Hi, I’m Jennifer Niven, and I’m reading from Breathless.

“I just keep thinking I should have seen it coming. And I should have, I don’t know, been a better daughter.”

“I don’t know your dad, but I do know something about dads who leave, and I’m pretty sure this doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“I’m kind of torn between hating him, like really hating him, and missing him. I want him to fix this and make it better and make it so it never happened. I’m angry at my mom for not doing something to stop it, and I’m angry at myself. Basically I’m angry.” It’s the first time I’ve said any of this out loud.

I feel his arm brush mine, and the feel of it reminds me that I’m not actually the only person left on earth. I take a breath. Let it out. I tell myself, You’ve talked enough for one night.

“My dad left for good right after I got home. I woke up one morning and he was gone. No explanation, at least nothing Mom would ever tell us. She’s always been good at making excuses for him while telling me what an asshole he is. I haven’t seen him since, which is honestly no great loss, but it’s made things harder for my sisters.”

I sit there beside him, thinking about fathers, his and mine.

“Did you know he was going to leave?”

He shakes his head and kind of grins at me. “See, the thing about my dad is that he doesn’t like to talk much. That includes not telling your wife when you’re going on a bender for a night or two, and not saying goodbye to your family when you plan to leave them forever.”

“So just like that?” “Just like that.”

“No more floor,” I say. “As in it was yanked out from under you.”

He squints up at the moon, considering this. “Yeah. Except in my case, I don’t think there ever really was a floor.” He shifts, his arm brushing mine again, and I suddenly have this bird’s-eye view of the two of us, side by side on this vast beach, looking out over this vast ocean. “You know, all my life I knew my parents were shitty. I can’t imagine what it must be like to have the perfect family and then have it obliterated.”
I look at him and he looks at me, and in that moment I feel like he knows me better than anyone.

“Moonlight suits you, Captain.” “'Captain’?”

His eyes go to my hat. “It’s a fisherman’s cap.”

“'Fisherman’ doesn’t have the same ring to it.”


He smiles. I smile.

And then this red-lipped, short-haired island Claude takes a breath and, without overthinking or thinking at all, reaches out and traces the freckles on his arms—very faint, a sprinkling, not everywhere like mine—remnants from another summer or maybe brand-new from this one.

He watches my face as I do, and then he takes my hand and slowly twines his fingers through mine. There’s another tattoo on the inside of one wrist—an anchor—and on the other, joy. I feel this pang because Joy might be a girl he loves, but then I tell myself, Don’t think.

I say, “I want to kiss you now. I hope that’s okay.” The exact words I said to Wyatt before leaving Ohio.

Jeremiah Crew’s expression doesn’t change, except for his eyes, which start dancing, and the smile that lingers on his lips. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

He shrugs. “I mean, yeah. Why not?” He sounds all whatever, but his eyes are laughing.

I lean over and kiss him.

For a second I’m worried he’s not going to kiss me back.

But then his lips are on mine just as much as mine are on his, soft and searching, little sparks everywhere. There is a pinch on my leg—the tiniest bug—but I barely feel it. I lean into him.

And then his hand is on my face and I like the feeling of it there, strong and warm and pulling me in, not pushing me away. I open my mouth and his tongue finds mine, and I’m tasting him and he tastes sweet and also dangerous, and I move in closer and he pulls me closer and I’m kissing him and he’s kissing me, and this isn’t any Claude I know. This is some girl with short hair who makes out with strange boys on strange beaches. And she likes it, this girl. She likes him. She’s not thinking about what comes next or what
could happen. She’s not making him someone he’s not or wishing he would be the one. She’s not overthinking him or herself. She’s just here with him, mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue. Let him think I’m a girl who makes out on beaches or anywhere else she wants to. As far as he knows, this is exactly who I am. And then my hands are all over him and his hands are on my waist, and I want this moment to last forever because in it I don’t have to think or be the me I used to know, the one who was sent away without a choice.

But suddenly he pulls away, and it takes me a minute to come down to earth, back to this beach. And he’s smiling at me like I’m a kid and not the woman who’s just been kissing him senseless for the past couple of minutes.

“Wow,” he says.

And I think, *Yeah. Wow. “You really want me.”*

I push him away.

He laughs. “How old are you again?” “Eighteen.”

“Just being sure.” “How old are you?”

“Eighteen. I’ll be nineteen in November.”

And then I’m Claude Henry again, making out with some strange boy on a strange beach in my jeans and light blue hoodie, the one with the grape-juice stain on the hem, covered in sand, skin freckled and burned a bright, painful pink from the Georgia sun, and being bitten everywhere by unseen Georgia bugs.

He says, “The sand gnats are out. You’re getting eaten alive.”