

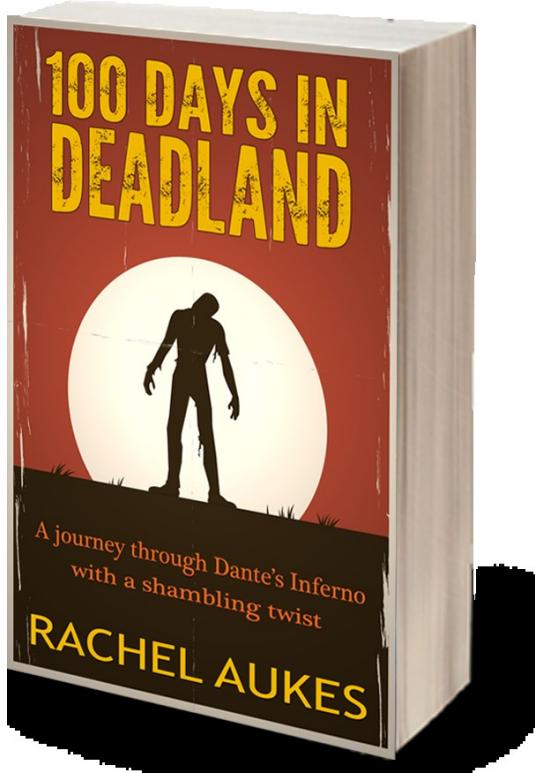
100 DAYS IN DEADLAND



A journey through Dante's Inferno
with a shambling twist

RACHEL AUKEs

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LIMBO: The First Circle of Hell

Chapter One

I paused on the way to my two o'clock meeting, and watched the woman standing outside the restroom with her forehead against the wall, clawing at the paint. After a long moment, I hesitantly reached out. "Excuse me, are you all right?"

At the sound of my voice, Melanie from Accounting turned her head. Her skin had a sickly jaundiced pallor to it, her eyes glazed over. She stared, swaying from side to side in a stilted trance-like manner.

I winced. "Christ, you look like shit."

She groaned, the jerky motion causing the line of drool hanging from her mouth to swing from side to side. She cocked her head as though trying to figure me out.

I took a cautious step back, not wanting to catch whatever bug was taking my coworkers and half of the Midwest by storm today. Ever since lunch, people had started complaining of indigestion. The cafeteria's daily special had been known to bring on afternoon bouts of heartburn, but this was crazy. "You had the taco salad, too, huh?"

The door to the women's restroom swung open and a blur ran past us, startling me and knocking Melanie out of her stupor. Her lips curled in a snarl. Then she lunged at me, her jaws snapping.

"Shit!" Lucky for me, she moved slowly and I sidestepped to the left, leaving her to stumble clumsily onto her stomach. My papers fluttered to the floor while she floundered around. I threw out my hands. "What the fuck, Mel!"

She glared up at me, this time vocalizing a guttural growl that sent shivers up my neck. She jerkily dragged herself up. Fear crept into my nerves. I edged around her, careful to keep my distance, and pulled the bathroom door open and jumped inside.

I put all my weight into pushing the door closed, but Melanie was over twice my size. She heaved the door open, tumbled inside, and took me down. The air whooshed from my lungs. She pressed against me, her jaws snapping like she wanted to swear-to-God *eat* me.

Holy fuck, I'd been scared in my life before, but this went beyond terror. When folks talk about flight or fight instincts, it's really flight *and* fight instincts. Everything I'd learned from self-defense classes was forgotten as I held my forearm against her neck while kicking and pushing with everything I had to get out from under her.

My arm shook under the weight. With a surge, I rolled her off me and shoved away. She grabbed at me, her fingers snagging my shirt and taking most of a sleeve with her with a loud rip. With nothing left to pull, the back of her head collided into the wall with a solid smack.

The bathroom door opened, and a high-pitched shriek pierced the air.

"Help!" I yelled while kicking away from Melanie, my Doc Martens squeaking across the floor, but whoever had opened the door had already disappeared.

A staccato pounding erupted from one of the bathroom stalls, matching the beating of my heart.

Knocking her head against the wall didn't slow down Melanie in the least. If anything, she was more pissed off than ever, now crawling at me like a clumsy, rabid dog. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the yellow "caution: wet floor" sign propped in the corner. I grabbed it and swung just as she closed the distance, nailing her across the cheek.

Snarling, she charged and I swung again, this time breaking her nose. Thick brown blood sprayed out with every snort and hiss. She came back at me like I hadn't even hit her. With no time to swing, I shoved the hinged end of the plastic sign forward as hard as I could, karate-chopping her in the throat. The force knocked her back just enough for me to get solidly onto the balls of my feet.

Having her windpipe crushed put an end to the animal sounds and stopped her from spraying any more blood. Yet, even though she clearly couldn't breathe, she came at me again like she didn't even need air.

Terror froze my muscles.

My instructor had said a throat chop would take down an assailant in mere seconds. Yet, it had done nothing to stop a desk jockey from Accounting.

With the pounding and growling escalating from the bathroom stall a few feet away, I started swinging the sign relentlessly at Melanie's head. My heart pounded and my breaths came in gulps, yet Melanie kept on coming at me.

When she moved to pounce, I slammed the sign into her temple, causing her to misjudge her attack, and she head butted the wall instead. She turned around. Her forehead was a bloody mess, and she still didn't seem fazed.

"What the hell?" I asked breathlessly and swung again. The now-bloody sign's corner nailed her in the eye, knocking an eyeball out of its socket. Another hit made her eyeball swing until it finally flew free and bounced off the wall. I swung again and again and again, my blows echoed by whoever was pounding on the stall door.

Bone crunched, and Melanie collapsed face-forward onto the floor.

More of that gelatinous coffee-colored blood trickled from her head and pooled on the floor. I hit her with the sign one more time to make sure she wasn't playing possum, and I was about to kick her when the stall door swung open and Julie, the new girl, tumbled onto the floor. She looked up at me with that same sickly, *ravenous* look.

"Agh!" I smacked her in the face with the sign, and ran out of the bathroom, throwing the sign at her before I yanked the door open.

And I found myself in utter chaos.

I flattened against the wall in the corner where I'd come across Melanie earlier. Copies of my meeting agenda still littered the floor. Cubicle city was generally a quiet place except for the white noise piped in, but now people were running, shouting, and screaming. The pounding of work shoes across hollow floors echoed around me. Over a nearby cubicle wall, I watched as one man tackled another to the ground, his mouth clamping onto his victim's throat. The other man screamed. Red dots splattered the beige fabric walls.

I'd like to think that it was because I was in shock that I didn't run to help. But to be honest, I was scared shitless. Still watching the wall where the men went down, I ducked and crabbed down the hall, trying to ignore the anguished screams, focused only on avoiding the crazies. When the man's screams abruptly stopped, something in my brain kicked me into gear, and I took off running toward my cubicle.

A hand reached out for me, and I twisted away. The work alarms blared. Phones were ringing everywhere. There were more screams and shouts in every direction. Some were begging for help, others were crying.

"Calm down! It will be okay!" a woman yelled from her desk. The next second, bloodied hands grabbed her and yanked her down as she let out an earsplitting scream.

Someone ran into me and I jumped back to find Alan from my team. He looked behind him before looking at me, his eyes wide. "This shit's fucked up. I'm outta here," he said under his breath as he headed past me.

Biting my lip, I glanced down the direction of my cube a dozen long feet away, where my bag and car keys waited in a drawer, and then turned back to Alan. "Wait up," I called out. "I'm coming, too."

He kept moving, and I sprinted to catch up. He slowed down, looking to the right, and I tugged him to the left. "This way."

We ran in the opposite direction of the mass exodus heading toward the main elevators. Alan hit the down button at the rarely used back bay of elevators. While we waited, a terrifying image shot through my mind of Melanie jumping out from the small six-by-six compartment.

Just as the elevator dinged, I grabbed Alan's elbow and tugged. "Stairs."

"Why?" he asked but followed me around the corner to the back stairs.

There were several others already heading down the steps. Alan pushed ahead of me, and I stayed at his back as he shoved past others, followed by a chorus of "hey" and "watch it."

We were only on floor eight, so we made it down the stairs fairly quickly. I paused at the third floor landing when I saw two men tackle a third man. One bit a chunk out of the guy's face while the other went for the screamer's throat. My adrenaline had already taken over, and my feet kept moving despite my shock. A gunshot rang out somewhere on the first floor. It was kind of like watching disasters on TV. It's so horrendously surreal that it doesn't fully register in the brain as reality. The whole Prima Insurance building had turned into the set of a slasher film, and unwillingness to face reality was the only reason I hadn't frozen.

Alan flung open the large glass doors. I rushed outside, shading my eyes against the afternoon sun, and scanned the parking lot. Some spaces were empty, some cars were tearing out of the lot, but most were still peacefully parked, waiting for their owners.

Gunfire erupted somewhere in the distance.

"Where's your car?" I asked breathlessly.

He turned around and looked at me like he'd forgotten I was still there. "Uh." He looked around. "Over there." He pointed to Lot C and took off toward it.

We were panting, but we sprinted all the way to his car, making wide arcs around other people running to their cars. It was a warm spring day, and my clothes clung to my sweaty skin.

Alan was an early-morning person, so his small Mitsubishi was parked only a few cars down the second row. He fumbled with his keys before holding out the fob. The lights flashed, and I yanked open the passenger door.

I swept the papers and CDs off the seat with a brisk move and fell onto the hot black leather. I had my door locked before Alan had the key in the ignition. The engine roared to life, and he squealed the tires in reverse, throwing me against the dash.

I hastily fastened my seatbelt and held on.

"What the hell is going on around here?" he muttered, throwing the car into gear and squealing the tires again.

I swallowed. "No idea."

For the past two weeks, there'd been talk about a fast-spreading epidemic in South America that had been quickly moving northward, though I hadn't worried. The Midwest was a long distance from South America, and we'd closed our borders to Mexico over a week ago. And most of the military stood between us and them to make sure the borders stayed closed.

Strange. The epidemic in South America was said to cause violent symptoms, exactly like what I'd seen today.

Maybe I should've worried.

Today had started as a typical Thursday. I'd listened to the radio on the commute to work. There'd been more talk on the growing epidemic, but local news overshadowed talks of the epidemic. At Prima, gossip ran wild all morning about last night's attacks on joggers and walkers in nearly every southern state west of the Mississippi. Several paranoid employees had called in sick today.

Then, two cooks in the cafeteria got into some kind a brawl just before lunch. One left in an ambulance, and the other had been taken away in handcuffs. The news was reporting similar attacks across the Midwest and Western United States. With all that, would Prima close for the day? Hell, no.

Several worried employees had already left for home to pick up their kids from school. And now, not even three hours after lunch, half of the office was going ape-shit crazy on each other. Whatever was going on, it felt like I

was caught in the middle of Ground Zero for some seriously screwed up shit.

I focused on breathing in and out. I reached for the radio and fumbled with the knob. I wrung my shaking hands, wiped them on my black pants, but they kept shaking.

Alan cranked up the volume, and I noticed his hands were shaking even worse.

"Reports are coming in from Kansas City, Des Moines, and Minneapolis of a fast-spreading pandemic. Seek shelter immediately and avoid contact with any infected. The infected will display violent tendencies and attack without provocation. They do not respond to reason," an unfamiliar even-toned woman reported. *"If you or a loved one is infected, you should quarantine yourself immediately so as not to spread the virus. Do not go to the hospitals as they are at full capacity. Stay tuned for more information."*

"That's it?" Alan asked. "That's all those idiots have to say about this thing? Nothing like how's it transmitted, or what we can do to protect ourselves?"

"Give it time," I said. The news last night had shown footage of random people attacking others without, but I'd assumed the attacks were the result of some new illegal drug gone bad. The idea of a pandemic made my jaw clench.

My dad was a doctor. My mom was a nurse.

My parents, early-retiree snowbirds, lived in a southern suburb of Des Moines. With me as their only child, they kept their house in town for the warmer months while moving to Arizona every winter. I prayed that they were safe at home, that they didn't think to go help out at the hospital. I had to believe they saw the news this morning and knew better than to get caught in the middle of some off-the-charts violent pandemic.

I wanted to call them to make sure they were all right, but my phone was tucked into my bag, which was still sitting in a drawer at my cubicle. I looked over at Alan. "Can I use your phone?"

He felt his pockets and then frantically swerved around a fender bender before shooting through a red light. Sirens blared as a police car sped past us.

"I think it's still on my desk," Alan replied in between panting breaths.

"This is crazy," I said. "Everyone's gone crazy."

"It's got to be a terrorist attack," he said. "Chemical warfare or something that's making people go nuts. It's like they're jacked up on serious shit like bath salts or something. Damn it!" He swerved again. "This traffic is insane." He turned to me, his glasses slipping down his sweaty nose. "You live on the north side, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"I'm way out on the east side. Mind if we hit your place until the roads open up?" His voice cracked and he wiped his face.

"Sure." I scrutinized him. "Are you okay?"

He grabbed the wheel with both hands. "No, I'm not okay! What about today would make you think that I'm okay? That anything's okay? It's World War III out there. No, it's worse than that. It's like the end of the world out there!"

I got it, I really did. The proverbial shit had hit the fan, and the rational part of my mind had decided to curl up in the fetal position. "We got out early," I said with as much confidence as I could muster. "Hopefully we can beat the worst of the traffic."

As though on cue, a car veered in front of us and rammed into the concrete separating the lanes. "Watch out!" I shouted as Alan cranked the wheel, nearly sideswiping the vehicle. I could've sworn the driver looked in the same bad way that Melanie had. The SUV behind us wasn't so lucky because it rammed into the jackknifed car and started a domino-effect pile-up behind us.

Alan and I stared at each other, and he stepped on the gas.

In the background, the radio station had switched to interviewing people outside one of the hospitals.

"I thought the kid was lost. I bent down to help, and the little bugger bit me! Can you believe that? The kid damn near took my thumb clean off! He went nuts, like he had rabies or something. And now they won't let me into the hospital. They've got barricades in front of the doors, and cops are in full riot gear, just standing around everywhere. I'm stuck outside bleeding, and no one is telling us what's going on. We have a right to know!"

"You think you got it bad?" another male voice chimed in. "You should've been downtown. This old bum attacked a woman. I saw it all. He was stumbling around all drunk-like, and then he just attacked. He went straight for that poor gal's throat like he thought he was a vampire or something. A couple guys tried to pull him off her, but he wouldn't let go. I jumped in to help, and he tore a chunk out of my arm. He wouldn't stop. Some guy had to shoot him. Can you believe it? It was insane, man. What's the world coming to?"

My heart felt like it was going to jump out of my chest, and I found myself on the verge of hyperventilating. I punched in another radio station, only to find the same barrage of stories. No one had any useful information, just more of those horrific tales. I leaned back, tried to tune out the radio, and focused on the traffic outside. With every mile, the number of vehicles on the side of the road increased. Some cars were in pileups, others looked like they had stopped haphazardly, as though their drivers had decided to simply stop driving.

I sucked in a deep breath. "I think I killed Melanie," I said quietly.

"Melanie Carlson?"

"What?" I glanced at Alan. "Oh. No. The other Melanie."

"Oh." He frowned. "Did she try to hurt you?"

"Of course she tried to hurt me. She tried to eat me."

Alan was quiet for a time. "I bet she could eat a lot."

I belted out a laugh. Not because it was funny but because my adrenaline high was coming down, and with it,

my shock. Alan laughed, too, though the stress was getting to him. He wiped his sweaty forehead with his arm and kept driving.

I'd killed someone today. The truth really hit me just then, and I let my head fall against the headrest. I hadn't even thought about the repercussions. Would I go to jail, even though it was an open-and-shut case of self-defense? I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. I'd lose my job. That was a given. How the hell would I pay the bills?

And then there was Melanie. That poor woman's final minutes were in a bathroom of all places.

"No, no, no, no," Alan chanted.

Startled, I glanced up to find a massive pileup of cars dead ahead. Vehicles were mashed together, filling up every inch of open space in the four lanes in front of us. An ambulance and two police cars were on scene but no tow trucks yet. Concrete prevented us from getting into the lanes of oncoming traffic, and a deep ditch prevented escape off to the right.

"Can you turn around? Take the last exit?" I asked.

He was staring in the rear-view mirror. "I don't think so. It's getting pretty crowded back there. Maybe we can find a way around this mess."

Doubtful, I scanned the wreck as we drew closer. People were running away, but not everyone. One cop was handcuffing a man who kept twisting his neck, trying to bite him. Several others were standing by cars, helping free the drivers and passengers. I narrowed my eyes.

Hell. They weren't helping free the people still in cars. "Oh, God," I whispered.

"What is it?" Alan asked.

"We have to get out of here," I said, staring at the crazies attacking the people in cars. It was like the entire world decided to go cannibal at the same time.

He frowned, pointing ahead. "Exactly how do you think we are going to get past this mess?"

"I mean now, Alan."

A man jumped out of his car and started firing his pistol into the mob. The sound must've finally registered what was underway because Alan's eyes widened, and he yanked the car around. Something slammed into our car and an explosive force threw me against the seat. Dazed, I blinked to see that we were now facing another direction.

Powder from the airbags sent dust flurries in the air. I shoved at the deflating white bag. The driver of the car that had t-boned us was still hidden behind his airbags. I glanced back at the horde of crazies to find them looking in our direction.

I unlatched my seatbelt and tugged on Alan's arm. "C'mon. We need to get out of here."

He muttered something, and shook his head as though to clear it.

"Stupid idiot!"

I looked outside to see the other driver climb groggily out of his car, shaking his fist. He stepped up to Alan's door, and pounded on the window. "Moron! What were you thinking turning around in the middle of the road like that?" he yelled.

"Fuck off!" Alan growled right back.

Alan was not a large man. He was my height and had maybe thirty pounds on me. To see him yelling at a pissed off guy only added fire to a tinderbox. Then I saw them coming our way. "Uh, Alan?"

"What!"

I pointed at several crazies with pallid skin stumbling toward us, their jaundiced sights homed in on the man standing outside our car. Their faces and chests were blood-soaked, and a few sported violent injuries of their own. One hobbled along with a broken leg. Another was missing an arm. Still another looked like half her throat had been ripped out. They moved slowly and jerkily but were relentlessly closing the distance. Alan looked and gasped.

The man outside continued to yell until he realized Alan was no longer paying any attention to him. He followed Alan's gaze. He cried out and took off running back to his car but was too late. All of the crazies attacked him at once. The driver screamed. It was an awful, bloodcurdling scream, but I couldn't see what was happening under the pile of writhing flesh and gushing blood. Not that I wanted to.

I glanced at Alan, and then opened the door and ran.



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About 100 Days in Deadland

The world ended on a Thursday.

In one day, the world succumbed to a pestilence that decimated the living. In its place rose a new species: vicious, gruesome, wandering plague monsters with an insatiable hunger for the living.

There is no government, no shelter.

Still in her twenties, Cash has watched her friends die, only to walk again. An office worker with few survival skills, she joins up with Clutch, a grizzled Army vet with PTSD. Together, they flee the city and struggle through the nine circles of hell, with nothing but Clutch's military experience and Cash's determination to live. As they fight to survive in the zombie inferno, they quickly discover that nowhere is safe from the undead... or the living.

This is the beginning after the end.

Special Note:

100 Days in Deadland is a journey through Dante's "Inferno," the first poem in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, the classic tale on the horrors of hell... zombie apocalypse style!

About the Author

Award-winning author Rachel Aukes was raised on a farm where she boasted the nearby small town's largest (and only) comic book collection. An obsessive reader and compulsive daydreamer, it was only a matter of time before she fell in love with writing stories with *kickassitude*. When not writing, Rachel can be found flying old airplanes and watching Sci-Fi movies. She currently lives in the Midwest USA with her husband and an incredibly spoiled sixty-pound lap dog.

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