

Places Between

A Wielder World Short Story

by Nat Kennedy

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Photographs of faces—sunken cheeks, empty eye sockets, skin the color of deep forest mosses—and their escorting dossiers covered the surface of the Bureau of Wielder Services massive conference room table.

“See these signs, the hollowness, as if the body had been sucked free of its juices—”

Bethany Wolfe-Martin, senior mind Wielder of the BWS, leveled her gaze as her non-Wielder partner, Russ Jameson, tried for entertaining and spooky. They'd worked together for nearly her entire career as an Agent at the BWS, and sometimes she hated being the straight man.

Jameson jogged his shoulders as if someone had passed over his grave. “The creepy green skin—?”

Raising her eyebrows, she played her part, let him do his song and dance. As a non-Wielder at the Bureau—whose mandate was to find and capture Wielder criminals—he was always going to be of lower rank than she, but even given his mundane handicap, he was a superb detective.

“Same Wielder. Sure as shit.” He nodded thoughtfully.

“You don't say?” Beth drawled. Just that morning, her assistant, Ricky, had given her another file, another photo, another face to add to the long list of the dead. She glanced at the picture of what was once a young woman, maybe in her teens, though it was hard to tell when all of her fluids had been taken from her body.

The pictures didn't lie. That same color of gray-green was all they really needed to pile Andrea Kane's file in with the Green Killer case. Every Wielder—Wielder of the Nerve of the World—left some unique Tracer behind when they used their magic by plucking a Nerve of the World—a magical conduit that connected everyone and everything. For mind Wielders like Beth, it was sound, for force Wielders, a scent, and enhancement Wielders, a sensation in the air.

And this, this corporeal change, this manipulation of the bodies, was like nothing the Bureau had ever experienced. Wielders either worked the mind, worked forces or boosted their own physical capabilities. No power of the Nerve sucked a body dry or left a physical Tracer behind.

Wielders were *evolving*, plucking new branches of the Nerve.

The door banged open, rebounded off the brace on the floor, and nearly smacked Ricky in the face, almost forcing him to drop his coffee. “Agent Wolfe-Martin,” he jerked his head back towards the interrogation rooms, “Shimmy's here. Wants you.”

Jameson rolled his shoulders as he stood from his hunched position. He exchanged a look with Beth. “She's your snitch. You want me there?”

“Ricky, you know what it's about?”

Ricky's mouth turned down. He sipped from his Styrofoam cup. “Well, she seemed pretty scared. Wouldn't talk in the pen.”

Beth and Jameson shared a look. Nodded. “All right,” Beth said. “You're with me.”

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“So,” Beth said. “Shimmy isn't a known mentalist, but still keep your brain on tight. She could be hiding her angles from me, and we don't need someone like her digging around your head, learning more than she needs to.”

All jokeship gone, Jameson's determination set his normally jovial face into deep lines highlighting his scowl. “I've built up my thought control. You said I was passable.”

“Passable,” she stressed. “If she was a trained mind Wielder, she could knock aside your

control.” Beth offered Jameson a smile and gripped his bicep. “You’re good, but...” She shrugged. Jameson knew a good mentalist could rip apart any non-Wielder; she didn’t have to tell him.

Beth swung the door open and stepped into the interrogation room, her low heels clacking against the worn, dull tiles. Jameson, his large presence a comfort, entered behind her.

“Shimmy, what’s up?”

Shimmy, a scant thing in her late thirties, perched on the edge of her chair. She ran a psychic shop, read palms and crystal balls, and turned tricks on the side. On her rap sheet, she was designated a force Wielder, but Bethany had never seen her in action. It was Beth’s guess Shimmy wasn’t that powerful. The fidgety woman hadn’t done anything illegal with her power, so normally the BWS wouldn’t be interested in her, but she had broken the more mundane laws so often in the past, she was on a first name basis with Bethany.

“Ah, yeah. Well—” Shimmy tucked some dyed black hair behind her ear, not meeting Beth’s eyes. “I heard that—” She glanced at Jameson, then at the camera mounted in the corner of the room over the door. She leaned forward. Beth pulled out the cold metal chair, sat, and leaned towards Shimmy.

“The Martiniques are missing girls,” she said in a breath.

Beth kept her expression neutral, but her mind was flipping through the dossiers of dead young women. “So, the kids get a clue and go home?” She *hoped* they’d quit the Wielder gang.

Shimmy shook her head, her thick bangs swaying across her forehead. “No, missing, as in they’ve been,” her eyes darted to Jameson, then back to Beth, “snatched away.”

Beth frowned. “Snatched? Why do you say that?”

“Rena saw one of them get hauled into a beige sedan, she thought it was a Toyota. On 18th and Bridgecreek. And their parents,” she shrugged, “don’t know where they’re at. Didn’t you get the missing person’s report?”

Beth snorted. There were stacks of missing person’s reports.

“How many?” Jameson asked, his voice deep and commanding. His interrogation voice.

Shimmy shrugged. “I don’t know. I just heard this. A few. And nobody wants to come to you, ‘cause they’re with the gangs. But, if girls are missing....”

Shimmy had had her own bout of rough street time. Bethany knew the woman wouldn’t wish her own personal horror on other kids.

“You said Rena spotted someone get taken? Rena Blackstone?” Beth asked.

Shimmy nodded. “She thought it was someone from Mara Murda who’s taking ‘em, but I think that’s just straw.”

Beth nodded. Mara Murda, a cult of male Wielders, had run from the city following a crackdown on their hangout up on Steptoe. This was probably just a squabble between the female gangs. “Any other news?”

Shimmy barked out a bitter laugh. “s it true? The Green Killer’s only going after Wielders? It’s what they’re saying. He’s targeting girls. And they’re saying it’s a... a physical Wielder?” She swallowed, all color leaving her face. “A physical...” she said under her breath, “what do you think they can do?”

Beth couldn’t help it, she exchanged a look with Jameson.

She’d wanted to go public about the victims weeks ago but was told to wait. Wait until they knew for sure. Girls who would have been more watchful had they known a killer was stalking the streets now occupied a morgue slab.

“Yes. It’s true. And I don’t know. Physical is new to us, too.”

“Wolfie,” Jameson warned.

“It’s got to be a man. A skell.” Shimmy’s hands skittered across the table, grasping for Beth’s. Beth did not disagree with this theory. “Hunting us! You know it. Some mad male Wielder who’s

killing girls. You gotta protect me.” Shimmy's tone took on a desperate screech. “Don't let him kill me!”

“Shimmy, calm down.”

Shimmy's face blazed red, a hot coal of panic and fury. “Don't you tell me to calm down!”

Beth's hand began to go numb from the woman's grip. She cleared her throat, wondered if being delicate would matter. “You're not of the same demographic as the other victims.”

“I'm a Wielder. He's killing Welders!”

“Young Welders, Shimmy. Come on now, let's focus on the under twenty-fives, find out their patterns, see where their paths cross. This killer, skell or not, is hunting young women.” Bethany watched as Shimmy's face dawned with realization. She nodded slowly at the woman, over-exaggerating the motion until Shimmy gave her own little nod. “We need to protect them. Find out where they are gathering. Where they are walking when on their own. Where they might be vulnerable.

“I need you to do something for me, Shimmy,” Beth concluded once it appeared Shimmy was on board. “I've got some pictures...”

Bethany's phone rang; she glanced at the screen. Her husband. She considered sending it to voice mail, but she had few moments in her day to take a personal call, and Jameson could take over from here.

“You got this, Jameson. Show her some of the photos?”

Her partner nodded. “Sure thing, Wolfie.”

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“No, honey. I can't come tonight. I've got this case—”

“Beth,” her husband's voice over the phone took on that tone of exasperation she hated, “Melanie's recital has been on the calendar for two months.”

Bethany pulled the phone away from her face and flipped through her planner with her thumb. Meeting with Director Ricksfield. Interrogation for the Medlow case. Stakeout on the waterfront. No recital.

Wonderful. If only she could go back a week, or maybe a month, and fill in all of Melanie's performances in her planner, all of the meetings Paul said she had to attend. She gritted her teeth; time didn't flow backward, only forward.

“Listen, Paul, I must have missed—”

“Yeah, I know.” His voice got low, and Bethany braced herself against his favorite litany with a silent breath. “Like my dad's birthday. You haven't once picked up Melanie from her dance classes, or gone to any of those boring as hell PTA meetings. I'm tired, too, Beth. You don't even make our counseling sessions.”

He sighed deeply. Bethany held her hand up to Ricky, who hesitantly held out a pile of folders in one hand, the other grasping his coffee cup. A quick scan of the inhabited desks decorating the open floor plan of the Bureau station showed everyone was eavesdropping and working very hard to appear like they weren't. She ducked her head, shielding the conversation with a brown veil of her hair.

“Didn't you even notice the poster on the fridge? About the recital?”

It had been a week or so since Bethany had even approached the refrigerator. She got home late, showered, and crawled into bed, back to back with her husband. Breakfast consisted of a sandwich from some crappy food cart. Was there a garishly decorated poster on the white refrigerator door, with little girls all dressed up in pink leotards with frilly tutus and mile-wide smiles?

She dug her fingers into her scalp. And she called herself a detective.

“Paul, I don't know. Can we talk about this later? You know this case—”

“Fine. Whatever. I'll let your daughter know you won't make it, *again*. Just put that on me, Beth. Appreciate it.” He hung up.

Bethany closed her eyes, tried to count to ten, but kept repeating number three. When she opened them and peeked out past her hair, Ricky was standing there, clutching the files to his chest, shifting from side to side.

“Give me those.” She snatched up the folders.

Ricky turned a one-eighty, hunched his shoulders, and skulked away.

Jameson waved to catch her attention and gestured for her to join him and Shimmy back in the interrogation room. “Think we got something.”

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The warehouse docks teemed with people early the next day—typical in gang territories. Signs of Wielding magic hung in the air. Chimes and bongs and scratchy, itchy sounds resonated together to form a discordant white noise while harsh smells tainted sweet, honied scents, and the patches of hot or sticky air amidst cool or hot zones broadcast the acts of boosters. Tracers were different for each power wielded and specific to every Wielder. Beth's mind-reading conjured up the sound of a strummed harp string, emitting a tenor chime when she plucked the Nerve.

Shimmy had fingered most of the dead Wielders as having skirted the rim of the Martinique gang. Which meant, if Bethany wanted her killer, she would need to start at the source of prey.

Hugging the edge of the afternoon dock party, she kept the few men in the mix at an arm's length, observing them for signs of Corruption, but none showed flaking skin, horns, or burn marks. Didn't mean the man wasn't a Wielder or he hadn't gone mad. Not every man could control the power as well as her brother. For most men, it was said that the Nerve plucked them. It was an inevitable end for male Wielders who Wielded: madness. To be fair, Bethany had to accept that these men could be muscle or just boy toys for the women.

It took Bethany a minute, but eventually, she found Rena Blackstone, her roommate from college.

“Rena!

Rena spun around, eyes glinting in the afternoon light. With a swift double-take, Rena blinked, smiled and called out over the buzz of the gathering, “Bethany!” Then she rushed out, “What're you doing here?”

Within that secret place no scientist could map, Bethany reached deep, her inner senses flitting across an array of strings—the Nerve—until she found the one she was looking for. She reached out and plucked it.

A soft chime burred through the air, totally subsumed by the clamor of women around her.

Bethany smiled at her old friend as she scanned Rena's mind, searching for evidence that she knew about Bethany's connection with the Bureau.

“It's been a while. How've you been?” Beth asked, continuing her scan. Nothing came up. Rena had no idea her old college friend was BWS. In fact, to her smug relief, Rena was as absent-minded as she had been back in college. Bethany spun up some tale of just returning from time up in Canada.

Rena's brows knit on her forehead. “I totally forget, what do you do again?”

Bethany smiled. “Environmental geologist. How could you forget?”

Rena laughed, flipped her hand through the air as if to dismiss her forgetfulness. “You know me, just spacey at times.”

“So, Rena. I was hoping to join up. You know, safety in numbers.” Bethany left her face open, expression soft. “With someone out there, picking us off...” Letting loose a bit of her worry, a bit of her fear wasn't hard. “What do I need to do?”

Rena grabbed Bethany's hand, grimacing in worry. “Yeah, some skell's out there. But don't

worry, Bethany. We'll find him. The gang won't stand for this." Then her friend grinned, big and bright and dismissive of all other concerns. "But if you really wanna join, that is so cool. You'll have to talk to Cynthia, first. Come on!"

Bethany was in.



Bethany kept her head down, met no eyes, and shored up her mental shields. Simple numbers assured that many of these Wielders had been arrested for some crime, or were involved in a Wielder Involved Incident. She shortened her stride, dropped her chin, tried to appear *small*. All her clothing revealed of her was that she had a modest budget and didn't like bright colors.

Bethany followed Rena through a group of women surrounding a cluster of picnic tables. Barbecue sizzled on a grill, overpowering the evidence of most smell-based force Tracers. Her mouth watered.

Rena ducked under a half-raised roll-down door into a brightly lit warehouse, halogen lamps hanging from overhead fixtures. Dust moats caught the light, floating like aimless gnats. Bethany reflexively blinked against the grit. The building had a drywall partition erected, blocking off the main section of the warehouse floor. She thought it a pretty nifty set-up for the use of space.

Near a room labeled "Toilet", Rena gestured at a set of chairs. "Wait here, Beth. I'll go see if Cynthia is around." She leaned closer, her smile a kissing cousin to a bad girl smirk. "You're really not supposed to be in here but just stay by the door and nobody should bother you."

Rena rounded a corner, passing out of sight into the warehouse. Beth peeked around the wall to get a better view of the layout. More wall partitions suggested a handful of offices or maybe living quarters. A larger area to the right was left open with a boxing ring set up and an area jumbled with odd objects: cars, desks, bowling balls. All busted up. Force Wielder training. They had rooms like this at the Bureau.

"Excuse me, are you new?"

Bethany jumped, immediately checking her mental barriers. She turned around, adopting a sheepish look: pressing her lips together, raising her eyebrows. She twisted her hands into a knot. An older woman waited in the warehouse doorway.

"Hi, kinda," Bethany said, oozing some apology into her tone. "I'm here to meet Cynthia. I want to join."

Bethany reached out to pluck yet another Nerve to scan the woman's mind, but came across an insurmountable shield and released the Nerve, not daring to draw attention to herself. This woman was probably also a mind Wielder because non-mentalists just couldn't build this kind of barrier. "I've been in Canada for a while. I'm Bethany."

The woman nodded. "I'm April." With her hair trimmed short, a powerful steely gray in color, she had the air of a politician about her. She offered her hand and they shook, both women smiling.

Bethany glanced around the warehouse. "I'm a friend of Rena's."

April tilted her head, studying Bethany. Bethany pulled her inner thoughts in tight, letting slip others that had nothing to do with who she was and what she was doing. A sound like the noise an industrial hole-punch made thumped around them, heavy and telling. Out seeped her worry about her daughter. The guilt over her marriage. Bethany swallowed, turned away from the woman's scrutiny. That hadn't been leaked intentionally; this woman had plucked it through the intentional holes in her mind shield.

In polite society outside of the cults, a mentalist never read another's mind without permission. For one, you could never hide what you were doing, the Tracer always gave the mentalist away. And second, it was illegal. Outside of the cult, Bethany would demand such action cease, but here Bethany was not a BWS agent, but a geologist vying for a face-to-face with their leader. She didn't blame April for checking on Bethany. But April had shown her hand. Bethany knew this woman's

power and Tracer.

The older woman nodded and pointed. “Over there. She's gathering the young ones, telling them about their unique snowflakeness and how with power and numbers come strength. You know.” April smiled thin-lipped, closed her eyes, and shook her head.

“Why are you here if you don't...?” Bethany, embracing her shy-girl persona, didn't feel it prudent to finish.

April cast a far-off gaze that lost itself somewhere over Bethany's shoulder, then she sighed the sigh of the weary. “It's nice to be with other Wielders. Those without the ability shield themselves behind a certain caution—if they know about you—that gets tiring after a while. I'm no little girl; I'm tired of pretending.”

Bethany understood. Whether with her husband, or her non-Wielder friends, her 'otherness' dominated the atmosphere. Non-Wielders treated those who could pluck the Nerve with equal parts awe and distrust. But at her job, where over half of the agents Wielded the Nerve, she had purpose and a sisterhood. It was easy for her to understand why these women would join up with one of the cults.

The two women walked into an open area within the warehouse. About fifty yards away in yellow plastic lawn chairs, sat a woman with three teenage girls. Rena waited nearby patiently, her back to the approaching women.

Cynthia, the leader of the Martinique gang, was a round, unassuming woman with dark skin and indeterminate heritage. Bethany had never met her, since she wasn't on the gang task force, but recognized her instantly. If someone was kidnapping her girls, using her power on them, Cynthia was the woman to go to for intel.

Unless Cynthia was the one behind the acts.

Cynthia said something, and the young women all looked at each other, eyes wide. They were the faces of hope, opportunity, and belonging. Bethany watched the gathering, something fluttering in her imagination—the image of her own daughter inserted into this group of women. Young Melanie, perhaps just finding out she could Wield—luckily that was a few years off—worried how her parents would take it, but optimistic, looking for acceptance, for fun, joining up with a gang.

Indigestion bubbled solidly in Bethany's gut. No, her daughter would never feel the need to join a cult; Bethany would support her every step of the way.

Cynthia rubbed a young woman's shoulder, supportive. Bethany shook her head, letting reality assert itself. Cynthia wasn't behind this; it made no sense for this advocate of Wielders to kill the very people she was trying to influence.

A woman in a ponytail rushed in from another warehouse door. Her chest heaved as she gasped for breath. “Someone from BWS is here.”

The teens gasped. Cynthia adopted a sly smirk.

Beth's jaw clenched. Did Jameson get caught? He wasn't due to storm the castle yet.

“Shall we go greet our guest?” Cynthia asked, and she and Rena followed the other woman out the door. The girls trailed after, huddled close and whispering. Left alone with April, Bethany let her muscles ease, relaxed her hold on the Nerve she'd gathered up.

April turned toward Bethany, her smile mild. “So, why *are* you here, BWS?”

Bethany's heart pounded once, then seemed to backfire in her chest. She shored up her shield an instant before she heard that same hole punch stamp.

April narrowed her gaze, viper sharp. “You're a formidable mentalist,” she said. “I didn't get it off your mind, but I'm very good at picking out the feds. The shoes, the glasses, the act you put on, attempting to diminish yourself, but you're obviously focused. Why are you here?”

Bethany took in a breath, offered a tight smile. They were alone in the warehouse, but a commotion outside suggested their solitude wouldn't last long. Jeers and curses split the air.



Threats and goosebumps skittered up Bethany's arms.

"I'm looking for a murderer. Someone who is killing Wielders. Young women."

April's hard façade faltered. So, she hadn't expected that.

"We're missing girls," April said.

Bethany dropped her pleasant, blasé act. "I was told the Sierras were missing some too."

April studied Bethany once more and shook her head. "Killer's not anyone here. I check everyone over."

Bethany believed that, the old, suspicious matriarch. She wondered at the position this unassuming woman had in the gang.

"But the killer's hunting your girls." Bethany stood tall, eagerly sloughing off the act. "I must talk to Cynthia."

"Yes, you should."

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"Mandy." A photo of a shy brunette with braces slid across the plastic desktop. "Sara." A picture of an older teenage girl with a short bob of dark hair and a sassy grin. "Coral." A pale Scandinavian girl with a cocky smirk. "Eva." A Hispanic girl with thick black hair and dimples. "Tora." A brunette with freckles and bright blue eyes. "Cindy." A young Asian woman, early twenties, shyly glancing at the camera.

"These are our missing friends," Cynthia finished, her flat and unimpressed tone aimed at Bethany.

"Why didn't you report any of this to the police?" Jameson asked, holding a cold compress to his cheek where a metal barrel had been thrown into his face.

Cynthia gave Jameson a look of disbelief.

Bethany dropped her 'why don't we all get along' attitude. "Women are missing—*girls*—and you're worried about coming to us? You're worried about your little tower of power here and not about the people who are a part of it. Ridiculous."

She seethed. Each face, each smile, she'd seen them before. Seen them desiccated and green. Seen them on the morgue slab with a toe tag for decoration.

Her phone buzzed in her pants pocket, the vibration rubbing against her leg. It'd been buzzing for twenty minutes now, off and on. She wondered what item was missing on her daily planner today and wanted to curse at the wackjobs of the world who got off on hurting people so she couldn't be at home with her family.

Cynthia sneered, but she couldn't intimidate Bethany. "You never—"

"Setting blame isn't the important thing right now," Bethany said. Cynthia inhaled, puffing out her ample chest like a crowing cock.

"We need all the information you can give us about these girls," Jameson said. "Who they hung out with, where they might have been. If you know, where they were last seen, or taken."

April leaned over and whispered something into Cynthia's ear. Cynthia's face darkened. She nodded, then slammed her fist against the desk, scattering the printed snapshots of the dead girls.

"Yeah. Fine." She slowly dribbled information to them, every piece like some precious jewel callously given away. Bethany jotted down the notes on each girl, wishing that discovering ways to appease Paul were as easy.

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Flack vest strapped on, weapon readied. Stationed in the crowded back of a surveillance van, Bethany stared down at her phone. It'd stopped buzzing hours ago, but this was her first breather since her truce with Martinique. She picked up the phone and hit a button. It rang once. Twice.

"Beth. Thanks for calling me back." Paul didn't sound happy.

"I'm in the middle of a huge case, Hon." Which he knew.

"I know you can't make it to any of our counseling meetings, so I'm telling you over the phone. I'm done. I've had enough. I love you, Beth, but I can't live like this anymore."

Paul hung up.

Beth stared at her cell, numb. A piercing ringing echoed in her ears.

Jameson cleared his throat. "Wolfe," —he never did use her full last name— "they're ready to roll. Waiting on you."

Bethany pressed her lips together, tore her eyes away from the phone. She would fix it later. Go to every session. Be home at a reasonable hour every night. Right now, she needed to catch this killer. She nodded once. "Yeah, I'm ready."

Seven agents huddled with the equipment in the cramped space. Police back-up had been stationed around the neighborhood. After pulling the information from Cynthia—worse than taking Ricky's coffee away—they'd found a common factor. The girls all gathered or hung out at Perky Press, a small independent bookstore meets coffee joint. With the agents was a young woman, a member of the Martinique gang who'd just began to figure out her powers. Cynthia had insisted on joining, but April had talked her out of it. Instead, the much calmer April leaned towards the girl, Penny, comforting her with words.

Penny didn't seem too worried; in fact, she seemed to be treating the entire operation as an exciting outing. Bethany couldn't look at her. She had long dirty blond hair and high cheeks. She reminded her too much of an older Melanie. Melanie, whom Paul would take away from her. The map of the area in Beth's hand wrinkled in her fist.

"Bethany, pull yourself together." Jameson's harsh words tickled against her ear. "Can you do this?"

She glared at Jameson. He had a wife and kids; how did he make it work? His overtime matched her own. How did he live in these two worlds?

"Of course."

They held each other's gaze for a moment, then Jameson nodded once and looked away.

Bethany turned to the girl. "Penny, you understand what you have to do?"

Penny rolled her eyes. "course. Just act normal. Get my coffee, play on my tablet for an hour, then leave."

"Yes. Remember, you might be followed tonight, or you might not. Just walk the directed route and people will be there waiting for you. You'll be watched at all times."

"Eww, as bad as the NSA."

Bethany took a relaxing breath. Melanie was never this flippant.

"And keep your tablet on and we'll monitor you through that, got it?"

She made a face but nodded in acknowledgment.

"All right, Penny," Jameson said. "Time for you to go. Our people are already in place."

"Got it." Penny hugged April, then hopped out of the van and walked the few blocks to Perky Press.

Then they waited.

"You have kids," April said. It wasn't a question, and Bethany itched knowing that this gang woman knew personal details about her.

"Why do you say that?"

April smiled, the wrinkles on her face deepening. "Got a hint from your thoughts, but really, it's the way you watch Penny. It's like you're some aloof protective hawk. Watching, but never getting too close. It's a motherly instinct, but not the coddling kind."

Jameson leaned against the van wall next to Bethany, keeping quiet.

"I'm not a coddler," was all Bethany could come up with.

"It must be hard," April said. Bethany lifted her brows at the woman, not going in for the bait.

“Having such a demanding job and raising children,” April continued. “It’s a difficult life you’ve chosen, this place between work and home.”

Ah, little did this woman know. She probably raised her kids in the era of stay-at-home dads keeping the house for the wife while she brought home the paycheck. Or even the stay-at-home moms; a lot of women did that until their children went to school. Of course, Bethany couldn’t do that. She loved her job. Loved doing good things for the community. Too bad Paul didn’t want to be a stay-at-home dad. Bethany snorted bitter laughter at herself. Every other agent’s husband seemed to accept their wives’ determination and duty. If their positions were changed, she would probably put up with his absence knowing he was working hard to keep the world safe.

Bastard.

“Package is in place,” informed an agent camped in a folding chair before a bank of video monitors erected in the back of the van.

Time oozed by like growing mildew, and all Bethany wanted was to act. To do something. She hoped the Wielder moved soon, so they could go in and nab the bitch and send her to prison for a very, very long time. Then she could go home and fix this thing with Paul. Let Melanie know she was the most precious thing in Bethany’s life.

The hour allotment hit and Penny left the cafe, beginning her solo walk back to the van. Nobody moved for her. Damn. They’d have to do this again.

Static and then through the mics, “Someone’s on her. Tall, dressed in a long black coat. Male.”

Everyone in the van shared a look. A man? A male Wielder? Unpredictable, often imbalanced in the brain, Bethany had arrested enough in her days. Male Wielders were scorned by society, so much so that her brother kept his status as a Wielder a secret. Most of the sane ones did.

“She turned down Herald Lane.”

“Jameson, you take Mitchel and Zereph. McPhearson and Dabby, you’re with me.” They jumped out of the van. “This could be the Green Killer. We don’t know how physical Wielding works. Be careful. And it might not be him. Keep your eyes open for any women trailing them as well.”

She took her team to the left, around the block so they’d have a good view of Penny as she came down Herald.

They crouched behind cars—cats on the hunt, silent in the dark. McPhearson and Dabby were force Wielders; two women who had watched her back for years.

Penny came into view. She was on her phone, chatting with someone. Good cover. Bethany reached out, the distance challenging, to get a sense of her mindset. Tickling a Nerve, she knew the girl was scared. A tenor chime tinkled in the air, low and steady as Bethany kept her touch to the Nerve. Penny had realized she was being followed. Bethany didn’t dare try for more, the sound would be too loud in the silent night.

They had to wait until the tail made a move. Penny knew that too.

Good girl, Bethany thought. Stay strong.

“Hey, excuse me.” A man in a long coat came running up to Penny. Bethany held up her hand, ready to signal her team. “You left this in the cafe.”

Penny turned around, said something into her phone, then louder, “What?”

The man drew closer. Bethany was flooded by Penny’s anxiety. Her mind flitted to Melanie and hoped her daughter never had to be in such a situation. Penny’s thoughts rushed through where to run, where the agents were, and if she had left anything behind.

He held something out. Penny stepped towards him. Bethany held her breath.

“My wallet?” Penny’s thoughts questioned if she’d actually left it behind or if he’d lifted it off her. Bethany approved.

“It’s yours, right?”

Penny turned it over in her hands and nodded.

“Good. Be safe, it's dark out.” Then the man turned away and left.

Bethany remained in position.

“Any read on him, Wolfe-Martin?” Dabby asked.

With a curse under her breath, Bethany dropped her connection to Penny and reached out for the man. She tickled the Nerve, but he was too far. She got no read.

Radio in her ear, she ticked Jameson with it. “Looks like he's going. Keep on Penny.”

“Roger,” came Jameson's quiet, clear voice.

She should have realized this wasn't their culprit when they'd discovered it was a man. Maybe a pervert or a stalker, but not their killer. Still, Penny was safe, and that eased something within Bethany that had grown tight and hard.

A few cars passed by and nobody else seemed to be following their bait. The perp wasn't taking it tonight. They'd do it again in a few nights, but keep the place under surveillance. She'd be able to go home tonight and talk to Paul, work this thing out. Salvage a marriage that she'd once cherished.

The squeal of tires ripped through the air. Then Jameson in her ear. “Penny's been taken. Sedan. Toyota. Light brown.” As Jameson rattled off breathless details into their ears, Bethany hit the road, pistol aimed at the ground, her support right behind her.

Around the corner the sedan squealed, burned rubber spewing up from the tires, a stinky dark cloud.

“Stop the car,” Bethany ordered McPhearson and Dabby. “Be careful of the passengers,”

McPhearson stood tall, head bowed. Her hand contorted into a claw at her side as she plucked the Nerve. Dabby pressed her palms together in front of her. Both force Wielders strummed the Nerve in their own ways. From her past experience with these Agents, Bethany knew that Dabby was creating a force-based cushion within the vehicle to protect the passengers from the collision, while McPhearson was creating that very collision.

Before Bethany's eyes, the sedan slowed, the front end folding in like an accordion, the rear end hopping up and then dribbling onto the pavement once the momentum was brought to a stop. On the air, the scent of pine needles and scorched plastic mixed with the burned rubber causing her eyes to water. Bethany charged forward, gun ready. All around agents swarmed out of the suburban landscape, behind cars, from around RVs and hedges. One acrobatic woman dropped from an oak tree.

Another force Wielder ripped the passenger door off the sedan. Guns clicked, each one aimed at the inside.

A person slumped behind the wheel; another was limp in the passenger seat. Bethany gestured to an agent on the far side of the car as she kept her gun on the driver. The agent leaned into the car and pulled out Penny, limp like a doll.

“She clear?” Bethany asked into her mic.

From the bud in her ear, “Target is clear. One individual left inside. Looks to be coming to.”

Bethany called, voice commanding, cool, “This is the Bureau of Wielder Services. You are surrounded. Put your hands on the steering wheel.”

The door banged open and an individual rolled from the car into a nearby bush.

“Do we shoot? Agent Wolfe-Martin?”

Again, Bethany ordered the kidnapper down. “We will shoot if you do not come forward, arms up. Do not Wield or we will be forced to shoot.” Into her mic, she said, “Do not shoot unless she proves a threat. I repeat. Keep the kidnapper alive.”

A bang ate through the anticipation. Her first thought was: Tracer or gunshot? But the spear of heat slicing along her thigh, throwing her back, cleared up that confusion instantly. Instinct

overrode all logical thought as she dodged to the ground, reaching out her mind to pluck the Nerve, diving into the psyche hiding in the bush.

Inside, the mind was turbulent, a crazy tangle of thoughts and emotions. Bethany, trapped in her own pained panic, couldn't make out the next intention. All she got was a savage amusement. A kind of glee she'd felt before in the mind of Samantha Branch, the Mistress of Morlocks, the woman who brainwashed an entire town in Arkansas and used them as slaves.

Around her, shots barked through the air, the smell of cordite overwhelmed by the Tracers of force magic. From the edges of her awareness, she spotted officers racing for the car.

“Officers down. Officers down.” The words in her ear sucked away her warmth.

“The target is around the side of the red house,” Dabby piped through the mic.

Bethany sneezed, the smells tickling her nose. Using an oak tree as support, she climbed to her feet, keeping most the weight off her bad leg. Mother of God it hurt. She'd been shot once before, three years ago, in the meaty part of her upper arm. Paul's worry had turned into anger after she hadn't chosen a desk job following her injury. He'd never understood her need to act, to help people, and pushing paper had never interested her.

Dabby and McPhearson circled the vehicle. The red house was just to her left. A two-story with a white fenced-in yard. Tucked behind the fence in the shadows, Bethany spotted the rounded shape of a hunched over body in a squatting position.

Gun out, she whispered into her mic. “Spotted an individual in backyard. East side. Someone round to the west. Approaching target with caution.” Her muscles flinched as she put pressure on the leg, telegraphing pain up her thigh.

A linebacker plowed into her side from behind, tackling her to the ground with a lung-exPELLING slam. A scream escaped through her mouth, sharp, until she swallowed it down, canted her hips and rolled the individual who'd landed on her. Just her luck, the shadow wasn't the perp. She scooped up the perp's right hand that clung to a handgun and smacked it against the soft lawn. And again. And again, twisting the wrist until the hand went limp, releasing the weapon.

Bloodshot eyes, wide and piercing. A twisted grin on thin lips. A weak jawline. Pale skin.

“It's a man,” she said into her mic. The man smiled, showing yellowed teeth. “In contact. We're between houses, east of the red house.”

“Not so pretty. Not so nice. But I'll make you even prettier,” the man cooed.

“Wolfie, get out of there,” Jameson screamed from a few yards away. “If he's the Green Killer, you've no idea how his Wielding works. Get out of there, now!”

Bethany narrowed her eyes at the man she had immobilized, the pounding pain from the gunshot in her thigh flicking away her reason. She knew she should disengage, but he could run. He could run and kill more girls. Small, helpless girls—like her daughter.

“You have the right to remain silent—” she began but was cut off by the skell's cold, low laughter.

“I've got a clear shot, Wolfe,” Jameson urged. “Get clear. I'm taking it.”

Time was short. She had to know if this was the man. How he Wielded physically. Bethany reached out again, the chime a loud crescendo. She plucked the Nerve and dove into the killer's mind.

*They won't get us. They won't get us all. They can't get us. Nobody will get the Order. The Core will protect us. They will fall. Fall to us all.*

The Order. The Core.

Then the mind switched, switched from a panicked babble to purposeful intent. Within the mind of the madman, she felt him reach out for the Nerve, and the Nerve was a highway of power, nothing like the piano strings she plucked. She'd never seen this before. Never felt this before.

“Jameson. Shoot him now. Shoot him!”

Despite the wound in her leg, Bethany thrust herself off her foe, a scream tearing from her lips at the agony. The sound of gunshots rang through the night as the Nerve went taut, and within Bethany's mind, she could feel the man's effort to pluck the Nerve slowly die.

And so did the skill.

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"You let your guard down," she said to Jameson with little conviction. "I did, too."

The debriefing had lasted all night after she'd sat through a medical exam and earned a few stitches. Luckily it had only been a graze. Vaguely, Bethany hoped Melanie's recital had gone well, that her little girl had glided across the stage like an angel. She was an angel. Dancing amidst the clouds, floating high overhead.

Jameson let his eyes linger on her wrapped thigh as he nodded, the gesture rocking his body like he was listening to some peppy tune. "He was probably the Green Killer, I just wish we knew for sure."

"At least nobody got juiced. He didn't attack any of us using the Nerve. Damn it. We'll never know how he did it." Bethany tensed her leg. The muscle pulled and sparked around the graze in her thigh. "Jameson—" he looked up at her, his eyes as hollow as she felt, "—the power he had. The Nerve he had in his grasp. I'd seen nothing like it ever before. I feel like a charlatan. I've got to work harder. Be prepared."

"The Order and Core?"

"The heart of the rumors?"

"There are always rumors." Jameson shook his head. "A mad male gang of Wielders bent on destruction and mayhem?"

Bethany wanted to take his dismissal and stuff it down his throat. "Yeah." She nodded. "I was in his mind. I think that's what he believed."

"He was mad." Jameson's tone was level, logical. It almost swayed her.

"True, but I'm still going to work harder. Better myself. Nice shot by the way."

Jameson continued his thoughtful nod. "He was an easy target. Well, I'm ground down. I'm going home. Take the day off, spend time with your family."

Bethany thought about putting on an optimistic smile and nodding, but Jameson was her partner, her best friend, he knew too much and so she'd only be lying to herself. Instead, she sighed. "Not sure if I'm welcome anymore."

Jameson slapped her gently on the back. "Sure you are. They're your family."

Jameson left, calling out farewells to the other agents.

Exhaustion kept Bethany from zipping out of there. She went to her desk to gather her purse and other things.

"Great job, Bethany. You helped save that girl," Dabby said as she left the pen. Bethany waved, not fully paying attention. On the desk was a manila envelope with her name written across the front. She recognized that handwriting. It was Paul's.

She picked it up, her fingers numb. She bent the metal tab and flipped the top flap open. Inside she felt sucked dry. She'd expected an aching dread, but she'd seen it coming. He'd warned her. Given her chances, and she'd ignored him. Trusted in his love for her, his faith in her.

The bundle of papers wasn't as thick as she would have expected. The top one had her name listed, and Paul's, and across the upper margin were the words: Petition for Divorce.

She'd tried to bridge the worlds, but instead, she got stuck in a place between.

The end.

Acknowledgments

Places Between was the original story that started the Wielder World. Now it sits nicely between the first two novellas (Edge of Desperation and Center of Deception) and the upcoming novel (Afflicted to the Core). So, in essence, this is Wielder World 2.5.

I must thank my first readers, Mark, Joe, Dawn, Susan, Terri and countless others, including Owl Editing, who always works her magic.

If you enjoyed Places Between, I hope you'll check out Afflicted to the Core, the upcoming Wielder World novel. It all starts with Edge of Desperation — (<https://goo.gl/2OplKu>) Visit <http://natkennedy.com> for updates on upcoming stories.