

# LOVE AMONG THE STACKS



ANDI DEACON

AARON leaned back in his chair with a sigh. His eyes were crossed from the small print in the book in front of him. And who would've thought literary criticism of H.P. Lovecraft's awesome horror stories could be so dry, anyway?

What a way to spend a Friday night. He could've been out partying with his friends. Maybe tonight would've been the night he met Mr. Right, or at least a hot-bodied Mr. Right Now. Instead, here he was stuck on the fourth floor of the library in a carrel buried behind the stacks researching for a mid-term paper in a course that wasn't even in his major. Frickin' elective requirements. *Last thing in the world I want to be is well rounded*, he thought, snickering at his own joke.

Still, he'd thought a course on horror lit might be fun, a nice break from hours in the computer lab writing code and doing raster calculations. Sure, the readings were pretty cool. Those old guys—Poe and Lovecraft and Machen—they were better than he'd expected, almost as good as King and Simmons and Barker. But all the pick-it-apart analysis and the heavy writing requirements? Yeah, not so much.

Aaron dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, feeling the half-pleasant, half-painful burn. When he opened his eyes again, all he could see for a moment was a greenish blur. Then, slowly, his surroundings filtered in again. This time of night, especially on a Friday, the library was nearly deserted. None of the other carrels on this side of the stacks

appeared to be occupied—at least, none of the banker’s lamps with which they were fitted were on.

The stacks nearby were dimly lit, fading away into complete darkness further out. The lights above the lines of shelves were on motion sensors as an energy-saving measure. When there weren’t many students wandering up and down the rows of books, it could get pretty gloomy. He’d heard of kids actually getting freaked out and having to leave.

Well, he wasn’t afraid of the dark or the cavernous silence. Even if he had just spent a couple of hours reading about arcane texts hidden in the creepy recesses of the library at Miskatonic U.

*Enough farting around, Michaelson,* Aaron told himself. *Library’s going to close in a few hours and you’ve got half a dozen more sources to look at.* He heaved his body out of the chair and stretched before heading into the nearest row of shelves for the next book on his reference list.

“PS3521—3606” read the tag at the head of the row. As Aaron started down the aisle, the lights hanging from the ceiling flashed on and then flickered. They’d been doing that on his previous forays, too, but this time instead of finally settling down, they flashed a little brighter and then died, leaving the aisle wrapped in a deep gloom.

*Oh, great,* Aaron thought. *Fuckin’ great.* Like it wasn’t hard enough to read the call letters on the books’ spines to begin with. Now how was he supposed to find the volumes he needed? He squinted at the nearest eye-level shelf, but all he could make out was a jagged landscape of various-sized books in silhouette. Damn. He’d just have to go down to the

circulation desk and see if someone could do something about the lights. Yeah, like that was going to happen at ten thirty on a Friday night. Maybe they'd at least have a flashlight he could borrow.

Aaron turned and headed in the direction of the elevator lobby, but he'd only taken a few steps when a shadow loomed at the end of the aisle, blocking the way. He stopped with a sharp intake of breath, startled and maybe a little freaked. The eight-foot-high shelves seemed to loom over him in the dark, hemming him in, and he was suddenly afraid that if he turned around, the other end of the aisle would be blocked as well. His scalp prickled.

Okay, maybe more than a little freaked.

Then the lights flickered on again, and a glow bloomed around the shadow, revealing the familiar shape of a human being.

*Idiot, Aaron chided himself, releasing his breath. What'd you think? It was some freaking minion of the Great Cthulhu, all slimy and octopus-y? It's just another kid. Some other poor fool stuck here studying instead of out having fun.*

"Hey," Aaron called. "You kinda startled me, there. I thought I was the only one up here tonight. I was getting ready to go down to the desk and see if they could do something about the lights, but I guess...."

Aaron's voice faded out as the other student approached. It was a guy. No one Aaron had ever seen before, and wasn't that a damn shame?

Because he was beautiful.

The boy was about Aaron's height but had finer bones. His skin was pale and his hair a shade of blonde more silver than golden, worn longer than most guys wore it these days but looking silken and touchable. He had high cheekbones; large, slightly tilted grey eyes; ridiculously long eyelashes; a generous mouth; and just the hint of a dimple in his firm chin. A long-sleeved, tie-dyed shirt clung to his chest and tapered toward his narrow hips to meet the waistband of his faded jeans. A small, fringed leather sack hung off one belt loop, and he wore a turquoise-inlaid ring on his right hand. Kind of '70s, but it suited him.

"Hi," the guy said as he came near, "I'm Danny."

"Uh," Aaron swallowed. "Hey. Aaron."

Danny moved closer, invading Aaron's personal space enough to make him a little uncomfortable, even if the view was really nice. "It's nice to meet you, Aaron."

Aaron eased back a step, trying not to be obvious. "Yeah, good to meet you, too. I don't think I've seen you around campus."

Danny smiled and, without even seeming to move, was back in Aaron's space again. "I'm mostly here in the library," he explained. "I work here."

"Oh," Aaron replied, then felt the need to say something else and added, "I'm usually in the comp lab."

Danny kept smiling, tilted his head slightly, and reached out his hand toward Aaron's face, not quite touching. "You're very handsome, Aaron," he said.

Aaron swallowed reflexively. Pretty damn ballsy thing to say to a perfect stranger. Maybe if you were in a club where

everybody expected you were looking to hook up, but in the library? Ballsy.

And also kind of hot.

“Uh,” Aaron fumbled. “You’re, uh, not so bad yourself. I dig the retro look.”

The dude glanced down at himself as if he weren’t exactly sure what Aaron was talking about, but he looked up again quickly, pinning Aaron with his grey gaze. He moved even closer, until there was scarcely enough space between their bodies for a piece of paper. Aaron shivered, feeling chilled and warm at the same time. The warmth centered itself in his gut and the base of his spine and he just knew other parts of his body were going to be joining the party real soon.

“I want to kiss you,” Danny informed him. “May I?”

“Yeah,” Aaron replied, more breath than spoken word.

The first brush of Danny’s lips was feather-light, but his mouth firmed up rapidly as the kiss continued. Danny raised his hands to either side of Aaron’s face and used his lips to lever Aaron’s open, sliding his tongue into Aaron’s mouth, tasting and exploring with flicks and swipes across Aaron’s teeth and the roof of his mouth. The guy was one hell of a kisser.

Aaron decided it was about time he got invested in the proceedings, and he raised his arms to grab Danny’s shoulders. But Danny caught his wrists before his hands could land and used his grip to turn Aaron and slide him back against the nearest bookshelf. Aaron wasn’t usually down with being manhandled, but somehow this didn’t feel

like that. Danny's grip was firm but gentle, and what might have felt like aggression with some guys just felt like urgent need from Danny.

Aaron felt the spines of the books pressing unevenly against his shoulders and back and down his arms. Danny shifted even closer until his entire body was plastered against Aaron's without breaking the kiss for even a moment. Aaron began moving his own tongue, tangling it with Danny's, and at the same time he spread his legs apart and rocked his hips against the other boy's, introducing Danny to his cock, which was hard and pulsing in the confines of his denims.

Danny moaned. The sound went all through Aaron and enticed an answering moan from deep in his own throat. Danny's dick was fully as hard as his and slotted next to Aaron's as Danny undulated against him, a bar of heat he could feel through both their jeans.

The books behind Aaron shifted from the pressure of his back and the shelf protested with a metallic creak. Suddenly conscious of their surroundings, Aaron broke the kiss, not without some difficulty, and avoided Danny's seeking mouth long enough to say, "Hey, maybe we should take this back to my room."

Danny's eyes widened and flashed. "No!" he exclaimed, startling a flinch out of Aaron. Danny went on more quietly. "No, I want to stay here. I like it here. Don't worry. No one will disturb us."

Before Aaron could protest, or even just react, Danny dropped to his knees between Aaron's legs and reached for

Aaron's belt. "I want to suck you," Danny said. "I want to feel you in my mouth."

"Shit, yeah," Aaron managed. "Oh God, Danny."

Danny had Aaron's jeans undone and slid halfway down Aaron's thighs, releasing his cock to spring against his stomach. "I like when you say my name," he whispered. "Say it some more." Then his lips slid over the head of Aaron's penis and down, warm and slick and completely fucking awesome.

Aaron had had a few blowjobs in his life, but never anything like this. Danny deep-throated him effortlessly, taking Aaron's dick all the way to the root on each down-stroke and applying the perfect amount of pressure with lips and tongue on the up-stroke. Danny's hands were busy as well, cradling and stroking Aaron's balls. Sensation just barely this side of too much spiraled through him and he shuddered with pleasure.

"Danny," he breathed. "Danny." He was coming undone. He wanted it to go on forever, and he wanted release at the same time. His hands had become entangled in Danny's hair at some point, and he was too blissed out to fight the temptation to tug Danny's head and fuck into his welcoming mouth.

Danny shifted Aaron's sac into one hand and put two fingers of his free hand in the corner of his mouth as his lips slid up Aaron's dick again, wetting the digits with saliva and pre-come. He slipped that hand behind Aaron's balls and began to lightly stroke the crack of Aaron's ass, pressing and fluttering those wet fingers against Aaron's hole.



That was it.

“D—Danny,” Aaron stuttered. “Gonna come, man.”

It felt more like an eruption than a shot. The aftershocks went on and on, and Danny never even blinked, swallowing everything that poured out of Aaron like a man dying of thirst. He held Aaron in his mouth until Aaron softened completely before finally pulling off, tonguing Aaron clean on the way.

At that point, Aaron went boneless. His legs wouldn't hold him up anymore, and he had to brace himself against the rough drag of the books behind him and slide to the floor to avoid just dropping like a rock. He ended up sprawled on the floor with his back against the lower shelves, feeling like he'd just been... well, just been blown to within an inch of his life.

Danny still knelt between Aaron's spread legs, searching Aaron's face with his gaze.

“Dude,” Aaron said, his voice coming out hoarse and breathy, “Danny. That was awesome, man. Jesus.”

Danny's answering smile was incandescent. “I made you feel good,” he said.

“Oh hell yes,” Aaron replied. Then it struck him that Danny had been the one doing all the work here, and he frowned. “Hey, let me return the favor. You must be....”

But Danny was shaking his head. “It's okay,” he said. “I don't need it. I... I got off.”

“You did?”

“I got everything I needed.”

Honestly, Aaron was so wiped out he wasn't sure he could have managed anyway. Sex usually wasn't that enervating. After all, he was barely nineteen. He should've been able to go on for hours. But he felt too sated and drowsy to worry about it. He'd make it up to Danny next time.

"What time is it, anyway?" Aaron wondered out loud, yawning uncontrollably. "Shit, we should probably go before the library closes."

"Just a little longer," Danny said, almost pleading. He moved to sit down beside Aaron against the shelves. "Here, lie down and put your head in my lap and rest a while."

Aaron complied happily, stretching out on the linoleum floor and laying his head on Danny's thigh. He tugged his jeans back up for the sake of comfort but didn't bother to zip them up. When Danny began stroking his hair, he looked up into the other boy's face and grinned, then closed his eyes.

"Just gonna rest a few minutes," he said.

"Say my name again?" Danny asked.

"Um," Aaron agreed. "Danny."

And sleep pulled him under.

"WHAT the...? Hey, man, are you okay?"

Aaron awoke with a jolt, startled words echoing in his head. He blinked uncertainly, disoriented and confused. Where the hell was he?

### II

“Dude, seriously,” the other voice came again, accompanied by rapid footsteps. “Are you hurt? Should I call 911?”

A dark shape hunched down next to him, and he looked up into the frowning face of a guy around his own age.

He was lying on the floor, Aaron realized, surrounded by bookshelves. Bookshelves? The library. Oh shit! It all came back to him with a rush, and he pushed himself up abruptly to a sit, barely avoiding toppling the guy crouched beside him.

“I’m okay,” he rasped. “I’m not hurt. I just....” He peered at the other guy, taking in his spiky, sandy hair and deep blue eyes. “Who are you? What time is it? Where’s Danny?”

“Uh, I’m Cody,” the guy answered. “Cody Ferris. It’s around seven o’clock. Danny who?”

“I don’t know his last name,” Aaron said. “He was here with me. Seven? In the morning?” At Cody’s nod, Danny groaned. “Shit, I’ve been here all night. Guess I fell asleep. Wait. What are you doing here? Library doesn’t open ’til eight on Saturdays.”

“Yeah, I know,” Cody explained. “I work here. We take turns coming in early on Saturday to check up on things before we open. I was doing that when I saw you lying here.”

Aaron started to get up and Cody rose with him, giving him a hand up. Feeling a sudden cool sensation on his stomach, Aaron looked down. His belt was undone and the fly of his jeans was unzipped, leaving him half-exposed. He felt his face go hot, and he glanced at Cody, who was biting his lip on a grin.

“So, what were you and this Danny up to up here, anyway?” Cody said, raising an eyebrow.

Aaron zipped up and jammed the tails of his shirt clumsily into his jeans. Totally fucking humiliating. At least Cody seemed more amused than put off. Aaron’s gaydar pinged at that reaction. *Weird*, he thought, wondering what the odds were of running into two gay students working in the library in the same twenty-four-hour period.

“Look,” Aaron said, “I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to break the rules or anything.”

“Naw, man, it’s cool. Not like you’re the first person I ever found sleeping off... something... in the stacks. I won’t rat you out.”

“Thanks,” Aaron replied, grateful and relieved. Cody grinned. The guy was really pretty cute. *Not beautiful like Danny*, he thought, and then it struck him, “Hey, if you work here, you probably *do* know Danny. He works here, too.”

“Um, I don’t think so,” Cody responded. “I’ve been working here since freshman year and I know everybody, staff and students. We don’t have anybody named Danny at the moment.”

“No, that can’t be right,” Aaron insisted. “He told me he works here. He said he was here all the time. Maybe he’s new this semester.”

“Unh-unh. I did orientation for all the new student workers this semester. No Danny. Maybe the dude was playing you.”

Aaron stiffened, not liking that idea at all. He thought about his and Danny’s encounter the night before. The kid

may have been aggressive in his approach, but he also seemed kind of sweet and shy. No, he was pretty sure Danny wasn't the kind of guy who would blow a stranger for shits and giggles. He started to say so, but Cody put up a hand.

"Wait," he said, forehead furrowing. "His name was Danny and he told you he worked here? Oh man. What'd he look like?"

"Blonde hair, grey eyes, really beau—uh—nice looking. His hair was pretty long. Old-fashioned-looking clothes, kind of hippie. And he had this big mother of a ring on."

"Fuck," Cody breathed, looking at Aaron wide-eyed. "I don't believe it!"

"What?"

"You've had a close encounter of the supernatural kind, dude."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your Danny was a ghost, man."

"Bullshit," Aaron snorted.

"No, listen," Cody protested. "It's a local legend. Everybody who works here knows the story. This kid named Danny Burke *did* work in the library. Back in the early '70s. He was gay but not out—I guess it was a lot harder back then, even with the whole free love thing—but he got involved with one of his professors. Only the prof was just using him, and when he got tired of it, he just dropped him cold. The kid committed suicide. Right here in the library. Hung himself off the edge of a bookshelf with a belt. Ever

since then, he haunts the library. Not many people have actually seen him, but there are stories.”

Aaron stared at Cody in disbelief. Maybe Cody was the one who was playing him. Or, shit, maybe he'd been wrong about Danny and they were in it together. A couple of bored student library workers having some fun.

“Fuck you, man,” Aaron snapped. He was furious, and maybe a little disappointed, too. “There’s no such thing as ghosts. You and your buddy must think you’re pretty funny.”

“No!” Cody exclaimed. “I’m not making this shit up, man. Honestly.”

“Yeah, right.” Aaron turned and started to stalk away. He was going to get his backpack and get the fuck out of here.

“Look, I know this sounds crazy,” Cody called after him. “But I know a way we can be sure, one way or the other.”

Aaron looked back at him with narrowed eyes.

“Come downstairs with me,” Cody insisted. “Just for a minute. I wanna know the truth as much as you do. Seriously.”

Dude looked dead earnest. If he was acting, he was damn good at it. What harm would it do to go see what Cody wanted to show him? Worse came to worst, Cody might lead him straight to the real Danny so they could both have a laugh at his expense. In which case Aaron could tell the both of them to go fuck themselves at once.

“Okay,” Aaron replied. “Let me get my pack and I’ll go down with you. But if this is more of your bullshit, you’re going to regret it.”

By “downstairs,” Cody meant all the way down to the basement level of the building. Ordinary students weren’t allowed down there as a rule; it was the climate-controlled domain of archives and reference materials students were only allowed to request and use under supervision. Cody had access, though. Apparently as one of the most senior of the student workers, he had access to pretty much everything.

“It’s back here,” Cody told Aaron, leading him through open stacks to a room in a back corner. “This is where all the University history material is archived. You know, photos and maps and blueprints and shit. Also all the yearbooks going back to the beginning. We’ve started scanning the yearbooks to get them online, but it’s going to take a while.”

Cody unlocked the door to the room and went straight to a set of shelves lining one wall. Yearbooks in a variety of colors and sizes filled the shelves, the newest at the top, spines fresh and vivid, and the older ones further down becoming increasingly dull and faded. He pulled a thick volume with a dark brown cover from a middle shelf and carried it over to an antique-looking wooden dictionary stand.

“This is 1973,” he said. “I’m pretty sure it’s the right one. Every year, the library staff, including all the student workers, has a picture made for the yearbook. They’ve been doing it forever.”

Cody opened the book near the back, past the class pictures to the group sections. Aaron leaned over his

shoulder and looked at the book, intrigued in spite of his suspicions.

“Okay, yeah,” Cody said triumphantly, landing on a page that was divided neatly in half between a group photograph and a long list of names. He backed up and gestured to Aaron. “This is the library staff in ’73. See anybody familiar?”

Aaron raised an eyebrow but stepped forward and looked at the picture. At first, it was just a blur of strangers’ faces that all sort of ran together in the black and white photo. Then Aaron gasped. There, standing at the end of one row, was the boy from last night. Even in black and white, his pale hair and beautiful face stood out. The clothes were similar, if not exactly the same. He was holding a book against his chest with his right hand, clearly displaying a ring on the ring finger. Impossible to be certain without color, but it sure was shaped a lot like the turquoise ring Danny had been wearing the night before.

“Well?” Cody asked. “Is that him?”

“Fuck,” Aaron breathed. “Holy fucking shit. I don’t... it can’t...”

Cody crowded in beside Aaron and traced a finger down the rows of names to the one for the first person in the second row. *Danny Burke*.

Aaron was practically hyperventilating. He wanted to believe it was a trick of some kind, but that seemed even more impossible than Cody’s version. “Man,” he gasped. “I had sex with a ghost. I had sex with a fucking ghost! How is



that even possible? Oh my God.” He felt dizzy, and he grabbed onto the corner of the dictionary stand.

“Hey, hey,” Cody said, getting a grip on Aaron’s elbows. “Come on, dude. You need to sit down.” Cody maneuvered him into a nearby wooden chair and pushed his head down toward his knees. “C’mon, man, just breathe.”

The dizziness passed as the blood rushed to his head, and after a minute Aaron was able to sit up. Cody kept a hand on his back and watched him anxiously.

“You’re not gonna hurl, are you?” Cody asked.

Aaron shook his head.

“Okay, look, I know you’re freaked out. I mean, I kinda am, too, and I *believe* in this stuff. But, you know, you’re okay. I mean, he didn’t, like, hurt you or anything. Maybe he’s just lonely. Maybe he just wanted somebody to see him.”

Aaron thought about that. *I like it when you say my name*, Danny had said. *And, I made you feel good*. *And, I got everything I needed*. “Yeah, maybe,” Aaron conceded.

“Um,” Cody said hesitantly. “Was it good?”

Aaron looked up at him. “Actually, it was awesome. I don’t know how that’s possible, but it was.”

“Wow,” Cody sighed. “Danny Burke. A ghost. For real.”

Grasping Cody’s arm, Aaron gave him a hard look. “Listen. You can’t tell anybody about this. Okay? I mean, they’d just think we were nuts anyway. Promise me you won’t say anything.”

Cody looked crestfallen, but he nodded. “Yeah, I get what you’re saying. It’ll be just between us. Promise.”

“Thanks, man.”

“No prob.”

Aaron stood up and hoisted his backpack over his shoulder. “I need to go. I need a shower and some food and some more sleep. Shit, I still have to come back later and finish the research for my damn paper.” *Just what I need*, he thought, *another immersion in weirdness*. He’d never be able to look at a horror novel the same way again. He snorted. “I think I’ll stick to daylight this time.”

Cody locked the room and led Aaron out of the basement and all the way to the main floor exit. “So,” he said. “I’m working all day today. Maybe I’ll see you here this afternoon, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Aaron yawned. Reaction was setting in and he was exhausted. He felt like he had a lot to process, some of which hadn’t even hit him yet. Beneath all that, he also felt a little sad. Danny. That poor kid. He nodded to Cody. “Later, dude. And, uh, thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Cody said. He paused and stared at the floor for a moment, clearly wanting to say something else. “Aaron?”

“Yeah?”

“If you get done with your research this afternoon,” he said in a rush, “you wanna maybe go grab a beer and a burger after?”

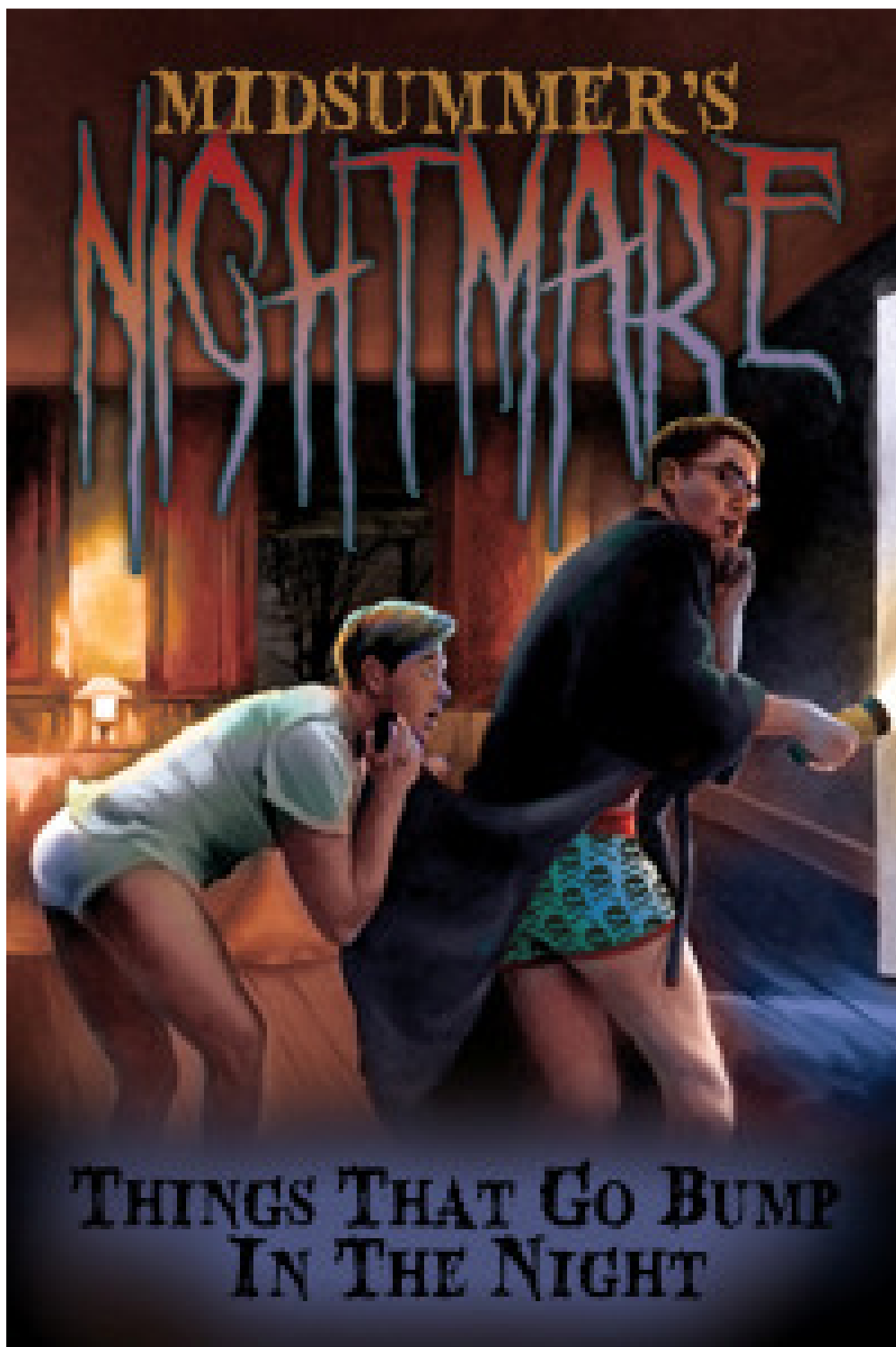
Aaron smiled, suddenly feeling better. “Sure,” he agreed. “Sounds good.”

Cody smiled back and stood watching as Aaron walked out the door.

It was a nice day, crisp but sunny. *Beer and a burger*, Aaron thought. And maybe even something more interesting after.

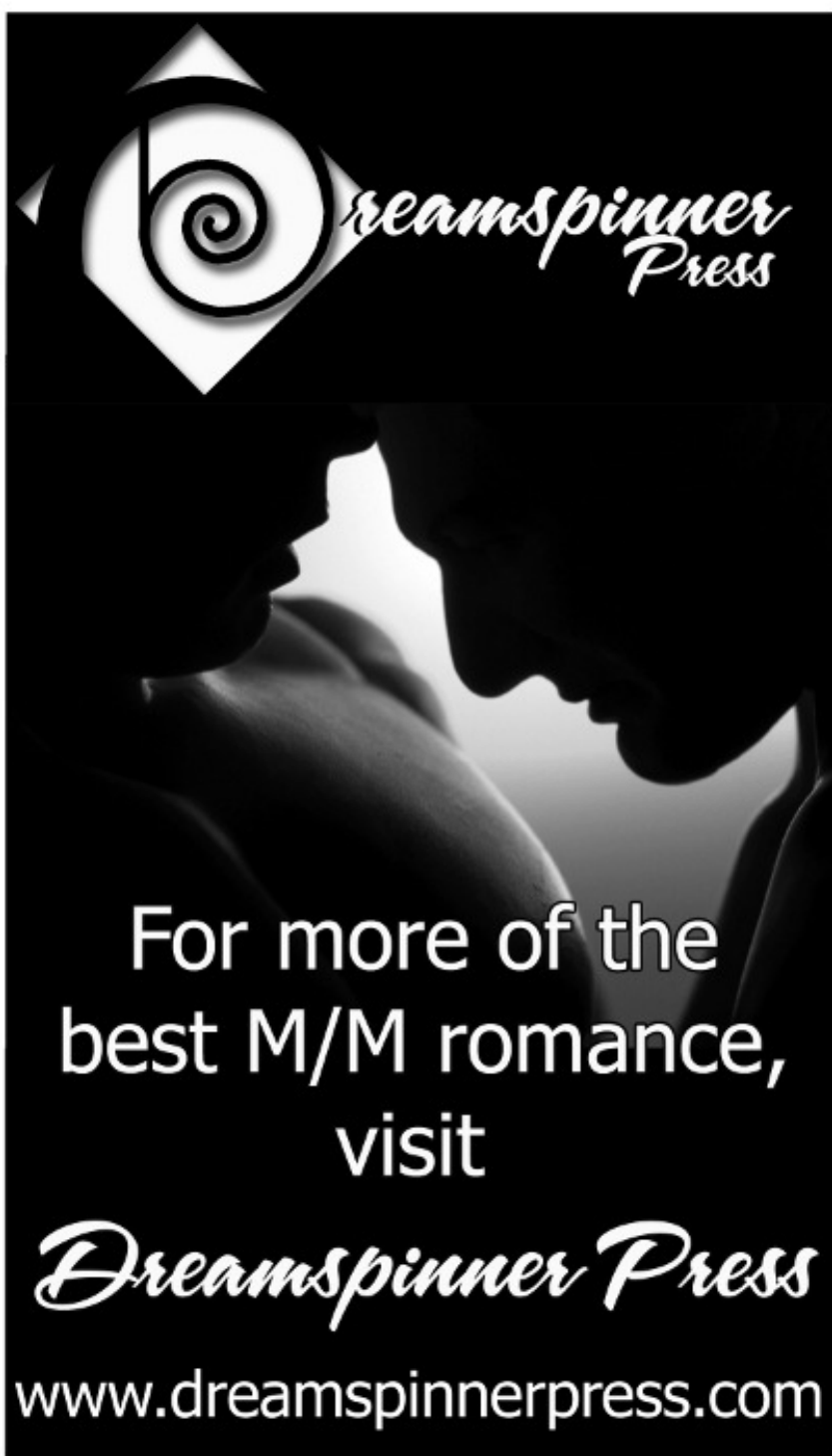
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ANDI DEACON wrote and illustrated her first book at age six. A sequel to *Black Beauty*, it gave a minor equine character a happier ending. Sidetracked for many years, she returned to writing via fan fiction and is now testing the waters of original fiction in her much-beloved genre of hot man-on-man romance. At home in North Carolina with a job, an adorable husband, and two spoiled cats, she still finds time to read, write, watch movies and television, fangirl, and make chain mail jewelry now and then.



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