

The Annabel Warrant Files, Part III

“Professor Erasmus Wormwood”

I’m usually alone when I discover a new scorch mark. But once I arrived to find somebody already there. The first thing I saw was his labcoat.

He was almost bald, only a few wisps of thin white hair tracing the dome of his head. And he was *old*, his face wrinkled and spotty. He wore a pair of small glasses, clamped tightly onto the front of his face in such a way that they appeared to have fused with his skin.

I saw all these details before he even so much as looked at me, so engrossed was he by the wall in front of him and by the violent splash of black that stained the bricks. Then all at once he became aware of my presence and he moved with reflexes faster than I would have expected from someone so old. He gripped my arm, tightly.

“You,” he said, pausing to wipe the sweat from his brow with a thick handkerchief. “You’re one of *them*, aren’t you?”

“I might ask you the same question,” I said, pulling my arm free and taking a step back. I did my best to look imposing, but I don’t think I was very successful. Generally school girls in brown plaid don’t look all that dangerous.

He regarded me for a moment, cocking his head to one side.

“What do you think they are?” I asked, breaking the silence. I pointed at the wall.

“There’s only one thing in all the world that leaves marks like that,” he said, his bottom lip quivering with what I took to be excitement. “An engine from *another world*.”

It was about then that I decided the old man was mad. But something made me stay a moment longer—long enough for him to ask me if I knew of any other places where there were similar marks.

“I can help you,” he said. “I can tell you about them; about Westcrest.”

I turned around and folded my arms across my chest. “Hrm,” I said, very deliberately. As a private investigator, I know that information *never* comes without a price. My heart drummed. Was the old man telling the truth, or was he just another of Genoa City’s crazies?

“I have records,” I said at last. “I can tell you the last ten places where I found markings like these.”

“Only ten?” He said, unable to hide the desperation in his voice. “But I know so much...”

“And I know the location of the last ten sets of scorch marks,” I said plainly.

“Very well,” he said. “Then allow me to introduce myself: I am Professor Erasmus Wormwood.”

“And I’m Annabel Warrant,” I said. I left off the “girl detective” part, so as not to seem conceited.

We agreed to meet the next afternoon, in the park at the edge of Lake Freyja. I had carefully copied a list of the last ten locations where I had discovered the scorch marks. This sheet of paper was tucked within the folds of a manilla folder.

The wind was cold, so I was wearing a heavy black coat. I pulled it tightly around me, clutching the manilla folder as I approached the park bench. It stood a little distance away from the swings where I normally sat when I came here alone.

Wormwood was waiting for me. His tongue flickered out from between his thin lips. There was something animalistic about him, I decided. Something almost... toad-like.

He did not waste time by greeting me. “Did you bring it?” He asked. “Did you bring the list?”

I nodded. The cold wind whipped around me. Waves crashed against the landscaped shore. I handed Wormwood the folder.

He snatched it a little too eagerly and I found myself wishing that I’d held onto it for longer. I watched as he gripped the sheet of paper between his wrinkled hands. His left hand, I noticed, was severely scarred—as though by fire or acid. His hands shook as his eyes traced the list. He read through it at least three times before I reminded him that I was standing there.

“You said you’d tell me about them,” I said. “What do you know about Westcrest?”

When he looked back at me there was a glint in his eye. It was less like the friendly glint possessed by grandfathers and more like the glint of a metal blade.

“It’s almost comical,” he said to me. “All of the time you spend running around the city searching for scorch marks. You are wasting your time.”

Frustration got the better of me. Not frustration about Wormwood’s obscure statements or the slightly demented way he had started cackling, but frustration about not being able to solve the mystery of Westcrest for myself. I stamped my foot on the ground and fixed Wormwood in a gaze fierce enough that—for a moment—he was forced to look away.

“Where then?” I said, raising my voice against the howling wind. “Tell me where I should look.”

“Out *there*,” he said, lips peeled back in a sickly grin. He was pointing at the lake.

That’s when I decided that Professor Wormwood was completely mad.

I didn't go straight home that afternoon. Instead I stalked away from Wormwood, away from Lake Freyja and into the streets of Genoa City. My heels clicked against the pavement and I bowed my head so that I would be better protected from the wind as it whistled between the tall brown and grey buildings.

As I walked I convinced myself that Wormwood was completely insane and yet, for some reason, I couldn't escape the feeling that somehow I had done something wrong by giving him the list.

I thought back to the places that I had noted down. There seemed nothing extraordinary about any of them, aside from the scorch marks. I walked the streets for some time, gradually becoming more and more overwhelmed by the futility of my so-called "investigations". Maybe I was no more sane than the Professor. Maybe I was just "another crazy".

I was so entrenched in my thoughts that I didn't hear the ambulance until it was already past. Water pooled in the gutter sprayed up as it passed, drenching me in an instant. It was starting to seem something of a habit.

I followed the ambulance—and as I chased it down the street, I realised that something in my pocket was vibrating.

It was less than a block before I realised where the ambulance was headed. Only one address had appeared twice on the list that I had given Wormwood—a petrol station and fast-food diner on St. Earl's street. *Best Hot Dogs in GC!* Read a sign out the front.

Up ahead, that same address was on fire.

The drab buildings around the gas station were lit by orange flames. Sirens, painfully loud, whooped and blared, as flashing emergency beacons struggled to compete with the ferocious light of the fire.

The watch was shaking almost uncontrollably in my coat pocket now, but I didn't stop to look. I walked faster and then I ran. I wish that I could claim it was concern for the innocent victims of Genoa City that spurred me on—but it was not tragedy that I saw in the blazing fire, but *hope*.

"Get back, Miss," said a police officer. They beginning to cordon off the area around the gas station. Somewhere I could hear sobs.

I stepped away from the officer and looked up. Smoke rose in a thick column, blotting out the sky. Everything looked orange.

Firemen approached the flames, holding thick hoses before them like cannons. Behind them, they were loading the body of a man into the back of an ambulance. Another two ambulances were blocking the far end of the street.

“Please, Miss,” said the officer. “It’s for your own safety.”

There came the rumbling growl of something exploding deep within the inferno and for the first time I became properly aware of the heat emanating from the flaming fire. My thoughts were racing. Was Westcrest responsible for this, or could it be...

The image of Wormwood’s scarred hand flashed before me, but I didn’t have time to complete my thoughts, because the police officer was now lifting me up and moving me forcibly away from the fire. Behind him I could hear somebody calling for “everybody to get back!”. A few metres away, a twisted lump of metal hit the ground. It was on fire.

“What happened?” I asked the police man as he set me down.

“Some wacko crashed into the bowser,” he said to me, shaking his head. “Go home, Miss. This isn’t entertainment. People *died* here.”

People die every night, I thought. I nodded seriously. When the officer turned his back on me I reached into my coat pocket and took out the pocket watch. It thrummed between my fingers as I flipped open the lid. The red needle was deadly still and it was pointing directly at me.

I frowned at it before realising that the needle wasn’t, in fact, pointing at *me* but at the alleyway I was standing in. It seemed that officer friendly (I’m quite sure that’s not his real name, but I wouldn’t say it’s *totally* impossible) had put me exactly where I needed to be.

Slowly, I turned around.

There’s only one thing in the world that leaves scorch marks like that, said a voice in my head.

It was the most amazing machine I have ever seen. Polished metal tubes circled around the front of the motorbike and clear sections amongst the pipes contained some sort of luminous blue liquid.

I inched closer, step-by-step. I held my breath as I reached out to touch the metal, stroking it with a single finger. The intricate series of pipes stretched beneath the seat and extended back to a wide exhaust pipe. The wall behind the bike was unmarked, but I had no doubt that it would be stained with black marks the next time the engine was started.

This was it. This was what I had been following.

Dizziness almost overwhelmed me as I reached forward and gripped the handlebars. For one ludicrous moment, I considered climbing on. Instead, I pulled one of the champagne coloured ribbons from my hair and looped it around one of the handlebars, cinching it tightly.

“Hello, Westcrest,” I whispered.

In the street behind me, the fire raged on.