

Chapter One of *When the Bough Breaks*

“Okay, Rachel. It’s your turn now. Truth or Dare.”

It was Friday night and Leap Day, February 29. Teresa, my best friend since we were eleven years old, and I were sitting cross-legged facing each other on her queen-sized bed, hanging out together as we usually did on Friday nights. We were halfway through ninth grade at Central Junior High, and once the summer was over, we’d be heading for Central High as sophomores. I was scared to death to start high school, but at the same time, part of me could hardly wait.

“Well, Truth is dumb, because you know everything about me!” Not only that, Teresa looked like me, too. We both had big brown eyes and long, naturally curly hair, but where hers was more of a dark blonde, mine was a bright yellow blonde. Blondest blonde. And I was a true blonde, too--not a fake, dye-job, bleached blonde.

“Okay, then I guess it’s Dare?”

I shrugged. “I guess so!”

Teresa grinned back at me. “Then I dare you . . . to prank call Jason West!”

I couldn’t stop myself from gasping. “Jason West?” I’d had a huge crush on Jason since sixth grade, and Teresa knew it. He didn’t, though, and that’s the way I wanted it to stay. “I can’t call Jason West!”

Teresa only laughed. “Why not?”

“Duh--everyone’s phones have caller ID. He’ll see the number!”

Teresa stretched behind her back towards her nightstand before lightly tossing something at me. “Then you’ll have to use this!”

I stared at the tiny pink cell phone that had landed in my lap. “Since when did you get a cell phone?”

“I didn’t. It’s my cousin Cindy’s. My aunt and uncle and their kids were here last weekend, and she left it behind on accident.”

“I can’t waste her minutes on a prank call!”

Teresa grinned evilly. “Yes, you can, and it serves her right. She bored me all weekend bragging about how she has a cell phone now. And then she left it here anyway! What a ding-dong.”

I giggled, but my heart wouldn't stop pounding. "He'll still see a number on his phone!" "So what? He'll only see Cindy's number. Besides--if he calls back, he'll get her voicemail. Just say you're her. She'll never know." Teresa snatched the phone from my lap and thrust it an inch from my face. "Come on. You picked Dare, so you have to do it!"

I jumped back a bit. "Okay, okay--you don't have to shove it up my nose!" We both giggled while I flipped the cell phone's lid up and stared at the shiny blue number pad. "I don't even know what to say--"

"How about something like this: `Jason? Is that you, Jason? Your voice sounds so sexy on the phone.'" Teresa said her lines in the most seductive voice she could muster without giggling too much. I couldn't help laughing. "See? It's easy. Now it's your turn!"

"I don't even know how to use this thing!"

"Just punch in the number and hit Send. Here--I'll do it for you."

Before I knew what was happening, Teresa had snatched the phone back and pressed in the numbers. I was fighting to stop giggling nervously, my mind racing to think of something to say for my prank call to Jason West.

"It's ringing!" Teresa handed me the phone, and while I held it to my ear, we both giggled harder. Ring number one. My heart kept pounding. Ring number two. It was pounding faster--

"Hello?" A woman's voice. Probably Mrs. West.

I gripped the cell phone tightly to my ear. "Hi--is Jason there?"

"Your voice is shaking," Teresa whispered. I grabbed a pillow and threw it at her.

"Just a moment, please." I heard a dull clunk as Jason's mom put the phone down.

"What are you going to say?" Teresa was bouncing up and down excitedly. I quickly covered the cell phone with my hand.

"Shut up, will you? He'll be on--"

"Hello?"

Jason West! My eyes nearly popped out of my skull.

"Jason?"

"Yeah. Who's--"

My heart was beating at an incredible rate, but somehow, I managed to speak. “Oh, Jason, you have no idea how long I’ve been trying to get a hold of you! Have you been waiting for me very long?”

“Waiting? For what?” Jason sounded so confused I nearly burst into a fit of nervous giggles.

“Well, my car’s got a flat tire, and--”

“Angela? Is that you?”

“Angela? Who’s Angela?” I made my voice sound confused as well.

“Wait a second. Who’s this?”

“Jason, I can’t believe you! It’s me, Cindy!”

Silence reigned for a long second. “I don’t know any Cindy.”

“Isn’t this 5-5-5-7-7-0-3?”

“No, this is 5-5-5-7-7-0-2.”

I made myself laugh. “Oh! Oh, I’m so sorry! I guess I dialed the wrong number. My boyfriend’s name is Jason, too. Kind of ironic, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I feel so stupid! I’m sorry for bothering you--this is totally embarrassing!”

“It’s okay, really.” I could tell he really did think it was okay. He didn’t sound annoyed at all. Almost amused, actually.

“Well, thank you for putting up with me. You sound really nice.”

“Well, so do you.”

I smiled into the tiny receiver. “Have a nice evening.”

“You, too.”

As soon as I hit the End button, Teresa released her tight hold on her mouth and screamed. I screamed, too, and we both laughed until we fell off the bed.

“Your voice how did you change it to be so--so sexy?” Teresa gasped.

“I don’t know--I just did!” I gasped back between laughs.

“You should think about acting instead of being a writer!”

That brought my laughing to a screeching halt. “What? Don’t you think I can write?”

Teresa rolled her eyes and threw a pillow at me. “Of course you can write, but wow--you were amazing!”

I wasn’t sure I was amazing, but I was definitely amazed I’d been brave enough to call and talk to Jason West, easily the hottest guy at Central Junior High and sure to be the hottest guy at Central High, too.

Teresa stood up and frowned as I struggled to get up, too. “By the way, who’s Angela?”

I shrugged and sat back down on her bed. “I don’t know. Jason thought at first I was someone named Angela.”

Teresa considered this for a moment before lifting an eyebrow. “I wonder if he meant Angela Barnett!”

Angela Barnett? She was a year ahead of us, blonde and too beautiful, on the high school drill team, and chased by way too many boys. But with all of that going for her, she wasn’t exactly the nicest girl in the school. Too popular and snobby for her own good.

“I don’t know. Why do you think he meant her?”

Teresa shrugged and sat down by me. “I’ve seen her VW Bug at his house a few times. Just makes sense to me.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Jason with Angela Barnett? Ick. She’s snooty and snotty. He can do better.”

Teresa nodded. “Yeah, he can. She can’t, though.”

I had to agree with Teresa on that one. There wasn’t anyone better than Jason West. I’d known that since sixth grade. Great looks, super personality, smart, nice, and good LDS, too. I sighed and lay back on Teresa’s bed. “He’d be the perfect boyfriend!”

Teresa grinned. “Unfortunately, every other girl thinks so, too!”

I sighed loudly again while Teresa jumped off the bed. “Come on, Rachel. Forget about Jason. I’m starving. Let’s order a pizza and watch a movie.”

Teresa stuck into the DVD player in the family room an old 1980s Bill Murray comedy that one of her older brothers assured us was a classic, and we laughed and ate ourselves sick. It

wasn't until the movie was over, and we'd made ice cream sundaes with chocolate fudge and gummy bears and eaten ourselves sick again that I squinted at the clock on the DVD player.

"It's almost midnight--my brother Ryan should've picked me up by now!"

Teresa ran for her cousin's cell phone and threw it at me again. "Here--call home."

I pressed the phone to my ear before shaking my head. "The line's busy."

"I'll see if someone here can give you a ride."

Luckily for me, Teresa had a million older brothers and sisters. Peggy, two years older than Teresa, was still up and grudgingly agreed to take me home. Teresa rode along, and because Peggy didn't want to listen to us giggle and "act stupid," she blasted the radio for the three miles from Teresa's house to mine.

"Hey--wasn't that the turn to my house?" I yelled over the radio's deafening roar.

"Yep--it sure was!" Teresa screeched back.

"Where are we going?" I screamed back.

Teresa laughed at my apparent stupidity. "We're making the rounds first, dope!"

"The rounds?"

"Yeah--I want to go by Brian's house! And Mike's house!" Teresa piped up as loudly as she could.

"What about Bill?" Peggy yelled, rolling her eyes.

I couldn't believe Peggy was being so cool, because she knew Teresa was in love with way too many guys at our school. I giggled alongside Teresa as we slowly drove past each guy's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of any of them, until a few quick, casual turns down familiar roads had me sitting up stiff and straight.

"Where are we going?"

Peggy laughed and looked at me in the rearview mirror. "Like you don't know!"

Panic set in as I realized where we were headed. "Don't go by Jason's house--please! Just take me home!"

Now Teresa was laughing at me, too. "Ah, come on, Rachel! Aren't you curious to know who goes over to Jason's on a Friday night?"

I fell back to slouch in my seat at what I saw once we slowly drove by Jason's house. Angela Barnett's unmistakable baby blue Volkswagen Bug was in his driveway.

Minutes later, Peggy stomped on the brakes and hit the radio On/Off button. "Holy cow, Rachel--what's going on at your house tonight? Another wild party of Ryan's?"

Teresa and I had been so busy giggling in the backseat over my chat with the great Jason West that I hadn't even noticed Peggy had turned down my street. I turned to look out the window and was nearly blinded by the blue and red lights.

Teresa whistled low. "Wow--there's a cop at your house!"

I stared out the window at that completely outofplace police car in front of my house and couldn't breathe. Then panic kicked in, and I was frantically climbing over Teresa to get out of the car and into my house.

I couldn't move once I stepped through the doorway. There were two police officers in the house. Two. One of the officers was sitting by Mom, who was crumpled on the couch, her face in her hands, crying hysterically. And Ryan, my seventeen-year-old brother--he was sitting in a recliner near her, his eyes bloodshot, staring vacantly ahead of him. His hands were shaking. I could see that, even though he had a hand flat on each of his knees.

"What--what's going on?" Somehow that whispered out of my lungs. "What? . . ."

Ryan looked up at me dully with dark, bloodshot eyes, though there weren't any tears on his face. "Dad was in a car accident."

I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe--I couldn't hear what the other police officer standing beside me was trying to say. "What do you mean--'Dad was in a car accident'?"

Ryan just kept staring through me. "Just what I said. He went to pick you up. Some" Ryan used a considerably foul word here--"driving on the wrong side of the road, going too fast, hit him head on. He was on his way to pick you up from your stupid friend's house!"

The room was starting to spin funny. Mom was calling to me to come sit down by her, reaching her arms out to me while she continued to sob.

"But he's okay, right? I mean, he's going to be okay. He has to be!" The panic was rising in my throat, strangling my words, and now I was shaking, too.

Ryan looked away while Mom kept begging me to sit down by her. And then the police officer standing by me said the worst thing in the entire world. Something no one should have to hear about their dad. Ever. Not from a stranger, and not now--not when I wasn't even sixteen yet. It wasn't time--it was too soon--too soon--

“I’m sorry, honey. There was nothing anyone could have done. Your father was killed instantly . . .”

There was a chair near the door, and I dissolved into it, silent screams echoing inside my head.

At that exact moment, I realized that the world had truly ended. I’d always wondered what that moment would be like, and now I knew. I could see Mom and Ryan, but Dad--Dad, whose presence filled every inch of any room he entered--Dad, who was big and loud, full of life and always fun, always wild and crazy, warm and outgoing, and spontaneous--Dad, who loved to take us camping and exploring, who loved to joke and sing and even sang in the church choir--he wasn’t anywhere.

I knew without a doubt, even during that horrible, first moment, that there was no way any of us would ever be able to overcome this night. Or any of it--this horrible It that had now invaded my life, and Ryan’s, and Mom’s. And Robert’s, too--my oldest brother, who’d moved out and married a couple of years ago.

“Robert?” I whispered.

Ryan answered flatly. “We called him. He’s flying home tonight.”

I sat there and felt my heart pounding as nausea gripped my stomach, forcing me to bend forward while I held my head in both hands.

I will never get over this. How could I when I had no idea, even, how I was ever going to be able to get out of this chair and stand up again?

This was a fact that sat heavily on me now, a fact I knew would never leave me.