

The First Principle

A NOVEL

MARISSA SHROCK

If inalienable rights begin with life itself, will Vivica have the courage to defend them, no matter what it takes?

In the not-too-distant future, the United Regions of North America has formed. Governors hold territories instead of states, and while Washington, DC, is gone, the government has more control than ever before. For sixteen-year-old Vivica Wilkins, the daughter of a governor, this is life as usual. High school seems pretty much the same—until one day, that controlling power steps right through the door during study hall.

When Vivica speaks out to defend a pregnant student against the harsh treatment of Population Management officer Martina Ward, she has no idea she's sowing the seeds of a revolution in her own life. But it isn't long before she discovers her own illegal pregnancy. Now she has to decide whether to get the mandatory termination—or to follow her heart, try to keep the baby, and possibly ruin her mother's chances at becoming president.

"Marissa Shrock is a fresh, vibrant voice in the YA market. Her writing is fast-paced, contemporary, and insightful." —DR. DENNIS E. HENSLEY, author of *How to Write What You Love and Make a Living at It*



Marissa Shrock is a middle school language arts teacher and works with her audience every day. She's a graduate of the Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild courses, and is a member of the ACFW. Her articles for teens have been published in *Evangel* and *Encounter*. This is her first book. Visit her at www.marissashrock.com.

YOUNG ADULT
Fiction / Christian / Futuristic

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"[*The First Principle*] challenged me to stand up for what I believe in, no matter the risk."

—*Abi, 15*

"*The First Principle* is fantastic. . . . Keeps you wanting more. . . . A great read."

—*Joanna, 16*

"Loved reading it and hope there will be a sequel."

—*Leah, 17*

"Amazing! . . . I love how Vivica is well known and has to make decisions that may affect more than just her own life."

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"It was hard to put down. . . . The future that Marissa Shrock writes about could very well happen."

—*Monica, 14*

"Raises good questions about government control and personal freedom. . . . I would recommend this book to my older friends."

—*Rebekah, 13*

"I absolutely loved *The First Principle*, a dystopian story with a Christian twist. . . . Tear-jerking, heart-racing, and beautifully written."

—*Tessa, 16*

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The First Principle: A Novel

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To Mom and Dad
Thank you for always believing in me

CHAPTER 1

The biggest rebellions begin with the smallest steps, and I took my first small step one December morning during study hall. The quiet drumming of fingers on desktops filled the room as my classmates used keyboards projected from their government-issued multiphone devices to work. I tried to concentrate on writing an essay for my literature class, but the blinding glare reflecting from the sun on the snow outside made it difficult for me to see my screen. I didn't mind. The glare gave me the perfect excuse to let my thoughts wander to Ben Lagarde. Three weeks ago he'd broken up with me, and while I'm not the type to fall in love, I really cared for Ben until he ended our relationship.

In the seat in front of me, Meredith Alderton sat with her chin in her hand, curly brown hair shrouding her shoulders. She was the girl Ben had been hanging around lately. The fact that I'd even noticed meant I needed to find another guy and move on.

A message bubble appeared on my screen.

Viv? U ok? Not much typing up there.

It was from my best friend, Tindra St. John, who sat three seats behind me. She was using the school's rogue messaging system that I'd created during the summer after hacking into my high school's network. The messaging system my friends and I used broke through the school's server blocks and hid inside the network. It allowed us to communicate with each other using our multiphone devices, also known as MDs or docs. The message system was only a fraction of the enhancements I'd made. The one that provided the most possibilities was my access to the grade books. Already a straight-A student, I didn't need my grades altered. However, Tindra did, and we'd made a deal. I changed her algebra grade from a D to a B-, and she quietly promoted my new job to the other kids. I made some extra cash, and my mother had no idea I was breaking the law.

Yeah. I'm fine. Just thinking about Ben.

Tindra's response made me smile.

Don't waste your time. You're too good for him.

The classroom door opened, and twenty-five heads turned. One of the school's government-appointed security guards, Officer Jim, held the door open for a woman wearing a military uniform. Her black hair was cropped close, and her pretty features were marred by the hard expression that settled in her eyes and around her mouth.

Mr. Wilson stood and removed his reading glasses. "May I help you?"

"I'm Officer Martina Ward from Population Management." Her raspy voice was deep. "I'm looking for Meredith Alderton."

Everyone turned to look at Meredith who shrank in her seat. Mr. Wilson pointed to her.

"Stand up," Officer Ward said, and Meredith obeyed. "Come with me."

Meredith gripped the back of her chair. "Why?"

Officer Ward raised her eyebrows. "We'll discuss that later. Come with me."

"No!" Meredith sat down at her desk so hard it banged into mine.

I turned to glance at Tindra whose brown eyes were wide.

Officer Ward crossed the room in three strides, grabbed Meredith's arm, and yanked her out of the seat. "I'm a government employee. You're required to speak with me."

Meredith jerked her arm away. "I'm not going anywhere with you until you tell me why."

Officer Jim stepped in and put a grandfatherly arm around Meredith's shoulder. "Now, Meredith, it's okay. We need you to step out in the hall and speak with Officer Ward." His tone was friendly but firm.

"Then just tell her what she wants to know," I said to Officer Ward. Everyone turned to face me. Meredith shot me a grateful look.

Officer Ward glared at me. "Mind your own business."

I stood. "No. I won't." I caught Tindra's eye. She made a slight hand motion signaling me to sit. "She has the right to know what's going on."

Officer Ward moved closer. "What's your name?"

"Vivica Wilkins."

“The daughter of our governor. I thought you looked familiar.” Officer Ward turned to Mr. Wilson. “Is she always this mouthy?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “We’ll let them have their way. Miss Alderton, it has come to my attention that you are pregnant. As I’m sure you’re aware, the Posterity Protection and Self-Determination Act requires that you report to a Population Management Clinic for a termination since you’re underage.”

“I know what the law says.” Meredith raised her chin. “But I’m not pregnant. Don’t you have my vaccine record and my test results from last month?”

“Funny you should bring that up”—Officer Ward tilted her head—“since someone tampered with your results.”

“I don’t know anything about that.” Meredith stared the woman down, but her voice trembled.

“I think you do. We recently obtained security camera footage from Officer Jim and discovered you sneaking into the school office after hours.” Officer Ward paused and surveyed all of us with a sneer. “Can you believe she was idiotic enough to believe we wouldn’t notice?”

Officer Ward’s mockery turned my stomach.

“Miss Alderton, you will come with me and comply with the law.”

Meredith flinched as if the officer’s words caused her physical pain. “You’re not going to kill my baby!” She bolted for the open door and darted into the hall. Before either Mr. Wilson or Officer Jim could take off after her, Officer Ward seized her gun from its holster and fired. Meredith’s hand flew to her arm, and she moved a few steps before she seemed to hit an invisible wall and collapsed next to the lockers.

A few students screamed and chairs scraped against tile while I ran to the door with several classmates.

“Sit down!” Officer Ward yelled. “It was a tranquilizer gun.” We shrank against the wall. Officer Ward looked at Mr. Wilson. “Keep them in here.” She pointed at Officer Jim. “Lock down the school. Now.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off the crumpled heap in the hallway. She was more than a little nutso if she thought she could break the law and get away with it. It’s not like you could hide a pregnancy. Why hadn’t I

ignored the impulse to stand up for her? Why had Ben befriended her? And then the obvious occurred to me—he was probably the cause of her situation.



I pushed steamed broccoli and carrots around my lunch tray. I'd only managed to swallow one bite of over-baked chicken before my stomach rebelled. I took a sip of vitamin-infused almond milk and wished I could have a brownie, but government regulations rationed sugar and fat for everyone and banned school cafeterias from providing any good stuff.

"You have to eat," Tindra said. "You'll feel better." She'd polished off her entire meal, and her eyes flicked toward my tray. Food always made Tindra feel better, and she was lucky it didn't show on her petite figure. Even though I was tall and slender, I couldn't get away with her eating habits.

"Help yourself." I pushed my tray toward Tindra and moved hers closer to me. The last thing I needed was the cafeteria monitor reporting my lack of consumption. "I can't get Meredith out of my mind." That was half true. I couldn't get Ben *with* Meredith out of my mind. Had he been seeing her while he was with me?

"I can't believe you stood up for her like that." She attacked the broccoli.

"That woman from Pop Management was a bully. But what was up with Meredith sneaking into the office? How dumb was that?"

"I know."

"I can't believe her vaccine didn't work." Every year the government gave each underage girl a vaccine to prevent pregnancy and STDs. We learned in health class that the shots were healthier and more effective than the hormone-based pills women had used years ago, when pregnancy control was optional.

"So what if it didn't?" Tindra asked. "Why didn't she go terminate? Doesn't she want to have a life? A kid would totally ruin everything."

I plucked a strawberry from my original tray and nibbled it. "I don't

know.” Maybe she just wanted to defy the government. Underground rebel activity had been a problem in our country for years. It was the reason the government monitored everyone and everything. I’d heard of pregnant girls going into hiding with rebel help, but I’d never known one personally. I’d more or less figured that part was urban legend. “You think she’s a rebel?”

“Duh. Why else would she skip termination?”

“Then why wasn’t she in hiding?”

“Do I look like a rebel expert? Maybe she was afraid to run away and leave her family.” Tindra shrugged and flipped her shiny black hair over her shoulder. “All I know is that if I ever get pregnant, I’m terminating. No worries here.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”



When I arrived at my URNA history class, everyone was unusually silent. I took a seat in the third row and propped my doc on the table. The bell dinged four times, and Mrs. O’Keefe rose from her chair, although the screen above her desk that normally held our notes remained blank.

Mrs. O’Keefe tucked a red curl behind her ear and cleared her throat. “I know you’ve all heard what happened today during fourth hour.” She paused and looked at us. I nodded and noticed several other heads bobbing. “I need to read the following message from the principal before we begin.” She tapped her doc. “Today during fourth hour, a young lady was placed into a juvenile detention center for attempting to change the results of a government-issued pregnancy test in an attempt to avoid the required termination. Though pregnancy is rare due to the success rate of our vaccination program, we would like to remind you that the Posterity Protection and Self-Determination Act was implemented for the common good of our country. We hope that such an incident will not be repeated, as it reflects badly on our school and community.” Mrs. O’Keefe looked up, her expression grim. “Now, moving on—”

“That’s bull.” Darius Delano crossed his arms. D² was a new student this year, and he always had an opinion.

Mrs. O’Keefe held up her hand. “I know some of you found this incident disturbing, but I’ve been told that we are not to discuss this issue any further.”

“What gives the government the right to tell her she can’t have a baby?” D² asked.

“We simply can’t discuss this.”

D² scowled, and I think he swore under his breath, but I wasn’t sure. Mrs. O’Keefe must not have been sure either because she hesitated before she focused her attention on opening the class notes.

“Why can’t we?” This time I knew the voice without looking. It was Ben, his tone gentle and disarming.

“Principal Daniels asked that we not.” Mrs. O’Keefe’s tone was firm, but her thin hands fluttered around her doc. “Besides, it’s clear that the student’s actions were illegal.”

“Can we at least discuss the law and if we even need it anymore? We don’t have to talk about Meredith,” D² said.

Several people agreed.

“Fine. Darius, since you feel so strongly about the matter, go ahead.”

D² sauntered to the front of the class, and Mrs. O’Keefe moved to the side and supported herself with one hand gripping the edge of her desk.

“So, the best teacher ever”—he grinned at Mrs. O’Keefe—“taught us the Posterity Protection and Self-Determination Act, a.k.a. *term law*—’cause of the part that says underage girls and people with too many kids have gotta terminate pregnancies—was put into place back in the day. Our government was trying to get the country rolling after the Great Collapse and the Second Civil War. Too many people were poor and starving, so they had to control population growth.” D² shifted back and forth. “The economy is better now. We have food. Why should the government care if some teenage girl has a kid? Or if adults want a big family?”

Claire, who sat in the front row, waved her hand. “You’re kidding, right? Do you know how many people *still* live in poverty?”

Pop Management regulations ensure we have enough resources to go around. And what about the environmental impact of overpopulation? Besides, you aren't being honest. Adults can have more than two kids if they pay."

D² crossed his arms again. "It shouldn't be the government's job to provide for everyone, and no woman should have to pay a huge fine or terminate."

"If she can't afford the fine, then she can't support another child," Claire said.

"People like Meredith fight the law because they think the required termination part is wrong," Ben said. "It's not about resources. Or the economy. They don't want to slaughter kids."

I spun and shot Ben a look. *Slaughter?* What was he thinking? Using words like that could cause the government to investigate you for hate speech or anti-government activity.

D² pointed to Ben. "That's right."

"So, Darius, are you announcing that you're a rebel?" Claire asked.

He scowled. "I'm expressing my opinion. That doesn't mean I'm a rebel."

"Right." Claire rolled her eyes.

Mrs. O'Keefe stood. "Darius, do you have anything else to add?"

"No." He stomped back to his seat.

"Anyone else?"

The room stilled. Even if someone had a thought, Claire's accusation against D² was enough to silence the entire class.

CHAPTER 2

“Vivica!” I whirled at the sound of Ben’s voice. “Hey, wait up.”

The last bell had rung, and students pushed out the front doors, buzzing about their weekend plans. I stopped. My bodyguard waited outside the door in the snow, and if Ben had something to say, I didn’t want Bobby to overhear.

“I need to talk to you.” Ben sounded sincere.

“I don’t feel like listening.” I adjusted my bag on my shoulder, and Ben reached over and slid it off. I jerked it back. “What are you doing?”

He held on to my bag. “I’m going to carry this for you.”

“No, you’re not.” I snatched the bag.

“What if I said I’m sorry?”

I smirked in spite of myself. “For . . . ?” A couple of girls from my pre-calc class walked by and gave us a curious look. Rumors would be in full force by tonight. I took a step back. “You need to be specific.”

Color rose in Ben’s cheeks. “I will. At your house.” His chocolate eyes pleaded, but they reflected enough pride that it didn’t seem like begging. Why did he have to look so cute?

“Will you leave me alone if I agree?”

“Yes.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, then let’s get this over with.” I pushed through the door, and the frigid air numbed my lungs and made my eyes water. The sun reflecting off the snow tickled my nose and caused a sneeze. I nodded toward Bobby. “Ben’s coming home with me.”

Bobby looked Ben up and down and then led us to the executive car next to the curb. “Got to take a detour. Bad accident.” He opened the door, and I slid into the back seat. Ben left space between us, which felt weird because when we had been dating, he would’ve snuggled next to me. His brown hair fell in soft waves across his forehead. I longed to reach up and brush it aside like I used to.

I stared out the window at the drab scenery that announced the poor section of town. No wonder Bobby usually programmed the car to avoid this route. Graffiti full of anti-government sentiments splayed over crumbling brick walls. Beggars huddled against buildings with boarded windows.

Many people had been destitute since the Great Collapse years ago. After the economy failed, elected officials in the U.S. government spent so much time fighting with each other that they couldn't resolve issues. Riots broke out among starving people. Militias organized and attempted to break away from the government, which led to the Second Civil War.

When Mexico saw the confusion, its military attacked parts of Texas and New Mexico, claiming the land was historically Mexico's. Then Canada was drawn in when millions of United States citizens sought asylum to the north. To bring peace to North America, the Council of World Peacekeepers stepped in and used a nation consolidation model that it had implemented throughout the world. And the United Regions of North America was born.

The Council of World Peacekeepers divided the three former countries into seven geographic regions: the Atlantic Region, the Great Lakes Region, the Coastal Plain Region, the Great Plains Region, the Desert and Pacific Region, the Rocky Mountain Region, and the Caribbean Region. Each region had its own governor. The Nationalist Party dominated, and at the president's recommendation, the Council of Representatives appointed my mother governor of the Great Lakes Region eight years ago.

I thought of the debate today in URNA history. Claire was right. There was still too much poverty. But what did Ben think about the neediness that surrounded us? Did he care or was he comfortable with our affluence? There was a lot I didn't know about him.

The car stopped at a red light where a group of mothers and children waited on the sidewalk. In front stood a little girl whose large, gray eyes looked too sad to belong to someone so young. She held the hand of a woman who had the same eyes, only they contained weariness mixed with the sadness. The girl's face was slender, and her shabby clothes,

which were tidy, looked too thin for such a cold day. I grabbed my bag from the seat. “Reprogram the car, Bobby. I want to stop here.”

He turned and frowned. “Not in this neighborhood.”

“Yes.” I rummaged until I found my wallet and withdrew an empty cash card. I removed my doc from my pocket. Bobby entered the commands into the car’s computer, and as soon as the light changed, the vehicle maneuvered through traffic and parked along the street.

Ben leaned over. “What are you doing?”

I pushed a few buttons on my doc and activated my bank account, and the allowance that I used for shopping transferred to the card when I scanned it. “I’m helping that child.”

Ben glanced out the back window. “What child?”

I jumped out and sprinted down the street waving. “Wait, please!” The group stopped, and I charged forward and bent in front of the little girl. I held out the card. “I want you to have this.”

The girl looked puzzled, but she accepted the card. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Her mother snatched the card and inspected it before holding it out to me. “We can’t take this.”

I stood. “I really want you to have it.”

The young mother studied the sidewalk. “I know you do. And I appreciate your kindness. But there’s no place we can use that card without being suspected of stealing it. The numbers on the card show it belongs to someone in the upper class.” She pointed at the card’s serial number. “I can’t go to jail and neither can my husband.” She waved the card, urging me to take it.

I reached out my gloved hand and took it back, trying to ignore the lump that welled in my throat. I was upset by my inability to help, but I was equally embarrassed to be so out of touch. How could I not have known about the numbers?

The woman smiled. “If you donate it to a government-sponsored charity, it can help people like my family.”

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

“God bless you, Miss Vivica.” The woman took her daughter’s hand and continued down the street. That she recognized me only added to

my embarrassment. For the first time since stepping out of the car, I felt the cold and shivered. Ben put his hand on my shoulder.

“Can you believe that?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you know they wouldn’t be able to take the card?”

“Yes. It’s been on the news. People have been falsely accused of stealing after someone tried to help them.”

“Then why didn’t you stop me? I feel so stupid.” Maybe I needed to stop worrying so much about the latest celebrity gossip and pay attention to the news alerts that appeared on my doc every day. “It’s been such an awful day. I wanted to do something nice.” We walked back to the car.

“I know.” Ben opened the door. “I didn’t have time to stop you. And you heard the woman. Donate the money to charity.”

“I wanted to help *that* little girl.” Tears formed, which upset me even more because I didn’t usually cry so easily. Plus, I didn’t want to break down in front of Ben. I turned away, and we rode in silence.

The slums gave way to our affluent neighborhood, and we passed through an iron gate in a massive stone wall that surrounded our elite community.

Ben lived a few streets over, but he usually took the school’s transportation home. My mother considered the shared transportation too much of a safety risk for me, so Bobby escorted me everywhere.

The car passed through another gate and turned onto the winding drive that led to the governor’s mansion. It looked more like a fortress than a home, glaring at anyone who dared to travel up the lane. The car parked, and Bobby got out and opened the door.

“Are you getting out?” Ben grinned, his eyes twinkling.

“Yeah.” I scrambled out, stuffed the cash card into my pocket, and hurried into the house, letting Ben find his own way.

I grabbed two apples and water bottles from the kitchen, and we headed to my side of the house. Settling on the couches in the sitting area off of my bedroom, I tossed Ben an apple. “So talk.” I bit into my apple, the crunch magnified in the silence. I hoped whatever he had to say would help get my mind off everything that had happened.

Ben sighed. “I’m sorry for taking advantage of you.”

“What do you mean?”

He twisted the cap off his water bottle. “I shouldn’t have had sex with you.”

I fought the urge to laugh. Where was this coming from? “In case you forgot, I was a willing participant.” I took another bite.

“I know. But it was wrong. I didn’t show you the respect you deserve.” His eyes searched mine. “I know better than to have sex with someone I’m not married to.”

I swallowed before I choked. Some radical religious groups believed sex was only for a man and a woman who were married, but they usually stayed quiet to avoid accusations of hate speech. Now Ben agreed with them? Weird. It was kind of sweet that he felt bad since it had happened only once. After that he’d broken up with me.

“So, you feel guilty now?”

“Yes. What we did was a sin,” Ben said.

“Where were these convictions when we were dating?” I sounded harsher than I felt, but Ben confused me.

He blushed. “I was ignoring them.”

“And hiding them.”

“Yes. But God has forgiven me. And now I’m asking you to.” Guilt dimmed the kindness that normally shone in his eyes.

I shrugged. “You’re forgiven. No big deal. I get it. You have to hide what you believe or someone will accuse you of hate speech.”

Relief flooded his expression before his eyes clouded, and he looked down. “True Christians shouldn’t hide their beliefs.”

“The smart ones do. Look, I don’t really care. I’m so over it.”

“Viv, you can stop acting tough. I know I hurt you when I broke up with you. It probably felt like it came out of nowhere.”

“Okay, fine. You hurt me. At least I know now it wasn’t me. Are you happy?” I drew my knees to my chest.

“No, I’m not happy. I want to be the friend I should have been before I got carried away.”

Though his apology was more than I had ever received from most guys, I wasn’t sure about us being friends. “Why bother if there’s nothing in it for you?”

Ben's shoulders slumped. "Because I care about you. You're exciting. Sophisticated. Smart. Beautiful." He sighed. "And we had fun together before I ruined everything."

We did have fun. From the day he'd worked up enough nerve to talk to me after smiling awkwardly at me for a week in URNA history, we'd been inseparable. He listened to me. I didn't have to put on a facade. I could just be Vivica—not the governor's daughter.

"If I'm so wonderful and you care so much, then why break up with me?"

"Because I don't want . . . never mind. Can you just believe me?"

I tossed the apple core toward the automatic trash disposer in the corner. It hit the metal with a dull thud. The feeling that there was more to his agenda than a simple apology bugged me.

"I forgive you, okay? We can be friendly. But I have homework I need to do."

"I understand." Ben stood and cleared his throat. "One more thing. You're not pregnant, are you?" His cheeks turned pink.

I laughed at the look on his face. "No. You can relax."

"You're sure? Because the vaccines don't always work as well as the gov—"

"I'm sure. The school nurse even gave me my mandatory test a few days after we . . ."

He looked away and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Besides, if I were pregnant, it would be an easy problem to fix."

Ben nodded slowly, his face a mix of relief and disapproval.

"You obviously have an opinion."

He hesitated. "I don't agree with the term law."

"I'm not surprised based on your word choice in class today." I frowned. "You'd better watch what you say, or you'll be investigated and end up in prison."

"Says the girl who sassed the woman from Pop Management."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Yeah, I heard." His gaze was intense.

"No one's going to think I'm anti-government."

“Not all of us have a mom who’s the governor. But we should have the right to say what we believe.”

Should we? The laws are meant to protect us from domestic terrorism.

“Whatever.” My thoughts turned to Meredith, and I held up a hand. “Wait a second. Why were you hanging around with Meredith?”

“We weren’t dating.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “She needed a friend. That’s all.”

“Because she was trying to hide her pregnancy.”

“She didn’t hide it very well, now did she?” His eyes flicked toward the door.

He knew something he wasn’t telling me, but I’d already stirred up enough trouble for the day. “Well, you should be careful what you say. People might get the wrong idea.”

“Viv, do you really agree with the term law?”

I looked away. Why couldn’t he let this go? “The law is the law. We have to follow it.”

“Is that what you really believe or just what you say because of your mom?”

I bristled. “I believe it. Weren’t you paying attention when we went through that neighborhood today? Didn’t you see how many people need help?”

“The term law has been in place for years. Is it helping?”

I opened my mouth to retort but stopped.

“I saw how it made you feel when you couldn’t help that woman and her daughter. And what about Meredith? How’d that make you feel? Don’t you want freedom to make your own choices instead of being told what you can and can’t do? What you can and can’t say?”

There it was—the rest of his agenda. What was with him? It was like there was a totally different person standing in front of me. *This* guy had not been my boyfriend.

“I’ll get over what happened today. My mom and I don’t always agree, but she’s a great governor.” I crossed my arms. “If you’re trying to convert me to ease your conscience, forget it. That’s not me. I know how the government feels about exclusivist Christian whackos. You’re crazy to talk about this.”

“You gonna report me?”

“No.” I couldn’t believe he thought I’d do that.

Ben rested his hands on my shoulders. “I’m sorry I was selfish and took advantage of you. I’ve been a poor excuse for a Christian.” He dropped his hands and picked up his backpack. “I’ll leave you alone now.” He opened it, pulled out a wadded gym uniform, and uncovered a book.

“Where did you get that?” Books made of paper were rare because of environmental regulations restricting paper usage.

“It’s an original Bible. Not the government’s edited version. Take it.”

“No way.” I stepped back. “That thing is full of hate speech.”

“Viv, there’s nothing hateful about it. Why don’t you read it yourself instead of believing everything you’ve been told? It’s helped me a lot.”

“Fine.” I took the book so he’d leave. I could always get rid of it later.



“Good morning! Vivica, sweetie, where are you?”

I stifled a groan as I applied mascara. It was too early to deal with Melvin Powers who’d been my mother’s faithful assistant since she’d launched her political career as a representative twelve years ago. He’d lasted because he thrived on taking orders. Gaining a bit of influence through my mom probably helped too. He rapped on my bathroom door.

I laid the mascara tube on the counter. “What is it, Melvin?”

“Your mother wants to see you in her office. Pronto.”

“Why?” I raked my fingers through my hair and adjusted the pins.

I could hear Melvin’s sigh through the door. “Just do me a personal favor and get over there.”

“Fine.” I owed him for all the times he ran interference for me with my mother. I finished my makeup and tried to guess what she wanted.

I crossed the catwalk that bridged the chasm of living space that separated my rooms from my mother’s quarters and ambled down the staircase to her office. Out of habit, I avoided the creaks in the hallway. I stopped at the door, watching her work at her steel and glass desk in

front of a wall of computer screens. Melvin, seated on the couch, jabbered on a call with someone important. My mother's black Labrador retriever, Commander, rose to greet me, and I patted his head while his tail beat against my legs.

My mother glanced up and waved. "Come in, Vivica." She tapped a few computer screens, and a map and images from a newscast appeared. "Let me finish." My mother pursed her lips and studied the screen.

The cameraman focused on huddled masses of humanity that swarmed in front of a courthouse. I didn't recognize the location, but from their screams it was obvious something terrible had occurred.

"Melvin!"

He excused himself from his call, hopped to his feet, and wrinkled his nose as he brushed dog hair from his designer suit. "What do you need?"

"The media are reporting a rebel uprising in the Coastal Plain Region. Contact the head of the Department of Security and get a report on the amount of rebel activity in our region."

Avoiding Commander, Melvin scurried out.

I glanced at the screens. "If you're busy, we can talk later."

"No, I may not have time later." She motioned to the couch.

I sat as Commander collapsed at my feet with a sigh. My mother relaxed in her chair. *Regal* was what the media called her. It was true. Her golden hair was arranged in an elegant French twist, and her air-brushed makeup made her skin appear youthful and flawless. I tried to recall the last time I saw my mother without makeup and realized I had no memory of that. There were many who said I looked like her, and while I shared her golden hair, aquamarine eyes, and height, I had a long way to go before I could match her flawless elegance.

"What's going on with the rebels?"

Mom's eyes fastened on me. "The Nationalist Party intends to nominate me for president."

I studied the screen above my mother's head. The camera zoomed in on a crowd of people who pushed and shoved against the government officials trying to prevent the mob from storming the courthouse. A rhythmic chant throbbed in the air, but the audio was too low for me

to understand the words. One man held our nation's flag out for the camera while the woman next to him glared into the camera lens and set the flag on fire.

"Vivica. Did you hear me?"

"Yeah. The presidential nomination." I pointed at the screen. "What's going on? Why is there an uprising?"

My mother whirled in her desk chair and brushed her fingers over the screens. The images faded to ebony. "I need you to focus."

"Please tell me what's going on first." I wasn't trying to be difficult, but it was hard to concentrate after the images I'd seen.

"According to my sources, there are food distribution issues in the Coastal Plain Region. The lower class is staging protests, and the rebels are encouraging them. The security in that region is pitiful because their governor is worthless. Now . . . about my presidential nomination."

"What about President Hernandez? I thought the party liked him."

My mother raised her chin as if I'd offended her, which I hadn't meant to do. I was just curious. "They do. But they think after twelve years of Hernandez it's time for someone new. They like what I've done as governor. Besides, Felipe is ready to retire."

In our country the powerful party leaders chose the presidential nominee, and the representatives appointed by the governors of each region confirmed the nomination. "Well, they should like what you've done with security." Our region was one of the most secure in the nation with very little rebel activity due to my mother's policies. She'd be a great president, and I could get used to being the president's daughter. I grinned. "So, the nomination is pretty much a done deal?"

My mother returned the smile. "Yes. Unless something unforeseen happens to prevent it."



There was always a long line at the school's retinal scanner. I didn't see any of my friends, so I pulled my doc out of my bag and accessed my bank account. My mother had deposited my weekly allowance. Maybe I could take a shopping trip after school. Or I could give the money to

a government charity like the little girl's mom suggested . . . I decided on the charity and transferred the money.

When the machine finished scanning my eye, the door opened. I waved to Bobby, who nodded. As bad as it was having him escort me, I was thankful he didn't follow me around the school. Unlike my string of previous bodyguards, Bobby understood a sixteen-year-old girl needed space and instinctively knew what information should be reported to my mother and what information should be ignored. For that reason, Bobby and I got along, but out of habit I operated under the assumption that anything he witnessed might be relayed to my mother.

I entered the lobby where Tindra appeared and grabbed my elbow.

"Good morning." I checked out her cream-colored, lace T-shirt that complemented her olive skin. "I love that top."

"You are totally not gonna believe what I heard."

She pulled me away from the crowd, and we huddled near a screen that exhibited three-dimensional images of trophies as pictures of the school's championship teams scrolled by.

She looked around and then leaned close. "Mrs. O'Keefe got fired for allowing the discussion in class yesterday."

I gasped. "Did Claire tell? I mean she was arguing with D² and made it clear she agreed with the term law."

"I wouldn't put it past her. She's tight with the principal's daughter."

"What about D²?"

Tindra shrugged. "Don't know."

I clutched my purse handle. "Do you think Ben will get in trouble?"

"Why are you worried about him?"

I stared at the trophy case. "He apologized yesterday. He doesn't want to get back together or anything, but an apology is more than I've gotten from some guys."

She shook her head. "Whatever. If it makes you feel any better, I heard Claire has a crush on him, so maybe she'll keep him out of it."

I hoped Tindra was right.



That evening at dinner I forced myself to take a bite of cod. It wasn't the food. It was my appetite.

"It's my understanding that some interesting events have taken place at your school during the last couple of days," my mother said.

I rested the fork on my plate. "The girl they arrested was in my study hall. I saw her get shot."

"It was only a tranquilizer gun."

"It was still disturbing."

"Perhaps the young lady should have thought of the consequences before she broke the law." My mother dabbed her lips with her napkin and surveyed me. "Is there anything else you want to tell me about that day?"

I took a drink of water and then shook my head. "Can't think of anything." Had someone reported my outburst in study hall?

"I see."

"Wait." I glanced away and pushed asparagus pieces around my plate. "There was a discussion about whether or not we still need the term law in URNA history. I didn't realize people were actually against it."

My mother grimaced. "Only the rebels. The sane people in this country support the law."

"We still need it even though the economy is better?"

"Absolutely. The law was put into place to help reduce the number of people needing government support. Young, single mothers have always been a drain on government resources, and after the Great Collapse, we had to take stopgap measures to bring it under control so everyone could have their fair share. It made such an economic difference, the law became permanent. With young women free of the burden of children, they can further their education or work and contribute to society. Besides, teenage girls have no business rearing children. They should be free to live and enjoy their lives. Imagine being burdened with a child, at your age."

"Couldn't they just have the babies and give them up for adoption?"

"It's too much for the health care system to handle. And there's no guarantee that the children will be adoptable. The rebels have been managing to hide a few lawbreakers"—she smiled—"but they won't for much longer."

“What do you mean?” As long as I asked questions, she’d keep talking.

“With the help of the Global Health Organization, the United Regions of North America is preparing an initiative that will vastly improve health care. Citizens will have biochips implanted in their arms to monitor their health data. Other countries are using biochips already, and citizens are able to have advance warning of, and thus prevent, at least fifty percent of heart attacks and strokes. Diabetics will have immediate access to their glucose levels, making it easier to determine their insulin needs. Another benefit is that if a woman becomes pregnant, we’ll know even before she does. And those are just the most immediate and obvious benefits. The entire nation will have an increased quality of life.”

Not having to take a pregnancy test every four months would be nice. “How soon?”

“The plan is to begin shortly after I take office. It will be one of the hallmarks of my presidency.” Her eyes gleamed as she studied me.

Uh-oh. “Sounds like a great plan. How will—”

“If I ever hear of you showing disrespect to a government official again, I will cut off your allowance for six months.”

Busted. “Who told you?”

“It doesn’t matter. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

My mother and I ate in silence until Melvin appeared in the doorway.

“Excuse me, Governor. I’m so sorry to interrupt your dinner.” He held my mother’s enhanced multiphone device in his hand. “The security director needs to speak with you. It’s urgent.”

My mother shoved her plate aside and took the MD3 from Melvin and projected the screen onto the wall next to the table. When I started to stand, my mother shook her head. “Finish your dinner. Go ahead, Director Spiegel.”

“Governor, I looked into the rebel activity in our region per your request.” He smoothed his comb-over.

“And?”

“It’s not surprising that the rebel movement has spread from the Coastal Plain Region to the others, including our region.”

My mother swore. "I always knew no good would come of their poor security. If they'd controlled their population better they wouldn't be in this mess now. How bad is it?"

"I have my agents on it, but from what we can tell there are at least five rebel cells in the Great Lakes Region with the biggest one in your hometown. Membership appears to span social classes. Many, but not all, are exclusivist Christians. As we expected based on reports from other regions, they're spreading anti-government sentiments based on old U.S. constitutional principles. The exclusivists are circulating unauthorized print versions of the Bible and claiming our government's Revised Freedom Version is inaccurate."

Ben had to be involved. Where else would he have gotten an unauthorized Bible? Plus, his family had moved into our region two years ago. I forced myself to take a bite and pretended not to listen.

"We're investigating anyone who has moved into your region during the past several years from the CP. However, I'd be careful about trusting anyone, no matter how long you've known them."

"How could this have happened in my own region? How long will it take to find these people? How soon can we have them in custody?" My mother sounded panicky.

"Governor, it could be awhile. But don't worry. The problem has spread all over the country. I don't think it will hurt your nomination chances."

My mother bristled. "Never mind the nomination. How I handle security in my region does matter. Do you need more manpower? More funding? Whatever you need, you have to let me know."

"I think we have enough, but I'll let you know. I'm also sending you a detailed report of our findings."

"Thank you, Director. I'll expect a daily report on your progress."

"Yes, ma'am."

She disconnected. "That idiot is not going to handle this properly!"

Melvin sighed. "I was afraid you'd think that."

"Why wouldn't I? 'It could be awhile'? He ought to know I don't want to hear that. I want people in custody *tonight*, not a week or a month from now."

Melvin rested his hands on the back of a chair. "You may not have

people in custody tonight, but you need to do something to discourage the growth of the rebel cells.”

She bit her lip. “Schedule a press conference for tomorrow. I have an idea.”

Melvin hurried away, and I started to follow.

“Wait.” She leaned forward. “Earlier when you were talking about the debate, you implied students were espousing rebel principles. Who were the students?”

My mind churned. D² wasn’t a rebel. He just had too many opinions for his own good. I forced myself to meet my mother’s eyes. “It was just one new kid. I . . . think his name is Jarvis.” I bit a hangnail. “I don’t know his last name.”

“That doesn’t matter. His first name will be enough.”