

The Matildas

By Dave Pasquantonio

Excerpt: First 10 Chapters!

Chapter 1: My Gun, Her Body

I picked up a pulp novel, the last of a dozen that I had rescued from a Cape Cod flea market last summer with my girlfriend Leah, back when she was still alive.

This was *My Gun, Her Body* by Jeff Bogar, published in 1952 and originally titled *Dinah for Danger*. Most pulp titles are bad—*My Gun, Her Body* is fantastically awful. If I ever write a book, I'll come up with my own so-bad-it's-good title, and I'll even name each chapter after a forgotten pulp novel. My tribute to the golden age.

On the front cover, the tagline blared, "He prowled the halls of a Florida brothel!" Should be easy to catch him. How many halls can there be in a brothel? I took in the artwork. A lanky man, his face half in shadow, sports a trench coat the color of split-pea soup and holds a cigarette in his left hand while pulling something black out of his coat pocket with his right hand. He gazes over his shoulder at a heavy-lidded, heavily mascaraed blonde, also half in shadow, who leans against a doorframe while clutching the front of her pink robe in a half-hearted attempt to keep it cinched. Seductively draped over her bare left shoulder is—a dish towel? Has Trench Coat caught Heavy Lids in the middle of cathouse KP duty?

Most pulp plots are formulaically bad, swapping a brunette for the blonde and a dark alley for the brothel. Doesn't matter to me if the stories are hokey. I don't read anything to expand my empathy or to gain a deeper understanding of the multiverse.

I read to escape.

I flipped through the brittle, yellowed pages and sniffed deeply. I adore the smell of old paper—every book lover does—but there are traces of other scents in these pages, mementos left behind by the readers who came before me. Perfume. Cigarettes. Whiskey. Even when the scents aren't really there, I still smell them.

I ran my fingertips over the cover, barely brushing the surface, tracing the cracked spine, feeling the nicks and folds and imperfections. This wasn't always a beat-up book. Back in 1952, someone saw it in a newsstand or drugstore and dropped a quarter for a few hours of hedonism. The lurid cover was unblemished, the thin pages crisp, the thin story untold.

Who bought this copy? It's fun to imagine. A post-war office worker on their lunch break? A teen who hid it from her parents? A sailor on leave in an unfamiliar port?

Whoever they were, they were a book lover like me. They read it by flashlight under a blanket, or on the bus ride home from their dead-end job, and then they passed it on to a friend, or left it in a diner for the next patron, or dropped it in a box and forgot about it. As the decades passed, this little book could have died any of a thousand deaths. Buried in a landfill. Chewed by mice. Burned in a fire. But it didn't die. It survived and made its way to me.

These books give us stories, but they also have their own stories.

I opened the book and flipped to page one. Classic rock pounded from my headphones. The

cheap window air conditioner groaned. The kids were asleep. A dopey Labrador retriever named Mungo was snoozing on my lap, pinning me to the too-short couch.

This wasn't my house. They weren't my kids. It wasn't even my dog. But it was a typical Matilda Garrigan night—reading a hokey pulp novel, listening to awesome music, and talking to no one.

Bliss.

But ten pages in, my ringing phone turned my bliss into annoyance.

I peeked at the screen. It was Ray Yodice, the founder and head of Mitotic Press, the tiny publisher where I used to work. Nine weeks ago, I quit Mitotic after I was too late returning from a routine business trip to the other Earth to stop Leah from killing herself.

Ray called me every few days to woo me into coming back. I always let the messages go to voicemail. I wasn't ready to go back. I wasn't sure that I'd ever be ready.

Besides, eleven at night was way too late for a Ray wooing. I tapped "Ignore" on the phone and got back to the book and the music.

For ten seconds.

My phone rang again. Yodice again. Ignore again.

If I can't be wooed during business hours, I certainly can't be wooed late at night. Manners, Ray! But I started to feel a little uneasy. There was no reason for Ray to call me *except* to ask me to come back to work—and he knew that I was *not* coming back to work any time soon. Odd.

My phone rang for a third time.

"Come on, Ray," I muttered as I prepared to hit Ignore again, "leave me alone." But this time it wasn't Ray. It was Steve McAllister, my best friend both in and out of Mitotic.

I sighed loudly at the snoring Mungo, pulled off my headphones, and answered.

"Steve-o."

"Mattie," Steve said quickly, "are you home?"

"Nope, I'm at Tommy and Gretchen's. I'm on aunt duty tonight. Why? Where are you?"

"Mitotic. Did you see that Ray called?"

"Yup."

"And you didn't answer?"

"Why would I? It's always the same thing. *Come back to work, Matilda. We need you.* I'm not ready, Steve. Ray knows that."

"Mattie, you should have answered. This isn't about you coming back to work. Someone found out about the Room."

"What do you mean, found out?"

"I mean *found out* found out."

My stomach flip-flopped. "What happened?"

Steve sounded like he was panting. "Someone left a book. In the parking lot."

"A book? Mitotic is a book publisher. There are books all over the place. That's no

emergency.”

“But this book, Mattie—it had a note in it. A very threatening note.”

“You’re not making any sense, Steve.”

“Just get here. You need to see this.”

“I can’t leave the twins alone. Plus, whatever is happening, it’s not my problem.”

“Mattie, this thing—at least hear what happened. So, a few hours ago—crap, hold on, someone’s knocking at my office door.”

I gave Mungo a few pats with a shaking hand while I waited for Steve to return. This had to be some kind of mix-up. A book and a note? Pretty stupid way to start a mystery. Plus no one could have found about the Room. Mitotic Press was nothing if not an excellent secret-keeper.

Steve was back. “That was Ray. We’re all going to look at the footage again to see if we missed anything.”

“Footage? Of a book?”

He groaned. “I don’t have time to get into it. Look, I’ll tell Ray you’re not coming in tonight. But you better come in first thing in the morning. Things could get real bad, real soon.” He hung up.

Mitotic Press had kept the Room a secret for decades. Both Ray Yodices were convinced that civilization would crumble if either Earth learned Mitotic’s big secret: our two offices, on two almost-parallel worlds, were connected by a portal in a basement conference room, allowing us to travel to the other Earth as easily as walking from one room to another. Which, by the way, is literally how we did it.

The portals were the key to Mitotic’s deceptively simple business model: they took published novels from one Earth and published them as their own on the other. Mitotic Press is, literally, a company of thieves. And I had been one of those thieves—until I quit after Leah killed herself. That’s when I stopped caring about things like parallel Earths and portals. And I was the better for it.

I think.

I grumbled at Mungo, who kept snoring, then I texted Ray and Steve and told them I’d come in tomorrow morning—if Ray still needed me. Most likely he’d have solved this little mystery by then, and I could stay quit. A book in a parking lot? It had to be nothing.

I shut off my phone. I didn’t feel like dealing with Mitotic anymore tonight. I put my headphones back on to drown out my soliloquy and tried to get back to reading *My Gun, Her Body*. After all, Dinah was in danger! But I couldn’t concentrate.

Leah. Nine weeks dead, and she was still keeping me from living.

Chapter 2: Small-Town Chippie

I immersed myself in Janis Joplin songs for an hour until my sister-in-law Gretchen returned, announcing her presence with typical Gretchen flair by dramatically flinging open the door, which then whacked loudly into the stove and rebounded into her, knocking her backward. She had a white smear on the front of her black waitressing shirt and an orange smear on her cheek, she smelled like fried chicken, and she was visibly exhausted, an at-the-moment single mom while she and my brother, Tommy, tried to patch up their forever-leaky marriage.

Mungo jumped on her, his tail wagging, and began licking her shirt.

The last thing Gretchen needed was for me to give her crap. But she had made things a little too easy.

"Oh, miss," I said, holding up my index finger, "you've got some restaurant on your face."

Gretchen pushed Mungo down, held up a different finger, and trudged upstairs to check on her sleeping twins Evie and Aaron while I boiled water to make tea. She returned smear-free five minutes later and plopped onto a chair across from me, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. I slid a mug over to her and started the lying.

"So, Gretch. I need to go back to Mitotic tomorrow. Something's come up."

Gretchen's eyes snapped open and she leaned in, her long brown hair crazy from a hard night of work. "What? No way!"

Short to my tall, stacked to my straight and narrow, and fiery to my cool blahness, Gretchen is a complicated, beautiful handful, and about as opposite from me as is possible. I think that's why Tommy married her. My brother had won the lottery with Gretch; he was just too clueless to realize it. Sure, she had a fuse an inch long, and about thirty personalities, and whenever she was tired or angry—which was all of the time—she morphed into a five-foot tornado.

But Gretchen also embraced the one thing that Tommy and I lacked: passion. She loved fiercely, she hated fiercely, she was pure emotion. My brother and I were 10 percent sarcasm and 90 percent repression.

"Keep it down. I worked hard to get your kids to sleep," I said, mock-angry.

"They've slept through my screaming for eight years," she snapped, then laughed. "And I'm glad you're going back to work, girly. You've helped me out so much since Tommy left, but you're not living. You loved working. You had a purpose. Then you had one awful day, and you gave up."

She'd never know what had *really* happened nine weeks ago. But she was right about everything else, so I kept quiet.

"But why tomorrow?" she continued. "What happened?"

The lie came easily. "Just an author I used to work with. I need to clear a few things up."

"Ooooookay," she said, stretching out the word, then narrowed her hazel eyes, flecked with perpetual annoyance. Gretchen, like everyone who wasn't part of Mitotic Press, didn't know about the portals and the other Earth. To the rest of the world—worlds, actually, ha!—I had a humdrum "book job" and took frequent business trips where I was consistently unreachable.

"It's no big deal," I lied after ten long seconds of her silent staring. "But I might not be back when the kids get off the bus in the afternoon. I'll get Cindy across the street to watch them."

"Screw that. I'll tell Tommy to be here." She dug through her purse for her phone.

"He's been working a ton of hours. Let him sleep tonight. We can figure out things in the morning."

"And screw the morning, while I'm at it," she said, waving her phone around. "Sometimes I wish you weren't so nice. Or didn't live so close. You've made things *so easy* for Tommy."

"How is this my fault? You just thanked me for all my help. And you're the one who booted him out. Now he's at my place all the time, eating my food and leaving a mess. How have I made it easy?"

"You make it *easy* for him," she repeated, tossing daggers with her eyes, "because he's always got a place to go. He runs away to your house, you run here to help, and I do all the work without a husband."

Then her face ever so slightly crumpled. I'm a softie for crumpling, so I treaded lightly. "Maybe you're right. But he's my brother, Gretch. There's no one who wants things to work out between you two more than me, believe me. I'd have food and a clean house again. I'll talk to him."

"Good." The crumpling was gone, as a new personality—this one venomous—took hold. She lifted the phone to her ear. "Time to wake up Tommy. I live for these moments."

"Gretchen, please. It's late. Leave him be."

She re-narrowed her eyes, then sighed, typed out a message instead, and plunked her phone on the table. She sank back in the chair and shut her eyes again. "I asked him—*nice*ly—to be here to get the twins," she moaned. "But all I get from him is grief. I ache, and I smell like trash, and the restaurant was a million degrees tonight, and I get to do it all again tomorrow, and every day for the rest of my life." She then trailed off into unintelligible weary muttering.

I stood, walked over to her, and kissed her forehead, wiping my lips on my hand after to get rid of the trash and fried chicken taste. "Sleep in. I'll couch it tonight and get the kids off to school in the morning before I go. I'll fill you in on work when I'm back."

"You better," she said, eyes still closed. "You gave that place so much. I'm surprised they left you alone for this long."

"I'm not going back for good, Gretch. I just need to go in tomorrow. No big deal."

"You'll go back for good someday. But thank you, Tilly. Best. Aunt. Ever."

Chapter 3: The Street Is My Beat

In the morning, I turned my phone back on and saw a few texts from Ray, urging me to come in as soon as possible. I texted him back a cartoon picture of a thumbs-up, although what I really wanted to send was the same finger Gretchen had graced me with last night.

I chugged coffee to chase away last night's nightmare—finding Leah's body, the same dream I had every night—then got Evie and Aaron ready for school. Mungo and I walked the kids to the neighborhood bus stop one block over. The twins hopped on the bus, the cliquy parent bitch sessions broke up, and the dog and I hoofed it back to the house. Once inside, we raced each other up the stairs. Mungo beat me and jumped on Gretchen's empty bed. Gretchen came out of the bathroom wearing a fluffy white robe.

"Hey, big guy!" she said to Mungo, who had already closed his eyes, head on her pillow. "I want a man in my bed again, but not if they're going to fall asleep that fast."

"He's all worn out. He's walked about two hundred feet today."

"Laziest dog. I should have named him Tommy." She flopped onto the bed and put her head on Mungo's back. "What are you going to wear for your big return to work?"

"I'm going like this." I had on black jeans, a gray tee shirt, a black leather jacket, and basketball sneakers. My bottle-blond hair was short and spiky, although I had added a few streaks of blue a few days ago, because who doesn't love the blues?

"No, no, no. Plus that hair makes you look like Billy Idol."

"Thank you."

Gretchen laughed. "Try professionalism on for size."

"It's just a quick meeting. I'll be in and out."

"So to speak, Tilly. So to speak."

I fired up my Jeep and started the drive through Massachusetts suburbia from Gretchen's house in the lousy part of Framingham to Mitotic Press in nearby non-lousy Sudbury. I'd driven past Mitotic a few times since I had left, seeing how the old commute felt, but I hadn't stopped in. Sometimes I missed the place, but mostly I tried to forget it. I was good at avoidance. I worshiped at the Church of Isolation.

I punched on the radio, got lousy reception from my favorite low-wattage college station, popped in an 80's MD instead, and pondered what lie ahead. Or lay ahead. Working with books, I really should get that rule straight.

Familiar streets and houses rolled by as I drove, the swath of older homes leading to a stretch of newer developments named after whatever natural features had been bulldozed to clear the land: "Strawberry Hollow" and "Pine Run" and "Pillar's Creek," pretty places buried under dozens of decade-old Colonials and dead-end drives. I crossed into Sudbury, banged a few lefts,

and there it was: Mitotic Press.

Ray Yodice had bought the gorgeous Victorian from his retired professor, who had headed the physics department at Norris College, Boston's prestigious science school. The professor had let star-student Ray run experiments in his basement, using some spare and, looking back, perhaps faulty equipment. One February night in 1977, Ray's experiment failed (or succeeded, depending on how one felt about parallel Earths). Ray hid the newly created portal from the professor and scraped up enough cash to buy the house when the professor died six months later. A few years in, Ray founded Mitotic Press with his duplicate—the Ray Yodice from the other Earth. Two decades later, I joined Ray's team of book-stealing, portal-hopping secret keepers.

A tiny book publisher could exist anywhere. But Mitotic Press couldn't exist without this house and without the portal. It was a place, and a secret, worth protecting. Or at least, I used to think that it was worth protecting. After what had happened to Leah, I wasn't so sure.

I swung into the driveway and parked, leaving the engine on and the music rolling, and drummed my hands on the steering wheel, burning off nervous energy. Bonnie and the Clydes were working their way through the chops-busting punk classic "Help Me Go or Go to Hell" on the MD. It's one of my all-time favorite songs—growing up, I so wanted to be Bonnie. I *still* want to be Bonnie, although I'd settle for being a Clyde.

It was a fitting title for today, though. Mitotic Press might be in big trouble.

Chapter 4: Trouble Is My Name

Al Bunton, the head security guy, stood from behind his desk when I walked in.

“Matilda Garrigan. Good to see you.” He then held out a beefy hand, and we shook over the desk. Al had played pro football, and although he was at least sixty years old, he could still snap a man in half if needed.

He nodded his head toward Ray’s office. “He wants to see you right away, obviously. But Steve has been pestering me since dawn. Wait in the meeting room and I’ll call him.” Ray had converted a former pantry into a teeny meeting room. We used it to meet with guests who didn’t need to make their way to the basement and see something they shouldn’t see.

“Thanks, Al.” I walked past the desk to the meeting room, closed the door, flicked on the light, and sat down to wait.

I hadn’t missed the work part of working, because I’m lazy, but I had missed this beautiful house-turned-office. Bookcases everywhere, a big table in the kitchen where we could meet as a team without the other office eavesdropping, bedrooms converted to offices. We even kept one of the former bedrooms as a bedroom so employees from the other Earth’s Mitotic had a place to stay when they crossed. The other side did the same for us in their identical house. The whole place smelled like fresh coffee and books, and the chatter of keyboards was like hearing a favorite song.

I had worked here since graduating from college and it still felt like home. Mitotic Press was irresistible—apart from the basement.

The door popped open. Steve.

He closed the door. “How are you, Mattie?” he said, out of breath. Steve’s the only one I let call me Mattie; everyone else has to use Matilda, although Gretchen and every girlfriend past and present call me Tilly (an offbeat name calls for offbeat measures). “Ray’s itching to talk to you, but I wanted you first.” We both sat.

Steve was too thin, too sweaty, and too pale. His black curly hair was going gray on the sides. I knew what was wrong, and I wanted to ask him how he was feeling. But now was not the time.

Steve rubbed his face and started. “Let’s talk before this place turns into a hellhole. Good to have you back, by the way.”

“I said I’d come in so I could hear what happened, but that’s it. I’m not back for good.”

“I know that.”

“I don’t know that you do. After Leah—”

“Mattie, I *know*.” Steve sounded exasperated. “And I’m sorry. We all are. If this was any other time, we could commiserate about our sucky lives over a sucky beer in a sucky bar. But

this place might be in trouble.”

Trouble. Apart from keeping the Room a secret from the rest of humanity on both worlds, we were all normal worker bees doing normal worker bee stuff. Normal worker bees got into normal kinds of trouble—slacking off, fudging expense reports, flirting at the holiday party. Trouble wasn’t part of our day-to-day. I’d had enough trouble, and I wasn’t looking for more.

“Fine,” I said. “Tell me what happened.”

Steve rubbed his face again. “I hate even thinking about it. Okay. Janice and Mark—” He stopped when his phone chirped. He groaned when he read the message. “It’s Al. Ray saw your Jeep.” He stood, then pocketed his phone. “Just listen to what happened, okay?”

“If someone actually *tells* me what happened.”

I followed Steve out. And there he was. Silver hair, wire-rimmed glasses, looking like a professor straight out of central casting. Ray Yodice. The head of Mitotic Press. The accidental creator of the Room. And the man I wrongly blamed for the death of my girlfriend.

Chapter 5: Two-Sided Triangle

Ray shook my hand, looking serious as always. “Matilda. So good to see you. Thanks for coming in.” A little oily, a little smarmy. That’s Ray for you.

I hadn’t planned on ever leaving Mitotic. It was the best job a book lover could have, on either Earth. You get to read books that no one else on your Earth has read, and you get paid for it. What could beat that?

But nine weeks ago, Ray had asked me to meet with a vendor on the other side, a normal work meeting like a zillion others that had come before it. I had grumbled about having to cross over to the other Earth on short notice, but I crossed nonetheless, and took the company car to drive to the meeting. I broke up a robbery in progress on the street, it made me late getting back home, I found Leah’s body, something inside me snapped, and the next morning I called Ray and I quit. After Leah’s funeral, I hadn’t seen any of my coworkers besides Steve.

Especially not Ray. If I hadn’t gone to that meeting, Leah Shea might still be alive.

Steve said a quick goodbye and peeled away, trudging up the stairs. I followed Ray to his office, and he shut the door. His office hadn’t changed since I’d quit. A leather couch, three guest chairs, and a desk topped with an enormous walnut top, rough on the edges as if it had come from one massive and unlucky tree. The guest chairs were some weird cross between futuristic and rustic. The Ray from the other Earth had bought six and split the lot up, three for each Ray. The chairs had been crafted by an artisan who’d never know that her work cradled bottoms on a parallel Earth she’d never see.

Ray clasped his hands as he rested his arms on his desk, gave me his most earnest look, and began.

“Thank you again for coming in. I know you didn’t have to, and I can assume you didn’t want to.” He was batting a thousand right away. I said nothing, so he continued. “I’d like for you to talk with Janice and Mark. They’ll walk you through what happened last night. I’d like for you to hear the story from the source. I don’t want to color the tale.”

Everyone here knew what happened, but no one wanted to be the first to tell me. My annoyance meter started pinging.

“Fine,” I said, not bothering to tamp down the annoyance.

“Meet me here when you’re done and let me know what you think. I have an idea of how you can help, but it’s not worth talking about until you hear the whole story.”

More vagueness? *Ping ping ping*. “Fine,” I repeated, doubling down on my irritation. Ray started to add something, but I cut him off.

“Just tell me this. Whatever happened—do you think it’s serious?”

He studied his hands for a bit, then nodded.

"If it happened, then yes. It's very serious."

I went upstairs and around the rotunda to find Janice Pisano. She was on the little deck outside her office, yapping on her phone and smoking a cigarette. I tapped on the door to get her attention. She held up one finger and turned away.

I walked down the hallway to Mark Reiner's office. He was looking out the window, leaning back in his chair, his feet up on his desk. I slammed my open palm on his door to startle him, and his feet knocked over a pencil cup.

"Matilda. Good to see you," he said, a broad grin lighting up his face. He was a tall lean guy who gave off a surfer vibe, a perfect worker-match for high-strung Janice.

"Janice knows I'm here, so hopefully she'll pop over in a few minutes and I can finally hear what happened," I said. "I thought she quit smoking."

"Last night was pretty stressful for her. She usually smokes those NicStics, and they don't bother anyone. But she's back on the real ones today." He sighed. "She's a mess. This has not been the most productive day."

Then Janice stomped in, her long brown hair in a ponytail, circles under her eyes. She looked athletic, but the only thing I've ever seen her run is her mouth.

"So, the prodigal son returns," she said, scowling, before giving me the quickest of hugs.

"Nice to see you too, Janice," I said. This wasn't the time to wallow in Janice's douchery, but I did miss our sparring, so I took a swing. "By the way, you're using *prodigal* wrong, not mention that I'm nobody's son. Your grammar has really gone downhill since I quit."

"Ripples, Matilda," she said dismissively. "What's gone downhill since you quit is my productivity, since I'm doing all your work."

Mark flicked a hand at Janice. "Whatever. How you holding up, partner?"

"I'm holding up crappy, *partner*," Janice snapped. She started pacing around the office, her words fast and sharp. "I didn't even send my kids to school today. They're at my mom's house, and I couldn't give her a reason. I swear, every driver on the way here was staring at me. I feel like I'm going crazy." She turned to face me. "Do you have any idea what I feel like right now?"

"How could I? I haven't heard the story yet," I replied, my annoyance meter now redlining.

"Good to have you back, though," Mark said to me.

"I'm not back. I wish everyone would stop saying that."

"Wish you were back," Janice said. "Wish you never left. Wish everything was back the way it was before you quit. You here doing your own work, and no one leaving a threatening book on my car."

"How is a book threatening?" I asked.

"So here's the story," Mark began.

Chapter 6: Office Game

Someone had left a book on Janice's SUV. That was odd, but it should not have sent Mitotic Press into a tizzy. However, this was a book from the other Earth. And how it found its way to our Earth? Nobody knew.

Earlier in the evening, Mark and Janice drove to Bookaria, a fantastic bookstore in tony Wellesley. The store is a reader's dream—new books, used books, helpful staff, and you can always find the first title in a series, unlike at the crappy chain stores. It's a great independent bookseller, and Bookaria is a great name to boot.

Anyway, Mark and Janice browsed the aisles, buying novels that the other side's Mitotic Press might want to publish. Mark drove the two of them back to the office in the company's Datsun. Janice went downstairs to the Room to leave the books, she and Mark said bye to the guard, and they walked to their cars to leave. All normal.

Then they spotted a plastic bag on Janice's hood. Inside the bag was a hardcover book—the newest novel by John Sandford. Janice and Mark were confused, because although the office was loaded with books, why would someone leave one on the hood of Janice's SUV? And John Sandford had never written books on our Earth—he had stuck with newspaper reporting—so a John Sandford book shouldn't exist on our Earth. Then they saw a note on plain white paper sticking out of the top of the book: it read, "I know about your portal—find me, or I tell both worlds." Along with the note was a printed receipt—the book had been purchased yesterday, with cash and from a store that didn't exist on our Earth but did on the other Earth.

Janice and Mark went to pieces. Janice called Ray at home, screaming for help, while Mark jumped up and down, waving his arms to catch the guard's attention on the parking lot security camera.

Ray rushed to Mitotic and asked the guard on the other side's office to call that side's Ray. The two Rays met in the Room, then called everyone back in. And that was the story.

The Sandford novel could only have come from the other Earth. And the only way between the two Earths was through the portal in the Room. Nobody had passed anything across yesterday, Mark said, not even a book, before Janice and Mark's purchases.

A John Sandford novel from the other Earth, with a receipt dated yesterday, appearing on Janice's SUV? It was an impossibility. But it had happened. And what it meant? Nobody knew.

Chapter 7: She'll Get Hers

"How can you say that it's 'probably just some kid'?" Janice asked Mark. We had moved to the deck outside Janice's office so she could smoke again. The sun was strong, and the air was thick with humidity, a typical late-May morning in eastern Massachusetts.

"All I'm saying is that you need to reel in the end of the world talk, partner," Mark said. He was leaning up against the deck door, plinking away at his phone.

I looked out at the pines behind the house, my elbows resting on the cedar railing.

"If it wasn't someone here pulling some prank, then I don't know what's going on," I said. "There's no way that book could have come across except through the Room. But there has to be a simple explanation."

"That we know of," Mark pointed out. "*When you've exhausted all possibilities, remember: you haven't.*"

"You're quoting Edison?" Janice blew out a cloud of smoke at Mark. "That's your sage advice? See, Matilda"—she turned back around to lean on the railing next to me—"this is the big reason I miss having you here. I didn't have to put up with rampant stupidity from the rest of these clowns alone." She took a final drag on her cigarette and tossed the butt into a ceramic pot nestled in the corner of the deck.

"That thing had a plant in it until this morning," she said, nodding at the pot. "I dumped it over the side. My husband will kill me for starting back up. He'll smell it all over me tonight. Mark, remind me to go to the laundry room and get some dryer sheets before the end of the day. I need to rub them all over myself."

"Noted, partner," Mark said, typing something into his phone.

"And if you know what's good for you, *stop* calling me partner."

"Noted, partner," he said, grinning. He opened the door and went inside, leaving Janice and me alone.

She turned to face me. "You want a cigarette? For old times' sake?"

I laughed. "I'd kill for one. But you know me. Once I start back up, it's going to take me forever to stop again."

"Loser." She sighed. "What if this is the beginning of something big? I mean, there's no way it could be happening, so there's no telling what will happen. There's no predictability."

"Like chaos theory?"

"Sure, I guess," she said, frowning. "Butterfly flapping its wings in Africa, culminating in my house getting torched by some angry author from the other Earth."

"Settle down. This is a Mitotic thing, not a you thing. It just happened to be your SUV. And what author?"

She ignored me. "We don't know that it's a Mitotic thing. And who would do this to me, anyway?" She paced. "I haven't upset anyone except Mark on an hourly basis, and we know it wasn't him."

She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out her pack and her lighter, squeezing them in her hands, hugging herself.

"I wish everything was back the way it was before you quit," she repeated.

I nodded. I wished the same thing every day.

Chapter 8: Pages of Sin

I left Janice alone with her nicotine and walked over to Steve's office. Novels blanketed his desk, and he was writing notes in the slim margins of a hardcover.

He looked up. "Mattie. You hear the story?"

"Finally. Seems stupid."

"You don't think it's a threat?" he asked.

"I think it's a book that someone dropped in a parking lot." I eased myself into his guest chair after brushing some crumbs to the floor. "Enough mystery for a few minutes. What have you been working on?"

"This? Eh, it's taking forever." He scowled at the book in his hand like he wanted to swat it. "It's by Paige Cameron. She's that young horror writer. You ever read any of her stuff?"

"I've had enough horror, thanks."

"She reminds me of early Koontz and King. She's young, so she could write for decades, which is always a plus for us."

"Too bad about King."

"Too bad is right." He made a slashing motion across his neck. A crazed fan had murdered our Earth's Stephen King last month. And our side's Dean Koontz stopped writing in 1979. He never hit the best-seller list like the Dean Koontz on the other Earth had, so their side's Koontz books were a goldmine for our office. "Cameron was never born over there, so I'm prepping her books for the other side. We'll stick with Paige Cameron for the author name." All of the books that we re-wrote and published (umm, stole) were attributed to pseudonyms or to a stable of in-house writers. No author book tours, no author interviews, and no author questions. Mitotic Press had to stay well under the public radar.

We talked shop for a few minutes, and then I asked, "You up for looking at the security footage with me?"

"Sure. Wait until you see how funny Mark and Janice looked jumping around in the parking lot. I could use a laugh right now. I need a break from this Cameron stuff. It's depressing. She's got a trilogy set in Manhattan after Bridge Night. It's hard for me to get through."

I hadn't known anyone who had died on Bridge Night back on Christmas Eve in 1999, when thousands of holiday travelers across the nation had been killed on major bridges by thirteen concurrent terrorist attacks. Steve had lost a brother on what used to be the Walt Whitman. Bridge Night was the saddest day our country has ever seen. It's tough to trivialize it as fiction. But that's Mitotic's work in a nutshell. Horrific event on one Earth, a breezy beach read on the other.

Steve and I headed to the network room. Al greeted us with a yawn. "Let's see if Matilda

spots anything new.”

We stood near a bank of monitors as Al brought up the footage. He zipped through the daytime scenes. A few cars arrived, a few cars left. Normal activity. Then he slowed it down.

“Here’s where Janice comes back after grabbing dinner,” he continued, “so this is before they headed to Bookaria. She gets out, walks into the office. Then Mark comes back, maybe ten minutes later.” The camera showed Mark’s car and Janice’s SUV side-by-side, Mark’s trunk and Janice’s book-free hood facing out.

Al forwarded some more, and day turned to dusk on the screen. “Zipping through...Mark and Janice leave for the bookstore in the company Datsun...Mark’s driving...there’ll be nothing until they come back, and then you’ll see the crappy truck.”

“There’s a crappy truck?” I asked.

“We get people turning around in the lot all the time, so I didn’t pay it any notice right away.”

On the screen, the Datsun Aero that Mark had been driving slipped past the two parked cars on the monitor and out of the frame, parking in the garage. Dusk had turned to night.

About a minute later, a pickup, headlights blazing, appeared at the far end of the frame and stopped on the road.

“You can make out that it’s a pickup truck, but that’s about it,” Al said, freezing the footage. “Our security cameras are terrible in low light. I can’t figure out the make or model. It’s maybe dark green or black.”

Al rolled the footage. The driver’s door opened, and a big figure in dark clothing got out. After a few moments, the figure lurched along the bushes that bordered the lot and slipped in between the two parked cars. The hefty he or she put a bag on Janice’s SUV’s hood and returned to the truck, got in, and pulled away.

“You can’t see anything about the driver,” I said. “Can you zoom in more?”

“Yep.” He did, but there were no new details. “That’s it. Oh, there was this one jogger who seemed to be checking our office out.”

He worked his keyboard and we saw daylight footage from a different angle.

“This dark-haired woman runs past the building here”—he pointed at a figure on the monitor—“and then a few minutes later, she runs in the other direction, looking straight ahead. See, she’s wearing a ball cap and sunglasses. You can’t make out her face. When she’s jogging on that first pass, she’s looking straight at our office instead of the sidewalk. She’s looking sideways.” We watched the jogger on the screen trotting along the sidewalk.

“I doubt that’s anything,” I said. “There’s plenty of people who use that sidewalk. And probably twenty joggers a day, right?”

“Whoever it is has a nice bum, though,” Steve said. I looked again. Steve was correct. The way the woman ran was familiar, but I’d run here at lunchtime hundreds of times, so I’d probably

passed her somewhere in the neighborhood. It was nothing, although I'd love to see what she looked like in person.

Al stood. "That's about all we've got. Any thoughts?"

I sighed. "The truck and the big dude are something, but the runner doesn't seem like anything. Besides you finding a nice jogger bum, of course."

Al laughed. "I'm going to steal that line. Let me show you the book and the note."

We left the network room and walked to the guard desk. Al reached into a drawer. "Here it is," he said, handing me the book. "The note's inside."

I opened the book and took out the note. There was nothing remarkable about it—a dumb threat printed in blue ballpoint ink. I held the note up to the light but didn't see a watermark or anything else of interest. Not that I'd notice anything of interest anyway. I'm no detective.

Then I turned my attention to the book, fanning its pages. Nothing fell out.

"Anything special about the book?" Al asked.

"Just that it's a new Sandford," I replied, "and that's always a good thing. At least our mystery person has good taste in mysteries."

John Sandford released a new book in his Prey series every year on the other Earth, but I hadn't seen this one yet. I looked at the cover again. The book was titled *Defenestrated Prey*.

"Not a very cheery title," I said.

"Guess we know how *that* bad guy does it," Steve replied. "As for our bad guy? Nada."

Chapter 9: Digging the Love Goddess

I tapped on Gloria's half-open door, then peeked in. Gloria cradled her phone on her shoulder as she paged through a book and listened to whomever was on the line.

She looked up, smiled widely at me, and dropped the book on her desk while she continued her conversation.

"Yes, Gloria Ciampa. No, C-I-A-M-P-A. No, my account number is..." She rattled off a string of numbers. "Yes, a store credit would be fine. Thank you for your help. Bye now." She hung up. "I hate Sears."

"Give them hell before they go bankrupt."

Gloria burst out laughing, whirled around the desk, and hugged me hard. She was short and round, in her early sixties, and had big curly brown hair, a big face, and a voice like she had taken a teeny hit of helium. She did all of the stuff that the rest of us couldn't be trusted with or bothered with—paperwork, formatting, computer stuff that was over our heads. Gloria was Mitotic's mother hen. I had missed her terribly.

"Matilda, it is *so* good to see you," she said. Gloria and I talked on the phone several times a week. I had avoided most work people after I had quit, but I needed Gloria in my life.

"What do you think is going on?" she asked. She sat, and I took a seat in her side chair.

"I don't know. When Janice and Mark told me what happened, it felt like nothing at first. But given that the book could only have come from the other Earth, it's a mystery. And that message sure sounds like a threat, albeit a stupid one. But why leave a threat on a piece of paper in a book? What if Janice hadn't seen the note, or the bag fell off her hood?"

Gloria picked up a pencil and twirled it around as she spoke. "There's the how the book got there, and then there's the why. The how makes no sense—if it didn't come from here, it had to come from there, but there's no way it could have come from there, so it had to come from here. But it couldn't."

She sat up straight. "And the why. Why a John Sandford book? And why threaten to reveal the Room? To blackmail us? To scare us?"

I shrugged. "Ray should put you in charge of figuring it out. You're the sharpest person here."

Gloria smiled sadly. "You know I can't cross. Not yet, anyway."

"How is she doing?"

"The same." She pursed her lips. "No change."

If there was one person who deserved to cross after so many years at Mitotic, it was Gloria. But she couldn't.

She'd been in her twenties when Ray ran his experiment. They had been dating off and on, he

trusted her, and she stayed close with him even after they stopped dating (and even after she learned about his experiment from hell). Like Ray, Gloria couldn't cross, because she was alive on both Earths.

There couldn't be two of you on the same Earth. If you tried to cross to the other Earth and you were alive there, you bounced off the invisible barrier in the basement that separated our two Earths. We called that barrier the Boundary. If you were conceived after the day of Ray's experiment, you could cross the Boundary, because there wasn't another *you* on the other Earth. And if you died on one Earth, then the other you could cross to the other side. But that was a lousy way to get a multiverse passport.

We called the day that Ray ran his experiment the Split. For book people, we weren't always imaginative.

Gloria had no brothers or sisters, and her parents had passed away, both sets on both sides, so as far as family went, she had been alone for years. Except for the other Gloria.

The two Glorias had bonded like sisters. They had lunch together in the Room every day, one on one Earth, one on the other. They played cards, swapped new stories about the same old friends, and traded books. Everyone at Mitotic traded books. Books were our drugs of choice.

Two years ago, the folks on the other side found their Gloria slumped on the floor.

A brain aneurysm, a half inch of tangled and blown blood vessels, had left her in a permanent vegetative state. She'd never leave her transitional care facility. She was alive with no hope of recovery. And our Gloria couldn't see her.

The saddest of the sad. You meet the one person who truly knows you as well as you know yourself. You learn through her tragedy that you have a potential time bomb in your own head. And you have to wait for her to die to finally touch her. I'd give anything to let our Gloria be with their Gloria, but it wasn't up to me. The Boundary set the rules.

I was born pre-Split, so I shouldn't have been able to cross. But Ray had that covered when he recruited me. During my interview, he told me that my parents and I had died in a car accident on the other Earth when I was three, so there was only one Matilda Garrigan.

Lucky me.

Chapter 10: So Many Steps to Death

Ray interrupted me and Gloria to say that both teams were going to meet downstairs. I waited ten minutes to give everyone time to get through any work talk—more avoidance on my part—then trudged down the basement stairs. I sat on the bottom step before turning the corner, my heart racing, my two-years-dormant nicotine center screaming for attention like a toddler.

The last time I had been in the Room, I had crossed, driven to Leah's place, and found her body. Now I was afraid to enter the Room. That would sound stupid to anyone outside of Mitotic—a grown woman afraid of a room!—but my fear felt real. Maybe it shouldn't have been, because the Room was just a basement. Almost.

Aside from the fact that it had a portal between parallel Earths, the Room was like any other conference room. It had whiteboards, office supplies, a big table, and plenty of chairs, and we held lots of boring meetings in it. The table spanned the two Earths. The Rays had pushed and pulled it from one side across the Boundary, stopping halfway through, and voilà, one table on two Earths. It could seat about twenty people if everyone squished together. I had asked once why they went with one big table instead of two smaller ones. They claimed that it was a show of unity between the two Earths. Whatever.

Three walls in the Room were normal; the fourth simply wasn't there. The Room was twice as big as it should have been, because where it *should* have ended, the other side's Room began.

The Boundary was invisible. Sometimes things on the other side looked a little ripply at times, but we could see and hear one another fine. We could safely pass across anything we wanted, if it was inert, like wood or plastic or paper. That was a big reason why taking books from one Earth and publishing them on the other was Mitotic's business—books were unaffected by the Boundary, easy to reproduce, and something we could sell.

But not everything could go through unscathed.

Technology? No. We had tried everything. Cassette tapes demagnetized, old disk platters were wiped, cell phones got fried. We couldn't swap data, except on paper. No networking computers, no trading newfangled gadgets, no bumming the other side's wireless networks even if we could figure out how. CDs and DVDs from the other side and MDs from my side survived the crossings, but since the players got trashed if they went across, they were useless.

People could cross. If they didn't exist on the other Earth, they could walk right through the Boundary to the other Earth. If they did exist on the other side, they bounced off the Boundary, sometimes in comic fashion. But crossings came with effects. Not always, and not always the same, and not for everyone, but crossings could cost.

The Boundary was the most wonderful, amazing thing that humanity has ever created. And it was a stupid accident.

Ray Yodice's original experiment had something to do with exploring the duality of gluons

or leptons or some other above-my-head technobabble that he unsuccessfully tried explaining to me dozens of times over the years. The moment that he ran his experiment, one wall in the basement disappeared, and everything changed.

The story he told was always the same. At first, Ray hadn't realized what had happened, because whatever he had been trying to do, he wasn't trying to create a portal to a parallel Earth, he claimed. It seemed to him that he was looking at a reflection on the wall, like a mirror. He shut off his equipment, and his reflection did the same. He raised his right hand, and the image raised its right hand at the same time—so it wasn't a reflection. Ray stepped around the machinery and walked toward the wall, stuck out his hand to touch it, and thudded into nothing. It had felt, as he'd said aloud to himself, "like soft glass."

The other Ray Yodice did and said the same thing at the same time, but one of them had let the other finish the sentence. That's when he stared at himself and realized that "he" was now a "they."

We had all wondered what we would have said if it had been one us in the Room on that day, the first person to meet someone on a parallel Earth. Ray was always tight-lipped about the ensuing conversation. Perhaps it was momentous. Perhaps it was frightening. Perhaps if it was me, my annoyance meter would have started pinging right away.

Anyway, instead of revealing their work—guaranteeing a Nobel Prize and having it renamed the Yodice Prize—the two Ray Yodices did what no scientist should have done: they told no one for months. After they brought a few people in on the secret, including Gloria, they each bought the house and spent years trying to decide what to do with their discovery. Eventually, they figured out that people alive on one Earth but not on the other could cross over, and they started their book business, successfully keeping the Room hidden from both Earths. Until, apparently, yesterday.

Ray had run his experiment on February 12, 1977—the date of the Split. Sometimes we said the Earths had *duplicated*, but we knew that didn't make any literal sense, as Ray hadn't conjured up a spare six thousand trillion tons of matter and cloned billions of people.

My guess is that both Earths were always there, one side-by-side with the other, waiting for someone like Ray Yodice to unlock a hitherto unseen cosmic door.

The two Rays tried to replicate their experiment without success. When they had originally fired up their contraptions, they were doing so in the exact same place at the exact same time, with the exact same equipment—all conditions identical, both timelines exactly the same. But immediately after the Split, both Earths began to diverge, meaning that Ray's experiment could never again work, because the conditions weren't identical. That was one theory. Another theory is that there are no more Earths, so of course the experiment could only work once. I'm not sure which theory is correct, but it doesn't matter—one Boundary and two Earths are enough for me.

The differences between the two Earths were minute at first. A few late hockey games that night ended with different scores on each Earth. The weather was nearly identical the next day

on both Earths. But soon, chaos theory took over—minute random changes, billions of different everyday decisions, billions more left to chance—and both Earths started to vary. People met different romantic partners, worked different jobs, took different drives to work, lived on one Earth but died on the other. Nine months after the Split, unique people on both Earths began to be born, because the odds of the same sperm nailing the same egg were nil.

Those unique people were important. Everyone who was alive on, or conceived by, February 12, 1977 existed on both Earths. Everyone younger than that could cross, because they only existed on one Earth and the Boundary would let them through. In another sixty years or so, everyone on both Earths would be able to cross, because all of us older people with duplicates would be dead.

Both Ray Yodices had drilled into us the need to keep the Room a secret. They were convinced that humanity would abuse the Room, would take over the house and Mitotic and use it for something horrific. Their rule, one we all had to agree to, was that fourteen billion people could never know that they could change what Earth they lived on simply by walking into a basement in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

Enough musing. I screwed up my courage and walked into the Room.

Thank you for reading the first 10 chapters of my book, THE MATILDAS. I hope that you enjoyed this excerpt!