

THE PLANCK FACTOR
(First Three Chapters)

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.

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 the blank sides of which I used 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."