Missfit

Maria Beaumont

WARNING: THIS EXTRACT CONTAINS EXPLICIT LANGUAGE!

THE FIRST BIT

The Bit Before I Turn Into Lydia

'Shhuuushhh!' Daniel hushes me with a shush loud enough to get him a job as an air-raid siren. 'They must be able to hear you giggling a mile away.'

What can I say? I'm nervous. Who doesn't giggle when they're nervous? I should think Eminem practically wets himself in the dressing room, pre-concert . . . Well, I bet Gareth Gates does.

'OK, whatever you do, don't sneeze,' he whispers.

Oh my God. The power of suggestion. I clamp both hands over my nose. It does the trick, but only because I can't breathe. I'm very literally suffocating myself, but I'm too scared to remove my hands in case I'm beset by sneezes or giggles or both at the same time, thus sending the precious white powder into orbit. I'm dying here . . . Need . . . oxy . . . gen . . . It's me or the cocaine. Simple choice, surely? The coke looks like Canderel and came wrapped in a ripped-out corner of a page from last week's OK!, whereas I am a sensitive and beautiful human being (or at least I would be if I could only lose a tiny bit from around my hips). Nobrainer. I win. I remove my hands and take a noisy, drawn-out breath that sucks so much air from the room I feel my ears pop from the pressure change.

'If you're that scared, let's just forget it, Charlie,' Daniel whispers irritably. 'And keep the noise down. If someone hears us we're dead.'

'Oh, stop being such a drama queen. No one's going to die. We'll only get sacked . . . and arrested . . . and imprisoned. Er, please tell me you locked the door.'

'Course I locked it. Now, for Christ's sake shut up and let me concentrate.'

I shut up and watch him concentrate. I've seen people do this in dozens of films. Take a little heap of white powder and transform it into a pair of perfectly straight lines with a couple of deft chops from a Gold Amex card. Daniel doesn't have an Amex. He doesn't even have a TOPMAN card. He's using the edge of his index finger, which is trembling (so his lines are more like wiggly worms) and sweaty (so more coke is sticking to his finger than is on the desk) because, like me, he's shitting himself.

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Being a drug virgin is so uncool. I'm twenty-four and I've never even had a drag of a joint – or a cigarette, come to that. Daniel's ahead of me. Slightly. He snorted his first line last night and came into work this morning raving about it. He also came in with that little bit of OK! in his pocket and he's been going on at me all day to try it with him. That's why we're locked in our boss's office now.

We're on the seventh floor of The Zone, London's most prestigious fitness centre. So prestigious that we're not allowed to call it a fitness centre. No, it's a Total Body Emporium. Apart from my own breathing, the only sound I can hear is the plinky-plonk of the piano wafting along the corridor from the ballet studio. Total Body Emporium, classical piano, ballet; these are not things usually associated with drug culture. Add to that The Zone's zero-tolerance policy . . . We must be out of our minds.

Daniel's lines are getting wonkier and he's looking seriously stressed. I thought drugs were meant to be fun (well, apart from when you've turned into a desperate junkie who's reduced to selling everything from your Walkman to your ulcerated body in order to score the next fix). What we need here is some light relief. I've just had a thought that definitely comes under the heading of light so I try it on Daniel. 'Hey, this is good: Charlie's doing charlie. Get it?' I proceed to laugh a little too hysterically because, as I've explained, I'm shitting myself.

'Shut up,' he snaps, clearly impressed by my dazzling wit. 'Here, gimme some money.'

'I said I'd pay you for my half later.'

'Not for that, you prat. We need a note to suck it up through.'

'Oh . . . Yeah . . . I knew that.' I fumble in my pocket and come up with a fiver that's seen better days. It's limp from over-use and as I unfold it I discover it's held together with Sellotape. I hand it to my drug buddy.

'Is that all you've got?'

'Sorry. I told you I need to go to the bank.'

'It'll have to do.' With quivering hands he tries to roll it into a tight tube, but after several attempts it's obvious it isn't going to happen.

'How about a Post-it?' I ask, spotting the yellow pad on the desk.

'Don't be daft. The coke will stick to the gummy bit at the top.'

We look at each other, deflating audibly. Looks as if the seventh floor is as high as we're going to get today. 'Tell you what,' Daniel whispers, perking up. 'Let's do that thing where you rub it onto your gums.'

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Excellent idea . . . Not. I know how this stuff gets into the country. I've seen those documentaries showing terrified African women sitting on toilets waiting to poo out condoms of the stuff. And he wants me to stick it in my mouth?

He doesn't wait for my answer. He dabs his fingertip at the powder, but, unlike a few moments ago when he couldn't get the stuff off his hands, it doesn't want to stick.

'Use a bit of spit,' I suggest, remembering what I used to do with my Sherbet Dip when I was younger. (OK, last week.)

He licks his finger and tries again, this time getting a generous splodge of powder to stick. Without a moment's hesitation he thrusts finger into mouth and rubs vigorously – like he's at a mate's for a sleepover and forgot his toothbrush.

'Euughhh!' he squeals, rapidly withdrawing his finger.

'What?' I squeal back, registering the terror on his face.

He can't speak. He stands rigid as white foam begins to dribble from the corners of his mouth. OhmyfuckingGod, he's OD-ing. Or he's scored a batch of pure, uncut something or other. Or . . . Or . . . I don't fucking know. I'm a drug virgin. But whatever's happening, I'm sure it can only be a matter of minutes – seconds even – before he slumps into a coma, his heart goes into arrest and he becomes another tragic statistic in the terrible war on drugs. Gotta do something because the dribbles of foam have turned into fizzing, popping bubbles that are practically exploding from his mouth. Do what, though? I've passed a fully accredited first-aid course, but – believe me – we never covered oral effervescence. His arms are flapping in a desperate plea for help before his body shuts down. I respond by – obviously - flapping my arms right back at him. He tries to speak, but it comes out as an incomprehensible bubbly gurgle. I lean forward, because if these are going to be his final words I'd never forgive myself if I didn't catch them.

'Bastard,' he groans at last.

'C'mon, Daniel,' I urge, gripping his shoulders firmly. 'Talk to me. Hang on in there.'

'The fucking bastard,' he splutters, a fresh torrent of bubbles spilling from his mouth. 'This isn't coke––'

I knew it. He's bought a batch of rat poison!

'––It's Alka-fucking-Seltzer.'

'Uuueeh?' When I'm nervous I giggle. When I'm confused, words come out as strange noises.

'That fucking con artist. Fifty quid I gave him . . . for fucking hangover relief. Charlie, it's Alka-Seltzer,' he says, his mouth fizzing merrily to emphasise the point. Before I

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can show my relief by laughing in his face, we're immobilised by the sound of the door – the one that Daniel swore he'd locked – clicking behind us.

'What the hell are you two doing in here?'

We turn to see Lydia, hands on hips, left eye looking at me, right eye staring at Daniel. She has the world's freakiest squint, which right now is an asset because it means she can glare at the both of us simultaneously. Luckily we're standing in front of Jamie's desk and blocking her view of the mess of white powder behind us.

Oh boy, are we in trouble.

'Sorry, Lydia. Philip was complaining that his piano's out of tune,' I grovel. 'Just came upstairs to have a listen.'

Wow, I'm quick on my feet. I'm the queen of instantly improvised excuses. Put Philip the ballet teacher's constant whingey whinges about his piano together with the fact that we can actually hear the thing from here (sort of) and – bingo! – we have a possible get-out.

'In case you hadn't noticed, Charlotte, the balletstudio piano is in the ballet studio, not in Jamie's office.'

Well, I only said it was a possible get-out.

Next to me Daniel is swallowing like he's never swallowed before (and, let me tell you, that's saying something) in an effort to deal with the ongoing fizz before he says, 'Obviously we came into Jamie's office because the acoustics in here are excellent.'

'Daniel, what in God's name do you know about mus––'

'Shh . . . Hear that?' he says as fresh notes cascade along the corridor. 'Perfect D sharp. Isn't that the most gorgeous note on the scale?'

Daniel wouldn't know D sharp from dog shit, but he has stopped Lydia in her tracks. For a moment anyway.

We should leave now. Walk out the door and run. But if we move she'll see the white powder and we'll have a fresh heap of excuses to think up. So we stay put. We stare at her nervously while she stares back, her spooky eyes swivelling independently like a pair of department-store security cameras. Her right one settles on me while her left hovers in the vicinity of Daniel's groin. And although it's strictly a no-girl zone (Daniel doesn't do girls, hence the swallowing comment earlier), I'm not surprised because I've done my fair share of staring at it today. He's wearing a pair of spray-on Lycra shorts which contain what appears to be a salami squashed between two grapefruits. Company cars, corporate health-plans and profit-share schemes? Pah. Daniel's is what I call an impressive package. If aliens were looking

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down, it's the first thing they'd see. 'They peel them with their metal knives and . . . What the fuck is that between his legs?'

Tragedy, then, that it remains off limits.

Suddenly Lydia's eyes widen in alarm. 'What on earth is that?' she demands.

'What?' we reply in unison.

'On Jamie's desk . . . Is, is that what I think it is?'

Shit and fuck. We now have confirmation of what we've always suspected. It's official: Lydia's mutant eyes can see around corners. No way could a normal-sighted person have spotted it through two bodies pressed tightly together for the sole purpose of concealing it.

Daniel and I turn and look at it, feigning surprise. Then Daniel leans over and makes a play of careful forensic She sees ticks on socks.

'Remember, I've got my eye on you, Charlotte––' Singular eye, that's about right '–– Now, take them off immediately and get back to reception while I clean up this mess.'

As she turns towards the desk, we run.

'Ugly freak,' Daniel says when we're out of earshot.

That's not fair. She's nowhere near ugly. She's fiveeleven with the figure of Beyoncé and her face is stunning. Physical perfection in other words . . . Except, I'm afraid, for that squint. Which there's just no getting past. Which makes her a freak.

We stop briefly to peek through the ballet-studio window. Philip's pianist is playing something really fast now – like the classical equivalent of drum 'n' bass – and his dancers are scurrying around like mice on acid. Philip pauses and gives Daniel a coquettish wave.

'Please, tell me you haven't had him,' I say.

Daniel smiles inscrutably – which can only mean that, yes, he's had him – and we set off towards the lift.

We arrive back in reception. Rebecca's there, frozen exactly where we left her half an hour ago. Literally. As we departed Daniel said, 'Just off upstairs, Becks. Don't move.' Well, she hasn't. I doubt she's even blinked. I check her eyes for puffiness. They look all right. No disasters then. Rebecca's only seventeen and not good with stress.

'Everything OK, Becks?' I ask.

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She nods and says, 'A man phoned. Wanted to know if we had any Steps . . . I thought they'd broken up.'

'I think he probably meant step classes, sweetie,' Daniel says.

'Oh, like aerobics,' she says, blushing, suddenly remembering what we do here.

'Never mind,' I say. 'You got his details, yeah?'

(The Second Commandment: Staff shall obtain every caller's details in order to ply them with membership info. And they mean every caller, even those phoning to sell us something.)

'I didn't think,' she mumbles. 'I said he should try Tower Records.'

She's been here for six months and it's Daniel's and my job to teach her everything we know. She doesn't seem to have picked up much and it occurs to me now that maybe it isn't her fault; we haven't been the world's most conscientious teachers.

'Don't worry,' I say soothingly. 'Tell you what. Nip up to the caff and get us a drink. A Tango and a Co-- Make that two Tangos.'

'OK,' she bubbles, chuffed to be given a job she can handle.

As she scurries off, Daniel says, 'She'll screw up, you know.'

'I know. I should've written it down for her.'

Seconds later the automatic doors swoosh open and Jamie strides into the foyer as if he owns the place. Well, how else is he going to stride? He owns the place.

'Hi,' I call out. 'I thought your meeting was an alldayer.' (Which was the reason Daniel and I felt brave enough to turn his office into a drug den.)

'Change of plan,' he says briskly. 'Where's Lydia?'

'She was in your office a few minutes ago,' Daniel says, unable to prevent a last maverick bubble escaping from his mouth.

'Good, I need to talk to her.'

As he steps into the lift, Daniel gives me a look. 'Jesus, it's only just sinking in; how close we came to getting totally busted up there. Thank God for Alka Seltzer, man. I should find that bastard rip-off merchant and kiss him . . . with tongues.'

I flop into one of the chairs behind the reception desk, unlace my trainers and peel off my illegal socks. Then I sit back and put my slightly sweaty feet up on the counter. I look up at three fifty-inch plasma TVs on the wall. They're tuned into MTV Base. Nelly's gyrating on the screens. Mmm. I could so do it with Nelly. Just let him

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phone up with an enquiry about the Pilates timetable. That's what I love about this job. OK, Nelly isn't likely to call anytime soon, but Craig David was in a couple of weeks ago. And Daniel Bedingfield is a member. Not exactly A-list gyrators, but how many other jobs are there where I could meet real pop stars and in-between-times sit with my feet up watching MTV? Even the fact that I have to dress Zone is a plus. It's cool gear, every bit as funky as adidas and Nike. OK, it's still a uniform, but it's about as far from a McDonald's nylon smock as you can get. Yes, this job is just about perfect.

If only we could get rid of Lydia.

Daniel and I spend roughly an hour a day trying to think of ways. We haven't come up with one yet, but it's surely just a matter of time.

'Have you really done it with Philip?' I ask, believing it but not wanting to.

'Twice,' he tells me. 'Once in Lydia's office and once in the Mile High Club Lounge.'

The Mile High Club Lounge is on the seventh floor – the only other room up there besides the ballet studio and Jamie's office. It's hardly a room, actually, more of a broom cupboard. It's only ever used by Daniel and the cleaners and I reckon he's in there more than they are. I don't know how he does it. It's dark and cramped, and more to the point it's only a few feet away from Jamie's office.

'I'd have thought Philip's a bit sophisticated for your dirty old broom cupboard,' I say.

'You're kidding, aren't you? You should see him on all fours. He's a dirty little dawg.'

'Who's a dog?' asks Rebecca, back with the drinks.

'Lassie,' Daniel says.

'Oh, yeah, right . . . Who's the Sprite for?'

'Neither of us,' Daniel replies, taking the cans from her and handing me the Lucozade.

I hate Lucozade. Wish I'd written it down for her.

'Turn the telly over,' Daniel says as he pops his can. 'I hate this.'

He's talking about the Kelis video that's kicked off.

I pick up the remote and flick to Box. Nelly again. He's everywhere today. Like a horny, hip-grinding virus. I carry on cruising through the fifteen music channels, getting brief snatches of Girls Aloud . . .

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'Ugh, girls,' Daniel declares.

. . . Marilyn Manson . . .

'People that ugly should not be allowed to make videos.'

. . . Evanescence . . .

'Yeuch! Weirdo Christians.'

. . . Limp Bizkit . . .

'Aaagh!' Daniel wails.

I stop flicking because the phone's ringing. I pick it up, then immediately hold the receiver two feet from my ear. I can still make out every word that Mr Angry is yelling at me, even over Limp Bizkit.

Mr Angry: Steve the gym manager. That man is always shouting. So aggressive. Daniel puts it down to the steroids. I put it down to the fact that he's just an aggressive bastard. I once saw him pick a fight with an empty chair in the caff.

I don't have to listen. I know why he's phoning. He hates it when Daniel and I channel-surf. That's because the screens in reception aren't the only tellies in The Zone. They're all over the place. There are ten dotted around Steve's huge gym alone, all linked to the remote I've got in my hand. A few weeks ago one of the cyclists demanded a full refund on his membership. He claimed to have slipped a disc when Daniel flicked the TV from a soppy Will Young ballad to some speed garage.

'Sorry, Steve,' I say, bringing the receiver back to my ear. 'Shall we stick with the metal or find something else?'

'I don't give a flying fuck,' he barks. 'Put it on the fucking Shopping Channel for all I care. Just stop fucking changing it.'

As I hang up, I see Lydia. Stomping towards reception.

Shit.

She must have been in the gym when Steve called. I am in big trouble.

I brace myself, but when she reaches us she doesn't stop. She carries on down the corridor to the side of the counter and a moment later we hear her office door slam shut. Daniel and I stare at each other, lost for words. Lydia never misses an opportunity for a bollocking. In the past, she's had us for walking too slow, breathing too fast, smiling inappropriately or not smiling enough. Whatever we do, however we do it, it's never quite right. Right now, for instance, she could have had us for not striking the correct poses. In quiet moments she likes us to go through

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gentle stretches or to stand straight-backed and erect like we're psyching ourselves up for an Olympic long jump. The Third Commandment: Staff shall at all times look like fitness professionals. My sweaty feet are still up on the desk. I don't look like a professional anything. I'd give a minicab office a bad name.

'What's with her?' Daniel mouths.

I shrug.

The first of the ballet dancers spill into reception. It must be eight o'clock. Our cue to shut up shop. The last classes are finishing. The gym and pool will be closing. The beauticians have performed the day's last massage/wax/facial. After a day of helping London's finest on their way to achieving Optimal Physical Outcome – well, having a laugh with Daniel and watching MTV – I'm ready to go home too.

'Fancy hitting Billy's when we're done?' Daniel asks.

Billy's Bar. Our local. Being at the Piccadilly Circus corner of Soho it's a pretty funky local. It usually has someone for everyone. Well, for Daniel and me. Gorgeous, empty-headed boy-band types for me and . . . er . . . gorgeous, empty-headed boy-band types for him.

But not tonight.

'Can't, Daniel. I've been using the excuse too much lately. Dad will go mental if I stay out again.'

'Surely not? After a smash as bad as Sasha's you could be helping with her rehab for months yet.'

I blush at the thought of my lies. Of course Sasha isn't in a wheelchair after a horrendous pile-up on the M25, and of course I'm not helping her defy the doctors and take her first tentative steps, but the thought that I am is making my parents very proud, proving, therefore, that lying can actually be a really good thing.

'God, you're twenty-four, girl,' Daniel says. 'I don't know why you still live at home.'

I know. Because it's warm and comfortable and I don't have to pay rent and . . . um . . . because my dad would kill me rather than see me leave – unless I happen to be wearing a white dress with a twenty-foot train and I'm tossing back the bouquet for my kid sister to catch.

The phone rings. Daniel's putting on his jacket and says, 'You get it.'

I pick it up and announce, 'Good evening, this is The Zone, Charlie speaking, how may I help?' . . . If you're still there after all that.

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It's the way we have to answer the phone – the Fourth Commandment. I'm surprised we don't have to add on the time, date, temperature and a full rundown of what's on at the Leicester Square multiplexes before the caller gets a chance to speak.

'I'm Julie Furmansky at Mission Management,' the caller says in a nasal voice which makes her sound as if she's either got a very bad cold or she's just incredibly snotty. 'Can I speak to the studio manager, please?'

That would be Scary Lydia – last seen heading for her office with a face like thunder. Do I really want to be disturbing her now?

'She's left for the day,' I say. 'Would you mind calling back tomorrow?'

I should have said Is there anything I can do? but she might have replied Yes, there is and I could have been stuck here for hours – I just want to go home.

'You want me to call back?' she says, as if I've just asked her to clean out my toilet with her tongue. 'Do you know who I am?'

'Not exactly,' I tell her truthfully, suppressing a weary sigh.

'I act for Blaize,' she tells me. Four little words that immediately put me in my place.

Blaize is a big deal. At this year's Smash Hits Awards she got Best Newcomer, Best Single, Best Video, Best Snogger . . . No, made the last one up, but you can bet that if they'd offered it, she'd have won it. Yep, she's a big deal all right and normally I'd be thrilled to be speaking to her manager . . .

But I just want to go home.

So I tell her, 'I'm sorry, but the studio manager will be in at seven thirty tomorrow. You can get her then. OK? Bye now.' I say this in my jolliest voice so I can't be accused of being unhelpful. Then I hang up.

I head down the corridor as the phone rings again. Sod it. I'm ignoring it this time. I reach the locker outside Lydia's office and get my coat out. Her door is open a crack and I hear her pick up the call. I hope it isn't Ms Snottynose at Mission Management. I stand still and listen.

'A girl you say . . . ? Rude and unhelpful . . . ?'

Shit. It's her . . .

'. . . Well, she was wrong. The studio manager hasn't left . . .'

. . . And I am fucked.

'. . . I'm here, but I just don't give a shit. Goodbye.'

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Lydia slams the phone down and I squiggle my fingers in my ears because I can't believe what I just heard.

Lydia doesn't give a shit?

Lydia's whole point is that she gives a shit about everything. She's the queen of giving a shit. I peer through the crack in the door. I can make out a cardboard box on her desk. She's chucking stuff into it.

Is she leaving?

She couldn't possibly be leaving.

Could she?

Right, I don't care how scary she is; I don't care if her wonky eyes give me migraines. I've got to know. I tap on the door and push it open. She looks up at me (and at the shelf to my left), but doesn't speak. Her face is streaked with tears.

'Sorry to bother you, Lydia,' I say nervously, 'but someone from Blaize's management just rang for you. I thought you'd gone home.'

She still doesn't speak.

'Is everything OK?' I ask.

'No . . . No, it is not OK,' she snaps. 'I'm leaving.'

Yeeeeeeesssssssssssssssssssss!

'My God, that's terrible,' I say, trying very, very hard to sound like I think it's terrible. 'Why?'

'Good question. Why don't you ask Jamie?'

He fired her? Oh, Jamie, I fucking love you, man.

'He didn't . . . you know . . .'

'Fire me? That's exactly what the bastard did.'

Tears are rolling down her cheeks again. I'm shocked. Not because she's crying either, but because her tears are running completely vertically. Shouldn't they be falling in opposite directions? Ah shit, now I feel really bad. Mostly because I've been longing for this to happen and now that it has I feel guilty.

'Why?' I ask. Stupid question because suddenly I think I know. 'It wasn't the . . . er . . . you know . . . on his desk?'

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'The Alka-Seltzer? Don't be silly. He fired me because I––I think I'll save the answer to that one for my lawyers. I'm going to have that bastard. I am so going to have him.'

'Is there anything I can do?' I ask, because it seems like the thing to say.

'I very much doubt it,' she replies, flinging more stuff into her box.

'I'm sorry . . . I'll really miss you . . . We all will.'

This is the biggest lie I've ever told in my life – bigger even than the Sasha-in-a-wheelchair one – but it also seems like the thing to say.

'Bollocks, darling,' she answers with her usual charm. 'By tomorrow you lot will be dancing on my grave. Now, are you going to stand there all night?' she asks. Is she talking to me or has someone else just walked in? A quick look over my shoulder tells me there's no one there. 'I wouldn't mind some privacy right now.'

I shuffle backwards and mumble, 'Of course, Lydia. Sorry. Look, goodbye and . . . um . . . It's been . . .' What has it been?

Hell?

A nightmare?

Like having open-heart surgery without anaesthetic?

'. . . fantastic.'

What else can I say?

As I walk out, I feel very weird. Not sure whether to dance with joy or slash my wrists. I should probably go with the joy. God knows what our next boss will be like, but he/she/it couldn't possibly be worse than Lydia. Even if he turns out to be the Butcher of Piccadilly. 'I need to check your heart rate for our new research paper. Best to remove it first. Now, just lie still, girl, close your eyes and you won't feel a thing.' At least I'll know for sure he's talking to me.

I arrive at reception to find Daniel putting the phone down. He has a frighteningly serious look on his face. Rebecca stands, cowering, just behind him. 'What's up?' I ask, bursting to tell him the news, but desperate to know why he looks so spooked.

'That was Jamie,' he says. 'He wants to see you.'

Oh, shit.

With knobs on.

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