

# The Shout

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# STEPHEN LEATHER

## The Shout



First published in Great Britain in 2018 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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

Hardback ISBN 978 1 473 67178 2  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 67179 9  
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 67182 9

Typeset in Plantin Light by  
Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

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For Thorne



## I

He smiled as he looked down at the body sprawled across the bed. Her name was Emma Fox and she was in her early thirties, a natural blond with shoulder-length hair splayed across the pillow. She had been dead for twenty minutes so she was still warm. Her eyes were wide and staring, the whites flecked with pinpricks of red. That was what happened when people were strangled. Petechial haemorrhages they were called, ruptures of the capillaries.

It had taken Emma the best part of forty minutes to die. He had wanted it to be longer but strangulation was an inexact science. He had tied her hands to the bedhead but left her legs free. She couldn't struggle much because most of the time she was unconscious, but when she did struggle it felt so much better. He'd used a length of cord to restrict her air supply, looped twice around her pretty neck. It was a delicate balance, cutting off her air. He wanted her conscious, but if she was conscious she could scream and that would spoil everything, so he used pressure on the cord to keep her precariously balanced between being awake and being out cold. He had ejaculated inside her, and that was when he had pulled the cord too tight for too long and the life went out of her.

The cord lay coiled at her feet. The fire would destroy it, the way it destroyed all the evidence of what he had done.

He dressed. He could smell her scent on him and he wouldn't shower or bathe for two or three days, not until it had faded completely. He went over to the sash window and opened it a few inches. A fire needed three things to burn efficiently – heat, fuel and an oxidising agent. It was what they called the Fire Triangle. Oxygen was the perfect oxidising agent. The heat would come from the book of matches he had in his pocket. And the room was full of fuel. The bedding, the mattress, the carpet, the curtains, her clothes, all of it would burn nicely.

There was a nightdress lying across a chair in the corner of the room, pink and frilly and quite long. It would burn, but it was polyester so it would leave a residue, which meant she had to be wearing it. He picked it up and carefully pulled it over her head. It took him a while to get her arms through the armholes, but he took it slowly. Eventually he pulled the nightdress down her long, lithe legs. He found himself getting hard again and wondered if he had time to have sex with her one more time. He found himself growing harder as he pictured himself on top of her. He looked at his watch. It was eleven o'clock, the time that she usually went to bed. And sex with the dead was never as satisfying as sex with the soon-to-be dead. Better to set the fire and go.

He knew pretty much everything about Emma Fox. He had befriended her on Facebook with a fake profile and chatted to her on Twitter under another identity. He had watched her apartment from the cafe across the road and followed her to and from her work. She was a shop



assistant in Top Shop in Oxford Circus. Early on in his stalking he had approached her in the store and asked her advice on buying a pullover for a non-existent sister. That was one of the most exciting things he had ever done. To stand next to her, to breathe in her fragrance and look into her eyes, knowing that one day he would own her. He had thanked her and walked away, almost shuddering with anticipation. That had been two weeks ago. And now she was dead.

He pulled the duvet from under her, then placed it on top of her. He took out a toilet roll and a plastic spray bottle he'd filled with diesel. He pulled a length of ten pieces of toilet roll and laid it on the floor, then repeated the process six times. He lined the lengths up so that they were touching and then sprayed them with diesel. Diesel in its natural state was almost impossible to ignite, but when sprayed over tissue it became deliciously flammable. He put the spray bottle into his backpack and then laid the strips of toilet tissue over the duvet. They would burn quickly and hotly and would be totally destroyed in the fire.

He took out a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches from his jacket pocket and placed them on the bed. In his backpack he had a small can of lighter fluid. He poured a little of the liquid over the foot of the bed and watched it soak into the quilt. It was important not to use too much as that might leave a trace for investigators to find. He put the can back in the backpack and took a final look around the room, making sure that he would be leaving nothing behind.

Satisfied, he lit a cigarette with one of the matches, took two drags on it and then clipped the cigarette into

the book of matches so that the burning end was about two inches from the first match. It was a Benson and Hedges, the same brand that Emma smoked, but they were counterfeits that he had bought at a car boot sale in south London, almost certainly manufactured in the Far East. Since November 2011, all cigarettes sold in the UK and the European Union had to be reduced ignition propensity cigarettes, designed to go out if not drawn on regularly. The RIP cigarettes had been designed to cut down on the number of fires started by smokers but the counterfeiters weren't bound by the EU regulations and would burn down to the filter. He carefully placed the book of matches on the bed and stood up to admire his handiwork. The cigarette would take at least ten minutes to burn down to the matches by which time he would be long gone. The matches would ignite, the lighter fluid-soaked duvet would catch fire, boosted by the diesel-impregnated tissue and within minutes the room would be ablaze.

He shouldered his backpack, left the bedroom and headed for the front door. There was a smoke alarm in the hallway but he had taken care of that. By the time anyone realised the flat was ablaze the fire would have reduced the bed and the body to ashes. He took a final look around the hallway and left. He didn't plan on waiting around to see the fire brigade arrive. Most arsonists were caught eventually because they stayed to stare at the flames. He wasn't an arsonist. He took no pleasure from watching things burn. The fire was a means to an end, and that end was for him to continue to kill. That was what gave him pleasure, the taking of human lives. But not just any lives. He had a type. He knew that was a

weakness, and that having a type was as likely to get him caught as watching the buildings burn. He knew that as well as he knew that night followed day, but he couldn't help himself. It was in his nature. Or his genes. He wasn't sure which, but then it didn't matter, all that mattered was that he loved taking lives and he had found a way of doing it and getting away with it.

A cold breeze blew down the street as he stepped out on to the pavement. He turned up the collar of his jacket and walked away, whistling softly to himself.