

## The Annabel Warrant Files, Part V

### “The Massacre”

My name is Annabel Warrant and this is a story about why I hate Westcrest.

I searched for so long. I spent so many sleepless nights with that single word resonating, over and over in my mind. It drove me to the point of obsession.

Westcrest made me stop caring about everything else in my life.

Now I know better. Now I’ve seen first-hand the destruction for which they are responsible. Death follows them, wherever they go. And once... I followed them too. But not anymore.

I am *done* with Westcrest. I am finished.

I will never forgive myself for what has happened.

I never intended for Steven to get involved. But he was there for me and it’s difficult to push somebody away that is so eager to help; so agreeable to everything that you say.

And that’s *exactly* what Steven was like.

He was in love with me—of course, I see that now. It might seem funny that it took me so long to realise. But often we are misguided and don’t notice the things taking place right under our noses.

This is a story about my friend Steven and how he died.

It all started with the watch. Steven was the one who first encouraged me to follow the pointing red hand and it was together that we discovered the first of the scorch marks. Sometimes the watch lead us to other things as well, but none of those stories matter now.

From that day, my obsession grew. If it weren’t for Steven, I probably would have gone crazy. He was the only person I could talk to Westcrest about and know that he’d really understand. Steven helped me to collect my records and it was the first thing he would ask me about whenever we spoke on the phone.

“Have there been any more scorch marks?” He would ask. “Have you found anything else?”

So when I got home on the night the gas station exploded and discovered a crumpled up note from Erasmus Wormwood stuffed into pocket of my coat, he was the only person I considered calling.

“Annabel?” He said to me and I could tell by the tone of his voice that he’d been sleeping.

"Were you asleep?" I asked.

"No, no," he says and I could hear him actually *trying* to sound more awake. "I'm awake. Is everything okay?"

"Oh yes," I said and began telling him about the events of that night. When, finally, I got to the part about the note, he asked me what it said.

"Not much," I smoothed the paper out against my bed. "It's some sort of address. Like, for a website."

"Read it to me," he said and I did.

"Does it say anything else?" He asked. "It's asking for verification."

"Only my name," I said. Wormwood had written my name on the note in untidy lowercase letters.

There was a pause and I could hear Steven's fingers striking the keys on the other end of the phone. "Have you ever heard of anything called Department 38?" Asked Steven.

"No, why?"

"Because your name just worked as a log-in on their website," he said.

For the next couple of weeks, Steven and I continued to probe the Department 38 website, but all that we found were riddles and nonsense: links leading in endless loops, blank pages and information veiled by obscure language and foreign words that neither of us recognised.

For a while, we were so caught up in our research that I forgot all about the watch and the scorch marks. Since finding the bike itself, the marks it left behind didn't seem as much of a mystery anymore.

Together, we began compiling lists of the information we had discovered. Department 38, it seemed, was some type of secret organisation that conducted research into paranormal phenomena. On one section of their website they listed the terms by which they recruited new members, complete with a list of special abilities and unique vocational fields in which they were particularly interested.

The first time I read the list I felt a chill creep into my spine: *Robotics and advanced weapons development. Accelerated healing. Psychology. Energy manipulation.*

"Exorcism," read Steven out loud, sounding impressed, and I snappishly told him to close the page. Finally we were getting closer to the truth about Westcrest and yet it all seemed so impossible; so unlikely. Like some sort of fiction.

“Uh-oh,” said Steven as he clicked away. “Annabel, I think you should read this...”

I looked over Steven’s shoulder at the laptop monitor.

*Access Blocked*, said the page, which was nothing uncommon. But beneath it, in flashing blue letters, was a message I had never seen before.

*We know who you are, Annabel.*

I wasn’t exactly *afraid*. It seemed obvious that they (whoever “they” are) would know who I was eventually; whether it was Professor Wormwood’s doing or simply the fact that I’d be logging into the website using my own name.

But Steven was almost inconsolable.

“They know,” he said and his face had gone quite white. “If they know who *you* are, then they know who I am.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I said and I could tell at once that I’d hurt his feelings.

“This is too much,” he said, rising from the seat and picking up his backpack from the floor. “I can’t keep doing this. It’s crazy. It’s dangerous.”

I didn’t know what to say to him. “Steven...” I tried, but by then he was already halfway out the door and it was swinging closed behind him.

Later that night, he called me.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he said.

“No, no,” I shook my head, even though I knew he couldn’t see me.

“I’ve been wondering...” He began, but let his voice trail off.

“Yes?”

“This Westcrest stuff,” said Steven. “I think it’s getting out of control. I think it’s making us *both* crazy.”

“I can agree with that,” as I tucked the phone under my chin and walked into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. Mum was in front of the TV, watching one of those late night talk shows. Canned laughter.

“I was thinking, we should do something different. You know, get away from it all for a night.”

“Are you planning on inviting me to a romantic dinner?” I asked. From my perspective it was an obvious joke. At the other end of the line, Steven gulped.

“No!” He said. “There’s just... a big dance party tomorrow night. I was wondering if you’d like to come with me. Let your hair down. Have some *fun* for a change.”

“A club?” I said bemusedly. Then, before I had a chance to overthink things: “Okay, I’ll come. It’s about time we put our fake ID’s to use. What’s it called?”

“Have you ever heard of Club Mojo?”

I didn’t know what to wear. I spent the longest time staring into my closet before deciding on a pair of sensible heels, a tan and brown plaid skirt and an old black jacket with too many pockets. It was the same sort of thing I normally wore, but I didn’t think Steven would mind.

Not even once did I stop to consider Steven’s motivations in asking me out. Even now I can’t stomach my own stupidity. I paused in front of the mirror to check that the champagne coloured ribbons in my hair were neat and then I stepped outside.

“Where are you going?” Asked Dad, he was cooking something on the stove. Frankfurters sizzled and popped.

“Going out with Steven,” I said and he nodded without taking his eyes away from the frying pan.

And for the first time in months, I left the pocket watch home.

“You look great,” said Steven when we met up outside the club. There was already a lengthy line and I hoped that the doorman wouldn’t turn us away. Steven’s uncle had made fake ID’s for myself, Steven and Sarah almost a year ago and although they hadn’t failed us yet; although I was used to using them for less obvious purposes than getting into clubs.

“Thanks...” I said uncertainly, because it seemed like a strange thing for him to say. If I could go back in time and slap myself, I would.

We joined the line and talked for a while. Actually, *Steven* talked for a while. I had never seen him so animated, or talking about such mundane things. Once, I think, he even mentioned football. I finally started to realise that it was going to be a strange night, but I never could have guessed just how badly everything would turn out.

Eventually we made it inside; the doorman waving us both past without a second glance. As I enter the club I sense a strange, unhealthy smell emanating from the guard and wrinkled my nose. But then we were inside and the sights and sounds of Club Mojo overwhelmed me.

“Let’s dance,” said Steven, but I convinced him to get me a drink instead. Lights swept around the club at dizzying speed and loud drum beats shook the floor.

Steven returned and handed me a glass of rum with a slice of lime on the side. I had never tasted rum before and winced as I took my first sip.

I’ve never really drunk much, aside from a couple of sleepovers at Sarah’s that we inevitably regretted the next day. With every sip the lights seemed a little brighter and the music a little easier to dance to. Clearly, Steven felt it too. A few steps away he was taking part in some sort of primitive mating ritual in order to impress a group of girls that had gathered around him. I don’t think it was working.

When he saw me watching he missed a step and almost hit the floor. Struggling to his feet he shook his head sheepishly and I laughed. It was working, I realised. I hadn’t thought about Westcrest all night. Except for thinking about *not* thinking about them.

“Come here,” he said to me, but I couldn’t hear him over the music. After a few more tries and no small share of rapid arm gestures he lured me away from the dance floor and to a relatively quiet corner beneath a large, artificial palm tree.

“Annabel,” said Steven. His voice was only slightly slurred.

“Steven,” I said, smiling.

“Annabel, we’re friends, right?”

I nodded seriously. “Of course we’re friends,”

Behind Steven something was happening. People were cheering. I narrowed my eyes briefly at the dark-skinned man that was making his way up the stage that cut through the centre of the dance floor. People were reaching up to him and crying out.

“I can tell you anything, right?” Steven continued. He wasn’t looking at me, but down at his feet. I turned away from the stage and focussed my vision on him. I reached for his hand.

“Of course you can,” I said and he looked up at me in a way that I’ll never forget. At the time, I didn’t think much of it, but now I’d give almost anything to see it again. “Steven, what is it?”

“I’m in love with you,” he said and I did the most horrible thing I’ve ever done in my life; I laughed.

His whole face collapsed under the onslaught of my laughter. I can’t even imagine how cruel it must have sounded. “No, stop,” I said as he began to move away. “Please, Steven. I didn’t mean to laugh. I just wasn’t expecting...”

"Of course you weren't," he said and even in the darkness of the club I could see that there were tears shining in his eyes. "Because you're always too busy thinking about yourself."

"That's not true!" At the edge of my vision I knew that something else was happening on stage. There was a few high-pitched sounds, like screams, but all I could focus on right now was Steven.

"Yes, it is," said Steven, pulling away from me. "All you care about is Westcrest and that stupid silver pocket watch. But I can't do it anymore," he said. "I just want to be *normal*. Have a *normal* life. A *girlfriend*. I want to do normal things, I..."

And then the screaming became too loud to ignore.

"Steven!" I called out, but it was too late. A dark shape ploughed into him; *through* him. Blood splattered against my face and I saw Steven's body crumple lifelessly to the ground. There was a knife protruding from his chest.

"No!" I screamed. "No!" And I tried to move to the body, but there were too many people pushing me in the other direction. I stumbled and fell. One of my shoes came off, but I didn't go back for it. I crawled on my hands and knees, through a forest of legs.

Somebody stepped on my fingers. I struggled to my feet. "Steven!" I cried out, but my voice was but one against a chorus of hundreds. I was buoyed forward by the press of the crowd. Behind me, I heard the unmistakable sound of gunshots.

"Everybody out!" Called a voice from ahead. A young man with floppy brown hair was standing beside an open door and holding what appeared to be a cellphone.

"It killed Steven," I told him, but he didn't seem to hear me. Then I asked: "Who *are* you people?"

He looked at me for just a second and said: "We're Westcrest."

Today, I went to Steven's funeral. I told all the people there that I had loved him and I was telling the truth. I will never forget the way I laughed when he had tried to tell me the way that he felt. I will never forget the pain in his eyes.

Since that night I have not even thought about Westcrest. The day after it happened, I took the box in which I had been keeping all of my clues and set it on fire. For a while I watched over a year of my life go up in flames. I felt a little better.

Westcrest never brought me anything but pain. I can see that now. Worse, it made me stop caring about the little things... about the people in Genoa City I had wanted to help when I'd first started doing detective jobs.

On the night the petrol station exploded, I hadn't even stopped to think about the innocent victims inside that might have been injured or killed. In fact, I'd felt *excited* by the powerful glow of the flames.

It makes me *sick* to think of it now. And to think about all of the other people that Westcrest must have hurt. But nothing makes me feel more sick than the way I treated Steven.

Today, when we all took our turn to pay our respects I took the silver pocket watch out of my pocket and buried it into the bouquet of flowers on the top of Steven's coffin.

"Sorry," I said and I'll always know that it wasn't enough.