

ARDOR

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october 2015

THE NEWSLETTER OF ASHAVAN DOYON

Books by
Ashavan Doyon

From Dreamspinner Press

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The Colors of Romance

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A Wounded Promise

Novels
Gerry's Lion

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The College Rose Romances

Loving Aidan
Steven's Heart
Andrew's Prayer

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Short based on characters from *I Almost Let You*
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Editorial

A Rose in Every Color

Roses are at the very core of our symbolism around issues of love. Beautiful and evocative, the sight and smell are nearly synonymous with love in our culture. A single red rose is an unspoken promise of love, one that requires no words.

When I decided to explore the idea of a sequel to *Loving Aidan*, I went back to that cover. My first romance title, *Loving Aidan* had exactly the cover I'd asked for. It featured the primary actors as a study in contrast. Aidan, antiquated and almost ethereal. Sammy almost naked, wreathed in black. The contrast was meant to be striking, and it was softened by only one element—a rose (it was originally pink, and I asked that it be deepened to red).

My subject for the sequel was dictated by readers. I'd meant the character as a distraction and a catalyst, but when Steven poured his heart out to Aidan, the readers listened. And so did I. I think every author has a few characters that stood up and started making demands. For me, that was Steven. Not content to remain a plot point, Steven so forcefully overtook the story that my editor and I discussed rewrites that would have made him the focus of the narrative.

In the end, I settled for taking an axe to the story and excising almost 10,000 words of love and care and seduction. Words that made it hard to look past Steven and see Sammy. Some readers still couldn't. And because they couldn't I resolved to make

Steven happy.

I had my sequel. *Steven's Heart*. And when I started writing, all I knew about that mysterious heart is that it was somehow related to a rose—a blue rose. A symbol of magic and impossible love, I knew that Steven was going to find something special and wonderous. He wouldn't tell me what it was. He wouldn't tell anyone, and so I was as surprised as I hope you will be when he showed me just what his heart was hiding.

It'd become clear by now that roses were going to be a theme. In *Andrew's Prayer* it was the white rose, a symbol of purity, of steadfastness in love, that would become so central to the theme of Andrew's unexpected romance. A character who, for the best of reasons, has no faith in love, Drew finds a heart of his own and the drive to seek something pure and loving over wanton sexuality. Though he enjoys that too, to be sure.

Of course there are more colors. Should Torquere indulge me, there is at least orange to look forward to, and I have stories percolating for purple and green as well. Every rose has its own story, its own color, and we'll have to see how many I can write before they tell me to stop!

—Ashavan Doyon



He did exist
He existed for me
I loved him

The Byte of Betrayal by Ashavan Doyon

Caleb McDonnell lives his life online. A thirty-year-old fast food worker, he spends his time talking in an Internet world where his job and living conditions can't dictate his friendships. He's found acceptance, friendship, and even romance. But when an online friend is revealed as a fake, Caleb loses all sense of trust. To stave off the emotional collapse of his betrayal, Caleb leaves his online life behind and retreats into the monotony of his job.

Nicodemus Rokos feels like his heart has been torn out. He knew Caleb would be hurt, but he'd hoped not to be shut out of his boyfriend's life. He can only hope Caleb still feels something when he shows up in person to reclaim what he's lost.

Excerpt

From The Byte of Betrayal

Caleb McDonnell sat in the dark, looking at the glowing screen of his laptop. His back was pushed against the headboard, his fingers poised over the keys. Caleb was waiting for something, and it didn't take long. The soft tone of an incoming message arriving sounded, and Caleb smiled.

kevin2010: hey! you're out?

macalebhottie: yeah. done for the day, thankfully.

kevin2010: working late too much.

macalebhottie: need the money. how are u?

There was a long wait, and finally Caleb sent another message.

macalebhottie: sorry. know u hate to talk about it.

kevin2010: just, this is my escape, you know?

macalebhottie: it's fine. I just get concerned.

kevin2010: appreciate it, but don't bother. trust me, enough people worried here already. hey, you ask him out yet?

Caleb closed his eyes for a moment. He should never have told Kevin about that. His little useless crush. He'd never even met Nic. Of course, he'd never met Kevin either. Hardly mattered. He told Kevin everything.

macalebhottie: that's not happening.

kevin2010: why not?

macalebhottie: because it's not. just stop it.

kevin2010: like you stop telling me to take care of myself? you should ask him.

Caleb ran a hand through the dark copper red of his tight curls. He sighed, letting

the breath out, slow and long. "Sure, right," he muttered. "Like I could ever really tell Nic."

He glanced around the room. It was a studio apartment, and even now Caleb could feel the color in his cheeks. Even if he had the confidence to tell Nic, he could never invite him here. A crappy studio apartment? Besides, Nic was happy and far away in one of those Midwestern states. Caleb tried to pretend he didn't know which one. That he didn't know the city and the street. That he hadn't used street view to look at the house.

God, he was a stalker!

macalebhottie: can't.

kevin2010: you mean won't.

macalebhottie: same difference.

kevin2010: you had confidence once. what happened?

macalebhottie: what do u mean?

kevin2010: macalebHOTTIE. It took confidence. You had it once. what happened?

macalebhottie: we've been chatting for months. u know what happened.

kevin2010: no. because every time I ask, you do this. before everything started happening, I was a psych major. I might be tempted to call what you're doing deflection.

Caleb groaned. Why was Kevin always so frustrating?

macalebhottie: so I let myself believe I was hot once. convinced others, even.

kevin2010: seen pictures. weren't imagining.

macalebhottie: those were just beach pics.
kevin2010: you were wearing a speedo. you didn't look embarrassed to me. you looked good. If I didn't have Scottie, I mighta been interested.

Caleb looked away from the screen. His stomach did that thing, the one that made him all uncomfortable. Butterflies, gurgles, who cared what they were called. All Caleb cared about was that it felt crappy. Because he was jealous. Jealous that Kevin had someone. Jealous that a twenty-year-old who was barely even out was engaged to a great guy. Jealous because, at thirty, he was alone and living in a crappy studio, while Kevin was....

It was unworthy. It was a very human reaction, jealousy, but that didn't help Caleb. He still felt like a miserable shit. Kevin had enough to deal with.

macalebhottie: Scottie's a lucky guy.

kevin2010: I'm the lucky one. he's been home every weekend to spend time with me. he should be at school, but he comes anyway.

macalebhottie: glad he's there for u. I'd visit u know, if u would let me.

kevin2010: no. you can't afford that, and you know it.

macalebhottie: still would do it.

kevin2010: I know. :)

macalebhottie: so I can?

kevin2010: no. chill, cal. you have enough to deal with there. besides, if you're here, you won't be chatting up this guy. I can tell you like him.

macalebhottie: how?

kevin2010: you won't tell me his name, so I can't look him up.

macalebhottie: like u would.

kevin2010: I bet you did. I bet you know everything about him.

macalebhottie: stop it!

kevin2010: gotta go anyway. it's really late here.

Of course it was. Caleb struggled with

Nic for the same reason. It was so hard to talk at all. Time zones never worked out quite right. He glanced at the clock. It was really late where Kevin was. Unfortunately, Kevin was right. It would cost a fortune for Caleb to visit, and it was a fortune he didn't have.

macalebhottie: all right. ttyl.

kevin2010: def.

Caleb set his computer aside and stripped the rest of the way down. He'd dropped the uniform as soon as he'd gotten in, but he still needed to shower; he smelled like grease and fast food. The only good thing about these studios was the hot water, which was plentiful and practically steaming. Well, that and the super cheap price tag. It was the only thing that let him live alone.

Luxuriating in the shower was a familiar thing. He allowed himself that, to feel the hot water massaging his aching muscles. He'd never thought it before actually doing the job, but it was grueling work, standing hour after hour making sandwiches. The air got thick with grease and his curls got slick and heavy and dark with the grime. There was function in luxuriating in that shower, and it wasn't just the time he took to find his release.

He emerged from the shower clean, and he dropped the dirty clothes and the towel he'd used to cover his bed before he showered into a bag that stank with sweat and grease. He felt clean. He looked at the bag, glad for the extra uniform shirts being full time—or what passed for full time in fast food—meant. He wouldn't have to do laundry tonight.

Caleb dressed in a loose set of flannel sleep pants and sat at the table by the window looking out on the city streets. The endless beeping and honking and dull roar of the city came through the half-frosted window. He'd always been told you learned to tune it out, but Caleb never had.

Real couples have fights. Sometimes horrific and devastating fights, because when you're in a relationship with someone, they learn enough about you to strike where you're the most vulnerable. I Almost Let You was an exploration of that. I've gotten comments that Chris clearly didn't love Aaron. So I thought I'd write this, and maybe you can decide for yourselves.

Short

When did you know?

"You don't have to do this, Boo." Aaron held Chris's hand and squeezed. The light from the street lamp and the angle of the car window left them both in shadow. They'd waited almost an hour, until finally the car in the driveway opposite had pulled out and sped down the street.

Chris ignored that they were both shaking. He stroked Aaron's cheek and kissed the lips that had meant home now for almost a year. It wasn't passionate, not the way it would have been if they were in bed back at their broken down apartment. But it was tender. Moist, sweet lips that meant something more than just home. He paused, close, and let himself luxuriate in the heat of Aaron's breath. He cupped his other hand against the opposite cheek, cradling Aaron's face. "It'll be okay," Chris whispered. Maybe he meant it because even though the words had felt shaky to him, Aaron drew away.

The turmoil in his stomach made smiling hard, but Chris knew the effort was worth it. The brief spark in those beautiful blue eyes. The surge that had compact little Aaron nestled in his arms. Chris kissed Aaron's newly spikey black hair. "Baby, I'm coming back," Chris said, accompanying the words with a gentle squeeze.

"I could go with—"

"No. You know how that would go."

Aaron's body rocked as he let out a sob.

"Last time I almost... you almost—"

Chris closed his eyes tight and pulled

Aaron closer, burying his face in Aaron's hair. "I know," he murmured against the soft locks. "I have to try."

Aaron nodded numbly and slowly pulled himself back into his seat. He looked blankly out the windshield. The words that followed were choked and painful. "Don't leave me."

Chris leaned in to kiss the scarce stubble that none-the-less darkened Aaron's cheeks. "I'll be back." Chris brought Aaron's hand to his lips. "I promise, baby."

The door swung open, groaning as Chris used the frame to pull his lanky, muscular frame out of the low-riding station wagon. He swung the door shut, trying to ignore how final the slam of metal seemed. A quick glance told him what he already knew. The street was abandoned except for their car and dim light of the lamppost outside the house. It needed to be changed. Chris swallowed hard. When he'd lived here, that had been his job. He brushed his hair out of his face and crossed the street.

Each step was painful. By the time he reached a dozen and stood in the driveway, he already wanted to turn back. Aaron was in the car. That was what mattered. That was his family.

So is this.

A grimace on his face, Chris continued, looking too much at his feet and the paved path to the door. At the door he closed his eyes completely and tried to breathe.

It should be automatic, but he felt like his body was forgetting to do it.

Even now his hands wanted to search his pockets, involuntary muscle memory guiding them to look for a key he no longer had. The new ones were the wrong color, and there were too many. They had a life and a home and too many dead-bolts protecting them from the reality of the life they'd chosen together. Chris swallowed again, gulping down what moisture he could.

It's a life together. With my love.

He took another breath, the kind he'd take at a meet to steady himself before a race. His lungs were still strong, even if competition was behind him. He glanced at the car. He could tell by the hunch of Aaron's back that Aaron was retreating inward.

"I have to do this, baby," Chris whispered. He wasn't even sure the words were audible. They didn't need to be. They'd discussed this often enough. Slowly, deliberately, Chris pressed the doorbell. The chimes sounded, dull and simple. When no one answered, Chris pressed the button again. He knew she was home. He knew she was alone. He could hear the steps. The pause at the far side of the door. He could picture her on the far side, holding a kitchen knife or a rolling pin. The thought made Chris smile, even though he knew she was chronically frightened, answering the door alone at night. Once he'd been old enough, he'd been the one that could protect her from that fear when his dad was gone. Now she didn't have anyone to do it.

The door cracked open. There was a clatter. A hand covering her mouth. A sob, choked out and desperate as tears welled at the corners of her eyes, at the corners of his. She rushed past the screen and folded him into her arms. It was desperately uncertain, but she squeezed harder than he'd ever known.

"Mom." It almost came out as a gasp, she was squeezing that hard.

She let go and moved to touch his hair, his cheek. She gripped his bicep and patted

a hand against his cheek, then hugged him again, just holding. If Chris was shaking, well, that was okay. He'd been denied this comfort over a year, and even though he had Aaron, it wasn't quite the same.

"Can I come in?"

His mom pulled away. She was thinking, calculating. He knew why and tried to pretend it didn't hurt. Chris didn't let it show on his face, but he knew he would be crying again later. She nodded quickly and retreated behind the screen door. She looked seriously both directions out the door before she closed it, like she was checking to see who was watching. Chris wanted to be offended, really. But he knew why. It was why he'd chosen this time. No one would be watching.

Once the door was closed, she picked up the fallen rolling pin and led him to the kitchen. It was what he expected. The living room, the TV, the whole house except for that space belonged to his father. The kitchen—that was hers.

She gestured to a seat, setting the rolling pin on the counter and pulling a pitcher from the fridge. Lemonade. She didn't drink it, and neither did his dad. Had she made it automatically this morning? Had she wanted him here that badly? She set the glass in front of him and though it was pained, she smiled and tousled his hair.

"It's too long," she said. In the light it was hard not to notice how much more gray was in her hair than he remembered.

"Knew you'd say that," Chris said, smiling.

Slowly, she took a seat next to him at the table. "He found you?" Her voice was soft.

Chris nodded. "Beaten and half-dead. Sat with me in the hospital till I recovered. Doctors said he wouldn't leave my side for a moment."

Tears were starting in her eyes again. "I told him. I told him if he loved you, if it was a good love, then God would help him find you." She held Chris's hands in hers. "And he did."

"Mom, I..."

"Hush. I just... I need to know. When did you know?"

"That's what you want to know? I've been gone a year!"

She looked away. "I can't leave your father. I love him. It's a good love. A strong love, even after..." She sighed. "I know this might be the only time I ever see you. I need to know..."

"... that he loves me?" finished Chris.

She nodded.

"You know that, though. He found me. You said yourself, that God would help him, if it was a good love." Chris stared at his hands. She was still holding them, cupped in hers.

"Please?"

Chris let his gaze stray around the room. It was much the same as it'd always been. Except there had been pictures of him once. Pictures that were gone. "He hates me that much?" asked Chris, his gaze pointedly on the spot that had once held a picture of him accepting a trophy.

She didn't say anything, only nodded, dabbing at her eyes.

"All those parties with friends," Chris said. "I was going to meet him. Maybe because it was so secret, it was close, that time—amplified somehow." Chris looked at her. "We were together two months before he kissed me."

His mother grimaced, nodding. "He made you feel good?"

"The best. He chaffed at it being so private, Mom, but he let me take that time. He let it go slow, way more slowly than any of my friends. And then he was kissing me. Mom, it felt right. I'd never felt so right and so scared in my life."

"But was that when you knew?"

Chris shook his head. "It caused a fight. Even though it felt so good and I knew it was what was right for me, I was terrified. We fought. Not that we'd never fought, but Mom." Chris paused. "It hurt. Deep in my chest like it was ripping out my soul. We didn't talk for a week. I thought my life was

over."

His mom looked at his hands. "I remember. You spent the whole week in your room crying. Your dad was so mad."

Chris bit his lip. "He offered me a chance. A night watching the stars. I seized it and afterwards, as we lay on the hood, I kissed him. Not him kissing me. Me kissing him. Felt it down to my toes." Chris looked at her. "I knew what he needed. What he'd wanted us to do. And I felt whole again, for the first time since we'd fought. I felt ready."

Chris couldn't hold his mother's gaze, not just now. "I made my choice then. I asked him to get naked with me." Chris couldn't help the smirk. "I learned what being whole meant, Mom. And I know it might seem like everything was physical. I'm a physical person, maybe that's part of it. But it was more than that. We made love. He's a part of me."

"He loves you."

Chris nodded.

"You know that means that this. You and me..."

"Because he's to you what Aaron is to me," whispered Chris.

"I can't give him up. If you were a little boy, maybe it'd..." she shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry."

Chris stifled a sob. "I love you, Mom."

"Shh, baby boy. He loves you." There were tears in her eyes. "You love him. And knowing that, sweet baby boy, knowing that makes this bearable."

"I should... I need to..."

"He's waiting for you?"

Chris nodded.

"Go. I trusted God that he'd keep you, love you. And he has. Trust that. He's the love you're meant to have. God's plan, baby. For you to be loved. Make it a good love."

Chris had never felt a more final sound than the door closing behind him. He stumbled to the car, and somehow got himself inside. All it took was a look for Aaron to hold him. He was loved.

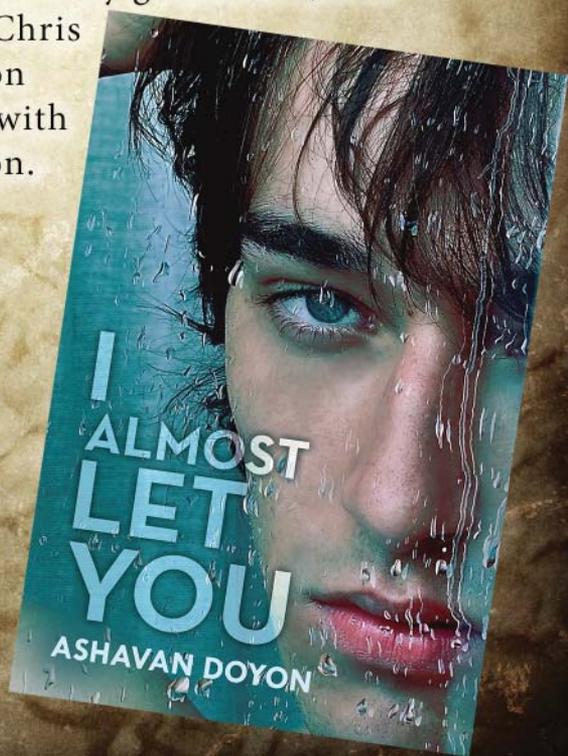
This is my family now.

I Almost Let You

by Ashavan Doyon

When Aaron refused to discuss getting married, he didn't expect Chris to take it so poorly. They've been together twelve years. Aaron thought they'd at least talk about his very valid reasons. Gay marriage isn't even legal in their state, and what do they need a piece of paper for, anyway? When Chris leaves after the fight, Aaron tracks Chris down just in time to see him about to lock lips with a stranger in a club, which drives home the situation's urgency. Aaron must make things right with Chris. He's willing to do anything, but their friends' advice only goes so far, and when he learns what Chris has been hiding, Aaron has to decide if a life with Chris is even an option.

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Work in Progress

Who is Rory Graeble?

People following me on social media know that I have been working for a rather long time on the next College Rose Romance. In fact, this one was started before *Andrew's Prayer* (released July 2015). It was upsetting, at the time, because I'd always intended to write Drew's story. I tend to favor stories that take characters people don't like very much and lift them up and show that maybe they are more complicated than the brief glance we get shows them to be.

But when I started writing Drew's story, Drew wasn't in a mood to be cooperative. That was good, in the sense that Drew's rebellion meant that he was alive enough in my head to have a story. But it was also inconvenient. As a full time working stiff who has to fit my writing into lunch hours and bits of evenings, I needed to be writing.

What I got was Rory. I didn't even have a @#!%\$ character named Rory! Except I did. I just didn't know it yet.

As it turned out, Rory was an evolution of the character of Lawrence. In *Loving Aidan*, Lawrence was one of two gay lit boys mentioned as steam tunnel dalliances in Aidan's quest to forget Michael. Unlike the very forward Drew who manages a proto-villain role, Lawrence is quiet and in the background. I had discarded him as a possible character to write about because I felt he was too similar to Drew and I didn't want that. Both I'd described as non-descript, somewhat geeky lit boys who dressed in

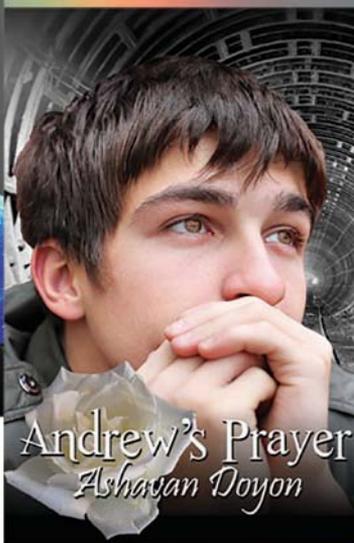
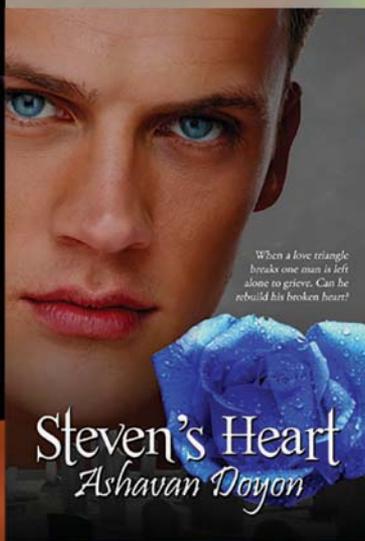
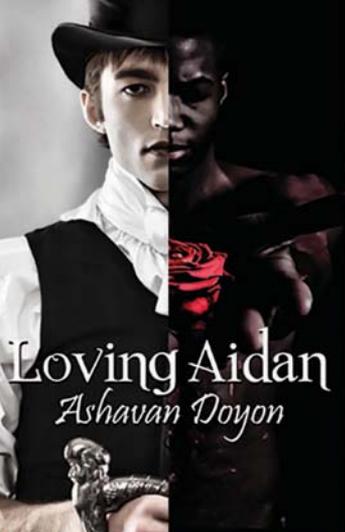
button down shirts, ties, and sweater-vests. I knew how I intended to make Drew interesting. Lawrence just wasn't.

And then Rory appeared in my head. He was excited and nervous and talking. He wouldn't shut up until I started writing. And when I did I discovered how very wrong I was. Rory wasn't just different than Drew, he was radically different. Expecting to write Drew's confident sensual character, I was thrust instead into writing a nervous character, tip-toeing into a sexuality he could only perform confidently when on his knees in the tunnels.

Unlike Drew, Rory takes being outed as an opportunity to reinvent himself. What would he become if he didn't have to worry about hiding anymore? What could he be if he wasn't wearing a mask named Lawrence?

The new leader of a reluctant gay community on campus, Rory begins, hesitantly, to make changes. He eschews the name Lawrence. He tries to find anything that isn't a sweater vest to wear. He starts going to parties that aren't the stuffy wine and cheese affairs that his literature crowd favors.

Like all my College Rose Romances, Rory has a rose associated with him—the orange rose that speaks to passion and intensity. Both things he finds in a fiery returning character we met first in *Steven's Heart*. Just who is it? Hopefully I'll break through these last few thousand words, and you'll get to find out soon.



*discover the
thrill of romance*

ASHAVAN DOYON

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