

Rebecca Sanders  
dba Becca Branch  
369 Margarita Avenue  
Palo Alto, CA 94306  
650-269-4194  
Becca@beccabbranch.com

Carter's Creek  
by Becca Branch

## Chapter One

I always leave when the drinking starts. I pretend I'm going to the bathroom or getting something to eat, then I slip out and walk to the nearest bus stop. Once you memorize the schedule, it's easy. All buses connect to the 22. If the party's in the hills, I have to walk a bit to the nearest stop. A bus ride is the cheapest way to be independent with no car. My friends use Lyft when they need to get places. If I did that, my allowance would be gone in like two seconds.

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 conversation with me before diving for a beer with a "be right back." Eye roll. Time to leave.

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.

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 exotic 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 ethnic grocery stores can go head to head with Whole Foods and Safeway.

Immigrant families ride the bus, travel in tight-knit wads, holding hands, speaking softly - and sometimes not so softly -- in a mix of English and their own language. Older ones watch out for the younger ones. It's nice. Immigrant families, minimum wage workers, the homeless and the respectable poor ride the bus with me. My friends are freaked out by the bus, but to me, it's like being a world traveler.

My social studies teacher 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 is a mix of Asian, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, Black and "other". He's probably targeting all the whites and anyone who's rich, which is most of the Asian kids and many of the whites, I guess. I'm sure it feels stupid to the people of color to be told to check their privilege when their parents have busted their asses 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 even in the textbook. But he's right about the privilege thing. A bus is a good place for everyone to "check their privilege." Thanks to Rosa Parks, we are all equal on the bus. International leaders should all be made to ride the 22. Maybe we'd finally get world peace if everyone just rode 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 car 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.

"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. Our parents agree on everything for me and for Hayes. They say if you want something bad enough you'll work for it and get it yourself. If you're not willing to put in the effort, then you don't really want it. They are right, of course. It's so annoying.

Hayes saved like Silas Marner 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.

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

"You're welcome, Laney."

#

It's just a few long blocks to my house. I could walk it blindfolded. Not only because I've ridden the bus and walked it like a million times, but because this house, this neighborhood is the only home I've ever known. I came home from Stanford hospital to the same room I'm in now. It's been redecorated a few times. I don't know if I remember the sailboats on the walls or if it's because I've seen pictures of the sky-blue wall dotted with clouds and sailboats. It was yellow when I was in my safari phase, and Mom put in lots of tall plants so I could pretend I was in the Serengeti with all my stuffed animals.

Then in eighth grade, I read Pride and Prejudice. We relocated the plants and painted my room ivory. Grandma Pea sewed me a lace bedspread with matching curtains and bought me a real Oriental rug. So now I have a proper bedroom for a "young lady" as Grandma Pea says. And I really do love my room. I know I'm supposed to be a slob with my soccer stuff all over the floor like my friends, but I like things put away. Hayes is the same.

As far as I know, we've lived on our block the longest of any other family. People change jobs in Silicon Valley like changing clothes and that also means changing houses. And as

prices have skyrocketed, some of the long-time residents took the money and ran, making way for new families from all over the world. They knock down perfectly good homes, my mom complains, so they can build McMansions. But not the Pearsons. My parents moved here for Dad's work and he's been at the same company since before I was born. We're comfortable but we're rich like some of our new neighbors.

The lights and traffic of El Camino fade as I wind my way along my street. 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.

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 swat at their younger brothers and

sisters like flies. Hayes would never do that. My stomach tightens. He's only been gone a few weeks. Dartmouth is so far away.

#

I unlock the front door and pocket my key. I hear the hum of the Friday night football game on TV coming 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 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 hit their little brothers and sisters 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. 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 that leads to Dad's study and the game room. The football game gets louder and louder as I approach. I go into the game room, ready to ask, "Hey, who's winning?" like I always do. Dad is 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. I could wake Dad up, but why? 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. I 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?

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. I slip into the room. Her dressing table light is on. There she is, fully dressed, neatly laid out on top of the bedspread, her arms folded across her chest. The room has always smelled of the hyacinth sachet she uses. But tonight there's something else. I sniff. It's pungent almost like natural gas, but sweeter. I know there is no pipeline up here. 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 has specially ordered for her. But she also smells like something else, like wine, or not wine.

My mother is beautiful. She has Snow White's raven hair, pink cheeks and rosy lips. She looks young and at peace. The lines of her face are smoothed out, and in the dim light, she looks almost like a girl. At 46 years old, she's slender and athletic. She used to be popular, I think. We have photo albums and she was always in the middle of big parties. Dad says he was lucky to be the one she chose. Mom always denies it, but smiles, pleased with the compliment. It's their little routine. Some people say I look like her, but I don't. I do have her hazel eyes, but Hayes got her hair. True my cheeks are always rosy but my skin is darker like Dad's. We tan. She and Hayes burn. But like Mom, when I get embarrassed I turn bright red like a fire engine. I'm pretty enough, not gonna lie, but "beautiful?" Not feeling it.

I shiver. It's cold in here. The window's open. It's like the temperature dropped 10 degrees since I got home. Just a few days in, autumn has already forgotten about summer. I close the

window. 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 loves us to pieces. She's warm like the afghan.

I arrange the afghan on mom as gently as I can so I won't wake her. There's something spilled on her sheets. It's brownish 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. I mean she and Dad usually have wine at dinner. 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.

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. But 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. I open the window again.

## Chapter Two

I feel, then see the shadow. I blink. I don't remember lying down, but here I am, stretched out on the floor under the open window. Dad stands over me, his eyes narrowed in concern. He reaches over and pushes the window down. Did I fall asleep? My eyes are dry and itchy. I blink. Dad taps my shoe with his hand and raises a finger to his lips, reminding me to be quiet. He motions me up and I follow him out into the hall. I step around the open bottle of Jack Daniels that I left on the floor. He closes the door noiselessly and leads me gently down the hall. We stand at the top of the stairs.

Neither one of us says anything. But I have a million questions. But they stay locked inside my head. Dad exhales and runs his fingers through his wavy hair. He looks so uncomfortable. I almost feel sorry for him. He shifts his

weight. He should take his wingtips off. They must be killing him.

"Is there anything you want to talk about, Laney?" he asks.

I feel the flash of heat and energy. Didn't he see the open bottle? Isn't he surprised? And then another jolt. He knows! Of course, he knows! Not only does he know, but he also doesn't mind. It's their little secret. My throat is dry and I swallow hard.

"How was the game?" I ask, which is the dumbest thing I could say.

"Homestead lost by three," comes his even dumber answer.

I turn toward my room.

"Too bad," I murmur, my head swimming. Dad steps forward; his arms arc toward me. Whoa, what is this? He leans across the space between us and puts an arm around my shoulder while pressing his ear to the crown of my head as if he is trying to hear what's going on in there. Is this a hug? I don't remember the last time he hugged me -- even fake hugged me. This is too weird. My eyes are suddenly hot. I pull away. I hear Dad choke out "goodnight."

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I plop down on the foot of my bed. Guilt and fear roll over

me in quick succession like clouds before a downpour. It's more than teen angst, Hayes, I mutter. Something is wrong with her, wrong with us. And Dad not only knows but lives with it and allows it. I flop backward on my bed, staring up at the dove white ceiling and I feel like a blind person who suddenly sees. Not a miracle cure, but like I have been walking around with a bag on my head my whole life, and look, the bag can come off. All I had to do was take the bag off my head. But what about Hayes? He probably doesn't even know either!

I know it's late on the East Coast but it's Friday night. Hayes, the night owl, will still be awake. I text him, "Can you Duo?" Like that, the Duo app sounds. I click the camera icon and his face fills the screen.

"What's up?" Hayes says. "Anything wrong?"

"Does something have to be wrong for me to say 'hi'?" I say. I can hear how defensive I sound.

"So what's wrong?" he says with a smile. His narrow deep-set blue eyes are slits. I love the way they crinkle at the corners when he smiles. Mom's dark hair and fair skin; Dad's blue eyes that crinkle when they smile. When he goes to the beach or has a lacrosse game, he's got to slather on the sunscreen. He looks like he spends all day inside reading, which is sort of true. He always has a book in his hand, but he's the



most well-rounded person I know. He loves tinkering with engines and machines. He's ambitious but what he's ambitious to be he doesn't know yet. Mainly he just loves to learn. An old-timey scholar. Me? I don't mind studying for the test, but get me out of the classroom ASAP.

"It's kind of quiet here," I stutter out.

"So, it's taken you, what, less than a month to miss me?" he says with a smile.

"How's school?" I say.

"Hard. So what's wrong?"

"It's Friday night, how come you aren't out with friends?" I say, buying time, not knowing how to begin.

"They weren't kidding about the drinking culture here," he says. "That's all anyone wants to do. I got a study group in the morning, so I figured tonight was not the night to get shit-faced."

I can't tell if he's joking or not. I've never seen Hayes take a drink in his life, but he's just given me the perfect segue.

"Did you know that Mom drinks?" He looks blankly back at me. "I mean," I stammer. "Did you know that Mom drinks like in bed?"

"Ah!" he says sitting back in his chair. "So you finally

figured out she's an alcoholic." It's a statement, not a question. I hate how he's almost smug. I swallow and gulp some air. Not true! It's not true.

"No she's not! But yeah maybe she drinks too much. Do you know why?" I ask.

"Because she's an alcoholic?"

"So you and Mom have talked about this?"

"Course not."

"With Dad?"

"Seriously, Laney?"

"Well, how can say that? I mean I just found her in bed with a bottle of Jack Daniels. Is that how you found out?" He stares at me pointedly, his blue eyes practically pin me to the wall. I mean it's like he's always known. A ball of rage forms in my gut. He knew and did nothing?

"How come Dad never got Mom to go to rehab or something?"

"Don't you remember?" A terrible silence fills the space. "Maybe you were too young. There was a pretty big blow-up" He doesn't offer anything else. Something about this feels familiar but I can't touch it right now. My stomach churns.

"Well how come you didn't do something?"

"For one thing, I was like 8 years old."

"That'd make me 6. But I don't remember."

He shrugs.

"How about when you grew up?" I ask.

"Not my problem," he says.

"That's bullshit, Hayes."

"I figure that if two adults can't figure out their lives, what can a kid do? The parents reached some kind of truce," Hayes continues in his annoyingly laid back style that all the girls who aren't his sister find super sexy. "The broken system works well enough," he adds. He pauses and then looks directly at me, grimacing.

"So are you okay?"

"Why didn't I realize before that she was ... you know..."

"It's okay, Laney, you can go ahead and say it. Al-co-hol-ic," he says emphasizing each syllable. He waits. I can't say it.

"My advice?" he continues. He pauses and then I realize he is waiting for my permission. I nod my head, vigorously. Maybe he can tell me how to fix this; I really want to know.

"Don't meddle or try to fix Mom and Dad. This is the choice they have made." His voice sounds clinical. I'm surprised at the callousness. As if he reads my mind, he adds, "Look, it's hard to accept, but I had to, and you just have to get over it. Don't let it spoil your junior year. You don't want to get mired in

trying to fix them. This is a big year for you so you need to concentrate on your future. Theirs is set."

"You're so fatalistic."

"Realistic. Big difference. I don't want you burning your energy worrying about the parents, you know. That's not your job. You're still a kid." He sounds about 50 years old instead of 18. I gulp some air and look away. I force my voice to sound even.

"How come we never talked like this before?" I ask. He shrugs.

"The important thing is we're talking now...but did something happen?" He moves his face closer to the screen and I feel like he is in the room with me here.

"I don't know. I just feel cheated."

"By me?" His voice is soft, full of concern...for me! I suddenly want to cry.

"I don't know," I whine. "Everybody! I told myself this whole story about Mom, you know, why she couldn't be there like other moms, like she was special, y'know. Like we're different."

Now, I'm really blinking back those tears.

"Believe me I know. I had to figure it out too. There's no guide book."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you love Mom so much, Laney. Just like I do."

And that's when I lose it. I start crying. His image dissolves before my eyes but I hear him. I cuff at my eyes with my sleeve. Then reach for a tissue from the box by my bed.

"Hey Laney, it's okay. It's okay. You're okay. Okay?"

I nod as I blow my nose.

"How's school?" he asks. His voice is chipper.

He drags details out of me until I am breathing normally again. I ask him about his girlfriend Celia who went to Dartmouth with him. Where is she? He says she's going to rush for a sorority so she's out making friends. He also says that all the upperclassmen are hitting on the Freshman girls, which is really hard to stand by and watch. He'd like to put his fist in a few faces. I remind him Celia's crazy about him, which she is, and then the talk dwindles off. He tells me to call him any time. And then he says a quick, "Love you, Sis," before his eyes crinkle their smile at me and he signs off, leaving me staring at the keypad on my phone. Has Hayes ever said, "Love You, Sis" before? And what about that hug from Dad? I bury my face in my pillow.

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What they say is right. It does feel better to cry. You want to hold back cause you know big kids don't cry. We're all

mature now. But once you start, it's hard to stop. I hug myself, glad for the solitude. No one to see me. Nobody to explain myself to.

I'm startled by a movement out of the corner of my eye. It's me! In the mirror. I hardly recognize me. I stare back at myself in the mirror. Sandy hair like dad. Mom's hazel green eyes. Which parent do I take after on the inside? Am I more like Mom or like Dad? I learned in Bio that alcoholism has a genetic component. It runs in families. Am I going to be an alcoholic? Or am I already one? If I don't drink, I won't have to find out if I've got the gene. Maybe that's why Hayes never drinks. I see the way kids act when they're drinking at parties, so I'm never even tempted. I know how bad things can get.

I'm only 16 but suddenly my life feels over. I mean what's the point? You have fun when you're a kid and then you grow up and the bad stuff starts happening. My eyes fall on my desk and the stack of homework to do this weekend. I don't feel like sleeping, I could start my homework I guess. I sit at my desk, open my laptop and bring up my browser. I type the word "alcoholism" into the search box. There's tons of clinical info of course. I can even take a test to see if I am one and how to tell if a family member is one. I don't need the internet to tell me what I already know, based on my own evidence.

Mom always goes to bed right after dinner, right? Sometimes she's doesn't even make it to dinner. She's tired after her long day. Dad or Hayes helped me with my homework, back when I needed it. What about all the times Mom was late to my choir performances or soccer games and then acted like she'd been there the whole time? Or the times she didn't even come? Memories swim around in my head: "Can we give you a ride home, Laney?... We've got plenty of room?... You did great, Laney... You're mom's going to be so proud when you tell her." Mom never comes to school to help out on workdays. She never joined the PTA: "I'm happy to write a check, Honey. I just don't have time for volunteer work. It's enough keeping this family running and this house together."

Since Hayes left, no one has even come over to hang-out. I mean with Hayes here our house was the place to be. When did my friends stop coming over for sleepovers? Did I stop inviting them? Or did they stop saying "yes"? Or did they tell their moms they never saw Laney's mom? Hayes's friends were always around. I guess I assumed everybody's mom went to bed early, after splitting a bottle of wine over dinner with their dads or boyfriends. All the time, the real drinking was waiting for her upstairs. Like a bolt of lightning, I am crushingly awake to the truth about Mom.

"Alcoholic."

There I said it.