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Courtney and the Spark

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His paddle hit the water like a spear. *Fuuwwsht*, she heard. Then the other side, *Fuuwwsht*. Courtney stared at the distant figure, shirtless in the cold, as he paddled the large board across the smooth, early-morning face of Donner Lake. There was a black dog sitting at his feet like canine royalty. Court, as her father had nicknamed her, rose each morning for the last three weeks, cup of coffee with four sugars in hand, wishing the man to come closer than he ever came. It was only his paddle blade she heard. Only he struck the water with such force, the sound audible in the dawn before traffic on the water and the nearby road severed their connection. Even then, she sometimes had to scooch her big rump forward onto the edge of her dock in order to hear him.

There were other less powerful board riders of all ages, sexes, and sizes, though none as large as her. They rode their stand-up paddleboards, SUPs they called them, in circles, triangles, and drunken polygons, depending on their skill level. The activity had exploded in popularity. It seemed each day there were more and more, their blades slicing and carving their way to joy.

Donner Lake was calm in the morning. That was when Court was going to try, before the wind came up and the kids on wakeboards and Jet Skis chopped up its tranquility. She'd bought the equipment the prior evening—extra-large board and paddle, men's wetsuit size XL, as well as an emergency personal floatation device—from a skeptical teenage salesperson at the local snowboard shop, which also carried SUPs. She'd even set a date, only two days away, and put it on the Union Pacific train calendar in her father's rustic-gone-feral cabin, now hers.

In the parlance of the local Truckee real estate agents, the chalet was lake direct, which meant the decrepit one-story cabin was as close to the water as possible. There was no setback as required for new construction. The dock, too, was longer than currently allowed, with a small private sandy beach below. There were no cabins like it remaining. The others had been torn down and replaced with multilevel, Silicon Valley type mega-mansions that took up every inch of buildable lot and blotted out the view of the lake from the road. Her father's cabin was known around the town as the Mickey Mouse chalet because it was in such disrepair. The roof had been
patched so many times it looked like an AIDS quilt, with four separate TV antennas, all hand-installed by her father, in order to pick up the signals of as many baseball games as possible.

Agents swarmed her with brochures and emails that filled her mailboxes, real and virtual. She couldn’t set foot in the small town without one of them, usually an older woman with too much makeup, coming up to her in the aisle of the Big Chief supermarket to find out what she was doing with her valuable eyesore. “What are your plans?” they would repeat again and again, but Court had no plan. Her father’s calendar had only one thing written for the entire month of September. Under the twenty-ninth, circled in red, she’d written—Change your life.

She and Ricky were supposed to move down together from San Francisco to be closer to her father and to give living on the lake a go. She’d known Ricky wasn’t a fix-it type of guy, but it still astonished her that changing a light bulb was the only home improvement he’d attempt.

“I’ll just screw it up,” he’d say.

“How do you know if you don’t try?” She pleaded with him to fix something in their apartment. She thought if he could do it once, it would give him the confidence to springboard himself (and their relationship) forward. Apparently, Ricky didn’t want to springboard. First off, he was too damn heavy, weighing close to three hundred and fifty pounds. No, his focus was on painting scenes of mayhem and destruction featuring barely clad female warriors with spear tips for nipples. His only other priority was getting high all day and smoking the top-quality weed his medical marijuana card enabled him to purchase. Selling his art and getting good weed were the two reasons he gave for letting her go, alone, to Donner Lake.

Court’s father, known as Papa or Papa Joe, had taught her the basics of home improvement. She’d inherited his tool kit, as well as the cabin, when his Alzheimer’s took over and left him living in his long johns, unable to remember to dress and eating little more than the Donner party did and they had starved to death only a few hundred feet from the cabin in the winter of 1846. She’d bought Papa a walking cart in the spring to get food from the closest market. It had worked fairly well through the summer, but the only market within walking distance closed on Labor Day, when the tourist kids willing to spend $7.50 for a Royal Bomber Pop headed back to Silicon Valley. Papa couldn’t drive anymore because he had his license taken the same week he got the cart. She’d called the state, anonymously, a few weeks earlier to report him as unsafe. Within a week, he received a letter to come in for a test, which he forgot about. Finally, when she was down visiting, Court took him to the local DMV.

“I’ll take that, sir.” The black woman behind the desk plucked the license from Papa’s see-through fingers.

“But I’m going to need that to drive.”

“No, Mr. McMillan, you won’t be driving anymore.”

“Dr. McMillan,” Court said.
"Oh, a doctor? What kind?" the desk worker asked with the faintest of interest.

"Aeronautical engineering with a focus on statistical turbulence theory."

The worker stopped typing on her ancient desktop computer to glance at Papa dubiously. His response seemed to make her feel better about taking the license.

"He's telling the truth," Court said. "He has a Ph.D. He worked on the B-52 bomber, and he worked at NASA," she said, desperately trying to remember the highlights of her father's career in order to mark him, in this woman's mind, as something more than a demented old man at the end of the road. She almost told the woman that her father had top-secret security clearance that she'd recently found secret military documents in the cabin's garage, but Court worried the woman might turn her in, even though the papers were over forty years old. The worker wasn't listening. She was too busy stamping the Unsafe Driver License Revocation forms.

"I'm sorry, Dr. McMillan. You didn't pass the test. It's not safe for you—or for others. You don't want to hurt anyone, do you now?"

"No, of course not."

"You're going to be fine. Our public transportation is pretty good. You might just meet someone special on the bus," the worker said and moved to pat Papa's age-spot riddled hand, until she saw the look on Court's face and stopped.

Maybe Papa would be fine (though she doubted it), but Court wouldn't be. She spent that chilly spring evening sobbing in one of the cabin's tiny twin beds, unable to forgive herself for what she'd done, and for what she was going to do soon.

After that, whenever she visited and it was time to go out, Papa would stride to the garage to start up his Olds Delta 88. He wasn't physically infirm and had the leanness of a survivor of eighty-six years. He'd hunker down behind the wheel on the burnt orange velour interior.

"Hop in," he'd say.

"Papa, you can't drive anymore. They took your license."

She couldn't take the look he gave her, since each time the news came as a shock. Her father would stare as if she were crazy, but somehow—no matter how bad a day he was having—he knew at the same time that she was right.

She turned to Plan B, the bus, got the local schedule and rode the route with him over the summer to the Super Chief. When she sent him on his own, following surreptitiously in her Volvo, he got off at the wrong spot. In Truckee, where harsh winters came early and stayed forever, a mistake like that could be fatal.

"Papa," she said, after she secured him inside her car. "You're going to the Super Chief. It's on Donner Pass road. Why did you get off the bus early?"

"I'm going to Mike's."

"No, Mike's just closed. Remember, he closes every year right after Labor Day."

She watched him take this in.
"I know that."
"So why did you get off the bus?"
"Apples are cheaper at Mike's."

If he couldn’t get food by himself up here in the Sierra Mountains, it was time for intervention.

"Well, I'm not wasting my money," he said and looked out the window as she held in her tears. Even though Court made the two-hour-plus drive every weekend, winter was coming. There'd be times the I-80 would get shut down, and no matter what, she wouldn't be able to get to him. Papa had outlived his friends and neighbors, and he did not know his new neighbors. Certainly they didn’t see them over the walls of their compounds, though occasionally Court would see their Bentleys or Hummers, all with tinted windows, as they pulled in or out of garages larger than the Mickey Mouse chalet. She might have considered asking them to keep an eye on Papa—despite the fact that they’d been calling the city about the state of the cabin—but come winter these people would be long gone. Donner Lake was their summer home. Papa would be on his own.

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"My name is Courtney McMillan. I have an appointment," she told the gangly man seated behind the glass window inside the Truckee Family Care Center. He was wearing a black turtleneck and blue jeans. He put down the mountain-climbing magazine he’d been reading.

"Welcome."

"I called about my father. He has Alzheimer’s."

Court noted that the man was not just skinny but practically emaciated. She was probably twice his weight, though they were around the same age. What was it with these Donner Lake people? He was nearly as thin as Papa. Was starving themselves part of some strange homage to the lake’s namesakes?

"Name?"

"I just told you, Courtney McMillan."

"I got that," he said quietly. His black eyes were huge or maybe it was just that his cheeks were so sunken in. He was tall, too, and barely seemed to fit in the small reception office.


The man leaned forward in his desk chair and craned his neck outside of the reception window Court stood in front of. There was no one else in the lobby except for Papa, who sat and smiled politely when he saw the man’s giant head.

"Okay, why don’t you come on in? I’ll give you the tour."

He motioned her toward a door that led inside the facility and buzzed her in. He was waiting on the other side, basketball player tall.

"Hi, I’m Aaron Rondo, but everyone calls me Rondo."
He put out his hand and she took it, watching her pudgy one vanish inside his rough catcher’s mitt of a hand. She walked past him and started into the facility.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”
“I don’t think so.”
“Well, if your dad is going to live here, I think he should see if he likes it first.”
Embarrassed, Court tried to shrink as Rondo glided by her, almost rubbing against her. She was surprised by his gracefulness, his airplane-wing arm holding the door open. He gave a catcall whistle to get Papa’s attention.

“Hey, Dr. Mac, you play ping pong?”

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On the twenty-ninth, the wind was blowing hard first thing, wrecking the surface of Donner Lake. The timing of the bad weather caused her to question everything about the paddleboard enterprise. First off, even with the wetsuit she could barely get into, the water was going to be freezing when she fell, and she was going to fall, a lot. She’d watched other newbies kerplunk themselves again and again into the cold lake, and Court was bigger than all of them. Why didn’t she just join the gym? Why couldn’t she get over her fear of people looking at her the way she looked at herself? She’d thought, on the relative privacy of the lake (for the most part) and in a tight wetsuit that made her appear round rather than obese, she could find an exercise to do each and every morning to lose weight. The access couldn’t have been easier. She just had to step off her dock onto the paddleboard. If she got good and didn’t fall, she wouldn’t even get wet. Plus, after the equipment purchase, the activity was completely free. Now, the first black clouds since she’d put Papa in the home sucked the motivation out of her and down into the pit where she’d lived since she realized Ricky would never marry her. That was over three years ago. She wasn’t fat then, only heavy. Why had she stayed? Why had she wasted so much time? She wondered if it was too early for chocolate.

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That evening, though, was perfect for Court to go off her new diet and over to the Big Chief to stock up on cookies, pies, and chocolate cake. On her way out of the market, the guilt of what she carried in the two brown bags gnawed at her. She decided to unload some of it to Papa, who could use as many extra calories as possible. He liked sweets if they were handed to him, but they didn’t sing to him in dreams the way they did to her.

The center’s reception desk was empty, not unexpected since it was after nine. She used the code family members were given and opened the door to surprise Papa with dessert, but his room was empty too. There were few people anywhere. Court wasn’t worried because the center’s residents were elderly and likely in bed, but she heard voices and followed them to the entertainment room, where her father stood, glistening in the fluorescent light, playing ping pong, surrounded by a crowd of cheering residents.
He was playing Rondo, running the skinny colossus from side to side until the younger man missed. She didn’t even know her father could play ping pong, but there he was hitting the ball as though there was nothing wrong with him.

“Where did you learn to play ping pong?” Court asked, incredulously.

“In the Navy, but I played the most at NASA,” he said, then served the ball. Rondo smacked it into the net.

“Your dad’s a ping pong master. I’m lucky to return one serve. I would never have accepted him if I’d known that. He’s making me look bad.” Rondo smiled and went under the table to retrieve the ball. He had to go all the way to his knees first and then slide on them while scrunched down so he wouldn’t hit his head. While Rondo was easing himself under the table, Papa looked at Court with an expression she’d seen before, when he wasn’t sure why he couldn’t drive anymore.

“Dad?” he said and cocked his head.

What they told her would happen one day, had happened. He didn’t know who she was. She felt wobbly, like she’d just stepped on her paddleboard and was hanging on for dear life.

“Papa, it’s me. Courtney.”

Now he was confused, as he had been in their garage sitting behind the wheel of the Olds Delta 88.

Court ran out just as Rondo was extricating himself from under the table.

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He knocked on her window, startling her. For a moment, she thought it might be
Papa, sneaking out to say he'd been dehydrated from the game and lost his wits for a second, but it was Rondo.

"Hey."

"Hi."

"I'm really sorry about that," he said, shivering in a gray t-shirt outside the car. September wasn't over and the Truckee nights were already biting. She saw he was wet from the game. "Can I get in for a minute?" he asked.

"Oh, sure." She scrambled to hide the wrappers from the individually wrapped double chocolate, chocolate chip cookies that were her favorite. She'd just gotten rid of the evidence when he opened the door, folded himself up, and then down into the passenger seat.

"Can we not talk about what just happened?" she asked.

"Sure."

"The seat goes back."

Rondo reached around but couldn't find the latch, so she leaned over and helped him, her bosom on his knee causing him to jerk. Finally, he pushed back while she held the latch, but the seat wouldn't budge. Then she remembered the bag of paddleboard stuff on the floor directly behind him.

"Wait." Court turned and twisted herself into the backseat and grabbed the bag. She tried to pull it but it ripped, forcing her to throw the items one by one onto the backseat. Because of his height, Rondo was easily able to see them.

"Whoa, new wetsuit."

"I'm taking it back."

"It doesn't fit?"

"I just don't need it."

She turned back to face forward, but his attention stayed on the backseat.

"You got a personal floatation device too."

"I'm returning it all tomorrow."

Now he turned toward her, his head held at an angle so to not scrape the roof.

"Why did you buy it?"

He wasn't a handsome man; his face was scary in the bad lighting inside her Volvo, though being crushed uncomfortably in the improperly adjusted front seat was probably the main reason for his grim expression. But, he did seem kind.

"It was just an idea I had to lose some weight. Another in a long list. For example, I'm on this diet called The Wrest. You buy this app and pay a monthly fee and then you take a picture of everything you eat. If the food is bad for you or you have too much, you have to 'wrest' the food off your plate or an alarm sounds. It's really annoying."

They both spotted a cookie wrapper she'd missed on the dashboard of the car. Court
quickly grabbed it.

“Does it work?”

“Does it look like it?”

He smiled. At least he had nice teeth. Nice and nice teeth. He was already two things up on Ricky.

“How long have you worked at the center?” she asked.

“I’m part time. I do construction too, but winter’s coming so it gets kind of slow.”

“What kind of construction?”

“Carpentry, mainly, but I can do a bit of everything. Except painting. I do not do painting.” He said the last part like it was a punch line and she was supposed to laugh, so she did, but it only served to make him nervous and they both got quiet.

“I’ve have to get back. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, I can understand that.”

“Can you? Do you see fathers not recognize their own child for the first time often?”

She didn’t mean it to sound the way it did, mean and bitter, but it drove him to open the door. He pulled one knee into his chest, then swung it out onto the ground, then did the same with his other leg. When he was clear, he stood and disappeared from her view. She leaned down and tried to find him like he was the moon, lurking somewhere just out of sight. Then, he was knocking on her window again, and she lowered it this time.

“If you want to hang onto that stuff,” he said, pointing at the SUP equipment on the backseat, “I’ll teach you how to paddleboard. I go every morning.”

It was not possible.

“Well, me and my—”

“Dog. You have a black dog.”

“Yeah, I guess you’ve seen us.”

“I hear you.”

He looked as confused as Papa had.

“I hear your paddle strike the water. It’s what inspired me to buy all that stupid stuff.”

“Oh, now it’s my fault.”

“Yes, Rondo, it is.”

“Then, the least I can do is teach you how.”

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