

Flesh House

Stuart MacBride

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Extract

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‘No, you listen to me: if my six year old son isn’t back here in ten minutes I’m going to come round there and rip you a new arsehole, are we clear?’ Ian McLaughlin slapped a hand over the mouthpiece and shouted at his wife to turn that bloody racket down. Then he went back to the idiot on the other end of the phone: ‘Where the hell’s Jamie?’

‘When I got back from the pub they were gone, OK? Catherine’s not here either . . . maybe she took the boys for a walk?’

‘A walk? It’s pissing down, pitch black, freezing cold—’

‘What? What’s wrong?’ Sharon stood at the door to the living room, wearing the witch costume she’d bought from Woolworths. The one that hid her pregnant bulge and made her breasts look enormous.

Ian grunted, not bothering to cover the phone this time. ‘It’s that moron Davidson: he’s lost Jamie.’

‘Jamie’s missing?’ Sharon clapped a hand to her mouth, stifling the shriek. Always overreacting, just like her bloody mother.

‘I never said that! I didn’t say he was lost, I just—’

‘If we’re late for this bloody party, I’m personally going to see to it that—’

The doorbell: loud and insistent.

‘—your life is going to be—’

The doorbell again.

‘For God’s sake, Sharon, answer the bloody door! I’m on the phone . . .’

There was a clunk and a rattle as Sharon finally did what she was told, and then she shrieked again. ‘Jamie! Oh Jamie, we were so *worried!*’

Ian stopped mid-rant, staring at the soggy tableau on the top step: Jamie and his best friend Richard Davidson, holding hands with some idiot in a Halloween costume. ‘About bloody time,’ said Ian, slamming the phone down. ‘I told you to be home by five!’ The two small boys looked wide eyed and frightened. And so they bloody should be. ‘Where the hell have you two been?’

No reply. Typical. And look at the time . . . ‘Jamie!’ Ian hooked his thumb in the direction of the stairs. ‘Get your backside up there and get changed. If you’re not a Viking in three minutes you’re going to the party as a kid in his vest and pants.’

Jamie cast a worried look at his partner in crime, then up at the stranger on the doorstep – the one wearing the blood-stained butcher’s apron and Margaret Thatcher fright mask – before slinking up to his room, taking Richard with him.

Great, now they’d have to drop the little brat off at his parents’ house.

Today was turning into a *complete* nightmare.

'House of Blood' parents missing

Christopher Davidson exclusively to the paper about discovering kitchen bloodbath

EXCLUSIVE

by Martin Leslie

A MAJOR police operation was launched last night to try to locate Ian McLaughlin (27) and his wife Sharon (22) who disappeared from their house on Seafield Drive in the late hours of Friday.

In a statement issued to the press Detective Chief Inspector Gary Brooks claimed that the police were "significantly worried" for the McLaughlins' safety.

The alarm was raised when friend of the family Christopher Davidson became concerned after his six-year-old son failed to return home after visiting the McLaughlins.

"I went round to check if everything was all right and the house was a mess," Davidson said,

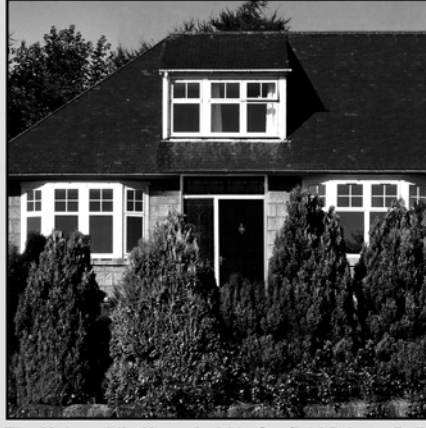
"there was furniture overturned in the lounge and the kitchen was covered in blood."

Speaking from outside the Children's Hospital, where both his son and Jamie McLaughlin (6) are being treated for shock, Mr Davidson was clearly distressed.

"My wife was with the children when they left our house. Something terrible must have happened - she would never have left them unattended!"

Police refused to comment on rumours that the two boys could have witnessed the assault, but stressed the need to locate Mr and Mrs McLaughlin, and Catherine Davidson, as soon as possible.

DCI Brooks said, "We are concerned that one or all three of them are in significant medical trouble."



The McLaughlin Household in Seafield Drive - Police are searching for the missing family.

It is understood that Ian pounds the door for hours.



The Aberdeen Examiner

Fears for mother's safety

EXCLUSIVE

by Martin Leslie

THE HUSBAND of Catherine Davidson spoke last night of his fears that his wife will never be found.

Speaking exclusively to the Aberdeen Examiner, Christopher Davidson (27) shared his thoughts on his wife's disappearance: "I am very worried about her. She is a devoted mother and our son, Ian (6) has had nightmares ever since she disappeared." "All we know is that she walked out of the house last night and his friend Jamie home last night before Halloween. I can't see where she's gone."

Whatever happened that night, it has left its mark on Mr Davidson. "The police have done their best."



Remains Found

POLICE have confirmed that the remains found in a derelict shop on Palmerston Road are human.

Sources within Grampian Police said the remains may belong to Sharon McLaughlin, missing since the 30th of October, but they were unable to confirm this until further evidence is carried out.

A nationwide manhunt was sprung when the McLaughlins disappeared from their Mannofield home on the night of Halloween.

The McLaughlins' son, Jamie (6), was discovered hiding in his bedroom with his friend Richard Davidson. Neither boy was able to clearly recall what had happened.

THREE DEAD IN TENEMENT HORROR

GLASGOW police issued an urgent plea for information last night, following an anonymous tip-off that led them to a tenement flat soaked in blood. "We can't tell for certain," said DI Simon Ridley of Strathclyde police, "but it looks very much as if Mr and Mrs Sutherland have been the victims of a vicious attack."

Similarities to a recent case in Aberdeen. The killer, dubbed "The Flesher" (the old Scottish term for Butcher) is believed to be responsible for up to a dozen murders all over the United Kingdom.

A special task force made up of officers from various regions is now investigating.

Flesher arrested

Aberdeen killer caught
Police suspect more deaths

IN A DAWN RAID yesterday Grampian Police arrested the man chillingly known as "the Flesher".

It was the night before Halloween, but little did Ian and Sharon McLaughlin know that something more terrifying than the horror film was at their front door.

discovered in a disused butcher's shop, leading detectives to focus their enquiries on Aberdeen's meat trade.

Missing body parts

DCI Brooks, who led the 50-man strong taskforce said that the arrest "represents a significant achievement after three years of searching for the missing body parts."

When bi

IDENTS of a small North munity have been stunned by the discovery of the remains of a missing woman in the sea.

20 Years Later

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Detective Sergeant Logan McRae winced his way across the dark quayside trying not to scald his fingers, making for a scarred offshore container pinned in the harsh glow of police spotlights. The thing was about the size of a domestic bathroom – dented and battered from years of being shipped out to oilrigs in the middle of the North Sea and back again – its blue paint pockmarked with orange rust. A pool of dark red glittered in the Investigation Bureau's lights: blood mingling with oily puddles on the cold concrete, while figures in white oversuits buggered about with cameras and sticky tape and evidence bags.

Four o'clock in the morning, what a *great* start to the day.

The refrigerated container was little more than a metal box, lined with insulating material. Three wooden pallets took up most of the floor, piled high with boxes of frozen vegetables, fish, chicken bits and other assorted chunks of meat, the brown-grey cardboard sagging as the contents slowly defrosted.

Logan ducked under the cordon of blue-and-white POLICE tape.

It was impossible to miss Detective Inspector Insch: the man was huge, his SOC coveralls strained to nearly bursting. He had

the suit's hood thrown back, exposing a big bald head that glinted in the spotlights. But even he was dwarfed by the looming bulk of the *Brae Explorer*, a massive orange offshore supply vessel parked alongside the quay, all its lights blazing in the purple-black night.

Logan handed one of the Styrofoam cups of tea to Insch. 'They were out of sugar.' That got him some rumbled swearing. He ignored it. 'Sky News have turned up. That makes three television crews, four newspapers and a handful of gawkers.

'Wonderful,' Insch's voice was a dark rumble, 'that's all we need.' He pointed up at the *Brae Explorer*. 'Those idiots found anything yet?'

'Search team's nearly finished. Other than some incredibly dodgy pornography it's clean. Ship's Captain says the container was only onboard for a couple of hours; someone noticed it was leaking all over the deck, so they got onto the cash and carry it came from. Shut. Apparently the rigs throw a fit if they don't get their containers on time, so the Captain got someone to try fixing the thing's refrigerator motor.'

Logan took a sip of his scalding hot tea. 'That's when they found the bits. Mechanic had to shift a couple of boxes of defrosting meat to get at the wiring. Soggy cardboard gave way on one of them, and the contents went everywhere.' He pointed at a small pile of clear plastic evidence pouches, each one containing a chunk of red. 'Soon as he saw what was in there, he called us.'

Insch nodded. 'What about the cash and carry?'

'Firm called Thompson's in Altens: they supply a couple of offshore catering companies. Frozen meat, veg, toilet paper, tins of beans ... the usual. They don't open till seven am, so it'll be a while before—'

The large man turned a baleful eye in Logan's direction. 'No it won't. Find out who's in charge over there and get the bastard out of his bed. I want a search team up there now.'

‘But it—’

‘NOW, Sergeant!’

‘Yes, sir.’ Arguing with Insch wasn’t going to get him anywhere. Logan pulled out his mobile phone and wandered off to call Control, getting a search team and warrant organized between mouthfuls of tea. Doing his best to ignore the cameraman circling him like a short, balding shark.

Logan finished the call, then scrunched up his polystyrene cup and . . . there was nowhere to get rid of the thing, unless he just chucked it down on the dockside, or over into the water. Neither was going to look good on the television. Embarrassed, he hid it behind his back.

The shark lowered its HDV television camera – no bigger than a shoebox, with the BBC Scotland logo stencilled on the side – and grinned. ‘Perfect. Thought the sound was going to be a bit ropery there, but it’s not bad. This is dynamite stuff! Dismembered bodies, boats, tension, mystery. Ooh,’ he pointed at the crumpled-up cup in Logan’s hand, ‘where’d you get the tea: I’m gasping.’

‘Thought you were meant to be a fly on the wall, Alec, not a pain in the arse.’

‘Aye, well, we all have our—’

Insch’s voice bellowed out from the far side of the quay: ‘SERGEANT!’

Swear. Count to ten. Sigh. ‘If this programme’s a success, can I come work for you guys at the BBC instead?’

‘See what I can do.’ And Alec was off, hurrying to get a good angle on whatever bollocking the inspector was about to dish out.

Logan followed on behind, wishing he’d been assigned to a different DI tonight, especially as the news from Control wasn’t exactly good. These days, talking to Insch was like trying to do an eightsome reel in a minefield. Blindfolded. Still, might as well get it over with, ‘Sorry, sir, they don’t have any bodies spare – everyone’s down here and—’

‘Bloody hell!’ The fat man ran a hand over his big, pink face. ‘Why can no one do what they’re told?’

‘Another hour or so and we can free up some of the team here and—’

‘I told you, I want it done now. Not in an hour: *now*.’

‘But it’s going to take that long to get a search warrant. Surely we should be concentrating on doing a thorough job here—’

The inspector loomed over him: six foot three of angry fat. ‘Don’t make me tell you twice, Sergeant.’

Logan tried to sound reasonable. ‘Even if we pull every uniform off the boat and the docks, they’re going to have to sit twiddling their thumbs till the search warrant comes through.’

Insch got as far as ‘We don’t have time to bugger about with—’ before he was tapped on the shoulder by someone dressed in a white SOC oversuit. Someone who didn’t look particularly happy.

‘I’ve been waiting for you for fifteen minutes!’ Dr Isobel McAllister, Aberdeen’s chief pathologist, wearing an expression that would freeze the balls off a brass gorilla at twenty paces. ‘You might not have anything better to do, but I can assure you that *I* have. Now are you going to listen to my preliminary findings, or shall I just go home and leave you to whatever it is you feel is more *important*?’

Logan groaned. That was all they needed, Isobel winding Insch up even further. As if the grumpy fat sod wasn’t bad enough already. The inspector turned on her, his face flushing angry-scarlet in the IB spotlights. ‘Thank you *so* much for waiting for me, Doctor, I’m sorry if my organizing a murder inquiry has *inconvenienced* you. I’ll try not to let something as *trivial* get in the way again.’

They stared at each other in silence for a moment. Then Isobel pulled on a cold, unfriendly smile. ‘Remains are human: male. Dismemberment looks as if it occurred some time after death with a long, sharp blade and a hacksaw, but I won’t be

able to confirm that until I've performed the post mortem.' She checked her watch. 'Which will take place at eleven am precisely.'

Insch bristled. 'Oh no it won't! I need those remains analysed now—'

'They're *frozen*, Inspector. They – need – to – defrost.' Emphasizing each word as if she were talking to a naughty child, rather than a huge, bad-tempered Detective Inspector. 'If you want, I suppose I *could* stick them in the canteen microwave for half an hour. But that might not be very professional. What do you think?'

Insch just ground his teeth at her. Face rapidly shifting from angry-red to furious-purple. 'Fine,' he said at last, 'then you can help by accompanying DS McRae to a cash and carry in Altens.'

'And what makes you think I—'

'Of course, if you're too busy, I can always ask one of the other pathologists to take over this case.' It was Insch's turn with the nasty smile. 'I understand the pressure you must be under: working mother, small child, can't really expect the same level of commitment to the job as—'

Isobel looked as if she was about to slap him. 'Don't you *dare* finish that sentence!' She flung an imperious gesture in Logan's direction. 'Get the car, Sergeant, we've got work to do.'

Insch nodded, pulled out his mobile and started dialling. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a call to make . . . Hello? . . . That West Midlands Police? . . . Yes, DI Insch: Grampian CID, I need to speak to Chief Constable Mark Faulds. . . . Yes, of course I know what time it is!' He turned his back on them and wandered away out of the spotlights.

Isobel scowled after him, then turned and snapped at Logan, 'Well? We haven't got all night.'

They were halfway to the car when a loud, 'WILL YOU FUCK OFF WITH THAT BLOODY CAMERA!' exploded behind

them. Logan looked over his shoulder to see Alec scurrying in their direction while the inspector went back to his telephone call.

‘Er . . .’ said the cameraman, catching up to them by Logan’s grubby, unmarked CID pool car, ‘I wondered if I could tag along with you for a while. Insch is a bit . . .’ He shrugged. ‘You know.’

Logan did. ‘Get in. I’ll be back in a minute.’

It didn’t take long to pass the word along: he just grabbed the nearest sergeant and asked her to give it forty-five minutes, then tell everyone to finish up and get their backsides over to Altens.

Alec was in full whinge when Logan got back to the car. ‘I mean,’ the cameraman said, leaning forward from the back seat – knee-deep in discarded chip papers and fast-food cartons, ‘If he didn’t want to be in the bloody series, why’d he volunteer? Always seemed really keen till now. He shouted at me – I had my headphones on, nearly blew my eardrums out.’

Logan shrugged, threading the car through the barricade of press cameras, microphones and spotlights. ‘You’re lucky. He shouts at me every bloody day.’

Isobel just sat there in frosty silence, seething.

Thompson’s Cash and Carry was a long breezeblock warehouse in Altens: a soulless business park on the southernmost tip of Aberdeen. The building was huge, filled with rows and rows of high, deep shelves that stretched off into the distance, miserable beneath the flicker of fluorescent lighting and the drone of piped muzak. The manager’s office was halfway up the end wall, a flight of concrete steps leading to a shiny blue door with ‘YOUR SMILE IS OUR GREATEST ASSET’ written on it. If that was the case, they were all screwed, because everyone looked bloody miserable.

The man in charge of Thompson’s Cash and Carry was no exception. They’d dragged him out of his bed at half four in the

morning and it showed: bags under the eyes, blue stubble on his jowly face, wearing a suit that probably cost a fortune, but looked as if someone had died in it. Mr Thompson peered out of the picture window that made up one wall of his office, watching as uniformed officers picked their way through the shelves of jelly babies, washing powder and baked beans. 'Oh God ...'

'And you're quite sure,' said Logan, sitting in a creaky leather sofa with a cup of coffee and a chocolate biscuit, 'there haven't been any break-ins?'

'No. I mean, yes. I'm sure.' Thompson crossed his arms, paced back and forth, uncrossed his arms. Sat down. Stood up again. 'It can't have come from here: we've got someone on-site twenty-four-seven, a state-of-the-art security system.'

Logan had met their state-of-the-art security system – it was a sixty-eight-year-old man called Harold. Logan had sneezed more alert things than him.

Thompson went back to the window. 'Have you tried speaking to the ship's crew? Maybe they—'

'Who supplies your meat, Mr Thompson?'

'It ... depends what it is. Some of the pre-packaged stuff comes from local butchers – it's cheaper than hiring someone in-house to hack it up – the rest comes from abattoirs. We use three—' He flinched as a loud, rattling crash came from the cash and carry floor below, followed by a derisory cheer and some slow handclapping. 'You promised me they'd be careful! We're open in an hour and a half; I can't have customers seeing the place in a mess.'

Logan shook his head. 'I think you've got more important things to worry about, sir.'

Thompson stared at him. 'You can't think we had anything to do with this! We're a family firm. We've been here for nearly thirty years.'

'That container came from your cash and carry with bits of human meat in it.'

‘But—’

‘How many other shipments do you think went out to the rigs like that? What if you’ve been selling chunks of dead bodies to catering companies for months? Do you think the guys who’ve been eating chopped-up corpses offshore are going to be happy about it?’

Mr Thompson blanched and said, ‘Oh God . . .’ again.

Logan drained the last of his coffee and stood. ‘Where did the meat in that container come from?’

‘I . . . I’ll have to look in the dockets.’

‘You do that.’

The cash and carry’s chill room sat on the opposite side of the building, separated from the shelves of tins and dried goods by a curtain of thick plastic strips that kept the cold in and the muzak out. A huge refrigeration unit bolted to the wall rattled away like a perpetual smoker’s cough, making the air cold enough that Logan’s breath trailed behind him in a fine mist as he marched between the boxes of fruit and vegetables, over to the walk-in freezer section.

Detective Constable Rennie stood beside the freezer’s heavy steel doors, hands jammed deep in his armpits, nose Rudolf-red, dressed like a ninja version of the Michelin Man in layers and layers of black clothing.

‘It’s freezing in here,’ said the constable, shivering, ‘think my nipples just fell off.’

Logan stopped, one hand on the freezer’s door-handle. ‘You’d be a lot warmer if you actually did some work.’

Rennie pulled a face. ‘The Ice Queen thinks we’re all too thick to help. I mean, it’s not my fault I don’t know what I’m looking for, is it?’

‘What?’ Logan closed his eyes and tried counting to ten. Got as far as three. ‘For God’s sake; you’re supposed to be looking for *human remains!*’

'I *know* that. I'm in there, standing in a sodding freezer the size of my house, looking at rows and rows of frozen bits of bloody meat. How am I supposed to tell a joint of pork from a joint of person? It all looks the same to me. A hand, a foot, a head: *that* I could recognize. But it's all just chunks of meat.' He shifted, stomping his feet and blowing into his cupped hands. 'I'm a policeman, not a bloody doctor.'

And Logan had to admit he had a point. They only knew that the joint of meat found in the offshore container was human because it had a pierced nipple. Farmers were an odd lot, but not that odd.

Logan hauled open the heavy metal door and stepped into the freezer . . . Dear God it was cold – like being punched in the chest by a bag of ice. His breath went from mist to impenetrable fog. 'Hello?'

He found Dr Isobel McAllister on the other side of a stack of cardboard boxes, their brown surfaces sparkling with a crisp film of white ice. She'd traded in her white SOC oversuit for a couple of dirty-blue parkas and a set of padded trousers, the ensemble topped off with a red and white bobble hat bandaged onto her head with a tatty maroon scarf. Not exactly her usual catwalk self. She was picking her way through a mound of frozen mystery meat.

'Anything?'

She scowled up at him. 'Other than hypothermia?' When Logan didn't answer, Isobel sighed and pointed at a big plastic crate stacked with chunks of vacuum-packed meat. 'We've got about three dozen possible pieces. If it was on the bone it'd be a lot easier to spot; cows and pigs have a much higher meat to bone ratio, but look at this,' she held up a pack labelled 'DICED PORK'. 'Could be anything. I'd expect human meat to be redder – based on the amount of myoglobin in the tissue – but if it's been bled and frozen . . . We'll need to defrost and DNA-test all of this before we'll know for sure.'

Isobel pulled over another cardboard box, sliced through the plastic strapping, and started picking her way through the contents. 'You can tell *Inspector* Insch it'll take at least two weeks.'

Logan groaned. 'He's not going to like that.'

'That's not my problem, Sergeant.'

Oh, when she wanted someone to babysit her kid, or suffer through her endless digital camera slideshows of the sticky-fingered, dribbly little monster, he was 'Logan', but when she was pissed off at work he was 'Sergeant.'

'Look,' he said, 'it's not *my* fault Insch had a go at you, OK? You think he's bad tonight? I get him all bloody day—' Clunk. Logan froze, eyes sweeping the shelves of frozen goods, hoping it wasn't Alec with his camera. Things were bad enough without being caught complaining about Insch on national television. 'Hello?'

'Sergeant McRae?' Mr Thompson peered around a stack of boxes marked 'FISH FINGERS'. 'I've found the dockets...' he trailed off and stared at the pile of meat as Isobel added another chunk to the crate, the frozen pieces clattering against one another like ceramic tiles. 'Is ... is that all ...?'

'We won't know till we test it.' Logan held out his hand, and the rumpled man looked puzzled for a moment, then tried to shake it. 'No,' Logan took a step back, leaving him hanging, 'the dockets?'

'Oh, right. Right. Of course.' He handed over a crumpled sheet of yellow A4, covered with biro scribbles. 'Sorry.'

Thompson fidgeted nervously as Logan read.

'What's going to happen? I mean if that ...' He swallowed. 'What am I going to tell my customers?'

Logan pulled out his mobile phone and scrolled through the contacts list. 'We're going to need names and addresses for everyone who has access to this freezer. I want staff records, customers, suppliers, the lot.' An electronic voice on the other

end of the line told him the number he was dialling was busy, please try again later.

The man in the crumpled suit shivered, wrapped his arms around himself and looked as if he was about to cry. 'We're a family firm, been here thirty years . . . '

'Yes, well,' Logan tried for a reassuring smile, 'you never know: the tests might come up negative.'

'I wouldn't go getting Mr Thompson's hopes up,' said Isobel. She sat back on her haunches, breath a cloud of white around her head as she lifted something out of the box at her feet. From where Logan was standing it looked just like another chunk of pork, and he said so.

'That's true . . . ' she turned the joint of meat over, 'but pigs don't usually have tattoos of unicorns on their backsides.'