



A PORT IN PIECES

*Prologue*

*T*here was a lot to do since Hurricane Adam had blown through Port City. The billion dollars in damage still left its mark around the small town. Trees that had been thrown like little twigs over the streets had now been cleared. But the streetlights and traffic signals now sitting at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico had not been replaced.

The temporary stop signs marking intersections were a reminder of what the people along the port had endured, and how far they had to go to be whole again.

It was the same at Port City High School. Even though the money had been raised to get students back into their beloved school, only the essentials had been fixed. None of the other damage could be repaired until recovery money was in the hands of the school district.

A special team assembled. Their job was to clear the school of debris and garbage. Once that job was complete, contractors, parents, and student volunteers were allowed to begin painting. Portions of the school were now ready for business.

“We did it,” Shane said, standing in the foyer of Port City High.

“I’m proud of you girls,” Trent said, standing next to Marisa. “This could not have happened if the three of you hadn’t stepped in.”

“Love, it couldn’t have happened if people like you didn’t come home for the holidays and help us out. Thank you so

much for staying,” Marisa said, looking adoringly at her boyfriend.

“Anything for you. Let’s go check the lobby again.”

“Ew, go back to Arkansas already. You two are gross,” Shane said, making faces at her friends. “See y’all later.”

Trent and Marisa left, heading down the hall.

“You want me to show you a little love,” Ashton said, winking at her.

“Fool, no. We’re gonna inspect our work.”

Brandi and Erick Wright were trying to move paint and supplies into one of the classrooms that was turned into a temporary storage room. “Ashton, grab the other side of this plank,” Shane said, jumping in to help them remove some of the materials. Once they were done clearing the hallway, they all sat on the floor, propped against a wall.

“Mrs. Montgomery is supposed to be

coming soon. When are you going back to school, E?” Shane asked Erick.

“I have a few more days in town. After this, I need a nap or two before I have to jump back into my spring schedule. The University of Texas is brutal. They are trying to break everybody. They like to weed through the freshman class.”

“Fun,” Brandi said, getting a glimpse of what campus life could be like for her.

“Bran, come on. You love a challenge,” Shane told her.

“I’m just happy we won’t be a part of all that freshman craziness. We will be right here at Port City College, getting through basic courses, easy breezy,” Brandi said.

Shane laughed. “True. I’m not into torture. I just want to do my four years, get my degree, and be out.” Shane smiled, picturing the three of them in the same classes.

“Are you really staying in Port City