

**I**T WAS THE FIRST DAY of fall break and all we had planned was lots of fun stuff together. Like watching cranes, for example.

My brother Jadran and I raced each other along the path through the woods to the lake. He ran ahead of me in his rubber boots. I let him win. Everyone let Jadran win. Even though he was as strong as a young wolf, his big, gangling body was slow.

And he couldn't stand losing.

"Watch out, Giant, I'm catching up with you!" I shouted to fire him up.

And Jadran liked being fired up. He staggered across the stones to the squelchy shore. As usual, his head hung slightly forward and his back was hunched.

"I want to be the first to see them," he panted. "I'm always the first to see everything, aren't I, Josh?"

The sound of trumpeting came from behind the reeds.

*Krrroo krrroo krrroo!*

Jadran turned and waved at Mom and Murad, who were strolling to the lake, arm in arm. Yasmin trudged along behind them, doing her best not to see any cranes at all. She'd wrapped her scarf high over her face, right up to her glasses.

"I can already hear them!" shouted Jadran. "That counts too, doesn't it, Mom?"

Mom and Murad gave a thumbs up, both at the same time. And that made them both laugh, also at exactly the same moment.

Murad and his daughter had only just moved into our apartment last week. And it hadn't exactly gone smoothly. It had taken forever before Jadran would say a word to Murad. The night of the move he had barricaded the front door with a dresser. The only thing that eventually saved the situation was the promise that he could sleep in my room from now on, on two mattresses pushed close together.

Jadran ran clumsily toward the sound of the cranes, his chin sticking out and his big hands dangling beside his body.

"Josh, make sure he doesn't go too far!" Mom screamed above the wind. "He's not allowed near the marsh!"

I sprinted after him. Jadran was sixteen and could lift me up in the air with one arm. But even though he was almost five years older than me, he was my little brother as far as Mom was concerned.



We squelched our way over to a bed of reeds, Jadran squawking along with the cranes. With every step, his feet sank deeper into the mud.

*Krrroo krrroo krrroo.*

We saw the huge birds among the reeds, pecking for food. There were dozens of them, with their long legs and their bushy tail feathers. They had patches of red on their heads, and their black-and-white necks jerked back and forth.

“There they are!” shrieked Jadran, way too loud. He threw his arms in the air and made a leap toward the birds. The cold water splashed and soon he was up to his calves in the sludge.

“Shut up, Giant,” I whispered, but it was already too late. They’d spotted us. The crane alarm went off.

*Kaa kroo-ee! Kaa kroo-ee!*

The birds turned to stone, heads forward, high on their toes. Only their beaks still moved, making that eerie cry.

“You scared them,” I hissed.

“But I didn’t do anything, did I?” Jadran plowed on through the reeds. “Don’t be scared, my friends. I’m coming to see you!”

“Jadran, stop there!” Mom called from the shore.

That basically meant: *Stop him, Josh!*

I slid my sleeves over my hands so I wouldn’t cut myself on the sharp leaves. My brother thrashed wildly with his arms and crushed the reeds under his feet. The cranes spread their wings and cried louder and louder.

*Kaa kroo-ee! Kaa kroo-ee!*

“Just wait, Giant!” I shouted.

Jadran cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “I’m not going to hurt you! I never hurt anyone!”

And then, all at once, they took off.



It was pandemonium, a thundercloud of feathers. The cranes bumped into one another, skimmed past the pine trees, and flapped away as fast as they could.

Startled, Jadran took a step back and sank knee-deep into the mud.

“Stay calm,” I said soothingly. “Take a deep breath.”

Mom and Murad hurried toward us along the lake path. Yasmin had grabbed her phone and started filming everything, just for fun.

“They have to stay here!” shouted Jadran.

“Never mind,” I said. “They’ll be back soon.”

Jadran splashed the water with the palms of his hands. “They’re flying away, aren’t they? In the winter they live in Spain—that’s what you said!” The duckweed sloshed up onto his butt.

The cranes gathered and glided in two low lines across the water. You could hear the swish of their feathers as they flapped their wings. I took Jadran’s hand and dragged him out of the slurping mud before his boots got completely stuck.

“Look, they want to say goodbye,” I said, steering Jadran back to solid ground. “Cranes make letters in the sky—did you know that?”

Jadran shook his head. But he still looked back at the birds, which were flying higher and higher.

“U!” he shouted.

“So they can talk to each other, all the way from Finland to the Mediterranean Sea,” I said.

Jadran nodded and started pointing here and there. “And look, that wobbly line over there, that’s an S!”



I led Jadran to the wooden jetty, which was packed with boats in the summertime. Yasmin was standing on the edge, filming herself with the flying cranes.

“Here, here, here!” said Jadran, trying to lure them back.

*Krrroo krrroo krrroo-ee!*

“Hey, they’re calling to me, aren’t they?”

Yasmin indignantly stopped filming. “Don’t be so dumb.”

“Jadran is not dumb!” I said.

He squeezed my hand tighter and tighter. “It’s my fault.”

“Shh,” I said.

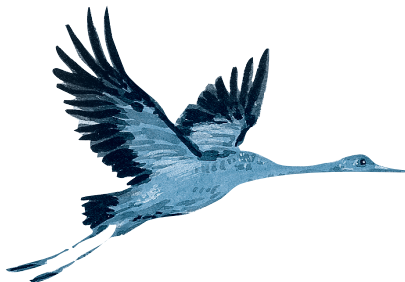
“Everything’s always my fault, isn’t it?”

His arm was shaking. My fingers were cracking.

“Not everything, Giant.”

“How much?”

“No more than half.”



**T**HE CRANES DID A FINAL spin around the lake and then disappeared among the wispy clouds. An airplane drew a line through their letters.

Jadran's pant legs were dripping, and his face was covered in splashes of mud. The duckweed was up to my knees.

"Look at the state of you two!" said Murad, and it almost sounded like a compliment. As always, he was wearing shiny shoes and pants with an ironed crease down the front.

Mom took a tissue from her bag and began to clean Jadran's cheeks. He stood there like a little kid, even though he was a head-and-a-half taller than her.

"Next time stay close to us," she said. "And don't go running off into the water."

*Ee-oo!* came a sudden cry from some nearby trees. Jadran pushed Mom's hand away. The tissue fell to the ground and blew off into the reeds.

"What's that?" he said.

*Ee ee ee-oo!*

Yasmin was the first to follow the squeaking sounds. She lifted her feet carefully so that her sneakers didn't get dirty. And of course we weren't going to let her go on her own.

Mom shouted, "I just told you to stay close to us, Giant!"

But we were already dashing off.



The shrill cries were coming from under a hazel bush. I pushed the branches aside so that we could get closer. Among the leaves, there was a tall, thin bird. It was a young crane, with its beak open wide. Its feathers were still brownish, and its neck wasn't the same beautiful black-with-a-white-stripe that the older birds had.

"He's panicking," I whispered.

Jadran was shaking with excitement, and he clenched his hands. "They've forgotten him!"

"Look," said Yasmin. "He can't leave."

I crouched beside the young bird. He kicked out, but couldn't reach me. His wing was tangled in a piece of fishing line.

"He's bleeding!" shouted Jadran.

"Poor thing," said Yasmin.

Murad came to help us. He showed me how to stop



the bird from moving. Holding the bird's legs tight with one hand, he untangled the fishing line with the other. The down under the bird's left wing was matted with blood.

"He's gotten the hook stuck in him," said Murad.

I slid my fingers under the wing and lifted it so that Murad could pull the fishhook out of the wound. Quick as a flash, the bird pecked me.

"Ow!" Yasmin jumped back as if it was *her* hand he'd jabbed.

Murad wound up the fishing line and put the hook in his coat pocket. There was blood on his ironed pants, and his shoes were covered with moss.

For a second, the crane just lay there. Then he scrambled to his feet and hopped out of the bushes. He suddenly looked gigantic. When he stood upright, he almost came up to my chin.

The young bird pattered along the shoreline in a bit of a daze. But there was no sign of any other cranes. He screeched so loud that it hurt.

Jadran looked very serious. "He's calling his family, isn't he?"

"They'll come looking for him," said Murad. "Animals don't just abandon their young."



We stood and watched for half an hour. It was starting to get dark, and the lake glowed one last time, a rusty orange. But the cranes didn't come back.

Every time the bird did a little jump, Jadran hopped along with him. When he tried to spread his wings, Jadran did the same. He stretched out one arm, with the other dangling limply beside his body.

*Sprrrree!* went the crane, as if it had swallowed a soccer referee's whistle. *Spriri ri ree!*

"Sprig!" cooed Jadran. "Sprig! That's his name."

Mom bit her lip. We all knew what that meant. Everything that Jadran gave a name to had a special place in his head. And once it had a place there, it never left.

Jadran hopped about, flapping one arm. "His wing's broken, isn't it?"

"We'll have to call the park rangers," I said quickly. "They'll know what to do."

Murad wiped his shoes clean with one of Mom's tissues.

"That sounds like a smart idea," he said. "After all, it is a wild animal."

Jadran wasn't afraid of wild animals. Before anyone could say anything, he danced toward Sprig with big steps.

At that point, Mom lost what little was left of her good mood. Jadran had already given us enough headaches in the past few weeks.

“I’m going to look after him!” he said, stalking the bird like a dog.

“Stop it!” I shouted.

Jadran opened up his arms to make a trap and chased Sprig toward the jetty. Blocking Sprig’s way with his foot, he grabbed the bird from behind. The bird just let himself be caught. Jadran slid an arm under him and picked him up. He stroked the bird’s back, smoothing his feathers and folding the bird’s legs into his hands.

“Quiet now, my little Sprig,” he whispered. “I’m taking you home with me!”



The wind was blowing harder and harder. The hazel branches swished about, and dark clouds tumbled above the trees.

Mom and Murad discussed what to do.

“I’m out of here.” Yasmin was talking half to her phone and half to us. She was already walking back to the path.

Jadran hugged Sprig to his chest.

“Don’t squeeze him so hard, Giant. You’ll suffocate him,” said Mom.

“He’s staying with me!”

For a moment, my gaze locked with Jadran’s. And it was enough to convince me that we couldn’t leave Sprig behind.

“When it’s dark, a fox could get him,” I said.

“Murad has a friend who’s a vet,” said Mom. “We’ll take him to see her.”

Murad nodded encouragingly. So that was the plan.

But Jadran didn’t fit into any plans. He started to tremble frantically. His lips became thin. His chest was heaving up and down.

“Don’t do it!” I pressed my hands to my ears.

Jadran opened his mouth wide. Sprig cowered as Jadran started howling fiercely. Mom glanced left and right. Luckily, there was no one else on the shore.

“Fine, then,” she said quickly. “Take him home.”

Jadran peeped with one eye. The howl was at half volume now.

“But tomorrow morning . . .”

Jadran wiped the tears from his face with his sleeve. He gave Sprig a stroke, rocked him like a giant baby, and then walked past Yasmin and into the woods.

Within three steps, he’d already forgotten that the world had just been about to end.