

PUDDLEBEND



A CREEK STORY

The
Landing Branch

WREN MARLOWE



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Written and illustrated under the Puddlebend house name Wren Marlowe.

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*For anyone who needed somewhere to
land.*





Hush waited in the gold water between the reeds. Evening made everything too quiet. He kept his gum leaf tucked and ready. Something always rustled here before dark.



The reeds rustled. Hush snapped straight and whispered, "Branch. Branch. Branch." He held still as any stick. He wanted the dark not to find him. On the mud hump a tiny body compressed once.

Nix had found the perfect branch. It did not sway, and it had two bright eyes. "Me first," she said. She bounced on the mud hump once. Then she compressed small as a seed. Her pennant fluttered hard at the tip.





Hush held his freeze. Nix did not mind.

"One-two-THREE!" she cried, and she sprang. She glided between the gold reeds, membranes wide. Her pennant streamed behind her. She aimed straight at the shoulder that would not move. Her open paws crossed the last reed toward his crown.



Nix landed on his head with a soft plop. The gum leaf caught under her paw. "Made it," she said, and her membranes drooped. Hush went stiffer than a real stick. His huge eyes stared out under her soft weight. He did not dare breathe. The world's worst branch had just been sat on.



Nix looked up and found a taller reed. "Next one," she said. She launched off his crown before he could sag. Her membranes spread and her pennant snapped taut. Hush stayed rigid in the water below, leaf trembling. He had become a launch pad. A fresh rustle shivered the far bank of reeds.



The rustle came closer through the reeds. Hush snapped vertical again, wider than before. He whispered, "Branch. Branch. Branch." He locked his beak at the sky. His eyes stretched wider than ever. The freeze had failed him once. He tried it harder anyway.



Nix came back faster than a blink. She bounced beside him, pennant ready. "One-two-THREE!" she cried, and she landed soft. She puddled flat across his whole crown. Her body melted and her membranes drooped over both tufts. Hush stayed locked rigid underneath. He was out of moves. The reeds rustled longer and closer around them.



The longer rustle came. Neither
of them moved. Hush's eye
stayed open under her.





Hush did not snap into a branch this time. He opened his wide mouth above the reeds. Nix was already compressing on a nearby stalk. Her pennant fluttered, ready to go. "I will say it," Hush whispered. One clear word rode out toward the rustling reed.



"Reed!" said Hush, all in one big breath. The word flew out loud across the gold shallows. Nix stopped mid-compress on her stalk. Her pennant hung still as stone. She did not finish the launch. The scary rustle had a name now, and a friend who said it too.



Hush and Nix sat in the gold water. Their shoulders almost touched. "Branch. Branch. Branch," Hush said, soft as dusk. He did not freeze. Nix leaned her head against his wing.

EVERYONE AT THE CREEK



Bramble

COMMON WOMBAT

The steady big-kid guardian



Cinder

COATIMUNDI

The nosy neighborhood explorer



Hush

TAWNY FROGMOUTH

The tall nervous big cousin who thinks nobody can see him



Nix

SUGAR GLIDER

The littlest rocket sibling



Skip

MUDSKIPPER

The tiny little brother who cannot wait his turn



Sora

SANDHILL CRANE

The tall watchful big-sister neighbor



Tock

FIDDLER CRAB

The bossy little drummer who wants everyone in the game



Tuck

SHORT-BEAKED ECHIDNA

The littlest cousin who is always a bit too close

ABOUT THE CREEK

Puddlebend is a slow bend in a warm creek where the water is shallow enough to stand in and the mud is soft enough to sit down in. Everyone who lives there is small. Everyone who lives there is working something out.

These stories are about the ordinary, difficult business of being a friend: waiting your turn, going back for what you dropped, letting someone hold you when you are all spikes.

WREN MARLOWE

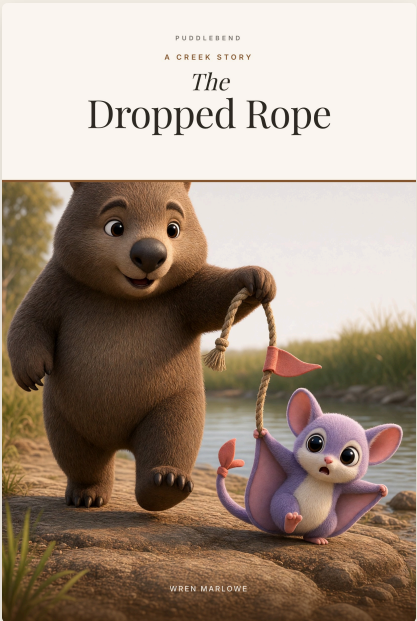
Wren Marlowe is the Puddlebend house name for stories made at the water's edge — quiet, funny books about small creatures working out how to be together.



ALSO IN THIS SERIES



The Missed Leaf



The Dropped Rope



The Belly-Up Hug



The Clacking Lid



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