

The Annabel Warrant Files, Part II

“Chasing Scorch Marks”

Let me tell you a few things about Genoa City.

Each year, in Genoa City, there are more temporal anomalies reported than anywhere else in the United Territories of Almarica. The most famous of these was in 1991, when over one-thousand independent witnesses claiming to have experienced some form of “time travel”. Most common were reports of children growing up overnight.

That’s the year my little brother went missing.

Late last year, a man claimed to have been attacked by one of the gargoyles that adorn Eternity Hall. A week later, a taxi driver claimed that the statues had trashed his car. Less than a month after that, when the dismembered remains of a receptionist were found strewn across the stone steps of Eternity Hall, no mention of the gargoyles was made.

The gargoyles themselves, however, have not been seen since.

Three years ago, those aboard a tourist bus filled headed to Genoa City claimed to see a cluster of coloured lights hovering in the sky. The reports were detailed and were accompanied by dozens of photographs.

Aside from a handful of low quality images that were leaked to the press, these pictures, as well as the cameras they were taken on, have vanished entirely. Most of the people that were on the bus refuse to talk about it, and the Sanctum—that’s the central authority of the Genoa City Police Department—refuses to accept responsibility for the missing evidence.

I keep one of those photographs in a locked box. The edges are marked with burns.

Every night in Genoa City, no less than three people go missing from the city’s streets.

Most are never found, despite the “best efforts” of Genoa City’s finest. I have spent time with many families besides my own who have lost loved ones and I have come to realise that there is no rhyme or reason to most of these disappearances. No common link.

Physicists are just as likely to go missing here as prostitutes. Dozens of children never make it home from school each year and one old lady even went missing during her own 98th birthday party. Come to think of it, that last one might not actually be so strange.

Many of my unsolved cases have lead me back to one of the same three locations.

There is an abandoned house on the outskirts of Genoa City that's decorated entirely in 1970's décor. Despite the fact that it is completely deserted, the power is still connected and there is running water. According to official building records, the house doesn't exist.

There is an outdoor basketball court, where—if you're standing in the right place when the wind blows just so—you can hear music in your head. There are several stains on the asphalt there that I'm convinced are blood.

And there's the lake. Freyja, named for the Nordic Goddess of love and beauty. More than any other place, it is here that most of my cases come to an end. There's a pair of swings down by the water that I sometimes sit on and look out at across the dark water.

It doesn't make any sense for my investigations to lead me here; to an unexceptional park beside an unexceptional lake. Surveillance footage shows that many of those who go missing are spotted in the vicinity of Lake Freyja, before they vanish without trace.

Any attempts to drain the lake are inevitably squashed by the unruly chorus of Genoa City's environmental groups, most notably, the *Lake Freyja Preservation Society*. And they're probably right, because in over *fifty years* there hasn't been a single body recovered from Lake Freyja. Not one.

For a city that's built *around* a lake to have not a single body floating in it in over fifty years seems strange to me, but perhaps I'm being pessimistic. Could the answer to this mystery be as simple as a family of hungry plesiosaurs?

Most of these stories are dismissed by the *Genoa City Tribune*, if they are ever acknowledged in the first place. Those that persist live on mostly as "crazy news" supplements for the news in other territories.

It's only natural, I suppose, for people to discard ideas that aren't convenient. But it still infuriates me. These things—these crazy, inexplicable, *impossible*—things are happening right in front of us, and nobody seems to notice!

There's an old power transformer located in a squat, square building near the edge of Lake Freyja. In a way, that building has come to represent every case I've failed to solve. Marked with graffiti, overrun by weeds where they burst free from the concrete in defiance of civilisation, the building is an ugly blight on the otherwise picturesque park.

Sometimes, when I'm swinging (because you're *never* too old to swing), I like to pretend that all of the answers I'm looking for are located there inside that useless little building, and that all I need to do to find them is kick open the metal door that keeps evolutionarily-challenged children from electrocuting themselves.

For the record, I *have* been inside it, and power transformers aren't really that exciting.

All that leaves me with are the scorch marks. Over one-hundred-and-thirteen of them scattered across Genoa City. I've already filled two folders with photographs and notes about them. I've plotted each location on a map and even sent off samples of burnt brick to be analysed at a laboratory.

The marks are often located near the location of police business, but I don't require the cooperation of *Genoa City's finest* to find them—I use the pocket watch for that.

It is made of silver, dulled by age. Intricate numerals trace the face and letters denote the points of the compass. Two of the hands, in black, tell the time. A third, in red, swings in slow circles, sometimes stopping to switch directions.

At the centre of the clock face, cursive letters that are almost too small to read reveal that the watch was made by a place called *McCallister's*.

There are two metal switches on the top-right of the watch and there is a loop where a fob chain may have once been attached to it. And on the back of the pocket watch, engraved delicately into the silver, is the word *Westcrest*.

Westcrest.

That word, always that same word. And nothing to reference it anywhere. I had heard it long before I found the watch sitting in the mud. To this day, I believe it was my brother who lead me to it, but that's not an admission I'm in the habit of making.

I remember that day clearly, soaked by rain as I was, my legs splattered with mud and missing my left shoe (this seems to be a habit of mine). At the top of the hill I'd missed the last bus from Beringsford. At the bottom of the hill, there was a telephone.

The storm came out of nowhere and waited until I'd travelled too far down the hill to turn back. Down below I could see the warm lights of *Beringsford Burger* luring me on. The path quickly became slippery and negotiating my way down the hill proved harder than I had expected. I gritted my teeth. It had been a bad day.

Normally my investigations keep me within the confines of Genoa City, but earlier that day I had received an unusual phonecall. Anonymous tips aren't uncommon in my line of work, but tips about my missing brother are.

Still, I feared from the beginning that the trip would be futile, another pointless lead. But there had been something in the urgency of the voice on the line that had made me wonder. I *wanted* to believe.

But the tip had been a dead-end, a pointless exercise that ended with me showing a picture of my brother to a number of suspicious-looking but entirely clueless truck drivers at the Beringsford truck stop. Nobody had seen him, nobody had *ever* seen him. And I couldn't help but feel that the picture I used was worthless—if my brother was still alive he wouldn't be a round-faced toddler anymore.

And that was how I found myself soaking wet on the side of a hill in Beringsford, stumbling forwards and trying to pretend that the tears in my eyes were only rain.

It wasn't until I fell that I found the pocket watch. Utterly dejected I wallowed in the mud with my bottom lip poking out. It was pathetic and I was overwhelmed by an emotional deluge that threatened to drown me faster than the rain could.

A sparkle of light caught my eye, a glinting reflection that briefly lit up with the passing of each car on the road below. I crawled forward on all fours and dug into the ground with my fingers. And that is when I found it.

So I sat there in the mud, with my legs crossed, and worked the narrow switch that caused the cover of the watch to slide open. With the sleeve of my blouse I wiped the rain from the glass and studied the hands as they traced their paths.

I didn't even notice the rain stop.

The watch remained in my possession for some time before I realised how it worked.

I was showing Steven when it happened. The red hand, which I had so far only seen spinning around the clock's face, was frozen in place. When I shifted the watch in my hands, the needle also moved so that it still pointed in the same direction.

At Steven's suggestion (and because we had nothing better to do that afternoon), we followed the arrow and only three streets down, we found a hole in the ground.

Police swarmed about the crater, around which were strewn large portions of green, pulpy waste. Later, the *Tribune* would claim that burst sewage pipes were to blame for the mess.

As we drew closer to the hole, I noticed that the needle was moving again. It wasn't directing us to the hole in the ground, I realised, but to a nearby wall plastered with concert posters. A black smear stood out against the wall and as I approached the red needle began to spin much faster than normal.

"It's... burnt," said Steven and I moved my hand out to touch the rough black surface of the wall. The needle was now spinning too fast for my eyes to follow, bathing the entire face of the watch in a soft carmine blur.

I asked a passing police officer about the scorch mark, but he only shook his head.

"We got a hole in the street, Miss," he said to me seriously. "You'd best move out of harm's way."

Since that day I have been chasing the trail of unexplained scorch marks across Genoa City. Each night I lay on my bed with the pocket watch open and wait as the red hand traces its path across the numbers... until it stops.

And then I follow it.