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Opening Extract from...

Mile High

Written by Rebecca Chance

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Mile High
REBECCA
CHANCE

PAN BOOKS



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Chapter One

Fog over London, swirling like grey wraiths across the Thames and twining around the bridges, sweeping around the great bend in the river, clouding up the mirrored facades of Canary Wharf's jagged skyscrapers. Rising up from the murky water of King George V Dock over the single runway of City airport, trailing such thick, opaque curls of mist across the equally grey asphalt that, even without the storm clouds looming, so heavy that they almost touched the mist below, every plane at the airport would inevitably be grounded.

Buses lined up in front of the glass sliding doors, ferrying frustrated passengers to larger London airports; flights were swiftly cancelled or rescheduled, and Heathrow and Gatwick, already at high capacity, swelled like balloons about to burst. Travellers crammed into departure lounges, occupying every seat in the pubs and bistros, spending money they didn't have on duty-free perfume and chocolate they didn't need. Bookstores and newsagents did a roaring trade; smokers prayed in thanks to the god of nicotine for e-cigarettes; parents surreptitiously dosed their wailing children with extra Calpol. Airline employees worked frantically behind the

scenes to cope with the flood of additional travellers, desperate to get them boarded before lengthy delays meant that they could start claiming food vouchers and compensation.

The view from the walkway above the airside of Heathrow's Terminal 5 departures area showed a seething, barely contained mob besieging the information desk. Much preferable, from the airport's point of view, were the passengers who self-medicated with tranquillizers before their flights and were slumped in Diazepam hazes on the seats facing the departures board, trying to keep their eyes open enough so they didn't miss the eventual call for their flights.

And yet, just a wall away from the crush of people, but a world apart in every other respect, a select cluster of VIP passengers were clinking champagne glasses and nibbling canapés at the launch party to celebrate the maiden flight of Pure Air's LuxeLiner to Los Angeles, quite unaware of the adverse effects of the bad weather on lesser mortals. Their celebrity status cocooned them from any mundane worries as if they were perpetually swaddled in silk and mink; concerns about being bumped from flights or having to crash overnight on uncomfortable airport floors were for people infinitely lower down the hierarchy of fame and fortune.

However, the woman whose job it was to make this launch, both metaphorically and literally, a soaring success, was by no means immune from pressing concerns about Pure Air 111 taking off on time.

'Fog! Dammit! I *said* February was a bloody stupid month to launch the LAX service!' snapped Vanessa Jenkins, the publicity director of Pure Air, staring grimly out of the

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floor-to-ceiling windows of the most exclusive lounge in not only Terminal 5, but the whole of Heathrow airport.

This was the Marlborough Suite, where true VIPs were hosted – no check-in queues or waiting at passport control for A-list celebrities. First-class passengers might have their own dedicated security areas, but the Marlborough Suite was the only port of call VIPs ever saw when travelling. Their limousines would pull up outside its discreet doors and the passengers would step out to be welcomed by the waiting concierge; their baggage would be carried in and stored as the concierge led them to their own private lounge, where they would be checked in by airline staff and have their passports verified. They would be served refreshments and left to relax before being chauffeured in due course to an equally discreet door next to their boarding gate and personally escorted onto their flights, the first to board.

Upon arriving at Heathrow from an international flight, the process was followed in reverse. Passengers would be met at the air bridge by a member of the VIP team and chauffeured to the Marlborough Suite, their bags collected and loaded into their waiting limo while a passport officer personally visited them in their private lounge. While hoi polloi were still queuing up for the automatic passport machines to scan their identity documents, the VIPs were already on their way out of the Marlborough Suite, a phalanx of staff trailing behind them like the wisps of fog outside the plate-glass windows. And though the concierge politely wished them a pleasant stay in London, those parting words were almost always ignored by the VIPs, as unimportant to them as the damp mists of February, which barely touched their

slim, expensively dressed bodies as they moved from the carpeted, glassed-in entrance area to the soft leather interior of their limousine.

The Marlborough Suite offered not just whisper-smooth transitions from one mode of luxury travel to another, but the opportunity to celebrate one's A-list status with fellow VIPs. Its centre was a large, lavishly decorated lounge area, hung with colourful but inoffensive paintings that alternated with flat-screen TVs, a chrome bar at its centre offering waiter service. At the far end, slightly apart from the whirl of excited, bustling activity, Vanessa stood, looking out of the window in the hope of seeing the usual stream of planes taking off and landing. However, the Marlborough Suite, not being airside, had no view of the runways, and the fog meant that she could barely make out a lone plane taking off over the terminal building, a pale white streak whose purple and orange lettering and jaunty tail fin were only visible for a brief moment as it crested the mist before disappearing into the grey clouds above.

'FedEx,' Vanessa muttered to herself. 'Bloody bastards, why give *them* priority? They don't have passengers to shift!'

She rounded abruptly on the director of the Marlborough Suite, who was standing nervously at her side, doing his best to maintain his customary professional poker face. Functioning as the liaison between the VIP guests and the airport authorities, he was accustomed to all kinds of demands from imperious and spoiled celebrities, but Vanessa in full flight was infinitely more menacing than an entitled film star who had pre-ordered a cheese canapé selection and then, suddenly deciding they had gone dairy-free, was

demanding yellowtail sashimi with jalapeno vinaigrette plus spicy tuna rolls, to be provided immediately.

‘We’d better be keeping our scheduled departure slot to the *minute*,’ Vanessa hissed at the director, her voice lowered to avoid attracting the attention of the many journalists present. ‘No excuses. This is the biggest event at the entire airport this fucking *month*, if not *year*, and if there’s *one* flight that makes it out on time, it’s ours. Got it? I don’t care how many other flights the airport has to push back to make it happen.’

‘Lord Tony just told me—’ the airport employee made the mistake of saying, glancing over at the Pure Air CEO and figurehead. Dressed in a cobalt suit and matching silk tie, the Pure Air signature colour, his golden hair brushed back from his high forehead, Lord Tony Moore looked like a Viking who had been reincarnated as an air steward. He beamed over the heads of the assembled journalists, his teeth flashing as white as the starched collar of his shirt, his eyes as blue and bright and clear as a Ken doll’s; the Pure Air cobalt had been personally chosen by him to match exactly the same shade of blue as his irises.

‘Lord Tony tells people anything they want to hear,’ Vanessa said tartly. ‘That’s why he pays me a fortune to schlep along behind him, cleaning up the mess. Remember that big hurricane in Mexico last July? Planes grounded for almost a week? All those holidaymakers stranded?’

‘Of course,’ the Marlborough Suite director said, grimacing at the memory of the disruption it had caused.

‘We had *swathes* of tourists over there with Pure Air Holidays,’ Vanessa continued. ‘Stranded, running out of water

at the resorts, some of them even in storm bunkers.' She huffed out a laugh. 'One poor guy came out of the bunker to carry out the pee bucket, apparently, and the wind blew it right back in his face. All over his clothes. And then he had to go back down into the bunker again, stinking of everyone's pee and coated in sand, too, from the wind. Stayed there ponging up the place for three more days. God knows what they were doing visiting Mexico in July anyway. Fucking idiots.'

She fixed the director with a basilisk-like stare.

'Remember what Bayes and Cocker did?' she asked, naming one of Britain's biggest package holiday companies. 'They sent over all these BA jets to rescue their lot. Seven jumbo jets, landing one after the other at Cancun airport. Looked fantastic. Tons of publicity. Got onto the *News at Ten*, everything. Tony was begging me to organize a stunt to match that, but I told him no, we'd wait it out and do sweet FA till our own planes could fly. Got everyone out eventually. And guess what?'

The director knew much better than to hazard an answer.

'We did surveys afterwards, our lot versus the Bayes and Cocker travellers,' Vanessa said triumphantly. 'Both sets were equally pissed off. Blamed the travel companies for them being stupid enough to go to Mexico in hurricane season, whinged their heads off, yadda yadda yadda, the usual. But Bayes and Cocker didn't get *any* credit for spending an absolute fucking fortune on showing off with their BA jumbos. None at all. We got just the same customer satisfaction rating as they did. I was bloody right not to lift a finger to help them.'

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She smiled triumphantly. Someone picturing a highly paid head of corporate communications might expect the stereotypical image of a high-flying career woman, slim and sleek-haired in a dark crêpe Stella McCartney business suit and Tory Burch pumps, the designer version of the handful of elegant, groomed Pure Air stewardesses who had been selected to attend the launch. Vanessa Jenkins, however, was the type of woman who people sometimes, unwisely, describe as ‘maternal’. Comfortably built, with an extra roll of padding at neck, wrists and waist, she favoured loose peasant-style blouses with drawstring necks, and wide-legged trousers to balance her substantial derriere. Her hair was cut in a short shaggy style, her fringe sticking to a forehead that was perpetually sweaty, and her brown eyes, set in little puffy casings like grilled button mushrooms in miniature vol-au-vents, had a perpetually cosy expression that lured her opponents into a false sense of security.

‘So what’s the moral of this little story, I hear you ask yourself?’ she concluded, her slightly gappy teeth giving her smile a crocodile aspect of which she was very well aware. ‘Here it is: *no one* ever rewards you for being nice. *Ever*. There is no fucking benefit in the travel industry to being nice. Which is why I’m telling you, not nicely at all, that if *you* don’t tell BAA that our LuxeLiner’ll be pulling back from the gate bang on time, I’ll have their fucking guts for garters, as my old granddad used to say. I don’t care if they have to fucking bump *royalty* to make it happen.’

The director of the Marlborough Suite, duly briefed, shot off across the wood-panelled floor so quickly that he caught the toe of his shiny brogue in a rug, tripped and did a hop,

a skip and a jump to save himself. Vanessa, her smile even wider for the benefit of all the media present, headed over to the group of journalists and entertainment TV crews who were gathered waiting for the most A-list of the celebrities who would be travelling on the first-ever LuxeLiner flight.

‘She won’t be much longer, will she?’ a journalist asked Vanessa, who shook her head just as confidently as if she knew that Catalina was about to emerge from her private room off the main lounge.

‘She’s usually bang on time,’ another chimed in, eliciting nods of agreement from the rest of the press pack. ‘Could set your watch by her.’

‘If she’s not out in five minutes, I’ll go and chivvy her along,’ Vanessa promised, very aware that interview time was limited by the scheduled departure of Pure Air 111, and that it was crucial for the media to get decent quotes and footage from the one true superstar on the flight.

The term ‘superstar’ was often overused, but there was no doubt it applied to Catalina, who would be classified as A+ on any current celebrity scale. She had been an internationally famous singer and songwriter since she was fifteen, first conquering Latin America, then the English-speaking world with her crossover album, *Heart/Corazón*, which had been available in both English and Spanish. A phenomenal success, partly because a significant percentage of her fans eagerly purchased both versions, it had put her on the map: famous musicians had promptly lined up to collaborate and co-write with her, attracted not only by her talent but the entry she offered into the huge Spanish-language market.

Catalina was a triple threat, a singer, writer and performer

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who could literally dance rings round any of her peers. She had been onstage since eight years old as a child star in her native Argentina, and she was nothing if not a trouper. Her latest album, *Chasing Midnight*, had been a huge international success; the title song, of the same name, had gone to number 1 in almost every country in the world; she had just completed a sold-out worldwide; and the icing on the cake was 'Forever is Now' being nominated for Best Original Song at the Oscars, the bookies' favourite to win.

It was a dizzyingly high peak in Catalina's career even by her own extraordinarily successful standards. Unfortunately, this professional triumph coincided with the lowest ever point in her personal life. A few months before, she had simultaneously suffered not only a terrible heartbreak, but the worst betrayal of her life, and since then, she had been virtually a recluse, holed up in her beach house in Punta del Este with her personal assistant, Latisha, crying, grieving, and writing songs that were so depressive and miserable that the executives at her label were becoming seriously worried about the direction of her next album.

She had also dropped weight that she definitely could not afford to lose. Almost all stars are much smaller in real life than one expects, but Catalina was positively miniature, with the whip-thin, ectomorph build of a dancer that looked even tinier in proportion to the great mane of dark, curly hair that cascaded down her back. Curled up on one of the sofas in the private lounge that had been assigned to her in the Marlborough Suite, she could have been a cartoon version of herself, or one of those frighteningly unrealistic dolls made to appeal to pre-pubescent girls. Like the heroines of *Frozen*,

her eyes seemed too large for her face, her waist and wrists and ankles so narrow that it was hard to see how those fragile bones could support even her minimal weight.

The resemblance to a doll was emphasized by her ridiculously lush hair, which cascaded around her face so luxuriantly that a little girl's fingers would have itched to brush and plait it, and it earned her a small fortune in styling product endorsements. Right now, however, it made her face appear narrow, even pinched, by comparison, and her body as thin and easily snapped as a daisy stem.

'Uh, hon, we need to get going,' Latisha said for the umpteenth time. She was sitting on the sofa facing her boss, doing her absolute best to remain calm and not jump up and start pacing the room impatiently. Catalina had done a big press call that morning, but since then had barely spoken, allowing Latisha to shepherd her in and out of hotels and limos, organize their mounds of luggage, while Catalina followed along in mute acquiescence. Now, however, she was required to reactivate her personality, participate in another lively press conference, and not only did she seem completely unwilling to say a word, Latisha was becoming increasingly worried that Catalina might not even get up from the sofa in time to board the plane.

'Hon, the clock's ticking,' Latisha said gently. 'We should be getting out there and schmoozing the press.'

She shot a glance at her employer, who had taken her mass of hair out of the loose chignon in which it had been pinned that morning by the London stylist and was hiding behind it as if it were a veil.

'I really think you should pull back your hair, hon,' she

suggested. 'It swamps you when it's down like that, unless it's properly done. And people want to see your face. I can do a nice braid if you want. That always looks good.'

Catalina drew her full lips into a straight line, pinching them together, a silent gesture that rejected Latisha's words.

'Or, uh, a ponytail?' Latisha suggested, although she knew perfectly well that the hairstyle suggestion was not what Catalina was refusing.

There was no response to this, not even a grimace. The only sound in the room was the soft, generic instrumental music piped through the overhead speakers, versions of pop ballads revamped for easy listening background music. One of Catalina's own love songs had been featured earlier, the hugely famous '*Corazón*', but to Latisha's great relief, Catalina had not seemed to notice it. She was liable to start crying at the slightest thing, and there was a mournful, yearning element to some of the verses that might have set her off, even if she could only hear the melody.

'Cat, look,' Latisha tried again, only to tail off as Catalina raised her head, shaking back her mane of hair, and fixed Latisha with her huge dark eyes.

'I don't want to get on a plane today,' she said softly, her English perfect, but lightly tinged with her native Argentinian Spanish accent. 'I don't want to go back to LA.'

Over the last few months, Latisha had been functioning more as Catalina's on-site therapist than an actual personal assistant, and one thing she had learnt was that Catalina talking was more positive than Catalina silent. A taciturn Catalina could not be encouraged to do anything at all: eat, sleep, take some exercise. She just sat or lay wherever she

was, near comatose, her increasingly skinny limbs wound into a ball, seeming not to hear any words that were being addressed to her. Food and drink left on a bedside or coffee table were completely ignored: tea had got cold, water had got warm, snacks had gone stale.

But once Catalina started to communicate, Latisha knew her boss so well that she could usually find a way through to her. She leaned forward encouragingly, trying not to panic at what Catalina had just said.

‘Hon, we gotta go back to LA,’ she said reasonably. ‘You’re singing at the Oscars! I love you – I’d do anything to look after you – I’d get you out of anything I could! But this one is *so* not optional.’

She paused, very aware of the reason behind Catalina’s resistance to returning to LA. It was there that Catalina had briefly been so blissfully happy before her life had been catastrophically turned upside down, there that she had lost the love of her life. Catalina now associated her beautiful house in the Hills with heartbreak and grief. She had fled it the terrible day of the showdown and never returned, holing up in a suite at the Roosevelt Hotel until she had finished her last shows in LA and been able to escape to Uruguay and the seclusion of Punta del Este.

‘We’ve got a great suite all booked in at the Four Seasons,’ Latisha commented. Worried that Catalina would balk at returning to the Roosevelt, where she had mostly spent her stay lying on the carpet, crying and squeezing pillows to her narrow chest, Latisha had sensibly chosen a different hotel for their return visit.

‘And hon,’ she added, ‘we kinda need to get there sooner

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rather than later, you know? You have rehearsals scheduled, you need to get over the jet lag, you've got final fittings for your outfit, I have a whole bunch of beauty treatments booked in for you, and you *know* how busy it gets in Oscar week! There's no way any of those can be moved – they've been set in stone for months now.'

'I could get another flight,' Catalina said in a tiny voice. 'One where I don't have to do interviews and all this media stuff, so I could just board in a hoodie and keep my head down and not talk to anyone.'

Latisha closed her eyes briefly – safe to do so, as Catalina wasn't looking in her direction – and embarked silently on a long prayer that began *Lord Jesus, I'm begging you here . . .*

Catalina's presence on this Pure Air maiden flight had been on her calendar for as long as the various facials, hair treatments, styling and skin-brightening appointments booked in for the pre-Oscar beautifying week. It had been a stroke of genius for both Pure Air and Catalina's PR teams. The airline was able to garner superb press coverage from the fact that it had such a major celebrity on-board, while Catalina's squad of publicists at her record companies around the world rejoiced in the extra boost of this triumphant return to public notice after the months she had spent completely off the radar. Latisha had played a crucial role in organizing her employer's presence on this flight, and the mere thought that Catalina might balk at the last moment and refuse to get on-board sent shivers down her spine. Pure Air would be livid if Catalina pulled out, and the fallout from the negative publicity would be huge.

But no one became the right-hand woman to one of the most famous stars on the planet by allowing themselves to panic – at least not visibly. Latisha’s face remained as calm as ever, her high forehead smooth and unruffled, and when she responded, it was in the most easy-going tone possible, as if it made no difference to her at all that Catalina might be about to torpedo something that Latisha had spent countless hours and much painstaking effort organizing.

‘Yeah, you totally could,’ Latisha said casually. ‘We could. It’s just that we’re here now, and our cases are all on-board . . .’

‘You could get them taken off,’ Catalina said to her lap. ‘Book us onto another flight.’

‘Oh sure, no problem,’ Latisha said just as easily as before. ‘It’s just that there isn’t another LA flight out this evening. That’s why Pure Air’s making such a big deal about this one – the time slot. It’s the only night flight. They’re really pushing the whole landing-at-LAX-at-midnight thing. So we’d have to schlep back to London now, or crash in an airport Hilton till tomorrow. The morning flights don’t start till at least 10 a.m.’ She shrugged as nonchalantly as if it didn’t matter a hoot to her. ‘I mean, we’re here now . . . But hey, if you want to head out and hit an airport hotel for the night, that’s fine with me. I can start making calls.’

Latisha didn’t reach for her phone, however. Instead, she picked up her glass of wine – sorely needed; thank God for these luxury airport lounges that laid on hot and cold everything without you even having to ask. She had meant to take just a sip, but she ended up sinking half the contents in one swig. The prospect of Catalina pulling out of the flight at the last minute, with all the mess and fuss of the consequences,

the negative publicity, the torpedoing of such very carefully laid plans, made Latisha look very longingly at the Chardonnay remaining in the glass.

Catalina's head was still lowered, watching her slender fingers fold the hem of her sweater over and over in a series of tiny little pleats. Latisha settled back on the sofa and forced herself to count down from twenty to one, as slowly as she could bear. Then she shifted a little, fixed her eyes on Catalina's face, and said more firmly, 'So? Shall I phone for a car? I can tell Vanessa and make all the calls about hotel and flights as we go.'

She held her breath. So very much depended on this, for all sorts of reasons. Catalina needed to pull herself together, get back on track. Yes, she had been terribly disillusioned about the man she loved: no one knew that better than Latisha, who had broken the awful news to her boss. But Catalina had made a series of professional commitments around this Oscar nomination, and if she started allowing herself to break any, it would be a terrible sign. This was the kind of behaviour for which lesser stars were notorious: partying too hard, say, and pulling out of shows claiming exhaustion or dehydration and tweeting photos of themselves in a hospital bed with an IV drip in their arm. Or turning up late for a flight, holding up all the other passengers while they strolled nonchalantly on-board, neglecting even to apologize for having made the plane miss its take-off slot.

But Catalina had never behaved like that kind of entitled celebrity. She worked hard, didn't party, was always, as the journalist waiting outside for her had commented, a hundred per cent reliable. It was one of the reasons for her

immense success, and it was a crucial part of Latisha's job to keep her boss punctual and on track. Catalina's management team would rip Latisha a new one if Catalina pulled out of this promotional opportunity at the last minute. For these, and all sorts of other very pressing reasons, Catalina could not be allowed to let herself and Pure Air down, *had* to land in LA at the scheduled time to keep all her appointments, *needed*, unequivocally and imperatively, to get up from the sofa right now, plaster a smile on her face, walk into the Marlborough Suite's main room to answer questions from the media and then *get on the goddamn plane . . .*

Latisha realized that her fists were involuntarily clenched in tension, her elaborately decorated nails digging into her palms. She couldn't have reached for her phone even if she'd wanted to. Finally Catalina stirred and raised her head, those huge dark eyes meeting Latisha's in a look of silent surrender.

'I don't want to . . .' she began, and Latisha actually choked on the breath she was holding, '. . . have to wait the night here and get on a plane tomorrow,' Catalina concluded, as Latisha burst into a fit of coughs. 'Are you okay?' Catalina asked, concerned.

Latisha nodded wordlessly. Reaching for her wine glass, she sank its contents in one go, washing down the last spasms of coughing. Then she put the empty glass back down on the table, inhaled deeply and stood up, shaking back her heavy braids, squaring her wide shoulders. Walking round the coffee table, she held out her hand to Catalina.

'I am now,' she said. 'Let's go, hon. You're a pro. You can totally nail this. The sooner you give the journos out there

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what they want, the sooner you can get on-board that LuxeLiner, settle into bed and get a good night's sleep.'

She flashed a smile as Catalina leaned forward and took her hand. Pulling her boss to her feet, however, Latisha had to conceal a wince at how frighteningly easy it was: if Catalina weighed the hundred pounds that was the standard for Los Angeles women, it was only because of the heaviness of her hair.

'And you should eat something,' Latisha continued. 'Grab a bite, settle into bed and go to sleep. I'm gonna take a Zopiclone and crash myself. You've got your Valium, right?'

Catalina nodded. She strongly disliked turbulence, and always took a Valium before take-off in case the flight got bumpy.

'Well, that should zonk you out,' Latisha said, 'and you can take a Zopi with it too. I checked your handbag to make sure you've got vials of both, just in case. We've got a majorly busy time ahead of us over the next week – we need to get all the beauty sleep we can.'

Standing up, even in the three-inch stacked heels of her Robert Clergerie ankle boots, Catalina barely came up to her assistant's shoulder: Latisha had gone to university on a hockey scholarship and had an athlete's build. Latisha took Catalina's hair in both hands, pulled it gently to the crown of her head, took a no-snag Maddyloo elastic out of her jeans pocket – Latisha was always fully stocked with these small but important necessities – and fastened it around the twist of hair, arranging it into a loose bun that revealed Catalina's features and gave her a little extra height.

Catalina stood, acquiescent, while her assistant prepped

her for the press call, dabbing her lips with tinted gloss and her cheeks with a touch of cream blusher to give her peaky face some much-needed colour. Latisha dropped the make-up back into her shoulder bag and surveyed her tiny boss, who resembled, at that moment, a depressed teenager rather than an international star. Her Latin colouring meant that her skin was naturally a pale golden shade, but her miserable state of mind made her look greyish and drawn, and there would have been pronounced dark shadows under her eyes without the reapplication of By Terry Touche Veloutée concealer (infinitely superior to the Yves Saint Laurent version, according to Catalina's make-up artist, which in his opinion was not only far too light but also had a brush that was too fine to give the even coverage that the By Terry one achieved).

Relieved as Latisha was to have her employer on her feet and ready for the waiting press, it was hard to see her in such a despondent, depressive state. It was as if her loss had hollowed her out inside. Latisha had worked for Catalina for nearly a decade; they had seen each other through personal ups and downs, celebrated Catalina's successes, grown together in many ways, shared hotel suites whenever they travelled, were indubitably each other's best friend. And in all that time, Latisha had never seen Catalina so heartsick. She had truly been in love, and she had lost not just her lover but her faith in her own ability to pick a trustworthy partner ever again.

Impulsively, Latisha pulled Catalina towards her and enfolded her in a hug into which the star almost completely disappeared.

'It'll be okay,' she said into Catalina's hair. 'Honestly, it'll

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be okay, I promise. I know it's a shitty cliché, but time really does heal everything. You'll meet someone, you'll see, the right one this time. Hey, who knows?' She dropped a quick kiss on the top of Catalina's head. 'Maybe it'll happen even sooner than you think!'

Above Catalina's head, Latisha saw her own reflection in the mirror over the sofa. But, unlike her voice, which was soft and consoling, the expression in her eyes was quite impossible to interpret.