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The Jackdaw

Written by Luke Delaney

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THE JACKDAW

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The thick hood was pulled from his head and Paul Elkins squeezed his eyes closed tightly against the bright, white light that tried to penetrate his pain and fear, but the agony of the duck-tape being ripped off his mouth fired them open as wide as if he was being electrocuted. As the shock of the pain receded, his eyes blinked the room into focus, his chest heaving with panic as the sweat poured down the sides of his face and back. His arms and legs were bound with more duck-tape to a heavy, old wooden chair that creaked as he struggled, but didn't move. He bucked and kicked in the chair until the futility of his efforts overwhelmed him and drained him of his strength and determination, the desperation of his situation becoming increasingly undeniable.

The details of the room that was now his prison seeped into his consciousness. It was painted entirely white, with portable lamps providing too much light. Sheets of black plastic hung from the walls where he assumed there were windows, so no natural light penetrated the room. In front of him the man who'd abducted him from the London street in broad daylight stood straight and strong – confident and in control, his face concealed by his black ski-mask and wrap-around sunglasses, his hands in black leather gloves, the rest

of his clothes also all black. Only his mouth was partially visible, slightly obscured by a tiny microphone held in place by a head-strap and connected to two black boxes attached to his chest – one about the size of a hardback book, the other the size of a cigarette packet. The man didn't speak. Behind him a foldable table stretched out – upon it a collection of laptops, cameras, phones and other equipment Elkins didn't recognize, all of which were connected to a portable electricity generator.

Elkins stared at the man through his brown eyes for what seemed an eternity, waiting for him to speak and explain his motivation – to tell him why he'd been brought to this intimidating place. But the man said nothing. In all his fifty-one years Elkins had never been treated with anything other than respect and sometimes fear, but now that counted for nothing. Again his slim, fit body writhed in the chair before once more surrendering to futility. He forced some saliva into his dry mouth, moving it around with his tongue before speaking.

'Do you know who I am?' he demanded, but his voice trembled so much he hardly recognized it himself. The man said nothing. Did nothing. 'I know a lot of powerful people. The people I work for will happily pay you whatever you want, if that's what this is about.' The man slowly turned his back on Elkins and began to switch on the various computers and cameras on the table, all of which Elkins noticed were pointing directly at him. 'What are you doing? What's this about? Are you sending a ransom demand?'

The man turned to him and finally spoke. 'No,' he answered, his voice warped by the voice distorter that hung around his neck, electronic and distant – un-human. 'No ransom demand. I'm summoning your jury.'

'What?'

'Your jury, Mr Elkins.'

Elkins blinked in confusion. 'You know who I am?'

'Of course.'

'Then what do you want?'

'Justice, Mr Elkins. All I want is justice.'

'I don't understand.'

'You will,' the man told him before turning his back to examine a computer screen, speaking without looking. 'It appears we're attracting some attention. Just a few hundred people, but this is only the beginning. You are the first, but you will not be the last. In the future thousands will log in as jurors. Thousands will see justice being done. Justice for the people, where money and power can't corrupt the system. Where your influence means nothing. Are you ready to be judged, Mr Elkins?'

'I haven't committed any crime.'

'Is that what you really believe? Why don't we let the people decide?'

The man spun quickly on his heels and walked to Elkins's side, filling his chest with air before beginning to speak in that unearthly voice. He addressed the hundreds who watched from their homes and offices, bus stops and trains – all of whom had stumbled across the live-stream of Elkins taped to the chair while searching the Internet for cheap holidays, news updates, amusing homemade videos and God knows what else. He spoke directly into the camera connected to the computer.

'All of you should know this man you see here is a criminal,' he accused. Elkins bucked in his chair, a look of disbelief spreading across his face.

'I'm no criminal. I've never even been arrested.'

'No. No you haven't, because your type never do get arrested, do they, Mr Elkins? They never get brought to justice, are never punished for their crimes. They are above the law. Not any more. It's time for the people of this country to judge you.'

'I've never done anything to anyone,' Elkins pleaded, his words stuttering and desperate. 'Why are you recording this?'

'I'm not just recording it,' the man explained. 'This is being transmitted live, so people like me can finally see justice being done.'

'I haven't done anything. You're not the police. This isn't a court.'

'Haven't done anything?' the man asked, his electronic voice calm. 'Then let me explain your crimes – your crimes against honest, hard-working people who lost their jobs, had their houses taken away from them, lost their wives, husbands and their families while you grew richer and fatter on their misery. You paid yourselves millions in bonuses despite your incompetence, leaving the people to pay for your mistakes and your greed.'

'What?'

'But as your banks came close to collapsing was it you who financed their survival? No. It was *us*. *The people*. And when the government was emptying our bank accounts and stealing our jobs, did you or any of the other pigs at the trough stop gorging yourselves? No. The feeding frenzy continued whilst we suffered. Some of us lost everything. Many others took their own lives to escape the pain and misery you caused. You continued to not only protect your wealth, but grow it, while we could barely feed our children.'

'Christ. Is this what this is about – the banking crisis? For God's sake, that was years ago.'

'And still we suffer and still the bankers grow fat refusing even to loan us our own money – investing it in houses across London that most of us could only dream about, stealing our money just as surely as if they'd robbed us in the street – and you dare to ask what your crimes are, dare to say you're no criminal.'

Elkins tried to defend himself, but the man talked over him, resting a gloved hand on his shoulder. 'You are Paul Elkins, correct?'

'Yes.'

'You are the CEO of Fairfield's Bank, correct?'

'So?'

'A bank that lost billions because of its failure to properly supervise its own staff – a staff who were knowingly selling mortgages to people who couldn't afford them?'

'We made mistakes, yes, but . . .'

'Because they'd been promised bonuses of tens of thousands of pounds if they met their greed-driven targets?'

'No one was forced to take out one of our mortgages.'

'Weren't they?' Elkins didn't answer. 'Decent people sold into poverty, homelessness and bankruptcy by you.'

'I didn't sell anyone a mortgage.'

'You were the CEO,' the electronic voice snapped at him. 'You were responsible. You were supposed to prevent it from happening, but you didn't, because the money kept rolling in – right into your pockets. And when it went wrong, when the walls of your bank almost came tumbling down and you had to be saved by the government, by money that rightly belonged to *the people*, did you lose your job like we would have? No. You kept your two-million-pounds-a-year salary and even had so much contempt for the rest of us that you paid yourself a three-million-pound bonus. A three-million-pound bonus for failure.'

The man stepped closer to the camera, his hand pointing back to Elkins as he spoke. 'Members of the jury, this man is not just a criminal and a thief – he's a murderer. Every life taken, every suicide committed because of the crimes of the greedy few – this man and others like him are responsible. But have any of them been punished for their crimes? No. It's time to change all that. It's time for justice. My brothers and sisters – it's time to judge.'

Mark Hudson, seventeen years old, sat in the bedroom of his family's council flat in Birmingham hypnotized by the masked man preaching in his electronic voice on the screen of his

laptop. His friends, Danny and Zach, messed around in the background, not nearly as interested.

'Shut the fuck up, you two,' he demanded. 'I can't hear what he's saying.'

'It's all just bullshit,' Danny argued. 'It ain't real. Just a couple of clowns looking for publicity.'

'No,' Hudson snapped. 'Listen to what the man's saying. That bloke in the chair's one of them banker bastards.'

'So?' Zach joined in. 'What the fuck's that got to do with us?'

'Just shut up and listen,' Hudson insisted, silencing his friends who had no intention of crossing him further, well aware of his reputation on the estate that had earned him the nickname 'Psycho Mark'.

'Time to judge this man for his crimes against the people of this country,' the man on the screen told them. *'Your job is merely to pass judgement. Once his guilt has been established I will determine his sentence, which I must warn you now – could be death.'*

'Fucking hell,' Hudson declared, his eyes wide with excitement – a grin appearing on his lips. 'He's gonna kill him.'

Gabriel Westbrook leaned in closer to his computer screen when the masked man mentioned death. He didn't know the victim, but they had plenty in common – high-paid careers in the City, beautiful homes, expensive habits – although he was much younger than Elkins at only thirty-four. He considered summoning his wife to watch with him, but decided that was probably a bad idea.

'Is this for real?' he whispered to himself as he listened to the man's words, rendered all the more disturbing by the warped voice.

'If there was another way I would not be doing what I have now been forced to do. But it is the only way these people will ever listen to us. Only through fear and terror will they take notice. I have no choice but to do what I have to do.'

‘Christ,’ Westbrook told the empty room. ‘Is this a hoax? Please let this be a hoax.’

‘Come and have a look at this, love,’ Phil Taylor called out to his wife Cathy in their small home in Hull. She sensed the excitement in his voice and walked the short distance from the kitchen to the cramped office. Her husband was sitting in front of a computer screen that displayed a masked figure next to a man taped to a chair.

‘For God’s sake, what are you watching?’ she asked, shocked that he’d want to share it with her. ‘This isn’t pornography, is it?’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ he told her. ‘This bloke’s kidnapped one of them bankers.’

‘Not this again,’ she moaned, rolling her eyes in disapproval.

‘Hey,’ he warned her. ‘Those bastards cost me my business and our home. We wouldn’t be living in this shit house and I wouldn’t be doing my shit job if it wasn’t for their bloody greed and incompetence.’

‘We overstretched,’ she reminded him. ‘That’s why we lost the business and house.’

‘You can believe that if you want,’ he told her with a snarl, ‘but I know the truth. Now it looks like someone else has finally had enough too.’

‘It’s important I make a statement here and now. It’s important we show the rich and the greedy this is their new reality. No more can they steal from us and fear no retribution. From this day on, they will be punished for their crimes.’

‘What’s he gonna do to him?’ Cathy asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he answered. ‘Said he might kill him.’

‘Jesus Christ, turn it off,’ she told him.

‘No,’ he insisted, never looking away from the screen. ‘I want to see what he does to him. I want to see the bastard squirm.’

* * *

Father Alex Jones sat in the small office in St Thomas More Catholic Church, Dulwich, watching and listening to the continuing monologue of the masked man. Instinct told him that this was no stunt – the man was deadly serious. His original reason for searching the Internet long forgotten, he pressed his hands tightly together and began to whisper prayers for both the victim and masked man – salvation for both and forgiveness for one.

'Now I need you – my brothers and my sisters – to play your part. It's time to judge. If you believe this man is guilty of crimes against the people then simply click on the like icon. If you believe he is innocent then click on the dislike icon. Once the judgement is made, the sentence will be carried out accordingly. One click, one vote. Don't waste your time trying to make multiple votes. The Your View system only allows one vote per user.'

'God forgive you,' the priest whispered as he clicked on the dislike icon, leaning away to watch how other viewers were voting. The like and dislike numbers were growing rapidly – but one far quicker than the other.

Mark Hudson watched the voting just as closely as the priest, but he was praying for a different outcome.

'What's happening?' Danny asked.

'Shut the fuck up,' was Hudson's only reply.

'The people have voted and they have overwhelmingly found you guilty. Have you anything you want to say?'

'This has gone far enough,' Elkins shouted as the masked man momentarily disappeared from the screen. *'You need to let me go now.'* His face twisted with terror. *'You've made your point.'*

There was the noise of metal on metal before the man reappeared with a length of rope – a noose tied at one end while the other looked to go straight to the ceiling, out of shot. The masked man looped the noose over the struggling Elkins, ignoring his writhing and bucking – ignoring his pleas.

'Please don't do this. Please. I haven't done anything wrong. I can give the money back. You can have it. I just want to see my wife and children again. I'm a family man.' But the man ignored him as he reached for another rope that seemed to hang from the ceiling.

'The people have judged you, Mr Elkins. Now I must pass sentence. Your punishment shall be . . . death.' Before Elkins could speak again, the man pulled the rope he was holding towards the floor, the rope attached to the noose around Elkins's neck instantly growing taut, vibrating with tension as it lifted him, chair and all, from the floor. Terrible sounds came from behind Elkins's gritted teeth as he fought desperately for his life.

'Fucking hell,' Hudson exclaimed, unaware that his two friends were backing away from the screen, their faces serious and pale while his beamed and glowed. 'He's hanging the fucker. He's really doing it. Ha. This is fucking brilliant.'

Westbrook watched on as the older version of himself hung from the rope, still taped to the chair – the man's eyes growing increasingly bulbous and grotesque – his mouth now open with his tongue protruding and writhing around like a dying lizard. He felt sick and scared all in the same moment. Someone wanted revenge – revenge against him and all his type. Which one of them would be next? He felt a shiver run up his spine.

'I can't watch this any more,' Cathy told her husband. 'I think I'm going to be sick. Turn it off.' She reached for the computer's power switch, but her husband pushed her hand away, eyes full of hate – although not for her.

'Leave it,' he ordered.

'Please tell me you don't want to watch this,' she pleaded. 'A man's being killed. Murdered. Why the hell do you want to watch it?'

'Maybe he had it coming. Maybe he deserved it. Maybe they all do.'

'Jesus, Phil,' she told him. 'No one deserves that.'

'Don't they?' he asked. 'And what about me? Did I deserve what happened to me? Did I deserve to lose everything?'

'You just lost money, Phil. This is a man's life.' She turned and walked from the room. 'I won't be in the same room as this. I hope they catch the bastard and hang him.' She left him sitting staring at the screen – a thin smile spreading across his face as he watched Elkins's body finally go limp.

The priest closed his eyes and drew an imaginary cross over his heart, summoning the courage to once again look at the scene of barbarity he'd just witnessed on his computer screen. Being a priest in modern London was not what the public imagined it to be. He regularly had to deal with abused youngsters and battered women who for whatever reason were too scared or unwilling to go to the police, although he'd always encourage them to do so. And then there was the missionary work he'd done in Africa – teaching men and women who'd had their arms hacked off with machetes how to somehow survive after yet another civil war in the Congo, as well as many other terrible things he'd seen that he never talked about. But this was as repellent as anything he'd ever witnessed. When he finally opened his eyes the masked man was standing in front of the still swaying body and chair.

'Justice has been done. The first of the guilty has been punished. Rest assured, my friends – my brothers and sisters – there will be more.' The man released the rope and allowed the body and chair to crash to the floor before walking towards the camera. A few seconds later the screen went blank.

Father Alex clasped his hands together and began to pray, but found it difficult to focus – his mind still trapped in more earthly matters. The terrible crime he'd just witnessed would no doubt have to be investigated by the police – by detectives.

The thought brought to mind the troubled policeman who occasionally came to see him – DI Sean Corrigan. Would he be the man who'd have to try to catch this remorseless killer?

'Our Father who art in heaven – protect us from this *new* evil in our lives and forgive him who has done the unforgivable.'