

A CREEK STORY

THE BELLY-UP HUG



WREN MARLOWE



PUDDLEBEND



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*For the prickly, who are
also soft somewhere.*



The Belly-Up Hug

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Written and illustrated by Wren Marlowe.

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Bramble had spent the morning tying a long rope circle around the softest patch of Creek Park grass. “Gather spot,” he said proudly. It was waiting for every friend. Tuck waddled over with her arms wide and her mustard pom-pom bouncing. “A gather needs a hug!”

“Hug?” Tuck asked hopefully. “I will be very, very soft.” Bramble smiled. “Come close, then.” He smelled of warm earth and rain. Tuck rushed in, spines flattened with care, and leaned all her round little self against Bramble’s broad chest.





Bramble gave the gentlest squeeze he knew. Tuck's spines poked his fur. Tuck felt Bramble's heavy paw press on her pom-pom. "Ow, sorry," they said together, and sprang apart. Both rubbed their sore spots.

Tuck curled into a small ball just outside the rope circle. One bright eye peeked through her spines. The empty circle seemed very large. Bramble lowered himself nearby. “I wanted to welcome you,” he said. “I did too,” said Tuck. “But that hug did not feel good.”





“Maybe less squeeze,” Bramble suggested. He held out one paw, palm up, and kept the other safely behind him. Tuck uncurled enough to touch it with one tiny claw. They tried a careful side press. Tuck’s spines still bumped his shoulder. “Not that,” she whispered.

“Maybe more room,” said Tuck. Bramble sat farther away, and Tuck leaned her side against his side. The hug felt roomy, but lonely. “Can you feel me there?” asked Tuck. “Only a little,” said Bramble. “I cannot tell if we are hugging or waiting for a bus,” Tuck said. Bramble’s low laugh rumbled.





They tried a paw hug. They tried a shoulder hug. They even tried wrapping the rope gently around both of them. The rope tickled Tuck's nose, and Bramble worried it was too tight. "Too tickly," Tuck said. "Too tight," Bramble agreed. "We keep trying the same kind of squeeze," he said.

Tuck looked at the sky. Clouds made soft round shapes above the grass. Then she looked at her own cream belly, where there were no spines at all. “My soft part is here,” she said, tapping it. “Could a hug come to that part instead?”





Bramble did not move closer. “Would you like me to see it from here, or come closer?” he asked. Tuck’s ears perked. “Come closer, but ask again when you get there.” “I will wait for your answer,” Bramble promised.

Tuck rolled carefully onto her back inside the rope circle. Her belly faced the blue sky, and her spines made a little fence around her. “This is my belly-up shape,” she said. “May I try it with you?” “Yes,” Bramble said. “Show me the soft place.”





Bramble lay beside her, not on her. “May I put my paw beside yours?” he asked. “Yes,” said Tuck. “And may I say stop anytime?” “Anytime,” said Bramble. Their paws touched first. Then Bramble rested his warm shoulder against Tuck’s soft belly, light as a fallen leaf.



Tuck's spines stayed safely away. Bramble's heavy paw stayed gentle. "Hug," Tuck breathed. This time nobody yelped. The rope circle held the grass around them, while their new hug held just the right amount of close.



“What makes it work?” Tuck asked. Bramble thought for a moment. “Your soft place. My slow place. And asking.” Tuck nodded. “And stopping when it is not right.” “Then asking can make room,” said Bramble. “For both of us,” said Tuck.

They made a welcome mark for the gather spot. Tuck pressed a round belly-up shape into the soft dirt. Bramble placed two pawprints beside it. “What does it mean?” Tuck asked. Bramble held one paw open. “Ask first,” he said. Tuck touched the other paw. “Then listen.”





Soon, a breeze carried the warm grass smell through the park. Tuck sat up and opened her arms. “Do you want another belly-up hug?” Bramble’s tiny ears lifted. “Yes. I do.” “I like knowing where your soft place is,” he said. “I like that you asked,” said Tuck.

“May I roll?” Tuck asked. “Yes,” said Bramble. “May I come close?” “Yes.” “May I put my shoulder here?” Tuck smiled. “Yes, please.”





“We know every part now,” said Tuck.
“Roll, ask, answer, settle,” Bramble said.
Their paws found each other in the grass.
The mustard pom-pom bobbed once, then
became perfectly still.

Inside the rope circle, Tuck rolled belly-up beneath the bright afternoon sky. Bramble settled beside her, shoulder light against her soft middle. Their joined paws rested in the warm grass.



EVERYONE AT THE CREEK



Bramble

COMMON
WOMBAT

The steady big-
kid guardian



Skip

MUDSKIPPER

The tiny little
brother who
cannot wait his
turn



Cinder

COATIMUNDI

The nosy
neighborhood
explorer



Sora

SANDHILL
CRANE

The tall
watchful big-
sister neighbor



Hush

TAWNY
FROGMOUTH

The tall
nervous big
cousin who
thinks nobody
can see him



Tuck

SHORT-BEAKED
ECHIDNA

The littlest
cousin who is
always a bit too
close



Nix

SUGAR GLIDER

The littlest
rocket sibling

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 makes quiet, funny picture books at the water's edge: small creatures working out how to be together.



ALSO IN A CREEK STORY



Cinder's Paw Band



The Clacking Lid



Cinder and the Missing Moon



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