



All rights reserved.

No part of this document may be copied, redistributed, or otherwise reproduced without the author's written consent.

Lisa Lane horror: <http://www.cerebralwriter.com/horror.html>

Michael Gatlin slammed on his brakes and made a sharp turn, swerving to avoid debris from a fallen tree. The truck fishtailed. Michael gripped the wheel and slowly pressed down on the gas, regaining control after a terrifying moment of uncertainty. He concentrated on the road ahead of him, his hands shaking. He reminded himself that he was driving; he had allowed himself to get far too distracted. He needed to focus. He could dwell in his misery all he wanted once he got to the cabin.

Michael was a robust man with broad shoulders and large hands. He worked as a laborer for the local union, and made enough money to provide his wife and son with a comfortable enough life. In his mid thirties, Michael considered the possibility of his current issues resulting from an early mid-life crisis. Grace was a lovely wife, but she was not in any way a saint. She had put on quite a bit of weight, insisted on being a housewife although she was a rotten housekeeper, and had a habit of abusing the credit cards on a regular basis. Justin had become a terror as he entered into adolescence, and his awkward social skills had become enough of an issue for the couple to seek counseling for the boy.

Concentrate on the road.

Michael wiped the sweat from his hands and sat up straight, gripping the steering wheel at precisely eleven and two o'clock. He focused on the road.

The sun had finally set behind him, and the sky ahead slowly grew dark. The two-lane highway curved and climbed through a thick forest of evergreen trees. The air had grown cool and moist. Michael felt the sting of different memories hitting him as he passed a familiar landmark along the road.

It was a tree that looked like it had a man frozen within its trunk. The face stared out at

the road with a desperate, horrified grimace, as if the forest had actually enchanted a man and now he beseeched any and all who passed by to free him of his curse. Grace had pointed out the tree every time the two of them had passed it.

The cabin was only a few miles ahead.

Michael wondered what Grace and Justin were doing. Did they miss him yet? Would they miss him at all? Would he miss *them*?

Grace had really crossed the line when she got on his case about going to the bar. The woman had never worked a day in her life; she had no clue what it meant to need to wind down after a long day. While it was true that he had come home drunk a few times, Grace had gone too far when she accused him of being an alcoholic.

And then there was the sadistic choice she presented to him: it was to be either her or Jack Daniels, one or the other, no exceptions. Who the hell did she think she was to give such an ultimatum? Michael was not justified in his response, but Grace had no right to talk to him in that manner.

Michael winced. That night was a hazy mess in his mind. They both said and did things they did not mean.

Concentrate on the goddamned road!

Michael stared at the road, trying to clear his mind. He noticed a sign for the Foothill Bar just ahead, and contemplated it for a moment. He slowed down as he spotted the parking lot, opting at the last minute to stop for quick a drink or two.

The Foothill Bar stood only a couple of miles from the cabin. The place was a literal hole in the wall cut right into the side of the forest, not much more than a small box built out of glorified Lincoln logs. It was a place Michael was moderately familiar with, nonetheless; it had

been a dark, dank refuge Michael had retreated to on many occasions during long family vacations. One could only fish with the boy or chat on the porch with the wife for so long before one developed the absolute need to devise an escape plan, something to break up the monotony and help him clear his mind.

Michael sat at the bar. He eyed an ashtray and took it as a sign that it was still okay to smoke there. Cursing the bastards who a few years ago had made it illegal to smoke inside business establishments, Michael lit up a cigarette and waited for the bartender. He looked around, annoyed at the country twang that caterwauled from the jukebox.

There were only a handful of patrons, most of them local red necks playing pool and pickling themselves in pitchers of beer. Michael kept to himself, as the locals always seemed intent on finding excuses to pick fights with strangers. They obviously led very boring lives, Michael thought. Either that, or they all just had very simple brains and fighting was their only means of resolving a conflict. Michael shook his head ... sad, stupid red necks....

The bartender walked up to Michael and wiped down the bar top. He was a young man with unkempt hair and an unshaven face. He smiled, revealing a missing front tooth. "What can I do for you?"

"Double shot of Jack, chilled straight up," Michael automatically replied.

"Strange request."

Michael smiled. "Makes it sweet as candy."

The bartender began the drink with a shrug. He measured two liberal shots of whiskey into a shaker with crushed ice, shook the mix for a moment, and then strained the whiskey into a small tumbler. "One double Jack, chilled straight up," he said as he presented the quaint order to Michael.

Michael threw down a small wad of singles and nodded for the bartender to keep the change. He stared at the glass before him as if it were a crystal ball about to show him his future. He took a sip.

Sweet as candy.

Michael grinned, savoring his cigarette. He already felt better. He and Grace both just needed a little time and distance to cool off, he told himself. When it all came down to it they really did love each other; she just happened to do a lot of things as of late that seriously pissed him off. A decade of marriage had changed them both, and in many ways they had grown apart, he reasoned.

His mind suddenly flashed back through the highlights of their most recent argument.

“Bitch,” Michael muttered.

The bartender glared over, trying to decide whether or not Michael had specifically addressed him.

Michael caught the bartender’s eyes, sensing the confusion. “My wife.”

The bartender nodded, looking sympathetic.

Michael looked down and realized that he had finished his drink. He slid the glass to the end of the bar. “One more, if you could.”

The bartender prepared another glass and happily exchanged it for another small handful of Michael’s wadded up dollar bills. He counted the sum discretely, and then nodded his thanks for the generous tip as he stuffed it into his pocket.

Michael cringed as the next selection played on the jukebox. It was one of those achy-breaky honkey-tonky numbers, the kind that made Michael want to crawl out of his skin. He downed his drink, and then dug a few quarters from his pocket and trotted over to the jukebox.

The selection was disturbingly slim, as Michael had remembered it from previous visits. He searched for the numbers of the three songs on the menu that he could actually enjoy: “Take it Easy,” by the Eagles, “The Devil Went Down to Georgia,” by the Charlie Daniels Band, and “Sweet Home Alabama,” by Lynyrd Skynyrd. Michael punched in the three songs each at least a couple of times over, buying as many selections as his change would allow. He returned to his seat, feeling more at ease just by the anticipation of the twang soon ending.

Michael ordered a couple more shots, satisfied with the change in music, and sat back to reflect on his problems with Grace. He thought to leave before he started feeling a buzz . . . stop by a liquor store on the way to the cabin and decide from there whether or not he was going to allow himself the pleasure of getting drunk. As “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” began to play, however, Michael decided to stick around for a while. After all, he had no one waiting for him. He had an empty cabin to look forward to. He could relax and take his time.

Michael took a deep, contented sigh. The sense of freedom he suddenly felt was almost intoxicating. The alcohol had begun to take effect as well, and Michael felt his mood begin to lighten a little. His mind went back to the last argument with Grace, and he considered the roll he had personally played in all of it. He had responded to Grace’s harsh words with undue aggression.

How else was he supposed to respond, though? Never before had anyone branded him – *judged him* – in such a way. Grace’s tongue had been a whip; it felt as if her words had penetrated through to his very spirit, and his body and soul continued to ache from the lashing. *Alcoholic.*

Michael paid for another drink as one of the local red necks left the pool table and sat down beside him.

Michael lit another cigarette, pretending not to notice the company. The man reeked of fermented hops.

“How many times are those three songs going to play?” the redneck asked, leaning uncomfortably close to Michael.

Michael shrugged, and then finished his drink. “Two or three. Sorry you don’t like it. I just wanted a break from the country.”

“You got a problem with the music here, you can go drink somewhere else.”

“No problem, man,” Michael said, taking a few drags from his cigarette. He stared ahead, avoiding the other man’s eyes. “I like those three songs just fine.”

The bartender walked up to the two of them. He addressed the redneck. “Is there a problem, Joe?”

“Have you been listening to the juke box?”

The bartender emptied Michael’s ashtray and wiped down the bar top. “It’s not that big of a deal, is it?”

“If I hear ‘Sweet Home Alabama’ one more time, I’m going to have to kick someone’s ass,” the redneck said.

Michael turned to the man and blew a lung-full of smoke into his face. “Fuck you.”

The young men at the pool table all perked up, waiting for the fight.

The redneck quickly threw a sucker-punch at Michael’s head. Michael avoided the blow, and then countered the attack with a jab to the ribs. The bartender dove over the bar top and shoved the two men apart. “Out – both of you! Finish this outside, if you think you have to!”

Michael turned and threw a surprise shot at the redneck’s jaw, punching past the bartender. The redneck fell to the floor in a daze.

The redneck's friends began to slowly move toward Michael, but the bartender signaled for the men to back off. He glared at Michael. "Leave now or I'm calling the police."

"Not a problem." Michael dug his keys out of his pocket and dangled them in front of him. "I was just leaving."

The bartender snatched Michael's keys and stashed them in his pocket. "You can call a cab; come pick up your vehicle in the morning, when you're sober."

Michael grabbed the bartender by his shirt. He felt certain that he was sober enough to drive two miles down the road. He was buzzed, but not drunk. The audacity! Moreover, the man had no right to confiscate his keys in such a manner. For all he knew the bartender intended to rip him off. "Give me back me keys, asshole!"

"You've had too much to drink. There's a number to a cab company on the phone booth outside." The bartender threw Michael off of him, toward the door.

"Take it Easy" played yet again on the jukebox, although the room might as well have been perfectly silent. All eyes were on Michael.

"Do what the man says," one of the others at the pool table said. He took a few steps toward Michael, carrying his cue as if it were a baseball bat.

"Fucking prick," Michael mumbled as he left, defeated.

The phone booth stood at the side of the building, overlooking the parking lot. Michael dug into his pockets as he slowly moved toward the graffiti-covered structure. He was a little more buzzed than he had previously thought, he admitted to himself, although he still felt that the bartender shouldn't have taken his keys.

"Shit!" Michael cursed aloud, remembering that he had dropped all of his change into that damned jukebox. He turned around and went back to the front door. One of the red necks

stood in front of it.

“You’re not allowed back in,” he said with a smile.

Michael thought to fight the man, and then thought better of it.

Michael turned to the forest and began to walk. It was a nice evening. The moon was full and the sky was clear. The air smelled of damp pine needles.

Michael was only a mile or two from the cabin. He could cut through the forest and be there in less than an hour. He really didn’t have anything better to do, and at the time it seemed perfectly logical to stumble across the woods in such a state.

The forest suddenly seemed to spin around him, and Michael leaned against a tree to vomit.

He braced himself up against the tree as he tried to reorient himself. He wiped his face with his shirt, and then continued into the forest. He immediately froze with the sound of a second set of footsteps. He looked around, seeing no one. “Hello?” He waited for a response.

Silence.

“I know you’re out there!” Michael yelled, trying to spot his perpetrator.

He waited again, listening for any evidence of movement. “If you want to fight, come out here and do it like a man!”

Michael turned with a start as someone tried to approach him from behind.

Still, he saw no one.

Michael’s heart began to race. He knew that at least a couple of the redneck bastards had been looking for a fight, but as far as he knew dozen or more of them had followed him out. His thoughts became a jumbled, confused mass.

They’re going to jump me!

Michael darted back toward the building. He could hear someone following, gaining on him. He felt another dizzy spell coming on, and he fell to his knees as his stomach heaved its remaining contents. He quickly turned to see who was behind him, but again he saw no one.

He considered the possibility that the bartender had somehow dosed him. He felt far too intoxicated for the handful of drinks he had consumed. He felt increasingly afraid for his safety, knowing that if he had been given some type of drug in one of his drinks there was a good chance that the bartender really was planning on ripping off his truck.

Michael looked around again, struggling to keep himself awake and cognizant of his surroundings.

Wait ... eyes ...yes, they were definitely there. Michael saw them as a glint of moonlight that reflected back through the weak cover of a bush. Michael stared them down. He got to his feet, wiping a spot of bile from his lips. "Come on out! I might be dosed, but I'll still kick your ass!" he yelled.

A deep growl emerged from the creature's throat as it appeared from its retreat.

Michael's instincts told him to run, and then suddenly his mind completely blacked out on him.

Michael awoke the next morning, taking a moment to orient himself. He was in bed, at the cabin. He searched his brain for any small piece of memory that might tell him how he had gotten there.

He winced. At first he could only feel the pain pulsating in his head. His brain threatened a full explosion on him if he didn't get to some aspirin immediately. He sat up, crying out as he discovered his injuries.

It looked like he had been mauled. His left arm swelled from what looked like the bite of

a large animal, although a blunt weapon of some sort could also have created the wounds. His pants were reduced to ribbons and the meat on his right leg was shredded. His right hand was swollen and felt possibly broken. There were shards of glass on his sleeve.

He found the first aid kit and doused the wounds with alcohol. The wounds stung, biting into his nerves with vindictive fervor. Michael gritted his teeth, wiping them down and dressing them to the best of his ability.

You shouldn't have gotten drunk, now, should you?

He cursed his luck, but was grateful that at least Grace did not have to know about it. He would have never heard the end of it. Still, he did probably need to see a doctor and Grace would inevitably find the bill. He limped over to the telephone and dialed home.

Grace picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Grace, it's Michael."

Grace's voice went hostile. "What the hell do you want?"

"I was just wondering . . . do you know if I'm up to date on my tetanus shot?" Michael fought to keep from stuttering.

"What did you do *now*?"

"Does it matter?" He felt his own sense of hostility coming on. The woman could never discuss anything without finding a reason to bitch at him, it seemed.

He could feel her rolling her eyes at him before she sighed angrily and hung up the phone.

"Fuck you, too." He hung up and hobbled back over to the bed. He laid his weary body back down, moaning in agony and at his solitude. He hoped that sleep might take him again, to relieve him of his suffering, but it did not. He tossed and writhed, unable to escape the pain.

Michael sat up. He checked to see that his wallet was still in his pocket. It was. He changed his shirt and ran a comb through his greasy hair. He could feel his leg swelling even more severely; it felt as if the skin might burst open in new places to compensate for the immense pressure.

Michael left the cabin, relieved to find his truck parked out front. The driver's-side window was broken. Michael looked at his hand and wondered if he had broken into his own truck last night in order to get to the cabin. He got in. Sure enough, he had hot-wired it.

Pretty skilled for a man in a drunken stupor.

Michael got the truck started again, cursing at the pain that emanated through his body. There was only one cure for that.

There was a liquor store only a mile further up the road, and Michael opted to buy a few bottles of Jack with his cigarettes and junk food. He didn't want to have to return anytime too soon.

Michael stayed in the cabin for several days at a time, leaving only for quick trips to the liquor store when he ran out of whiskey. He came to one morning with the realization that he had been binge drinking for close to a month, and now suddenly he felt simply too ill to continue. His body shivered and ached. Sweat saturated his sheets and clothing. His stomach rejected even the smallest sip of tepid water.

Grace had never called back.

Michael slept through the better part of the next few days. He experienced a recurring dream, one which purportedly filled in all of the gaps from the night he had blacked out . . . and yet the dream was so bizarre he had to wonder how much of his memory might have been twisted by the drugs he had been slipped.

“Come on out!” Michael yelled, moving closer to the bushes. “I’m going to kick your sorry ass!”

Michael froze as he heard a deep, angry growl.

An enormous wolf emerged from the bushes, snarling as it stared Michael down with its luminescent amber eyes.

Michael turned and ran toward the bar, the wolf following suit. Michael could hear the animal gaining on him. He could hear it....

Was it laughing?

Michael cried out as the wolf lunged for his arm and knocked him down to the ground. Michael summoned all of the strength he had within him to throw the wolf off of him. The wolf struck the trunk of a tree, stunning it just long enough to give Michael the small lead he needed.

He got to the parking lot, and then froze as he realized that the truck was still locked. The wolf came up behind him, growling and baring its teeth. Michael’s blood dribbled from its mouth. It stared Michael down, daring him to move another inch.

Michael looked at the animal’s shadow. It looked like the shadow of a human. He analyzed the shape carefully. His eyes had to have been playing tricks on him. That creature, whatever it was, had a human shadow.

A werewolf?

Michael knew that he was out of his mind to even consider the possibility of that animal being a werewolf, and yet its shadow clearly said that there was something abnormal about the animal....

He decided to try and speak to it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

The wolf growled.

“I thought you were somebody else,” Michael continued. He glanced toward the bar, wondering if he could outrun the creature if he needed to.

The wolf spoke very clearly to him: “I don’t like trespassers. Those are my woods, understand?”

Michael nodded, surprised to see an animal talk, not really sure how to react. He began to laugh, unsure of why he would respond in such a way, but unable to control himself. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know—”

“Well, it’s too late now. I have to finish you off, see? It’s nothing personal.” The wolf readied itself to spring toward Michael.

Michael buried his fist in his sleeve and punched the window. He unlocked the door just as the wolf jumped toward him. It grabbed Michael’s leg with its teeth as he dove into the truck, tearing long gouges through his flesh. As it let go to aim higher on Michael’s body, he kicked the animal in the face and pulled the truck door shut.

Michael sat up in bed, wiping his sweaty face. No, it couldn’t have happened that way. Still, the dreams felt so real, and they spurred memories that he knew to be genuine. He remembered now; he remembered the wolf.

What if it had rabies?

Rabies certainly wouldn’t make an animal capable of human speech. But how was that possible? He clearly remembered that now, too. The wolf did have words with him, at least according to his recollection.

And then there was the shadow. It had a human shadow.

Michael reminded himself that he had been far from sober that night. Obviously if he was intoxicated enough to completely black out, he could have been drunk or high enough to

hallucinate. Still, would his memories return to him in such a twisted manner?

The wind thrashed about outside. Michael looked at the dark window and wondered what time it was. He turned at the clock. It was two a.m.

Michael turned to try to catch a clear glimpse of an image he thought he saw out of the corner of his left eye. He sat up, looking around, seeing nothing but shadows upon more shadows blanketed across the dark room.

Michael switched on the lamp. A shadow seemed to shift in the far corner.

Something was there, watching him.

Michael sat frozen on the bed, close to the lamp. The shadows began to pulsate and move in a strange circular pattern, as if they were breathing. Michael turned to the other shaded corners of the room, and they also were moving.

His heart began to beat hard and swift. It had become so loud that he literally could hear it. He began to sweat profusely. He had no idea what to make of the specters surrounding him. He had not had a drink in days. Had he simply lost his mind? Perhaps he was in a strange state of detoxification.

That was very possible.

“Michael?” the voice asked.

Michael looked around, trying to find a source. He recognized that voice, but couldn't quite place it. “Who's there?”

“You've already forgotten me? I haven't forgotten you. No, you've been on my mind a lot these days,” the voice said.

It was the wolf.

Michael began to shake. “What do you want?”

“We’ve got a bit of a bond now, you and I. Something needs to be done about that,” the wolf said.

“Okay....”

“Come back to the forest, so we can finish what we started.”

Michael continued to look around. “I’ll make sure to bring my shotgun!”

No response.

Michael got up. His head throbbed. Steering clear of the shadows surrounding the far side of the room, he found some aspirin and tossed them into his mouth. He searched for a clean glass, and then filled it with cool tap water.

Michael took a large sip of water, and immediately began to choke on the aspirin. He spat out the water, almost dropping the glass, and then finally coughed out the aspirin. He took a moment to catch his breath, and then attempted to take another sip of water. Again, he gagged and choked.

Michael sat down the glass, and then fell to his knees. He could barely get a breath in. He coughed and cleared his throat, finally clearing the passage.

Michael looked up as he distinctly heard laughter echoing through his head.

“Come to the forest and fight me like a man, or I’ll see that you starve to death like a coward,” the wolf chuckled.

How could the wolf possibly control his mind like that? Maybe he really had gone crazy.

Michael ran to the bathroom, quickly flipping on the light. Something screamed as the light came on, but Michael saw nothing in there, even after thoroughly investigating the room.

He went to the sink and rinsed his face. He looked at himself in the mirror, jumping back and screaming as *something* stared back at him. It looked just like him, but it had glowing

yellow eyes ... and it was smiling. Michael backed away, unable to take his eyes off of it.

Michael made a dash back to the bed and huddled next to the safety of the lamp. The light was safe; somehow he just knew ... if he stayed close to the light he could keep whatever was in the shadows at bay.

Michael found himself feeling faint and nauseous, and he tried to lie down once more. The wind howled outside.

Or was that a wolf howling in the distance?

The lamp flickered, and then went completely out. The house went dark. A power line must have fallen.

Or something knocked it down....

“No!” Michael sat up. He could see the shadows closing in on him. He ran to the front door and darted out, hoping to find safety in the moonlight.

Michael looked up. The moon was full. He looked around. The shadows seemed to all stay in their places. He felt relatively confident that he would be safe outside; the moonlight would keep him safe.

He soaked in the light. It felt good ... it was warm, and its essence permeated through his every cell. Michael stared up at the moon, moved by the warmth and sense of calm it offered him. It was intoxicating. Suddenly Michael's skin felt excruciatingly hot. He felt as though he had stepped into a sea of hot embers.

Michael fell to the ground, suddenly finding his entire body in agonizing pain. He cried out, biting his tongue. His body contorted and convulsed. His head felt hot as dizziness overtook him. His body went numb, and then his mind went black.

Michael awoke a moment later to find that his body had completely transformed into that

of a wolf. He got to his feet and began to look around. He had to take a moment to adjust to the lower point of view. He whined, wondering if the transformation would be permanent.

Suddenly all he could think about were Grace and Justin. He needed to get home to them.

Could he ever return to them, now?

He considered all of the werewolf movies he had seen over the years, and decided that facing the creature that had done this to him was his only recourse.

Michael turned to the forest and began to walk.

The pine needles smelled pungent from where he now stood, and all sorts of other new smells filled the forest. He could tell by the various markings on trees and in bushes that countless animals moved through the region.

“I’m here!” Michael cried out. “Come out and fight me!”

Michael continued in a straight path, and found himself approaching the bar. Only one car remained in the parking lot. The bartender was likely still there, washing dishes and counting his tips. Michael smiled at his good fortune.

Michael found the back door unlocked and open, likely to fan out the stuffy back room. He quietly crept in, sniffing for a scent.

He picked up on a man in the restroom and slowly snuck up on him. The bartender stood at the sink, washing his hands. He ran his wet fingers through his hair, and then began to sing a country-western tune. His voice was hideous, and the choice of song unforgivable.

Michael slammed the man to the ground, growling and snarling.

“You!” the bartender screamed.

Michael locked down on the man’s neck, snapping it. The body twitched. Michael

backed away.

He killed the man ... he actually killed him.

Murdered him.

Michael caught a quick glimpse of himself in the mirror, and for a split second he saw the image of a man. He shook his head. The wolf peered back at him through his reflection. He took another look at the lifeless bartender. Its eyes had become glassy, foggy.

It wasn't murder if he did it as a wolf, Michael reasoned. Wolves went by instinct; what happened couldn't have been helped, really. And what was done was done, so there was no need to continue dwelling upon the ethics of it all.

Michael trotted out of the building and ran back into the forest. His heart raced. He felt both terrified and exhilarated at the same time. It was a strange dichotomy that filled his mind with an unusual blend of emotions and thoughts. He felt empowered and free, although he knew that his life would mean nothing unless he found the wolf that had done this to him.

He had to destroy the monster, lest he become a monster, himself. He prayed that he was not already too late.

His body cried for rest, but Michael continued on. He pictured the wolf in his mind's eye, lying lifeless as the bartender had. He pictured the wolf's eyes glassy and dead. The excitement inspired by that one simple image was all that kept his weary body moving. He called out to the wolf, threatening its life, daring it to show itself.

Nothing.

He waited, pretty sure he was at the spot where he had first encountered the wolf. "I'm here!" he yelled.

Silence.

Michael sat down, growing impatient. “You wanted to meet me! Show yourself!”

The wolf was nowhere to be seen.

Michael thought about the landmark on the road, and wondered if there truly was a cursed man in that tree. Clearly Michael had been enchanted, and if he had been then there very well could be others. He wondered how many there might be.

Michael began toward the landmark to get a closer view of it. Perhaps it held a clue as to what horrific force had transformed them both. He had only seen it from the road; perhaps there was something to be found by viewing it from the forest’s edge. It would take Michael only a short while to reach it, and if he was lucky he might even bump into the wolf on his way. He followed the road to make sure he wouldn’t accidentally pass the landmark in the forest. Luckily there were no cars at this time of night, at least this far up the mountain.

Thick clouds moved across the sky. The forest slowly grew darker as the clouds blocked out the moonlight. Michael struggled as his eyes adjusted to their dimmer surroundings.

Suddenly, the burning agony returned as Michael’s body transformed back into its human build. He lay on a bed of pine needles for a moment, stunned and bewildered. Somehow he also had his clothes on again; he even had his pack of cigarettes and matches in his pocket.

Michael got to his feet. He looked up at the sky. The moonlight had made him a wolf; it only stood to reason that a lack of moonlight for long enough would cause him to revert back into human form.

Was the wolf that bit him now also human, as well?

The shadows began to contort; the darkness suddenly knew Michael was vulnerable.

Michael ran along the side of the road, spotting a street lamp up ahead. Coincidentally, the landmark stood close-by.

Michael approached it carefully. “Hello?” he called in his loudest whisper.

He came up to it and analyzed its features. The details in its face were unmistakable; even part of the man’s body could be seen contouring the lower part of the trunk. The face stared ahead, frozen in its anguish, trapped, desperate.

“Hello?” Michael asked, addressing the face.

The frozen man stared silently, but Michael knew it was begging him for help. It needed to be released. Only God knew how long it had been that way.

Michael looked around, ensuring that he was alone. He gathered some dry pine needles and small branches, and then built them up around the frozen man. He built the pyre with care, talking to the man as he worked on it. “Your nightmare will be all over soon,” Michael assured it.

Michael stood back to admire his work. He lit a cigarette, and then tossed the match into the pyre. He watched the tree go up in flames. The frozen man would be free soon. One less curse upon the forest. Maybe the wolf would burn too, and whatever else had been unlucky enough to fall under the forest’s enchantment.

He took a drag of the cigarette, and then he doubled over as moonlight peaked through the clouds.

“No, not again!” Michael cried out, his body transforming once again.

“You’re not going to get rid of me that easily,” Michael heard the wolf growl from beyond the flames.

Michael gazed through the growing fire and spotted a distinct set of eyes glaring back at him.

“You belong to me,” the wolf continued, “and you are worth more to me dead than alive.

I will watch you starve to death, and then I will gladly dine on your rotting carcass.”

“Not if I kill you first!” Michael roared, diving into the flames. He screamed as his flesh melted and burned in the intense heat, fighting to keep his eyes open long enough to see where the wolf had gone.

Michael collapsed, crying out in absolute agony. He made no attempt to get back up. His body contorted and convulsed with the burning pain as his sight went black. Everything slowly went numb right before his final breath left him.

A few days later Grace received a telephone call from the Northern County sheriff’s department. The cabin had been lost in the fire. A couple of bodies had been recovered from the forest, and dental records confirmed that one of them was Michael.

Beyond the forest fire’s reach, a feral dog lay dead. The dog, likely a husky mix, stared lifelessly at the late morning sun; maggots had already begun to chew holes through its drying skin, while the stench continued to attract the excitement of other hungry insects.

The dog had gone mad before death had finally relieved it of its misery. The infection had only been in its brain for a short time before it could no longer make logical sense of the world around it. Excruciating head pain had made it turn aggressive; hydrophobia and starvation had sent the animal over the edge and were ultimately the largest contributing factors to its death.

A few small animals also opted to scavenge bits of the rotting meat among the maggots and the flies. One by one they walked away, satisfied with the meal, completely unaware of the deadly rabies virus that now incubated in their tiny bodies. The only true curse lurking within the Northern County forest would continue on through them, at least until the cruel insanity claimed their lives in a month or so, as well.