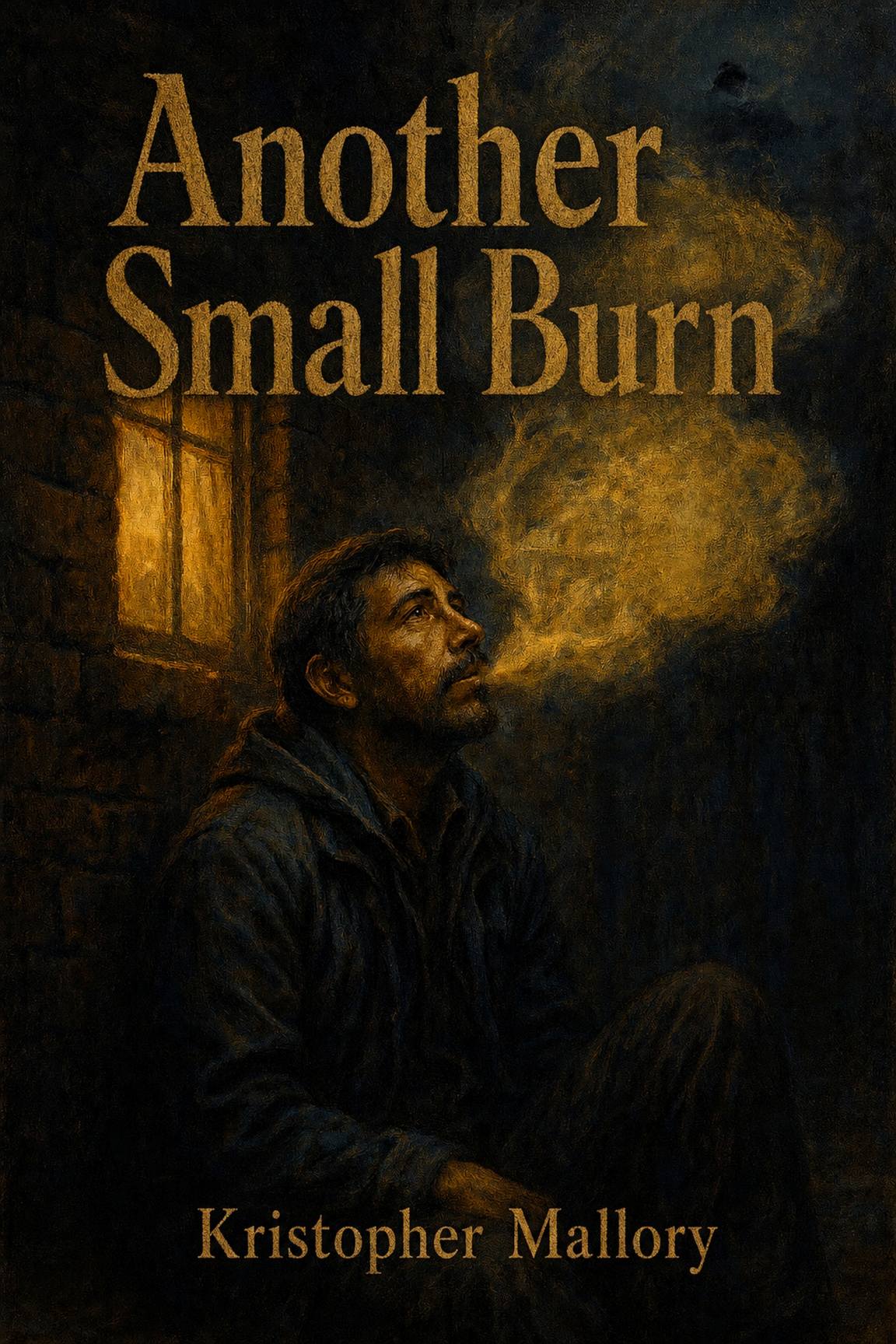
Another Small Burn



Kristopher Mallory

Another Small Burn

by

Kristopher Mallory

Another Small Burn

A Quiet Horror Short

Copyright



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Another Small Burn

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Other Releases by Kristopher Mallory

The Absinthe Smuggler

The Death Agreement

I Know What They Are

Master Stargazer

These Bad Dreams Combined

Mega Millions

What People Are Saying about Kris's Stories

The Death Agreement:

"This is all so confusing and mind blowingly awesome." – *Jesslikewoah*

I Know What They Are:

"This is absolutely amazing. Has me a bit paranoid as I get deja vu quite a bit, hopefully not too many good futures have passed me by..." – *Niamhel*

Master Stargazer:

"Hands down one of the best short sci fi books I have read" – *Ricky G.*

These Bad Dreams Combined:

"No idea WTF is going on here, but I'm fascinated!" – *Ali*

Special Thanks

To Wade, for pushing me to write something new. This one's on you.

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Another Small Burn

“Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?”

~ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Carlos became aware of the damp brick against his back, cold and rough through the thrift-store parka. He opened his eyes, grateful that the rain had stopped, but unsure how long he'd been out. No dreams, thankfully.

It must not have been long; the last few wisps of soft blue smoke still lingered around his head, slowly curling away into the cool dawn air. He noticed a sad tinge of a deeper indigo woven through the haze — and he knew it meant a tiny piece of his childhood had burned away to pay for those few hours of oblivion.

Best not to think about it.

The smoke could linger, but Carlos wouldn't.

He yawned, twisting his neck, first to the left, then to the right. "Doesn't matter," he reminded himself.

As he leaned forward, his stomach rumbled, a low, insistent growl. He pressed a hand to his belly and let out a weary sigh, doing his best to ignore the ache of how long it had been since he'd last eaten. It was time to move on. But first, he should run through the ol' mental checklist he'd been relying on these past few weeks.

First question - Do you know who you are?

"My name is Carlos Ortega, and wherever I go, there I still am." He paused, a moment, considering. "Until I'm not."

Second question - Do you know where you are?

Carlos knew the answer. This time, anyway. He'd chosen the narrow alley behind Marty's Corner Store — the only place in his childhood town that ever left its lights on after midnight. The stack of newspapers he'd slept on behind the dumpster had turned to pulp beneath him, but the date on one was still visible above a doomsday headline. Three weeks ago. He'd only been out here a couple of nights, though, and that surprised him. Why he hadn't stayed in his parents' old house, he couldn't say.

Last question - Have you hit rock bottom?

Carlos frowned.

He should get rid of that item altogether.

Back when it was alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling — or what-the-fuck-ever — sure, back then, there were bottoms. He'd hit bedrock on every one of them. Yet each time, something in him fought to claw free; that stubborn will was the only thing he ever admired about himself. The times he'd kept it together lasted months, even years, before a loose stone gave way and he slid back down into darkness.

Then he met her... whatever her name was. He thought he'd made it out for good. Nearly a decade, sane, steady, and on top — but that was before.

His final fall hadn't begun with another *slip*. Instead, it was an avalanche, a cataclysmic, world-ending event that no one in their right mind could have predicted. A guy like him, with whatever he had broken inside, yeah, what chance did he have when given a power such as this?

Hope, that was the problem, Carlos realized. "Why haven't I burned that useless shit out yet, huh?"

Yes, it would take a lot from him; risk starting an uncontrolled burn, he knew. And of course, that terrified him. Truth was, he would burn those memories, regardless, the moment he thought of something worth trading that one little thing he had loved about himself, that stubborn will of his. Until then, he would continue to deal with what? The nostalgia of having a small chance to crawl his way out of this strange new hell?

Carlos wondered how the others like him were faring out there.

They say everyone can burn, and more and more people discover how every day. They say the power is a blessing. They say it's safe if done correctly. They say we've entered the age of arcana, and we could make the world a beautiful and happy utopia where there is no hunger or disease.

Yeah, but they don't say anything about the burnings that ran out of control and spread from person to person, like those that happened in Chicago, London, or Shanghai. Untold millions lost. Not dead, no, worse than dead.

He'd seen them, the burned. Mindless zombies, swaying in the streets, dead eyes staring at nothing as they withered in clouds of multi-colored smoke. They didn't die, though. And you couldn't kill them. At least no

one had figured out how. The power they held was too great, useless to them as it was.

Fuck, I'll end up like that one day, won't I?

Carlos pushed the thought away. He should be moving…

"Hey there!" someone shouted, their cheerful voice echoing through the damp alley.

Startled, Carlos whipped his head toward the street, but no one was there. He jumped to his feet, quickly burning the first aggressive memory that came to mind, something about a bar brawl he'd gotten pulled into during his twenties? Details of the memory flashed away as a puff of red smoke poured from his nose, smelling of hot metal. A split-second later, a ball of pulsing crimson energy formed in the palm of his hand.

His stomach cramped again.

"Hey, up here! Whoa, don't worry, I'm not gonna hurt ya! How's it going?!"

Carlos snapped his gaze to the breaking clouds, ready to launch the deadly glowing orb like a homing missile.

The figure held up his hands, fingers spread. "Easy, easy."

Carlos squinted at the silver-haired old man levitating midair, thirty feet above him, black smoke tinted neon green leaking from the man's nose and mouth as he chuckled.

Instinctively, Carlos sniffed the air and picked up the scent, something akin to burnt hair with a touch of spoiled milk.

"Cancer!" the man yelled.

"What?" Carlos called back, the remnant of memory he'd burned away pulsing in his grip, ready to be hurled at the slightest provocation.

"I have Cancer! Well, I mean, I used to have Cancer!" The old man drifted a few stories lower so that Carlos no longer needed to strain his neck to see him. "I might still," he continued. "Don't rightly know. Burning those memories now."

"Oh." Carlos nodded. Black is always the worst of the worst moments one has: pain, suffering. What was green again? Ambitions, or was it

failures, he couldn't recall. "I s'pose letting go of something like that is the real prize. Flying's just a nice bonus."

Carlos judged that the old man wasn't a threat and lowered his hand. As he relaxed, the ball of energy dissipated along with the angry, crimson smoke. *What a waste*, he thought, aware he'd never had many combative memories to draw on for self-defense.

Best not to think about it.

The man grinned. "It's gonna be a nice day, looks like."

Carlos didn't reply.

"Wanna come up? It's amazing."

"No thanks," Carlos answered, stomach cramping yet again. "Was never one for heights."

"Aw, well," he said, a touch of disappointment in his voice as he drifted back to his previous height. "Guess I best be going then."

"Wait!" Carlos called out, genuinely unsure why.

The old man looked back down, and even at this distance, and even through the black smoke, Carlos could make out his cocked bushy eyebrows. "See anyone else still in town? … Alive, I mean?"

"No, son. Only you."

"Thanks," Carlos said, slowly lowering himself back down onto the mash of newspapers. He had figured as much. Other than the zombies, the only other person he had run into when he'd arrived in town was a woman burning something bright purple before she teleported away to god knows.

The old man paused a moment longer, seeming to notice something about Carlos for the first time. "Take care of yourself," he said finally, then quickly transformed into a blur as he shot away towards the rising sun, trailing black smoke.

Carlos should be moving on, too. Nothing was here for him anymore. The last few nights were spent rolling through a self-powered high greater than anything he'd ever shot into his veins. The pleasure ride had taken a lot out of him, and he needed a break.

One perk of magical smack, he thought, *is the complete lack of withdrawal*. Another, he had discovered, is the ability *not* to O.D. A dangerous combo, indeed.

He reached into his jeans and grabbed the keys to the old Ford pickup parked out front, and his stomach twisted yet again in slow, hollow protest — simple, run-of-the-mill hunger.

Fast food sounded great, but drive-thrus no longer existed. The business model of paying teenagers minimum wage to hand out fries was one of the first to collapse once they learned how to manifest almost anything they wanted on demand. Some had even left their former workplaces in smoldering ruins. Yeah, the age of the morning latte was over.

Breaking the glass storefront of *Marty's* and scrounging up some food would've been easy enough, but it was so much easier to burn something small to fill his belly. Then he could get moving again.

Running a hand through his greasy hair, he thought about what he was ready to part with.

If she could see me now.

Christ, he's already given away her name — traded it for one temporary superpower or another — but love remained, a soft ache that refuses to fade. He wasn't ready to burn that. Not yet.

"It doesn't matter," Carlos mumbled, reminding himself again as memories, good and bad, cycled through his Swiss-cheesed mind.

One scene kept bubbling back to the surface.

Honey and rye toast, a small bite already taken from one corner. Sweetness and warmth filled the air on that quiet Sunday morning, hours before the first chaotic reports began to appear on the news feeds.

Deeper, he recalled how she had delivered the tray to him in bed. How they had made love. How they pretended to snore, quietly giggling together as the kids tried to get into the locked bedroom.

It was the one memory he'd returned to again and again since the world ended.

Carlos doesn't want to lose all of it, just the taste of the honey, just the recollection that the jar was on the tray that morning. He *won't* lose the rest. At least, that's what he thinks. Probably what he always thinks before burning.

Give up just enough for a day of fullness. Quell the hunger.

He breathed deep, held on as long as he could, then slowly exhaled the memory.

Smoke, brilliant amber, rose from between his lips, twined with thin threads of gold. *True happiness*, he thought drowsily.

It moved like a living thing — slow, weightless, spiraling upward into the dawn. Within, faint ephemeral shapes ripple: a cup of coffee steaming in impossible stillness, a curl of butter sliding down toast, sunlight scattering into dust motes that rise instead of fall. And there's something on the tray that he can't make out now. Something important.

"No," Carlos whispered. "Not this one."

Magic didn't work the way he wanted, and all fires are indiscriminate. Secretly, he'd known that the whole precious part of him would be burned to ash.

"No," he repeated, tears welling in his eyes. He had made a mistake — the kind you can't take back.

The scene flickered as if caught between frames of a broken film projector. The smell — toasted grain and honey — hung sweet and unreal. Then the vision begins to fade, the smoke unraveling one of his last remaining cherished experiences to nothingness. For a heartbeat, just the shape of a woman's smile lingered.

Carlos waved golden wisps from his face, staring at the cobblestone ground, disoriented. The air felt heavier than before — he'd been there too long; it was time to move on. Rising to his feet, he turned toward the mouth of the alley. He took a few steps before a trace of sweetness caught his breath.

Honey?

Tiny strands still drifted from his mouth. He tried to recall the taste and failed, that quiet emptiness having replaced his hunger. A moment ago, he'd been starving, and he knew that feeling wouldn't return for a long, long while.

Carlos shook his head and started forward once more. "Another small burn," he muttered. "That's all it was."

Best not to think about it.

The smoke could linger, but Carlos wouldn't.

THE END.



About the Author



Born near Baltimore, Maryland, Kris has been writing short fiction since he was a kid. First sharing his ramblings on Stealth Fiction and then on Reddit, where most of his stories were posted to r/nosleep. His stories have been featured on The NoSleep Podcast, Chilling Tales for Dark Nights, Tales to Terrify, and Horror on the Rocks. The recording of The Scarecrow Corpse, read by Markiplier, has been heard hundreds of thousands of times. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife. And occasionally, he turns into a strawberry.

More stories: StealthFiction.com

What's Next?

LET ME TELL YOU HOW I LOST MY EYES

A Short Story Collection by Sammy Fowler

Coming one day. Maybe. Probably not.

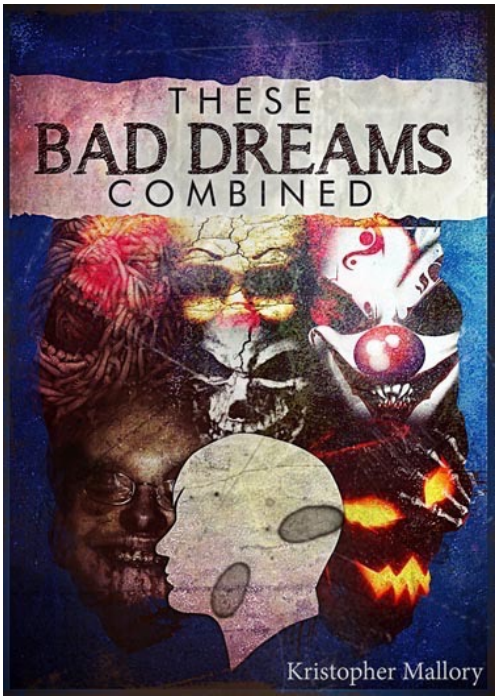
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Hear It Read Aloud

Another Small Burn was read aloud on YouTube by Viidith22, released on 7 January 2026, the day the story came out.

Listen on YouTube

More from Kristopher Mallory



THESE BAD DREAMS COMBINED

This suspense thriller is now available. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

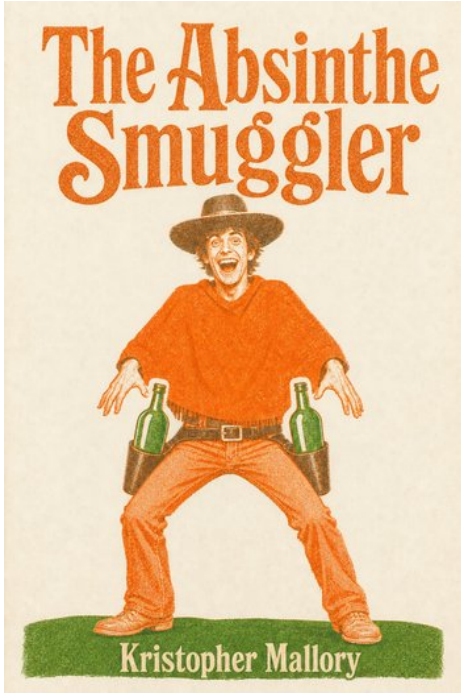
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A man struggles to deal with severe nightmares. A new medical trial is his last chance at a normal life.

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Praise for These Bad Dreams Combined:

"Twisted. Had me hooked from the first nightmare." – *Anonymous*



THE ABSINTHE SMUGGLER

This comedy short is now available on Amazon. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

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A teenager on holiday in Madrid promises his friends two bottles of the green fairy, and customs turns out to be the easy part.
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I Know What They Are

This short horror story is now available. For more information on this book, please visit Stealth Fiction.

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A young woman interacts with the city's homeless population as she walks to work each morning. Her life takes a turn into strange territory when she meets a homeless lady wearing a lab coat and holding a sign that reads: I know what they are.

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Praise for I Know What They Are:

"This gave me chills." – *Jason W.*