

A Theory of Darkness

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

January 2009

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Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
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*Your file* *Votre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-63340-3  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-63340-3

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## ABSTRACT

A Theory of Darkness

Catherine Paquette

*A Theory of Darkness* is a cross-genre mystery novel that works within the conventions of the mystery-genre to explore and subvert commonplace beliefs about the nature of time, identity, and fantasy. The novel features Sally Smith, a clerk at ‘The Mystery’ bookstore, as she begins to receive anonymous letters that challenge many of her assumptions and beliefs, and push her to confront herself and the world around her. On a quest to uncover Anonymous’s identity that leads her to seedy spots and peculiar characters, Sally must examine the very notion of a mystery and what it means to know. In a novel where characters range from a private detective and a femme fatale, to a physicist and a bookstore owner, plot and structure stand side by side with experimentation and theory. Using Sally’s quest to find Anonymous as a frame for the larger mystery of humanity’s search for understanding, *A Theory of Darkness* gives new meaning to the ‘dark’.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Mary di Michele for her guidance and support throughout this project, as well as my readers Jonathan Sachs and Mikhail Iossel for their insights. I would like to thank Manish Sharma for introducing me to Derrida and Deleuze, and consequently pushing me to another level of thought. I will be forever grateful to Stephanie Bolster for her dedication as a teacher and her encouragement throughout my time at Concordia. Thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for helping fund this project.

I also thank Stephanie Alexander for her infinite curiosity and interest in this project, and for her ideas that wove themselves into this story. I am very grateful to my wonderful parents Brenda and Gilles Paquette, as well as to my stellar sister Stephanie Paquette, for their generosity and support. I thank Lea and Graham and Finn, my other family, for the good laughs, warm meals, and love. Deepest gratitude to Karine Igartua and Rachel Henry for helping me realize my potential. And finally, thank you to Kathy Mitchell for sparking my love of literature and to Susan Chamberlain for fanning the flames.

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*“Since my house burned down,  
I now own a better view  
Of the rising moon”  
-Masahide*

*“Leave all actual things behind (forget everything)”  
-Gilles Deleuze*

## Chapter 1

“Something terrible’s happened,” said Jackson Todd, clutching a paperback in his hand, as Sally entered The Mystery. It was a rainy Monday morning and all Sally wanted was to still be in bed. She wiped her glasses dry then stared at her boss. His usually bright face was pale and drawn, and his thin white hair spilled in several directions.

“What do you mean?” Sally asked.

“It’s William.” Watson, the store’s fluffy gray feline, meowed and rubbed up against Sally’s jeans. She cringed thinking of his fur plastering itself on her damp pants.

“William?” she asked.

“My brother up North.” Jackson looked down at the book in his hand and tossed it onto the front display table. “He’s quite ill.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Sally cleared her throat. She had never seen Jackson so upset.

“Cancer,” he said. “The doctor told him on Friday. Explains why he was so tired. It’s in his lymph nodes. Doc doesn’t think he’s going to live much longer...” Jackson looked at Sally, then quickly at Watson who was cleaning his paws. “I have to get on the next train.”

The wall clock ticked above them, louder than Sally ever remembered hearing it. “How long’s the ride?” she asked, unsure of what to say.

“Oh, I don’t know... maybe six hours or so.” Jackson choked up. “Can you manage the store until I get back?”



“Of course.”

“I should only be away for a few days. I’ll give you time off for any extra days you work. Make sure to feed Watson half a cup of his Kibble Green – vet put him on a diet last week.”

“No problem.” Sally hoped he wouldn’t be away for too long. As the store’s only employee, it would be taxing to manage the store for more than a week on her own – though she had done it before. Besides, it would be just her and the books, which might be an adventure.

“Thank you for understanding. He’s my only brother left.”

Sally nodded as Mr. Todd buttoned his navy jacket and wrapped a tattered brown scarf around his neck. He pulled a handkerchief from his pant pocket and loudly blew his bulbous nose.

“I’ll call you in a couple of days to check in and let you know what’s happening. Call Tracy at home if you need anything. Of course, she’s too busy to see William.” He flared his nose.

Sally looked at the floor. “Oh.. That’s too bad.” Take care, eh?.”

“Will do. Thanks again,” he said patting Watson on the head then quickly left the store.

‘I didn’t know he had a brother,’ mumbled Sally as she watched Jackson disappear. ‘Poor old guy.’ Sally looked around. The store was a mess – there would be lots for her to do. She sighed wishing he would hire another clerk for situations such as these. But he was a stubborn old man that only wanted one

employee at a time. It had taken him twenty-one years to hire his first employee, who after working at The Mystery for merely ten months, had ended up in a missing person's file. Sally had been hired last March, half a year after the woman vanished. At the time Sally had been working at the Sub City over on Main Street, and was thrilled at the prospect of trading meat for mysteries. She had rarely shopped at The Mystery before having been hired there – her budget had not allowed it – though Sally had been reading mysteries ever since she dropped out of college. She had been well known at the Riverdale Public Library and sat in the study room on her days off for hours reading. By the luck of the draw Jackson had hired her. The used bookstore specialized in mysteries, though it had a few other sections. It was the only used bookstore in town. Now, Sally had the luxury of reading on the job instead of at the library.

Sally walked slowly past the high bookshelves and the display tables that stretched through the store. Glossy black and white photographs of men and women in mystery garb hung on the walls between the shelves. Detectives, police officers, femme fatales, criminals... When she had first started working at the store a year ago, Jackson had told her they were headshots of different actors in detective movies, and Sally had been able to find all but one online. She figured the mystery portrait was a star in some obscure foreign film – Jackson liked that sort of thing. He had traveled considerably before meeting Tracy – his wife who had moved across the country to Riverdale after a bitter divorce. Jackson had told Sally that after her failed marriage, Tracy, who was at her wits' end, had opened a

map, closed her eyes, and pointed. Her finger had ended up on Riverdale, and soon thereafter, so had she. That was four and a half years ago. Six months after her move, Tracy had walked into the bookstore, and according to Jackson, wooed him from his solitary life. Sally couldn't imagine Tracy 'wooing' anyone. She was a stern woman, who kept to herself, and didn't like to get out much. As a result, the couple spent most of their time in Riverdale. From what Jackson told her, Sally suspected Tracy had developed a mild case of agoraphobia. 'Marriage has a hefty price,' Jackson liked to say.

Sally paused at her favourite photo: the mystery portrait. She looked at the woman who sat seductively in a chair, ensconced in a haze of cigarette smoke. Unlike the other photos, this picture was larger and its frame more ornate. She'd caught Jackson staring at this photograph once, when she'd dropped by the store unexpectedly and she could understand why. Sally was also taken by the woman's long jet-black hair, hard stare and full lips, in a way that she couldn't explain. She sometimes referred to the woman as 'Midnight'. Something about her piercing black stare made Sally think of the absence of light.

"Hi there beautiful," she said winking at Midnight. The woman stared stonily back at her. Sally chuckled, then went and hung up her jacket, grabbed a duster, and flipped on the store radio.

As Laura Bell, the local newswoman's voice drifted into the store, Sally began to dust *...residents are facing the lowest tax increase from the Riverdale Council that they've seen in eleven years...* She ran the feather duster over a stack of hard-boiled novels feeling a surge of energy. It was happening again. Just like

it did at home sometimes when she read for long stretches. She could feel it.

*...Heritage Fest organizers gearing up for a week of fun...* Sally suddenly imagined herself wearing a trench coat and a fedora. Her shoulders pushed back and strength coarsed through her body. She clenched her jaw and her eyes darted around the store. *...Big Sisters in need of volunteers...* The duster became a

weapon and she spun around with her back against the shelf, hands in gun-drawn position. Sally crept slowly and evenly, with expert skill, listening for intruders.

*...Riverdale Rangers coach charged with fraud ...* Sally spun facing a shelf, running her weapon along the books to displace the dust. The actors in the photos stared at her as she twisted back around to detect Watson advancing towards her.

*...Missing person case remains unsolved...* Sally leapt at the cat, her expression hard and menacing. 'Freeze!' Watson jumped and meowed, then bolted towards the front window. *...last September without a trace, after failing to show up for her shift at the local bookstore...* Sally stopped. The fantasy dissipated as quickly as it had come. *Her parents are holding a vigil tonight at City Hall in hopes that anyone with pertinent information as to her whereabouts will come forward.* Sally

figured the newscaster was talking about Teresa, The Mystery's former employee. She'd have to ask Jackson about her when he returned, though he didn't like to talk about the disappearance. Whenever the case came up in conversation, he quickly changed the subject. Sally heard someone bang on the door—a customer.

The round wall clock read 9:34 a.m. She had gotten carried away again. She headed towards the door, hoping for a quiet day.

## Chapter 2

Sally sat at the front counter wishing the customer browsing through the fiction section would vacate the store so she could read her book in peace. On quiet afternoons she liked to read mysteries and solve the cases, but could never fully escape into the story with others around. Today she'd decided to put her latest mystery aside and reread the Sinova Kuznetov book "The Bloody Truth About Time" that she'd found on the counter during the summer. Sally kept the Kuznetov book in a secret spot under the front counter for long days like this when she needed to be kept awake. Kuznetov's ideas captivated her, and she had read everything she could find by the author – which was difficult since most of her books were out of print ever since she had been exiled five years ago from her country for treason. Sally had read in several articles online that explained Kuznetov had been accused by government officials of infesting people's minds with propaganda and false versions of history. What brought Sally back to 'The Bloody Truth About Time' today was boredom. The day had dragged on and on, and the provocative way the author explored the brutal history of her country, the idea of a national memory, and how history changes over time to suit those who create it, was like drinking a pot of strong coffee. Sally found the histories of Kuznetov's country that were published in the book – which were only revealed as factual fictions months following the book's publication – to be mind-boggling. Sally wasn't sure if this excited her or angered her. Kuznetov's theories were often left unresolved and posed as questions, rather than providing definite answers. The price of this open-endedness and the challenge to her state's

conventions of time and memory, among other topics, had cost the author her livelihood. Kuznetov had disappeared without a trace.

She put down ‘The Bloody Truth About Time’ and looked at the wall clock. 4:46 p.m. It had been a long day with few customers, and Sally wanted to keep it that way.

She hopped off her stool and walked over to the young man flipping through a copy of ‘Mysteries’ by the Norwegian author, Knut Hamsen. The man’s shaggy blond hair and baggy jeans irritated her.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

The man looked up from the book. “Yeah. What do you think of this one?” he said showing her the cover. “Any good?”

“It’s probably too weird for you,” she said trying to keep her voice steady. She had hardly been able to get through the book herself. The prose was strange and the plot, senseless. Nothing was resolved at the end, which made for an irritating read.

The customer seemed a bit startled. “Huh?”

“It’s a frustrating read,” said Sally. “I mean, what kind of author writes such a convoluted mystery? Everything becomes increasingly surreal throughout the book. I don’t know how it ever got published.”

“That sounds kind of cool actually. Something far out.”

“Well, if you’re looking for a mystery, I recommend something a bit more true to the genre, like this.” Sally pulled out a copy of ‘The Big Sleep’ and handed

it to him. “It’s gritty, yet works as a mystery. It makes sense, and it’s a good read, even if Philip Marlowe is a touch arrogant.”

The man crinkled his brow. “Yeah, I’ve heard of this book. But I think I want this one,” he said clutching the Hamsen book.

“Suit yourself,” said Sally shrugging her shoulders. He obviously didn’t know a good mystery.

She went to the counter and the customer trailed behind, quickly paying for his book.

“What a rip off,” she muttered, not offering him a bag.

He laughed then shoved the book into his back pocket. “Have a good day lady,” said the man and walked out of the store.

Sally turned back to Kuznetov and cracked open the book. *...History written by the blood-soaked pens of government officials is a propagation of not what has been, but rather a filtering of the current regime’s hopes of what will be. ‘History’ is thus used as a nationalistic storytelling machine, under the veil of ‘truth’. It tells stories that fit the current regime’s delusions and their skewed vision of the nation-state, and becomes nothing more than a manipulation technique – similar to the techniques of marketing and public relations in more ‘libertarian’ countries. Historical documents, from where I can never reveal my source, from before authoritarian seizure of our country reveal tales quite different from those that school children learn today. Take the example of the story of the 1905 uprising...*

The door chime and a gust of cold air startled Sally out of the text. ‘What now?’ she muttered, as she caught a glimpse of someone walking away. A shadow. Customers were always mistaking The Mystery’s door for Taylor’s, the run-down stationary shop next door. Sally’s eyes caught sight of a white envelope on the floor mat. She frowned a little. The postwoman always came in for a quick chat, and besides she’d already been in just before noon. Sally hopped off her stool and maneuvered around the counter towards the envelope. She picked it up, noticing it was unmarked.

“This must be from one of Jackson’s strange friends,” she said.

She thought she should probably put the letter in Jackson’s ‘away bin’ and resume reading, but could not seem to move. She needed to know what was inside of the envelope. Jackson had put her in charge of the store and who knew when he would be back? In fact, it was in his best interest that she immediately open the letter in case there was important business to attend to.

Sally ripped open the envelope and pulled out a note with a verse in the centre of the page written in calligraphy. Steadying herself against a bookshelf, she read:

07 November 20—

*A love poem in the dark begins when Sally enters the forest  
When Sally enters the forest she opens to the dark  
And dark is a forest when Sally thinks she should not go, but  
When she does not think, she draws to the dark midnight forest because  
Midnight is when dark things happen, a forest of experience,  
When it whispers Midnight, go to the forest’s dark silhouette*

*—Anonymous*



P.S. –Sally, meet me **tomorrow** at midnight by your rock where the forest encounters the sand.

Sally's hands shook as she reread the poem. "A love poem begins? At midnight? What the hell is this? Why does this creep know about my rock?"

Maybe it was Mike trying to be romantic. No, Mike knew nothing about poetry, nor about her secret spot in the woods, so it couldn't be him. She stood up and paced past the private detective and the police officer locked inside their frames. They were watching her, wondering what she was going to do next. Go to the forest tomorrow at midnight? That was out of the question! During the day it was a lovely escape, but the dark changed everything. It was creepy. And what was even creepier was that this stranger was aware that she frequented this spot. No one knew. It was hers. Her secret life.

Riverdale Park was on the west end of town. It had a walking trail that lapped around a modest pond where ducks swam and waddled along the shore. Past the pond, lay a forest, or what people called a forest, though it was simply several acres of trees and brush with a few paths that ran through it, which eventually cleared onto an endless stretch of beach – the Riverdale river. A couple of months before she'd been hired at the bookstore, Sally had wandered away from the usual public trail, and had come upon a narrow dirt path obscured by tall trees, shrubs and grass. Since then, from time to time, she'd go to the forest and navigate her way through the bush for about five minutes until she reached her secret path.

When on one of her treks, Sally would discretely walk for about ten minutes until she arrived at her special sitting rock where the forest met the beach. She would then hoist herself up on top of the large rock and watch as the waves lapped onto the sand. She liked the rhythm of the waves and the way they diffused onto the shore. As the gulls cried, she would let her thoughts carry her away into the blazing horizon. She would imagine herself as a lone renegade in a trench coat on the fringe of justice sipping whiskey and creeping around corners in the fog. Lost in these thoughts while sitting on the rock and watching the river, Sally would feel something like excitement. Something like escape.

But now this creep had ruined all that. The creep had ruined everything. Sally took a deep breath and looked at the clock. 5:01 pm. Maybe she should go tomorrow and give this jerk a piece of her mind. She could bring a weapon. Her knife. She could bring Mike or call up her brother Rob. But that meant revealing her secret spot and she vowed never to share it with anyone. It was hers. 'Mine, dammit.' "This is crazy," she muttered. "You've been reading too many detective novels." She stuffed the letter in her pocket, determined to push it out of her mind.

### Chapter 3

The next evening Sally sat in her small apartment wishing the pitbull next door would stop barking. She had lived alone in the apartment for over two years, and though the rent was cheap, the neighbourhood left something to be desired. Her small television was on mute and the screen cast an eerie blue hue about the room. The wall-clock to the left of the television read: 10: 05 p.m. Watching *Street Justice* had proved futile. She was too tense to even get up and run a bath. The letter on the coffee table lay in front of her. *Midnight*. Sally hated midnight. She experienced it far too often. The thin expanse of seconds stretching into minutes, dragging into hours, until the light poured through her barred window. Her black nights came in waves, like her dreams.

Sally heard footsteps approaching on the creaking hallway floor and then a light knock at her door. She remained on the couch. Sally hated surprises. A key turned in the lock, but the inside bolt kept the door from opening. It had to be Mike. She walked to the door, unbolted it, and opened it a crack.

“Hey babe, how y’a doing? You gonna let me in or what?” Mike stood before her with his ballcap backwards and his chin-length curly hair spilling out the sides. The tips of his ears were red.

Sally reluctantly stepped back and opened the door, giving him a weak smile. She remembered that she hadn’t returned his calls.

“Good to see you too,” he said, bending down to give her a kiss. Sally tensed remembering the letter on the coffee table. She wanted to lie with him on

the couch and talk to him about it, but she couldn't. "You're cold," she said stepping back.

"Yeah. Freezing out. Hey, I was on my way to the Pit Stop for a little trivia. Wanna come? We could split a basket of wings or something," he said, beginning to take off his jacket. He hesitated, "I can come in, right?"

Sally's crossed her arms. She didn't want him to see the letter. "I'm not feeling that well," she said putting her hand on his back. "I was getting ready for bed." She looked away.

Mike looked at his boots as he forced a smile. "Okay Sal, another time."

She gave him a hug as he pulled away. "Mike, please don't be mad. My head really hurts. Work was rough today." She sighed. "Besides, I thought I asked you to call before you come over."

He nodded. "I thought I'd surprise you. You okay? You seem a bit off."

She smiled. "I'm sorry. I've just got a lot on my mind."

"Like?..." he asked stepping back to look at her.

Sally hesitated. She wanted to tell him about the letter, but she figured he would just laugh and tell her to forget about it. No, she'd better keep quiet. He wouldn't understand. "It's been a weird couple of days. Jackson left town for the week to be with his dying brother, so it's just me at the store. It's been pretty busy – no time to even read."

"Is that it?! Is that why you haven't called me since Sunday? Wish I got time to read on the job!"

Sally tensed. No, she couldn't tell him anything. "You don't even like to read!" she retorted. "And for three times the pay, I'd be happy to give up reading." She wasn't sure that was actually true.

"All I'm saying is I earn my pay."

Sally ignored the comment and gave him a hug. "I don't want to fight Mike, and I need to go to bed. I'll call you tomorrow."

Mike shook his head. "Sometimes, I feel like I don't know you," he said then left.

An hour later Sally found herself on the couch. The letter would not let her go. "What? What do you want?" she asked it. The only answer came from the ticking wall-clock. It's second hand moved methodically as it measured each passing interval. Kuznetov's words echoed in her head. *...time brings us closer, carrying us away...*

"So, you want to take me round the clock? Round the clock to midnight? You want to carry me into midnight? Is that what you want?" The clock kept ticking, never breaking its pace, never speeding up or slowing down.

Sally got up and paced to her sliding balcony door. She stared out above the brick building that was parallel to her apartment, then up into the sky. The moon was full and seemed to be shining its spotlight on her. Its brightness mesmerized her momentarily. She eventually turned to her chipped-blue bookshelf packed with books. The miniature green die she had bought at the stationary store caught her eye. Without knowing why she picked it up and

pocketed it, jumping back onto the couch. *When it whispers Midnight, go to the forest's dark silhouette...* Sally picked up the letter and reread the poem looking for clues:

07 November 20—

*A love poem in the **dark** begins **when** Sally enters the **forest**  
**When** Sally enters the **forest** she opens to the **dark**  
And **dark** is a **forest** **when** Sally thinks she should not go, but  
**When** she does not think, she draws to the **dark midnight forest** because  
**Midnight** is **when dark** things happen, a **forest** of experience,  
**When** it whispers **Midnight**, go to the **forest's dark silhouette***

—*Anonymous*

P.S. –Sally, meet me **tomorrow** at midnight by your rock where the forest encounters the sand.

‘Dark’, ‘Midnight’, ‘forest’, ‘when’. The words stuck out and glared at her. They were the four words that found themselves on every line. What was “Anonymous” trying to tell her? Why was there such a stress on these four words? Was midnight dark like a forest? Why was Midnight written as a proper noun? As though Midnight was someone’s name. Who was Midnight? Midnight, like the femme fatale in the picture at The Mystery? Who was Anonymous? How did love play a part in this? A “forest of experience”? What exactly was there to be experienced in the dark? And the word ‘when’ suggested that something may be about to happen. But what?

Sally wanted to know. In fact, she had to know. And though she felt she should listen to her logic, there was something almost magnetic drawing her outdoors. She remembered how the moon controlled the tides. Perhaps it was

controlling her. Nonsense. The moon did not interest her, nor did the night. But being a junkie for a good mystery made her dangerously curious. She could perhaps get to the bottom of this. But at what price? This wasn't something that she could just read then file away on a shelf. Her life might be at stake. No, it was not wise to pursue this.

Sally reached into her pocket and pulled out the tiny die. She rarely relied on chance. But tonight was somehow different and so. One. Sally's favourite number. If she rolled a one, she would go. If not, she would forget she ever received the letter. She would rip it up into the tiniest pieces and bury in the garbage under the eggshells and apple cores. Her palms became clammy and her breathing faster. She toyed with the miniature cube and then rolled in spite of herself. The little green die spun from her fingers, flipping through the air and landed on top of the letter. She leaned in and took in a short breath. One.

## Chapter 4

Sally stood on the curb in front of her building, clenching her umbrella as the rain poured down. The sky flashed and the wind howled. Sally pulled her hoodie tighter, then touched the Swiss Army knife in her pocket. In her other pocket was a small flashlight, and the miniature can of mace that her brother had given her before he joined the military. Sally turned and eyed her building through the rain. She should go back inside and stay there. Forget all this nonsense. A large Cadillac cab turned the corner and slowly drove towards her. *KRAMER'S TAXI*. She could run. Right now. Retreat. Abort mission. She could... She could do anything and yet. The taxi pulled up, its headlights blinding her. Sally shielded her eyes until it stopped beside her. The car was long and black, and its windows were tinted. Sleek. She suddenly felt important, as though she were going to take care of some very serious business. Sally scanned the deserted street, then opened the door and slid in.

A stocky driver with thick work glasses turned around. "Where to ma'am?" he asked in a gravelly voice.

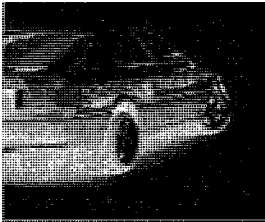
"To the park. Take me to the edge of the trail in Riverdale Park," said Sally.

The driver raised his eyebrows. "At this hour? It's pouring out."

"Yes. Just drive. It's urgent," replied Sally, shrinking back into the plush seat. As the driver pulled away she knew there was no going back. Not now.



Ten minutes later, Sally found herself at the edge of the forest in Riverdale Park. Thankfully the rain had stopped, though it had left the ground muddy. Her courage lasted until the cabbie drove away. As the vehicle slipped into the darkness, Sally wanted to run after it, telling the driver she'd made a mistake. But the taxi streaked away into the night. The wind ruffled the leaves of the tall cedar trees that encased the forest. They looked threatening, overpowering, like giants jutting out from the ground: a band of bodyguards protecting a secret. A secret. A secret. Sally shivered and approached the sign at the entrance of the trail. She squinted and began to read:



**LIKE A CAR SPEEDING THROUGH THE NIGHT. YOU WILL BE UNSURE: "WAS THAT SOMETHING THAT STREAKED BY, OR ARE MY EYES PLAYING TRICKS, AGAIN?" YOUR ANSWER WILL QUESTION, AND THEN DECIDE THAT THE TANGIBLE AND THE TRICK AMOUNT TO THE SAME. THE LINES HAVE BLURRED; AND THE WORLD WILL HATE YOU FOR NOT DISTINGUISHING.**

“What?! The world will hate me for what?” Sally took off her glasses and everything became a blur. She rubbed her eyes. “Mind’s playing tricks on me again. The mind plays tricks in the dark.” She put her glasses back on and looked up again at the sign that now read: ‘Riverdale Trail’ with an arrow pointing forward. She looked up into the dark sky, and knew the moon would light up her

path better than her measly flashlight. Leaving her umbrella on the ground, she took a deep breath and then crept into the forest.

The forest was darker than Sally expected. It was strange at night. The moonlight filtered sparsely through the thick treetops, barely lighting her way. The light was faint and blotchy. It came in patches. Sally headed up the damp trail and then crept into the bush. Her palms were clammy and cold, and she wished she'd remembered her mini-gloves. Sally trembled and her heart pounded so hard she thought it would stop. She wished she were more like the private detectives in the mysteries she read. They would face the forest head on. Not like Sally. The shrubs brushed her legs, and her hands kept coming against rain-soaked bushes and tree trunks. Moving as quickly and as quietly as she could, Sally kept her hands in front of her so as to feel anything the moon failed to highlight. Her eyes were playing tricks again. Shadows became humans. Branches swaying became arms reaching out to clench her neck. The wind was whispering something. Trying to tell her. Watch out. She walked faster, pushing through the foliage. A noise startled her. The forest was about to pounce. She knew it. Unable to control herself any longer she ran as fast as she could towards the blackness, not caring as the branches whipped her face. The pressure in her chest was unbearable and she gasped wildly for air. She ran faster. Until. Her forehead hit a thick tree trunk. She cried out as she fell to the muddy ground. Blood trickled down her forehead. It was the last thing Sally felt before the blackness.

*In the dream you simply hit the tree and shake your head. It hurts, but so what? You stand there, stunned. No stars, no nausea. Just a minor headache. The tree is close to you. Right in front of you like a body or a face. It tells you to come closer. That you can trust it. That you've walked by it countless times before, but have never been properly acquainted. Have a real good look. It's time. And so, you slowly place your hand on the bark. Run your hand up and down the coarseness. Your hands linger on the woody crevices. A tree. So wild and unfamiliar. Placing your hands on the trunk, you lean in and smell. A fresh scent fills your nostrils. The sensation causes you to lean closer. You tilt your neck and rub your cheek on the bark. Everything is so rough and so fresh. So new. As you push against the trunk, you feel two gloved hands slip around your waist. "It's Midnight," whispers a voice that sends electric currents through your body. There is something simultaneously soft and hard about it. Something that makes you burn. "Midnight and you're still in the forest," it says. You want to see it; you want to know who and what it is. You try to turn around to face the voice, but cannot. You feel the stranger's hands slip away and are overcome by a sense of loss. Your body remains pressed against the tree, but your heart leaves with the stranger in the night. Finally, you tear yourself away and face the forest. There are only shadows and the wind brushing up against the leaves.*

Sally awoke in a heap on the ground. It was beginning to freeze. Her head throbbed and her neck was stiff. She opened her eyes to a blur of shadows. There was the sound of leaves ruffling in the wind. In the distance an owl called out. She

thought she saw trees, but was without her glasses and couldn't be sure. Sally ran her hand along the dirt searching for her glasses, but only felt sticks and rocks. She blinked and tried to focus. Where was she? What was happening? Sally raised her hand to her forehead and felt a large bump. Yes, she'd hit her head. She felt dazed. Out of sorts. Where was she to go? Sally listened and heard the faint sound of water crashing. Waves. There was only one thing to do. She would follow that sound. It would lead her to safety. Yes, to her rock! She had to get there. She didn't remember why. But she couldn't turn back now. She could stay there until morning. Curl into a ball for warmth. Someone would find her. She would wake up in a different state. Sally pushed herself up, and stumbled blindly towards the sound of the waves.

The familiarity of the rock soothed Sally. She leaned against it and caught her breath, taking in the smell of water. She looked up at the light emanating from the sky. The moon's glow was powerful and she felt small under its spotlight and the stipple of stars.

"You are late," said a muffled voice from behind her. Sally jumped and spun around to face the voice. She could see nothing but a blur of tree trunks and shadows. She thought she could make out a black shape leaned up against the trunk a few meters away, but it was hard to tell. She reached for the can of mace in her pocket.

"Do not even think about it," it said as though speaking through a cloth filter. It was neither distinctly male nor female.

Sally left her hands at her sides. The note... The cab ride... The dream... They came flooding back to her in fragments. “Anonymous?” she called out.

“The one and only,” the stranger said laughing.

“Who are you?”

“The question is: who are you?” Anonymous stepped out of the shadows and onto the sand. Sally could only make out a black blur as though she were in a censored movie. She wished she had her glasses. She wished she hadn’t hit her head. The shape stood a few meters away from her. “Who are you?” it repeated more forcefully this time.

Who am I? thought Sally, what kind of question is that? Her head pounded.

“Sally Smith. Age twenty-five. Clerk,” she answered uncertainly.

“Now that is not the entire story, is it Sally?” The stranger waited. Sally wished she’d stayed home and buried herself under her bedspread. “I know there is a story in you, aching to get out. That is why I selected you.”

Sally stiffened. “What do you mean, selected me!? What do you want from me?” she asked.

“I want to touch you through time.” Sally shuddered. “A choice. I’ll give one choice,” continued Anonymous.

“What sort of choice?”

“Kill me now or love me then.”

The wind picked up, catching Sally off guard. She steadied herself, as Anonymous tossed something at her. It thumped on the sand beside her. Sally

leaned over and picked it up. It was hard and metal. She ran her hand down a barrel. A gun. She'd never held a gun before!

"Is it loaded?"

"One bullet. Your choice."

"My choice?" She touched the gun carefully then aimed at the shadow. With a gun in her hand she felt powerful, as though she had agency to decide what happened next.

"I've always wondered what it would feel like to take a life," she said. Sally had read about murder so many times, but had never fathomed she would do so herself. Why not? Why not take a life tonight? Sally's heart raced as she gripped the gun. *...to kill time is to eradicate the present into past...*

She aimed it at the darkness before her and ... pulled the trigger. The gun swerved sideways as it fired; the sound reverberating into the wind.

Sally hesitated forward.

"Nice try." She stopped. "You missed," said Anonymous laughing.

Sally's shoulders slumped. She had failed. She was a failed killer. But she didn't want to be a killer! She wanted to hunt killers. If Anonymous hadn't called her out here to hurt her, what exactly did this stranger want?

"Step out of your present and into the world that is my different world," said the stranger.

Sally threw the gun at the shadow and stepped backwards.

"You let me live when I gave you the chance to kill. Your choice has been made. You will now lose everything. And you will love me still. "

That was ludicrous! She could not be forced to love something she could not even see! Love? What a joke.

“If you say so,” replied Sally with disbelief as she heard the crackling of branches. The shadow had disappeared. “Wait! You can’t just leave!” she cried lunging towards the forest. Sally stumbled in the sand. “Tell me who you are! What do you want from me?!”

“Time will tell,” Anonymous called back.

A dizzy spell suddenly overwhelmed Sally. She lay down on the cool sand and listened as the waves crashed endlessly onto the shore.

## Chapter 5

Sally burst into the bookstore. She'd come directly from the forest. Somehow without her glasses, she'd found her way. To the security of the books and the photographs. Tough detectives and powerful femmes. Keeping watch. If she'd gone home, Sally was afraid of what might happen, afraid that her imagination would get the best of her and hold her hostage through the remains of the night. Why? Why was this happening? To her of all people. What had she done to deserve this?

Sally went behind the front desk, fumbling for her spare pair of glasses. She found the case and slipped on her glasses, instantly relieved as her surroundings became clearer. 4:07 a.m. Watson meowed and peered out from under the desk. Sally leaned down and petted his fur. His warm body relieved her stiff fingers. She sat down on the floor against the desk. Her eyelids became heavy as Watson rubbed his body against hers. She needed to rest. Just for a moment...

*And that's when she waltzes in. Spiky heels, long legs, breasts. To die for. Big, round, perfect. The kind to live for. The kind you dream of. The kind you'd ravage instead of dinner. That would ravage you. Forget dinner. These gems are where it's at. Cupped and held together in a low-cut black shirt. Revealing just enough to excite. Withholding just enough to keep you wondering. Wanting. More. You've seen her before. Framed. In black and white. But never like this. Up close. Closer. Larger than life. She's zooming in. Your eyes widen, mouth waters, your*



*tongue practically hangs out. Are you a dog? God, you're such a dog in the dark. Don't bark. Just sit. Stare. At that impeccable bottom in the clingy black skirt. Muscular and meaty extending into her impossible legs. Heart-shaped calves, rock hard thighs, stretching, stretching. Sweep up and zero in on her hair. Long, black, wavy. Like an Amazon's. The kind that makes you thank god for femme. Closer. Into her dark brown eyes. Hard as hell. They promise to bore a hole in your soul. If you had one. She's smoking. Luscious wet lips. Thick and red. What's that? Low raspy voice. She's saying something. Something you can't quite make out. Watch out. She could take you for all your worth. You're stiff as she walks away in slow motion. Click. Click. Click. Heels ticking like a clock. This woman is way past your bedtime, way past midnight. She turns her head. 'Find me,' she mouths. You think she winks. Maybe she does. Maybe in your dreams.*

Sally started awake. She was on the floor. Drooling. Watson was nestled against her waist. Midnight. Midnight! She sprang up startling the cat, and moved towards the back of the store towards the mystery femme fatale. She stopped in front of the picture frame.

“It's you, Midnight. All these references to Midnight. Get out here. It's time!” she commanded the woman who sat smoking in her velvet chair. The woman of her dream. Was she still dreaming? She didn't think so. And so, a little more hoarsely, “Midnight please.” Her heart thundered and her eyes widened at the unfamiliar tone in her voice.

The frame suddenly contracted and expanded as a long sleek leg pushed beyond the photo's flat surface into the store. The same shapely leg from her dream. And then the other. High heels digging from the past into the present. Sally looked away as the femme slid further out of the frame, her tight black skirt hugging her body. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. When Sally looked back, Midnight towered before her with the fierce expression still on her face. Penetrating eyes. Dark hard stare. Merciless. Mocking. Smoking. Trouble stirred in Sally's gut. Before her stood the most striking woman she had ever imagined. No longer in a black and white still, but now a full-bodied femme fatale in a haze of smoke.

"This, better be good," Midnight whispered seductively, strolling towards Sally. Her hips swayed and smoke swirled from the cigarette she held between her fingers. She brought the cigarette to her thick red lips and inhaled.

"Uhh..Midnight? Are you Midnight?"

"Call me whatever you like." She laughed. "I've noticed you looking at me. Standing in front of my frame with your pants on fire. You're pretty obvious you know."

"I just like your photo! It reminds me of my favourite mysteries."

"Riiight." Midnight raised her sharp eyebrows and took a long haul from her cigarette. "So did you call me out here for a reason, or was it just to stare?"

Sally started a little and jerked her head. "Don't start with me! It's been a rough night!"

"I'm sure it has," said Midnight in a low purr.

“You don’t know the night I’ve had!”

“Sure I do.”

“You do?”

“Well, I can tell by the gash on your forehead and by the leaves in your hair, that it hasn’t been pretty.” She slowly ran her tongue across her thick bottom lip. “You know honey, you really should do something about your hair.”

“Is it that bad?” Sally ran her hand through her ponytail.

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’m...afraid,” Sally admitted. She suddenly felt small.

“Of course you are,” replied Midnight, blowing a long stream of smoke in her face. Sally coughed and stared at the floor. “Does this have anything to do with a love story in the dark?..” asked Midnight.

“A love story in the dark? What do you mean?”

Midnight sighed deeply. “A poem from a certain, ‘Anonymous’?”

Sally stared intently at Midnight. “How do you know?”

“Let’s just say, I have a *killer* instinct. Some things never change.” She shook her head. Sally thought she detected a flash of anger in Midnight’s eyes.

“Some things never change?” repeated Sally.

“Just leave it. Okay?” Midnight pursed her lips. “So, what do you want?”

“I think I need your help.”

“Oh do you now? How so?” She inched closer to Sally. Sally’s hands became clammy and her breathing shallow.

“I’m being stalked.”

“And what exactly do you want me to do about it?” Midnight ran a fingernail along Sally’s cheek. Her perfume was hypnotic.

“I... I don’t know. It’s just a feeling that you might know what to do. References to Midnight keep coming up in my life and I just thought...” Sally felt like putty. Unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

“Look, I’ve seen you skulking around this store as though you’re one tough dick. Pretending to solve cases. Stop pretending. *This* is your big break.”

“But I don’t know what to do.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m scared!”

Midnight’s eyes glimmered and she licked her lips. “Scared, eh? A wannabe like you is scared?”

“I’m not a wannabe!” Sally clenched her jaw.

“Prove it.”

“How?”

“Listen I’m going to go over this once. And only once.” She grabbed Sally by the front of her hoodie and thrust her against a bookshelf. “You have two choices. One – freak out like a baby; or rise up like the P.I. you long to be and take on the case you’ve always wanted.”

“I never wanted to be stalked and lured into the forest at midnight...”

“Oh, now I’m supposed to pity you?”

Sally trembled.

Midnight continued, releasing Sally. “Well, isn’t this what you always wanted?”

“No! Not really.”

“But you wanted a mystery.”

“So?”

“So take your mystery and do something about it.”

“But I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Even better.”

“What!?”

“Get your nose out of those books and get real. For once. Get real.”

“But I’m not strong enough.”

“Okay, if that’s what you think.”

“Huh?”

“Tell yourself what you want. You know what you need to do. It’s not my job to hold your hand. Besides I’m here to play with you.”

“Play with me?!”

“Exactly.” She crushed her cigarette out on the display table and whispered in Sally’s ear. “Some people believe in God. Some people believe in science. Try believing in Midnight.” The woman turned and bolted towards her frame. She leapt up, her legs dragging seductively over the wood like a high jumper in slow motion.

“Wait!” Sally ran to the photo, but it had already returned to its original size. Midnight was flat and motionless again, framed on her velvet chair, frozen in another time.

Sally looked around at the store full of books. The clock’s faint tick filled the silence. She wanted to wake up. Yes, she had dreamt the whole thing, No? She was going mad. Was she? Who was she? A person in a store full of books. With a gash on her head. In a night that dangled between the tangible and the trick. Head trauma. That was it. She was injured. She was not crazy. She refused. She could collapse under the pressure or she could not. Her choice. And so she chose. The dark. Chose her.

08 November 20—

Dear Sally,

Some things are big. Like the forest, the night, time. Like our bodies of water. And the river, of love. Sometimes, I feel big things. Take last night, for instance. In the forest, where I have seen you at a distance from time to time, I walked into the clearing and stood. We were transfixed by the night and its stars, and the moon so very full. The stars pricked us individually and cosmically with their hidden codes. (Why does everything seem to belong to a code?) What do you think they had to tell us? The universe does not always tell us what we want. So the matters of your mind, into your own hands take them, and tell me: how many have looked up, are looking up, and will look up? How many heads full of their own heads have been thrown back like yours, mouths slightly open, eyes wide, staring, wondering... looking and never quite seeing? Do you ever think of such things? Do you feel big things too?

Sappho felt big things, I suspect. We find her in fragments now, like: *Some...say an army of horse and some...say an army on foot/ And some...say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing/ On the black earth. But I say it is/ What you love.* This strikes me like the clock strikes twelve, the darkest hour, black like earth at the hour I love to love, midnight. Flaubert adds to this conversation, satirically defining 'midnight' as: *the farthest boundary of honest pleasures; beyond it, whatever is done is immoral.* Is it immoral to love the dark? Flaubert, Sappho, Dear, my earth black; my midnight, round the clock.

We make our choices. You chose. I choose carefully. You. I have grown fond of watching. Am drawn to: your being, your fantasies, your unchallenged existence. You put in. Put out. But what moves you? I want to tear you apart. "You will lose everything," I said. And so you will. Think of this as an experiment in time. My hypothesis is that you will crumble as I try to touch you. Become a ruin, like the ancient columns. Become no longer who you once were. Surrender. Let go into something else. We have so much to share. A 'Theory of Darkness,' for instance. Yes, all in good time.

Until,

*Anonymous*

## Chapter 6

Sally sat in the dark in front of her computer screen clutching yet another letter. She'd received one yesterday at the store, and then a new one this evening upon returning home from work. Mike had left several messages wondering where she'd disappeared to, but she couldn't bear to call him back. Not now. She simply wanted the letters to stop. She uncrumpled the most recent note and reread it:

09 November 20—

Dear Sally,

Wednesday. 11:40 pm. Draw the curtains. Turn off the lights; turn on your computer. Go to [www.cryptocomm/P2P/Onionrouter.com](http://www.cryptocomm/P2P/Onionrouter.com). This is an underground online communication server that uses cryptography and encrypted protocols to thwart traffic analysis. Rest assured, I will remain untraceable through an IP address, which is crucial to the success of our communication. Do not try to track me. Follow the instructions on the site and log in under the name Nighttime13. At 11:45 pm enter the 'darkroom67.10'. I have arranged for this to be our private chat room. I remain,

*Anonymous*

Sally looked at the clock – 11:37 p.m., then back at the computer screen. The circular shape on her screen saver swirled and faded, then reappeared as a square. Anonymous. She wondered what it wanted from her. Why meet in such a strange space? She wanted to ignore the note and yet, she couldn't. Ever since the first letter at the bookstore, it was as though there was a magnet pulling her towards this mystery. A magnet she felt she should resist. She felt a twinge of



guilt for avoiding Mike. He had been upset the last time she'd seen him, but then again he didn't know that his girlfriend had a stalker. She was tempted to ask him to track down Anonymous and put an end to this mystery. He was the computer expert after all. For a split second Sally imagined Mike composing the letters at his desk—but it didn't make sense. He hated writing. Besides, he had no motive to send her such notes – Mike was too nice for that. He was too nice period. No, she would not ask him for help. Sally was determined to figure out just who Anonymous was on her own.

She typed in the website Anonymous had specified and logged in under the name Nighttime13. Her mouth grew dry as she navigated her way to darkroom 67.10. The screen immediately turned black with a white cursor flashing after the name 'Nighttime 13' in the upper right-hand corner. Eerie chamber music began to softly flow out of her speakers, as another cursor began to flash. Anonymous logged on, blinking before her.

Anonymous: Good evening Sally.

Nighttime13: Hi.

Anonymous: You might be wondering why you are here.

Nighttime13: You could say that...

Anonymous: Ask yourself why you are here.

Nighttime13: You requested that I log into this site.

Anonymous: Do you do everything that is requested of you?

Nighttime13: Leave me alone! I don't want anything to do with you!

Anonymous: Keep telling yourself that.

Nighttime13: Look - I really don't appreciate being harassed. I could call the police you know.

Anonymous: Oh, but you shall miss out on all the fun. Besides, I know you will not.

Nighttime13: You don't know anything... But since we're here, there's something I want to ask you about...

Anonymous: Do proceed.

Nighttime13: The other night you said you wanted to touch me through time, what did you mean? What do you want from me!?

Anonymous: Let me say there is a space that we can touch, but that is not necessarily tangible. A similar example might be something like 'cyberspace' - you are there, I am here. But together we are somewhere.

Nighttime13: Why do you want to touch me? It's weird.

Anonymous: I want to because you want me to.

Nighttime13: I do not!

Anonymous: You are aching to get out. To express what you live inside. This is your chance.

Nighttime13: My chance for what?

Anonymous: Stop asking questions you know the answers to!

Nighttime13: ?!

Anonymous: Have you ever heard of the fantasy tense?

Nighttime13: Tense as in present, past, and future?

Anonymous: Yes.

Nighttime13: No.

Anonymous: It is the world spent in your head - that coexists and blends itself with the present, past, and future. The tense we are simultaneously living as we live. That flashes in and out in fragments.

Nighttime13: You're puzzling me.

Anonymous: Right. Like a puzzle of a world visible only to you and those you choose to share it with.

Nighttime13: Like a secret life.

Anonymous: Something like that. Let me ask you a question - If I kill you in my fantasy, am I a criminal of the mind? If I kiss you in my fantasy are we lovers of the psyche?

Nighttime13: No!

Anonymous: Oh, but perhaps we are killers, but not criminals, and lovers, but not bound. See, there is more freedom in the fantasy tense, unlike action in the present tense, which holds us accountable. However, inside we are free to kill and love as we please. There is a world inside that is divorced of criminality and judgment, if we allow it to be so.

Nighttime13: Like anarchy?

Anonymous: Not exactly. In the fantasy tense we can do anything because the laws that govern that world work in accordance to the world of the fantasy. For example, if I want to kill someone and rejoice, then I can and it is okay, because it is in my fantasy and is permitted in the world of that momentary vision.

Nighttime13: But I'm afraid of my thoughts. They're dark.

Anonymous: The rules that govern this present world differ from the rules that govern the world in your head. In the fantasy the only action there is that of thought. And of imagining. Think of it the same way that we think of a theory.

Nighttime13: A theory?

Anonymous: Yes, a theory is an abstract idea.

Nighttime13: Where are you going with this?

Anonymous: You know very well where I am taking you. To the place of practice. Where ideas are translated into action, into the present. Sally, may your mind run freely through the woods of your darkness. Into your dark, through your dark. Grope, grope, grope, until that no longer works. Then let go. Let it out.

Nighttime13: Let what out?

Anonymous: Your private dick.

Nighttime13: My private dick?! What? Who are you? What do you want from me?

Anonymous: What happens when we turn you inside out? What happens when the mirror reflects your inside out? What happens when the reflection everyone thought they were looking at changes? Whatever will others think? Do you become accountable? Do you try yourself?

Nighttime13: What are you saying?

Anonymous: I am saying you are going to start living what you dream and imagine.

Nighttime13: Why?!

Anonymous: Because you are so afraid that it will be entertaining to watch you become a ruin. And because you live in your head rather than in the world. Because I want to bring you out and ruin Sally; rework her, if you will. This is an experiment - experimental living. And you are my subject. And there is a Theory of Darkness we must practice together. What good is a theory without action?

Nighttime13: You're crazy.

Anonymous: Are we not all crazy? Good night.

Nighttime 13: Wait! Where are you going?

Sally waited for a reply, but all that remained was the flashing cursor and a black screen. The conversation had been erased, as though it had never happened. But it had. Hadn't it? Sally shut down the computer, then stared at the clock as it struck midnight. In the dark of her apartment she sensed the future. Something was about to happen. She could feel it.

## Chapter 7

Wide-awake after the chat, Sally found herself in front of the full-length bedroom mirror as a candle flickered on the nearby dresser. Her face was drawn and pinched. There were shadows under her eyes. Something wouldn't let her sleep. Her heart. It thundered and begged for attention. She was more aware of it than she had ever been. Its urgent drum made her want to run. But where? There was nowhere to go. And so, deciding it might be best to know her body was trying to tell her, she began to listen, and let it lead her where it must.

The mirror. What a weird place. It bothered her; the not-quite-right reflection. Her thin frame, disheveled hair, small eyes. A projection of herself back at herself. Someone she'd looked at her whole life, in a constant state of morphing. Someone she'd looked at and never quite seen. She was looking now and seeing whom, she didn't quite know. Oh, she knew well. She could see what she wanted. She knew what was inside. And so, on this unusually black night, Sally opted for honesty. She turned to herself.

"Hi Sally," she said.

"Hey," nodded her reflection.

"So here we are."

"Indeed."

"Who are you?" asked Sally the person in the mirror.

"I'm you," said her reflection.

"I'm scared."

"What are you so scared of?"

“Of you.”

“Why?”

Sally noticed her shoulders expanding. They had slowly become broader, and had almost doubled in size.

“Because women like me aren’t supposed to be dicks like you.”

“What makes you think I’m a dick?”

“Just a feeling I get.” Sally looked her reflection square in the eyes and felt her muscles expand. She flexed her arms. “Listen, all these years I’ve been the lanky-haired four-eyes. Now I’ve got some creep keeping me up at night telling me that’s not the full story.”

“So, what’s the story?”

“Well... you wouldn’t know it to look at me, but I’m a bit of a renegade.” Her voice deepened and her jaw grew stronger. “A whisky drinking broad in a suit that fights crime. Riverdale isn’t ready for someone like me. Best shut the hell up and keep quiet.” Her legs grew thicker, her stomach harder.

“You don’t have a choice,” said her reflection tearing off her housecoat to reveal her naked body. “Watch it, we’ve flipped you inside out.” Sally no longer recognized herself. Her female body now also had male traits. She found herself in a sort of in-between state that didn’t make sense. That didn’t fit. Was this a joke?

“What do you mean, ‘we’? What are you doing to me?!”

“What you’ve always wanted,” replied her reflection, reaching for the scissors and cutting Sally’s hair. “Don’t ask so many questions.”

“Stop! Just stop!”

But the reflection wouldn't let up. She noticed a shadow flicker past the bedroom window. Anonymous? She dared not move. It crept on. Sally thought she heard the click of high heels echoing in the distance. Maybe it was Midnight. But the sound soon faded leaving Sally once again with her wild reflection. She stared at her short hair, her new body and felt a surge of anxiety.

“You look petrified.”

“That's because you've taken me over. I feel naked.”

“You are naked.” Her reflection handed her a pile of undergarments, and then a black pair of dress pants, suit jacket, a crisp white shirt, blue tie, a pair of shiny black patent leather square-toed shoes, and a pair of lightly tinted glasses. Sally began to dress herself. The outfit melded against her body and soon Sally found herself staring at a dapper young detective. Her reflection handed her a fedora, a pair of black leather gloves and a lined trench coat, which she put on. Sally had a momentary sense of satisfaction, but then felt as though she couldn't catch her breath. Panic. She realized she had to get herself back and tried to tear off the clothes, but they remained fused to her body. Even the glasses stuck to her face. Her expression was harder than she ever remembered it and though she wanted to cry out, she could only speak in her new gruff voice. Everything seemed beyond her control.

“What has Anonymous done to me?” she sputtered.

“What have you done to yourself?” asked her reflection. “Isn't this what you want?”



“It’s one thing to think something. It’s another to live it. I can’t go out like this. Give me Sally back.”

“There is no going back.” Her reflection handed her a business card. It read: ‘Chris Tisdale, P.I.’ with a telephone number below the name.

Sally stared at her new self in the mirror. What she saw evoked a stronger, more confident, rougher feeling in her. She held herself taller and her gaze didn’t falter.

Sally moved to the kitchen and pulled out a small bottle of single malt whiskey and her special whisky glass from her cupboard above the sink. She poured herself a drink and walked around the apartment, examining things as though they were clues. She crept and ducked and spun around corners, until she ended up hand against the wall, head cocked, hat tilted, looking straight into the mirror. Sally was nowhere to be found.

## Chapter 8

Sally stepped into the night. The streets were empty and shadows spilled onto the sidewalks. A black cat slipped past her, its eyes shocking the dark. She walked as briskly as she could, watching her breath crystallize before her, not knowing where she was headed. What was going on? She felt she was no longer in control of her body. Her mind had a mind of its own. Something vibrated against her breast. She opened her trench coat and slipped her hand in the pocket of her suit jacket. A cell phone. Weird. She didn't even own one. She was tempted to toss the phone into the wind. Impulse said ignore it, instinct said pick it up. She flipped open the phone.

“Hello,” she said startled by the gruffness of her voice.

“Hi, is this Chris Tisdale?” said the voice on the other end through static. A woman. Soft, sultry voice. A slight rasp, the kind from drinks and cigarettes.

“Who's asking?” Sally said. The voice reeked of trouble, and she didn't need any more trouble.

“I can't tell you on the phone. Too dangerous.” The woman coughed, then took a long drag of a cigarette. “I need your help. Meet me at Rainy's in fifteen minutes.”

The line went dead. Sally knew her night was going to be long.

About twenty minutes later Sally approached Rainy's – a little dive at the far end of Hill St., a place she'd heard of, but had never had the guts to enter. Until tonight. The bar's front window glowed dimly like a refuge from the dark.

But she knew better. The sign read: Closed. She swung open the door and walked squarely onto the red-carpeted floor. The place smelled of dampness, wet piss and beer. Gritty piano music with some raw vocals played in the background. The walls were covered with wood panels and the clientele seemed washed out. This was the kind of place to drown sorrows. To drown oneself. The sort of place old men went to die. Sally's eyes adjusted to the dim light. She scanned the room. To the left of her was the bar. A long wooden counter, a few stools, most of them empty except a couple of large middle-aged men staring into their pints and then at the television in front of them. The bar maid had a blond dye job and a tired face. Her wrinkles suggested she'd seen a few things. Sally walked up to her.

“A JD's on the rocks.” The bartender snapped her gum and then slowly began fixing the drink.

“Three bucks,” she said pushing the drink towards Sally.

Sally put down a five and then walked away with her drink. She looked around the room. Booths lined the bar. They were tall, almost too tall to see into. She would have to walk by them, to find her caller.

Sipping her J.D.'s, Sally passed a couple having a fight, “I'll kill you, you bastard,” hissed a woman to the man sitting in front of her. Sally walked on. Empty, empty, empty, and then in the last booth, there *she* sat. Shit. Midnight.

Midnight's gaze bore into Sally, as though trying to make her weak. Sally figured she had probably made a lot of people weak, taken them for all they were worth, never hiding that that was the plan from the beginning. Her eyes were so brown they were black. Her gaze so dead it would eat Sally alive if she wasn't

careful. Midnight was holding a cigarette and the smoke swirled around her, hypnotic, as though it could charm a snake. Sally heard the woman's long fingernails tapping against the table; she could almost feel them digging into her back. Midnight continued to stare, challenging her to sit down. She did.

“Chris?” she asked in that raspy sultry voice of hers that Sally thought would sound seductive regardless of what Midnight was saying.

‘Chris?’ thought Sally. Had Anonymous changed her into Chris Tisdale, the person on the business card?! She quickly opened her wallet, flipping through her cards. All of them read ‘Chris Tisdale’ and had her new picture! She shoved her wallet back into her suit coat and stared stonily at Midnight. She'd best deal with this woman, then get out of this place. Midnight took a long drag of her cigarette, and then blew expert smoke rings from her thick lips. The rings wafted towards Chris, expanded, and encircled her before dissolving into the air. She suspected Midnight was testing her. Toying with her. Why? Chris didn't know and quite frankly, she didn't want to care. But she was there. So, she decided to hear the woman out.

“Okay, Midnight. You call me out here, in the middle of nowhere, at a crazy hour, to tell me what? What is it that you want from me?”

Midnight looked around making sure no one was listening then whispered, “I'm hiring you to hunt down Anonymous, before it gets you too.” She pulled a white envelope from her leather purse and removed a note from it.

“I found this envelope tonight outside of The Mystery and had to call you right away. My curse only allows me out of my frame after dark and doesn't

allow me to talk about my past. My past is trapped in time, and soon I'll be trapped forever too. Unless..." She blinked her thick eyelashes.

"Unless what?" grunted Chris.

"Unless you find Anonymous and free us both. My time is running out. If you don't find Anonymous, I'll be trapped forever inside my frame. And soon, so will you."

Chris glared at the woman, snatching the note from her hands to read it.

09 November 20—

Dear Chris,

A theory is an idea thought possible. It is a perspective, a perhaps-maybe. Who am I? Am I the darkness of time? The darkness of your fantasy tense? Are you my shadow? You have one week to find me and come up with your own 'Theory of Darkness'. Will the Sally you once knew be forever trapped in a frame? Will you live briefly as Chris until she too is buried alive in time – in a photograph; in memory? Of course, this is your choice.

Until,

*Anonymous*

Chris clenched her jaw and scanned the letter again, noticing the whiteout under the word 'find'. She held it up to the lamp above their table, but could only see scribbles under the liquid paper. Perhaps Anonymous had been in a rush while writing the note, though none of the other letters contained mistakes. Chris eyed Midnight suspiciously. What did this woman gain by hiring her? A woman like Midnight always wanted something for something.

"Did you open my letter without my permission?"

Midnight tossed her hair. “I had to – I knew it might contain important information. And I was right!”

Chris tightened her fists wishing Midnight’s thick red lips weren’t so mesmerizing. She slammed her fist on the table. Midnight didn’t even flinch.

“Okay Midnight, let’s cut to the chase! You want to hire me to find my Anonymous stalker... Why? What’s in it for you! Who are you?”

Midnight gripped Chris’s thick forearm as her face contorted in a way that Chris assumed was supposed to make her want to protect Midnight.

“Are you afraid to be alone? Afraid of the night? Are your nights awake and endless? That used to be me, until...” She stared past Chris, as though she was looking into her distant and forbidden past.

“Until what?” asked Chris, pulling away her arm.

“Until that very same Anonymous stalked and drove me inside a frame.”

“So you’re not a film noir star like the others in the photographs?”

“No.” Midnight shook her head. “I’m trapped in my frame. Sure, I come out from time to time, when folks like you pull me out to enrich their world and wet their dreams, but really I’m a prisoner of time – flat and frozen.” She dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “My time’s running out. Soon I won’t be able to leave my frame. If you find Anonymous, you’ll free me as well as yourself.” Midnight stubbed out her cigarette. It hissed.

“And if I don’t?”

Midnight ran the tip of her high heel along Chris's pant leg, causing an involuntary tremor to jolt up her leg. Chris pulled away her leg and cleared her throat.

“And if you don't, you'll end up like me, only much more quickly. It seems to be happening faster this time. Believe me, it's no better than being dead and buried inside a coffin. You're our only hope...” Midnight suddenly began coughing loudly. “I'm not feeling well...” she sputtered, reaching for her drink. Chris examined the femme's face. As her coughs subsided, she caught Midnight's eyes and held them. They were two dark pools, swimming with murky mysteries. Chris crossed her arms and leaned forward. “You said earlier that you wanted to hire me – so now I want to know, what's in it for me?”

The darkness of Midnight's eyes threatened to swallow Chris up like two black holes. “You bastard,” whispered Midnight, stifling another cough. She smiled slyly and pulled a bundle of bills from her purse, shoving it into Chris's chest. “A dick after my own heart.” Chris pocketed the money and waited.

“Be careful Chris. This Anonymous character isn't something you want to mess with. Take it from me.” She checked her silver wristwatch, then quickly buttoned up her fur jacket and grabbed her purse.

“Give me something. Anything to go on,” said Chris.

“I can't.”

Chris shook her head in disgust.

Midnight reached into her purse and handed Chris a piece of paper with a number on it. “Here’s my pager number. Only to be used for emergencies.” She slid out of the booth. “I’ll be in touch.”

“I’m sure you will,” muttered Chris.

Trouble. This woman reeked of it, and these days, trouble was everywhere  
Chris turned.



## Chapter 9

Early Thursday afternoon, Chris walked into Rainy's with a sense of purpose. She had kept the bookstore closed for the day, since it was imperative that she avoid seeing anyone who might recognize traces of Sally in her. Chris needed more time to figure out what to do, though because she only had a week's time to solve the mystery, every minute counted. As she walked towards the counter, Chris recognized the bartender as the woman who'd served her a whiskey last night. She figured the bartender was a permanent fixture there. The woman flipped through a celebrity gossip magazine as she chomped on gum and eventually looked disinterestedly up at Chris. Chris sat on a barstool and slapped down a Polaroid she'd taken of Midnight's picture at the store.

"You know this woman?" she asked.

The bartender's face was expressionless as though it was too much energy to move a muscle, let alone respond. She stared blankly at Chris then turned back to her magazine.

Chris pulled a twenty from her wallet and tossed it on the counter. "Two whiskey's, one for me, one for you. Keep the change."

The woman raised her eyebrows and sniffed. "I don't drink whisky, but I'll keep the change." She took the money, and then slowly fixed the drink.

"Okay, what do you want?" The bartender sighed as she sat down sliding the drink towards Chris.

“Answers,” said Chris in a low voice, making sure no one could hear. Chris motioned to the picture. “Word around town is that this woman was a regular here. You know her?”

The bartender sniffed again. “What’s it to you?” She waited, crossing her arms.

Chris reached into her breast pocket and pulled out her business card, slapping it on the counter for the woman to read. “Chris Tisdale, P.I. I’m conducting an investigation. This woman may figure in it.” She paused, “Her life may be at stake.”

The bartender’s eyes indicated she was thinking, and then, as though she had made a decision, she said, “Aw, what the hell. Yeah, I seen her around. She used to come here lots about a year or so ago. Not anymore. Except the other night, I saw her with you. First time in a while. Looks the same. Watch out, eh. Maneater.”

“Maneater? What do you mean?”

“You know, the golddiggin type. Like my cousin Cindy. Always a new man. Embarrassin’ if you ask me.”

“But this woman,” Chris motioned to the photo, “what makes you believe she’s a maneater?”

The bartender snorted and rolled her eyes. “Well, look at her. Flashing her knockers and wearing those tight black clothes. And her boots. Nothing respectable about those boots! Seemed she was always comin’ here with an old

guy. Her sugar daddy. Getting him to buy her drinks. Next thing I know, she was here with someone different.” She shook her head in disgust.

Chris took a swig of her whiskey. It burned on the way down, just the way she liked it. “You ever remember any of their faces? Or hear any of their conversations?”

“What do you take me for? Someone who gives a crap about what others have to say? I’ve been at this piss job for fifteen years and I don’t give a damn about what customers have to say. They haven’t given me squat.” She tossed her magazine aside. “Stupid stars. All a bunch of head cases.”

Chris nodded, and then tried a different angle. “How often would she come in? On any particular night?”

“She was a regular. Fridays. I remember she’d always come on Fridays and drink dry martinis. Who drinks martinis in a place like this? A hotshot – that’s who.” The bartender looked around. A middle-aged man looked up from his pint.

“This hotshot givin’ you trouble Tam?” he hollered.

“Nope, everything’s fine Rick,” she said then turned back to Chris. “My bodyguard. Where was I?.. Oh yeah. Sometimes she’d come more. Mostly at night. Sometimes alone. But usually with her sugar daddy. Until she got bored. Or got what she wanted. Then she got herself a new guy.”

“The new guy?” Chris eyed the bartender.

“Yeah.” She shrugged.

This woman wasn’t giving her much to go on. Chris knew she had to dig deeper.

“Describe him to me,” said Chris.

“Well...” The bartender stopped as though waiting for something. Her stare penetrated Chris’s chest. Chris reached into her pocket and pulled out another twenty. “Gal’s gotta make a livin’ somehow,” said the bartender snatching the bill. “Guy was middle-aged, about forty. Big curly hair and thick brown moustache. Collard shirts. Tie. Stood out.”

“Do you remember when he started coming here with her?” asked Chris.

The bartender thought for a moment, then answered, “I think it was fall because I remember that nasty jacket he wore. Tweed.”

Chris moved her body closer to the bar. “Is there anything particular, any situation between them that stands out in your mind?”

“Maybe. Okay, I remember this one time they were yelling. Or maybe it was just him yelling. I had to get one of my boys to go over there and tell ‘em to keep it down, or get out.”

“One of your boys?”

The bartender motioned over to the man drinking a pint. “Yeah, he’s one of my boys. Looks useless, but he’s been around long enough to know what’s what. Anyways... the man ended up storming out. Or maybe it was her. Don’t remember. All I remember is it sure was different from her regular encounters where they left all excited.”

“Do you know who he was?”

“Funny thing, I think I seen him on TV a few weeks after. Late spring. Some science teacher at Allsburg University. Superstar. Quit just like that.”

“That story sounds familiar. When did you last see her?”

“The night they were fighting. Was glad that she stopped coming. This place don’t need anymore trouble.”

“What about the other guy, the ‘sugar-daddy’?” asked Chris.

The bartender opened her magazine back up. “I think you’ve wasted enough of my time.” She snapped her gum, “Like I said, I don’t need no more trouble.”

“Right.” Chris downed the rest of her whisky and hopped off her stool.

“It’s been a pleasure Ms....” she stuck out her hand.

“Tammy. It’s Tammy,” said the bartender staring at Chris’s hand.

“If you think of anything else Tammy, give me a ring.” She turned and headed for the door knowing The Mystery would have to wait.

## Chapter 10

After searching through the library's *Allsburg Albatross* and the *Riverdale Daily's* back-issue databases, Chris found the articles she'd been in search of. She clicked on an article and read:

### **Allsbrug Physics Superstar Resigns**

Josephine Walker

Fredrich Neilson, physics professor extraordinaire, resigned from his position at Allsburg University early Tuesday morning. Considered by the university to be the up and coming Stephen Hawkins, the school's president had expressed her regret at Neilson's unexpected decision. "We do not know what prompted this sudden action and are quite saddened by the news. Neilson contributed a wealth of cutting-edge research to the university during the years he was with us," said Roberta Block. "He will be greatly missed." An anonymous co-worker reported having seen Neilson pack up his office, tell everyone within earshot that it was something he had to do and to not ask questions, and then walk calmly out of the Hubble building, boxes in hand.

Neilson was hired seven years ago by Allsburg University after completing his post-doctoral work at the prestigious Wilson Institute for Higher Learning. By this time he was on his way to becoming a household name for his 'Theory of Everything,' a term he coined to describe the project he was working on. The theory purports to hold the key to a single understanding of the universe, unlike today's partial theories, like the theory of relativity. Neilson claimed to have cracked the first part of this theory and was hard at work on completing it, when he unexpectedly halted all research. When asked about his decision, Neilson replied, "Everything? It's clear to me now that no one wants a know-it-all." The university will hold an official press conference tomorrow on Neilson's decision.

Wednesday June 4, 20--

Over the next few hours Chris read the articles that appeared in the weeks following Neilson's resignation. She recalled hearing about the story on the news. The press blamed Neilson's resignation on personal problems – rumours of an affair and a bout of severe depression, for which he had been institutionalized briefly as a young man – though no reporter, not even the nosy Josephine Walker had been able to confirm the speculations about the affair. A few colleagues and acquaintances had stated that Neilson had been talking incessantly about darkness and time, and the concept of the eternal return before he resigned. Many sources also noted that he had seemed more disheveled than usual, had lost weight, and had been seen around campus walking with a young woman dressed in clingy black clothes and dark sunglasses, that some compared to a dominatrix or a woman straight out of a film noir. In an investigative piece Walker had confronted Neilson about the woman, asking, "Did your extra-marital affair contribute to the resignation?" "I don't know what you're talking about," he had replied. "It was probably one of my students asking me about an assignment or a physics problem. I don't keep track of everyone I talk to." Walker had also written that Neilson had been adamant about never again working in his field. He blamed his theory for having almost destroyed his life and was completely disillusioned with academia. Walker had spotted him in the Riverdale library's philosophy section scribbling furiously in a notebook. In the following article, Walker reported that Neilson had stopped taking media calls. International media coverage had been minimal and had reiterated what Chris had read in the two local papers. The story soon disappeared altogether and now remained buried in the archives.

Chris logged out of the database as the quote, 'Everything? No one wants a know-it-all,' echoed in her head. It reminded her of a passage she'd read in the Kuznetov book about the 'unknowability factor' embedded in historical renderings and how history was, in a way, like an unsolvable mystery. According to the author, historical documents were mere clues to a larger whole. Her theories always left the reader with more questions than answers. Perhaps Neilson was familiar with Kuznetov's work and had been influenced by her theories. Her work incorporated physics problems, so he would've likely heard of her. Chris had definitely heard of Fredrich; in fact, she remembered a gangly man who looked exactly like the newspaper photo, coming into the store last August looking for Jackson. Jackson had been at home after his arthritis flared up, though she had told the man to come back in a few days. He'd seemed jumpy and relieved at Jackson's absence. Chris had never seen him since.

She turned back to the computer screen and then quickly searched a digital address book, drawing up five local phone numbers and addresses under the last name 'Neilson'. She jotted them down and then headed outside.

Chris sat shivering on a bench in front of the library's birdhouse irritated by the chirping chickadees. She had had no luck with the first four numbers, and her patience was wearing thin. She dialed the last number, cursing the birds.

"Neilson residence," said a boy.

"Is Fredrich there?" asked Chris.

"Daddy? Daddy's camping up North."



“Where up north?”

“Goose Bay. Who is it?”

Chris ignored the question. “Do you know when he’ll be home?”

“Nope. Maaaaaaa” He screamed half into the receiver. Chris heard a muffled voice and a ‘who is it?’

“Hello?” A woman’s voice answered.

“Hello,” replied Chris.

“Who is this?”

“Sonya Daoust. PhD candidate from the Wilson Institute. I’m giving a lecture at Allsburg University this week and have communicated over email with Professor Neilson about dropping by to pick up a folder for my presentation.”

“Oh, really,” said the woman flatly.

“Yes. He said he had everything ready for me and would be happy if I came over to pick it up once I arrived in town.”

“He said he was happy?” The woman snorted. “Well that’s a first. Fredrich doesn’t want anything to do with Allsburg University.

“He’s a good friend of my supervisor, Brian Ward. They attended Wilson together. Professor Ward also contacted Professor Neilson about my presentation.”

“Right. Well, he’s never mentioned him before. And he never mentioned you before he went on his trip.” The woman sighed.

“His trip?”

“Yes, his trip. He left a week ago.”

Chris tried to sound desperate. “He left? But he promised me the file! It’s crucial to the success of my presentation! When will he be back?”

“I don’t know. Late next week, I think. Maybe later.”

“Next week?! That won’t do. My presentation is on Monday. I need it today.”

The woman cleared her throat. “I’m just about at my wits end with that man. Never tells me anything. What a scatterbrain. You’ll have to make other arrangements.”

“That’s not possible. I need that file. He said I could use some of his notes for my presentation. Can I contact him?”

“Look, he’s unreachable right now. No phone. No internet. Just him in his cabin. Again. Clearing his brain he says. More like, drinking himself into a stupor.”

“If I don’t get that file today my presentation is going to be a disaster. Is there any way I can come by this evening for the file?”

“You’re kidding me...” she sounded exasperated. “They say never marry a cop, well, I should’ve never married a prof.” A kid shrieked in the background. “Coming...” yelled the woman.

“Fredrich promised me he was done with academia. We’re going to have to have a talk when he gets back.” The woman paused. “Fine. You can come by, but I don’t have a clue what file to give you. His office is such a mess. I never go in there.”

“Don’t worry Ms. Nielson. I’ll find it.”

“Sure.” Chris could almost feel the woman rolling her eyes.

“What’s your address?”

“3251 Brig Sideroad. We’re in between Riverdale and Allsburg, north of the 20.”

“Okay, I’m sure I’ll find it.”

“Fine. I’ll expect you in an hour.” The woman hung up.

Chris smiled at the birds. What had earlier sounded like shrill chirping transformed itself into glorious song.

## Chapter 11

Two hours later the taxi pulled up in front of the Neilson residence. The wad of cash that Midnight had given Chris allowed her the extravagance of forty-minute cab rides. The Neilson home was located on an acreage off a rural road. Brick, two stories, double garage, well-kept yard. The cab killed its engine. Chris stepped out of the taxi and walked briskly up to the door, briefcase in hand. She knocked and an Asian woman with short stylish hair and elegant attire answered the door. She glared at Chris.

“Sonya?”

Chris nodded her head and stuck out her hand. “And you are?”

“Fine. I’m Judith.” They shook hands and stood there looking at one another.

“Can I come in and get the file?” asked Chris.

Judith looked her up and down. “Okay. Take off your shoes,” she said as Chris stepped into the house.

A young boy with a plastic sword whizzed by. “On guard!” he shouted slaying the air in front of him.

“Thomas, go play in the toy room!” yelled Judith.

“Nice kid.”

“Most of the time. I’ve got another one too. More like her dad. Always reading. Probably grow up to be maladjusted. Come.”

She led Chris through a hallway and down a set of stairs into the basement, and then opened the office door. There was a crash upstairs and then

screaming. “Shit, he’s always having accidents. Hurry up and get what you came for – I’ll be back in a minute.” Judith charged up the stairs as Chris entered the office.

Tall bookshelves lined the small office. The shelves were dusty and crammed full of science, math, and philosophy books. Two dead plants in clay pots sat on the shelves, their upright skeletons serving as the office’s only decor. That and the clock. A small black timekeeper hung on the wall, its hands fixed at 12 o’clock. Chris slipped it off its nail and checked the battery slot. Empty. She noted its peculiar time then hooked it back on the wall. There was a wooden desk pushed up against the back wall and a filing cabinet to the left of the desk. A small family portrait rested on top of the cabinet. Chris quickly slipped the photo in her suit coat. Hearing the woman walking around upstairs scolding her son, Chris jimmied the lock on Fred’s filing cabinet with a letter opener. The cabinet sprung open, revealing files labeled: ‘Bills’; ‘Students’; ‘Funding’; ‘Research’; ‘Cosmology’... She flipped through the ‘Research’ file, scanning sheets covered in equations and scribbling. Chris was able to make out a few words like ‘speed’, ‘rotation’, ‘black holes,’ and ‘past’, though just the thought of trying to read the notes gave her a headache. She dropped the file back into the cabinet, hoping to find something more legible. Something that made more sense. What exactly was she looking for? For a moment Chris speculated that Fredrich was behind the anonymous letters. But why would he want to send her letters? Listening again for Judith, Chris pulled open the cabinet’s top drawer to find a mess of papers. She dug her hand under the sheets and pulled out a thin black notebook labeled

‘EVERYTHING’. A pair of lacy black thong underwear fell from between the covers and onto the desk. Chris quickly put the evidence into her pocket, as a wave of familiar perfume filled her nostrils. She opened the notebook. A business card was tucked inside the front cover. *Bruce Johns. Clockmaker. 1902 Ross Ave. Studio B.* Chris hurriedly flipped through the pages, and then began to read:

If I crack my code, will she use it to find the one she purports to love? Is a woman like her capable of love? Will she take off with my theory to make...

“What are you doing?”

Chris jumped, shoving the notebook in her pocket and turned around. Judith was in the doorway, holding her son’s hand. The boy stared up at Chris, wiping his runny nose with the back of his free hand.

“I found the file,” said Chris grabbing her briefcase. “Is everything okay?” she asked the little boy. He silently continued to look at her.

Judith looked distrustfully at Chris. “You found what you were looking for? I don’t want you back here.”

“Yes. It was right on the desk as promised.”

Judith folded her arms across her slight body. “You weren’t nosing around were you? Fred hates nosy people.”

“Of course not,” replied Chris. “Look, I have a taxi waiting for me. I have to get going.”

Judith moved aside to let Chris pass. Chris walked quickly upstairs and to the door. “Thank you,” she said to Judith, and then stepped outside into the cool

fall evening. The sun was beginning to set and cast a romantic glow on the landscape.

“Next time, make an appointment like everyone else!” Judith called after her, slamming the front door.

Chris smiled slightly touching the panties in her pocket. Finally, she had something to work with.

## Chapter 12

The taxi dropped Chris off in front of *Rainy's* as it grew dark. She loosened her collar then walked into the bar, nodding to the men who sat watching a football game. Tammy was still on her stool behind the counter, chatting with one of her customers. She looked over at Chris with the same disinterested look in her eyes.

“You again?”

Chris nodded. “One whisky. No ice. Actually, make that a double. It’s been a long day.”

“Tell me about it,” muttered Tammy, as she got up slowly to fix the drink. “Lock anyone up yet?” she asked blowing a bubble with her gum.

“In five hours? No, but it’s coming along. Thought I’d do a bit of work here tonight.” She pointed at her briefcase.

Tammy raised her eyebrows. “This ain’t exactly an office hon. But suit yourself.” She slid the drink towards Chris. “Five bucks.”

Tammy took the money from Chris and lowered her voice. “A woman called the bar earlier asking about you. She was drilling me, trying to find out if you’d been sniffing around. Better watch out. I told her the same thing I’m gonna tell you. I don’t need no trouble round these parts. Any more funny business and you’re banned from my bar.” She looked over at her boys sitting watching the game. “And they’ll make sure you never come back. Got it?”

Chris gripped the counter. “What did the woman sound like? Sultry? Seductive?”



Tammy scoffed. “Hardly. Didn’t sound sexy to me. Now stop bothering me or I’ll show you the door.”

Chris grabbed her drink and made her way to the back of the bar. She took off her trenchcoat and slid into a booth. It must’ve been Midnight tailing her investigation. Who else could it have been? Judith? No, how would Judith know about the investigation? Though she had seemed rather suspicious of Chris. And why would Midnight hire Chris only to tail her? What was she afraid of? How could a detective work in such absurd conditions? She felt like calling Midnight and giving her a piece of her mind, but she couldn’t be certain it was her who called. Instead, she opened her briefcase, taking out the thin black notebook. She turned to the first page and began to read:

21/10/20—

I have begun to work again on my Theory of Everything. Last summer I thought I’d nearly cracked the code that I believe will help us understand the universe and the nature of time, but it soon became apparant that my theory was defective. Perhaps Siny was correct. But I should forget her since she’s nothing now. I will have to work harder. Now that my class load is lighter this year, I can focus on my research. My objective is to find a single theory to replace the fragmented theories we have today. It will be more efficient to have a complete understanding of the universe. If I can prove that my formula is absolute, I will be the first scientist to have accomplished such a feat. To understand everything by way of a simple equation will demystify human existence. It will be as renown as Einstein’s  $e=mc^2$ , though will function in an all-encompassing manner. There will be little left for scientists in my field to grapple with. If I’m the one to answer everything, I’ll be deified. It’s only a matter of time.

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09/11/20—

A woman disrupted my research tonight. I was studying the equation for position in an attempt to incorporate a more accurate time and space dimension into the problem all the while aptly describing basic particles and forces, when I heard heels approaching in the hallway. The noise induced piloerections in me. Intervals later, a

woman dressed in black – short skirt, fitted shirt and jacket, black hair, knee-high boots – appeared at my door. She was smoking. The woman walked over to the chair facing my desk and sat down. She said ‘I’ve been watching you.’ I responded, ‘You have?’ She said, ‘I admire your work.’ I replied, ‘Thank you. Who are you?’ She said, ‘Whoever you think I am.’ I said, ‘That’s projection.’ And she said, ‘There’s nothing wrong with a little fantasy now and then.’ ‘I suppose not,’ I said. She slipped me a piece of paper with a time and date on it. ‘Rainy’s,’ she said. ‘Meet me there, then.’ As quickly as she had positioned herself in my office, she retreated. As her heels echoed away, I tried to calculate the velocity of departure, but was unable to concentrate. When the silence returned, I wondered if I had fabricated our encounter. If it weren’t for the paper, I would’ve concluded so.

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15/11/20—

Tonight I found myself at an establishment named Rainy’s. I don’t usually frequent dens like that, but it’s better we met there – at an appropriate distance from my house so that I could remain anonymous. Judith and I rarely come into Riverdale. After entering the bar, I located her in the back booth; her black hair and thick lips as startling as the night we met. I mumbled hello, then sat down without looking at her. She took a sip of her martini (dry), inhaled her cigarette, and said, ‘A theory to change all theories, eh? Tell me everything.’ I wanted to ask why a woman like her would be interested in subjects such as the intersection of quantum mechanics and general relativity, but she ran her high heel along my leg and all I could focus on was the sensation. The skin is an actually sensitive organ. I found myself jabbering, relating information I’d told no one – no one except Siny. But here I was in a derelict tavern, talking about ideas such as how my theory would unify all of nature’s fundamental interactions. I lost track of time, as my excitement took hold. After I had exhausted the topic, I realized how much information I’d been keeping to myself. She then excused herself and disappeared before I could inquire why the topic so interested her. I felt as though I had been robbed.

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21/11/20—

Midnight returned to my office last night. That’s what she calls herself. Imagine. Midnight. I demanded to know why she’d run off the other night, but she ignored the question and sat down, swinging her leg onto my desk. It was that damn calf that led me off course. The way the muscle tensed under her epidermis. I took the bottle of gin out from my desk and poured us some drinks. After a few shots, I found myself showing her my notes and rambling about things like superstring theory and the notion of extra dimensions. I cannot quite recall what followed. All I know is that I woke up alone this morning on my office chair, wearing only my briefs.

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25/01/20—

Other activities have kept me from writing in this journal as of late – I've been rather preoccupied. Midnight and I have been seeing one another for a couple of months now. Once in a while we rent a room at the Lover's Rock – a degenerate establishment on the outskirts of Riverdale. Despite its filthiness it is safe, since no one I know would ever frequent such a place. There is something peculiar about Midnight – her obsession with fantasy. She likes to role-play and tells me to release my alter-ego. She tells me she lives as hers. I don't quite comprehend, but she doesn't care to elaborate. The games we play are rather bizarre, but how can I refuse? Besides, somehow our interactions have become the most stimulating exchanges that I've ever experienced. I feel more alive, more virile, than I have in years. However, I must be prudent; Judith is not a fool. She suspects I'm having an affair. When she shouts and cries, I tell her it's all in her mind, I want to tell her the truth, but I don't. I can't relinquish Midnight.

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02/03/20—

Midnight is distracting me from my work. Chaos threatens my order. She is the sensitivity that causes perturbation in my system. My reaction therefore cannot be random, but deterministic of my previous condition, which though is deemed to be chaos, is simply programmed into me. My condition before meeting her, found me working with precision and rigour. Now, I sit and stare at a blank screen, my thoughts turning to Midnight. The formulas evade me. The Theory seems meaningless in comparison to how I am affected in her presence. I try to contain myself and cease meanderings, though cannot think of anything but her. I try to search for the preexisting weakness in my system, try to locate the order in this chaos, though I return only my disordered mind. I have grown tired of explanations, tired of my endless quest to resolve 'Everything'. Perhaps my work has been senseless from the beginning, and that all along I have been simply resisting and fighting the truth of time. The mystery that perhaps should remain a mystery. What Siny and I argued over endlessly after that conference half a decade ago. What drove our collaboration apart. But I have built my career on this theory. I am nothing without it. Will I box myself up into my research, into my marriage, into time, and run circles, or I can run towards Midnight? I will run either way.

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29/03/20—

It seems I am plummeting. I've noticed an increase in my drinking, a decrease in my appetite, and am often unable to sleep. I fear that Midnight does not love me. She is only concerned with my research. She pushes me to work harder and faster. Doesn't she realize her chiding blocks me? She's running out of time, she says. Out of time for what? I cannot concentrate enough to continue my reformulation and expansion of such things like theories of time in order to master my Theory of

Everything. It is a current impossibility. The foundation is threatening to pull my funding if I don't publish another report like that of last year's. In all of my years as a theorist, I have never experienced such an intellectual recession. Tonight, I told Midnight I needed to temper things between us. All the time spent at the Lover's Rock is taking a toll on my career and on my marriage. Midnight simply smiled when I told her, then straddled me and pushed me into another fantasy. I love her. She pulls me towards her like a gravitational field so powerful that nothing can escape. In my darkest hour, I confess that it makes me want to kill her, freeze her in time. Of course I won't, but I comprehend why one can kill what one loves. I am desperate for release.

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20/04/20—

I've been asked by the department to take a leave. Terrance entered my office today and urged me to take the time to reflect and sort out my priorities. It was my professionalism that kept me from shouting at him. Does my prestige no longer mean anything? The university is but a factory of ideas. Yes, I've temporarily lost my drive, but after all I've brought this institution, can they not understand that even the most rigorous struggle? Midnight stole my passion from me. She wants to use my theory to find something. Something I've been pushing her to tell me. I suspect she may be involved with someone else – a rival -- but she denies it. Why else would she be so keen to understand my theory? In the world of ideas, one can never be too careful. Perhaps, after what I took from Siny, I deserve to be taken from. I did what I had to get ahead. And look at me now. I don't know what to do. If this doesn't stop, I may have to quit my job.

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23/04/20—

If I crack my code, will she use it to find the one she purports to love? Is a woman like her capable of love? Will she take off with my theory to make sense of her mystery? I found that letter; I know she's up to something. Who is her 'Anonymous'? Midnight will take all of my ideas, my years of research, to give to him. She has already begun to. I cannot let her have my Theory of Everything, for then she will have all of me. If it weren't for my theory, I suspect she wouldn't want me. Today, when I told her I would leave Judith for her, she laughed. I cannot help but gravitate towards her, and yet she threatens to destroy me and my years of hard work.

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27/04/20—

Today, I feel as though someone is observing us. Midnight and I were in our room at the Lover's Rock and I thought I saw a pair of eyes peering through the window. It was dark, though I am almost certain there were eyes. My imagination has

become more vivid since I met Midnight. I love her, but I have made a commitment to myself to stay with Judith. I love Judith too, like a sister. Judith will fall apart without me. Compared to Midnight, she is devoid of passion. Though I am terrified Judith will soon catch me in my affair, I rely on Midnight for normal functioning. Perhaps this could be classified as dependence.

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04/05/20—

I want to cease all communication with Midnight, but seem to be incapable of such an act. Midnight is taking my theory from me; she's stolen my notes – I'm almost sure of it. Files are missing. And though I do not usually indulge in such nonsensical ideas, perhaps this is karma for what I did to Siny. It was quite clear back then that Siny was going to be exiled or killed, so what harm did I cause by using her ideas? Better that than have them destroyed. However, perhaps this is some sort of karmic payback. How embarrassing that I've stooped to such silly hypotheses. Midnight seems to be in love with a certain 'Anonymous'. I loathe this Anonymous and want to destroy him. He's taken from me the only things I've ever really loved – my ideas and this woman.

The entries ended. Chris flipped through the remaining pages to find them blank. She set down the journal on the sticky table and took a sip of her whisky. Could the 'Siny' Fredrich referred to be Sinova Kuznetov? Could it be that she and Fredrich had known each other before she'd been exiled from her country? What was it that he did to Sinova? What were the chances that this author, the author that Sally had been reading when she'd received her first anonymous letter, was somehow enmeshed in this mystery? Fredrich had seemed to have lost himself to Midnight. The degree to which she had infiltrated his life was incredible. Fredrich had allowed himself to be powerless before Midnight and had been ruined as a result. Why had Midnight wanted his Theory of Everything so desperately? What was it to her? Had Anonymous also sent Midnight a similar letter to the one Chris received, asking her to come up with a Theory of Darkness? Had she thought that if she wowed Anonymous with Fredrich's theory that she

would have been set free again? That perhaps she would've convinced Anonymous to let her go? To reveal itself to her? To remove her from the trap of time? The questions coursed through Chris, but the answers lay somewhere beyond her reach. Somewhere in the darkness, somewhere in outer space. Chris tossed the notebook into her briefcase and downed the whiskey. There was only one thing she could do. She would go up to Goose Bay. Fredrich Neilson was the gatekeeper to the answers she urgently needed.

Dearest,

Once upon a Midnight there was a library of the world. If, for an instant, there was the possibility of knowing everything, would you take it? Would you say, *yes, I would like everything to know?* For is not that what a detective wants? To make the choice, you choose, and if so: Once upon a choice there was everything. It was there, wherever you are.

*I would like to understand, you say, for I have my life to live.* So, once upon this time there is a philosophy of all philosophies. To know it all simultaneously. The contradictions would sound like music – an orchestra of chaos. In this philosophy of everything let us get real: There are people. People are matter. Fleshy moving bodies. Diverging and converging; contacting and clashing. We are different every time we come to anything. The idea of everything is the idea of flaws, since our experience of each other is only in relation to our experience of ourselves and in relation to what has been. In the midst of our experiences, the internal and the external of present and past converge, bringing us only to a theory of something, or perhaps a theory of more.

Let us translate our theories, our thoughts, our choices, into the experience of practice.

The choice that led the detective to the forest was unromantic. You turned and crashed through the air towards something. The sensation in your body was beyond definition, though the pinpricks that fired your flesh felt electrical. Big things. You feel them, okay? Big things happen. Fear will take care of itself. The scariest things dissipate, eventually, and besides, you are hungry. We are always very hungry.

Remember the sandwich you had for supper? Your hunger was all you could think about. It was everything, and of course, it was not. Layer upon layer, meat upon condiments, upon vegetables, upon cheese, upon bread, spilling, spilling, staining your shirt, smearing your lips, rendering your fingers sticky. The function functioned in its own uncontained way. Your plate was full of crumbs and bits; the floor caught some of the veggies and mustard slops. It was a mess of an experience, of hunger; you ate and ended up full, so full you wondered if you could move. Of course, you can.

You did. Once upon a fear there you are, consumed by the forest, full of the dark. In theory, you thought; in practice you stepped. Translated the

symmetry of ideas into the wobbliness of activity. You had the urge. When we have the urge we waver. You found yourself wavering with the urge, stopping yourself from starting, starting – diverging and digressing. Soon, like bite after bite, step after messy step. *What about the danger in overstepping boundaries?* Oh, darkness is a concentrated effort. An uncomfortable stay. You used sense as your guide, copping feels and groping your way through the night, towards... Towards what? Who knows? You hit your head. Then the black. This is not what you had in mind when we began. This is not what you expected when we spoke of knowing everything.

Yes, you came to an end and began. You began with an awareness of the black world around you, and it was this awareness that stripped you to the depths of your forest. Panting, you understood the wildness in wilderness. It was then you thought that perhaps you would not like to know everything. That you had been mistaken and had had ‘eyes bigger than your stomach’. That you should go home. Do the dishes. Mop the floor. Tidy up. You stopped. Thinking about it all. *I only live once*, you rationalized and resumed your path, deciding to call your practice, ‘experimental living’.

‘Experimental living’ is going to the forest in the dark. It is the place you know you have to go, the boundary you have to cross, but cannot articulate the exact why into words. We wrestle with the night and then finally let it cover us. Creative things happen in the dark, for a ‘Theory of Everything’ is a ‘Theory of Darkness’.

*Anonymous*



## Chapter 13

Early Friday morning Chris stepped into The Mystery still thinking about the letter she'd received last night under her apartment door. Anonymous seemed to be trying to use Fredrich's theory to create a theory of its own. Why? Watson rubbed against her legs and meowed urgently as she locked the store's door. Chris pushed him away distractedly, walking quickly to the back of the store to replenish his food bowl. She'd gotten so wrapped up in the investigation yesterday she'd forgotten to feed him. Pouring the pellets into Watson's dish, questions ran through her head. 'Could a Theory of Everything' be a 'Theory of Darkness'? She didn't even know what the theories were, let alone how they could possibly be the same. Was Fredrich's theory, the theory Anonymous was after? Or could it be that the Theory of Everything that Anonymous was referring to was something entirely different from Fredrich's? It was as though Anonymous knew she had gone into Fredrich's study and read his journal. But how? Could Midnight be Anonymous? Could she be after a certain theory for her own purposes? Chris planned to find out. Her train to Goose Bay left tomorrow morning. Finding Fredrich and getting the answers she needed was paramount to getting Sally back – to making sure she didn't get stuck in time. And time was running out.

The phone rang as Chris began to clean Watson's litter box. 8:53 a.m. The store didn't open until 9:30, though the feeling in her gut told her she should answer it.

"The Mystery Bookstore," she answered gruffly.

“Sally? Is that you?” The line crackled and the voice sounded far away. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be in yet.”

Jackson. “Jackson?”

“Sally?”

Chris hesitated. “Yes.”

“You sound congested,” he said.

“I’ve got a cold,” replied Chris forcing a cough. “Where are you?”

“Still up North.”

“Where up North?” she asked as casually as she could.

“Listen, I don’t have much time. I’m calling from the hospital. How’s the store doing?”

“Fine. There’s a lot of mail here for you, and a few bills that need to be paid. It’s been pretty quiet overall since you left.” She forced another cough.

“How’s Watson?”

Chris looked at the cat as he devoured his food. “He seems to miss you. I’m taking good care of him,” she said, sitting down on the computer chair.

“Good to know.”

“Jackson, I may have to take a couple days off. I’m really feverish. I can hardly stand up.”

“There’s no way you can just sit at the cash?”

Chris imagined herself sitting at the cash in her suit and fedora. She imagined the customers stares. Their comments and questions. No it was impossible that she work at The Mystery while she was Chris. Hopefully she

could wrap the case up by Monday and be back to work as though nothing had ever happened.

“That won’t be possible Jackson. I’m really not well.”

“Fine then. Just make sure to put a sign on the door and change the message. Give Tracy a call. She can come cover the store if need be.”

Chris cringed. She wasn’t looking forward to contacting Tracy and wished Jackson would’ve offered to do it himself.

“Sally...” said Jackson.

“Yes.”

“I’m planning to stay up here with my brother for another week.”

“Another week?” Chris smiled. That gave her more time if the case took longer to solve.

“Is that feasible for you?”

“Uhh... sure. With the couple days off to get over my cold, I can manage for another week. Even longer if necessary.”

“You’re a good woman Sally, and good women are hard to come by.”

“Uhh... Thanks.” She paused. “How’s William?”

“William?”

“Your brother.”

“Yes! Of course... You mean Bill?”

“Sure, Bill. How is he?” She frowned.

“He’s perked up a little. Eating. Talking. We’ve even had a few good laughs.”

“Good.”

The phone suddenly sounded muffled, as though Jackson was covering the receiver and talking to someone.

“Sally?”

“Yes?”

“That was my nephew. The doctor wants to meet with us. I’ll have to let you go. If anything changes, I’ll call you, but otherwise, I’ll be back next Saturday.”

“Is there a phone number where I can reach you?”

“I don’t have my sister-in-law’s number memorized, but if you need to reach me, email me. I check my account at her house.”

“Will do.” Chris tensed. “Hey Jackson. One question.”

“Sure Sally, but make it quick.”

“Does the name Midnight mean anything to you?” She listened carefully, but could only hear static.

“Midnight?” he asked as though he were giving it some serious thought.

“No, I’m afraid not. Why?”

“No reason. Just a character in a story. That’s all”

He laughed. “We sure love our mysteries, don’t we Sally? That’s why I hired you. Well, take care of yourself and Watson, and I’ll call you in a few days.”

Chris nodded. “Sounds good. Give your family my regards.”

“Okay. Bye.”

Chris hung up the phone, twisting its cord around her fingers. Something felt askew. She couldn't quite pinpoint what had unsettled her about the conversation, though something was not quite sitting right with her. Why wouldn't Jackson tell her where he was up North? Chris picked up the phone again, trying to trace the call. A recorded voice informed her that the call had been placed on a public telephone and could not be traced. She hung the phone back up and stared at Watson. He meowed, then licked his lips.

“Tasty breakfast?” Chris asked then turned on the computer as the cat jumped onto her lap. She pet his fur until the computer was ready, then clicked on Jackson's email icon. Chris had access to The Mystery's email address, though Jackson always protected his personal account with a password. As potential passwords entered her mind, she typed them in, hoping for access. ‘Big Sleep.’ She typed. ‘Password Incorrect. Try again.’ ‘Mystery.’ No. ‘Femme fatale.’ No again. ‘Midnight’. No. Chris yanked open the top desk drawer thinking perhaps the password was hidden in there on a piece of paper. There were only envelopes of old bills. She shut the drawer and moved to the lowest one, opening it. More bills. Invoices. Chris rifled through them, coming across a curious looking pink envelope. She picked up the envelope. The letter was addressed to Jackson Todd and handwritten in a flowing plume. She opened it and read:

Dec. 9, 20--

Dear Jackson,

After what happened between us last night I know that this letter will not come as a surprise. The game has become more than a game – it has almost gotten out of hand – and I can't find my way back anymore. I am not who I used to be. These heels, this prowl, this power is now mine. Teresa Kathleen Blackwood is dead. We have both killed her. I am living my fantasy and it terrifies me. My love is Anonymous. Goodbye.

Regards,

~~Teresa Kathleen~~ Midnight

Chris set down the letter in front of her. Jackson and Midnight? He had lied to her on the phone. Teresa Kathleen Blackwood? She ran to the filing cabinet and jimmied it open with a paper clip. Jackson always kept the first drawer locked. Come to think of it he kept a lot of things locked and that could only mean one thing: secrets. The lock turned and the cabinet sprung open. Chris scanned the files until she found what she was looking for. “Records of Employment”. She pulled the folder open and saw there was only one record. “Teresa Kathleen Blackwood”. It had only been in the past couple of years, after his sixty-fifth birthday, that Jackson had begun to hire employees. For the twenty-one years before, he had run the store himself, preferring to work long hours in the company of his books. He had spent a good part of his life working and

reading in The Mystery. Chris had always wondered how Tracy Todd could put up with her ghost of a husband.

Chris pulled out Teresa Kathleen's record of employment. The woman had only worked there from January until September of last year. She had disappeared over a year ago. Why had she gone missing? Had the same thing that had happened to Sally, happened to her? Chris tried to recall if she'd ever seen Teresa Kathleen at The Mystery before she'd been hired as her replacement. Chris had spent most of her spare time at the library that year and had only come into the store a handful of times. However, she remembered a tall woman with a straight black bob cut and thick black-rimmed glasses sitting behind the counter. The woman had been rather unfriendly and Chris had paid little attention to her. That must've been her. Could *this* woman have transformed into Midnight? Chris looked up at the store. There was something sinister about The Mystery; something was very wrong.

## Chapter 14

A loud pounding out front startled Chris out of her thoughts. She looked at the rear exit wondering if she should leave through the back. She couldn't answer the door, not looking like this. The sound stopped, then started again. Unable to listen to the banging any longer, Chris leapt up and marched towards the door. Mike. It was too late – he'd seen her and wanted in. Chris walked to the door and opened it. Mike's face was pinched and his eyes were red. He gaped at her.

“Hi,” she said hoping he wouldn't recognize her. “We open at 9:30.”

“I know what time you open.” Mike stared at Chris intensely, then pushed his way into the store. “Sally? Is that you?”

“I can explain,” said Chris.

“What happened?! You look so different. I hardly recognized you! Is this some sort of sick game?” He walked over to the display table near the front and flipped through a Victorian short story anthology, and then threw it back on the table. “What's going on? Where have you disappeared to?” he asked, not looking her in the eyes.

“I got your message the other night. I've been busy and didn't have time to call you back. Things have been pretty chaotic lately.”

“No kidding!” He walked up to the front desk. “You've changed; you're different. What's going on?”

“You wouldn't understand. A lot's happened in the past few days.”

“Like what?”

“Stuff.” Chris squared her jaw.



“Stuff? What stuff? Why don’t you tell me anything?” He slammed his palms on the counter.

“Oh, so now you have a claim on my life?”

“That’s not what I’m saying!”

“What Mike are you saying?” She crossed her arms.

“You look different. You’re acting funny. You’re avoiding me and won’t tell me anything. What do I have to do to get you to talk? I don’t know what to do anymore!”

Sally looked away. “About what?”

“About what?! You’re nuts. It’s like you’re off in your own world. One that I’m not a part of.”

“I’ve been feeling off lately. Is that a crime?”

“Why do you gotta be so dramatic?”

“I’m not being dramatic.” She leaned against the counter. “I think I just need to spend some time alone until this passes.”

“Until what passes?”

“Until I start feeling like myself again.” Chris nodded towards the door. “I have to get back to work.”

“Don’t do this!” he cried, refusing to move.

“It would only be temporary.”

“Did something happen? You sick? Are you into in someone else? Christ, are you having an affair?”

“Those are a lot of questions!”

“Look at me.” Chris turned to face Mike. “Well, are you?”

“Am I what?”

“You know what.”

“What? Having an affair?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know.”

“What? You’re not serious!” He exhaled loudly. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I don’t know.” She glanced at the clock. “Shouldn’t you get to work? Lester hates it when you’re late.” Chris ran her hand through her hair, still not used to the length.

“Forget Lester. Tell me who it is!” Mike stepped towards her.

“I really don’t know.”

“Right.”

“They haven’t told me their real name.” Chris backed away slowly from Mike. She’d never seen him like this before.

“Wow, that’s creative! You and your weirdo imagination!”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Mike tried to grab her hands, but she pushed him away.

“Try me.”

“I don’t know where to begin.”

“Try the beginning. Where did you meet?”

“It’s complicated.”

“It’s complicated! Well, this is too complicated for me! Who the hell is it? I’m going to kill him! He’s screwed you hasn’t he?” He was close to her face now, breathing heavily, sweat beads forming above his upper lip.

“Not really.”

“Not really?!”

“We haven’t quite seen each other. I don’t even know its name.”

“Its? What is this a neuter?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you joking?”

Chris raised her eyebrows. “I wish I was.” The telephone rang.

“Let it ring.” Mike sniffed loudly. “So if you’re not sleeping together then what exactly is going on?”

Chris stepped towards Mike, making him take a step back. “I keep getting these messages. These letters.”

“Show them to me.”

“I can’t. I threw them away.”

“Liar.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions.”

“Damn right I’ll jump to conclusions! You just told me you’re having an affair!” His voice cracked.

“I’m not really having an affair.”

“What is it then Sally? What is *it* that you’re having?”

Chris paused. "Feelings. I'm having feelings that I've never had before."

She was startled by her answer. "I'm concerned."

"About what?"

"That it's real. That it's not real."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, I know. He's writing you love letters, right? He's more romantic than I could ever be? Is that it? May I remind you, you hate ROMANCE!"

They stood inches apart. Chris could feel the heat between them. "I don't know anymore. I don't know anything anymore. I mean, look at me."

"Yeah, look at you. You're quite a sight." He shook his head. "I don't get it. I really don't get it. I never thought you were like this Sally."

"I'm not."

"Why do this?" Mike backed away from her.

"It's nothing. It'll pass."

"So, you're going to break it off with him and start being normal again?"

"It's not up to me."

Mike shook his head. "I can't believe you! You won't take any responsibility for this! How can we be together when you're messing around and you've changed into this?" He gestured at her. "What are you trying to be? A mobster or something?"

"You don't understand."

"You won't let me understand."

“I didn’t want it to be like this.”

“Me neither.”

“I...”

“Stop! I’ve heard enough. I gotta go.” He turned and headed for the door.

“Okay.”

“Okay?!” Mike opened the door and turned to look at Chris. “When your little affair is over and you get back to yourself, call me. Maybe I’ll still be around – but don’t count on it.”

“I need some time,” she called out.

“Yeah, I’m sure you do.”

He walked out of the store without looking back. Chris stood there and felt suffocated by the tales that surrounded her. It became increasingly difficult to breathe as she imagined volume upon volume toppling from the shelves to bury her. The wall clock’s ticks were amplified, and she sensed its second hand motioning, as if to wave good-bye. She was staggered by the stifling scent of stories.

## Chapter 15

After seeing Mike, Chris left The Mystery. She didn't want any customers to see her, let alone Midnight – who, though could only emerge from her frame at night, seemed to know quite well what happened at the store during the day. Chris slipped out the rear exit, into the back alley, and steadied herself against the brick. Her hand trembled as she pulled the business card she'd found in Fredrich's notebook from her pocket. *Bruce Johns. Clockmaker. 1902 Ross Ave. Studio B.* She decided to pay Bruce a visit before she left for Goose Bay.

Twenty minutes later, Chris stood outside the clockmaker's store. She avoided looking at the shoppers who strolled past her. As Chris turned to walk up the stairs, she noticed a tall woman across the street in a bulky green windbreaker, with curly salt and pepper hair tucked back. The woman resembled Tracy Todd. A car passed and honked, momentarily distracting Chris. She had only spoken to Tracy in person a handful of times, since she rarely came into the store. Tracy had been rather curt, and since the last conversation they'd had, Sally wanted to avoid her if at all possible. In the summer, Sally had been reading 'The Bloody Truth About Time' at the front counter, and Tracy had come into the store to pick up a couple files for Jackson. It was the first time Tracy had ever shown interest in her. She had asked Sally about the book she was reading, and Sally had told her about Kuznetov. The author, she had explained to Tracy, as one of her country's few female intellectuals, had challenged her authoritarian government with her ideas of propaganda and history – and how history 'conveniently' changes over time to

fit the needs of its tellers. Tracy had seemed curious when Sally explained how Kuznetov had narrowly escaped death when the state police had invaded her office and destroyed all of her research. She had been forced into a labour camp, but due to her connections she had been rumoured to have fled the country, though no one knew for certain since she had vanished without a trace. As a result of possible political retribution, Kuznetov's publishers had immediately ceased publishing her books, which is why they were now so difficult to find. Sally had then revealed, much to her embarrassment afterwards, that even though Kuznetov's theories often upset her, she wished she could be as bold as Kuznetov, to stand by her convictions even if they cost her her life. Tracy had stared at Sally with an intensity that made her blush, but then had grimaced and walked away without another word to find the files she'd come for. Sally had avoided talking to Tracy after that.

Chris looked back across the street, but the woman had disappeared. She wondered if it in fact had been Tracy or if she was seeing things again. If anything, it served as a reminder to call Tracy after she'd visited the clockmaker. Sally turned and climbed the stairs leading to Studio B. Chris heard ticking as she approached the door. The sound grew more pronounced with every step, and by the time she reached the door she felt as though the noise had turned into the drum of a thousand hearts. She pressed the buzzer and waited. A thin elderly man with neatly combed gray hair, wearing a cardigan and corduroy pants, opened the door and smiled as though he had been waiting for her.

“How may I help you?” he asked.

Chris pulled out her card and handed it to him. “Chris Tisdale, private investigator. I’m wondering if I might ask you a few questions.” Bruce looked at her from behind his bifocals with a gleam in his eyes.

“Sure. I could use a break from these here repairs anyways. Besides this is the most exciting thing that’s happened to me all month.” He motioned her in. “I’m Bruce, by the way. Bruce Johns.”

They shook hands, then Chris followed him into what seemed like a labyrinth of clocks. Clocks of all shapes and sizes lined the walls. Old clocks made out of antique parts, puzzle clocks where the numbers were separated into pieces, digital clocks, grandfather clocks, mirror clocks, time was everywhere, ticking. At the far end of the studio was a workstation scattered with clock parts: hands, numbers, motors.

“Please have a seat,” said Bruce. Chris took off her fedora and opened her trenchcoat, swinging the chair around so that she could straddle it to face him. He sat across from her, waiting.

“How can you stand all this noise?” asked Chris. “Doesn’t it drive you crazy?”

Bruce looked around and chuckled. “Oh, the ticking? Don’t even hear it anymore. Sounds like the hum of a fridge or background noise to me. Actually, I find it relaxing,” he said. “So what’s this business about asking me questions. Am I in trouble or something?” He lifted his hands up in mock-surrender. “Don’t shoot!”



Chris pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. By the clockmaker's demeanor, she deduced he was probably a harmless old man, but Chris didn't like to rely on surface impressions. She kept her voice businesslike.

"Though I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of the case, my client is being harassed by a certain..." she paused, "...person, and I have reason to believe that some of the messages she's been receiving have to do with the nature of time. I also have reason to believe you might be able to help me." She removed the photo of Fredrich and his wife from her breast pocket and passed it to Bruce.

"Do you recognize this man?"

Bruce nodded, "Oh yes. Professor Neilson. Regular client of mine. Is he in trouble?"

"Not necessarily. When did you last see him?" Chris tried to ignore the ticking around her.

"He placed a rush order just about two weeks ago. I finished the job last Saturday. He was in a hurry when he came to pick them up. We used to have very good chats when he would come to buy his clocks, but he's quite preoccupied these days."

"Tell me about the clocks he purchases," said Chris. She didn't remember seeing an abundance of clocks in the Neilson residence when she'd visited. The only clock she'd seen was the clock in his study that was stuck at midnight.

"Professor Neilson comes in every month or so for a custom-made clock. He always orders the same design. A clock without hands. Where every number is a '12'. In fact, he picked up a couple 'Round-the-clock Midnights' last Saturday.

That's what I call them. Sometimes, when he's out of town I ship them to him." Bruce held up a black patent leather wall clock for Chris to see. There was something about the leather that made Chris shiver. Something cold, yet enticing. Without hands it was as though time was suspended. "The peculiar thing about these clocks is that Professor Neilson wants them to have an audible tick. A tick without hands. As though time is stopped, yet somehow moving. I'm a bit more conventional in my clock tastes; I mean, I prefer hands and numbers to indicate the passing of time, but some of these eccentric professor types... They're just not so linear."

"Yes, of course," said Chris. "When did he become your client?"

"Last December. About half a year before he left the university. It was all over the papers, though we never discussed it. Sensitive subject, I imagine."

"How many has he ordered in total?" Chris took the clock from Bruce and examined it carefully. The numbers were silver and shimmered under the light.

"Hold on. Let me check." Bruce leaned over and opened his filing drawer. He pulled out a folder and rifled for a minute through the invoices.

"If my files are correct, the last order will put him at a total of twelve Round-the-Clock Midnights. It's rather strange I suppose, but he pays me good money, and with business so slow these days, it's better I don't ask too many questions."

Chris cleared her throat and put the clock down on the table. "Listen, you mentioned you occasionally have to ship him a clock. Can you show me the shipping address?"

“Now Mr. Tisdale, Professor Neilson is a valued client of mine and it’s not my place to share his personal information. He’s one of my most loyal customers and I’d like to keep it that way. Haven’t you asked enough questions?” Bruce clasped his hands.

Bruce had mistaken her for a man, and Chris decided not to correct him. She smiled to herself. “I know that he’s a good client and by showing me the address, you’d be helping him. Don’t worry, he’ll never know we spoke. It’s simply...” Chris scrambled for something to say, “...his life might be in grave danger, and if I don’t get to the bottom of this, you may not have a client at all.”

Bruce looked startled and cleared his throat nervously. He then rummaged through a metal box on his worktable and pulled out a piece of paper. “Here,” he said handing it to Chris. “But I need it back.”

The address was a P.O. Box in Goose Bay. For some reason, Fredrich was getting the clocks shipped up North. She quickly jotted down the address. “Thank you.” Chris thought back to something Bruce had said earlier. “You mentioned that you’ve chatted with Fredrich. Do you remember what you talked about?”

“The weather and his family primarily. And about his cabin up North.”

“What did he say about his cabin?”

“Simply that he liked to get away. That he found these parts stifling.”

Chris nodded. “I can understand that. Did you ever talk about anything else?”

Bruce searched his memory, his eyes suddenly lighting up. “Well there was this one time. He was a bit louder than usual, perhaps a bit sauced. I smelled

it on him. He grilled me, asking why I had devoted my life to the measure of time.”

“What did you tell him?” asked Chris looking around, not quite understanding it herself.

“I told him out of habit. I enjoy the ritual of making things tick. I took the business over from my father and hope my grandson will take over the business from me. But, kids nowadays – don’t know what they want. Anyways, Professor Neilson seemed agitated by my answer and we never spoke of such things again.”

“Seems strange to me that a man so conflicted about the measure of time would buy so many clocks,” muttered Chris.

“We are mysterious creatures my dear.” He smiled. “I should probably get back to work. I have two repairs to finish this morning and my wife expects me for dinner at noon sharp.”

“Sure. Just one more question.” Chris reached into her breast pocket and pulled out the picture of Midnight. “Do you recognize this woman?”

Bruce’s shook his head. “No, I’ve never seen her at all, but she’s something.” He chuckled.

“She’s something all right.” Chris pocketed the photos and stood up. “Thank you for your time.”

Bruce smiled. “The pleasure’s mine, and if you ever need a clock or any repairs, you know where to find me. I’ll give you a discount.”

Chris nodded. ‘Fat chance,’ she thought. After this case was over she never wanted to see another clock.

They shook hands and then Chris descended the stairs as the sound of time faded.

## Chapter 16

Chris slammed her apartment door and went straight to her desk. The sunlight streaming in from the balcony window warmed her as she sat down and flipped through her address book for Jackson's home phone number. She wished she had time to curl up in bed. The morning had proved to be more eventful than expected. She could still hear the ticking from Bruce's studio in her head, as though time was stalking her. The beat was relentless and pushed her to work faster and harder. 'I'll sleep when I'm dead,' she thought, as she found the number. As Chris dialed, she hoped she would be lucky enough to leave a message for Tracy. Ever since Chris's rendering of Kuznetov's work had evoked such a negative reaction in Tracy, Chris wanted little to do with her. Tracy's cold and business-like air was rather off-putting. She rarely made an effort to be friendly and spoke with such formality it was as though every word was composed beforehand. This gave her an air of artificiality, or perhaps it was pretentiousness— though Chris couldn't imagine what she had to be pretentious about. The fact that Tracy refused to leave town and disliked Jackson's work habits also irked Chris. The woman seemed to hinder him. She wondered why Jackson had married her, but then thought of Mike. Loneliness sure could make people do funny things.

The phone rang one last time and then the answering machine picked up. *Good day.* Said Tracy's recorded voice. *You have reached 897-9034. Leave a message after the tone.* Chris scrambled for something to say.

She forced a cough into the receiver. "Hello. This is Ch.." She stopped mid-sentence. "...I mean, Sally Smith. I'm very sick and closed the store for the weekend. Jackson asked that..."

There was a click. "Sally? Yes, this is Tracy Todd. I simply walked in the door. What is the nature of your call?"

Chris drummed her fingers on her desk and suppressed a laugh. "The nature of your call?' Who spoke that way?"

"I talked to Jackson this morning," said Chris forcing another cough, "And.."

"How is William?" Tracy cut in. "I could not go with Jackson. I'm not much of a family gathering sort. Besides, I'm occupied."

Not much of a 'family gathering sort'? Her husband's brother was dying. Could Tracy not put aside herself and think of Jackson for once? Chris gripped the desk. "It seems he's in better shape today." She sniffled. "Tracy, I'm calling because I have the flu and I'm too sick to work."

"Yes, I thought you sounded rather peculiar," remarked Tracy.

Chris imagined Tracy standing at the kitchen wall, with her thick eyebrows furrowed and her foot tapping against the floor tiles.

"I've spoken to Jackson," Chris continued, bracing herself, "And he said that you might be able to run the store until I get better."

"I am rather busy these days." said Tracy.

Chris couldn't imagine what Tracy was busy with. She was retired and had no commitments that Chris was aware of.

“I understand you’re busy Tracy, but it would only be for a couple of days. I should be..” Chris coughed and choked as though she couldn’t stop. “I should be better by Monday or Tuesday at the latest.”

There was a silence on the other end. “Fine then. I suppose he wants me to feed the cat as well.”

“Yes, that would be great. Watson takes a...”

“I know what he eats,” Tracy said. There was another pause. “Are you aware that I never approved of his stock?”

“His stock?” Chris asked. “Sorry?”

“His stock—the books in which Jackson fills his store. Those silly little mysteries. I try to encourage him to branch out from the genre.”

Chris felt her cheeks get hot. There was nothing wrong with Jackson’s stock. The books suited the customers just fine. It was as though Tracy was being purposely provocative.

“How would you know?” retorted Chris unable to stop herself. “You probably wouldn’t know a good mystery if it hit you in the face.” Chris picked up a pen and began scribbling on a scrap piece of paper.

“You have little idea what I do and don’t know,” snapped Tracy.

Chris didn’t respond to the comment, but instead scribbled with more force. “So, you’ll watch the store?”

“Yes, I will babysit the store. Do call me Sunday night to let me know if you are well enough to return to work on Monday. And Sally...”

“Yes?” said Chris.



“If Jackson contacts you again, instruct him to call me directly instead of having you play messenger.”

There was a click and the line went dead. Chris slowly set down the receiver and put her head on the table. Could Tracy have something to do with the letters? The woman was unfriendly and bitter, but how could that tie her to the anonymous letters? Did she somehow want to ruin Jackson’s employees, and in turn, ruin his store? Chris decided to keep this in mind, though the theory couldn’t account for Jackson’s strange behaviour or Midnight’s affair with Fredrich. Why would Tracy allow someone like Midnight to seduce her husband? No, it didn’t make sense. Chris crumpled up the paper in front of her and threw it at the balcony window. She had bought herself the weekend and now the pressure was on for her to get the answers she needed in order to return to work as Sally on Monday morning and lay this mystery to rest.

## Chapter 17

After Chris had packed for her trip and downed a couple drinks of whisky, she logged onto the Internet. ‘Teresa Kathleen Blackwood.’ She typed the name into the search engine. Several hits came up, all of them news stories, relating to the woman’s disappearance. Chris clicked on a story that was featured last year in the *Riverdale Daily* and began to read:

### MYSTERY EMPLOYEE DISAPPEARS

Josephine Walker

Riverdale police are looking for Teresa Kathleen Blackwood, an employee at The Mystery Used Bookstore, after she failed to arrive for two consecutive shifts. She was last seen at work on Thursday by bookstore owner Jackson Todd, and then early Friday morning buying a pack of cigarettes, by Terri Jones, a convenience store attendant on Rosewood Street.

Blackwood, who is a single 32-year old woman, is described as white, about 5-foot-7, 145 pounds with a straight black bob and brown eyes. Her black Ford Focus with the license plates 056 RXP was also found missing by police from her parking space in her apartment complex’s garage.

Based on information from family and friends, investigators believe it is unusual for Blackwood to leave town without informing anyone of her whereabouts. She has been described as a professional and responsible person, who mostly kept to herself, though in the past month her family reported that she had been acting “distant and strange”, refusing to return phone calls and attend family dinners.

At this time, investigators have no evidence of foul play. They also said that she has not used her credit cards or debit card.

According to detectives, five days after her disappearance Todd received a letter from Blackwood in the mail, which he immediately handed over to investigators, that stated she had moved away to begin a new life and that she was sorry for any distress she may have caused. She asked him to relay the message that she did not want to be found, that “it was better this way”, and that her family had caused her great upset over the years, and she no longer wanted anything to do with them.

Blackwood’s parents were devastated by the news and in an interview her father said, “We will never stop searching for our daughter. She is everything to us and we intend to find her. To get the answers we deserve to get her back.”

Anyone with information on Blackwood’s whereabouts is asked to call 9-1-1 or Det. Jacob Fuller, 720-878-0375.

Monday September 28, 20--

Chris continued to read articles about Teresa Kathleen's disappearance. Based on media reports, police had been unable to locate the woman and eventually had put the case aside to focus on more pressing investigations. The file remained open, but progress seemed minimal. Her family was convinced that foul play or kidnapping was involved, though police had found no evidence to support that claim. They declared that the evidence suggested that Blackwood had left by her own free will, and unless anyone came forward with new information, they would have to move on. There was little mention of Jackson in the news, other than the fact that he noticed his employee had been rather withdrawn during the weeks leading up to her disappearance. Chris noted that there was no mention of Jackson's affair with Midnight, nor did it seem he was much of a suspect in the missing person's case. Police stated that he had a credible alibi that cleared him as a suspect in the case. Chris recalled hearing about the story last year, but had paid little attention to it. She had been too busy reading mysteries at the library and working at the sub shop. It was as though she had been in her own little world back then. Chris wanted to ask Jackson about Teresa Kathleen when she next spoke to him and had to find a way to do so without arousing his suspicion.

Was the same thing that happened to Teresa Kathleen happening to her? Had Sally already disappeared? Had Anonymous, in a sense, kidnapped them both? Killed them both? No! She wouldn't let it happen. She wouldn't lose herself to this foolishness. Chris paused. The letters and the correspondence. Anonymous. There was something about it all that wouldn't let her go. It was almost surreal. Almost magical. She found herself thinking about things she had never thought to

think of before. Anonymous was changing her. Changing her into what? She had been flipped inside out, and in the process, she found herself missing. This wasn't supposed to happen. Who the hell was this Chris Tisdale anyways? What was with this deep voice? With these big hands? With the swagger? And the damn trench coat and fedora? Sure, it had been great to imagine and dream about the hard-boiled life during weekday afternoons, but to live it? That was a different story.

Chris had to do something. She had to get in touch with Anonymous. Logging into the underground chatroom, Chris entered darkroom67.10, annoyed by the chamber music that emerged from her computer. She knew it was a long shot to think that Anonymous might be logged on to the site at this exact moment, but she had to try. Before heading to Goose Bay she needed as many answers as possible. Time was running out and she was not much closer to finding Anonymous. The idea that Sally would disappear forever if Chris didn't find Anonymous was terrifying. To be 'framed', as Midnight put it, was not something Chris wanted. She looked at the black screen and began to type.

Nighttime13: Are you there Anonymous? It's urgent. I need to chat with you.

The white cursor flashed hypnotically below the text, as though it was blinking at her. She stared back, suddenly remembering her fight this morning with Mike. Mike had wanted to speak to her, urgently, and she had rebuffed him. As a result of this mess, he was gone. Granted, their relationship had never been the most exciting, but it had been comfortable. Until now. Now, all that remained

were her memories of their time together – their time watching crime shows, splitting baskets of wings and fries at the Pit Stop, and their Sunday night card games. There was something comforting about the ritual of their relationship. Chris stopped. Who was she kidding? She had never really been that happy with Mike. He had simply felt secure to her, ever since they met three years ago, when she had brought her computer into the shop for repairs. They had gone out shortly after that, enjoyed each other's company, and had ended up in a relationship. He was easy, straightforward, predictable, and she liked that about him. He brought her a sense of relief.

Nighttime13: Please! I need to talk to you!

Still, no answer. Chris decided to wait one more minute and then start packing for her trip. She was about to log off when the cursor shot out:

Anonymous: Make it quick – I am the one who is supposed to contact you, not this other way around.

Nighttime13: Well, rules are meant to be broken. Isn't that what you believe? Listen, I can't take this anymore. I can't live like this. Flip me back to Sally.

Anonymous: Now why would I do that?

Nighttime13: Because you can.

Anonymous: I have given you what you have always wanted. Now it is up to you to do with it what you will. You can let it destroy you, or you can let it open you. It is your choice.

Nighttime13: But if I don't find you, Sally will forever be a memory and Chris will remain a fantasy. Where does that leave me?

Anonymous: Find me?! I wrote no such thing. Did you not read the letter I sent you?

Nighttime13: The letter said I had one week to find you.

Anonymous: Where did you find the letter?

Chris paused. Anonymous didn't know about Midnight. That Midnight had hired her to find Anonymous. It was best for Midnight's sake not to slip up, though Chris had an uneasy feeling about that woman.

Nighttime13: At the bookstore. Outside, on the doormat.

Anonymous: That is very odd. Since I slipped it under the door! What is going on? What are you not you telling me?

Nighttime13: I don't know what you're talking about. The letter told me that I had one week to find you and to come up with a Theory of Darkness, or else Sally and Chris would cease to exist.

Anonymous: Well, that is half right - before someone tampered with it, (and I will find out who!). The letter said: you have one week to come up with a Theory of Darkness and *surrender* to me, or else Sally and Chris will be lost in time.

Nighttime13: Surrender?! What do you mean by that?

Anonymous: Figure it out. Listen, what would you do if everything you thought to be true was called into question? What would it take for you to not know? Not to find the answers you were looking for, but to be instead left with more questions. What would it take for you to accept disorder? To walk wavering among the living? What would it take to abandon the idea of a fixed self? Your identity? Your definitions and anticipated outcomes? Your dreams? Walk away from it all. Step out of your world.

Nighttime13: Excuse me?!

Anonymous: Step out of your costume. Stop clinging, grasping. Step out of your body bag of identity, of comprehension, and emerge.

Nighttime13: What?

Anonymous: Surrender.

Nighttime13: Never.

Anonymous: Your choice.

Nighttime13: Who are you? What's happening in The Mystery? Why can't you tell me the truth?

Anonymous: Stop trying so hard to find out! It is not relevant.

Nighttime13: But the letter...

Anonymous: Forget the letter. Forget everything.

## Chapter 18

Chris ripped the cell phone out of her suit jacket and dialed Midnight's emergency pager number. She paced the apartment as she waited, running possible scenarios through her mind. Midnight had not tampered with the letter and it was Anonymous who was playing with her. Or perhaps, Midnight had tampered with the letter because of her agenda. What was her agenda? Was it simply revenge or did it go deeper than that? ...*History is always modified to fit the teller's agenda...* Kuznetov's words echoed in Chris's mind, and though this was not a history, it was a letter that had been edited to fit an agenda. Whose agenda? Why did everything have to be called into question? Was nothing as it seemed? Was Midnight a sham? A fraud? Why would she want to alter the letter? Chris remembered how Midnight had pocketed it after showing it to her. No, she didn't trust that woman. Why would Midnight so desperately want Chris to find Anonymous? What was at stake for her? Could it be that Midnight was Anonymous? Why would Midnight be Anonymous? The phone suddenly vibrated in Chris's hand. She flipped it open.

"Chris here," she said.

"Chris," said the voice on the other end. "What are you doing calling me at this hour? You know I only come out at night!"

"I need to see you tonight to... discuss important details of the case." Chris listened as Midnight took a long drag of a cigarette.

"Of course you do. Meet me at 11:30 p.m. at the Lover's Rock Bar."

Chris started. It was the place Fredrich had described in his journal.



“At the Lover’s Rock? That dump? No one goes there except creeps,” said  
Chris.

“Exactly. You know where to find me.”

The line went dead.

## Chapter 19

Later that night, Chris got out of the cab and crossed the nearly deserted parking lot to the Lover's Rock. She had spent the rest of the day preparing for her trip and going over the case in her mind. Tonight she planned to find out what exactly Midnight was up to. Her shoes crunched the gravel as she headed towards the big flashing fluorescent sign: 'Lover's Rock – Strip Bar and Motel'. On the sign a pink silhouette of a woman in stilettos swung around a pole. One of her stilettos remained unlit. The bar's windows were black and an oversized man in a leather jacket stood at the door with his arms crossed. Hard rock music blasted out of the bar. Chris nodded as she passed the bouncer and entered the bar. Shrill electric guitar riffs filled the dark room, as did the smell of perfume and alcohol. The stage was glass, with a shimmery silver curtain as a backdrop and a metal pole in the middle. A handful of middle-aged men sat around the stage staring drunkenly as a voluptuous woman with shoulder length brown curls crawled like a tigress across its surface. Chris scanned the tables in the dim light, but found them empty. She felt a tap on the shoulder and spun around, coming face to face with a topless blond staring intently at her.

"Looking for something?" asked the woman looking Chris up and down.

"No," said Chris.

"Do you need *anything* tonight?" reiterated the woman staring boldly at Chris's crotch. She recalled that the bar had been rumoured to provide clients with 'anything' they desired, for a certain price.

Chris cleared her throat. “No thanks. I’m meeting someone here tonight,” she said. “Listen, is there another room in this place? Anywhere else someone might be?”

The woman frowned, then pointed towards the curtain in the back corner of the room. “There’s the hot tub and the lap dance booths past that curtain.”

Chris nodded and walked away. She slipped past the curtain and into a long dark hallway with various closed doors. Music and occasional groans emanated from the rooms. The soles of Chris’s shoes stuck to the ground as she walked. At the end of the hall was a room with a sign on the door that read ‘HOTT TUB’. As Chris opened the door, she was engulfed by thick vapour. She walked slowly towards the hot tub as her eyes adjusted to the steam. A woman in a black bikini sat in the tub as the waves swirled turbulently around her. Midnight.

“You found me,” said Midnight tossing her damp hair, then ashing her cigarette. “Hop in.”

Chris tensed. “I’d rather not.”

“Why?” Midnight asked.

Chris ignored the question. She approached the side of the heart-shaped hot tub. “You tampered with the letter,” she accused. “You told me to find Anonymous.”

Midnight sat up. “You want to find Anonymous. Don’t project your desires onto me. I hired you to do a job. A job that can free us both. I paid you good money. Don’t think that Anonymous has your best interests in mind.”

“You changed the letter – Why?”

Midnight took another drag of her cigarette and stood up. She lifted her sleek leg over the side of the tub and then the other. Chris was surprised to see she was still wearing her black high heels, as though they never came off. Just like Chris's suit. Water ran down the woman's body leaving her skin slick. Chris locked eyes with Midnight's dark cold stare, waiting for an answer.

"Anonymous tried the same lines on me. 'Surrender. Surrender' What the hell is it to surrender anyways? Surrender leaves you with a broken heart and sticks you in time, let me tell you."

"Tell me what?" asked Chris making sure to keep her focus on Midnight's eyes.

"Anonymous will ruin you. Just like it did me! You think you're free now. You think you are living out your fantasy, but you're not free. You're a prisoner in time. If you don't find Anonymous, you'll be framed forever."

"What about you?"

"Well, soon I'll be frozen in time forever. And then you're next."

"Oh really Teresa Kathleen?"

Midnight blanched. "What did you just call me you little shit?" She stepped forward and crushed her cigarette on Chris's palm. Chris stood firmly as her skin sizzled and burned.

"Now that wasn't very nice," she said flexing her forearms.

"Nice is for phonies." Midnight pushed Chris against the wall with a surprising amount of force. "I don't know what you've been digging up, but you're looking in the wrong places. Don't put your nose where it doesn't belong. I

hired you to do a job. To find out who Anonymous is so that we can both be free. Don't question my motives and don't go causing more trouble than need be just to prove yourself as a young dick. Find me Anonymous." She growled. "Or else."

Chris stepped forward, her chest touching up against Midnight's wet chest. "I'm doing the job you hired me for – but it's not easy when the person that hires you is the person that's messing you around."

"Save your sob story for someone who cares," said Midnight wrapping a black robe around her. Turning her back to Chris, she began patting her legs off with a towel.

Chris cracked her knuckles. "Maybe you're Anonymous."

Midnight jerked around, her wet hair expelling droplets of water across the room. "What makes you think that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something about a vindictive villianesse, an angry ex-Mystery employee, coming back to avenge her sour love affair with, a certain man."

Midnight's eyebrow's jolted up and her face grew red. "This has nothing to do with anything. Get out of here. Get out before I ruin you!"

"Is that a threat?" asked Chris.

"It's a promise. Now find me Anonymous, or..."

"Or what?"

"Or Sally will forever be dead."

"She already is," said Chris as she stepped past Midnight and slammed the door behind her.

## Chapter 20

The next day, after a long train ride, Chris found herself in the town of Goose Bay. As she walked down Main Street with her suitcase, she noticed a few people staring at her. The houses were quaint and cottage-like, and the air outside damp. There was a peculiar atmosphere about the place, and Chris knew the fewer people that saw her, the better. She didn't have time to be nice, and she didn't have the energy to be noticed. She had to find Fredrich's cabin as quickly as possible; time was running out. The thought of staying in a motel and having a shower was divine, but it wasn't worth the risk of being remembered. Instead, she planned to camp in the forest near Fredrich's cabin for the duration of her stay in Goose Bay.

Chris caught sight of a restaurant across the street. A family sat eating in the window. 'Sunrise Family Diner'. Her stomach rumbled, and hunger led her into the restaurant. The stuffy smell inside and the brown carpeting reminded Chris of her deceased grandmother's basement. She'd spent a lot of time playing by herself in that basement as a child. A teenage girl greeted her at the door. Her nametag read 'Natalie'.

"Table for one, sir?" asked the girl, holding a paper placemat menu.

Chris was relieved she was being mistaken as a man – if anything happened she would be remembered that way. "Yes. Over there please." She pointed to the back corner of the restaurant, then followed her waitress.

Natalie set up her table and brought her water. "You know what you want?" she said.

Chris quickly looked over the menu trying to decide.

“I’ve been stuffing Chinese noodle take-out bags all afternoon and I’ve just about had it,” said Natalie. “You like Chinese food?”

“Chinese food?” Chris was surprised.

“Yeah, people round here like it. I don’t know why. It’s just a bunch of greasy chicken balls anyways and white rice. We have other stuff too. Deep fryer’s broken today, by the way. Johnny’s comin’ to fix it any minute, but I recommend you order something else, if you’re hungry.” She rolled her eyes. “Knowing him he’ll show up at close.”

“What do you recommend?” Chris asked.

“Hot chicken sandwich with peas is decent. I can substitute your fries for a dessert.” She shrugged. “Deep fryer.”

“Sure. Sounds good.” Natalie was about to walk away, but Chris stopped her. “Listen, I’m just passing through this place. I’m on my way up North, but I thought I might like to rent a cottage around here for a few nights or maybe on my way back. Do you know of any for rent? Goose Bay is really nice.”

Natalie scoffed. “This place isn’t so great. When I’m done school, I’m gettin’ as far away as I can. Everyone up in everyone else’s business. It’s weird.”

“Oh. Well, yes, it’s good to get out and see the world... I’d still like to rent a cottage though – do you know of any?” she asked again.

“Only cottages up here are about five miles out – on Braydon Lake. There’s another few past Braydon Lake, off in the woods, but they wouldn’t be for rent. Weirdos up there. Not from around here.”

“You mind drawing me a map?” asked Chris.

She shrugged, taking out her order pad and pen. “Yeah sure, whatever,” said Natalie. “This here’s how you get to Braydon Lake,” she explained drawing on the paper, “and then if you go this way, I think, it’ll take you to the cabins.” She handed her the paper.

“Thanks a lot eh?” Chris smiled.

“Sure.” Natalie sighed then went off to place the order.

After a couple hours of walking and a bit of luck, Chris found Fredrich’s cabin about a quarter of a mile into the forest. From behind a large tree, she peered out and recognized the license plate from the search she had done yesterday. Blue Mazda, four doors. That was it. Earlier that afternoon, she had introduced herself to a cottager at Braydon Lake as Fredrich Neilson’s nephew, saying she had gotten lost and needed directions to his cottage. The man had happily provided her with directions, saying he didn’t know Neilson personally, but he’d heard of him. Now in front of the cabin, she found herself in a potentially dangerous situation. Chris quietly set down her suitcase, hiding it in the tall grass. She would set up camp after she had investigated a little. Gray clouds filled the sky. The forest air was damp and cool. As she planned her strategy, she felt a vibration in her chest. Chris reached into her breast pocket and pulled out her cell phone surprised that she could even pick up a signal in the woods. A text message awaited her. ‘Where r u? Need to meet. ASAP. - Midnight’. Annoyed that her mission was being sidetracked by this woman, she wrote back, ‘Cant. Out of



town. Call me later.' Chris was changing the phone's settings to silent when it vibrated again. 'Incoming call'. She leaned up against the tree and opened the phone.

"Chris here," she in a low voice.

"Where are you?" said Midnight in a breathy voice. "I miss you."

"You've got to be kidding! Can't talk right now," Chris whispered into the phone. "I'm hunting down Anonymous!"

"Are you getting close?" asked Midnight excitedly. "Tell me where you are right now."

"No way. Look lady. You hired me to do a job, so let me do my job."

Chris jumped thinking she saw movement in her peripheral vision, but soon realized it was a squirrel. It was risky to remain on the phone any longer. "Gotta go."

"Meet me tomorrow at midnight sharp at Heritage Fest in the Labyrinth of Mirrors. You'll regret it if you don't." Her voice had lost its seductiveness and sounded menacing.

"I don't make promises," said Chris and hung up. She immediately turned off her phone to ensure she no longer be disrupted.

Chris crept up to the side of the log house and glued herself to the wood. She slid along the side listening for movement. There was only the occasional birdsong that could be heard in the distance. She inched towards the large side window and craned her neck up to peek in. She looked into a small kitchen. It was

empty. The kitchen table was piled high with papers and there were dirty dishes in the sink. She crept along the cottage, looking in all of the windows, seeing no one inside. Chris tried to open the back door. It was locked. She noticed the basement window was a crack open. She crouched down and looked into the window. It was pitch black inside. Fredrich must've gone for a walk. Looking around and seeing nothing but trees, she removed the screen easily and pushed the glass across, making a space large enough for her to slide in. Chris glanced around one final time, and then slipped feet first through the window into the darkness.

She landed on the ground, making as little noise as possible. She waited for someone to bust into the room, but no one came. Pushing herself up, she waited as her eyes adjusted to the dark. Ticking engulfed her – a similar sound to the one she had heard in Bruce's studio. When her eyes adjusted, Chris gaped at what she saw. Countless identical clocks without hands, like the one that Bruce had shown her, hung in succession on the wall. The clocks encircled her, strung up in a straight line that ran on every black wall – black on black, with only the silver numbers '12' gleaming in the dark. A circle of circling midnights. On the far wall was a large poster-sized photo of Midnight. She was sitting with a drink in front of her and a cigarette in her hand. Her eyes sparkled like two exotic jewels. Midnight was leaning back, legs crossed in her short black skirt, high heels on her feet. Chris could almost smell her perfume wafting through the room.

Chris turned to the bookshelf and desk on her right. She scanned the book titles: 'Caught in Time: Nietzsche and the Concept of the Eternal Return', 'Ruins: An Illustrated History,' 'Lost in Pieces,' 'Black Holes and Other Metaphors'...

She remembered learning about the concept of the eternal return in her high school philosophy class with Mr. Trudeau. Sally had rarely paid attention in that class, though for some reason the concept had stayed with her. She'd found it interesting – the idea that every action had the potential of recurring eternally, as though nothing was ever lost; it was simply being recycled somewhere in time.

She caught sight of a thin black notebook on the desk. It looked similar to the one she found in Fredrich's office, however this one was slightly larger. She quickly pocketed it then shone the light of her cell phone on the desk. There was a small carving knife on the desk beside a note with a poem on it. She strained to look at the wood and realized Fredrich was inscribing the poem into the wood.

She leaned towards it and read:

### **Midnight**

*In the eternal recurrence of my heart,  
there is a moment that stretches across time  
to meet itself over and over. Time, that thing that runs  
away and towards us colliding...*

The inscription stopped there though Chris figured Fredrich would soon finish carving the poem into the wood. She reached for the piece of paper, but a pile of books off to the side of the desk grabbed her attention. Shining her cellphone's light on their spines, Chris realized they were books by Sinova Kuznetov – books Chris had read about online and had wanted to order, but were unavailable ever since the author's exile! Chris quickly flipped through the titles. 'From Time To Time: (Re)Membering the Past to Construct our Present'; 'Cultural Ruins: An Exploration of Fame and Man's Quest for Immortality';

‘Ozymandias: Greatness and the Fall of Empires’; ‘Dancing with Ghosts: Neuroscience, Physics, and Everyday Phantoms’; and ‘Atoms for Adam: The Love Letters of Sinova Kuznetov’. What was Fredrich doing with all these books by Kuznetov? Chris’s hunch had been right – he had heard of the author and the ‘Siny’ he had referred to in his journal, was almost certainly Kuznetov.

The sound of footsteps on the gravel startled Chris. She dropped the books and looked around frantically, knowing it would be too risky to slip out the window in case Fredrich decided to use the back door. Why had she gotten so caught up with these books? She cursed herself and looked around the room. There was nowhere to hide. She spotted the door and swung it open to find a dark corridor that led to a laundry room, a closet and stairs that ascended to the back door. As Chris heard a key enter the back door lock, she threw herself into the cramped closet, but was unable to shut the door. She crouched as far back as she could against what felt like coats and shoes, hoping that Fredrich hadn’t noticed the window.

## Chapter 21

Chris heard voices as the door opened. She breathed as quietly as she could, straining to hear what they were saying.

“...It’s such a coincidence that I ran into you,” said a strangely familiar male voice. “Thanks for letting me use your bathroom. I just couldn’t hold it another minute. I’m not much of a go-in-the-woods kind of fellow.” The first man laughed and seemed to be taking off his shoes.

“Yes, well, um. I was quite surprised myself to run into you on the trail. It’s not every day I bump into someone from Riverdale up here. Especially not in the woods,” said the second man in a deep voice.

Chris sucked in her breath. Someone from Riverdale? She knew she recognized that first voice!

“I do wish we could visit, but I must really to get back to my work,” the second man added.

“Really?” said the first man. “I thought you didn’t do that anymore though.”

The second man coughed. “Don’t believe everything you read. Anyways, how’s Tracy doing?” he asked. “We tried to meet up to converse a few weeks ago, but didn’t manage to find the time. I hope to go to the book club in the fall. You should join. The bathroom’s up here.”

Jackson! Chris couldn’t believe it. What was he doing here?

“Tracy’s fine. I don’t see much of...” His voice became faint as they walked upstairs. Chris had to hear what they were saying. She waited for a

moment, listening to the footsteps above her. Could Jackson's brother live in Goose Bay, or was he here for another reason? How did he know Fredrich and how was he implicated in the search for Anonymous? Chris heard the toilet flush and feet walk across the cottage into what she assumed was the kitchen or the living room. She heard them talking again, but couldn't make out what they were saying. She had to get closer.

Chris slowly opened the closet door, cringing as it squeaked. She waited for footsteps to come towards her, but the voices didn't even pause. Chris tiptoed towards the stairs, then pushed herself against the wall as she crept upstairs. She stopped at the top stair, keeping her back against the wall, and listened.

"...It's simply that I must work," said the man with the deep voice, who had to be Fredrich.

"Oh, come on Mr. Professor. You're not at the university anymore. You don't have to work. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to kick me out," said Jackson. "You wouldn't want me to think that, now would you?" Jackson's voice had an unfamiliar sharpness to it.

"I suppose a cup of tea would be alright. Okay. Let me put the kettle on. Will orange pekoe do?"

"Yes, that's fine."

One of the men walked across the kitchen and opened a cupboard.

"So, is this your cottage or do you rent it?" asked Jackson.

"It's mine. I bought it while I was at the university. I come here more often now, for weeks at a time, to get away and write. It's much more peaceful

here than at home.” Fredrich was so close to Chris that she could probably touch him if it weren’t for the wall. If he decided he needed something downstairs, she’d be in trouble.

“It seems pretty peaceful up here, but it must get kind of creepy up here alone at night. In the dark. No one around. Kind of dangerous wouldn’t you say?” asked Jackson.

“Dangerous?” Fredrich asked and then laughed. “Goose Bay is the least frightening place I’ve ever been. You haven’t spent much time up here, have you?”

Chris heard a chair scrape against the floor and a couple of footsteps. “No, just to visit my brother. He’s dying. Hey, I’m just pulling your leg,” said Jackson chuckling. “Why don’t you give me a tour of the place while the water boils?”

Fredrich coughed. “I really shouldn’t. It’s such a mess, I’m far too embarrassed. Perhaps another time.”

“Don’t worry about it. What, do you have dirty briefs lying around or something? Don’t worry about it. Please, I insist.” He began walking towards the stairs. Chris flew down the stairs and leapt into the closet.

“Did you hear something?” asked Fredrich.

“It was probably one of those fat squirrels outside. They’re everywhere. What do they eat to get so big?” He continued down the stairs.

“Wait!” cried Fredrich. “What about the tea?” Through the crack in the closet door, Chris saw him follow Jackson. Fredrich’s face was pale and his eyes wide.

“The tea can wait,” said Jackson walking towards the laundry room. “Oh, here’s where you keep your dirty clothes. Tisk. Tisk.” He chuckled “And there’s the furnace room. What’s wrong Fred? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

Fredrich coughed again. “No. I suddenly feel ill. I should go lie down. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Oh, but we haven’t finished the tour!” cried Jackson. “What’s in there?”

Chris held her breath.

“Closet. That’s the closet. There’s nothing in there.” The men were standing right in front of her now. Fredrich seemed to be having trouble breathing.

“The closet? Well that’s no fun. What’s in there?” asked Jackson.

“Nothing!” said Fredrich. “It’s merely my office. It’s in shambles. Let’s go.”

Jackson stepped forward. Chris could no longer see them.

“No,” repeated Fredrich.

“You’re blocking my way,” said Jackson. “What are you so afraid of?”

Fredrich was silent. Chris knew he was quite a bit taller and probably much stronger than Jackson. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I’ve had enough of this.”

Jackson laughed. “You’ve had enough? You’ve had enough!” he yelled then lowered his voice to what sounded almost like a growl. “I’ve had enough.”

“What on earth are you doing?!” cried Fredrich. Chris wanted desperately to see what was happening.



“And I’m not afraid to use it. Now open the door.” Chris heard the door slowly open.

“Now what do we have here Mr. Anonymous?” Jackson asked.

“Mr. Anonymous?”

“You heard me! Anonymous. Do you get off on that? Does it float your boat to be all mysterious and weird?”

Fredrich’s breathing became more laboured. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You stole her from me. For months I tried to figure out who took her from me. Who she left me for. Now I know. You should’ve never given Tracy that manuscript, you fool. I found it on our kitchen table. She told me you lent it to her; she told me everything.” There was a thud, and the sound of books falling to the floor. “One wrong move and you’re dead.”

“What?! What manuscript? Who did I steal from you? Midnight?”

“Midnight,” echoed Jackson, his voice hoarse.

“I loved her, but I’m not Anonymous. You’re terribly mistaken. She left me for Anonymous!” cried Fredrich.

“You’re pathetic you know that? You’re nothing. I read it all. ‘Beyond Recollection’! You’re so obsessed with getting her back that you don’t even live in reality. You have this room, this museum, preserving something that never was. It’s all a fantasy, Fred. Wake up. She didn’t care about you! You brainwashed her into leaving me!”

Fredrich whimpered. "I didn't know you were with her. She appeared out of nowhere. I promise."

"You ruined me Fred! You wrote her those letters and took the only woman I ever truly loved away from me. She told me about the letters. About the 'Theory of Darkness'. About surrender. Is that how you court a women? Woo her with big ideas?" Chris heard the sound of something being ripped into pieces.

"Don't touch that! Please!" Fredrich began to cry. There was the sound of smashing and banging.

"It's not midnight anymore, is it Fred? I guess it's 5:56 p.m. like it is for everyone else around here! Get a grip. Oh? You're mad are you? You want to hurt me do you? Go ahead, try."

Chris wanted to run out and stop Jackson from going any further, but she was unarmed. Besides, rushing into the room would potentially ruin her chances of finding Anonymous. But Fredrich might get hurt, and she couldn't let that happen either.

"Do you hate me, Fred?" asked Jackson. Fredrich whimpered. "Well, I hate you," Jackson continued. "I hate you as much as I loved her. And I loved her!" he cried. "I loved her and you took that from me. What makes a man steal from another man? Greed. That's what. You're so greedy it's disgusting."

"I..didn't..even..know..about..you," gasped Fredrich. "How could I have known about you?"

"We were in love. We were so in love..." Jackson trailed off for a moment. "I found you up here. I found out where you were and came here when you were

out. I already knew about this joke of a room. Now you're going to pay. I've waited so long for this day. Oh, how I've waited for this day." He giggled.

Chris felt around the closet for something she could use as a weapon. She couldn't let this go on any longer. Suddenly there was the sound of grunting and wrestling. She could only feel coats. Hangers. Shoes. Then she heard a piercing scream and sobbing. Was it Fredrich or Jackson? Something had happened. She had to do something. Anything. And then silence. And the sound of heavy breathing. Then shuffling. A throat cleared.

"Anonymous. You're not so anonymous anymore," said Jackson. Chris saw Jackson pass slowly by her then climb up the stairs. His white hair was messy and he moved with great effort. There was blood on his shirt. She noticed he was wearing gloves. She waited. It was all she could do.

After what seemed like an eternity, Jackson left the cabin. He had stayed there for quite some time, cleaning. She counted to thirty, making sure he was really gone, then threw open the closet door and bolted towards the room. Fredrich lay off to the side, against the bookshelf, with a knife sticking out of his chest. Chris gasped. She'd never seen a murder victim before. He lay in a pool of blood, arms at his side, mouth twisted in a grimace. He was caught in a grotesque pose, as though stuck in his worst nightmare. Shards of clock lay around him. Fragments of Midnight. Books were everywhere; covered in glass and splattered with blood. Chris made sure not to touch anything. She wondered if her

fingerprints were in the closet, in the room, on the window. She'd have to wipe everything she touched; she couldn't be framed for this.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her stomach in knots. She pushed the feelings aside. Feelings had no business here. Chris quickly made her way to the closet, found a rag, and removed her prints from every surface she remembered touching, hoping she hadn't removed traces of Jackson in the process. ...*Lost or distorted histories are like crimes...* she remembered reading ...*fingerprints removed from the surface of time...* Kuznetov. She was tempted to take the books with her, but they were spattered in blood. It would be too upsetting to read them with the last moments of Fredrich's life strewn across the covers.

She stuffed the cloth in her pocket and took one final look at Fredrich. At his eyes. His terrified expression. Chris clenched her fists. She'd had enough of Midnight. Enough of Anonymous. Enough of this game. Jackson and Fredrich were trapped in a fantasy. Trapped in time. Just like her. She wanted Sally back more than ever. She stopped and looked around the room at the disorder.

"We can never go back," she muttered then left.

## Chapter 22

Chris didn't know how long she lay in the soccer field behind the small Goose Bay schoolhouse as the rain poured down from the night sky. Her teeth chattered and she hugged her body in an attempt to stay warm. Earlier, she had anonymously called the police from a pay phone, tipping them off that a bloodstained Jackson Todd had been spotted leaving Fredrich Neilson's cottage. She had then quickly and as inconspicuously as possible, walked down back streets until she had come upon the schoolhouse. Now, she lay motionless allowing the storm to overcome her. The sky rumbled and flashed. She was awed by the sheer power above her and felt small under its outpouring. The rain showered down as though it would never stop. As though it had only ever rained.

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, it stopped. "Rain always stops," she mumbled, taking off her glasses and wiping them as dry as she could. Chris stood up and dragged her suitcase across the muddy field until she reached the schoolhouse. As she sat down against the damp brick, she tried to control her chattering teeth. Clouds drifted across the dark sky, revealing the full moon. That large luminous faraway sphere. A spotlight breaking through blackness. Opening her suitcase, she pulled out the wet notebook she'd found in Fredrich's cottage, and a flashlight, which had managed to stay dry under her trench coat. She turned on the light and opened the book, noticing the poem she'd seen earlier.

## Midnight

In the eternal recurrence of my heart,  
there is a moment that stretches across time  
to meet itself over and over. Time, that thing that runs  
away and towards us colliding. In the dark  
night's glow, the instant of my hands  
on the exposure of your face.

"There is that moment again!" we say rubbing  
our respective psychological states. Oh,  
this flipping dance of a wrestling match,  
your skin sets my palms aflame. No,  
this will not be that familiar poem  
about longing or the isolation of time;  
an amputated clock ticking its phantom tick.  
This will be an exaltation of love's cliché,  
a spinning and turning with the half-cry  
of your face under the romance of the moon.  
The moment of this heart echoes  
the heart of this moment, into this love of a poem  
that writes, has written and will continue  
to remind us that the moon is always full and  
we will forever be under its spotlight of time.

Chris stared at the words. There was something sad and simultaneously  
beautiful about the poem, as though it were mourning the loss of the moment and  
celebrating its return. She looked up. Was she caught in a love letter to time? Was  
she spellbound by this phenomenon? Midnight, Fredrich, Jackson, Mike, and  
Chris? All entrenched in their respective fantasy tenses? Each person held hostage  
by their beating hearts and the uncontrollable flow around them? Was  
Anonymous simply highlighting this fact? Holding a mirror to the fantasy and  
making it real? Saying 'do with it what you will'? Saying, 'let it destroy you or let  
it lift you up'? Jackson's inability to let go had driven him to kill. Fredrich had  
religiously worshipped his fantasy around the past, allowing himself to lose touch

with the present. Midnight wanted to find Anonymous at all costs. Would Chris fall into the same trap or could she 'surrender' to the present fantasy, surrender to Anonymous, and thus surrender to time? Was Anonymous asking them all to accept motion and change, no matter how difficult it was? To give in to it? Chris didn't know. She turned back to the journal and began to read.

13/08/20—

Midnight. Ever since she left me, I am only able to retrieve her in my memory. She recurs eternally in my recollections, again and again. Somewhere in a sequence long past, we circle. As a result of her presence, and now of her absence, I have been ruined. My Theory of Everything is but a theory of pieces, of half-truths and faulty formulas. What is the sense of fully explaining and linking together all known physical phenomena, when I live in my memory? It seems Siny was correct after all – she predicted I would find myself one day in ruins. I abandoned my theory, for I no longer have the will to continue with it. I've put it aside and have begun to work on a new project. Something much different than my usual fact-bound track. It is a philosophical inquiry into the nature of memory and the undying past, pilfered from the notes I took from Siny's office the last time we spoke. What use are they to her now *anyways*? I am determined to understand why I am stuck in time, stuck on Midnight. I wonder if she experienced the takeover I have. I assume not, since it was she that deserted me. I long to return in time to find out. The moments I knew but that are no longer tangible. Why have I consecrated myself to this ungraspable time? This question remains unanswered. I wrote the poem for Midnight using the idea of eternal recurrence and applying it to my situation. I've never been one to indulge in airy poetic drivel, and yet after Midnight left, it served as a necessary outlet. The idea of the eternal recurrence, serves as a comfort and simultaneously as a torment. The clock, in a sense, was amputated and I have become stuck. Even if Nietzsche called the return a burden because every action matters, I like to think that somewhere in time, on a cold winter's night, I touch her again and again. Even after all that has occurred, after all of the betrayal and the dishonesty, in that moment, I knew only then. There's something self-contained and simple about a moment without retrospect. The echo of her heels and the intervals between them, as she walked through the park on that paved path, are etched into my consciousness. That was before I left the university. Before my research ceased. Before the descent of my marriage. Before all that. Somewhere we are still there before, pressed together under the spotlight of the eternal moon. But how can I rewrite it as though I remember it perfectly? Siny states in several of her books that to tell time past is to story-tell. And so, I tell my story.

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15/08/20—

To steal is to take something that does not belong to you. We have all robbed and been robbed. Midnight tried to rob me of my ideas, though I think I stopped her before she could absorb too much. Despite this intellectual assault, I continue to long for her. So I now rest in time and stick to my clocks. Judith doesn't know what I do up here at the cottage. She thinks it is a place I go to work. Yes, I do work. I compose my philosophy book, and imbibe, and reminisce. I analyze and reformulate Siny's ideas on the reinvention of retrospective memory into my own more concrete ideas in my special Midnight room. I have concluded that I must trap myself in this time and relive it again and again, in order to potentially one day release myself from it. What would be involved in freezing time? On first thought the laws of physics would seem to be violated if time was stopped, but I postulate it is not so. Instead of my Theory of Everything, now I am interested in returning the time I had with Midnight and isolating myself in that time. I have Bruce make me a clock without hands every month until I can physically return to that moment and embody it. I want back to a time when she was tangible.

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19/08/20—

Clocks measure the illusion of time, cutting up our days and nights. I recently came across a quote by a Roman playwright that said something similar to that about sundials. "wretch who first...set up a sundial in the market place to chop my day to pieces." The measured clock tick measures what exactly? One moment to another? The passage thereof? When does one moment end and another begin? What really can be constituted as a moment? We synchronize ourselves to the clock and to its intervals. There is only one time for me and it is the Midnight of my past. Without her I am out of sink. I tried to find her, but to no avail. I found out she was with Jackson Todd – the owner of The Mystery bookstore – before our affair. Tracy confided in me over coffee a while ago, when we met up one day to talk about books. She said her husband had been cheating on her with someone that looked like a woman straight out of film noir. Jackson was apparently obsessed with those films. Tracy said that he was always at the store 'working' and that they never talked about the affair but she had her ways of finding out. My surprise kept me from further inquiry. Tracy changed the subject after that – perhaps she sensed my discomfort. We're not the closest of friends, after all. We only have the book club as our common link. Ever since I left the university, it's pleasant to have another person who's relatively well-read to engage with. Though I wonder how a housewife in Riverdale is able to generate thoughts on ideas as complex as Derridian differance, which in my opinion renders systems meaningless and is far too post-modern for any meaningful truth. Perhaps she fills her time by reading voraciously. Tracy and I have debated at length on the topic of differance, among many others, and I wonder how she can believe that meaning, and thus truth is constantly



deferred. It seems rather absurd, as though nothing can really mean anything. I'm sure if I told her about my Theory of Everything, she'd have much to criticize. I've decided to keep that to myself. I also remained silent in regards to my involvement with Midnight after she told me about Jackson. It appears that Midnight left Jackson and came to me, and then she left me, but for whom? This unknown factor keeps me awake at night and forces me to drink. It remains in the shadow and makes me cling to memory.

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21/08/20—

I sit here in my study and think about what Siny wrote in her manuscript regarding the boundaries of a moment. I'm taking a break to work through this idea in my journal. For example, when does a moment begin and a moment end, she asks, then goes on to write that moments have something to do with memory and the episode we remember. What is a moment? I used to define it as the product of a quantity, like force, and the perpendicular distance of it from a fixed axis. But Siny seems to have disregarded such an explanation and focuses instead on the abstract nature of a moment and fixes it in memory. My memory is faulty and leaves me with gaps. I cannot recall what Midnight and I discussed that winter night in the park behind the university, however I do remember the biting wind and the glaring moon. Midnight pushed me up against a tree, and as I took off my glove and ran my palm on her face, a surprised expression overtook her. Perhaps she had not expected such gentleness from me. I had certainly surprised myself. I remember our bodies against the bark and under the moon. Is this the moment because this is the memory? Siny would say that a moment, and its boundaries, begins and ends in memory. Why are so many of my ideas not my own? Why am I such a sham?

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26/08/20—

I continue to rewrite the manuscript. Judith must wonder why I've yet to return home, but I do not care to call her. The very thought of her tires me. We remain in our marriage for the children and for appearance's sake. Judith does not want to be seen by parents as a divorcee. Traditional people like her parents cannot accept the end of a marriage. I may leave her regardless of her parent's outdated views. Though it is a relief to be away from Judith, it is rather desolate up here. Sometimes I have the inexplicable sensation that someone is watching me. I felt that way when I was with Midnight too. I believe this occurs when I consume large quantities of alcohol and go for days without human interaction. Lately, I've been most often alone. I suppose this produces unusual reactions.

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01/09/20—

Now memory. According to Siny's meticulous, though at times incomprehensible notes, memories are comparable to a mountain range. We remember certain things most vividly because these moments have impressed themselves upon our neurons and have physically changed their structure. Siny writes about the "drama of the mind" and the superlative state. A striking passage in her notes is as follows: "I have been angry to the highest degree, I have felt my heart flutter to the highest degree, I have been saddest, most hopeful, most jealous – yes my life story is a story of mosts, of dramatic impressions, ordered in the most peculiar way." What Siny explicates as an anti-thesis to the natural process of forgetting, is the spaced repetition of retraining. If we feel the material is important enough for us to recall, our minds will proceed as such, thus 'permanently' etching it into our psyches.

However, how accurate is memory and what do we remember, asks Siny in her notes. I am beginning to think that perhaps she was right -- that if I remembered the story of my life it would come to me in pieces. We argued about this years ago. She was fixated on the notion of pieces and mental gaps. Then I scoffed at her, but now I see that perhaps a personal history is a selection of fragmented memories that are rearranged mentally. I never thought I would ever become so abstract. With my Theory of Everything I'd hoped for a concise explanation for universal existence, however now I revisit this initial goal to reflect upon and reconsider it. Siny has written that memory is an ever-changing puzzle and is a time in and of its self. Memory, she writes, is a constant process of editing. On page 144 of her manuscript, she writes: "I edit out all the long hours I have sat staring at the clouds and insert my most impressive moments, to call it my life. I must remember that I remember in pieces. So I will not tell my story as though it began at the beginning. There is no beginning when we remember. There is only the memory – a stranger we revisit."

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04/09/20—

If time recurs eternally, then I can postulate that even after I cease to exist, my moments with Midnight will remain like ghosts. Perhaps we will eternally remain positioned against that tree under the moon. The laws of physics do not deny that we can travel backwards in time. We have not found a way yet to execute this operation, but it has not been proven to be impossible. The universe is unlikely and entirely possible. Perhaps there is a way that I can return to that time and leave Judith and the kids behind. It is as though I have been taken hostage by my memories and pull to return to a previous time. It is as though I am being stalked by her, though she is nowhere near. I awoke last night, and for an instant observed what appeared to be eyes staring at me through the window. I blinked and they vanished. It was most likely a figment of my imagination. Where is Midnight? She inhabits my past, as do I. Could all tenses exist simultaneously as Siny postulates? As we are accessing our present, we partially access our past and future through

devices like memory and premonitions. Is it possible that the things I've experienced and the things I have yet to experience are happening somewhere in time as I sit writing this? Could we be mistaken to think that we are walled into the present?

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08/09/20—

I am in my dark room again – I spend most of my evenings down here, writing and recollecting. The clocks tick mechanically reminding me of time past. We are designed to forget. Just like we are designed to die. Just like we are designed for continuous modification. So why do I refuse to allow myself to forget? Why do I sit in here in this room forcing myself to remember? No one knew about our affair. What she did to me. How she manipulated me, then disappeared. I wonder if she did the same thing to Jackson. I went to The Mystery twice after she left, and attempted to converse with him, though he seemed rather preoccupied. He was disinterested. What would I say anyways? Perhaps Tracy could invite me to their house for dinner sometime. I want to know what happened between Jackson and Midnight. Perhaps he knows her whereabouts. Though until I return to Riverdale, I remain here, wasted. I put my hand through the window when she left me. I later told Judith it was an accident, though of course, she knows me better than that. My blood dripped on the bathroom floor. Eventually the blood clotted on my arm. A while later a scab began to form. Now, I realize that the mind is like that too. When Midnight disappeared it was as though I had been injured. What had been, transitioned into a scar of a memory. A sensitive recollection that scabs over then falls off, only to leave a trace (a scar) of what has been. The skin moves on and heals. My mind betrays me, as do my memories, because I have been programmed to survive. Survival is equated to motion and therefore to change -- the constant change of a location or body (or memory). We move on because we cannot remain stationary. I have been betrayed by my makeup. This dark room is an attempt to counteract motion and change. This room disallows me to forget.

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11/09/20—

My revisions are progressing satisfactorily, though I must soon go home and be a father for a while. I will then return here and finish the book. I have slightly modified Siny's original title to be: `Beyond Recollection: The Nature of Memory and the Undying Past`. An apt title. I anticipate that Tracy and I can discuss some of my ideas over coffee. Of course it will be under the guise of the book club and philosophy, since I know the value of guarding one's ideas. Tracy can be rather obtuse or confrontational at times, though she always manages to surprise me with her aptitude. A refreshing and humbling change from those hypocritical academics. Sometimes she holds eye contact with me for a fraction too long; it's as though she is scrutinizing or desiring me. Her small dark eyes are almost familiar, though

familiar to what, I cannot say. It's as though I've looked into those eyes before. A case of *deja vu* I suppose. No matter, it's most likely my imagination. Tomorrow or the day thereafter I will drive home. Judith may be happy momentarily, until she returns to her disagreeable self. If I had more nerve, I'd disappear like Midnight.

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06/11/20—

I've returned to the cottage after quite some time at home. It is a relief to get back to Midnight, or what I have left of her. It's only a matter of time until I relocate her, and make sure she never leaves me again. When I'm externally with Judith, I am internally with Midnight. I brought another couple clocks with me, to add them to my wall. The ticking increases in volume. One day the noise will deafen me. When I was away, I misplaced the hardcopy of my manuscript and a folder of Siny's notes. I searched for the printed copy, thinking it was buried under a stack of papers or a pile of books, but to no avail. I may have forgotten it at the Ground Water Café or at the library. I searched everywhere I could think of having visited in Allsburg and in Riverdale. I must stop drinking so much. Thankfully, I backed the manuscript up on my computer. I suspect Judith may have found it and shredded it. She resents it when I leave. I tried to meet with Tracy for a coffee while I was home, but she said she was very busy. I wanted to know with what, since she has no job, and as far as I know, few other commitments. She did not elaborate. I had wanted to discuss ideas related to my current project. We had quite a lively discussion the last time we met, however it was cut short with a call from Judith. Tracy can certainly relate – she's hinted to how she and Jackson don't occupy the same bed any longer. When I spoke to Tracy on the phone, I mentioned I'd most likely be back for our next book club meeting. Perhaps we can meet then.

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10/11/20—

I've been drinking more than I'd like. It is almost as though Midnight is holding me captive, making me behave in ungainly ways. Last night as I was drifting to sleep, I felt her nails digging into my skin. I bolted upright and turned on the light, though found myself alone. Maybe I shouldn't come here any more. Maybe this time has reached its end. Today, I suspected someone was in the house when I was out for my walk through the woods. The door was unlocked and it looked as though things in my Midnight room had been moved around. My memory isn't as reliable as it is when I'm dry. I've begun to carve the poem I wrote into the desk. This is a way to ensure I will never forget. The memory will be there every time I sit down to write. Tomorrow I will resume writing my manuscript and I will soon leave this cabin indefinitely.

Chris closed the notebook. There would never be another entry. It was over for Fredrich. She hoped for his sake that he was back in his moment, back with his eternal Midnight. They belonged together. Chris couldn't believe that he had stolen Kuznetov's ideas and used them as his own.

Chris took out her cellphone, surprised that it was still working in spite of the downpour. It was almost midnight. She knew she had to leave Goose Bay as soon as possible, but the next train didn't leave until noon. She had to make sure no one saw her. She would stay behind the school until dawn, then hide out near the train station until right before departure.

As she grabbed her sleeping bag from inside of the suitcase, and wrapped it around herself, Chris's thoughts turned to Jackson. If he was convicted of the murder, the bookstore would likely fold – unless Tracy decided to take it over. Chris didn't see that happening, since she didn't seem to have much interest in the store. If it was discovered that Chris had been in Fredrich's cabin, the police would most certainly think she was implicated in the murder. Chris had cleaned up as much as possible, but she knew she couldn't account for things like hair or fabric. The story that she had been turned into Chris wouldn't cut it. They would think she was crazy. Maybe she was crazy. She thought of Anonymous and the letters. Did Anonymous realize that the letters had turned the men against one another? Had Anonymous used Midnight as a pawn? Or was it a test? An experiment in time to see what they would do with such circumstances? Such chaos? If they would surrender to changing nature of time or allow themselves to get stuck by resisting change, and therefore, latching onto the past? Both men had

sunk in the quicksand of their ideas. Fredrich had been fixated on his version of Midnight and Jackson on what he believed to be Fredrich's betrayal of him. Perhaps Anonymous wanted to ruin them. Ruin them all. Ruin Teresa Kathleen, ruin Sally, imprison Jackson, and kill Fredrich. Was this an experiment to see if Midnight or Chris could surrender to the previously undisclosed parts of themselves? Could they surrender to not knowing Anonymous's identity, or would they resist by trying to find it and explain everything? Just like Midnight was doing now or like Fredrich had been doing at the university. Chris was tired. She didn't want to care anymore who Anonymous was, but somehow, now, she cared more than ever. Part of her wanted Sally back, but another part of her felt strangely at home in her new body. She found herself looking forward to the possibility of receiving another letter and at the same time wished she never received another one again.

Chris inhaled slowly and tried to focus. She pulled her sleeping bag tighter and tried not to shiver. Jackson was not Anonymous – he had accused Fredrich of being Anonymous and taking Midnight away from him. Fredrich's journals indicated that he was not Anonymous either. So who was Anonymous? Could it be Midnight? Could she be playing games with Chris? Or could it be that Chris was simply trapped in a nightmare? No, that was too easy, too cliché, too ridiculous! She thought back to when Jackson had accused Fredrich of giving Tracy his manuscript for the book 'Beyond Recollection'. Since it most likely referred, perhaps not in name but in description, to a femme fatale-like figure, it was unlikely that he had shared the manuscript with Tracy given her knowledge

of Jackson's affair. If Tracy and Fredrich had not seen one another during Fredrich's time at home, how would she have gotten a hold of the manuscript? Chris supposed she could have broken into his house, but that scenario didn't quite seem to fit. What would Tracy want with turning Jackson's employees into their fantasies? Why would she create someone like Midnight who in all likelihood would seduce her husband? And why would Tracy leave it on the kitchen table for Jackson to find? Perhaps someone had planted it there. But who? Midnight? Judith? Bruce?

Dearest,

Slip me a part of your heart and I will slip you a fraction of mine. Let us take a slice of each other then adjust ourselves, fastening these new pieces inside. ‘Thump thump thump.’ *What’s that?* The beat sounds different now. And, of course, it is.

If we could dance, we would. Fragment to fragment; face to face. Take me to an empty lot and sway with me. We will feel funny things in our chests and blame it on the newness. We are sensing the takeover. We have begun.

To look closely upon one another. When we stop dancing, we will come to see we are like neighbours peering in on each other’s lives. If we could trade places, we would know that our difference is mostly a matter of angles.

But try as we might, we cannot get behind the window of each other’s perception. And so we pretend we are two of the same, and forget to think that two creatures in time are merely compatible aliens.

We assume we are rational beings; we mistake what we see for what is. You can only see from your inside and I from mine. I am swimming through the waves of my sight to reach you. But I am stuck inside. Inside looking out.

Imagine a mobile of many perceptions and call it a world. What do we see, all at the same time turning? I have made my version and you have made yours. The collective moment is also unique. It is simply a matter of spinning.

Beyond subjectivity is the *thing*. The thing we are all differently grasping through our filters of laws and theories. We cling to our teddy bears of understanding, tossing and turning. We are getting dizzy.

When we spin in our dance, what are our respective experiences? And what are we when divorced? The earth is quaking. Where is our ground now? The space between our perceptive distances is the place we meet.

If we have exchanged the pieces I think we have, and have fastened them into our hearts, can we extend to the space between us and call it ‘love’?



Can the space become a land we make our own? Will we colonize it in passion's name?

I am living with the fragment you have given me and call it 'you'. How can a fragment look so whole? You are a uniform body and yet this metaphor I call 'a piece of something greater' remains.

When you realize the alien factor and cry because you can only know me in parts, remember that it feels better to eat a piece of the pie than to eat it all. Perhaps everything is like a pie. Sweet in slices. Sickening as a whole.

*Anonymous*

## Chapter 23

The next night, Chris entered the Heritage Festival fairgrounds on the outskirts of Riverdale. Every year the field was transformed into the fair for a week. Chris was exhausted from her trip to Goose Bay and two close run-ins with the police. A Goose Bay cruiser had nearly driven past her on her way to the station earlier that morning, but she'd managed to duck inside a phone booth just in time. There had also been an officer in the train station when she'd gone to purchase her ticket, though she had slipped quickly outside and waited behind a large van until she saw him walking around on the platform. Somehow she'd managed to get on the train unnoticed. The ride back had been rather trying due to an elderly woman who had insisted on sharing her entire life story. When Chris had gotten off in Riverdale, she was so relieved she'd forgotten to worry about the possibility of being spotted or arrested. Luckily, a cab safely deposited her at her apartment, where she had found another letter from Anonymous under her door. She'd also found a threatening note from Midnight demanding that Chris meet her tonight at the fairgrounds if she knew what was good for her. Her answering machine had been flooded with messages – two from Mike telling her to stop avoiding his calls because he wanted to pick up the clothes and board games he'd left at her place as soon as possible, three hang ups, and finally, a message from Tracy Todd demanding to know why Sally hadn't called her. Chris had left a message on Tracy's answering machine saying she was still very ill, but would do her best to be at work by Wednesday, and then downed a few drums of whiskey, which had knocked her out for a couple hours.

Now, she found herself groggy and nauseous, in a bustling fairground. The fair came to Riverdale once a year and attracted a particular crowd. She usually avoided it, but tonight that was out of the question. Children with ratty hair and cotton candy cones ran circles as parents lumbered behind chomping on hotdogs and carmel corn. Others roamed around holding colourful stuffed animals and beer in plastic cups. Teenagers smoked cigarettes and flirted loudly with one another beside games like The Galloping Horse & Water Pistol Challenge and Pinball. Lights flashed in all directions and a cacophony filled the air. Mimes, clowns, and jugglers weaved through the crowd amusing youngsters. Chris walked among the excited crowd, looking for the Labyrinth of Mirrors. The large clocktower in the centre of the fairgrounds read 11:50 p.m. She passed a tarot reader who winked at her and then walked by a platform where a tiny man was doing gymnastics as a bearded woman played acoustic guitar. The sight of a giant merry-go-round circling ahead almost made her lose her balance.

Chris leaned up against a picnic table to steady herself. She then caught a glimpse of a man with chin-length curly hair and an Allsburg Bears tee-shirt slip out of a portapotty. Mike. She rushed behind a nearby ticket booth. Had he seen her? She couldn't talk to him right now, not before meeting Midnight. What was he doing here, she wondered. He hated the carnival. Chris crept out from behind the ticket booth and walked as fast as she could, searching for the Labyrinth. She looked back and thought she saw Mike move behind the pinball machine. Was he following her? She walked faster, weaving in and out of people. Chris looked behind again, but was unable to see him. A flashing sign ahead announced the

Labyrinth of Mirrors. She ran towards it then pushed her way into the massive tent.

The man at the entrance grabbed her bicep. “Two tickets.” Chris didn’t have any tickets and she knew she couldn’t risk going back outside. She eyed the man with the cigarette hanging from his lips and pulled out a twenty from inside of her pocket.

“How about a twenty instead?” He raised his eyebrow as she crumpled the twenty into his calloused palm, then reluctantly motioned her in.

Chris walked through a black corridor entering a dimly lit hall of mirrors. Soft chamber music, strangely familiar to that of the online chatroom, filled the labyrinth. She looked around not knowing in what direction to turn. Darkened replicas of Chris Tisdale encircled her. She admired the countless tough agents of detection and nodded at them. They nodded back in unison. The dim lighting erased many of the details; everything was more anonymous in the dark.

Moving slowly, she made sure not to run into her reflections and carefully passed through an opening into another room. She continued this way, walking through slot after slot, until she felt stuck.

“Midnight,” she called out, the word echoing loudly. She waited as the sound faded. Chris heard something approaching and was soon surrounded by a myriad of Midnights. Her perfume overwhelmed the space. Chris lunged towards her, hitting a mirror instead.

“Don’t even bother,” purred Midnight, “you’ll never get me.” She laughed and threw back her long black mane. Chris planted her feet firmly in the ground.

“Why did you want to meet tonight?” she demanded.

Midnight smiled, but remained silent.

“You lied to me!” Chris shot out. “You told me if I didn’t find Anonymous I’d be framed forever. You used me!”

The smile vanished from Midnight’s face. She walked towards Chris with a blazing look in her dark eyes. “We’ve already been through this. Everything you did, you chose to do. You make your choices. You pay your prices. If Anonymous taught me anything, it was that. You want to find Anonymous as much as I do. I’m trapped, so I hired you, before you end up like me, and I’m gone forever.”

Chris could sense Midnight was close and could almost feel the energy radiating from her body. She pressed herself against the Midnight in front of her, but was soon in front of herself again, touching her own cold reflection. “If I find Anonymous, I give you what you want; I’ll never give you what you want!”

Midnight bared her teeth. “I was trying to protect you! Don’t you get it? Anonymous is dangerous. It must be found! Now go finish your job!”

Chris laughed. “I’m already finished. Look at me. I can’t go back to my life. I’ve lost everything. It’s over Midnight. I’m through working for you! You use people; you suck them dry.” Chris held Midnight’s menacing stare. This woman was used to getting what she wanted, but not tonight. “You used Jackson and Fredrich. You were after Anonymous, so you seduced them to get what you wanted. To get Fredrich’s theory. You thought that would make Anonymous happy, but you didn’t get what you wanted, so here you are, trying to use me! Well it’s won’t work. I’m done with this. I don’t care if I find Anonymous. I don’t

care about these stupid theories. If I don't find Anonymous, you stay buried in time, because you're too stupid to let go. Well, I'm not going to be like you Midnight. I'm going to let go of all of this. Of you. And you can fall back through time and space, into love."

"Into love?!" spat Midnight. "What do you know about love?"

Chris stepped forward and decided to test some of her own theories out on Midnight. "I know you loved Anonymous. You loved it because it turned you into who you always wanted to be." Midnight coughed as Chris continued. "You were just Teresa Kathleen before Midnight took over. An uptight bookworm. A nobody. Then came Midnight and everything changed. Suddenly, for the first time ever, men threw themselves at you. They worshipped you, the fantasy they had of you. This gave you power and made you hungrier."

"Hungrier for what? You don't know what you're talking about," she hissed.

"It made you hungry for more. You loved being the object of their desires. The object of fantasies. But that's all you were: an object. They didn't want you Midnight, they wanted their idea of you. You fed off of this. Their hunger. You got everything you wanted. Except.."

"Except what?"

"Except you wanted Anonymous more than you wanted anyone ever before. When Anonymous wouldn't let you have it, you couldn't handle it. You tried as hard as you could to get the theory you thought Anonymous was after, but when it turned out you were wrong – that Anonymous didn't want Fredrich's

Theory of Everything – you were furious. You hate being wrong, hate not being in control, and hate not getting your way. You were in love Midnight! You were in love with something you couldn't control, something you could never fully know. You couldn't accept that. You had to have it fully. You couldn't surrender to the darkness of not knowing, to the darkness of time. So, your time expired and you were caught in your frame.”

“What do you know about anything?!” cried Midnight.

“I know that you loved Anonymous. You loved the thing that turned you into the person you always longed to be and hated it for going away. For coming to me instead. You were consumed by jealousy as you sat behind your pane, watching me receive the letters that had once been directed at you. You knew that I was your last chance to try and get to Anonymous. Well, you're not going to trick me into becoming like you. No way! What exactly were you going to do with Anonymous when I found it for you? Tell me.” Chris waited expecting Midnight to wildly protest, but no protest came.

“I was going to kill it!” she whispered instead. “Kill it for taking my life away from me. For making me fall in love then ruining me.” Midnight's confession and the sadness in her voice almost made Chris drop her guard. “I was...” Midnight gasped. “I was going trap you so that I could be free!” Her face twisted with rage. She pulled a gun out from the waist of her skirt and lunged towards Chris, pushing the pistol into the detective's heart. “Now there is only darkness and there is only midnight.”

Chris kept her voice steady. “Don’t be irrational Midnight. If you ever hope to be free, you need me. If you kill me, it’s over for you too. You don’t want to do that.” Chris would have to lie to her. Strike a deal of some sort then skip town or try to get rid of her by tearing Midnight’s photograph to shreds.

“Don’t tell me what I want. You don’t know anything about me! You don’t know what it’s like to have the heart you never knew you had get broken. What it’s like to fall for someone you don’t quite know. Fall for something you can never hold. That you can never really have. You don’t know what it’s like to be left with your life in ruins!” Spit flew from her mouth as she pressed the gun harder into Chris’s chest.

Chris stood still. “Yes. I do know. I know what you’re talking about, a lot more than you think. But why hold on Midnight? Why hold onto something that’s gone? Holding on is what ruined Fredrich and Jackson, and now it’s ruining you,” said Chris.

“Who have you been talking to!” exploded Midnight pushing Chris back.

“You asked me to conduct an investigation and I was doing my job. Fredrich’s dead, Midnight. Jackson will soon be in jail. They couldn’t let go of you. Are you going to let the same thing happen to you because you can’t let Anonymous go?”

“So now you’re a philosopher? Miss high and mighty!” Midnight shot back. She advanced towards Chris. “You’re just a woman playing dress-up.”

“No,” said Chris firmly. “Anonymous changed me. Flipped me inside out just like you. Allowed me to live in my fantasy tense. Made it real. Maybe I love



Anonymous for that. I don't know..." she said startled by what had just come out of her mouth.

"Why are you talking like that? Are you in love with Anonymous?" shouted Midnight pushing Chris harder this time. Chris stumbled back and caught her balance. Something metallic suddenly slammed into her cheekbone, causing her to double over.

"One more word out of you and I'll kill you! You have no idea what I'm capable of. Anonymous is mine and I have to find it. I don't know why I ever thought you had the brains to solve this case!" Midnight pushed Chris as hard as she could into a mirror. It shattered as Chris fell onto the ground. Mirror shards cut her skin and then, like a flash, it came to her:

***A theory is like a mirror. A mirror of the universe. It reflects the world back at the perceiver. It only exists in our minds, like a fantasy, and is not tangible. Until we bring it out and impose it on our time; onto our present – call it reality, the truth, whatever. When there is a shift in perception (or a new theory comes along) it is as though the mirror one has been looking into shatters and the world becomes a stranger. It becomes different. But the world is what it is and the theory is just the lens in which to view it. In which to think about and understand it. The truth is there even if we can't completely know or hold it. Even though we can never completely see it. Like a memory. Or a flash. Take a photograph of love; try to capture it. Impossible. Like time, love is Anonymous.***

This Theory of Darkness cut through Chris on the fairground in The Labyrinth of Mirrors as she stared at her world in pieces. Her fragmented reflection made her realize that her perceived world – history, memories, stories,

people, and mysteries –could only ever be a collection of fragments. Of clues. Hints. Suggestions. And in between these fragments was the darkness. The dark. It was a place that gave children nightmares. Adults tried to soften the dark with light – setting their cities aglow, rubbing out the midnight sky – but against the artifice, the darkness prevails.

Chris looked around at the pieces. They could never fit back together again, make the same whole. There would always be marks, cracks, and gaps – reminders of what was missing. That was her Theory of Darkness. The space between the cracks. The black bits that would remain unknown. If she got out of the labyrinth alive, she would write down her theory and leave it for Anonymous, then get out of town. She didn't belong here anymore.

Chris lifted her throbbing head to see Midnight's long black high heel lowering itself towards her chest. The spike threatened to pierce through her heart at any second. As her eyes traveled the highway of Midnight's leg, visions of Fredrich with the knife stabbed through his heart flashed in her mind. Suddenly a loud bang reverberated through the labyrinth. There was a scream. The gun had been fired!

## Chapter 24

Chris bolted upright, narrowly avoiding the spiky heel. Adrenaline coursed through her body. She jerked her head around Midnight's frame to see many Mikes holding a smoking gun. She barely recognized him – he seemed like a stranger instead of the man she'd dated for three years. They stared at each other with new eyes. Midnight turned around to face him, and Chris noticed blood dripping down the woman's leg. She had been shot in the back. Midnight heaved, pointing her pistol at Mike. Her hand trembled violently. Chris sprung to her feet and did a double roundhouse jump kick – a carry-over from her childhood martial arts classes – knocking the weapon to the ground. She quickly grabbed the pistol aiming it at Midnight, who lunged recklessly for Chris.

“Don't move or I'll shoot again!” yelled Mike grimacing at Midnight as she dropped to the ground. “You leave Sally alone!”

Chris stared at Mike. “What are you doing here?! This doesn't concern you. You're going to get us both arrested.”

There was yelling from the corridor. Someone was fast approaching. “Get out of here,” Mike called towards the sound, “Or I'll shoot you too!” The footsteps stopped. “Get out!” he screamed and the person headed back towards the entrance. It was only a matter of minutes before the police arrived on scene.

Mike had a frantic look in his eyes. “Is this who you're in love with? Is this who you cheated on me with? Is this the 'Anonymous' you've been chatting with?”

Midnight moaned and gurgled, as a trail of blood dripped from her mouth.

“What do you know about my chats! Did you break into my place? Have you been monitoring my computer?”

Mike didn't answer and stared stonily from Midnight to Chris. Midnight was bleeding profusely from her back. Blood dripped down her leg as she wheezed, her lungs sounding like a slowly deflating balloon.

“I didn't cheat on you with her! Nothing happened between us. We have to get out of here now! The police are going to be here any minute!” She grabbed his hand and pulled him towards her. “We'll talk about this later!”

“Wait!” cried Midnight pushing herself to her feet and stumbling towards them.

“You're finished Midnight!” said Chris. “You brought this on yourself. Now you'll be caught in this eternal midnight.” She kicked Midnight's shoes as hard as she could, snapping off the long thin heels. Midnight almost fell, but managed to force herself upright. She was shorter and lost much of her stature without the heels. Her legs were no longer highways of sensual flesh, but rather a regular pair of legs – to stand on and walk with. The women stood at eye-level now. Chris almost felt sorry for Midnight. Midnight stepped towards Chris, with her arms slightly open. Chris stepped back causing Midnight to lose her balance, then crumple to the ground. As Midnight gasped her last breath, Chris pulled Mike towards the exit.

“Common,” said Chris. “Let's go!” They stepped through the opening into a dark corridor and ran, bumping into mirrors, navigating through the labyrinth's twists and turns, until they reached the blaring red exit sign. Chris could hear

voices and footsteps following them through the labyrinth. She poised her gun in front of her, as Mike mirrored her movement.

“You ready?” he whispered pulling out a balaclava from his pocket and putting it on.

She nodded then stepped out into the night. A family, being entertained by a man juggling knives, caught sight of Mike and Chris. The father yelled as the mother grabbed her two children, shielding them, causing the juggler to drop his knives. Many people in the crowd turned and looked at the mother, who was yelling, “They’ve got guns! They’ve got guns!” There was more shouting amidst the sounds of machines chiming and ringing, as the panic spread and people ran for cover.

Chris fired her gun into the air, which caused more commotion. “Freeze! If anyone moves they get shot!” Most people stopped and stared at her with gaping mouths. “I said, freeze, or die!” Chris could see two security guards running towards the labyrinth. She looked around, then fired her gun into the air once more.

“This way!” shouted Mike, pulling her hand towards the massive cornfield behind the fairgrounds. They ran as fast as they could towards it, looking back ever so often to make sure no one was following them. Mike pointed his gun behind him. “Stay away or we’ll kill you!” Even the security guards had stopped. There were sirens in the distance. As they ran through the fields, the corn stalks cut their bodies, and the mud made it harder for them to run.

They ran for what seemed like forever, until finally they spilled out onto Brig Sideroad. Trying to catch her breath, she spotted Mike's gray Taurus parked ahead. They ran to it and hopped in. Mike started the engine and they sped off through the backroads towards Riverdale.

Mike parked his car on the quiet street in front of his apartment duplex, then flipped on the radio. *...opened fire on a crowd at the Heritage Festival fairgrounds. There have been unconfirmed reports that one woman has been fatally wounded, while several others seem to be getting treated for shock. The suspects are two white males in their mid to late twenties, one wearing an Allsburg Bears tee-shirt and the other in a suit and tie. They are armed and dangerous. Anyone with information is advised by police to immediately call Crime Stoppers by dialing NO-CRIME. Mayor Jones has issued a community-wide alert urging residents to stay indoors until further notice...*

"Well, at least no one spotted us in the car...I hope" said Mike turning off the engine and touching the cuts on Chris's cheeks. "Let's go inside."

She stepped outside and walked briskly to his front door, waiting for him to unlock it. The cool air stung against her skin. They went inside and Mike locked the door behind them.

"What the hell were you thinking?!" she yelled as she flipped on his hall light. "I know you were trying to help, but now we're going to end up in jail. " She shook her head, then stormed into the living room, pacing across the wooden floor. "This is crazy."

Mike sat down on the sofa. "I saved you from getting smoked. If I hadn't found you tonight, that woman would've shot you. Midnight, right?"

"How do you know?" demanded Chris. "Have you been stalking me or something?" She grabbed him by the shoulders. "Well, have you?!"

Mike shrugged her off. "No," he said. "I just wanted to know who you dumped me for. I saw you a couple of times skulking around town. Pretty weird if you ask me."

"No one's asking you," retorted Chris.

Mike ignored the comment. "I went to your place yesterday to get my clothes. I was fed up of calling you. I had every right. Found that note from 'Midnight' telling you to meet her in the labyrinth. It sounded sketchy, so I came to make sure you were okay."

Chris sat down beside him. "I can take care of myself, okay? If it weren't for you I wouldn't be in this mess."

"No, you'd be dead," he said quietly.

She sighed. "Maybe. But you can't come into my apartment anymore when I'm out. You pushed me to give you that key. It's over Mike. Give it back!"

His shoulders slumped. "I left it on your kitchen counter. Didn't you see it?"

"No." She stared at him. "What else did you find?"

"I had a look at your computer. Was thinking of taking it, but I didn't," he said.

"How dare you!" Chris said.

“I have a right. I bought you the damn thing!” He rubbed his palms together. “So, you’ve been busy chatting with your little friend?”

“This doesn’t concern you. We’re not together anymore Mike. Things are different now.”

Mike bit his bottom lip. “Yeah, they sure are. I don’t even recognize you. What happened to the Sally I love?”

“She’s gone Mike. I’m a private detective now.”

“What?! Private detective! You’ve been reading too many books! I don’t understand.” Mike looked small and confused, like a hurt little boy who had just lost his favourite toy. “You’re not who I thought.”

“Neither are you,” said Chris. “Look, we’re all different when we flip out. Try it sometime.”

“Well, what if I was Anonymous, Chris? Huh? What if I was the one who sent you letters all along? Would you stay?” A shadow crept over his face.

“What?” asked Chris gripping his thigh.

Mike waited, and then slumped his shoulders. “Well, okay. I’m not Anonymous,” he said shaking his head, “but I wish I was.”

“I’m sorry Mike, but it’s over between us. Things have changed. We can’t go back.” She softened her voice, “You should lay low for a while – cut your hair, don’t wear sports shirts, or go out too much, until this blows over.” Chris touched his hand. “Listen thanks for tonight. I owe you one.”

Mike put his hand on top of her scratched fingers. “Stay.”



Chris flinched. "I can't," she said standing up, then left before she could change her mind.

## Chapter 25

Her apartment was darker than she'd remembered leaving it. Chris could have sworn she'd left the lamp on in the living room before going to meet Midnight. The computer screen glowed casting eerie shadows throughout the room, while a white cursor flashed on the monitor. Familiar music softly flowed from the speakers. Why was the computer on? Why was she logged into the chatroom? She knew she hadn't even turned it on today. Someone had been in her apartment. Mike? Anonymous? Chris flipped on the lights and noticed her balcony door was open a crack. She drew the pistol from her pocket and peered outside, looking down the fire escape. Nothing. Cautiously, she made her way through the apartment searching every possible hiding spot, but found no one inside. Everything seemed to be in its place. Chris sat down at her desk. Anonymous flashed before her. She pulled a bottle of whisky out from her desk drawer and took a big swig.

Anonymous: It is burning.

Nighttime13: Excuse me?

Anonymous: Everything is burning. Ruining.

Nighttime13: You're being cryptic. I don't have the brain for this right now. How did you get into my apartment?

Anonymous: I have my ways.

Nighttime13: I'm done with this! I want you to leave me alone. My life is falling apart. Midnight's dead and so is Fredrich. Jackson's in trouble. So am I.

Anonymous: I know.

Nighttime13: You do?

Anonymous: It is on the news.

Nighttime13: Figures. Soon they'll come for me.

Anonymous: Not necessarily. They have not mentioned you or your partner by name yet.

Nighttime13: Good, but that doesn't mean anything. I'm through with this Anonymous. You've ruined me. Just like you promised, I've lost everything - my relationship, my job, Jackson, Sally, my security, even my self.

Anonymous: Loss is difficult, but think of the potential.

Nighttime13: The potential?! The potential of what?

Anonymous: The potential of ruins.

Nighttime13: The potential of my ruined life?!

Anonymous: Yes.

Nighttime13: Are you kidding?!

Anonymous: Stop for a moment and think. You never liked your life before I came into it. You never really wanted your relationship. It was just something safe. A habit. You never liked your job. You liked the fantasy surrounding your job. The mysteries. The detective you were in your head. The outlet it provided you with.

Nighttime13: It was all I had.

Anonymous: No, it was all you let yourself have. Think of the potential of destruction. Maybe all this upset has allowed you to be who you really want to be. Maybe ruining is not as bad as you thought. Maybe the darkness is not so scary. Maybe embracing the fact that you are not in control is okay. Think about it. Everything falls apart. Nothing stays in the same state. Loss is everywhere. A job ends. A relationship

ends. A day ends. Beauty decays. Civilizations crumble. We build upon ruins. Our lives are personal towers of ruin. Think about the flipside of loss and ruins -- the potential to recreate. To begin again.

Nighttime13: To begin again?

Anonymous: Yes. Now you can take your life in a different direction. I will help you.

Nighttime13: How?

Anonymous: Wait and see, but first, let me remind you. You were not happy as the Sally you used to be.

Nighttime13: Okay, no. I wasn't really happy.

Anonymous: Then why do you want back your unhappiness?

Nighttime13: Because that's what I knew. That's what I was comfortable with. That was my life.

Anonymous: Why? Because it is safer to expect the expected? Because a letter from a stranger in the middle of your routine that asks to go into your dark seems like a threat? Seems scary and unknown? Think of the potential that your fantasy made real gives you. The potential is a reminder that we are constantly in ruins and therefore the potential is constantly within our reach. Our challenges can stop us from opening or we can use them to grow. To learn and expand ourselves. Think of the potential of Chris. Where do you want to take Chris? What can you do as Chris? Why are you so attached to Sally? To a life that trapped you?

Nighttime13: I feel trapped in my present as Chris.

Anonymous: Only you can do something about that. Besides, is it not better to live your fantasy in the present, then to live your present in a fantasy? Living in your head is a dream of an existence.

Nighttime13: I still wonder if I'm really awake. Sometimes I wish I wasn't.

Anonymous: You are awake. The potential of your ruin is slowly waking you into your present. Most people live in their motion pictures of distraction. Often we miss things. We lose our everyday experiences to our fantasies and fail to see that in our patterns of existence there are always continuous differences. That things are always changing. We fail to see what is right in front of us. What is right inside of us. Because we are so distracted. So dishonest. Honesty is a difficult stay. Think about it: Before you became Chris your ever-flowing thoughts were part of your motion picture of distraction. The actors in your mind required most of your attention. The mysteries in your head wanted everything from you. They wanted to whisk you away. Save you from your everyday. At least now you cannot be saved, because you are living it, rather than imagining it. It is hard to see past a motion picture, especially when you are the main character.

Nighttime13: So you're saying that it's better to live in the world than to live in my head?

Anonymous: It is not necessarily a question of better. It is a question of difference. Ask yourself what tense you want to live in. Perhaps it is a matter of mixing the tenses. A matter of weaving in and out. But the present, which is our most immediate tense, is often our most ignored tense. Have you ever looked Sally? Have you ever looked at, for instance, the sky and really looked at the clouds? Try it sometime. After, you might ask yourself if it has always been that way and you just failed to notice. You might notice how subtly the clouds change and inch towards another form. How massive and brilliant they are. The clouds change so discretely they can almost be mistaken for staying the same. Sometimes change is dramatic, sometimes it is quite discrete. Change discretely and remain unnoticed or change instantly and be observed. Have you ever woken up and realized you are a stranger?

Nighttime13: A stranger to what?

Anonymous: A stranger to yourself.

Nighttime13: Yes. When I became Chris. When I looked at myself in the mirror. I looked as the person in my

head became real and I didn't recognize it as myself. I felt different as though I had been living with this stranger inside of me for many years and then I came face to face with this person I didn't really know. This person was me.

Anonymous: Yes, stepping out of your head can really help you be present.

Nighttime13: But there's something terrifying about the present and about the unknown future. Something in me simply wants to escape.

Anonymous: Try a different angle. You have been taught certain things. Forget everything. Your teachers have been as afraid as you are. They have taught you to hold onto certain ideas. For example, ideas that there are only good things and bad things. There are only men and there are women. That time is linear. That black is bad and light is good. That you must act a certain way to be in the world. Turn around. Have a different look. Look at what is.

Nighttime13: Look at what? What is this, a Theory of Darkness? Darkness to me has always been a negative thing. A dark place - means a bad place. A place housed in fear. How can I flip around the darkness? How can I see the darkness as positive? How can my life in ruins possibly be something to be celebrated?!

Anonymous: It is not necessarily about celebration. It is more about perspective. Like the way I see ruins as potential. Of course there is grief and pain associated with loss, though intermingled with that suffering is also the opportunity for regrowth and renewal. If we were stuck in time we would grow stagnant and bored. So why do we strive for this? Why do we attach ourselves to forever? Like Fredrich and Jackson attached themselves to the idea of an eternal Midnight? Like Midnight attached herself to the idea of me? Why must things like loss and darkness inspire only grief and fear? Why must everything be fully defined? Fully controlled? Why must we latch onto a false sense of safety? Because it is easier? Because it helps us sleep at night? Why do we want to run if the present is dark?

Nighttime13: If the present is dark? I don't understand. Tell me more about the present.

Anonymous: Being present is an awareness of your immediate world. Like being aware of your breath - the easily ignored but miraculous everyday. The future is like a corner we cannot see around. The fantasy is the story in your head-the make-believe. Your mind runs away with your present, past or future, and tells a tale. We cannot reach the present completely through fantasy unless we make the fantasy real. Or unless we abandon the fantasy. You were too attached to your fantasy to abandon it. You were too afraid to live it though you had a desperate desire to make it real. This is why I helped you bring it into your present.

Nighttime13: I didn't want it to be like this! What am I supposed to do now? Where am I supposed to go?

Anonymous: Things happen Chris. Things happen in life that are beyond your control. I came and shook up your world. I came and made you stop. And think. And start again. Now it is up to you to decide what you want to do with your life. Where you want to go.

Nighttime13: I want to run away. Run back into my fantasy. It was safer to live in my head.

Anonymous: Run away then. Run back to Sally. She is there waiting for you. Miserable in her apartment. Walled into her life. She's walled into her photograph now. Into a memory. Go back if you think you can, but think about what you are missing if you try to turn back. If you resist surrendering. If your Theory of Darkness is a Theory of Fear. If you are afraid to open to the dark you will miss your present. You will miss the potential of Chris. You will miss your chance if you choose to remain stuck in a fixed identity. Do you really want to end up like Midnight?

Nighttime13: I don't want to end up like Midnight.

Anonymous: Midnight was like you Sally. I found her because she was working at the store. *The Mystery* attracts people like you who are stuck in time. Stuck in their fantasy. There is something about a quiet store full of stories that draws dreamers like you.

Midnight was similar to you. She went to work. Went home. Had her fantasies. I flipped her inside out and she ran. Ran like a madwoman trying to get back to her old self. When she could not get back anymore because Teresa Kathleen was but a fragment in time, she let her present destroy her, and began manipulating the people in her life. She let her transformation into Midnight ruin her without opening to the potential of the situation. To her surprise, she fell in love with me. Just like you are falling, she fell. The woman with no heart found she had one. I wrote her a letter telling her to surrender and write me a Theory of Darkness or she would forever be lost in time. She could not accept it. She was determined to find me. To solve the mystery of Anonymous. She used her sexual prowess on people to try and get closer to me. To try and find me out. She resisted surrendering to her present and thus resisted me. She even tried to use you to get closer to me. It did not work, because you are different Chris. You can surrender to the unknown. I know you have always wanted to be a detective, so go and be a detective. But do not let it destroy you. Go live your life. Midnight could not accept losing me. She could not accept that she could surrender to something she could never fully hold. But Sally, you understand that you cannot hold time. It passes through you. You cannot put ruins back together again. They will find you in pieces.

Nighttime13: So, why are you hiding?

Anonymous: I am not. There are just some things that you can never fully know. Like a past. Or a story. Like a mystery. Or a case. There are only bits of a whole. The whole is not for you. It's not for anyone.

Nighttime13: So you're saying I should do the opposite of what I think I should do, which is to find out who you are? You're saying I should abandon myself to the unknown and not see not having all the answers as something negative.

Anonymous: It is all up to you. We determine how we want to navigate through our time. What tenses will be the most prominent. For example, there is serious value in being present, but without any past we are divorced from context. We would be alien to ourselves



and to our environment. On the other hand, if we live only in the past, then we rob ourselves of the present and from living fully. The past changes as the present changes. We are constantly forgetting and remembering differently. If we are enlightened, we honour the present. If we are usual, we perceive now with then and imagine. If we are visionary, perhaps we see the future before it happens upon us. Choose your time and then live it.

Nighttime13: You remind me of an author I like to read. She disappeared though. Stopped writing.

Anonymous: Is that so?

Nighttime13: Yes. Sinova Kuznetov. She's full of interesting theories on time. Ever heard of her?

Anonymous: The name sounds familiar, but I do not have much time to read these days.

Nighttime13: Time? That's what got us into trouble in the first place.

Anonymous: Trouble? This is not trouble. This is life.

Nighttime13: How can I live what I cannot see? How can I love the dark?

Anonymous: Shut your eyes.

Nighttime13: They're shut.

Anonymous: Stop. Tell me, what are the temporal aspects to love?

Nighttime13: There is only one aspect: tonight, I love you.

Anonymous: And I love you. Now, bring me your Theory of Darkness and you are free to go.

Nighttime13: Free? Really? Bring it where? Right now?

Anonymous: Yes. Come to The Mystery. There is a black Lexus parked a block from the store, outside of the Doughnut Den. The keys will be in the ignition. There

is an envelope on the seat with directions to your new life inside.

Nighttime13: My new life?

Anonymous: Yes, it is yours if you want it. Keys to an apartment, keys to an office. Directions to your new city. A health card, driver's license, money, bank card. They are all for Chris Tisdale. But you can never come back to Riverdale.

Nighttime13: Never?

Anonymous: Not for a long time. Drop your theory on the curb beside the car and drive away.

Nighttime13: And if I don't?

Anonymous: Either you go and live as Chris, or you take Chris back into Sally. Not to the Sally you once were. She is gone, but back into her body. Back to the body you once had. You will be different now, of course, but if you want Sally back, she will be there when you wake up tomorrow. Either way, just drop the theory off beside the car, then go, wherever best suits you. Just do not try to find me. It is over.

Nighttime13: But why? Why all of this? Why the car and the new life?

Anonymous: Because. Sometimes we need a change. And so...

Nighttime13: So what?

Anonymous: So good-bye.

Nighttime13: Is this it between us?

Anonymous: Yes. We have touched one another through time. You have surrendered to the experiment. You made it. Now it is time to go. Good-bye.

Nighttime13: Good-bye.

The screen went black. It was over. Could it really be over? Chris looked around her apartment. Could she leave her life? Could she just drive away? Take her money and drive? Into another world? Or should she return to Sally? It would be up to her to make Sally different. Up to her to live Chris through Sally. Now that she had gone all the way as Chris, the prospect of being a new Sally was less intimidating. She could take what she had learned in the past week and bring it into herself. Perhaps she didn't need to know who Anonymous was anymore. She'd experienced a piece of it and that could be enough. As a detective, Chris found it difficult to leave this mystery unsolved, though she figured that some mysteries could never completely be solved. Perhaps that was the solution. That some mysteries had to remain mysteries. Anonymous's words were sometimes like Kuznetov's. For instance, some lines in the chat reminded Chris of Kuznetov's description of time: *the ever-evolving unexplained*.

Chris took another swig of whiskey. How were the police going to explain Midnight's death? They would certainly build a case and come after someone who resembled Chris, so if she returned to Sally, Chris would be untraceable. In a sense, she would be free. If she left town, she would also be free, to start a new life – the life she'd always imagined herself living. What should she do? Chris knew right now that there was only one thing she could do. She picked up her pen and began to write.

## A THEORY OF DARKNESS

By: Chris Tisdale, P.I.

*Can a story be beginning middle and endless? Can clues be pieces or fragments of an ever-evolving whole? Can the story ever be completely told? The mystery ever fully solved? Can we give in to what surrounds us? Give ourselves over to the fantasy? To the tale? To the darkness? Can we learn to love what we do not know? What we don't completely understand? Walk away from certainty? From safety? From identities? From systems and codes? Can we abandon expectations? Can we love what we cannot contain? Let our hearts overflow? Into the metaphorical rivers and over jagged cliffs of experience? Can we toss ourselves to the waves and allow ourselves to be recycled? Can we crumble like rock and accept that we've been ruined? Can we understand that time begs us to come together and fall apart, come together and fall apart? That there is love among the ruins? That the story is never complete and there is always more to know? That it will always remain partially untold? For even the silence is telling. Telling stories of darkness. I am dark and stranger every day. I am the ruin upon ruin surrounded by clue upon clue, fragment upon fragment, building something like a case, a theory, a life, a world, a story. And as equally important as the pieces puzzled together, are those that are missing. The black holes of thought and time, that suck us into their blind mysteries. The dark isn't so bad. It's just dark. It's a fear of the dark that makes us grope our way through life and cling to what we hope might ground us. But the ground is always opening. And I am falling. Tumbling through the heartbeat of time.*

## Chapter 26

As she neared The Mystery, Chris smelled something charred in the air. It reminded her of summer campfires when she was younger. She looked up and noticed a cloud of smoke billowing into the night sky. A fire. Hadn't Riverdale experienced enough excitement for one night? *Everything's burning.*

Anonymous's words from their chat ran through her head. Chris picked up her pace, her walk turning into a light jog. She stuck to side streets, trying to remain inconspicuous as possible, since the police were probably monitoring Riverdale quite closely after what had happened tonight at the fairgrounds. As the odour grew stronger, she picked up her pace, and tried to outrun the uneasy feeling in her gut. There was noise now, like the sound of machines or hissing. Turning onto Main Street, she saw flashing red lights. Three fire trucks were parked in front of what looked like The Mystery – or what remained of it. Massive flames devoured the store, hissing as the water tried to suppress them. It was really over now; even The Mystery was going up in smoke. A small crowd stood watching as fire fighters sprayed giant jets of water onto the smoldering store.

*Everything is burning.* Chris crossed the street, watching the scene from a distance. People milled about, and she didn't want to get too close. There were too many eyes. Too many police officers. Someone might recognize her. She buttoned up her trench coat, flipped up the collar, and averted her gaze as a middle-aged man walked out of a nearby apartment building in a checkered bathrobe.

“Rumour has it, it’s arson,” he said staring off at the smoke. “Heard from my neighbour that they just arrested the owner. They think he did it.”

“Crazy,” muttered Chris. She suspected Jackson had come back to town. She wondered if he set fire to the store. For insurance money? To destroy the evidence that led to Fredrich’s murder? It seemed like a good way to draw a lot of attention to himself.

“Pretty wild. Was watching TV when I heard the sirens about a half hour ago. I’m an insomniac.” He looked at Chris. “No fun to always be awake you know. You see more than you ever want to see. Hey, wanna get a closer look?”

Chris shook her head and pulled her collar higher, trying to conceal her cuts. “No, I gotta get home. Have a good night.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, then strolled off towards the crowd.

Chris watched as the flames dissipated. There was little left of The Mystery except part of the building’s frame and a pile of smoking rubble. All those stories that she had spent hours mulling over had been reduced to ashes. To nothing. Just like that. She remembered the chat she’d had earlier with Anonymous. *Everything is burning*. All that talk of destruction. The fire seemed to be the ultimate metaphor. Had Anonymous caused the fire? It was unlikely that Jackson was Anonymous, given the conversation she had overheard between him and Fredrich. Unless Jackson had been putting it on, and he had been pretending. If Jackson wasn’t Anonymous, then perhaps he hadn’t set the fire, but instead would be framed for it. Why?

Chris noticed a black Lexus parked three cars ahead of her. She walked towards the car and stopped. There was an envelope on the passenger's side, with keys in the ignition. It was the car Anonymous had promised her. Her ticket to a new life. As she decided whether or not to get in the car, a tall woman walked by. Chris looked up and saw the woman had shoulder length salt and pepper hair. The woman stopped and turned around. It took a moment for Chris to recognize that it was Tracy Todd, since her hair was usually pulled back. Chris tried to avert her eyes, but the woman's intense stare wouldn't let her go.

"My husband's store," said Tracy. She didn't seem to recognize her. "The police think he lit the fire."

"Really?" asked Chris feigning surprise. "Do you think he did it?"

Tracy looked at the smoldering store. "Does not matter what I think," she said.

Chris nodded, not quite knowing what to say. She looked at the remains of The Mystery. "It's a shame. I loved that bookstore."

"It was okay," said Tracy unmoved. "Though it never stocked my favourite author."

There was an awkward silence as Chris tried to think of something to say. "Who?" It wasn't the best time to discuss literature, given The Mystery had just burnt down and she had to get away as soon as possible before someone recognized.

"Well, my favourite author is Sinova Kuznetov. She has some interesting ideas. Have you heard of her?"

Chris tried to keep her face from changing expression. Tracy must've read Kuznetov since the last time they spoke. She wondered how Tracy had managed to get her hands on the author's books, since they were almost impossible to find, and how in such a short time, Kuznetov had become her author of choice. "No. Never heard of her."

"Well, she is worth reading, if you ever have the time," said Tracy pursing her lips. "Time..." Tracy's voice trailed off into a silence that made Chris want to get away even more. The smoke was dissipating and the crowd dispersing.

"Sure," said Chris, "Well...I'd better get going."

Tracy examined her closely for a moment then walked towards the store.

Chris shook her head. What an odd woman. She made sure Tracy was out of sight and then put her briefcase on the hood of the Lexus and snapped it open. 'A Theory of Darkness' lay there in the case. Her hands shook as she pulled the envelope from the case and discretely lay it on the curb beside the Lexus. Should she hide and wait to see who picked it up? Chris stared at the envelope on the driver's seat and opened the car's front door. Leaning down, she saw that there were two envelopes on the seat. The first envelope was labeled: 'IF YOU STAY; the second: IF YOU GO.

Chris took the miniature green die from her pocket. It had come to this again. One to three – she stayed. Four to six – she left. She threw it high into the air, as high as she could. It shimmered with the moonlight, twisting in the air like a diver, then descended onto the sidewalk, tumbled, and stopped right before her shoes. Chris held her breath as she crouched down to read her future. Three. She



sighed, pocketed the die, and pulled out the first envelope from the front seat. It was heavy. She would open it later. Chris hesitated then slammed the car door shut and put the envelope in her briefcase. She looked down the street and thought she saw Tracy look in her direction. Chris quickly grabbed her briefcase and headed home.

## Chapter 27

Chris woke up groggily as sunlight streamed through her window. Her alarm clock announced it was noon. What was she doing in bed? She had to be at work! Chris tossed off her checkered comforter and jumped out of bed. Last night came flooding back to her and she sighed, stumbling to the bathroom. She was out of a job. Chris splashed water on her face, then put on her glasses and looked in the mirror. She gasped. Instead of the reflection she'd grown used to, Sally stared back at her. Her hair was lanky, her face thinner, and the cuts were gone. She'd have to do something about that hair. Sally looked down at her hands. They were smaller and softer. She thought she would feel relieved to get herself back, but instead she felt sad. She already missed Chris, but then remembered that Chris was still skulking about inside of her, and it was now up to Sally to bring her out. Sally walked slowly out into the kitchen, wishing she had taken off into a new life. That would've been far more exciting than this. No! It was up to her to make her life her own and she would do it. But first things first. Sally opened up the envelope that she'd taken from the Lexus. She pulled out a framed black and white photograph of a detective against a black backdrop of books. It was Chris in *The Mystery*. Somehow, Anonymous must've taken it at the store. Had she really looked like that? wondered Sally looking at Chris's set jaw and hard expression. She was glad to have the evidence. Sally slowly pulled a letter out of the envelope. Strangely enough, she was going to miss the letters, and after all this, she was actually going to miss Anonymous. *You will love me then...* and right then, Sally began to read:

Dear Sally,

You have completed your transition and returned full circle. Of course, like the Deleuzian analysis of the eternal return, in repetition there is difference. Unlike the idea that we return eternally to the same, with Deleuze we return eternally to the same-different moment. In time, we are always becoming and are always changing, therefore even in the eternal there is difference. If you do decide to return to your life as Sally, she will never be the same as before. What follows is an explanation that will help clarify *some* things I hope, but, of course, not everything.

I come from a faraway place that will remain nameless. I am certain you have heard of me. I once saw you reading my book and we briefly conversed about the ideas it explored. I had placed it on the front counter the night before, hoping that you would pick it up the following day. I thought it might provoke you. You expressed great interest and ambivalence towards my theories. Of course, at the time you did not know the author you held in your hands also stood before you. Five years ago, when I was exiled from my country I was afraid that I would never work again. After claiming refugee status here and changing my identity to keep from being killed, I finally decided to settle in Riverdale. It was Fredrich Neilson who initially made me want to move here. We had met back in my country at a physics conference and had collaborated on a project regarding the nature of time from a cosmological perspective. Though we had different ideas on the nature of time, during several private meetings in my office, I realized that some of our research converged. We decided to collaborate on a project, but differences in opinions made our project fall apart. We ceased all communication, though it soon became apparent through a paper he published in the international journal *Physics* that he had stolen many of my ideas. Shortly after the paper was published, I was exiled from my country for my controversial research. Knowing that a fugitive cannot come forward, Fredrich went on to publish a book using many aspects of my research and ideas that we had discussed in our meetings. Again, I was unable to publicly denounce him. As an exile with a price on her head for treason, he knew that I could not come forward. I was devastated and felt there was nothing I could do to stop him. He was using my ideas to contribute to his Theory of Everything, when my ideas begged to stand on their own as a fragmented understanding of the universe. How many histories and stories are versions that are torn out of context and manipulated to fit an agenda? How many people in the history of ideas remain anonymous? I was more determined than ever to ruin him for this and to work on an antithetical Theory of Everything, which I called a Theory of Darkness.

I discovered that Fredrich lived close to Riverdale and researched the small town. It was The Mystery that caught my attention. I had read of Jackson and his store in an online newspaper and soon determined that I would marry him. The feature had reported him an elderly bachelor, and I knew that a discrete town would be a perfect hiding place for someone like me. As his wife, I would also remain connected to the world of books, which was paramount. Once I had mastered my English and new identity with the help of a specialized culture coach, I moved to Riverdale and courted Jackson. Soon after we were married. It did not take long for me to get bored; I was never meant to cook and clean as though that was my sole purpose in life. Back in my country I was doing important and revolutionary work, though was despised for it. Here, I was accepted, but invisible. As a way to cope with being a lifelong fugitive, and to reclaim and further my research, I became Anonymous.

With Jackson always at the store, I decided to resume my research on the nature of time and the effect of change on the human brain. I study how people mentally compartmentalize the tenses they experience (past, present, future, and fantasy) and how major upheavals in life affect these compartments. Back in my homeland, my unique research in neuroscience, physics, and philosophy, led me to learn how to access people's fantasy tense (region in the brain where fantasies are stored) by activating a certain section in the frontal lobe. My regime did not believe in fantasy, and found the idea of fantasy as a threat to conformity. The only fantasy in my country is the mythology created around nationalism. The state does not like the idea of fantasy because it is the uncontrollable place in people's minds. Therefore, the regime was committed to irradiating my idea of the fantasy tense. In Riverdale, I decided to expand my research and apply this discovery to certain test subjects by making their fantasy tense a reality. I wanted to see how they reacted to full fantasy exposure. Using The Mystery as my laboratory, I applied 3 ml of g38d6 fluid (a specially engineered substance that I created in Jackson's kitchen) to test subject #1 (Teresa Kathleen Blackwood) to fire her neural pathways into expelling her fantasy tense from within to without. The firing allowed me to access her nodular C10 receptor – this being the place where fantasies and imagination are stored – and project her fantasy tense/secret life upon her. When ingested, the g38d6 fluid allowed me to systematically record my subject's fantasies via an electro-magnetic transmission, which radiated to the viewing portal I constructed in Jackson's shed.

Allow me to further explain: Several months after Jackson hired Teresa Kathleen Blackwood, I bugged The Mystery with video surveillance

equipment. After carefully studying her for eight weeks, I sent Ms. Blackwood my first anonymous letter, and then three days later slipped the g38d6 fluid into her coffee. Precisely twelve hours after she ingested the beverage, she turned into her fantasy – a femme fatale we came to know as Midnight. The fluid unleashed a woman full of seductive powers: the sort of woman that is worshipped and simultaneously abhorred by your society. My husband was seduced by Midnight once Teresa Kathleen disappeared. If he was aware that she had been transformed into Midnight, he did not come forward with this information because he was too transfixed by this woman to risk losing her. Jackson became increasingly obsessed with Midnight, and by the time she left him for Fredrich, he seemed unable to let go of the affair. Jackson and Fredrich became my test subjects #2 and 3, and allowed me to explore the impact to loss and what I call ‘the mental past tense cling’. I gave Midnight the choice to surrender and write me a Theory of Darkness, or to resist and become eternally caught in time. As a result, she sought out Fredrich and his ‘Theory of Everything’.

My hope, in part, was to expose Fredrich’s theory as a sham, since I believe that instead of ‘everything’ we can only have a series of continual differences and becomings. A concentrated understanding of the universe is impossible and time perpetuates difference; change and mystery are important elements to life. Fredrich allowed himself to be wrecked by Midnight, and like my husband, became so attached to his mental-past cling, that he abandoned his theory in the pursuit of his eternal moment with Midnight. But again, even in the midst of his despair, he began working with *my* ideas on memory and recollecting the past. Being part of the philosophy book club allowed me to keep close watch on Fredrich and his ideas. As Tracy, I became his confidant, which is how I found out about his research on memory. Though I had disguised myself by significantly altering my appearance, mannerisms, and intonations, on a couple of occasions, I feared he was about to discover my identity. Thankfully, the alcohol he admitted to regularly consuming, clouded his usual insight. After Fredrich revealed his latest project, I broke into his study and stole his manuscript, which confirmed that once again he had stolen my ideas. Thankfully, Jackson took care of him.

My experiment with Teresa Kathleen and Jackson was both a success and a failure. It was a success because it halted Fredrich’s manipulation of my ideas, but it was a failure because Midnight did not embrace the changes in her life; she refused to surrender to the nature of time. Instead, she fought the changes, and in turn, fought time. She was unable to surrender to her fantasy and to the mystery, but rather wanted complete control. She wanted to know who I was at all costs; she did not want to let go of me or risk

losing her new identity. I found that because of this cling and the effect of the g38d6 fluid, she was fading and would very shortly become caught in a photograph of who she was. Lodged in time or what I call 'the freeze frame', which is the distorted memory of what was. The clearest example I can give of this is our relationship to the 'photograph'. It stands as a snapshot in time, and allows us to recreate a memory—a story around time past. Due to the lingering effect of the fluid, Midnight had time to remain in an in-between state – half trapped, half free to come out at night as Midnight. Had she not been killed by Mike, she eventually would have become completely frozen in time, due to her unwillingness to surrender. It is only when one surrenders and the nodular C10 receptor activates the temporal RD5 gland, that one is free to bring the fantasy back inside and live it in a more holistic way – never suppressing it, but expressing it without fear through the present tense, in the subject's original frame.

After Midnight disappeared from Jackson's life, he hired you. You became my test subject #4. I gave you a much more concentrated dose of the g38d6 fluid to shorten the transformation time and 'surrender' deadline, and watched you wrestle with your new identity. You tried very hard to resist it and find out who I was, and for a time I was afraid that I would lose you as I had lost Teresa Kathleen, but then, you seemed to give in to the mystery. When you stopped fighting yourself as Chris Tisdale and embraced the nature of change, I then realized that my experiment could succeed. That my formula could help those trapped in the confines of their imaginations. If they could realize how to incorporate their fantasy tense into their present tense, they would not have to suppress it, but could employ it to fully embrace the present.

I will use you as evidence in my latest book as the positive test subject. You helped me realize that it is possible to isolate the temporal regions in the brain and that fusing certain regions like the present and fantasy tenses can create a more present present. Imagine the possibilities of everyone living out who they really are and who they imagine themselves to be, instead of projecting a false identity. Oh, how I wish I could lift this veil of anonymity from me, but I cannot, for the secret police from my country's regime will find then kill me. I entrust that you will destroy this letter immediately after reading it to ensure your personal safety. If not, it will self-destruct within one minute after you've read it – another formula that I have perfected to ensure my safety. Do not try to find me; I am already gone.

We have touched one another through time and I thank you for helping me with my research. Some may argue that it is unethical to conduct experiments such as these, but to ask for consent would have defeated the

purpose and jeopardized the results. Thus, for the greater good, I was obliged to conduct these experiments in secrecy. I regret that the store had to be eliminated, but I can leave little trace of what has been. Everything ruins anyways; it's simply a matter of time. In the envelope you will find a sum of money, which I hope will help sustain you until you begin a new job, hopefully as the private detective you have always wanted to be. There is enough money to enroll in the Law and Security program – in the 'Private Detecting' special major – at the Allsburg Collegial Institute. It has been my pleasure to work with you. Do look for my latest book in a year's time. It will be published anonymously, as 'A Theory of Darkness.'

In terms of the theory we have created together: experimental living means entering into a forest of darkness. Get to know its deepest recesses. Accept that though you cannot see and know everything, there is plenty to discover. In regards to what is inaccessible and lost, accept the black holes, the gaps and spaces in between, and surrender to unknowing. Figure out what you can strive to know and what you can never know, then strike a glorious, harmonious balance. Surrender to the potential of change and of becoming. Time is a series of differences – of losses and gains, births and deaths, entrances and exits – continually and simultaneously occurring in disjointed union. Time is becoming. A theory is nothing without practice. A theory is just words strung together to form an idea, to form a perception. A theory creates a ground that begs to be traversed. Practice is the action that results from those ideas; living is much messier. Ideas without action? Theory without practice? Tell me, what ever is the use of imagination and fantasy without actualization?

I remain,

*Anonymous*

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## Appendix A

*Mirrors:*  
A Theory of Darkness  
Reflected in poems

### **Killing Time**

She wants to kill the bug that crawls and flits across her window. To crush it hard under her thumb. Stop it. She wants to rule out all factors and keep everything out of her space. A flawless night, a clean apartment, an arranged life – she wants – certain things. Security, the kind that wants to be put on at night like earplugs in anticipation of noise. She wants a dreamless sleep for uninterrupted hours. Most of all, love, she wants the kind that can fit into a pocket or be contained in a heart. Affection that is concise; care that can be slotted into a spreadsheet and calculated. She wants to construct the formula of her life. Plug in ‘a’ and ‘b’ to arrive at ‘c’. Simple, linear, set. Yes, she feels calmer thinking about the mathematics of it all. And is comforted by the thought of guns and clocks and killing time. Time is a messy formula to hate. Clocks are laughable containers. Like hearts. She notes the exceptions to her rules and hates them for contradicting. The flitting bug again. She is comforted by the fact she can kill but doesn’t. By the fact that she can love but won’t. No, she is not comforted by the storm that breaks outside and the fact that she might lose everything.

### **These black nights**

She wants her life back. But she still has her life, so how can she want back what she continues to have? Different and simple. She wants it. Oh, what is life anyway? A simple walk in the park? No, a walk in the park is not always simple. A walk in the park is sometimes dark. But what? What is it about the dark that is so threatening? Is it the way it rolls over her like a thick black fog? The way it has her crashing blindly through space and time? The way it smells and feels? Rough and damp. Unfamiliar and unknown like a masked stranger. Masked and stranger. We have found ourselves masked in our leather faces. We have stared into the mirrors of our darkness unable to recognize who is before us. We have been startled by what our eyes reflect. We have plunged into the forest in the depth of the night. We have heard our hearts echo through the chambers of the woods. We have run our fingers along the bodies of the trees. We remember that light binds us to our shadow, and that in darkness, in shadow we drown. Yes, we fear we will always get it wrong. And sink deepest, never to see or be seen again. We are already disappearing. We can feel it. We are already slipping through the dark hands of time.

### **Anonymous**

A shadow slips into her life. She can sense it. Feel it. Like a breeze. As it runs itself along her skin. Such a tease. Plays with her and then plows her over. Overwhelming. Hey, hold on! Did someone turn out the lights? She didn't ask for this. Or maybe she did. It is impossible to know when racing thoughts collide. Tumbling through space and time. See, it was supposed to be order and habit. She had a life; a routine. Oh, imagine. There was a plan and this is a glitch. Like a patch of black ice. Slipping invisible. No, like a black hole. It takes her by the heart and pulls her into the night. There is nothing now, nothing but

## **Alarm**

When time takes over her life it is not easy. But time has always been in charge and she failed to recognize it. But once she realizes it she wakes up. And when she wakes up she doesn't like the look of things. Or maybe she likes it too much. Hard to tell. She is hot and bothered that people will see her, so she sticks to the night and hopes for the best of the worst. But hope is useless when you're dying. Oh, now, now, we're all dying. Dying to get out.

### **Beginning off centre**

The underwear in the cabinet. How did they get there? To whom do they belong? When did they appear? The questions zoom out into unanswered space. But she can investigate the underwear; and bring them back to the lab. Tests will be run. She will deduce certain things and put together a file on the situation. She will piece together a timeline of it all. Clues will come together to stitch a significant garment of understanding. How the material rests will be telling. The smell, revealing. More specifically, the way the panties have been carefully slipped inside a notebook with entries on the subject of 'time' implies an intention of sorts rather than a frenzied toss. Suggests memory rather than utility. Was the suspect tired of reading their notes and felt it an apt moment to remove their lover's underwear? Or were they a souvenir from a night long past? Did they equate temporal theory to that which cups one's bum? Was there an implication of pleasure to come? The shedding of something for the gain of something else? The style suggests that seduction may have been involved. The time of year must be considered. Was it hot? Too hot to bother with such things? She will ask these questions and proceed accordingly. She will order her findings to revel in the linearity of it all. However, if she is not particularly on guard, she might wonder if clues are fragments, pieces that do not necessarily correlate to straight lines, whole circles, and other such metaphors. Beginning off centre is a good place to end.

### **The Funeral Home of Time**

“Why is everything breaking into...” she asks, her voice cracking. It is like that. The fragmenting of a sentence. Something breaks into something else. The sun is rising. Breaking out from the darkness and the moon is fading out with the stars. Her chest heaves as breath regains and loses itself unevenly. Yes, she has lost. Her lover. Gone. There are deaths all around her. Is this the poetry of motion? she asks, grasping for a holdless something. The temporal grope leaves her empty handed. She sits and watches the dark becoming light. The ruins of the night. Invisibly present and invisibly past, weaving in and out of the shifting moment. Now, she is hungry and eats, takes in, chewing. She changes matter into mush and uses it to fuel her now. Time gives life to change. And buries the same. “No,” she says. “We do not have time to attend all the little funerals.”

### **The serial killer question**

She starts in bed, remembering death will happen. Maybe is not a thing to base (*yes it is*) a life on. There are countless deaths as she wakes into morning and makes her dreamless way to the bathroom. The moment from bed to there dies and morphs itself unimportant in her later mind. Each couplet of breath is released into space and let go. She sheds her pajamas for skin to wash then dries changing into something else. Is everyone a serial killer? she asks breaking down over breakfast, thinking too much about coffee and its deadly effect on her stomach. Yes, she is affected,

and remembers crying like a girl on a bus full of strangers. But memories are little funerals, so forget about it. Maybe bases her life on me. Ambiguity is everything and I forget when I first shut my eyes for her. So there I go, flailing or is this dancing? Grasping to ungrasp; waving to the familiar unfamiliar. These big hand gestures, extensions of the surges I long mistook for crashes. This is just a life, of little big, passing things. Walking down a walk of losses, passing through entrance after exit, I say hello to goodbye then hello again. Maybe, she hears me, and kisses me to death.

## **Clouds**

When the clouds are this dark it is as though they have always been. Heavy. Was there ever a time when they were fluffy and light? Or has she imagined that time? This storm seems permanent and lightness but a flicker. It was too hot out. Too hazy to think straight. They lost themselves to the heat. And now there is only the creeping grayness and the heaviness of impending rain. It is almost a relief. To remember that the sky has always been. So eerie and inevitable. So massive and subtle. It is the subtlety that gets her. A slow undetected takeover. Something creeping, creeping over like a shadow, or a hand, holding, leading, until she finds herself in an empty field, under clouds that can no longer contain themselves. Lightning cracks, thunder rumbles, and the sky cries out, again and again. This moment has only ever been. She is held a permanent hostage. No, this will never end and she should've seen it coming, but how was she to know with her head in the clouds? It is not her fault that she failed to see. How alone she is. Under the big black sky. How was she to know that clouds are always ready to burst?



## **Words and the Wordless**

She cannot find the words. And so, she walks away. It is as easy as that. A blank page. An open field. Invisible, unreadable, and possible. Like the future: blank and so full. Sometimes she cannot say what she means because words are mere outlines of the bodies she contains. She is full of wordless beings. She is wordless trying to use words to express what cannot be expressed quite. A look a touch a feeling abandons language and walks away

into a world that is my different world. I come to everything as though it was the first time. Faith has me trust what lies beyond. I wake up speechless. I wake up to the world's warm body against mine. The world's eyes are shiny and I do not try to read them. They look and I look and we exchange our silence. I let go into other truths. The truth transcends our words. We know this. We know a lot more than we let on.

We grow accustomed to the Dark—  
When light is put away—  
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp  
To witness her Goodbye—

A Moment—We uncertain step  
For newness of the night—  
Then—fit our Vision to the Dark—  
And meet the Road—erect—

And so of larger—Darkness—  
Those Evenings of the Brain—  
When not a Moon disclose a sign—  
Or Star—come out—within—

The Bravest—grope a little—  
And sometimes hit a Tree  
Directly in the Forehead—  
But as they learn to see—

Either the Darkness alters—  
Or something in the sight  
Adjusts itself to Midnight—  
And Life steps almost straight.

*-Emily Dickinson, 1862*