The Perfect Man

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Position: Barbados.
Weather: fine and dry. Wind: south-easterly force 4.
Temperature: 26°. Barometric pressure: 1014.9mb.

'There's a calypso band on the quayside.' Mia leaned further over the ship's rail and peered into the dusky light below before straightening up again and turning to face her sister. 'I think they're supposed to be serenading us.' She pushed her tawny curls out of sparkling green eyes that danced with amusement. 'I've never been serenaded before.'

'Neither have I,' admitted Britt. Her glance flickered to the band and then back across the docks and towards the yellow and white lights that were beginning to dot the landscape beyond. 'I guess serenading is a little bit old-fashioned these days.'

'Wouldn't it be wonderful, though,' said Mia, 'if a guy actually did that? Stood underneath your window in the moonlight, a single rose in his hand, and sang about everlasting love. It'd be so romantic, don't you think?'

'Any guy hanging around beneath my window warbling in the middle of the night would find himself in police custody pretty damn quick,' Britt told her decisively. 'I don't want my beauty sleep interrupted by a karaoke reject, thanks very much. Anyway, it would probably just be a diversionary tactic on his part to distract me while his burglar mate nipped in around the back and made off with the TV or something.'

'Britt McDonagh!' Mia's tone was one of scandalised humour. 'How can you say something like that? You of all people!'

'Of all people?' said Britt drily. 'Of all people, I'm clearly the

most qualified on board this ship to say what is totally cheesy when it comes to romantic gestures. And someone mangling "Nessun Dorma" or "Three Times a Lady" outside my two-bed terraced would be fighting for the number one spot.' She shuddered suddenly. 'I have a horrible feeling that this entire voyage is going to be full of cheesy moments, and I really and truly am beginning to think that it was a mistake to even consider it.'

A worried expression crossed Mia's face. 'Don't say that,' she protested. 'It's the trip of a lifetime. You know it is.'

'No it bloody isn't,' responded Britt. 'I can tell you here and now that if I was picking my trip of a lifetime, spending the best part of a fortnight on this floating love palace wouldn't be it.'

'Oh, come on.' Mia used her most persuasive tone. 'It's fantastic. You know it is. And you know that we're going to have a great time, too. How can we not?'

Britt said nothing, but turned from the rail and sat down on one of the comfortable deckchairs. Mia's eyes followed her anxiously. It wouldn't do, she told herself, for Britt to start having doubts about the trip again. She thought her sister had already dealt with all that. Mia knew that Britt wasn't exactly thrilled about her role on the journey ahead of them, but she'd been hoping that her sister had managed to convince herself that everything was going to be OK.

Mia herself was perfectly prepared to concede that joining the exclusive MV *Aphrodite* for its romance-laden Valentine Cruise was probably not exactly the voyage either of them would have booked as the trip of a lifetime – even if they'd had the appropriate boyfriend to take with them and thus could be part of the whole loved-up experience – but the fact was that they were still going to spend almost two weeks sailing in tropical seas on board one of the world's most exclusive cruise liners, which had to be a good thing.

And it was because of Britt that they were staying in the amazing suite with its private balcony as (almost) pampered passengers and not prepping food in the galley or sluicing out the loos as would have been far more likely – at least in Mia's case – otherwise. So it absolutely wouldn't do for Britt to get an attack of nerves again now, and it was Mia's job to make sure that she didn't. The only problem was that Mia wasn't entirely sure she was qualified to carry it out.

Earlier on, when they'd first boarded the *Aphrodite* (smaller than the average cruise ship because it was supposed to offer passengers a more intimate at-sea experience, but still enormous in her eyes), Mia had remarked that she could see why the brochures billed it as the holiday of a lifetime. And Britt had looked at her with a suddenly stern expression on her heart-shaped face and reminded her that neither of them was there on holiday, they were there to work. And that she wasn't to forget it.

How could she forget it? thought Mia, pushing her river of curls out of her face again. Britt reminded her of it often enough. But though she might want to call it work, surely a fortnight of island-hopping – even if you did have to spend half of it delivering workshops and lectures in Britt's case, or making sure everything was exactly right for her perfectionist sister in Mia's – was a million times better than spending it in Dublin in what had turned out to be the wettest February on record. And despite the fact that Mia herself hadn't been in the gloom of Dublin but had been working in Spain, where it was dry although not yet particularly warm, at the time the call from Britt had come, the carrot of a trip that meant travelling from the Caribbean to the Pacific and calling in to Guatemala (where she'd first met Alejo) was too good to pass up no matter how many times she asked herself whether she was doing the right thing by going. She concentrated on the calypso band in their brightly coloured shirts and white shorts on the quayside below, and very firmly pushed Alejo out of her mind. She wanted to visit Guatemala again because she'd spent a wonderful few months there four years ago and because she'd loved the country and its people. She didn't want it to be some kind of homage to her foolish past. Or to Alejo. She couldn't exactly forget the past, of course, but perhaps she could use this opportunity to put it into context. Visiting Guatemala, she assured herself, would bring closure to that time in her life. It needed closure. She sighed imperceptibly. Being ruthlessly honest with herself, despite what she knew she *needed*, she wasn't exactly sure that she *wanted* closure on it at all.

A motorised buggy, precariously piled with a mountain of luggage, zipped along the quay and stopped at the side of the ship, where the bags were placed on a ramp leading into its hold. Two ship's officers paced up and down alongside. Mia's eyes

followed them as they oversaw operations, and she couldn't help thinking that crisp white uniforms had a lot to recommend them. She whistled the theme tune to *An Officer and a Gentleman* under her breath. She'd been a toddler when the movie was released but it had been one of her mum's favourites, and due to the number of times she and Paula had watched it together, it had become one of Mia's favourites too. She'd always agreed with her mum that nobody could look as good in a white uniform as Richard Gere. But now she conceded that she might be wrong. The young officer shepherding the final passengers towards the gangway appeared, even from a distance, very hunky indeed. She wondered fleetingly if the ship's crew were allowed to get into the spirit of the Valentine Cruise. She liked the idea of being romanced by a man in uniform, even if he didn't have a calypso band to serenade her.

She closed her eyes for a moment and allowed herself to think of being swept off her feet by an officer. Then she opened them again and told herself not to be so bloody silly. Whatever else was on the cards for the next two weeks, Valentine Cruise or not, it certainly wasn't romance. At least not personally. Any romantic moments that came her way would be entirely due to the job she was there to do. Besides, she wasn't in the market for being swept off her feet. She'd learned her lesson the hard way.

The final passengers began to board the ship, stopping at the bottom of the gangway to have their photographs taken in the pink and gold light of the sunset by the pretty young ship's photographer, who was making sure that they looked happy and excited despite the fact that it had been a long day and most of them were exhausted. She'd just removed her camera from around her neck and begun to walk towards a group of her colleagues when one more passenger strode swiftly across the quayside, hesitated very briefly and then, before she had the chance to take his photograph, hurried up the gangway, leaving her standing looking after him in consternation, her camera in her hands.

The photographer hadn't been there when Britt and Mia had arrived and so neither of them had had their embarkation photos taken. They'd caught a scheduled flight that had left London early that morning rather than travelling on the Blue Lagoon Cruise Company's chartered plane later in the day. Their earlier depar-

ture had meant they'd boarded the ship before anyone else and before the photographer had taken up her position at the gangway. Mia supposed that it was a good thing they hadn't had to pose for a photo with a massive cut-out heart as a backdrop. She was pretty certain she couldn't have persuaded Britt to agree to it anyhow.

The scheduled flight had been courtesy of the cruise company and at the insistence of Britt's needle-sharp agent, Meredith, who had originally intended to accompany Britt on the trip and for whom 'economy' was an unknown word. And although Mia was as excited as anything about the cruise ahead of them and had to keep reminding herself that it was real and that she was actually here, she couldn't help feeling deep down that it might have been better for everyone concerned if Meredith had been able to come as planned. As it was, she had to keep telling herself that on this voyage she wasn't Britt's hopeless younger sister. She was her assistant, her paid assistant, and so a professional person. She also had to remember – hugely difficult though it might be – that her sister wasn't plain old Bridget McDonagh any more. She was Brigitte Martin, author of *The Perfect Man*, the heartbreaking romantic novel that had spent the last six months at the top of the international bestseller lists and was now about to be a major motion picture starring two Oscar winners and an Oscar nominee.

As a result Britt (somewhat unbelievably in Mia's opinion, given that her sister was probably the least romantic person she'd ever known and had, after all, divorced her husband after less than a year of marriage) was now seen as a kind of authority on love and romance as well as being an award-winning novelist, and was in massive demand to appear on talk shows and at literary events to discuss the nature of love and talk about her life as the writer of the most romantic book of the year. This demand, Mia knew, escalated every time Britt said no to appearing on anything. And Britt said no quite a lot, which Mia was certain drove Meredith to despair. Mia – who loved chat shows and eagerly watched them all so that she could keep up with the latest showbiz gossip – couldn't quite understand how Britt could keep refusing to appear on them. Mia loved Jonathan Ross and Ryan Tubridy and even Podge and Rodge's anarchic show, but Britt insisted that she had no intention of discussing her life with anyone or being mocked

by two wooden puppets on television. Eventually, however, she'd caved in and appeared on the *Late Late* on RTÉ, but that was only because Paula had been horrified at the idea of her daughter refusing to appear on the nation's longest-running chat show and had badgered Britt incessantly until she'd finally given in. Paula could wear Britt down more effectively than Meredith. She wanted the trip up to Dublin, she told Britt firmly, and she wouldn't be denied a great night out just because Britt was being silly about it. Paula had eventually triumphed and afterwards had raved to Mia about the evening, saying that Britt had been amazing and brilliant and an absolute natural. She'd sent Mia a DVD of the show and Mia had been astonished to see that Paula was absolutely right.

The most amazing thing of all, Mia thought, was the transformation of her sister's fashion look from the black linen suit and white silk blouse ensembles that she'd almost invariably worn over the past ten years to the astonishingly pretty woman with sleek curls and a colourful dress who was laughing and joking with the audience. It had been a long time since Mia had seen Britt laugh and joke like that, and it had made her think that writing the book might have been a turning point in her sister's life. But it hadn't. Paula had told her that once the programme was over, Britt refused to hang around and chat with the celebs but insisted that she was tired and wanted to go home, where she'd immediately removed the make-up and brushed the curls out of her hair. And, Paula had added, Britt had said that the whole thing had been a huge strain and that she hoped she'd never have to do it again.

It was typical of Britt, Mia thought, that she'd managed to be so successful on the show even though she hadn't wanted to do it. She knew that in the same circumstances she herself would have been tongue-tied and useless. Britt, though, was annoyingly good at most things – especially things she didn't like doing. She'd once told Mia that it was easy to be good at stuff you enjoyed. Being good at stuff you hated was a much greater challenge. (Mia had been doing her maths homework at the time and it hadn't been going particularly well. Unlike Britt, she was terrible at doing things she hated!)

Britt, however, was also obstinate and much to Meredith's disgust still turned down many of the publicity opportunities that her

agent and her publicist presented to her, regardless of how good she might have been at them. ('I can't spend my life telling people how to find the right man,' she would protest. 'Sooner or later someone's going to notice that I don't have one myself and they'll ask me questions that I am absolutely not prepared to answer.')

Given that Britt had had to be strong-armed into agreeing to the cruise, Mia kept reminding herself that she had to be like Meredith and treat her as the amazing success she was instead of simply her irritating older sister, so that her stint on *Aphrodite* would be a total triumph. She wasn't entirely confident in her own ability to do that, and the more she thought about it, the more she felt that agreeing to step into Meredith's high-heeled Louboutin shoes was a very bad idea indeed.

Although she was accustomed to acknowledging Britt as one of life's constant successes, Mia had spent most of her life doing her best to put her in her place rather than pandering to her. She'd been the one to put spiders in Britt's bed when they were small, or hide her schoolbooks to get her into trouble, or rob the last of her favourite perfume just to hear her rant and rage. She was used to provoking Britt at every available opportunity, if only to shake her out of her complacent self-satisfaction at always getting top marks at school as well as being the teacher's pet.

When she'd been much younger, Mia had been utterly convinced that she must have been adopted as a baby, because she couldn't understand how she could possibly be related to somebody as over-achieving as Britt. (Especially a blond-haired, blue-eyed, pouty-lipped overachiever.) It seemed impossible to her that the same people who'd produced such a wonderful daughter the first time around could've messed it up so spectacularly with her. It made much more sense to think that Paula and Gerry had taken her in after she'd been abandoned by her own mother. In her teens, Mia had decided that she was actually the daughter of a (slightly plump) Russian princess whose family had been made destitute during the Revolution and who'd had to give up their children in the hope of a better life for them. It had taken a long time for her to accept the evidence of her own birth certificate and finally admit that she was actually Paula and Gerry's natural child. (She'd never forgiven them for bequeathing the slightly plump gene to her and not Britt.)

She knew that Britt was serenely unaware that her sister envied her her self-possession, her brains and her ability to say no to second helpings of Paula's chocolate fudge cake every Sunday. Britt was totally focused and had a relentless determination to succeed in whatever she chose to do. She was also amazingly disciplined, and that, Mia knew, was something that all novelists were supposed to be, so perhaps it made sense that she'd suddenly, though unexpectedly in the eyes of everyone who knew her, written the book of the year.

In fact, the only time that Britt's famous self-discipline had snapped was when she'd married Ralph. Mia often thought that a little less discipline over other things and a little more discipline over Ralph would have been a lot better for her sister, although she kept that thought strictly to herself. Because after Ralph, Britt had changed utterly – from a warm person with flashes of icy reason to an icy person with flashes of warmth. And that was why Mia had been so utterly astonished when Britt's book had been hailed as a romantic masterpiece. As far as Mia was concerned, Ralph had killed off Britt's romantic gene. And in all honesty, despite *The Perfect Man*, she hadn't seen any sign of it in her sister since.

So she'd been stunned when Britt had phoned and asked her about joining her on board the *Aphrodite*, and thrown into a total quandary about what to do.

'Are you absolutely sure you want *me* along?' she'd asked doubtfully when Britt had called her out of the blue and put the proposal to her. 'Not that I wouldn't love to come and everything,' she added hastily, 'but I would've thought that someone from your publishers might be better at this sort of thing than me.'

'I have to share a cabin,' Britt said with a hint of panic in her voice. 'I can't do that with someone I don't know. It would've been OK with Meredith, I'm used to her by now and I can cope.'

Britt wasn't good at sharing. She liked her own space. When they'd been younger and had been invited to sleepovers in friends' houses, or when Paula had asked them if they'd like friends to stay with them, Britt had always refused because she preferred to sleep on her own.

She must be in a real state, Mia thought as she listened to her sister give the lowdown on the cruise, to ask me to come with her even as a standby. She's neat and I'm messy and I know it drives her bonkers.

'Can you do it or not?' Britt had sounded agitated but imperious.

'It sounds great, and thanks for asking, but I can't really leave Allegra,' said Mia, who was wrestling with the desire to see how the other half lived (after all, there wasn't a chance in hell that she'd ever be able to afford a top-of-the-range cruise herself in normal circumstances) against the knowledge that she had a three-year-old daughter to worry about. Britt could ultimately look after herself. Allegra couldn't.

'It's only for a fortnight,' said Britt. 'She'll be fine. And I'll pay you, of course. Mum told me that you'd lost your job at the town council.'

Mia gritted her teeth and wished that her mother wasn't such a damn blabbermouth.

'Only because it's seasonal,' she said. 'Sierra Bonita is a growing place and the council arranges a lot of English lessons for its employees. I'm a good teacher and they said that they'd take me back in a few weeks.'

'Perfect so,' said Britt. 'In the meantime you can help me and I can help you.'

'I . . .'

'Please. I really need you.'

It was rare that Britt ever asked for help, and Mia hadn't heard her sound so anxious in years. She glanced at her petite dark-haired daughter, with her button nose and rosebud mouth, who was playing with her doll on the tiled verandah outside their house on the hillside, and tightened her grip on the phone.

'I really can't,' she said regretfully. 'It's a long time to leave Allie and there's no one I can leave her with.'

'Don't be daft,' Britt retorted. 'What about James and Sarah? Didn't they visit you last year? Allegra knows them. Besides, she'll have a great time with Barney and Luke. They're all around the same age.'

Mia didn't correct her. Barney was eight and Luke was six, and that was a huge difference. But then Britt was clueless about kids; she'd been the only one on their road not to do babysitting to earn pocket money when they were teenagers. She'd said that she found children too annoying and not worth the money.

'I'd have to bring her back to Ireland,' said Mia doubtfully.

'And it's a year since she's seen them so she might not remember them and perhaps she'd feel abandoned.'

'She won't feel abandoned,' said Britt. 'And it would be good for her, don't you think, to mix with other children?'

'She mixes fine with other children.' Mia had bristled slightly at the implication that there was something amiss in Allegra's life.

'Ask James,' said Britt urgently. 'I bet he and Sarah would be delighted to have her.'

Mia wasn't so sure about that, but she was wrong.

'She rang me already,' said her brother when Mia phoned him later that night to tell him about Britt's request. 'Aren't you the lucky one! She's never asked me to go anywhere with her, even though I'm sure I could be a great bodyguard.'

'Yeah, right.' Mia was teasing. It was well known in their family that James was a gentle giant who ran a mile at the first sign of trouble. 'I'd probably be a better bodyguard than you.'

'So that's why she asked you!'

'I'm surprised,' admitted Mia. 'We haven't really talked in ages.'

'She hasn't "talked" to anyone in ages,' James reminded her. 'You know the way she is these days.'

'The way she's been for years,' said Mia.

'It's not her fault.' James stuck up for Britt. 'She was really hurt by the marriage-we're-not-allowed-to-mention.'

'For crying out loud, it was years ago!' exclaimed Mia. 'You'd imagine she'd be over it by now.'

'I don't know which bit she isn't over,' said James. 'The fact that she got divorced, or the fact that marrying Ralph was a mistake in the first place.'

Mia giggled. 'She hates making mistakes.'

'And this was her biggest ever.'

'She'd have been better off getting her nose bloodied in a few hopeless relationships when she was at school,' Mia told him. 'But you know what she was like. Holding out for the perfect person from the start.'

'Absolutely the wrong way to go about it,' agreed James. 'How in God's name did she manage to write this book when she's so bloody hopeless about men? Has she even gone out with anyone since Ralph?'

'I haven't a clue. She doesn't fill me in on the state of her love

life. And as for the book – would you read a love story written by someone who probably hasn't been shagged in a decade?'

James laughed. 'I read thrillers,' he said. 'So no. But I can't help wondering what on earth her readers think when they meet her and she bites their heads off.'

'I think that's why she needs someone with her on the cruise,' said Mia. 'Apparently her agent knows when she's had enough of pretending to be fluffy and nice, and hustles her away before she cracks and allows her true nature to erupt. I'm supposed to do that as well as make sure everything's organised for her.'

'It could be fun,' James told her. 'It's a cruise in the Caribbean, for heaven's sake.'

'I'm sure it'll be wonderful,' agreed Mia. 'At least for the other passengers! But I just don't know what to do. On the one hand, I'd so love to go on the cruise. On the other, it's with Britt, and I can't reconcile the Britt I know with this romance person she's supposed to be. On the one hand, she's paying me. On the other . . . Oh, James, I can't leave Allegra. I'll miss her like crazy and she'll hate me for ever.'

'Of course she won't hate you for ever,' said James. 'Don't be silly, Mia. I know you'll miss her, but it's not that long really. Besides, Sarah would love to have her to stay. I think our testosterone-laden environment gets a bit much for her sometimes.'

'I haven't decided yet,' said Mia. 'Oh, why on earth did her stupid agent fall off her stupid horse! If the woman had stayed on the damn animal, Britt would've gone off quite happily without me.'

'Maybe it will be good for the two of you to go away together,' said James seriously. 'You know, be girlie.'

'You're joking, aren't you? I do love her, but she's such hard work and there's no chance of us being girlie together. Anyway . . .'

'Anyway what?'

'She always makes me feel so bloody inadequate,' admitted Mia. 'I mean, there she was with the glittering career and getting her name in the papers before, and now here she is with another glittering career and being on the telly; and it's not like I ever wanted it or anything, but I know she's going to give me the "you too could be brilliant if you put your mind to it" lecture. She always bloody does!'

James laughed. ‘It’s hard work having her in the family,’ he agreed. ‘But she’s a decent soul really.’

Mia groaned. ‘She means well. But she can be so patronising sometimes. And whenever she is, I want to scream at her that her husband left her after a few months and so she’s not successful in everything she does. But her marriage is the elephant in the room, isn’t it? We can’t discuss it. Oh, no! *She* can criticise us till the cows come home, but nobody can talk about her massive divorce.’

‘Maybe you shouldn’t go if you’re going to be like that about it,’ agreed James. ‘You’ll kill each other.’

‘I know . . . Hold on a sec!’ Mia catapulted across the verandah and just managed to catch the empty terracotta pot that Allegra had almost pushed from its plinth on to the tiles below. ‘That’s bold,’ she told her daughter. ‘Really bold. I told you not to touch it.’

Allegra stared at her mutinously from her dark brown eyes and then sat on the steps with her back towards her mother, indicating her annoyance.

‘All the same, you could do with a break.’ James’s voice came over the phone again. ‘You’ve been on your own with her for over three years, Mia. You haven’t had any holidays. You deserve one.’

To Mia’s horror, she felt her eyes fill with tears.

‘I don’t need a holiday.’ She swallowed hard before she spoke. ‘And I’m perfectly fine.’

‘You don’t need to do it all on your own all the time,’ said James gently. ‘It’s only a fortnight. I know it seems like a long time, but it’ll go really quickly. And we’ll look after Allegra for you. We won’t let her miss you.’

‘Of course she’ll miss me!’

‘She’ll be fine with us,’ James promised, ‘honestly.’

Mia leaned against the whitewashed wall and stared across the lush green valley towards the thin blue strip on the horizon that was the Mediterranean Sea. She lived in one of the most beautiful places in the world, with its glorious climate and wonderful people. But sometimes she felt trapped. And sometimes she was very lonely.

‘Come and stay with us for a few days before you leave,’ suggested James. ‘That’ll give Allegra time to settle in with us.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ said Mia. ‘I’ll think very hard.’

In the end, she’d decided to go.

I'm so lucky really, she reminded herself when she arrived in Dublin with Allegra in tow and Sarah met them at the airport, wrapping her arms around them and saying how lovely it was to see them. I have the most fantastic family. I must get them to visit me more often.

Although Allegra had met her two cousins when they'd visited Spain the previous year, Mia had worried that she might feel shy now, but within minutes she had thrown herself into the game they were playing and before long she was chattering away to them in Spanglish, the mixture of Spanish and English she spoke with Mia.

'She can talk quite well now,' Mia assured Sarah. 'In both languages. She understands English perfectly, especially things like "no" and "put that down" and "what the hell d'you think you're doing?"'

Sarah laughed. 'She's an absolute pet,' she told Mia. 'We're really looking forward to having her here.'

'She hasn't been away from me before,' said Mia anxiously. 'She might get upset.'

'You've recorded those video clips for her,' said Sarah. 'You can call her every day. Don't you worry. She'll be fine.'

Yes, thought Mia a couple of days later as she headed over to London to meet up with Britt, who had been on a publicity junket, Allegra might be fine. But what about me? Blissful though it was to walk through an airport without having to worry about whether she'd brought enough wipes, or Tig-Tag doll, or her daughter's favourite apple juice, she felt as though part of herself was missing. As she pressed the button for the lift, a surge of loneliness took hold of her, so intense that she almost gasped out loud. She swallowed hard and blinked away the tears that had unexpectedly flooded her eyes. She didn't want to turn into a foolish, possessive mother who couldn't bear to be parted from her child for an instant. It would be good for Allie to spend some time with the boys. She muttered the words out loud to convince herself. But she only succeeded in feeling guilty again.

She was meeting Britt at the exclusive boutique hotel in Paddington where her sister was staying during her time in London. Despite her loathing of publicity, Britt had given in to Meredith's insistence that, as *The Perfect Man* had been nominated for its third

award of the year, she had an obligation to everyone who'd gone out and bought it to give something of herself back. Besides, Meredith had said, even though you say you hate being interviewed, you come across really well. Britt had opened her mouth to disagree but in the end she'd nodded. Mia had been startled to see her sister's picture on the front of a TV listings magazine at the train station, promising that she was going to give her top five tips for landing the man of your dreams. It all sounded impossibly glamorous, and a far cry from her world of running after Allegra or struggling to teach English to exhausted town officials who would much rather be at home with their families. It was exciting, if nerve-racking, to think that she was going to be part of it.

Mia got the Heathrow Express into London, grateful that the hotel wasn't far from the station because her suitcase was ridiculously heavy. She'd tried to go light on the packing, but her head had been filled with ideas about dressing up for dinner in the evenings and she'd got into a complete panic about what she might need to wear. Consequently she'd put just about everything she possessed into the case. She'd had to pay a hefty excess baggage charge because of the weight and was wondering what Britt would say if she tried to claim it back as a business expense.

The hotel where her sister was staying was relentlessly modern, with black marble floors, snow-white walls and minimalist black leather furniture, only occasionally relieved by a single pillar-box-red plant. The bedrooms were black-and-white minimalist too. Britt had enthused about them. Mia hated them. She would have preferred some comfortable sofas and colourful cushions, even though she did quite like the enormous marbled black-and-white bathroom with its toasty underfloor heating, huge shower area and supersized warm towels.

'I always stay here,' said Britt, who'd placed her hands on each of Mia's shoulders and pecked her lightly on the cheek when she'd opened the door, so that Mia hadn't, as she'd intended, hugged her in return. 'It's comfortable.'

'But not very homely,' observed Mia, wondering where the wardrobes were and then realising there was a white panel on the wall that slid back to reveal a built-in unit.

'I like it.'

'It's your style all right,' said Mia. She looked at Britt. 'Your

old style. You look the same as always. I thought you'd have changed completely. I was expecting you to look like Brigitte.'

Britt grinned, and suddenly Mia felt better about everything. Britt's grin was always unexpectedly wicked, hinting at a sense of humour buried deep beneath her cool and calm exterior, if she'd only let it come to the surface. Unfortunately, in the last few years, she hardly ever had.

'I'm two different people,' she told Mia. 'When I'm doing book things I'm Brigitte. But the rest of the time I'm the sister you know and love.' She looked quizzically at Mia. 'Do you prefer Brigitte?'

Mia stared at her sister, uncertain of what to say. Right now Britt was herself – tall and leggy, with her straight fudge-blond hair loosely pinned up at the back of her head. She was wearing stone-washed jeans and a soft lilac V-necked jumper. A small white-gold pendant hung around her throat, the tiny diamond in the centre glittering under the bedroom lights. As always, because she hated towering over people, her shoes were flat.

It was a completely different look to her *Late Late* appearance, and indeed the last time Mia had seen her on a UK morning TV interview, which she'd watched on the internet. Britt had been even more over the top then, with her vivid eye make-up, long lashes and bright pink lip gloss. Her top was silk, her skirt long and floaty, her pink shoes high-heeled. (The heels, in fact, were skyscraper high, and golden. Mia noticed that the presenter didn't stand up when Britt joined him.)

Britt had smiled a lot during the interview, and even flirted with the presenter – at that point Mia had been utterly flabbergasted, because she'd never known Britt to flirt with anyone in her life – not even Ralph. She'd watched the download twice, and it was only on the second viewing that she realised that Britt's smile didn't reach her eyes and that when the presenter touched her on the shoulder, her sister edged away.

'I'm not sure Brigitte is really you,' she said eventually. 'But this hotel certainly is.'

'I know you'd prefer chintzy cushions and drapes,' Britt teased. 'But I really do like this stuff. That's why they put me up here. If I expressed a preference for flowers and flounces, they'd do that too.'

Mia looked at her in wonder. 'Do they do everything you want?'

‘At the moment they do,’ said Britt, in an offhand way. ‘I’m their big money-spinner this year. In a year’s time they’ll probably have found someone new and more exciting and I’ll be yesterday’s news, but at the moment they’re making a fortune out of *The Perfect Man*, especially since the movie deal and the awards.’

‘Glad that some man is good for something,’ said Mia.

‘In general I made a lot of money from them,’ said Britt, and Mia laughed. Britt’s real career – the one she’d been so successful in before the publication of *The Perfect Man* – was as a lawyer specialising in high-profile divorce cases. She nearly always represented the woman and she nearly always won them excellent settlements. Mia knew that Britt’s legal career had been very important to her. But, she thought, how much better fun it must be to write about true love than deal with messy divorces.

‘Our flight is at eleven in the morning,’ Britt told her as Mia began to unzip her case. ‘So you don’t need to unpack anything.’

‘Just getting my nightie and stuff,’ Mia told her. ‘And . . .’ she waved a book at her, ‘my copy of *The Perfect Man*.’

It was a new copy with an airport price tag on it. Britt frowned.

‘I sent signed copies to everyone as soon as it came out,’ she said. ‘I sent one to you too.’

Mia looked at her apologetically. ‘I got it. But you know me and books. I was never much of a reader. And before I got around to reading the copy you sent . . . well, it accidentally ended up in a swimming pool. Sorry.’

‘You mean you haven’t read it at all yet?’ Britt’s eyes opened wide.

‘I read it in Spanish,’ Mia assured her. ‘But I want to read it in English. I know I can speak the language but I don’t read it so well and I guess I didn’t quite – quite get it.’

‘You mean you didn’t like it?’

‘It’s not that,’ said Mia hastily. ‘I didn’t get every word of it, though.’

‘I understand,’ said Britt. ‘It’s fine.’

But Mia had known, from the sudden tightness in her sister’s voice, that actually it wasn’t.

* * *

She read *The Perfect Man* on the flight to Barbados. She hadn't entirely told the truth about the fate of the copy that Britt had sent her. Its immersion in her neighbour's swimming pool hadn't been accidental at all. On the day the book had arrived she'd been tired, up all night because Allegra had developed a worrying cough, and so she'd been quite unable to sleep. She'd also managed to puncture a tyre on her ancient third-hand jeep driving her daughter to the doctor that morning which meant that she'd turned up at the clinic looking haggard and wan. The only up side was that Allegra had improved with every passing minute and by the time they eventually got home again she'd run around the house like a mad thing, broken Mia's favourite vase, used up her only decent lipstick on herself, 'to make me feel better', and generally driven her mother demented. So when the postman arrived with the book and Mia saw the 'International Bestseller' blazed across the front of it and Britt's gorgeous, carefree face smiling at her from the back, she'd actually lost her temper completely and flung it over the terrace balcony, watching it sail in a wide arc through the air before landing with a splash in Carmen Colange's pool halfway down the hillside. Carmen rented out the house for a good part of the year and Mia had known that there were tourists staying in it. So she hadn't gone to retrieve her sodden signed copy but had eventually bought the Spanish translation in the tiny bookshop in Sierra Bonita a few weeks later. Naturally she hadn't told Britt this at the time – all she'd actually done was to send her a text thanking her for the lovely book. And even when she'd got around to reading the Spanish version her heart hadn't been in it; she'd simply skimmed through it to get the gist of the story.

Now, relaxed and comfortable in the business-class seats, she couldn't believe she'd ever skimmed through the book. Every so often, as she turned the pages, she glanced at her sister, but Britt was engrossed in the in-flight movies and didn't return her look. When Mia finally finished it, just twenty minutes before they landed, she cleared her throat and sniffed. Britt glanced at her.

'So did you get it this time?' she asked.

'Oh yes.' Mia cleared her throat again. 'I suppose . . . when I read it in Spanish I was all caught up with Allegra and stuff and I didn't . . . didn't appreciate it. But it's wonderful, Britt, it really is. It's warm and lovely and . . .'

'No need to go overboard,' said Britt dismissively. 'As you said yourself, you're not really into books.'

'I know, but . . .'

'So you don't have to pretend just for me.'

'I'm not pretending!' cried Mia. 'It's great. It's just . . . I never would have expected it from you.'

'Oh?' Britt looked at her enquiringly. 'And why's that?'

'Because . . . because it's just gorgeous!' she cried. 'It's so utterly, utterly romantic. And uplifting. It's so . . . so unlike you.'

Britt made a face. 'It's fiction.'

'Yes, but . . .'

'And it wasn't meant to be romantic.'

'What, then?'

'It was just about a man,' said Britt.

'The most amazing man ever.' Mia's tone was heartfelt.

'Which is why it's fiction.'

'Don't be like that,' said Mia. 'Admit that you've rediscovered your softer side.'

'There wasn't anything there for me to rediscover,' said Britt.

'I know that you were never the most romantic girl in the world,' conceded Mia. 'But it's nice to see that your heart hasn't been completely hardened over the years.'

'My heart is the same as it always was,' Britt told her. 'And my feelings about romance haven't changed one single bit.'

Mia glanced at her. Britt's face was taut. And Mia knew that it was time to drop the subject of true love for the time being.

Now, at the quayside in Barbados, six thousand miles away from the minimalist London hotel, she turned to look at her sister again. Britt had stretched out on one of the balcony's teak loungers, a faraway expression in her indigo-blue eyes.

How is it, Mia wondered, that our lives have turned out to be such polar opposites? How is it that she's always been so astonishingly successful, but the only success in my life has been Allegra? Not that most people would consider being a single mum an entirely successful thing in the first place. How can she be so cool and calm about her achievements, while all of my life has been about being hot and bothered about my failures? And what in

God's name are the chances of me managing to look after her the way she needs to be looked after on this trip when I haven't a clue what to do?

'Why don't we head down to the sail-away party?' she suggested suddenly as she glanced at her watch. 'It's happening beside the pool. And there's free champagne.'

'We're not here to go to parties and knock back free booze,' Britt told her firmly. 'We're here to work.'

'Bridget Marie McDonagh!' Mia sounded incredulous. 'I know you've always been a total workaholic, but what kind of work could you possibly expect to do tonight? It's been a long day and you deserve some time off. Besides, your first session isn't until the day after tomorrow. Now, maybe I'm sadly lacking in work ethic myself, but all the same, I don't think going to the sail-away party is some terrible waste of our time. You might get to meet some of the passengers.'

Britt looked horrified. 'I don't want to meet the passengers,' she said.

'That's what you're here for,' Mia told her. 'To meet them and be nice to them and talk to them about *luuurve*.'

'Oh, please!'

'Are you saying that whenever you meet anyone you're going to be rude and nasty?' asked Mia.

'Of course not. But I'd rather not bother.'

Mia regarded her sternly. 'I'm here to bolster your image,' she said. 'You can't avoid everyone all of the time.'

'I know, but . . .'

'They won't recognise you now anyway,' said Mia. 'You don't look anything like your photos.'

Brigitte's publicity photo was one of her in what Mia mentally described as her 'full metal jacket' look with the curled hair and extravagant make-up that made her seem like a total stranger.

Britt shrugged with impatience. 'I'm not worried about being recognised,' she said. 'I'm completely different when I'm Brigitte. But I'm here as Brigitte, so I don't want to talk to anyone when I'm not.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' Mia was exasperated. 'Don't tell me you're not going to step outside the cabin unless your hair is perfect and you're plastered with slap. That's ridiculous. You don't

have to turn yourself into another person to walk around the ship. You're not Dolly Parton, you know.'

'Be sensible,' retorted Britt.

'Be yourself! Nobody will give a toss what you look like,' said Mia.

'People expect me to be a certain sort of person because of the book,' Britt told her patiently. 'They think I'm warm and caring and romantic, and I'm not. You know I'm not. They'll be very disappointed when they realise that I'm a grumpy cow. You're here to stop them finding that out.'

Mia looked at her thoughtfully. 'You're not . . . gushy,' she conceded finally. 'But you can be warm and caring when you want to be; you're not always a grumpy cow.'

Britt raised an eyebrow at her. 'I thought that's what you and James used to call me.'

'Years ago.' Mia blushed. 'When you were studying for your law exams and wouldn't talk to us.'

'You called me that at school too,' Britt reminded her.

'OK, OK. But I didn't actually mean it.'

'It's fine,' said Britt. 'I know I can be moody and grumpy. I just don't want to be that way with the passengers.'

'You're not as bad as you try to make out,' said Mia. 'I know there's a caring person buried underneath the moody exterior.' She looked at Britt curiously. 'So who *do* you care about these days?'

'My clients,' replied Britt.

Mia exhaled sharply. 'You're being deliberately tough,' she said.

'Not really.' Britt shrugged. 'I'm a single girl. I'm a divorce lawyer. I live on my own. I don't even have a cat! I don't need to be warm and caring.'

'Let me earn my keep, in that case,' said Mia after a moment in which she wrestled with the desire to hit Britt over the head. 'If someone tries to talk to you and you can't be nice, I'll tell them that you're jet-lagged.'

Britt smiled faintly. 'I guess that's as good an excuse as any.'

'So come on, we're going to the party and we'll have a good time, and nobody is even going to notice you because they'll be far too excited about their holiday and probably jet-lagged themselves.'

‘I suppose you’re right,’ agreed Britt in resignation.

‘I accept it’s not your thing,’ Mia acknowledged. ‘But it’s mine. And you’ll be with me so you don’t have to mingle. You’ll have a good time and nobody will bother you. I promise.’

And before Britt had time to raise any more objections, Mia had hustled her through the cabin and out of the door.