

Desperate to do something right in a wasted life, Kelly Allison kidnaps two wealthy people, intending to use their ransom to finance moving a West Virginia town filled with unemployed coal-miners to a better life in Arizona.

Kelly's Last Chance

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## **Kelly's Last Chance**

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# **Kelly's Last Chance**

**Richard Lemmon**



## CHAPTER 1

### Kelly & Viney

Kelly Allison had never done anything worthwhile in his life. Or so his mother has always told him as she ignored his pleas to let him help her restore the plantation's long overgrown cotton field. "If not the field, Mama, I can do the roof."

"I handle the plantation, you handle Kelly Allison." And she'd push him away. "Watch and learn. That's what my father told me, that's what I pass on to you. When I think you're ready to do something worthwhile, I'll be the first one to tell you're ready."

The trouble was, she'd never found him ready to do anything, starting from his first day in long pants right up to her funeral. And now that she was dead and the plantation was falling down all around them, he wondered why he had ever listened to her at all.

"Catch up, boy, quit hangin' back, we ain't got all day," Viney ordered, tapping her calloused foot on the dusty driveway, releasing a cloud of ugly red dirt. "Your Mama's funeral is over and you got to get with it now. Start thinkin' what's to be done with Allison House."

Kelly hurried to catch up with his only friend, a black woman that the town of Weatherford had sneeringly called his black mammy. Here he was approaching fifty and Viney was the only thing in life that he loved or trusted.

"You hear me, boy?"

"Tell me something," Kelly mumbled as he approached the old woman. "What did Mama die of?"

"Thing called emphysema."

"Is it contagious?"

"Meanin' have you got it too, no. Leastways I don't think so. Although her doctor said they ain't zackly sure."

"Then I could have it too?"

"Probably not, boy. Now lets talk on other things."

"I bet I do," Kelly guessed. "Sometimes I get out of breath too easy."

"I say probably not, I mean probably not, boy."

"So here I am about to die, maybe, and what the hell have I done with my life? Seems to me that a man in his fifties--"

"You're forty-nine, boy, not fifty."

"Should have done something I could be proud of," Kelly insisted. "Something big since, seems to me, I've done nothing even remotely worthwhile for others."

"Your Mama's dead, quit listenin' to her, boy. Seems to me you done a lot of good things in your life."

"For myself or others?" Kelly asked, watching Viney button up her coat against a biting wind coming at them down the long driveway. Under the coat, Kelly knew, she had on the faded black dress that she once been given on her birthday. Straight-laced, iron-willed and still ramrod stiff after serving the Allison's for more than fifty years, he watched as she patted her gray hair, held in place by the colorful ribbons she'd always worn.

"You ain't dyin' and you ain't selfish, boy, so get it out of your head. Now, you get that gate fastened with the chain and lets get supper." Side by side then they continued toward Allison House. Surrounding them along the way were a long line of ancient oak trees, giving Allison House the look, at least from a distance, of a *Gone With the Wind* movie. Five miles from the front gate was the little town of Weatherford Georgia, barely visible now in the settling fog. It was the only neighbor that his Mama had ever liked.

"Now that she's gone I'm going to keep the van inside the gate."

"Do what you want, ain't nobody tellin' you nothing no more. Now what you thinkin' bout? These days seems like all you been doin' is thinkin'."

"How come I didn't cry at the funeral?" Kelly whispered, as if worried that someone might hear him

"Time my mama died--I was twelve when the good Lord took her-- a preacher told me that the tears would come when they come. And just like you, I didn't cry for her. Don't mean to you don't love, just means you ain't cryin'." Viney paused at the bottom of the porch stairs to stare through an oversized hyacinth bush at the old tin roof that covered the house, the porch and the white columns that supported it. "You see that roof, boy?"

Kelly followed her gaze and nodded.

"Your great-granddaddy would have fixed that roof a long time ago. You remember him?"

Recalling the vigorous man in the hallway painting, Kelly related his Mama's view on her Grand-father. "James T. Allison. Called the Cotton King that nobody bothered messed with, Indians, Yankees, whatever. He built this whole place with his bare hands."

"You lookin' for doin' something now that you're the Cotton King, get busy on that roof," Viney suggested. "It's about to fall in and I don't want my kitchen destroyed. After that you can pave this old driveway. I told your Mama, and she didn't pay no never mind, that I was dog tired of cleanin' dirt off everything."

"She never listened to anybodies ideas but her own and never changed her mind," Kelly added. "Whatever was put in her mind when she was a child stayed there unchallenged to the end. Used to drive me nuts." He returned his attention to Viney. "Another thing Mama drilled into me was the story about the first day you appeared at Allison House. She said you were thirteen years old, that your mother died of tuberculosis, and that you had noone else to take care of you. She said she was pregnant with me and my Granddaddy thought that she ought to have help."

"True enough, boy, true enough." She started up the stairs to the house. "As to feelin' sad you didn't cry, boy, or even feelin' sorry there weren't many people at her funeral, just you count the people that came and liked you."

"I still say that I caught her emphysema."

"Ain't no tellin' you otherwise and I'm already tired of tryin' boy, but one more time, you don't know that."

"I feel it though."

Viney paused to shake a bony finger under his nose. "Fine. Then lets move on and never talk about it agin'. This here's your place now and you're set to make your mark. Make it and move on."

"Why was Mama unhappy?"

"A long time ago, before you was even five, your daddy run off with another woman. After that, seemed to me, Your Mama threw herself into this plantation and that was that."

"I never saw her smile."

"People in pain never do, boy. Now after you git the roof fixed--and you better do it--put some new sidin' on the barn."

"What makes you think that I don't have emphysema?"

"I got no reason to think that way and the doctor told me it probably wasn't. Now you just forget all that and do the best with the time you got left. And that's the last word on you dyin' tomorrow, boy."

"A little bit of gumption and I should have married Terry. Remember her?"

Viney started through the front door. "What's done is done, boy."

"She married the quarterback. Damn." Kelly followed her inside toward the kitchen. High above them in the hallway, three crystal chandeliers lit their way. And all along the way, peaceful in their gilded frames, a long line of Allisons watched them. Under their feet, muffling their steps, was a



faded Persian rug that hid the scarred, pine flooring. Further down the long hallway, a wide spiral staircase wound up to the second floor.

They paused at the room that his mother had called the parlor. "Set yourself down in there parlor and I'll fetch dinner, such as I got time to fix."

Kelly settled himself on one of his mother's three velvet settees. Never. From now on he'd call them couches and he'd call this room the living room. He looked around and shook his head, vowing that when he had the time he get rid of all the old furniture she'd loved.

Five minutes later Viney shoved a plate on his lap and settled down on a facing couch. "Eat your sandwich, boy, that's it."

"I'm not hungry."

"Ain't nuthin wrong with--" Viney stopped in mid-sentence, threw her arms up and fell back against the back of her couch as two huge Dobermans came bounding into the room, bent on catching the crumbs that would soon be falling. Their brother Doberman was somewhere outside chasing rabbits.

"They like you, don't worry," Kelly suggested with a grin. "Just don't get on their bad side. Ever."

"You better back yourself down," Viney yelled at the dog called Bittersweet. "Fore I come upside your head with my foot." The dog backed away to Kelly's couch, laid down and stared back as she opened yet another pack of Camel cigarettes. The other dog, Mistletoe, calmly took up his post near the door.

"Your Mama got them dogs to help guard this place, not git in my way," Viney warned.

"Watch how I can make Mistletoe guard you," Kelly said as he snapped his fingers and pointed to Viney. "Guard!" The smallest of the three dogs jumped close to Viney and growled, a deep rumbling sound intended to warn her against moving.

"Don't be doin me this way," Viney pleaded, unmoving and clearly frightened. "Call him off, boy, fore I have me a heart attack."

"Release!" Kelly ordered. Mistletoe backed off and Viney ran for the kitchen.

Finished with his dinner, Kelly signaled the dogs to remain where they were as he walked around the room, eyeing each piece of furniture bent on replacement.

Viney came back with two glasses and a bottle of brandy. "Lets us have a little nip fore bed."

Kelly came back to the couch, accepted one of the glasses, and took a quick sip. "Second change," he coughed, "is we're going to get a bottle of half decent brandy. Mama went for the cheap stuff."

"Where's all this money comin' from?"

"I'll find out all about the will when I go to the bank tomorrow. Maybe

if the price is right, I might even sell it."

Viney's eyes narrowed and her back came to attention as she yelled to a departing Kelly. "You don't sell nuthin' boy. A man don't trifle with the land!"

On the spiral staircase, Kelly paused. "If I do, and I'm not saying I will, I would never leave you high and dry."

"I been poor all my life, boy, and you ain't got no idea what that is like. You need to find out and do a little thinking about how other people live. Then you do what needs doin, but don't you be thinkin' bout sellin' Allison House!"

"What would we do to make a living if we stayed here? Fix up the cotton fields maybe and start regrowing cotton?"

"You don't do nuthin' you never done in your life, boy. And you ain't never picked cotton. Your hands are lily white, never a scratch on them."

Kelly looked down at his hands and shrugged. "Okay, maybe not cotton, but if we stay here we've got to do something. And at my age, I can't afford to practice doing good. I'll have to start big." Shaking his head, he walked up to the first landing and paused. "And I'm pretty sure that I do have emphysema."

Viney refused the bait.

## CHAPTER 2

### Billy Joe & Maybelle

"Praise God," the Reverend Billy Joe Taggert mumbled as he worked on the zipper, using the other hand to bless the kneeling teenager. Irritated at his inability to work the zipper up against the strands of damp blonde hair clogging it, he broke off the blessing.

The young teenager looked up, then tried to disengage her hair from the zipper to no avail.

"How many times did I tell you to tie your hair back before we make love!"

Love ... Grace's cow-like eyes filled with tears and she barely suppressed another crying jag. Father hated such displays and she knew it well. "If you want I can--"

Billy Joe finally worked her hair loose from the zipper and sighed. Dealing with teenagers had always been a challenge. From the early corn fields of Iowa, through a series of little churches in a series of little towns, up to his present TV ministry. Fortunately, the challenge proved worthy of the effort. "Now, now," he patted her head, "There's nothing wrong. It's just that occasionally the labors of the Lord overwhelm this unworthy servant."

"I know," she whimpered, drying her tears with his offered handkerchief. "When I think of all the sacrifices you make for us, daily, in Christ's name--"

Billy Joe glanced at the Rolex, a gift from the network for his lofty ratings, and from there down to Grace, still on her hands and knees, this time looking under the bed. "Now what?"

"I can't find my panties."

"In my zeal to honor our commitment to one another, I think that I threw them under the dresser. "But hurry up, we're late for the show."

On her feet, arms over her breasts, she scrambled across the room to the

dresser where she recovered her panties and slipped on her skirt. Hurriedly buttoning her blouse, she paused to straighten the tiny, gold cross necklace that Billy Joe had awarded to his Vestal Virgins. Satisfied that her clothing was in place, she watched Billy Joe rearrange himself in the dresser mirror. Suitcoat open--the buttons no longer matched up--he was busily hand-combing the thinning white locks in his usual effort to hide his bald spot.

"Ready for your blessing, Father," she whispered.

Billy Joe turned, placed one hand on her shoulder and raised the other one in prayer. "Lord, Lord, I can feel Your closeness and the closeness of Your only Son, Jee--sus." He dragged out the name Jesus just as he'd been taught in the Coswell School of Divinity, fifteen years earlier. Head bowed he backed slowly toward the door. "Not my will, but thine, Lord. Amen."

"Amen," Grace agreed, disappointed as always when he left. "Can't we stay awhile longer, Father? Just being together is--"

Billy Joe sighed, came to a stop and turned. "I told you I must be about the work of our Heavenly father and I am late."

Grace's eyes filled with tears. "I know we must all be about His work, Father, but when I'm all by myself I can't help but wonder if it's right for me to do these things with you. The commandments say otherwise and in last week's sermon you said--"

Billy Joe wondered, as always, why the weak ones had to ask so many damn questions. "My sermon on licentiousness," the word thundered from the depths of his throat, "was not directed against the proud and righteous union that--" He stopped when he saw Grace's eyes open wide in surprise. "What are you thinking?"

"Righteous union," Grace repeated in a hushed voice. "You said righteous union and I know that it is. But if that is so, why does Mabelle dislike me?"

"She doesn't, she--"

"She does," Grace insisted. "Shouldn't she know that what is done for the shepard helps the sheep? You said so yourself and--"

Sheep? Had he really said that within sound of the Vestal Virgins? Stupid. And careless.

"Didn't you?"

"Strange indeed are the ways of the Lord as he lights my path down life's highway." He bowed his head to hide the irritating tic that had developed in his left eye. Maybelle had once told him the tic was a dead giveaway. "As to wheter or not Sister Maybelle loves you, I can assure you that she loves you just as she loves me." Once again he glanced at his watch. "Now we must both get to the studio, you well after me as always."

"But if we have a righteous union," Grace wouldn't turn it loose so easily, "Is it right to have more then one wife?"

"The Lord orders me to be about His work and it is not for me, or you, to question His ways. You, and I, must learn to honor His timetable and not our wants and desires."

"Amen ... I guess," she whispered.

"Now I really have to go," he opened the door, "or Sister Maybelle will worry. In the meantime, get your makeup on and make sure I didn't leave anything behind."

"Yes, Father."

"Then stop by the front desk on your way out." He stepped into the hall. "See if we can get some money back since we were only here for a half hour. I registered in your name. Let fifteen minutes go by and then head for the studio. We can only hope Sister Maybelle hasn't noticed your absence."

"I could sing for the love of Jesus all day," Grace shouted after him as he headed for the elevators.

"Amen." Billy Joe waved his hands. "Just remember that the Lord bids us be discreet in pursuit of His work." Standing at the elevator, thinking about Maybelle and the path that had led them to their present success, he wondered why it taken him nearly ten years to break away from the small town churches to the richer TV ministries.

Fifteen minutes later, Billy Joe crept into his dressing room, locked the door and laid down on his couch to take on the building headache. Through the closed door he heard Maybelle lashing at the cast and crew of The Hour With Christ Show. Had he been out there she might have deferred to him and curbed her ambitions. Probably not though.

For her part, Maybelle, unaware that her husband was in his dressing room, glanced down at her diamond-encrusted Picard, a gift from the show's sponsor, and returned her attention to today's TV script. Fat, well on the way to gross, she nervously tapped her fingernails against the script and looked up to find the show's director, Hal Falter staring. "Don't tell. You're pissed at something. What?"

"Where is the head bastard?"

Falter shook his head. "If I can assume that you mean Billy Joe, you'll have to assume he doesn't check in with me. In which case you'll have to go on in his place smelling like a brewery. Do you realize this is ratings week?"

"I want to know where he is!"

Falter shook his head. "We can't afford to lose the Bible Belt, so please, Maybelle, if you're drunk, don't go on stage."

She stared at the jello-jowled producer and snarled, "You're nothing but a Nielsen rating in search of a show."

Falter sighed and courage in hand asked, "That's not an answer, Maybelle. Please. Can you or can you not handle the show without Billy

Joe?"

Maybelle pushed him away. "I'm so much better than that jerk it's amazing. Can I go on without his highness? Is the Pope Hungarian? So just how long have you been directing The Hour With Christ show, Toadman?"

"Ten years."

"In which case you then know that, drunk, sober or dead, I can easily handle this show. Now, back to my being well prepared, who do I interview if he's not here?"

Falter pointed to her script. "It's there on the first page. An ex-priest."

She thumbed back to the front of her script and shook her head. "Father Horatio Aloysius? Is that name for real or a joke?"

"It's for real and if you'll kindly recall that Billy Joe's theme this week is how to deal with other faiths, it'll all make sense."

"You're sure this priest son-of-a-bitch isn't being tested by Billy Joe as my replacement?"

"He doesn't take me in his confidence."

"You give me a pain. Shut the fuck up."

"Please don't use that--"

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" Maybelle quacked, flapping her arms, bringing everyone around them to a stop. "How does that grab you?"

Falter took the script from her hands and shrugged. "Have it your way, Maybelle, you always do. But in case he doesn't show up, again, don't forget to put in a few words on tithing."

Maybelle looked surprised. "Don't tell me we have another shopping center to make? God, I can't wait until that thing is built and we can selling shares. I'm so tired of going on stage, throwing all this malarkey, and then having to practically beg them for money. Assholes. Now give me some info on Aloysius."

"Forty year old ex-priest. Used to be at St. Anthony's just down the street."

"He get kicked out for being a queer?"

Falter closed his eyes and sighed. "The word is gay, Maybelle."

"You didn't answer," she snapped.

"Last month he got caught with an altar boy and the insurance company called the Bishop, who in turn--"

"A pervert, ah but who cares nowadays." She hitched up her girdle and started for the stage. "Lets get it on, huh?"

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