

Water Bourne

By LJ Cohen

IN A ROOM FULL OF STRANGERS, she knew she was the strangest. Born of stray thoughts and discarded memories, she shifted from moment to moment, the raw material of her self captured by each guest's expectations. Now a fine boned beauty with hair as dark and sleek as seal skin. Now a college co-ed with onyx eyes and a shy smile. Now one of the caterers, laden with trays and dismissed as soon as noticed.

Longing made flesh, she was as powerless to choose her own transformations as the men and women around her their desires. In a way, they all shared her curse. Slipping amongst the revelers, she waited, restless as water, for the one who had conjured her, the one whose need would bind her to a single form for the evening.

Looking up, she lost herself in a tumble of unfamiliar faces. Each, save hers, kept its own shape as she swept through the room, searching. None had the power to hold her gaze.

Sea water splashed across her cheeks. No, not seawater, she realized, tears. How odd, she thought. Only humans cried.

"Are you all right?"

He looked down at her, brows drawn over deep blue eyes the color of the ocean at the horizon line.

I wonder who he sees, she thought, swiping the dampness from her face.

"I--I'm sorry. No. I'm okay. Really." Her voice tuned to a smoky alto. She clenched her jaw as bones shifted beneath her skin. "I was supposed to meet someone here." That was true. That was always true.

He nodded, his gaze never leaving her face. "I hope he was in a car accident."

"What?" She was certain she'd misheard him.

"Well, he'd better have a damned good reason to abandon such a beautiful woman."

She smiled. Very smooth. He was why she had been called here tonight.

"I'm Aiden. Aiden Clancy." He held out his hand. Clean, squared off nails, long fingers, calluses. A capable hand.

"Kelsey Finn." As she met his grasp, the names and details of her life clung to her like a set of clothes custom made for a new five foot six inch frame. There was the house she grew up in; Scout, her childhood dog; her on-again, off-again boyfriend Peter who stood her up tonight; a job managing a local bookstore. A bittersweet pleasure to know who she was, knowing she would have to strip Kelsey from her like a second skin come sunrise.

"Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

"Just soda water." Kelsey didn't drink. Her father and two uncles all died from complications of alcoholism. She looked around the room and shrugged. "Hard to be the only sober one at a party."

"Good thing you're not the only one." He shook his glass. Misshapen ice cubes clinked at the bottom of a nearly empty tumbler. "Tonic, with lime."

Someone cranked up the stereo. The throb of bass rumbled through her ribcage. He steered her towards the bar, his hand warm in the small of her back. She leaned into its certainty. He would always be Aiden. She wondered what that would be like.

"Can we go outside?" Now that he'd defined her, she wasn't worried she'd shift again, but the noise and the crush of bodies made her empty stomach roil.

He carried both their drinks and led her out the French doors to a quiet balcony. The beach below was nearly invisible in the darkness of a new moon night, but the sound of the surf settled her heartbeat to its rhythm. "That's better, thank you."

He tipped her chin up towards his face. "If you don't like crowds, why did you come tonight?"

She smiled. "To meet you."

He nodded, accepting what sounded to Kelsey like a cliched pick-up line with serious consideration.

“Why are you here?” she asked, sorting through the possible stories. Bad break up, best friend wanting to set him up with someone, work obligation.

“You needed me,” he said.

It was so close to the truth that she stiffened, ready to bolt. He molded his hand to the contour of her spine and turned her toward the sea. “Listen,” he said.

The tide was receding, each wave lapping a little less of the shore, leaving foam and shell behind. Just like her, diminished after each transformation. But onus, stronger even than the moon’s pull, brought her back time after time.

“My company offered me a promotion, a big job out in Chicago,” he said, “but I turned them down. I couldn’t live that far from the ocean.”

The hair on the back of her arms fanned out. To live apart from the open water would destroy her. “There’s always Lake Michigan,” Kelsey said. “I went to school in Chicago. Great sailing.” And the memories were there, complete, down to the name of the laser she’d sailed on the college race team.

“It’s not the same,” he said.

“No,” she agreed. The water in the lake lay sluggish, cut off from the teeming vitality of the sea. She would not survive there.

The doors banged open, bombarding them with distorted music and laughter. A drunk couple spun out onto the balcony, groping one another, the sweet reek of alcohol mingling with their sweat.

Aiden nodded in the direction of the stairs. “I really hate these parties. Walk with me on the beach?”

They slipped out of their shoes, leaving them to mark their spot on the balcony. Aiden rolled up the cuffs of his pants. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her to him. She liked being Kelsey, liked what Aiden saw in her. It didn't always turn out this way, but it always ended in spindrift and early morning fog. She glanced down at this slender body. Is this what she

wanted? To be locked into a single form, unchanging?

A sea breeze blew in across the water, raising goose bumps along her bare arms. For an instant, memories of all her past selves whirled around her like a cyclone. She felt dizzy. The wind snatched at the newly made details of Kelsey's life. They slipped through her like sand through grasping fingers. "No, please," she cried, but her voice was tossed back to her, just another piece of wreckage. Aiden hugged her closer and turned them as a single unit, using his back to shield her. She clung to him and stopped shivering.

"Do you want to go back?" he asked.

"No." She held back a sob. No, she didn't want to go back. Back to what she was, waiting for the next new moon, nameless, formless, adrift. Tears spilled down her cheeks again. *What's happening to me?*

Aiden touched the tip of his index finger to her face, brought it to his lips, tasted, swallowed. "Salty."

She fumbled for something to say, something to distract herself from the sensation of flowing into him. "It's like sea water. Our blood too. Like we carry our own little oceans inside us." She was babbling, her words a stream over stones.

"Don't be afraid," Aiden said.

"I'm not," Kelsey said. But she was, her whole body trembling against his. Fear tasted new, like the tears. Another Human thing, a shape she could mimic, but never own. She looked into Aiden's face and what she saw in him settled her, gave her something familiar. She was his to rescue for the night, so she would be something in need of saving.

The tide struggled to turn. She sensed the forces warring with one another--the pull of gravity, the mass of water draining from the shores of the world into the belly of the ocean. Now the sea held still. Slack tide. By the small hours of the night, the water would surge back to shore, only to slink away at sunrise, taking her with it. Again.

Aiden would be left with the remnants of a lovely dream and a memory of the nice time he had at the beach house. He might reconsider, take the job in Chicago, and learn to find the beauty in a different kind of water. Kelsey would shatter into a thousand droplets, a child's soap bubble

when the surface tension breaks.

Perhaps she could fall in a sudden drenching Midwestern storm or mingle with Aiden's exhaled breath on a foggy day. She sighed. It would be just as likely for water to learn to drown.

"I'm not my usual self tonight," Kelsey said. And then she laughed because it was true. Because it was always true.

"Me neither," he said, his face still in the darkness, no laughter in his voice.

Sea spray splashed her bare feet, stealing what little warmth this body held. "What will you do? I mean, without a job."

"I have a job," he said.

"What about Chicago?"

"Tonight, I'm supposed to be here. With you."

His lips sealed hers firmly. She softened, embraced the shape he chose for her. His tongue teased her mouth open. He tasted like sea spray and a westerly breeze. Water lapped at their legs, sucking the sand from beneath their feet.

How did the tide turn already?

They were twined together on the sand at the tide line. Her hair clung like damp seaweed to the back of her neck. "Aiden, we're soaked!"

He laughed, pulling her on top of him. "So what?"

The warmth radiating from his body kept Kelsey's teeth from chattering.

"There is strength in water," he said.

A ripple of color passed across his face, his eyes glittered like fish scales. His heartbeat with the thunder of distant surf. She held her breath.

"It only looks as if it yields." He reached his hand up to cup the round of her cheek. "But in time, everything yields to it."

Her heartbeat sped up until she couldn't separate the blood roaring in her ears from the surging waves. His hand was as smooth as sand-weathered shell and she leaned into it.

"Even me," he said, his voice no longer Aiden's soft baritone, but a deep bass thrum with the power and terrible patience of the sea.

"I don't understand." The fierce undertow dragged Kelsey's memories from her, stripping away the remnants of all her temporary lives.

"You will." He pulled her head down to his and kissed her slowly. "I was wrong, my sweet selkie. Please forgive me."

She curled up against his chest and wept.

DAYLIGHT BURNED THROUGH KELSEY'S SALT and sand crusted eyelids. "What the hell?" Her tongue felt thick and heavy. *Son of a bitch. Peter must have spiked my drink.* She knew the hurt would come later. Now she was too angry, too cold. She sat up, looking down at herself. Her shoes were gone, her dress a soggy ruin. The last thing she remembered was arguing with him before stumbling down the balcony stairs to the beach, his laughter harsh in her ears.

"Are you all right?"

Kelsey skittered to her feet, heart racing, and tugged at the hemline of her mini dress. The soft baritone voice didn't belong to Peter. She took a deep breath. The man stood tall, with sandy hair and dark eyebrows crooked over deep blue eyes. He held out a fluffy bath towel in one hand, a steaming travel mug in the other. The scent of coffee made her mouth water.

"I saw you from the house."

She didn't meet his gaze, looking up at the balcony where she and Peter had fought last night.

He handed her the towel and mug. She wrapped the towel around her shoulders and shivered as she gulped down the hot coffee.

"Is there someone you'd like to call? You can use my phone."

His concern burned through the chill and her shame. "No. He's why I'm here. Like this."

The silence between them was broken by the tumble of surf and the call of seabirds.

He reached for the empty coffee cup and she shivered as he brushed her hands with his.

"I'm Aiden. Aiden Clancy."

His touch teased a memory of warmth that receded like the waves at low tide. Her name

sprang to her lips in automatic reply. “Kelsey Finn.” She was certain she’d never met him before. She looked away from the strong lines of his face and stared at the sea. “Are you always in the habit of rescuing damsels in distress?”

“Only on alternate Thursdays,” Aiden said. His voice was warm and full of secret laughter. “Saturdays I look for mermaids.”

It was Saturday. She held her breath. The beach seemed to stretch for miles, an unbroken ripple of sand at the edge of the world. She felt herself waver, a heat shimmer in the morning sun.

“Kelsey? Is something wrong?” Aiden asked, his brows crooked, his eyes clouded.

She took a deep breath. The sound of her name on his lips felt right. Her heartbeat steadied. She shook her head. No. Everything felt all right now. The sun on her face, the wind tugging at her hair, Aiden smiling at her. A gull wheeled overhead, laughing as she took one single step away from the water and then another.



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LJ Cohen's debut novel, [THE BETWEEN](http://www.ljcohen.net) is currently available in trade paperback and ebook formats.