

Over You

Lucy Diamond

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Extract

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Chapter One

It was too tight. Far too tight. The perfect, to-die-for top that Josie had fallen in love with on first sight was — there was no doubt about it — boob-jammingly, belly-clingingly, flesh-pinchingly tight. Yet it had definitely said Medium on the label. Josie grimaced at her reflection in the changing-room mirror. Why did they always have to *lie* on the labels anyway? Was it just to make you feel bad?

Typical! It had seemed the ideal top for a girly night out, too, back when she had first spied it on its hanger. It had ticked all of Josie's boxes, being black (flattering), with a plunging V-neck (minxy), made of floaty, chiffony material (feminine), with tiny shiny beads stitched into the bodice (a bit glam — although a bugger in the washing machine, she guessed).

She sucked in her tummy and looked at herself side-on. Oh God, even worse. Roll upon roll of flab. The seams were straining. All she needed now was for Trinny

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and Susannah to burst in with a camcorder, laughing hysterically as they mauled her around, grabbing spare bits of flesh.

Josie realized she was turning purple and let out her breath hurriedly. She did *not* want Nell and Lisa to see her in this tomorrow. They would think she had let herself go, big-time. She hadn't seen them for ages – at least a year – and had been hoping to look good in a seemingly effortless hasn't-Josie-done-well-for-herself? kind of a way. If she wore this, though, Nell would probably launch into a round of 'Who Ate All the Pies?'.

The three of them had been flatmates, soulmates and best mates back in their twenties, living it up in London together in a succession of grotty rented flats. It seemed like a lifetime since they'd parted to go their separate ways – herself into marriage and kids, Nell into travelling and failed romances, Lisa into career glory and the salary premiership.

Finding the photo of the three of them tucked away in one of her books had been the prompt for Josie. It was a picture that – what was his name? Dale? Dave? One of Nell's many exes anyway – had taken one New Year's Eve when they'd all been dressed in their finest, ready to hit the West End for booze and snogging. They had looked so happy with their arms around each other and, damn it, so fresh-faced and young, that a lump had

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swelled in Josie's throat. She could conjure up even now the singeing smell of Nell's curling tongs as she'd styled everyone's hair that night, could remember the exact way the floorboards of that dismal Kilburn flat had shuddered to her own *Dance Anthems* CDs, and she could practically taste the siren-red lipstick on her own lips, as if it had been yesterday. It must have been eight or nine years ago, though. A reunion was way overdue.

And so, thanks to Josie, within a week or two the whole thing had been arranged. Weekend for three at Lisa's posh new pad (Josie could hardly wait to see it).

But what the hell was she going to wear?

Well, not this, for starters. Josie wrenched the top over her head with relief. Her skin was flushed and clammy-looking, and her ponytail was wisping out all over the place. The changing-room lighting was so bright it showed up the dull flatness of her hair, and every line and bag under her eyes. She could smell her own sweat.

God. Josie Winter. What *happened* to you, anyway?

Josie swung away from her reflection and pulled on her baggy cream jumper and coat. The boys always called it her Miss Hoolie coat, much to Josie's dismay, even though she was quite sure she looked absolutely nothing like Miss Hoolie from *Balamory* when she wore it. It was just a sensible, everyday coat. Just a plain, ordinary coat.

She zipped it up, feeling glum. It was a mum coat,

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wasn't it? With its stupid hood (for rainy days) and quilted lining (for cold days) and big pockets (for gloves and small toys and fir cones and interesting stones...).

Oh God. What had *happened* to her?

She put the black top back on its hanger, tried to smooth it a little, then opened the curtain and handed it to the over-made-up assistant.

'Any good?' the girl simpered.

'No,' Josie replied. 'A bit on the big side actually.' Sod it, she'd got her coat done up, hadn't she? Underneath that she could have the body of a goddess, for all the assistant knew.

Did Nell still have such a slinky figure? she wondered, leaving the shop without bothering to try on anything else. Lisa had always been the chunkiest one of the three – not fat exactly, although she was always moaning that she was. She was just ... well, 'nicely covered', as Josie's mum put it. 'Thighs like a footballer,' Lisa had frequently sighed, 'and bum like the back end of the number seventy-three bus – that's me.'

But Nell had always been knock-out slim with good legs and a nice little bottom. Plus she had those gorgeous long blond curls too – with the help of a bottle, mind, but dazzling in a Pre-Raphaelite, shampoo-advert kind of a way.

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Maybe Nell had put on a few pounds these days, thought Josie hopefully, now that she was shackled up with — what was his name? Gareth? It did sound romantic, the two of them in that remote cottage somewhere in north Wales. Perhaps Nell had taken to hogging loads of comfort food in front of their log fire, now she was loved-up and content. She probably didn't have the most rocking social life these days any more either — calories no longer burned off by the thousand every weekend by dancing in sweatbox clubs all night. And maybe she'd stopped bothering to touch up her roots too...

Well, Josie would find out tomorrow, anyway. Tomorrow! She found herself grinning as she went into Marks and Spencer and began loading up a basket with provisions for the boys. If the truth be told, she was secretly *dying* to know how Pete was going to manage without her. Their four-year-old twins, Toby and Sam, weren't exactly naughty or difficult children, but they were rather — how should she put it? They were *lively* boys. Energetic. She tossed three ready-to-cook spaghetti bologneses into her basket and smirked. They let you know they were around, those boys of hers. And tomorrow, for the first time ever, the pleasure of looking after them single-handed for the weekend would be all Pete's. Whereas she, on the other hand...

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She'd be living it up in the big city, just like she'd done all those years before. It would be like stepping back in time.

Josie was on her way back to the car when something caught her eye. There in front of her was a heavily pregnant woman, bump so rounded you could see the faint outline of her pushed-out belly button where her top stretched over it. The woman was showing a friend a romper suit she'd just bought, holding it carefully over one arm, her face animated.

Josie felt herself staring, footsteps slowing. It was a cerise romper suit, with a pale pink cherry design embroidered on one pocket. 'I just couldn't resist it,' the woman was saying, folding it up again and patting it affectionately before she slid it back into the bag. 'Girls' clothes are so sweet, aren't they?'

Josie felt a pull in her own belly and rolled a hand over it. Her pulse quickened. And then, almost before she knew it, she'd wheeled around, straight through the doors of Baby Gap behind her. She just couldn't help herself, marching straight through to the racks of teeny pink and white clothes. Fleecy dungarees, frilly skirts, little buttoned cardigans ... The woman was right. Girls' clothes — especially baby girls' clothes — were utterly, heart-meltingly gorgeous.

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Josie stroked a pair of dungarees, size 0-3 months. They were so tiny and fleecy and *pink*. Candy-floss pink, perfect for a newborn. She unhooked them from the rail and put them reverently over one arm. Her mouth was dry suddenly, and she licked her lips. Next, she picked up a packet of vests that had a fairy print all over them. So, so cute! Oh, she just *had* to have them. And how about the pink knitted cardigan, even if it was hand-wash, the kiss of death for baby clothes? Just gorgeous, though, with the teeny mother-of-pearl buttons. I couldn't resist, she told herself in her head. Look, and there was the most darling little plum-coloured hat! It was adorable!

Josie rubbed her thumb across a pair of soft white tights, imagining small chubby legs tucked inside, kicking and twitching in that random, unintended newborn way. She added them to the selection over her arm and then, after a last brief look at a display of pink cot blankets — no, she'd probably got enough of those for now — she turned towards the till.

The girl behind the counter rang up her purchases without comment, even though Josie was more than ready for the usual questions. *When's it due?* she wanted the girl to ask. *Thought of any names yet?*

A few months to go yet, Josie would reply, patting her belly with a contented smile. *And we're going to call her Rose.*

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Rose! the girl would say. Such a gorgeous name!

I know, Josie would nod. It's our favourite too.

Nothing of the sort, though, unfortunately. The girl was only young, nineteen or twenty at a guess, chewing something, her eyes bored. No doubt she was thinking of where she'd be clubbing later that evening, what she'd be wearing, how she'd do her hair. Exactly the kind of things that had occupied Josie's waking mind for so many years – Hmmm, pointy high shoes or boots? – until the boys had been born and looking after them had consumed everything else.

The girl tissue-wrapped the clothes and placed them in a bag. 'That's forty-two pounds please,' she said, shifting her wedge of chewing gum to the other side of her mouth.

Josie handed over her card, eyes fixed on the dark blue bag. There we are, Rose. Won't you look lovely in that lot? My little sweetheart!

Then she saw the time. Christ! She'd be late for playgroup kicking-out time if she didn't get going.

She ran to the car, stuffed the bag in the boot and started the engine.

'Look, Mum, I done a ambulance for you. There's its light, there, and this is the driver. And he's going really really fast cos there's somebody *dying* in the back and

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there's loads and loads of blood and they've got to get to hospital before he *dies* and ...'

'Lovely, darling,' Josie said automatically to Toby, trying to wiggle his coat sleeves on to his arms without him noticing. 'Hello, Sam. Had a nice morning?'

Sam flung himself bodily against her legs, small arms wrapping tightly around her. She bent down and kissed his head, breathing in his delicious salty boysy smell of Play-Doh and warm trainers. Sam always seemed so relieved whenever she reappeared to take him home that it was impossible for Josie to smother a niggle of doubt about him being at playgroup. Maybe Pete's mum had been right all along, maybe it was a mother's duty to stay at home with her children until they were old enough to vote, instead of having the nerve to put them in playgroup a few mornings a week ...

'Those precious years,' she'd sigh, eyes up to the ceiling, whenever Josie said anything about it. 'You'll miss them when they've gone. You mark my words!'

Barbara was very fond of making such pronouncements. Josie had had to mark Barbara's words on all manner of things over the years. She was the expert, it seemed, on teething, potty training and tantrums, as well as state childcare. With a pursing of her lips and her fat arms folded meatily over her chest, she liked nothing better than to tell Josie where she was going wrong.

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'They *enjoy* playgroup, though, Barbara,' Josie had tried to argue several times through gritted teeth. 'And I like them being there. It's good for their independence – and mine.'

The plan had originally been for Josie to return to work on these mornings. She'd been a designer, pre-kids, a good one too, rising to a senior position in a large children's charity. She'd held out for the boys' starting playgroup as the moment to claw back some time for herself, to kick-start her brain and build up a portfolio of work once more before job-hunting. But it hadn't quite worked out like that somehow. Three mornings a week was not long enough to get the housework and shopping done, let alone anything creative. And almost every time she'd fired up the Mac and started playing around with ideas, she'd been conscious of the minutes slipping past. One hour left before the boys needed picking up. Twenty minutes. Five ... And that had been that.

No matter. There was plenty of time to start work again once they were at school, come September. Josie wasn't in any hurry.

'Did you paint an ambulance as well?' she said to Sam, ruffling his hair.

He shook his head. 'I done a frog. For you,' he said. 'But it's still wet.'

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'You did a frog! Well done,' Josie said, trying to sound surprised. Of course he'd done a frog. All Sam ever wanted to paint was frogs. 'We'll pick it up next week. Let's get your coat on now and we'll go home.'

Once the boys had been strapped into the car, Josie pulled out on to the main road, half listening to Toby's chatter about killing pirates and half worrying she'd forgotten something for the weekend. *So for lunch tomorrow, they can have those rolls and tuna,* she found herself musing, *and for tea, the spag bol, and ...* She forced herself to stop. This was ridiculous! There was a corner shop at the end of their road! If Pete needed anything, he could easily make his way there and sort it out. She was being patronizing, really. Pete was perfectly able to cope. He was a grown man, for goodness' sake! And even if he hadn't been very keen on the idea of Josie going off with the girls, he was just going to have to live with it.

'And I'd whack him over the head with my sword, right, and ...'

She glanced at Toby in the mirror as he gestured some bloodthirsty bit of violence or other. She'd never imagined herself to be the mother of boys. Never thought she'd have to learn the intricacies of model pirate ships, or try to explain how rockets worked. She'd never dreamed that she'd be the one having to referee punch-

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ups over whose turn it was to go on the swing, or that she'd end up walking any number of different ways home so that she and her sons could solemnly inspect the yellow JCBs that were carving up nearby roads.

Josie had always pictured herself hand in hand with beaming daughters; had imagined plaiting their hair with shiny bobbles, taking them to ballet lessons, throwing fairy parties and decorating cupcakes with pink icing and jelly tots.

It wasn't that she wasn't crazy about the boys. Quite the opposite. She'd fallen in love with them the second she'd laid eyes on them, even though they resembled wrinkled, blood-covered rat babies, so tiny and mewling, coming as they had six weeks early. It had been like the strangest, most surreal kind of dream — she'd been bleary from all the drugs they'd given her pre-Caesar, the very air seemed a hallucination, shimmering and rippling as first one little rat baby then another was mysteriously pulled from within her belly.

'A boy!' Pete had cried, holding Toby, first out of the bag.

'And another boy!' the surgeon had cheered, handing Sam over to Josie. She could still hear the way he'd snuffled in her arms like a small vernix-covered puppy, could still remember exactly how he'd felt against her

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bare arms, skin to skin, warm, wet and jittery, with those dark blue eyes opening just a crack to inspect her.

And oh, it had been love at first sight. Even though she now accepted they must have been hideous to an onlooker, so shrivelled and greasy from the waxy white vernix, hardly a scrap of hair between them, arms and legs as tiny as sticks. They were beautiful to her. Her boys. She had *sons!* As she held them both to her chest, their miniature hearts pulsing on top of hers once again, she felt as if she might very well combust with sheer joy.

'Mum! Why aren't you stopping?'

Toby's voice jerked her out of her thoughts, and Josie slammed on the brakes. She'd almost driven straight past their house, so wrapped up was she in baby memories.

Once home, she went upstairs with her precious bag of goodies and stowed it at the back of her wardrobe. There was already a mobile of pastel-pink bunnies there, plus a pile of fuchsia blankets, still in their cellophane wrapping, and a sweet little white teddy with pale pink ears. *All for you, Rose. When you're ready, sweetheart.*

She came back down to see that the boys were out in the garden. Sam's face was set in deep concentration as he swung up the climbing net, a frown rucking his eyebrows. Toby, sure-footed as a cat, was already at the top, shooting imaginary enemies in the forsythia.

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Josie started making lunch, peeling sausages from their packet and sliding them under the grill, and putting on a pan of water for the potatoes. She froze as there came a familiar chittering sound, and the glossy-winged magpie flew down to next door's cherry tree. *One for sorrow. Again!*

It was always on its own, that sodding magpie, living out a lonely bachelorhood in the pale pink froth of blossom, flaunting its bad luck each time in clear monochrome. Why couldn't it find a partner and settle down, so that Josie could have 'two for joy' for a change? Or, better still, invite a couple of mates over so that she'd have 'three for a girl'?

Her period had started eight days ago. Eight days. That meant an egg was silently ripening inside the red darkness of Josie's ovary right now, on the verge of detaching itself and rolling headlong down a tube into her waiting womb. And there it would lie, still and quiet, half a possibility, half a person. Half a daughter, with any luck. Half of *Rose*.

She breathed in hard, and put her arms around herself. *Come on, Rose. What's keeping you?*

She and Pete had been trying for a daughter for so long now. Too long. And Pete had absolutely no idea she'd been stocking up with baby things in preparation. He'd probably think she was mad.

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Maybe she was.

Josie peeled a couple of potatoes and slung them into the pan of water. So if we have sex on Sunday night, she reminded herself, and every day until Wednesday, then maybe, just maybe ...

She would cook something with shellfish on Sunday, she decided, so that she could boost Pete's sperm with a bit of zinc – did a prawn curry count? Maybe she could order in a takeaway – nothing too chilli-tastic, just something to get them in the mood ...

Josie checked how much wine they had in the rack. Three bottles of white, four reds, some bubbly. Well, she couldn't see Pete polishing that lot off on his own tomorrow night, however knackered a day he'd had, so there would definitely be some left for Sunday ...

She grimaced. It wasn't like she *needed* alcoholic help when it came to seducing her own husband but ... you know, anything to oil the wheels was a bonus. She could even dig out some of the sexy underwear that he always bought her for birthdays (uncomfortable, chafing, cold) – even if, truth be told, big Primark knickers were the finest thing since chunky Kit-Kats in her opinion.

Josie watched the magpie flap away and felt a twist of sadness that she and Pete had once been unable to take their hands off each other, yet nowadays, he would paw at her hopefully once the lights were off and, nine times

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out of ten, she'd sigh and say, 'Oh, sorry, love, I'm just sooo shattered tonight,' or whatever. Headache. Not in the mood. *Must* get an early night because of blah-blah-blah tomorrow.

She always hated herself during the moment of silence as he took his hands off her and rolled over, rebuffed, but then felt nothing but blissful relief as she shut her eyes and said good-night into the darkness.

Sunday night, however, would be different. He'd love it!

There was a scream outside and suddenly only Sam was on the climbing frame, white-faced, his mouth one enormous, shocked 'MUM!'

The sausages were burning. The smoke alarm shrieked.

Snap out of it, Josie, she told herself savagely, racing outside to her oldest boy. His face was a sickly *eau-de-nil* as he lay sobbing and shaken on the grass. Catch a grip! Look where daydreaming gets you!

The unpredictability of the traffic, late-running meetings and post-work drinks all made the equation of Pete's ETA home difficult to calculate on any given evening. Sometimes, very occasionally, he'd be back in time to give the boys a bath after their tea, which meant an orgy of splashing, whooping and speedboat noises. Other times, also relatively occasionally, he wouldn't be in until

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they were asleep under their dinosaur quilts, an arm or leg flung over the side of the bunk bed, hair fluffed against the pillow. Most nights, they would hear his car pull up, the engine die and the *clunk* of the central locking outside as Josie was reading the boys their bedtime stories. It was pretty much Josie's favourite time of the day. Her sons, in their pyjamas, smelling of soap, hair damp and sticking up, both leaning into her as she read them *The Smallest Dragon* or *Pirate Peg-Leg*, or whatever had been chosen. Gone was all the bravado of the daytime. As twilight fell, they seemed to regress to babyhood, clambering on to her knee, sucking their thumbs, wanting cuddles.

On this night, she had just opened her mouth to read the first line of *Where's That Monster?* when there was the usual *clunk* from outside the window. Both boys whipped their heads around immediately, monsters forgotten.

'Dad!' cheered Toby, leaping off her knee.

'Daddy!' echoed Sam a second later, racing after his brother.

The front door opened and Josie leaned back against the sofa, listening to them contentedly. Her three boys. Team Winter all present and correct!

'Dad, I fell off the climbing frame!' Toby was boasting. 'Right from the top, like a dive-bomber. Can you see my plaster? Look! There was loads of blood. Loads!'

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'Dad, I can hop on my own – look!' Sam's voice was next, with accompanying thumps. 'See, Dad? Can you see I'm hopping? Toby can't do it yet, just me. He still has to hold on to the wall. Look, Dad. See that?'

'Excellent, excellent.' Pete sounded distracted. It often took him longer than the commute home to leave the office behind. Josie felt an anxious ache inside at the thought of Sam's proud, hopeful face, and crossed her fingers that it hadn't melted to disappointment, mouth turned down, triumph unheeded.

'Good day?' Josie asked, getting up as he came into the living room. He looked tired, she noticed – grey-faced, eyes slightly pouched – but just as handsome as he'd been when she'd met him eight years ago.

'Not bad,' he said, pulling his tie off and tossing it on to the sofa.

He still hadn't looked her in the eye. Still hadn't pulled her in for a kiss. Something's wrong, she thought uneasily.

'Everything all right, Pete?' she asked. 'Shall I get you a drink?'

The boys were swarming all over him and at first she thought he hadn't heard her. It was only when he'd swung Toby up around one shoulder and was dangling Sam upside-down that he glanced across to where she

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was hovering. 'Love one,' he said. 'Glass of red would hit the spot.'

'OK,' she said, walking into the kitchen. This was all about her going away tomorrow, she thought, with a flash of annoyance. A pre-emptive sulk to make her feel bad about leaving him with the boys for one single night, even though he'd disappeared on business trips for days on end, and had stayed in London loads of times when his meetings had run over unexpectedly. 'Nell and Lisa?' he'd echoed when she'd announced her intentions. 'But ... Well ... You should have asked me first. I might have been busy that weekend!'

'Well, you're not,' she'd replied. 'I checked on the calendar. Oh, go on, Pete, it's only for one night ...'

He'd huffed and puffed a bit, tried to joke about Nell and Lisa being a bad influence on her (as if!), but for once Josie had dug her heels in. She really, really wanted this weekend. And the more he went on at her, the more determined she was to have it. It wasn't too much to ask, was it, that he looked after the kids on his own for once?

She gritted her teeth as she took down a glass for him, then, as an afterthought, one for herself too. They'd been over this already. They both knew she was going. He didn't have to make such a fuss about it all over again now, did he?

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And here's me, trotting into the kitchen like an obedient little wifey to pour him a drink! Josie thought, yanking out a wine bottle from the rack. Well, as from tomorrow morning, Josie Winter, obedient wifey, is temporarily history. And Josie Bell, party animal, can bloody well make a comeback — and about time too!