

Friends Like Us

Caitlin Davies

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Chapter One

BEL

Shit. It's happening again. Why is it happening again? It's been ages since I did this, why is it starting again? I've put the film in the side pocket of my suitcase, I've seen my fingers zip it shut, I know it's in there, safe. But I have to check it again, I have to make sure, I have to feel the shape of the hard black canister as it bulges against the pocket.

At least I'm alone; at least there's no one in the house but me. The silence is startling. When I go into Ashley's room I can't even hear the sound of my own bare feet on the tiled floor. Ashley's got the best bedroom, but then she would; it's white and cool and uncluttered and smells of vanilla, just like her. The cover on her bed is so smooth it's like she never even slept here last night. There's a small wooden table with a mirror on top and she's arranged all her creams and potions in a row. She's left her bracelets here as well, in a pile of silver and gold.

I walk through the room and step onto the balcony. Outside, down in the garden, the fig trees aren't moving. The almond trees are still. All around the trees are square little stones like crumbly biscuits. In the mornings I water the trees with a hosepipe like a white snake, but it's late afternoon now and they are thirsty. I can hear the air buzzing. Down by the cliffs the dragonflies are mating.

Did I shut the door downstairs? If I shut it then I'll be able to hear Ashley coming back. Why isn't she back yet? The others will be back soon too; it'll only take them twenty minutes to get up the cliff. I stood there, on the top of the cliff, just ten minutes ago and I felt on top of the world.

I'm sure I shut the door; I can see myself closing it tight, see the way the handle went down in my hand. But what if I didn't? What if I didn't shut it properly enough? And what if the film's not there, safe in the side pocket of my suitcase? Sometimes I don't know how to know whether I know something or not.

I go back into my room and put my suitcase, my brother Joe's cast-off, on the bed and unzip the side pocket. It's like a bag, this pocket, like Mum's old string shopping bag. I check the film again, feel the canister. I zip the pocket shut and pat it. Then I pat it twice more to make it three. Three used to be one of my numbers. Three still feels safe.

I wish I'd never taken the picture. I just came up to finish the film because I was bored of taking pictures on the beach: Loreen holding half a watermelon on her head so the pips got caught in her hair, Karen pulling that face where she sucks in half her mouth. And Ashley had gone; she'd disappeared with the German boys from the bar. It's always the same when we meet boys. Loreen sees them first, decides in an instant which one she fancies, which one she'll marry and have kids with, but the boys always radiate to Ashley, even though out of all of us she's already got a boyfriend. And she's slept with him, Loreen told me.

'Why are you going back?' Loreen asked. 'Why don't you stay with us?' She was sitting on a towel in her new Top Shop bikini, peeling back the wrapper on a Cornetto, licking at the swirly jam topping. We were in the same spot we'd been going down to every morning. The beach is long and wide and at one end it weaves around a little peninsula, the sand disappearing between hunks of jagged rock and then sprinkling out again. The spot we like is up against the cliff which has pitted holes like open mouths; it's where the rocks form a pool and the water is warmer.

‘I’m just going back to the house,’ I told Loreen, ‘that’s all.’ But Loreen can never understand why I would want to be alone, because she doesn’t even like going to the loo on her own. At school she still moves her desk so it’s next to mine. When we walk down the street she links arms. When I stay the night she squishes the beds together so we can talk without raising our voices and waking her mum.

‘Can’t you wait for us?’ Karen asked, and she looked at me as if I was up to something. She was sitting in front of Loreen, cross-legged on the sand. She put down her book. Everywhere she goes she reads; it doesn’t matter what’s going on around her she can still read. Only she doesn’t read a book, she eats it. She opens it up and she holds it right up near her face and she stays like that, turning the pages, until she’s full and the book eaten. That’s why she’s so good at school. That’s why I get her to do my English homework.

‘No,’ I told Karen. ‘I’m going to go up and finish my film. I’ll see you back at the house.’ Sometimes even when I’m settled, even when I’m happy with what I’m doing, then I just have the urge to move on. I picked up my rucksack, my brother Joe’s old rucksack, and I thought I was putting it on carefully but Karen heard the clang as I lifted it onto my back.

‘You took that bottle!’

‘What bottle?’ asked Loreen, scrunching up the wrapper of her Cornetto.

‘The one at the bar,’ said Karen. ‘The one that was on the table where the German boys were.’

I laughed, caught out.

‘Did you pay for it?’ Karen asked.

I shrugged. If someone was stupid enough to leave a bottle of vodka on a table then what was I going to do?

‘They’ll have seen you,’ warned Karen, putting her book face-down on the sand. Her hair was matted; she’d only just been swimming, going far out as she always does until Loreen worries she won’t get back.

‘What’s it about?’ I asked, nodding at the book, distracting her from the fact I stole the bottle because I knew she was going to tell me off.

‘Well,’ said Karen, ‘it’s about this American bloke, Nick, who rents a house in Long Island where all these really rich people live. His neighbour is called Gatsby ...’

‘I’ve heard of him,’ said Loreen. ‘Didn’t we do that book in English?’

‘No,’ said Karen. ‘We were going to but we never did.’ Her eyes were bright now and she was holding the book in both hands because Karen wants to go and live in America, that’s why she’s always reading American books, even when we don’t have to. ‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘Gatsby lives in this mansion and has these wild parties with all these celebrated people ...’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Loreen.

‘That’s what he calls them,’ said Karen. ‘Celebrated people, you know, famous. And everyone gossips about Gatsby because they don’t know who he really is or how he made all his money. Nick, his neighbour, has this cousin, Daisy, who’s married. One day Nick, he’s the one telling the story, gets an invitation to one of the parties and it turns out Gatsby knew Daisy before and has never stopped loving her and all these parties are really just a way to impress her ...’

‘Aah,’ said Loreen, because she’s soppy.

‘So he wants Nick to help arrange a reunion with Daisy. And that’s as far as I’ve got.’

‘Sounds boring,’ I said. I don’t like the books Karen likes, I like detective books. I like books where you have to find out who did it.

‘Not really,’ said Karen. ‘Because it’s about how messed up these rich people are and how everyone wants to know about Gatsby because he’s such a mystery figure.’

‘It still sounds boring.’

‘Well it’s not.’ Karen put the book down again but she was smiling because she doesn’t care whether or not someone likes something she likes. ‘And I still think you should take the bottle back.’ She said it like it was the right thing to do and that she knew I knew it was the right thing to do and once I thought about it I would admit this too. It’s the same way Mum talks. But it isn’t the way Loreen’s mum talks. If I could choose one of our mums I wouldn’t choose Karen’s because her mum never listens to her, and I wouldn’t choose Ashley’s because her mum is always in a panic. I would choose Loreen’s. I would swap my mum for Loreen’s mum Dudu any day. Loreen’s mum is always smiling and saying, ‘yes my dear’. Even when she’s telling Loreen off, she’s smiling. Loreen’s mum talks about ‘where I come from in Africa’ and ‘people back home’ and she makes me feel there is a bigger world than the one we’re in.

But if I had to choose one of our fathers I don’t know who I’d choose. Loreen’s father died when she was a baby, Karen’s father is too grumpy, and Ashley’s father gives me the creeps.

I stood there, still with the rucksack on my back, while Loreen got a magazine out of her beach bag. ‘Stay with us and let’s read this,’ she said, and I could see she had a copy of *My Guy*. Loreen still likes that crap. She and Karen like answering all the questionnaires and reading the problem pages, like they’ve been doing since they were thirteen. ‘Listen to this!’ laughed Loreen. ‘I used to masturbate when I was younger and now the lips around my vagina are very swollen and stick out. I’m worried I’ll never be able to have sex properly.’

‘Go on,’ said Karen, frowning.

‘OK, at a disco I met this fella and we had a great evening together and I didn’t let him go any further than putting his arm around me. But next day I heard some other boys saying he was only after what he could get. Should I see him again?’ Loreen looked up, to see what me and Karen thought about this, and then she saw Ashley. ‘Look, she’s with the dark-haired one.’

We all looked down the beach, past the bar where we’d been sitting earlier. The bar is like a shack, its walls are wooden and painted green. Half is built over the beach; the rest is built on stone. Inside there are octopuses turned inside out hanging from the ceiling, and Loreen says that’s why she’s going to become a vegetarian.

Along the beach I saw the man who comes every day to sell doughnuts from a wicker basket. I saw him stop and bend down on the sand by a family with three small children, and I could see him open the basket and take out the doughnuts, all filled with cream. And I could see Ashley in her cut-off jeans and red and white bikini top walking slowly past the doughnut man, along the shoreline with three boys. Two were behind her and the third, the dark-haired boy wearing blue and white Bermuda shorts, was right next to her. Ashley’s legs, against the bleached denim of her jeans, shone. She waved; she could see us watching her. Her yellow hair was wet and slick and reached her shoulders.

‘She looks like the girl in the Tampax advert,’ said Loreen, enviously.

The tide was coming in. In the morning I'd walked around the rock pools and got some great reflections. Now the pools were submerged and gone. A Portuguese family next to us started to pack up: a yellow umbrella with white frills round the edge, a hamper, a big red Thermos, towels with pictures of leaping dolphins, two inflatable rings, one with the head of a duck. Along the shoreline people's bodies were becoming shadows in the afternoon light, almost as black as the hunk of rock that stood alone in the water, separate from the cliff and the beach and everything else.

I watched Ashley and I watched the sudden explosions of silver over the sea and saw it was sparkling. The night before I'd come down when the sand was grey and cold and smooth like a London pavement after rain, and the sea was dark like metal, and I'd watched the fishing boats go out. I'd watched until the swinging lights of the boats became almost too small to see.

'Has she got a love bite?' Loreen said, putting on a t-shirt before the boys reached us. 'Oh my God, I think she's got a love bite!'

'Gross,' said Karen. 'How can you see from here?'

'What if Steve sees it?' Loreen asked excitedly. 'Oh my God, what would he say if Ashley came back from Portugal with a love bite? Would we tell him?'

Karen and me looked at each other; we couldn't believe Ashley was serious about Steve anyway. She only likes him because he's eighteen and in a band. She met him outside the school gates; he's got black spiky hair and skinny legs and plays the drums. His band is crap.

Loreen stood up and started putting on her shorts. 'He's got very close-together eyes,' she said, watching the dark-haired boy. 'And very thin lips.'

'And that's bad?' asked Karen.

'Eyes that are close together aren't good,' said Loreen, and I knew she'd got this from one of her magazines. 'It means he's mean and you can't trust him.' But I knew she was only saying this about the dark-haired boy because that was the one she'd fancied. He was the one I had liked as well, even though I knew there was no point.

'I'm going to the bar,' Karen said. She pulled a dress over her head and got up.

'Why?' I asked.

'That's for me to know and you to find out.'

Loreen sighed and settled herself on her towel with *My Guy*.

'Where did you go with them?' I asked Ashley when she'd come back and the boys had gone.

She looked up; she was busy spreading sun cream along her legs, smoothing it in from her ankles up to her thighs. 'Just having a walk,' she said, and she threw down the sun cream, lay back on the sand, put on her sunglasses, and just like that she looked glamorous.

'Just having a walk, oh yeah!' said Loreen.

'What, with all three of them?' I asked.

'You could have come,' Ashley said.

I couldn't see her face. I was sitting down by her legs and I could just see the skin of her stomach golden from the sun.

'What?' She put her head up; she could tell Loreen and me were staring at her. 'What? You think I got off

off with one of them?’ Ashley did that thing where her cheeks tighten and her eyes go narrow and she looks beautiful and scary at the same time. ‘Oh come on! Are you saying I got off with one of them?’

‘Maybe,’ Loreen giggled. She took a battered white paper bag of sweets out of her beach bag and offered them around. ‘Mmm, lemon bon bons,’ she said, ‘mmm mmmm mmmm. Who wants the pear drops?’

‘So you think I’m going to cheat on Steve?’ asked Ashley. ‘Is that what you think?’

I looked at Ashley. I couldn’t see any sign of a love bite; Loreen was making it up.

‘Because I wouldn’t,’ said Ashley. ‘I wouldn’t cheat on Steve because it would be morally wrong.’

I laughed. Only Ashley would use a word like morally. If Ashley says something is wrong then we don’t do it, and if Ashley agrees to something, we do it, even if other people would say it was wrong, like nicking earrings from Top Shop. Like putting a pair of Top Shop trousers over our own and running off with them. That was what we’d done the Saturday before we left, the four of us standing on the escalator into Top Shop on Oxford Street and seeing ourselves all glittery in the mirrors.

‘Would you cheat on someone? Would you?’ Ashley sat up properly now, brushing sand off her legs. ‘So are you saying you think it’s OK to cheat on someone?’

I was going to answer, when Loreen nudged me with her foot. Then I remembered about Ashley’s father. So now Ashley’s going to know what it’s like not to have a dad around, just like me and Loreen.

‘Anyway,’ said Ashley, ‘he fancies Loreen.’

‘Who does?’ asked Karen, coming back to where we sat.

‘You know the German boys?’ asked Ashley. ‘The dark-haired one fancies Loreen.’

‘Really?’ Loreen beamed and put a lemon bon bon in her mouth. ‘What did he say?’

‘He said,’ Ashley started picking sand out from between her toes. ‘He said, “mine’s the tall one”.’

‘How do you know he said that?’ asked Karen, sitting down.

‘I’ve been doing German for three years, haven’t I?’

‘But you’re taller than me,’ said Loreen.

‘Yes, but he didn’t mean me,’ said Ashley.

I looked at her. She was lying.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Loreen, and she started picking at the skin round her fingers, all excited. ‘Did he really say that? Oh my God, it’s the last day of the holiday! Do you know where they’re staying?’

It was good to leave the beach and get away and be alone. I spent ages on the way up the cliff trying to photograph two dragonflies. They were stuck together, mating, their green and yellow bodies trembling, wings spinning. I waited a long time to get them; I stood so still I could have been frozen. Then I kept on going up the cliff, staying as near the edge as I could get because I like the feeling that I could fall. I could see the sand down at the shore and the ripple of the crashing waves like the end of a long tiered skirt.

I went up, past purple flowers and huge cactuses, their pale green arms lined with little white spikes. The cactuses had faded brown markings where someone had written on them, slashes and lines like the hieroglyphics we did in history. Some of the cactuses had shot out trees of their own, long hard stems with little rigid clumps at the end. They were not pretty like the almond trees I could see further up at the top of the cliff. The almond trees looked as if they were dancing, their thin stems stretched out in crazy patterns

patterns heavy with nuts in soft green casings.

I went further and stopped under a fig tree, big like a bush with wide hairy leaves sheltering purple fruits as fat as little balloons, as if the tree had been busy blowing them up. I stopped to take a picture and to finish the film. I wanted to fill the viewfinder with the purple figs, to zoom in and focus right on the white sap that would spill out when I pulled a fig down from the branch. This is my very first SLR, it's a grown-up camera. Dad gave it to me for my birthday. He likes to give me something I can't say no to.

I turned away from the tree for a moment because I could see two people coming up from the beach, walking up the cliff path from the green-roofed bar. I swung the camera round, using it as a telescope, refocusing so I could see what they were doing. The girl was laughing. I couldn't hear her but I could see she was laughing from the way she moved her head. The boy put his arm round her shoulders. They disappeared for a moment, behind a wall of cliff, and when they appeared again they were much nearer. I could see the boy's black hair was wet and I could see the blue and white pattern on his Bermuda shorts. They stopped, leaning their bodies against the sandy wall of the cliff as if they were hiding from someone. Then all of a sudden the boy moved in front of the girl and slid a hand into the top of her bikini and I could see how white her skin was beneath. I watched, riveted, as the boy pushed his other hand between the girl's thighs and the girl put her head back and I saw it was Ashley.

I took a picture. I had the camera right there; it was what I was doing.

I thought about three weeks ago at school. Mr Jefferies had shown us a film of a man filming his own murder. The man was a cameraman; he was in a war zone, filming a war. But because he was behind a camera he thought he was protected. Until he filmed the bullet that shot him in the head.