

his coat. "Assholes," he grumbled, flicking them off.

Danny stepped forward to say something but stopped when Leo grabbed his shoulder. When the kid was gone, Danny glared. "You let him get away with that?"

"He's young, struggling. He needed this job. He's going out for clients tonight, Danny, because we didn't give him a job."

"You don't know that."

"Yes. I do."

"Leo, this is a business. We have to be discriminating. Unless you want to get on stage again?"

"Can't."

"Won't more like." Danny shook his head. "It's been a fucking year, Leo. How did you let that guy mess you up like this?"

Leo sat at the edge of the stage. "He made me feel like that," Leo said quietly. "Like that kid who thinks that all that matters is his body and his dick. And then John made me feel like this body wasn't enough, and nothing else about me mattered."

Sighing, Danny sat down next to Leo. "John fucked you up, man. But your confidence can't be shot forever. You have to get out there, even if you can't do it on stage."

Leo fell backward against the stage. "Last date just left me at the table."

"Because you do this. It's a date, Leo. It's supposed to be about having fun and establishing attraction, desire, common interests. It's about making someone want more, and when you do this shit, you're proving John right."

It stung.

"Look, I get it," Danny said. "But you've let your whole world be about that. It's affecting you."

Leo clutched his head. "What do you want me to do?"

"Take a break. That cruise, the one you took with John. It's coming up, isn't it? Go. Get on that damned ship. Get laid. Get tan. Go dancing. Swim on the beach. Get yourself good and drunk and when you come back, for fuck's sake, leave the shade of your

fucking ex on the damn boat!"

Grunting, Leo sat up. "That's your prescription? Booze, boys and beaches?"

"Yes."

Leo looked at his dangling feet. "You'll hire the kid? With the brunet we saw earlier? If they do the routine together..."

"I'll have to talk to Jen."

Leo swung his feet back up onto the stage. He grabbed his shirt, pulled it back on, then hopped off the stage. Halfway to the door his step was interrupted.

"Make sure you bring real clothes."

"These are real."

"Leo, you're fucking gorgeous and you dress like you need to hide your body."

"I don't want them to see it. I don't want anyone to fucking see it!"

Danny's boots clapped against the floor of the club as he launched himself off the stage and then clacked against the floor with every step. "You don't have to show it off. But wear something that fits. Hell, wear those damned tropical shirts you love so much if you have to. At least they aren't hiding you."

"Not worth being seen, Danny."

"Fuck that. Pissed as that boy was, he would have gotten into bed with you in a second if you'd been offering."

"No, he wouldn't."

Danny grabbed Leo, turning him so they were face to face, eye to eye. "Yes, Leo. You are a gorgeous man. You used to know it. John was a stupid cheating schmuck. He spent months trying to get back with you. You think he did that because you're ugly? No. Even he knew you were worth it and that he'd messed up."

"He cheated on me!"

Danny patted Leo on the cheek. "Yeah. But that reflects on him, not you. Are you going to book that ticket? Or do I have to do it?"

THE LINE WAS AS LONG as he'd remembered it. Leo's suitcases had already been taken by the porters, he just had a small bag of

essentials. He watched the crowd, numbly. It was cheerful. That was to be expected, at Christmas. Young couples treating themselves to a vacation. Older couples avoiding the bustle of the holidays. College students avoiding home. As he moved from one line to the next, through security, establishing onboard credit, he watched the crowd.

He'd spent a week trying to blow it off before he'd come home to his apartment to Danny and Jen in the living room. They hadn't yelled. But they had packed for him, clothes he hadn't worn in a long time. Skimpy clothes. Sexy clothes. Tropical shirts. Boxes of condoms and lube—he swore there was enough for him to fuck a different boy every hour and still have some left over!

There were hot college boys in the line with him. Some of them had tells. Enough for him to know he could spend the whole trip in his cabin fucking if that's what he really wanted.

To one side, frequent cruisers slipped through a shorter line in a fraction of the time. Quietly escorted and shepherded through, the line drew Leo's notice only for the handsome African-American man who seemed to go through it all with a numb, vacant expression. He made Leo doubt every tell, too perfect to trust instinct not to be wishful thinking.

Leo watched the man slip through the lines and let himself smile at the what if.

"Passport, please," asked the person behind the counter, distracting him.

Leo quickly searched his pockets for his paperwork and handed it across the counter.

There were more lines, a dismally long wait at an elevator, and then he was in his room. He stepped out onto the balcony. The view right now was lousy, facing the city, but later he'd be able to look across the water. It was a splurge he hadn't made last trip. Danny had known that.

The knock on the door was insistent and came with instructions for the required

mustering drill. That reminded him too much of the last cruise, and he was so flustered the only man he noticed was from the activities staff. With what happened last time, it wouldn't have mattered if the guy had been perfect, all Leo could see was rage.

Cruises were meant to be pleasant and fun, and it wasn't long before every crew member was quietly prodding him to go to deck twelve for a party as the boat slowly pulled away from the dock. That was good. Leo needed a drink, and he got one as soon as he arrived, sitting at the bar and ordering something strong rather than tropical.

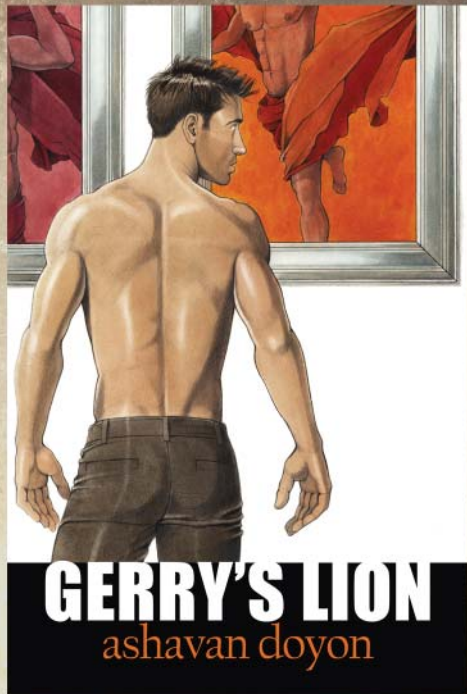
The dancers were already on the floor, trying to get a passenger to join them. The crew shimmied, shook and twerked away. Leo's breath caught. The African-American man he'd noticed in the regular cruisers' line was on the floor.

A red polo contrasted against the shade of his skin, and the man's shaved scalp was beaded with sweat. But what most attracted Leo was the expression on the man's face as he danced. While before he'd had a vacant, distant expression, as he danced it became joyful, ecstatic. The song slowly ended, and after he'd endured the embarrassment of being called out for his fantastic dancing, the man moved to the edge of the deck, eyes on the horizon.

Doubts filled Leo. This man was gorgeous, and while the dancing was a tell of its own, Leo still felt the awful twist of his stomach at the thought. *What if John was right? What if I'm just a whore?*

Leo pushed his drink away and licked his lips. "If I'm going to put this behind me, I have to start somewhere," he whispered. A smile formed slowly. *Besides, that's the cream of the crop. If he says yes, I could be in heaven for the whole cruise!*

Step by step Leo forced himself forward. All he had to do was say hello. Surely he could at least do that. In sexy, husky tones he'd had no cause to use in a year, Leo forced the words out. Fuck John. He was going to try. He had to.



Gerry's Lion

by Ashavan Doyon

Gerald Tanner lost the piece of his life he loved most, his husband Adam. When faced with the prospect of another Christmas with a family who thinks he's better off now that Adam is gone, Gerry decides instead to revisit the memory of when they met, and boards a Christmas cruise on the Sunrise. He's not expecting to meet Leo Ystrabov. He certainly never imagined the courageous young man would challenge him into feelings of desire and the possibility of a love that isn't his precious Adam.

Leo Ystrabov doesn't quite know how to handle the shattered heart Gerry presents so hesitantly. But the offer is precious, and Leo can't resist. However, with two families none too eager to accept them and a lot of baggage on both sides, their relationship faces an uphill battle. Leo will have to find his courage to be the lion Gerry sees in him.

Published by Dreamspinner Press

Work in Progress

Lightning Strikes

When I first made my plan for this issue of the newsletter, I was really expecting to be talking about my next College Rose Romance. The fourth, *Becoming Rory*, was just submitted to my publisher, and for the past three years, I've written the draft of one of these stories during National Novel Writing Month.

Becoming Rory was different. I wrote it over the course of a full year. When it came time for Nano, I was ready and expecting to start the next story, even though I don't know yet whether my publisher is going to take *Becoming Rory*.

I have ideas. The next two College Rose Romances are planned. I have titles, book cover ideas, and even characters in mind for both of them. In a lull during writing, I created a graphic for the next one: a handsome man over a stormy purple background with a lightning strike. Superimposed was the rose that told me what it was supposed to be about. Purple. A single word—beloved. My critics were just going to love me, as a purple rose is symbolic of love at first sight.

That's not the draft I wrote during November. It's a worthy story and the small graphic inspired a cover concept that I'll pitch, assuming my publisher takes *Becoming Rory*. But I needed a break, and so I wrote something very different. Inspired by the cover design for this issue, I wrote a story about a man touched by winter.

It's a modern fantasy story, rather than

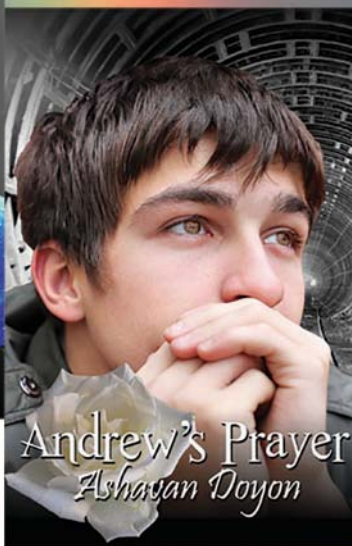
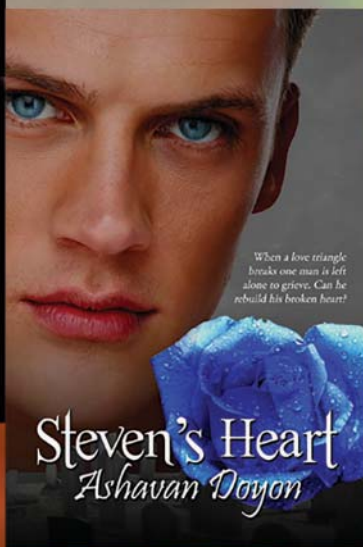
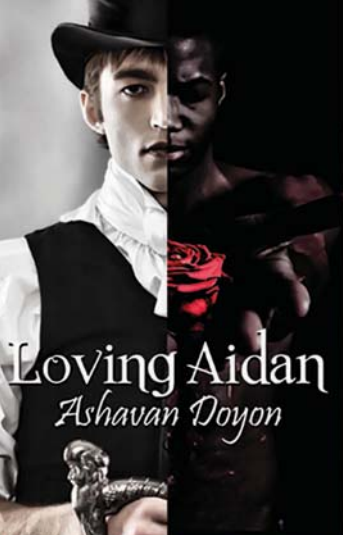
a strict contemporary. I liked the seasonal aspect, playing on perceptions of spring and summer as positives, opposite autumn and winter as seasons touched by death. What if those of the folk touched by autumn and winter were really rare, their births touched by sadness? And so I had two brothers. One is exiled into the realm of mortals, for autumn meant death to the folk. The other, winter, is tolerated only because winter is the renewal that allows spring to come.

The child of autumn is left ignorant of his heritage, making his way as a changeling child, fostered by parents who understand nothing of why he is different. This feeling of being alien and unknown by everyone is something he shares with a friend, and in secret they celebrate their shared difference in a forbidden relationship.

The relationship begins to awaken the power of autumn, and the folk, cloistered in their realm, consider the young man a threat to their own mortality. The king of the folk sends his warriors of the spring into the mortal realm to destroy the threat forever.

But the king had not counted on the possibility that a mother might love her exiled son, or that a brother might try to intervene, even into the mortal realm.

Lost is a story about self-reflection, about discovery, about the power of memories and of love, about loss and transformation. I look forward to sharing it with you.



*discover the
thrill of romance*

ASHAVAN DOYON

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