



THE LAST PERSON WHO CALLED ME

SWEET PEA

ENDED UP DEAD



C. J. SKUSE

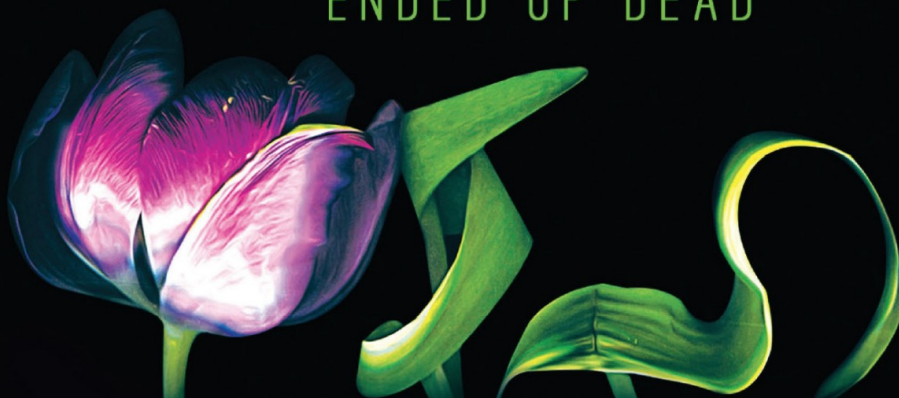


THE LAST PERSON WHO CALLED ME

SWEET

PEA

ENDED UP DEAD



C. J. SKUSE

The last person who called me Sweetpea ended up dead...

I haven't killed anyone for three years, and I thought that when it happened again I'd feel bad. Like an alcoholic taking a sip of whiskey. But no. Nothing. I had a blissful night's sleep. Didn't wake up at all. And for once, no bad dream either. This morning I feel balanced. Almost sane, for once.

Rhiannon is your average girl next door, settled with her boyfriend and little dog...but she's got a killer secret.

Although her childhood was haunted by a famous crime, Rhiannon's life is normal now that her celebrity has dwindled. By day, her job as an editorial assistant is demeaning and unsatisfying. By evening, she dutifully listens to her friends' plans for marriage and babies while secretly making a list.

A kill list.

From the man at the grocery checkout who always mishandles her apples, to the driver who cuts her off on her way to work, to the people who have it coming, Rhiannon is ready to get her revenge.

Because the girl everyone overlooks might be able to get away with murder...

PRAISE FOR SWEETPEA

“Bridget Jones meets *American Psycho*.”

—*Red*

“This darkly comic novel...has the potential to become a cult classic.”

—*Daily Mail*

“*Sweetpea* hits all the right buttons. A dark, twisted read about a female serial killer with dollops of humour, sarcasm and a lightweight approach...keeping you gripped and on the hook, both smiling and squirming.”

—Maxim Jakubowski, *LoveReading*

“You MUST read this book especially if you like your (anti) heroes dirty-mouthed, deadly and dark, dark dark. ADORED IT.”

—Fiona Cummins, author of *Rattle*

“This book is OUTRAGEOUS.”

—*Compulsive Readers*

“This anti-hero is psychotic without doubt, sexually voracious and incredibly funny.”

—*Shots* magazine

C.J. Skuse

Sweetpea



For my cousin, Emily Metcalf.

For the years I spent at your mansion while mine was being decorated.

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31st

- 1. Mrs Whittaker—neighbour, elderly, kleptomaniac*
- 2. Dillon on the checkout in Lidl—acne, wallet chain, who bangs my apples and is NEVER happy to help*
- 3. The suited man in the blue Qashqai who roars out of Sowerberry Road every morning—grey suit, aviator shades, Donald Trump tan*
- 4. Everyone I work with at the Gazette apart from Jeff*
- 5. Craig*

Well, my New Year has certainly gone off with a bang, I don't know about yours. I was in a foul mood to begin with, partly due to the usual Christmas-Is-Over-Shit-It's-Almost-Back-To-Work-Soon malaise and partly due to the discovery of a text on Craig's phone while he was in the shower that morning. The text said:

Hope ur thinking of me when ur soaping your cock—L.

Kiss. Kiss. Smiley face tongue emoji.

Oh, I thought. It's a fact then. He really *is* shagging her.

L. was Lana Rowntree—a kittenish twenty-four-year-old sales rep in my office who wore tight skirts and chunky platforms and swished her hair like she was in a twenty-four-hour L'Oréal advert. He'd met her at my work's Christmas piss-up on December 19—twelve days ago. The text confirmed the suspicions I'd had when I'd seen them together at the buffet. Chatting, laughing—her fingering the serviette stack, him spooning out stuffing balls onto their plates. A hair swish here, a stubble scratch there. She was looking at him all night. And he was just bathing in it.

Then came the increase in “little jobs” he had to do in town—a paint job here, a hardwood floor there, a partition wall that “proved trickier” than he’d estimated. Who has any of that done the week before Christmas? Then there were the out of character extended trips to the bathroom and two Christmas shopping trips (without me) that were just so damn productive he spent all afternoon maxing out his credit card. I’ve seen his statement—all my presents were purchased online.

So I’d been stewing about that all day, and the last thing I needed that New Year’s night was enforced fun with a bunch of gussied-up pisseheads. Unfortunately, that’s what I got.

My “friends” or the PICSOs—People I Can’t Shake Off—had arranged to meet at a restaurant on the harbour side called Cote de Sirène, dressed in Next Sale finery. Our New Year’s meal-slash-club crawl had been planned for months, initially to include husbands and partners, though one by one they had all mysteriously dropped out as it became a New Year’s meal-slash-*baby-shower*-slash-club crawl for Anni. Despite its snooty atmosphere, the restaurant is in the centre of town, so there’s always yellow streaks up the outside walls and a sick puddle on the doormat come Sunday morning. The theme inside is black and silver with an added soupçon of French—strings of garlic, frescos of Parisian walkways and waiters who glare at you like you’ve murdered their mothers.

The problem is, I need them. I need friends. I don’t want them; it’s not like they’re the Wilson to my skinny, toothless, homeward-bound Tom Hanks. But to keep up my façade of normality, they’re just necessary. To function properly in society, you *have* to have people around you. It’s annoying, like periods, but there is a point to it. Without friends, people start labelling you A Loner. They check your internet history or start smelling bomb-making chemicals in your garage.

But the PICSOs and I have little in common, this is true. I’m an editorial assistant at a local snooze paper, Imelda’s an estate agent, Anni is a nurse (currently on maternity leave), Lucille works in a bank, her sister Cleo is a university-PE-teacher-cum-personal trainer and Pidge is a secondary school

teacher. We don't even have the same interests. Well, me and Anni will message each other about the most recent episode of *Peaky Blinders*, but I'd hardly call us bezzies.

And it may look like I'm the quiet cuckoo in a nest of rowdy crows, but I do perform some function within the group. Originally, when I first met them all in sixth form, I was a bit of a commodity. I'd been a bit famous as a child so I'd done the whole celebrity thing—met TV presenters Richard and Judy. Jeremy Kyle gave me a playhouse. Been interviewed on one of those *Countdown to Murder* programmes. Nowadays, I'm just the Thoughtful Friend or the Designated Driver. Lately, I'm Chief Listener—I know all their secrets. People will tell you anything if you listen to them for long enough and pretend you're interested.

Anni, our resident Preggo, is due to drop sometime in March. The Witches Four—Lucille, Cleo, Imelda and Pidge—had spared no expense on the nappy cake, cards, streamers, balloons and booties to decorate the table. I'd brought a fruit basket, filled with exotic fruits like lychees and mangoes, starfruit and ambarella as a nod to Anni's Mauritian heritage. It had gone down like a whore on a Home Secretary. At least I wasn't driving, so I could quaff as much Prosecco as my liver could cope with, and snuggle my brain into believing I was having a good time while they were all clucking on about the usual.

The PICSOs themselves like talking about five things above all others...

1. Their partners (usually to slag them off)
2. Their kids (conversations I can't really join in with cos I don't have any, so unless it's cooing over school nativity photos or laughing at Vines of them wiping poo up the walls, my contribution just isn't called for)
3. IKEA (usually because they've just been or are just going)
4. Dieting—what works/what doesn't, what's filling/what isn't, how many pounds they've lost/put on

5. Imelda's wedding—she only announced it in September, but I can't actually remember a time when it wasn't on our conversation rota

In my head I'm usually thinking about five things above all others...

1. Sylvania Families
2. My as-yet-unpublished novel, *The Alibi Clock*
3. My little dog, Tink
4. When I can go to the toilet and check my social media feeds
5. Ways I can kill people I don't like without getting caught

Before too long a tray of drinks came over—Prosecco and a selection of slightly smudged glasses.

“What's this?” Imelda asked.

“Compliments of the gentlemen at the bar,” said the waiter, and we looked over to see two types leaning against the counter, evidently looking to score with the nearest friendly vagina. The one wearing gold hoop earrings and too much gel raised his pint in our direction—his other arm was in a sling. His friend in the Wales rugby shirt with the tattooed forearms, cut on his eyebrow and protruding beer gut was unashamedly salivating over Lucille's ridiculous breasts. She says she “doesn't do it on purpose.” Yeah, and I don't bleed from my crease every month.

“How marvellous.” She smiled, swooping into the breadbasket. We each took a glass and cheers'd the men, before continuing our conversational merry-go-round—babies, boyfs, IKEA and how draining it was just generally having tits.

Anni opened her presents, all of which she thought were either “amazing” or “so cute.” Of all of them, I found Anni the least annoying of the PICSOs. She always had an anecdote to share about someone brought into Emergency with a Barbie doll shoved up their arse or a motorcyclist with his head hanging off. This was at least mildly entertaining. Of course her baby would come soon, and then there would be nothing left for us to talk about

other than Babies and What Fun They Are and How I Wish I Had One. That's how these things usually went.

We all ordered steaks in various sizes with various sauces, despite the rainbow of diets we are all on. Mel's on the Dukan or GI, I forget which one. Lucille's on the 5:2, but today was a five day so she had three rolls and twenty breadsticks before her meal hit the tablecloth. Cleo "eats clean" but she's had Christmas and New Year off. I'm on the Eat Everything in Sight Until January 1st Then Starve Self to Death diet, so I ordered a 10 oz sirloin in a béarnaise sauce with triple-cooked French fries—I asked for the meat to be so raw you didn't know whether to eat it or feed it a carrot. The taste was unreal. I didn't even care if the cow had suffered—his ass was delish.

"I thought you were going veggie?" said Lucille, tearing off another hunk of complimentary bread.

"No," I said, "not anymore." I couldn't believe she remembered me saying that about eighty-five years ago. It was actually my GP who told me to give up red meat to help with my mood swings. But the supplements were doing their job, so I didn't see the point of going full McCartney for the sake of a few bitch fits. Besides, I always find earwigs in broccoli and sprouts are the Devil's haemorrhoids.

"Did you get anything nice for Christmas?" Cleo asked me as the waiters brought out a selection of lethal-looking steak knives.

"Thank you," I said to the guy. I always made a point to thank waitstaff—you never knew what they were stirring your sauce with. "Some books, perfume, Netflix voucher. Waterstones voucher. Beyoncé tickets for Birmingham..." I left out Sylvanian stuff—the only people who understand how I feel about Sylvanians are Imelda's five-year-old twins.

"Ooh, we're seeing Beyoncé in London in April," said Pidge. "Oh, I know what it was I wanted to tell you guys..."

Pidge started this inexorably long speech about how she'd gone to six different pet stores before she found the right something for her house rabbits—Beyoncé and Solange. Pidge's conversation starters were always somewhere between Tedious and Prepare the Noose; almost as dull as Anni's

midwife appointments or Lucille's Tales of the Killer Mortgage. I zoned out, mentally redesigning the furniture in my Sylvanians' dining room. I think they need more space to entertain.

Despite the ongoing gnawing fury in the centre of my chest, courtesy of Le Boyf, the meal was nice and I managed to keep it down. I noticed there were fake flowers in the vases on all the tables—which won't please the TripAdvisor fairy—but as restaurants go, I'm glad I went. It was almost worth the two hours I'd spent crowbarring myself out of the pyjamas I'd lived in since Christmas Eve and dolling myself up. Well, it was until the subject of Imelda's wedding came up. Lucille was the culprit.

"So, you got your hair sorted out yet for the big day?"

Now this was the rare occasion when Imelda *did* hear what Lucille said—because she had asked about Imelda or weddings or Imelda's actual wedding.

"No," she whined. "I want something up at the crown but not spiky. French plaits for the bridesmaids, keep it simple. Did I tell you about our photographers? We're having two. Jack found this guy from London and him and his partner—his work partner that is (cue chorus of unexplained laughs)—are coming down to see the church in May. He's going to be at the back so that he can take pictures of everyone's faces as I come down the aisle, and his mate's going to be at the altar."

"No chance of anything being missed then?" I added.

"Exactly." Imelda smiled, seemingly ecstatic that I was taking an interest.

"What you wearing for your night do, did you decide?" asked Anni, returning from a third toilet break.

"Oh the dress again definitely."

"You're going to have it on all day?" said Cleo.

"Yeah. It's got to be something striking. It is my day, and everyone will be coming to check me out so...and that way the people who didn't get invited to the day do will be able to see it then."

"Yeah, wouldn't want *them* missing out on anything," I mumbled, checking my phone. And again she smiled, like I was right on her