

8 My Son

"Mommy, my feet hurt," Taegan whines from the backseat.

I look back at him in the rear-view mirror and can tell he is perfectly ne. Just bored and tired from being in the car.

"Take your shoes off then, sweetie."

"Then my feet will be cold," he whines, throwing his head back against his carseat dramatically.

I chuckle softly at his theatrics. "You have a blanket, remember."

He scrunches his nose up in disgust while looking beside him at the blanket he discarded just 10 minutes ago when he started complaining about being too hot. "I don't like that blankie. It was the fuzzies that make my skin itch."

Oh, this child. He's adorably dramatic at times, which always makes me smile. Despite the circumstances we are currently in, he has kept me amused and laughing since he woke up a few hours ago.

We left early this morning. Really early. It was just after 3 am when grandma and I started to load up my trunk with mine and Taegan's suitcases and bags. We packed everything we could. That way, we would have less to move later. We talked and talked about what to do next, and both grandma and I decided it was best to permanently move, no matter how the court case went.

There would always be the threat of Levi over mine and Taegan's head. He made that more than clear. If he does turn out to be Taegan's father, I will do everything I have to do to keep him from ever getting custody of my son. He is psychotic. Who would threaten to kill their own son and his mother like that? He couldn't have an ounce of love for Taegan to even be able to make that kind of threat.

We are going to start a new life, me and my son, and when she can, grandma is going to join us.

"Mommy. Mom! MOM!"

I sighed loudly at Taegan's irrational behavior caused by his restlessness. "Yes, child?"

"Why do we have ten toes instead of, uh, nine?"

I laughed at his silly question. "Because we would look weird with 9 toes instead of 10."

"Mr. Larson has 9 toes. Grandma Lucy told me not to ask him why, but I had to. I was worried he left one somewhere and he couldn't nd it. He said he lost it at work. I told him he should check the lost and found. When I lost my red toy car at the grocery store, grandma took me back to nd it and they put it in the lost and found. Did you know that?"

"You think Mr. Larson can still nd his lost toe if he looks in the lost and found?" I ask, trying to keep from laughing.

"I don't know. He said he lost it a long time ago when I told him that. I bet someone took it by now."

I laugh at the ridiculous notion, "Would you take a toe if you found it in the lost and found?"

I watch in the rear-view mirror as Taegan looks down at his bare toes, wiggling them. He took his shoes and socks off. I guess he really wasn't too worried about his feet being cold after all.

"If the toe was cooler than one of my toes, I might swap it out."

I chortle, covering my mouth with my hand, imagining my son trying to take off one of his toes to put a cooler one on. He was completely serious.

"Mommy. Why do little fuzzies get between your toes when you wear socks?"

"Because your toes are just so cool the fuzzies want to cling to them," I chuckled at him.

"Mom," he gave me a disapproving look. "You laughed. That means you don't think my toes are cool."

I shook my head, "Your toes are the coolest. I'm laughing because I think it's amazing I have the best son in the world with the coolest toes."

"Oh," he thinks about my answer for a few seconds, then smiles brightly, "That's true. You are pretty lucky. But guess what, mommy?"

"What?"

"I have the best mommy in the world," he smiles smugly, knowing what it does to me when he says stuff like that.

I put my hand over my heart while 'awwing' at his sweet words. I love this little boy with all that I am. He is my everything. I'm glad grandma talked me into hiding him away. I need to protect this precious little boy in every way that I can.

We are getting a lot closer to that little town I visited with Levi all those years ago. There is a part of me that feels like its awakening for the rst time in years. Butteries are uttering around in my stomach as the sign for Blue Cliff comes into view. I can't believe I'm back here.

I felt this pull to come back for years. Ever since the morning I drove off with Levi, if I'm being honest with myself. I had to shut off this part of me, this inner calling, or maybe it was more of a drive to come back. When I found out I was pregnant, and especially when I found out how far along I was, I had to shut that part of me off, numbing it, tampering down the craving and drive to return because I thought I was doing what was best for my child.

Numbing that part of me made it easier to get back with Levi. I learned to not expect much from him, numbing myself when he started to nag or say toxic things. If he hadn't hit me that one night, I probably would have toughed through being with him longer.

Now, driving past that town sign, I feel like I'm being awakened; like I'm coming home.

It was a weird, tingling sensation that came over my entire body. Almost like a shock, but lingering.

"Mommy, where are we?"

"A new town. We are maybe going to live here for a little bit," I tell him, hoping he doesn't ask too many questions about why.

"We aren't living with Grandma Lucy no more?"

I shook my head, peeking up at him in the mirror. "No, but soon she can move here with us."

He scrunches his nose, thinking over my words. "Will dad be moving here too?" From the tone in his little voice when he asked, I can tell he is hoping the answer is no.

I smiled at him sadly, "No, baby. He is going to stay back at our old home, while we make a new home for me, you and grandma here."

He sighs in relief, "Good."

Taegan is smart for his age. Too smart. He knows Levi doesn't care for him. He also knows that his mama and Grandma Lucy don't like Levi, even though neither of us have ever told him with actual words. Our discomfort around him spoke volumes.

We had just reached the familiar inner part of town when Taegan started complaining about his feet again. I'm almost out of gas, and need to gure out what our next move is going to be anyway, so I decide to pull into the only gas station in town to ll up and x Taegan's feet while I gure things out.

"Wait one second, sweetie and I'll get your feet back in your shoes," I told Taegan as I got out of the car.

"Socks rst, mommy. You have to put socks on before shoes."

I chuckle. "You're right. My silly me."

The pump doesn't have an option to pay at the pump, so I run inside, paying quickly while keeping my eyes on the car with my child. After running back out and getting the gas going, I opened the back door and reached across the seat to retrieve Taegan's socks and shoes.

"Mommy, can you get the fuzzies out of my sock? I know my toes are cool and they like them, but I don't like fuzzies."

I laugh, "I can try, but I don't think it's possible to get all the fuzzies out of socks."

His little mouth scrunches to the side in disappointment. I really do try to pick as much of the fuzzies I can out of his socks before slipping them on his feet. I'm sure he will still complain about them later, but he seems content seeing me putting in the effort.

"Mommy, who's that?"

"Who, sweetie?"

I have one of his shoes in my hand as I turn to see who he is talking about, and end up dropping it when I see who it is.

"Bailey?" Axel's deep, husky voice reaches my ears, making me gasp. It's been years, but he still looks as handsome as the rst time I saw him. His blue eyes are intense, staring me down, as if he can't believe that it's really me. "Bailey," he says my name again, this time like it's the answer to a prayer.

Does he remember me? He remembers the name of the woman he had a one-night-stand with all those years ago. I nd myself getting lost in his eyes. They are the same shade of blue as my son's, but the passion and desire I can practically feel behind them is so extraordinary, they make my insides feel like they are turning to mush while my heart beats fervently inside my chest.

"Mommy!" Taegan calls out. "My shoe! It's going to get dirty."

It takes a lot of effort, but I somehow tear my eyes from Axel's as I bend over to get my son's shoe. When I looked back up, Axel was staring into the car, a confused look on his face. He sniffs the air a few times, like he is trying to pick up a scent. The action seems almost animalistic and catches me off guard.

Do I smell bad from being in the car for the past several hours?

Axel steps forward, and starts to lean into my car, peering into the back seat. His close proximity to me leaves me paralyzed as I ght back this burning desire to touch him.

After getting a good look at Taegan, Axel's mouth drops, his eyes going wide.

Taegan looks up at him curiously, and though most kids would feel intimidated by Axel's bulking frame, Taegan looks at him with a big smile on his face, not at all uncomfortable or scared.

"Bailey," Axel turns to look at me, but quickly looks back at Taegan, like he can't take his eyes off my boy. "This is my son."