

BURNED: DEATH PLAYS WITH MATCHES

by Sarah Hualde

EXCERPT

“You don’t have to do this,” I pleaded. My eyes crossed as I stared at the gun barrel waving in my direction. The room smelled of sweat and sneakers. Not a smell I wanted to perfume my last breaths, but I had greater concerns.

“Come on, Penny!” My aggressor frowned with disappointment. “Don’t do this. Not to me.”

“Don’t do what?” I asked, buying time. I saw little else that I could do. Having a gun pointed at me wasn’t helping me problem solve. It was all I could do to stave off hyperventilation. The stink wasn’t helping.

“Enough with the therapy talk,” my opponent argued through heated tears. His hands flickered with what I hoped was a bout of second-guessing. “I thought you were on my side. You, of all people, have to understand.”

A penetrating boom rattled the air. The stench of gunpowder overpowered the previous funk. Smoke wafted toward me. My knees buckled, and I sank to the floor. Life didn’t exactly flash before my eyes. Only the sweet face of Titus Church steeled me against my present circumstance. If I died today, I’d never get to tell him how much he meant to me. Then again, it might be safer for him if I didn’t.

Over the last ten months, my tangles with near-death had escalated. From a fatal family scuffle in a gift shop to the intentional vehicular murder of a new friend, death was upping its game. In the last town, I barely escaped. My only out was to find a pivot point between the broken heart in front of me and the Raven smudged on his cheek.

The Raven tagged along, like my personal dust storm of doom wherever I went. This pesky bird, also known as the omen of death, kept me living a nomadic life. I never knew what drew him to me. I was nothing special. That didn’t faze him. His evil schemes sent someone to their afterlife twenty-

four hours or less after he claimed them. Just to tease me, the Raven sprinkled song clues along my path. Those had led me to my current drama at the business end of a gun, begging for my life.

Only days before, my VW Bus and I sputtered to the edge of Billington. One of my discoveries about backroads travel was the lack of gas stations along the way. The bus delivered me to safety, puffing like an asthmatic cheerleader into the Big Bill's Truck Stop. My cheeky black and white cat, Spades, lounged on my lap as I steered us into pump station twenty-one with a prayer of thanksgiving on my lips.

Truck stops were my favorite place to fill up. I could eat, shower, and pump gas all in one place. Plus, if the town wasn't hospitable to overnight parking, I could trek back to the stop to sleep.

Godzilla, which I called my beast of a home slash car, was gassed up and cleaned just in time for a call from Titus, or T.C., as his paranormal podcast listeners knew him.

"Hey there," I said, feeling chipper after my deliverance from near-strandedness.

"Well, well," Titus chimed, echoing my good mood. "You sound cheerful today."

"I feel it," I responded.

I set my phone on the pull-down dining table and switched the call from voice to video. Titus's bespectacled face beamed from his side of the screen.

"You look it, too," Titus complimented me with a blush as our eyes met.

"Thanks," I responded before explaining the skin of my teeth arrival in Billington. We chatted about nothing in particular as I drank a massive cup of ginger ale, and Titus sipped from his mug. His nose crinkled as the string from his teabag attacked him. The date-like call made me giddy, even if the feeling was one-sided.

"Didn't you have pink hair the last time we met face to face?" Titus referred to my fading hair color.

"Yes," I answered. "It's changed quite a bit since then." My dark roots with pinkish tips teased my clumsy self-awareness. "It's a mess, now."

"Not from my side of the screen." His glasses steamed as he took another drink.