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Not Without You

Written by Harriet Evans

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Harriet Evans

Not Without You



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For Cora

I felt as though I had returned from far, far away.

David Niven, *Bring on the Empty Horses*

PROLOGUE

A BRIGHT SPRING day, sunshine splashing yellow through the new leaves. Two little girls stand on the banks of the swollen stream, which rushes loudly past their small feet.

'Come on,' says the first. 'There's magic coins in there. Gold coins, from the elves. I can see them glinting. Can't you?' She pushes the short sleeves of her lawn dress up above her shoulders; a determined imitation of the men they see in the fields beyond, backs curved over the soil. Her brown hair bobs about her head, sun darting through the bouncing curls. She grins. 'It'll be fun. Don't listen to *them*.'

The second one hesitates. She always hesitates. 'I don't know, Rose,' she says. 'They said it's dangerous. All that rain . . . Father said you weren't to do it again. He said you'd be sent away if—'

'You believe them, don't you.' Rose crosses her arms. 'I'm not doing all those things they say I do. They're making it up. I'm *not* bad.'

'I know you're not.' The younger one mollifies her sister.

'I didn't mean to break the jug. Something happened to me, everything went black, and I didn't know where I was.' She bites her lip, trying not to cry. 'I don't like it. I want Mother and she tells me I'm bad when I do.'

A tear rolls through the brown film of dust on her cheek. They're both silent, under the old willow tree. Eve speaks first.

She points at the gold coins, swelling and then vanishing in the water's rush.

'Come on, let's try to get them, then.'

'Really?' Rose's face brightens.

'I'll do it if you do.' She always regrets saying that.

Rose immediately clambers in. 'I'll go first.'

Eve watches her doubtfully. 'It's awfully strong. You won't get swept away?'

'I told you, it's fine. Thomas does it all the time,' Rose says, leaning over, confident again now, and Eve relaxes. Rose is right, of course. She's always right. 'There it is. I'm sure it's gold! I'm sure the elves were here – their kingdom is right under the ground, ancient noble soil!' She claps her hands. 'Golly! Imagine if it is! I told you, little Eve. You mustn't worry – they won't send me away. I'm not going anywhere.'

This is the last image of her that Eve remembers. Standing like a miniature pirate, legs planted firmly in the stream. 'We'll always be together. I'm going to be a famous explorer. You'll be a famous actress. We'll do different things for a couple of weeks at a time. I'll see some polar bears and . . . pharaohs. And you'll do plays and dine with Ivor Novello. Then we'll meet up in New York, under the King Kong building. You'll have that delicious robe on, the one Vivien Leigh was wearing in *Dark Journey*. 'Member?'

Eve nods. She joins in the game, smiling. 'Oh . . . yes. We'll stay in beautiful hotels and we'll drink milk stout.' This was a great obsession of theirs, after Cook had told them it was her favourite tipple. But Cook had left, like so many of the servants lately. Gone in the night, shouting, 'I'll not stay here with that thing in the house!'

Rose nods. 'We'll always be together, Eve, like I say, 'cause I'm not going anywhere, not without you.'

And she screamed, then jerked forward. I can still see it, as if something else, an evil spirit maybe, was knocking her over from behind.

* * *

Should I have stayed? Or gone for help and left her prostrate in the water, eyes wide open, small body rigid? I still don't know to this day if I did the right thing. I ran to the house, as fast as my legs would carry me.

But it was all over by the time they came back, by the time the doctor arrived. I stayed in the kitchen, with Mother; they wouldn't let me go out there again, and when they finally returned it was much later. Too late. You see, Rose was gone. My beautiful sister was dead, and it was my fault. I should have stayed with her. *Not without you,* she'd said. And I let her down.

That was my first mistake, though I couldn't be blamed for that, as everyone told me. I was only six. It was many, many years ago. But I know what I did was wrong. I left her when she needed me. I carried that mistake with me, maybe for too long. And when someone showed me a way out, a new life, I took it.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Los Angeles, 2012

> *'And . . . coming up next . . . Sophie Leigh's diet secrets! How the British beauty stays slim, and the answer is . . . you won't believe it! Chewing cardboard! I know, these stars are crazy, but that's Hollywood for you. That's all when we come back . . .'*

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL May morning. We're on the 101, on our way into Beverly Hills. I'm heading into my agent's office and I feel like crap. I'm super late, too. I'm always late, but when your most recent picture had an opening weekend of $23 million it doesn't matter. I could turn up at Artie's mom's funeral and demand to have a meeting and he'd clear the synagogue and thank me for coming.

I flip the TV off and chuck the remote across the car, out of temptation's reach. There was a time when a ten-second trail like that would have sent me into a tailspin. *They're saying I chew cardboard? But it's bullshit! People'll believe it, and then they'll . . . they'll . . .* Now I just shrug. You have to. I've never chewed cardboard in my life, unless you count my performance in that action movie. It's a slow news day. Sometimes I think they stick a pin in a copy of *People* magazine to choose their next victim and then make something up.

When you've been famous for a while, you stop reacting to

stuff like this. It just becomes part of life. Not your life, but the life you wake up to and realise you're living. People filming you on a phone when you're washing your hands in the Ladies' room. Girls from school who you don't remember selling your class photo to a tabloid. Being offered $5 million to sleep with a Saudi prince. Working with stars who won't ever take their sunglasses off, 'cause they think you're stealing their soul if you see their eyes. Sounds unbelievable, right? But there's been some days when I almost know what they mean. I know why some of them go bat-shit crazy, join cults, wear fake pregnancy bellies, marry complete strangers. They're only trying to distract themselves from how totally nuts being famous is. Because that's what fame is actually about, these days. Not private jets, diamond tiaras, mansions and free clothes, handbags, shoes. Fame is actually about how you stay sane. How you don't lose your mind.

I know I'm lucky. It could have been any one of hundreds of hopeful English girls from small towns with pushy mums who curled their hair and shoved them into audition rooms, but it was me, and I still don't quite know why. All I know is, I love films, always have done, ever since I was little. Lights down, trailers on, credits rolling; I knew all the special idents the studios use to open a movie by the time I was eight. My favourite was always Columbia – the toga lady holding the glowing torch like the sun. And I know I'm good at what I do: I make movies for people to sit back and smile at on a Friday night with their best friend and their popcorn, watching while Sophie Leigh gets into another crazy situation. OK, it's not *Citizen Kane*, but if it's a bit of fun and you could stand to watch it again, is there anything wrong with that?

Lately I've been wondering though: maybe there is. Maybe it's all wrong. The trouble is, I can't work out how it all got like that. Or what I should do about it. In Hollywood, you're either a success or you're a failure. There's no in-between.

The freeway is crowded, and as we slow down to turn off I look up and there I am, right by the Staples Center on a billboard the size of your house. I should be used to it but

still, after six years at the top, it's weird. Me, doing my poster smile: cute chipmunk cheeks, big dark eyes peeking out from under the heavy trademark bangs, just the right amount of cleavage so the guys notice and don't mind seeing the film. I'm holding out a ringless hand, smiling at you. I'm cute and friendly.

Two years of dating. She's thinking rocks.
No, not those ones, fellas . . .
SOPHIE LEIGH IS
THE GIRLFRIEND
May 2012

My phone rings, and I pick it up, gingerly, rubbing my eyes. 'Hi, Tina,' I say.

'You're OK?' Tina asks anxiously. 'Did the car come for you?'

'Sure,' I say.

'The clothes were OK? Did you want anything else?'

Do I want anything else? The late-morning sun flashes in reflected rays through the windows; I jam my sunglasses on and sink lower against the leather seats, smiling at the memory of him asking the very same question, then taking my clothes off piece by piece, getting the camera out, and what we did afterwards. Oh, it's probably insane of me, but . . . wow. He knows what he's doing. I'm not some idiot who lets herself be filmed by a douche-bag who puts it on the Internet. This guy is a pro, in *many many ways*.

'I'm good. Thanks for arranging it all.'

'No problem.' Tina is the most efficient assistant on the planet. She looks worried all the time, but I don't think she actually cares where I was last night. 'There's a couple things. OK?'

'Go ahead.' I'm staring out the window, trying not to think about last night, smiling and biting my lip because . . . well, I'm exhausted, that kind of up-all-night skanky, hungry, and a little bit hungover exhausted. And I can't stop smiling.

'So . . .' Tina's voice goes into her list-recital monotone. 'The *People* interview is tomorrow. They'll come by the house. Ashley will arrive at eight a.m. Belle is doing your make-up frosty pink and mushroom – she says the vibe is Madonna eighties glamour meets environmental themes.' Tina takes a breath. 'DeShantay wants to drop off some more outfits for the Up! Kidz Challenge Awards. She has a dress from McQueen and she says to tell you you're gonna love it. It's cerise, has cap sleeves and it's—'

'I don't want to sweat,' I say. 'Tell her no sleeves.'

'DeShantay says it won't be a problem.'

'I'm not—' I begin, then I stop, as I can hear myself sounding like a bit of a tool. 'Never mind. That's great. Anything else?'

'Tommy's coming over later this week to talk through endorsements. And he's gotten *Us Weekly* to use some new shots of you doing yoga on the beach. And the shots of you grocery shopping are being run again, in *In Touch*. And *TMZ* want the ones of you getting the manicure, only they need to reshoot—'

'OK, OK,' I say, trying not to feel irritated, because it's so fake, when you say it out loud, but it's true, and everyone does it. You can so tell when someone doesn't want their photo taken and when they do, and those ones of me pushing my trolley through the Malibu Country Mart wearing the new Marc Jacobs sandals and a Victoria Beckham shift, holding up some apples and laughing with a girlfriend, came out the same week as *The Girlfriend* and I'm telling you: it's part of the reason that film has done so well. It's all total bullshit though. The clothes were on loan, and the friend was Tina. My assistant. And I don't go food shopping; I've got a housekeeper. Be honest. If you had someone to do all that for you, would you still go pushing a trolley round the supermarket? *Exactly*. Today stars have to look like normal, approachable people. Fifty years ago, it was the other way round. My favourite actress is Eve Noel; I've seen all her movies a million times, and *A Girl Named Rose* is my favourite film of all time, without a doubt. You didn't have photos of Eve Noel in some 1950s

Formica store buying her groceries in a dress Givenchy loaned her. Oh, no. She was a goddess, remote, beautiful, untouchable. I'm America's English sweetheart. Pay $3.99 for a weekly magazine and you can see my nipples in a T-shirt doing the sun salute on Malibu beach.

Another thing: I starved myself for three days to fit into that fucking Victoria Beckham dress. That girl sure loves the skinny.

We're off the highway, gliding down the wide boulevards of Beverly Hills, flanked on either side by vast mansions: old-looking French chateaux wedged right next to glass-and-chrome cubes next to English Gothic castles, Spanish haciendas, and the rest. My first trip here with my best friend Donna, both aged nineteen, driving round LA in a brown Honda Civic, these houses blew our minds – they looked like Toytown. It's funny how things change. Now they seem normal. I know a couple of people who live in them, and I haven't seen Donna in nearly seven years. Where is she now? Still living in Shamley, last time I Googled her.

We're coming up to Wilshire and I need to check my make-up. 'I'll see you later,' I tell Tina. 'Thanks again.'

'Oh – one more thing. I'm sorry, Sophie. Your mom called again.' I stiffen instinctively. 'She says you have to call her back.' Tina clears her throat. 'She says Deena's coming to stay with you. Tonight.'

The compact mirror drops to the floor.

'Deena? She can't just— Tell her she can't.'

Tina's voice is apologetic. 'Your mom said she has roaches and damp and it needs to be sprayed and . . . She's got nowhere to go.'

'I don't care. Deena is not bloody staying. Why's she getting Mum to phone up and do her dirty work for her anyway? No. No way.'

My head feels like it's in a vice. It always aches when I don't eat: I'm trying to lose ten pounds before *The Bachelorette Party* starts shooting.

'Her cell is broken. That's why. So – uh – OK.' Tina's tone

conveys it all. She keeps me on the straight and narrow, I sometimes think. I'd be a Grade A egomaniac otherwise.

I clear my throat and growl. 'Look. I'll try and call Mum and put her off. Don't worry about it. Listen though, if Deena turns up . . .' Then I run out of steam. 'Watch her. Make sure she doesn't steal anything again.'

'Sure, Sophie,' says Tina, and I end the call with a sigh, trying not to frown. There are wrinkles at the corners of my eyes and lines between my eyebrows; I've noticed them lately. The Sophie Leigh on the poster doesn't frown. She doesn't have wrinkles. She's twenty-eight, she's happy all the time, and she knows how great her life is. That's not true. I'm thirty, and I keep thinking I'm going to get found out.