



A PREQUEL TO
Somebody's Home

OVER THE
EDGE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KAIRA ROUDA

Praise for Over the Edge

Over The Edge is the perfect accompaniment to Kaira Rouda's stunning thriller, *Somebody's Home*. In this enticing prequel, we get a tantalizing bite of what drives each of the main characters: hate, passion, ambition, revenge, setting the table for the main course—the deliciously sinister, *Somebody's Home*.

—Heather Gudenkauf, *New York Times* bestselling author

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Contents

Praise for Over the Edge

Title Page

Description

Jess Jones

Julie Jones

Roger Jones

Tom Dean

Sandi

Doug Dean

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It's a brisk, foggy Wednesday evening in Orange County, California.

In this gripping prequel to *Somebody's Home*, you'll meet the cast of characters who unknowingly are on a collision course. Discover what, exactly, is pushing each of them *Over The Edge*. None of them know it, but this weekend is when everything changes.

Forever.

One bad decision . . . Jess Jones is fed up with just about everything. Especially her mom Julie. She's trying to keep her grades up, and her time at home minimal, until college next fall. Then, she's out of there for good. She just needs to keep focused and not let anything or anyone derail her from her dreams. What she doesn't realize is she can't control anything and one bad decision at a party can ruin everything.

One kind gesture . . . Julie Jones has other plans, but she hasn't shared them with her daughter, yet. She knows Jess is at a breaking point, and she gets it. Julie's been pushed too far, too. All the money in the world isn't enough to stay in her loveless marriage. She knows she needs to show Jess how strong she really is before it's too late.

One set up . . . Roger Jones is rich, as he'll tell anyone who will listen. He likes to get his way, and he usually does – in business, and with the ladies. Sure, he's married, but he has needs Julie doesn't understand. Besides, he gives his family everything money can buy. In return, they appear by his side, props to a perfect life that's about to come tumbling down.

One evil plan . . . Tom Dean is about to be homeless after his parents sold his home out from under him. He's 23 years old, and his parttime bartending job won't cover rent in Orange County. But he has a plan. He's made new friends, spent a week with them in the desert, and they promise to help him once he completes his initiation into their group. He'll do that this weekend. What he doesn't know is fate will intercede in the form of a gorgeous teenage girl.

One broken heart . . . Sandi Dean is a preacher's wife, mom, and proud homemaker. Proud, that is, until her husband lost her job, and they were forced to move, giving up the only home Sandi has ever

wanted. She's starting over in a strange town, trying to settle her younger sons Davis and Danny, without any help from her husband, of course. Doug's behavior has grown worse since his humiliating departure from the pulpit of the biggest church in Orange County. Sandi doesn't know if she can watch him fall even lower. She doesn't think she can bare it. It may be time for her to finally make a stand, a stand she should have made when Tom was a child, before he was too far gone.

One desperate man . . . Pastor Doug Dean is angry. Hurt. And he wants his old job back. The problem is the congregation has moved on and has made it clear to him. But Doug can't let go. Won't let go. And he doesn't know it yet, but this weekend he'll be called back into action by the very community that kicked him out. Unfortunately for the pastor, though, stepping into the limelight again won't save him from the terror he's unleashed.

Find out what happens two days before *Somebody's Home* begins. The spark that lights the flames and pushes everyone *Over The Edge*.

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JESS JONES

Oceanside, California
Wednesday Evening
The Jones Residence

My mom's so called book club is in full swing. And of course, she had to have them over here tonight, the night before my big AP English exam. Another high-pierced laugh jars me out of my studies. She told me there was no way she could move it to next week, but she couldn't give me a reason why.

In atypical Mom fashion, she just told me no. End of topic. She's never that firm with me, about anything. Pretty much, I rule this roost. Except for tonight, that is. My dad's out, as usual, and I'm stuck in with a gaggle of these annoying women.

I can't take this much longer. Mom promised they'd all be gone by nine tonight, but it's almost ten and they're still here, screech laughing, loud talking, guzzling wine and tequila and sodas, and gossiping about the latest scandals of Oceanside. Let's face it, these women don't have anything else to do.

But I do. I need to keep my GPA up, even though I'm already admitted to USC. I've worked too hard to let this book club mess it up.

I call my mom's phone, but it rolls to voicemail. She's left me no choice but to go out there and "ruin everything" as she's fond of saying about almost everything I do.

Fine. Here comes a teenage tornado, mommy dearest.

I yank open my bedroom door and stomp down the hall. I barrel into the kitchen and ignore all the women who try to say hi or ask me about school.

"Where's my mom?" I ask, louder than I meant to. But where is she. "Where's Julie?"

One of her so-called-friends, this one wearing an uber-tight blue dress that would be inappropriate literally anywhere but especially at a supposed book club blinks her fake eyelashes at me and points toward the ocean. “She’s outside, on the deck. Some important call or something.”

So my mom can hide out and get peace from this group but I can’t? “Thanks, look, I have a huge test tomorrow and I really need to study, and you guys are making it impossible to concentrate,” I say to the five women gathered around me in the kitchen.

I make eye contact with Mrs. Rogers as she gulps half of her glass of champagne. “You know we have the AP English test tomorrow. Stan has it, too.”

She stops drinking and stares at me. “Oh gosh, you’re right, Jess. And look at the time. We’ll just clear out. No need to bother your mom. Girls, book club is over.”

“Thanks Mrs. Rogers,” I say. “I’ll tell mom you all said thanks and goodbye.”

“Please do,” says blue dress bimbo.

I lean against the kitchen counter and watch as they make what can only be described as an impressively quick withdraw from the house. In moments, it’s just me and Mrs. Rogers.

“I’m worried about your mom,” she whispers. “She seems off. Do you know what’s wrong?”

I stare at Stan’s mom and realize she and her son have the exact same face. Long, big forehead, dangling ears. My mom and I don’t look anything alike. She is perfect, a man-made form of perfect that does as advertised: draw attention from men. Well, all men except my dad, but that’s another story.

“What’s wrong with my mom? Oh, I don’t know. She seems fine to me,” I tell her. I’m lying. “I mean, look at this place. She has everything anyone could want, right?”

Mrs. Rogers seemed unconvinced. Her eyes squint and refocus on me. “Well, good luck on the test. I’ll tell Stan you said hi.”

“Please do,” I say.

She turns and walks toward the front door, high heels tapping the floor with purpose.

I take a moment to look around our grand mansion hugging the Southern California coast. Like I told Mrs. Rogers, we have everything.

I take a deep breath and start back down the long hall to my bedroom. College is months away. Each day I mark a big red X on the Sierra Club calendar hanging on the wall in my room. Each X is a day closer to freedom.

I cannot wait to get out of here.



JULIE JONES

Oceanside, California
Wednesday Evening
The Jones Residence

Fog has descended coating the coast in a thick gray blanket. From where I stand on our back patio, I would normally have an unobstructed view of the ocean. But tonight, I can barely see the end of the deck. I can hear the waves crashing, though, and find some solace in that.

I need to get back inside to my book club. Even thinking that makes me smirk. We don't read books. We barely acknowledge whatever the month's pick is. When I was invited to join the book club by a very organized, library loving Oceanside mom named Harriet who was in charge, I was shocked. I didn't find out until months later that it was only because Jess was in the gifted reading program with Harriet's daughter. They assumed I was literary and smart like my daughter. They were wrong. But I had jumped at the chance to make new friends, to make Jess proud of me, to have something to do. The first couple years I read every book. Harriet seemed pleased with my diligence. I even hosted the group at my home, and served a full dinner tied to the novel's theme.

When Harriet moved back east, that's when we became a drinking club. Betty, our new leader, cares much more about fashion and gossip than books. Jess makes fun of me for being a part of it, and I know she was calling me to complain about the rowdiness of the party. I check my watch. It's almost ten p.m.

Jess is going to kill me. As usual. I race across the back deck and hurry inside through Roger's library office. Ironically called a library because he's never opened one of the books in here, nor has he lended any out. I run my finger along the spines of the leather-bound volumes. They're likely first editions, and likely never been touched

since they arrived at this house. They are props, meant to look at, meant to impress.

Like me. I take a deep breath and tell myself not to cry. I've made my decision. I will not vacillate, not this time. Not when it's this important. I walk quickly in the direction of the kitchen and realize I don't hear any noise. Where are my guests?

The kitchen is a wreck. Half-full wine and champagne glasses litter the counter. The huge charcuterie display that filled the island with an overly extravagant selection of meats, cheeses, , crackers, vegetables and dips has barely been touched. I think one carrot is missing. Meanwhile, all but two bottles of wine have been emptied. A typical book club performance. But why would they all leave without saying goodbye? I wasn't outside that long, was I?

"Jess!" I yell to my daughter. I know she can hear me, even though the bedroom wing is large and her room is at the end. I march down the hall and bang on her door.

"Geez, what? I am trying to study, mom," she says yanking the door open.

"Did you tell my book club to leave? You wouldn't be that rude, would you? It was my last one," I say before I can stop myself.

"Right. You've threatened to quit for years, and you don't. Just like a lot of things you say. Empty promises," Jess says.

I step back, wounded, as usual, from our conversations. We need a fresh start, while we still love each other. I remind myself hatred isn't the opposite of love. Indifference is.

"I love you Jess. Get back to your studies. I'm sorry we bothered you," I say.

Jess' scowl turns to a small smile. "Why does Betty dress like a hooker for book club? The one in the blue dress."

"She likes to get dressed up, no matter the event. You should see her when she shops at Trader Joe's. Heels, jewelry, hair all done, pulling up in her navy-blue Bentley. It's quite the, um, impression." I say remembering when I ran into her last week. I wore jeans and a white t-shirt. Like a normal person, I think. Or maybe, here in this part of Oceanside, Betty is the normal one.

"It's weird," Jess says. "I'm glad you're getting out of that."

I smile. I'm getting out of so much more than book club, but my daughter doesn't need to know that now. Tonight, she studies for the test. Tomorrow morning, she goes to school, gets another A, and tomorrow afternoon, I'll let her in on a very big secret.

I know she won't love the idea, not at first. But I also know it's the only way to save us from indifference, and everything else that's ruining everything. It's never been Jess who ruins things, although I

do accuse her of it. One of the many things I'm going to work on fixing between us. The only person to blame in the end is me.

"Don't stay up too late, honey," I say as she closes the door between us. I won't sleep tonight, that is a given. But I need to focus on the future, remember to breathe.

Only I can fix this. And this weekend, I will.

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ROGER JONES

Santa Ana, California
Wednesday Evening
Gold Club

This is one of my favorite clubs. It's tucked away in a mixed use but mostly industrial complex that I happened to develop a few years ago. Not a surprise, I developed most of Orange County. That's why I'm so rich.

"I'll take another, sweetie," I say as the waitress grabs my empty glass. She's cute, in a homely way. Not my type and too young, maybe just a little older than Jess. Thinking about my daughter makes me feel a little pang of guilt about being here. But just a little. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, especially since his wife has turned into an iceberg. Julie's pretty face pops into my head and I feel another zap of guilt. I push it away and remind myself I wouldn't be here if she was still into me.

Well, that's a lie. Ha!

"Here you go sir," a different waitress, this one older, and hotter, serves me my drink.

"Thanks. Hey, I need to see Brittany. Can you send her over?" I ask.

She smiles and looks even hotter. "She's out sick tonight. Sorry. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I've never seen you around here before," I say. "Unless good old Ted has been hiding you from me. He wouldn't do that, would he?" Ted's the owner, a scumbag, but I like coming here despite of him.

"No, Ted hasn't been hiding me. I'm new. Just got out here from Ohio," she says. "I'm Samantha."

Midwesterners are so nice, friendly. I like that about them. About Samantha. "Sit. Have a drink with me Samantha," I say and slide over in the booth.

“Oh, I don’t know, I’m sort of waiting on other customers too,” she says.

“I’m the only customer you need, gorgeous. Ted will get others to cover,” I say. I pat the seat next to me. “I’m Roger Jones. I own most of this county. I’m a regular here. Ted will vouch for me. Go ask him.”

“Yes, ok, let me go ask him if it’s ok to have a drink with you, Mr. Jones,” she says. I like the way she talks. I like the way her blue eyes sparkle, and I really like the way her boobs stretch the Gold Club logo. “I’ll be right back, unless there’s something else you need?”

“I just need you. All night, if possible,” I say. I’ve pulled out my wallet, yank out a bunch of one-hundred-dollar bills and fan them out on the table. “There’s much more where this came from.”

“Great, that’s fantastic, Mr. Jones,” she says. I swear her smile is even bigger now.

“Go tell Ted you’re busy the rest of the evening, and then hurry back,” I say. I take a sip of my drink. It’s strong, like me.

“I’ll be right back, Mr. Jones,” Samantha says.

I watch her walk away, swinging her hips, enticing. I’m excited about the evening now. And I don’t feel any guilt, not even a little. I deserve this. I do.



TOM DEAN

Huntington Beach, California
Behind the Bar
Wednesday Evening

I try not to bite my fingernails because it's an ugly, weak habit as my dad would tell you. When he catches me doing it, he's ruthless about it. Daddy Doug turns on his preacher voice, which is easy for him since that's what he does for a living, and bellows: "Tom Dean you are disgusting. Look at you, your nails. Go wash your filthy gnawed hands. Now."

Always those words. Since I was a kid. Has it stopped me from biting my nails? No, but it has helped me learn to be sneaky, so thanks dad. For this and so much more. I imagine my stepmom Sandi's face as she hears those evil words spewed at a nine-year-old kid me, or a 13-year-old kid me, or even now, a 20-something-year-old man, and I watch her clasp her hand over her mouth. She sees evil but says nothing. That's just as bad in my book. If dear old dad talked like that to the perfect little boys, her real boys, well, she'd say something I bet. Because they actually belong to her. I'm just somebody she got stuck with when my real mom ran away.

"XL, hey, can I get a beer?" I turn toward the voice, and I can't believe it's him. It's Vic. I'm not ashamed to say I'm in awe of Vic. He's the only thing good in my life right now. And he used my nickname, the one they gave me during the retreat. My entire mood just lifted.

"Sure, beers on me sir. As a small thanks for a great week in the desert," I say, pulling him a draft. I cannot believe I was invited to the training camp. I felt like I'd won some sort of secret lottery. For a week, I didn't bite my fingernails. I didn't think about my messed up life, didn't worry about where I am going to live. I learned to shoot,

and to direct my anger in a positive way. I learned to make a plan. It makes me feel better, more in control of things in my life.

After this weekend, I'll be a full member in the group, if everything goes according to plan. And it will. I smile and hand Vic his beer.

"Thanks. How you feeling about things?" Vic asks. He pulls out a bar stool and sits. I can't believe he's spending one on one time with me. My stomach flips. He wants to discuss my plan, I think.

"I feel good. Do you want me to go over the plan –"

Vic holds up his hand and scans the bar. It's almost empty. Just a couple of old guys playing darts in the corner. "You never discuss things in public, do you understand me?"

I've messed up as always. I'm such a loser. That's why I don't have any friends, or a girlfriend, or a real family, or well, anything at all. I hang my head. "Sorry sir. Of course."

I feel his hand on my shoulder. "Look, you're new, you're just learning. Just be careful, ok. We don't want anything to go wrong. We like you, and we want you to hang out with us again."

Despite the fact I'm at work, at a bar, and I'm a guy, tears are swamping my eyes. I hurry to brush them away before Vic can see them. I take a deep breath and say, "Thanks sir. You know I'll do anything you say."

"I know," Vic says.

"I'll be right back," I say. Another guy is at the bar waiting to order. A smile works its way onto my face as I walk to the other end of the bar.

I think this might be what belonging feels like. I like it. I'll do anything to keep it.



SANDI

Temecula, California
Wednesday Evening
The Dean Residence

I put the boys to bed early tonight, earlier than normal, but they didn't fuss too much. They're tired from school, from being the new kids, from all this change.

I suppose I am, too. I sit on the couch and flip through TV stations, but nothing interests me. Doug is out late again, past church office hours. Since we moved here, he has been putting in long hours supposedly at the church, getting organized and such, as he explains.

I'm not sure I believe him. He's given me plenty of reasons not to over the years. I pick up a framed photo of the five of us, an Easter Sunday morning when my youngest, Danny, was still a baby and Davis was an adorable toddler. When Tom would still smile in photos and let me hug him, tuck him in, read stories to him. He called me mom back then, all the time, not Sandi as he's fond of doing now. I worry about him, about all the hatred in his heart. And I worry, too, about where he will go now that the house is sold. It's the only home he's ever known, bless his soul. I know he's overly attached to it, and I pray that Doug will come to his senses and help him through this transition. I'm exhausted just settling the little boys into a neighborhood full of strangers, but I will keep trying to help Tom. He's my bonus boy and I haven't given up on him. Not yet.

Doug hasn't helped with any of the move, none of the unpacking, none of the settling in. It's like he's not really here. I place the photo back on the coffee table.

It may be a sinful thought, but I like it when he's gone.

I push myself up from the couch and look out at the back yard. It's nice to have this much space for the boys to play. And they never had a tree house before, so that's a bonus. Despite trying to focus on

the positive though, I can't shake the sense I of dread I feel about our lives. Like we are living on the edge. Like something terrible is going to happen soon, and it will be all Doug's fault. I say a quick prayer before pulling the curtains closed.

I tell myself to calm down. That everything is fine. I know it's not.

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DOUG DEAN

Oceanside Church
Parking Lot
Wednesday Evening

I have tried to start over, I really have. I've tried to "make amends" whatever that means and embrace the new congregation in Temecula Timbuktu. But I don't like them, none of them. I like it here, in Oceanside. These are my people. I am their shepherd. This is my church.

As I sit in my car in this huge empty parking lot, I stare up at the glowing cross adorning the top of the church I built. There would have been no mega church here without Pastor Doug Dean, everyone knows it. I pound the steering wheel with my fists. Damn self-righteous folks who tried to bring me down must realize by now they shot themselves in the foot. Their new guy Pastor Lovett can't fundraise, he can't preach like I can, and he's going to lose members. They'll be dropping like flies.

And then, they'll have no choice. They'll come crawling back to me and I'll agree to come back, for double my salary and an iron-clad contract. Next time, I'll leave when I say so, likely in a casket. This is where I should be, where I belong. Sandi fakes it at the new house. Pretends she's the happy homemaker when I know she hates it out there, too. I do feel a little bad my actions led to our move. But she should be happy I let her pick the new house. I mean, I gave her a choice between two and she picked so it's her house, really.

She complains that it's nothing like our home in Oceanside, and she's right. But she needs to learn to suffer in silence, like the Bible says. I can take her misery and mine all rolled together. That kind of sadness drives me crazy, and then I get angrier and then I lash out. So, yeah, I have enough on my plate without Sandi whining about

our new place. She's lucky she and the boys have a roof over their heads. That's all because of me.

I stare up at my church again and tell myself all I need is patience. This will all be mine again soon. I still have supporters here, a lot of them. I think of my women's group, the recent divorcees I've helped through so much. They'll all vouch for me when the time is right, at least, all the ones who are still members.

One of the most frustrating parts of this stupid situation was the look on my oldest son's face when he found out I was moving to a new congregation. He laughed. Said they finally got smart and kicked me out.

I should have punched him in the face, the good for nothing ingrate. He's the worst, a soon-to-be homeless loser. Sandi wants to help him, of course, coddle him like he's a kid. He's not. He's a full-grown man and he needs to get a life instead of playing video games in the shed out back. My shed. Well, my former shed. His former shed. The new owners move in on Friday and they gave him the weekend to pack up. It's in the contract. He must move out this Sunday. I know he doesn't have anywhere to go but a homeless shelter. Or his car. He could live in it I suppose.

I take a moment to think about our Oceanside home. We had a lot of good memories there, both before Tom's mom left and after, when Sandi arrived. As much as it pains me that I had to sell the place, when I come back to town, back to head this congregation, I'll buy a house twice its size. I'll show Sandi. I'll show my boys. All of them will be so proud of me.

Maybe I'll be proud of myself again, too.

Headlights illuminate the parking lot. A white pickup truck has pulled in. It's the rent-a-cop Tony. I know because I hired him to keep the crazies away. He inches his truck up to where I'm parked, pulling up behind me, blocking my exit. That's fine. I don't want to leave anyway.

He's out of the car, flashlight beam pointed at the driver's side window. I give him a wave and roll down my window.

"Pastor Dean, what are you doing here again?" he asks. "It's late. You should go on home."

"Hey Tony. Good to see you," I say, ignoring the ketchup stain on the front of his white uniform. He always was a slob, but he's a good guy. I think. "Just sitting here, thinking, that's all. No harm done."

"Well, you know I have to ask you to leave again. It's just not right, you just idling here. It's a bit unsettling for the new pastor, as you know. We have cameras out here. He can see you," Tony says.

Oh, I know he can. I'm the one who installed the security system, the high-res cameras with nighttime capacity. I want him to be

unsettled. I want him to leave, go back to whatever Texas town he's from. I force a smile.

"I'll be on my way, for you," I say. But I'll be back, as often as I'd like. There's nothing he can do to stop me. We both know that.

"Alright then. Good night, Pastor Dean, take care on your drive home. And don't come here again, OK? Tell Mrs. Dean hello for me," he says. His smugness is overwhelming. I'm responsible for his job, for his paycheck. Me. Not the fake pastor from Texas. I should be allowed to sit in this parking lot as often and as long as I want. I'm not hurting anyone. Is it my fault if my replacement feels threatened by me? Nope. That's his problem.

I watch as Tony walks to his truck, slides in, and pulls away. I back out and follow behind him. It takes everything in my power not to step on the gas and rear end him. I want to hurt someone, I want someone to pay for what they did to me. I glance back at the church in my rearview mirror. They made a huge mistake forcing me out.

And I will make them pay for it, one way or another, soon. Very soon. I think about this weekend, how much I don't want to preach at my new church, and promise myself, despite what Tony says, I'll be back. I punch the accelerator and smile as my tires leave their mark on the otherwise pristine parking lot.

The End