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Carter's Creek

By

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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 couldn't even finish his sentence when someone yelled out, "Beer Here!" With a "be right back" and that sweet smile of his, he was gone, diving for a beer, hoping there'd be one left for him. Didn't offer to get me one, not that'd I'd have accepted. What if he'd offered to get me one, and I'd said "no, I don't drink." Would he have said he didn't need one either to let me know I was more important. I watch him push his way through the crowd of mostly guys gathered around the table. Eye roll. Time to leave. Through the window, I see him looking for me, his fingers clutching a bottle. I make my way through the yard to the gate. Estimated time to the bus stop? Fifteen minutes.

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.

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

Last year in Living Skills, 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, inappropriate or dangerous. "It's worse for girls," Ms. Torg said and we all groaned. We already know, everything's worse for girls.

Hearing about this stuff in school is bad enough with all the girls snickering around the room, but it would have been intolerable to have the boys there hearing how it's hard to keep your pants on when you're drunk. They split us up when it comes to this sex stuff. The boys get Mr. Mason. I think he is supposed to be teaching them not to rape, to understand consent.

Miss Torg lectured us so hard one day on sexual safety that Ana started crying. Her 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. After the Ana thing, if anything, Miss Torg got even worse. Now she's my soccer coach and even though we're done with Health, she still keeps up the lecture. It's super embarrassing, because she talks so loud in practice. She screams at the boys to get a move on, stop gawking and let the girls play without their calling out. I mean you want to crawl into your sports bag.

Still she's not wrong. She tells us 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 like a weapon, remember that, she said. Even though she drilled this into our heads the way she makes us dribble the ball down the field a million times, I didn't remember anything until Chester got me alone at that party last year. And now I'll never forget a thing she said. Sometimes I feel like calling up Ana's mom and letting them hear my story.

I pull my jacket around me against the October chill, sticking close to the shadows, avoiding the bright spray of the streetlights in the center of every block. Be invisible but be ready to run. Don't avoid eye contact, but don't lock eyes either. Don't smile. Don't frown. Don't slump. Be neutral. Don't

let them think you're ashamed or afraid. Easier said than done. Dang! That guy was cute as anything. He's goes to Altamesa. Why did he prefer beer to me? What was his name anyway? It's like he's already in my past. Simon. That was his name. Simon.

Dad always offers to drive me. It's bad enough I have to tell them where I'll be. I can't imagine having them drive me there and everyone seeing. Even if they drop you off a block or two away, someone will see you and call you out at the party. "Was that your Dad, Laney? He's sooooo niiiiice to drop you off." 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.

When it's dark, Mom and Dad don't want me biking. I can't blame them. Even when people are wearing reflective clothing and flashing like Christmas trees, cyclists get killed like crazy in the Bay Area -- which has got more cars than the streets can handle, which is another reason to ride the bus. I'm not even that green. 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.

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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 the best. I mean we all make jokes about her. But she wants the best for us, 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. He knows I'm a total loser. But it's okay. Better be a loser and alone than get "Chestered." 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 the 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 featuring food and spices from around the world can go head to head with Whole Foods and Safeway. All buses connect to the 22.

Tonight there are about fifteen of us on the bus, our usual international mix of people, just like at school. Having a car is expensive and a drag because traffic is so bad. Most have come to Silicon Valley because of Stanford or to work in the tech boom. 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. My Spanish is pretty good so I can understand a lot of what is said by people speaking Spanish.

I bet if there was a way to measure these things, after the United Nations, 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 wonder if I could be a translator at the UN 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.

I look down at my pale hands. I'm just an average white American mutt, I guess. Mom's people came over on the poor people's Mayflower seeking religious freedom and Dad's people

came over during one of the immigration waves in the 1800s. His family was starving to death back in the old country.

The bus stops and a man gets on clutching a slim paper bag by the throat. The man wobbles a little. His clothes are dirty and so are his hands and face.

"No open containers," Bert says. The man looks down at the bag, nods and shoves it in the deep pocket of his jacket. He makes his way to the nearest seat by a window and drops down with a loud sigh. Some people move to avoid him. I don't blame them. I can smell him from here. Poor guy.

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 this 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?

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 theirs, 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, 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. So I let my hand slip back into my pocket. He knows my stop's coming up. Pretty pathetic. As the bus slows, I move forward. The drunk guy is asleep, nestled next to the window. Bert will let him ride until the end of the line. Bert helps them off and

over to a shelter near the bus terminal. Gotta love Bert.

"Thank you, Bert," I say as the bus stops.

"You're welcome, Laney."

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It's five long blocks to my house. 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 residents took the money and ran, making way for new families from all over the world. As money has flowed into the valley, the houses have gotten larger. Perfectly good homes are demolished, my mom complains, so rich people can build McMansions.

But not the Pearsons. I mean we did add onto the house. We had one of those smaller homes, but it was on a large lot. Mom designed an add-on and to save money, she was her own general contractor and sourced everything herself. 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 does a great job. She's the ultimate DIY. Sometimes it drives me crazy. The dishwasher breaks and Dad and I say just get a new one, but she's there taking it apart and testing everything. Once she's satisfied it's beyond hope, then she buys a new one!

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 house. My friends think my parents are super old fashioned and strict, which is why 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. Their houses are bigger than hotels.

Mr. Armitano reminds us to check our privilege, which is super annoying, right? We're just kids. Whites are like half the school. The rest are a mix of Pacific Rim Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, Hispanic/Latinx, Pacific Islander, Black and "other". 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. They've got the dual language thing going, which is pretty cool.

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 about gender studies, gentrification and the criminalization of poverty, topics not in the textbook.

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 burned, 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 needs like 12 hours to herself at night, her alone time. She likes to go up as soon as dinner's over. She's a reader, does yoga and meditates. It's kind of weird but I'm used to it. She's not like other mothers, and we're not like other families either. That's okay. I mean we don't have a lot of drama trauma in my family the way other families do. We're old-fashioned that way. Nothing ever happens in my family.

A gust of wind. Leaves swirl at my feet. I turn the collar of my jacket up and hug myself. Some people already have pumpkins set out and their yards decorated with tombstones, skulls and spiders for Halloween. Houses are lit up from their deep setbacks like theater stages, alive with the golden glow of spotless picture windows, the curtains raised, projecting 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 as long as I wasn't annoying or whiny. Hayes is nice like that. My friends are annoyed by their little brothers and sisters. My stomach tightens. He's only been gone a few weeks. Dartmouth is so far away.

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When I unlock the front door, the football game hums from the game 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 Fridays. They are corny but fun to watch. Mom's in bed already, of course. They are real homebodies. They say they spent their twenties partying. Why go out when they can enjoy one another in a home

they love? That's what Mom says. I don't know if spending time in opposite ends of the house on different floors with one person asleep constitutes spending the evening together.

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 game 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 upstairs 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 he's dozing, if you can call it that. He is 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 Hayes has. They each have 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. It's Fremont versus Homestead, I note and tiptoe out.

Upstairs I pad along the hall toward my room. Their bedroom door's ajar, which is strange. It's usually closed, day or night, and we always have to knock. A tiny triangle of light stabs the hallway floor. Maybe she's awake, reading. I doubt it. The only time I see her with a book anymore is when she sleeps, 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 kids to grow up. If I were still a toddler, I could have accidentally eaten fertilizer or set the house on fire by now while they were both sleeping. What if I was in an accident 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. I mean I never drink, so what are they worried about? They just need to trust me.

Even though I could just poke my head in, I rap quietly on the door. No answer. I turn toward my room, but something pulls me back. Sniffing the air, a taste sweet and bitter, like flowers and chemicals, a little like natural gas. We don't even have natural gas. During the remodel, Mom got rid of it. Induction is so much cleaner and safer. So what is it? 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 knock and wait.

I sniff the air again. What is that? What if something is wrong? I slip into the room. Her room has always smelled of the hyacinth sachet she uses, but now that pungent smell is stronger. What is it? It's not gas. It's more astringent.

Her dressing table light is on. There she is, in her yoga pants and shirt, neatly laid out on top of the bedspread, her

arms folded across her chest. If it weren't for the slight motion of her chest rising gently at each breath, she could pass for a corpse. 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 once and now orders online for her. But she also smells like drink. I guess maybe she had a few too many at supper. But this smells different from wine.

I shiver, suddenly cold. I'll just 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, just like Grandma Pea. Even though she's stern, she's warm like the afghan.

I arrange the afghan on mom as gently as I can so I won't wake her. The smell is really strong right here. Her pillow is damp, something's spilled, brown like tea, but I don't see a teacup. Should I wake her up, or just get a towel and try to clean around it? Something gleams, just from beneath her pillow. I lean in. It's the neck of a bottle. I wrap my fingers around the neck and tug. She stirs. I slowly pull the bottle out from under the pillow. It's an open bottle of brown liquid with a black label with white swirly writing on it. Jack Daniels. That's their brand of bourbon but what's it doing here in bed with her and spilled all over the place?

I sit down on the bed. Mom doesn't move. Do Mom and Dad secretly whoop it up in here every night? Their private party? Well I guess that's romantic and everything but seriously? Dad isn't even here. So she's drinking alone. So unlike Mom to drink like this. Dad likes his martinis; he's the one I've always worried about.

Maybe she got bad news and went for the strong stuff. But if there was bad news why is Dad watching TV as usual? I came home to get away from drinking. I look down at the bottle. WTF? The tumblers of my universe slowly start to click into place. Despite the chill, I break out in a sudden sweat.

Mom doesn't stagger around in public. She doesn't drink to blackout. I've never seen her drink anything stronger than wine. Look at her. So peaceful. The scent of hyacinths mixed with the smell of bourbon is so stifling. Despite the chill, I open the window. WTF?