

BETWEENERS



Morgan Lineberry

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

BETWEENERS

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First Edition

Chapter 1

I learned what it meant to be afraid and uncertain when I was just a kid. This portion of my life seems so unreal it feels more as a movie than my own childhood. I am not recounting my childhood for a pity party. It just happens to be the beginning of my story and I want to tell it how I remember it; as honestly as I can.

I remember being happy in the way that only kids can be. I was my mother's only child. My father left when I was a baby, and to this day I neither know his name nor do I care to. I also had a lot of what everyone else called my "imaginary friends." My mom never seemed to mind them or think it was odd that I saw, spoke to and played with these friends but other people did. Sometimes people would ask her why she let me have my imaginary friends but she would always say I was a creative kid who could do anything with or without her. I can still hear her saying those words in my defense. I used to believe them but now I know it is not true. Without her, I would have grown up alone. Without her believing in me, I could never have believed in myself.

My narrative begins on the day my mom died. I was seven years old and we were leaving the park. I noticed some creatures playing in a nearby tree and ran off to talk to them. I shouldn't have left without telling her where I was going but sometimes kids do not think. The creatures looked almost exactly as falling leaves; dancing from the top of the tree to a bush below. Other people would have seen them as leaves but I recognized what they were. The tree was only a few feet from the car and no one was around.

I swear, because I looked.

I had learned, as did any other child, to stay away from people I didn't know. I talked to these creatures for that very reason—they are not people. Suddenly, I looked up and there was a man in front of me. He was a tall man with dark skin, shining black hair and strange black clothing. He had on a black shirt with shining metallic buttons, each with a different symbol on it, dark pants, faded slightly at the knees as though he knelt a lot and a long coat of midnight sky colored velvet material that blended in perfectly with the shadows. I remember thinking he looked as though he were made of shadows, except for his eyes. He had calm purple eyes.

I was not afraid he would hurt me but I knew something was wrong. I knew with the same child-like certainty that allowed me to believe in creatures very few people saw.

The same certainty that made me obey when he said quietly: “Look me in the eye.”

He looked at me as though he were summing up everything about me in that one moment. Even as a child who saw magical creatures, I wondered what he could possibly see in me. I was dull and plain, with pale skin, light-brown-almost-blond hair and gray-green eyes, more gray than green. Even at the age of seven, I knew there was nothing special about me besides my ability. Perhaps, I thought, that was what he was looking for. I felt as though he were looking through me; looking at something deeper. Whatever he saw must have been enough, because he held out his hand, palm up, revealing a roughly carved silver wolf’s head necklace with a brown leather chain.

“I’m sorry. This is all I can do,” he whispered gently, with a voice that reminded me of everything constant. I looked away from his eyes, at the necklace, and the moment was shattered. When I looked up, he was gone. Everything reassuring died that day.

In the next instant, a police officer was pulling me gently into his car while trying to block my view. It had taken them twenty minutes to get there. My mom had been hit by a car and was lying dead on the sidewalk. The driver held a cell phone in his shaking hand. He stared at the ground with tears streaming. He did not look at me.

“He took twenty minutes,” I told the police officer, looking down at my dirty sneakers. I’m not sure how I knew nor why I felt the need to say this aloud. Maybe I wanted him to know I was not upset during that time.

“I know. I’m sorry. We came as fast as we could, kiddo,” he said back.

I realized he had not seen the man. Of course, he couldn’t have.

“It’s OK,” I said.

For some reason, I didn’t cry that day but the police officer did. I wish I could remember his name.

I would like to make it perfectly clear to whoever reads this that I never thought the things I saw were real. Nor did I believe, because belief is accepting something as fact without evidence and entirely too often, without reason. I knew yet it isn’t even knowledge. Knowledge is gained over time. This is fact. It’s truth. It’s the sort of knowing that can only be

maintained if it is never disproven. I have no other example of this than my own experience.

I knew I saw things very few people could. For a while, I thought I might be the only one. I also knew just because very few people could see them did not make them any less real. They were real. It was in my genetic code—in my blood—the blood of an almost extinct lineage. We are called “Betweeners” because we are not only people who see the things others cannot but because our minds literally exist between this world and all other worlds; allowing us to glimpse and sometimes interact with beings considered not to be “real” in our world. There are strict rules and most creatures either choose to stay in their respective worlds or are forced to stay away for the safety of others. I neither know how many worlds there are, nor how they are classified. I have never asked and I never intend to. I do know, with one tiny slip, a Betweenier can become lost.

These are people who have been abducted by fairies or aliens or possessed by various entities. Being a Betweenier can be dangerous. There are so many things out there of which the average person has never heard. There are so many things out there of which not even Betweeniers have heard. Everything is out there somewhere. Many are dangerous.

Everything anyone has ever written about, read about, imagined, or dreamed of exists, because when a person puts time and effort into creating a creature; whether they mean to or not, that creature comes into being. They begin in this world but are often filtered into other worlds more suited to them, especially if they are dangerous. Sometimes they stick around though and some can even cross into our world, as did the leaf creatures I saw the day my mom died.

There have been amazing people who have created amazing creatures—creatures I would have been all alone without as a child but there are also scared children imagining monsters in the night. I have seen what children fear and of what those monsters are capable.

Many Betweeniers get lost in another way too, voluntarily. Mental institutions are full of such casualties. Once in a while, there is even a person who slips into a coma-like state for no medical reason. They are called check-outs because they have voluntarily checked out of this world and into another. Unlike the worlds of fairy time lapses and alien abductions, these worlds only require your mind for you to go to them. It is impossible to tell whether or not they are happy there, because the risks

of returning are too great. Too much hopping back and forth could cause a collapse in the system, so once someone checks out, they are gone forever. I think someone could probably even die in another world without it affecting their body here or *visé versa*.

Few people can handle being a Betweenener because of the mental strain that comes from being in multiple worlds. A person has to be able to either accept their abilities or block them out. If they cannot, they are in danger. Also, since there are so few before the lost and checkouts, you would have to search determinedly for a Betweenener if you wanted to meet one. That is one of the main reasons I feel safe enough to tell my story, especially under the label of “fiction”. It is also why I still find myself shocked by the story you are about to read.

Chapter 2

Not much changed about me over the years. I grew tall and skinny but remained dull as ever. No one really noticed me in school after they got used to my being in foster care. Any initial curiosity tended to pass quickly. As with my looks, I was dull. I made myself dull. When no one cares about you, it becomes easy for you to crave anonymity and that is what I did.

Please don't ask how someone who sees demons, fairies, monsters and other creatures can be dull. I did not exactly advertise my ability. My mother was the only person who ever knew. After she died, I was very careful who I talked to and when. The creatures were used to going unseen, so being ignored was not much different. I knew my ability was not normal, even as a child and telling people about it could be dangerous.

Mostly I just talked to Aurora. She was my personal imaginary friend. I created her after my mom's death with one much-needed specification. I created her to be able to communicate with me telepathically so I could talk to her whenever I needed to. Most kids make up imaginary friends at some point but usually stop believing in them. This is when they go into their respective worlds to live out the rest of their existence. Since I knew Aurora was as real as any of the other creatures I saw, it did not make much sense to stop believing in her. I'm far from a psychologist but I am sure she came from the necklace the man gave me. Her personality and abilities might have come from feelings of fear and uncertainty after my mom died. Wolves came to represent peace and strength to me—two things I needed and sought in my friend. Aurora was never scared and she knew all the answers to every question that had ever been asked. After all, who else would help me understand my ability? Admittedly, she helped me more on my homework than on any sort of profound search for the meaning of life.

You can probably guess Aurora is a wolf. I always liked wolves, even before the necklace and Aurora came along. I've often wondered if the man knew that. Wolves were everything I could never be—brave, smart and able to keep living no matter how harsh the winter got. My life was as a winter portrait without the snow just cold and lonely, except for Aurora. She was white and her fur glistened as freshly fallen snow. She completed my portrait. She was my best friend, my only friend most of the time.

I would like to clarify I am not an antisocial person and I did have a few friends as a kid but, after moving to six different foster homes and three different school districts, I gave up on normal social interaction. Nothing else in my life was normal, after all. I came to accept Aurora as my only constant.

My senior year of high school was stressful. While everyone else was filling out college applications and celebrating their escapes, I was trying to find a job and a place to live. My current foster care guardian had insured me a roof until I graduated, for which I was grateful; but she had a lot of other kids in the house and more lined up, needing a place to stay. She could only do so much and because I was a legal adult, it was only fair for me to move out.

I had been working at a small grocery store for two years and managed to buy a car that went when I pushed the gas and stopped when I pushed the brake hard enough. It usually started when I turned the key too—well, eventually. Having a job and an apartment within walking distance of each other was ideal. I was reading the job postings in the Sunday newspaper and becoming more discouraged by the minute. I had all but given up on this particular day and began glancing meaninglessly at the ‘For Sale’ and ‘Free Kitten’ advertisements. I really don’t know why.

“Trying to replace me?” Aurora lifted her head and asked, yawning unconcernedly.

Oh look, a poodle, I thought.

She scoffed. “Found anything yet? Like a miracle, maybe?”

“Your faith in me is overwhelming.”

“I’ll assume this means no.” She rose, putting her paws on the table to look at the paper herself. “You’re in the wrong section. Most of these things cost money.”

“I thought you were going to be helpful for a minute there,” I smiled, despite myself and casually pushed her off the table. No one else was in the room but I still had to be careful.

She looked at me with honest concern in her eyes; turning her head in that universal dog-like manner. “You will find something, Rae.”

I didn’t doubt her. I never doubted her. I looked back at the newspaper intent on figuring up the distance between every cheap apartment and every decent job I saw. Aurora could always do that for me, give me the faith I never had in myself.

That was when I saw it; a misplaced want ad shoved between a missing German Shepard and a found Tabby. My mouth fell open and I reached for the phone. First, I read the ad two more times:

Help Needed: Elderly woman seeking on-site help maintaining large garden-like property. Living quarters with water and electricity provided. Payment to be discussed.

It was followed by a phone number.

“You’re not serious about the poodle, right?” Aurora’s head came back into my vision.

I pointed, unable to explain. I wanted to make sure she saw it too. Of all the things I had seen over the years, it’s odd to think the only thing I ever doubted was a newspaper want ad.

“Wow.” She looked at me expectantly. When I did not respond, she nudged the phone in my hand, nearly causing me to drop it. I had forgotten I was even holding it.

“Call.”

I dialed the number with shaking hands and almost fell over when an older woman answered, confirming the advertisement was real. She explained her husband died last year leaving her plenty of money but no help around the house. Unfortunately, her two children were far too busy with their own lives and families.

“They try, dear. Don’t get me wrong but you know how young people are. They just stay so busy these days,” Julie explained. I could tell she was an understanding person so I told her the truth about my situation and all I would need was little money for food.

“You won’t go hungry here, dear,” she reassured me with a good-natured chuckle.

“Do you want to...? I don’t know, interview me, or something?” I asked, kicking myself for not sounding more grown up and sure of myself.

“Oh, nonsense, dear. You’re the first person that’s called and that’s good enough for me. Just come on by tomorrow. Bring your luggage. If you like it, you can take on the job. If not, you can leave. It’s that simple.”

“I don’t know much about gardening...actually, I don’t know anything about it.” I felt as if she would soon discover this, if I did not tell her anyway.

“Well, I do. I don’t need someone who knows everything. I can teach you. I just need someone who’s willing to do it, dear.” She chuckled again.

“Then I look forward to meeting you, Mrs... umm,” I realized I had not asked her name yet.

“Oh, just call me Julie, dear. No need to be so formal. And you’re Rae, right?”

“Yes, ma’am”

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow, Rae.”

“OK. Thank you...Julie.” It felt awkward calling her that.

I hung up the phone; still in a daze.

“Well?” Aurora put both paws on my leg and whined persistently for news.

The smile on my face must have said enough because she threw her head back and howled, loud and long. It was a happy sound causing her fur to ripple as ocean waves.

I jumped up and ran from the kitchen and through the living room where three boys turned to look at me, surprised by my enthusiasm. Mike and Joseph were foster kids there and the third was a freshman at my school. They all knew me as the quiet dull girl I was.

“What’s up, Rae?” Mike asked. He was a good kid, and I could have seen us being friends, if I made friends anymore.

“Found a job and a place to live within ten feet of each other,” I said; unable to keep myself from smiling.

“Holy shit,” Joseph said.

He was a rough kid from a rough home where people cursed too much, played music too loud and generally didn’t care about him. He secretly loved to write. I had walked in on him writing in a huge, mostly full notebook one day. He was writing a poem. He looked horrified. “Who am I going to tell?” I had said, shrugging. I guess that made him like me enough to be happy for me.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” I laughed.

They all laughed and took turns congratulating me. Then I went outside to find my foster mother.

“Teresa?” I found my foster mother with the three little kids in the back yard. She was pushing them on a swing set that looked as if it had seen better days and warning a three-year-old girl named Sandy not to eat some berries that were growing beside the house.

“Hello, Rachael,” she smiled.

“Rae.” I corrected.

“Ms. T,” she responded. This was what everyone called her.

“I thought that might get on your nerves,” I don’t know why I was nervous around her. I guess because I honestly liked her. Mrs. T was pretty in a natural way that made men gulp when they saw her but women could not even get jealous because she was too nice. She was always doing something, pushing kids on the swings, cooking, washing clothes, picking up messes or one of fifty more things and, if someone needed something, she would always manage to do it. She smiled a lot, too. Mrs. T just seemed to like to smile. Seeing her smile made me smile, sometimes. She also had green eyes as did my mother.

I forced myself away from this train of thought before it crashed.

“Not at all. Everyone calls me that. I’m thinking about getting it legally changed. Teresa turned toward the little girl picking berries, “Sandy, honey you can pick them, yes, but then bring them to me or throw them away. It’s OK to pretend but don’t really taste them.” She turned back to me. “I’m sorry, Rae, what did you need?” She smiled. She had successfully made the young girl smile, too.

I smiled, too. “I found a job and a place to live.”

Her smile turned more parental making me less than comfortable. “Are they close by and in a decent location?”

“Close together. About two hours from here. It’s on a lady’s land. She’s older and lives alone and needs help maintaining her garden. She has a big shed she turned into a guest house. There will be free electricity and water and she’ll pay me a little too.” I realized that it still sounded impossible.

“That sounds a little too good to be true. Did you call?” Mrs. T asked.

“Yeah. A lady named Julie answered; she insisted I call her that. She said I can bring my stuff and if I like it, I can stay and, if not, I can leave.” I looked at the ground as though it would tell me something to make what I had to answer next easier.

“When?” She was watching Sandy.

“Tomorrow.” I looked up. She didn’t look at me. She nodded.

“You can come back if you need to, you know,” she said, carefully. She was not smiling, exactly. “I’m proud of you, Rae.” She spoke as though the two sentences went together. They seemed to fit together but I wasn’t sure how.

“Thank you,” was all I could manage to say before I turned and went back inside to pack my one suitcase.

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