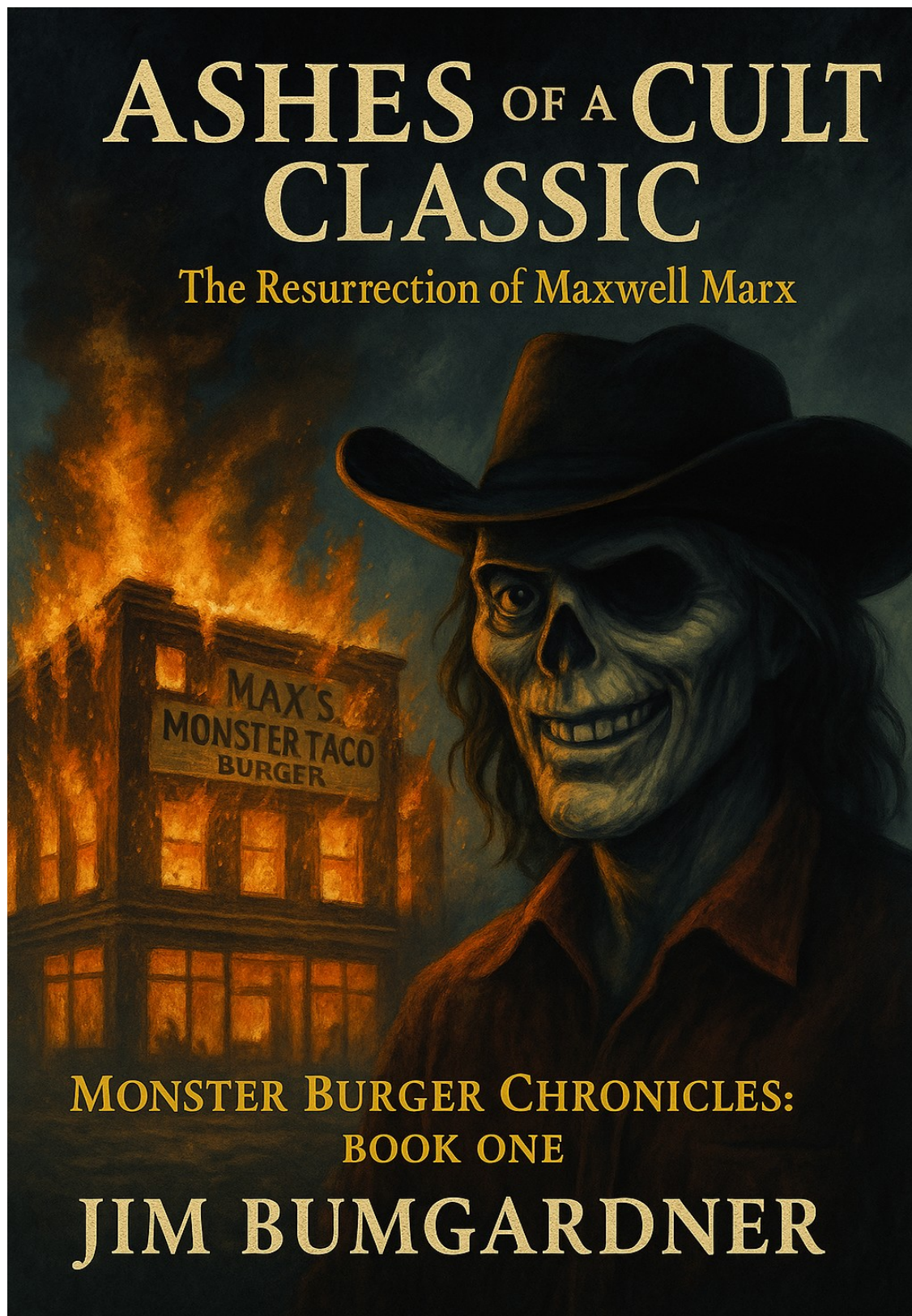


Ashes of a Cult Classic: The Resurrection of Maxwell Marx



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(Monster Burger Chronicles, Book One)

CHAPTER 1

“What Burned Down Max’s?”

Thomas had been coming to “Max’s Monster Taco Burger” for nearly three decades. It was his go to for food but more importantly for his regular conversations with his muse. The atmosphere was perfect. A simple menu of tasty, feel good food surrounded by memorable from a little known (now) entertainment icon from days gone by. “Maxwell Mark” was a legendary character from the earliest days of radio and television locally. A weird, spooky and kooky personality that at first treated radio listeners of WDRL-AM to tales of terror twice a week, to eventually playing late night host to the creature features shown on WDRL TV Saturday nights. Little did Thomas know that this day would be his last chance ever to enjoy a “Taco Burger Supreme with a Bloody Brownie Milkshake and the mandatory side of Monster Size Fires” while listening to the Max Characters 1962 novelty album in the background.

As he was letting his regular fast food treat settle, his fingers froze in position on his laptop. The cause for this paralysis came with the familiar voice of Todd the cook screamed; “Fire!”

Thomas’ head turned to the left and indeed, smoke was running across the ceiling tiles. It was getting thicker as the row of gold records became obscured by the thickening plume. A further turn of his whole body allowed his eyes to lock onto the port window from the kitchen to the counter where flickering flames in the frame, looked to be putting on an old punch doll puppet show. Tracy the waitress and cashier screamed and ran for the door while Garret the manager yelled at her; “Call 9-1-1!”

As Thomas watched Tracy sprint towards the door with her cellphone glued to the side of her head, he saw Todd the cook running back to the kitchen with two fire extinguishers from the dining area. Apparently he had already exhausted the two that were in there. Garret was in action mode. While his adrenaline was noticeably increasing, his demeanor remained calm and professional as he made quick sweeps through the arcade and gift shop area to the small theater area and finally back to the restrooms. It’s at those doors Thomas was able to see the adrenaline doing its job in giving Garrett a heightened level of strength as if slammed the doors open very forcefully repeating the mantra of the moment; “There’s a Fire. Get out NOW!”

Florence the other waitress on shift approached Thomas with a fast shuffle in her movement. Her backpack purse was locked in place over her shoulder although only one strap was in use. Her arms became extended as she bypassed Thomas’ gaze and began vacuuming up the contents he had sprawled across the table.

“Honey, we have got to go,” she said. There were no hints of options or negotiations otherwise found in her voice. Thomas turned and retrieved his laptop and phone. Florence had already gathered, stacked and now clutching Thomas’s things tightly to her chest and heading towards the door. She never looked back as she got closer to the front entrance / exit door where the smoke from the kitchen was now rushing towards.

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Thankfully it had been a slow Wednesday afternoon at Max's making the headcount easy. The staff consisted of Garrett, Todd, Florence and Tracy. Only Thomas and a family of four from Kentucky had been inside the eatery. All were accounted for as the first responder vehicles began filling up the parking lot. The flames could now be seen coming from the roof above the kitchen reaching up into the sky. The overcast clouds helped in making these gruesome fiery vandals stand out against the gray horizon while the smoke began to mess with it in an almost evil gradient blend.

As the firemen flew into action, Garrett approached the Sheriff deputies car. The EMT's from the ambulance had already descended onto the family of four from Kentucky. The 4 year old boy was crying in his mothers arms, still clutching his Odie the Ogre plush toy that his dad had won for him from the claw machine that was in the arcade. The 9 year old girl was more calm but locked onto her father's side still wearing her paper Max cowboy hat. Everyone was okay. Merely shaken by the experience. That is except Todd the Cook.

He was sitting on the edge of the parking lot staring blankly into what was now all ablaze. He had spent the last twenty years as the head cook at the restaurant. His role was not that of someone with "just a job". Instead he took his position and role very personally as it was his lifelong career and passion to provide quality food and service served from his always clean and pristine culinary laboratory. Even if it only served "fast food". Nothing seemed to penetrate his hypnotized stare. Not even the black Lincoln Continental that had roared into the parking lot, piloted by the owner of the restaurant (and license of all things Max), Cameron Markel.

Thomas was haphazardly placing all of his things into the backseat of his car as Florence handed it to them. Both never taking their eyes off of the burning establishment. This wasn't just a fire. This was a loss of long time employment for Florence and Thomas' adjunct office where he began the creation of some of his best work. Only young Tracy the waitress had been there less than five years. Everyone else had been there since opening day 23 years prior on October 31st 1999. It was like watching a family member murdered before their eyes.

The twilight hues kept an eerie, fiery glow around the now remaining pile of charred remains that was once Max's Monster Taco Burger. With the exception of Tracy, the family of four from Kentucky and the first responder's, everyone else was standing around Cameron's car in the parking lot. Not many words were being spoken. Most conversation had already been exhausted. Now it was an overwhelming sense of mourning around the collected. Stunned silence.

Being a talker by nature, Thomas interrupted the void in sound. "Now what? Rebuild?" "How can you rebuild two decades worth of love and memories?" Garrett asked rhetorically. Todd the Cook attempted to speak but couldn't get a word out. His throat was sore from all of the choking back of tears he had been doing for the past several hours. He turned his head back to the blackened lump and let one tear finally escape his right eye.

"I don't know," Cameron said after a few beats. "I really don't know where or how to begin," Florence was solemn as she rubbed her hand across Cameron's back. "I'm sure the insurance money will cover

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the costs.” she said. “There wasn’t any.” Cameron replied. All eyes turned to him and in unison replied shocked, “What?”

“I couldn’t afford it. That god damn pandemic damn near broke me. We were just now starting to recover as far as revenue goes.” Cameron replied to the team. “Why in the hell didn’t you tell me?” Garrett asked forcefully. “Because I knew it would work itself out. We cut all the fat and staff as best we could and still operate. You knew damn well how hard we were being hit. Hell, all of you took a pay cut, which I still truly appreciate, to keep things going. I just didn’t see this coming.” Cameron said sheepishly. “I really thought it would be okay.” “Garrett snapped as he started walking towards his truck; “Obviously not.” He jerked the door open and climbed in, forcefully slamming it closed and simultaneously cranking the engine. “God damn it!” was the last thing those remaining by Cameron’s car could make out as he tore out of the parking lot. “He’ll calm down.” Todd the Cook said softly. “He always does.”

Todd and Garrett had been friends since elementary school. The two had been closer than brothers since their first meeting in third grade. And for 40 years as inseparable as conjoined twins. They had actually known 23 years ago that Max’s was to be their final career stop together. It was almost too perfect not to be.

They had both grew up as underground fans of the character. Garrett was even inspired to get into broadcasting because of it. Todd the Cook however always knew his forte was in the kitchen. Garrett was the organized one. Todd was the mechanic of sorts. Even as kids working at the movie theater together, Garrett elevated up to management quickly while Todd was perfectly content slinging popcorn in the concession stand. So much so that when Garrett began his short but successful broadcast career, Todd stayed at the theater. Nothing else seemed to be that great of an idea to him. Plus, the atmosphere and role kept him comfortable as Garrett ran up and down the radio dial over the first 5 years after graduation only to return to the theater after the industry dried up.

The cinema company was actually glad to welcome him back and hired him in as General Manager thanks to his real world experience. He enjoyed the job as well. Not only were he and Todd back in constant contact, it was a rewarding job where no two days were ever the same. Yet when the word of “Max’s Monster Taco Burger” began to float around, the pair couldn’t shake their curiosity to learn more about the possible opportunity coming to town.

As fate would have it, Garrett learned that the guy who was building the place was actually a radio salesman he had met early on in his broadcasting career. He and Cameron had crossed paths at WDRL radio in 1992. Cameron was a slick and damn good salesman for the company. He consistently turned down the offer of being the sales manager as he saw no benefit in having a title. He was in it to make money not adopt a staff of egos and narcissists. His charisma and charm is what drew the young Garrett to him and a mentor relationship was born.

Over the next two years as Garrett was earning his way up the ladder in the programming department, Cameron would lean on him as his go to when things needed to be done for clients. He always told him; “Kid, you may not be the funniest guy on the air or the best in the production room but your certainly the most dependable and well organized person I’ve ever seen.” It was Cameron who actually

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heard about and recommend Garrett for a position at a radio station a couple cities away. It's not that he wanted to see Garrett go but he knew that he his options for growth at WDRL had hit the ceiling and he was too ambitious and hungry to be trapped in that cage any longer.

So with Cameron's guidance and written letter of recommendation, he shipped off an audition tape and resume to the smaller town where the opportunity laid. He was reluctant at first to make what he thought was a "step backward" but Cameron's insight into reality helped him get over that pretty quick. Cameron pointed out to him not just the ceiling he had hit at WDRL but more importantly, this new operations position at WAMP would give his skills the opportunity to grow him and prove his abilities to a smaller struggling company that needed him and what he could do for them.

Cameron was right.

Over the next three years, Garrett fined tuned WAMP's operations into a well oiled machine that made life easier and more productive (and profitable) for both the programming and sales departments. So much so that by 1996 the clandestine offers started coming in. Realizing that once again he has peaked and it was time to move on, Garrett made the biggest move of his career to KSEN and Southern Air Airwaves in Oklahoma City. He had finally landed in a major market and it was time to push himself on to greatness.

All was going well until it was announced that Southern Air Airwaves was being acquired by The Rainbow Skies Corporation. This would lead to massive consolidation of the broadcast properties they had been snatching up since the FCC deregulated the ownership rules of how many outlets one company could own in any given market, all around the country. From an economics side, Garrett could see the business sense in that. In the heart and purpose of the industry however, he knew it would lead to an almost dystopian landscape of boring, bland and eventually worthless on air inventory.

Rainbow Skies was impressed with him and wanted him to stay on board, overseeing the southern arm of their operation. It consisted of 37 stations across Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. Lots of travel and new places to experience is what they thought would convince him to commit to the deal. They were wrong. He graciously declined the offer and tendered his resignation. It was time for Garrett to go home. He had heard WDRL was still independently owned so they might have something for him. Plus, he missed sharing life with his popcorn slinging best friend Todd.

When he arrived back home, he stopped at the movie theater to meet up with Todd, The two had stayed in touch pretty consistently over the past 6 years after graduation but never had the chance to actually get together. That changed that day. While waiting on the afternoon matinee rush to end and the concession crowd to slither into their respective auditorium for the 90 to 180 minutes, Garrett had gotten into a conversation with cinemas Regional Manager and learned of a possible opportunity there.

After the warm up conversation, Regional Manager Ron Lewis was impressed with Garrett's radio stories and his history with the theater. So much so that he offered him the vacant General Manager position on the spot. Garrett was slightly hesitant if only for the shock of the timing.

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He quickly mulled over the offer which was less money than what he was hoping to work out with WDRL but, as the saying goes, “a bird in hand is better than two in the bush,” Add to that he had seen the hand on the wall for the industry as a whole and he had a feeling in his gut that whatever opportunity he might secure at his original broadcast home, it would more than likely be phased out fast. With that information processed, he stuck his hand out and said to Ron; “You know what, I’ll take it,”

It was from there that Garrett and Todd the Cook would be back together, side by side enjoying lives as closer than brothers through day to day work, relationships, marriages, divorces and kids. But not at the theater. Come to find out, Garrett was right in his prediction about the future of broadcasting. All of WDRL had been sold off and absorbed by the Frequency Partners Corporation. The local station was now little more than an empty building full of relics, memories and dust from a long gone era that would never return. He made the correct call. And so for the next two years, he and Todd the Cook had a blast until that day they heard about the rumors of the “Max’s Monster Taco Burger” opening soon.

It was the late Spring of ‘99 when the story started to spread about “Max’s”. The curiosity of Garrett and Todd were peaked almost everyday as chatter among the locals who were hanging out in the theaters lobby, kept catching both of their attention. It finally crossed over to more focused to determination for Garrett to the real story when he heard who was going to be doing it. His old mentor and friend: Cameron Markel. He know if it was Cameron’s place, it would most certainly be a success. He grabbed the phone book and was pleasantly surprised to see that Cameron’s number was actually listed. He made the first call that same afternoon.

“Hi, is Cameron Markel available?” Garrett asked the voice that picked up after the third ring.” “Depends on who’s asking,” the voice replied. “Hello, this is Garrett...” “HEY! I was just thinking about you!” an obviously surprised and excited Cameron Markel said cutting him off. “That’s kind of spooky actually.” Cameron said almost as an aside. He continued; “Hey! So how have you bee? What have you been doing? Still in radio? You now what, where are you, let’s get together.” Garret surprised, “Um actually at the cinema 10.” “What time does your movie end? We really need to get together.” Cameron sounded almost out of breath. “Actually I run the place. I’m the General Manager.” Garrett replied confidently. “Even better!” Cameron exclaimed. “Give me 20 minutes and I’ll be there!” Before he could respond, Cameron hung up the phone.

Garrett walked out into the lobby with an obviously shocked look on his face. “What’s up with you?” Todd asked of his friend. “Cameron Markel is on his way here?” Garret replied as if detached from his surroundings. For some reason he couldn’t explain, his mind was racing with what the potential conversation was going to be about. He remembered Cameron being a happy, positive and excitable fellow but not quite this excited. “The guy who’s opening the burger place? Didn’t you guys work together before? What does he want?” Todd asked suspiciously. “I honestly don’t know, but I do know he’s excited about something.” Garrett replied.