



Welcome. Before you lies the first chapter of Deadworld. It is foremost, a suspense novel, meant to keep the tension high and the pace quick. It should at times knot your stomach or make you gasp, and keep you turning pages to see how the protagonist might possibly get out of the mess they have found themselves in. I hope that it will also bring a smile or tear, perhaps make you think, but above all, I hope you are entertained, because as a storyteller, that is my obligation to you as the reader. So, I hope you enjoy the read.

JACKIE

Jackie Rutledge awoke to the abrasive grind of sand against her bare breast. She groaned and turned, feeling it abrade between her thighs, her shoulder, the cheeks of her butt. She was sleeping on sandpaper. Then the abrupt and shrill peel of her phone threatened to rupture the tenuous strands of sleep that still held her head in one piece.

The phone blared, announcing to her along with the blinding slice of light beaming between the curtains, that it was indeed morning, or perhaps midday. Again the phone teetered dangerously close to making her head explode. A deft fling of the pillow that had been covering her head from the glare was rewarded with a soft thump and a meow. Bickerstaff, the captain of all things comfort, blinked at Jackie from the end of the bed, a decidedly distasteful look on his face.

“What?” He blinked but otherwise did nothing. “Don’t give me that look.” The phone beat into her skull once more, and Jackie turned over to grab it off the nightstand. “God. Leave me alone.” In the dim, morning light, she poked at the buttons on the phone and managed to miss the mute button entirely.

“Hello? Jackie?”

It was Laurel, her soon to be dead partner. “Have a good reason to call me at the crack of dawn or I will stumble over there and throw up all over you.”

“It’s almost nine, you nit. I know you’re hung-over and blinded with a headache, but get your ass out of bed now before Belgerman drives over there and drags you out.”

Oh, shit. Jackie sat up, gasping at the pressure against her eyeballs. “He pissed?”

“He’s going to be. Actually, never mind coming in. I’ll just pick you up. We can drive over to the scene. It’ll give you more time to recover.”

“I’m fine,” she said, reaching over to turn on the bedside lamp to prove the point. “Jesus Christ. There’s sand all over my bed.”

Laughter erupted on the other end of the line. “Happens when you get drunk with



My name is Jackie Rutledge. I'm an FBI agent with the Chicago field office. Guys at the office call me "Jack," unless you're my boss or my friend, then it's Jackie. My partner is a psychic, and her name is Laurel. She keeps me sane, and she can call me whatever the hell she wants. Honestly, I probably wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for her. You could say I have weak boundaries when it comes to catching the bad guys. Admittedly, safety has never been high on my priority list. I won't stop until they're dead or behind bars, and I'm not too picky on which. I'm probably going to owe Laur a drink for that one.

a lifeguard. Cute guy though.”

Cute. Oh, yeah. Jackie remembered cute, and a nice ass. There had been some fooling around by the lake, but it had gotten too cold. The rest was blank. “Yeah, nice enough. God damnit, my thighs hurt.” Jackie swung her legs out of bed and winced. *What the hell had he done to achieve that effect?*

“Ha! If you remember how they got that way, I’ll expect explicit details. In the meantime, get ready. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty? I thought you were my friend?”

“Just get ready,” she snapped back, her patience now running thin. Jackie knew better. She had probably followed them home last night just to be sure. “This one doesn’t sound fun.”

“Oh?” She struggled to her feet, and watched Bickers head for the kitchen. Just the thought of opening a can of cat food made her stomach churn.

“Yeah, someone decided to exsanguinate a twelve-year old-boy. The method matches up with the woman we found down here from Madison a couple months ago. I’ll see you soon.”

Exsanguinate. The throbbing pulse in her head kept Jackie from figuring out if she knew what that word meant. The distracting rub of sand in every crack and orifice of her body did little to help matters. It was all she could do to drag her body into the shower and get under the hot water before throwing up , which fortunately amounted to little more than a couple minutes of dry heaving and some nasty tasting bile.

Purged and grit-free, Jackie had managed to down four Tylenol, gargle some Listerine, run her fingers through the short tangle of auburn hair, and get mostly dressed before Laurel let herself into the apartment. Jackie glanced across her living room at the wall clock above the piano while she laced up her boots. Twenty-one minutes.

“You’re a minute late. Can I go back to bed?”

Laurel popped her head out of the kitchen doorway, Bickers in one hand, a can of cat food in the other. “Traffic was hell, and I’m impressed. You’re actually almost ready. I gave it fifty-fifty you’d have fallen back asleep.”



There's a laugh. The woman has boundaries all over the place. And it's true. If I didn't watch her back all the time, it probably would've been broken by now. To be perfectly honest though, she's been broken for a long time. I knew it the first time I saw her. That's not the psychic in me, it's just being perceptive. She told me once, after a few too many tequila shots, about that night when she was twelve, the night everything ran red and the monster got a way. Sometimes, the monster stays with you, and Jackie has been chasing it for 20 years now. I try to help, but sometimes love only goes so far.

“Bite my ass. I can move when I want too.” Jackie marveled at Laurel’s efficiency. No telling how many times she would have been written up if it had not been for her deft handling of things on the paperwork end. Her brain seemed to malfunction when the word ‘report’ got entered into it. “Hey, could you get me some—“

“Juice?” she finished, disappearing back into the kitchen. A moment later, she walked over with a glass in hand. “Drink up and let’s go. Bickers is fed, and the rest of the crew is already there.”

Jackie gave her a wan smile and downed the glass of juice in several large gulps. The cool tang of it was nectar on her throat. “Thanks, by the way.”

Laurel smiled, a knowing turn of her mouth that encompassed more than just that morning but the turn as friendly guardian the night before. She walked over and grabbed Jackie’s coat from the entry closet. “What are partners for, if not to help save face from drunken revelry the night before?”

She walked back to the bedroom for her gun, ignoring the strewn clothing, all of which was thankfully hers. “I’d save you too, if you actually got drunk and did some revelry.”

“I know you would.” That faint, ever-present smile spread into a grin, her big brown eyes shining with amusement. “Though, I’d rather not see what you’d do to him.”

Jackie came back and grabbed her coat from Laurel’s hand. “He’d live.”

“Yeah, but he wouldn’t be a man anymore.”

“So? He wouldn’t deserve to be one anymore. They just use their dicks to fuck —“

“Fuck us over anyway. Yes, Jackie. I know.”

She locked the door behind them and walked out to Laurel’s government issue, blue sedan, parked next to her Durango. “Well, it’s true.”

Laurel shrugged and got into the car. “Perhaps. I don’t need a dick, anyway.”

“You’d look funny with a dick, Laur.”

“Make you think twice about being around me drunk.”

“Ha!” Jackie snorted at the thought. “You’d be a better lay than most of them, that’s for sure. And you wouldn’t make my legs hurt.” She kneaded her hands into the



My name is Nicholas Rembrandt Anderson. These days I just go by Nick. I'm 36 years old, have been for a long time now. I've been a doctor, lawyer, chef, chemist, painter, concert pianist, and a professor to name a few. I was a Sheriff once upon a time, but those days are long gone. I'm a PI these days, specializing in otherworldly cases, which means I help people deal with the ghosts lingering around in their lives. It's a skill I've gained over the years. Let's just say I gained it through my own otherworldly contacts. I get help from my ex, a woman whom I believe lives for my continued discomfort. She's a good friend though, and I can't say that I blame her. Her attitude is pretty much my fault and well deserved. I do hope to rectify that situation soon.

sore flesh of her thighs, wishing to hell she could remember even a little of how they had achieved that state.

“Don’t be so sure,” she said, failing to suppress a grin. “I haven’t been laid in a long time.”

“Oh, please. I don’t need that image this early in the day. Can we change the subject?”

“Great day for a walk on the beach.”

Jackie looked over at Laurel with a narrowed gaze. “Fuck you. You better be stopping for coffee on the way or I’m going to hurt you.”

“Hmmm. You’re making me hard now.”

“God! Shut up and drive.” Jackie laughed and leaned back against the headrest, closing her eyes until she had a cup of blessed coffee in her hand.

They arrived at Giribaldi Memorial Park, far enough out in Chicago’s burbs to have the skyline blocked by the wall of maple and oak that dotted the grounds, amidst a swarm of onlookers and media. It was difficult to say which Jackie disliked more. Morbid curiosity was such a distasteful human trait. She glanced up at the drifting scatter of clouds and hoped that maybe she would get lucky and a thunderstorm might send the crowd running, but it was plain to her that luck had gotten up on the other side of the bed today.

An enormous maple, it’s wide, green leaves so burdensome upon the branches that the canopy hung nearly to the ground, was completely encircled with crime scene tape. Some of the crew were walking around, combing through the grass. The local police looked to have been put in charge of crowd control. She took the FBI jacket offered from Laurel, who was scanning the crowd out past the pair of television vans parked at the curb of the parking lot.

“They must be pretty sure this is the same M.O. as the Wisconsin woman. You want to check out the scene first or take a look around?” It was the typical opening. Laurel always liked to get herself oriented to the scene before examining the victim. Jackie liked to see what the damage was right away. She did not have the patience Laurel



My name is Shelby Fontaine. The above picture doesn't really do me justice. I have longer hair now, and I don't pack a piece anymore. I suppose the "don't fuck with me" look still holds true, but it's mostly for effect. Mostly, I work with my ex, more for the work than the money. I've invested well over the years and don't need a real job. Working with your ex might seem like an odd choice to make, but he's a good guy, even if he is a depressing ass most of the time. He understands me, and I truly appreciate that. I understand him more than he likes, so I can honestly say the man really just needs to get laid.

did of building things up from the outside and working toward the center. Besides, Laurel's forte was not forensic.

"Something is off here."

Jackie's gut instantly knotted up. "Not off in a 'spike your morning coffee' sort of way I hope?"

"There's some bourbon in the trunk." Laurel did not smile at her humor. She was too intent on something out in the crowd.

"Great. Off to a fabulous start already," she said, but Laurel was already walking slowly across the grass to the other side of the parking lot where the crowd had gathered. Something had tweaked that little psychic nerve of hers, and Jackie knew when to leave well enough alone. "Go find your boogie man, Laur." She turned and made her way toward the overhanging tree before any media might notice she was standing by herself.

Pushing through the blanket of leaves and limbs, Jackie found herself standing in near darkness, thin shafts of light shining down on a boy seated neatly against the trunk of the tree. A couple members of the crew were already milling around in the shadows.

"That you, Jack? Glad you could join us."


Jackie's mouth creased into a frown. Pernetti. He would be the one detailing the victim. As if her headache didn't already feel like someone cranking a screw down into her skull. "Don't even start with me, Pernetti. I'm not in the mood."

"Boy, did you get laid or something? You're bright eyed and bushy-tailed this morning."

For a moment, Jackie thought he might have actually noticed, but then common sense took over. Pernetti was not capable of noticing anything like that. "Kiss my ass. Just tell me what we've got here."

He knelt down next to the body. "Archibald Lane, age twelve. Some sicko sucked the boy dry. There's ligature marks on the wrists and ankles. Funky marks, though. It looks like zip ties. Other than the hole in the arm, there's nothing else visible on him. Scene so far is spotless."

Twelve. What was wrong with people? "Spotless? That's doubtful." These days,



Deadworld
a novel of suspense

Where does the title come from? It presents a double meaning in this book. Firstly, Deadworld is literally the world of the dead. It is that place between the realm of the living and whatever lies beyond that souls go to when they are done with this world. It is that waiting place, where spirits linger, waiting for loved ones, or for justice, or whatever unfinished business keeps them tied to those that still live. It also refers to that place in us that deals with death and loss, where we put the emotions and memories that we are afraid to deal with, and where we resolve to put such things to rest forever.

everyone left something to track. Unless of course you knew how to clean up after yourself, and knew how forensics worked, but even then, it was unlikely.

“Clean so far, Jack.” He shrugged, pointing at marks on the boy’s wrists. “Other than the marks and the hole, he’s got a couple bumps and scrapes, that anyone might get when they’ve been out and about for a couple days.”

“Two? He hasn’t been dead that long.”

Pernetti stood back up, thrusting his hands into his pockets. “Runaway, according to the sheriff. Fled from mom and dad beating each other up, and not seen until this morning.”

She doubted very much that mom was doing any beating up on dad. It hit her then, a brief flash of a twelve year old running away from a ‘domestic dispute’ nearly twenty years prior. Mommy certainly had not been doing any beating on. Jackie took a deep breath. The smell of death was doing little to wash the residue of memory away. “Anything else?”

“Nope. Area still being gone over. Bowers and Prescott are out canvassing, but it’s looking a lot like that Wisconsin women we brought in couple months back.

Jackie shrugged. “Maybe. Ok, move Pernetti, I want a look.” She did not want one, really. There was almost nothing she would see here, she could tell already. The perp had been clean and careful, and nothing visible to the naked eye would appear here. Still, she would be lead on the case, and if anything, she needed to verify Pernetti’s own observations.

“Think we should track down those parents and see what they have to say. Let them know their son is dead because they can’t bitch at each other like other civilized folks.”

She did not bother glancing up at him. “Go away, Pernetti. You’re distracting me.”

Thankfully left in silence, Jackie gave Archie a quick look over, and found nothing out of the ordinary. He looked almost peaceful, if one could ignore that fact that he looked like a pasty, deflated version of his former self. The thought sent a shiver

This chapter has been formatted with the sidebar to generate more interest in the novel. It is hopefully a bit more interesting to look at compared to your standard words on the page. It's a little extra jumpstart into the story, giving a feel for the major characters involved. It's also something of an experiment. Reading online or in digital format, allows for content beyond the simple, printed word (which honestly, I love as much as any other format). People want something a bit more from the experience of reading digitally. E-reading will continue to proliferate, growing with the changes in technology. My hope here is that by formatting in some additional content, it makes the reading experience just a bit more than the usual, and gives you, the reader, a greater desire to read the whole story.

down Jackie's spine, and she decided she had seen enough for the moment. Putting her sunglasses back on, Jackie stepped back out from under the tree to find Laurel seated on the hood of their car smoking a cigarette. That was the first sign of trouble right there. A healthy girl by nature, Jackie knew if you hit the stress button hard enough, Laurel would be reaching for that security blanket in the bottom of her purse.

Jackie knew any shot at the day getting better was vanishing with each puff of smoke.