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*by Lawrence Dagstine*



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# The Romance of Vegada

*Lawrence Dagstine*

Esposito Vegada was spending the first dark hours of night as he so often did, roaming around the endless maze of silent, empty rooms. Foaming at the mouth, feeling his own skin crawl, hearing his own footsteps echo through the cavernous hallways, seeing his own reflection in the grand ballroom lined on one entire wall with mirrors, hearing only his own voice; sometimes a muffled growl, other times not, knowing either way that there was no one to answer.

This was what it meant to be lonely.

The house was palatial. A huge estate built almost a century earlier, when his great-grandfather, Senor Elio Vegada, came from Barcelona and made his fortune in the shipping industry. A fishing port off the Spaniard coast known as Calienté. As for the estate, there were more than twenty rooms in this three-story mansion. Esposito knew that well. For a while now he had been examining them, spending these long, empty nights exploring each one. There were small dens and drawing rooms, pantries and sitting rooms, bedrooms and parlors. But it was just recently he had inherited them, furnished in the lavish décor of his roots; all were decorated ornately, in the style of Spanish kings. Hand-painted murals and small tapestries on the walls and ceilings of spice-bearing ships and conquistadors, gold trim around the windows, thick carpets, and lush velvet curtains. Yet this glorious mansion had fallen into ruin. The paint was peeling, the wooden floors and tiling in some rooms loose and dull, the rich fabrics tattered and covered with cobwebs, irremovable stains, and dust. Roaming through the house, he deplored its decay, fantasizing about the happiness

and laughter for which it had served for almost a century as a backdrop. For his great-grandfather the place had signified privilege and the realization of an American dream, but his children and their children had had no interest in maintaining it. They'd moved to the city, finding the upkeep of a country estate a burden. *How ironic*, he thought angrily, glancing around at the worn splendor that surrounded him these past few weeks, experiencing a mixture of appreciation and contempt. To think that his great-grandfather built an estate, an empire, with the money he made from being a shipping mogul. That even now he was able to live off the inheritance from his fortune, yet also destined to spend his life burdened with a curse that enslaved him to these dark corridors.

Little remained in the way of furnishings. That was all long gone. He himself needed little; still, he mourned the loss of those objects of honor and beauty even as he disdained the family that had acquired them. His family. Having been born a Vegada was, after all, what had burdened him with this loathsome curse. While he didn't understand how it had begun, he fully understood how it had sentenced him to a lifetime of loneliness, of misery, of living in the shadows. For some time now he had done genealogical research, studied his past, and acquired knowledge of what he was; just about anything or everything pertaining to his bloodline. But tonight the anger gnawed away at him even more strongly than usual. Looking in the grand ballroom mirror, he once again found himself thinking about a woman: long, flaxen-blond hair and green eyes. She was beautiful, he reminisced. What a mixture of emotions he'd experienced that afternoon when she'd approached him by the maple in the woods. He'd known she was coming, of course. And it wasn't just that he had been able to hear her and pick up her distinctive scent—a unique mixture of fragrant soap and the

subtle fragrance of daffodils as if their petals had been rubbed into her skin...

No. It was more. Lately a new feeling had been coming upon him, the feeling that the two of them were playing out a large role in a script that had been written long before either of them had even walked the earth, a role that led them to each other, dictated that they find each other...

"No!" he spoke aloud, his voice echoing in the eerily silent room.

This was dangerous thinking. To entertain the idea—or just imagine that they could ever be together—to want it so badly that he might allow himself to believe, even for a moment, that it could really happen. Yet he could not deny his feelings for her. For the first time in his life, he had fallen in love.

How long he had anticipated this moment. Dreading it, welcoming it, hoping it would come, praying it would stay away. He had waited for this, waited for the one person who would test him; somehow he'd suspected that the fragile rhythm he had created, the routine he had fashioned for himself out of chaos, definitively, would one day be disrupted. And he'd known, deep in his heart, that when things of this nature did happen, he would have no control over it whatsoever. Oh, God! How he deplored his wretched condition! To love...yet to know he could never act on that love. What misery could be more devastating? What trial more difficult to endure? As he paced up and down the ballroom, his eyes fixed on the gray marble floor, he felt as if someone were trying to wrench his heart out of his chest.

*Julia Englewood.* To him her name sounded like angels singing. And already it was embedded inside him, even though he might spend the rest of his life doing what he could to banish it. *Julia.* What was it about her? The feelings or honesty with which she spoke to him? The look in her deep-green

eyes, so innocent, yet at the same time so alluring and wise? The ability to feel and to know, to understand and to give? He sensed that it was all as much a part of her as it was of him.

Maybe, just maybe...

No! There it was again.

Even before he would allow himself to think such thoughts, he had to shut his mind off and put a stop to them. It was impossible. It was too dangerous to think that he could ever pretend he was like everyone else. Even to fantasize that there might be someone who could understand and accept him was foolish. Yet already he had stepped over the line. Twice he had reached out to her. He had taken the kind of risk he had sworn all his life he would never take. The conversation in the woods by the old maple tree, writing those poems, even without putting his name to them, was enough to put himself in peril of overstepping the boundaries which were designed to keep his secret safe. Still, he hadn't been able to resist. Looking at her, seeing her, just feeling her pain and depression had made him forget all of his own resolve. For the moment, nothing had mattered but her...and his feelings for her. The love he was now carrying in his heart had blinded him, obscuring the rational thoughts that made it possible for him to have survived so far.

Suddenly an idea came to him. He ran out of the ballroom, heading down the long corridors toward the primary drawing room. There, he flung open the closet door and dragged out a wooden crate. It was massive, easily five feet high, and so wide that it was a struggle to ease it through the doorway. It reminded him of old wooden treasure chests, often used by Spanish sailors during shipments. He had found it when he first came to the house, one of the few things that wasn't opened or hadn't been stolen, sold,

or destroyed. He pried it open with ease, the wrought wood offering little resistance to his strength. Inside were countless antiques and treasures. Old things. An array of wonderful little trinkets that once upon a time had belonged to someone in the family, most likely a woman. He didn't know her name; she was a Vegada and it didn't matter. What did matter was that he finally knew what he would do with them. They were worthy of a princess. And he knew, when he first met Julia Englewood, that he had found that princess.

He took out each item, one at a time, handling them all gently. A hard-carved wooden jewelry case, the palest pink trimmed with gold leaf; a delicate figurine of a young shepherd tending two timid lambs; a handheld mirror which reflected an "eye of the beholder"-type gaze through its eccentric glass shape. Not every object was beautiful. Wrapped in tissue paper was a conquistador helmet and face mask that were adjoined to each other, a grotesquely distorted facial plate so bizarre that it elicited a deep, primal fear.

There were other things as well, beautiful things, mostly fine things; too good for just anyone, but perfect for her. His heart pounding, he studied them piece by piece, spread out before him on the floor. He considered every item, trying to see each one through her eyes. After a long deliberation, he finally made his choice.

The poetic locket.

Yes, he was taking a risk. He knew that. But he still believed he could keep it under control, express his love for her and still be a part of her life. Nevertheless, he would have to be careful never to let her find out; she must never even suspect. He had been a master of deceit for so long—for

almost eight years now, ever since he had learned the truth about himself. Surely he could continue even as he tried to reach out.

He felt fired by his resolve. Yes, he was determined to continue. Not try. No, no—dare! And he would be so careful that no one, not even she, would ever guess the truth or know otherwise.



*Like shining stars and gentle rays of sun,  
Like sand dunes and the blue of the sea,  
Like mounds of snow and falling rain,  
My love, together we can never be...*

"Huh?" Julia Englewood was confused. "I...I don't get it. How can he give me a locket with such beautiful poetry but not want to be with me? Am I not pretty? I don't understand. Is there something wrong with him? Is there something wrong with me?"

For a week these questions ran through Julia's mind, and more than anything she wanted the answers. And, if she had to, she would go to the one place in town she saw him most. It was the one place, other than the old maple, she saw him at regularly.

The library.

Out on the edge of Grayrock, an air of desolation hung as thick as the fog that blanketed the woods she frequented. Overhead the pale afternoon sun was barely visible against the gray cloudy sky as she struggled to

maneuver her bike over the narrow dirt road, pitted and uneven from years of neglect.

Quimby Way was treacherous, an endless path of sharp turns and unexpected twists, both in and out of town, that snaked up into the hills. All around her were rotted fences, jutting out from fields of weeds. She hadn't been on this road since she was a child, when she and her girlfriends used to head out on their bicycles in search of adventure. She was dismayed over its state of disrepair. Yet what struck her most was the silence. Nothing, not even birds, seemed to dwell here. She felt it was Esposito who had compelled her to come here to the outskirts of town. She loved the woods; she was very much a loner in her older years, and she had to see him. Poetry or not, her desire to be with Esposito had grown to a longing that was almost desperate.

She had no idea where he lived. He didn't hang out at the arcade or diners or pizza parlors like most twenty-one-year-olds. He liked to read. Read and borrow books an awful lot, he told her. That's what he said that day in the woods. So she stopped in at the library, hoping that someone there might know.

"Now let me see," said Ms. Hanson, the library clerk. She'd retrieved a box of file cards from under the counter and shuffled through them, peering through her eyeglasses. "He did apply for a new card recently. I believe his old one expired, so I should have—Oh, yes, here it is: Esposito Vegada...Quimby Way."

"Has he been in here today?" Julia asked her.

"If I remember correctly, I believe he was interested in some Latin literature."

"What kind of literature?"

"Oh, nothing specific on hand. We're a very small branch. We don't have the titles or mainstreamers most of the bigger city libraries have. Grayrock has much more than we do."

"Well, what was the last title he borrowed and returned?" Julia then asked.

Ms. Hanson checked the computer now. "It was yesterday," —and in turning, she popped her head in the return cart and pulled a book—"hasn't been put back on the shelf yet. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, very much."

The library clerk shrugged her shoulders and handed her the book.

Julia figured if she could learn some of Esposito's reading interests, his tastes in literature, they would have more in common, more to talk about. It might even lead to him wanting her, getting closer. But when she saw the title on the front of the book she was slightly taken aback. Why would he be reading this? Surely this was not something a poet would read.

"Hmm...The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Analyst's Guide and Compendium to Lycanthropy," she read aloud, and then started flipping pages. She turned to the very middle of the book, which offered an extensive folklore section on Europe. The folklore was analyzed and dissected to the very last detail by various historians. The page with Spain's introduction had a post-it note for a bookmark. "The Wolves of Calienté."

"Pardon," said Ms. Hanson.

"Oh, nothing." Julia paused briefly, and then: "Is this book fiction?"

Ms. Hanson took it back and looked at it. "I believe this is a rare copy. Purely for research purposes. I'm surprised this title is among our stock."

"Yes, but is it fiction or non-fiction?"

"My dear, if it's for research purposes then it's obviously non-fiction."

Julia was silent for a moment.

"Would you happen to know where the borrower of this book lives?" she then asked the library clerk.

"I'm really not allowed to give out personal addresses," Ms. Hanson replied.

"Please," Julia begged her. "This is an emergency. I need to find this man."

The library clerk frowned. "Well, if it's an emergency. Hmm...The only house I know of on Quimby Way is that dilapidated old estate. What is it called? Lunacy Manor?"

Julia was startled. "Esposito lives at Lunacy Manor?"

"I highly doubt it. Nobody's inhabited that old haunt for years. I'm surprised the Board of Health hasn't had it leveled by now." Ms. Hanson shook her head. "I think there must be some mistake."

But something told Julia there was no mistake. "I suppose you're right. Well, thanks anyway," she told the librarian, then exited the building and rode her bike back toward Quimby Way.

Something was out of place. Julia had an even stronger sense that she was on the right track when she rounded the final bend in the road. The off-beaten path, which no one must have traversed in years, was barren. But there Lunacy Manor was, rising up suddenly from above the tall thin trees that separated it completely from the rest of the world. Ever since Julia was in grade school, the mansion had made her think of a European castle. Made of columns and stones that were pale gray, its two imposing wings were joined by an awe-inspiring center tower, which gave the impression it *was* designed like a castle.

Undeniably an historical showplace at one time, it was now forbidding. Even in the bright afternoon light, it was shrouded in shadows. The darkened windows resembled dozens of unseeing eyes. Julia's spine tingled as she leaned her bicycle against a tree, then cautiously made her way toward the steps and front door. Up close, she could see that the house was in a terrible state of decay. As she entered the garden area, many of the stones were pitted or disintegrating—the victims of decades of neglect. The flowers in the garden were wilted, the brick path leading from the driveway up to the front door overgrown with weeds. She stopped at the foot of the stairs. She wondered if the crumbling steps would support her weight. It was growing more and more difficult to believe that anyone still lived here, but somehow, for Esposito, a young man who read books and kept to himself, it made sense. But what about his parents? Nevertheless, she reached for the heavy brass knocker.

After awhile the door opened and Esposito peered out, his expression quickly changing from fear to astonishment. "Julia!" he gasped. "Wh...what are you doing here?"

"Can I come in?"

He hesitated for a moment, as if deciding, then stepped aside to let her in.

"Thank you."

Relieved, Julia walked into the foyer. It was so dark it took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust. She found herself in a huge entryway that led to a dramatically high marble staircase, edged by an intricately carved wooden banister. On either side of her were cavernous rooms but, nevertheless, the interior of Lunacy Manor was in the same state of decay as the exterior.

"I didn't think you lived here," she said. "Of all places. I guess being a Vegada has its advantages."

Esposito faced the floor. "I suppose," he said.

She could imagine these rooms having been elegant. But now they contained barely any furniture; the few pieces that remained were vandalized and worn and obvious casualties of time. Piles of rubble were pushed into corners, plaster worn and paint peeling, decorative trim faded. And everywhere there were shadows, as if there was not enough light in the entire world to bring this place alive again.

"It's going to be beautiful tonight," Julia then said. "Sky's clearing. Full moon."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Esposito mumbled to himself.

"Pardon? I didn't catch that."

"Sorry, but you shouldn't have come," Esposito said as evenly as he could. He was standing behind her as she surveyed the decrepit mansion that was his home.

She quickly forgot all about her bizarre surroundings. "You don't understand. I *had* to see you," she explained, turning to him.

"You don't belong here," he said in the same monotone.

"Oh, Esposito, just hold me!" Disregarding his sudden coldness, she wrapped her arms around him. Clutching his shoulders, she gazed up at him. Much of her was lost in his eyes...the eyes she searched for warmth, sincerity, the appreciation she so desperately craved. A sense of comfort; she needed him to tell her she was wanted and that she wasn't alone.

A small eternity passed. Finally she felt what she had yearned for for so long: he clasped his arms around her lovingly, drawing her close. She collapsed against his powerful chest, a feeling she couldn't remember having

felt for a long time. It was *wonderful*. She raised her face to his. The intensity in his blue eyes created a stirring of emotions deep inside her. And then he leaned forward, slowly pressing his lips against hers. Gently at first, as tentatively as if he were asking a question. But his kiss grew more ardent. Julia was astonished by the passion with which he responded. Eagerly she gave in to it and, reaching up, encircled his neck with her arms, her body melting against his.

Finally he drew back, nuzzling her neck. "My Julia," he whispered, his breath hot against her skin.

"Hold me," she pleaded, clinging to him.

He grasped her even more tightly. "Oh, Julia." He embraced her so softly and so tenderly, holding her as if he could infuse her with some of his own strength. "I just want us to appreciate this moment. At least for now."

He took her gently by the hand and led her through the rest of the house. She was breathless as she took it all in, the size and structure. Room after room, each one more beautiful than the last...all of them having slipped into ruins over the years, as if they'd been cursed. There was so much she wanted to know, yet she didn't dare ask. Instead she concentrated on Esposito and the wonder of the two of them just being together, hand in hand. Out back was an old grove. She could tell that, like the rest of the house, it had once been an enchanted place. Now it looked just like the front of the house, covered with weeds, the meandering paths barely visible to the naked eye. In one corner was a fish pond, an oddly shaped pool of water that was now murky and covered with algae. There was a fountain of a dog where the stubby patches of grass pushed through, and it too was covered with algae. In the distance was a plant maze, fashioned from shrubs that over the years had become oddly misshapen.

Despite its decline, Julia was awestruck, and even perhaps a bit intimidated, by its grandeur.

"It's magical!" she breathed, sinking onto a crumbling concrete bench. "There isn't anything bad I can say about it. How did you come to live here?"

"Inherited. My family owns this estate. My great-grandfather built it after he made a fortune in the shipping industry." He glanced around with a rueful smile.

"Where is he now?"

"He died a long time ago. His son, my grandfather, had sold the business and established himself outside of Grayrock, so he just closed it up. When he died six months ago, I decided to move back to Grayrock and open the place back up. The will stated everything was left to me when I turned twenty-one, and so here I am. Living among the Vegada family inheritance."

"Isn't it lonely, living here by yourself?" Julia asked with concern.

A startled look crossed Esposito's face. Then, in a dull voice, he told her, "I've been alone my whole life."

They sat together for a long time, hands locked together, enjoying the garden, allowing the peacefulness of the place to settle over them. Julia told him so much of what was in her heart—the pain, the confusion, even the hope. Once again she was surprised by how easy it was being with him. Talking to him. Trusting him.

"Let's go inside," he suggested when the sun began dipping in the sky and the late autumn breezes grew stronger.

He led her back into the house, this time going off in a different direction. He held her hand the entire time, and a moment later they ended

up in the ballroom. Julia let out a gasp. What a marvelous room! Her eyes traveled upward, taking in the hand-carved running frieze joining the walls to the ceiling, the elaborate gold-leaf trim, the ornate cornices above the windows.

"Oh, Esposito, it's breathtaking," she cried, taking his arm. "This house is like something out of a dream. Wouldn't it be wonderful if together we could bring it alive again? Just imagine! We could make it just as beautiful as it was when your great-grandfather first built it. I could work in the garden. I'll bet that in a single summer I could get it back into terrific shape. And inside, we could refurnish and paint and make repairs..."

She cast a sidelong glance at him, eager to see if he was with her. Instead, the look on his face frightened her.

"What is it, Esposito?"

"It's hearing you talk like that."

Julia bit her lip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Don't you see, Julia?" he cried. "Don't you know that's what I want, too? For us to be together? More than anything. I'd give anything, Julia, if we could make it happen!"

"Why can't we?" Julia said, undaunted by the force of his words.

"We can't see each other anymore," Esposito said evenly. "Accept that. I hope you understand."

"All I know is that I love you," she said quietly, "and I want to stay with you. I want you badly." She took a step forward then, her eyes locked on his, saying with her body what she could never put into words. Holding her breath, she waited for his reply. But instead of him melting against her the way she'd hoped, she felt his muscles tense.

"No, Julia. Don't."

"But I do love you! I can't stop thinking about you. I—I don't want to stop!"

Esposito buried his face in his hands and paced about the room, talking more to himself than to Julia. "I was afraid of this. I tried to stop it, I thought perhaps I could control it—"

"Esposito, what is it? Why is it wrong for me to love you? Was our walk in the woods that day worthless, your poetry, or this locket you sent me? Was all this for nothing? Tell me! Why is it wrong for me to love you?"

"No! You don't understand." As Esposito turned to face her, Julia expected to see anger in his blue eyes. Instead, she saw depression. "I'm not what you think I am."

"But Esposito—"

"Go away, Julia," he pleaded. "Before it's too late. There are things about me, horrible things you don't know."

"Then tell me," she pleaded in a tender voice. "I want to know everything."

"You couldn't possibly understand *this*."

"I understand how I feel, what my heart is telling me. I understand, probably for the first time in my life, what it truly means to be in love. And I know you feel the same." She moved toward him, but he stepped back. As he did, she gave way to anger. "You're right, Esposito. I *don't* understand. But at the same time I also see that there could be something special, something wonderful between us. And you know it. Why, there already is—or at least I thought there was. You're afraid of it. That's it. You're turning your back on it."

"Listen to me, Julia! It's not what you think!"

"I don't know what to think. All I know is that you're sending me away. But I don't want to go. Yet if I have to, I will. You're not the only man in the world who could possibly care for me."

"What are you talking about?"

A surge of power rushed through her as she said, unable to stop herself, "Like you, I have been a loner far too long. There could be someone else. Another, who pours out his heart to me in beautiful poetry...someone who's not afraid of giving the same love in return!"

She whirled around, racing toward the door of the ballroom, crying. Never in her life had she sobbed so much. It was as if someone had pulled her heart out of her chest and stomped on it. She heard him say her name once more.

"Julia!" It came out like a groan, more a desperate plea than a cry. "Wait!"

She turned around. "What is it?"

Esposito looked out the nearest window. "The moon is full. It's coming."

She was slightly confused. "What's coming?"

"The family curse," he said. "The reason why I must live my life alone."

"What curse?" Then she remembered the book he had returned to the library.

"A long time ago, there was a curse. This curse took place off the fishing port, Calienté. The Vegada family, my family, were affected by it."

"Esposito, tell me...what are the Wolves of Calienté?"

"They are my ancestors. I am a descendent of Calienté."

"But what is it?" she practically yelled at the top of her lungs. "Tell me!"

He handed her a poem, folded up, then faced the window and shouted at her, "Go! Arrgghh...Please, before it's too late..." He looked like he was in pain.

She took the poem and didn't turn back. Instead she rushed outside. The air was tinged with iciness. The approaching dusk was already painting the sky with purples and oranges, the towering trees darkening against the fiery backdrop. As she reached the gates, she realized she had left her bike behind. Going back for it, she dropped her jaw in fright! Esposito was standing outside the house. His body was convulsing. "Esposito?"

No, not convulsing. *Changing.*

He noticed her and said, "Please, Julia, don't look at me!" Then he roared and made for the woods. As for Julia, she found no comfort in her surroundings. Her pain was so wrenching that between the darkening landscape and Esposito going through some kind of metamorphosis, misery only served to heighten her feelings of loss and hopelessness...



*This curse that I long to flee, to hide,  
This burden, all of it, is hard to bear,  
But along with the misery, the torture,  
It's not so bad, because I know you care...*

Esposito's folded-up poem. Deep inside the torment was so great he feared it would consume him. Perhaps that was why he wrote it.

Now more predator than human, he roamed the forests of Grayrock, his heart heavy with remorse and shame. His hunger, his appetite—all had been forgotten. The gnawing emptiness in his stomach, compared to the intense loneliness that ate away at him, was like nothing he'd ever felt in this state. Julia. Hopefully she understood. He had seen it in her eyes. The shock, the horror...and above all, the pain he had caused her. The thing he had feared most had finally come to pass.

She now knew him for what he really was.

Throwing back his head, he let out a mournful howl. Yes, he was still a beast, a werewolf, a tortured soul destined to undergo shapeshifting once a month. This time, however, the line between the man and the beast was thinly drawn.

This time, his body was that of an animal...but his mind was that of a human.

It was *her*. She had done this. The power of her emotions had weakened the pull of whatever source of evil was responsible: she had instilled in him a sense of control unlike any he had ever before experienced under the full moon, the curse. Her love for him had been so strong that when it came face to face with the power of the curse, love had triumphed. Still, he knew that he did not deserve that love. How could he, when over the past eight years he had killed? How could he, when his legacy was to change into a monster every time the moon was full? How could he deserve her love, when he lacked the strength to combat the forces that preyed upon him? He wandered through the woods, keeping himself hidden amongst the trees' shadows...loathing what he was, wishing it could be different.

Knowing it never could.

And then, as if being led by some supernatural force, he found himself at the edge of a lake. He was far inland, he knew, farther than he usually traveled during his once-a-month nighttime forays. The lake was beautiful, stretching out before him like a sheet of glass; the bright light of the moon glinted off the tiny ripples of its surface.

He sensed the water was deep. He understood then why he had been brought to this spot. The evil force had led him here, to his destiny. He stood at the edge of the lake, imagining how it would feel—plunging into the icy water, allowing the liquid to surround him, to overpower him, to suck him down into its depths. The fact that it would relinquish control.

For a moment he was certain it was the only path to follow. He yearned to let go, to give it up. To end the torment, to admit defeat. And yet, despite the lure of abandoning the fight, there was some other force acting on him as well. Yes, that cursed moon, still high above him in the night sky—gazing down at him, laughing at him, as always seeming to mock him—yet the dark purple horizon was already growing paler. The morning mist, as thick and white as a veil, was settling in over the woods, working its way into the deep shadows, covering the darkness like the first snowfall of the season. Soon the night would end. He was already changing, shifting back to a man. The brown hairs covering his limbs were growing sparse, and he could feel his muscles losing some of their strength. His eyes were turning blue again, his jaw was getting smaller, his features beginning the metamorphosis from that of an animal to that of a human.

And then suddenly he saw something move. He turned, slightly tense. There had been a movement from deep inside the underbrush. He was not alone. That much was obvious. Now he peered through the mist, curious

about who, or what, was seeking him out. He braced himself, expecting to feel the presence of evil...

Julia emerged through the white swirls of fog. Her green eyes and long blond hair, wild and free, framed the soft, gentle features of her face. It was as if a beam of light had penetrated the darkness that had befallen him.

Her expression was one of total serenity. All-knowing. Forgiving. Gracefully she walked across the forest floor, holding up the hem of her dress to keep it from getting caught on the brambles. He watched, spellbound. She looked like a vision of loveliness. But she wasn't a vision. She was real.

His Julia was coming to him.

His first instinct was to flee, to hide from her in shame. But he saw there was determination in her step as she made her way toward him, a certainty that what she was doing was the right thing.

From her, he gained a sense of strength. He stood before her, half-man, half-beast. Prepared, for the very first time, to show her what he was.

The moon's glow was fading as the darkness of the night recoiled in deference to the approaching dawn. Yet even in the pale light, as he took a step toward her, he could see the love shining in her eyes; having finally reached an understanding of his curse only made her love for him even stronger.

"You came," he said, his voice hoarse.

"Yes," she said simply.

As she studied him, his expression was tense and uncertain. His face was the same—his blue eyes, his strong features—yet fine brown hairs clung to his cheeks and chest. While his hair was still the same shade of brown, its

texture was that of a wolf's fur, thick and smooth and gleaming. "You want to be with me, Julia? Now when you finally understand—?"

She held a finger up to his lips, then reached for his hand. Smiling up at him, she said, "I love you." She felt him stiffen.

"How could you possibly love me, now that you know what I really am?"

"Don't you see?" she cried. "It's a relief, finally being able to understand." She squeezed his hand. "True, I know what you are. But it doesn't matter. I can't just deny what's in my heart. You and I belong together."

"Then you'll stay with me? Please, Julia. Tell me you'll stay. Please, say you'll help me!"

"I believe love can conquer any curse," she said. "We must believe that love is our only hope."

In the pink light of the dawn she could see their reflection in the lake's glassy surface—the two of them, clinging to each other. Experiencing a love so deep and so pure that no obstacle—not even this—could stand in its way. At the same time knowing a fierce struggle lay ahead of them, yet believing with all their might that in the end they would prevail.



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Lawrence R. Dagstine is the author of well over a hundred short stories and articles, many of which have appeared in publications such as: *Pablo Lennis, Gotta Write Network Litmag, Alternate Perceptions, Lost Worlds, Midnight Times, Samsara, The Ultimate Unknown, Surprising Stories, Bewildering Stories, Nova SF, Dawnsky, Silverthought, AstoundingTales.com, Deathbus, Sinister City, Down in the Dirt, The Fifth Di..., Jupiter, Wanderings, and Whispering Spirits.*

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Cover: "Surrender"

Copyright 2006, *Rachel A. Marks*

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