

AN ORIGINAL  
FOREST OF HANDS AND TEETH  
STORY

WHAT  
ONCE  
WE  
FEARED

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CARRIE RYAN

An Original Forest of Hands and Teeth  
Story

What Once We Feared

Carrie Ryan

Also by Carrie Ryan

*The Forest of Hands and Teeth*

*The Dead-Tossed Waves*

*The Dark and Hollow Places*

“Hare Moon” (an ebook original short story)

Edited by Carrie Ryan

*Foretold: 14 Tales of Prophecy and Prediction*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2013 by Carrie Ryan

Cover art copyright © 2013 by dimitris\_k

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc. Visit us on the Web! [randomhouse.com/teens](http://randomhouse.com/teens)

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at [RHTeachersLibrarians.com](http://RHTeachersLibrarians.com)

[carreryan.com](http://carreryan.com)

eISBN: 978-0-385-37507-8

Random House Children's Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

v3.1

# Contents

*Title Page*  
*Other Books by This Author*  
*Copyright*

**First Page**

*About the Author*

The first time I saw the apartment building I thought it looked like a bunker; it never occurred to me that we'd end up using it as one. Nicky's the one who actually lived there—or at least she and her dad moved in there when her mom kicked them out. She was the one who suggested we take shelter there. It's not like we had a lot of other options and it seemed like a good idea at the time.

But isn't that always the case? The ideas that seem so good in the moment turn out to be the worst when everything is said and done?

The Overlook—that's the name of the apartment building—was a massive chunk of a structure that sat just outside the interstate loop circling Uptown (how pretentious does a city have to be to call it "Uptown" rather than "Downtown?"). It was made of concrete and half dug into a hill so that three sides had a long, thick foundation and the fourth faced the road.

Most importantly, though, it was the closest place we could think to run when the outbreak began raging through the city. We'd been on a senior class field trip to Discovery Place when it happened. I'd just stepped outside with Nicky and I was thinking about how hard I'd worked to make sure I ended up partnered with her for this project and then *BAM*.

Nicky didn't know what made the sound and at first, neither did I. I couldn't place it—it was loud but not a gunshot, solid but not familiar. I was still trying to figure it out when I saw the body lying broken on the ground. Nicky hadn't seen it yet and I tried to keep her turned away. Then there was another *BAM* and she started screaming.

The man landed not five feet away, one leg completely shattered underneath him from the fall. Another hit right after that, and I swear to God it seemed like it was raining bodies (later, Felipe would start singing "It's Raining Men" whenever Nicky brought this up. It took her a while, but eventually she started laughing at the joke—what else could you do?).

Nicky had already jumped back under the Discovery Place awning, but like a moron I just stood there. "Jonah!" she screamed at me. "What are you doing?"

I was never able to explain it to her in a way she understood, but I couldn't stop staring at that first body. Later I'd realize that bits of his shattered leg had sprayed across my pants. But in that moment I just kept thinking that there are 206 bones in the adult human body and I wondered how many of them were broken in the fall and from which story of the skyscraper he'd plummeted.

There was something impossibly beautiful about the moment. All at once I grasped that the man had lived this life and in an instant it was gone and I'd been there to see it happen. How many people get the experience of watching the moment someone dies? The switch from "something is there" to "something is not"?

I guess now that's kind of a moot question; at the time, though, I remember being awed.

It was looking up that shocked me out of my reverie. There were more of them coming, tumbling through the air like acrobats. I stumbled back and Nicky grabbed my arm and pulled me to safety. No lie—two seconds later a body hit right where I'd been standing.

He was the first to start moving. He was so broken up it was impossible to tell where he'd been bitten, but it was the only explanation. The only way someone who'd just been dead could suddenly be not-dead.

When the first dead guy came back to life—not that guy on the sidewalk, but a man from the West Coast who'd ended up on the news weeks before—we all should have run. That's what I know now.

But when the president gets on TV and tells you that everything's under control, that the disease has been contained, and the best thing you can do is not panic and try to live your life as normally as possible—that's when you're in trouble. That's when your parents send you off to school when they should be packing you up and raiding the grocery store.

That's why your teacher still insists on the senior trip to the Discovery Place: because that's what normal means. And since Uptown was packed with armed reservists and the outbreak hadn't even touched the East Coast, the principal and most of our parents figured we'd be safe.

As it turned out, we weren't.

Half of our class was stuck in the bowels of Discovery Place when the panic began, but Nicky and I were outside, with Beatrice, Felipe, and Gregor right behind us. We could hear screams coming from down the block.

The air stank of blood and Felipe had to shout over the sound of the reservists' gunshots. "We should go back in—get to the buses through the rear entrance!"

The guy who'd landed in front of me was so broken there was no way he'd ever be able to stand, but even so, he twitched his fingers against the concrete, splitting his nails as he tried to drag himself closer.

There was such a desperate need in him that it was hard to make sense of.

Beatrice began hyperventilating and Nicky's cheeks shone with tears. I hated the indecision of that moment. Even now I wish I could go back there and stop time and just give myself a minute to think.

That's the thing about bad decisions. They can feel so right in the moment because they give you something to do other than stand around uselessly. But maybe all you're doing is delaying the inevitable and giving yourself a nice long time to play out how stupid you were.

All around us, people were giving up on their cars, not even bothering to turn them off or to shut their doors after abandoning them in the middle of the road. The streets were gridlocked, horns blaring. We knew then that we'd never get far.

We'd never get home.

That's what Beatrice said, actually: "I want to go home," and I'm pretty sure that's what made Nicky say, "My dad's apartment—it's in the Overlook." And then we started running.

We were like a hive mind—no discussion, no coordination. One of us thought it and so it became. As a pack we dove through the city, drops in the sea of humanity desperate to escape. We learned quickly to stay in the middle of the road—those on the outside were the easiest targets.

Everywhere was madness. Or so I thought. Maybe I didn't truly understand madness yet, because I still felt the compulsion to steady those who stumbled. To pull them free of clawing hands.

I still tried to help.

There were only two entrances to the Overlook: the leasing office, its windows already shattered, and the underground garage, which had a massive, jail-like gate stretched across the ramp.

Nicky pulled a remote from her purse and pointed it at a black box. Slowly, slowly, with a lot of creaking, the gate began to roll open. She was the first through, and then Beatrice and Felipe. They sprinted through the garage for the bank of elevators. I was the one to hold

Gregor back.

“It’s every man for himself, right?” I asked him.

He didn’t get what I was saying. “Look,” I tried again. “We gotta lock this thing down now, right? Is it wrong if we do that? Keep everyone else out?”

Gregor’s eyes were wide as he looked from me to the road outside. People were screaming, trying to run. So many of them were smeared with blood that it was impossible to tell who’d been infected already and who was safe.

“Come on, Jonah!” Nicky screamed. Her panic was contagious, and my fingers fumbled as I pried the cover off the electric motor that worked the garage gate.

“Tell her to just hold on a sec,” I ordered Gregor, “and get that clicker from her!”

I’d wanted to be all cool and find a way to disable the motor, but in the end I couldn’t keep focused on all the wires and gears. I ended up grabbing one of the big metal garbage bins and slamming it against the motor until it was in enough pieces to be unsalvageable. Gregor pointed the clicker at the black box and sure enough, the gate was well and thoroughly broken.

No one was getting in through the garage.

Once we were all piled in one of the two marble and wood elevators, Nicky had to use a special electronic key to access the penthouse level. When she pressed the “P” button Felipe whistled. “Fancy girl, eh?”

She rolled her eyes at him. I remember that so distinctly because I’d been thinking how glad I was that he was such an ass because it made me look better by comparison.

Of course, that only lasted until we reached the top floor and the elevator doors opened. Nicky stepped out into the vestibule first, without even pausing to look around, and I grabbed her hand before she could take off down one of the dim, carpeted hallways.

“What are you doing?” I hissed in her ear. “What if it’s not safe?”

Beatrice muffled a cry by pushing her palm against her mouth, and even Felipe’s face paled. On either side of us a hallway stretched between the other apartments. Gregor took off to the left, but the floor must have been configured in a square or something, because a minute or two later he came sprinting back from the right. “Everything’s clear,” he reported. The corridors were silent, empty.

“Yeah, but for how long?” Felipe asked.

As if in response one of the elevator engines kicked in, and it whisked away from our floor down into the bowels of the building. There was a distant ding and then the sound of the elevator starting its climb back up.

I held my breath, hoping it stopped before reaching us, and thought of all those people out in the city. They were going to run somewhere, and this place would look pretty good, with its thick walls and proximity to Uptown. It was the closest thing to a fortress our city had.

“Unless we’re the ones who called for it,” Nicky whispered, “Whoever it is would need to have a key to get to this floor.”

Beatrice finally spoke up. “They ... those things ... can’t ...”—she moved her hand in the air as if it could talk for her—“like, think, can they? You know, press buttons and stuff like that?”

It’s funny how long it took us to start using the word *zombie*. For the longest time we just called them “they” or “those things,” because *zombie* was a word that existed in games and movies. It felt stupid saying it, always coming out with a kind of “shit, can you believe I’m actually using this word?” laugh.

“We shouldn’t wait to find out,” Felipe suggested, already easing down the hallway. He tugged on Nicky’s sleeve and she shrugged him off.

“It could be my *dad*,” she said, emphasizing that last word. Felipe flicked his eyes at me, like I was somehow in control of the situation. But none of that mattered because the elevator dinged and my stomach turned over on itself as the doors slid open.

I don’t know who was more surprised—us or him. There was a moment where it felt like it could be a normal day and this normal guy with graying hair was getting home from work with his suit a little rumpled, his tie loose around his neck.

But then I saw where his sleeve was torn and how he held his hand against his stomach. There was blood. A *lot* of blood.

It’s not like he could think we wouldn’t see it, and for a second he had a guilty look on his face. Almost panicked, even. But then he must have remembered that he was an adult and we were just a bunch of teenagers, because he pushed past us and strode down the dim hallway, his keys rattling in his bloody fingers.

And it worked. We stood there like dumb kids and let him do what he wanted, because seriously, who were we to stop him?

Then, to add to our stupefied uselessness, the elevator doors began

to slide closed and I couldn't get there in time to stop them. I started pounding the button, trying to call it back. The call light lit up, but I was too late. Behind the double doors, the engine hummed and wires whisked the little cage back down into the building.

There would be more coming—more people. More infected. I'd locked the garage down, but they could still get into the Overlook through the office. We wouldn't stay safe for long if that happened. We had to stop them. Any way we could, we had to keep anyone else from getting up to the penthouse.

We had to stop the elevators from running.

I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate, but every thought was shrouded in a red-tinged panic. "How many elevators are there?"

Nicky didn't answer and I turned to face her. "How many?" I asked again, and she kind of flinched as though my words had been physical.

"Just these two," she finally answered. "Why?"

Behind the metal doors I heard the cables whirring, from the bowels of the building, floor chimes rang one after another, growing louder. Other people were filing into the building. Like water rising, they would get to us eventually if we didn't find a way to pull the plug.

On the other side of the vestibule a sign for the billiard room hung on the wall next to a set of double doors. I tried the handles but they were locked. "Can you get me in here?"

Nicky's face was pale, her lips white and dry and the rims of her eyes raw. She was shutting down; my words seemed to be getting trapped in her head in some kind of endless cycle. Instead of answering, she stood there blinking.

Behind her the elevator's engine hummed. Blood roared through me—that feeling of having the perfect strategy for winning a game and just hoping you have the chance to play it out.

And knowing just how many ways it could all go wrong.

A crisp *ding* sounded, and even though we'd been the ones to call the elevator, its arrival startled us. We turned as one, waiting for the doors to slide open. I braced myself for a monster to come stumbling out and felt almost light-headed when I saw that the car was empty.

Except for the glistening pool of blood oozing along the floor.

"Oh my God," Beatrice started mumbling over and over. She backed down the hallway, a low wail building in the back of her throat.

"Don't let it leave!" I called to Gregor as the doors began to slide shut. He had to dive for it, his foot slipping on the blood and his

elbow crashing against the wood paneled wall

I turned to Nicky and wrapped my fingers around her shoulders, forcing her to focus. “I need you to get me in that room.”

Her hands shook as she held out the same black electronic key she’d used to access the top floor. I pressed it against the lock and the door opened with a click.

I didn’t care anymore about trying to appear smooth and confident. I only cared about what could be coming in that second elevator. Hearing its ascent, the beep of buttons as it climbed past floor five, then six, then seven. Knowing that eventually someone else with a key to the top floor would come home, bringing with them more danger.

Those men who’d fallen from the top of the skyscrapers earlier—the ones who’d stayed dead which meant they were probably uninfected—had to have jumped because that was less terrifying than whatever was coming for them. I didn’t want to know what that was. I didn’t want to face it up here in this dim hallway.

As I’d hoped, the billiard room had a few seating arrangements, and I grabbed the closest chair, dragging it over the thick carpet into the hallway. Gregor kept having to battle the elevator doors as they tried to close over and over again. The alarm started to buzz, the sound grating and horrible in what had been almost silence before.

Gregor helped me maneuver the chair into place to block the doors, and then he climbed out, cradling his elbow. “Call the other one,” I told him as I went back for a second chair.

Nicky tried to stop me. “What are you doing?”

I moved around her. With the alarm going I couldn’t hear the cables of the second elevator, couldn’t tell how close it was. “Locking it down.”

“But my dad ...” She grabbed my sleeve.

I pulled free. Said nothing. Started dragging another chair out into the hallway.

She jumped in front of me, kneeling on the seat and leaning over the back toward me. “My dad’s still out there,” she argued.

My hands clenched the armrests. I felt the words rising in my throat, pushing against my vocal cords. “Screw your dad!” I wanted to scream in her face, because seriously, what were we supposed to do? Camp out in the hallway and stand guard? Hope that her dad eventually showed up and wasn’t as bloody as the last guy?

Instead, I took a deep breath. “It’s not safe.” How could she not understand?

The other elevator dinged, and even before the doors opened we heard banging and moaning. “Oh crap,” Gregor breathed.

Beatrice took off running down the hallway, and Felipe chased after her. But I didn’t follow. I couldn’t. We had to block the elevator so more of those things didn’t get up here. I kicked the chair I’d been dragging toward Gregor and then grabbed Nicky, throwing her into the billiard room.

When the elevator doors whisked open, I wasn’t looking. I was racing toward the row of pool cues hanging on the wall.

It was the first time I’d heard the moaning close up and personal. Not filtered through the TV as background noise in a newscast or as part of the panicked stampede out of Uptown earlier.

This was the sound of something that used to be human and was no more. It was the kind of thing that could make your heart stop, your lungs constrict, your nerves shrivel.

Later the sound would become the backdrop to everyday life, the way the hiss of electronics and the buzz of traffic used to be. But not in that moment. Right then, I realized that death had a sound and it was coming for us.

“No, no no no nonononono,” I kept muttering under my breath. I’d had the winning hand here—I’d known how to keep us safe, and this wasn’t part of it.

I swept the pool cues into my arms, hating how flimsy they felt. How in the world could these protect us? Protect me? They’d snap instantaneously. No way could they inflict the damage necessary.

When I got back to the door I saw Gregor in the hallway, holding the chair up like a lion tamer, trying to push back a tall woman in a business suit. One of her sleeves was ripped off and her skirt was twisted. A gash ran the length of her face, flapping open to show her teeth and the bones around her eye. Her hair was drenched with blood. It was still wet, hanging in ropes that splashed against her neck and sent droplets flinging onto the walls and the front of Gregor’s shirt.

*I could just close the door,* I thought. My hand curled around the knob. Nicky and I would be safe locked in here. We could survive.

Behind me, Nicky gurgled in panic, and Gregor must have heard, because he glanced up at me. With that one look he knew. I could see it register in his eyes. I was going to abandon him.

*Every man for himself,* he was thinking, remembering the way I’d said it earlier.

The thing about decisions is that sometimes you don't make them for the right reasons. Sometimes you have an idea of yourself that isn't real. It's an aspiration; it's the picture you hold in your mind so that you don't weep at all of your failings.

In my head, I was the savior. I was the strong one, the guy in charge who could keep us safe. But I knew standing there that that would never be me. Never *could* be me.

In reality, I was the coward. The one so terrified of dying I'd sacrifice anyone and everyone for the chance to keep my own heart beating for just another second.

With that single glance, Gregor knew this truth about me. It was written in the disappointment that shuddered his breathing with the terror-laced understanding that suddenly, he was alone in his fight.

What's funny is that if I'd just let him die, he'd have taken that knowledge with him. I'd have been safe from his censure. I could have repositioned the mask of competence over my face and stared down the next challenge, hoping not to waver and fall again.

The thing is—I didn't decide to save Gregor because that's the kind of guy I am. I tried to save him because I couldn't stand him knowing the worst of me.

The chair Gregor used as a weapon was heavy and unwieldy. His arms were tiring and his reactions slowing. I leapt into the fight with a pool cue in each hand. My first swipe went wild, snapping against the woman's shoulder and doing nothing.

"That won't work!" Gregor screamed.

"I know!" I shouted back.

Images from old kung fu movies flashed in my head, but none of them were long or bright enough for me to capture them and figure out what to do. Behind us, Nicky screamed, "Kill it!" as though somehow that would be helpful.

The woman lurched, her teeth snapping at Gregor's fingers. He yanked his hand out of reach, dropping one side of the chair in the process. In that second he was unprotected, and the creature lunged.

I tried to use the cue to push her back, but the angles were off. I was only successful at tilting her off balance, and I quickly shoved the other cue between her legs, tripping her.

She fell to the floor with a thump, something somewhere inside her snapping. Already she was pushing herself to her knees. I didn't know what to do to stop her, so I kicked her in the abdomen, sending her tumbling to the side. Gregor toppled the chair over her, trying to

position it so that the crossbars on the legs would pin her down. But it wasn't working.

She grabbed Gregor's pants, yanking hard. He lost his footing and fell, his head smashing the wall as his body went limp. The woman flailed, teeth going straight for Gregor's ankle. Nicky screamed.

If I'd had time maybe I'd have thought to wedge the pool cue in her mouth so she couldn't bite him. I could have rolled the woman onto her stomach and pinned her arms back while the others figured out a way to tie her up.

But I knew nothing except panic; I tasted its bitterness at the back of my throat, the heat of it searing my neurons so that I couldn't think. Instead, I just acted out of pure, blind instinct and kicked the woman, hard, in the face.

The year before I'd been the place kicker on the football team. I knew how to kick a ball, how to gather the power in your legs and transfer it out through the top of your foot.

As I felt her teeth rip free and heard her jaw popping, I thought, *This is a woman's face you're destroying. A human being you're attacking.*

Her head snapped back, her moans choked on shards of teeth now lodged in her throat. But that didn't stop her reaching for Gregor again.

It was like this would never end.

That's the truth I grasped in that moment and never lost again: this was the beginning. I could kill this woman and there would be another behind her. And another behind that. They would come and come and come and eventually I'd have nothing left in me to fight.

It would never be a question of how long *they* could last; it was all about how long *I* could. And I knew, right then, that I would give up. Not now and perhaps not soon, but at some point I would have fight left in me, and I would let it go.

Because I wasn't strong enough for this new world.

In the end, I'm not a survivor.

There was something about embracing my inevitable death, knowing that it would come and it would be my choice, that made it easier to flip the chair over and press the top rail of it against the woman's throat. She was pinned on her back, facing me, her jaw crooked, her mouth a gaping mess.

Her mascara was smeared, dried grayish tears streaking her cheeks. I assumed she'd died in the elevator, alone. Just trying to go home. Later, when we started breaking into apartments looking for supplies,

I'd find hers—a tidy corner unit with views of the mountains. Her furniture was modern, her bathroom a mess, and her kitchen had been that of a woman who loved to cook. Cupboards stuffed full, a refrigerator with the first fresh vegetables we'd had in days. She had only one picture frame on her dresser, and in it was a photo of her and another girl who looked just like her. Probably her sister.

Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to find that sister. To have to confess that that woman was the first human being I'd ever purposefully hurt. She was the first I killed.

And it was terrible and impossible.

As I pressed the rail of the chair against her throat I realized that choking her was useless. Decapitation or destruction of the brain—that's what we'd been told on the news were the only defenses. And yet, no matter how much weight I put behind it, even when I jumped, trying to add pressure, I couldn't sever her neck. I couldn't even crush her spinal cord.

Nicky had pulled a groggy Gregor out of the way, and she cradled his head in her lap as she watched me try to kill this woman. "Oh God," she moaned over and over again. Felipe had come back, and he pulled another chair from the billiard room to finally block off the second elevator. This time, Nicky didn't protest or mention her dad.

Beatrice stood down the hallway, already a dim ghost. I should have realized then that she'd jump, eventually. The first of us to give up.

But not the last.

I'd grown up with the assumption that the human body is fragile. It isn't. "Give me a pool cue," I said, holding out my hand. Nicky traded glances with Felipe, and I could tell she was about to ask why when he shook his head slightly, stopping her.

He picked it up, held it out to me. It wasn't easy to line up the tip of it against the woman's eye. Her lids were open, the irises visible, and I didn't want to see, but I had to.

It took more force than I thought it would, and all the while the woman struggled, snapping her teeth at me. Terror clogged my throat, infiltrated my lungs like smoke. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't force my muscles to move the way they needed to.

Her eyeball compressed but held firm. I tried using momentum but I was shaking too hard, and each time I tried to bring the tip of the pool cue down I missed the socket. Nicky was fully sobbing at this point and the elevator doors were still trying to close; their alarms

screamed.

“Just do it!” Nicky screeched.

And I did. Letting go of the chair, I wrapped both hands around the pool cue and I jammed it into the dead woman’s eye with all the force of my body weight and then some. There was a sickening pop that I felt more than heard as the tip of the cue jerked down, sinking through the bone of her orbital socket and then her brain.

The woman choked out one last moan as I twisted the cue, moving it back and forth like it was a shovel loosening dirt.

I know there was still sound, but in my head there was silence. A soft, stuffy kind like you see on TV when a character’s hearing goes out after an explosion. Everyone else sat stunned, staring at me.

Maybe I expected to see some sort of admiration. A moment of unity that we’re all in this together—that it wasn’t me alone who’d killed this woman, but me acting on behalf of a team.

Except that wasn’t what I found. I knew they were grateful. I knew they understood that I’d saved their lives. But that couldn’t keep the horror from their eyes. The disgust.

Later they’d rally around me and Felipe would start joking about it. And once, when we pried open the door to the neighbor’s wine closet, he and Gregor would act it all out again and we’d laugh (Beatrice would already be gone by then).

But in that moment there was just a sound-softened silence. All of them staring at me like *I* was the monster.

“Help me get him up,” Nicky finally murmured to Felipe, and together they helped Gregor to his feet. A thin trickle of blood smeared the back of his neck, and it took him a minute to become steady.

We left the woman in the little vestibule by the elevators for the time being. It felt strange to abandon her there like that. She looked so exposed—no longer a monster but the victim of some cruel and sadistic murder. Before catching up with the others, I flipped the chair over in an attempt to cover her ravaged face.

Nicky’s father’s place was at the far end of the building, one of a pair of apartments that jutted toward Uptown like a finger pointing at the city. The door opened onto a long rectangular room with the kitchen first, the dining room in the middle, and an awkwardly shaped living room at the other end.

Hardwood gleamed along the floor, the far wall nothing but floor-to-ceiling windows bordering a pair of sliding doors that opened onto

a wide balcony. Beyond was a spectacular view of Uptown, the afternoon sun glaring off a sea of office buildings.

A set of double doors off the living room led to the master suite: a massive space with a king-sized bed and full sitting area flanking another wall of windows, a huge walk-in closet, and a marble bathroom that boasted both a Jacuzzi and walk-in shower. Next to the kitchen was a hallway that led to another full bathroom, a bedroom (Nicky's room, I guessed, though it was about as personalized as a hotel), and an office.

Outside was chaos, but inside a sort of odd calm settled around us. The dissipation of adrenaline left us drained and worn. Something inside Nicky must have clicked into "hostess" mode—maybe it made her feel normal to offer us something to drink and eat. As if this were any ordinary day and we were just hanging out after school.

We tried calling home using both our cell phones and the land line, but the system must have been overloaded, because we could never get through (only Gregor would get the chance to speak to his parents again, and he refused to tell us anything about the conversation. He just hung up the phone and stepped out onto the balcony, where he screamed and screamed and screamed).

Beyond that, no one really had much to say. We barely made eye contact as we shuffled through the unfamiliar rooms. Suddenly, we became oddly polite, apologizing in soft voices if we had to maneuver around one another to get to the bathroom or ask for a towel.

As the day wore on, we each retreated to separate areas, as though marking out territory. Gregor lay on the master bed with an ice pack on his head, while Beatrice drifted into the guest room, closing the door behind her. All of us could hear her sobbing, but none of us knew what to say.

Ultimately, Felipe ended up in the office, which looked more like central command than anything else. One wall held four televisions, and he tuned them all to different channels. The computer had three screens, and he quickly filled them with an array of news blogs, obsessively refreshing and following links for more information.

Nicky staked her claim on the balcony outside, tucking herself into an Adirondack chair with a quilt wrapped around her shoulders and her back to the windows. I had no idea how she was doing: if she was awake or asleep, crying or praying.

I couldn't settle anywhere. I tried sitting on the couch, but my mind roared with action plans. So much needed to be done, and every time

I thought of something new I added it to my mental list, which was shaped like a pinwheel and kept spinning and spinning and spinning.

There were so many variables, so many calculations to make, that all of it felt like quicksand. We needed to gather food, but how urgent that was depended on how long the electricity lasted and how quickly the food in the fridges spoiled. Nicky had mentioned that some of the building's power came from solar panels mounted on the roof, but who knew how much that would help?

We needed to figure out what to do about the guy down the hall. He was clearly infected, but how long would it be until he turned? How long did we have to figure out how to kill him and build up the nerve to follow through with it?

My mind flicked through possibilities like a deck of cards: we could use a knife, a hammer, a baseball bat. We could search the other apartments for a gun. But how would we get access to the other places? The doors were reinforced with steel. (In the end we cut through the walls, tunneling from room to room. It turned out that the couple down the hall had a loaded revolver in their bedside table, but by the time we found it, it was too late—Gregor and I had already taken care of the infected guy with a carving knife and a nine iron.)

I needed to find bike chains to double-lock the gates on the stairs, I needed to find buckets and bowls to fill with water, I needed to find a way to paint "5/Alive" on a sheet and hang it out the window, as the news instructed. I needed to figure out if there were pets in the other apartments and what to do with them.

My mind wheeled down all the various paths our lives were about to take, parsing the possibilities, finding the holes and stuffing them with solutions that were the wrong shape and size no matter how tantalizingly right they appeared. There were so many "if ... then" possibilities that any attempt to figure out the future fractured under the weight of uncertainty.

And when dawn finally broke, I knew I'd followed the thread of every eventuality and they all led to the same knotted end.

Stepping out onto the balcony was like stepping into another world. This side of the building jutted out from a sloping bank, so the drop to the ground was much farther than I'd expected. At the bottom of the hill sat a concrete barrier topped by a fence that bordered the southern stretch of the interstate loop around Uptown.

Car alarms blared, horns blasted, people screamed. The air smelled of blood and ash, pain and despair. Down the road flames blazed and

smoke billowed from a twisted pile of metal that used to be an eighteen-wheeler and who knows how many cars. A few industrious souls tried to thread their way through on foot, bikes, or motorcycles.

But the fences along the interstate were like the walls of the shore, keeping the tide of living dead from escaping. From my vantage point so many stories up, it was easy to recognize that those people trapped on the road had little chance of surviving. But they didn't know that yet. They couldn't see what I did: the churning storm of dead less than a mile away.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted a warning. Nicky stirred behind me: "I tried already—it won't work. Even if they hear you, they won't listen." Her voice was listless, scratchy.

It crawled under my skin. Because I knew she was right and that she wasn't just talking about the poor souls on the road below. She was talking about all of us. We were fooling ourselves into thinking that by continuing the struggle we could somehow survive. That that was all it took, the act of struggle somehow a guarantee of success.

But that didn't mean we didn't have our own storm of dead to face down the road. Just because we were safer didn't mean we were safe.

The thing was, Nicky had suddenly stopped playing by the rules, and that made me angry. The rule was that she pretended we could be okay. That was her role in all of this: hopeful survivor.

"What, so you're just gonna give up?" I failed to keep from sneering, and so I kept my back to her, my hands clenched around the wide railing along the balcony. She didn't answer, which made it worse.

I needed a fight. Because of the itch I could never scratch, the need to *do* in a world where doing had become impossible. The rest of them found ways to contend with this new reality (well, until Beatrice jumped and the fall didn't kill her—that was the beginning of the end for Felipe).

For me, I held on by planning the next move and the one after that. And the truth was, I already saw where it ended. In my mind I could picture every path, every eventuality, and they all led to one place: the storm of zombies waiting.

We had no hope. The conclusion was written. The last line had been carved in stone and our judgment handed down. There was no appeal, no do-over. The moment we'd stepped into the Overlook we'd chosen our path, and we'd chosen wrong.

It would take us a long time to get there—longer than I'd even

realized at first. The building had an elaborate roof garden with a saltwater pool. Early on we rigged a ladder to get up there, and thanks to a retiree with an odd penchant for collecting seed packets, we were able to plant a vegetable patch that was pretty successful.

But on that first morning at the Overlook there was this moment when I was standing on the balcony with Nicky and the rising sun hit the pink-tinted windows of an apartment building a few blocks south. And suddenly, everything around us turned rosy; the world became soft and beautiful.

Nicky pulled me down into the chair next to her and she tilted her head back and I did the same. “When you only look at the sky,” she whispered, “it’s like nothing’s changed.”

And she was right. The wall of the balcony blocked the chaos below—I could no longer see the wrecks or the carnage. In that rose-tinged heartbeat, there existed a flutter of hope. I could see it in Nicky’s eyes—that what she’d said earlier wasn’t really true. Being the hopeful survivor wasn’t just a role. She didn’t believe in giving up, which is something I wouldn’t come to fully understand until much, much later, when her raw-ribbed chest rattled and wheezed.

I’d come onto the balcony that morning to give her the chance to circumvent it all: change her decision and choose a new path. She could fly over the railing or take the elevator down to the main level or find any other number of ways to determine her own ending.

All I could see were the ways our world had fallen apart, but somehow Nicky had found a way to show me that in some respects it was still the same, and it could be beautiful.

At the very end she would take it all back, of course. When death was no longer a promise but a pressing reality, I asked her if she regretted this dawn-inspired commitment to survival. Her answer had been a simple yes. That if she’d had it to do over again, knowing that rescue would never come, she’d have killed herself on that first morning.

And then she was gone and it was just me. The only one who’d never really hoped. The one who’d never seen the Overlook as some sort of waiting room before life resumed as it had once been. The one who understood that our world hadn’t been put on pause but shifted into a new reality and that days would continue to come and go, piling on one another as they always had.

I’d known from the beginning what Nicky had understood only at the very end. But just because I’d seen the truth from day one didn’t

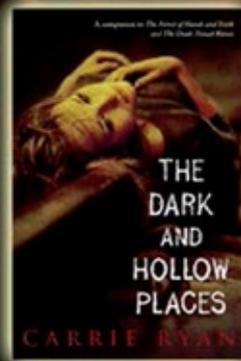
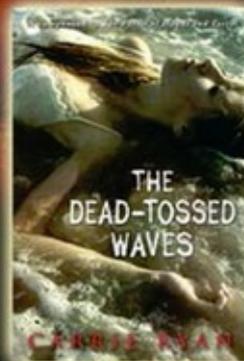
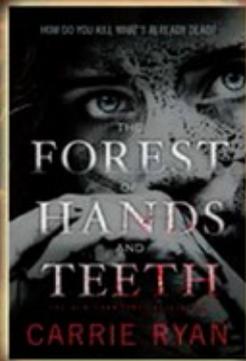
mean I needed to force her and the others to see it too. Because there's something I learned in that sliver of pink sunrise: we all come into the world knowing we're going to die. And maybe I'd figured out that our death would come sooner and it would come harder, but that didn't make it any more or less inevitable.

And it didn't mean there wasn't something worthwhile about those days in between—the good and the bad of them. The kisses and the fights and the fears and the laughter. I was done with fearing death and I was done with fearing regret. I'd made my choices. Maybe they'd been the wrong ones, but I intended to live them to the end.

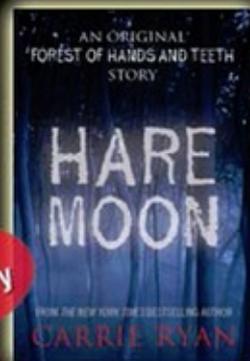
Carrie Ryan is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the critically acclaimed Forest of Hands and Teeth series, which has been translated into over eighteen languages and is in development as a major motion picture. She is also the editor of the anthology *Foretold: 14 Tales of Prophecy and Prediction*, as well as author of *Infinity Ring: Divide and Conquer*. Born and raised in Greenville, South Carolina, Carrie is a graduate of Williams College and Duke University School of Law. A former litigator, Carrie now writes full-time and lives with her husband, two fat cats, and one large dog in Charlotte, North Carolina. You can find her online at [carrieryan.com](http://carrieryan.com) or follow [@CarrieRyan](https://twitter.com/CarrieRyan) on Twitter.

# EAT. PREY. LOVE.

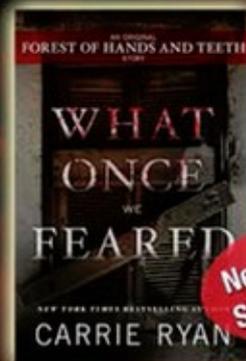
Read the complete heart-pounding series from *New York Times* bestselling author Carrie Ryan.



Photograph © 2011 by Diego Oprisco



Digital Short Story



New Digital Short Story!