

The Dark Side of Midnight

Chapter 1: Death Threats

It had turned into a nasty campaign with her opponent casting slurs like they were candy for the voters. Jet ran her fingers through her blonde hair and wondered how such an unprincipled man could even think about running for County Sheriff. After all wasn't the law and its enforcers supposed to be honest and fair.

Sheriff Daniel Crocker was fighting for his political life. He had been shocked when the election had ended in a tie forcing him into a runoff with Justine Erica Trent known by her colleagues as Jet. And jet she was in more ways than one. She had whirled out of the academy at the top of her class breaking records set by men who simply wondered, "What happened." She always won the annual marksmanship competition. A karate black belt, she often took down men twice her size. She had won every medal of honor and bravery the department and state awarded, and she had jetted up the ranks to captain before she was thirty.

The problem was, he liked her. She was honest, loyal, and dependable. She was also movie star gorgeous. He had laughed when she asked his permission to run for sheriff. "You're a woman," he had responded.

"Thank you for noticing that Sheriff," she had smirked. "I'm also a damn good law enforcement officer."

He had hitched up his pants and said, "Sure, go ahead and run. You don't stand a chance." At fifty-five, he had been sheriff for twenty-five years and there was no way a woman could beat him.

Paradise, Texas was a college town located on the widest part of the Brazos River, the longest river in Texas.

Paradise State University was a highly acclaimed college ranking in the top twenty institutions of higher learning in the United States. The town could be as wild and woolly as the old west or as serious and protective as a mother bear. If a neighbor needed a helping hand Paradise citizens could be counted on to rise to the occasion.

Friday night football was the most popular activity followed by most of the sixty-thousand residents. Jet never missed a game because she loved football, and her twin brother Justin was the high school coach.

Justin and Justine Trent were as close to royalty as the citizens of Paradise ever encountered. They were elected king and queen of every function held at Paradise High School and the trend carried through college. Justin was captain of the winning football teams and Justine was the captain of the girls' volleyball and basketball teams, setting state records in track and field.

They often double dated in college with Justin going steady with the head cheerleader and Justine dating the boy who was the flavor of the month. They shared everything, their hopes and dreams, their disappointments, and heartbreaks. The one thing Justine never shared was her attraction for women. Good Texas girls didn't desire other women, not if they wanted to amount to anything.

So, while Justin married the college cheerleader, Justine became the captain of the Sheriff's department and possibly the only thirty-year-old virgin in Texas.

"You know Friday night is homecoming," Justin charged through the door of his sister's office. "All the queens from the past have committed to an appearance, but you."

"You know I hate that," Jet whined. "I need to be on duty. You know how rowdy the kids get during homecoming. I need to be in uniform and very visible."

“Come on Jet. You know how everyone loves you. You can wear your dress blues and it will be good publicity for your bid to become the first female sheriff in Paradise.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jet muttered.

“It won’t hurt you to be recognized as the candidate for sheriff *and* the sister of the winningest football coach in the history of Paradise High School.”

“Don’t forget the humblest coach,” Jet chided him. “I’ll be there.”

“You’re the best.” Justin waved as he closed the door behind him.

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“Captain, Mrs. Autry Bishop has asked to speak with you,” Secretary Margaret Lane announced as she opened the door.

Jet raised her brows.

“The high school principal,” Margaret clarified.

Jet rose from her desk and walked to the door to meet Autry. “Please, come in,” she invited.

Autry Bishop was a year older than Jet and mouth-watering beautiful. While Jet had been a jock in college, Autry had been president of the drama club and captain of the debate team. She had written several bestselling novels under a pen name, and was also the wife of Frank Bishop, the presiding judge over the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. Their paths had crossed often in college but were only acquaintances not friends. Jet wondered why Autry was visiting her.

“Please, have a seat,” Jet gestured toward the chair across the desk from hers. “To what do I owe the honor?” She smiled sweetly.

“I need your advice, Autry replied. “My husband is receiving threatening phone calls and last night someone spraypainted ‘Die Demon’ on our front door.”

Jet couldn't stop herself. "What makes you think the painted message was for your husband?"

Autry gave her a blank, then a disgusted look. "Who else would it be for?"

"You." Jet said. "You are the high school principal."

Smoky gray eyes flashed icy daggers at Jet. "I made a mistake coming to you," Autry exclaimed standing and gathering her purse and sweater.

Jet jumped from her chair. "I'm just playing with you," she admitted. "I'm sure the message was for the judge. I bet he receives tons of threats."

Autry scanned Jet from head to toe. "I've heard that you are a bit looney," she said.

"What? Who told you that?" Jet sputtered deep lines furrowed her brow.

"Not so much fun to be teased about something serious, is it, Captain?" Autry walked toward the door.

"Mrs. Bishop, I am sorry. Please let me help you?"

Autry turned to face her, smiling slightly. "Only if you can control your weird sense of humor."

"Scouts honor," Jet held up two fingers in the scout salute.

Autry returned to her chair and pulled a bundle of letters from her purse. She shoved them across the desk to Jet. "I assure you these were sent to my husband," she smirked. "Frank received these during the past thirty days."

Assuming her most professional attitude, Jet pulled on gloves then slipped one of the envelopes from the rubber band around them. She pulled out a single sheet of paper and read it aloud. "In thirty days, you will die." The message was written in red crayon.

"All of these are similar death threats," Autry emphasized.

"I must speak with Judge Bishop," Jet said. "I need to know if he has any idea who might be sending the threats."

“He won’t come to your office,” Autry replied. “He is ignoring the letters. That is why I’ve brought them to you. I fear for my husband’s life, but he doesn’t take the threats seriously.”

“I’ll have all the letters checked for prints. Prints for you and Judge Bishop will be in the system since you are an educator, and he is a judge. Has anyone else handled the letters?”

“No, just Frank and me—and the post office employees.”

“I could meet with the judge in his office,” Jet volunteered.

“He wouldn’t like that. Perhaps you could come to our home one evening this week.”

“I’m free any night but Friday,” Jet informed her.

Autry smiled. “Ah yes, Friday night football and homecoming. I’m afraid little learning will happen this week with mums and funky costumes being the focus of the week.”

Jet checked her calendar. “I have Wednesday evening opening. Will that work?”

“Wednesday is prayer meeting,” Autry’s scolding look made Jet feel she was headed straight to hell. “Would Thursday evening be okay?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I will check with Frank and let you know if it works for him.” Autry said.

Jet nodded. “Do you like being principal of the high school?”

“Yes, I do.” Autry gathered her things. “Thank you for meeting with me, Captain.”

Jet walked her visitor to the door. “I will look forward to hearing from you?” She shrugged when Autry didn’t acknowledge her comment.

Jet returned to her laptop and finished writing the speech she was giving to the Paradise Rotary Club dinner tonight.

Chapter 2: Rotary Club

Every politician and successful business owner attended the Rotary Club meetings. It was where friendships and deals were made. Jet had happily watched the membership evolve over the years from a predominantly male dominated, good ole' boys club to an organization that welcomed women business leaders and their ideas. The current president was Dena Parsons owner of Southern Comfort, the only four-star restaurant in Paradise and Jet's best friend since grade school.

Dena introduced Jet and praised the sheriff's department for the excellent job they do keeping the peace in their robust college town.

Jet thanked Dena then launched into her heartfelt thanks to the Rotary Club for their support of the sheriff's department and their assistance in getting the department's new ray guns for use in violent crowd control.

She looked down at her notes as the door at the back of the room opened. When she looked up she caught her breath at the sight of Autry Bishop sitting down at a table. The woman was stunning. Golden streaks of hair that had been hidden in a bun during her visit to Jet's office now hung in loose waves down the principal's back. Autry's beauty was unparalleled.

A soft murmur ran through the room as the men and women welcomed Autry's appearance. A slow smile curved full lips as she held Jet's gaze.

Jet struggled to pull her thoughts back to her speech. "Um, er, I am pleased to inform you that your sheriff's department accepted delivery today of a dozen ray guns.

"As you know we have had violent attacks on business owners and their establishments in Southlake Mall and Heritage Mall that have resulted in millions of dollars in damage and theft and the death of a woman shopper.

“Although the police department has an incredible water cannon that is excellent for disbursing rioting crowds, it is slow and requires refilling. The ray guns were developed by the military and have been tested for twelve years. They never run out of power and aren’t lethal. However, they are painful enough to stop criminals in their tracks.”

Jet chanced a glance at Autry and smiled when the brunette tilted her head and smiled back. “The ray gun won’t kill anyone, but it will burn them slightly. It will only penetrate the skin one-sixteenth of an inch. It has the same effect as pressing a hot sixty-watt light bulb against the skin. It not only stops criminals, but it also helps us identify them when we round them up and take them to jail.

“If you have any questions, I’ll be happy to answer them or invite you to come by my office at the sheriff’s department.”

Dena, quickly stepped to the microphone and thanked Jet for speaking to the club and adjourned the meeting.

“Thank you,” Jet whispered. “I didn’t want to be here all night fielding questions from the open floor.”

“Neither did I,” Dena grinned. “I have a hot date.”

“Must be nice,” Jet teased.

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Autry hung back visiting with other leaders in the community as people gathered around Jet asking her questions and thanking her for addressing the club. Jet politely moved through the people around her, hopping to catch Autry before she left.

Brad Peterson, the owner of the local radio station who fancied himself a ladies’ man, had cornered Autry and was pushing into her personal space. Jet shoved her way between them and took the brunette’s elbow.

“I apologize for the wait,” she addressed Autry. “Sometimes citizens just want to be reassured that their city is safe. I told the judge; I’d escort you home.”

“I can take her home,” Brad insisted.

“Oh no, the judge would have my hide and my job if I failed to get her home safely. Oh, and Brad, I love your new drivetime deejay.”

“Thanks,” Brad beamed as Jet moved Autry through the milling members and out the front door to her car.

“Thank you,” Autry said as she fastened her seatbelt. I was having difficulty getting away from him.”

Jet started her car and Autry placed her hand on the blonde’s arm. “I do have my car here.” She smiled.

“I noticed you arrived too late for dinner, and I didn’t eat either,” Jet explained her actions. “I thought we might dine at Casa del Sol, and you can tell me the latest on Judge Bishop.”

Autry nodded her agreement and removed her hand from Jet’s arm. The sudden loss of the principal’s touch left a coldness both felt. Their gazes locked momentarily and looked away as Jet put the car into gear.

“You don’t usually attend our meetings,” Jet noted as she pulled from the parking lot.

“I thought it would be nice to see how you handle yourself before a group of our community leaders. After all you are in a runoff for sheriff, and I want to make certain I vote for someone who is qualified to lead the department and not just a pretty face.”

Jet laughed. “You think I’m a pretty face?”

“Gorgeous,” Autry softly replied, “and very capable too.”

I hope you enjoyed this short preview of “The Dark Side of Midnight,” coming December 14, 2023. You can pre-order here:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CKS2TPQC>

