

Blurred Excerpt  
*Somewhere I Belong*  
Connections #3.5 by Kim Karr  
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The people in Australia say they have sand in their souls. I believe it. Thirty thousand miles of paradise and I've made sure to circle all of it. Now I'm back to the city that I first landed in six months ago, any surfer's wet dream—Bondi Beach. I lay in bed, staring out the open window just listening to the sound of the ocean. It's early, but there's enough light to reveal a hint of what the waves promise today. It's my last day in the Bondi Bubble and I don't want to leave, but I have to. The trial for the drug cartel is about to begin and I've been called to testify.

The time passed here in the blink of an eye. What I'll remember most is that I was able to forget...forget about my life back home for the first time since I supposedly died as Ben Covington so long ago. I feel stronger, more focused, and more determined to make this transition in my life—to finally move on. I'm ready. Being here has helped me put things in focus and I can finally accept that Dahl is happy with someone else.

Stacks of *Surfers End* magazines lay on my nightstand. I reach around them to grab my laptop and punch a few keys to bring up my bank account. I officially have less than I paid for my first board in it. Fuck me—where did all my money go? My brilliant plan of living off the rent didn't work out so well. I shut the lid and lean back thinking about what I'll do when I get home for money. An hour passes before I decide to get up. When I do, I glance out to the majestic shoreline I've enjoyed so much and see families already frolicking on the beach and lifeguards in their signature red and yellow swim caps monitoring them for safety. It's a slow and easy way of life here—one I could very easily get used to.

My clothes are neatly piled on top of the dresser ready to be placed in my bag. My journal is packed, the one I haven't been able to write in. I survey the room for what's left—not that there's much. All I'll have to do before I leave for the airport is grab my duffle, my briefcase, and my board. But I have time so I quickly shower and head to the

Bucket List for breakfast. The diner spills out onto the beach with its wide patio. It's one of my favorite views of the Pacific. I could sit here for hours staring at the coastline, the glistening sand, and the stone cliffs. The place itself looks like a pirate ship with its faux fisherman style décor, complete with lobster pot lampshades on every table and a namesake mural that looks like a map lining the walls. The only difference being the purpose of the mural is to record your bucket list items and not navigate the sea.

"You're finally doing it today?" My waiter Scott asks pointing to the sharpie I have in my hand.

I shrug as if it's no big deal. "I am."

"Way to go man, you did it." He raises his hand and I slap it.

After I drink a cup of coffee, I approach the iconic wall with my marker and write my checked off items on it. It reads:

*Ben Covington*

*Jog the Bondi Bronte Cliff Walk*

*Brave the surf at Tamarama*

Yes, I did do it. I rode the waves of Tamarama yesterday despite its ferocious currents and strong riptides. It took me six months to get back in shape but I can now say: mission accomplished.

Time grows short and I move through town in an effort to say my goodbyes—not only to the locals but also to the places. I stop at Icebergs. It's a local bar with its own outdoor pool wedged right into a cliff. The pool refills itself with seawater whenever waves crash against the rocks below it. And the joint itself is filled with happy, friendly people. No one cares what demons you carry. They're just here to have a good time. Not to mention, the deeply tanned waitresses saunter around taking drink orders wearing skimpy bikinis...talk about living life easy.

Living in the Bondi bubble...life couldn't be sweeter. But my visit here today isn't to enjoy the pool or talk to the waitresses, it's to say goodbye to Kale Alexander, the owner's son. He and I hit it off right from the start. He reintroduced me to what I once

loved—writing. Not just the thrill of catching the story that I had become addicted to, but he reacquainted me with the passion I once felt for words.

Kale writes for *Surfers End Magazine* and is worried he'll be losing his job soon. The publication is tanking in circulation. We've had in-depth discussions as to why. His view was very eye opening but I didn't necessarily agree with it.

When I walk in he's sitting where he always does—a table near the railing overlooking the water, notebook in hand. He's old school—no laptop, just pen and paper. Ironically I think that's the issue with the Magazine—they need to enter the world of technology.

I clasp his shoulder. "Hey man, how's it going?"

He looks up, lifting his shades. "Just trying to figure it all out."

I sit across from him. "That's heavy for this early in the day." I bob my chin to one of the waitresses and hold up two fingers. She smiles and I direct my attention back to Kale. "Care to elaborate?"

He sets his pad down and leans with his elbows on the table. "Surfing is at a crossroads."

"What do you mean?"

"Too many of us out there."

I scrunch my brows together.

He points out to the water. "Watch that."

I do. Two, three, four, five surfers systematically fading with one another in what at first seems to be some strange choreography. However, once the wave rolls over the surfers are shaking their fists at one another—obviously fighting for the waves and not bothering to wait their turn.

"Why is no blood being spilled over this? You can't just fade someone rail-to-rail and get away with it," he says slamming his fist on the table.

It's a thin fabric that holds surfing together. Kale is a former champion and holds his standards high. I shake my head. "But there are so many unwritten rules out there and some have long passed their use."

Our drinks arrive and I push one his way.

"Too early man, I have to get something on paper before I can indulge."

I push it further toward him. “I’m taking off today.”

He sits up straight. “Fuck, how about a little warning. I just got used to seeing your scrawny ass around here.”

“Yeah, right,” I grin and raise my glass before downing its contents. Then I stand up and extend my hand. “Hope to see you in another life, brother.”

He quickly rises and pulls me to him. Patting me on the back. “Take care man and keep in touch. I’m serious about coming out to see your nephew in action. Who the fuck knows, I might even be writing about him some day.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be something. See ya man.”

“Oh and Ben, make sure you teach your nephew better than what just happened out there. Courtesy is one rule that should never pass its time.”

I nod. “I completely agree.”

As I walk away he says, “In my day that would never have happened. If it did someone would have gotten a fucking punch in the head.”

I twist around and as he snakes his arm around one of the waitresses and plunges his tongue in her ear before looking over toward me. “Sure you don’t have a little time?” he asks his eyes darting to the chick in his arms.

I grin at him before I take a last look around. “Next time.”

I have one final stop to make before I leave—the beach herself. As I make my way through the sand, I think about the many hours I’ve spent here...surfing, walking, running, looking for myself. On this beach, I found a part of what I was missing. It was finality, a feeling of closure. Something I missed over and over with everyone I lost. I’ll especially always regret how things ended with Dahl. As I meander down this beach for the last time, I want so much to let that guilt roll off my shoulders. But there are some burdens that just won’t wash away. While I wipe the sand from my feet and slip back into my shoes, I try to focus on the possibility of new beginnings instead of the fact that when I head back to California no one will be awaiting my arrival.

Just as I enter the gleaming glass doors of the Sydney Airport, my cell rings and I grab for it from my front pocket. I see Caleb’s name flashing across the screen.

“Hey fucker. How’s the newly minted agent?”

Caleb snorts. “Hey fucker yourself. And you’re being a little premature with your greeting. I haven’t graduated yet, but I am doing fucking amazing. I drove my first surveillance detection route yesterday.”

“Sounds like a kinky fantasy life if you ask me.”

“Scraping ice off cars and specialized training classes don’t add up to anything whatsoever kinky.”

“Sucks to be you then.”

“Yeah, yeah it does. But not you I’m sure. How’s Australia?”

“Not a waste of time, I can tell you that, but I’m headed home now.”

“For the trial,” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Absolutely fucking not. But I do want to hear more about your shenanigans. When are they letting you out of Quantico?”

“Soon. Really soon.” His laugh is low. “But it’s not like I’m in prison.”

“I’d say that’s up for discussion.”

“Over a few beers?”

“Is there any other way?”

“Really, how are you doing man?”

“I’m managing. I need to get a job when I get back and figure everything out, but right now life is good.”

“Hey, one day at a time, right?”

“I’m not in AA, fucker.”

“I know, Ben, but when you get back—take it easy. And make up with your sister. Jason said she really misses you.”

“Yeah, yeah. One day at a time,” I groan and roll my eyes.

“Listen, I gotta run. I have a simulated bank robbery I have to get to, but I’ll call you next week. And Ben, I just found out I won’t be home until the end of the year, but I’ll have a month off then and I’m planning on spending it with you.”

“Aren’t I a lucky bastard then?”

“Hey, seriously man, call me if you need me and Ben, take care.”

“Yeah, you take care too.”

I’ve always liked being independent because if you didn’t depend on anyone—there was no one to let you down. But Caleb and Trent are the exceptions. I looked forward to their calls. Caleb was the one person, besides Dahl, I had always depended on. And Trent, was the one person besides Dahl, I’d always allowed to depend on me. The fact that he’s doing so well right now is the shiny spot in my life. He’s out of rehab and back in school. He’s even training for a local surf competition.

The first time I called Trent from Australia was the hardest. I had just arrived and he told me Dahl went to Paris for her honeymoon. For the longest time when we were younger, I wanted to take her there. I wanted to be the one to show her the Eiffel Tower she had always dreamed of photographing. The days that followed that call are all a blur. After that, whenever I called Trent, I quickly changed the subject whenever her name came up.

The airplane door swings shut with a thump and I twist my head toward the window. This is it, there’s no turning around—I’m really going back. As the plane takes off I look at the golden coastline and say goodbye to what just might have been my own piece of heaven. White sandy beaches and crystal blue water blend together and I close my eyes as that life fades away.

When I open them, the wheels are touching down and my old life comes rushing back. Shit, while I was gone I did a great job of not thinking about anything and I only hope I can keep it up. Even Dahl seems to have faded in my memories. Her birthday came and went and I never remembered it until days later. I’m not sure why—maybe the passage of time, maybe the distance. It doesn’t really matter though; whatever the reason it’s working.

Standing stiff with tension, I look around Los Angeles International. Home Sweet Home. I had Trent pick up my car months ago and told him to keep it. Now I have no wheels. I shuffle over to the rental office and take the cheapest they have. I hand the attendant my credit card and get a sick feeling knowing I'm living off of borrowed credit.

I shove my stuff in the shitty sedan and exit the airport, hopping on the 405S. The freeway is jam packed with cars, but that's nothing new. If it's not an accident or a stalled car bringing traffic to a stop, then it's construction. I mean really, where else in LA do you get to park your car for free except on the fucking highway. I always hated this town, and today nothing feels any different.

Thirty minutes later I'm still inching along the road listening to the radio when I look ahead and see the bumper sticker on the car in front of me. It reads, "Life is only what you make of it," and those eight words remind me of the advice my mother gave me just before we took Trent to the recovery center.

She looked at me with such sadness and placed her hands on my face before saying, "Please, be happy for the life you have. Make the best of it and don't waste it. Instead, try to put your life back together. Benjamin, please try. If not for yourself, then do it for me. I only want to see you happy."

I grip the steering wheel and jerk my car toward the 110, and away from the road that would take me to Laguna Beach. I silently answer her plea because I didn't then. "I can do that for you Mom. I can try."

With her words ringing in my head, I know what my first step toward a new life has to be—securing a job. So I reluctantly decide to call my old editor from the *LA Times*. She liked me and I'm sure she'll be happy to hear from me. I dial the paper and enter her extension. I get her voicemail and leave her a message.

The sun is starting to set as I click my blinker, taking the Adams Street exit. I figure the next thing to check off my list is finding a place to stay and it might as well be near the paper since I don't have a car. When I stop at the light my mind flips to the last time I drove down this street and stopped at this very same place—the day I 'died.'

*The glow of the headlights shone through the rain. I hated listening to top 40 music, but I turned the radio station to 102.7 for her because I knew she'd like it and it would*

*make her smile. We were listening to Gavin DeGraw's "I'm in Love with a Girl," and I was singing along to the lyrics. She was surprised that I knew the words. Of course I did, I always listened to what she was listening to after all.*

*She was watching me, I could feel it, so I turned to look at her. I stopped singing and I told her, "If I ever wrote a song, this is the one I'd have written about you." Then I got off the 110 the same as I just had and headed toward the Millennium Biltmore. I noticed she was still looking at me. So I asked her, "What?"*

*She grinned at me and reached over the console. She placed her hand on my thigh before running it up my leg and said, "We're going to be late to your first award party, and it's all your fault."*

*I grinned and said, "So fucking worth it," because it was. I needed that one last time with her—I had to show her how much I loved her.*

*Then we stopped at a traffic light and she took her hand off my leg to turn the radio station back. I knew the set-up was on. It was time, but fuck I wasn't ready. I wanted her hand back on me. I wanted to feel her touch forever. But it was too late. Tires squealed. The SUV with heavily tinted windows jackknifed in front of us just as planned. The passenger door opened, and the paid-off shooter in a ski mask jumped out holding a gun with blanks for bullets.*

*She screamed, "Oh my God, he has a gun!" but I already knew he would.*

*She was afraid and it killed me. I wouldn't let anything happen to her. I sat there trying to decide if I should just tell her. I couldn't take it, but once I looked at her, I knew I had to go through with it. She was too perfect, so beautiful, and all too fragile to take with me. So I said, "Just keep calm, Dahl."*

*When I didn't get out on cue, the gunman tapped his piece against the window a couple of times and then pointed it to her head, reminding me she'd be dead if I didn't go through with it. So I pretended like I would have tried to flee if I could. I pounded the steering wheel with my fists and said, "We're fucking blocked in."*

*Her cries only grew louder and she started to shake.*

*I grabbed her hand tightly one last time, while I opened my car door and told her, "Call 911!"*

*She sat there in shock and I wanted to cry. But I pulled it together and told her,*



*“Whatever happens, don’t get out of this car. Do you hear me?”*

*She screamed, “Ben, don’t!” as I stepped onto the pavement. Then her last words killed me. I didn’t have to be shot to feel the pain because I felt it when she yelled, “You don’t have to be the hero! Come back!”*

*Fuck I wasn’t a hero. I wasn’t anything of the sort. But I did what I was taught to do when I heard the shot and fell to the ground.*

*She screamed, “No! No! Noooo!” and that was all I heard from her.*

I hop back on the freeway, wanting to avoid that street. Clearing my head of the memory, I can’t wait to get a fucking drink. I take the next exit I see and pull into the first cheap, extended-stay motel I can find. It’s some kind of Econolodge in West Hollywood. The perks, the check-in clerk tells me, are I’m close to Melrose and Sunset and they have Internet. The only perk I see is that I’m close to the Dodger Stadium and it’s baseball season.

I climb the flight of stairs and try to read the sign directing me to room 220. The glow of the moonlight is too dim and the grim that covers the plaque makes it unreadable. With my key in hand, I take a guess and turn right. I pass door after door of peeling green paint and rust. Room 216 swings open, and a chick wearing only her panties stands there. She covers her tits with her hands and then turns to slam the door. I think the squeaking of my sneakers against the stick of the concrete made her think I was someone else. I finally reach my destination and open the door, only to be greeted by the pungent smell of stale cigarettes, alcohol, and if I sniffed hard enough, I’d say sex. The room is a shithole. The carpet is ragged and torn. The walls are dingy. And the TV looks like it’s from 1980. I decide it’s safer to leave what I have in my bag and drop it on top of the dresser. So with the unpacking done, I hit the street in search of a liquor store to buy some liquid relief.

The sidewalk is crowded—people push and shove each other to move from one place to the next as if that might get them there any quicker. I duck into what has to be a supercenter for booze and peruse the aisle of whiskeys. So many to choose from—tall bottles, shorter ones, blue labels, white labels, darker amber liquids, lighter amber liquids, and then I spot it, Jack Daniels. I grab it off the shelf by its neck and purchase it with my

credit card and a smile. My one friend I can always count on. The one who I already know will fuck me up the ass before I even sign my name on the yellow slip.

The night air is cool and with my brown bag in hand, I take a small detour down La Cienega Boulevard. In the middle of all the high-end establishments sits a bookstore. I pop into it, in search of something to read. I decide on one of my favorite classics—Huckleberry Finn. As I pick up the spine of the dark blue cover embossed with silver letters, a stray memory surfaces. Another one I've tried hard to push away, but once it presents itself I can't stop it. I fight the small smile that crosses my face as S'belle Wilde's red hair and emerald green eyes pop into my mind.

*Books surrounded me. The library was large and filled with people, along with hushed whispers. I was a senior in college and I was hiding out in the USC library reading Huckleberry Finn, laughing to myself as I reread my favorite part when I felt someone's stare. Leaning against the bookshelf, I tapped my heel against the mass of books and watched the curious girl set her sunglasses on top of her head and approach me. She thought she was invisible as she snuck my way. But I noticed her...I noticed her right way. In fact, I stole glances she didn't catch as she shuffled books around. First at her green heeled pointy-toed shoes that no girl wears to the library. Then at the scarf with quotes on it she had wrapped around her neck. She was slightly overdressed for the library but she looked fucking amazing.*

*I fought laughter as she pushed each book back without even bothering to look at them. I ran my fingers through my hair. My pulse sped up when she swung a glance my way but I quickly averted my gaze. However the first time my eyes caught on her otherworldly green cat eyes, I couldn't help but stare. When her wild long curly red hair bounced with her movement, I became the pretender. I made like I was still reading my book. The cute girl had dropped the book out of her hands and it tumbled to the ground. My eyes stayed glued to her as I bent to retrieve it. My hands grasped it from the floor and as my eyes swept the title, I couldn't help but smirk. But when she got close enough my smirk turned into a snort, almost a snicker.*

*"You're reading about Kama Sutra?" I raised a brow and tried to feign utter seriousness.*

*She answered, but her voice sounded distant. "What?"*

*I pointed to the book with a photo of a woman's body and her panties pulled partially down. "Your book. A Lover's Guide to Kama Sutra?" This time I had to laugh.*

*"No, no. I wasn't reading that." Her eyes widened like saucers and a look of horror crossed her face. She immediately grabbed the book from me and pushed it into an empty space in the shelf. Then she laughed too.*

*After a few moments she pointed to my book. "Homework?" she mimicked me and raised a brow.*

*I raised my hands surrender style. "No. You caught me. Just hiding out reading one of the classics. Fucking Huck Finn. Something he said turned my mind in a way it shouldn't have."*

*"What?" she asked. Her curiosity peaked.*

*"Have you ever read it?"*

*She shook her head no.*

*"Don't judge me then," I said as I opened the book to any page, but recited the line I knew so well. "That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it."*

*She stifled a giggle as she covered her mouth. And when our eyes locked again, I felt something strange—I felt like she got me. I also knew I should leave. I had a girlfriend that I loved. I blinked remembering that thought and handed her the book. "You should read this if you have time. It really is one of the best books ever written."*

*She snickered at that. "Right. It's up there next to Tom Sawyer."*

*"How'd you know," I winked.*

*I walked backwards and kept my eyes on her. I stopped at the end of the aisle, put both my feet together and leaned forward slightly. I pretended I was tipping an imaginary hat. "It was nice talking to you..." I paused, waiting for her to fill in the blank.*

*"S'belle," she finished for me.*

*"S'belle," I grinned. I stood straight again and quickly disappeared around the corner knowing I had to leave.*

*She yelled, "Wait, I didn't catch your name."*

*I called back, "Ben. My name is Ben Covington," and left the library as fast as I*

*could.*

I clutch the book tight and push the memory away. I'm getting good at that. The word ghost catches my eye and when I glance at the shelf, it's a book about haunted locations around Los Angeles, I grab it as well. I may despise L.A., but certain stories and historical events that occurred in this city fascinate me. As I'm checking out, I see a rack of journals right next to the cash register and pick one up. It's black with gold gilded pages, similar to my old ones. The ones I no longer have. I haven't allowed myself to put my feelings on paper since after my mother's death, since the day I gave Dahl the journal I kept for her, but I think it's time now.

Turning the corner back toward my hotel, I spot a small coffee shop like the one in Laguna. The sign on the window reads Four & Twenty Blackbirds and the name catches my eye—pie. I peer in the window. Pressed-tin walls and communal tables with a few booths cultivate a sense a small-town charm and I know I'll be coming back here. The night's young but I'm feeling wrecked. I still have one more thing to accomplish today before it's over. I pull out my phone and search for her number. Making this call might be a risk, but since she hasn't phoned me back I can only assume she isn't checking her messages until Monday. So calling my former editor at home is my only option.

"Hello?" Christine answers.

"Christine, it's Ben. Ben Covington. How are you?"

"Ben," her voice breaks. And although I know she already knew I was alive, her surprise is still genuine but her professionalism quickly returns. "I've been meaning to call you."

"Good that makes two of us. Can we get together and talk?"

"Yes I'd love that. Unfortunately I'm out of town until Friday afternoon, but I can meet that night. What do you say to Novels at seven?"

"Great. I'll be there. See you then," I say and hang up.

I'm almost back to the motel when a flash appears in front of me. Fuck me—the paparazzi found me already. I'm not in the mood for their shit, but game on. I weave in and out of stores until I find one with a back door. Once I lose the douchebag, I high tail it to the fleabag motel.

Not feeling nearly as tired anymore with adrenaline coursing through my veins, I pour a drink. I flick on the TV, which surprisingly works, and make my way to take a shower. A few stray hairs in the bathroom make me hate my life even more. I glance at myself in the mirror. What the fuck have I done with my life—I'm twenty-seven, staying in a shit bag motel with no money and nothing to look forward to. I stand here in silence and ponder my decision--questioning this supposed new start of mine.

A few hours later, I'm struggling to get some sleep when a disturbance from next door gets louder. Male, female, I can't tell because the voices are muffled, but the act is undeniable. The lack of light through the broken blinds clues me in that it's either really late or really early. I roll over and cover my head with the pillow, but can't fall back to sleep. After a few minutes, I turn back around. The moans and groans are gone, replaced by quiet whispers that can still be heard through these paper-thin walls. I stare at the plaster peeling from the ceiling and watch the fan blades moving around as I try to stop my mind from thinking about how I ended up here. It wanders and I mentally scold myself for allowing any form of self-pity.

I jump out of bed to grab another drink and my journal. I run my fingers along the lines of the page and then let the ink bleed upon it. I write about Australia, how sweet life was there. I write about the upcoming trial, I even write about finding a place to live and calling Christine for a chance at a new job. When I'm done, I close the journal and set it on my lap. New journal. New beginnings. New life. I eventually drift off, spending the rest of my first night back in California alone in a fleabag motel.