

Crushed: A semi-paranormal mystery starring Penny Nicols
Book 2 in the Paranormal Penny Series

By Sarah Hualde
Copyright Jan 2021

1

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

There’s nothing more frustrating in life than forgetting to bring a towel with you before you pop into the shower. This frustration is amplified by infinity if you were dying your hair in a gym’s locker room.

Standing in a puddle of navy blue water, I shivered. The steam quickly deserted my stall after the shower timer flicked off. It would be at least five minutes before I could restart the warm water. Meanwhile, I became a giant goose pimple. If my skin wasn’t stained blue from the hair dye, the chill would turn it blue soon enough.

I pictured exiting the stall and spotting Violet from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* staring back at me from the full-length mirror. Except, if I couldn’t find my towel, I’d be naked and purple.

I triple checked my water-resistant bag. It hung at arm’s length on the hook of the shower door. Everything was in place. Shampoo? Check. Deep conditioner? Check. Hairbrush? Check. Everything my shoulder-length hair needed was accounted for, minus a blow dryer. The gym had one of those for patrons to borrow. Everything but a towel. Two towels actually. A queen-sized beach towel that I wrapped around my plus-sized body and a ratty old Ewok towel that I used when I dyed my hair. Both were missing. I paced in the four by four cell. Picturing Godzilla, my van, and my tiny house, I cataloged my shower routine. I followed my past self as I’d set out a kitty litter box for Spades, my cat. Then I’d arranged solar panels on my windshield. After that, I’d packed my bag, rolled up my towels, and stepped out into the frigid air of February.

I was positive my towels had come inside the gym with me. I was certain of it. Until I remembered what I'd been doing right before heading out to grab a shower.

I'd been chatting with Mr. Joe, an old boss of mine from three towns back. Mr. Joe loaned me his mailing address and collected most of my mail. In exchange, the sweet silver-haired man asked me to check in with him once a month. These calls acted as phoned-in proofs of life.

Joe seemed determined to encourage me away from my loner existence. He didn't believe me when I told him my strange gift was a curse undercover—for me and for everyone I bumped into. He believed it was a blessing. One that I hadn't figured out quite yet. I doubted I ever would. Spotting death omens, usually in the shadowy form of a Raven, twenty-four hours prior to an acquaintance biting the big one was tricky enough. Understanding why I seemed to be the only one with this particular ability was a conundrum of monstrous proportions.

That didn't stop me from trying. Nor did it hinder a certain podcaster of the paranormal from pursuing a professional friendship with me, which led me to why I'd been so distracted before my shower.

Joe had cleared his throat and asked, in his blunt way, "How are things with the skinny British kid?"

My throat seized. I didn't like speaking about T.C. Sure, he paid me to be on his podcast twice a month. Yes, he'd been supportive and helpful whenever possible. True, he was well mannered and kind. But, I knew better than to allow people to get too close. I'd answered Joe with a grimace and a swift switch in the subject. We ended our chat soon afterward.

The damage was done. T.C. was on my mind and now there wasn't room for much else, including towels.

"I must've left them on my couch," I spoke into my bag as I resigned to my growing need for help.

Before tucking my phone back in my bag, I checked the time. It was 11:43 a.m. Aqua Aerobics ended thirty minutes ago. I knew this because I had to wait for them to vacate before attempting my shower and hair coloring session. I had close to ten minutes before the next group of classes were released. They'd be beating down the frosted glass door if I didn't hustle.

As the last stream of tinted water raced down my spine, I poked my head out of the stall. "Hello?"

No answer.

I leaned out a little farther. "Hello?"

Sudden terror trickled up my neck. Wasn't this just the way every horror movie started? A hot, naked starlet searching out the source of a mysterious voice in just a towel? (If anything.) All that to bite the dust in the most gruesome way possible just steps away from salvation? My shivers intensified.

I was naked and alone, but at least I wasn't a hot starlet. For once I was glad for my pudge. Yet, it was those very rolls that kept me from venturing out into the changing room to look for help.

Maybe I could dry off enough to dress without a towel. Still, that would mean walking to my changing station in the other room. I didn't dare. Knowing my excellent track record as a clumsy foot shuffler, I'd end up sprawled out, butt in the air, on the locker room floor. Bad news on all accounts.

A creaking from the sink area shot hope into my dire situation. "Hello?" I called again.

Mumbled singing echoed back to me.

"Hello?" louder and with a bit more frenzy in my tone, I shouted out to whoever was there.

"Hello?" a cheery reply came at last. I clapped at the response.

"Hello! Hello! Could you help me?"

Sneakers squeaked on the tile, a few steps closer to me than before.

"Where are you?"

I stuck my hand out of the stall door. "I'm here. I forgot my towel."

"Oh my," the woman sympathized. "Is it by your locker?"

"No. No. I think I left it at home."

"That's not good," the kind voice came a bit nearer. "What can I do for you? I can buy you a towel from upfront. Or I can stand guard for you. No one else is in here but me."

Did I dare trust her? People could be cruel. I could go from shivering in private to starring in an online video. My next choice would decide it all.

Then again, the helpful lady could just rip open the door of the stall right now. Decency was the only thing holding her back.

“Hang on,” she said when I didn’t answer.

There was a crackle before she said, “Hey Nadia, it’s Shannon. Could you bring me a beach towel from the member shop?” she asked. I couldn’t make out what Nadia was saying on her end of the walkie talkie. It was all varying degrees of static from where I stood. “Put it on my tab. Yeah. I’m in the women’s locker room. Sure. Thanks,” she said. Shannon ended the call and stepped closer. “Help is coming,” she reassured me. “I’ll hold off the next class until we get you your towel.”

Relief puffed out of me. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“No biggie,” Shannon said. “That’s what I’m here for.”

A moment later, another set of doors opened. From the sudden clamor of voices and music, I guessed the class was already coming in. “Showers are closed,” Shannon’s voice went from compassionate to authoritative without losing a smidgen of its kindness.

Other female voices rumbled against her statement.

“It’ll just be a moment,” Shannon explained. “I’m over here!”

I pictured Nadia, whoever she was, wedging herself between Shannon and the crowd of desperate gym-goers to hand her co-worker the teal and orange towel.

Shannon’s shoes hustled closer. She lifted the towel over the rim of the shower’s door. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” I replied. In a rush of nerves and embarrassment, I wrapped the stiff towel around me. Tucking it under my arms, I snagged my shower bag and cracked open the door.

Shannon’s happy face greeted me. She wore a smile and a small smattering of freckles decorated her cheeks like joyful constellations. It fit her happy voice. “Totally fine. I’m glad I was here.”

She held back the sweaty class long enough for me to escape behind my changing station’s curtain. Once released, they herded to the showers, snarling and snuffling like angry oxen. I curled further into my booth and hoped no one waited in the lobby to tell me what they thought of me holding up their after workout wash off.

I hustled to get dressed. My towels weren't in the dressing cubicle, either. My bet was Spades was currently shedding his black fur all over them. Once the sound of running showers drowned out the overhead music, I made my escape. Hustling across the floor was not a wise move. I skittered a good six feet along the tile before slamming into the edge of the locker room exit.

A soft chuckle came from behind me. Shannon, it was the helpful towel lady. "You okay?"

I nodded and rubbed my nose. I'd smashed it on the wall. "I think so."

"Hey," Shannon said. "I love the purple."

My eyes rolled upward. Given the stress of the last hour, I'd forgotten about the switch in hair color. My red plus navy blue made it a vibrant plum.

"Thanks."

"I'm Shannon. I'm an instructor here," she said as she pointed to her nametag. "I've spotted you here before. What classes do you attend?"

I hid my frown. I'd been using the gym's shower for the last week. Showers were the whole reason I maintained a gym membership. Sometimes, I even scored a space in a solar-paneled parking spot. When I was so lucky, I plugged into the space and charged Godzilla's backup battery. It made the nights far less frosty if I was able to run a heater.

For the moment, Shannon didn't need those kinds of details. "I'm new," I said. "I haven't made the rounds to any classes, yet," I told her. Not that I ever planned to subject myself to that particular form of public embarrassment.

"Just checking out the equipment, then?" Shannon didn't wait for a response. I was grateful. "I totally get it. You wanna get a feel for the place before jumping in."

"Something like that," I replied. My bag's strap slid down my shoulder. I repositioned it. "Thanks for coming to my rescue. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. Do I pay you for the towel at the front desk? Or here?"

Shannon waved a hand across her face. "Don't worry about it. I'll use my frequent member points."

"Are you sure?"

"Totally," Shannon strolled beside me. "Let's walk out front. I could use a small break."

I followed, uneasy, as Shannon led me to a table next to the smoothie bar. I waited for her to sit before absorbing the next stool. I hated staying longer than I needed to. Meandering or loitering drew unwanted attention to my lack of exercising in the gym. It might even get the change in my hair color noticed.

Though I tried to wash the stall, some color was bound to linger behind. A normal bout of hair coloring meant I'd dye it and then return to the same stall for a few days in a row to finish the cleanup. I wasn't sure I'd get a chance now that I'd been cornered.

Shannon started. "Do you live around here?"

"Yes," I replied. A smirk fought with a blush for control over my expression. It could be said I lived out in the gym parking lot. "What about you?"

Shannon sighed. "Not super close. I live on the edge of town. About a mile from the city limits."

"That really is the edge."

Shannon shrugged. "It's my grandmother's place. She lets me stay for free. I've got no complaints."

"Sounds nice," she remarked. But what would I know? I'd never met my grandparents, let alone lived with them.

Shannon seemed to enjoy it. She beamed as she thought about her living situation. "It's great. She's my best friend. Always has been. Are your grandparents still living?"

I shook my head. It was easier than explaining. Family tragedy followed by foster home after foster home, landed me living in a mobile tiny home with just a snarky cat as company. Real family was a novelty to me. I watched it like a goldfish from inside its bowl. I took part as a temporary observer, not a full-fledged member.

"I'm so sorry," Shannon's eyes clouded. "I almost lost my grandmother."

I felt eyes on the back of my neck. Using my peripherals, I spotted a muscular man sitting on the bike machine nearest the smoothie stand. He pumped the pedals without urgency. Even from where I sat, I could tell he was watching us. He tried to hide it by pulling down the brim of his Vida Blender cap. It was a useless gesture. He was definitely snooping. I just didn't know if he was spying on me and my drippy hair or Shannon and her all-around peppiness.

A muscular man with a buzz cut blocked the ogler's view when he walked to our table. Shannon turned to greet this new man. "Paul," she said.

"Paul this is," Shannon turned to me. "Geez, I'm a dope. I forgot to ask you your name."

"It's Penny," I answered, trying to appear winsome.

"Paul, this is Penny. She's been letting me chat her ear off. Without even asking her name."

Paul kissed the top of Shannon's blonde head. "Nice to meet you, Penny."

Was everyone in love but me?

"What are you ladies up to?"

Shannon spun in her stool. She wrapped her ankles around Paul's huge calves. "We're just shooting the breeze before I start the next round of Aqua Aerobics. Where are you headed? I thought you were off shift?"

Paul's forehead wrinkled. "Blanca called in sick, again. I'm off to man the smoothie bar."

Shannon petted Paul's arm. "That's too bad," she said. "I hope she's alright."

With a shrug, Paul deepened his working woe pout. "Her mom called it in. She's in the hospital. We'll have to wait and see what's up. Until then, there are smoothies to blend."

Shannon's fitness tracker chirped. "Uh, oh," she responded. She hopped down from the stool. "Ten minutes until class. I better get going."

She hugged Paul and waved at me. "I hope to see you soon Penny."

"Thanks again," I called after her as she speed-walked away. "For everything."

Once more, she offered a carefree forget-about-it wave in response to my gratitude. When she turned from me, Paul held his hands together. "Well, it's off to work again for me."

I swiveled in my stool to say goodbye when I spotted a familiar furry character on the shoulder of a leaving gym member. "That lady has my towel," I said, pointing, dumbfounded, to the gray-haired aquaciser.

Paul looked around me to follow my point. He chuckled. "That's Miss Bernie. She's the gym's resident klepto. Good luck getting it back."

I frowned. I loved that old towel.

“How about I treat you to my first smoothie of the day before you head out?”

It was too nice an offer to refuse. Or so I thought. Little did I know, protein-packed fruity goodness wasn't the only thing in store for me.

Want more Crushed?

Check it out on Amazon - on February 2nd 2021

And consider reading Write and Wronged: Honey Pot Mystery book 6
AKA: the first literary appearance of Miss Penny Nicols

<https://amzn.to/3oHwuz7>