

THE DAVIDSONS



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EMMA'S WHISTLE

Emma was sitting on the grass in her backyard, strumming her guitar under a cloudy afternoon sky.

“What do you think?” she asked the sugar maple next to her. “Do I spend too much time by myself?”

While waiting for the tree to answer, she heard the faint, familiar sound of a doorbell. She set the instrument aside, leaped gracefully to her feet, and scurried up the stone path to meet the visitor on her front porch.

“Em, you promised to come over and help me make posters today. Did you forget?”

Sharleen was running for class president, and Emma, a fellow seventh-grader, had agreed to serve as her friend's campaign manager.

“Uh, of course not,” Emma replied, scratching the tip of her nose. “I was just about to head over to your place.”

Ten minutes later, the girls were brainstorming election slogans at Sharleen's kitchen table.

“You're gonna talk in your speech about composting food waste from the cafeteria and planting a butterfly garden next to the school yard, right? How does ‘Go Green. Vote for Sharleen!’ sound?”

“I like that,” Sharleen replied.

After also agreeing to use ‘Sharleen Foster, the Smart Choice!’ they made posters with colorful markers to hang at school and talked about the other candidates.

“Em, I won’t mind so much if I lose to Josh, but if Annie wins, I’ll be totally embarrassed.”

Emma decided not to tell Sharleen that letting Stacey run as her vice-president was probably a mistake.

“Don’t worry. You got this, Shar. Remember,” she added with a grin, “you’re the smart choice.”

Just then, the horn of the Springhurst Fire Dept. blasted, signaling—as it did every evening—that it was 6pm. For Emma’s family, it meant dinner time. She sprang up from the kitchen chair.

“Meet me at the corner tomorrow at 7:20,” she said. “That should give us plenty of time to hang the posters before first period.”

Sharleen gave a thumbs up, and Emma said goodbye. As she opened the front door to leave, she saw that the rain that had begun falling lightly an hour earlier was coming down hard. She borrowed an umbrella and hurried home to help her dad fix dinner.

While brushing her teeth that night, Emma suddenly remembered what she had left in the backyard. She rushed outside in pajamas and bare feet. It was only drizzling now, but rain had poured on her guitar for hours, softening its wooden body enough for a pair of hungry squirrels to gnaw on. She shooed them away, but it was too late: The damage was beyond repair.

Seeing how upset his daughter was, Mr. Davidson offered to pay half the cost of a new guitar. The ruined one was going to need to be replaced eventually anyway, but since ‘eventually’ had arrived much sooner than it should have, he explained to Emma that purchasing a new instrument was her responsibility. She didn’t welcome his reasoning, but it made sense to her.

The following afternoon the sun was shining, and Emma came home feeling better about her mistake.

“Dad, I just tried out an incredible acoustic at Darsey Music. It’s perfect for me. When you see it, you’re gonna flip out!”

“Really?” Mr. Davidson replied.

“Definitely! It’s on sale too. But half the sale price is still a LOT more money than I have.”

Emma put on a sad face, hoping that her father might volunteer to contribute a higher amount.

Instead he replied, “Well, I guess it’s time for you to get a part-time job.”

“I’m twelve, Dad. Who’s gonna hire me? I can’t even babysit til next year for anyone but Nate, and you don’t pay me for that.”

“For the record, I never earned a dime babysitting your uncle Jerry. Anyway, I think you may be in luck. I meant to tell you: Kayla’s father said there’s a soccer-referee course starting soon that you two might be interested in. For ages twelve and up. They allegedly pay twenty-five dollars for working a ‘U8’ game.”

Emma played pick-up soccer when she wasn’t practicing or competing with her travel basketball team. She enjoyed ‘the beautiful game’ and knew the rules.

“Wow! Twenty-five bucks to ref a game for seven-year-olds? Sure. I’ll do that! Sounds like easy money.”

“I don’t know if the money’s easy,” Mr. Davidson responded, “but if you do the referee course, I’ll pay for it. How’s that?”

She hugged her dad. *Things are looking up*, she said to herself.

During lunch period the following day, Kayla told Emma that she wanted to become a referee too.

“Let’s study together for the tests,” Emma suggested. “We can quiz each other on questions for the written part and take turns practicing stuff we’ll need to do during the field test.”

“Yeah, great idea, Em! Let’s sign up today at the community center!”

And so they did.

The following afternoon, Mr. Davidson bought the guitar with Emma. Luckily, her canvas case had survived the rainstorm and didn’t need to be replaced too. On the way home, she promised her father that she would “never, ever” leave her guitar outside again, and that by the start of summer camp, she’d pay all the money she owed him. She was equally excited to play the new instrument and begin the referee course.

Three weeks later, Emma burst through the front door of the Davidson’s house. In her right hand, she carried a black athletic-gear bag with the white logo of the Springhurst Community Center on one side. She couldn’t wait to show her father and brother the bag’s contents.

“Dad, Nate. Come and see!”

Mr. Davidson was glad that Emma was in such good spirits. She unzipped the bag and, taking care not to bend

it, removed her course diploma from a protective folder. She raised it over her head with both hands.

“This certificate,” her dad read aloud, “is awarded to Emma Davidson upon successful completion of the SYSL youth-soccer referee course.”

“That’s impressive, Emmy. And suitable for framing.”

She smiled and pulled her uniform out of the bag.

“SO cool,” Nate said, snatching the bright-yellow jersey from his sister’s hand. Mine doesn’t have a collar like yours.”

Nate was a new member of the Thunder Hawks, a local SYSL team in the U8 division.

“Hey, what’s this?” he asked, pointing at a black circle the size of a tennis ball on the pocket of Emma’s jersey.

Emma dug into the bag and fished out a round piece of stiff fabric the exact same size. She showed her brother and dad how the red-white-and-black referee badge stuck with Velcro to the circle. The badge stayed in place securely but could also be removed easily before washing the jersey.

“Clever,” Mr. Davidson remarked.

After he and Nate also admired the black shorts and black-and-white socks, Emma triumphantly pulled from the bag’s side pocket what she had saved for last to show them: a

silver whistle—shiny proof that she was queen of the soccer pitch, and everyone there needed to follow her instructions. She was eager to use it and start earning big money.

Like the patchy grass at Union Park, Emma’s first match as a referee was bumpy. She wasn’t always in the right place on the field, and when she blew the whistle, it wasn’t loud enough—even though she had learned to play trumpet at Woodside Elementary. Mr. Sherman, the head of the referee organization who came to observe her, told Emma after the match that she had done really well for a beginner.

“You have a great handle on the rules and keeping time,” he added.

But he pointed out what any new referee could do better.

“Just as important as trying to make correct calls is making them clearly and firmly, okay?”

Emma got the message. By the second half of her third game, she felt sure of herself. Her voice, body language, and whistle-blowing were signs of that. At the end of the match, she wasn’t surprised to receive compliments from a coach and a parent about the job she did. *This is gonna be a breeze*, she thought. *At this rate, I’ll be able to pay Dad back before camp and have plenty of spending money too!*

The following Saturday, forty minutes before Mr. Davidson was supposed to drive Nate to his team's soccer match, Emma received a frantic phone call from Kayla.

“Em, you gotta help me out. I'm supposed to ref the two o'clock Strikers – Thunder Hawks game at Waterfront, but my cousin just offered me a free ticket to the circus in Westerville! It starts at three. Can you please take my place? PLEASE?”

Emma frowned.

“Kay, didn't you already see it twice?”

“Yeah, it's SO fun! Listen, Em. I know your brother's on the Thunder Hawks, but Mr. Sherman said ANY certified ref can replace me. There's no time to find someone else!”

Emma felt uneasy about refereeing Nate's game, but she knew how much Kayla loved acrobats and clowns, and the chance to earn an extra twenty-five dollars was too tempting to pass up.

“I'll do it,” she replied, “but go easy on the cotton candy.”

“You're the best, Em!”

When his sister hung up the phone, Nate walked into the living room.

“Have you seen my water bottle?” he asked nervously.

“The one I watched you stick in your soccer bag a minute ago?”

“Oh, right,” Nate replied, as he confirmed the whereabouts of the bottle.

“By the way,” Emma added, “it looks like I’ll be joining you on the field today.”

Nate was puzzled, but instead of asking her what she meant, he started searching the house for his shin guards—the pair that he was already wearing.

Shortly after two o’clock, Emma stood next to the kick-off circle on Field #1 at Waterfront Park. She took a deep breath of the slightly chilly, October air and watched it turn into a wisp of steam when she exhaled. Enjoying her view of the Mill River framed by yellow and golden-orange leaves adorning nearby hickory trees, she started thinking about how to spend the money that was about to fall into her lap that day. *Should I give all twenty-five to Dad for the guitar? Maybe ten and spend the rest on something for me? I could really use more yarn!*

Before new thoughts could distract her, Emma swiveled her head and checked that the goalies were ready. Then she looked down and bent her arm up to focus on her wristwatch. While waiting for the seconds hand to reach the number 12, she added in her head exactly twenty

minutes until halftime. At the right second, she blew her whistle sharply and the match began.

Nate was on the bench for most of the first half.

“Let’s GO!” he cheered energetically when the Thunder Hawks went ahead 3-0. His team looked unbeatable. Emma was glad for her brother, but she knew not to show it.

In the second half, the Strikers staged a comeback thanks to a player who arrived late from a dental appointment. He quickly assisted on two goals, and with under ten minutes left to play, Nate made a mistake on defense that allowed the Strikers to tie the game. He looked miserable, but Coach Powell kept him on the field.

The teams traded possession several more times, and Emma stopped the game twice for substitutes to enter. As she had been trained to do, she looked at her watch every now and then to keep track of how much time remained. *I’m really good at this*, she told herself.

With less than a minute to play, number ten—the player on the Strikers with the cleanest teeth—stole the ball near his own goal and weaved his way up the field. He dribbled between his opponents until only one defender stood between him and the Thunder Hawks goalie. Emma checked the time again. There were eleven seconds left before she was supposed to end the match.

The Strikers player closed in on the goal, but the defender moved to block his path. As the boys collided, Emma glanced at her watch and blew her whistle emphatically. Was it the end of the game or the signal for a foul? And if it was a foul, who committed it? Number ten—or Nate?

Without hesitation, Emma pointed her arm to indicate that the Strikers had earned a direct free kick. The Thunder Hawks coach lowered his head and put a hand over his eyes in dismay. Nate collapsed in despair. The Strikers coach shouted “YES,” and a mixed chorus of voices erupted from players and fans.

Following the rule book, Emma set the ball down at the spot of the foul, made sure that everyone on the field was in position, and whistled to start the last play. Number ten stepped to the ball, and with the top of his left cleat rocketed a shot through the goalie’s hands and into the net. The referee forcefully sounded her silver whistle. Game over.

While the Strikers and their coach and families rejoiced, Eric Miller’s dad and uncle—who had already complained about some of Emma’s decisions—went berserk on the sideline. They flailed their hands and shouted at her, accusing Emma of not only making the wrong call but dragging the game out too long. She stayed silent and tried to ignore them as she walked towards the corner flag, took

out her ‘click’ pen and match report from the pocket of her jersey, and wrote down the final score.

On his way to the field to console Nate, Mr. Davidson reminded the Millers that they were adults who needed to calm down and behave better. A few feet away, the losing goalie’s mother had her arm around her weeping son. Close by, his heartbroken teammates looked on jealously at players and their family members high-fiving number ten.

Across the pitch, the opposing coaches were arguing about how the game had ended. Emma went to collect her gear bag, and the Thunder Hawks coach looked past her like she was invisible. *How did such a beautiful afternoon turn into this?* she wondered.

On the drive home, the only sounds in the car came from a chronic rattle in the dashboard, the soft sobs of Nate, and a single, deep sigh from his sister. They were each replaying in their heads the last moments of the match: Nate was picturing himself crashing into number ten, and Emma was second-guessing her decision that led to the final goal.

When they entered the house, Nate flung off his cleats, trudged upstairs to his room, and quietly shut the door. Mr. Davidson watched Emma slump on the living-room couch and fold her arms across her chest. She was still shocked by the reaction of the grownups.

“I guess you learned today that money doesn’t always come easy,” Mr. Davidson said.

“Honestly, Dad? I don’t really want to ref anymore. I tried my best, but my best obviously wasn’t good enough. Otherwise, Mr. Miller and Mr. Miller wouldn’t have yelled at me like that...and Coach Powell wouldn’t have ignored me on purpose when I left...Stuff like that never happens at my basketball games.”

“Oh Emmy,” her father replied, “people don’t always behave reasonably, especially soccer parents. And trust me. I’ve seen basketball fans act like idiots at a few of your games.”

“Maybe I didn’t notice because I wasn’t the ref.”

“Exactly...Now listen, Emmy. I understand how you feel, but it doesn’t do any good to run away from situations every time they get hard.”

His daughter shrugged.

“Sticking things out,” he continued, “is how people get better at whatever they’re doing. It also thickens their skin. It makes them tougher. Like Gramma used to tell me, ‘Thin skin lets the hurts in.’”

Emma tilted her head from side to side, weighing her father’s and grandmother’s words.

“I’m proud of how good a referee you are,” he added, “and for making a tough call against your brother, even though you knew it would upset him--not to mention his coach and his teammates...plus their families. Well, except me at least. And besides,” he asked with a wink, “how are you going to pay me back if you quit now?”

Emma thought some more. *Dad’s right*. She stood up, walked towards the bookshelf, and picked up the guitar that was leaning against it.

“I’m gonna write a new song,” she announced.

She paused and added with what seemed to be the hint of a smile, “I think I’ll call it *The Referee Blues*...and maybe end it with a blow of my whistle.”

Mr. Davidson started to laugh, but he stopped when he realized she wasn’t joking. The look on her face, he now understood, had been one of determination. She sat down on the rug and began tuning her guitar. Losing herself in thought, she concentrated on what to say and a melody to sing it with.

Like an autumn leaf that changed color sooner than its neighbors, Emma was more mature than other girls her age. In fact, she already felt close to leaving childhood behind. Mr. Davidson rose from the sofa, looked tenderly in her direction, and headed upstairs to check on Nate.

He tapped three times on the door of his son's room.

“Can I come in?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“How're you feeling, sweetie?”

“I stink at soccer.”

“Nate, you just started playing.”

“I know, and I'm already one of the worst players on my team. They're gonna hate me for losing the game.”

“Sweetie, by tomorrow they'll probably forget all about it.”

Nate shrugged.

“By the way, did you see,” Mr. Davidson asked, “how the last goal went right through Charlie's hands?”

“I guess.”

“So listen up. When Charlie practices more, he’ll learn to stop those shots. And if you decide you want to be a great player, it’ll happen if you practice enough.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I guarantee it. How about we kick the ball at Union Park tomorrow? I’ve got a few tips for you about how to defend against attackers.”

Nate nodded. He started to feel better.

“You know what? his father asked. “Maybe we can figure out how you can use your karate skills on the soccer field. Sound good?”

“Dad, players aren’t allowed to try to punch or kick each other.”

“I know, sweetie,” Mr. Davidson replied with a chuckle. “But you’ve been learning at the dojo how to react fast and keep your balance. And instead of watching only the ball, you can start paying attention to the way the attacking player moves his body, like you do with a sparring opponent in karate. Those kinds of things.”

“That’s good, Dad. I never thought of that...Can we go to the park right after breakfast?”

“Sure thing.”

He smiled at Nate.

“Should I shut the door?” he asked his son.

“No, you can leave it open.”

Mr. Davidson turned and walked to his own bedroom. He sat down on the chair at his desk and opened the top drawer.

By the time the six o’clock horn of the fire department sounded, he had lost track of how long he’d been peering at the family photo album. He closed it, put it back in the drawer, and went downstairs to make dinner. From the kitchen, he heard his daughter sing the following lines:

I learned from a maple much wiser than me

Don’t do things solo—they’ll go better as ‘we’

If one team wins, and the other’s gotta lose

I’ll never feel alone with the referee blues.