

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. It was early September and warm enough to wear just a tank top above her jeans.

Mid-song, she stopped and asked the sugar maple next to her, “Do I spend too much time by myself? The thing is, if I wanna be great, I have to practice a LOT.”

While waiting for the tree to answer, she heard the faint, familiar sound of a doorbell. Setting the instrument aside, she leaped gracefully to her feet and scurried in her sneakers 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 be her 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. Emma was still trying

to wrap her head around the fact that her shy friend since kindergarten was finally 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 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.”

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

But that ship already sailed, so instead she responded, “Don’t worry. You got this, Shar.”

“I do?”

“Yeah, don’t sweat it. Remember,” she added, shaking a fist and smiling, “you’re the smart choice.”

Just then, the horn of the Springhurst Fire Dept. 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, a loud rumble of thunder rolled across the darkening sky.

“You better run, Em.”

“Yeah, I’m already late to help my dad fix dinner. See you in the morning,” she said, pumping her fist again.

A few minutes later, she was dashing toward the porch steps of her house when rain started pelting her. *Whew!* she told herself. *Just made it!*

While brushing her teeth at bedtime, Emma suddenly remembered what she had left in the backyard. She rushed outside in pajamas and bare feet. *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 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 MY brother either. Anyway, 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 competing in travel basketball or practicing for it. 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— and throw in a pair of basic cleats. How’s that?”

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

During lunch period on Thursday, Kayla told Emma that she wanted to become a referee too.

“Let’s study together for the tests,” Emma suggested, recalling the sugar maple’s advice from Tuesday. “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. On the way home, she promised her father she would 'never, ever' leave her guitar outside again. She was thrilled to own the new instrument and excited to begin the referee course.

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

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

On a Friday afternoon 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 a 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 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 game, Emma received a frantic phone call from Kayla.

“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 had 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 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 you stuck 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 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 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 a new thought 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 second hand to reach the number 12, she added in her head exactly twenty minutes until halftime. At the right instant, she blew her whistle sharply and the match began. *Game on*, she said to herself.

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

“Let’s GO!” he cheered 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 half 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 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 that the Strikers had earned a direct free kick. Their coach shouted “YES,” and a mixed chorus of voices erupted from players and fans. The Thunder Hawks coach lowered his head and put a hand over his eyes in dismay. Nate, overwhelmed, collapsed in despair.

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 semi-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 during their outburst and walked quickly 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. The losing goalie's mother, a few feet away, 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 her brother's coach looked past her like she was

invisible. *How did such a beautiful afternoon turn into this?* she wondered.

During 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 kept picturing himself crashing into number ten, and Emma couldn't help second-guessing her decision that led to the final goal.

When they entered the house, Nate dropped his soccer bag and kicked off his cleats, using his toes to pry them loose at the heels. He trudged wearily upstairs to his room and shut the door quietly. Emma unlaced her cleats and put them in the hall closet with her referee bag. She slumped on the living-room couch and folded her arms across her chest, 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? Right now, I don't feel like I want to ref anymore. I tried my best, but my best apparently wasn't good enough. Otherwise, Mr. Miller and his brother wouldn't have yelled at me like that—and Coach Powell wouldn't have ignored me on purpose when I left.”

“Oh Emmy,” her father replied, “people don’t always behave reasonably, especially soccer parents. And sometimes fans and coaches act like idiots at your basketball games.”

Emma shrugged.

“I understand how you feel,” Mr. Davidson continued. “Nobody likes being yelled at or given the cold shoulder, but it doesn’t do any good to run away when things get difficult.”

“Yeah, Dad, I know. Like Gramma says, ‘Thin skin lets the hurts in.’”

“Yes, and here’s the main thing, Emmy: You should be proud of how good a referee you are. You made 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. *From now on, I’m not reffing Nate’s games...and if ANYONE yells at me, they’re gonna get a yellow card.* She stood up, walked towards the bookshelf, and picked up the guitar leaning against it.

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

She paused and added with what seemed like 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 the 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 she’d left childhood behind. Mr. Davidson rose from the sofa. With her back to him, he looked tenderly in her direction before heading upstairs and knocking lightly three times on the door of his son’s room.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

“Yeah, Dad.”

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 towards the ceiling. His feet were crossed at the ankles, and his blue socks—which he had flung in the direction of the wall—were resting haphazardly on the floor.

“How’re you feeling?” his father asked.

“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. I’m glad Gramma couldn’t come today.”

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

Nate shrugged.

“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 with his hands on his knees.

“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 defending.”

Nate gave a quick nod. 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,” his son replied. “But I’ve been learning at the dojo how to react fast and keep my balance when I’m attacked. Isn’t that important in soccer? And I wonder if I’m looking at the ball too much. Maybe I should also start paying attention to the way 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 at Nate, turned to leave, and looked over his shoulder at his son.

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

“No, it’s okay. You can leave it open.”

Mr. Davidson was happy to see Nate, like Emma, bouncing back. He went across the hall to his own bedroom, 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’d lost track of how long he was peering at his photo album from college. He sighed, put it back in the drawer, and stood up to go make dinner. When he reached the top of the stairs, he stopped and listened to his daughter sing the following lines before getting up to help him in the kitchen:

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.