

A Special Delivery

by ReadWorks



"Anything you want, anytime you need it."

The message showed up at the same time on the same day: December 12, at 12 p.m., on computers across the nation. Simultaneously, couriers delivered embossed envelopes containing cards with the same message to the offices of the five hundred largest companies in the country, as well as all of the major news outlets.

One of those many cards found its way to the desk of Christoph Ferstad, a business reporter at one of the biggest newspapers in Washington, D.C. It arrived during his lunch break and was waiting when he returned, burrito in hand. Christoph was only too happy to put off getting back to work, so he picked up the card to inspect it more closely. It was a beautiful piece of design, and obviously expensive. The paper felt silky to the touch and weighed heavily in his hands. The background was stark black, with the words printed out in a crisp white font. There was no explanation on the back, just a website address.

"When did this arrive?" he asked the office secretary.

"Just around 12 p.m.," the secretary replied. "A courier brought it especially for you. He had other, identical envelopes, too. Perhaps they were going elsewhere in the building?"

Christoph picked up the card, turned it over, and typed the web address into his browser. A site popped up, identical to the card: all black, with the same message in white. But the site added in small print:

"Anytime: Launching Tomorrow."

Just then Christoph's phone rang.

"Christoph, did you just get a card from a company called Anytime? Do you know anything about this?"

It was Martine, Christoph's friend and a reporter at the *San Francisco Chronicle* on the West Coast. "I just got it, too, Martine," Christoph responded. "No idea. Their budget must be sizable, though, if they're hand-delivering the cards to reporters all across the country."

The next day websites and blogs were filled with articles trying to guess at the identity of Anytime. Was it an Amazon spinoff? An elaborate prank? Something semi-illegal? Anytime's marketing campaign had worked—they were a household name before they'd even made a single sale. When the reveal came, that day at noon, it was considerably less exciting than the rumors that had swirled around the company.

The website suddenly had a single field that read, "What do you want?" All you had to do was type the words into that box and then the website would show you options. You could get your desired item within

one, ten, or twenty-four hours. Bloggers were the first to test the limits of the service. Readers quickly learned that within an hour, Anytime could deliver to you: a puppy, an alligator, a meal from the most exclusive restaurant in New York City, a manicurist, and, miracle of all miracles, a cable guy who actually showed up to fix your Internet connection.

Christoph had his first experience with Anytime the next day, when his older brother pranked him by having a miniature pig delivered during an important meeting. Christoph reciprocated by sending his brother a mariachi band during a romantic dinner with his wife.

Within weeks, Anytime had become a part of daily life. Nobody used other delivery sites or the postal service anymore-why would you when Anytime was cheaper and you could have whatever you wanted delivered more quickly?

Christoph still wondered what exactly Anytime was, though. He looked through the corporate records, but the company was registered in the Cayman Islands. It was impossible to decipher who actually owned Anytime and who was running it. Christoph began to track other peoples' interactions with the company. He heard rumors about Anytime being used for more nefarious purposes. Not only could you get puppies and mariachi bands through Anytime, you could purportedly get weapons and illegal substances as well.

The more Christoph delved into Anytime's business, the more something seemed off. One of Anytime's competitors had tried to sue the company for patent violation; something to do with their operational processes at a central warehouse. Within a week, the man behind the lawsuit had died in a mysterious accident. The man had drowned at his lake house, even though he had been an expert swimmer.

Christoph read about an attorney general in New York City who had wanted to investigate Anytime for potential tax violations. Three weeks later, the attorney general had to resign after a smear campaign revealed that he had taken bribes from construction companies.

And on and on. Whenever anyone questioned Anytime, something horrible seemed to happen to that person. Christoph began a spreadsheet, outlining every instance that something awful had befallen a person who'd gone up against Anytime. By lunch, Christoph had a list of more than one hundred examples. Goosebumps graced his arms. This could be his big story, the one that would win him a Pulitzer Prize. There was absolutely something underhanded going on here. Christoph worked on his list the rest of the day, emailing potential sources and looking through newspaper archives. One by one, the rest of the computers shut down and the lights in the newsroom were turned off as his colleagues went home to bed. But Christoph couldn't stop; he was so energized by the leads he was finding. Two of the sources had already emailed him back and they wanted to talk about the suspicious occurrences they had witnessed.

Around 4 a.m., Christoph fell asleep at his desk, his forehead resting on the keyboard. He woke up with a start at 6:30 a.m., when the early shift arrived and began turning on the lights. Bleary-eyed, Christoph stared at his computer. His inbox was full of emails from an anonymous address that all said the same thing: "Stop stirring up trouble." Christoph smiled. He had no intention of stopping his investigation, and now he knew he was on the right track.