

THE BOY ON THE BUS

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Edinburgh, 1997

The Grassmarket was just beginning to wake up, beaten to the chase even by a moon that had been in the sky for a good two hours at least. But the people crowding the street didn't seem to mind: they spilled out of the makeshift theatres and into the bars and take-aways, talking loudly and oblivious that the city might have a single soul in it that hadn't travelled there for the Festival.

With that many people around, and that much alcohol flowing, the scream was nothing unusual. Barely anyone paid it any attention.

Barely.

'It's weird,' Martha was saying, holding a chip in front of her. 'It's like they got gravy and brown sauce and just mixed them up.'

She popped the chip into her mouth with a smile.

The Doctor wasn't listening. His bag of chips, with salt and sauce, was sitting open in his hand, but his eyes were looking in the other direction.

‘Doctor?’ Martha said. ‘Hello?’

‘Hmm?’ he said, distracted. He seemed to remember that she was there for a moment, which was nice, and said: ‘Did you hear that?’

Here we go again.

‘Oh come on!’ Martha whined. ‘You said we were just staying to get chips: we’ve been here all day. Can’t we just leave it?’

But the Doctor’s attention was down the road again: a double-decker bus had pulled to the side of the road, its driver standing by the doors trying to hold back a young hoodie. No, Martha corrected herself, it was the nineties and they didn’t have hoodies yet: he was just a young kid in a hood. A small crowd was starting to gather around them, but no-one was helping the bus driver out. Probably too scared of the boy, who was violently kicking and shouting as if his life depended on it.

‘Hold these, would you?’ the Doctor said, handing his chips over.

Martha rolled her eyes, but as the Doctor hurried over to the bus she was only a few steps behind him. It might not be Dalek invasions, but there might be something the two of them could do to help.

‘Hello there,’ the Doctor said cheerfully. ‘What’s all this then?’

The driver just gave him a pitiful look and kept trying to pull the shouting youngster away from the vehicle.

‘He’s touched in the head,’ the driver barked.

The Doctor rested a hand on the youth’s shoulder and prised him from the driver’s grip. For a moment, the youngster seemed too surprised to react, spinning and finding himself eyeball to eyeball with the Doctor. Martha felt her heart give a little skip, but the Doctor just gave a friendly smile.

‘There now,’ he said. ‘Everything’s alright, isn’t it?’

‘You’ve got to stop him, man!’ the boy shouted.

‘Alright,’ came a gruff Scot’s accent through the gathering crowd. ‘Let’s be calming all this down, eh?’

A ginger-haired man in a pinstriped suit appeared by the Doctor's side. He took a cigarette from his mouth and dropped it to the floor in one practiced motion, as he folded his arms and looked disapprovingly at the Doctor. In his wake came a shorter, darker man whose clothes were almost completely hidden beneath a crumpled brown raincoat. The second man looked nervously to Martha the moment he felt her eyes on him, and then snapped his attention back to the trio at the centre of the crowd.

'Why don't you let the wee schemie go, eh?' the ginger-haired man said, with an air of half-veiled threat. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a little leather wallet, flipping it open. 'DI Kirkwell. This is DC Walk. How about we quieten this up so we can all get home to bed, eh?'

The Doctor reached into his jacket and pulled out his own wallet.

'DCI Sam Tyler,' he said, showing a blank piece of paper. 'This is DI Jean Hunt. Greater Manchester Police.'

DI Kirkwell gave Martha a quick look, and she smiled sweetly.

'You're a way off your patch, sir,' he grumbled.

'Just here for the Festival. Aren't we, Martha?' the Doctor answered. Martha flashed her eyes, and the Doctor leant confidentially towards the DI: 'She likes to be called Martha. No idea why. Anyway, we saw the commotion and thought we'd lend a hand.'

'Much obliged,' Kirkwell said, making it clear he meant the opposite.

'Is he alright?' DC Walk asked the driver, looking at the young boy.

'He's off his nut,' the driver answered helpfully.

'You're polis?' the boy said urgently, grabbing Kirkwell by the lapels. 'You've got to get him. He's up there!'

The boy looked back to the bus, a look of terror on his face.

'It's alright,' Walk said, his voice calm and English-accented. 'You're safe.'

'I'm no!' the boy shouted. 'He's up there! He killed Davey, and he's after me!'

The Doctor and Kirkwell gave each other a grave look, and then turned as one to the bus door. The crowd started backing away from the bus.

‘I’ll go up the stairs,’ the Doctor was saying. ‘You watch the windows.’

Kirkwell simply nodded.

‘You’ve got to stop him,’ the boy sobbed.

Martha stepped forward and put a comforting arm around him.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said softly.

‘You both as touched as he is?’ the driver snapped. ‘You think I’d be down here wrestling wi’ him if there was a killer on my bus? It’s empty up there: this mad rocket’s the only one who’s been up there this last quarter of an hour.’

The Doctor and Kirkwell both looked to the driver, to each other and finally to the boy. Martha could feel the youngster’s sobs as they fought their way out of him: whatever else he might be, he was genuinely terrified of something.

‘He killed Davey,’ he sobbed again. ‘He killed him.’

And he looked to Martha, pleading for her to believe him.

The CID suite was stifling hot, even at such a late hour: the days were uncommonly hot that summer, and the station wasn’t air conditioned. Five minutes ago, it had been empty: all the detectives were either safely tucked up in their beds or out on the streets trying to carry on their business as if the city’s population hadn’t just trebled overnight. Now, of course, it had five new occupants: the young boy, sat on a chair clutching a plastic cup of water, and around him Kirkwell and Walk, Martha and the Doctor.

Nobody else said a word, waiting for the boy to carry on.

‘He was my mate,’ the boy said. ‘Me and Davey. We grew up together. He lived in the flat next to me. Did everything together. And he killed him, and you’re giving me all this? Why aren’t you looking for him? Coz we’re just a couple of schemies from Craigie. You don’t care.’

The boy's name was Martin, Martin McMillan according to the records that DI Kirkwell had managed to drag up. He lived in what the DI had assured Martha was one of the rougher areas of the city, where the police only went in riot vans, and then only if they absolutely had to. Martin was only fifteen, but already had quite a record behind him: petty thieving and fighting, mainly, although recently he'd been branching out into mugging. Martha had seen plenty of Martins before at Royal Hope, coming in of a Saturday to get patched up. Frequent fliers, Andi on reception called them.

She gave the boy a small smile, but he just scowled.

'Tell me what happened,' the Doctor said, leaning in.

'What do you care?' Martin spat.

'I care,' the Doctor said, fixing the boy with a stare. 'Tell me, please.'

There was a moment, then Martin shuffled uncomfortably.

'We were on the bus,' he said, not catching the Doctor's eye. 'Me and Davey. Going into town – down to the Grassmarket.'

Martin looked at the four of them, as if daring them to say something. Kirkwell had already explained that after dark the Festival attracted a lot of the local lads, looking for posh drama students who were in turn looking to slum it for the night. If they were lucky, all they had lost in the morning was a little bit of their self-respect.

'We saw this feller on the bus,' Martin continued. 'Not so big. Bit of a scruff. I wanted to leave him be, but Davey was in the mood. He gave him a bit of hassle. Nothing big: just bothered him for a fag, that's all.'

'And a bit of cash too, eh?' Kirkwell said.

'I don't know, it was Davey,' was all Martin would say, scowling in the DI's direction.

'And then what?' Martha asked softly.

Martin gave a shudder.

'He grabbed him,' he said, his eyes glazing over. 'Picked Davey up by his neck and threw him right across the bus. Bent the seat all out of shape when he

landed, he threw him so hard. Then he looked at me. "Wait there: you're next" he said, and started laying into Davey. He was killing him. There was nothing I could do. I ran. But that choob driver wouldn't let me off, wouldn't believe me. Then you lot turned up and now I'm sitting here and he's out there laughing at us. You should be doing something.'

The Doctor closed his eyes for just a second.

'Don't worry,' he told Martin. 'We'll find him.'

Martin didn't look convinced.

'We'll find him?' Kirkwell said incredulously.

DC Walk had been left to look after Martin, and offer him some scant reassurance that his mysterious attacker wasn't about to break into the station and finish the job. Kirkwell, Martha and the Doctor had stepped out to the canteen, ostensibly to get a coffee and discuss the case, but Martha didn't much like the look of the ancient machine in the corner and the Doctor and Kirkwell looked too set on arguing to bother with anything else.

'There's no-one to find, man!' Kirkwell threw his hands up in despair. 'There's no Davey Malcolm: there's not even a Malcolm family in that lad's whole tenement. The family on his left are Stevie Carmichael's lot God help them, and on his right it's the Pakistani family run the corner store underneath. We've been over every file we've got on McMillan and there's no Davey Malcolm. But he reckons they both got done for shoplifting twice last month. How d'you think we missed him twice?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor admitted.

'I'll tell you how: because he doesn't bloody exist!' Kirkwell yelled. 'And if the victim doesn't exist, how you going to convince the DCS that the murderer does, eh?'

'He does seem pretty certain about it all,' Martha said diplomatically.

'He's aff his heid,' was Kirkwell's answer.

Martha had to admit that it was the most simple explanation.

'I don't think so,' the Doctor said. 'It's a very specific psychosis if it is, anyway. To imagine a lifelong friend murdered in front of you, but with no other symptoms demonstrating themselves? You said yourself that he was here twice last month: he was that sick and not one of the officers who came into contact with him noticed it?'

'Aye,' Kirkwell said gruffly. 'Well we were too busy processing his imaginary friend, weren't we? I'm going to see how Walk's doing. Sir.'

And with that, Kirkwell turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door loudly as he went. Martha watched him go, and then turned to the Doctor with her eyebrows raised.

'Sir?' she echoed.

The Doctor looked a little guilty.

'You forget, DI Hunt, I'm a Detective Chief Inspector,' he said. 'I outrank Detective Inspector Kirkwell.'

'So you can order him to investigate Martin's story?'

'Well, technically . . .' he answered. 'But DI Kirkwell works for Lothian and Borders police, while we apparently work for the Met. We'd have to get our superiors to convince his superiors before I could really order him about.'

'And that might be a little tricky,' Martha said with a grin.

'Considering we don't actually have any superiors,' the Doctor admitted. 'Still, there's bound to be a bit of professional courtesy.'

'I can see that,' Martha laughed.

'Well, let's just hope we don't annoy him so much that he rings police HQ to complain,' the Doctor said ruefully.

'You really think it's worth sticking around?' Martha asked.

The Doctor stopped for a moment and fixed Martha with his soulful eyes. She felt a shy smile beginning to play across her lips, and pulled herself together sharply.

'Don't you?' he asked.

Martha paused.

'I want to help,' she said, cautiously. 'But this doesn't seem like our kind of thing, does it?'

'Doesn't it?' the Doctor echoed. 'I don't know . . . He's not mad, I know that much. In my line of work, you tend to get a pretty good radar for that kind of thing. And I can't see any advantage for him in sticking to his story. He wasn't doing anything wrong on the bus that we can tell: all he has to do is say he made a mistake and Kirkwell would let him walk out of here right now. But . . .'

'So he's telling the truth?' Martha said. 'Davey was real, and this stranger killed him so well he never even existed?'

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair.

'It's not so difficult to delete records from the police database,' he mused. 'And with the right technology, you could even erase someone from history altogether. It would be like they never existed.'

'You're kidding,' Martha said uncertainly.

'I could do it,' the Doctor answered quietly.

Martha felt a little shiver work down her spine, and she decided that she didn't want to go any further down that road.

'Come on,' the Doctor said, heading for the door. 'Let's see what Kirkwell's up to.'

And so Martha followed.

They found the DI in the station's AV room, in front of a stack of video recorders that looked ancient to Martha but were probably state of the art for 1997. He had a video tape in front of him, and a remote control that he was scowling at as if it was his chief suspect. He looked up as Martha and the Doctor stepped into the room, and then went back to glaring at the remote.

'This is the CCTV tape from the bus,' Kirkwell said, not looking up. 'Arrived a couple of minutes ago.'

'That was fast,' Martha said.

'I told them you wanted it,' Kirkwell said bitterly. 'We always bend over backwards to help out our colleagues from down South. You want to see?'

The Doctor slid into the chair beside Kirkwell.

'Soon as I work out how to use this thing . . .'

'May I?' the Doctor asked.

Kirkwell threw his hands up, disowning any responsibility for the remote from the moment it touched the Doctor's hands. From the look on his face, he looked like he might be hoping it would explode.

There was a knock on the door, and DC Walk entered.

'Phone call for you,' he said.

'Tell them I'm busy,' Kirkwell grumbled.

'Sorry, sir,' Walk said. 'Not you. DI Hunt.'

It took Martha a moment to remember that was meant to be her.

'Me?' she said, surprised.

'Sounded important,' Walk said.

Martha looked to the Doctor, and he gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

'OK, where is it?'

'The DI's office. Down the corridor on the left,' Walk answered, sliding into place behind Kirkwell and the Doctor. 'Can't miss it.'

As she left, she heard the Doctor say:

'Alright, shall we watch?'

As she returned from DI Kirkwell's office, Martha tried hard not to run. It was pretty late at night now, and the station was running on a skeleton staff, but she still didn't want to draw too much attention to herself. If anybody asked her what was wrong, she wasn't entirely sure that she could answer. But something strange was definitely going on.

As she reached the AV room, DC Walk was just stepping out.

'Hey!' she shouted.

Walk turned and looked at her.

'DI Hunt?' he said. 'Can I help you?'

'Where's the Doctor?' Martha asked.

'Do you mean the pathologist?' Walk asked, eyebrow raised.

Oh yeah.

'DCI Tyler,' she corrected. 'I need to speak with him.'

'Oh, he's still with DI Kirkwell,' Walk said. 'I don't think the CCTV was as helpful as he would have liked.'

'OK, thanks,' Martha said.

Walk stepped aside so that she could get into the AV room. He didn't follow her in, probably having his own business to attend to. Inside, she found the Doctor staring at a blank television screen. DI Kirkwell had leant back in his chair, hands behind his head and a broad smile all over his face.

'Is everything OK?' Martha asked.

'Oh aye,' Kirkwell beamed. 'Positively.'

'The CCTV footage,' the Doctor explained, pointing at the blank screen.

'Martin was alone on the top deck from the moment he got on to the moment he ran off screaming.'

So, he was mad then.

'Well, we've got something else to worry about,' Martha said.

'Don't tell me that was your mother,' the Doctor joked half-heartedly.

‘It was the Commissioner,’ Martha said. ‘They need us back at the Met. Something big’s happened.’

The Doctor turned in his chair and fixed Martha with a strange look.

‘What?’ he said.

‘The phone call?’ Martha explained. Surely it wasn’t that hard to grasp? ‘They’re recalling us: we need to get the next train to London. They’ll brief us when we get there.’

‘The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police called here?’ the Doctor asked slowly. ‘For us?’

‘Yes!’ Martha was getting exasperated now.

‘Well, don’t be a stranger,’ Kirkwell said brightly.

‘No, let me just get this straight,’ the Doctor said, fixing Martha to the spot with a look. ‘Paul Condon rang here and ordered DCI Tyler and DI Hunt back to London?’

Now that he said it like that, something did seem strange about it.

‘Erm, yeah,’ Martha said hesitantly.

The Doctor smiled broadly.

‘DI Kirkwell,’ he said. ‘Shall we watch that video again?’

Martin McMillan said on an uncomfortable plastic chair in the middle of the office and waited for somebody to tell him what was going on. He’d always knew that the polis had no love for schemies, but for them to just pretend that Davey hadn’t even died? He didn’t know what scared him more: that they’d even bothered trying it, or that everybody seemed to be taking their word for it.

The polis in the long coat walked in and handed him a plastic cup of water.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘You’ll be able to go soon.’

Martin just grunted and took the water.

The doors at the far end of the room swung open and the other three walked in. They all had serious looks on their faces. Martin felt his heart beat a little bit harder, and then the ginger one turned and locked the door behind him. This was it then: they were going to keep him quiet any way they could.

‘Hey, alright,’ Martin stammered. ‘I admit it: I made it up. There’s no-one called Davey. Just let me go home, eh? I won’t talk to no-one.’

‘You’re not in any trouble,’ the Doctor said softly.

‘Aw don’t hurt me, man,’ Martin cried.

‘Shut it,’ Kirkwell barked at him. ‘Who’s talking to you?’

‘We know you didn’t mean to hurt anyone,’ the Doctor continued. ‘Did you, DC Walk?’

Martin looked up at the polis in the coat.

His mouth was hanging open.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ Walk said.

But Martha could see in his eyes that he knew.

‘We watched the tape again,’ the Doctor explained. Walk’s eyes widened. ‘And before you do anything, why don’t you listen to us? It can’t hurt just to listen, can it? You can always do whatever you were going to do afterwards, can’t you?’

Walk paused, and then rested quietly into a chair.

‘How did you know?’ he asked.

‘Who cares?’ snapped Kirkwell. ‘I want to know how you did it. I watched that tape twice and I saw that little minker on his own on that bus both times. Then along comes DCI Tyler, and suddenly there you are sitting in the seat next to him. It’s not bloody possible.’

‘Him?’ Martin said. ‘He wasn’t on the bus!’

'Yes, he was,' the Doctor said. 'He was there all the time, but he altered your memory so that you didn't remember him. He did the same with your memory of watching the CCTV footage, DI Kirkwell. Mine as well, actually. Fortunately, you altered Martha's memory of coming to the Inspector's office and finding out there wasn't a telephone call for her. My guess is that you can't read minds, just implant false memories, is that right?'

'What?' Kirkwell spat.

Walk looked down at his feet.

'Yes,' he said.

The Doctor nodded.

'So you planted a memory in my head?' Martha said in disbelief. 'It seemed so real: I honestly believed the Commissioner had called us back to London.'

'Even though there was no way he could have,' the Doctor said.

'You aren't really policemen, are you?' Walk said.

'No,' the Doctor confirmed.

'What?' Kirkwell said again.

The Doctor pulled his leather wallet from his pocket.

'Psychic paper,' he explained. 'Have you heard of it?'

'No,' Walk answered.

'It works in much the same way your abilities do,' the Doctor explained.

'Convinces people they remember seeing something they haven't.'

'You're impersonating police officers,' Kirkwell glowered.

'Not now,' Martha said sharply.

'So why don't you stop your influence now?' the Doctor suggested gently. 'It must be tiring for you.'

Walk looked up at the Doctor, and then disappeared.

A red-eyed green skinned creature sat in his place instead.

Kirkwell collapsed backwards onto a desk.

The CID suite was stifling hot, even at such a late hour: the days were uncommonly hot that summer, and the station wasn't air conditioned. Most of the night, it had been empty: all the detectives were either safely tucked up in their beds or out on the streets trying to carry on their business as if the city's population hadn't just trebled overnight. Just the same five occupants: the young boy, clinging tight to Martha, and Kirkwell and the Doctor. Looking at the green-skinned creature that had pretended to be Walk, sitting in the chair.

'Why don't you tell us what happened?' the Doctor asked softly.

The creature that had been Walk bowed his head.

'I was on the bus,' he said quietly. 'I wasn't going anywhere particular. I am a castaway here: my days are mostly spent trying to keep from being discovered. But this boy approached me and demanded money from me. I did not have any. I would have gently implanted the memory that he had not seen me, but before I could he had drawn a weapon. He cut me, and I panicked. I implanted a defensive memory.'

'You made him think you'd killed his best friend,' Kirkwell growled.

'It was intended to frighten him away,' Walk answered. 'I panicked.'

'And then?' the Doctor asked, frowning at Kirkwell.

'I realised what I had done,' Walk said. 'I tried to stop the boy, remove the memory, but he ran to the driver, who stopped the bus, and then . . .'

'There were too many people for you to influence,' the Doctor nodded. 'And then the Inspector arrived.'

'Yes,' Walk confirmed.

'But you could have just escaped,' Martha interrupted. 'You made us all think you weren't on the bus: why not just run?'

'I wanted to make sure the boy was alright,' Walk said.

'So you altered the Inspector's memories to make him think you were his colleague,' the Doctor said.

'That's why there was no DC Walk on the duty roster?' Kirkwell said.

'We checked after we realised someone had altered our memories of the CCTV footage,' the Doctor explained.

'I'm sorry,' Walk said, looking up at Kirkwell.

'So what do we do now?' Martha asked.

'Do?' Kirkwell echoed. 'It's a bloody alien. It made me think he was my constable: I remembered going to his birthday party last week! There are people we ring, and they take care of it. Torchwood –'

'Won't be hearing about our friend here,' the Doctor said coldly.

'Oh do you bloody think so?' Kirkwell snapped. 'I'm not just going to forget about this!'

There was an awkward silence.

'I'm sorry,' said the Doctor softly. 'I'm so sorry.'

His head pounding, James Kirkwell rolled groggily over and punched his alarm clock off. His mouth felt like the Sahara had moved in for the duration, and he had a horrible suspicion that he was meant to be on duty in a stupidly short amount of hours. He rubbed his eyes and let out a little groan, trying to piece together his vague memories of last night. He had definitely gone out for a couple after work with John, and he had a vague recollection of stepping out when the Inspector had suggested they head to the Oxford Bar. The rest of the night, though, was a blank.

Was there something about a bus?

He really needed to give up the booze.

Martin McMillan sat on the brick wall, kicking his feet and thinking. He'd been there most of the morning, watching his friends milling around in the courtyard below, putting together their little schemes and hatching their little plans. A couple of them had called up to him to get off his arse and join them, but Martin had just waved them away and turned his head.

Something had happened last night.

Something strange.

He remembered the bus. He remembered the polis. He remembered getting dragged up to the station, even though he'd done nothing wrong. He remembered Davey, poor daft Davey, but more than that he remembered that Davey was nothing more than a twitch in his brain. There was no Davey, and he had never really died, even though his best friend Martin could remember it. But he could remember his real life too, nestling there side by side with the fiction.

And of course he remembered the Doctor.

Last night, after the alien thing had done whatever it had done to the policeman's head, they'd all stood outside the station and looked up at the moon. The policeman – Inspector Kirkwell – had wandered off in the opposite direction, heading home. He didn't remember any of it, because of the alien thing.

Martin had looked up at the Doctor.

'What you going to do now?' he'd asked.

'Well,' the Doctor had answered. 'I think I should take our friend back to his home. His real home. After that? Who knows.'

'And me?' Martin had asked. 'You going to make me forget too?'

There had been a long pause then.

'No,' the Doctor had finally answered. 'I think we can trust you. Can't we?'

And then they'd put his memories back the way they should, and they'd gone.

No-one had ever trusted Martin before. He was just some dumb Schemie from Craigie, and no-one expected much more from him than not scraping his knuckles as he shuffled down to the dole office each week. They didn't trust him to

keep himself alive without some social worker checking up on him every other week. But he had found out the big secret: there were aliens out there; there were aliens down here. And they trusted him to keep it to himself.

That was more than they had the polis.

'Hey, Marty!' Jimmy Grove shouted from the courtyard. 'What you doing?'

Martin looked around him, and saw the lives of his friends and neighbours mapped out before them. Fighting against the polis; fighting against the social. Fighting against everybody that didn't trust them and living up to their very worst expectations just to show them how bad it could be. He saw himself on that bus, threatening the guy he'd thought was just a guy with a knife, just to get enough cash to buy him a pack of smokes and a bottle of cider.

'Something else,' Martin shouted.

And jumped down from the wall.