

Carter's Creek  
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## Chapter 1

I always leave when the drinking starts.

I pretend I'm going to the bathroom or getting something to eat, then I slip out. Why does someone always have to bring a six-pack or a bottle of Fireball? Then the drinking becomes the focus. Like the cute guy I was talking to. He goes to Altamesa. We were sitting side by side on the hearth bench. Crystal's house is full of stuff with names like hearth bench. It's a great place to party. Plus, her parents hang out at the other end of the house, about a soccer field away.

He was funny as well as cute. I couldn't stop laughing. Guess he's a class clown type. He loves chemistry but sometimes forgets safety protocols. Once he didn't wash up properly and broke out in hives. He figured out that every time he wore the jeans, he had on in class that day, he got a rash. I did this double take on the jeans he was wearing and scooted away. He laughed and scooted closer to me, saying he'd thrown those jeans away. But I kept scooting. We did this little seated dance on

the hearth bench. He was about to scoot me into the corner, which I was looking forward to, when more people arrived and I heard Chester's big stupid mouth yell out, "Beer Here!"

With a "be right back," that sweet smile of his, chin dimple and curly brown hair, Simon was gone, swan diving for a beer, hoping there'd be one left for him, I guess. Didn't offer to get me one, not that I'd have accepted. What if he'd offered and I'd said "No, I don't drink." Would he have said he didn't need one either? Wasn't I more important?

I watched him push his way through the crowd of mostly guys gathered around the table. Eye roll. Time to leave. I duck out one of the French Doors. Through the window, I see him looking for me, his fingers clutching two bottles. That was thoughtful, I guess. I slip around the side of the house and down the sloping lawn to the gate in the wrought iron fence that surrounds Crystal's parents' property. People up in the hills have property. Down in the flats, we have homes. Estimated time to the bus stop? Fifteen minutes. If I hear a car coming, I just duck into the shadows. Disappearing's one of my mad skills.

Everyone's always telling us that teenagers should never drink. That's what they pound into our heads at school. Our brains are still developing. Exposure to alcohol gives us brain damage. I believe it. The kids I know that drink, each time I see them, they act stupider and stupider. But it's different with adults. Alcohol doesn't give them developmental brain damage; it just kills off their brain cells faster than the adult brain can regenerate them. They slowly get brain damage. Something to look forward to if I ever decide to be an alcoholic.

My friends think I'm straight edge, but what I am is scared shitless. You are never safe around a drinker, that's what Ms. Torg says, and she's right. Ask me how I know.

Last year at the homecoming party he hosted, Chester practically raped me. I thought he was so hot. He would be the love of my life and I'd be the envy of all the girls. One of those varsity stud muffins who seemed so nice, did community service and all, but then he got me alone. The crazy thing was that very day I'd been in Living Skills, and we'd been learning

about sexual safety for women. Big yawn. I thought I knew it all.

They split us up when it comes to this sex stuff. The boys get Mr. Mason. The girls get Ms. Torg. I mean it's always super uncomfortable talking with an adult about sex, right? But we had to get into STDs and birth control methods. Ms. Torg said no matter what our religious beliefs, we need to know how our bodies operate, so we can stay safe and take care of ourselves. Staying clear-headed and out of dangerous situations is the best way to stay safe, she said. Think of a doe in the forest surrounded by predators. Does a doe ever let her guard down? We're the deer. It's hard to watch for predators when you're drunk, Ms. Torg said. Then she started hammering away at the rape statistics, reported versus prosecutions leading to convictions. But that Friday, it went in one ear and out the other. I forgot about everything, until Chester was on top of me and then I remembered it all.

Ms. Torg told us that alcohol turns off the governor. What's the governor? The person inside your head who keeps you from doing and saying something stupid or dangerous. "It's worse for

girls," Ms. Torg said, and we all groaned. We already know, everything's worse for girls.

Ms. Torg said that even though the victim is not to blame, most victims are female, and we have to do everything we can to not be the victim. Even if you're not drinking and you think you're safe, you're not if there's drinking going on. Even when you're legal, alcohol is not your friend, remember that she said. Then she passed out all these case studies of girls who'd been drugged and raped and photographed, pictures circulated on the internet, and they killed themselves. Ana lost it. She just flipped and ran out of the room sobbing. Marnie jumped up and raced after her. Marnie's like that. While I'm worrying what to do, she's taking action.

Ana's mom called the school to complain, and it sparked this big thing. Ms. Torg's defense was she was only telling the truth. Girls need to know these things. Parents from all over rushed to defend Ms. Torg, including my mom who never gets involved in anything. Eventually it all died down. Ana got to drop the class without consequences and switch to an independent study and wrote a paper on the relationship between botulism and

Botox. She presented it to our class. They use the same bacteria that causes botulism to shoot into your face to freeze your muscles, so the wrinkles go away. Botox. Totally gross. She got an "A", and it was like Ana and Ms. Torg were best friends.

Even though we're done with Health, Miss Torg's my soccer coach and she still keeps up the lecture, 24-7. We often go to games on the same bus with the guys' teams. She always makes sure we have like 10 parent chaperones. I guess she thinks we'll have orgies or something. It's super embarrassing because she talks so loud in practice. She screams at the boys who are whistling and calling out. She tells them to get a move on, stop gawking and let the girls play. I mean you want to crawl into your sports bag.

Still, she's not wrong. Like I said, I didn't remember anything she said until Chester got me alone at that party last year. And now every time I see him, part of me wants to puke. I ignore him. I'm not afraid of him. I'm afraid of what I might do. Start screaming or I might jump him and tear his eyes out. If I can ever calm down about Chester, I'll call up Ana's mom and let her hear my story. Or maybe Ana already had her own

story to tell that. I could ask. "Hey Ana did that stuff in health class trigger you? Chester tried to rape me. How about you? Wanna go for some bubble tea?"

I pull my jacket around me against the October chill, sticking close to the shadows, avoiding the bright spray of the occasional streetlight. I suppose I could call Dad for a ride. He'd come in a second because he always offers to drive me. It's bad enough I have to tell them where I'll be, but to be seen in the car with him is impossible. Even if he drops me off or picks me up a block or two away, someone will see and call me out in front of everybody. "Was that your dad, Laney? He's sooooo niiiiice to drive you." The implication being that you're such a loser no one will give you a ride. And of course, you are uncool to begin with since you don't have your own car. My options are bike, walk or bus.

When it's dark, Mom and Dad don't want me biking and they'd be freaking out if they knew I was walking up here in the hills like this. They're not wrong. Even when people are wearing reflective clothing and flashing like Christmas trees, cyclists get killed like crazy on these winding roads. Another good

reason to ride the bus. I'm not particularly green but hey one less car trip, right? It just makes sense.

Taking the bus is the cheapest way to be independent. My friends use a ride app when they need to get places and there's no car. If I did that, my money would be gone in like two seconds. Once you memorize the schedule, it's easy. All buses connect to the 22. When the party's in the hills, I have to walk a bit to the nearest stop. No big deal.

Waiting at the bus stop, I don't stare down at my phone. Another Ms. Torg-ism. She says standing alone staring down at your phone is like wearing a sign, "Hey I'm not paying attention. Come jump on top of me!" She's kind of the best. I mean we all make jokes about her. But she really cares. That's why she gets all serious on us and gets in trouble with the PTA.

The bus pulls up. It's Bert. We nod at one another as I climb on.

"Early night or just starting?" he asks as I swipe my Clipper card. He knows it's an early night.

"Just starting," I say. We both smile. I don't mind that he knows I'm a total loser. I drop down in my favorite seat, the



one over the wheel hub so I can put my feet up and hug my knees if I want to. I crack the window and the air pushes in to dilute the closeted smell of sweat, grime and tang that is the Bus 22 user experience. The 22 runs the entire length of the Peninsula from Palo Alto to San Jose, along state highway 82, a.k.a. El Camino Real, passing through cities where a hundred languages are spoken, and grocery stores feature food and spices from around the world and go head-to-head with Whole Foods and Safeway. All buses connect to the 22.

My friends are freaked out by the bus, but to me, it's like being a world traveler because you see people from everywhere and can listen to the melodies of other languages. A mom scolding her kid sounds pretty much the same the world around. People in love whisper in a certain way no matter where they're born. An argument is an argument in any language period.

I bet if there was a way to measure these things, the 22 Bus would be the most diverse place on earth. International leaders should all be made to ride the 22. Maybe we'd finally get world peace if everyone just rode the bus.

I'm not bad at languages. I've been taking Spanish since 5<sup>th</sup> grade and I'm starting Mandarin. I wonder if I could be a translator at the United Nations and sit in a booth all day with headphones on. That sounds kind of fun except I would need breaks every hour to run around and stretch my legs. I bet we could put together some mad good soccer games at lunch.

The bus stops and a group of hipster guys get on. They've got the skinny, sleek, angular look that's popular with the tech workers and the geeks at school. I can smell the alcohol from here. One of them is holding a can of something. Their faces are flushed.

"No open containers," Bert says. The guy holding the can looks down at his hand and is surprised to see he's clutching a beer. "Oh," he says with a laugh and without even thinking tosses it out the bus door over the heads of his friends behind him. Bert shrugs and shakes his head while the friends all laugh. They make their way past me, giggling, to drop down in seats at the back.

Alcohol again. What's the point? I get the idea of wine with dinner, all that pairing crap that grown-ups talk about, like

what Mom and Dad do. But that guy? Did he take his first drink at a party in high school? Did that one taste so good that he reached for another and then another? And before you know it, he's tossing open cans out of bus doors and trashing the streets.

Another reason to sneak out when the drinking starts. You don't want to be stuck when someone offers to drive you home. Have they been drinking or not? You ask them and they give you a look like you're stupid. "Of course, I've been drinking but I'm not drunk." Which brings me back to the bus.

I have my provisional license, but my parents won't get me a car. I don't get to use their cars, unless it helps them out, like "Laney, you drive while I talk to Grandma Pea." They aren't the buy-cars-for-your-kids type. I've got about \$4000 saved up from being a junior counselor at summer soccer camps the last two years, but I can't decide which low-end, used car to buy. My friends drive late model cars, hand-me-downs from their parents. Crystal even got a new Mini Cooper for her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. My dad thinks a used pick-up would be good. I guess he sees hauling in

my future. Great. I can park in the school parking lot next to all the Bimmers, Audis and Teslas. Oh, and the Mini Coopers.

"As long as it starts and goes forward," was my mom's way of encouraging Hayes when he bought his junky Alfa Romeo and started to rebuild it.

Hayes saved like crazy and bought the parts he needed. Once in a while Mom and Dad would put a muffler or a few spark plugs under the Christmas tree. The result is that Hayes loves that car and is really proud of it. He stores it covered in our garage. When he got accepted to college, no way would he expose that car to a New Hampshire winter. I can't see myself doing anything like that. Restoring a car. I want one I can jump in and drive off the lot. Like that is going to happen any time soon.

I reach for the pull cord, to let Bert know this is my stop. But I can see him looking at me in the mirror and he nods. My hand slips back into my pocket. He knows my stop's coming up. Pretty pathetic. I move forward. "Thank you, Bert," I say as the bus slows.

"You're welcome, Laney."

Shrieking laughter comes from those guys at the back. Bert and I nod our heads at one another.

"Another Friday night on the job," he says.

It's five long blocks to my house from El Camino. I could walk it blindfolded. Not only cause I'm always stuck riding the bus, but this is the only place I've ever lived. I came home from Kaiser hospital in Redwood City to the same room I'm in now.

We're one of the oldest families in the neighborhood. People change jobs in Silicon Valley like changing clothes. That also means changing houses. And new people move to the area for work like all the time. Prices have skyrocketed. Dad says we could never buy our house today. Some of the long-time middle-class residents took the money and ran, making way for the tech boom millionaires. As money has flowed into the valley, the houses have gotten larger. My mom complains when perfectly good homes are demolished so rich people can build McMansions.

But not the Pearsons. My parents moved here for Dad's work. He's been at the same company since before I was born. Everyone assumes we're rich because we live here and have a nice enough house. We had one of those smaller homes on a large lot. And like everyone else we added on, but Mom designed the remodel using the existing house. She was her own general contractor and sourced everything herself to save money. And they did it slow since they wanted to pay as you go. No added debt.

It took forever. But yeah, I have to say, Mom did a great job. She's the ultimate DIYer. It drives me crazy. The dishwasher broke last year, and Dad said just get a new one. But she got hold of the manual, took the whole thing apart and tested everything. She found that the intake pump was broken. So, she replaced that, and it sort of worked, but the dishes weren't getting clean. After some more testing, it turned out some computer chip was bad. It couldn't be replaced because they don't even make that chip anymore - that's how old the dishwasher was. Only when she confirmed for herself it was beyond hope, she bought a new one.

My friends think my parents are super old fashioned and strict, since I don't get a car and all the fancy stuff that they get from their parents. I play along. Why should I have to explain to them the difference between being comfortable and being rich? I mean we are rich compared to most of the people in the world, I guess. But not anywhere near like a lot of the people around here.

Mr. Armitano reminds us to check our privilege, which is super annoying, right? We're just kids. We're a mix of European, Pacific Rim, Asian, Middle Eastern, Hispanic/Latinx, Pacific Islander, African American, people with ancestors from countries all over the world. But we're all pretty much all-American, right? Sure, there's plenty of kids whose parents are here as tech workers with green cards, but most of the kids were born here.

I'm sure it feels stupid to the kids of color to be told to check their privilege when their parents have worked hard to get them into a good public school system. Mr. Armitano is from Venezuela. He'll probably get fired because he's super popular and is teaching us stuff not in the textbook like gender studies

and the criminalization of poverty. I really hope no kid complains to their parents because the class discussions deal with real life, like what's going on in the newspaper. If it's going on out there, shouldn't we know about it?

We spent a week and a half on gender identity and representation in the media, what it means to be gender non-conforming, how intolerance murders people's souls, not to mention the actual murders that happen when insane haters can't control themselves. I mean we -- most of us kids -- get it. He should be teaching this to our parents.

After gender studies we got a week on poverty and the school to prison pipeline and then he went right into gentrification as another way people can be oppressed. Like Facebook built its headquarters out there by the Bay in an industrial area near modest neighborhoods. The price of nearby housing there started going right up as Facebook employees started snapping up properties, essentially pushing out the traditional owners. Mr. Armitano's smart to teach all the important stuff early in the term. By the time parents figure it out, he'll be teaching out



of the textbook and can pretend he doesn't know what the complainers are talking about.

The lights and traffic of El Camino fade as I wind my way along my street. Maybe I should have tried sticking it out at the party. But I drop that thought the moment it sneaks in. Once caught, twice cautious. That's a Grandma Pea-ism.

Another Friday night cut short. Dad will be asleep in front of the game, and Mom will be in bed. She likes the evenings to herself, her alone time. She goes up as soon as dinner's over. The kitchen is pretty much spotless before dinner is served, so all Dad and I have to do are the supper dishes. She's a reader, does yoga and meditates. It's her time. It's kind of weird but I'm used to it.

Besides, my friends talk about their parents scream at night. We don't have a lot of drama trauma in my family. We're old-fashioned that way. Nothing much ever happens to us. I made that one mistake with Chester last year. I won't do that again.

A gust of wind. Leaves swirl at my feet. I turn the collar of my jacket up and hug myself. Houses are lit up from their

setbacks like theater stages, alive with the golden glow of spotless picture windows, the curtains raised, echoes of music and laughter. I could pull up a seat and watch. I'd have more fun here than I would've had at the party if I stayed.

Rounding the corner, two dim lights shine from inside my house. It's like there's nobody home. If Hayes were still here, every light in the house would be on, and there'd be a million cars parked in the drive, out front and down the block. He had tons of friends and they'd be over all the time. That made my social life easy. I could hang out in the background and be one of the guys, Hayes's little sister, maybe not so little anymore, but none of them saw me as a girl-girl. I could shoot pool and play video games with them. It was no big deal.

In fact, I won at darts that one time playing against Evan, Diego, and Hayes. It was pretty close. We were all down to less than 40 points and trying to hit the doubles we needed to win. I got down to 16 points, so I aimed for the narrow outer ring of the 8 and my first shot landed the double 8. I slew it.

"Man, where'd you learn to shoot like that," Evan asked, asked me. Which was pretty great.

"I don't know, just lucky," I'd said. But the greatest thing was Hayes.

"She's a soccer striker so she can spot a target. Guess, she's got a good arm, too." I can still remember that warm feeling spreading all the way to my fingers and toes when he said that. My friends are annoyed by their little brothers and sisters, and don't want them around. But Hayes always included me. My stomach tightens. He's only been gone a few weeks. Dartmouth is so far away.

I push open the front door and the football game hums from the TV room. That's where Dad is and where I'd be if I hadn't gone to Crystal's party. Dad likes to watch the live high school game that the local TV station broadcasts on Friday nights. They are corny but fun to watch. My parents are homebodies, but they say they spent their twenties partying. Why go out when they can enjoy one another in a home they love? That's what they say. I don't know if spending time in opposite ends of the house on different floors constitutes spending the evening together.

I mean when I visit my friends at their houses, their parents are around doing stuff. They go out to parties or have people in. Our place is like a tomb since Hayes left. I didn't realize until now that Mom and Dad don't really have friend-friends, just each other. Sort of weird.

Hayes is always saying to me, "Laney, you do you and let them do them." He's philosophical like that. I wish I were more like him. I can't let things alone. I am always wondering why things are the way they are, why we are the way we are, why we feel different than other families. Hayes says everyone feels they don't fit in. He says it's part of teenage angst, that I'll grow out of it.

He probably doesn't even miss me. The same friends who find their brothers and sisters annoying say I must be so happy. I get the house all to myself. No more sharing everything. Hayes isn't even coming home for Thanksgiving. He's going to our Pearson cousins in Massachusetts. Grandma Pea will be there. I have to wait until winter break to see him.

I guess I could watch the rest of the game with Dad. He'll ask me why I'm home so early, and I'll say, "I was bored." And

we'll leave it at that, just like we always do. I circle through the living room and down the hall. This is the part that Mom built. It leads to Dad's study and the TV room. On the other side of the house, Mom added a utility room and an office for herself off the kitchen, plus a second set of stairs to get to the second floor the back way.

The football game gets louder and louder as I approach. I burst into the game room with a "Hey, who's winning?" like I always do but Dad's full-on snoring, slumped against the back of the sofa, eyes shut, jaw sagging. Other than that, he is sitting upright as if his body is watching the game. His shirt collar is unbuttoned, and his tie is still on but loose. He still has his wingtips on. He could wake up and practically leave for work.

He's got the sandy-blond hair that I have and the close-to-but not quite model good looks that he gave Hayes. They each have the same bucket shaped jaw and a little crook in the nose just below the bridge. Barely noticeable unless you've been looking at it all your life. I could wake Dad up, but what's the point? I can imagine the rest of the evening, so why live it?

We'd have the usual conversation and then watch the rest of the game, Fremont versus Homestead. Homestead's ahead. I tiptoe out.

Upstairs I pad along the hall toward my room. I pass Mom and Dad's. The door is open. It's usually closed. A tiny triangle of light stabs the hallway floor. Maybe she's awake, reading. The only time I see her with a book anymore is when's she's napping on the sofa, holding it against her chest. Maybe this is what getting old is like. You still do the same things in the evening like watch TV and read books, but half the time you are asleep doing them. That's why it's important for babies to grow up. If I were still a toddler, I could have eaten fertilizer or set the house on fire by now while they were both sleeping. What if I was in an accident tonight and someone tried to reach them? Would they even hear the phone? Maybe that's why they don't let me borrow the car at night to go to parties. They wouldn't hear the doorbell ring when the police came to tell them I was dead. I mean I never drink, so what are they worried about? They just need to trust me. I rap on the door.

"Mom?"

I guess she's asleep. I turn toward my room, but something pulls me back. Sniffing the air, a taste sweet and bitter, like flowers and chemicals. Gas leak? We don't have natural gas anymore. Mom got on the clean energy kick. Now we have induction and a fuel pump. So, what am I smelling? It's nuts but I resist going in. And I realize that's weird. I mean this is my own house. Don't people go into people's rooms all the time in books and TV shows? Not the Pearsons. We always wait to be admitted. Knock first.

I sniff the air again. What is that? What if something is wrong? I knock on the door louder. No answer. I slip into the room.

Mom's dressing table light is on. Mom's neatly laid out on top of the bedspread, wearing her yoga pants and shirt, her arms folded across her heart. If it weren't for the slight motion of her chest rising and falling, she could pass for a corpse. I shudder. A chill hovers. The window is cracked. The hairs gather up along my arms and the back of my neck. I shiver. Her room has always smelled of the hyacinth sachet she uses, but now I'm hit

with the acrid smell of stale alcohol. I check myself out. Did someone spill something on me, and I didn't notice? No stain. I sniff my clothes. Not me. What the hell?

Mom? I put my face close to hers. Her breath is warm, smells like the cinnamon bark candy from Sri Lanka that Daddy brought her from a business trip and now orders online for her. But she also smells like, not like the wine they have at dinner. This smells like what Poppop drinks. A gust of wind pushes through the crack in the window and blankets the room in cold. I'll toss this throw on her. Dad can help her get under the blankets when he comes up. I reach across her for the crocheted Afghan that Grandma Pea made. It's not very soft, but it's warm. It's tough and practical like Grandma Pea. Even though she's stern, she's warm like the Afghan. Just thinking of her makes me feel better.

I arrange the Afghan on mom as gently as I can, so I won't wake her. The alcohol smell is strong right here. My gut coils. I left the party to get away from drinking only to find mom has extra whooped it up tonight. Was there a special occasion? Did Dad get a raise? No one ever tells me anything.



Something shimmers from beneath her pillow. I lean in. It's the neck of a small bottle. I wrap my fingers around it and tug. She stirs. I slowly pull a pint bottle out from under the pillow. The cap's off. It's practically empty. Jack Daniels. Poppop's brand.

I sit down on the bed. If this was a special occasion, why aren't they celebrating together. Why is Mom up here with this bottle? Dad's the one I always worry about. Him and his gin martinis. But Mom? The tumblers of the universe start to click into place. Despite the chill, I break out in a sudden sweat.

Mom doesn't drink. Does she? I mean she doesn't stagger around in public. She doesn't drink to blackout. I've never seen her drink anything stronger than wine except on special occasions. Look at her. So peaceful. The scent of hyacinths mixed with the smell of bourbon is so stifling. I look down at the bottle in my hand. WTF?