

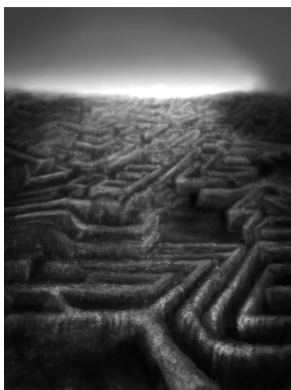
# The Between

LJ Cohen

*!Interrobang Books*

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## Chapter 2

THE METAL SEARED CLIVE'S SKIN like a brand. *She cut me! Thorn and weed, she cut me!* Clive pressed against a willow tree, wincing as the movement jarred his arm. The willow's roots sunk deep into the earth, drinking Fae magic along with cool, clear water and Clive borrowed some of its strength. The pain eased, but the damage was already done.

His arm burned clear down to the bone. The wrongness of the iron leached like poison from a thorn. They had to leave before it was too late. He lurched to his feet, hissing at the shock running the length of his arm. He pointed to the key ring lying on a spreading patch of death. "Pick it up," he said. She looked at him with blank eyes. He had no time to coddle her. "Now." Leaving the metal here would only speed the decay.

Even with the tree's borrowed vitality, Clive could sense how close he was to collapse. He cradled his arm next to his side.

Lydia reached for the key ring like it was a venomous snake. Little did she know how true that was. He stared at her as she tucked the metal back in her pocket. How could she handle it with her naked skin? What kind of magic filled her?

“We need to leave now,” he said.

“It was an accident,” she whispered. The scattered freckles on her cheeks and nose stood out against her shocked white face. Her brown eyes were open wide and she stared past him, unblinking.

He set aside his fury. Their safety, her safety, was more important than consequences right now. She was used to the Mortal world and needed explanations. Something to anchor herself to. “Look around,” he said. This part of the Between was falling into full twilight. The sky was smoky, turning a translucent gray as the horizon receded. “This place is going to collapse on us like a big soap bubble. We have very little time.” Measuring time was a Mortal construct, but it was a factor right now and not in their favor.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t have the strength to take us through now. And we can’t stay here.” How had something so simple gone so wrong? “So you get your wish.” He swallowed his anger. The delay would be costly, no matter that she hadn’t intended it. “I need you to take us back to the Mortal world.”

A ting of color crept back into her cheeks. “How?”

“This is a place your mind helped build. You have Bright magic. Use it.” She had been cut off from her Fae heritage for so long. What if she couldn’t do it? His wounded arm throbbed. That wasn’t something he wanted to dwell on. “Picture your room, imagine yourself opening the door.”

“What do you mean?”

He had borrowed the rainbows from her wallpaper, the trees from a painting of butterflies hanging in her room. “You have to take us back there,” he said. In the distance, Clive heard a crack as sharp as the thawing of winter ice. “Now, Lydia.”

She stared at him, unblinking. “So I just click my heels

together?" Her voice broke and her whole face flushed. "You've got to be kidding."

"Magic is harnessed by belief," he said. This wasn't the time or place for a lesson on Fae magic and the building of bindings and glamours. "Look, if you expect to get home after clicking your heels three times, it will happen."

She backed away from him. "This isn't *The Wizard of Oz*."

He didn't know what she was talking about, but if it was something she had faith in, then it would work. "Lydia, we have no time for your denial." The trees nearest them were shivering in a non-existent gale. Further away, all the green had smudged into gray. "The longer you wait, the more distorted time gets." There was no telling how much time had passed in the Mortal realm already. Maybe only hours, maybe as long as a day or two.

"You got us here," she said, "why can't you get me home?"

"The metal. You . . . it poisoned me," he said, working hard to keep his voice steady. Her cheeks colored. She was so ignorant, yet she had the strength to wield iron on Faerie's doorstep. How much did Oberon truly know about her? "And until I can cleanse the wound and recover my strength, it's up to you."

Lydia frowned, looking at him square in the face. "Can I really believe us home?"

Clive paused, not wanting to look too closely at the wilting grass beneath his feet. "That's the question," he said. "Can you?"

Her hand fluttered to her mouth. "I don't think . . ."

Clive shook his head. If she said it out loud, if she really believed they couldn't get out, it would be true and they would be trapped here.

"I feel kind of silly," she said, looking down at her feet.

He shrugged, trying to remain casual. It wouldn't help to frighten her any further. "Get over it."

"I'll try," she whispered. She closed her eyes and the silence stretched out until it felt brittle.

Wind chilled his skin with the memory of snow. "Lydia, hurry."

"Okay," she said, "there's no place like home." She touched the heels of her sneakers together. One tap, two taps and she paused. "I can't . . ."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Wait," she said.

He took a deep breath. The sky was split like a cracked egg. Soon he and Lydia would spill out. She tapped her heels a third time. For the span of ten heartbeats, nothing happened. Blood pulsed in his injured arm. He imagined the iron being driven deeper inside his body. He tasted metal on his tongue.

Then it was if he were spinning in space, his body impossibly large or infinitesimally small. A door slammed in his mind and the scent of freshly cut grass rose up around them. Stumbling, he sprawled to the ground, and reached his hands out to break his fall. Pain shot up his arm and knocked the breath out of him.

Darkness had fallen. In the distance a dog barked. The porch light snapped on.

"Lydia? Lyds is that you?" a woman's voice rang out.

She had done it.

\*

**A** SLOW STEADY RAIN WASHED down the kitchen window. Lydia stared out at the muted landscape. Since her side trip down the rabbit hole with Clive yesterday, everything was different. She rubbed her chest, but the ache in her heart wasn't some-

thing she could reach. Nothing kept its true color anymore, not the trees, not the grass, not even her parents. Her mother just looked worn away like a chalk drawing that some careless thumb had rubbed across. Lydia turned to the breakfast dishes piled in the sink.

At least the house was quiet. Her father had taken Marco and Taylor to the movies since their soccer games were washed out. It was just Lydia and her mom. Her mom. Except Clive said this wasn't her true family. She wanted to believe everything he said was wrong, just the product of a deranged mind, but she couldn't shake the sense that she was changed somehow by that darkness yesterday.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Lydia jumped, splashing water along the counter top. Her mother reached over with a towel and blotted it dry.

"I'm good, Mom." How could Lydia even begin to tell her what happened? She didn't understand it herself. Her mom had accepted her explanation that she'd missed the late bus and had found another way home from a schoolmate. She'd been so relieved that Lydia hadn't been on the bus when the driver collapsed. At least he was going to be okay. Lydia was feeling guilty enough already.

It was the truth, if not the full story. At least she didn't have to explain Clive. He'd vanished as soon as her mom stepped off the porch.

"You're so pale," her mom said. "And you hardly ate anything for dinner last night or breakfast."

Lydia busied herself drying dishes. It was easier than looking at the washed-out version of her mother or explaining that the food just tasted gray.

"Your father and I were talking. If you can save up half the money, we'll help you pay for the car."

It seemed like a lifetime ago they had that argument.

Less than two days had passed since Lydia's life and happiness hinged on having her own car. She even remembered her impassioned arguments, but that girl and her concerns were distant now. Besides, who needed a car when you could pop through doors from here to there and back again? Wherever there was. Lydia didn't know whether she wanted to laugh or cry.

She turned to her mother. And despite what Clive had said, this woman *was* her mother. That hadn't changed even if everything else had. "It's okay," she said. "The car's not that important."

Her mother's eyes widened. She placed a cool hand on Lydia's forehead. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

Lydia nodded, finding a smile for her mother.

"Okay, who are you and what have you done with my daughter?"

She couldn't laugh at the familiar family joke. Changeling child. Something out of faerie tales. How could she be what Clive said? This was crazy. "I'm going for a run."

"You'll get soaked, Lydia."

"I'm not made of sugar and spice, Mom."

"Well, leave your muddy shoes in the laundry room."

"Yes, Mom." It was one thing to be planning to leave in a year. No matter how far away college was, she would still belong here. But this was different. Whatever Clive had done to her yesterday had already started to tear everything apart. Even if he disappeared forever, Lydia knew her life would never be the same.

\*

**C**LIVE LEANED AGAINST A TREE, fuming. The skin over his forearm itched beneath the bandage. At least the Mortals under-

stood how to repair their fragile bodies. Flexing and extending his fingers, he felt the pull across the rapidly healing scar. The metal had been completely flushed from the wound, but he still felt washed out, weak.

He watched Lydia emerge from her house in sweats and a t-shirt, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. How could she just pretend everything was back to normal? And how was he going to get her to Faerie before Oberon lost his patience? He knew Oberon as well as any member of court. Maybe better. Powerful, charming, and utterly ruled by his whims. The Mortals had that word totally out of context. They used whimsical as a synonym for harmless. Clearly, they had never met Oberon.

Clive was weary, but he slipped between raindrops as he followed Lydia, making no more sound than a shadow might. Her sneakers pounded against the pavement. She made no attempt to avoid the puddles, smashing down in them hard enough to break glass. The rain slicked her bangs against her face.

It was simple to let the rain bend around him. No use both of them getting soaked and these small magics didn't strain his resources, even on this side of the barrier. He ran along and beside her, hidden in plain sight. Fae she might be, but her untrained eye saw no more than any Mortal would. She would never notice him.

A peal of thunder rumbled in the distance. Darklings? Or maybe something more? Clive jerked his head up and stared across the park. Lydia swore and swerved off the bike path towards an enclosed field. She slammed the gate open with her hip and ducked into the scant cover of a shelter as the skies let loose.

Still breathing hard, Lydia paced around the shelter, keeping her leg muscles moving. She didn't really need to do

that. Well, as long as she saw herself as Mortal, she did, but that wouldn't be for much longer.

The tang of ozone teased his tongue. Someone was definitely crossing between the worlds. He searched the horizon, but couldn't see anything. It had to be someone from the Shadow court. For all of Oberon's faults, mistrust wasn't one of them. Clive was pretty certain that as soon as the Faerie king had sent him here, he moved on to other plans and plots. It wasn't as if he didn't care, only that he expected success. It was a boon and a burden. He scanned the sky and the trees. Nothing.

Not that he figured he would find anything or anyone unless Titania willed it. Where Oberon's Bright magic was overt, aggressive, the Shadow Queen was an expert in subtlety and concealment. He expected no less from the Fae who served her court. Clive would watch and wait. Unless the darklings returned or Titania's emissary presented a clear threat to Lydia, he could not directly intervene. This was a matter between the courts and Clive knew his place and the law.

So Shadow was here, as well. He settled into the silence of old trees and watched Lydia pace.

## About the Author

LJ Cohen is the writing persona of Lisa Janice Cohen, poet, novelist, blogger, local food enthusiast, Doctor Who fan, and relentless optimist. Lisa lives just outside of Boston with her family, two dogs (only one of which actually ever listens to her) and the occasional international student. She is represented by Nephele Tempest of The Knight Agency. When not doing battle with a stubborn Jack Russell Terrier mix, Lisa is hard at work on her seventh novel, a ghost story.

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