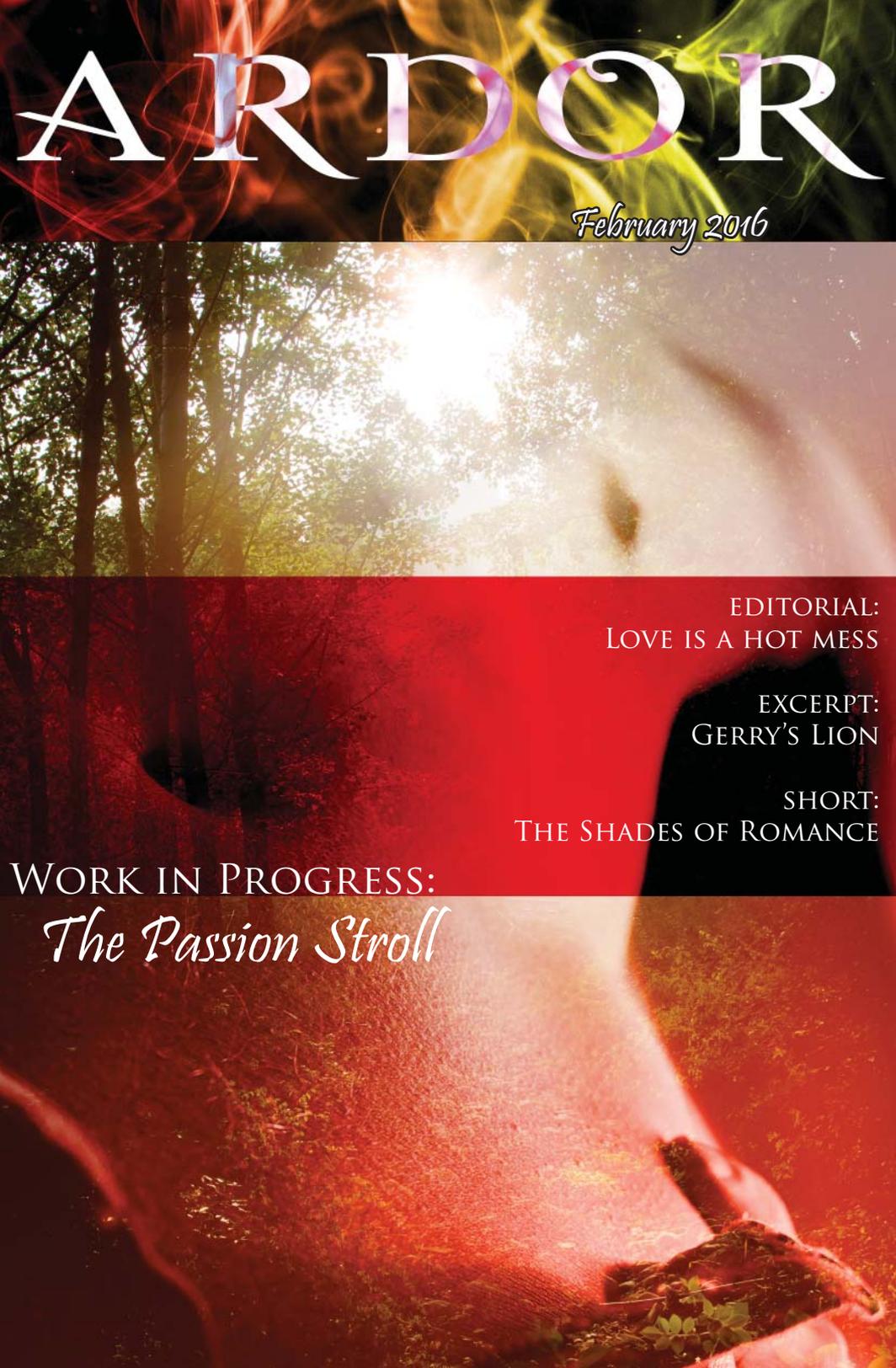


ARDOR



February 2016

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LOVE IS A HOT MESS

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THE NEWSLETTER OF ASHAVAN DOYON

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The Kings Mate
The Colors of Romance

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Gerry's Lion

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Loving Aidan
Steven's Heart
Andrew's Prayer
Becoming Rory (Coming Soon)

The Shades of Romance
Short based on characters from
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Editorial

Love is a Hot Mess

Valentine's Day has been very much on my mind. Not because it's February, but because my husband adores the chance to be sappy and romantic. I like that, but he usually expects the sap and romance to go both ways, and I despise Valentine's Day. It was that loathing that led me to the character of Theo Dwyer and writing *The Colors of Romance*.

What's wrong with Valentine's Day? There's plenty, but setting aside the usual arguments of it being overly commercialized and all that goes with that, my complaints are personal. For me, growing up lonely as a gay guy in an era before kids were forced to give their valentines to everyone or no one at all, I was the kid that got none. As I got older, that didn't change. Even in college, I was a big bearish guy in a community of twinks that wouldn't look twice at anyone who looked over twenty-three or had more than a twenty-eight inch waist.

Not that there weren't occasional chasers, even ones I dated. That gave me the opportunity to experience first-hand just how much getting dumped the night before Valentine's Day sucks.

I also had a friend commit suicide on Valentine's Day. I'm a reluctant celebrant.

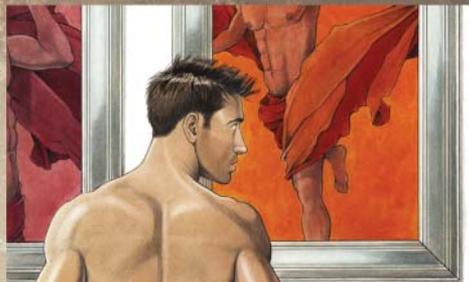
But I'm also married, and so my husband expects chocolates, flowers,

dinner—really all three—on a day when I want nothing to do with romance. And yet, like Theo, I crave it. I want the romantic soul that woos and pleads and desperately wants me. I want the mystery and the sweetness. I want the careful thought we see in @TruClrs4vr's daily missives to Theo. I want to feel that desired.

So every Valentine's Day, I shudder and I pick out cards and I wish I was remotely as creative as the character I created is. You might think I could channel my own character enough to come up with sweet things like he does for Theo. You'd be wrong. When I'm not writing and in someone else's head, I just don't have those ideas. I wish I did. @TruClrs4vr is quite a catch. I actually based him on someone I knew in college, though the sweet surprises he came up with for his partner were darker and more Goth inspired.

I keep trying though. I know that romantic soul is waiting to come out. Someday I'll manage to channel the romance in my own life and not just in stories. In the meantime... Love is a hot mess.

—Ashavan Doyon



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

Excerpt

From Gerry's Lion

Gerry walked quietly through the gallery. It'd been a long time since he'd done this. He stopped at each painting. He squatted and looked from the height of a ten-year-old, then stood, moved to one side, then the other, and then he moved to the next painting, and the next. There weren't many, and even those he did stop to view, he did so reluctantly. These were paintings he'd done while Adam was sick and in the months after. These were about pain and loss.

"You okay?"

He turned and smiled. It was very nearly Adam's face, and he surrendered

immediately to the embrace that followed the question. "Sorry. It's just hard."

"He'd have been so proud of you, son."

"Would he?" Gerry asked softly. He looked at the pictures. "I let myself wallow. That's what this is."

The man cupped a hand against Gerry's face. "You let yourself grieve. You think I'm done? You think Donna is? He's our son. We're not even close to done grieving. I want you to look at this," he said, gesturing to the painting Gerry had been looking at. "What is it?"

"Waking up alone."

"And this?"

*Gerry, you're our son,
too. Losing Adam—it
didn't change that*

"Watching him fade."

"Do you think everyone is so emotionally charged and skilled to know how to deal with those feelings? Do you think most of us can even describe them?" The man set a hand on Gerry's shoulder. "He would have been proud, son."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being here. Keeping me part of your family."

The man smiled, an older mirror of the smile that had brightened Gerry's life for so long. "Gerry, you're our son, too. Losing Adam—it didn't change that."

Gerry closed his eyes.

He could hear the footsteps. The click of a man's shoe. "This one is new."

"Yes," Gerry said, his voice very soft.

The steps paced for a moment. "What's his name?"

"Leo."

"He makes you happy?"

"Yes," Gerry managed, a guilty rasp. He didn't dare open his eyes.

"Good." His dad's hand settled on his shoulder. "Your mom is still struggling. The idea of you with someone else is hard for her."

"I'm still struggling," Gerry said. "I

don't understand why you can accept it so easily?"

"I remember sitting with Adam. It was right after that last set of chemo. We were watching him go, every day. All of us knew it, including him. He was so sad. Do you know why?"

"He was dying, Dad." It'd been a difficult adjustment at first. Calling this man 'Dad' as though they were father and son. That was how Adam's parents had wanted it, for him to feel welcome—part of the family. There were years where it felt awkward and forced, but those were far behind him.

"He knew that. He'd made his peace with what was happening. You know he had." Strong hands seized him by the shoulders and

turned him to look at the painting on the far wall. "Look at it."

"It makes me feel guilty."

"Son, Adam wanted you to be happy. He knew what the wish meant."

"Did he?"

Before his dad could answer, there was a sudden din, the sound of many voices, hushed but bolstered by numbers. Footsteps echoed in the empty spaces.

After a few moments his dad spoke, his voice quiet. "He'd have been proud, son." The steps moved away, and Gerry was alone. He stared at the painting. It was radiant, like the sun. Yellows and reds and oranges, a mane of light around a dark figure, dancing—Gerry, engulfed by his lion.

"Leo," he whispered.

A smile slowly came to his face as the room played host to a slow stream of young people, brought from far off on field trips. Museum showings were

easier. There was no pressure to sell. Not for these. These were recognition, dearly bought.

Every so often a teacher would come in talking about Gerald Tanner and his contribution to art. They'd talk about the change in tone, and how the paintings here were a departure. They'd stop next to him and smile at the picture of Gerry's lion, and say how this is what he was known for, putting joy and life and happiness to the canvas. He listened as they tried to put to words what the painting might symbolize.

Gerry didn't move for a long time, staying rooted to the spot. He knew there were tears on his face. *Oh, Adam, baby. I forgot to live. You wanted me to live.*

The sharp clicking of a woman in high heels came up behind him. He smiled. That was a step he knew. "Janice."

"The exhibit seems to be a success," she said.

"You were concerned?" He turned and looked at the overtly professionally dressed woman. "I've never failed you. Even when my name was new."

"Well, back then we were doing favors to be showing your work at all."

"And I'm returning the favor."

"They're magnificent, Gerry. But it's like fingernails on a chalkboard for the eyes."

Gerry shuddered. "Hardly a flattering way to put it."

"Pain and loss on canvas, Gerry? I would have preferred more like this one."

"Not every painting can be meant to pull in donors," Gerry said, turning to look back at the somber blues and whites that spoke of hospitals and loss. "Some still have to be art."

*I love that we meet TruClrs4vr in this sort of faceless way. He manages the mystery man exquisitely. But we can see from later in **The Colors of Romance** that he's very human and uncertain in all the ways gay youth are so often uncertain. Here's a part of the story from his point of view.*

Short

The Shades of Romance

I'M ALWAYS GROGGY when I wake up. I don't have an excuse, I grew up getting up earlier than most people can contemplate. But since I came to college my body's natural resistance to the effort has been rather more pronounced.

I have the usual rituals: a cold drink, a shower, brushing my teeth. When I get dressed I'm glad of my single room, because I'd hate to think of what the guys would think if they knew how long I spent getting ready, on making sure my jeans hug my ass just right. They just think I'm naturally rugged. I fucking work at it, harder than they can imagine. But I can't let them know, because if I did, they'd guess my secret.

Some days, most days, I wonder why I bother. If no one knows, how is anyone ever supposed to act on it? How am I ever going to find someone?

So I'm a downer. It's February, I'm twenty-one, and I'm a fucking virgin.

The reality is, it wouldn't matter if someone noticed my ass, or the deliberately just-tight-enough outline of my junk in my denims. I'm a hopeless case.

I moved to this dorm at the beginning of the year. Changing dorms and roommates every year is a defense. If no one really gets to know me, then no one can notice the little things, the tells, the way

I go out clubbing and always come home alone, even though they know girls have given me their number. But I'm lonely, and this way keeps my secret, but it makes me feel so alone—I hate it.

In the mirror blue eyes stare back at me. They seem haunted. Everyone tells me that they sparkle. That when I smile I have dimples. I don't see it. I'm just thankful my not-quite-long hair does what I want it to with just a few combs of the fingers. Not that I settle for just a few, because it has to be perfect. Playing baseball in high school kept me fit, and I know I'm lucky to be so muscular. Dad wanted me to play football, but how could I? Have you ever seen how tight a baseball uniform hugs your ass? And you're allowed to look! It definitely had to be baseball.

Come on, Aster. You're talking to yourself again. This is important. This is about him.

I saw him the first time the day I moved in. I knew his roommate, Jeremy. Fellow baseball fan. But his roommate? I honest-to-God, literally fell when I first laid eyes on him. Fell to the ground and pretended I'd fucking tripped. Theo fucking Dwyer. If God had a smile, that would be Theo. Most sexy thing? He has no idea at all how beautiful he is.

He's also hung. We live on the same hall

and share a bathroom. Yes, I've looked. Easy thing about men's bathrooms and looking—everyone is so busy deliberately not looking that it's easy to sneak a peek. Want to judge? Just don't. Seriously, I couldn't help it. He's gorgeous.

The worst part? This isn't some crazy lust that goes away in a week. That falling down? That was in fucking August. It's February. Every time I see him it's worse. When I talk to him? I'm just glad I can get the words out, terrified my name for him, beautiful, will slip out and he'll know.

When I get really lonely, I hope I'll slip up. But I've known I was gay since I was six and didn't have a word for it. I've been hiding it pretty much my whole life. The chances of that slipping out are about zero. Unless there's alcohol involved, so I usually drink alone. Drinking alone sucks.

Even though we're on the same hall, sometimes I think Theo doesn't even know I exist. Worry, fear. Those are better words for it. I don't think I can live like this much longer. But if I come out, if my parents find out, it'll break their hearts. So if I'm going to risk that, it can't be for a maybe. I have to know.

A quick text to Jeremy is all it takes to put my plan in motion, but I spend half an hour hunched over the toilet afterwards, sure I'm going to lose my guts. And I do. Why does this have to be so hard? But I've never told anyone. And just knowing that someone will be across the table, that someone else will know, that control over who knows about me will very suddenly be out of my total control—it's hard.

But I'm good at this part, at least. I brush my teeth again. I rinse with mouthwash. I chew some gum to get the horrid taste out of my mouth. By the time I meet Jeremy at the cafe, no one would know I'd spent the morning puking my guts out.

Jeremy's there already when I reach the cafe, cap backwards, clad in a loose t-shirt and faded jeans. He looks like a frat boy and I wonder for a moment why he didn't go that route. He flashes a smile and holds up his cup as I go to stand in line for my own coffee. The pastries are freaking expensive, but I promised Jeremy one for meeting me. I can't meet his eyes once I sit down.

He grabs the pastry off my plate and takes a bite. Jeremy doesn't have a bit of guile in him, and he takes his time savoring it. That's my fear. I'm not just telling someone, I'm telling someone I know can't lie to me. I trust him to try, but I know it won't work. He just doesn't have it in him.

He's licking his fingers, and he's enjoying that too. Finally he wipes his hands with his napkin. I'd love to know what his expression is like, but I still can't look at him. How can I be this afraid? This is my friend!

Jeremy drums his fingers against the table. It's a quiet seat in the corner. No one can hear us. Almost no one is here anyway, but I still automatically check. He's grinning like a maniac, and I know that's not just the pastry.

"What?" It's clipped and almost angry, but I can't help it.

The corner of Jeremy's mouth ticks upward. He sips his coffee and remains silent. Fingers drum against the smooth wood of the table. His eyes sparkle in a way I quite simply know mine never have. He's confident and sure and he's staring at me with eyes that live so fully I can only dream that I....

"Spit it out, Aster."

"What?"

He laughs. His smile is a genuine one, all boy next door. "You know what."

I look away. Am I that transparent?

"Jaz figured it out?" I croak out. I'm

proud that my voice doesn't actually break. It would make me happier. I met Jeremy through Jasmine. They've been dating for almost two years now, and she knew me before that. I'd feel better, less of a fraud, if she had been the one to spot me.

"You wish." Jeremy leaned in. His eyes caught mine and holy Hell, he knew. He wasn't guessing. He fucking knew. Bastard.

"How?" I closed my eyes. I couldn't look into that certainty, not right now.

"You have puppy dog eyes whenever you look at him."

"Theo," I whispered. Hesitantly I looked up to meet his gaze.

"Jaz didn't notice." Jeremy beamed. "Knew I was right."

I let out a breath, so slow, and tipped the hat I wore everywhere. "Does he know?"

Jeremy shook his head, leaning back in his chair. Somehow he managed to keep drumming at the table. "Nope."

"Valentine's Day is next week. If I asked him... I thought maybe a double date—"

"No." Jeremy's eyes were stormy.

"It'd be non-threatening!"

"That's my time with Jaz, man."

My throat felt like I was in a desert, dry and cracking. "What would she say?" I said, my jaw clenched.

"Fuck." He slammed his hand against the table. "You don't get it, man. Theo doesn't do Valentine's Day. He doesn't like it. He doesn't want to like it. This is a bad time."

I closed my eyes. "It's the best time. I can make him want it. I can woo him properly. I'm ready."

"You can?"

Jeremy's questioning look and furrowed brow made me think he didn't have much confidence in me. But I did. I was in love. I'd been in love with Theo for months. I'd

cursed it sometimes. I never believed in love at first sight until I saw that beautiful young man. Even now, just thinking about the moment had me breathless. I nodded. "I know he's old fashioned. I know he wants someone to sweep him off his feet and make him feel special. I can do that. I want to do that."

"Not for Valentine's Day, man. Trust me."

Just the words made my heart hurt. "All you have to do is ask him. Don't tell him who. Leave that up to me. I can do this. I know how."

"How are you going to do that when you can't even look me in the eye and tell me you're gay?"

I looked up and stared into the sparkle. "I'm a romantic. I know I can help him. I know I can show him a way to feel it. I have to. There's too much at stake. Jeremy, I'm in love with him."

Jeremy pulled his chair close to the table and leaned in, peering into my eyes, searching for something. Finally, he leaned back and reached for his coffee.

"He's going to say no. You understand that, right?"

I nodded, slowly.

"You'd better be serious. He hates Valentine's Day for a reason."

I swallowed. Did that mean Jeremy was going to do it? My thumbnail bit hard into my palm. "So, you'll ask him?"

"I'm thinking about it." His expression grew stern. "If he gets hurt..."

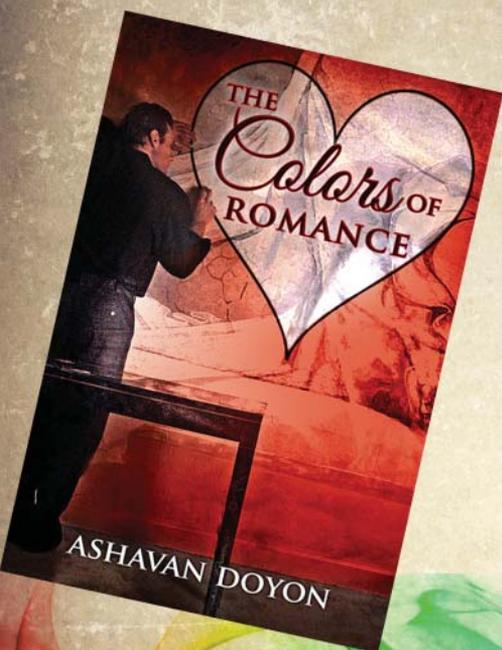
"All I want is a chance. Something to open the conversation, so that it doesn't come out of nowhere. I want to romance him not creep him out."

"And you think you can do that?" asked Jeremy.

"I know I can," I said. And I meant every word. I would do anything I had to. Flowers. Candy. Poetry. Theo would know romance. I'd make sure of it.

THE OF Colors ROMANCE

by Ashavan Doyon



A disastrous date during his freshman year of college has left Theo Dwyer with no faith in men, relationships, or especially Valentine's Day. When his roommate sets him up on a blind date, naturally Theo refuses. Then a persistent online suitor known only as TruClrs4vr begins sending Theo flowers and arranging romantic virtual meetings. After his treatment by his ex, Theo is reluctant to trust another man, but the determined TruClrs4vr might be the one to rekindle his passion, one color of the rainbow at a time.

Work in Progress

The Passion Stroll

I've known for a long time that I would need to start a blog. It's a reality of being an author in today's connected world. Facebook and Twitter are useful social media presences, but having and maintaining a blog is the authors chance at an ongoing conversation with readers. I've resisted for a long time. Part of that is a simple acknowledgement of the time commitment required—I've been a contributing author on a blog in the past, and I know what that workload is like. Part is also a question of content. What did I want the blog to be?

Over the past year I've contemplated the question, always promising myself that I'd get the blog started, and always balking. I want there to be a purpose, and that purpose can't just be for there to be a blog with my name on it. Even when I had an idea of what I wanted my blog to be, still I delayed. Fear and anxiety are powerful, especially when I have so many other projects competing.

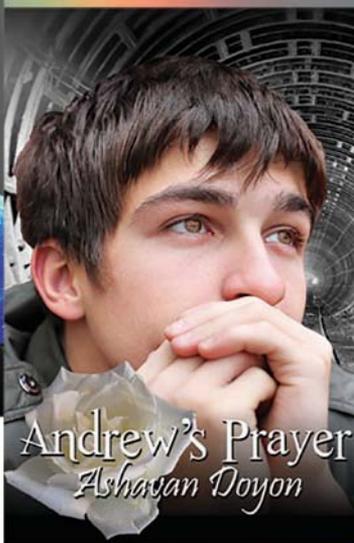
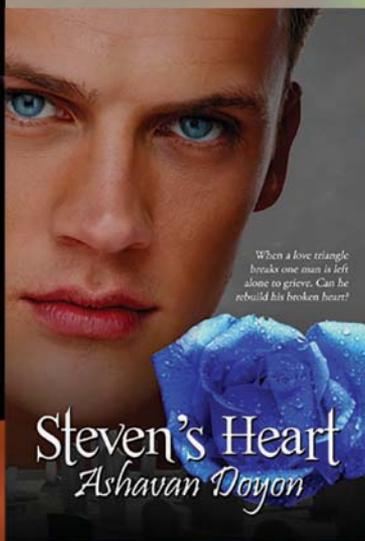
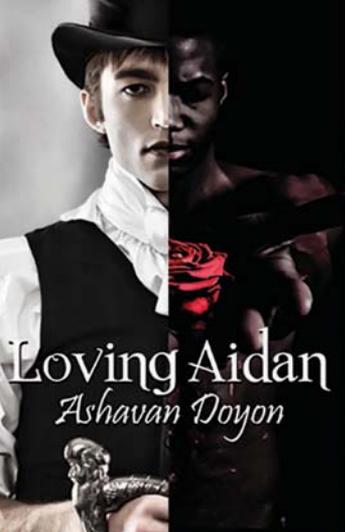
Finally, it was a story that made me come back to the idea. I think of reading sort of like taking a stroll. I'm a big guy and I end up on diets a lot, which means a lot of walking. And I hate that, because I don't like to walk. I like to stroll. I like to wander through the woods without any purpose other than taking in the

surroundings and letting my imagination loose as I go. I experience reading like that, and I expect many other readers do too. Romance—that's a special kind of stroll, one through passion and angst and love and sweetness and hope.

How did a story bring me back to that idea? Well, it was the sort of story an author loves to hate. A personal project, one that melded the favorite genre of my youth, fantasy, with the contemporary romances I write today. It's a mix I've played with a lot. I don't know whether there were too many fantasies in the pipeline when I submitted, or if I hit some unknown taboo. What I do know is that I couldn't find the story a home.

I toyed with the idea of self-publishing it. Growing up I spent meager allowances on books, and I remember getting my first job because paperbacks jumped from a standard \$2.99 price point to \$4.99 in the course of just a couple years. Because of that, the price of ebooks sometimes shocks me. It'd be a welcome change to set my own price.

Ultimately, I decided to share it—piece by piece, on my blog. It'll take about a year to post all the chapters and in between there will be musings and discussion, and yes, the evils of promotion. I hope you'll join me.



*discover the
thrill of romance*

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