

ASHES TO ASHES

A CONNOR MAXWELL MYSTERY



TIMOTHY GLASS

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Ashes to Ashes

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Cover art by Timothy Glass

Photograph of Sundae front Cover by Mathew Danver



Library of Congress Control Number 2021909919

ISBN 978-1-7331972-4-3

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In Memory

To Sunda: If ever there was intelligence, beauty, and perfection in a canine companion, you were all that and more. I could have never asked for more. I miss your presence each day as I write. They say a writer's work is filled with many solitary hours but when you were here with me, I was never alone. As I take my early morning walks, I remember how you always led the way. Until we meet again, I miss and love you.

In Loving Memory

April 27, 2009-December 24, 2020

Forever in My Heart

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Cathy, my wife, for your love and support for what I do every day—and all too often into the night and early mornings. A special thank you to Lisa Dignan Christiansen for your valuable help and information about sign language. To Matt Danver for your help and information about drones. To my wonderful fans and friends for your encouragement and belief in me. A big thanks to the word sleuths who spend hours reading and rereading my material. Lastly, I extend my appreciation to all the four-legged canine officers that serve our country.

QUOTE

When a good man is hurt all would be called good
must suffer with him.

Euripides

SUNDAE



Sundae

CHAPTER 1



The ripple of children's laughter had long since faded as darkness rolled across the city of Lakewood like a blanket covering its young. The days had begun to shorten and the nights lingered longer. September had welcomed a brisk chill early this year and Lakewood homeowners closed their windows to block out the cold. High above the city, the harvest moon shone brightly. It glowed through the bony, naked trees, creating long shadows that formed an eerie pattern on the grassy canvas below.

The home was a large two-by-four structure whose owner had built it some thirty-eight years earlier. Joel Sawyer had constructed the home for his

wife, Sylvia, and his young son, Logan. The rambling ranch-style residence was set back from the other houses in a cul-de-sac. The home had a large, well-groomed front yard and a backyard twice the size of any of the others on the street. It was a magnificent yard, laid out with flagstones that curved around the grass and led to an outdoor fireplace, a bricked-in barbeque, and wicker furniture. The backyard bordered a large forest, giving the home even more privacy. Rumor had it that the house at 2255 was the first home to be built on Decker Avenue.

Joel strolled over to his flat-screen TV and began to stream his favorite piano and stringed music. As it played softly in the background, he peered out the living room window and into the darkness. The mirror image of his face shone off the glass. After checking that the front door was locked, Joel eased himself into his favorite chair in front of the fireplace. There, he held a book in his lap and watched the flames dancing before him. His mind took him back in time, to a much happier era when he and his wife, Sylvia, had often sat in this same spot, reading together. She had passed away two years ago. At seventy-eight years of age, Joel knew he would never remarry. He doubted that he would

want to remarry even if he were twenty-eight. There would be only one woman in his life and that was his Sylvia. God knew how much he missed her. When his best friend, Fletcher Potts, had lost his wife months later, Joel had invited Fletcher to move in with him and Joel's adopted disabled son, Cole.



In the backyard at 2255 Decker Avenue, two deer lazily grazed on the foliage under the moonlight. Suddenly, a window exploded, spewing shards of glass onto the lawn. Flames licked upward around the house's exterior. Both deer looked up, startled at the sound, then bolted in fear back into the forest. Every window in the house glowed as the fire engulfed the interior. The lumber creaked and moaned as the roof gave way and collapsed with a whoosh.

Behind the house, close to the forest, stood a black-clad figure who watched the home burn. Only when the sound of a distant siren became louder did the figure snuff out the cigarette with the toe of his shoe. After taking in one last look at the house fire, he turned and left.



It had been a long day. Detective Connor Maxwell unlocked the door of his unmarked police unit and started the drive home. He had to pick up Sundae, his canine companion, at the vet before they closed. Switching to a country station, Connor brushed a lock of brown hair off his forehead.

As he turned left out of the Lakewood Police Department parking lot, he saw the orange glow of a fire filling the night sky.

“15, PD, has Lakewood Fire Department been dispatched to the westside?”

“Negative, 15,” said the Lakewood dispatcher. After hours, the police department dispatchers handled all the police and fire department calls.

“I’m heading over there now. Better get those smoke suckers rolling.”

Connor drove toward the glow, turning down two wrong streets before he found his way to Decker Avenue and the burning house. The siren and flashing lights from Connor’s car brought the neighbors out from the warm comfort of their homes to watch. Connor quickly gave the address to dispatch and then ran for the garden hose at the side of the house. He peered in the windows, trying to see if

anyone was inside, but the fire was too hot and burning out of control. He felt helpless trying to contain a house fire with only a garden hose. One of the neighbors ran to the backyard and used the hose there.

Coughing, Connor ran back to his car, grabbed a rag, and wet it with the garden hose. He wrapped the rag over his nose and mouth while using the garden hose as best he could. By the time the fire department arrived, the house was pretty much a loss. Connor walked across the street, where a cluster of people stood watching the firefighters who tried to contain the relentless blaze.

“Did they make it out?” asked a woman wearing a fluffy pink bathrobe and pink rabbit-eared slippers.

“Can you tell me who lives there?” Connor asked.

“Oh, that would be Joel Sawyer. He’s very elderly and...what’s his name?” She snapped her fingers as if the movement would cause the forgotten name to flow from her mouth. “Oh, I can’t remember his son’s name. He has some type of disability. Also, another elderly man lives there, moved in a few years ago after Joel’s wife passed...”

Connor left the woman in mid-sentence and ran

back to Kirk Neil, the captain of the fire department. Everyone called him “Captain Kirk.”

“There could be three males in the house,” Connor yelled to Kirk.

“If there are, they perished in the fire,” Captain Kirk said.

Connor pulled the rag back up over his nose and mouth and started for the back door. Captain Kirk grabbed Connor by the shoulders and stopped him.

“Detective, no one would have survived this house fire. All we can do is pray they all went out for the night. Did you ask the people if they saw them in the crowd?”

“Captain, when I got here, no one was standing outside.”

Connor returned to the crowd that had gathered on the sidewalk and tried to gather any information he could about the occupants of 2255 Decker Avenue. He took notes from the neighbors as he watched the smoke billow into the sky.



Hours later, when all that remained of 2255 Decker Avenue was a pile of water-drenched rubble,

Captain Kirk and Connor walked through the soggy ash and debris. They found the charred remains of two people.

“Didn’t you say Sawyer had an adopted son?” Captain Kirk looked at Connor.

“That’s what the lady told me. Said he was disabled, too.”

“We have only two bodies here that I can see.”

Connor looked down at the two charred sets of remains lying on their sides.

“Guess we’d better have another look-see,” Captain Kirk said.

“Do houses usually go up this fast?” Connor asked.

Captain Kirk stopped, studying the debris.

“It almost looks like an accelerant was used. Gas usually burns away, leaving us with very few clues. But the way this fire reacted, I think every room was doused with gas or something.”

Captain Kirk began walking through the remains of the house. Still, only two bodies could be accounted for. Connor bent down, examining one of the bodies. He had turned his head to one side to get a better look when he noticed something. Quickly, he pulled a ballpoint pen from his shirt

pocket and examined a hole in the back of one of the victim's skulls. Then Connor stood back up and bent down to examine the other victim. Again, the same thing: a hole in the back of the skull.

“Captain, we don't just have a house fire here. We have a double homicide.”