

ROUGH PASSAGES

K.M.
HERKES

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DEDICATION

Paul, without you, I would still be only a dreamer of daydreams, not a published author. Your steadfast support and encouragement make my creative adventures possible. No dedication, no acknowledgement, no words will ever be sufficient to express my gratitude and love.

This will have to do.



To my faithful, patient, alpha and beta readers: your patience, enthusiasm, and generosity continue to amaze and humble me. Your critical observations, pivotal insights, and meticulous attention to detail are essential to polishing my lumpy ideas into shining stories.

Thank you all.



*This one's for you, Dan'l. I finally did it.
Guess I'll let you get back to what you were doing.
I miss you something fierce.*

EXTRAORDINARY



PART ONE: A SPECIAL DAY

Valerie loved the carnival. Every April, it set up in the Indio city park for one magic week, and every year, she celebrated her birthday there. The year she turned forty-two, she got to watch everything come to life while she ran all her unpleasant annual errands. Having the day free from both jobs felt like a holiday even if she spent it on obligations.

Partially-constructed machinery rose against the sunlit Santa Rosa Mountains like dinosaur skeletons as she drove to the DMV. The rides were running by the time she passed on the way back. Their colored lights flashed pale under the bright blue sky, and she caught tinny scraps of familiar melodies on the hot breeze through her open window. Piles of canvas and wood became a colorful lane of gaming booths and exhibits between her trip to the gynecologist and the one to the Public Safety Clinic where she took her R-factor test.

On impulse she pulled over to the curb to watch two of the crew lift a sign into place. *Cotton Candy!* it proclaimed in a rainbow of pastels, and the cook maneuvering her machine into position



shouted curses at them when the panel smacked her in passing. Valerie took a deep breath of air heavy with the residue of gasoline fumes and the salty-sweet promise of caramel popcorn before she reluctantly drove on.

Anticipating the coming evening kept her so preoccupied that she barely felt the usual twinge of nervousness as her blood was drawn. While she waited in the chilly exam room for the usual post-test medical lecture she read posters about cancerous moles and the warning signs of heart attacks and reflected that getting older was dangerous for everyone. Only one in every few thousand came up positive for rollover these days. Valerie wiped her hands dry and reminded herself that she was far more likely to get cancer than end up turning into a monster.

The clinic nurse delivered the usual warnings about watching her weight and wearing sunscreen. She made it sound like Valerie had chosen to be born pasty-pale and prone to putting on pounds despite being on her feet all day. Her ankles were swollen, she noticed. The buzzing fluorescent lights made her blonde hair look green in the door mirror. The roots were showing, and her bangs needed a trim.

The nurse also wanted Valerie to make another appointment to get over the blood test results with a doctor. Valerie signed the release forms to get a letter instead, and she hurried to her car to get the rest of her errands finished. One nagging session a year was enough. She didn't have time for another lecture about preparing for the worst and planning for her family's future anyway. She'd used up all her favors to get these few hours free for herself. Usually day shifts at the diner and night hours at another restaurant kept her life full, and shuttling her mother to and from physical therapy filled the gaps.

Besides, she'd heard the be-prepared speech twice already, at forty and forty-one. The warnings were all pointless. If she was

unlucky enough to roll, then Public Safety would come to her, the way they'd taken away a customer from her night job a few months earlier. The poor man's friends had fled the fancy restaurant when their table started icing over, and he'd sat there looking terrified while things turned white and crumbled all around him. He cried when the retrieval team took him away.

Valerie turned up the car stereo to drown out the memory of those whimpers. She didn't have time to worry about things that wouldn't happen. She still had to buy groceries for the week and drop off bills at the post office before she could pick up her mother and the boys and go have fun.

By the time she got her family to the carnival the sun was down, and the line for tickets stretched down the block. Not even the long wait with her cranky mother and two ram-bunctious toddlers could dampen her spirits. Sweat made her sundress stick to her breasts and thighs, she got wood chips in her sandals, and they stood near a rancid garbage can far too long, but the raucous laughter from people swooping past on the roller coaster took her back to times when happiness was a matter of giving herself a stomach ache from too much popcorn and taking too many spins on the teacup ride.

Her sons, Gary and Johnny, caught her infectious enthusiasm and spent long minutes deciding which concession stands to visit, and then they had a serious discussion on the relative merits of neon-braided lollipops and purple puffs of cotton candy. The proprietors smiled at their thoughtful scowls and their matching blue shorts outfits.

They were in a phase when their clothes fit, and they had a rosy-cheeked blond beauty that invited indulgence. Sometimes she saw their father's calculating selfishness in their smiles and his obsessive anger in their frowning squabbles, but moments like these were ones she wished would last forever.

The moment didn't last. Of course it didn't.



Cotton candy won the snack war, but Gary fell headlong on the woodchip path between the concession area and the aisles of gaming booths before he took a single bite. He scraped both his knees and ruined his new jeans, and while Valerie was distracted by his tears and the cleanup, Johnny ate his all of his little brother's cotton candy as well as his own. Five minutes after that, Valerie was holding Johnny over a trash barrel while he vomited it all back up.

Valerie wiped his face and gave him a sip of her icy drink, trying hard to ignore the fact that her clothes were now sopping wet with tears, snot and spatters of vomit. Then she embraced Johnny and glared at her mother over his shoulder. "You could've told me he was stuffing it all down his throat."

Mom leaned on her walker and sniffed in disapproval. "The greedy little pig learned his lesson. He'll thank you for it later. You're too soft on them."

Valerie held her breath so that she would not say, "And maybe if you'd been a little softer with me, I wouldn't be raising two boys alone while I work two jobs to pay off debts run up by my abusive addict ex-husband." If Mom heard all that she would cry, and when she cried everyone blamed Valerie.

Mom looked like the big, soft, apple-cheeked grandma she pretended to be. She hid her flinty cold heart beneath an ample bosom and wrapped herself in flowery house dresses, and she kept all the hard bitterness inside. There was no point in arguing, so all Valerie said was, "Mom, please. Not tonight."

Then she looked around at the hustle and bustle and blinked back tears. Barkers shouted, music played, and people strolled past on all sides, politely ignoring the family tension in their midst. Tent walls swayed in the cool breeze, the air was dusty and thick with grease, and flashing rides spun and rattled like monsters moving in the twilight.

It was perfect, except that her heart was full of acid sadness, and she ached for all the years she'd wasted trying to be a good child and then a good wife instead of a real person. For all she knew, she'd wasted her whole life. If her R-test came back positive, this might be her last proper carnival ever, at least as a free woman.

She shoved the morbid thought away. Rollover wasn't a death sentence. Not these days. Most factor-positive people led full, normal lives even after the changes. And they tipped well. Other servers would whisper "Poz" to each other and pretend they were too busy to serve rollovers, but Valerie was happy to take the tables and the tips.

But it wasn't going to happen to her.

A hawker for one of the game booths leaned over his counter and waved, catching her eye. "How about a free game for the kiddos?" he called out. A gold tooth flashed in his scruffy beard, and he tipped the velvet top hat on his shaggy dark hair. "And one for their beautiful mother."

Mom snorted. "Beautiful? You? He must be blind."

The insult poked right through Valerie's temper and let the all sourness drain out.

"Well, Mom," she said, "people do say I look just like you."

They had looked alike once, before age hunched Mom's spine and shriveled her skin, before the accident broke her hip and bed rest added even more padding to her soft body. They were both big women with thick arms and thicker ankles, and the color in their hair came from the same bottles these days. Valerie smirked at her mother's shocked expression and took her sons by the hand. "Come on, guys. This will be fun."

The boys walked fast and bouncy. The words *free* and *fun* were enough to make them forget the earlier small tragedies, and they left



Mom, her poisonous tongue and her walker far behind. Valerie didn't care if the woman ever caught up, but of course she did. The nasty comment went unremarked. Things ignored ceased to exist. That was Mom's way. They spent a lot of evenings not speaking to each other.

The boys tossed balls at painted boats floating in tubs of moving water, and Valerie chatted with the man running the game. He had a polished patter and a rough, gritty charm. The boys cheered, water splashed, and Valerie paid for two more games after the first and considered it a fair bargain. The harmless flirting made her feel alive again.

"Bah," Mom said. "Will you look at that? Back in my day, the freaks stayed in the sideshow tents. Disgusting."

The boys both turned, blue eyes gleaming with curiosity, and Valerie turned too. Her stomach knotted up. She already knew from Mom's words what would be there.

Visitors flashing bare skin and dressed in gaudy colors filled the path going both directions. The two women in gray and black Department of Public Safety uniforms walking away along the other side stood out for reasons beyond their drab wardrobes. They were visibly R-positive rollovers, and they walked in a bubble of clear space, untouched by the jostling crowds.

Both were tall and fit, and one of them looked normal except for the purple hair she kept in a thick braid. The length of it should have dangled past her waist, but instead it writhed and twisted like a live creature. She walked with both hands around it to keep it from questing towards people. The other officer had cropped short black hair, a scaled gray muzzle of a face, spiny lumps where most people had ears, and—

Gary crowed with laughter and shouted, "Look, Mama, he's all scaly."