

CELEBURBIA

by

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Novel. Romantic comedy/satire hybrid

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EPISODE ONE

The very moment Sheldon Trent leapt back into her life, Daisy Thorne knew he was the man for her. The guy was straight out of a sizzling romantic novel; a hypnotic duet of hazel eyes, a chaos of wax-messed chestnut locks and the athletic physique of a guy who knew exactly how to work himself into a hot sweat in the gym.

Before he was famous, Sheldon chose to kiss Daisy's soft and willing lips. Before he was famous, Sheldon cocooned Daisy's petite frame within the solid warmth of his muscular arms. And before he was famous, Sheldon almost, yes, get this, he almost became her official boyfriend.

But then she lost him.

Ouch.

Now he was famous, Sheldon Trent was no longer available. Now he was famous, the man was strictly off-limits to the heart-fluttering, bosom-heaving desires of all rival women. Now he was famous, Daisy's almost-but-not-quite boyfriend belonged to somebody else.

Melody Diamond.

Bitch.

Melody Diamond was a nobody. To be precise, Melody Diamond was the most famous nobody in the world. Never before had such a nobody rocketed towards the dizzy, vertigo-inducing heights of super-stardom. But she'd somehow managed it. Oh, yes, there was no denying it, this total nobody was a huge somebody.

With the proverbial world at her feet, Miss Diamond had everything. Money. Notoriety. An ultra-massive fan-base. And now she had Sheldon Trent.

Again... bitch.

In comparison, what did Miss Thorne have? Easy. A broken heart.

For the last three days, Daisy had shuffled around in her pyjamas and dressing gown like a zombie/hermit hybrid. She hadn't washed, she hadn't dressed, she hadn't once left her shoebox of a one-bedroom London flat. Actually, "London flat" was too kind a phrase for the place. "Bottom of the pile London hovel" was a far more fitting description. Still, in comparison, it was (fairly) cheap to rent, a rarity amid the city's eye-wateringly over-priced property letting market.

During these three depressing days, Daisy had couch-potatoed her way through hour upon hour of god-awful daytime television. Yes. Daytime TV. It was a wonder she hadn't gone mad. Or maybe she had, but just didn't know it yet. Furthermore, her diet had consisted of any random species of tinned goods she could forage from the deepest, darkest depths of the kitchen cupboards. And get this. She'd spoon-scooped her foraged foodstuff straight from each can. Eeeewww! The girl had even devoured the tin of pilchards she couldn't recall purchasing. Yes. Pilchards. She detested pilchards.

This time last week, Daisy had enjoyed existence as just another average twenty-two-year-old London girl; plastic maxed to the limit, way too many shoes, chaotic cascades of flyaway hair refusing to be tamed, a waist two sizes socially too big, a pair of boobies three sizes socially too small and a sheer-drop canyon of an overdraft. Yet despite all that, life was (or at least had been) essentially good.

But now look at her. Melody Diamond had turned the lass into a hopeless feral wretch.

What was Daisy thinking?

Why had she let herself get like this?

God knows.

Huh, in Daisy's opinion, Melody was in no shape or form Sheldon's ideal match. She couldn't work it out. What the hell did he see in her?

What was Sheldon thinking?

Why had he let himself get like this?

Again... God knows.

Daisy considered hitting the town and losing herself in a one-woman pub crawl. The insatiable sinking of way too many voddy and cokes, sickly cocktails and vile-tasting shots seemed like the greatest idea of the century. Yes. Drown her sorrows. Drink to forget. But no. Journeying beyond her front door meant facing the outside world, a deffo no-no. Instead, in an attempt to distract herself from the heartache, Daisy powered up the TV. Sod's law kicked in with an advert for Melody Diamond's brand new autobiography.

'Two years ago,' an uber-enthusiastic narrator boomed out to Livingroomland, 'an unknown twenty-three-year-old hairdresser from Essex stepped into the Fly On The Wall villa. From that day onwards, everything changed. Forever.'

The premise of Fly On The Wall (the most successful reality TV show ever in the entire known universe) was simple:

1. Bung ten ordinary people* for three months into a purpose-built Mediterranean villa peppered with hidden cameras. Offer them no TV, no radio, no internet, no mobile phones, no newspapers, no connection whatsoever with the outside world.
2. Unlike previous reality TV shows of a similar vein, DO NOT dish out dares, tasks, zany contests, the desperate need to couple up to stay in, the even more desperate need to get back with a nightmare ex to stay in, or any other form of stimulation to quash the grey onset of mind-numbing boredom.

3. Give them one luxury. Unlimited alcohol.

4. Light the proverbial blue touch paper and see what happens.

*The term "ordinary people" was a phrase intended to be taken loosely. Very loosely.

Without fail, every season's ten shortlisted auditionees were a far cry from regular members

of the public. They were needy, narcissistic, egotistic, self-obsessed, practically brain-dead and (most importantly) ready to blow. In other words, TV gold.

The advert went on to display a noisy montage of Melody moments from the Fly On The Wall archives; her mega-tantrums, her riotous run-ins with fellow tenants and her (censored) flashing of body parts whenever she detected a distinct lull in her share of airtime.

The overblown narration then continued. ‘Everybody remembers where they were when Melody Diamond left the Fly On The Wall villa.’

Cue VT of Melody’s infamous ejection, greeted by the raucous adulation of hundreds of avid fans.

‘She may not have been crowned Queen of the villa, but my word, she certainly went on to win the hearts of the entire nation.’

‘Not this bloody heart,’ growled Daisy to the TV, spooning the final remnants of cold baked beans straight from the tin and into a mouth boasting tomato-sauce-stained lips.

A fast-paced sequence of documentary-style everyday happenings then showed the woman shopping, phoning, driving, public-appearancing, whatevering. It was a wonder they didn’t show her peeing or, God forbid, taking a number two.

‘Since then, we’ve seen life through a lens of this reality sensation via her ratings-busting TV shows, Melody Diamond: After The Villa and Melody Diamond: Two Years In The Life. And now, for the first time ever, everybody’s favourite celebrity opens her heart about her meteoric rise to fame, her addiction to cosmetic surgery and the reason why she bared all as a top-shelf centrefold model.’

Next came a close-up still of the book’s front cover, dominated by the flawless, airbrushed headshot of the woman in question.

‘Melody Diamond: On Top. Her new autobiography.’

The advert concluded with a soft-focus shot of a seated Melody clutching the autobiography. 'In my own words, I hold nothing back,' she stated, firm and resilient in a thick Essex accent, her doleful eyes cleverly depicting the plastic cow as a hopeless victim of her own insatiable hunger for fame. 'I reveal all. And I mean all.'

Urrrrgggh, unable to take any more of this vomit-inducing pantomime, Daisy standbyed the TV.

Good news: The killing of picture and sound freed her eyes and ears from a certain nobody-turned-somebody. Well, for now at least.

Bad news: Said killing of picture and sound failed to offer respite to her tortured memory, her fractured mind, her heartbroken mess of a life. Like the idiot tattoo of an ex-lover's name, the aforementioned nobody-turned-somebody was going nowhere.

It was then when her door intercom buzzy-buzz-buzzed again and again and again. Oh, great, the last headache she needed right now was a visitor. No, no, no, she'd ignore the persistent buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzzing, yes, that's what she'd do. Whoever it was would soon get bored and leave the heartbroken girl to fester in peace.

There followed a long, lingering silence. Had the caller taken the hint and departed?

Buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzz!

No. He or she hadn't.

Buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzz, buzzy-buzz!!!

Argh, FFS, she parked her now-foodless tin can and accompanying spoon upon the coffee table, then marched into the hallway and placed the intercom handset against her ear. 'Who is this?' she barked. 'And what do you want?'

'Daisy. It's your mother. Let me in. Now.'

Oh, FFS revisited. Of all people, why did it have to be her?

‘Mum, I can’t. I’m...’ The hermit thumbed with haste through her mind’s inventory of excuses, thumb, thumb, thumb, thumb, thumb, but her bullshit gene had clearly packed up for the day. All she could manage was a pitiful, ‘...busy with stuff.’

‘Oh, don’t give me that old codswallop. I’m not going anywhere, young lady, so you might as well open this door.’

It was true. Mum was no quitter. The woman had once camped overnight in the doorway of a department store during a Force 9 blizzard just to bag the best bargains in an end of season clearance sale. This meant that Daisy had no choice but to receive the visitor. And so, reluctantly, she buzzed her in.

Upon entry into the property, Mum tutted at the sight of nightwear at three o’clock in the afternoon. She then marched into the lounge, met in an instant by the sullen shadows of morose self-pity. ‘Oh, shame on you, Daisy. You haven’t even drawn your curtains.’

The disgruntled parent swished open the fabric barriers, allowing a brilliant white tsunami of sunlight to surge into the room, chasing away shadows and turning gloomy grey into vivid splashes of colour. As a result, the equally disgruntled daughter performed a rapid outbreak of blinks in a hasty attempt to adjust to the cold light of day.

Mum grimaced, taking note of the chaotic herd of empty tin cans gracing the coffee table, the carpet, both arms of the sofa, everywhere. ‘Is this what you’ve been living on?’

‘Yesssssss,’ Daisy hissed, well and truly rumbled.

‘Straight from the can?’

Daisy flopped her unpreened frame onto the sofa, the resulting tremor evicting its resident cans. ‘Guilty as charged.’

Mum rolled her eyes and sniffed the surrounding mustiness. ‘What this room needs is fresh air.’ She threw open a window, then turned to face her feral daughter. ‘How long have you been hiding away in this place?’

‘Three days.’

‘Three days? What about your job?’

‘I phoned in and pulled a sickie.’

‘Good God.’

‘This is what a broken heart has done to me.’

‘Oh, don’t be so melodramatic. You’ve been dumped before. Loads of times.’

‘Yeah, thanks for reminding me about my back catalogue of facepalm failures in the male of the species department.’

‘I’m doing this for your own good.’

‘It doesn’t feel that way on this side of the fence.’

‘Look, what I mean is, you always go off the rails a bit. Well, more than a bit.’ She then indicated to her daughter’s bedraggled hair, her food-stained nightwear, her current wretched existence as a whole. ‘But you don’t normally sink to this sorry state.’

‘Yeah, well, this time, it’s different.’

‘How?’

‘Because my boyfriend ran off with an airhead reality TV star,’ she blurted out. ‘There. I’ve said it.’ Daisy couldn’t help herself, she shook her head, she blew air through her nostrils, she balled both hands into knuckle-whitening fists, and out of her mouth poured the inevitable denial. ‘Melody Diamond doesn’t love him. I know exactly what that plastic bitch is up to. Their so-called relationship is a total sham. A pairing of convenience for the benefit of the cameras. A fit guy by her side to make her look good and match all the other beautiful things in her life. Why can’t Sheldon see that? The guy is being taken for a ride. Melody’s wearing him around her cosmetically-altered form like the latest must-have fashion accessory. He’s nothing more to her than...’ She rifled through her brain for an apt phrase. And then she found one. ‘...an amusing pet.’

Mum was having none of it. 'Right, that's it. It's high time you pulled yourself together. I never brought you up to act so pathetic and weak. You've clearly inherited far too many of your father's genes.'

Fists unballled, Daisy surrendered, bowing her head in shame. 'I can't help it, Mum. She stole Sheldon from me and it hurts.'

'For God's sake, Daisy, he was hardly yours to begin with. You only had one date.'

'So what? I'm still heartbroken.'

'There's a cure for that. It's called getting back out there and finding yourself somebody new.' Her mother dealt a tactical pause, then added, 'Stephen's still available.'

'I don't want Stephen, I want Sheldon.'

'You can't have him. He's her boyfriend now.'

Ouch.

No reply from her daughter. Instead, the young lady buried her face in both hands and delivered the absolute boss of distressed huffs.

As a result, Mum's tone softened. 'Oh, Daisy. Right now, it might seem like the end of the world. But time truly is a wonderful healer.'

'Yeah, so they say,' the girl mumbled through the narrow fissures between her fingers.

'Pity I don't have a thousand years to spare.'

'You need to realise, dear. Sheldon Trent is simply not worth all this pain and anguish.'

'He is to me.' And then, one drawn-out sigh later, she added, 'Oh, God, what does he see in that bitch?'

'Language.'

'Sorry.'

Mrs Thorne sat down on the sofa beside her daughter. 'We all know that vile Melody wotsit doesn't deserve somebody like Sheldon. The thing is, unless the lad works it out for himself, there is nothing anybody can do about it.'

Daisy's palms fell from her face and her eyes inflated with acute realisation. 'Mum, you are so right.' She stood bolt upright, her entire body aglow with renewed hope. 'Melody isn't worth it. She doesn't deserve him. I do.'

Mum's face dropped. 'Actually, no, that's not quite what I meant.'

Too late. Daisy was already sold. Wearing the ear-to-ear grin of steely determination, she knew exactly what she needed to do next. 'Melody Diamond,' she cried out to an imaginary figure situated at the opposite side of the lounge. 'The battle lines are drawn. This is it. This is war.' The girl awarded herself a firm nod of self-approval, then turned to face a second imaginary figure situated in another part of the room. 'Sheldon Trent. My new purpose in life is to help you come to your senses. And believe me, I won't rest until I've got you back in my arms.'

EPISODE TWO

FIVE DAYS AGO...

‘Daisy, have I introduced you to Stephen Baker?’

‘Yes, Mum,’ Daisy sighed, overly rolling her eyes. ‘Twice so far.’

‘He’s a self-made businessman. Launched his own recruitment firm from scratch.’

‘Yes, Mum. So you’ve told me. Three times now.’

‘All right, Daisy, less of the attitude, I’m only trying to help. A girl your age shouldn’t be on your own. It’s... abnormal.’

Her parents’ infamous garden barbecues were always like this. They began with the promise of sociable drinks and chatter amid charred sausages, hard-baked burgers and incinerated chicken drumsticks, but inevitably progressed into a relentless matchmaking bonanza whenever Daisy was an official member of the singledom club. Without fail, the poor lass found herself paraded in front of eligible bachelors in true debutante ball fashion. Embarrassing was an understatement. This was scarlet cheeks territory. Face cheeks, that is, and not her buttocks.

‘I happen to like being single.’ It was true. She did. ‘No man means no jealousy, no arguments over stupid subjects, no morning queue for the bathroom and thankfully no banal debates about football. Oh, and to top it all off, I get to claim all-night possession of the duvet.’

‘Oh, don’t be so silly, dear. Nobody likes being left on the shelf.’

‘Left on the shelf? I’m hardly the only unsold toy in the shop.’

Huh, the cheek of it. Daisy was young, free and single by choice. Her choice. This girl’s present subscription to the world of singledom felt so liberating, so stress-busting, a well-

earned break from the ever-revolving relationship waterwheel of dating, loving, fighting, breaking up, dating, loving, fighting, breaking up, dating, loving, fighting, breaking up, etcetera, etcetera.

Daisy considered the notion of further stating her case concerning her current unattached status, but soon decided against it. Mum had sworn lifelong allegiance to the old-school camp. While less domineering parents allowed their offspring to be themselves and make their own way in the world, the woman stood by the firm belief that a daughter's place was to make her mother proud by marrying a suitable career man, closely followed by starting a family. No way did Mrs Thorne want her only child getting too pally with the solo life.

'I think you and Stephen would make a lovely couple.'

'Oh, Mum, please ration the matchmaking. Me and Stephen, no chance.'

'Give me one good reason why not.'

'Okay. One good reason coming up. The man is ancient.'

'He's only thirty-six.'

'Yes. And I'm only twenty-two. If I ever feel the need to shack up with a sugar daddy, I'll give him a call.'

The parent wasn't giving up just yet. 'Give me another good reason why not.'

'Okay. Another good reason coming up. He's got no...' Daisy struggled for a politically correct version of the reason she had in her head. '...no...'

'Got no what?'

'...oomph.'

'Oomph?'

Did she really need to spell it out? Yes, she guessed she did. 'He's not exciting enough.'

'You don't even know the man.'

'Yes, I do. Sort of.'

‘What do you mean sort of?’

Daisy sighed. Loudly. ‘Earlier, I spoke to him for at least five minutes.’

Mum scoffed. Louder than loudly. ‘Five minutes is nowhere near enough time to get to know a person.’

‘Never heard of first impressions? Gut instinct? I’m telling you, Mum, he is not the man for me.’

In response, Mum blew out the theatrical air of head-shaking disillusion. ‘For the life of me, I don’t know where you get that rebellious streak.’

‘Oh, really? I suggest you take a peek in the nearest available mirror.’

Mum opened her mouth to reply, then closed it, then opened it, then closed it again. Eventually, she uttered, ‘All right, so you’ve got me there. But it doesn’t explain your anger. Your frustration. Your... anxiety.’

‘That might have something to do with you calling me Daisy.’

‘What’s wrong with Daisy? It’s a lovely name.’

‘Not when my surname is Thorne. At school, I was a laughing stock. You should have heard all the tittering going on in the classroom every time my name was called out. I’m sure that’s the root of all my problems.’

‘You should count your blessings, dear. My first choice was Rose.’

Daisy lobbed her mother a gobsmacked double take. ‘Rose? Rose Thorne?’ She’d never been told this before. ‘Like, seriously?’

The parent tipped a vague shrug. ‘Seemed like a good idea at the time. It was your father who suggested Daisy as an alternative.’

‘Oh, thank God for Dad’s input,’ phewed the young lady who could have so easily ended up as Rose bloody Thorne. ‘Lucky escape or what?’

‘Thinking about it,’ added Mum, ‘that’s the one and only occasion in our marriage where he managed to get his own way.’

Sudden loud male cursing broke Daisy and Mum’s flow. The two of them looked across the garden to Dad. The aproned man loomed over the barbecue grill, tending to a lazy, semi-smoking bed of sooty charcoal which by now should have been a red-orange glow of intense heat. Behind him, a sorry parade of tall, dry and weather-worn fence panels blocked out his share of the sunlight.

Daisy winced at her father’s somewhat unnerving progress. ‘Surely it’s not safe to have a barbecue positioned so close to a wooden fence.’ Then came a wave hello to fresh buds of dread as she clocked the man putting a rather dodgy Plan B into action. ‘And should he really be squirting paraffin straight onto smouldering charcoal?’

‘Daisy, stop fretting over things you don’t fully understand. He knows what he’s doing, he’s a responsible man.’ A sneer of distaste then contorted Mum’s mouth. ‘Unlike a certain somebody from next door. You remember Sheldon Trent, don’t you? You used to play together as children.’

Daisy flicked her mother the second double take of the day, recalling a far more accurate depiction of her childhood. ‘Play together? More like you forced me to associate with him.’

‘Well, I felt sorry for the lad. He didn’t have any friends.’

‘Yes, and in the process, I lost most of mine. Do you realise how embarrassing it was, spending so much time with the porkiest kid in the universe?’

‘Don’t be so nasty, you. Some people can’t help having a weight problem. They call it big boned disorder, or something like that.’

‘Mum, they could have fed the starving nations of the world with the amount of crap he chucked down his throat on a daily basis.’

‘I dare say a lot of it was comfort food,’ came Mum’s response. ‘Don’t forget, the poor soul didn’t have the happiest of childhoods, what with his parents constantly screaming blue murder at each other. No word of a lie, the entire street blew a communal sigh of relief when the pair of them finally split up. Well, apart from young Sheldon, of course. His B-word of a father suddenly upping and leaving the way he did must have scarred the boy something rotten.’

Up until that moment, Daisy had forgotten all about the infamous break-up of Sheldon’s folks. Well over a decade had passed since the episode in question. The height of summer. The hottest, stickiest day of the year. She knew this because she could clearly recollect herself and the fat kid waiting for the ice cream van to turn up and refresh their parched tongues. When it did eventually arrive, Sheldon was the happiest child alive. But not for long. In the time it took the boy to trade his pocket money for a double-headed cone, fully loaded with ice cream and smothered with a sprinkling of hundreds and thousands, a toss of chopped nuts and a liberal squirt of raspberry goo, his departing father had loaded his gear into the car and was in the process of sparking up the engine.

The last Sheldon saw of Daddy Not-So-Dearest was the man jabbing an extended middle finger at his sobbing mother through the driver’s side window as he stamped hard on the accelerator pedal, leaving a swirling wisp of exhaust fumes and a thick pile of unpaid bills in his wake. All young Sheldon could do in response was stare in open-mouthed, sodden-eyed silence at the emptiness of roads while his unlicked ice-cold treat turned into white mess and cascaded down his trembling wrist. Sad, so sad.

Meanwhile, back in the present, an afterthought decided to tap Daisy on the shoulder. She turned to face her mother and asked, ‘Any particular reason why you’ve randomly brought up the subject of Sheldon Trent?’

‘Ah, yes.’ The conversation had skewed so far off the beaten track, Mum had almost forgotten to tread upon the very point she wished to make. ‘He’s back from wherever he’s been hiding. Eight months ago, he bought himself a car and disappeared. Just like his father did.’

Daisy frowned. ‘Has he been on the run or something?’ Although Daisy couldn’t imagine somebody so overweight running very far.

‘No, no, nothing like that. But his mother’s been worried sick. No phone calls, no letters, nothing, until last Tuesday when he turned up out of the blue on her doorstep.’ Mum had hit unstoppable soapbox mode. ‘Gallivanting around the world apparently. He called it education through travel. Well, I call it too bone idle to get himself a job. Honestly, Daisy, if you ever end up with a loser like him, I’ll cut you out of my Will.’

‘Oh, don’t you worry, Mum. I have absolutely no intention of going there.’

Whoooooosh!!!!

Screams of terror pierced the air as the barbecue surrendered to a raging fireball. Spooked guests scattered here, there and everywhere. The bottle of paraffin was lost in transit and landed upon the grass as Dad stumbled backwards and fell flat on his back, a troupe of fledgling flames dancing upon his charred apron, growing in size upon each flicker. He yelped in alarm, thrashing his arms and legs in all directions and rolling in the grass in a panicky attempt to extinguish himself.

A safe distance away, Stephen of “launching his own recruitment firm from scratch” fame, the only barbecue guest dressed in a suit and tie, stood frozen on the spot.

Mum looked to him for much-needed assistance. ‘Stephen! Do something!’

The horrified man dealt her a clueless shrug. ‘Such as?’

‘I don’t know! Anything!’

Stephen failed to move. It was all too much for the man.

Meanwhile, Dad's kicking, jerking feet met the burning barbecue, sending it keeling over and setting alight a thick tuffet of dry grass. The arid vegetation crackled and snapped as the ruthless flames took hold. Then bang, the paraffin bottle exploded, painting the wooden fence with an orange-yellow sheet of blazing magma. Roaarrrrrrr!!! What was once an embarrassing no-show of smouldering nothingness was now an out of control inferno.

Daisy made for the mayhem, but Mum grabbed her arm, holding her back.

'No, Daisy! It's too dangerous!'

The terrified daughter gawped at her mother, then back at the fiery monster. It was true. Going anywhere near such a chaotic blaze was far too risky. She looked across to Dad. He was in big trouble. No matter how much he rolled, the flames upon his apron kept on rocking.

'Dad!' she shrieked, distressed and helpless.

What Daisy Thorne needed more than anything right now...

...was a hero.

OMG, the figure appeared from nowhere. Boasting the wowest of physiques, the young male vaulted himself over a part-burning length of fencing and into the garden. He tore off his checked shirt, revealing the most delicious ripped torso Daisy had ever seen. Her breath stuck in her throat as she watched the hero race over to Dad and pat away the invading flames with his discarded garment. The muscles in his arms and back tensed and rippled as he dragged her parent away from the fire and to safety, sending Daisy's heart, her soul, her entire body into an involuntary shimmy.

Wow and double wow. Who was this guy?

Overwhelmed with sheer relief, Mum shook the mystery man's hand. 'Oh, thank you so much. I'd hate to imagine what would have happened if you hadn't shown up.' She then averted sour eyes from his topless state. 'But please. Cover yourself up. There are women and children present.'

The young man who enjoyed an early twenties status grinned to himself as he searched for something suitable. Aha, a tablecloth minding its own business beneath plastic plates, ketchup bottles and bread rolls would do just fine. He yanked it free from the patio table (hardly disturbing said plastic plates, ketchup bottles and bread rolls) and wrapped it around his lean, athletic frame.

Mum trotted over to where an injured Dad lay. 'Are you all right, dear?' she whimpered. 'Please tell me you're not scarred for life.'

Strange. Daisy hadn't seen so much concern for Dad spew through Mum's lips in years.

'I don't think I could bear the daily sight of major deformities,' her mother then added.

Oh. Scrub the concern. It was clearly an aesthetic agenda.

Daisy's father was clearly in a lot of pain, yet he somehow managed to quip, 'I think I'll live... but my chest doesn't half smart,' as he tore away from his scorched shirt the charred remnants of what was once his apron.

Stephen, meanwhile, continued to play the dumbstruck background statue, not knowing quite how to act amid all the drama.

Mum took note of his lack of anything particularly useful. 'Look lively, Stephen.'

Another awkward shrug. 'What shall I do?'

'What do you think?' she hollered, indicating to her soot-faced husband. 'Call a bloody ambulance.' She then pointed to the burning fence and surrounding area. 'And then call the bloody fire brigade.'

Stephen nodded, plucking a mobile phone from his pocket. 'Yes, yes, of course, Mrs Thorne.'

Daisy, meanwhile, found it impossible to tear her eyes away from the amazing hero who had leapt into her life. Her heart was a flutter, her eyes shone bright and her smile stretched so far across her face, it had very little room to manoeuvre. Oh, wow, could it be that Daisy

Thorne was experiencing love at first sight? And if so, was this an opportune time to take back all that previous waffle she'd spat out about preferring the independent single life?

Hmm, knowing she had to be quick, for there were rival single ladies on today's barbecue guest list, she marched straight over to the man in her sights. This guy was for the taking and there was no way she was willing to let anybody but herself make that take. 'Oh, my God, you saved my dad's life.'

'Um, yeah, I guess I did.' It was weird. Humble and unassuming, the man in question seemed somewhat stunned by his own startling achievement.

'Have you been sent down to me from Heaven?' Cringe alert. Sure, a miracle had occurred today, but what a dumb and numpty line. 'Actually, forget I said that.'

'Consider it forgotten,' he responded with a smile.

'So... information request. Who the hell are you?'

His brow furrowed in question. 'Don't you recognise me?'

'No.' And off her hero's strange look, she added, 'Should I?'

'Daisy, it's me. Sheldon Trent.'

EPISODE THREE

‘I’m warning you, Daisy Thorne,’ she said to her own reflection via her trusty hand mirror. ‘Mess this up and I will never, never, ever, ever speak to you again.’

Why was she delivering stern self-pep-talk? Simple. Very soon, she would be hosting her very first dinner date with him.

The new-look Sheldon Trent.

OMFG!

The invite she’d offered the man in question a few hours earlier at the barbecue and the way it had played out circled her brain over and over again like an aeroplane refused immediate touchdown.

‘Hey, Sheldon. Maybe we could... you know... do something together sometime.’

The subject of her brand new burning desire seemed most intrigued. ‘You mean like a date?’

‘I guess that’s what I’m getting at, yes.’ [Of course that’s what I’m getting at.]

Oh, yes, her mind’s inner voice often spat out far more daring and/or direct and/or honest square-bracket comments for her ears only, the likes of which the somewhat meeker Daisy on the outside didn’t have the bottle to utter out loud.

Sheldon, meanwhile, oblivious to the private square-bracket workings of Daisy’s mind offered across a positive nod. ‘A date sounds good, I’d like that.’

Expecting worst-case scenario, namely, soul-crushing rejection, Daisy failed to register the man’s approval. ‘It’s cool if you don’t want to. I won’t mind if you say no. If I was a guy, I’d probably turn me down flat.’

‘No, no, I’d like us to –’

‘Forget I said anything.’ Nerves. Yes, it had to be her overly anxious manner affecting the inner mechanics of her hearing. ‘It was a dumb idea anyway.’

‘Daisy.’ He placed both hands upon her shoulders and looked the girl straight in the eye. ‘I said yes.’

Her mouth flopped open. ‘You said yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘To a date?’

‘Yes.’

‘With me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wow.’ Overwhelmed, she couldn’t think of anything else to say, so she repeated, ‘Wow.’

‘What have you got in mind?’ he enquired.

The reply came a nanosecond later. ‘My place. Tonight.’ [Yes, good call, Daisy.

Assertiveness is the key here. Dither too much and the man could lose interest.] ‘I’ll cook you a meal.’ [Argh, way too assertive. And borderline suicidal. What the hell made you suggest dinner for two? You can’t cook to save your life.]

Oh, actually, thinking about it, she still had time to change her mi–

‘Sounds good to me,’ he said.

Too late. A smiling Sheldon had accepted the invitation. If she now went on to retract the offer, she’d look like a total dwerk. Hmm, she needed to face facts. There was no going back. The point of no return was but a shrinking landmark in life’s rear-view mirror.

Sheldon then wanted to know, ‘Consider yourself handy in the kitchen, huh?’

[Hah, as if. I’m totally useless. I even burn water.] ‘Of course,’ she fibbed behind the faux innocence of a toothy beam. ‘I can cook like the best of them.’ [Ouch, WTF?]

‘Ooh. What’s on the menu?’

[How should I know? I've just this second lied to you about my cooking skills. I haven't had time to progress towards stage two, namely, choosing exactly what to totally incinerate.]

'Tell you what, I'll surprise you.' [Surprise him? More like put him off food for life.]

'Excellent. What time would you like me? Seven?'

[No, no, no, I'll need more time, this hair won't straighten naturally, these legs won't auto-shave, this face won't paint itself.] 'Eight would be far more convenient.'

'Cool. Eight it is then.'

'Great. It's a date.'

'Well, I'd better be making tracks.' Sheldon indicated to his mother's house which stood beyond the charred remains of what had once been a wooden fence. 'Mum has given me a loooooong list of things around the place that need fixing.'

[Mmm, good with your hands, eh?] 'Okay, I'll see you later.'

'You certainly will.'

'Eight o'clock?'

'Eight o'clock.'

'On the dot?'

'On the dot.' Sheldon turned to leave, then paused before facing Daisy once more. 'Just one more thing.'

'Yes?'

'It might be a good idea to tell me where you live.'

Fast-forwarding to this evening, a freshly showered, pampered and dressing-gowned Daisy scampered into the kitchen and pulled open the oven door to check on the progress of the meal. Okaaaaaaaaay, not bad... but its potato topping should have been browner and crispier and yummiier by now.

Remedy: Daisy turned up the heat a couple of notches.

She'd chosen shepherd's pie. Why? She liked shepherd's pie. Oh, and it was the only dish Mum had ever taught her to cook. Actually, closer to the truth, it was the only dish she'd allowed Mum to teach her to cook. Daisy had never been the culinary type. In her opinion, food creation was a service provided by fast food joints, cafés, bistros and restaurants, not a home hobby. As such, friends often complimented the girl on her spotless kitchen. Hah, if only they knew the reason why.

Daisy headed to her bedroom to place the final piece of the jigsaw of preparation into its rightful spot. Namely, clothes. How much time did she have left? She checked the alarm clock on her bedside cabinet. 19:57. Oh, God, three minutes and counting. In a flustered panic, she yanked open the wardrobe doors. Twenty outfits, possibly more hung on parade, yet –

'I've got nothing to wear!' From right to left, she rifled with lunatic rapidity through the garments. 'No.' Swish. 'No.' Swish. 'No.' Swish. 'No.' Swish. 'Definitely not.' Swish. 'No.' Swish. 'Oh, maybe.' A pause for thought. 'Actually, no.' Swish. 'No.' Swish. 'Ugh, what was I thinking with that one?' Rifling halted, she looked upwards, both palms pressed flat together in prayer, turning to the Supreme Being for answers. 'Oh, sweet Goddess of Fashion. Please advise me what coordinates best with shepherd's pie.'

Silence.

'Oh, great,' she groaned. 'The sweet Goddess of Fashion is clearly "out of office."'

Right, that's it, the time had arrived to give her reflection a good telling off. She quit her search through the forest of rags and addressed her hand mirror. 'Daisy. Pull yourself together. You're beginning to act like one of those ditzy airheads you write about. How you look isn't the be all and end all of everything. It doesn't matter whether your outfit is designer or charity shop. It's all about the person inside the dress.' Clock check two, widened eyes, a

loud gasp. ‘Under two minutes of preparation time remaining. Oh, God, time flies when you’re having kittens.’

Drastic measures alert. Not too dissimilar to sticking a pin in a map when unsure of where next to travel, she closed her eyes, pointed blindly to a random garment, plucked it from the rail, re-opened her eyes and –

– oh, good. Her little black dress. Short. Figure-hugging. Dead sexy. And oh, so daring.

Returning her attention to the mirror, she told herself, ‘Ooh, yes, Daisy Thorne, you have chosen wisely.’

Daisy squeezed her body into the garment, accessorised with a hint of jewellery, sprayed a liberal cloud of perfume about her person, then applied a fresh coat of blood-red lipstick. Job done. Miss Thorne was at last ready to rock ‘n’ roll.

She made her way into the lounge, proud of the way she’d decorated the room’s resident table an hour earlier for refined and sophisticated dining; tablecloth, glassware, placemats, the works. The room itself was bathed in the delicate, semi-lit ambience of a lone candle standing aflame at the centre of the table, complemented by the golden haze of a strategic lamp in the far corner. Meanwhile, romantic music played low in the background, a rich and classical piece entitled *Something Or Other For Piano And Violin In D Major Or D Minor Or D Whatever* by one of those long since dead and buried composers, a CD she’d purchased on a whim months ago from a charity shop for just such an occasion.

It was clear. Daisy Thorne had gone to a lot of trouble to set the mood.

Oh, wow, Sheldon was due to turn up any second now. Was she nervous? God, yes. And so, to take her mind off the raging butterfly battle in her stomach, she grabbed the remote control and fired it at the TV. Oh, typical, the image of the most famous nobody in the world filled the screen. Was that airhead ever off the telly? Evidently not. The advert itself was for Melody Diamond’s *Work Yourself Into A Sweat* workout DVD. Dressed for exercise, the

girl star-jumped with a plastic smile, the concrete rigidity of her over-sized fake bosoms defying all known laws of physics. Daisy couldn't help but bark a contemptuous guffaw when the voiceover announced to women everywhere, 'Buy this DVD and you too will have a body like Melody Diamond.'

'Hah, get real,' Miss Thorne remarked to herself. 'To have a body like hers, I'd need a whole lot more than a strict daily fitness regime.' She counted her fingers as she recited a list of necessary requirements. 'Liposuction, silicone breast implants, oh, and a world-renowned cosmetic surgeon on speed-dial for as-and-when modifications and repairs.'

Daisy skipped channels. Oh, great, another Melody advertisement. For what exactly? Fitgirl, that's what, the reality TV star's over-priced contribution to a never-ending conveyor belt of celebrity endorsed perfume.

The highly lucrative Fitgirl brand had been specifically built around the woman in question. Not limited to high-end perfumery, Fitgirl also stretched to a complete range of cosmetics, a daring lingerie collection, oh, and even condoms "for the discerning lady's handbag." This particular Fitgirl eu de toilette commercial featured two late-teen models, one male, one female, both way too perfect to be true, wearing next to nothing whilst bumping and grinding amid the backdrop of a lavish Edwardian mansion setting.

Then freeze.

Mean, moody, smouldering pouts at the camera.

French accent voiceover: 'Fitgirl. The scent of girlkind.'

Daisy. Unimpressed. 'Hah, more like the scent of working girlkind.' And then an afterthought raised its hand. 'Why do perfume adverts always feature French accent voiceovers? Why not Eastern European? Or American? Or Brummie?'

It was then when the door intercom buzzer did its thing.

Her date had arrived. Yes! Air punch.

With one shot of the remote, she killed the TV, then adopted the elated skip of a child promised sweets into the hallway, buzzing entry to her visitor without even checking if it was him. There, she waited, one ear pressed against the still-closed door, listening with bated breath as an approaching set of eager footsteps scaled the communal stairs. The footsteps then fell silent, replaced instead by the tappy-tap-tap of knuckles upon wood.

Perhaps a tad too enthusiastic, she threw open the door. 'Hi!' she greeted, high-pitched, excited, bordering on lunacy. 'You made it.'

Sheldon Trent stood at the doorway, his hair waxed and styled, his face clean-shaven, oozing masculinity in a tight-fitting shirt, black skinny jeans and a cute smile to die for. Mmm, Daisy was most impressed. She recalled Sheldon looking hot enough this afternoon, and not only because of the raging fire, but gasp of gasps, the guy had managed to achieve the seemingly impossible tonight by vastly improving on said hotness. Wow, already, she could feel her heart beating faster. Her rate of respiration had also quickened. Oh, and without warning, an involuntary warm-fuzzy-oooh glow between her legs decided the time was right to introduce itself.

Her date eyed her up and down, displaying mammoth admiration towards her sexy attire. 'Wow, Daisy, you look stunning.'

Daisy of "stunning" fame was most pleased. Oh, and glad that her little black dress had done its job. 'Aw, thank you. It's just... something I threw on.'

Funnily enough, for quite possibly the first time ever in the history of throwing something on, this statement was one hundred per cent true. After all, the garment had definitely been tossed upon her former panicky frame in record time.

Sheldon said, 'I didn't know whether to bring red or white.' He held aloft two bottles of wine, one of each variety. 'So I got both.'

‘Two bottles are better than one,’ she quipped, promptly relieving him of his gifts of alcohol before turning and walking away.

The newly abandoned Sheldon hovered at the doorway, awaiting an invitation to enter.

Realisation then hit Daisy straight between the eyes. ‘Oh, what am I thinking? How rude am I?’ The girl made her way back to her guest. ‘Come in, come in.’

The host ushered her guest into the lounge and over to the designated dining area. Placing both bottles upon the table, she pulled out a chair for her date. She sat directly opposite, unable to avert her hungry eyes from his handsome face, his sparkling smile, his shapely torso. She deduced that the man’s tight shirt was purposely one size too small, clearly to enhance his build. Heh, clever trick. Did she mind such blatant vanity? No, of course she didn’t. Slurp of slurps, what a tantalising view. He looked good. He smelled good. And she even wondered if he tasted good. Ooh, naughty, naughty, Daisy.

It was clear. Sheldon had also gone to a lot of trouble to set the mood.

Mmm.

Sheldon then gestured towards the bottles. ‘Are we having red or white?’

‘You really think I’m willing to choose between the two? One bottle straight after the other sounds like a better plan.’

Mr Trent grinned as he de-corked the red wine. ‘Shall I pour?’

His date nodded. Animatedly.

Her date began to fill her glass. ‘Say when.’

He poured. And poured. And topped the glass to the brim. Finding that he could pour no longer without the certainty of spillage, he withdrew the bottle and lobbed a pair of questioning eyes in her direction.

She peered at him and grinned. A moment passed. And then she uttered, ‘When.’

Emitting a chuckle in response, he filled his own glass with the blood of joy, then asked, 'How's your father doing?'

'Oh, he'll be in hospital for observation for a couple of days. The burns on his chest look pretty nasty, but thankfully, they're not life-threatening.' She posted a warm smile in the direction of her dinner date, the man of the moment, her hero. 'Thank you.'

Sheldon flicked a humble shrug. 'What for?'

'What for? Like, duh. For rescuing my dad. For being there when I really needed you.' And boy, she'd certainly needed him at that particular moment in time. 'If you hadn't leapt over that fence and landed back into my life... well... things might be a whole lot different now.'

Sheldon reached across and planted a shoosh finger upon her lips. 'Let's not think about what might have been. Let's think about what could be... if we let it happen.'

Oh, wow. What a sweet line. And yes. Good advice. As a result, Daisy donated a secondary smile coupled with a firm nod. As a counter-result, Sheldon withdrew the shoosh finger. And then they shared a long, lingering, beautiful moment. The kind of moment when silver droplets of fresh dew sparkle in the virgin light of an early morning sun. The kind of moment when a mischievous late summer breeze skips and dances through proud thickets of golden wheat. The kind of moment when... when... mmm, when the man of her dreams sits a mere length of a table away.

It was weird. Daisy hadn't felt this way about a member of the opposite sex in ages. More than anything, she wanted to reach across and touch his broad shoulders, his athletic torso, his... everything really. As if on cue, her mouth began to water. Mmm, and that devilish warm-fuzzy-oooh glow down below showed no signs of ditching the party just yet.

'Look at you,' she gushed, crossing her legs in an attempt to suppress that dastardly warm-fuzzy-oooh glow whilst at the same time indicating to his manly form. 'I can't get over your...

your...’ She wrestled for a fitting word or phrase to describe such an impressive personal feat. ‘...transformation.’

‘Well,’ he began to explain, ‘I woke up one morning, looked in the mirror and thought, “Sheldon, you are obese. What are you doing to yourself?” It was only then when I realised I was eating myself to death. I really needed to do something about it, and quick. My health was at stake. So I got off my fat, lazy buttocks and turned my life around. I went on a strict diet. Took up jogging. Worked out.’ He flexed his biceps as a visual verification of the fruits of his tough fitness regime, not that he needed to perform such a mime. ‘And as they say, the rest is history.’

Daisy sampled the wine, glowing with sincere admiration for the guy. ‘I am so proud of you.’

‘Thanks. But that’s enough about me. I’d like to hear all about you.’

The man raised his drink to his waiting lips, sitting in expectant silence, clearly waiting for Daisy to offload a dazzling array of equally amazing achievements. Well, it stood to reason he’d be hungry for the lowdown. The two of them hadn’t laid eyes upon each other for years. It was only natural for the guy to assume she’d have plenty to talk about, having lived that thing called life.

Ermmmm... that thing called life? Hmm, she must have missed the memo.

Even so, the girl wracked her brains, searching for anything remotely noteworthy to reveal about the world according to Daisy Thorne. The list amounted to:

Zero results. Please broaden your search criteria.

This came as no surprise. She was nothing special; an ordinary girl who shared a city with zoodles of other ordinary girls. Just another face, jostling for space in an ever-expanding lip-glossed crowd.

‘What would you like to know?’ she then decided to ask, if only to deflect the pressure.

‘Let’s start with the basics.’ He took a couple of gulps of his wine, then asked, ‘What do you do for a living?’

‘I write for a magazine.’

Sheldon’s face illuminated, interest overload. ‘Oh, wow. Which one?’

‘The Goss.’

‘The Goss?’ Illumination lost, Sheldon’s face fell dark. ‘But that’s... a celebrity gossip rag.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘What’s right with it?’

Daisy noted the distinct odour of scorn in his voice. He couldn’t be any more standoffish, even if she’d admitted to writing hardcore pornography involving farmyard animals.

‘Proper celebrities, the ones with actual talent,’ Sheldon soapboxed, ‘who break into the industry through sheer hard work and determination hardly ever get a mention. Yet zero-talent reality TV rejects and non-entity offspring of ageing rock stars are treated like gods.’

Daisy sank. How dare he waft in her direction such scathing contempt for her employer? Ah, but thinking about it, he was right. The magazine was indeed the lowest of the low. While similar publications gave their readership an equal mixture of talent versus non-talent, i.e. TV and film stars, pop singers, fashion gurus and the like in one corner, lowly and desperate fame-chasers in the other, The Goss tended to steer closer towards the people in vogue who were famous for... well... just being famous really; footballers’ WAGs, YouTube and Tik-Tok “sensations,” limelight-hungry ex-partners of genuine stars eager to sell their stories to anybody willing to shell out a hefty fortune for kiss and tell exclusives, oh, and not forgetting (as Sheldon had quite rightly pointed out) reality TV contestants (winners, runners-up and losers alike) and coming-of-age sprogs of celebs who harboured a deluded sense of

entitlement that they should be equally famous without putting any actual work in, blah, blah, blah, the list of annoying nobodies went on and on and on.

Oh, and who could forget all those irritating wannabe models who had found fame by “accidentally” falling victim to leaked sex tapes? Awww, diddums, your poor little things. How could that have possibly happened? Deliberate publicity stunts for career furthership perchance? Like, duh. Obvious alert.

However, despite its trashy reputation, nobody could deny that *The Goss* was a popular periodical. Week in, week out, its sales figures went through the roof and beyond. The British public were hungry for gutter sleaze. And boy, *The Goss* certainly fed it to them.

Meanwhile, back to the conversation, Daisy’s latest contribution came in the form of, ‘How would you even know what *The Goss* is like? You’ve never read it.’

‘Oh, believe me, I have,’ Sheldon replied with a theatrical wince. ‘Any time I pay a visit to a doctor’s surgery or a dentist, that’s all I find in the magazine pile. Well, that and brochures for over 60s cruise getaways.’

‘You do have a choice not to pick it up, you know.’

‘A choice? Oh, really? I think you’ll find my options are limited to A: reluctantly catching up on what the nobodies are up to, or B: dying of boredom with nothing to occupy my mind while waiting an ice age to be called for my appointment.’

There followed an exchange of good-humoured smiles.

‘Admit it, Sheldon,’ the girl then uttered. ‘You’re addicted to celebrity gossip.’

Sheldon barked a fake and overblown cough. ‘Celebrities? Is that what you call them?’ A derisive chuckle, a shake of the head, a rolling of the eyes, all the usual contemptuous suspects were coming out to play. ‘I must say, Daisy, I’m very surprised to learn that you’re playing a part in this insane fame-chaser circus.’

Daisy's smile faded, not quite gone, but not quite there either. 'Airhead gossip was never my grand plan,' she felt obliged to admit. 'I always hoped I'd write for a top rock magazine. You know, interviewing bands, reviewing albums, that kind of stuff.'

'So why didn't you?'

'Music magazines are a dying breed. Nowadays it's all celeburbia.'

Sheldon looked intrigued by this particular C-word. 'Celeburbia?'

'You know. Today's ditzy, glitzy celebrity culture where a total nobody can become an overnight somebody and talent is so overrated.' And then it was back to her story. 'Anyway... I offered the last few surviving music magazines my services. Their response? No room at the inn. So when a position at The Goss came up for grabs, I figured I'd settle for second best.' She flipped the upward-turned palms of defeat. 'C'est la vie.'

'Well, I'd have kept shopping around for a better job, no matter how long it took.'

'That's you, this is me. And besides, earning money ASAP meant I could move out of the family home a whole lot sooner than I'd planned.' She indicated to her humble surroundings. 'Okay, so this place is hardly a penthouse suite, far from it, but at least I've escaped from Mum and her constant nagging.'

They traded knowing laughs.

'And as they say,' she concluded, wanting to end on the exact line Sheldon had used in his overcoming obesity speech, 'the rest is history.'

Sheldon smiled, seeing what she did there. 'Yeah, but working for The Goss means you've kind of sold your soul to the Devil.'

Daisy felt a strong desire to defend the playing cards that life had dealt her. They didn't exactly add up to a full house, a four of a kind or a royal flush, but at least she'd been handed the basics. A shoebox of a property, yes, but it was a roof over her head. A somewhat miniscule wage coming in, yes, but it was regular income. Oh, and good health... which was

something not to be sneezed at. Okay, so she was stuck on the lowest rung of the towering ladder of fortune, but being right at the bottom surely meant the only way was up. Didn't it?

'At least I have a job,' she then blurted out in mock protest, clawing back control of the discussion. 'Unlike you and your eight month disappearing act.'

Sheldon took the jibe in good humour, but it was obvious that the subject matter also bothered him. 'Ah. I see our mothers have been gossiping.'

Daisy slurped her wine, then nodded. 'Professional chatterboxes, the pair of them.'

'For your information, I worked while I travelled,' he claimed in his defence. 'How do you think I funded my trip?'

'Doing what?'

'Odd jobs here and there. Bar work. Gardening. Fruit picking.' A wicked grin then filled his face. 'Selling my body.'

Just for a moment, a mere second or two, Daisy almost believed his last-mentioned occupation. Of course, she wouldn't blame him if he'd actually got into that particular line of work. He certainly had the body for it. And (most probably) the stamina.

'Only joking,' he promptly added. And then he entered serious mode. 'The thing is, I had an ulterior motive for disappearing the way I did. A friend of mine did some research for me and managed to develop a number of leads, so I decided to buy a set of wheels and follow them up. I didn't expect my detective work to take as long as eight months, but...' He tipped a shrug. '...there you go. It was important to me.'

Daisy. Puzzled. 'Leads for what?'

Sheldon. Sombre. 'The possible whereabouts of my father.'

Daisy's jaw fell. 'Oh, my God. Are you serious?'

'Never been more so.'

'But... your mother. She said you were —'

‘Off gallivanting around the world,’ Sheldon cut in, completing her sentence. ‘Yes. I know. That’s the story I spun her. Truth is, I never even left the country.’

‘Oh. Right. I take it she doesn’t know what you were really up to.’

He shook his head, a firm no. ‘I didn’t want to upset her.’

Daisy opened her mouth to speak. Zero sounds emerged. Instead, her lips shaped their way through a clumsy sequence of potential yet unrealised sentence beginnings. It took a while, but she eventually arrived at, ‘Did you manage to find him?’

He looked away, crestfallen. The outcome was obvious, long before he’d uttered a single word. ‘No such luck. The trail ran cold.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ And she was. Truly.

‘Don’t be.’ He downed the remainder of his glass of wine in one. ‘I searched high and low, but...’ He blew out a flurry of air from his nostrils. The candle on the table flickered in response, but the flame won the battle, on with the show. ‘...I guess he didn’t want to be found.’

For the longest of moments, a weighty blanket of silence smothered the room. Sheldon used this hiatus to replenish both glasses with fresh claret.

Daisy decided to ask, ‘What happens now?’

‘Now... I wash my hands of him.’

A further chapter of intense hush muted their world as they both digested the extent of his quest, the subsequent pain of his failure and the agonising, devastating conclusion.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ he eventually stated, steely conviction glowing in his eyes. ‘If and when I become a father, I will never, ever abandon my child.’

His statement hung in the air.

He stared at her.

She stared at him.

There then came a puzzled sniff from Sheldon. ‘What’s that smell?’

Daisy frowned. ‘What smell?’

Another sniff. ‘The smell of... burning.’

It didn’t click at first. But when it did, Daisy’s eyes inflated to near-bursting point. ‘Oh, my God!’ She leapt bolt upright. ‘The shepherd’s pie!’

The secretly crap cook charged into the kitchen. Once there, she yanked open the oven door and was met by a swirling belch of black smoke. Wafting away the acrid fog, she grabbed her oven gloves and plucked the dish from its fiery hell. Too late. The potato topping she’d wanted browner and crispier and yummiier was certainly crispy all right... but also tar-black, rock-hard and positively inedible.

#fail

If the road to a man’s heart was through his stomach, Daisy Thorne had taken the mother of all wrong turns, only to hit severe gridlocked traffic.

‘Our romantic dinner, it’s bloody ruined.’ Wearing a face crumpled by rabid despair, she turned to face her date who stood by the kitchen door. ‘What are we supposed to eat now?’

Ten minutes later, both seated at the dining table, Daisy and Sheldon tried their hardest not to laugh as they tucked into their replacement meals.

Sheldon couldn’t help himself. He had to say it. ‘This is the yummiest emergency baked beans on toast I have ever tasted.’

‘Shut up and eat.’

They traded glances. They grinned. And then they surrendered to a bellowing fit of giggles.

Despite such an embarrassing setback, the evening seemed to be going well, or so Daisy hoped. In her mind, she envisaged two possible eventualities:

1. Sheldon would agree to a second date.
2. Sheldon would run a mile, never to return.

Hmm, she seriously considered tying the man's shoelaces together without him noticing to prevent him from fleeing for good. Just in case. But no. Sheldon didn't look as though he was planning on leaving any time soon.

Almost two spent bottles of wine later, a somewhat tipsy Daisy has long since transferred herself to the comfort of the sofa. Sheldon, meanwhile, knelt beside a floor-standing CD rack, browsing the girl's choice in music.

He asked, 'How come you've still got a CD collection? Surely it's all digital downloads these days.'

She replied, 'I happen to prefer the tangible, touchable version over something that doesn't boast a true physical state.'

'Fair enough.' Sheldon plucked a CD from its slotted residence and pulled a sour face. 'Toxic Shock?'

Sensing the man's disdain, Daisy clicked into steadfast defence mode. 'There's nothing wrong with Toxic Shock. They play proper rock music.'

The man snorted his total disagreement. 'They haven't had a hit in years.'

'I don't care. They were my favourite band when I was at school. They still are.'

'I thought they'd split up.'

'They did. But that doesn't mean I have to stop liking them.'

Sheldon returned the CD to its rightful slot and joined his date on the sofa. ‘You and your weird tastes. What’s that lead singer’s stupid name again?’

‘Brian Tumour. And it’s not a stupid name.’

‘It’s mental.’

‘It’s rock and roll.’

Sheldon smiled warmly and gently patted her thigh. ‘I’m only winding you up, babes.’

Daisy liked being called babes. Actually, more to the point, she liked Sheldon calling her babes. ‘You’d better be. Otherwise, war will be declared.’ She drained the final bottle for all its worth, holding it above her glass until all drips had ceased. And then she felt the need to ask, ‘So how come you’re not arrogant and conceited like all the other hotties?’

‘I’m hardly a hottie.’

‘You are to me. And probably every other girl on the planet.’

‘Arrogance is for losers. Just because somebody is...’ Open finger air quotes. ‘...a hottie...’ Close finger air quotes. ‘...it doesn’t mean they’re any better a person.’

She offered across a pleased beam. ‘I am so glad you feel that way.’

‘Well, let’s face it. I was a porker all my childhood, so I know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of ridicule.’ And then it was his turn to deliver a tongue-in-cheek query. ‘So how come you didn’t grow into a fully-fledged bitch?’

‘Why would I?’

‘Are you serious? Back in the day, you were a right little cow to me. You hated having to hang out with a fat kid, and you made doubly sure I was aware of how you felt about it.’

Acting all innocent, she demanded, ‘Give me one example of my right little cowness.’

‘That time you were given that set of toy walkie-talkies for your birthday.’

‘Hey, I asked for walkie-talkies specifically so we could play your favourite game, “Army Commando.”’

Sheldon scoffed. 'No, Daisy, get it right. You asked for walkie-talkies specifically so you could play my favourite game without having to be in the same vicinity as me.'

Daisy bit her bottom lip and blushed. Yes, he was right. She had indeed been a total monster to the boy. On several occasions. Almost to the point of downright evil, all because:

A: His body hadn't conformed to the norm.

B: Self-image, reputation and social acceptance ruled ruthless and mighty over unconditional friendship.

Tut, tut, tut, she was so glad that she'd grown out of all that nonsense.

'Oh, God, it's true, I was such a bitch to you. It's a wonder you still want to socialise with me.' She shook her head in shame. 'At least things are different now.'

'In what way?'

'We're both... adults.'

Daisy gazed at the man. Deep. Evocative. Wanting him. Needing him. He fell into her eyes, understanding without words. Measured and unhurried, she inched her face towards his, tilting her head to one side and part-opening her mouth, ready and willing to dock. He did the same, mirroring her movements to a tee. And at last, wow, their lips touched. The first kiss, a mere peck, delicate and undecided. The next, more together and confident. The third, oh, yes, the third, a full-on, no-holds-barred smooch. Mmm, she could taste fruit. Grapes. Ah, the very wine they had devoured tonight. Their tongues danced a tango in the moonlight of the moment. And his breath, oh, yes, his warm, sweet breath swirled like a tropical breeze, thawing her heart and warming her soul.

The fragile uncertainty of their initial encounter surrendered to a stronger, assured wave of passion as they pressed their lips harder and firmer together, only briefly leaving their posts to consume sporadic gulps of much-needed oxygen. She placed a hand upon his firm chest. He in turn wrapped his left arm around her waist.

Sheldon withdrew his lips and peppered her neck with licks and kisses. Ooh, it tickled. She giggled. Loudly. He pulled aside one dress strap and tasted her bare shoulder. Mmm, his warm lips, his passionate kisses, his snaking tongue, his sizzling breath, oh, yes, it all felt so enlivening, so invigorating, and while the man gorged on her flesh, Daisy's heart pounded for all its might. Meanwhile, down below, that warm-fuzzy-oooh glow yelled and screamed for immediate attention. Oh, God, yes, this was it. It was all set to happen. Two consenting adults, lost in the hectic kaleidoscope of uninhibited, unrestrained love. Or rather... lust.

Oh. Hold on. Lust.

'No!' Daisy pushed him away and took to her feet, shaking her head, mock slapping her brow, what was she doing, what was she thinking? 'This can't happen. Not tonight.'

A befuddled Sheldon sat up straight. 'Why not?'

'I'm not that kind of girl.' She winced at such an overused line. 'Okay, so call me a walking cliché, I don't care. But I want our first time to be special, not a quick bunk-up on the sofa.'

'Daisy, I can do special.' He stood up, unable to mask the prominent bulge in his jeans. 'Let's move to the bedroom.'

'Yeah, yeah, nice try, Casanova.' She needed to make him see sense. 'Oh, Sheldon. My body wants you badly. Really badly. But my head is telling me to wait a while.'

It was obvious. Sheldon was disappointed. He tried his hardest not to display his true feelings, but his eyes, his face, his entire demeanour had other ideas. Of course, Daisy knew full well that rejection was far from the only problem he faced. There was also the niggling dilemma of what to do with an erection all dressed up with nowhere to go.

'I want it to feel right,' she explained. 'And more than anything, I want it to be perfect. Do you see what I'm trying to say?'

'Babes, I also want our first time to be perfect.'

‘Oh, it will be. I guarantee that.’

Sheldon strolled over to the girl. ‘I guess this is my cue to call it a night.’

‘I guess it is.’ She smiled at him. ‘Thank you for understanding.’

He smiled back at her. ‘I’ll text you tomorrow.’

‘I’ll text you too.’

‘And I’ll text you back.’

‘And I’ll text you back straight away.’

Heh, it was almost a case of, “No, you put the phone down.” If she allowed the pantomime to continue, they’d be here all night. Therefore, needing to break the cycle of slushy rejoinders, Daisy led her date through the hallway and opened the front door for him.

‘Goodnight, Sheldon.’

‘Yeah, goodnight, Daisy.’ He planted a soft, caring kiss upon her lips, then made his exit.

She closed the door, turned around and pressed her back against the wood, taking stock of the rollercoaster events of this evening. And then she threw an air punch. ‘Yes! Get in there, girl.’ She couldn’t believe her luck. Oh, wow, this lass felt so happy. So ecstatic. So full of life. This was undeniable proof. Daisy Thorne had fallen head over heels in love.

Ah, but alas, unknown to the girl, her joy would prove short-lived, for it would only be a matter of time until Melody Diamond turned up to the proverbial party to dig her salon-painted talons deep into the unsuspecting flesh of Sheldon Trent.