

**'...THINLY SLICED TONGUE AND KIDNEY, SAUTÉED IN BELLY FAT AND DRIZZLED WITH A HEART AND EYEBALL BROTH. THE FOODS WHICH COULDN'T BE DISGUISED WEREN'T GOING TO WASTE...'**



**HUNGER**

# *Hunger*

*James Hancock*

With Penne pasta and tomato chunk vomit flushed away, Chester reached for the mouthwash. After a quick swish, gargle, and spit, he stared at himself in the bathroom mirror: ashen pale, with clammy skin and sunken eyes. He'd always wanted to lose a few stone in weight, but not like this. He looked unwell and he knew it.

'You been sick again?' Came the feeble voice of an old lady from a nearby room.

'You been sick again?' Came the feeble voice of an old lady from a nearby room.

Chester's mother, Patricia, didn't miss a thing. Chester stuck out a grey tongue. 'Aaaaaah!'

'Chester? Are you...' Patricia's words were cut short as a dry cough took over.

'Coming, Mother!'

Chester rushed from the bathroom and into his mother's bedroom. Patricia was propped up in bed. Thin, liver-spotted skin hugged her hunched skeleton, and long white hair draped over the shoulders of a faded pink nightie. She was a frail stick of a woman: brittle and ready to snap.

Patricia hacked into her hanky, struggling to breathe as she coughed, until Chester eased a glass of water to her lips and doused the tickling fire in her throat. He gently rubbed her back as she relaxed.

'Thank you,' Patricia wheezed and slowly eased back

against her pillows.

Chester's eyes fixed on red spots as Patricia folded the hanky and tucked it under the duvet. 'You okay, Mother?'

'I warned you. But did you listen? And now this...'  
Patricia ran bony fingers across her scalp and pulled away a fistful of white hair. 'See? Not long now.'

Chester shook his head.

'Denial. You stupid boy. When are you going to realise, I'm dying?'

'Don't say that.' Tears welled in Chester's eyes as he sat on the bed and placed a hand on his mother's. 'What can I do?'

'For starters, you can pull yourself together.'

Chester nodded and forced a smile.

'We can't go on like this.' Patricia tapped Chester's hand and looked him in the eyes. 'We need meat. Without it, we're both going to die. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Mother. I understand, Mother.' Chester fought back the tears.

'Good. Because it has been ten weeks. Ten long weeks, and if we carry on the way we are, I won't see eleven. Am I getting through to you, Chester?' Patricia held open the blood-specked hanky. 'We must have protein. I don't care where you get it, but we must have it. Now...'  
Patricia's words were interrupted by another coughing attack, and as she brought the hanky back to her lips, Chester rubbed her back and reached for her glass of water.

‘Yes, Mother.’

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Like most nights, Chester was tormented with vivid dreams of flashing lights and ambulance crews. His mother was a rag doll, thrown from gurney to hospital bed, taken from him by men in uniforms. He screamed for them to let him see her, but whenever he pulled back the curtain, there were always more men standing in his way. Then he heard her coughing, and he felt his throat tighten and breathing became a struggle.

They had found themselves in the lion’s den, in the heart of the virus, terrified and alone.

His nightmare always ended with death rolling in like a shadowy fog, separating him from his mother.

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Chester stared at the kitchen worktop. Four tins of tomatoes and the last two packets of spaghetti. The cupboards were bare, the fridge and freezer were empty, and the remaining dry goods and canned food were polished off weeks ago.

When the pandemic hit, Chester took lockdown seriously. He stocked up and locked up. Quarantine was the only way to stay safe. The only way to ensure survival. Leaving home and risking a visit to the shops was out of the question. Unfortunately, most

of the food was consumed within the first four weeks, and no matter how hard he tried, Chester couldn't secure a delivery of fresh supplies. Even with his elderly mother in the high-risk category, he found the home delivery slots were always unavailable. Supermarkets, farms, and other online grocery suppliers were constantly booked up.

They had been eating canned tomatoes and pasta for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for weeks.

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The cramps had become unbearable, and Chester was dry vomiting now. His mother was worse; her gums had started to bleed, and she had spells of unconsciousness. Chester prayed for help, but his pleas fell unanswered. He fought against it, but his mother's words interrupted every thought, sending shooting pains through his skull... *'We must have meat! We must have meat! We must have meat!'*

Mrs Finnegan, the old lady next door, was the obvious choice. Chester didn't have to travel far. Covering his mouth with a scarf, he popped around to her back garden and tapped on the door with a claw hammer. She was a friendly, less cautious soul, and opened the door without question. The incident was quick but brutal. A full force blow to the forehead, her eyes rolled, and she collapsed. As she lay twitching, Chester stepped over her and cracked two more strikes to her temple. The ordeal was over.

Chester lifted Mrs Finnegan onto his shoulders, propped her against the garden fence, and rolled her over into his back garden. Dragging her to his patio, he stripped her naked, poured two bottles of antiseptic liquid over her leathery skin, and washed her down with a hose.

The log saw in Chester's shed had hardly seen action over the years but was proving invaluable. He'd never had the need for a power saw but regretted not owning one now. Doing it by hand was hard work. He cut through fat and muscle and used the claw hammer to snap stubborn bone. The head was awkward; the saw's silver teeth moved with long and slow precision until Chester was able to twist and pull it free. When he'd finished, Chester burnt Mrs Finnegan's clothes in his garden chiminea and hosed the evidence off the patio slabs and onto the pea shingle border.

Chester reminisced about the days of his mother's mincer. A metal beast that would bolt onto the worktop and operate with a handle. He had no such device now and was forced to cut fist-sized pieces of flesh, and using the cheese grater, apply elbow grease until the task was complete. Grating chunks of meat was slow and painful. Blister-inducing.

Most of Mrs Finnegan was worked, bagged, and in the fridge or freezer by the time the cheese grater broke. A week's worth of meat broth, steak, and proper bolognaise.

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Chester placed a plate of fried liver on Patricia's lap, and cutting bite-sized pieces, forked some into his mother's mouth. She chewed and swallowed.

'Did Doctor Richardson send any bacon or onions?'

'No, Mother. He just got a butcher he knows to give us some pork and liver.'

'Pity. Liver tastes much better with bacon and onions.' Patricia took another mouthful. 'I'll see what I can do, Mother.' Chester gave her a reassuring smile.

'And see if he can deliver fresh meat. The first few steaks were lovely, but this tastes like that frozen packet stuff.'

Chester gently eased another small piece of liver into his mother's mouth. 'It's definitely not packet meat, Mother. I had to freeze some to keep it good...'

'Well, see if this butcher will send half as much but twice as often, so it is fresh.' Patricia scowled as she reluctantly chewed another mouthful.

'Yes, Mother.'

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Excluding nuts and berries, the caveman diet was giving Chester a newfound strength. To please his mother, he'd prepared meals in a variety of ways, but was still limited in what he could do. At the end of

the day, meat was meat. Thinly sliced tongue and kidney, sautéed in belly fat and drizzled with a heart and eyeball broth. The foods which couldn't be disguised weren't going to waste. He had defrosted a leg, slow roasted it all morning, and was now frying it in a pan to give it the crisp edge his mother loved, when there was a knock at the front door.

Chester peeked through the curtains. Rachel, Mrs Finnegan's daughter, was peering through his letterbox. 'Patricia! Chester! Can you hear me?' She knocked again.

Chester considered ignoring her until she went, but part of him needed the interaction. He'd always liked Rachel. His mother had said she'd be a good match for him. She was late forties now, so only a few years younger than Chester. She'd been divorced for five years, no kids, and Chester always did like a shapely brunette. Wrapping a scarf around his nose and mouth, he answered the door.

'Oh, Chester. Thank God.' Rachel pulled a mask from her coat pocket. 'May I come in?' There was concern in her tone. Chester knew why.

'Err, Mum's not well, so I...' Chester looked over his shoulder, fishing for an excuse. Why did she need to come in? He was sweating, twitching, and needed to calm down.

'I just need five minutes. Please, Chester.' Rachel's face was hidden behind the mask, but Chester could see the desperation in her eyes.

'Okay.' Chester stepped back and Rachel shut the



front door behind her.

Rachel removed her coat and Chester stared at her; aside from his mother and Mrs Finnegan, she was the first person he'd seen up close in months. Naturally tanned skin, enhanced by a white blouse and thin silver necklace. The blouse was low cut and Chester found his gaze fixed to her cleavage. Had she dressed this way for him? Did she think the same thoughts?

'Chester?' Rachel awaited a reply to something.

'I'm sorry.' Chester forced a nervous smile. Thanks to the scarf, she couldn't see it. 'Mother's not been well. I'm terribly worried.'

'My mother, Chester. I was asking about my mother. Have you seen her?'

Chester shook his head. He dare not speak. Rachel was intelligent. She would hear something in the tone of his voice. She would tell there was something... *Beep! Beep! Beep!* The kitchen smoke alarm interrupted Chester's thoughts.

'One moment. Sorry!' He dashed into the kitchen and turned off the gas hob. The hunk of Mrs Finnegan's thigh spat fat as Chester lifted the pan onto the draining board.

'What is that?' Rachel stood in the kitchen doorway.

'Oh, err, a leg of lamb.' Chester couldn't help himself. He glanced at the very thing he didn't want to draw attention to. Knee, lower leg, shin and foot, all recently separated from the "leg of lamb" and sat to defrost on the worktop. Rachel followed his eyes and looked straight at it.

As her expression changed from curiosity to realisation, Chester reached for the nearest thing to hand. ‘It’s not what it looks like,’ he said, and slammed the frying pan into the side of Rachel’s head.

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Three days ago, Chester’s Amazon order had arrived and was now being used for the first time. 50cm cable ties had bound Rachel’s hands and feet, gaffer tape wrapped around her mouth and back of head, and the living room carpet had been covered with a clear polythene sheet. Rachel was on her belly when she came around and immediately started to moan and wriggle, sliding across the polythene inch by inch, screaming a muffled groan which Chester droned out, turning up the TV’s news channel.

‘Keep still!’ Chester straddled Rachel, untucked the blouse from her skirt, and lined up the tip of a butcher’s knife against the skin of her lower back. Rachel tried to jerk her body free from Chester, but his weight held her fast.

‘I need to get this right. Please, Rachel.’ Chester put the knife’s tip to Rachel’s spine, and timing it with her left to right wriggling, he thumped the flat of his hand onto the knife’s handle. The point cracked into the spine. Rachel’s eyes went wide with terror, and she muffle-screamed into her gag.

‘No, the legs are still moving.’ Chester moved the knife’s tip and felt the vertebrae with his fingers. ‘The

spine is a wonderful thing, and if I can hit the lumber region just right...’ Chester thumped down again, and Rachel went silent. ‘Perfect!’

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‘You missed the PM’s speech. Percentages have gone right down. Things are finally on the up,’ Chester whispered into Rachel’s ear.

She was on her back, skirt removed, legs wiped with disinfectant, and cable ties pulled tight around the lower thighs and below the knees. Rachel took deep breaths through flared nostrils and stared up at the ceiling as tears dropped on the polythene sheet.

‘I don’t have any anaesthetic, but you shouldn’t need it. You won’t feel a thing.’ Placing his saw over the line he’d marked out with a blue sharpie; Chester pulled the saw’s teeth back across the flesh of Rachel’s upper shin. Blood flowed, her legs didn’t move, but she screamed. The TV showed vaccine stations in full swing and a queue of people being interviewed as Chester pulled and pushed the saw back and forth through bone. Rachel couldn’t feel a thing, but she screamed anyway. She knew what was happening. Even the TV couldn’t drown out the sound of her leg being amputated.

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‘What was all the banging about?’ Patricia asked, as

Chester brought her a plate of medium rare steak. ‘I was just doing a bit of DIY, Mother.’

‘Don’t waste your time. Your father was never any good at that sort of thing, and I expect you’re the same.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘You were in the garden, using that hose again. And you left the television on. It was too loud. I called out, but you couldn’t hear me.’

‘Sorry, Mother.’ Chester cut the steak into small pieces.

‘It took all my strength to get to the window, but you couldn’t hear me banging on it.’ Patricia chewed some meat and Chester wiped bloody juice from the corners of her mouth.

‘It won’t happen again, Mother.’

‘Good. And get some vegetables. I’ve eaten nothing but pork for two weeks.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

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‘We could have been great together, you know?’ Chester leaned against the kitchen worktop.

Rachel was sitting on a dining room chair, cable tied in place, and tape covering her mouth. Pieces of torn bed sheet were wrapped around stumps below her knees, dried with brownish-red and yellowing stains. The wounds were raw. The wounds were angry.

‘We still could.’ Chester smiled. ‘It’s up to you.’

Rachel stared through vacant eyes. Trauma had taken over and she had dissociated herself from the here and now.

‘Something to think about.’ Chester opened the oven door and pulled out a baking tray. As the foil was carefully unwrapped, Rachel’s eyes turned to the freshly cooked meat.

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The latest Amazon order was unboxed and ready for close inspection: Teppanyaki grill, glass lid wok, 7-inch meat cleaver, boning knife, meat tenderiser hammer, six cans of oil spray, and a case of 18 herbs and spices for seasoning meat. And then came a knock on the door.

With his mind set in the world of culinary experimentation, Chester answered the front door without thought.

‘Good evening, sir. I’m PC McCammon, and this is PC Garret.’ The male policeman held his ID card out from a chain around his neck, with his female colleague stepping up beside him and holding hers out for Chester to see.

PC Garret talked into her shoulder walkie-talkie, ‘We’re at the neighbour’s house now.’

Chester remained silent, his mind racing.

‘May we come inside, sir? We’d like to ask you a few questions.’ PC McCammon tucked his ID back under his shirt.

‘Err, the virus. We’re in isolation, and my mother isn’t well. She’s on the vulnerable...’

‘That’s okay, sir, we have masks.’ PC McCammon pulled a black cloth mask from his pocket. ‘We’ll be as quick as we can and let you get back to your evening.’ He placed the mask’s elastic over his ears and covered his nose and mouth. PC Garret followed suit.

‘Yes, okay. The place is a bit of a mess at the moment.’ Chester moved aside and the two police constables walked past him. He took a deep breath and shut his front door.

‘We just need to ask a few questions about your neighbour, sir. Have you seen or heard from her recently?’ PC Garret’s eyes fixed firmly on Chester’s.

PC McCammon had walked over to get a better look at the line of recently unpacked Amazon goods. Chester shook his head.

‘When was the last time you spoke?’ PC Garret’s questions had knocked the air out of Chester. All he could think about was his kitchen and the things that might be found if his new guests decided to open a few doors and drawers.

‘I stay indoors. Keep myself to myself.’ Chester watched PC Garret’s attention turn to his hands. He was nervously wringing them together. He stopped and put them by his side.

‘Quite a selection of cookware you’ve got here.’ PC McCammon looked at Chester. His eyes burnt into him. He knew something. He had to know

something. Chester just nodded. He was aware that he'd started sweating again and didn't know where to look. Was his breathing right? Was there a smell coming from the kitchen?

'Are you alone in the house, sir?' PC Garret brought Chester back to reality.

'Err, yes. I mean, no. My mother is upstairs.' Chester nodded and smiled, trying to make himself look relaxed but was aware he was making things worse.

'Oh, good. Would you mind if we had a quick word with her?' PC McCammon walked past Chester, towards the stairs.

Chester held up a hand to object, but PC Garret interrupted, 'Our records have you as Mr Chester Maddox, is that correct, sir?'

Chester nodded, about to speak...

'And your mother is Patricia Maddox. Am I correct?'

Chester nodded, watching PC McCammon walk out of view, heading upstairs to question his mother. He could feel the air become hot and thick, the room beginning to move, and he sat down on the sofa.

'Are you feeling okay, sir?' PC Garret stepped closer to Chester and crouched to his level.

Chester shook his head, grabbed the nearby meat cleaver, and brought it down onto PC Garret's head. A swift and unexpected attack had taken her off guard, the hatchet was buried deep, and PC Garret collapsed onto the living room floor.

Chester stood up, ripped the cleaver free with a forceful tug, and quickly followed after PC

McCammon.

‘Excuse me, Mr Policeman!’ Chester picked up the pace and caught up with PC McCammon at the top of the stairs.

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‘What was all that thumping and banging?’ Patricia was out of bed and trying to steady herself when Chester entered the bedroom.

‘It’s okay, Mother. We had a couple of visitors, but they’ve gone now.’ Chester took his mother by the arm and steadied her back onto the bed.

‘It sounded like someone had fallen down the stairs. Is everything okay?’

‘Yes, Mother.’ Chester helped her back into bed. ‘Everything is just fine.’

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The boning knife and cleaver proved useful tools, and great hunks of flesh were wrapped in cling film and jammed into Chester’s fridge and freezer. Uniforms burnt, patio hosed clean, and Chester’s mother convinced the noise was the continued effort of his DIY project, Chester set three large plates on the kitchen worktop. They would be perfect for displaying a surprise for any future guests. Chester knew they’d be coming soon.



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‘These chunks are too big,’ Patricia snapped. ‘And there are hairs on the plate.’ Chester stood by his mother’s bedroom window, looking at their street and waiting.

‘And still no vegetables. We need vegetables, Chester. Do you know how difficult it is to have a bowel movement when all you eat is meat?’ Patricia scowled and dropped the fork onto her plate. ‘Are you listening to me?’

‘Sorry, Mother.’ Chester watched as three police cars turned into his street, lights flashing. ‘Sorry, Mother,’ Patricia mocked. ‘Sorry isn’t good enough.’

Chester smiled. ‘Some people are here, Mother.’

‘What do you mean, “people”?’

Chester drew the boning knife from the belt behind his back. ‘People who want to take you from me.’

‘What are you talking about? And what are you doing with that?’

The police lights flickered across the window behind Chester, and car doors slammed. Chester looked at the blade of his knife and then at his mother’s throat.

‘They won’t take you from me, Mother.’

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Rachel, PC McCammon, and PC Garret were discovered in the kitchen. Three severed heads lined up on plates, and a bloody saw and meat cleaver on the worktop beside them. Meat and wrapped organs were packed into the fridge, freezer, and scattered in scraps across the sink and draining board. Chester and Patricia were found in bed, locked in each other's arms, with their bloody throats cut from ear to ear.

The police report kept the gruesome details to a minimum, and the death toll was recorded.

Six more virus-related deaths.







