

Chapter One

Susan Hogan drove around Oak Grove, Texas, for two days before she realized there was a dead body in the trunk of her car. And it was another three days before she knew that someone was trying to kill her.

On the second day, she noticed a slightly unpleasant, sweet but foul odor in the car as she drove south on Main Street, headed for the Oak Grove State University campus and her eight o'clock American lit class. Susan's 1998 Honda Civic often had mysterious odors that were all her own fault. Now her mind ranged over the possibilities—leftover spaghetti and meatballs that she'd put in an icebox dish to bring to school for lunch, maybe a to-go box from her favorite Thai restaurant in Fort Worth, spilled coffee since she drank hers with cream.

No matter. She was late for her class, so she opened the windows to let the cool air of the October morning blow through the car as she passed through the town. Oak Grove was one of those towns kept alive and even attractive by the presence of a small university. Main Street was landscaped with trees, benches, and some brick paving. Boutiques and small cafes sat next to a bookstore, a lawyer's office, and the traditional old stone bank. It was, Susan always thought, a perfect place to live and teach. She didn't really care if it was second-tier, not as prestigious as some of the bigger universities in the state.

"I'll clean the car tonight," she told herself, "before Jake sees it or smells it."

Her thoughts wandered to Jake Phillips. He was the police chief on the Oak Grove campus but more than that, he had been Susan's lover for two years. That he loved her, she had no doubt; that he might get tired of her high jinks and stubbornness was a thought that lingered in the back of her mind. Sometimes she wondered if she kept the relationship because it irritated her department chair, John Scott, that she was involved with someone with no more than a

community college two-year degree. Well, maybe at first, but she knew now she was hooked. She needed Jake in her life.

For his part, Jake Phillips was attracted neither by Susan's intellect nor her beauty but by the fact that she insisted on swimming upstream. If there was a difficult way to do something, Susan Hogan would stubbornly find it. She simply could not operate within the usual confines of academic tradition, and Jake knew she was forever being called into Dr. Scott's office for conferences that amounted to reprimands.

Not that he didn't find her attractive. Tall and thin, she wore her light blonde hair—he had seen the dark roots—in a boyishly short cut. Her smile was wide and quick and her eyes were brown under incredibly dark eyebrows. At thirty-five, Susan could still make heads turn, and Jake was proud to be seen with her.

As she drove onto campus, Susan looked at the seemingly endless construction, adding new imitations to the lovely old red brick, red-tiled roofs of the original building. But the administration had been on a construction jag in the last few years, adding buildings so fast it made the head spin, a few with ornate, out-of-place arches but for the most part there was an attempt at consistency. For all her sometime rebellion at academic restrictions and prejudices, Susan always felt a sense of being home when she arrived on campus. She had been at Oak Grove State eight years now and considered it home.

But she was late. Parking in the faculty lot behind Baker Hall, the liberal arts class building, she sprinted to her class. Her twenty or so college sophomores looked ready to bolt for the door. Casually, she walked in, said good morning, and began her lecture on Emily Dickinson. As usual, the girls were interested, scribbling frantic notes; the boys glanced out the windows

and chewed their fingernails in boredom. Susan was as happy as they were when the hour ended. Next time she'd cater to the boys and talk about Walt Whitman.

Caught up in a departmental meeting, at which Scott lectured on the important of faculty maintaining their dignity among other things, planning for her afternoon seminar, and office hours, Susan forgot about the smell in her car. During office hours, three students had to see her privately to explain why it was absolutely impossible for them to turn their papers in that day. Another boy came to explain the plagiarism in his paper about Nathaniel Hawthorne.

"My mother helped me write it," he said.

"Then your mother stole from one of the leading Hawthorne scholars," Susan said icily. The boy's grade remained an F.

Then Brandy Perkins appeared in tears to report that she couldn't come to Susan's late-morning class in women's lit because her roommate, Missy Jackson, hadn't come home the night before and she was too worried to concentrate.

Susan wanted to suggest that she call the roommate's boyfriend's apartment, where she'd probably find the girl. Staying out at night wasn't all that unusual for coeds these days. But instead she asked, "If you're that worried, have you called her parents?"

A shake of the head. "I didn't want to scare them."

Susan doubted the Jacksons scared easily. They had been one of about six parents who called to complain about Susan's ideas in the women's lit class she taught last spring. She was, according to the Johnsons, corrupting young minds and turning them away from their faith. As she recalled, Missy had been one of those particularly taken by Carolyn Heilbrun's life story and her book, *Writing a Woman's Life*. She had lectured on Heilbrun, women's activist, professor, free spirit, and author of the Amanda Cross academic mysteries.

Dark circles under Brandy's eyes suggested that she had indeed spent a sleepless night, and Susan somehow suspected there was more going on here than a roommate who spent the night with her boyfriend. Brandy's manner—secretive and yet scared—was an alarm to Susan.

“Have you called the campus police?”

Another shake of the head. “If she's okay, think how embarrassing that would be.”

And if she's not? “I think your roommate is probably fine, and I think you should come to class. It'll keep your mind off worrying, and you might get more out of it than you think.” Then after a minute, she asked, “Who is your roommate?”

“Missy Jackson. She took your class last semester.”

Susan nodded. “I remember her. A thoughtful student. I think she opened her mind to new ways of thinking during the class.”

“Yeah,” Brandy said, “I think she really did.” And on that puzzling note, she fled Susan's office. She wasn't in class later.

She was in the midst of her afternoon seminar, listening to a senior defend her paper on Edith Wharton, when Mildred, the department secretary, stuck her head in the classroom door.

“Dr. Hogan, I'm sorry to interrupt...”

It was an unwritten rule that no class was ever interrupted, except perhaps in case of fire. Susan whirled on Mildred. “Yes?” Her tone barely hid her surprise—and a bit of indignation.

“Mr. Phillips, the chief.....” Mildred began to stammer, and Susan wanted to urge her along. “He's on the phone. Says...well, he says he has to talk to you now. It can't wait twenty minutes until class is out.” She looked a little brighter. “I asked him to wait, but he said no.”

Jake calling her out of class? Susan didn't know whether to be angry or worried. She gave the class a reading assignment from Wharton and dismissed them.

Running to the office, she knew that she was at least a little bit scared. When she picked up the phone, she demanded, "What is it?"

Jake was businesslike and clearly impatient. "Susan, when did you bash the trunk of your car? I can't open it with my key."

"Why are you trying to open my trunk?" she asked, relieved that he wasn't telling her that her house had burned down or some equally major catastrophe had happened. "Because," he said with ice in his tone, "we've had four complaints of a really foul odor coming from your car. I got a thousand problems this morning—someone reported a missing coed, someone's parked in the dean's parking space. I don't have time to pry open your trunk and discover a five-day old take-out order of Thai food." Now he was really impatient.

Susan could see him, his blue eyes that icy color they got when he was angry or upset. He'd be running his hand across his burr haircut. That wonderful lopsided grin, under the nose bent by too many breaks in high school football, would be missing, and his mouth would be in a grim straight line.

"I didn't leave any food in the trunk!" she responded indignantly, her fear turning to anger. "Want me to come pry it open? Just give me a crowbar and watch me go."

"What happened to the trunk," he asked again.

"I don't know. I noticed the other night when I came out of the library that it had a new dent, but I didn't need to get into the trunk, and I sort of forgot about it." Susan's car had several dents, which always made Jake nervous because he drove a Jeep Cherokee in perfect condition.

“Just give me permission to open it. I’ll call you back. But, Susan, if it’s Thai food.”

His voice drifted off.

“Okay. You have my permission.”

She thought she’d just go back to her office, collect her things, and head for her car. But Ernie Westin stopped her. Susan and Westin were locked in a race for tenure, a race he periodically tried to prove to her that she was losing. Susan figured that the review committee and especially Dr. Scott would feel they couldn’t approve everyone eligible, as if that would indicate a lack of critical ability on their part. The automatic pay raise that went with tenure would stretch the department’s budget if two candidates were approved. She was working as hard as she could on her publication record, which now consisted only of articles. Tenure review committees always looked for an academic book, and she was working on a book about Zane Grey, hoping to prove that his novels were not pot-boiler westerns but carefully constructed works, filled with sexual tension and symbolism. Ernie was working on a study of Sir Walter Raleigh.

“I have a contract for my book,” he said. “Do you?”

“No, Ernie,” she said with as much patience as she could muster. She really wanted to wipe the smirk off his face. “I’ve been too busy preparing for classes to work much on it.” There it was, that old academic dilemma, publish or perish, which didn’t encourage great classroom preparation.

“Probably,” he said nastily, “because you spend too much time with that Jake Phillips. You could do better than a cop.”

Susan considered decking him with a well placed fist. Ernie Westin was short and rapidly going to both fat and middle age. He had that kind of gray complexion associated with ivory-

tower academics who never let the sun shine on them. And he was a whiner. For an instant, his snide reference to Jake made her wonder about Ernie's sexual orientation, but she figured that was none of her business.

"Ernie," she said, "I just don't have time to talk about your book or tenure or anything right now. There's a problem with my car"

"Oh, well," he said loftily. "That beat-up car you drive . . . I'm sure it has many problems." Ernie drove a dull Chevrolet with no character.

"Leave my car out of this," she said angrily. *Why, am I arguing with Ernie Westin when Jake's breaking into the trunk of my car?*

Her cell phone startled her. It was Jake. "Susan, get over here now. To your car." He spoke in the low, measured tones that Susan knew indicated a major problem, not just the impatience she'd heard in his voice a few minutes ago.

"Jake, I was. . . ."

"Susan, for god's sake, would you just do what I tell you for once?"

Jake's tone alarmed her. She bolted down the three flights of the liberal arts hall, grateful that she had decided on jeans and Reeboks that day, in spite of Ernie Westin's disapproving looks. Jogging around the student center, she saw a crowd of people in the parking lot.

They were mostly students, and they stood behind an area roped off with yellow police-scene tape. Her car stood in the middle of the tape. Around her she could hear voices, "What's happened? What's in that car? Whose car is it?"

Just then two city police cars roared into the parking lot, sirens blaring. An ambulance followed them. Susan saw a knot of men gathered about her car. The battered trunk lid was raised, and they were all staring inside.

She lifted the tape to scoot under it.

“Pardon, ma’am, but no one can go past. This is a crime scene.”

She didn’t know if she was angrier at being stopped or being called “ma’am” by a deputy who was at best five years younger than she was. “It’s my car,” she shouted. “They told me to get over here right away. Ask Jake Phillips.”

“No need, ma’am,” he said, holding the tape for her. “Phillips told us you’d be coming. I just . . . well, I expected a teacher.”

Susan looked down at her jeans and running shoes and ignored the deputy.

As she started toward the car, Jake came toward her. “Stop here, Susan. Don’t go up there.”

“Why not?” she demanded. “First you tell me to get over here, then you stop me.” She started to pull away from him, but he held firmly to her arm.

“We found the missing coed,” he said. “In the trunk of your car. Someone beat her to death, really bashed in her head.”

For a moment, Susan staggered. Her mind’s eye saw another body, a young girl, curled in a ball on a cold, tile floor. But that was a long time ago, something she’d worked hard to put behind her—the death, the murder accusation, the anger. She shook her head to clear her thoughts, but she felt momentarily remote, removed from whatever was happening around her.

“You okay, Susan?” Jake asked. His voice jerked her back to reality. “Did you hear me? Someone put a body in your car. When did you first notice that dent in the trunk?”

“Night before last,” she muttered. “I was in the library, doing research on Zane Grey, and when I came out . . . well, I thought I saw a dent that hadn’t been there before.”

“But you didn’t do anything about it?” Jake asked, his tone angry again. “Why am I not surprised?”

“I was going to. I just hadn’t had time. Besides, it’s not the only dent in my car.”

She had the uncomfortable feeling that she was going to break down and cry.

And right there, in front of everyone, Jake Phillips put his arms around her and held her tightly, pulling her head down onto his shoulder and running his hands through her hair, as though he were comforting a child. He was tall enough that she fit easily against him and found comfort.

“I just want to go home,” Susan said, tears running down her face. “Can you take me home?”

“Not yet,” Jake said softly.
