

## Chapter 2

... and Linda Wertheimer reports that non-profits are feeling the pinch.

LINDA WERTHEIMER, correspondent: The assembled musicians are actually happy when they're told the Dallas symphony will be performing a shortened season this year.

(SOUNDS OF MANY PEOPLE TALKING) I guess it's better than killing the entire season. This means all I have to do is find a third job.

WERTHEIMER: That's Audrey Ames, second violinist with the symphony. Like many, she thought she'd be out of a job after the symphony announced that falling donations might make it impossible to continue the 2004-2005 season. Rudy Clarkfield, chairman of the symphony board:

CLARKFIELD: We felt the drop most in estate planning. Since the discovery we ...

WERTHEIMER: The discovery of the afterlife?

CLARKFIELD: Yes, since then, people have reconsidered their estate plans.

WERTHEIMER: Estate plans. That's where people have made wills and have promised to turn over their estate — stocks, bonds, property — upon their death.

CLARKFIELD: Yes, I'm not going to say it's a major source of income, but we rely on it. And it may sound ghoulish, but we plan on it. But since 2001, we've had many people write the symphony out of their estate plans. And we certainly haven't had anyone new say they want to include us.

WERTHEIMER: The symphony's financial problems worsened after a disembodied man decided he wanted his estate, estimated to be worth \$15 million, to revert to him instead of the symphony. A court has agreed to halt any

disbursement from the estate until the case can be heard.

Of course, many other organizations rely on funds derived from estate plans, including this public radio station. That's why we need your help ...

Munroe looked at the clock in the CID room. It was 8:15 a.m. He figured he'd been around the world twice since he started. He'd read newspaper stories about serial murders in Japan, Sweden and France; read the results of the test match between South Africa and England (not that he knew anything about cricket); looked up the M1911 .45-caliber ACP; found out that the Platte Valley Model Railroad Engineers met the first Friday of the month at Denver's Union Station (open to the public the last Friday of the month); failed to find anything about the effects of a TASER on a disembodied person; checked the progress of the two Mars rovers; left some helpful (he hoped) comments at a support group for the recently dead; updated his blog with his two cents about the stalled bill to grant voting rights to the dead; registered with two news services so he'd get alerts about serial murders; checked his bank account; confirmed that his Amazon purchases were on track; and downloaded and watched a fan-made Star Trek movie.

It definitely wasn't like the early days of the AfterNet, when the only places he could go online were the public kiosks. He'd wait, sometimes for hours, until he could get online on those early terminals, which were abysmally slow, and then struggle to visualize a simple query in his mind.

And now he was juggling six open browser connections and he was trying to maintain two chats. He could have handled more, but the department only had a lowly T1 access.

*And I'm the old fart who wouldn't use a computer, he thought contritely. Now, I'm a surfing fool.*

He turned his attention back to one of the local Denver rooms, chatting mindlessly with a guy who claimed to be Ben Franklin. He was not doing a very good job of it while spouting endless Poor Richard sayings. He was also ignorant of Silence Dogood, which Munroe thought a poetic irony. There was also a woman who said she died in 1971 of cervical cancer (*thank you, too much information*), another man who claimed to be Voltaire but who couldn't understand Munroe's high school French (*which is actually in his favor*) and a living woman who said she was bored in Capitol Hill and was sitting naked in her kitchen and would leave the door open for any disembodied men.

*Why do I bother with this?* he thought. He was about to exit the chat when another person — rebeccathompson43 — joined.

rebeccathompson43: How yall doing?

Everyone answered her back with a hello but Munroe apologized that he was just leaving.

rebeccathompson43: Please dont go. Im checking all the denver chat rooms. Have any of yuo talked to minerofLove recently? he said he sometimes visited this room

voltaire11: Loose ur boyfriend?

rebeccathompson43: Hes my son

voltaire11: Apologies, Madame. I spoke without thinking.

rebeccathompson43: its OK. I was supposed to meet him in Golden and haven't found him.

jollycopper: Is your son disembodied?

rebeccathompson43: yes, he died two years ago and he decided to go on the europe vacation we promised him after graduation.

jollycopper: How much is he overdue?

rebeccathompson43: 4 days. Im worried.

jollycopper: Probably nothing to worry about. I'm a Denver cop. I can keep an eye out for him if you like.

rebeccathompson43: would u? Id appreciate it. Can I send you info about him?

jollycopper: Sure. Send it to jollycopper@denverpd.org

gettingsleepy: Way to go, jollycopper. I never nu u were a real cop.

jollycopper: You know kids. And we disembodied get trapped by the silliest things, especially when traveling.

poorrichard: I was trapped in an outhouse for four days.

jollycopper: Listen, rebecca, let's take this private.

Munroe sent rebeccathompson43 a private chat message. She told him her son died of an embolism when he was 21. He'd been attending the Colorado School of Mines and after his death departed on what grew into a year and half long trip around the world. She'd gotten constant emails from her son and chatted with him through the AfterNet.

Rebecca and her husband lived in Brush, Colorado, and they received a message a month ago that Brian was back in Denver. However, a friend of the family was ill and she was taking care of the friend's children, so they told Brian they'd have to delay meeting him until Dec. 14. They had planned to meet him at the school where Brian was contemplating finishing his degree.

But Rebecca had camped out at the school for four days without success.

rebeccathompson43: i don't know what Im going to do. I lost him hwen he died how can I lose him again?

jollycopper: Like I said, kids have no sense of time, and I can tell you, when you're dead, time becomes even more meaningless. You should alert AfterNet security, but keep doing what you're doing. Leave a message in the Denver forums, keep visiting the chat rooms. I'm sure he'll show up. Nothing can happen to us, remember that.

rebeccathompson43: Thank you very much jollycroper I will try to remember that. and Ill send a message to security right now.

jollycopper: The name's Alex Munroe, and I'll email you if I find him.

After Rebecca left the private chat, Munroe finished his surfing for the night, although by now, it was 8:30 a.m.

*Wish there were something more I could do, thought Munroe, but realistically I can't put out a missing person's report on a dead kid. And I'm sure he simply got distracted. Maybe I'll check with AfterNet security tonight, make sure they got her report.*

Munroe rose from the terminal. While he'd been talking with Rebecca Thompson, the

handful of detectives who worked Saturday had arrived and in the break room, the TV had been turned to CNN.

*May as well take advantage of the shift change and go for a walk,* Munroe thought.

Munroe waited for someone to exit the building and snuck in behind him. Outside, downtown Denver was still sleepy. *The Denver Post* website said it was clear and cold —10 degrees. Why he still checked the weather, he didn't know. From the department, Munroe drifted toward the 16th Street Mall, his path occasionally shrouded by the fog that spewed from manhole covers and sewer grates. He saw the huddled forms of the homeless who still remained asleep in window wells or near building exhaust vents that also belched clouds of steam.

*A lot of homeless, but still not as bad as Seattle,* Munroe thought, as he passed a knot of homeless men begging in front of a Starbucks.

As usual, the Starbucks made him think of home, Seattle. He ducked inside the store, on the heels of a young woman as she passed through the door held open by an older man, who did the gesture automatically while still holding his morning paper before him.

The line of people ordering coffee was five deep and the store was packed. Three men were holding an impromptu meeting and were watching a PowerPoint presentation on a laptop. A young man in need of a shave, wearing a Greek sailor hat and pea coat (the Old Spice theme went through Munroe's mind) was talking to a pretty girl wearing an impossibly short skirt for such a cold morning. Four women were hunched together at a table giggling. They all had security badges that showed they worked at Qwest.

Munroe drank in the scene, almost smelling the coffee and hearing the sounds of life on a cold, December morning. The depression hit what would have been the pit of his stomach if he'd

still had one, until he noticed the AfterNet terminal in the back of the store.

Moving toward it, he recognized it as a simple public terminal, the display meant only for the occasional living person who might want to use it for Internet access. The display did indicate the number of disembodied users currently online — 32.

*Wow, I wonder when Starbucks installed these. I bet they're in all the Starbucks by now.* The thought cheered him, the thought of all those terminals in all those Starbucks. The thought that disembodied people like him still needed the warmth of a meeting place warmed him as well.

As much of a junkie as he was, he didn't need to go online, but he did anyway and watched the number of users currently online change to 33.

Yamaguchi spent the day primping. There wasn't another word that would correctly describe her actions: she gave herself a manicure and pedicure (slightly grossed out by how long she'd allowed her toenails to get), removed the calluses from her feet (otherwise her dry skin would shred her hose), exercised on her stair stepper (while watching her TiVoed soaps) and then went to her hairdresser at 1 p.m.

Afterward, she stopped at the dry cleaners and thanked God the alterations were done and the dress was ready and that she wouldn't have to rely on her backup. She shouldn't have waited until the last minute to take it in.

Back home, she inspected herself in the mirror, holding the dress in front of her. *Oh God*, she thought, *those hours at the gym were worth it.*

At 4 p.m., she took a quick shower and spent an hour fussing with her hair, once rewetting it because the flip on the left-hand side of her head went the wrong way. Finally, with the help of a hot brush and hair spray, she got the desired symmetrical effect and was pleased.

Of course, now she was getting hot after the hot shower, the hair dryer and the hot brush. So hot, in fact, that despite the season she opened a window. *Oh crap, this is why I don't go through this too often.* After a few minutes, she sneezed a few times and closed the window.

By 5:30 p.m., she was starting to get worried, her eyes flicking back and forth between her watch and her face in the mirror as she applied her makeup. *OK, don't get rushed, plenty of time, Munroe won't mind if I'm a couple of minutes late.*

Despite her worries and a sneeze that made her jab her eye with a mascara brush, her makeup was perfect by 5:40 p.m. She grabbed her bag, her coat (*I'm going to freeze in this thing*) and went out to her car, when she realized she'd forgotten her gun. She went back into her apartment, grabbed the fanny pack with her off-duty weapon and went back to the car. *Fashionably late, that's all I am, fashionably late.*

Munroe kept wandering back to the corner so he could see the clock on the City and County Building. 6:15 p.m. *Come on Linda, where are you? You're past fashionably late.* He wandered back to the parking garage. Finally he saw her little car enter the garage. She pulled into her usual parking spot and reached across to open her door. Munroe got in quickly.

"I'm in," he told her.

She reached across and essentially through him to close the door, a breach of etiquette she'd normally never commit.

"You're late."

"... and my gun so I had to go back and get it." He'd lost part of what she said because the terminal on her armband kept changing positions as she closed the door and quickly backed up the car. The car came to an abrupt stop so he knew she was slamming the brakes.

“But that’s no reason for you to drive like a maniac.”

“I’m sorry, Alex. Just had a lot to do.”

“I thought you said you had the whole day free?”

“I had the whole day free to get ready. My beauty regimen is a little more involved than yours.”

“Well, I did shave,” he joked. “And I picked a tie that brings out the color of my eyes.”

“I’m sure you look quite dapper. So, what did you do today? Spend most of it online?”

“No,” he lied. “I spent most of the day exploring beautiful downtown Denver.” In reality, he only spent four hours in the Starbucks online, and then another three at the downtown Tattered Cover bookstore, and then another hour watching a college football game at a sports bar. Essentially about the same sort of day he might have spent while alive, minus the cigarettes, caffeine and alcohol. He reflected that he had to die before taking his doctor’s advice.

“Hey, are you going to wear your terminal on your arm like that the whole night? Won’t that clash with this killer outfit you promised?”

“Don’t worry, I’m going to put it in my bag, and I’m going to use the wireless ear bud.”

“Isn’t this the same ear bud you said picks up weird voices?” asked Munroe.

“Oh, let’s not talk about the voices I keep hearing, Munroe. They keep telling me to ditch you and find a real partner.”

Munroe chose to ignore her. He often wished for a way to do a *sotto voce* comic grumble via the terminal interface.

Yamaguchi’s driving quickly brought them to the performing arts center and they began their usual argument about parking. She wanted to park in the center’s parking garage.

“It’s up to \$8, Linda. Besides, there’s always parking on 20th Street.”

“Yes, if I want to walk six blocks in a dress and heels when it’s 20 degrees outside. And it’s windy, too,” she added, slyly.

“Is it? Oh yeah, well then we wouldn’t want you to walk that far.”

She smiled and hoped Munroe wouldn’t notice. Like many disembodied, Munroe hated wind. He said that moving through a strong wind for him was like walking through molasses. Of course, it was windy and the wind chill probably brought the temperature down to minus something, so she definitely wanted to park in the garage.

She found a spot in one of the lower levels that suited her small Honda del Sol and quickly parked, almost cutting off the SUV behind her. “Stupid monster car,” she muttered, *sotto voce*.

“See, only 6:30. Plenty of time.” Munroe ignored her and waited until she got out, then he exited while she waited.

“I’m out,” he told her.

They left the parking garage and went down a level to the main gallery of the center. Luckily the air was calm and they made their way through the crowd heading for any one of four events that night at the center. Munroe had to dodge the people and several times lost her, but he found her waiting for him by the main entrance to the concert hall.

“OK?” she asked.

“OK,” he answered. “You go in and I’ll try to sneak in.”

“We can try the handicapped entrance.”

“No, I’ll try to rise above it, if you’ll excuse the pun.”

“You’re excused. Meet by the coat check.”

She went inside while Munroe waited by the doors for a small lull, which never happened. So he rose above the crowd and squeezed in above the heads of the people. Luckily, he made it

without being crushed. He remained above the crowd after he entered until he caught a glimpse of her at the coat check. He lowered himself back into the crowd, feeling slightly winded.

It was still 20 feet to the coat check and it took Munroe a minute to arrive, just in time to see her being handed the ticket for her coat. She turned back and looked into the crowd. Munroe saw the dress, a dark wine-red number with tiny straps that almost revealed an indecent amount of cleavage but still managed to leave her looking elegant. The fabric formed an enticing fold or band around her breasts and when she turned around because someone bumped into her he saw the dress exposed a lot of her back. She had a wrap the same color as the dress but it hung low behind her. She turned back to look for Munroe again and now he noticed that it was her hair that kept her looking elegant. Instead of her usual ponytail, her long, black thick hair fell straight down and then curved inward at the ends, adding a touch of modesty as it concealed her breasts.

Munroe always knew Yamaguchi was pretty but he'd only ever seen her as a cop and had always assumed she was kind of hippy, but now he realized that was a false impression caused by her equipment belt, her vest and the unflattering police uniform. *My partner is a fox*, thought Munroe.

He also never realized how short she was. She was only 5'2", but as a cop, she carried herself with authority. Standing in heels, her new height slightly unnerved him. He searched for the terminal's field but couldn't find it, then remembered she'd put the terminal in her handbag, which she was holding in her left hand.

"That's some dress, Linda."

She smiled when Munroe's words came to her through the ear bud.

"Thanks, Alex."

"Something different with your hair, too."

“Got rid of the highlights.”

“Your mother?” he asked, knowing her mother disapproved of anything that took away from her Oriental features.

“Well, partially. Well, OK, yes, it gives her one less thing to complain about.”

A few of the people around her started looking at her, and an older woman said in a stage whisper, “Some people have no sense of the appropriate.” Yamaguchi’s eyes lowered and she backed away.

“The old broad say something?” asked Munroe, guessing from the sourpuss expression on the woman’s face that she said something disparaging. The woman must not have been talking loud enough for the terminal to translate her words. Yamaguchi nodded and said, without moving her lips, “she thinks Im on cell.” She was using the terminal’s field to talk directly to Munroe.

“What a tight ass. You want I should rough her up?”

“Yamaguchi, glad you made it,” someone said behind her, before she could answer Munroe.

She turned around quickly and Munroe lost the field of the terminal. He saw her talking to someone, a very tall, good-looking guy with a politician’s smile whom he recognized as their boss, deputy administrative chief Paul Clemens. Her terminal and purse were still in her left hand and she was standing near another group of people so Munroe couldn’t capture the field and get the translation of their conversation.

He saw her shake Clemens’ hand and exchange pleasantries. *He’s got to be saying something about the dress.* He saw Clemens laugh at something she said and he used the opportunity to put his hand on her shoulder, for just a second. Then she looked around and transferred her purse into her right hand and Munroe was able to talk to her again.

*Finally remembered me, did you?*

“... here somewhere.” He caught the tail end of Yamaguchi’s introduction.

“Alex, glad you could come,” Clemens said, with the usual unfocused stare.

“Tell him that was a clear case of sexual harassment.”

“Munroe says hi,” she said.

“I was just telling your partner what a lovely dress she’s wearing.”

“Tell him I agree.”

Suddenly the crowd seemed to be moving and groups of people were starting to wander off. It must have been the warning bell that the concert would be starting soon.

“The reception will be in the Aspen ballroom,” Clemens said. “We’ll want you and Alex there, of course.” He realized he must have missed something while he was checking out the crowd.

“We’ll be there,” she said. Clemens turned away and Munroe realized another woman had been with the deputy chief the whole time — his wife, he assumed. *Left her standing there and didn’t even introduce her, the creep*, he thought, although he saw Yamaguchi nod to the woman as they left so maybe she was introduced while Munroe was incommunicado.

“I always hated deputy chiefs,” said Munroe.

“Will you shut up?” she asked, while marching away from him. He hurried to catch up with her. “Come on, we’re in the nose bleed seats.” Although the tickets were complimentary, they were on the highest mezzanine level and she and Munroe climbed two big flights of stairs and then several more little flights to get to their seats.

At this height, most of the concertgoers were dressed casually and her dress stood out, which made her self-conscious. She showed her two tickets to an elderly usher and he peered with the

aid of a small flashlight at the tickets. He handed her two programs and without a word led them to their seats at the end of an aisle. There was, however, a large man sitting in one of their seats.

“I’m sorry, these are our seats,” Yamaguchi said. The man looked at her, then at the usher, then at the empty seat. “Sir, I have tickets for both these seats,” she said, with the same voice she used to tell gawkers at an accident scene to keep moving. The man immediately got up and started showing his ticket to the person next to him, who got up and showed her ticket to the person next to her and so on until the whole row shifted over one seat. “Thank you,” she told the large man, and sat in the aisle seat.

She shifted her purse to her right hand and Munroe sat.

“You do cause a lot of trouble,” he told her. She shrugged without saying anything.

The house lights dimmed and after a minute, the audience applauded and Munroe saw the first violinist come out. After her bow and the last minute tuning, the conductor came out. It was her last ever performance before she left Denver for a job at another city and the concert hall was packed. It took a while before the applause died down and she could begin.

And for the next forty-five minutes, Munroe was unbelievably bored. Unable to hear anything, he could only amuse himself by watching the movements of the orchestra and the conductor, which was interesting for about two minutes. He vaguely recalled that he liked Handel’s *Messiah* the one time wife number two dragged him to a performance, but he couldn’t recall the tune. This time of year all he really wanted were Christmas carols and even that was denied him. So he started talking to Yamaguchi.

“The fat guy on your right is already snoring. You should shove him in the ribs to wake him.” And, “Whoa, really bad toupee on the black guy two rows down. You can see the seam.” And, “My those are perky breasts on the blonde with the bassoon. You can see them bounce

from here.”

Finally, she turned to where Munroe was sitting and with unerring accuracy looked at him. She mouthed the words, “Shut up” and with a deliberate motion, removed her ear bud and turned it off, then returned her attention to the music.

Munroe was reminded of being in church when he was a kid: a lot of adults acting very pious and he feeling very bored and mischievous.

*If we had a portable terminal with Internet access, I could be doing something, he thought. Maybe there's a terminal downstairs in the lobby. Munroe's mind wandered randomly while he scanned the faces of the audience. He moved closer to observe the bad toupee. He thought of going down to the stage and observing the perky breasts first hand but wasn't sure how long he had. He moved up to the edge of the mezzanine platform and tried to peer over, but despite being dead he still kept his low-level fear of heights. If I fall, I'll just bounce. Still, it'll be unpleasant. Yes, but better than sitting through this. She'll never even know I left. I wonder how far I could fall. Well, they say we're invulnerable to just about anything. Yes, but it's that just about bit. Not like I'm exactly enjoying being this kind of dead, maybe there's another kind of dead. Yeah, but you like Linda, don't you. Well, yes. And being a cop, that's what you said was the only thing you were good for, isn't it. You got that going for you. And your health? That's right, your health is ...*

The house lights came up and the audience applauded.

*Thank God, intermission.*

“I’m sorry, I was just bored. Really, do you have any idea how boring a concert is when you can’t hear anything?” Munroe was essentially talking to himself, although his remarks were

addressed to Yamaguchi, who could ignore him because she had not replaced her ear bud.

They had returned to the lobby during intermission and she was standing in the ridiculously long line to buy a glass of wine at the bar. There were six people ahead of her.

“At this rate you’re only going to have three minutes to drink it, you know.” She continued staring straight ahead.

“All right, this is getting ridiculous. If you can’t take a joke, then that’s just your fault, Yamaguchi. If your anal little mind can’t find the humor in a situation then you can just stick it up your ...”

That’s when Munroe noticed the smile that had been creeping onto her face, and at the same time she lifted her right hand to push back her hair and reveal the ear bud.

“Oh, you little bitch. How long have you been listening to me?”

“Since left seat,” she told him. She was again accessing the field directly and not speaking aloud. “Amuse yourself until concert ends 30 mins. Meet u back by coat check, OK?”

*So she’s still mad, but I’m forgiven.* “OK, enjoy yourself.”

The line moved forward. “I plan to,” she said.

Munroe left the bar and lobby and headed toward the exits. He hadn’t found a terminal. *There’s a Starbucks a block away. Let’s see if they have a terminal.* As he left the auditorium he saw the clock in the main gallery of the performing arts center. *OK, I have forty-five minutes, enough time to check my email.*

Munroe was back in thirty minutes. He had checked his email in that time and also sent a message to AfterNet security, to make sure that Rebecca Thompson had notified them that her son was missing. It also gave him time to check the scores at ESPN and read yet another analysis

of why the Seahawks would almost certainly lose against the mighty Denver Broncos offense and why he would almost certainly lose his bet with the stiff in Detroit who had egged him into putting his money where his mouth was.

*Time to check out the perky blonde*, he thought to himself, and waited until he saw someone sneak out of the men's room. He followed the man and re-entered the concert hall behind him. He worked his way down the orchestra level and then up onto the stage.

His view of the orchestra and the entire auditorium was impressive. *I should have been down here the whole time*. Although he couldn't hear the music, he could sense the rhythms of it by the motions of the musicians and the baton of the conductor. It pleased him to see the feet of the musicians as they kept time when he bent down low and saw their perfect synchrony.

He allowed himself to see everything at once, not concentrating on anything in particular, for once enjoying the 360-degree vision that terrified him when he first realized that he was dead. He looked up at the overhead lights and allowed himself to see the full spectrum, playing the wavelengths from infrared to ultraviolet almost as if they were musical notes.

He realized the orchestra had stopped, and then he saw that the audience was standing, first in clumps and then standing as a wave of people. The conductor turned to face the audience and he saw her beaming, red face and he noticed the sweat that plastered her short brown hair.

She turned to her orchestra and in turns motioned for individual musicians or sections to take a bow. Finally, she had the orchestra take a bow together and again Munroe marveled at their simultaneous bow, as if they were all still keeping time with the music.

Suddenly he felt like an intruder, sharing the accolades that were meant for the orchestra and he backed away from the stage, up the aisle of the orchestra level and toward the exit. He never even saw the perky blonde.

Yamaguchi eventually showed up at the coat check, although he almost didn't see her because the crush of people had forced him into a corner with limited view.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she said. "Did you amuse yourself?" She began walking away from the coat check.

"Yes I did. And how was the music?"

"Sublime."

"And is that good?" She ignored his remark. She knew that he knew the meaning of the word. *Well, I'm pretty sure I know the meaning of sublime: from the ridiculous to the sublime, right?*

"Are you ready for the reception?" she asked.

"Yes, looking forward to it."

"And no smart remarks in my ear." A man they were passing looked at her oddly. She smiled at him and walked a little faster.

Munroe had to dodge a very fat woman who blocked his way and couldn't immediately respond. "R U listening?" she asked silently.

"Yes, sorry. No smart remarks. I'll behave."

"You know you can be very childish sometimes."

Munroe bit back a smart remark. "I said I'd behave. Uh, where are we going?" he asked, when he noticed they were leaving the building.

"The reception."

"I know that. I mean, isn't it in the concert hall?"

"Don't you read the email you're addicted to? I sent you the information. It's in the theatre complex, the next building over."

“Oh, yeah. I remember now,” he lied. He decided he’d better keep quiet until they got there.

She led them to the theatre complex. It must have been even colder because Munroe saw the crowd hunched even tighter than before. He saw that she was trying to show a brave face even though she must be freezing, despite her heavy wool coat.

She entered the building’s outer door. Inside, a doorman checked her invitation and he held the door open as she went through the inner door. Munroe followed as she headed for the coat check. As she was taking her ticket, she silently told Munroe, “Wait here Ill be back.”

“What, why?” he asked.

“Because Im going to the bathroom.”

Munroe waited for her. The novelty of touring women’s restrooms had long since passed.

She returned and Munroe asked, “Ready?”

“Yup, let’s do this,” she said out loud.

She led them up a flight of stairs to the ballroom. Munroe marveled at her knowledge of the performing arts center. *I guess she’s a culture vulture*, he thought. *Guess I don’t know as much about my partner as I thought.*

Another doorman opened the door and she stepped through. As Munroe entered, he noticed the field effect of an AfterNet terminal.

“Hi, name please,” a disembodied voice asked.

“Uh, Alex Munroe,” he told the voice. “Hey, hold on Linda, looks like I got to register.”

She raised an eyebrow but waited while Munroe talked to someone he supposed was dead like him, but for all he knew was just a living person somewhere else.

“Please enjoy yourself, Officer Munroe, and feel free to use the terminals while you’re here. There are several hotspots throughout the ballroom.”

Munroe was surprised. Since he'd died, he'd never had anyone extend that kind of hospitality to him except his partner.

"Wow, this is something, Linda. Wish I could have dressed up for the occasion."

Munroe saw a sea of women in evening dresses and men in expensive (although not always tasteful) suits. A string quartet was playing and a knot of people were being served food at a buffet table while a much larger group was at the bar.

"Ooh, open bar," she said, before getting in line for another glass of wine.

A few minutes later, she was balancing her wine and a plate of food and not doing a very good job of it.

"It's always so hard to juggle these," she said, while trying to devour an egg roll.

"You know, Linda, I wondered when I first met you whether you were cop material, but when I see you scarfing down food and wine at taxpayer expense, it puts my mind at rest."

"Giffit a wesht, Alesh," she said, turning her attention to smoked salmon on a cracker.

"Ah, Officer Yamaguchi," a man said while walking toward her, his hand extended. It was the Manager of Safety Marvin Montoya, the man to whom the chief of police reported, who incidentally was standing next to Montoya. The chief, Gerald Moncrief, took the plate from Yamaguchi, who didn't know what to say.

"Swallow, then shake his hand," Munroe said.

She did what he suggested.

"I'm sorry I caught you mid munch," Montoya said, "but Gerry pointed you out and I had to come over and say hello."

Yamaguchi had finally recovered her poise. "Yes, sir, thank you."

"Is your partner here?"

“Yes he is.”

“May I speak to him?” he asked.

“Anything you say, sir, is translated for him, so you’re already talking to him.”

“Say hi for me. Tell him I like his police department,” Munroe said.

“Munroe says hello, and he wants me to say he likes your police department.”

By now, two other people Yamaguchi and Munroe didn’t recognize had joined the group and a round of laughter greeted Munroe’s remark.

“Does he? Well, good. Look, would you mind accompanying me as I introduce the two of you to some people.”

She nodded, and said, “Alex says he’d be happy to ... uh ... ”

Montoya looked at her with a grin. “I think the expression is a dog and pony show. Yes, I want to show you off to some people, with your permission.”

She nodded again and Montoya led them to another group of people clustered around the conductor, Marie Alton, the star of the evening.

Montoya made introductions to the group and the conductor was intrigued. “I understand that the disembodied can’t hear, so I certainly appreciate your spending an evening at a concert that might have been boring for you.”

Yamaguchi could hardly believe what Munroe was asking her to relay.

“On the contrary, I had a very good time and I was actually on stage toward the end of the performance. Although I can’t hear, I can still recognize the harmony of your orchestra.”

The conductor nodded her head graciously at this and lifted her glass. Yamaguchi shot Munroe a silent “you went to see the blonde, right?”

“Quiet. They’re eating this up,” Munroe told her. He gave her more poetic observations of

his time on the stage to relate.

Yamaguchi was soon fielding questions for Munroe left and right. “No, I can’t see other disembodied people.” “No, I can’t pass through walls.” “Yes, I don’t need to sleep.”

After ten minutes, many of the standard questions had been asked and answered. Again she marveled that people always asked Munroe questions to which they already knew the answers. Nobody ever asked him questions like, “How do you spend all that time?” to which she’d enjoy really knowing the answer.

Chief Moncrief pulled her aside after the questions had died down. “Good job, Yamaguchi. I appreciate you keeping Munroe in line.”

“Actually, he was good as gold, sir,” she answered. “And you know, he is listening.”

“Yeah, I know. But remember, I hired you, Munroe, and I know the Seattle chief of detectives pretty well, so I also know your reputation. So, thanks to both of you. It will be remembered.” The chief returned to the group that had begun reforming around the conductor.

“Sounds like you made major kiss up points, Linda,” Munroe said.

“You didn’t do so bad yourself,” she muttered.

“Talking to your partner?” a man asked her. He’d joined the group after the introductions so she didn’t know who he was, but he looked familiar. He was handsome, tall with short blond hair and blue eyes and around 40 to 45. Then she saw the “AV” pin on his lapel.

“Sorry, just curious,” he apologized.

Munroe sensed another field and he knew the man was carrying a portable terminal, but like his partner’s, it wasn’t set for anonymous access.

“Yes, I was,” she said. “Talking to my partner, that is.”

The man stuck out his hand. “Bill Rybold,” he said. She reached out to shake his hand but

quickly moved it to cover her mouth when she sneezed.

“Um, Linda Yamaguchi,” she said, and took a tissue out of her bag. He took back his hand.

“And your partner is ... Alex Munroe, correct?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, I should have said. I know you, don’t I?” she asked while dabbing her nose.

The man grinned. “I don’t think we’ve met. I would have remembered. You might have seen me on television or in the newspaper.”

“Oh sure,” she said. “You own the cable company. But I thought ... I mean, I didn’t realize that ...” Yamaguchi wasn’t sure how to proceed. Despite her acceptance and familiarity with the disembodied, she had never met an avatar before. “Help me out here,” she said silently to Munroe. Avatars were mostly a luxury for show biz types or the ultra rich.

“Why do you think I know what to do?”

“bcause ur dead.”

“Yeah, play the dead card. I don’t know. I think you’re supposed to just play along and pretend this guy really is Rybold.”

The man decided to help her out by ignoring her difficulty. “I don’t own the cable company. I am — or was — the CEO. When I died, I lost the job. But with a few others, I still have a controlling interest in the company.”

“Oh, that’s right,” she said aloud, now remembering all she’d read about Rybold, who’d died a year or two ago. He was one of a growing number of people who’d prepared for his afterlife by creating a trust that would oversee his interests after his death, with the proceeds going to a bank account that only he could access. “Uh, why were you curious if I was talking to my partner?”

“I was wondering why you weren’t speaking to him directly. Wouldn’t that be more convenient, Officer Munroe?”

“I’m afraid I’m still a lot more comfortable, and more accurate, allowing the terminal to translate what I say out loud. If I try to use the field, I get a headache after a while. Uh, Munroe says I’m getting a lot better at it, but that he still has to figure out my shorthand sometimes. I tend to think in chat shorthand when I use the field myself. It’s just a little bit easier but he hates it.”

“You don’t use shorthand yourself, Officer Munroe?”

“He says, ‘You can skip the officer. Just Munroe. Or Alex.’ And he never uses shorthand or emoticons or abbreviations. Says it dilutes the beauty of the language.”

“Interesting. And, if I may ask, how did you get this job, Officer Yamaguchi?”

“Oh, please, just call me Linda. I ... uh ... well, my mom’s dead ... I mean disembodied. So I had some familiarity with the disembodied and when I went through the AfterNet orientation ... because my mom insisted ... that’s when I found out that I could access the field pretty easily. And just about that time the department was looking for someone to work with Munroe. He says I lost and I ended up with him,” she said, smiling.

“It sounds like you two have a good partnership. I was talking to your chief and he was saying, Alex, that you’ve been a great help to the department.”

“LOL,” said Yamaguchi.

“Excuse me.”

“He just proved me wrong.”

“Oh, I get it,” Rybold said, with a quick grin. “Let me ask a possibly rude question. Although you’re undoubtedly a great asset for the police department, aren’t you feeling a little ... under utilized.”

She was surprised that Munroe hadn’t groaned when he heard “under utilized.”

“Go on,” she prompted. “Uh, that’s Alex who said that.”

“As I understand it, you were a detective, a homicide detective, and you had a very good reputation in Seattle. In fact, there was a book about a serial murderer in which you were prominently featured.”

Yamaguchi said, “I never knew that. Sorry, please continue.” She said silently to Munroe, “the only reputation I thought u had was pain in the ass.”

“It just seemed to me that your skills are being wasted, Alex. Frankly, I think the department just thinks of you as a piece of equipment.”

“Ouch, that hit home,” she thought to herself. “You’re not kidding,” Munroe replied, and she realized that she’d let her thoughts leak into the field.

“Are you trying to steal my officers, Bill?” asked the police chief, who appeared from behind and clapped his arms around her shoulders. “I wondered how long it would be before you started chumming the waters. Great party by the way.” The chief was putting his body between her and Rybold, Munroe noted.

“Thank you, Gerry. And yes, I’m always on the lookout for people. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other guests I should meet.” He nodded to her. “Officers,” he said, with a nod.

After Rybold left, the chief asked, “What’s he been asking you?”

“Uh, sorry sir, he was, well mostly he was interested in how Munroe and I talk. You know, how I use the field.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, other than that last remark, which I guess you heard.”

“OK, well, stay way from him.”

“Did he pay for this reception?”

“What? Well, yes. Anyway, he gave the money to the CSO and that money went directly into this party. Look, I got more people to meet and greet. You two enjoy yourselves.” The chief nodded brusquely and left.

“So, what the hell was all that about?” asked Munroe.

“Wheels within wheels, Alex. It is not for us the little people to question,” she said quietly.

“Hey, I want to get more food.”

“You go ahead, I’m going to find a terminal hotspot. I’m kind of curious.”

“OK, I’m going to sit awhile. These heels are getting painful.”

She left and Munroe moved around the crowd and found three hotspots. He found a locally hosted chat room and discovered that there were about 50 disembodied people attending the party. Actually, there were probably many more, but only about 50 invited guests were able to login.

He found a conversation in progress.

brian.sullivan: got lousy advice from my broker

poodletoy: you still think this is a bubble

jollycopper has entered the room

paulieg: well, isnit?

sweetMary: I think someone new has joined us

jollycopper: Hello, didn’t know there was a chat going on here.

brian.sullivan: what else we going to do for fun?

poodletoy: Youre the cop, right?

jollycopper: Yes, Alex Munroe. How did you know?

poodletoy: Rybold’s been talking about you.

jollycopper: Really, when?

ribaldhumor: Just now, actually. Nice to speak to you directly, Alex.

jollycopper: Mr. Rybold? Oh, yes, there you are in the list.

ribaldhumor: Please, if I can call you Alex, call me Bill. I’m sorry if I got you in trouble with the chief.

jollycopper: Hey, I think my stock went up with the chief.

sweetMary: Bill dear trying to cause trouble? Headhunting again?

ribaldhumor: That's how I got to know some of you. By the way, I feel I've been neglecting you.

Munroe had located Rybold's avatar in the crowd, who seemed to be holding a spirited conversation with the conductor. He wondered if the avatar was cruising on autopilot or if Rybold was holding two conversations at once.

paulieg: thats right neglecting ur dead friends. how rude ;)

ribaldhumor: And I'm afraid I'll be neglecting you again. Even for me it's hard to hold five conversations at once. Alex, if you don't mind, once tonight is over, I'll send you an email. There are some things I'd like to discuss.

jollycopper: OK, I'll look for it.

ribaldhumor has left the room

sweetMary: so, lets get to know you better alex.

Yamaguchi ate with all the enthusiasm a healthy, hungry woman with the metabolism of a hummingbird can muster. She knew she'd never have to pay the price of overeating. Her mother remained thin all her life, and her father was still rail thin. She figured she had years to go before she had to worry. And for once she was eating without Munroe around who loved to remind her of the dangers of cholesterol, fat and colon cancer.

As she licked her fingers of the tiramisu fragments she became aware that someone else was sitting down at her table.

"I've never seen anyone eat like that, except me," said a rich, low voice. She saw a handsome, solidly built black man looking at her as she was removing her thumb from her mouth.

"Hmm?"

"I said I've never seen anyone else eat like that," he said again.

"Sorry," she said.

“Hey, don’t apologize. Just don’t let my wife see you. She’d kill you in a minute,” he laughed. He reached his big right hand across the table, “Ron Elbert.”

She took a quick look at her hand before she took his. “Like the mountain — Linda Yamaguchi.”

Elbert, looked puzzled, then said, “Oh, I get it. I’m not a native, you know. Yes, I saw you talking to Bill Rybold. You’re the cop with the dead partner. Excuse me, disembodied partner.”

“And you are ...”

“I work at *The Denver Post*.”

“No you don’t. You’re the editor of *The Denver Post*.” She recognized him now. She gave him a ticket two years ago, before she teamed with Munroe. She didn’t think he’d recognized her from that, however.

“That’s right. Some people don’t consider what I do work.” He laughed loud and deep. She recalled that he was an intimidating but friendly man, a weird combination that impressed her, even while he was sitting in his car calmly accepting his ticket.

“So, Linda, what did Rybold want?”

“I’m not really sure. Maybe he was trying to hire me. My partner for sure.”

“Interesting. Mr. Rybold’s a busy man.”

“Why’s he a busy man?”

“Because he’s been hiring a lot of disembodied people lately, or anyway, he’s been said to be hiring them. He’s been hiring almost as many people as the AfterNet, but it’s hard to confirm.”

Elbert stood up and Yamaguchi realized he was at least six feet five. “Nice to meet you again, Linda, under better circumstances, at least for me. See you again sometime.” He nodded and left.

“Who was he?” Munroe asked in her ear.

“Hey you’re back.”

“Yeah, I leave you alone a minute and you’ve already got a boyfriend.”

“Cool it, dad. A, you were gone at least 20 minutes, and B, he’s the editor of *The Denver Post*, and I think he was pumping me for info about your admirer, Mr. Rybold.”

“And I just had another contact with him in a chat room they set up here. There’re about 50 disembodied people invited to the party here.”

“Really, and Elbert, that’s the *Post* editor, said Rybold’s been hiring a lot of disembodied people.”

“Seems like I’m a hot commodity,” he said. “And I’m sure you are too, of course.”

“Don’t go getting a swelled head, Alex,” she said and stifled a yawn.

“Getting tired?”

“Yeah, I think I am. I’m not used to these intrigues and I’m freezing.”

“Hey, you do have goose bumps that go all over,” he said, after looking at her in infrared. “I think we’ve done our job. Let’s head out.”

She took one last long gulp from what he was pleased to see was a glass of water and got up. The reception was still going strong and in one corner of the room, people were being photographed with the departing conductor.

“Leaving already, Officer Munroe?” the disembodied something asked him through the terminal field at the door. By now, he was starting to view the terminal and hotspots throughout the ballroom as more intrusive than courteous and didn’t answer back. He and Yamaguchi made their exit after she collected her coat and returned to her car with little conversation except for the occasional assurances he gave her that he was in tow.

Back in the car, she put her portable terminal back in the armband and wore it clumsily

around the sleeve of her coat. But she also turned on the car radio to listen to NPR. Munroe tried to remember what she'd be listening to at this time on a Saturday night and guessed it would be some sort of new age ambient crap — or at least that was his interpretation of her description of it. He remembered that his estimation of her fell considerably the first time she mentioned that she liked that kind of thing. And he remembered her disparaging remark when he mentioned that he liked improvisational jazz. They were reduced to one-word conversations that week. Then he saw her eyelids droop.

“Hey, Gooch, wake up!”

“What ... hey, what did you call me?”

“You were falling asleep listening to that stuff. Put on something loud or open a window.”

“Are you kidding? It's freezing outside.” But she did reach forward to turn off the radio.

“Just talk to me, keep me awake.”

He realized that they were nearing the department. “Listen, Linda, don't drop me off at the department. Drive yourself home and I'll keep you company on the way.”

She reached up to pinch herself on the cheek. “OK, but what are you going to do?”

“We'll figure it out once we get there,” he said.

She drove to her apartment while Munroe kept up an inane commentary on the upcoming Broncos-Seahawks game, which normally wouldn't have interested her, but he prodded her to say something in the affirmative to each remark. Before too long she was getting irritable, but at least she was awake.

They finally reached her Congress Park apartment and she parked on the street. She rented the lower floor of a converted Victorian. It was relatively expensive for the area but she enjoyed the charm of the building. At the door, she yawned and asked him, “OK, what's the plan? Do

you stay here tonight? Do I call you a taxi?"

"Well, first go in, because you're freezing."

She opened the door and they went inside.

"If you don't mind, I'll stay here to ... wait a minute, you can log me onto the AfterNet, right?"

"Huh? Yeah."

"Just hook up your terminal to your computer and I'll be happy, that is if you don't mind me spending the night. And maybe in the morning you can drive me to the station."

She yawned and nodded. "I'd be happy if you spend the night. Let me ... make up the computer for you." She laughed and walked toward her bedroom. "Come on, it's this way."

He followed her and realized he hadn't known that's where she kept her computer. Her bedroom was large and oddly L-shaped. She had turned the stubby arm of the L into an office nook where her laptop sat on a roll top desk. She sat down before it and turned on the computer, then plugged her terminal into a recharging dock connected to the computer.

"Crap," she said, when she realized that she hadn't acted quickly enough to force her Macintosh laptop into the AfterNet OS during startup. She restarted it and this time clicked quickly enough to launch the proper OS.

He didn't catch any of this because he was too busy looking around her bedroom. Like her it was tasteful but definitely not feminine. It was decorated in the Arts and Crafts style of heavy dark furniture, with a Mission-style bed, a mock Morris chair and the yellowish-greenish wallpaper he remembered from his own Arts and Crafts house in Seattle.

*Just because Nadine liked Arts and Crafts doesn't mean it's bad, he thought to himself, remembering his second wife, the dragon lady and queen of the damned. And I'm sure it doesn't*

*mean Linda's a bad person.*

He noticed that she had shrugged off her coat and suddenly he sensed the AfterNet field again, temporarily off while the computer was rebooting.

“OK, it's up, Alex. Yo, Alex?”

He only caught his name, but he guessed she was telling him the computer was ready.

“I'm here. Uh, I didn't know your computer was in your bedroom.”

“Oh, I could move it into the living room but I'd have to move the terminal's dock and get behind the desk to get to the adapter and ...” Her comments trailed off.

“No, no, that's OK. I don't want to make trouble. It's just that, you know, you in bed and me here ...”

She rolled her eyes and he knew the discussion was over. “Oh, yes, well I'll just have to sleep with my gun under the pillow.”

She got up from the chair, repositioned it before the desk and then put a throw pillow on the seat. Munroe settled on the chair, feeling more like a dog than a man but appreciating that the pillow brought him up to “eye” level of the computer.

She started undressing, but stopped and walked into her bathroom, closing the door behind her.

*Well, at least I rate that much,* he thought.

She came back out a few minutes later, wearing a Denver police academy T-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms. She crawled into her bed and then looked toward him. “Good night, Alex.”

“Good night, Linda.” She turned off the lights and went to sleep.