

A long, frightening howl rang out from somewhere in the distance.

He opened his eyes. Thick fog swirled around his head. Dark shapes danced on the periphery of his vision, like black trees swaying in a cold winter breeze. Was he in a forest? Did he stray from some path and lose his way? He didn't know. He had the overwhelming sense that he was here for a reason, but he couldn't remember what that reason was.

The second howl echoed through the fog, closer than the first. It thumped against his chest like a kick drum, freezing him in place as it reverberated down his spine and back up again.

His mind raced as he searched his memory. Where was he? How did he get here? His stomach had twisted itself into a knot so tight that it threatened to spin him straight into the ground. He tried to steady himself. His legs wouldn't move. He looked down at his feet. A bright white light had frozen them in place on the cold tile floor below.

Tile! The floor has tiles! Finally, something he knew!

He squinted his eyes; if he could focus on something he recognized, he might be able to remember how he got there. He began to describe the tile to himself: flat, cold, sterile. Dark gray specks scattered all across its glossy white surface. A splash of crimson drew his attention to the corner of the tile under his feet.

Blood. It was blood. Something else he recognized.

The third howl pierced his chest and went straight through his heart. Except it wasn't a howl anymore. It sounded like something else... more like a cry for help.

Slowly, reluctantly, he followed the light at his feet across the floor. There, in the corner of the room, he found its source: a bright hot lamp attached to the edge of a cart, shining down upon something in a plastic tray below. Hovering over the tray were several figures which he now recognized as nurses. They worked together in an organized flurry, cleaning, clipping, and calming the thing in the tray as best they could.

A voice spoke out from somewhere behind him. It was the voice of his wife, asking him if he was okay. But she wasn't asking about him. She was asking about *him*; the bundle of mystery that one of the nurses had stepped forward to hand to him. Without thinking, he accepted it. His hands shook as he pulled the cover back from its face.

And there, underneath a fuzzy white blanket with thick blue and skinny pink stripes, he found the object of his fear smiling up at him.

It was a boy. A healthy, smiling newborn baby boy.

His son.

The baby nuzzled into his chest as he stood there rocking him in his arms. At that moment, all his fears grew quiet. He still wasn't sure of exactly where he was or how he got there. But none of that mattered now. He had thought that this would be the end of his story. Now he knew that it was the beginning of a brand new one.