The Girl and the Crane
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Every spring, Lily waited by the marsh with her small brown notebook. She wore her yellow rain boots and red scarf, ready for the first sign of her wild friend. The marsh was a wide, wet place full of tall reeds and soft mud. Lily loved the way it smelled of green things and fresh water. She sat very still, watching the sky.

One morning, a tall crane flew down from the sky. It had a slate-grey body, a white face stripe, and a bright red crown. A silver band shone on its right leg. Lily held her breath. The crane stepped slowly through the shallow water on long, thin legs. It dipped its beak and pulled up a wriggling fish.

Lily wrote in her notebook: 'Crane came back today. Very tall. Red crown. Silver band.' She named the crane Willow, after the willow tree by the water. Every day after school, she watched Willow. The crane was shy but graceful. It never came close, but it always came back to the same spot. Lily felt lucky to know it.

Spring turned to summer, and Willow stayed at the marsh. Lily filled her notebook with drawings and notes. She wrote: 'Willow likes to eat small fish and water bugs. Willow stands on one leg to rest.' She learned that cranes are watchful and patient. They need quiet places to eat and sleep. Lily wanted to protect Willow's home.

One day, Lily saw something new at the marsh. Two workers in orange hard hats and yellow vests were measuring the ground. A tall man with a grey beard held a clipboard. He pointed at the reeds and said, 'We'll build here.' Lily's heart thumped. 'But this is the marsh!' she said. 'The crane lives here!' The man looked surprised.

At school, Lily told her class about the marsh and Willow. Her teacher, Mrs. Patel, wore her teal cardigan and silver glasses. She listened kindly. 'That's a real problem,' Mrs. Patel said. 'How can we help?' Lily thought of her notebook full of crane facts. 'We could show people why the marsh matters,' she said. The class nodded. They wanted to help.

The children planned a big exhibition. They painted pictures of Willow and wrote facts about cranes. Lily brought her notebook. 'Cranes fly thousands of miles,' she read. 'They need safe places to rest and eat.' Other children made a model of the marsh with reeds and water. Mrs. Patel helped them hang posters. 'Invite everyone,' she said. 'Your voices matter.'

On exhibition day, the school hall was full. Lily wore her yellow boots for luck. She stood by her notebook pages and told Willow's story. She explained how tired migrating birds need marshes like this one. 'Willow comes back every spring,' she said. 'If we build here, where will the cranes go?' People listened closely. Some took notes.

Mr. Hale, the foreman, came too. He wore his orange hard hat and carried his clipboard. At first, he looked gruff. But he stopped to look at the children's drawings. He read the facts about migrating birds. 'I didn't know cranes flew so far,' he said. Lily showed him her notebook. 'Willow has a silver band,' she said. 'Someone far away is studying her.'

Mr. Hale was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, 'I have a boss, but I also have ears. You children have made me think.' He looked at the model marsh and the posters. 'Maybe we can find another place to build,' he said. 'Somewhere that doesn't flood in spring.' Lily's heart felt light. 'Thank you,' she whispered.

Weeks later, Mr. Hale came back to the marsh with news. 'We found a dry field near the road,' he said. 'The marsh can stay.' Lily jumped up and down in her yellow boots. Her classmates cheered. Mrs. Patel smiled and said, 'You did it, Lily.' Lily looked at her notebook. 'We all did,' she said. 'And Willow helped.'

That spring, Lily waited by the marsh again. She heard a familiar call. Willow flew down on wide wings and landed in the shallow water. The silver band glinted on its leg. Lily wrote in her notebook: 'Willow came back. The marsh is safe.' She felt warm inside. Loving a wild friend sometimes means protecting its home, even from far away.

Lily kept visiting the marsh all summer. She drew Willow standing on one leg in the sunshine. Mr. Hale stopped by once and said, 'The new building is going up fine. And the crane is still here.' Lily smiled. She knew that people could change their minds when they listened. The marsh was full of life again. Frogs sang and dragonflies danced.

One windy day, Willow spread its wings and rose into the sky. Lily watched until the crane was a tiny dot. 'Goodbye, Willow,' she said. 'See you next spring.' She knew the crane was flying far away to another marsh. But she also knew that this marsh would be waiting. And so would she, with her notebook and her yellow boots.

Back at school, Lily showed her notebook to the class. 'Willow left for the winter,' she said. 'But the marsh is still here.' Mrs. Patel nodded. 'Protecting a wild friend's home is a big job,' she said. 'And you did it.' Lily felt proud. She knew that loving Willow meant caring for the whole marsh, not just the crane.

When spring came again, Lily stood by the marsh with her red scarf flapping. She heard a call and saw a tall grey shape in the sky. It was Willow. Lily opened her notebook and wrote: 'Willow is back. The marsh is home.' She knew that this was the best story of all. And she would keep writing it, one spring at a time.