



# emBRace

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LOTHIAN



*Images of morning and evening flashed before my eyes, blinding me.*

*It was . . . violent. Painful. I dropped to my knees and screamed.*

*I heard Lincoln cry out, though he didn't touch me. I wanted to stop it, but I couldn't. Cold heat rushed through my body. I felt like a rigid*

*statue of ice with a volcano erupting from within. I could hear  
my screams. Worlds away.*

*My back arched, my arms falling behind me, dangling to the ground,  
my knuckles grazing the concrete floor.*

*An arm encircled my waist, holding me up as I arched back even  
further. Another hand gripped the side of my face, keeping me still.*

*I felt myself slipping away, losing myself to the senses. I tried to  
concentrate, tried to remember what Phoenix had told me. Emotion,  
I needed to control my emotions. Or distract them. Something that  
could totally consume me.*

*I hoped it was Lincoln's arm around my waist.*

*'Kiss me,' I whispered.*





*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood,  
but against principalities, against powers, against  
the rulers of the darkness of this world, against  
spiritual wickedness in high places.*

***Ephesians 6:12***





# CHAPTER ONE

*'Outside, among your fellows, among strangers,  
you must preserve appearances, a hundred things  
you cannot do; but inside, the terrible freedom!'*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

**B**irthdays aren't my thing.

It's hard to get too excited about the day that marks the anniversary of your mother's death. It's not that I blame myself for her not being here. No one could have known she wouldn't survive childbirth. It's not that I miss her either. I mean, I never knew her in the first place. But it is the one day each year that at some point I'll be forced to ask myself, was it worth it? Was my life worth taking hers?

I stared out the bus window, avoiding. Steph was blabbering on, something about the perfect dress, completely absorbed in what she was saying. She was relentless when it came to the science of shopping. I could feel her watching me, disappointed with my cheer level. Buildings flashed past through the frame of the smudged glass and I couldn't help but wish my seventeenth birthday tomorrow would slide by in the same hazy blur.

‘Violet Eden!’ Steph said sternly, sucking me out of my trance. ‘We have your dad’s Amex, a green light and no specified limit.’ Her mock rebuke morphed into a devious grin. ‘What more could a girl want as a birthday present?’

Technically, it was *my* Amex. My name, my signature. It just happened to be connected to Dad’s account. A by-product of being the only person at home who actually bothered to pay any bills.

I knew Steph wouldn’t understand if I told her I wasn’t in the mood, so I lied. ‘I can’t go shopping today. I . . . um . . . I have a training session.’

She raised her eyebrows at me. For a moment I thought she was going to pull me up on my fake alibi. But then she segued onto a topic we seemed to be discussing more and more often of late.

‘With Lincoln?’

I shrugged, trying not to let on how much just the mention of Lincoln affected me. Although the training part wasn’t true, I *did* have plans to see him later on and was already doing my best not to keep a minute-by-minute countdown.

Steph rolled her eyes. ‘Honestly, one of these days I’m gonna tell him you’d prefer to get all hot and sweaty with him in a different kind of way!’ She threw me her bitchy smile – something she usually reserves for other people.

I sat back and let her vent. It was easier that way. Steph didn’t get it and I couldn’t blame her – I’d never told her *all* of

the reasons why training was so important to me. Some things are just too hard to talk about.

'You *do* realise you're turning into some kind of sports geek, don't you? And don't pretend you actually like them all. I know for a fact that you hate long-distance running.' Steph couldn't understand how anyone would rather go rock climbing or boxing in place of shopping.

'I get a kick out of training with him,' I said, hoping to put an end to the conversation, even though she wasn't completely off-base about the running. If I didn't have Lincoln's backside to stare at the whole time, motivation would be a lot harder to come by.

I busied myself by rummaging through my backpack, which was jammed with all the books they force you to take home on the last day of term. Steph didn't seem put off.

'It's like he's training you for battle or something.' Her eyes lit up. 'Hey, maybe he has some underground fight club and he's grooming you!'

'That's it, Steph. Definitely.'

I didn't want to be talking about this. Didn't want to have to admit the round-the-clock desire I had to be with Lincoln. It was like something deep within me found comfort in his presence. *Crushing with the best of 'em, Vi!*

Too bad it was a lost cause. It had been that way ever since the moment I'd first met him two years ago. He was a late entry into a self-defence class I'd signed up for. When he was partnered with me, what I thought was going to be another

mediocre attempt on my part to get fit and strong became so much more.

I never found out why Lincoln had taken the class. He clearly knew more than the instructor, moving through the exercises with the kind of ease and grace that made it clear he was in another league. After the first couple of weeks, when I was finally able to string more than two words together around him, I asked him why he was there. He shrugged it off, saying it was always good to do a refresher class.

By the end of the three-month course, I was learning more from him than the instructor and he offered to give me some kick-boxing lessons. Now I get the best of both worlds. I get stronger every day – our list of activities has expanded to include rock climbing, running, even an archery course – *and* I get to hang out with Lincoln. It's perfect . . . almost.

'Well, I guess that means we're going shopping tomorrow then.' Steph pouted but couldn't keep it up. She could never stay mad for long.

Unfortunately, she was right. I knew Dad had given her strict instructions, due to my lack of spirit and his lack of knowhow, to make sure I had a new dress for my birthday dinner tomorrow night. The clock was ticking – shopping was inevitable.

'I can't wait,' I said, flashing her a well-practised fake smile from my birthday repertoire.

The bell rang as a group of kids started pressing the stop button. As the bus slowed, Steph stood up from our seat, three

rows from the back. She was convinced only the wannabes sat right at the back, the geeks at the front and the goths/weirdos right behind them. That left about three rows we could work with, the ones that apparently put us in the not-trying-to-but-can't-help-being-cool section. The ironic thing was – if judged purely on academic achievements – Steph was the biggest geek I knew. Of course, she never publicised the fact that she was some kind of borderline genius.

She wrapped her narrow frame around the metal pole near the doors, donned her favourite pair of D&G sunnies and blew me a kiss. I laughed. Luckily for me, Steph wasn't only a labels girl. For all the designer kit she paraded around in, she was surprisingly balanced. The fact that she was from a seriously monied-up family and was usually wearing something that cost more than my entire wardrobe didn't adversely affect our friendship. I didn't *overly* care for material possessions and she didn't *overly* care that I didn't.

'Do me a favour?' she said, making her way out the door, unfazed by the logjam of kids sardined behind her. 'While you're drooling over Mr Fantastic, make sure you jab him in the gut a few times for taking up all your free time and depriving me of my bff.'

'Sure thing,' I said, blowing her a kiss back and ignoring the twinge of guilt I felt about lying to my best friend.



## CHAPTER TWO

*'I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'*

*Genesis 9:13*

**I**nstead of going home to an empty apartment, I found myself walking towards Dad's offices. I wasn't sure why. On my way up to the fourth floor my phone beeped with a text message from Lincoln.

*Running a bit late. Meet at my place around 7?*

Smiling at the phone, my fingers fumbled over the keypad quickly.

*Yep – see you there!*

Then I deleted the exclamation mark and counted to thirty before I allowed myself to press send.

It was bittersweet, my relationship with Lincoln. Like always, as soon as the elation of hearing from him subsided, the reality of our 'friendship' hit home. It would be nice if he *was* offering a date, but he was really only granting me entry to his warehouse abode – there was a gigantic wall there just begging to be painted and Lincoln had finally agreed to relinquish it

to me. The most I could hope for in between coats of primer was a meal. Though I'd tried to reassure Lincoln that coffee and two-minute noodles are a well-balanced diet of dairy and carbohydrates, he remained unconvinced. Since Dad was never around at dinnertime, Lincoln had recently started inviting me back to his place for dinner before dropping me home. I had to admit, even though it wasn't romantic – *at all*, we mostly just went over training exercises – it was nice to have someone to talk to instead of eating alone.

Dad's company took up the entire fourth floor. When the lift doors opened, I spotted the familiar stainless-steel 'Eden Architects' sign that had greeted me for the past eight years.

'Hi Caroline,' I said, walking up to the reception area. 'Is he in?'

Dad's receptionist smiled at me and raised her eyebrows. 'Where else would he be?'

I found Dad in his office, cemented behind his drawing desk, reams of paper unravelled in front of him. It was an image synonymous with my dad and one that I'd had to accept a long time ago. I used to fight it – or rather, fight for his attention – but the truth was, the minute I had his full attention I always felt suffocated by it anyway.

He was completely absorbed in whatever he was doing and by the look of him he'd been there a while. Tie gone, sleeves rolled, ruler in one hand, pencil hanging loosely from his mouth.

I was willing to bet when he stepped away from the desk, he'd reveal shoeless feet.

I made it into the middle of his office without him even noticing.

'Hey, Dad,' I said with a wave.

He looked up and smiled, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair as if it could somehow release him from a world of lines, angles and light reflections. He pushed his pencil behind his ear and emerged from behind his desk. Socks only.

'Hi sweetheart.' He cleared his throat. 'This is a nice surprise. Ah . . . How was your last day of term?'

I hated that I could hear it, but there it was, same as always. The voice that said, *I'm glad you're here, but I'm really in the middle of something I don't want to be distracted from.*

I swallowed and pushed through it. It was all I could do. I knew if he knew I could hear it, he'd be mortified.

'Great!' I said, beaming with my news. 'I got into the Fenton art course. It starts in six months.' It had been the main motivator for going to school today. The last day of term is usually a blow-off – aka freebie day. Dad never enforced attendance on the last day. Well . . . Dad never enforced anything. But I had been waiting for months to find out if I got a place, and seeing my name on the shortlist of two had made the day well worthwhile.

He gave me his genuine Dad-of-pride smile. 'Of course you did! There was never any doubt. You take after your mum.' His

voice broke a little at the end. She'd been an artist too. He was rarely the one to bring her up. Like me, he preferred to leave painful things buried. It was easier that way . . . and harder. But the fact was, nothing was going to fix him. Her death had broken him completely.

'Thanks, Dad,' I said, eager for a change of subject.

He straightened abruptly and came towards me then, reconsidering, went back to his desk and sat behind it, gripping the sides as if to bolt himself down. Dad was finally losing it.

'I know it's technically not your birthday until tomorrow, but I'd like to give you something now.' He clicked his jaw from side to side, something he does when he has a deadline approaching or a big proposal going on. Then he took a deep breath and put his hand down on the desk, decisively. Nudging his wrist was the one personal item Dad keeps in his office – a sculpture of a white door with red graffiti over the front of it saying, *No nannies allowed!* It was the first and only artwork we had ever done together.

By the time I turned thirteen, Dad had caused seven nannies to quit by not getting home on time, forgetting to pay them regularly and expecting them to work weekends. I had dispatched eleven. What can I say – they weren't up to the job. On the day nanny number nineteen threw a hissy fit and stormed out, Dad and I pulled out some clay and decided, no more. From then on, it's been just us. Or rather, just me.

‘Dad, I don’t want any more gifts,’ I whinged. Dinner and the soon-to-be-bought dress were already more than I wanted. Tomorrow was the only day of the year I *didn’t* want presents.

‘It’s not from me,’ he said quietly, looking away from me. He opened the bottom drawer in his desk. The only one that required a key. His movements were slow, almost pained. He lifted a small wooden box from the drawer and gently placed it on his desk. His hand trembled over the intricate carvings that decorated the lid.

My eyes began to sting and I had to blink quickly. Dad rarely allowed his emotions this kind of exposure. He raised his hand and, as it hovered in the air above the box, he made a fist and closed his eyes. It looked as if he were praying – something I knew he didn’t do. I had only ever seen one thing make him look like that.

Finally he looked up at me with a small smile. I blinked again.

‘I was given instructions. I’ve waited seventeen years to give this to you. It’s from Evelyn . . . It’s from your mum.’

My mouth gaped involuntarily. ‘But . . . how?’

Mum’s death had been unexpected. A haemorrhage in childbirth that couldn’t have been foreseen. She couldn’t possibly have left something behind with instructions.

Dad pinched the bridge of his nose then rested his hand under his chin. ‘I honestly don’t know, sweetheart. That night, after I came home from the hospital,’ he motioned to the small

box, 'this was on the top of her chest of drawers. There was a note resting on it that said, *For our girl on her 17th birthday.*' He took a deep breath. 'Perhaps she was just organised, perhaps . . . I don't know . . . She was an extraordinary woman . . . She sensed things others couldn't.'

'Are you saying you think she knew what was going to happen?'

'I'm not saying that, sweetheart,' he said, absentmindedly caressing the box. 'And anyway, that's not the point. She wanted you to have this and it was important to her that it be now.' He pushed the box across the desk towards me, standing as he did. 'I'll . . . uh . . . I'll give you some privacy.'

He slipped into his shoes and quietly left me alone in the office. He'd had his hands in his pockets and looked so . . . alone. It occurred to me that Mum wouldn't be too impressed with where we had ended up.

The box was beautiful. It was a rich, dark mahogany with splices of illuminating gold breaking through. The carvings on the top were detailed and finely crafted to create not a picture but a pattern, a sequence of wispy feather-tips. The artist in me appreciated it instantly.

I'd never been given a gift by my mother. She'd never made me warm milk, never wiped away my tears or put a bandaid on me. She hadn't saved me from the embarrassing outing with my nanny to buy my first bra and she hadn't left me with a nifty stash of tampons in the bathroom cupboard that would never

run out and that I'd never have to talk about. There were a lot of things I'd never get from her, but I'd accepted that a long time ago. Finally *receiving* something from her, something purposely left for me and only me was . . . awkward.

I sat down in Dad's chair and ran my fingers over the top of the engravings as he had done. A shiver ran down my body. I wriggled in the chair and shook my hand out. 'Get a grip, Vi.'

When I opened the box my heart sank. A tiny silver chain with a small amulet lay inside. The last time I'd seen my baby necklace, it had been tucked away in the trinket box on my dressing table. Apparently, Mum had it made for me while she was pregnant as some kind of good luck charm. In every one of my baby photos I'm wearing this necklace. Dad had made sure Mum's wishes were followed – and then some.

Obviously, Dad had taken it from my dressing table. I started to wonder whether the rest of the contents of the box were from him, but then I dismissed the thought. He'd never felt the need for fake gifts before. It just wasn't his style.

I pulled two envelopes out of the box. Both were still sealed, though they were yellowed and worn with marks of consideration along the edges. It must have killed Dad to have known about them for seventeen years and not know what was inside them. I wondered how many times he had run his fingers along the seals, contemplating tearing them open. It was impressive that he hadn't succumbed.

I opened the first envelope. Inside was a page torn from a book. It was a poem.

*You must love no-thingness,  
You must flee something,  
You must remain alone,  
And go to nobody.  
You must be very active  
And free of all things.  
You must deliver the captives  
And force those who are free.  
You must comfort the sick  
And yet have nothing yourself.  
You must drink the water of suffering  
And light the fire of Love with the wood of the virtues.  
Thus you live in the true desert.*

It was pretty, I guess, in a sad and surprisingly religious kind of way. From what little I knew, Mum hadn't been religious. She'd hated anything that pigeonholed people's beliefs. I'd only been baptised because Dad's family had insisted and he saw the advantages in getting better high-school placements.

I opened the second envelope. Inside was a handwritten letter. The writing was confident: long letters, curling like old-fashioned calligraphy. My hands quivered slightly, holding the piece of paper last held by my mother.

*My girl,*

*Happy 17th Birthday. I wish I could be there with you, but I think if you are reading this . . . I am not. For that, I am sorry. The day your dad and I found out we were going to have a baby was the happiest day of my long life. I know the only day that will exceed that joy will be the day you are born – no matter how that day ends.*

*A big decision lies ahead. The burden of the covenant is a heavy one to bear. Choose with your heart, for I already know that you, my girl, must let your heart guide the way.*

*Believe in the unbelievable – for it will not wait for you – and know that nothing is ever as simple as good and evil, right and wrong. There are spirits in this world that are not like us, my girl. In their rightful place, they are wonderful and terrible, valiant and wicked – and that is okay, for we need both. Keep your eyes open, but do not trust everything they show you. Imagination is their highway, free will is ours.*

*Remember always, everyone has a place of perfect belonging, and if they leave that place without permission, sometimes they must be returned.*

*I love you. Please forgive me.*

*Mum*

Methodically, I refolded the letter and the poem, placing them back into their respective envelopes, concentrating on each function carefully so as not to think beyond. Focusing my

mind to slow down and not go places I couldn't handle. Not yet. It was a skill I had taught myself through practice, practice, practice.

The last thing in the box was a wristband. It was made of thick leather, though it looked metallic, with some type of distressed silver finish. It was roughly four centimetres wide and had similar engravings to the box. It was mesmerising. More handsome than pretty. Beside it was an identical circular mark on the wooden base where the varnish had worn away. At some point, this box had held a twin to this band.

I picked up the wristband, ignoring the fact that my mouth and eyes were watering. My nose was running too, although I could swear I smelled perfume. Something floral? I wondered if it was *her* smell, impossibly contained in the box for all this time. I pushed the thought aside. And then, just as quickly, another took its place.

The letter. She'd known she was going to die.

No, I couldn't think about it. Not now. Dad would be back any minute. I needed to stay in control, not let this derail me. I wasn't sure what the letter meant anyway. *A big decision?* Maybe school or university? It could be anything. She probably just left it as a precaution – every mother wants their child to believe anything is possible. As for the bit about her long life, I didn't understand that. How could anyone think her life had been long? She was only twenty-five when I was born . . . when she died.

I wiped a hand under my runny nose and placed all of the items back in the box in the same order. When Dad came back, I'd packed it away into my bag and moved to the couch.

He hesitated. 'Are you okay?' he asked.

'Yeah, good . . . fine . . . yep. There was a letter. Do you want to read it?' I really didn't want to give it to him. It was nice to have something of my own from her, even if it was strange, but I knew that seventeen years of suspense was enough torment for anyone.

Dad smiled, lines creasing in the corners of his eyes, but his shoulders dropped. 'No, it's okay,' he said.

*Oh crap*, I didn't know how to handle it if Dad actually cried. But he recovered, clearing his throat and tilting his head to the ceiling. 'No, honey. It's between you and your mum. But . . . thank you for offering.'

Apparently, the offer was enough.

'Well, like you said, I think she was just prepared. It was one of those . . . follow your heart letters.' I said it like I got them all the time.

'Don't be cynical,' he chastised me, though I knew he loved the fact that I was just as cynical as him.

He sat next to me and put a hand on my knee. I put my hand on top of his. We were silent for a moment.

'So . . .' he said finally, as we both moved our hands away. 'What are you doing tonight?'

'Going to Lincoln's. Got a wall to paint.'

'Finally gave in, did he?'

'Yep.' Victory was definitely sweet.

'Right . . . sure. So you'll be going there straight after this, then?' he asked, a lilt in his voice that normally meant he was about to tell me something I didn't want to hear.

'Yes,' I said, dragging out the word.

'Oh, good. You know, actually, I bumped into Lincoln today when I was out getting a sandwich.' His eyes drifted around the room and he stood up and went to his desk, suddenly very intent on a stack of papers.

'What did you do, Dad?' My heart skipped a few beats and I had an awful feeling I knew where this was going.

'Nothing. Nothing. We were just talking about you guys, you know, your training. Lincoln said you were going in a marathon next month with him. That sounds like fun.' He strained a smile. 'And . . . um . . . he asked me about work, which was nice of him and . . . you know . . .'

'No. You – know – *what?*'

'Well, I said, mentioned really, that you . . . well, that you'd been through a tough time at your old school and . . . ah, you know . . . that maybe he could bear that in mind . . . He *is* five years older than you, Vi. I just didn't want you to feel pressured. I didn't plan it, I just bumped into him and . . . Christ,' he said, getting more and more flustered, 'your mother was on my mind and I thought she'd want me to, you know . . . *say* something.'

Someone kill me now! From heartfelt moments to *this!*

I stood up, moving to the far side of the room. The tension in the air was palpable. Neither one of us liked talking about the attack. In fact, talking about it was an agreed out-of-bounds. Even this slightest mention brought a familiar darkness into the room.

I stared at my feet, stubbing the toe of my trainers into the carpet as if I could shift it if I concentrated enough. Why couldn't I be one of those kids with parents who actually knew what they were doing?

'You had no right,' I said flatly.

'That's not entirely true, Violet. I *am* your father.'

*He picked a great time to start taking the reins.*

'Dad, you're so far off the mark I can't even . . . Lincoln hasn't pressured me at all!' I grabbed my bag and heaved it onto my back. 'WE'RE JUST FRIENDS! He's not even interested in me like that – and thanks to *you*,' I shook my head at him in utter disbelief, 'he never will be now.'

Dad's eyes went wide with surprise. Clearly he'd decided Lincoln and I were a couple.

'Oh . . .' He stumbled over his words, lost for any comeback. *Great, now my own dad thinks I'm pathetic.* 'Oh . . . I just assumed. Sorry, Vi. I just . . . after everything that happened . . . I just worry.'

I didn't respond.

'I'll stay out of things from now on,' he added.

'I've gotta go. I'll see you tomorrow night,' I mumbled, knowing that even though we lived under the same roof we wouldn't be crossing paths before then. Especially now.

‘Yes! Great! I’m really looking forward to your birthday dinner. Meet at seven?’ he asked, over-enthusiastically.

I was already heading for the door. I threw a hand in the air. ‘Whatever.’

One good thing about Dad was that I knew he’d be happy to pretend this conversation never happened.