

The Public Eye A PORT CITY HIGH NOVEL

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THE PUBLIC EYE

Prologue

After their annual New Year's party, the girls were optimistic about the year ahead. All of their families were in a good place. Even the Maldonados, who had dealt with some serious issues last semester, were doing much better.

Marisa's brother, Romero, had gotten into some trouble, and their father's sudden outburst during Romero's court appearance had left him incarcerated and facing deportation. If it hadn't been for Shane's father putting his neck on the line, their story would have ended much differently.

Brian Foster had been the driving force behind Mr. Maldonado's release. He had asked for some favors, and now it was Mr. Foster's turn to make good on the promises he had made to some of Port City's most influential people.

And then there was Brandi's father, who had just gotten out of rehab. The Haywoods were all experiencing some difficulties adjusting to his return, but for the most part, they were just happy he was back home and in a good frame of mind.

"I am *not* ready to go back to school," Shane had declared, lying across the bed and dreading the conclusion of Christmas break.

"Me neither. It's too cold outside, and I just want to stay in bed. Christmas break should be as long as summer break. Wouldn't that be nice?" Marisa responded. "If it wasn't for basketball season, I would just homeschool this semester," Brandi said, laughing.

"Yeah right, we are too fly to be locked up in the house all day," Shane told them. "I wonder what time Ryan's picking me up. I need to text him."

"Dude, how many boyfriends are you gonna have this year?" Brandi asked Shane as they waited for Ryan Petry to pick her up for their date.

"I don't have a boyfriend. Ryan is just a friend who asked me out on a date."

"Um-hm, tell me anything. He is kind of cute, though, in a hot-bookworm kind of way. Ashton is going to be so upset," Brandi chuckled. "Just don't go anyplace where he may see you."

"I am not running from Ashton either. He is just my friend."

"No ... I'm your friend. Marisa's your friend."

"Amen to that!" Marisa hollered from

the bathroom, where she was flat ironing her hair.

"Ryan and Ashton drool when you're anywhere near them. What friends do that?" Brandi asked.

"This is a new year and a new me. I'm just trying to be more open to what's out there. You know I don't really date," Shane told them.

"Oh, so we are on New Year's resolutions now?" Brandi asked.

"I'm down," Marisa hollered from the bathroom. "Gimme a sec." Marisa finished her hair and joined her friends in Shane's bedroom.

"I already know what I have to do this year," Brandi told them. "I have to decide where this thing with Bryce is going. I was so sure before, but now ... I-D-K."

"Yeah, I'm with you, B. Pump your brakes with that one. The thing is, my girl Brandi Haywood can stand on her own two feet. Bryce ain't the reason you still standing ... you are."

Shane knew this was the best moment to tell Brandi how she felt about her relationship with Bryce Thomas. He was a hot-headed kid with a lot of baggage. She had met him in a group for troubled teens, and he was not only troubled, Shane felt he was disturbed.

Brandi nodded her head in agreement. "I know what you're saying, sis. I see it too. Don't think I'm blind."

"Okay, my turn," Marisa told them. "This year I'm focusing on modeling. Somehow, some way, a door is going to open for me. I can just feel it."

"That sounds good to me," Brandi told her. "You've got that *something special*, and somebody's gonna recognize it. You just gotta grind it out. Whatever that means, for wherever you are."

The girls held hands, and each of them

prayed silently for the upcoming year, for their families, and for their goals. Shane stuck her arm out in the middle of the circle. Brandi and Marisa followed suit. "New year, new me," she declared. "Better yet, new year, new we."

"I like that," Marisa said, giving her a nod of approval. "New year, new we."

Brandi repeated it as well, with a smile on her face. "I like it too. Adding it to my timeline today."

"Girl, you need to make a no-Friender resolution," Shane told her. After Brandi's abduction in ninth grade, the girls were all skeptical—and very cautious—about social networking. "You just be careful. And promise us, no Internet dating, please. We just got you back."

"I'm not trying to date anybody, but I like Friender. And that creep, Steven, is not going to have me scared of using my own computer. I won't give him that much power," Brandi declared. "Now let's get back to PCH and rock out the end of this sophomore year."

"That's what I'm talking about," Shane agreed.

CHAPTER 1

Shane

It was cold outside. It had rained for the past two days, so to get a little break from the rain was a pleasant surprise. Today, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was a beautiful, crisp winter afternoon. Even the birds had come out to enjoy the sunshine.

Shane wanted to look smart and sophisticated. After all, she knew that Ryan would look like a reporter straight out of the *Port City Tribune* when he arrived. Ryan was a serious twelfth grader, the editor-in-chief of the school newspaper and yearbook, and her boss in her position as photo editor. She wasn't sure what he wanted with a sophomore, but she seemed to intrigue him.

"Hey," Shane said as she jumped into Ryan's Jeep Cherokee. It was an older model, but it was in good shape. She could tell that the radio had been upgraded with an XM system. His truck was comfortable and warm and seemed perfect for him.

"Hey, Shane. I hate to be rude. I should say hello to your parents."

"They aren't even home right now. They had a meeting or something downtown. So no worries. And what do you have planned for us today?"

"You mean Shane Foster is going to let me take the lead on this date? Cool."

"Of course. I know how to ride shotgun."

"Well, in that case, I thought we'd go by the museum for lunch."

"The museum? We are not that old, Ryan. Haven't you heard of burgers and a movie?"