

THE DAVIDSONS



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EMMA'S WHISTLE

Emma sat cross-legged on the backyard lawn, strumming her guitar under a cloudy afternoon sky. In early September, it was warm enough to wear just a tank top above her jeans.

Mid-song, she stopped to ask, “Do I spend too much time by myself? The thing is, if I wanna be great, I gotta practice a LOT.”

The sugar maple answered with a knowing rustle of its leaves. Then Emma heard the faint, familiar sound of a doorbell. Setting the instrument aside, she leaped gracefully to her feet. In her well-worn high-top sneakers, she 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—more out of loyalty than enthusiasm—to be her campaign manager.

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

Ten minutes later, the girls were munching apples and brainstorming election slogans at Sharleen's kitchen table. Emma was still wrapping her head around the fact that her shy friend since kindergarten was actually putting herself out there.

"You're gonna talk in your speech about composting food waste from the cafeteria and planting a butterfly garden next to the schoolyard, right? How does 'Go Green, Vote for Sharleen!' sound?"

"I like that," Sharleen replied.

After also agreeing on '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."

Then why'd you let Stacey run as your VP? Emma thought. *Don't be such a pleaser!*

But that ship already sailed, so she hid her frustration and instead responded, "Don't worry. You got this, Shar."

"I do?"

"Yeah, don't sweat it. Remember," she added, shaking a fist and smiling encouragingly, "you're the smart choice."

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

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

Her friend gave a thumbs up, and Emma turned to leave. As she opened the front door, an ominous rumble of thunder rolled across the darkening sky.

“You better run, Em.”

“Yeah, I gotta help my dad fix supper, and I don’t wanna get soaked. See you in the morning,” she said, pumping her fist again.

A few minutes later, Emma was dashing toward her house when rain started pelting her. *Phew! Just made it!* she told herself as she bounded up the porch steps.

After dinner, instead of doing homework, Emma watched a documentary on television about women in sports. It ended right at bedtime. When she opened the bathroom faucet a short while later to brush her teeth, she suddenly remembered what she’d left in the backyard. She rushed outside in pajamas and bare feet, but it was too late. *This*

can't be happening, she thought, swallowing hard. It was only drizzling now, but rain had poured on her guitar for hours, softening its wooden body enough for a hungry flying squirrel to gnaw on. Emma shooed away the creature—clearly no fan of music—but the moonlight showed damage beyond repair.

Seeing how upset his daughter was, Mr. Davidson offered to cover half the cost of a new guitar. The ruined one was going to need to be replaced eventually, but ‘eventually’ had arrived years sooner than it should have. He’d help pay, but buying a new instrument, he gently explained to Emma, was her responsibility. She didn’t like his reasoning, but she couldn’t argue with it.

The following afternoon, the sky was cloudless and blue, the sun felt good on her face, and Emma came home in a better mood.

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

“Really?” Mr. Davidson replied, smiling good naturedly.

“Definitely! It’s on sale too. But half the sale price is still tons more than I’ve got in my money jar.”

Emma put on a sad face, hoping her father might volunteer to contribute a higher amount than he already offered. It was a look she'd tried before that sometimes worked.

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."

"Just to remind you, I never earned a dime babysitting MY brother either."

"I wasn't complaining, Dad. Only stating facts."

"Got it, Emmy...but listen...you might be in luck. I meant to tell you: Kayla's father said there's a referee course starting soon that you two might be interested in. For ages twelve and up, fall and spring soccer. They allegedly pay twenty-five dollars for working a 'U8' game."

Sometimes, Emma played pick-up soccer when she wasn't practicing for travel basketball. She enjoyed 'the beautiful game' and knew the basic 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 ref course, I’ll pay for it...and throw in a basic sports watch for keeping time. How’s that?”

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

During lunch period the next day, Kayla told Emma she was ready to become a referee too.

“What about you, Shar? Interested?” Emma asked, ignoring Allie, who was sitting right across from her. She knew her closest friend would rather clean toilets than do anything that required running.

Sharleen shook her head ‘no’ and began biting a nail. Understandably, she was in a dark mood. At assembly in the school auditorium that morning, she’d tripped on the stairs to the stage, in front of everyone, and then froze for what felt like forever at the start of her campaign speech.

“Kay, let’s study together for the tests,” Emma suggested, recalling the sugar maple’s recent advice. “We can quiz each other on material 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, the faded canvas case handed down by her first guitar teacher had survived the rainstorm with only grass stains and didn't need to be replaced. On the way home, she promised her father she'd NEVER leave her guitar outside again. She was thrilled to own the new instrument and excited to begin the referee course.

"Don't worry, Dad. I'll pay everything I owe you by the time camp starts."

"I'm counting on it," he replied.

* * *

Three weeks later, Emma burst through the front door of the Davidsons' house. In her right hand, she carried a black athletic-gear bag with the white logo of 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 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 beamed with pride and pulled her uniform top out of the bag.

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

Nate was a new member of the Thunder Hawks, a local SYSL team in the Under 8 division.

“Hey, what’s this?” he asked, pointing at a black circle the size of a tennis ball on the pocket of his sister’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 with a quick tug before washing the jersey.

“Clever,” Mr. Davidson remarked approvingly.

After he and Nate also admired Emma's new black shorts and black-and-white socks, she triumphantly pulled from the bag's side pocket what she'd saved for last to show them: a silver whistle—shiny proof she was queen of the soccer pitch, and everyone there needed to follow her instructions.

Emma handed the whistle to Nate after he promised not to blow it. Earlier, she'd tried it out on the walk home. Its shrill sound reminded her of the first time hearing this kind of whistle: as a second grader sitting in the stands at the Springhurst College gym before a women's varsity basketball game. She remembered being startled—but also fascinated—by how the referee signaled the tipoff. For a few seconds, everyone in the crowd suddenly got quiet and stopped whatever they were doing, all because one person blew sharply into a tiny hole in a small piece of metal.

Nate also found it interesting, even at two years old. His eyes had opened wide in surprise, and he'd shouted, "What's that?" It was an early sign of his curiosity about how things worked. For his sister, it had been more about the feeling of controlling the moment. Now that she had her own whistle, she was eager to use it to start earning big money.

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

"You have a great handle on the rules and keeping time," he added in his distinctive raspy voice, a constant reminder that smoking cigarettes was a mistake.

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 was feeling more sure of herself. Her voice, body language, and whistle-blowing showed that. At the end of the match, she wasn't surprised to hear "Well done" from a coach and "Nice job" from a parent. *This is gonna be a breeze*, she thought. *At this rate, I'll be able to pay Dad back way before camp and have plenty of spending money too!*

The following Saturday, a half hour before Mr. Davidson was supposed to drive Nate to his team's soccer game, Emma received a frantic call from a friend. She moved the phone a few inches from her ear. Kayla's voice always got too loud when she was excited.

"Em, you gotta help me out! I'm supposed to ref Strikers-Thunder Hawks at Waterfront at two, 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 see it twice already?"

"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, and she'd already officiated a match that morning. On the other hand, 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 you owe me a cotton candy."

"You're the best, Em! Thanks!"

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

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

“The one you stuck in your soccer bag five minutes ago?”

“Oh, right,” Nate replied quietly, as he confirmed the bottle’s whereabouts.

“By the way,” Emma added casually, “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 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 extra money 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 definitely use more yarn!*

Before a new thought could distract her, Emma swiveled her head to check that the goalies were ready. In the

distance, a deer poked its head out from between some bushes, seemingly unsure whether its presence near the field was welcome. Emma looked at it and sighed wistfully. Then she bent her arm up to focus on her wristwatch. She switched it to the stopwatch feature and put her whistle between her lips. At the exact moment she pressed ‘start,’ she blew sharply and the forty-minute match began. *Game on*, she mouthed, feeling the wind and a tingle of anticipation on the back of her neck.

Nate was on the bench for most of the first half. When the Thunder Hawks went ahead 3-0, he jumped up and cheered in his high-pitched voice, “Let’s GO!” His team looked unbeatable. Emma was glad for her brother, but she knew not to show it and held back a smile.

In the second half, the Strikers staged a comeback thanks to a player who arrived late from a dental appointment. He quickly scored two goals, and with under ten minutes left to play, Nate made a mistake on defense that led to an own goal and a tie score. He looked dejected, shoulders slumping, but Coach Powell clapped his hands in encouragement and kept him on the field.

The teams traded possession several more times, and Emma stopped the game twice for substitutes to enter. Remembering Mr. Sherman’s training, 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 half a minute to play, number ten—the Striker 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 six 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 the Strikers had earned a direct free kick. Their coach shouted “YES!” and a mixed chorus of cheers and groans erupted from players and fans. Lowering his head, the Thunder Hawks coach put a hand over his eyes in dismay. Nate dropped to his knees.

“Hey, number five. GET UP! ” Emma told her brother.

She immediately regretted saying it so sharply. Emma didn’t want to show favoritism toward Nate, but she

wondered if she would've spoken the same way to another player.

Following the rule book, she set the ball at the spot of the foul, made sure everyone on the field was in position, and whistled to start one 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 twice. Game over.

While the Strikers and their coach and families rejoiced, Eric Miller's dad—who'd already complained about some of Emma's decisions—went semi-berserk on the sideline. He flailed his hands and shouted at her, accusing Emma of not only making the wrong call but dragging the game out too long. During his outburst, she looked down at her feet and walked quickly toward the corner flag, took out her 'click' pen and match report from the pocket of her jersey, and jotted down the final score.

On his way to the field to console Nate, Mr. Davidson shot Mr. Miller an icy look and said, "She's only twelve! What the heck was that?"

The losing goalie's mother, a few feet away, bent down and put an 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 her brother's coach looked past her like she was invisible. *How did such a beautiful afternoon turn into this?* she wondered, her heart beating fast.

During the drive home, the only sounds in the car came from the usual rattle in the dashboard, the soft sobs of Nate, and a deep sigh from his sister. They were each replaying in their heads the last moments of the match: Emma couldn't help second-guessing her decision to add time for one more play, and Nate kept picturing himself crashing into number ten. He didn't like the way Emma had told him to get up, and he was jealous she got to decide how the game ended. *I wish she blew her whistle before the foul*, he thought.

When he entered the house, Nate dropped his soccer bag, forgetting the metal bottle inside until it clanged on the wooden floor. He didn't bother moving the bag and, instead of untying his cleats, used his toes to pry them loose at the heels. Then he trudged upstairs to his room and quietly shut the door. Normally, Mr. Davidson would've reminded him to put everything away first, but he let it slide this time.

Emma unlaced her cleats carefully, putting the ends of the laces inside each shoe before placing the pair neatly in the

hall closet with her referee bag. She slumped on the living-room couch and stared at the nicked armrest. *Maybe I'm not as great a referee as I thought*, she told herself.

"Well, I guess money doesn't always come easy," Mr. Davidson said.

"Honestly, Dad? I don't feel like talking about it."

"I get that," he said, "but keeping it inside probably won't make you feel better."

Emma pressed her lips together, remembering Gramma's advice about not allowing thin skin to let the hurts in.

"Okay, you want the truth? Right now I don't want to ref anymore. I tried my best, but my best apparently wasn't good enough. Otherwise, Mr. Miller wouldn't have yelled at me like that, and Coach Powell wouldn't have ignored me on purpose when I left."

Mr. Davidson sighed. "Emmy, you've played enough basketball games to know that adults sometimes don't handle losing well. And who ends up paying the price? It's always the refs."

Emma rested an elbow on her hip and lightly pressed her curled fingers against her lips.

“The way you stayed calm out there,” he went on. “that’s something a lot of grownups probably wouldn’t do. And making a tough call against your own brother couldn’t have been easy.”

She shrugged.

“Don’t forget,” he continued, “you and Kayla are the only girls out there reffing. That’s pretty special, right?”

He smiled and added with a wink, “Besides, how are you going to pay me back if you quit now?”

Emma rubbed her referee badge with the tip of her thumb. For a moment, she considered pulling it off, but she changed her mind. *From now on, she decided, I’m not reffing Nate’s games anymore...and if ANYONE yells at me, they’re getting a yellow card.*

She stood up, walked toward the bookshelf, and picked up the guitar leaning against it.

“I’m gonna write a new song,” she said. She paused and added, “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 quickly realized she wasn’t joking. She was still hurt, and judging by her look, full of determination. Turning her back to him, she sat on

the rug and began tuning the guitar. She was already focusing 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 most girls her age. Lately, she felt like she was already at least halfway between being a little kid and a real adult.

Mr. Davidson rose from the sofa. He kissed the top of her head before going upstairs to knock lightly on the door of his son's room.

"Can I come in?" he asked softly.

"Yeah."

Nate, still wearing his sky-blue uniform and black shin guards, lay flat on his back on his bed. His hands were clasped behind his head and his elbows pointed toward the ceiling. His feet were crossed at the ankles, and his ultramarine-blue socks—which he'd flung in the direction of the wall—were resting haphazardly on the floor. The pillow he'd tossed in the same burst of frustration was back in place under his head.

His father entered the room and stood with his back to the 'Planets of the Solar System' poster on the wall.

"How're you feeling?" he asked his son.

“I stink at soccer.”

“Nate, you just started playing.”

“I know, and I’m already one of the worst on my team. They’re gonna hate me for losing the game. I’m glad Gramma couldn’t come today.”

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

Nate rubbed the back of his neck, not quite believing him.

“By the way, did you see,” Mr. Davidson asked, “how that 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.”

Nate sat up, resting his elbows on his bent knees.

“Do you really think so?”

“I guarantee it,” his father answered confidently. How ‘bout we kick the ball at Union Park tomorrow? I’ve got a few tips for you about defending.”

Nate moved his head up and down four times fast. He started to feel better.

“Dad, do you think you can help me figure out how to use karate on the field?”

Mr. Davidson chuckled.

“Nate, you do know that soccer players aren’t allowed to try to punch and kick each other, right?”

“Yeah...of course. But I’ve been learning at the dojo how to stay on my feet when somebody attacks. Isn’t that important in soccer?”

“Hmmm,” Mr. Davidson responded.

“And I wonder if I’m looking too much just at the ball. Should I watch how players move, like I do with my sparring partners?”

“That’s really good, Nate. I never thought of that.”

“Can we go to the park right after breakfast?”

“Sure thing, sweetie.”

He smiled lovingly at Nate, turned to leave, and looked back over his shoulder.

“Do you want me to shut the door?” he asked.

“You can keep it open.”

Mr. Davidson was happy to see that Nate, like Emma, was bouncing back. He went across the hall to his own bedroom, sat down on the squeaky, brown swivel chair at his desk, and opened the top drawer.

By the time the six o'clock horn of the fire department sounded, he'd lost track of how long he was peering at old photos from college. He closed his eyes, breathed in deeply, and felt his shoulders sag as he exhaled. After putting the picture album back in the drawer, he stood up to go make dinner. At the top of the stairs, he stopped to listen. Emma was still in the living room. She was playing her guitar and singing the following lines:

*I learned from a maple who's wiser than me
Don't do things solo that go better as 'we'
When one team wins and the other's gotta lose
I won't feel alone with my referee blues.*

THE DAVIDSONS' HOMETOWN

Most people living in Springhurst thought the small town was named after the old, rusty factory next to the Mill River. For years and years, until it shut down, it made metal support springs that went inside mattresses. They were the kind of beds where, if a kid jumped up and down on one hard enough, a broken spring could poke through the top and keep a person from falling asleep.

In truth, Springhurst got its name from a cold-water spring that once trickled down, down, down to the river. It was a fact Emma and Nate had learned from their grandmother about their hometown on the steep hill.

From the train station at the river's edge, the winding streets of Springhurst rose in a series of gentle slopes. Gramma said they were built like that so walkers could catch their breath without stopping during their climb up the hill. On the way, they'd pass the cozy public library, a sleepy downtown, well-kept garden apartments, and houses that each had their own style. Anyone who made it all the way to the top of the hill could look out with sweaty armpits at oak tree canopies, shingled roofs, the wide river, and tall bluffs across the way.

Besides living there her whole life, Gramma knew a lot about the town because she volunteered at the Springhurst Historical Society in the Victorian house on Draper Lane. The building had lots of old documents and photographs that told stories about the town.

A name that stood out in the records was familiar to Emma and Nate. It belonged to Octavius Wells, the first mayor of Springhurst. In 1885, he sold his paper mill and bought land on the outskirts of town from an elderly bachelor who'd only hunted there. The mayor wanted it because the land was full of sugar-maple trees whose valuable sap was just waiting to be tapped.

"Octavius didn't know if people would always use paper," Gramma told her grandkids on a visit from them, "but he was sure they'd never stop craving syrup on their pancakes and waffles."

Nate gave an approving nod while adding brightly, "And French toast!"

"That's right, dear."

Looking at Emma, Gramma continued: “His plan for the trees depended on the education of his clever daughter. But back then, colleges rarely accepted girls, so Octavius hired an architect to design an impressive brick building in the meadow next to his estate. The money for it was donated by Charles Harwood, the outdoorsman who sold him the sugar-maple land. Octavius told people the new college would help the town grow, but just as important to him was giving his daughter Rebecca the chance to study chemistry there. He wanted her to learn how to make syrup better than anyone else’s. Of course, Harwood Hall was only the start of Springhurst College. It has more than ten buildings now.”

All of a sudden, there were two sharp knocks on the door. It was Mr. Davidson. He’d come to pick up the children, and from the sound of it, he was in a hurry.

“To be continued,” Gramma said, “if the two of you want to hear the rest of the story.”

Emma and Nate both nodded eagerly, gave their grandmother a hug, and said goodbye.

When they visited again the following week, before she even took off her coat Emma asked, “Gramma, whatever happened to the syrup Rebecca made?”

“Oh, the recipe was VERY successful. For a long, long time, three generations of the Wells family sold the syrup far and wide. But, after many years, the company changed the way it used the sugar maples because it turned out Rebecca’s grandson James hated syrup.”

Nate frowned. *That’s crazy. What’s not to like about maple syrup?* he thought.

“When James Wells inherited the business as a young man,” Gramma explained, “instead of tapping the trees for their sap, he cut them down and used the lumber to make hardwood flooring for bowling lanes and basketball courts.”

“That’s super cool, but what’s the deal with him and maple syrup?” Emma asked.

“Well,” Gramma answered, “one of those things happened that can change everything.”

Emma gave a knowing look as her grandmother continued.

“The summer before his senior year of high school, James worked for the family’s syrup company as a delivery man. One morning, he forgot to latch the back doors of his van. When he turned onto Main Street and began driving up the steepest part of the road, the doors swung open and box after box of syrup flew out onto the pavement. There were lots of broken bottles, and a woman on a bicycle skidded into a parked car. This all happened right in front of *The Springhurst Gazette* office, so they took a photo of the scene. It’s at the historical society.”

“We should go see that!” Nate said, his eyes lighting up.

“Speaking of seeing,” Gramma added, “James never got over what he saw: the damaged cartons and bottles, the sticky street, the twisted bike, and the poor lady sprawled on the hood of the car.”

Hearing that made Nate want to see the photo even more.

“Afterward,” Gramma said, “the thought of being around the gooey stuff for the rest of his life made James miserable. When he took over the business in his early twenties, after his dad got very sick, he decided to take it in a new direction. The first thing he did as company

president was to change the sign on the factory to ‘Wells Lumber.’”

“I guess the new company didn’t do too good,” Emma offered, “since there isn’t a lumber factory in town.”

“Not exactly,” Gramma replied. “It’s true about Wells Lumber no longer being here, but it was actually a booming business...until ‘The Big Fire.’

“Ohhh,” Emma replied. “That makes sense.”

Like just about everyone else in Springhurst, she and Nate knew about the enormous blaze that destroyed the woods near town. During annual assemblies with Fire Chief Dooley at Woodside Elementary, the first graders all learned how a group of careless teenagers, partying around a bonfire, had accidentally burned down the entire forest decades earlier. For years afterward, people with sensitive noses swore they could still smell burnt sap and hot dogs when passing by.

“It was,” Gramma continued, “a terrible, terrible day. Springhurst lost one of its loveliest spots, and Wells Lumber was forced to close down. But, on the bright side—for kids in the area and for the people who lost their

jobs and needed new ones—James built the indoor amusement center on the site of the old forest.”

“I LOVE that place,” Nate shouted. “I like trees too, but SportsTime’s the best!”

“Yes, dear.” She smiled softly and added, “When an accident happens, people have to accept it and then figure out how to move forward, just like James did with SportsTime...and since we’re talking about sports and moving forward, my old bones could use some exercise. Let’s go for a walk.”

They left her apartment and strolled along Rosedale Lane. Before turning up Leewood Drive, Nate showed off his skipping skills. He was proud his grandma could still skip a bit too. By the time they reached the Davidsons’ modest two-story house on Summit Avenue, Emma had won the three-way contest to avoid stepping on sidewalk cracks.

“Go inside, you two. I’ll walk home by myself,” Gramma said, giving them hugs and a smile. “Thanks for coming over today.”

After the goodbyes, Gramma went around to the backyard.

“I can’t believe how much time has passed.” She said it out loud, as if she wasn’t alone.

In the cool breeze, the branches of the majestic maple tree swayed rhythmically. She stopped and listened to their whispers, struck again by how strange it was that in a town once boasting a forest of them, only two sugar maples now stood in all of Springhurst: the one at the college and this one—a gift from James Wells to the young cousin he called Hare.

