

## **The Planck Factor**

by Debbi Mack

“Suppose powerful accelerators managed to produce large numbers of Planck mass particles, and that somehow a bomb was made with them. According to our theory, such a bomb would release exactly half the energy released by a conventional nuclear weapon with the same overall mass. In other words, such an expensive quantum gravitational weapon would be precisely half as powerful as a much cheaper conventional nuclear weapon. For more massive particles (say with masses equal to twice or three times the Planck mass) the result would be even worse. I was pleased to find that even generals would probably not be dumb enough to hire Lee or me.”\*

\*Unfortunately the possibility that  $E_p$  might be negative reverses this argument, as explained in our paper.

João Magueijo, *Faster Than the Speed of Light* (Perseus Publishing 2003), pp. 252 – 253.

## PROLOGUE

*Kevin*

He knew he had to act. Major plans were in the works. And lives were on the line.

But he had to eliminate Fred.

Fred had joined the group, ostensibly as a card-carrying anti-government dissident. But something felt off about him.

Fred wasn't genuinely involved. Kevin had always figured he was up to no good.

It was increasingly clear his allegiance belonged to the woman—a novelist, no less—who was using information he'd learned by infiltrating the group.

In short, Fred was a spy. Kevin shuddered, feeling he'd had an epiphany. This was entirely the wrong time for a spy to come along and botch the group's plans.

His only option was to kill Fred.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Jessica Evans*

"This sucks!" I shook my head. Why did I open the story with a man, alone at night on a twisty mountain road? I may as well have written, "It was a dark and stormy night . . ." I sighed and reconsidered the first lines again.

I'd been reworking the opening scene of my novel, over and over. How many ways were there to show that danger lay ahead?

I banged out a few more lines, but they still didn't seem quite right. Sometimes writing was like opening a faucet. I could sit at the keyboard and the words would flow non-stop, brain to fingertips. On days like that, I couldn't type fast enough. This was not one of those days.

"Ugh!" I stopped typing and read (for the third time? or was it the fourth?) the intro to my suspense novel-in-progress, *The Planck Factor*, and again reviewed the other scenarios under which Daniel could be killed. I'd chosen an auto accident along a mountain road—plausible enough, but overdone. Would an editor scan the first few lines, roll her eyes and toss the manuscript into the round file?

How about a mountain road in broad daylight? Nice sunny day. Totally defying expectations. Almost Hitchcockian. But the night scenario was so evocative. I liked the dark and the fog, the feeling of dread, the promise of evil-doings to come. It was an old trick, but maybe a good trick.

I envisioned other possibilities—pushed from a window and made to look like a fall? No, no—that and other kinds of accidental death would leave a very obvious body. In my version, Daniel was burned beyond recognition. Only dental records could establish the body was his. I liked that.

Wait! What if Daniel were attacked in his lab? Then what if someone set it on fire and made it look like an accident? He could be working alone, hear a noise and think Swede's coming. Then—wham! He's knocked unconscious or killed. And the poor schmuck gets roasted.

I breathed a deep sigh. If I went that way, I'd have to rethink the whole thing. And that dark scene on the road was so clear in my mind.

I rubbed my eyes, sipped some coffee and gazed out the window of my condo at the stellar view of the Flatirons, the rocky protrusions thrusting up at the western edge of Boulder, Colorado. They glowed rust-red in the sunrise.

After a five-minute break, I returned to the keyboard. Working on another scene could help. And I needed to develop the character, Alexis.

\* \* \*

After an hour's work, I looked over the results. Not bad. Might even work—assuming it wasn't too detailed. I thought of Elmore Leonard's advice:

"Leave out the boring parts." What the heck? Run the changes by my writers group, see what they think.

The sun had risen and the Flatirons stood in sharp relief against a bright blue sky, the white-capped peaks of the Rockies poking up in the distance. I stood and stretched my arms overhead. "Time to make the doughnuts."

I finished my coffee, washed out the cup and my French press and gathered my belongings before heading off for a meeting with my program advisor. We had a friendly ongoing argument, of sorts. I initially wanted to write my masters thesis on how genre fiction could have literary value. She convinced me to choose another subject. But then she challenged me to write a novel. I took her up on that and even joined the writers group.

As I placed my belongings into my old Dodge Dart, I thought about how genre fiction was often equally worthy of the acclaim granted so-called "literary" works. I had no idea if I could accomplish such a thing. I told myself, "You're not trying to write *War and Peace*. Just write a story you would read." What I'd settled on was a suspense story with a hint of science fiction and touch of espionage at its heart. Writing about a scientific topic was a bit of a stretch, but a good one, I hoped. Plus my research into physics was fascinating.

I started the car and headed toward the university.

As I drove off, I glanced in my rear view mirror. Two men in tan jumpsuits emerged from a dark van sitting in my parking lot. A young man with flaming red hair carrying a large case, and an older man with a clipboard. They seemed to be walking toward my building.

*A dark van? Just like in my story? Too weird.* I shook my head and laughed. *Jessica Evans, you're getting paranoid. Since when did life really imitate art?*

## CHAPTER TWO

*Daniel*

Daniel had thought about burning the evidence of the research he and Swede had worked so hard to gather--but throwing away all those years of work was more than he could bear. Did it come down to pride? Daniel maneuvered his VW bug along the switchback turns. Was it foolish pride that had led Robert Oppenheimer to head up the Manhattan Project?

Not pride--fear. Fear that Nazi Germany would develop the atom bomb first. Today, we're not fighting Nazis. Today, it's much harder to figure out who the bad guys are.

The VW's headlights pierced the light veil of fog descending around Oregon's coastal range. In places, the veil thickened into a shroud. The headlight beams swept across sentinel trunks of tall Douglas firs. Daniel squinted from the reflected glare as the car plunged into another cottony patch of fog.

All the things he'd never told Alexis and the arrangements he had made in case the worst should happen. He'd done his best to keep Alexis out of it and protect himself. Found someone who didn't have as big a stake in the whole thing as he and Swede did. Someone other than Alexis that he could trust.

A wave of guilt over what he'd never said to Alexis mingled with his anxiety about where all his work could lead if allowed to get into the wrong hands.

Daniel turned the wheel hard to follow a tight curve, and the VW slid sideways beneath him--a feeling of being totally out of control--in keeping with the rest of his life.

He steered as far from the precipitous drop along the roadside as he could. One moment, Daniel peered through the murk. The next, he squinted as his rear-view glared reflected high beams.

Daniel's heartbeat quickened. *Keep calm*, he told himself. Then, the car jolted as the vehicle behind him rammed his car.

"What the fuck?" he said. Daniel gripped the wheel harder. He focused on breathing evenly and staying on the road.



Daniel spotted a crossroad up ahead that led into the mountains. If he could just turn fast enough, maybe the vehicle behind him would overshoot the road. Hopefully, he'd lose the tail.

As he approached the road, Daniel waited until the last second and yanked the wheel left. The car spun as if floating. Daniel held fast to the wheel. A loud crash filled the air. Everything went dark.

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### *Alexis*

Two weeks. That's all the time Alexis had allowed herself after her fiancé, Daniel's, tragic death. Just two weeks off. Then it was back to her studies. She had a limited scholarship, after all. No parents, no big inheritance, no trust fund to rely on. She couldn't drop school, after all the work she'd done on her master's thesis on existentialism and modern literature. She had to keep going.

Alexis had to stay on track to get her Masters in Philosophy at the University of Oregon within the three years her scholarship allowed. But now her studies were more than a means to a scholastic end. Her textbooks were a blanket wrapped around her

consciousness. One that protected her from her parents' deaths, barely a year ago, under circumstances too painful to contemplate. And now Daniel. It was too much to take in.

Alexis worked in her carrel until the lights flickered. The library closed in ten minutes. Nine o'clock already? Where did the time go?

Reluctantly, she closed out her word processing program and turned off her laptop. She placed her books neatly to one side on the carrel's shelf and the little paper placard that read "Reserved" in the middle.

Alexis placed her belongings in a knapsack and, with a casual wave to the reference librarian at the desk, strolled out the door toward the parking lot. She placed the knapsack on the passenger seat of her aging Toyota Tercel, rounded the car and got in.

As her Tercel roared to life, further back in the lot, a small dark van's engine did the same. The van held three men--one behind the wheel and two in the back. Alexis eased out of the space and exited the lot. The van followed.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Jessica*

My advisor Shelley removed her glasses and set them on the desk. “You’re making progress with your thesis. I must say I’m impressed.” She ran her fingers through her shoulder-length hair and craned her head back, rolling it as if to loosen her neck muscles.

I could feel an inadvertent smile form, as I pulled my manuscript pages from a folder. “If you like that, I think you’re going to love this.”

Shelley re-donned the glasses and glanced at the first page. Soundlessly laughing, she grinned. “Oh, my God. You’re actually writing that novel?”

“How could I not accept such a challenge?”

She turned her attention to the story. After turning the page, she said, “Well, you’re off to a rousing start, that’s for sure.”

“And you don’t think the beginning is too corny?”

“Well.” Shelley paused and set aside the manuscript. “It’s not exactly *War and Peace*, is it?”

“Exactly! I’m not trying to write the Great American Novel. I’m just trying to tell a great story.”

Shelley shrugged. “To me, it reads like the stuff that sells. Not that I’m a big expert.”

“Nobody is.”

Shelley nodded. “Got that right. Look how that ‘Fifty Shades’ book did. Who would have thought?” She shook her head. “Think you can keep this up, while working on your thesis? Writing a novel isn’t the easiest thing.”

“I know, I know. I’ve been working on it slowly over time. Almost done, actually. I’m just going over it again to make sure it doesn’t completely stink.”

“Well, okay.” She delivered a probing gaze. “Just don’t let it interfere with your *real* work here.”

“I won’t,” I said. “Promise.”

“Uh huh,” she replied. She pointed two fingers toward her eyes, then at me. “Don’t forget.”

She picked up the manuscript again. “Who knows? With some real effort, you might even prove your original point.” She scanned the pages.

That was as close to a concession as I would ever get from Shelley.

“This almost reads like a movie script,” she added. “All high concept and big action and suspense. Not that it’s bad. But if you can make it more than just that, you could make it amazing.”

\* \* \*

Later, I drove home after a long day at the library, followed by a shift at the bookstore. It was almost nine. I was beat and starved. Lunch had been a cup of yogurt

and a banana. More like an appetizer than a meal. As I'd shelved books, my thoughts had been so consumed with the story, half the customers who asked me questions were treated to a dazed look and the cogent response, "Huh?"

Show, don't tell. Weave in backstory. Truisms, guides, rules, pointers—call them what you will. It was the kind of stuff writers heard all the time. Yet, somehow, writers were always bending these rules just a bit. Bending them to serve their own purpose. Inserting huge chunks of backstory so colorful you didn't mind reading it—even though conventional wisdom said to do so would slow the narrative. And adverbs. Never use an adverb. Oh, really? Well, I wish I had a dime for every adverb I'd read, even in the best-written books. Never say never.

After parking in front of my building, I grabbed my shoulder bag and knapsack and hiked the stairs to my condo. Despite my skimpy lunch, I cringed at the thought of making dinner. Maybe I'd scramble a couple of eggs. Order take-out Thai.

I was starved, but too tired to even think of what to eat and whether to make it or leave the cooking to someone else.

I tossed my shoulder bag onto the couch and the manuscript onto a pile of waste paper. I used the blank sides to print drafts: waste not, want not—and I couldn't afford to waste anything. Take-out would be nice, but expensive. The scrambled eggs were sounding better all the time. I figured I'd do some writing, then decide.

I sat at my desk and turned on the computer. Simply watching it boot up gave me a vague feeling of dread. Opening the word processing program would only increase my anxiety. Here we go again, I thought. How many times do I have to review this? How

many iterations of the same thing must I churn out before it's perfect? As perfect as I'll ever get it, anyway.

I took a deep breath and began to work.

\* \* \*

*Alexis*

Alexis arrived home and hauled her laptop and files up to her apartment. She was just putting the key in the lock when she thought she heard someone whisper her name.

The whisper came from the darkened landing above her, making her whirl with such force she almost dropped everything. She peered into the gloom, but saw nothing. Eugene, Oregon, was a small and relatively safe town, but no place was completely safe, was it?

Her hand trembling, she quickly turned the deadbolt and reinserted the key to turn the knob.

"Alexis."

She yipped in fear. This time, there was no mistaking it. Someone was up there.

As she turned the key and hurled herself against the door to get in, the voice said, louder and closer now, "Alexis, it's just me. It's Swede."

Alexis gaped at the tall figure looming above her on the stairs. "Jesus Christ," she said. "What the hell are you doing, Swede? You scared the shit out of me."

Swede drew close and said, "Let me in. Quick. We need to talk."

Alexis backed inside and the tall, dark-haired man followed. He closed the door behind him, turning and leaning against it, as if someone were on the other side threatening to break it down. Swede was breathing hard, his eyes closed.

How Alan Sweetser had gotten a nickname like Swede was anyone's guess. He might be many things, Alexis thought, but Swedish wasn't one of them.

"What in God's name are you doing here?" She got a good look at him and her voice softened a bit. "What's wrong? Jeez, you look like hell."

Swede brushed curly, dark locks back from a pale forehead shining with perspiration. He took a shuddering breath, opened his eyes--a startling lucid green--and said, "Someone followed you here. They . . . I think they're after something. It may relate to Daniel's research. Our research, that is."

Alexis, who'd been gaping in astonishment, laughed--a sound as harsh as ripping fabric.

"What the hell would I know about your research?" she said, making it sound like an accusation. Poking a finger into Swede's chest, she hissed, "You two were thick as fucking thieves about what you were doing. Daniel never discussed your precious research with me. Would've thought you guys worked for the CIA, from what little either of you told me about it. And you, of all people, know that goddamned good and well!" Her voice had climbed to a wail by the time she reached the end of her speech. A fleeting memory of Daniel's face brought grief bubbling to the surface of her consciousness. First one tear, then several others. The next thing Alexis knew, she was sobbing, over all the wasted time, the meaningless arguments, the wedge that research had driven between Daniel and her.

"Oh, God," Her voice shook from the force of her sobs. "Daniel. Oh . . . shit."

She swatted the tears away, swiping a backhand across her runny nose, and glared at Swede. "What the hell do you want?" she muttered through clenched teeth.

Swede gulped. "The research. I thought he might have . . . told you . . ."

"Goddamn it, Swede!" Alexis paused, hunting for the words. "So what are you saying? You think Daniel went back on his word and spilled his guts during pillow talk? Well, surprise! He didn't, okay? He never told me a thing. All the secrecy was no joy to live with, let me tell you. I knew something was troubling him, but if I tried to discuss it-- whoops!--we couldn't because it had to do with his research. There were nights not long before the accident when he couldn't sleep. He'd get up and pace, so I'd ask if he was okay. And he was like, 'Sure, sure. I'm fine.' But he wasn't fine and he wasn't telling me about it because it was all connected to that research, wasn't it?"

She paused, her ragged breathing matched only by Swede's and said, "Now you have the fucking gall to come here and act like I'm supposed to know something about this goddamned mystery research that was wrecking our lives, when you know Daniel wouldn't have told me and you know I know nothing about it." She paused again and swallowed, trying to regain self-control. "So why don't you just get the hell out of here?"

"You may not know what Daniel was doing," Swede stammered, "but they don't know that."

"Who the hell is--"

Then someone pounded on the door.

\* \* \*

*Jessica*

After spending the better part of an hour going over Swede's introduction to the story, I stopped and considered the result. Getting there, I thought. But how can I really know if it's there?



As I went about fixing my scrambled egg dinner, my cell phone rang. I flipped it open. (I won't buy a "smart" phone. Too pricey.) Private caller. For the third time that week. I don't like to take calls unless I recognize the number. I sighed and ignored it. I was melting butter in the pan when it rang again. Private caller. Hmm . . . could it be that editor I met at the symposium two weeks ago? But why didn't she leave a message? I took the call to find out.

"Jessica Evans?" I couldn't place the voice—deep and androgynous—though it had a familiar ring.

"Yes?"

"Look out your window, but don't move the blinds or make it obvious." A brief pause. "Someone is watching you."

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Jessica*

"Who is this?" I said. My chest tightened and my pulse raced.

"Look for a dark van. Down a few spaces to your right. Remember, don't—"

I snapped the phone shut. *What the fuck?* My pulse was pounding now. I thought of the story. The dark van in the parking lot that morning. And Alexis being followed by a dark van. Too weird. But it had to be a coincidence. Just some wacko.

The phone rang again. I jumped at the sound. Private caller again. I set the phone on the counter and moved back, staring at it as if it were about to explode.

The phone stopped ringing but started again within seconds. A burning odor filled the air. For a crazy moment, I thought it was the phone. Then I saw smoke billowing from the pan.

"Goddamn it!"

I turned off the burner and set the pan aside, surveying the wreckage within it, the butter singed on its surface in shades of mottled black and brown.

"Great," I said. "Just great."

The phone stopped ringing, then started almost immediately.

I snatched it up, checked the number. Private caller. Well, Private Caller was about to get a piece of my mind.

"Jessica?" It was the voice. "Have you looked out the window?"

"No. No, I haven't looked out the damn window. I've been too busy trying to burn my place down."

Silence. "Jessica—"

"No, listen up. I'm trying to make dinner and just ruined my best pan—thanks to you. So why don't you leave me alone. Quit fucking with my head."

"The van—"

"Fuck the van and fuck you. And how do you know there's a van outside my place? Unless, of course, you're in it. I'm calling the cops. Right . . . now!"

I hit the button to disconnect, and immediately dialed 911. In the few seconds it took for them to answer, I turned off the light and edged up to the window, so I could peek through the crack in the blinds without moving them.

Among the vehicles in the lot, I saw a dark van. Looked like the same van I'd seen that morning. My stomach felt hollow, as if I were plunging down a skyscraper in a fast-moving elevator. What was going on? I thought again about the story, but no one knew the details except my writers group. And none of them would play a sick joke like this.

"911. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Um. I've been getting strange calls." My voice sounded strangled. "And there's this van parked outside my place." I groped for the right words, but they all sounded crazy.

"Threatening calls?"

"Not exactly. Just . . . strange."

"Ma'am, this is an emergency line. If someone is trying to hurt you or break into your house—"

"No, no. And I'm in a condo." My voice shook. "But this person called and said I was being watched by someone in a dark van. And there's a dark van, just sitting there."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but there's no law against someone parking in a public place. And, just so I'm clear, did you say the caller threatened you?"

"No," I mumbled. "Never mind."

I couldn't even hit \*67 to trace the call. The private caller ID meant the number was blocked.

I closed the phone and, forgetting my hunger, decided to ignore the van and resumed my work.

\* \* \*

*Joe Cotter*

"What now, Chief?"

The question came from Billy, a 25-year-old, red-haired freckled fellow, new to the game and full of himself, in Cotter's opinion. From where he squatted on a small stool in the back of the van, the kid grinned at Cotter.

Cotter looked at Billy. "Keep tabs to her phone."

"But I think we been made."

"Did I ask what you thought?"

Billy frowned and turned back to the blinking console.

After several moments of protracted silence, Billy said, "You had the goggles, Chief. You could see that Evans chick as good as me."

Cotter took a deep breath, as if inhaling the fresh air of a new day.

"It doesn't really matter," he said.

Billy grunted. "I just hope she don't run."

"What if she does?"

"Complicates things, huh?"

Cotter shrugged. "She runs, we follow. Simple as that."

Billy snorted. "Oh, yeah."

"By the way, Billy?"

"Uh huh?"

"Don't call me 'Chief.' Understand, Sport?"

\* \* \*

*Alexis*

Swede leapt away from the door and stared at it. Another round of pounding ensued.

"Young lady, I know you're in there!" An indignant voice from the other side.

With an exasperated sigh, Alexis checked the peephole. It was her upstairs neighbor, a white-haired old man named Klaus who often complained in a strident Teutonic accent about her music being too loud.

"It's just the asshole from upstairs," she muttered to Swede, who kept eyeing the door as if a troll lurked behind it.

Yet another series of jarring knocks. Finally, Klaus harrumphed and said, "I know you're in there. They could hear you yelling a mile away. Keep it down or I'll call the police."

Muffled muttering followed, as Klaus turned to go back upstairs. Through the peephole, Alexis watched him leave, then turned to Swede, folding her arms across her chest.

"That was fun. What shall we do next?"

"Alexis." Swede took a deep breath and held his hands out in a placating gesture. "Please believe me when I tell you this. You have to leave here. We both have to go."

Alexis shook her head. "Go? Go where? I'm not going anywhere with you." Her voice trailed off. "Daniel's dead, Swede. And you and me, we died long before that. Let's not go there again."

Swede threw up his hands. "I'm not trying to get back together, if that's what you think."

"Good," Alexis said. She had cared for Swede. Maybe even loved him. But his brooding and pessimism could really get to her. Bright, but unstable. That was an apt description of Alan Sweetser. When they were together, at times, he would simply shut her out. When their differences finally tore Swede and Alexis apart, she turned to their mutual friend, Daniel. He was more patient, more even-tempered, and their relationship grew beyond friendship. Swede accepted the situation with more grace than Alexis had thought him capable of. But she'd continued to sense weird vibes when Swede was around. Like the air before lightning strikes. So she tried to avoid having him around.

"At the risk of repeating myself," Swede said. "But you need to get out of here."

"Why? I have no idea what you're talking about. And you never answered my question about who 'they' are."

Swede's brow furrowed. He almost looked ready to cry. "That's the thing. I don't know who they are. I just know that they're after our research. And if they get hold of it . . ." He bowed his head and shook it as if dazed. "It will be very bad for all of us."

"Why?"

"Our discovery . . ." Swede grimaced. "I . . . I can't tell you. I shouldn't. You're better off not knowing. Just in case . . ."

"In case what?" It took all of Alexis' effort to keep from shouting.

Swede slumped. "In case they catch you. What you don't know, you can't tell them."

Alexis just stared, then started laughing.

Swede didn't smile. "You still don't get it."

"Don't get it? You came here to warn me about a bunch of strange somebody-or-others who are looking for information about your research, which you've already acknowledged I know nothing about." She spread her arms. "Hell, that's the best joke I've heard in ages. It's positively hysterical."

"I told you." Swede's voice took on an urgent tone. "They don't know that you don't know anything."

"Yes, and what I don't know, I can't tell them, right? I think we've been over this already."

Swede laid both hands on her shoulders and looked directly in her eyes. "That doesn't mean they won't try to make you talk."

Alexis' breath caught in her throat. "What do you mean?" She shuddered. "Jesus . . . you must be joking."

Swede grabbed her shoulders and looked straight at her. "Do I look like I'm joking?" he asked.

\* \* \*

### *Jessica*

When I checked again a half hour later, the van was still there. I could barely make out the vehicle's interior. Then I remembered Fred's binoculars. He'd left them here, after our last hike through the woods. I ran for the closet and pulled them off the upper

shelf. With the lights off, I took the chance that no one would notice if I moved the blinds just enough to get a clear view through the binoculars. I trained them on the van and saw . . . an empty interior.

Okay, so the front seat was empty. Someone could be in the back. Or the person who called me could just be crazy.

I continued to check on the van every fifteen minutes or so. It never moved. And I saw nothing to suggest it was occupied.

"This is nuts," I said.

As I stored the binoculars, it hit me that I still hadn't heard back from Fred Barkin. He had promised me information I needed to confirm a few details for the book. I dialed Fred's number. Went to voice mail. For the third time in two weeks. Weird.

"Hi, Fred. I'm calling again to try to set up a time to meet with you." I paused, not sure what else to say. "Just call when you get a chance, okay?"

A mutual friend introduced me to Fred Barkin after I'd explained that I needed expert geology advice. Fred was very helpful because he knew people and things that helped provide background research for the book. After meeting to discuss some of the finer points I needed to cover, Fred asked if I would be interested in taking hikes with him in the foothills.

It was during these walks that I got to know Fred as a person. He was not only a geo-scientist, but he was a nature lover, through and through.

A couple of weeks back, I got an email from Fred, insisting we meet to talk about something he'd learned. He'd said it was important and should be discussed face-to-face.



I picked up a paperweight Fred had given me the last time I saw him, after a camping trip he and a few friends took to Yellowstone. I shook the clear plastic half-globe, causing snow to swirl against the backdrop of high peaks and green trees within it, a moose standing in the foreground.

"Since you couldn't come with us, I thought I'd get this for you," he'd said, blushing a bit. The small gesture seemed like the act of a little boy presenting an apple to the teacher. I told him I'd keep the ornament on my desk and he'd seemed genuinely pleased.

I always felt like Fred had things on his mind, but could never spit them out. I wondered what that was all about. Now, this business with the unreturned phone calls worried me. If something bad had happened, I'd have expected one of our friends to tell me. So why was he avoiding me?

I set the paperweight down and watched the snow slowly settle. It took my mind off the craziness with the van and the phone calls for a short while. But my thoughts turned back to them.

*Forget it. It's ridiculous. Whoever called you is just nuts.*

I had to relax, so I made myself a cup of herb tea. I backed up my files onto an external hard drive and shut my computer off. Checked out the window again. The van was gone.

I exhaled. It felt like I'd been holding my breath for the past hour.

My hunger had returned with a vengeance, so I made some toast, gobbled it down and rinsed the plate and knife quickly, filling the scorched frying pan with soapy water and leaving it to soak overnight.

"I knew it was nuts," I muttered, padding off to get ready for bed.



## CHAPTER FIVE

*Jessica*

The next morning, I rose before dawn to take another crack at the story. I made a fresh pot of coffee in my French press and downed a quick bowl of Wheaties, while checking email. Just for the hell of it, I peeked out the window again. Still no van. Good. I scrubbed out the pan in the sink and topped off my coffee, before opening my word processing program.

\* \* \*

*Alexis*

Alexis couldn't believe she was going anywhere with Swede. She had sworn that she'd never talk to the man again, let alone travel with him.

*I must be losing my mind.*

But what he told her had scared her. Swede actually seemed to believe that her life was in danger from these people looking for the research he and Daniel had conducted. Research so secret and dangerous, he still wouldn't tell her about it.

Alexis stared out the passenger window of Swede's rented compact. She'd wanted to take her own car, but Swede was afraid they'd be followed. She'd tossed the few bare necessities into a paper bag and, at Swede's insistence, "disguised" herself as best she could by wearing

a hoodie, under which she tucked her hair. It had started to rain, providing the perfect excuse for Swede to dash for the car with his jacket over his head. He'd pulled the car up to the building, where Alexis had jumped in.

"I can't believe you brought a laptop," Swede said.

"I've been working too hard on this thesis to just leave it behind," Alexis snapped. In a forlorn voice, she added, "Who knows when I'll be able to go home again?"

Besides, maybe her experiences would add a new dimension to her thesis on existentialism. She giggled and shook her head.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." She waved a hand. "There's nothing funny about any of this."

Even so, she couldn't stop smirking. How ludicrous was this? Her dead fiance's lab partner with whom she'd had a previous failed relationship was now whisking her away from some unidentified bad guys who were looking for research she knew nothing about. She snickered into her hand, in a desperate bid to stop herself.

"What?" Swede said.

"C'mon. Isn't this just the slightest bit absurd? Don't you feel the least bit . . . awkward?"

Swede's eyes darted between the rear view mirror, the road and Alexis. "I probably would. If I weren't scared shitless."

## CHAPTER SIX

*Jessica*

I drained the last of my coffee, got up and rinsed the cup. *Am I stretching this bit out too long?* Alexis has to insist at some point on knowing what's going on. *Did I choose the right way to convince Swede to tell her?* Maybe I'd find the answers while taking a walk. The sun was rising and it looked like another beautiful day in Boulder. A nice day to work outdoors even.

I backed up my files, grabbed my shoulder bag and laptop, a nice lightweight model my parents had bought me, and headed out the door.

Before leaving, I stopped to retrieve the previous day's mail. Probably nothing but bills, so I'd put it off. Looked like nothing but junk—a blessing in its own small way.

As I sorted through the various fliers for stores where I wouldn't shop, coupon booklets for things I didn't need, catalogs for clothes I couldn't afford and notifications of qualifying for major credit cards I never wanted, I came across a plain white envelope with no return address.

When I opened it, a sheet of white paper, folded in half, slid out. I unfolded it and read the printed message:

*Be careful. You may be in danger.*

*A concerned friend.*

\* \* \*

"And this person on the phone. You didn't recognize the voice?"

I nearly wept with frustration. How many times was the cop going to ask that?

"No! I didn't recognize the voice. Couldn't even tell you if it was male or female.

They mentioned a van. It was there, then it was gone. Now, I've got this creepy anonymous note."

I paused, trying to calm down. The cop, a tall, skinny guy who looked about sixteen, gazed at me with eyes like blue glass, as devoid of expression as the rest of his face. A nameplate above his left breast pocket read "A.J. Montgomery."

"I wish I could help you," he said, waving the letter. "But this isn't a threat."

"But that phone call—"

"Yes, I understand. That is strange." His eyebrows rose, and the side of his mouth turned up in seeming acknowledgment. "I'm afraid I don't know what to tell you. Except keep a record of your calls and hang onto any other notes you get."

"Could you dust for fingerprints or something? Figure out if this guy—gal—whatever is in your system?"

"I'm sorry. We can't ask the forensic lab to do that without some indication of a crime." He looked solemn. "Unless there's evidence of a genuine threat, we can't do anything."

My shoulders slumped. "So I'm right back where I started. Nowhere."

"Not really," Officer Montgomery said. "I'll file a report. Maybe we can't act on it now, but as I said, if you get more phone calls or notes like this, it might—and I want to emphasize *might*—establish a case for stalking."

"So I have to wait for something else to happen."

The cop nodded solemnly.

I sighed. "Goody."

\* \* \*

Instead of the park, I decided to head to The Cup on East Pearl Street, where I could work on the novel and drink socially-responsible coffee at the same time. While I was at it, I'd treat myself to a turkey club sandwich. I could already taste the bacon, avocado and Swiss cheese. Maybe I was being stalked by some loonie, but I wasn't going to deny myself life's small pleasures.

I pondered the situation as I drove. Who could've written that note, and why? Then a bizarre scenario suggested itself. Could it have something to do with Fred's failure to return my phone calls? Or the thing he wanted to talk to me about? No way, I thought. It has to be a coincidence. Just my overactive imagination, running away with me. So was the note written by the anonymous caller? And what did the van have to do with anything?

Writing a novel hardly seemed like a dangerous occupation to me, but now I wasn't sure. Whatever the reason for my current problems, I felt glad to have taken all those free self-defense courses the university offered.

I parallel parked near Pearl Street, trying not to think about it. How much danger could I be in surrounded by people in downtown Boulder? The Cup seemed like a pretty good place to be.

Not that there was any shortage of good coffee shops in Boulder. The Cup was usually busy, but not jammed to the gills with the regulars who hung out at Trident Bookseller's. Nor was it overrun with the earnest students in endless discussions of consciousness, the nature of time and inter-dimensionality who favored the second-floor trappings of Rocky Mountain Joe's Café. Such conversation could be stimulating—to a point. Right now, I needed to focus on my story. Work out the details of what would happen next to Alexis and Swede.

I'll admit, I felt a smidgen of guilt at hanging out at The Cup, agonizing over the fate of fake people in a made-up situation instead of working on my thesis. But I was so eager to review this draft of my novel and give it the final touches, I simply couldn't stop now.

I ordered my coffee and sandwich, then set up in a corner table to write.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Alexis*

They found a cheap motel well off the freeway, halfway to Portland. Swede peered out the window between the closed curtains, while Alexis stretched out on the bed and clicked through the ten available channels on the small TV.

"Are you ever going to tell me what this is about?" she asked, stopping on TBS to view what might be a watchable movie.

"I told you," Swede said. "It's about the research."

"Which tells me nothing."

"Like I said--"

"I know what you said." The movie was some cop flick, full of stupid banter and chase scenes. She muted the sound, tossed the remote aside and rolled over to face Swede. "You need to tell me more. I wouldn't have even come this far, if you hadn't freaked me out. But I have to insist on getting a few details. I'm not going any farther with you without them."

"I'm trying to protect you." Swede turned from the window. He looked exhausted. "Please. Just trust me."

Alexis considered this. "No."

"No?"

"I need an explanation. You're disrupting my life. I have a master's thesis to work on and classes to attend. And a limited time to finish my studies, so if you're going to insist that I live my life on the run, I have to know why I'm running."

Swede shook his head. "I had hoped to avoid this."

"Clearly, but if you don't explain now, I'm calling a cab or catching a bus back home."

Swede sighed. "Well, I can't really force you to come."

"They call it kidnapping."

Swede grimaced and glanced out the window again. He froze as the flash of headlights illuminated him briefly, then relaxed as they disappeared.

"All right," he said. "Did Daniel ever explain the theory we were testing?"

"I told you. Daniel didn't explain a thing."

"Well, you did know he was a cosmologist."

"Yes, yes. You were both studying the origins of the universe."

Swede grabbed a chair and turned it backwards. He straddled it and dropped with a grunt, resting his arms on the back, his solid torso settling like a sack of cement. "You've heard of Albert Einstein, of course."

"Gosh, no, Swede. Who's he?"

Swede's mouth quirked up to one side, but the half-smile quickly vanished. "You probably know that under Einstein's theory of relativity, the speed of light is constant."

"Yes, I know. I took basic physics, remember? Even thought about majoring in it, but philosophy was a better match for me."

Swede nodded. "That's right. Remind me. Why did you change your mind?"

"Couldn't hack the math. Calculus was my downfall."

Swede nodded. "There's a lot of that."

"Don't change the subject. You were talking about Einstein and the speed of light."

Swede paused, as if gathering his thoughts. "Have you ever heard of Joao Magueijo?"

"No. What the hell is that?"

"It's a who, not a what." Swede explained it was the name of a Portuguese cosmologist, Joao Magueijo. "He was trying to figure out certain inconsistencies between what we know about the universe and the Big Bang theory."

"Magueijo came up with this notion that maybe Einstein had it wrong. Maybe the speed of light wasn't a constant. To boil it down, if light moved faster than it does now when the Big Bang occurred, it would explain a whole lot of things that hadn't made sense up until then. Like the 'horizon problem.' Are you familiar with that?"

Alexis shook her head.

"Essentially, the background radiation in our universe is too evenly disbursed, too homogenous. The universe is so huge, this shouldn't be the case. The edges of the universe are 28 billion light years apart, but the universe is only 14 billion years old. If nothing can travel faster than the speed of light, heat radiation simply couldn't have travelled between the two horizons fast enough to even out all the hot and cold spots and create thermal equilibrium throughout the universe." He paused. "I get the feeling I'm losing you."

"I think I get the gist. Just don't start talking in differential equations or anything."

Swede smiled. A real smile this time. "That part doesn't really matter, anyhow. That's just the background. Suffice it to say, it's a controversial theory. He's been heavily criticized for positing it as a better theory than the ones that square with Einstein's views."

"Okay. And all this is dangerous why?"

Swede hunched his shoulders and leaned into the chair. "Magueijo wrote a book called *Faster Than the Speed of Light*. In it, he mentions that the research he was doing might end up being used to create a more powerful weapon than the H-bomb, but dismissed this concern in a footnote. Under his theory of VSL--that's variable speed of light--an accelerator used to produce Planck mass particles would create a bomb with half the power of an H-bomb. However . . ."

Alexis waited. Her life felt worse than a Hitchcock movie.

"Magueijo had a footnote to this in his book. It said that this outcome was based on a certain factor in his equations being positive. But if he was wrong and that factor was negative . . . it would actually create a bomb twice as powerful. At least, in theory."

Alexis drew in a breath. "So you've proved this theory? The one that could lead to . . . oh, my God."

Swede's head drooped. "Not conclusively, but our research led us to believe Magueijo's worst-case scenario could be true." He looked up at Alexis. "And I don't think Daniel's death was an accident."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Alexis*

"Wait a minute, wait." Alexis held up one hand like a crossing guard. "Why would they, whoever they are, want to kill Daniel?"

Swede heaved a sigh and rubbed his forehead. He resumed his watch out the window.

"I'm assuming you meant he was murdered," Alexis said. "Crashing your own car down a steep slope seems like an odd way to commit suicide."

Swede squeezed his eyes shut and his brow furrowed as if conjuring a response took great effort. "We were approached."

"Approached?"

"Three people who claimed to be with the government. They said they'd gotten wind of our research and wanted to know our findings. Daniel and I were suspicious right away, since we'd told no one exactly what we were working on. We asked them where they got their information, but they refused to tell us."

"Could they have checked your records at Stanford and figured it out?"

Swede shook his head. "Stanford makes you fill out a ream of forms before you can use their particle accelerator. They collect lots of information and make sure you're trained--"

"And not a terrorist?"

"Right. I'm sure they've checked our backgrounds. But they don't ask exactly what you're doing." Another vehicle cruised by and a phantom light striped Swede's pale face then faded. "These people had to get the information from another source."

"What about your advisor? You told him, right?"

"Only the bare essentials. That we were testing out Magueijo's VSL theories. We never told him what we found out about the Planck factor. We were afraid." Swede lowered his head into his hands, holding it like a basketball. "I guess we were right to be. I guess we were stupid to keep it a secret."

Alexis tried to wrap her mind around Swede's words, but something wasn't adding up. "How can you be so sure Daniel was killed over this? If they wanted your research, what would they gain from killing him?"

"To get to me. To force me to give it to them."

Alexis shook her head. "I find that hard to believe. Maybe these people were with the government. They showed you their ID, right?"

Swede shrugged. "So what if they did? You think these things can't be forged?"

Alexis peered at Swede. Could there really be something to what he said? Or had all the secrecy around his work with Daniel made him paranoid? Or worse?

Maybe coming with Swede had been a bad idea. She should just play along. At least until she could think of a way to get clear of him.

Swede was shaking his head. "It's all my fault. It was my idea to keep it secret. Daniel agreed, but it was my idea."

"You can't blame yourself," Alexis said, in a voice that sounded dull and unconvincing even to her. *Don't quit your day job for the theatre.* "You did what you thought was right at the time."

Neither spoke for a moment. The cop movie on TV was gearing up for what looked like a big finish. A battalion in SWAT gear huddled outside a brick building, while inside a man and woman did step-turn maneuvers around corners, their arms outstretched with handguns aimed, like Disneyland robots. *It's a Small World--and Very Violent--After All.*

Alexis rubbed her face. Swede's paranoia was exhausting. "So where are we going, anyway?"

"I've been trying to figure that out. Perhaps a big city. Somewhere we could get lost in the crowd."

Alexis' first thought was Seattle, but was that far enough? Swede stiffened and stared out the window. "Uh oh," he said.

"What is it?" Alexis whispered, though she couldn't imagine why she should.

"I'm not sure, but I think--"

\* \* \*

"Jessica!"

I lurched and my hands jumped from the keyboard. Gasping, I looked up to see Cynthia Dalrymple. One of Fred's friends.

"Cyn. God. You startled me."

"I'm sorry, Jess." Cyn floated over and eased into the chair across from me, tossing a red silk scarf over one shoulder like Isadora Duncan. Recalling the famous dancer's horrible death by strangulation when her scarf got caught in her car's rear wheel, I caught myself checking behind Cyn for rotating mechanical devices.

Cyn giggled. A bubbly champagne sound. "I forget how wrapped up you get in your writing. What're you working on?"

“Just a story.”

Cyn’s eyes widened. “Is this the novel? Oh, how cool! How’s it coming?”

“Okay, I guess.” *It’s for shit, but it’s going just swell.*

“Oh, I so envy you.” Cyn’s expression combined rapture and anguish. “I wish I could write. I would so love to be creative like you.”

“Not if you want to stay sane,” I muttered.

“Pardon?”

“I said, sometimes it overtaxes my brain.”

Cyn giggled again. “Overtax *your* brain? Oh, c’mon now. You’re a genius.”

She wrinkled her nose and scrunched her eyelids. “You’re such a kidder.”

I smiled. “That’s me. Jessica the Joker.”

“Have you seen Fred?”

It seemed like an odd change of subject. “I’ve been trying to reach him. I keep getting his voice mail.”

“Me, too. Strange.” She appeared put out. “Fred was supposed to come to Sherry’s party this past weekend?” Cyn had this way of making statements into questions. Drove me nuts. “He didn’t show. Not like him. Fred’s so social? So I called him and emailed. He hasn’t answered.” She pouted. “What’s up with that?”

“I dunno, Cyn. I don’t handle his social calendar.” I glanced at my watch, closed out the word processing program and prepared to leave. Time to move on.

Cyn recoiled. “No need to get bitchy, okay? Just asking . . .”

I paused before saying anything more. After counting to five (ten would have taken too long), I said, “I didn’t mean to snap at you, Cyn. But, really. I



don't know what's going on with Fred."

"Of course." She nodded, looking contrite.

"Frankly, I'm a bit worried."

Cyn nodded again. "Yes." She looked up at me. "He has been acting . . . strange?"

I peered at her. "So you've noticed a difference in his behavior, too?"

"He's seemed depressed, withdrawn. When was the last time you spoke to him?"

I thought back. "I guess it's been two or three weeks."

Cyn's brow furrowed. "That's when I noticed the change in him, too."

"Do you have any clue what it might be?"

Cyn opened and shut her mouth, then spoke. "I can't be sure, but I think it has something to do with you."

"Me?" *What the fuck?*

Cyn stared me in the eyes. "You need to talk to him, Jess. I think you need to get the story straight from him." She tossed her scarf over her shoulder again.

\* \* \*

I exchanged the bare minimum of chitchat with Cyn, before I made my farewells. I then gathered my things and bundled them into the car. From there, I dialed Fred on my cell phone. Got his voice mail again. Instead of leaving a message, I headed straight for his place, which wasn't far from school. Time to face whatever was going on with the guy.

On the way, I tried to picture what could be wrong. We hadn't argued or

had any kind of disagreement. If anything, Fred had bent over backward to help me get inside information that was proving useful in writing the book. He had lots of friends and connections—people who knew about political dissident groups and various anti-government crazies who might want to use Daniel’s research for nefarious reasons. The kind of information you can’t pick up at the library or even in a Google search.

My car chugged up the hill in the old tree-lined neighborhood, and I eased it up to the curb by Fred’s apartment building. From the street, I could see his beat-up green Volvo in the lot. I called his number again. Voice mail. Don’t know why I even tried.

I set the handbrake and turned the wheels toward the curb, a habit I picked up while learning to drive in the mountainous sections of Colorado. I got out and approached the white stucco building. The wind blew, and the fan-shaped leaves in the aspen trees trembled and whispered.

I stepped into the foyer and climbed the steps to the third floor, pausing before knocking. *Could Fred be really depressed? Could he have become dangerously unhinged?* I stood there, spinning out all sorts of nightmare scenarios. The product of too much TV (and, of course, reading too many suspense novels). Suddenly, I felt stupid. *Fred wouldn’t hurt me. Maybe the guy needs help. I owe him that much after all he’s done for me.*

I rapped on the door. No answer. I tried again. Nothing. On impulse, I tried the knob. Unlocked, but that wasn’t unusual. Many Boulder residents don’t bother locking their doors during the day. I started inside, calling Fred’s name, but

stopped short when a horrible stench overwhelmed me. Then I saw the wreckage. Someone had fucked the place up good. My jaw dropped involuntarily. I stood there until I spotted bare feet extending out from the kitchen.

I charged in without thinking. Fred was on the floor face up. His skin was waxy, his brown eyes vacant. Head resting in a pool of blood, his smooth brow was marred only by a small hole. Bending over, I felt bile rise in my throat.