

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STEPHEN
LEATHER

LAST
CHANCE

A SPIDER SHEPHERD THRILLER

IT TAKES
A KILLER

TO CATCH
A KILLER



THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

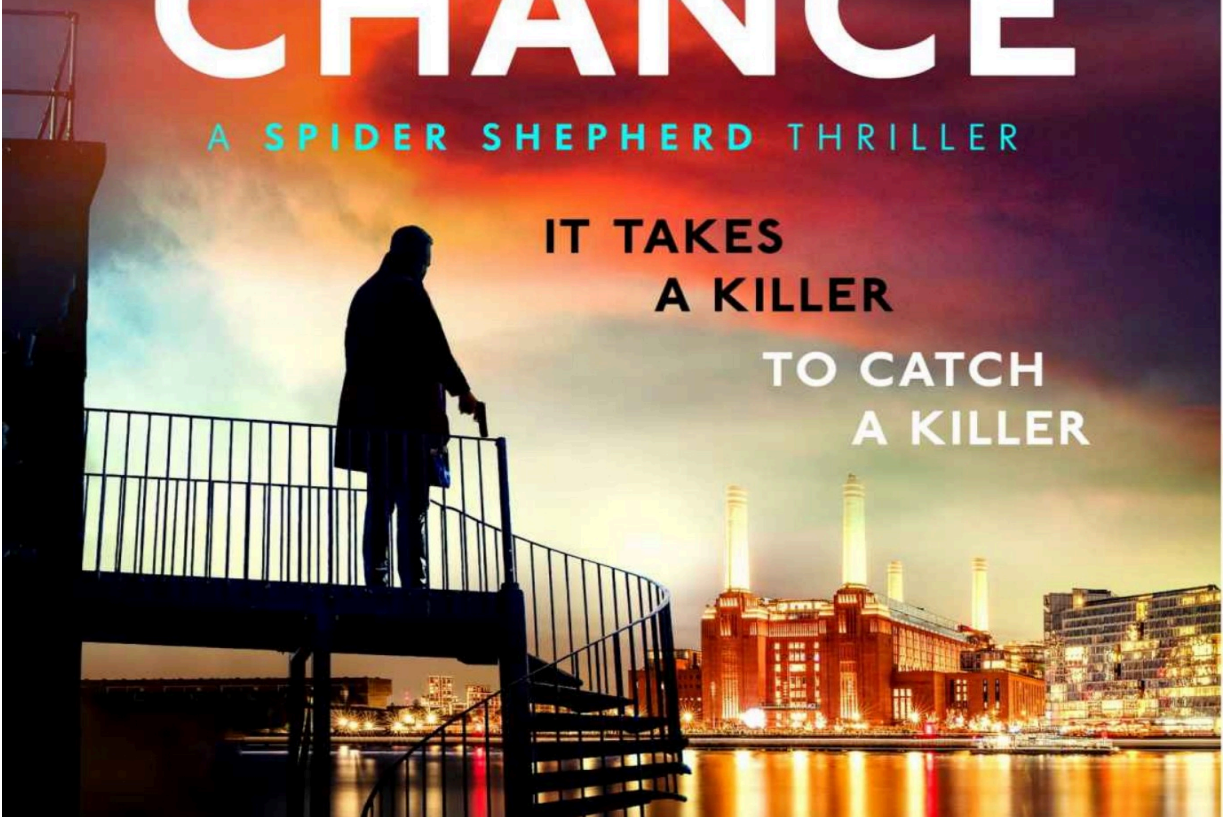
STEPHEN
LEATHER

LAST
CHANCE

A SPIDER SHEPHERD THRILLER

IT TAKES
A KILLER

TO CATCH
A KILLER



Stephen Leather is one of the UK's most successful thriller writers. Before becoming a novelist he was a journalist for more than ten years on newspapers such as *The Times* , the *Daily Mirror* , the *Glasgow Herald* , the *Daily Mail* and the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong. His titles have topped the Amazon Kindle charts in the UK and the US. His bestsellers have been translated into fifteen languages and he has also written for television.

[Also by Stephen Leather](#)

Pay Off

The Fireman

Hungry Ghost

The Chinaman

The Vets

The Long Shot

The Birthday Girl

The Double Tap

The Runner

The Hunting

The Bombmaker

The Stretch

Tango One

The Eyewitness

First Response

Takedown

The Shout

The Solitary Man

The Tunnel Rats

Spider Shepherd thrillers

Hard Landing, Soft Target, Cold Kill, Hot Blood, Dead Men, Live Fire, Rough Justice, Fair Game, False Friends, True Colours, White Lies, Black Ops, Dark Forces, Light Touch, Tall Order, Short Range, Slow Burn, Fast Track, Dirty War, Clean Kill, First Strike, Last Chance

Matt Standing thrillers

Last Man Standing, Standing Alone, Still Standing, Standing Strong

Jack Nightingale supernatural thrillers

Nightfall, Midnight, Nightmare, Nightshade, Lastnight, San Francisco Night,
New York Night, Tennessee Night, New Orleans Night, Las Vegas Night, Rio
Grande Night, Houston Night

If you'd like to find out more about these and future titles, visit

www.stephenleather.com .

LAST CHANCE

STEPHEN LEATHER



Copyright

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Hodder & Stoughton Limited
An Hachette UK company

Copyright © Stephen Leather 2025

The right of Stephen Leather to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Cover image © Silas Manhood / Trevillion Images

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ebook ISBN 978 1 399 74963 3

Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House

50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

Contents

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Stephen Leather](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

CHAPTER 1

As graves go, it wasn't much of one. Two feet wide and a little over six feet long, it was barely big enough to contain the body. It wasn't deep, either, four feet at most, just deep enough so that the body wouldn't be disturbed by one of the hundreds of foxes that roamed the New Forest. The soil from the grave was in a neat pile beside it with a spade stuck in to it.

There were three men standing at the side of the grave, looking down at the body.

'Looks like he's sleeping,' said one of the men. His name was Paul Dutch, a professional killer with more than a dozen contracts to his credit. He was a Geordie, though his accent had been smoothed over by a quarter of a century living in London. In the trade he was known as The Dutchman, though none of his clients ever dealt with him directly. Before he became a professional killer, he had made his living from robbing banks and post offices, and had the quiet authority that came from years of waving a sawn-off shotgun in people's faces. He was in his late forties and his hair was greying, but he was heavysset and well-muscled from daily workouts in the gym and an hour a day in his own pool.

'Looks dead enough to me,' said the man standing on Dutch's left. Jimmy 'Razor' Sharpe had a strong Glaswegian accent though, like Dutch, he had spent decades away from the city of his birth. He was an inch or two shorter than Dutch but weighed about the same, though the weight he carried was mainly fat, and most of it was distributed around his gut. His black hair was swept back tied into a small ponytail and he had his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his overcoat.

'Jimmy's right,' said the third man. 'You can see the three bullet holes clear enough.' His brown hair was greying at the temples but other than that he

looked a good ten years younger than his true age, with a runner's build and an alertness to his eyes that suggested he was used to nipping problems in the bud. He was wearing a black leather jacket over a grey polo neck sweater and was holding a smartphone, busy taking a couple of pictures. 'Everyone keep schtum while I take a video. We wouldn't want a confession caught on tape, would we?' He was using the name Darren Griffiths, but that was an alias. His real name was Dan Shepherd, and his friends called him Spider.

'I'm ready for my close up, Mr DeMille,' said Sharpe.

Shepherd pressed the button to stop recording. 'For fuck's sake, Jimmy, what part of "keep schtum" didn't you understand?'

Sharpe mimed a silent apology and Shepherd took another video, just three seconds showing the grave, the body, and the pile of earth. He stopped recording and nodded at Dutch. 'Are we good?'

Dutch took a long look around before nodding. 'Yeah, we're good to go.'

Shepherd put the phone into his jacket pocket and leaned over the grave. 'All right, Ricky, you can get out now.'

The man lying in the grave opened his eyes. 'About fucking time,' he said. 'It's fucking freezing down here and something has crawled into my ear.'

Ricky Lewis got unsteadily to his feet and Sharpe helped him out of the grave.

'This is fucking ridiculous,' said Lewis, using his hands to brush soil off his trousers.

'Ridiculous or not, it's keeping you alive, Ricky,' said Shepherd.

'My suit's ruined. Are you gonna pay for a new one?'

'Me personally, no. But I suppose the NCA might run to picking up the dry-cleaning bill.' He looked over at Jimmy Sharpe. Sharpe had been with the National Crime Agency for more than ten years, and prior to that had worked for the Serious Organised Crime Agency's undercover unit.

Sharpe grinned. 'About as much chance as hell freezing over,' he said. 'Come on, let's get you back to the safe house.'

'Yeah, about that. The safe house sucks. Can't I just check into a decent hotel? I'll pay.'

‘You need to be in a safe house, Ricky,’ said Sharpe. ‘The clue is in the name: safe. We can protect you in a safe house. Any man and his dog can walk into a hotel.’

‘There’s bed bugs in the bed.’

‘Well sleep on the bloody sofa then,’ said Sharpe. ‘Ricky, mate, if it wasn’t for us, you’d be lying in that grave for real.’

Ricky wiped his nose with the back of his hand. ‘And yet you still won’t tell me who took the contract out on me.’

‘We don’t know who it was,’ said Sharpe.

‘I’ve got a lot of enemies,’ said Ricky.

‘Yeah, well in your line of business, that’s to be expected,’ replied Sharpe.

Ricky Lewis was a major player in the UK cocaine trade, shipping it in from Colombia and dispersing it to several criminal gangs across the south of England. There were always disputes about supplies, pricing and competition, and someone had felt aggrieved enough to put out a hundred grand contract on his life. The contract had been taken up by The Dutchman, who hadn’t realised that the NCA had bugged his phones, car and house. The NCA had pulled him in immediately and given him a choice: cooperate or face a lengthy prison sentence. Dutch had agreed, albeit reluctantly.

Sharpe put a hand on Ricky’s shoulder. ‘Come on, let’s get out of here.’

‘I want a steak.’

‘Through the heart?’

‘Did anyone ever tell you that you’re a very funny Scotch prick?’

‘All the time,’ said Sharpe. He ushered Lewis away from the grave. He had parked his Jaguar a hundred yards away on a track that led through the trees.

‘There goes a hundred grand,’ muttered Dutch. ‘What a waste.’

‘You’d rather spend the rest of your life behind bars?’ asked Shepherd. Shepherd was an officer with MI5, the United Kingdom’s domestic counter-intelligence and security agency. MI5 and the NCA were running a joint operation to find out who was handing out assassination contracts across the UK. The Dutchman was their way in.

‘I’m not sure that a lifetime in witness protection is going to be any better,’ said Dutch.

‘I’ve been in prison, and I can tell you that it’s no fun,’ said Shepherd. ‘You’re better off on the out.’ Shepherd pulled the spade out of the pile of soil and handed it to Dutch. Dutch held up his hands.

‘Fuck the fuck off.’

‘We can’t leave it like this. If somebody finds out and the papers print it then The Office will know that Ricky isn’t dead.’

‘I dug the bloody hole, didn’t I?’

‘You did. And now you need to fill it in.’

Dutch took the spade from Shepherd and hefted it in both hands as if trying to decide whether to bring it crashing down on Shepherd’s head.

‘You wouldn’t get far,’ said Shepherd.

Dutch chuckled. ‘I’d get further than you.’

Shepherd stood with his arms at his sides. If Dutch did decide to have a go, Shepherd was reasonably sure he’d be able to take the spade off him. But the last thing he wanted was to fight the man. He wanted – and needed – his cooperation. He grinned. ‘Just fill in the hole and I’ll take you for a pint,’ he said. ‘On me.’

Dutch stared at Shepherd for a couple of seconds, then he shrugged and began shovelling soil into the grave.

CHAPTER 2

The safe house was on the outskirts of Reading, a nondescript new build detached home that was one of almost fifty identical boxes. Ricky Lewis had no connection with the town, and neither did Jimmy Sharpe, so it was the perfect place to stay below the radar. Lewis hadn't been impressed with the lodgings, claiming that it was a tenth the size of his house in Beckenham, south London. He had taken the main bedroom, which had an en-suite shower room, while Sharpe slept on the sofa in the living room. There were two other perfectly acceptable – albeit small – bedrooms upstairs, but Sharpe knew that if they did ever get visitors, it would be unlikely they'd be coming in through an upstairs window.

'Fancy a fry-up?' asked Sharpe, placing a mug of coffee in front of Lewis. Lewis was sitting at a small circular table overlooking a garden the size of a badminton court. Beyond it was a six-foot-high wooden fence, and beyond the fence was another house, a mirror image of the one they were in.

'Yeah, I guess.' He sighed. 'Jimmy, mate, seriously, this is going to do my head in.'

'I hear your pain, Ricky. But if anyone finds out you're alive and kicking, the shit will well and truly hit the fan.'

'All you've got to do is tell me who placed the hit on me and I'll take care of it.'

'We need to take out the organisation that's carrying out the hits, not the person who's got a hard-on for you,' said Sharpe. 'Once we've shut down the organisation, we'll arrest anyone who's used them and you'll be home free.'

'I'll kill him, whoever it is. And it won't be quick.'

'Yeah, you don't want to be telling me that, Ricky.' He opened the fridge and took out eggs, bacon, sausages and black pudding slices.

'What, you'd grass me up?'

'My job here is to keep you safe, not help you take out your competition.'