

When the Bough Breaks

Late 1960's. Time of the Vietnam War, hippies, fishnet hose, and mini-skirts. Add a flirtatious wink from the baby blues of 'love'em and leave 'em' Parker Shane and sixteen-year-old Darlene Moore wonders if she'll ever be the same.

Winner of the 2009 P&E Readers Poll in the YA category, *When the Bough Breaks* is more than a romance tale. Combining suspense, intrigue, and danger, Miss Mae pens a riveting story that keeps readers on the edge of their seats and gasping, "What's next?"

WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS

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Published by Miss Mae

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Acknowledgment

To the great Creator Almighty who makes all things possible, I submit my most humble gratitude. I want to acknowledge the patient support of my loving husband, daughter, and son-in-law. I'd like to acknowledge the continued support and faith of my loving family, my extended family in my church, and to all my friends, both online and those "live". Thanks for reading Miss Mae's works and for spreading the word.

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Autumn, 1967

CHAPTER 1

The crop of blond hair readily identified Parker Shane. It'd been the only thing Darlene glimpsed when he breezed down the streets of Dalesville in his red Thunderbird convertible. Though she heard plenty of gossip about the ex-Marine, she hadn't seen him up close and personal.

Until now.

Like a grounded fence post, he stood straight and sturdy. Rounded biceps flexed below the sleeves of his white t-shirt that stretched like a second skin. The taut fabric of his faded jeans pressed down the length of his long legs, the denim refusing to crinkle as he strolled through the doorway of Fat Man's drugstore. Easing atop a stool at the soda counter, he hiked a tennis-shoed foot on the rung and swiveled around. His lazy glance gave the place an unhurried once-over.

Darlene dropped her spellbound gaze to the floor, then raised it ever so slightly to peek through her lashes. Parker directed his casual look at the brunette who sat in front of Darlene. Lowered lids hid the expression in the girl's eyes, but a smile slowly dimpled at the corner of her full lips.

Darlene sat straighter. *Why is he staring at Gena? He has some nerve, with her boyfriend sitting right beside her.* Swiftly, she looked again at Parker, then at her sister. *Gena, notice Roy. Flirt with him!* She cleared her throat in an effort to gain her sister's attention. If Gena heard, she didn't respond. Digging into her pocketbook, she extracted a small compact case and flipped it open.

Warning bells shrilled in Darlene's mind. Something had to be done, and quickly. Leaning forward, she praised the young man who sat next to Gena. "You're such a swell guy, Roy." Deliberately, she raised her voice an octave higher, loud enough to reach her sister's ears. "Thanks for buying these ice cream sundaes for us."

Roy's hand stilled from where he busily cleaned his glasses with a handkerchief. A warm grin spread his generous mouth. "No sweat," he said. "Margo needs a break from babysitting every now and then." His dark eyes teased the blonde who sat beside Darlene.

"Do I ever." Margo licked hot fudge off the end of her spoon and shuddered dramatically. "I'll never understand why my folks had eight kids."

"But you didn't need us tagging along on your date today," Darlene insisted, frowning at Gena when she applied a fresh layer of lipstick. "You and Gena should spend time together."

With a good-natured laugh, Roy re-settled the glasses on his nose. "Hey, I wouldn't pass up a chance to be in the company of the three most gorgeous chicks in town." He reached for Gena's hand, and raised her fingers to his lips. "She and I will have our special moments later, won't we, sweetheart?"

"Mmm." Gena's tone sounded preoccupied. Her free hand snapped the compact shut while her gaze flickered to Parker's broad-shouldered form.

“That’s cool,” Darlene replied to Roy. “Would you like Margo and me to leave you alone now? We can...” A squeak came from the backside of Darlene’s booth, the noise cutting into her words. The occupant behind her rose to his feet and brushed by on his way to the jukebox. A moment later, a fast drum tempo of the latest Beatles song blared from the machine. The loud music made it almost impossible to talk, so she used it like a cover to hide her covert watch on Parker. Without warning, he flitted his blue eyes her way.

An odd sizzle raced through her, hammering her pulse to a dangerous level. *Stop it. Look away.* But she couldn’t. As if mesmerized, her gaze clung to his.

Parker held her eye contact for a moment longer. Then, he grinned, a slow, easy, confident grin before he swiveled back to the counter and beckoned to the soda jerk.

Darlene realized she was holding her breath. Slowly, she exhaled, air through her teeth hissing like a deflating tire. Drained of strength, she slumped against her seat.

Gena locked a captivated stare on Parker. Darlene grimaced, her skin prickling with trepidation. She’d never seen her sister look at Roy with such admiration.

She dared another peek. With his profile to her, she read Parker’s lips as he asked the teenage employee, “Who’s the redhead?”

Darlene gulped. Hopping out of her seat, she grabbed Roy’s hand and yanked him to his feet.

“Something the matter?” His brows rose in surprise.

“Take us home, Roy.” Desperately, she sought her brain for a viable excuse. “I just remembered I have to study for a Biology test.”

“But we haven’t finished.” Gena folded her arms over her chest and jutted her chin at a stubborn angle.

“You don’t mind if we leave, do you?” Darlene threw a pleading look at Margo. “You know how cranky Mr. Willis gets if anyone makes a grade lower than a B.”

Margo hesitated, glanced at her half eaten sundae, then laid her wadded napkin on the table. “Sure.” She shook her head. “No problem.”

Darlene leaned across the booth to reach for Gena. “Come on.”

“Darlene!” With an exasperated sigh, she rose slowly to her feet. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I have to get home, that’s all.” She prodded all three ahead and followed on their heels. Before the door shut on her hasty exit, she glanced at the far wall. Through the mirror that hung over the soda fountains, her eyes met Parker’s reflection. Another easy grin broke across his tanned face, but he added something else to the devastating affect. He dropped one eyelid in a slow, deliberate wink.

“I have to talk to you.” Darlene dogged Gena up the stairs to their shared bedroom.

“Hmm?” Gena tossed her purse into a corner wicker chair and immediately settled in front of the dressing table. She combed her silken strands slowly, humming a nondescript tune under her breath.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Darlene said. “We have to talk.”

“I wonder if he’s twenty or twenty-one?” Gena cocked her head in a musing gesture. “He spent two years in Vietnam, so he’s probably twenty.” She twisted on her stool to face Darlene. “But did he look like he might be twenty-one to you?”

Darlene gnashed her teeth. “We need to talk about Roy. *You* and Roy.”

Gena blinked. “Why?”

“Because!” Frustrated almost to the point of tears, Darlene stomped her foot. “He’s your steady! And he’ll be leaving for the Army in a couple of days!”

“Oh.” Gena picked up an emery board and ran it across the end of a thumbnail. “Yeah. I’m going to miss him.”

“You could’ve fooled me with the way you acted at Fat Man’s.”

Gena gave Darlene her full attention. One smooth brow arched up her forehead. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean the way you forgot all about Roy and dolled yourself up the minute Parker Shane strutted inside.”

“I did not.” Gena’s voice hardened, and before Darlene could contradict, she warned, “Don’t correct me. You’re my little sister, not my mother.”

“Well, it was a good thing I was there. Somebody had to keep you from making an idiot out of yourself.” Darlene planted her hands on her hips. “Have you forgotten all the talk about Parker?”

“Have you?” Gena shot back. “Of how he saved the lives of his squad during an ambush?”

“That’s not what I mean.” Too late, Darlene realized that particular aspect probably added an element of ‘*heroic romance*’ to Parker’s persona. She hurried to jerk her sister back to reality. “It’s his ‘*love ‘em and leave ‘em*’ reputation. He’s a classic playboy.”

“That’s plain old gossip.” Gena waved a dismissive hand, as though the subject bored her.

“There must be some truth to it. Otherwise, how did it get spread in the first place?” Before Gena could interject, Darlene went on. “The fact is, no decent girl would be caught dead with the likes of him.”

“You’re being ridiculous, Leny,” Gena scoffed, calling Darlene by her childhood nickname. “I’m not getting ‘*caught*’ with Parker Shane.”

“You mean that?” Darlene gave her sister a suspicious look. “I got real uneasy at Fat Man’s with the way you ogled him.”

“Ogled?” Gena laughed out loud. “Oh, come on. Can’t I dig a groovy guy without getting ‘*caught*’ with him?”

“Well, I just didn’t want you to forget Roy.” Something about Gena’s attitude still bothered Darlene. She decided it might be a good idea to push Roy’s merits. “He’s so patriotic. I mean, he’s leaving college to join the service. Other guys are running off to Canada to avoid the draft, but Roy’s volunteered to go.”

“Uh huh.” Gena opened a drawer of the table and rummaged through its contents. She withdrew a bottle of nail polish and shook it vigorously.

“And—and he’s a snappy dresser, he drives a new car,” Darlene pressed on, “and his dad is a big shot at Ryan Works. Why, Roy’s the most eligible guy in all of Dalesville.”

“You don’t have to polish his armor, Leny. What’s the matter?” Gena’s cheek dimpled prettily. “Don’t you trust me to know when I have a good thing?”

Before Darlene could answer, the downstairs telephone rang. Gena jumped up. “I’ll get it.” At the threshold, she turned and gave Darlene a wink. “I bet that’s my white knight calling.” Her giggle hung in the air as the door shut behind her.

Frowning, Darlene crossed to the window and looked out. A now too familiar sight met her eyes. Parker driving his old T-bird convertible streaked past the house and on down the street. Her gaze followed the car until it disappeared.

Why is Gena being so-so-facetious about Roy? She wouldn’t really two-time him, would she? The memory of Parker Shane’s blond good looks rose before her, sending a finger of icy foreboding down her spine. I’m going to keep my eye on him. He might be trouble.