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The Perfect Hero

Written by Victoria Connelly

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VICTORIA CONNELLY

The Perfect Hero

AVON

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To my dear friend, Deborah, with love.

'Is not general incivility the very essence of love?'
Elizabeth Bennet, *Pride and Prejudice*

Prologue

Peggy Sullivan leant forward in an attempt to get the pillows behind her just right.

'It's my eyes I miss the most,' she said to the young woman sitting by the side of the bed. 'I wasn't too bothered when my legs went. I was too tired to walk around much anyway. I didn't even mind when my right ear went last month but I do miss my eyes.'

The young woman leant forward and patted her hand.

'It's so kind that you come and read to me, Kay,' Peggy said.

'It's my pleasure.'

'It can't be easy for you, my dear. Coming here, I mean.'

Kay looked at Peggy for a moment before answering. 'It wasn't at first. I kept seeing Mum everywhere – sitting in the conservatory gazing out at the gardens, or serving everyone tea in the sitting room.'

'We all miss her so much. She always loved taking care of everybody – just like you do.'

Kay nodded. 'She used to call me "Little Mother" when I was growing up.'

Peggy smiled sadly and then looked at Kay with bemusement in her eyes. 'How you came to work at Barnum and Mason, I'll never understand.'

'It was the first job I was offered,' Kay said with a shrug. 'I took it thinking I'd only be there a little while. I was hoping—'

'Someone would discover your paintings,' Peggy interrupted.

'Yes.'

'Well, they're taking their time, I must say.'

They were silent for a moment and Kay looked out of Peggy's window. Her bedroom was on the ground floor of The Pines and overlooked the communal garden which was shivering under a layer of early snow. The poor cyclamen were doing their best to survive but one more fall of snow and they'd be buried alive, Kay thought.

Buried. The word sent a shiver through her. It had only been a month since her mother had been buried in the local churchyard after a brief but devastating illness. She'd been sixty-seven – not old by today's standards – and Kay missed her more than she could say. Perhaps that was why she was spending time with Peggy. She'd met her whilst visiting her mother and the two of them had clicked. Both had a profound love of the novels of Jane Austen and when Kay had discovered that Peggy was blind – a fact that she'd kept marvellously hidden – Kay had offered to read to her.

Peggy never seemed to have any visitors and Kay couldn't quite give up visiting The Pines.

'I do wish I could see your paintings,' Peggy suddenly said.

'I do too, Peggy.'

'Tell me about your new ones.'

'Well, I've only got one new one. I'm afraid work's been a bit hectic and—'

'That ratbag Roger still working you late?'

Kay grinned.

'I remember him when he was a lad. I knew his father. Lived in my road. Bullies – both of them. You mustn't let him push you around, Kay.'

'I don't.'

Peggy nodded. 'Because I'll have words with him if he's bullying you. I've got one of them portable phone jobbies. It'll only take one call.'

'It's all right. There's no need to call him.'

Peggy shifted forward and Kay got up to rearrange her pillows.

'So, tell me about your picture.'

Kay's eyes took on a wistful look as she thought about her latest painting.

'Well, you know the last chapter of *Persuasion* we read together? That moment when Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth see each other for the first time since he went away?'

'I love that scene!' Peggy said, her face glowing with the pleasure of remembering it.

'I chose that moment when Jane Austen writes "a thousand feelings rushed on Anne".'

'*Wonderful!*' Peggy enthused.

'And "a bow, a curtsey passed".'

'Yes, yes!' Peggy said. 'I can see it now. All those pent-up emotions they still have for each other. Oh, I *wish* I could see it!'

'I've always wanted to capture that moment when their eyes meet,' Kay said, tucking a strand of toffee-coloured hair behind her ear. 'It's so fleeting and yet so much happens in it.'

'So which scene are you illustrating next?'

'One of the Lyme Regis ones. I want to paint that

wonderful seafront with the sweep of the Cobb. I only wish I could visit it.'

'You've never been to Lyme?'

'No,' Kay said, her eyes taking on a dreamy look again. 'I've always imagined myself living by the sea one day and I think Lyme would be just the place to be.'

'Then what are you doing in land-locked Hertfordshire?' Peggy asked. 'I mean, now that you don't have any family ties.'

'My job's here. My house is here.'

'Oh, rot!' Peggy said. 'I know it's a terrible cliché but, if you don't take charge of your life, nobody's going to do it for you. Think of Anne Elliot and all those years she wasted.'

'But I've got a mortgage to pay. I'm kind of stuck here.'

Peggy's mouth narrowed. 'I don't like to hear such excuses. If you want to live near the sea then you should. It's as simple as that.'

'I wish it was,' Kay said. 'I really wish it was.'

Chapter One

That night, Kay Ashton dreamt of Mr Darcy again. It wasn't the first time, of course, and it wouldn't be the last. She often dreamt about her favourite fictional hero and she often *day*dreamed about him too. How many dull afternoons in the office had been cheered up by imagining the sudden arrival of Mr Darcy? He'd come striding in across the carpeted reception, his eyes fixed on Kay.

'In vain have I struggled,' he'd say, confessing his love to her there and then and sweeping her up in his arms, telling her to leave her desk behind and run away to Pemberley with him.

If only I could, Kay thought.

It was funny that she should be dreaming about Mr Darcy because she'd been drawing Captain Wentworth for the last few weeks now. Darcy had been the main subject of her last book – a collection of drawings in pen, and watercolour paintings of scenes from *Pride and Prejudice*.

She couldn't remember the first time she'd drawn Mr Darcy but she'd been putting pen to paper all her life, sketching little scenes of handsome princes and fairytale princesses which, as she'd grown older, had become heroes and heroines from the books she read. It was a world she'd

loved diving into because the real one around her had been a cold and cruel place.

Kay had been ten years old when her father had left her. She'd been upset and confused and had watched as her mother had crumbled before her. The two of them had clung to each other and had slowly built a new life for themselves but, just as they were getting used to being just the two of them, the unthinkable had happened. Her father had returned.

Life had been turned upside down once again and Kay was forgotten in the space of a moment as her parents had got on with the business of fixing their marriage. It hadn't been easy. Kay often wondered how her parents had managed to stay together for so long because they seemed to spend most of their time fighting. She could hear them shouting from her bedroom even when she closed the door and hid her head under her pillow. They shouted at night too when they thought she was asleep, their voices only slightly dimmed by the thin wall that separated their bedroom from hers.

Her mother would always look washed-out and red-eyed in the morning whilst her father would be silent and morose, his eyes avoiding hers as she ate her breakfast before school.

Then, after a year of endless fighting, he'd left again. This time, it was for good. There was no forwarding address and he never rang. It was as if he'd forgotten that he'd ever been a husband and a father.

Kay, who already spent most of the time with her head in a book, had retreated into her fictional world like never before and had never really surfaced since. For her, reality was only made bearable by the existence of novels and her

beloved stories and sketches had got her through the traumas of a dozen father-figures, the trials of her own string of disastrous relationships, and the boredom of her job at Barnum and Mason. It had been the one constant of her life.

The strangest thing was that Kay had never let the experience of her parents' marriage affect her own views of relationships. She still believed in the possibility of love and that your soul mate was out there just waiting to be found. Maybe it was a notion she'd picked up from the books she read but she truly believed it. She looked at her collection of illustrations now. It had been sitting on her desk for weeks and she didn't quite know what to do with it next. She supposed she should send it to a publisher but what if they rejected it? What if all her hopes and dreams of seeing it in print came to nothing? Leaving it sitting on the desk might not result in it seeing the light of day but at least her dreams remained intact that way.

The Illustrated Darcy she called it because, although she'd made sketches and paintings of all the main characters and major scenes, the emphasis remained on Darcy. He was a hero for all time, wasn't he? Kay often wondered if Jane Austen had known that when she'd created him. Had she known the power of her very special hero? Had her sister, Cassandra, said, 'Wow, Jane! You've done it! There will never be another hero to match this one!'

Kay often wondered what it was about Mr Darcy that fed the female imagination so much. There was something so special about Austen's heroes that had never been matched in other fiction. Kay had once – very briefly – gone through a Brontë phase but pulling your lover's hair out and then digging up their grave wasn't really the mark of

a hero, was it? You wouldn't get Mr Darcy prowling around graveyards in the middle of the night.

Ah, could there ever be a hero to match Fitzwilliam? she wondered.

Getting out of bed, Kay grabbed a sheet of paper and sketched a few lines, desperately trying to recall the man from her dreams. It was always the face that eluded her. She could capture the stride, the movement of the man, and the clothes were always easy to remember but the face always seemed to hover on the outskirts of her consciousness. What did the perfect hero look like?

She sketched on, covering sheet after sheet, her stomach rumbling in a bid to be fed but nothing was more important than her drawing. Food could wait, drink could wait but art could never wait.

It was then that the telephone rang. Why did the telephone always ring when one was in the middle of something very important? Kay dropped her pen and sighed.

'Hello?' she said.

She didn't recognise the voice on the other end but, as soon as the woman said where she was calling from, Kay knew that it wasn't good news.

Peggy Sullivan had died.

* * *

Denis Frobisher's face was, perhaps, the longest face Kay had ever seen. It reminded her of a basset hound but he had a warm smile that made his eyes twinkle and she understood why Peggy had chosen him as her solicitor.

'But I don't understand,' Kay told him. 'She left me *everything*?'

Mr Frobisher nodded. 'It's very simple. There were no siblings, no children. Nobody. Just you, Miss Ashton.'

'But I only knew her a short time.'

'Then you obviously made an impression.'

Kay shook her head. 'This is crazy.'

'Her husband left her very comfortably off. Of course, the nursing home fees made their dent over the years but she still left a sizeable chunk.'

'Yes,' Kay said. It was all she could say.

And then something occurred to her. Their last conversation. What was it she'd said to Peggy when they were talking about dreams for the future?

'If only it was that simple,' Kay said.

'I beg your pardon?' Mr Frobisher said.

'I made this happen,' Kay said, her voice quavering. 'I wished things were simple and that dreams could come true and now Peggy's dead. I didn't mean to wish her dead! Oh, dear!'

'Miss Ashton!' Mr Frobisher said. 'You're upsetting yourself unnecessarily. Mrs Sullivan was an elderly woman who'd been seriously ill for many years. It was her time. You didn't bring this about, I can assure you.' He pushed a box of tissues towards her and she took one and dabbed her eyes.

'Oh, Peggy!' she said. 'I never expected this. I never imagined . . .'

'Of course you didn't,' Mr Frobisher said.

They sat quietly for a moment whilst Kay recovered her composure.

'There's a letter too,' Mr Frobisher said gently. 'One of the nurses at the home wrote it for Peggy but she managed to sign it herself.' He handed her the white envelope and,

with shaking hands, Kay opened it and took out the folded sheet of paper.

My dearest Kay, I hope this doesn't come as too much of a shock to you but I've left you a little bit of money.
Kay stifled the urge to laugh at the understatement.

You see, I don't have anyone close to me and, unlike most elderly ladies, I don't have an affinity to cats so I won't be leaving my worldly goods to any rescue centres.

I know your mother didn't have much to leave you and I know you've got a whopping mortgage and an unfulfilled dream. Well, my dear, if you use my money wisely, you can fulfil that dream right now and I will feel that I am living on through you. Is that silly of me?

I'm going to miss you, dear Kay. I always loved your visits and thank you so much for the wonderful hours of reading. I hadn't read Jane Austen for years but your beautiful voice brought all those stories back to life for me again and for that I am truly grateful.

So this is your chance, isn't it? Do something amazing!
Your friend,
Peggy.

Kay looked at the scribbled signature in blue ink. It looked more like 'Piggy' really and Kay could imagine Peggy's arthritic hand skating over the paper, determined to leave its mark, and the image brought more tears to Kay's eyes.

'So you see,' Mr Frobisher began, 'she wanted you to have everything. We've been in the process of sorting things out. The house was being rented for the past few years – that's what brought in most of the income to pay the nursing home – but the tenant has gone now so the house is yours.'

Kay nodded, desperately trying to follow everything.

'Mrs Sullivan thought you'd want to sell it straightaway.' He paused, waiting for her reply. 'But you probably want to think about things for a while,' he added.

'Yes,' Kay said. 'Think.'

'And you have my number. I'm here if you have any questions.'

'Questions.' Kay nodded. 'Thank you,' she said. 'You've been very kind.'

'Not at all,' Mr Frobisher said. 'Simply doing my job and carrying out the wishes of my client.' He stood up to escort Kay to the door. 'Dear Mrs Sullivan,' he said. 'How she will be missed.'

Kay nodded as she stood up and she felt her eyes vibrating with tears again. She turned back round to the desk and took another tissue from the box – just to be on the safe side.

Chapter Two

Kay sat at her desk in the office at Barnum and Mason. It had been three months since Peggy's funeral and Kay still couldn't believe that her dear friend had gone and that she could no longer visit her at the nursing home, a pile of books in her bag ready for reading.

Peggy's funeral had taken place in the same church as that of Kay's mother on a May morning that was sunny but bitterly cold. The snow had melted and everything had seemed wonderfully green but there'd been nothing to rejoice about that day. Kay had sat shivering in the same pew that she'd occupied only a few sad weeks before, watching the service through a veil of tears.

And now here she was sitting in the office as if nothing had happened. How callous time was, she thought. It hadn't stopped to mourn the passing of a dear friend but had marched onwards and had dragged Kay along for the ride.

She hadn't sketched for weeks now, choosing to read instead. There'd been the usual diet of Jane Austen with Kay choosing *Northanger Abbey* in the hopes that Catherine and Tilney's company would cheer her up. She'd also been trying to find out more about preparing

her illustrations for publication and had raided the local library. There was one very useful book full of tips for the first-timer and she'd sneaked it into work in the hope that she'd be able to photocopy some of the pages in a quiet moment.

'Which is possibly now,' she said to herself, looking around the office. It was a small open-plan office with four desks occupied by her colleagues. Paul and Marcus were out at lunch and Janice was on the phone laughing. It obviously wasn't a work-related call; none of the business at the solicitors was stuff that provoked laughter.

Opening her bag, she took out the book and walked over to the communal photocopier. She only hoped she could get the pages copied before the silly old machine pulled a paper-jam stunt.

She was halfway through her copying when her phone went. Janice was still laughing into her own phone so Kay had no choice but to return to her desk to answer it.

She was just replacing the receiver when Roger Barnum walked into the office brandishing a large document that looked as if it had an appointment with the photocopier.

Kay watched in horror, unable to make a move in time to rescue her book, watching as Mr Barnum lifted the lid of the photocopier.

'Whose is this?' he barked, holding the book up and grimacing at it as if it might be infected. '*Painting for Pleasure and Profit*.'

Kay, blushing from head to foot, stood up to claim the book. 'It's mine, Mr Barnum.'

'And what's it doing on the photocopier?' he asked.

Kay wanted to groan at the ridiculous question but she didn't. She simply took it from him and mumbled an apology.

Mr Barnum sniffed. 'I'd like to have a quiet word with you in my office, Miss Ashton,' he said.

Kay nodded and followed him through.

'Close the door and sit down,' he said.

Kay did as she was asked.

Mr Barnum walked round his desk and sat down on an expensive-looking chair. It wasn't threadbare like the office chair Kay had.

'If you don't mind me saying,' Mr Barnum began, 'your mind hasn't really been on your work lately, has it?'

'Well, no,' Kay said. 'My mother died recently and I've just lost a dear friend too.'

'Ah, yes. Well, one has to get over these things – move on and all that.'

Kay blinked hard. Had she just heard him right?

'People come and people go. It's a sad fact of life and we have to get on with it.'

'Right,' Kay said. 'I'll try to remember that.'

'And this drawing of yours,' he continued, 'you mustn't bring it into the office with you. I think we had an incident before, didn't we? Something concerning that Mr Darcy. For the life of me, I can't see what it is you women find so fascinating.'

Kay didn't say anything.

'It's interfering. You must keep these things separate. Quite separate. Work is work. Play is play.'

'But it isn't play, Mr Barnum. It's my passion.'

Mr Barnum's eyes widened in shock at the word 'passion' as if it might leap across the table and do him some sort of mischief.

'In fact,' Kay said, enjoying having provoked such a response, 'I've been thinking of *playing* a bit more. You see,

I've just had a phone call and it seems I've got some money coming my way very soon. I was left a property recently and it's just sold so I'll be moving.'

'Moving?' Mr Barnum said.

'Yes. To the sea. I've always wanted to live by the sea. It's another of my passions. So you'd better accept this as my notice. I'll put it in writing, of course, during my lunch break – which is now, I believe.' She stood up and smiled at Mr Barnum. She was feeling generous with her smiles now that she knew she was leaving.

Arriving home that night, she flopped on to her sofa, kicking off her shoes and sighing. She felt exhausted. Decision-making was a tiring business, she decided, but it was a happy tired she was feeling. She'd handed in her notice! She smiled as she remembered the look on Roger Barnum's face. It was the first time he'd actually looked at Kay – *really* looked at her. Usually, his eyes would just sweep over her as he handed her a pile of paperwork.

Perhaps, she thought, it was also the first time she'd ever really looked at herself. She was thirty-one now. She knew that wasn't exactly past it by modern standards, but she wasn't exactly a spring chicken either. Enough years had been wasted. In Jane Austen's time, thirty-one would have been a very dangerous age for a woman. She would have been rapidly hurtling towards spinsterhood.

Life had to be grasped and what better time than now? What was it Peggy had said? *Do something amazing!*

'I will!' Kay said. 'I owe it to you, Peggy.'

Getting up from the sofa to pour herself a glass of wine, Kay still couldn't comprehend everything that had happened to her over the past few months. It was still impossible to

believe that she was a relatively wealthy woman. She'd never had so much money and she was determined to use it to its best advantage.

She was going to move to the sea, that much was certain and, as a Jane Austen fan who was currently reading *Persuasion* for the seventh time, it seemed only right that she should focus her search on Lyme Regis. She'd already Googled it a dozen times, gazing longingly at the images that greeted her. The picturesque fishermen's cottages, the high street that sloped down to the perfect blue sea and the great grey mass of the Cobb all seemed to speak to her.

Hey there, Kay! What are you waiting for? Come on down. You know you want to!

Having grown up in land-locked Hertfordshire, Kay had always wondered what it would be like to live by the sea. For a moment, she remembered a family holiday in North Norfolk. Other than two glorious sun-drenched days, the weather had been dreadful and Kay had had to spend most of the time trapped in the tiny chalet with her mum and dad who'd done nothing but row. Kay had done her best to shut herself away with an armful of second-hands books she'd found in a nearby junk shop. Reading about dashing highwaymen and handsome cavaliers had helped enormously but it was still a wonder that the whole experience hadn't put her off the idea of living by the sea for good

But what exactly was she going to do in Lyme Regis? Was she going to buy a tiny cottage as cheaply as possible and live off the rest of the money whilst she hid herself away with her paintings and waited for publication? She'd never been a full-time artist and she had to admit that the thought of it panicked her. What if she wasn't good enough? What if she spent years striving for publication whilst eating

into the money that Peggy had left her? She was a practical girl and the thought of running out of money was terrifying. She might have hundreds of thousands in her name but she also had a lot of life to lead and she was planning on living to a ripe old age. Besides, she'd always worked. Perhaps her job at Barnum and Mason hadn't been the best in the world but she'd been proud to make her own way and pay her own bills. But what could she do in a house by the sea in Lyme Regis?

'There's only one way to find out,' she said.

It had been decided that Kay could take the annual leave that was owed to her in lieu of her notice and that meant that she could get down to Lyme Regis this very weekend and not have to worry about being back home for work on Monday.

Finishing her glass of wine, she went upstairs to start packing her suitcase and she couldn't help feeling that Peggy – wherever she might be – was smiling down at her in approval.