



# Up on the Roof

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# CHAPTER 1

*THUNK!*

Lena whipped her head round, and her book tumbled out of her hands to the floor. Both cats bolted out of their beds and shot under the small table in front of where the fireplace used to be, their tails and backs arching.

That was definitely the sound of something large hitting her front door. Lena's heart pounded as fear crept through her. Was she being burgled? It was eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning—could burglars be that bold? Before she could move from her chair, she heard another thump, then... laughing?

*"Up your end."*

*"Up yours, bitch."*

Both voices were female, and loud, and tinged with mirth.

A third almighty thump on her door and more laughter.

*"Shift it, you great lump."*

*"Shut up, I'm doing the best I can."*

Curious now rather than alarmed, Lena stood, walked slowly across the room and down the narrow, curved staircase that led to her front door. Her heart was still racing, despite the laughter coming from the other side of the door. She pressed her eye up to the peephole. The fish-eye view revealed the backside of a woman bent over the end of a sofa. Extending her gaze beyond this alluring sight, Lena spotted another woman on the other end of the sofa. Both women were snorting with laughter as they attempted to manoeuvre the sofa around the small landing at the top of the communal staircase.

Like most Victorian conversions in London, the building that housed Lena's flat was far from regular in its layout. On opening the front door

of the building, visitors were met with stairs and, to one side, the door to a ground-floor flat. At the top of the stairs, which curved in a sharp bend two-thirds of the way up, was a landing area that had the doors to Lena's flat and her neighbour's. But, due to a quirky design of the converted building, when Lena opened her front door, she was greeted with another flight of steps to her loft flat. So while she had a front door on the same level as her neighbour, she lived a level higher than them. And that front door was currently being battered by each move the women made with the sofa.

While the noise and disturbance was irritating, Lena tried to take some comfort from the fact that the clumsy sofa-turning attempts meant someone was finally moving in to the flat below. It had been empty for a couple of months, and although not one to seek the company of others that often, there had always been comfort in knowing someone was down there, especially at night.

Satisfied she was not under attack, she turned to make her way back up the narrow stairs to her living space, when a quite different sound caused her to freeze and sent her irritation rocketing.

*Screech!*

It was the unmistakable sound of something sharp scraping across her front door.

A sound that was followed by a gasp from one of the women outside her door, and a loud, "*Oh, shit.*"

Lena turned back, breathing deeply in a vain attempt to control her agitation, and pulled open the door.

Facing her, wearing horrified expressions, were the two women, the sofa wedged between them. Lena's gaze followed theirs to the deep scratch gouged across a span of about twelve inches of the door. The flakes of paint it had carved out were already dropping silently to the floor like snowflakes.

Lena stared at the door for a moment, words refusing to form in her brain despite the anger that was churning in her stomach. She lifted her gaze to meet that of the woman nearest her. She was tall and solid-looking—a big-boned girl, as Dorothy from the ground-floor flat would say. She had blonde hair tied up in a long ponytail and pale, almost translucent skin. Her extraordinary blue eyes were wide with fear. She was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, the shirt covered in swirls of colour in geometric designs that Lena was sure would give her a headache if she looked at it for more than a

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few moments. Holding the jeans up was a studded belt that was clearly the offender responsible for the damage to the door.

Lena's gaze dropped momentarily to the belt then back up again.

"I'm so sorry," the blonde whispered. "I got pressed against the door, and when I tried to sort of slide away from it—"

Lena held up a hand.

"We'll pay for it!" the woman said quickly, and looked at her companion, who was nodding vigorously.

This one was equally as tall as her partner in crime, but skinny, with short-cropped hair and deep brown skin, a few shades darker than Lena's own. She was wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, and they highlighted the trim body and almost flat chest, which Lena only noticed because of the words "You're next" emblazoned across the front of the T-shirt.

Exhaling slowly, Lena brought her gaze back to meet the blonde woman's eyes.

"Yes, you will." Lena's voice was clipped, each word snapped out with precision.

"Sorry," the blonde said. "Not the best way to be introduced, but—" she twisted around, balanced the sofa on one thigh, and stuck out a hand "—I'm Megan, your new neighbour. And this is Jen."

Lena swallowed. She didn't like to touch people, strangers. You never knew where their hands had been. Inwardly grimacing, because she knew shaking hands was the polite thing to do, she quickly clasped Megan's warm hand and shook it for a few seconds. The handshake was firm, and Lena only just avoided blushing at the sight of well-formed biceps in Megan's arm that flexed with each movement of their joined hands.

"Lena," she said, averting her gaze from Megan's mesmerising eyes.

"And I promise I'll pay for that to be fixed. It's not much damage so it shouldn't be too difficult to sort out." Megan gestured at Lena's front door as their hands parted.

Lena bristled at Megan's oh-so-casual brushing off of the horrendous scar that now marred her front door. Fighting every one of the instincts that made her want to wipe her hand on her jeans following their handshake, Lena forced a smile, if only to avoid this confrontation getting any more uncomfortable than it already was.

"I will get some quotes and be in contact," she said, turning back to enter her flat.

“Um, sorry, could I ask a favour?”

Lena sighed and looked back at Megan over her shoulder, raising her eyebrows in question.

“Well, um, it’s just...I think this whole manoeuvre would be a lot easier if you could leave your door open for a minute. It’ll give us a bit more room to swing in, if you see what I mean.”

Lena glared at her. “If you cause any more damage—”

“We won’t! I promise. We’ll be really careful, won’t we, Jen?” Megan looked meaningfully at her friend, who nodded vigorously again.

Then, one-handed, Megan began unbuckling her belt.

“What are you doing?” Lena asked, her eyes nearly popping out of her head at the sight of the rather attractive woman pulling her belt out from the loops that contained it.

Megan smiled. “Just being careful.” She threw the belt gently on the sofa in front of Jen, who shook her head, laughing.

“At least those hips of yours are big enough for the job,” Jen said. “Unlike my own.” She gestured at her significantly thinner body, and Megan grinned.

Lena’s cheeks blazed as she dared to glance down at the enticing strip of abdomen that was revealed now that Megan’s belt-less trousers had settled down onto her hips. The view was even more distracting after Megan turned round—the top of what looked like some very lacy underwear was clearly on display when Megan bent slightly to juggle her end of the sofa.

Lena blinked rapidly and stepped backwards into her flat. She hopped up the first couple of steps and perched on the edge of the third, quietly watching the two women as they—carefully—moved the sofa around the turn, making the most of Lena’s open doorway to give them a bit more wriggle room. She winced at every move they made but had to admit they were being solicitous. This time.

Finally, they had the sofa lengthwise down the passageway, and Megan glanced through the doorway at Lena.

“Thanks. All done. Really sorry again—let me know when you’ve got the quotes and I’ll get that sorted for you.”

“Thank you,” Lena said stiffly, and without another word closed the door. She inhaled a deep breath, her mind a swirl of confusing thoughts about the two women she had met. She glanced down at her hands to find

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them shaking slightly and remembered the handshake. Barely holding back a yelp, she sprinted up the remaining steps and rushed into the bathroom.

After washing and rinsing her hands three times—once more than usual because who knew what else Megan had touched while she moved her possessions in—Lena finally relaxed for the first time since the drama had started. She made herself a fresh cup of Earl Grey tea and returned to her book. The cats had snuck onto the sofa in her absence, trying their luck again, and she shooed them off. They glared at her before slinking off to their beds in the corner of the room.

After brushing their hair off the sofa, she pulled her inhaler from her pocket and took a quick puff. As she sat down, she sighed heavily. The interruption to her day had unsettled her but if she returned to her routine quickly, everything should be okay. Routine was important. Without it, life was too...messy. And Lena didn't do messy.

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Megan stared at the closed door, then turned to look at Jen.

“Wow,” Jen mouthed.

Megan merely nodded. The entire incident with Lena had unsettled her in ways she couldn't quite interpret. At least, not when she had a sofa to move, a sofa that was getting heavier each minute they weren't actually moving it.

“Come on.” She grunted as she shifted its weight in her arms. “Let's get this thing in there.”

Jen nodded and Megan moved backwards, shuffling along the tight space of the passageway and wincing as the sofa brushed solidly against the walls.

“It's okay,” Jen said quickly. “No marks.”

“Thank God for that.”

Finally, they were through Megan's new front door and into the flat. The space was open-plan, with a large lounge, a small kitchen in one corner, the bathroom next to that, and two doors on one side of the lounge that led to the bedrooms. It was by far the biggest place Megan had ever lived in, and she was excited about having the extra space. Her last home had been a cramped studio so moving into so large a flat, even if the rent did push her funds a little, felt like heaven.

After dumping the sofa unceremoniously in the rough area Megan needed it, both she and Jen arched their backs and let out loud groans.

“At least we got the worst bit done first,” Jen said, rubbing at the small of her back and looking around the room.

“Definitely,” Megan agreed. “Boxes are going to be a piece of cake after that.” She flexed her arms, working out the slight ache in her biceps. One advantage of being a fitness instructor was that she’d never needed any professional help in moving home. With Jen’s equally impressive strength, honed from years of working in a bar and lugging barrels of beer around in the cellar, they made a formidable team.

“This is a great-size room.” Jen wandered over to the front window to glance down at the street below.

“Want the tour before we head back down to the van?”

Smiling, Jen nodded. “Totally. Show me your palace.”

Megan snorted. “Hardly that, Jen. But yeah,” she said, before Jen could jump in, “I know, it’s bigger than your place.”

“Just a bit!” Jen laughed.

Megan was glad Jen kept her response light—Jen’s place was tiny and more than a little tatty around the edges. She knew Jen was envious of Megan’s move, and also that Jen had been subtly angling to take up residence as a tenant in the spare room. Something that Megan had equally as subtly been pushing back on. The whole idea of getting the bigger place was to have some space, and she didn’t need another person, even her closest friend, invading that.

The tour took a few minutes, as they not only checked out each empty room but discussed Megan’s plans for furnishing each space.

“And, of course,” Jen said, as they walked back into the lounge, “you know you have a hot neighbour too. Couldn’t be better really.” She grinned.

Megan shook her head. “Trust you to spot that in the middle of that embarrassment.”

She had to be honest with herself though—she’d also noticed Lena’s subtle beauty, despite the iciness of their meeting. Deep brown eyes with eyelashes that went on forever, and a cute face, golden brown in colour, which hinted at an Indian heritage. Her dark hair was shoulder-length and had been half pinned up at the back, leaving tantalising wisps to drape over her ears and brush her cheeks.

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Megan had only dared the briefest of glances at Lena's body, but it looked proportioned in all the ways that set Megan's heart racing: full breasts, even fuller hips and thighs, and Lena's height was a good few inches shorter than Megan's five feet nine. Megan was a sucker for a smaller woman—someone she could enfold in her embrace, their head tucked under her chin.

“Are you seriously trying to tell me you didn't notice her hotness?”

Megan cursed her pale skin as the blush rampaged across her cheeks. “No,” she muttered. “Of course I did. I am laughing, though, because, as usual, your libido took more notice of events, no matter what the hell else was going on.”

Jen laughed. “And yours too, I'm guessing.”

Megan's blush deepened as she remembered in vivid detail what Lena looked like. Cursing under her breath, she poked Jen in the arm as her friend laughed even louder.

“Yeah, okay. She's very attractive. But come on, chances are she's straight. And maybe a little uptight based on how she was with us. So, let's ignore the eye candy and get on with unpacking that van, yeah?”

“All right, Megs. Whatever you say.” Jen moved past Megan towards the front door. “But I wouldn't be so sure about her being straight,” she said, smiling. “I'm pretty sure she plays for our team—her eyes were all over me.”

*Yes, they were. As usual, the hot ones are always more interested in you than me.*

When she'd first become friends with Jen, it had been hard to take that everywhere they went, women flocked to Jen's side, and Megan felt like a background extra in a Hollywood blockbuster. She didn't exactly have an abundance of self-confidence, and Jen's dazzling personality and—some might say—arrogance around women only dented that more. But gradually, over time, their deepening friendship allowed Megan to open up a little about her feelings, and Jen, to her credit, tried very hard to remember to take them into account. Mostly.

Sometimes, however, she couldn't help herself, and not for the first time Megan wished she had even an ounce of Jen's confidence and self-belief.

Trying to shut out the image of the beautiful woman who lived upstairs, and who apparently only had eyes for Jen, Megan let out a breath and followed her friend out to the hallway.



## CHAPTER 2

LENA UNLOCKED THE HEAVY FRONT door and pushed it open. The hallway light flicked on, triggered by the motion sensor the landlord had finally agreed to install the year before. As usual, Mr Jarvis had done so with some reluctance, never one to spend any money on the building if he could possibly avoid it. Numerous letters from Lena and Dorothy, the tenant in the ground-floor flat, had finally done the trick though. Until that point, the light source in the main hallway was a single naked bulb that could only be switched on from halfway up the staircase, a ridiculous position that caused many bumps and bruises after dark.

She collected her mail from the neat pile it formed on the shelf beneath the window. For all her faults—and there were many, in Lena’s opinion—this little daily task that Dorothy had taken upon herself was much appreciated. Dorothy was retired and seemed to take a disproportionate amount of joy in being able to take in the mail each day and sort it on behalf of each of them.

After tiredly plodding back up the stairs, Lena grimaced—again—when her scarred front door came into view. It had been a long week and she still hadn’t found time to phone around for some quotes. Her job had been exhausting—quarter-end for an accounting team always was, but this one had been especially trying with a new forecast due and demands for better numbers coming in two or three times a day from their head office.

She felt grateful as she stepped into her flat and locked the door behind her. As she switched on the overhead light, she frowned; there was that little damp patch on the carpet again, on the fourth step up. Gazing upwards, Lena squinted against the brightness of the light fitting to try to see past it to the darkened skylight above. She was sure that’s where the leak was, but

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she'd yet to find it. While she loved the skylight, loved the patterns of light it sent dancing down her narrow stairs on a bright day, lately it was annoying her greatly by leaving this same patch after every rainstorm. Ruefully she accepted that she'd have to borrow a step ladder to have a proper look—and only one person in the building had a step ladder. Dorothy.

She inhaled sharply. That could wait for another day. While Lena had learnt to be courageous in the past few years—coming out as lesbian in an Indian family wasn't for the faint-hearted, after all—there were some situations she still shied away from. And dealing with Dorothy was usually on that list. No, what she needed right now was some soup to warm her up on this icy cold October night and her book to escape into.

The mewling of the cats greeted her as she reached the top of the stairs, and her mood darkened. Irritating little beasts. Another thing she needed to deal with and hadn't found the time to do so. Her last two text messages to Chris had gone unanswered. She frowned, staring down at their rotund faces. Their pitiful cries, pitched to tug at a heart that cared, did nothing but raise her ire once more at the fact that they were even living in her flat. She stomped over to the kitchen, slung some food in their bowls, and topped up their water, all the while swerving away from their attempts to wrap their slinky bodies around her legs.

It wasn't their fault, she knew that. But Chris wasn't here and they were, so they got the brunt of her unhappiness about the situation. The black one, Midnight, glanced up at her as she side-stepped him once more, and she sighed. He really was quite beautiful. She bent down slowly and used the tip of one finger to scratch a gentle back-and-forth path in the centre of his head. His purr made her smile, in spite of herself, and when Snow, the white one, approached, clearly feeling left out of the love fest, Lena demurred and scratched her too. She indulged them—and herself—for a few minutes before rapidly straightening and heading for the bathroom to wash her hands.

After stripping out of her suit in the bedroom, she sighed blissfully as she slipped into her baggiest, comfiest pyjama bottoms and her Hogwarts hoodie. She finished off her slouchy outfit with the big fluffy socks her sister Madhu had given her for her birthday last year, smiling as she pulled them on. Though they were a little tattered around the edges, she cherished them, not only for the comfort they gave to her tired feet, but for always

making her think of Madhu whenever she wore them. After hanging up her suit, and ensuring the trousers lined up dead centre of the hanger, the crease razor-sharp, she took a puff on her inhaler and headed for the kitchen.

With hot, spicy parsnip soup and a bread roll balanced on her tray, she snuggled down into the sofa and picked up her book with one hand, her spoon with the other. She pushed the cats away with her feet when they made their usual evening attempt to sit with her on the sofa and ignored them as they huffed off to their beds. Carefully eating mouthfuls of soup as she read, she immersed herself back into the story of Drew and Annie and their oh-so-sweet romance. She'd read this one a few times before, but when she was stressed, as she had been recently, she returned to it like a comfort blanket, guaranteed to make her feel better.

In between chapters, she cleared her tray and quickly washed up her bowl and spoon. Dirty dishes could not be left out for even a few hours in Lena's abode—cleanliness was everything. After wiping down the counters with antibacterial spray and dropping the remaining crumbs into the bin under the sink, she took a look around, satisfied that all was as it should be. She topped up her tea and returned to the sofa, tucking her legs up so that her feet were nestled securely under her buttocks. It was nearly nine o'clock, and she had to be in bed by ten thirty in order to get her required eight hours sleep. Contentment imbued her as she faced the remaining ninety minutes of her evening tucked up with the book. It wasn't much, not compared to what she had this time last year with Chris, but it was enough.

*Mostly*, said a quiet voice in the back of her mind.

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Megan shoved open the front door and rushed through it as quickly as she could to get in out of the cold. She slammed the door behind her and stamped her wet boots on the mat before heading to the stairs. She'd just placed her left foot on the first step when a sharp voice rang through the hallway, making her stumble and wobble between the floor behind her and the step before her.

"Young lady!"

Megan grabbed at the bannister to right herself, then turned, slowly, to meet the piercing gaze of a short, rotund woman whom she guessed to be somewhere in her sixties if the grey hairs that edged her temples were

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anything to go by. Huge round glasses dominated her black face, her eyes wide behind them, magnified by the thick lenses to comic proportions. Megan only just held back a giggle under the withering stare of those eyes.

“Yes?” she asked, keeping her tone respectful.

“I’ve held my tongue until today, thinking the Lord would help you to see the error of your ways in His own time. But as that clearly isn’t the case, which by-the-by has me in fear for your soul, poor child, you leave me no choice but to address the issue in my own way.”

“I’m...sorry, what?” Megan had no idea what this woman was talking about, and anyone spouting religious talk always made her nervous. Auntie Jean had a lot to answer for.

The woman’s arm shot out with surprising alacrity, and she pointed a finger at the front door behind Megan.

“The slamming of the door, girl! Shaking this house, rattling my windows until I fear they’re going to fall from their frames. I’m praying to my Lord Jesus every time, praying this won’t be the day the roof comes tumbling down around my ears.” The woman was quivering, her hands now placed on her chest, held together in prayerful aspect.

Megan swallowed. “I’m so sorry. I-I didn’t realise I was doing it.”

The woman huffed, her frown easing a little. “Well, now you do. Let that be the end of it.” With that, she turned away and walked through what Megan assumed was the doorway to her own ground-floor flat. The door closed with a soft click, and Megan exhaled.

The main front door opened behind her, and she turned to see Lena step through and shut it carefully. Lena started as she saw Megan halted with one foot on the first step, and she tilted her head.

“Are you okay?” Her voice was tight, her eyes narrowed; clearly the scratched-door incident had not been forgotten. Or forgiven.

Megan shook her head, pointing at the door of the ground-floor flat. “Who...who is that?” she asked.

The smirk that painted Lena’s face held no warmth.

“That is Dorothy. What did you do?”

“Um, slammed the door. One time too many, apparently.”

Lena’s eyes rolled and she crossed her arms in front of her. “Great. Just great. Well, I hope you didn’t have any plans for some peace and quiet tonight.”

“What?” Megan was getting more confused by the minute. What the hell was going on in this house?

“How angry was she?” Lena walked across the hall to scoop up her mail and motioned impatiently for Megan to continue climbing the stairs, Lena following two steps behind.

“Well, pretty angry, I guess,” Megan said, over her shoulder, looking down at Lena and trying hard not to stare at how...glorious Lena looked with an angry scowl on her face.

“Did she quote the Lord?”

“Yes, actually. How did you—”

Lena’s sigh was audible. “Then there will definitely be no peace for us tonight. Thanks very much.”

With that, she turned her key in her lock, pushed open her door, and disappeared.

Megan stood next to the closed door and slapped her own cheek. Nope, definitely awake. What on Earth was—

The organ music was loud. Unbelievably loud. Megan hadn’t had a religious upbringing, despite Auntie Jean’s best attempts, but even she could recognise “Onward, Christian Soldiers” when it was blasted at that volume. The glass in the window of the main hallway was vibrating softly in its frame as a result. The floor beneath her feet was trembling, giving her a realistic impression of what it would be like to stand in an earthquake zone. In a daze, she walked along the passageway to her door and unlocked it.

The sound was even worse inside her flat; clearly her main room was above wherever the source of the music was situated. Singing was now audible too, and part of her brain had to be honest enough to register that Dorothy, if it was she who was singing, had a remarkably good voice. A loud voice, but good nonetheless.

Shaking her head, still not quite understanding the sequence of events that had unfolded since she’d first arrived back in Jackson Road fifteen minutes previously, Megan walked through to her sparse bedroom. She’d still only got as far as purchasing a bed but had plans to meet her father with his van at IKEA on Saturday to obtain wardrobes and a few more bits for the living room. Renting an unfurnished flat had added to her list of expenses, but actually she didn’t mind—it was fun buying all of her own things and getting exactly what she wanted. And despite the less-than-

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stellar start with her neighbours, she liked where she was living. The high ceilings and original features of all the rooms in her flat made it seem even more spacious. As did the lack of furniture, and although she still needed some essentials, she didn't want to overfill her new home.

“Abide with Me” was playing when she walked back into the kitchen to start making some dinner. How long, she wondered, did the live and unwanted concert go on?

## CHAPTER 3

“FORTY MINUTES?” MEGAN’S MUM SPLUTTERED. “That’s outrageous!” She sat down on the sofa, tutting.

“You know what, it wasn’t that bad in the end.” Megan laughed. “I mean, I was cooking for most of that time so by the time I was ready to sit down and watch some TV, she’d finished.”

“And does she do this every night?” Her dad was grinning.

“Not so far. Just that one night. I think it was my punishment, or something.”

“She’s a fucking nutter,” Jimmy said.

“Language!” Her mother reached across the sofa to slap Jimmy’s bicep. He barely flinched—like Megan, Jimmy, her youngest brother, was a fitness instructor, and his arms bulged with muscles that were as solid as wood.

“All done!” Callum’s voice floated out to them from the spare bedroom. He was her oldest brother, with four years separating them. Callum was a builder by trade and had insisted on being the one to put together all the flat-pack furniture from IKEA she’d bought the day before. Helping him was Daniel, two years older than Megan, and not generally known for being interested in physical labour. Callum’s bribe of twenty quid and a couple of pints later down at their local seemed to have worked wonders on his attitude.

They appeared in the doorway to the spare room, and Callum beckoned Megan over. She leapt up from the sofa, crashed her shins against the box of books that was serving as a temporary coffee table, and groaned as three mugs of tea shot sideways and catapulted onto the floor. Callum snorted, her father following suit swiftly afterwards. Jimmy caught Megan’s eye and gave her a sympathetic smile.

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“I’ll get it,” her mum said, holding up her hands and laughing.

“Sorry, Mum.” Megan sighed.

Her mother laughed louder. “It’s good to see some things never change.” She walked off to the kitchen area and returned with a wet cloth, and a dustpan and brush.

Megan’s clumsiness was the stuff of legend in the Palmer family. Some classic incidents from the past were regularly trotted out at major social events, earning Megan guffaws from anyone within earshot and endless teasing. While the retellings always amused everyone else, Megan merely smiled politely, writhing internally with embarrassment at having her infamous fault be the centre of attention.

Once the spillage had been dealt with, and Megan had hugged her mum in thanks, the whole family followed her to inspect the results of the brothers’ labour.

Megan beamed. It looked exactly how she’d envisioned. A foldout sofa bed was centred on the wall opposite the window, and a large desk took up the other half of the room. She’d tried to make the best use of the space possible for multiple purposes. While she didn’t want to give Jen the impression that she could move in, she did want her to stay over now and again, especially when Megan started throwing parties. Equally, she wanted a space for her desk and computer without them intruding on the main room, which she wanted to keep as her lazy lounging-around area. It was already filling up nicely with big floor cushions, the bookshelves the brothers had assembled earlier, and the big media unit on the longest wall.

“Nice work, my brothers.” She clapped each of them on the back, laughing as Daniel winced. While she, Jimmy, and Callum were all big-boned and solid like their dad, Daniel favoured their mother and was considerably slighter. He never took well to any of their hearty greetings and gestures.

“Right, that calls for beer,” she said, and laughed as her entire family cheered. That was the last of the construction finished—earlier that afternoon they’d all helped put together the wardrobes in her room, and arrange the table, chairs, bookcases, and media unit in the main room. Now all she had to do was unpack the rest of the boxes and she was done.

She pulled cold lagers out of the fridge for all of them, and they swigged from the bottles, her mother included. For as long as Megan could remember, her mother had disdained washing up and was happy to cut any



corners she could to avoid it. Using glasses to drink beer was a complete waste of time as far as Rosie Palmer was concerned.

Megan smiled as she looked around at her family. Her dad was talking to Callum, the pair of them looking like peas in a pod, even down to their thinning hair. Both well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders, they dominated any room they occupied. Her dad's beer belly was expanding faster these days, and she knew her mum had been nagging him about it.

She glanced over at her mum, who was rearranging cushions on the sofa. A foot shorter than her husband, and slim of figure, the contrast between her parents couldn't be greater. However, her mum was no diminutive pushover, despite what people might take from their appearances—she definitely wore the trousers in that relationship, ruling her household with a sharp tongue and a vicious flick of a tea towel when things got out of hand.

Jimmy and Daniel were rummaging around on the floor trying to set up the TV connections. Megan smiled. Daniel would be in his element. Anything electronic or gadgety and he was your man. He'd always been the quietest of the family, ensconcing himself in the room he'd shared with Jimmy as a kid, tinkering with who knew what on the desk that served as his electronics testing ground. She chuckled as Daniel smacked Jimmy's meaty hands away from a couple of cables. Jimmy may have been built like the proverbial brick shithouse, but Daniel wasn't intimidated by him. Although nearly four years younger than Daniel, Jimmy had come to the more timid Daniel's rescue a couple of times through their school years, and while that meant Daniel had a certain kind of hero worship for his younger brother, he also wouldn't let him get away with anything. Jimmy grinned at his older brother and swigged from his beer.

"Hey, Lumpy!" Megan's dad grabbed her attention with her old nickname, the name she despised but had never managed to talk her family out of using. She scowled and they all chuckled, which only irritated her more.

"What?" She tried hard not to snap, but it was difficult.

"How about some music?" Her dad was smiling widely.

Mentally shrugging away her annoyance, Megan flicked the speakers on and connected her iPod, then scrolled to a mix she'd put together for a party earlier this year. While it was only her family here, and still the middle of

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a Sunday afternoon, she was up for adding a little party atmosphere to the day. She and her family had always been good at that, spinning any event into an excuse for a good laugh and some drinking. When she spotted Callum nodding his head to the beat, she turned up the volume slightly and smiled when he grinned at her, knowing they were on exactly the same wavelength.

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Lena slammed her book down on the sofa. She took back everything she'd said about being happy there was now someone in the flat below hers. This was the third time in the last two weeks that Megan had played her music loud enough to disturb Lena, and she'd had enough. So what if it was a Saturday night, a night when most people might anticipate a measure of frivolity? It was all about manners—or in this case, the lack of.

Without spending another moment thinking it through, she marched across the room to the stairs and stomped down them. After unlocking the door, she walked quickly down the passageway to Megan's front door and knocked rapidly.

She waited.

And waited.

She knocked again, louder this time, her knuckles smarting at the energy she put into the action.

After a few moments, the music reduced in volume and the door swung open. Expecting to be faced with Megan, Lena prepared to launch into her complaint but stopped short when she realised it was the other woman—Jen, she vaguely remembered—staring at her, a wide grin on her face.

“Well, hello again,” Jen said, running her hand over her very short-cropped hair in what Lena had to begrudgingly admit was an extremely sexy gesture. “How lovely to see you.” Jen smiled widely.

Lena bristled. Was this woman actually trying to flirt with her? Now?

“Where's Megan?” Lena snapped.

Jen's eyes lost a little of their sparkle, and she took half a step back. “Um, somewhere inside. Want to come in?” She gestured behind her, and Lena glanced into the low-lit flat to see a room full of people, all swinging and swaying to the music and knocking back drinks like there was no tomorrow.

“Please get her,” Lena said through gritted teeth. As if she’d want to step into...whatever it was they were doing.

Jen shrugged and her smile faded. “All right, whatever you want. Be right back.”

Lena watched her walk away and fidgeted on the worn carpet of the hallway. She was suddenly, excruciatingly aware of how she was dressed compared to the people she could see in the room beyond. They in their sparkly tops and tight jeans, and she in her pyjamas and, she glanced down—*oh, no*—floppy-eared bunny slippers. Maybe she should go now, before Megan appeared. Maybe facing her tomorrow, in the cold light of day, would be a better idea. She took a step backwards, forgetting that the awkward shape of the slippers—with the big ball of a tail on each foot—always inhibited any reverse movement, and in the next moment found herself on her backside. Before she could scabble to her feet, Megan appeared in the open doorway. Eyes wide, rushing forward to help Lena to her feet, the drink she was carrying in her hand sloshed over the rim of its glass and in a graceful arc, made a beeline for Lena. It was as if it happened in slow motion, and yet there was no time for Lena to dodge it; in the next moment, she was wearing a significant quantity of something orange. And cold.

“Oh, shit!” Megan flushed and quickly deposited the now empty glass at her feet. “Oh, Lena, I’m *so* sorry.”

Lena stared up at Megan. Vaguely, she noted Megan was wearing a bright purple T-shirt with the words “Bite me” stencilled on it in silver letters. Megan’s long hair, almost white it was so blonde, draped over her shoulders in a way that Lena found inexplicably alluring. She wondered how soft it was. It looked like it would be incredibly silky to the touch, if she ran it through her fingers and—

Her chest was cold. Very cold. She plucked at the front of her pyjama top, her cheeks flaming as she realised where her thoughts were going and how they had completely made her forget the predicament she was in. She was also acutely aware that she was still flat on her backside with her legs akimbo, her now very wet pyjama top clinging in places that would leave little to anyone’s imagination. She wanted to sob from the embarrassment.

Ignoring Megan’s outstretched hand of help, she hauled herself back to her feet under her own power, pulling the soggy pyjama top away from

her as much as she could. She took a deep breath, emptying her mind of everything except her annoyance.

“You okay?” Megan asked, her smile tentative, her face only a shade lighter than beetroot. “I’m so, so sorry,” she repeated. “Can I get you a towel?” She made to take a step back but Lena held up a hand.

“I’m...fine,” Lena lied, wishing her own blush would fade as rapidly as it had appeared. “I’ll deal with this—” she gestured to her wet chest, then blushed again “—when I get back inside. I only came down to ask you to turn the music down.”

Megan’s eyes widened again. “Oh, God, sorry. I didn’t think. Have we woken you up?”

Lena snorted, her eyebrows lifting. “It’s only nine. I wasn’t in bed.”

“Oh,” Megan said, pointing to Lena’s pyjamas. “I guess I assumed...”

“Well, yes. Whatever.” Why couldn’t she stop blushing? “I was trying to read and your music is too loud. I read. In the evenings. And you are disturbing that.”

Megan held up her hands. “Again, I’m sorry. I’m not making a very good impression on you, am I? Since I moved in, I mean.”

Lena closed her eyes momentarily. “It’s...well, I guess we just have to get used to each other. The situation, I mean. You living here.” She stopped talking. Why couldn’t she string a sentence together? Yes, Megan’s pale eyes were ridiculously distracting, but she was angry at Megan for disrupting her evening, her routine, and for throwing a glass of whatever it was all over her. She needed to focus only on that. “Anyway, the music. Turn it down. Please.”

Before Megan could respond Lena turned, carefully making sure she didn’t trip over the extended ears of her slippers, and walked back towards her flat, keeping her clammy pyjama top away from her skin as best she could.

“Will do,” Megan called. “And if you need the pyjamas to be dry-cleaned, please give me the bill so I can pay for it.”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” Lena snapped over her shoulder.

“Okay.” There was a pause. “By the way—nice slippers.”

Lena’s cheeks flamed red again as she pushed open her front door.

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# UP ON THE ROOF

BY A.L. BROOKS

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