The Girl and the Hedgehog

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Every morning, the girl pulled on her yellow rain boots and ran into the family orchard. Her curly hair bounced in two puffy buns as she skipped between the apple trees. She carried a green canvas satchel for gathering fallen apples. The orchard was her favorite place, full of buzzing bees and rustling leaves. She loved how the branches made a leafy roof overhead.

One cool morning, something small moved under the big bush near the fence. The girl stopped and knelt down in the soft grass. A tiny hedgehog snuffled through the leaves, its brown-and-cream spines all round and prickly. It had a soft cream face, a little black nose, and bright dark eyes. A single fallen apple leaf sat on its back like a tiny hat.

The girl's hazel eyes went wide with wonder. She wanted to help this little visitor, but she knew she must be gentle and quiet. She tiptoed back to the house to find Mum. Mum was in the garden, her black braid over one shoulder, wearing her wide straw hat. "Mum," the girl whispered, "there's a hedgehog in our orchard!"

Mum smiled and tucked her gardening gloves into her pocket. "A hedgehog! How lucky we are," she said. "Hedgehogs love orchards with lots of bushes to hide in." The girl tugged her mum's denim sleeve. "But can it find its way around?" she asked. "The bushes are so thick, and the fence has no gaps." Mum nodded thoughtfully. "Let's take a look together."

They found Dad by the tool shed, wearing his green flannel shirt and glasses. His tool belt jingled as he walked. "A hedgehog needs safe paths," Dad said, kneeling down. "It can't squeeze through tight places or climb over walls." The girl clapped her hands. "Then we should make passageways!" she cried. "Little gaps between the bushes so it can explore!"

Mum showed the girl how hedges could be trimmed to create small openings. "A gap this wide," Mum said, holding her hands apart, "lets a hedgehog pass through safely." The girl measured with her own small hands. She found a thick hedge near the apple tree and pointed. "Here! Let's make a doorway here!" Mum pulled on her gloves and began to clip.

Dad brought his small saw and hammer from his tool belt. He cut away a few low branches, making a tunnel through the bushes. The girl gathered fallen twigs and carried them away in her satchel. "This will be the hedgehog highway," she declared. Dad laughed. "A highway for tiny feet!" They worked together until three safe passageways connected the orchard's bushes.

Next, Dad found a quiet corner under the old pear tree. "Hedgehogs like a snug place to rest," he said. He stacked small logs into a little dome and covered them with dry leaves. The girl helped tuck leaves into every gap. "It's like a tiny house," she said. Dad lifted her up so she could peek inside. "A perfect hedgehog shelter," he smiled.

Mum brought a handful of dry grass and soft moss. The girl spread it gently on the shelter floor. "Now the hedgehog will have a cozy bed," Mum said. The girl looked around the orchard. The new passageways curved between bushes like little roads. The shelter sat quiet and snug under the pear tree. Everything was ready for their small visitor.

That evening, the girl waited quietly by the big bush. The sky turned pink and gold. Then she heard a rustle. The hedgehog appeared, its little pink feet pattering on the grass. It sniffed the air and wiggled its black nose. The apple leaf still sat on its back like a hat. It looked at the girl with bright, curious eyes.

The hedgehog snuffled toward the first passageway. It paused, then slipped through the gap with ease. The girl held her breath. The hedgehog trundled along the leafy path, exploring every new opening. It visited the apple tree, the berry bush, and the flower bed. "It's using the highway!" the girl whispered, her gap-toothed smile wide with joy.

At last, the hedgehog found the quiet shelter under the pear tree. It circled once, twice, then curled up in the soft moss. The girl watched from a distance, her heart full. "It likes it," she breathed. Mum put an arm around her. "You helped make this orchard a welcoming home," Mum said. "For animals big and small."

The girl thought about what she had learned. "Wildlife-friendly spaces help nature thrive," she said slowly. Dad nodded. "Every little gap and quiet corner makes a difference." The girl looked at the passageways and the shelter. She felt proud and happy. Her orchard was not just for apples. It was a home for the hedgehog too.

The next morning, the girl ran to the shelter. The hedgehog was gone, but tiny footprints dotted the soft earth. It had explored all night and found its way around. She smiled and filled her satchel with fallen apples. The orchard felt alive with secret visitors. She knew the hedgehog would come back to its cozy shelter.

All through the season, the hedgehog visited the orchard. It snuffled through the passageways and rested in the quiet shelter. The girl watched from afar, never frightening it. Her family smiled as they worked among the trees. They had made a place where nature could thrive, one small gap at a time.

The girl sat under the pear tree, her yellow boots tucked beneath her. She listened to the rustle of leaves and the hum of bees. The orchard was a happy, welcoming home for animals big and small. She knew that kindness and care could make a big difference. And she felt glad, right down to her freckled nose.