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The Fourth Monkey

Written by J. D. Barker

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THE FOURTH MONKEY

J.D. BARKER



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For Mother

Don't stop reading. I need you to understand what I have done.
— DIARY

1

Porter

Day 1 • 6:14 a.m.

There it was again, that incessant ping.

I turned the ringer off. Why am I hearing text notifications? Why am I hearing anything?

Apple's gone to shit without Steve Jobs.

Sam Porter rolled to his right, his hand blindly groping for the phone on the nightstand.

His alarm clock crashed to the floor with a thunk unique to cheap electronics from China.

"Fuck me."

When his fingers found the phone, he wrestled the device from the charging cable and brought it to his face, squinting at the small, bright screen.

CALL ME — 911.

A text from Nash.

Porter looked over at his wife's side of the bed, empty except for a note—

Went to get milk, be back soon.
xoxo,
Heather

He grunted and again glanced at his phone.

6:15 a.m.

So much for a quiet morning.

Porter sat up and dialed his partner. He answered on the second ring.

"Sam?"

"Hey, Nash."

The other man fell silent for a moment. "I'm sorry, Porter. I debated whether or not to contact you. Must have dialed your number a dozen times and couldn't bring myself to actually place the call. I finally decided it would be best just to text you. Give you a chance to ignore me, you know?"

"It's fine, Nash. What have you got?"

Another pause. "You'll want to see for yourself."

"See what?"

"There's been an accident."

Porter rubbed his temple. "An accident? We're Homicide. Why would we respond to an accident?"

"You've gotta trust me on this. You'll want to see it," Nash told him again. There was an edge to his voice.

Porter sighed. "Where?"

"Near Hyde Park, off Fifty-Fifth. I just texted you the address."

His phone pinged loudly in his ear, and he jerked it away from his head.

Fucking iPhone.

He looked down at the screen, noted the address, and went back to the call.

"I can be there in about thirty minutes. Will that work?"

"Yeah," Nash replied. "We're not going anywhere soon."

Porter disconnected the call and eased his legs off the side of the bed, listening to the various pops and creaks his tired fifty-two-year-old body made in protest.

The sun had begun its ascent, and light peeked in from between the closed blinds of the bedroom window. Funny how quiet and gloomy the apartment felt without Heather around.

Went to get milk.

From the hardwood floor his alarm clock blinked up at him with a cracked face displaying characters no longer resembling numbers.

Today was going to be one of those days.

There had been a lot of those days lately.

Porter emerged from the apartment ten minutes later dressed in his Sunday best—a rumpled navy suit he'd bought off the rack at Men's Wearhouse nearly a decade earlier—and made his way down the four flights of stairs to the cramped lobby of his building. He stopped at the mailboxes, pulled out his cell phone, and punched in his wife's phone number.

You've reached the phone of Heather Porter. Since this is voice mail, I most likely saw your name on caller ID and decided I most certainly did not wish to speak to you. If you're willing to pay tribute in the form of chocolate cake or other assorted offerings of dietary delight, text me the details and I'll reconsider your position in my social roster and possibly get back to you later. If you're a salesperson trying to get me to switch carriers, you might as well hang up now. AT&T owns me for at least another year. All others, please leave a message. Keep in mind my loving husband is a cop with anger issues, and he carries a large gun.

Porter smiled. Her voice always made him smile. "Hey, Button. It's just me. Nash called. There's something going on near Hyde Park; I'm meeting him down there. I'll give you a call later when I know what time I'll be home." He added, "Oh, and I think there's something wrong with our alarm clock."

He dropped the phone into his pocket and pushed through the door, the brisk Chicago air reminding him that fall was preparing to step aside for winter.

2

Porter

Day 1 • 6:45 a.m.

Porter took Lake Park Avenue and made good time, arriving at about a quarter to seven. Chicago Metro had Woodlawn at Fifty-Fifth completely barricaded. He could make out the lights from blocks away—at least a dozen units, an ambulance, two fire trucks. Twenty officers, possibly more. Press too.

He slowed his late-model Dodge Charger as he approached the chaos, and held his badge out the window. A young officer, no more than a kid, ducked under the yellow crime-scene tape and ran over. "Detective Porter? Nash told me to wait for you. Park anywhere—we've cordoned off the entire block."

Porter nodded, then pulled up beside one of the fire trucks and climbed out. "Where's Nash?"

The kid handed him a cup of coffee. "Over there, near the ambulance."

He spotted Nash's large frame speaking to Tom Eisley from the medical examiner's office. At nearly six foot three, he towered over the much smaller man. He looked like he'd put on a few pounds in the weeks since Porter had seen him, the telltale cop's belly hanging prominently over his belt.

Nash waved him over.

Eisley greeted Porter with a slight nod and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "How are you holding up, Sam?" He held a clipboard loaded with at least a ream of paper. In today's world of tablets and smartphones, the man always seemed to have a clipboard on hand; his fingers flipped nervously through the pages.

"I imagine he's getting tired of people asking him how he's holding up, how he's doing, how he's hanging, or any other variation of well-being assertion," Nash grumbled.

"It's fine. I'm fine." He forced a smile. "Thank you for asking, Tom."

"Anything you need, just ask." Eisley shot Nash a glance.

"I appreciate that." Porter turned back to Nash. "So, an accident?"

Nash nodded at a city bus parked near the curb about fifty feet away. "Man versus machine. Come on."

Porter followed him, with Eisley a few paces behind, clipboard in tow.

A CSI tech photographed the front of the bus. Dented grill. Cracked paint an inch above the right headlight. Another investigator picked at something buried in the right front tire tread.

As they neared, he spotted the black body bag among a sea of uniforms standing before a growing crowd.

"The bus was moving at a good clip; its next stop is nearly a mile down the road," Nash told them.

"I wasn't speeding, dammit! Check the GPS. Don't be throwing accusations like that out there!"

Porter turned to his left to find the bus driver. He was a big man, at least three hundred pounds. His black CTA jacket strained against the bulk it had been tasked to hold together. His wiry gray hair was matted on the left and reaching for the sky on the right. Nervous eyes stared back at them, jumping from Porter, to Nash, then Eisley, and back again. "That crazy fucker jumped right out in front of me. This ain't no accident. He offed himself."

"Nobody said you did anything wrong," Nash assured him.

Eisley's phone rang. He glanced at the display, held up a finger, and walked a few paces to the side to take the call.

The driver went on. "You start spreading around that I was speeding, and there goes my job, my pension . . . think I wanna be looking for work at my age? In this shit economy?"

Porter caught a glimpse of the man's name tag. "Mr. Nelson, how about you take a deep breath and try to calm down?"

Sweat trickled down the man's red face. "I'm gonna be pushing a broom somewhere all because that little prick picked my bus. I got thirty-one years behind me without an incident, and now this bullshit."

Porter put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Do you think you can tell me what happened?"

"I need to keep my mouth shut until my union rep gets here, that's what I need to do."

"I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

The driver frowned. "What are you gonna do for me?"

"I can put in a good word with Manny Polanski down at Transit, for starters. If you didn't do anything wrong, if you cooperate with us, there's no reason for you to get suspended."

"Shit. You think I'll get suspended over this?" He wiped the sweat from his brow. "Jesus, I can't afford that."

"I don't think they'll do that if they know you worked with us, that you tried to help. There might not even be a need for a hearing," Porter assured him.

"A hearing?"

"Why don't you tell me what happened? Then I can talk to Manny for you, maybe save you the pain of all that."

"You know Manny?"

"I worked my first two years on the job as a uniform with Transit. He'll listen to me. You help us out, and I'll put in a good word, I promise."

The driver considered this, then finally took a deep breath and nodded. "It happened just like I said to your friend here. I made the stop at Ellis right on time—picked up two, dropped off one. I ran east down Fifty-Fifth, came around the bend. The light at Woodlawn was green, so there was no need to slow down—not that I was speeding. Check the GPS."

"I'm sure you weren't."

"I wasn't, I was just moving with the traffic. I might have been a few miles over the limit, but I wasn't speeding," he said.

Porter waved his hand dismissively. "You were heading east on Fifty-Fifth . . ."

The driver nodded. "Yeah. I saw a few people at the corner, not many. Three, maybe four. Then, just as I got close, this guy jumps out in front of my bus. No warning or nothing. One second he's standing there, the next he's in the street. I hit the brakes, but this thing doesn't exactly stop on a dime. I hit him dead center. Launched him a good thirty feet."

"What color was the light?" Porter asked.

"Green."

"Not yellow?"

The driver shook his head. "No, green. I know, 'cause I watched it change. It didn't turn yellow for another twenty seconds or so. I was already out of the bus when I saw it switch." He pointed up at the signal. "Check the camera."

Porter looked up. Over the last decade, nearly every intersection in the city had been outfitted with CCTV cameras. He'd remind Nash to pull the footage when they got back to the station. Most likely, his partner had already put in the order.

"He wasn't crossing the street; that man jumped. You'll see when you watch the video."

Porter handed him a card. "Can you stick around a little bit, just in case I have more questions?"

The man shrugged. "You're going to talk to Manny, right?"

Porter nodded. "Can you excuse us for a second?" He pulled Nash aside, lowering his voice. "He didn't kill him intentionally. Even if this was a suicide, we've got no business here. Why'd you call me out?"

Nash put a hand on his partner's shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay to do this? If you need more time, I get it—"

"I'm good," Porter said. "Tell me what's going on."

"If you need to talk—"

"Nash, I'm not a fucking child. Take off the kid gloves."

"All right." He finally relented. "But if this gets to be too much too

soon, you gotta promise me you'll tap out, got it? Nobody will think twice if you need to do that."

"I think working will do me some good. I've been getting stir-crazy sitting around the apartment," he admitted.

"This is big, Porter," he said in a low voice. "You deserve to be here."

"Christ, Nash. Will you spit it out?"

"It's a good bet our vic was heading to that mailbox over there." He glanced toward a blue postal box in front of a brick apartment building.

"How do you know?"

A grin spread across his partner's face. "He was carrying a small white box tied up with black string."

Porter's eyes went wide. "Nooo."

"Uh-huh."

3

Porter

Day 1 • 6:53 a.m.

Porter found himself staring down at the body, at the lumpy form under the black plastic shroud.

Words escaped him.

Nash asked the other officers and CSI techs to step back and give Porter space, to give him time alone with the victim. They shuffled back behind the yellow crime-scene tape, their voices low as they watched. To Porter, they were invisible. He only saw the black body bag and the small package lying beside it. It had been tagged with NUMBER 1 by CSI, no doubt photographed dozens of times from every possible angle. They knew better than to open it, though. They left that for him.

How many boxes just like it had there been now?

A dozen? No. Closer to two dozen.

He did the math.

Seven victims. Three boxes each.

Twenty-one.

Twenty-one boxes over nearly five years.

He had toyed with them. Never left a clue behind. Only the boxes.

A ghost.

Porter had seen so many officers come and go from the task force. With each new victim, the team would expand. The press would get

wind of a new box, and they'd swarm like vultures. The entire city would come together on a massive manhunt. But then the third box would eventually arrive, the body would be found, and he'd disappear again. Lost among the shadows of obscurity. Months would pass; he'd fall out of the papers. The task force dwindled as the team got pulled apart for more pressing matters.

Porter was the only one who had seen it through from the beginning. He had been there for the first box, recognizing it immediately for what it was—the start of a serial killer's deranged spree. When the second box arrived, then the third, and finally the body, others saw too.

It was the start of something horrible. Something planned.

Something evil.

He had been there at the beginning. Was he now witnessing the end?

"What's in the box?"

"We haven't opened it yet," Nash replied. "But I think you know."

The package was small. Approximately four inches square and three inches high.

Like the others.

Wrapped in white paper and secured with black string. The address label was handwritten in careful script. There wouldn't be any prints, never were. The stamps were self-adhesive—they wouldn't find saliva.

He glanced back at the body bag. "Do you really think it's him? Do you have a name?"

Nash shook his head. "No wallet or ID on him. He left his face on the pavement and in the bus's grill. We ran his prints but couldn't find a match. He's a nobody."

"Oh, he's somebody," Porter said. "Do you have any gloves?"

Nash pulled a pair of latex gloves from his pocket and handed them to Porter. Porter slipped them on and nodded toward the box. "Do you mind?"

"We waited for you," Nash said. "This is your case, Sam. Always was."

When Porter crouched and reached for the box, one of the crime-

scene techs rushed over, fumbling with a small video camera. "I'm sorry, sir, but I have orders to document this."

"It's fine, son. Only you, though. Are you ready?"

A red light on the front of the camera blinked to life, and the tech nodded. "Go ahead, sir."

Porter turned the box so he could read the address label, carefully avoiding the droplets of crimson. "Arthur Talbot, 1547 Dearborn Parkway."

Nash whistled. "Ritzy neighborhood. Old money. I don't recognize the name, though."

"Talbot's an investment banker," the CSI tech replied. "Heavy into real estate too. Lately he's been converting warehouses near the lakefront into lofts—doing his part to force out low-income families and replace them with people who can afford the high rent and Starbucks grandes on the regular."

Porter knew exactly who Arthur Talbot was. He looked up at the tech. "What's your name, kid?"

"Paul Watson, sir."

Porter couldn't help but grin. "You'll make an excellent detective one day, Dr. Watson."

"I'm not a doctor, sir. I'm working on my thesis, but I've got at least two more years to go."

Porter chuckled. "Doesn't anyone read anymore?"

"Sam, the box?"

"Right. The box."

He tugged at the string and watched as the knot unraveled and came apart. The white paper beneath had been neatly folded over the corners, ending in perfect little triangles.

Like a gift. He wrapped it like a gift.

The paper came away easily, revealing a black box. Porter set the paper and string aside, glanced at Nash and Watson, then slowly lifted the lid.

The ear had been washed clean of blood and rested on a blanket of cotton.

Just like the others.