

Nature Red

B.D. Ferguson

"This will hurt a little."

Under the bright light, a row of teeth gleamed. The needle slid easily between them.

"Try not to move, and it'll all be over soon. The last one freaked out, flailed all over the place like a, I don't know, an epileptic octopus. She caught me just here, look, broke the skin and everything. That was not a good day, let me tell you. But you're quiet enough. Hardly a peep out of you, is there? Just a little mouse. The last one shrieked like a banshee, thought she'd wake the dead. Isn't that what a banshee does? Or is it warn the dead? Not the dead, but the people who are going to be dead. Doesn't matter. Obviously it didn't work."

The needle was set aside. A scalpel flashed silver as it moved through the fluorescent glare. The woman in the chair whimpered when she saw it.

"Oh, you were doing so well." The disappointment was audible. "I told you it'd be over soon. You know, I can put up with a lot – and let me tell you, I do – but I can't stand that little sound, that little scared puppy sound. I had a puppy once when I was a kid, made that exact sound." A sigh moved the air. "Let's not talk about that."

"I don't suppose you read poetry?"

"Welcome to Monday," Detective Joe Sparks snorted as he yanked the car around a corner without slowing. Tires squealed.

"Another work week begins," agreed his partner. "Come on, Sparks. It's not all bad. You've got your health –"

"Some bastard broke my nose!"

"Other than that, you've got your health. The splint is hardly noticeable –"

"It's a metal splint in the middle of my goddamn face. How is it not noticeable?"

"You've got a great new partner –" she grinned " – and a job you love..."

"Yeah, right," Sparks muttered.

"And another week is another chance to catch yet another evildoer."

“Evildoer? What exactly do you do on your weekends, Sonnenfeld? Write pirate stories?”

Detective Patience Sonnenfeld laughed. “No one reads those anymore. No profit in it.”

“Right, it’s all police procedurals and stories about serial killers.” He braked to a halt. “This is it.”

The uniforms at the perimeter watched warily, but their faces brightened as they recognized Sonnenfeld. While they interrupted each other to tell their story, Sparks ducked under the crime scene tape.

The smell reached him as soon as his foot hit the foyer tile. “Welcome to Monday,” he muttered again, and pulled his gloves on.

He was standing in the kitchen when Sonnenfeld caught up to him.

“They found it exactly like this,” she murmured as she saw the woman in the chair. “Didn’t touch anything. Forensics is on the way.”

“What was the call?”

“Someone reported a scream from the house.”

“When?”

“First uni got here about twenty minutes ago, call came in maybe ten minutes before that.”

“Don’t call them ‘uni’s. How did they get in?”

“The front door was unlocked.”

“Do we know who she was?”

“Marie-Celeste Alvarez.”

“Anyone else live here?”

“Second team’s already asked some of the neighbours. Everyone says she lived alone. No overnight guests,” Sonnenfeld said.

“That anyone knows about.”

“Good point.”

“Cleaning service?”

"They didn't mention one, but we can find out. Based on the condition of the house, I'd say no."

"Who called 911? A neighbour?"

"So far everyone's denied it. No one saw anything suspicious."

"Like someone running away covered in blood?"

"Anything like that, yes."

"Okay: a scream from the house maybe half an hour ago. No other occupants, no visitors, no cleaning lady. The back door's chained, which leaves the front door, and no one saw anyone leave. So who screamed?"

"Well," sighed Sonnenfeld, "not her."

"She's been here a while," agreed Sparks.

"Though if anyone deserved to scream..."

"Save it. Let's do the job."

Stepping around the pooled blood on the floor, Sonnenfeld poked a gloved finger at a lumpy arrangement of red and white on the body. "Her teeth?"

"We'll let forensics do their stuff, but I'm going to go with yes for now. Based on how she doesn't have any left in her mouth."

"Sewn onto her chest," she said. "With something like fishing line..." She took a step back. "Kind of like a necklace. A really elaborate necklace."

"Of her own teeth. He probably took some as souvenirs, the sick bastard," Sparks grunted.

"Maybe not. There are thirty-one here," Sonnenfeld said. "The average adult has thirty-two."

"How do you know that?"

"I read." She gestured toward the display on the body. "This would've taken a long time to do."

"Yep."

"And she was probably alive when it happened."

"Now, now. We don't want the M.E. saying we were doing his job for him."

She sighed. "All her fingernails pulled out. Ditto toenails. What look like defensive wounds on her hands and arms -"

"Except that she's been tied to the chair so tight she couldn't possibly have fought back. These were staged, after she was helpless. Forensics will turn up whatever it was he drugged her with. Probably something like, oh gosh, what to choose - Rohypnol."

"And?"

"Check the fridge." When she reached for the handle, he added, "The outside of the fridge."

She paused, then stepped back. "Phone bill, shopping list... this?" Her latexed finger touched an oddly-shaped scrap set apart from the others. "Part of a train schedule?"

"Yep."

"And you think the killer left it here for us."

"As a clue." Sparks spat the last word like a curse.

"So... this one's just like the others."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a serial killer." Scowling, he moved toward the hallway, where a rising babble of voices signaled the arrival of the crime scene techs.

"Welcome to Monday."

"Train schedule," Sparks grunted as he turned the key in the ignition. "Is it my imagination, or is he getting lazy?"

"Not lazy enough. He's not leaving anything behind to identify him."

"Oh, sure he is, Patience. He's leaving us these little clues, isn't he?" Again Sparks' tone treated *clue* like a four-letter word. "Except they're all so stupid. They're like something from the Hardy Boys. I mean, a playing card? Come on. The second one was a matchbook. You have any idea how hard it is even to find a matchbook anymore?"

"Probably he's choosing these things because they're so innocent-looking. They look like they're part of the scene. It's not like he draws a chalk circle around them, or makes a little pile of things."

"No, he makes the piles of things out of his victims." Sparks drove in grim silence for a while. "It's too much to hope that we're looking for a card player who smokes and takes the train."

"Probably."

"So what's the point? The first one wasn't a gambler, or even a fortune-teller. So why the card? The second didn't smoke, didn't go to the club on the matchbook."

"And there's no real similarities in the victims, other than they all lived alone."

"He likes variety. He just likes to play with them first, and probably uses the same blades each time, though don't tell forensics I took that leap. I hate those 'more science than thou' lectures."

"Teeth and fingernails removed while the victim's alive," Sonnenfeld mused, "and left at the scene as art. Defensive wounds staged. Then he breaks the left wrist, slices open the femorals on both thighs, and lets the victim bleed out."

"Good thing we have a profiler to tell us he's a sadist. We might have missed it otherwise. Oh, to tell us we're looking for a white male between twenty and fifty, well-educated, comfortable lifestyle. That narrows the search." He scowled at the road ahead.

"We're missing something," Sonnenfeld said.

"You think? For one thing, we're missing this bastard. By now he should be strung up by his testicles until the death penalty comes back."

Sonnenfeld was flipping the pages of her notebook. "Okay. First vic: Jonathan Chang, twenty-two, college student. That was the queen of hearts card."

"And he wasn't gay," Sparks said. He sensed her gaze. "What?"

"Where did that come from?"

"The queen of hearts thing. To make us think it was some kind of hate crime. Look, I'm going for a more metaphorical explanation, all right? Help me out here."

"Second victim," Sonnenfeld went on. "Edith Laughlin, fifty-two, cook. That was the matchbook scene."

"Chef," Sparks corrected her. "She was a pastry chef. At that bakery on Fourth, what's it called?"

Sonnenfeld stared out the windshield. "Metaphorically."

"No, like 'Pies Incorporated' or some stupid thing -"

"No, like *The Queen of Hearts/ She made some tarts/ All on a summer's day*," she said. "You know, the nursery rhyme."

Sparks braked at a stop sign and looked at her. "Laughlin didn't have the queen of hearts card."

"No, she was next. Maybe the card was telling us about the next victim."

"So the matchbook..."

"Is about today's scene. The matchbook - what was that club name?" She started rifling pages again.

"That one by the docks." He frowned. "The Clamshell?"

"The Oyster and Pearl," Sonnenfeld read. "Pearl, as in necklace?"

"Oh, for Chrissakes," Sparks muttered. "So now it's a clue about what he'll do to them, as well as - what was your theory, exactly?"

"I think it's about who the next victim will be. Let's find out what Marie-Celeste Alvarez did for a living. Then we'll see if I have a theory."

"Yippee," Sparks sighed. "Wasn't the Marie-Celeste a ship? A famous wreck, Bermuda Triangle stuff. Wasn't it?"

"It does sound familiar." Sonnenfeld chewed her lip. "And The Oyster and Pearl -"

"Is by the docks." They drove for a moment in silence, then Sparks burst out, "Dammit, he can't leave a clue that means six different things!"

"Let's try the job connection first, and if it doesn't pan out, we'll go to the next layer."

"Layers," Sparks growled, accelerating. "We'll see how layered he is, hanging by his testicles."

"Until the death penalty comes back."

Sparks almost smiled.

Outside the police station windows, darkness had fallen. Inside, clicking keyboards and ringing telephones punctuated the continuous low rumble of voices. The stink of burnt coffee soured the air.

Sparks stopped typing as Sonnenfeld hung up her phone.

She sighed. "Turns out Alvarez was an aromatherapist."

"What the hell's that supposed to be?"

"You know, scented candles and oils. The odors are supposed to be relaxing and naturally healing. It's alternative medicine."

"Candles can heal you?"

"I guess some people think so."

"That's it? That's the link to the matchbook?"

Sonnenfeld shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe it's the club name and the necklace of teeth. But matches light candles."

"I figured she'd turn out to be a firefighter or something. If he's leaving us these clues to identify who's next, we're screwed."

"We might be anyway," she said quietly. "Every clue means he's already chosen the next victim. It might even mean he knows what he's going to do to them."

Sparks fingered the train schedule, glossy through its evidence bag. "I don't think this means he's going to push someone under a train. Not enough torture for him."

"It would be hard to drag it out and enjoy the pain."

"Which means maybe it's telling us who's next." He sighed. "Okay, we've got part of the Coggston line here. He hasn't given us the whole line, or even the whole timetable."

"Only mornings," Sonnenfeld agreed, reading upside down as Sparks placed the bag on the desk between them. "How many stops are listed?"

"Central, St. Joseph, East Finley... at least six, and the torn part goes right through the seventh." He squinted. "Might be Beaconville."

"So what do we do about it? Is the next vic an employee of the train system? A regular passenger? Are we supposed to watch every station?"

"That's a lot of manpower."

“And we don’t have a description. Forensics hasn’t turned up so much as a hair.”

“Did they confirm he always uses the same blade?” Sparks said. “Did we ever find out what it was?”

“Maybe. I’ll see if the tests are back.”

“And I’ll find out how the chief feels about stationing plainclothes at every stop on the Coggston line. I’m sure he’ll be delighted.” He reached for the phone with a grimace. “You should do this one. He likes *you*.”

“Sorry – already ringing.” She grinned over the receiver at him.

He sighed. “At least nothing else ever happens when there’s a serial killer on the loose.”

“The police are better than you might think at keeping secrets, you know. Still, word gets out eventually. The media’s come up with a name: The Chairman.” A low chuckle echoed through the kitchen. “The Chairman. Ridiculous, I know. But it looks like that’s all they have to work with. And when they call the university for some psych professor’s opinion – hey, you still awake over there?”

A gentle slap on the cheek made the man’s eyelashes flutter. A small groan sounded from behind his gag. That earned him a harder slap. His eyes flew open, blinked in confusion, widened in fear.

“That’s better. Awake is better, but remember: no sounds. Quiet as a mouse. What was I saying? Oh, yes. The newspaper’s always really careful to say how Dr. Whatsit is an authority on criminal behaviour. Like when they call in a profiler in a cop show, and he says, ‘We’re looking for a sociopath, well educated and well-off financially, highly intelligent and calculating. White male, right-handed, here’s an age bracket, and oh yeah, he’s probably blonde, blue-eyed and right here in this room.’ That’s what always happens in those shows.”

The man’s terrified eyes rolled frantically under the glaring lights.

“It’s a crock. A sociopath doesn’t plan. He acts impulsively, in the open, because he doesn’t give a crap. What they mean is a psychopath. Psychos plan ahead, are prepared, work in secret. Okay, the intelligence thing is true for both, but who says you have to be educated to be intelligent? I mean, I had some pretty stupid teachers. Left school early, but since then I’ve

read more books than any college graduate. And predicting the actual appearance of a killer is just – it's just laughable. So they're wrong again.

"I blame reality TV. They know they need to sound like they know what they're talking about. But they also know people will believe pretty much anything the media says, so they don't bother to check their facts. It's really irritating."

The man in the chair stiffened as the blade slid across his skin again. Another low chuckle filled the air, making his whole body flinch.

"Though as they say in the industry: it does make for a nice mislead."

Detective Joe Sparks scowled at the train station as they sped past, flew through a yellow light with his siren flashing, screeched around a corner, roared down a quiet street, and flattened the brake pedal against the floor.

"We did everything we could," Sonnenfeld said.

"Save it. Let's do the job." He slammed the car door with extra force.

They were met halfway up the path by the uniforms, tripping over themselves to talk to Sonnenfeld. Sparks ignored them and stalked on.

He'd been glaring at the body for some time before he realized Sonnenfeld still hadn't joined him. He turned just as she appeared. "What?"

"Just checking the living room."

"I thought the uniforms checked the place?"

"They did. No one else here. The call reported a scream –"

"Yeah, yeah. It wasn't the vic who screamed, and none of the neighbours made the call. We got a name for this guy with the pretty picture on his chest?"

"Martin Meyers." She moved closer and squinted at the body. "Teeth and fingernails. Again."

"And toenails. He's getting very artistic."

"Forensics says this isn't fishing line, just ordinary craft thread. It's not as strong, but it's hardly visible."

"Well, it's all about the presentation. This one's not nice and neat, it's more like a Rorschach test. What does this pattern say to you, Sonnenfeld? I see a squashed bat, which probably means I'm a bed-wetter with mommy issues."

"Cogwheels."

"What?"

She traced a pattern in the air above the dead man's chest. "Teeth for the cogs, interlocking wheels of different sizes."

"How the hell did you spot that?"

"Meyers is a clockmaker. He's got about ten of them in the living room, and another in pieces on a work desk."

"The timetable."

"Not about the trains at all," she nodded. "Even the name of the line -"

"Coggston. Son of a bitch."

"I agree."

"I'm sick of all this cryptic crossword crap!" Sparks snarled. "Why doesn't he leave a fingerprint or carpet fibre like everybody else?"

"Speaking of which... have you found it yet?"

"Haven't even looked. Knock yourself out."

She found it on top of a pile of sandwich plates in the cupboard, and carried it carefully over to Sparks.

He glared at it. "What is it?"

"Looks like a Lady's Slipper. *Cypripedium acaule*. See how the flower makes a kind of shoe shape?"

"No."

"They're rare," she said. "He didn't find it growing wild around here, and there won't be many stores in town that stock it."

"How do you *know* all this shit, Sonnenfeld?"

"Summer jobs with a florist."

She stared at the plate until Sparks prompted, "And?"

"My uncle's shop might carry these."

"Great. Let's go ask about people buying the damn thing lately."

"Yeah." She paused. "Our theory says this is a clue about the next victim. Do we warn him?"

The fitful ticking of the clocks drifted in, growing louder as the moment stretched.

"We'll figure out something," Sparks said. "These clues aren't what you'd call a clear threat."

"Right."

"In the meantime, this may be our break. We might even get a description of someone who bought one of these things recently."

"Maybe. Unless he's growing them himself."

"Don't say things like that."

"Sorry."

"Hot damn, we might actually have a lead. I'd forgotten what it felt like. Kinda warm and fuzzy."

Sonnenfeld's voice stopped him on the way to the door. "Meyers was dead while we were watching the trains. We couldn't have helped him."

"I said save it."

"And it's only been a day and a half since we got the Alvarez call. He left one crime scene and practically ran to the next."

"I know. He's escalating." He rubbed a hand over his face and winced when he hit the splint. "Let's go see your uncle."

The smell of today's coffee couldn't quite overcome the lingering reek of yesterday's. Chairs squeaked. Drawers slammed. Phones rang. A drunk sobbed and shrieked on the way to the cells.

Detective Joe Sparks stared at the window, but the dark outside returned only his reflection and the glare of the station lights. "The Chairman."

"You said that already."

"I'll keep saying it until it doesn't sound stupid. You know he's a serial killer when the press gives him a nickname. What else came in today?"

"More from the Laughlin scene. There was skin under one of her fingernails."

"The fingernails that weren't even on her fingers anymore? The ones sewn onto her chest?"

"The happy face, yeah."

They stared at each other, then said in unison, "Laughlin."

"Son of a bitch." Sparks threw his pencil so hard it snapped in two against the window.

"Forensics think they can get a genetic profile, but not much beyond that."

"We'll still need someone to match it to."

"That's how it works, yes."

"What about the blade?"

"Matches across every scene," she said, "which is surprising. Could mean they're his favourites, that he's attached to them somehow. He's so arrogant, he doesn't care that we'll be able to track them."

"Or he doesn't think much of our abilities."

"I like my version better. Anyone who leaves clues is a taunting kind of guy."

"But he's taunting us with things that we can't use. If I insult someone, it only works if they understand. Right?"

"So he's flaunting that he's smarter."

"Yeah, but we can only see the connection after the next kill. It's taunting, but it's also keeping him safe. Using the same blades each time is a whole other level of stupid. What kind of blade are we talking about, anyway?"

"Very fine, very sharp - likely a scalpel."

"And this is where I say, 'So we're looking for someone with medical experience'."

"And we run off chasing doctors and anatomy professors."

"Yeah, maybe later. How hard is it for just anyone to find a scalpel, do you think?"

"In a university town with a medical school? Easier than spit. I could probably have a pocketful in less than an hour."

“And if a med student won’t help you, just wander the hospital. It’s amazing what they leave lying around.” He touched his splint gingerly. “What about the rope? It looks like the same rope each time.”

“It is, according to forensics.”

“Nothing special about it? No little fibres caught and waiting for us?”

“Nope.”

Sparks straightened. “Is it all off the same roll, or spool, or whatever?”

She pulled the reports toward her. “I’m not sure they could tell. We could ask.” She reached for the phone even as she flipped pages.

“Chasing down rope,” Sparks grumbled as he reached for the phone book. “But he bought a lot, either all at once or as a repeat customer. It could be our break.”

A white-throated sparrow trilled to announce the hour to the silent kitchen. The call cut off abruptly and the ticking of the clock resumed.

“What was her name?” Sparks’ voice was barely audible.

“Annabelle Florian.”

“Florian.”

“Exactly.” Sonnenfeld was silent a moment. “You saw the stuff in the hallway?”

“Yeah. She was a dancer.”

“Ballet teacher. The lady’s slipper was a two-for-one clue.”

“Even I can see the pattern this time. He must’ve cleaned the teeth to make the tutu stand out.”

“He’s getting more creative, taking more time with this.”

“Well, he knows he’s got plenty.” Sparks stared at the body. “The rope’s the same. The blade’s the same. No hair, no skin, no transfer.”

“Maybe under the fingernails again –”

“All it would prove is that it’s the same guy. If it turns out to be a copycat instead, I’m quitting.”

“Don’t say that.”

"Save it." His voice was weary. "Let's just look for his little funtime clue and get out of here."

It was inside the stove. It was a birthday card with an old photo of two unsmiling Victorian men standing in formal portrait mode. Their top hats had been colourized in pink and orange, with purple hat bands. The caption beneath read, 'It's your Birthday! Let the good times roll!' Inside it added, 'Happy Birthday to an old party animal!'

"Too bad he didn't sign it," Sparks said.

"This slick surface would take a good print," Sonnenfeld said.

"He wears gloves."

"It's a unique sort of card. Maybe we can find the store."

"And they'll remember selling this one, sometime between yesterday and forever?"

"They might have security cameras."

"They won't keep the tapes long. It's a card store, not a bank."

"But they might -"

"Yeah, they might. We'll follow it up. Meanwhile, he's getting faster, and who's next? Someone having a birthday soon? That'll narrow it down. We'll make an announcement on the six o'clock news. 'And to any folks celebrating a birthday today -'"

"Come on, Sparks," she said.

"Right, he's never that obvious, is he? It won't be someone having a birthday. It'll be someone who owns a pink top hat. It'll be the great-grandchild of the guy on the left. It'll be someone who rents live animals for parties -"

"Joe."

"What? Layers, remember?"

"He's playing mind games. But sooner or later -"

"Soon he'll kill again and later we'll still be screwed." He stalked away.

"Look," Sonnenfeld called, "what about the knots? See this knot? It's an anchor hitch. That's a sailing knot."

He stopped and stood in the doorway for a moment, facing the darkened rooms beyond. "You always know these things."

"Look, if it's a sailing knot -"

"You know," Sparks turned. "There's something we haven't followed up about the first victim."

"The college kid?"

"Remember what he was studying? Law enforcement."

"You think that's relevant?"

"This killer leaves nothing behind. As if he or she knows police procedure, crime scene process."

"Any avid TV viewer does these days." She tilted her head. "Did you just say 'or she'?"

"Profiles have been wrong before."

"Takes strength to break a person's wrist."

"Not that much. You could do it, for example."

"Sure, but I'm a superhero."

"Beloved of the people." He smiled thinly. "Did you know there's a card game called patience?"

"More usually called solitaire. So?"

"Queen of hearts, first clue. You were the responding detective, Patience. Weird coincidence, right?"

"Anyone could've gotten that call."

"But it was you."

"Us, Joe. We got the call because it was our turn on the roster."

"Right. How's your uncle the florist? Any more unusual flowers?"

"Why? You want some for your sister the surgeon?" She raised an eyebrow. "No, I get it. But talk about weird coincidence - did you notice that Meyers lived near St. Joseph's station?"

"Yeah, I did," he said. They watched each other a moment. "You know, normally I wouldn't say anything, because I'm not supposed to look if your blouse happens to fall open a bit, but what happened to your neck?"

"Cat clawed me," she said, smile fading.

“Big cat.”

“How’s your nose? Broken noses usually bruise like a bitch. You should look like a raccoon about now. Maybe it’s just a scratch.”

“It’s not a scratch. Cat or otherwise.”

“Oh, Joe – another bar fight? We’ve got to get you socialized. No wonder you go through partners so fast. You live down by the docks now, right? Maybe I should come over, we could go out. Find a club.”

“It’d be out of your way. You’re closer to Fourth, near that bakery.”

Sonnenfeld closed her notebook.

“Why do you rush into these kitchens, Sparks?” Her voice was soft. “You always leave me behind so you’re alone in here. For a minute or two, at least.”

“And what are you doing for those few minutes?”

“Being thorough.”

“Right.”

They stared at each other while the clock ticked on.

“Mind games,” Sparks muttered.

“You probably don’t care, but this is going to look amazing. I can’t believe the press hasn’t got hold of this yet.” A bicuspid squeaked against its neighbour as the thread looped. “This moment always reminds me of Tennyson. Or Coleridge? *Nature, red in tooth and claw*. That’s it – don’t remember the rest. I never liked poetry, but that one line really stuck with me. Weird, I know.”

The needle flicked upward as the thread was pulled taut.

“At least a poem gave me something worth remembering. Something creative. Because the things people actually say are useless. ‘It’ll get better with time.’ ‘Boys will be boys.’ Take Dr. Whatsit, he was in the paper again, saying, ‘on some level, this killer wants to be caught.’ Please. A psycho sees people as worthless meat. He would not – on any level – want to be caught, because he has no conscience or remorse. He isn’t going to leave anything to lead the

cops to him. He'd lead them well away. If he plans right, it's the police who look stupid. Like the homicide squad right now. Have you seen the news? Talk about tooth and claw."

A chuckling shadow fell over the semi-conscious man in the chair. The needle dangled, flashing light, as a scalpel severed the thread.

"You know what's weird? Mice in a maze will learn if you give them rewards. But if you don't, they're too dumb to realize it's just an intellectual exercise, so they just sit there and get paranoid. Well, they say people love a good puzzle, but believe me, people mice: too long without a reward and they freak out. They only love it if they get to know the answer."

The needle was set aside. The scalpel tapped thoughtfully on the man's wrist.

"Careful planning isn't enough, though. You've got to be two steps ahead. And I'm thinking maybe I've done what I can here. I don't want to get into a rut, get stuck in that maze. A change of scenery would be good. Maybe I'll go south. Do something new. I've always been fascinated by the idea of a noose. I mean, it's just rope coiled around itself. Twists and turns. Looks so simple, but it also looks like it shouldn't work at all. I'll have to do some research. Got to keep the mind limber, keep thinking, play some games.

"Have some fun."

The police station was frantic with ringing phones. Hurrying cops brushed against desks, papers fluttering. A hysterical couple clutched at the reception cage, demanding to see their daughter.

Sonnenfeld and Sparks sat at their separate desks.

Periodically they answered calls from citizens, with reassuring calm.

Once or twice they phoned the forensics lab with careful requests.

When they had to, they spoke to each other with polite courtesy.

When Sonnenfeld got up to use the bathroom, Sparks leaned over and studied the appointment book she'd left on her desk.

When Sparks went to get coffee, Sonnenfeld scanned his call log and read the report on his monitor.

They each printed a Request for Transfer form and hid it in a desk drawer.

When there wasn't anything else to do, Sonnenfeld stared thoughtfully at the phone. Sparks looked unseeing out the window. The evidence box sat between them.

The night outside pressed its face against the glass, and offered nothing to disturb their silence.

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