

DAVID & BEVERLY
LEWIS



CHILD OF MINE



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David & Beverly Lewis, *Child of Mine*
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To our dear Shari Bieber

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CHAPTER 1



Kelly Maines sat nervously on a bench at the edge of the playground, wearing dark aviators and pretending to be obsessed with her cell phone. Last night she'd slept in an unfamiliar bed in a ratty hotel, and this morning she'd dressed in a blond wig and a stylish knit maternity dress. Burgundy was not a good color for Kelly, but it was an important color for today.

Ten yards away eight-year-old Sydney Moore was full of *joie de vivre*. The petite girl wore a set of red hairpins to match her top and designer blue jeans. She ricocheted about the playground with a dozen other squealing kids—sliding and swinging, scaling the plastic boulder, and teetering on the totter.

She's beautiful, thought Kelly, observing the exuberant little brunette. From the very minute Sydney had arrived at the park, Kelly had been studying her intently. She noted the way the child sometimes clomped about after zipping down the slide, the charming way she ran with hands outstretched, overly cautious, how she jumped like a jumping bean on the padded wood chips, giggling all the while. Sydney's brown hair glistened in the sunlight, complemented by the tanned hue of her skin and heightened further by

her expressive brown eyes. And those *freckles*, the adorable spots around her cheeks and forehead.

Like mine at that age, Kelly mused.

Despite the gloomy weather report, it was a glorious spring afternoon in Malibu, California, with sunlight flickering through filmy clouds. The playground at the edge of the bluff overlooking Zuma Beach, not far from Sydney's Juan Cabrillo Elementary School, was lined with lush California trees—exotic for a lifelong Ohioan—and the salty air felt fresh. The remaining landscape looked dry and scrubby, unredeemed by a scattering of blue and yellow wild flowers near the park's perimeter.

Kelly checked her phone: four-twenty. According to Ernie's reports, Sydney's adoptive mother ruled by a strict routine, rarely allowing her daughter more than thirty minutes at any one location. Since they'd already been here for nearly twenty, Kelly figured that time was running out.

She anticipated her first move, shivering as visions of what could go wrong flipped through her imagination like a row of dominoes. It had been nearly four weeks since her last encounter, a mere month, though long enough to feel rusty.

Deborah Moore, a round-faced blonde, looked nothing like Sydney. She wore strappy sandals and a flowery blue sundress and was sitting on the park bench a few yards from Kelly, focused on her own cell phone. Born to the upper crust, Deborah Sills had married Jeffrey Moore, a young man destined to join his father, William, who headed up a billion-dollar exporting firm out of Los Angeles. A family of three, they employed a full-time staff of five for their eight-million-dollar Malibu Beach estate overlooking Zuma Beach and the ocean beyond.

Due to their exorbitant wealth, Deborah and Sydney never left their home without the security services of Bruce Stiles, a muscle-bound thug in tight-fitting jeans, a purple silk shirt, and a leather jacket. Hidden behind his own dark designer sunglasses, he was presently sitting across the park pretending disinterest, though he

couldn't have been more obvious. Perhaps that was his intention. *Intimidation*. If so, it was working.

Feigning difficulty, Kelly pushed herself up with one arm, supporting her stomach with the other. She headed to Deborah's bench, shaded by a palm tree, and grabbed the back of the wooden slats, exhaling with an exaggerated sigh. "Whew, it's warm in the sun."

Deborah barely noticed her.

"Mind if I share the bench?" Kelly asked, sitting down.

Deborah flashed an obliging smile while Kelly arched her face into the sunlight. Should she say something more? Already, Kelly felt Bruce's eyes on her, decoding her mannerisms and scrutinizing her behavior for tells.

A few minutes passed before Deborah looked her way and then did a double take. "I *love* that color."

Kelly smiled. *I know you do*. She smoothed her skirt. "Me too."

"Are you close to your due date?"

"Any moment." Kelly grimaced suddenly, touching her rounded belly.

Deborah slipped her phone into her purse and studied Kelly with newfound interest.

Gotcha, Kelly thought.

She glanced toward Sydney across the playground. "Was it difficult for you?"

Deborah shrugged, apparently unwilling to admit she'd never given birth.

"The way I feel today," Kelly replied, "this might be my first *and* my last."

Deborah only smiled, and for the next few minutes they talked about raising babies. All the while, Kelly pretended not to notice Bruce's edging closer and closer. If she gave any hint of recognizing his function in Deborah's life, he'd surely become even more suspicious of her.

Despite her rising anxiety, Kelly proceeded with her plan,

skillfully leading Deborah through her carefully prepared trap door: Kelly's one-time supposed profession as a magician's assistant. As hokey as that might have seemed, it always worked.

Perhaps Kelly resembled most people's image of a magician's assistant. Or maybe the juxtaposition of a very pregnant woman as a once skimpily clad assistant was too bizarre not to be believed.

"What was that like?" Deborah asked, clearly amused.

"Actually, I got tired of being sawed in half."

Deborah laughed.

"At least I learned some magic myself," Kelly replied. "Card tricks, how to make quarters disappear—you know, that sort of thing."

When Deborah's eyebrows rose, Kelly made a show of digging through her purse.

"Wait. I have one," Deborah said, reaching into her own purse, her eyes rapt with anticipation. She picked out a quarter and gave it to Kelly.

Bruce's lips froze in a scowl. He stepped a few yards closer. Any nearer and he would be breathing down their collective necks. Kelly could imagine his wolflike eyes behind the shades, glaring at her, ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble.

Kelly maneuvered the quarter between her fingers, back and forth, back and forth—a trick that had taken six months to learn. Then . . . voila! She promptly made it disappear. She held up her hands, twisting them in the sun, showing her palms and the back of her hand.

Deborah's eyes grew wider. "Nice."

Next, Kelly reached behind Deborah's ear and produced the quarter—to her amazement. Kelly offered the coin to Deborah, who refused. "My little girl would *love* this trick."

Deborah called to her daughter, standing in the shadow of the boulder, sharing conspiratorial whispers with her friends.

"Coming, Mom!"

By now, Bruce had dropped all pretense and was standing two

feet away. He leaned over and whispered in Deborah's ear, undoubtedly concerned about the strange woman.

Kelly noticed his muscular biceps as they strained against his leather jacket and could even smell his musky alpha-male cologne from where she sat. She could see a slight bulge under his arm. Apparently Ernie was right—Bruce never left home without his Glock.

Seemingly annoyed, Deborah waved him off. Reluctantly, Bruce took a few steps back but continued his iron stare in Kelly's direction.

Deborah rolled her eyes and explained quietly. "That's our bodyguard, Bruce—such a pain. But my husband insists."

Kelly pretended to observe Bruce for the first time, giving him the once-over. "I don't blame your husband," she whispered back. "It's a dangerous world."

"True, that," Deborah agreed.

Meanwhile, little Sydney remained sidetracked, apparently unable to separate from her friends.

"We're going home, sweetie," Deborah called again, and Kelly held her breath, frustrated. Had she come so close only to miss her chance?

After a few quick exchanges, Sydney finally came running over. "Sorry, Mom! Taylor had a big secret."

Kelly couldn't help but smile, remembering her own happy childhood.

"You've got to see this magic trick," Deborah said, nodding toward Kelly. "This is Mrs. . . ." She hesitated.

"Michaels," Kelly lied, holding out her hand to shake Sydney's.

"Nice to meet you," Sydney replied, giving Kelly a polite smile and shaking her hand. She sat next to her mother, between her and Kelly, and leaned her cheek against Deborah's shoulder while looking at Kelly.

Talking softly, Kelly did the trick, moving the quarter about her fingers. Sydney inched closer, eyes wide. When the quarter

finally disappeared, only to reappear behind her mother's ear, Sydney burst into laughter and clapped her hands. "Do it again!"

Do it again, the universal childhood refrain, and how sweet it was! Kelly repeated the trick and Sydney clapped louder. This time, at the moment the quarter disappeared, she grabbed Kelly's hands, excitedly turning them over and back again. "Where'd it go?"

Sydney's unexpected touch was like an electric current. Kelly worried her stunned reaction might give her away. Forcing composure into her movements and voice, she breathed deeply, and when Kelly removed the quarter from Sydney's ear, the little girl giggled with delight.

"Want to see another one?" she asked, catching Deborah's eyes to confirm permission. Deborah nodded eagerly.

Clearly displeased, Bruce fidgeted. Kelly switched to the most important trick, the *coup de grace*, the cotton-swab-on-the-inside-of-the-mouth trick, although what she was about to put into Sydney's mouth didn't look like a cotton swab—it resembled a red lollipop.

Kelly removed it from her purse, ripped off the plastic wrapping, and before Bruce could object—though he'd raised his hand—she offered the red sucker to Sydney, who popped it into her mouth.

Too late, Kelly thought. *Snooze and you lose, Bruce.*

Kelly asked Sydney to remove the sucker, passing her hand across it, and voila! It was suddenly *blue*. Deborah and Sydney oohed and aahed.

Kelly handed it back to Sydney, who promptly put it into her mouth again. The trick had gone off without a hitch. It wasn't the same sucker, of course. Kelly had palmed the red one, hustling it out of view.

"And to think we almost didn't come to the park today," Deborah murmured.

"I know it!" Sydney exclaimed, touching Kelly's arm again, her little girl scent warming Kelly's heart. "Do another trick!"

How Kelly would have loved to stay longer, hours for that

matter, but she wouldn't push her luck, not with Bruce sweating bullets beside them—and packing real ones.

When Kelly pretended to experience a spasm of pain in her “pregnant” tummy, Deborah looked concerned. “You really should be at home resting.”

Kelly commented about being so excited about motherhood she sometimes spent hours just watching other children.

“Oh, you'll get your fill, believe me,” Deborah laughed, ruffling Sydney's hair.

After further niceties, they exchanged good-byes, and no one was the wiser. Bruce certainly seemed to breathe easier.

“Perhaps we'll see you again,” Deborah said, waving as Sydney skipped sideways.

Kelly waved back. “I'm sure you will.” She risked a nod at Bruce, whose expression remained deadpan and distrustful. *I'll be back*, she thought. *And you won't be any happier to see me.*

Kelly waddled her way to the car, collapsed into the front seat, and closed her eyes. Young Sydney's face hovered in her imagination.

At long last, she thought, ignoring eight years of dead ends and dozens of lollipop tricks, followed by an equal number of negative lab results.

Kelly fired up the rental car, ignoring Bruce's lingering gaze and her own sneaky temptation to flash him a bright *gotcha* smile.

He suspects, she thought. *Later, he'll kick himself.*

Instead of driving east on the Pacific Coast Highway back to her cheap Malibu hotel, she made a beeline for the nearest FedEx facility. At the first traffic light, she removed her uncomfortable pregnancy padding and tossed it into the backseat.

When she arrived at the FedEx parking lot, she parked and turned off the ignition. She placed the red sucker-like swab into the proper canister, put the entire kit into a lab-appropriate package, and headed for the lobby.

A young man with blue streaks in his blond hair took her

package, applied a label, and set it aside to be mailed to the lab in Akron, Ohio. Then he printed her receipt and pointed to a long assortment of digits. "Here's your tracking number."

My tracking number, she thought, grinning at the irony. The clerk noticed her amusement and gave her a cordial smile in return. She fought back tears on the drive back to the hotel. "Mission accomplished," she told herself.

Despite the lull of ocean waves, she slept fitfully.



Kelly checked out of the hotel the next morning and drove the short distance to LAX. There, she took the midmorning commercial flight to Atlanta, then on to Akron, Ohio.

On the plane she sat next to a white-haired woman in a pretty black-and-white polka-dot dress, who introduced herself as "Doris, from Minnesota," and pulled out of her purse a batch of pictures. She showed off her five grandchildren—all brunettes, as fate would have it.

"You remind me of my daughter," Doris said. "She's thin, like you. Too thin, really."

Kelly smiled.

Enduring another thirty minutes of benign small-town conversation, if only to appease the woman, Kelly nibbled on the standard flight fare of pretzels, washed down with a cup of orange juice.

"Would you like my pretzels, too?" Doris asked. "I have more snacks in my purse, if you'd like."

Kelly thanked her politely but was glad when the doting woman nodded off to sleep.

Kelly closed her own eyes as images of darling little Sydney emerged. Slipping deeper into her reverie, Kelly prayed silently, grateful that things had gone so well. Relishing the breeze from the small air nozzle above her, Kelly was barely aware of the passing landscape thirty thousand feet below.

Could it finally be her? Kelly thought before dozing off.