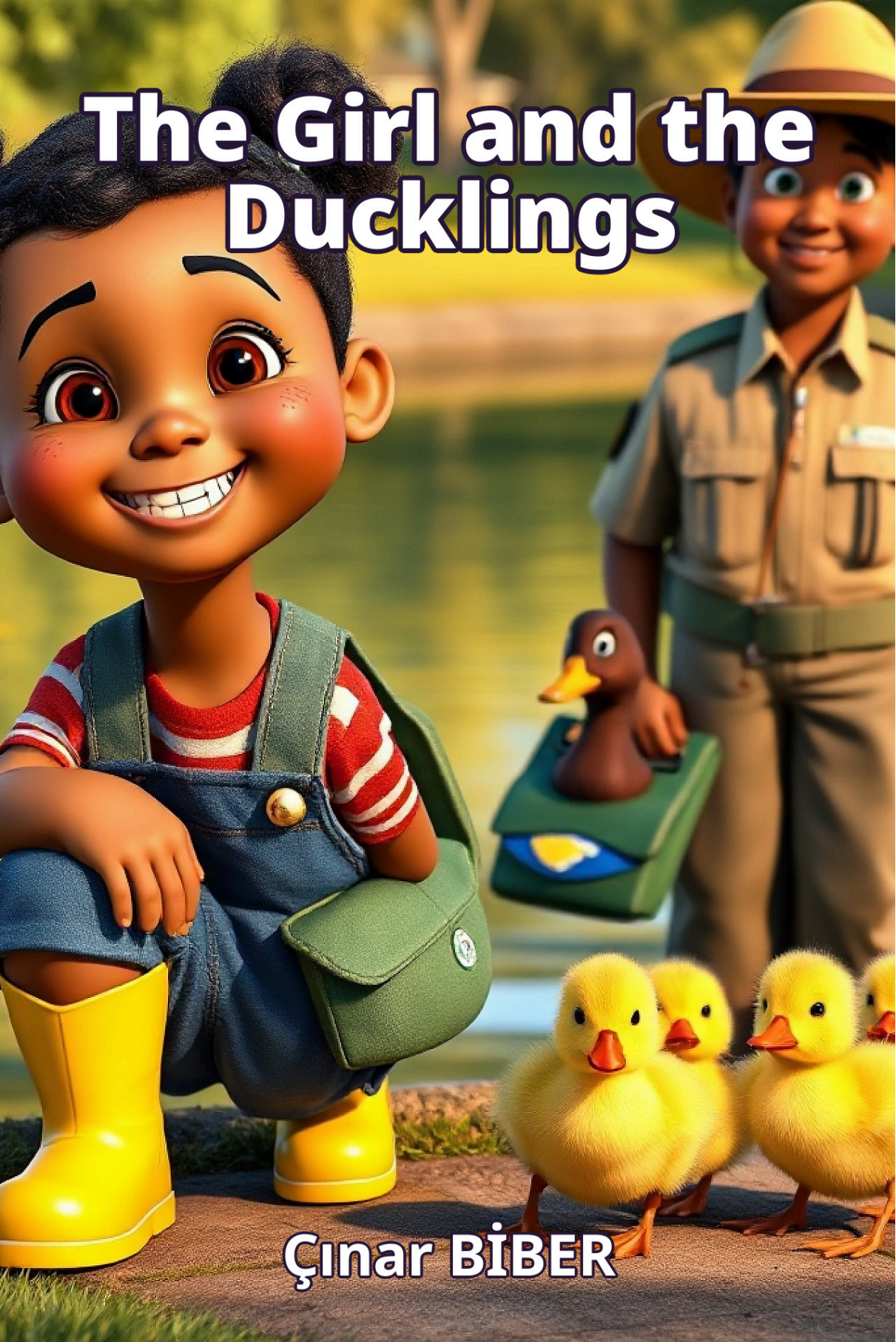


The Girl and the Ducklings



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Every morning, the girl walked to the pond in her park. She wore her yellow rain boots and carried her green satchel with the duck patch. She loved to watch the ducklings swim behind their mother. Their fluffy yellow down looked like little balls of sunshine. The pond was her favorite place in the whole world.



The girl had warm brown skin and curly black hair in two short puffs. Her round cheeks were freckled, and she smiled a gap-toothed smile. She knew every duck by heart. There was Mother Duck with her glossy brown feathers and a bright blue wing patch. She had a soft white ring around her neck and a bright orange bill.



The ducklings paddled in a wobbly line behind Mother Duck. One duckling had a brown speckled head, and the others were all soft yellow. They peeped and cheeped as they swam. The girl sat very still on the grass and watched. She felt calm and happy when the duck family was near.



One day, the girl noticed something wrong. Visitors came too close to the pond. Some children ran and shouted, and the ducklings hid in the reeds. Mother Duck looked worried. She gathered her babies under her wings. The girl frowned. "They need a safe space," she whispered. "A quiet place to rest and grow."



The girl thought about the problem all day. She wanted to help the ducklings, but she was only eight years old. Then she remembered Ranger Maya, who worked at the park. Ranger Maya wore a wide-brimmed hat and carried a clipboard. She had a kind smile and a silver whistle on a cord. Maybe she would know what to do.



The next morning, the girl walked to the park office. Her heart beat fast, but she was brave. Ranger Maya was there, writing on her clipboard. "Hello," said the girl. "The ducks at the pond need help. Visitors get too close, and the ducklings get scared." Ranger Maya listened carefully. "You noticed something important," she said.



Ranger Maya explained that nesting birds need quiet and space. "When people come too close, mother ducks get worried," she said. "They might leave their nests, and the ducklings could get lost." The girl nodded. "Can we make signs?" she asked. "Signs that ask people to watch quietly from a distance." Ranger Maya smiled. "That's a wonderful idea."



They sat at a table and made signs together. The girl drew a picture of a duck family on each sign. Ranger Maya wrote words in big letters: "Please give nesting birds room. Watch quietly from a distance." The girl colored the signs with bright crayons. She felt proud of her work. Soon, the signs were ready to put up.



They placed the signs all around the pond. Ranger Maya hammered them into the soft ground. The girl chose the spots where visitors often stood. "Here's a good place," she said. "And here, near the reeds." They put up six signs in all. The girl stepped back and looked at them. They looked cheerful and clear.



The next day, visitors read the signs. A family with a stroller stopped and read the words. "Oh, we should stay back," said the mother. "Let's watch from here." Other people nodded and moved away from the water's edge. They spoke in soft voices. The girl watched from a bench. She felt a warm glow inside. People were listening!



Mother Duck noticed the change. The people stayed far back, and the pond grew quiet. She led her ducklings to a sunny spot on the bank. They napped in a warm, fluffy pile. The girl saw the ducklings close their round dark eyes. Their tiny webbed feet were tucked under their bodies. Mother Duck rested too, with her orange bill tucked under her wing.



The ducklings grew bigger and stronger. They paddled happily in the calm water. The one with the brown speckled head was the bravest. It swam ahead and then waddled back to the others. The girl laughed. "You're growing so fast!" she said. The ducklings peeped as if to say thank you. The pond felt like a cozy home again.



Ranger Maya came to see the pond. "You did a great job," she told the girl. "The signs help everyone remember to give wildlife space." The girl smiled her gap-toothed smile. "I'm glad the ducklings are safe," she said. Ranger Maya gave her a high five. "You spoke up for the ducks," she said. "That's what caring for wildlife means."



The girl felt proud. Her park was a safe space for every duck family. She sat on her favorite bench and watched the ducklings swim. They dipped their little bills in the water and splashed their tiny feet. The sun sparkled on the pond. Everything felt peaceful and right. She knew the ducks would come back next spring.



From that day on, the girl visited the pond every morning. She always watched quietly from a distance. Other visitors did the same. The signs reminded everyone to be gentle. The ducklings grew into ducks with glossy brown feathers. But the girl never forgot the spring when she helped make the pond a safe home for wildlife.



The pond stayed a cozy place for every duck family. Mother Duck still swam with her new ducklings each spring. The girl still wore her yellow boots and carried her duck patch satchel. And she always remembered: even small voices can make a big difference. Wildlife families need safe spaces, and kind people can help keep them safe.