

## CHAPTER 68

Kolt stared at a blanket of white faces as he entered the courtroom behind his lawyer. Each face was distinct in its own way, but they all had the unmistakable look of despising him. He felt uncomfortable. The only faces of color were a couple sitting at the back of the room.

The black man smiled when their eyes met. The woman nodded. Kolt smiled. He sat at the table with his lawyer and spectators on his right. He wanted to see as few white faces as possible. The ones on the jury were enough.

He breathed deeply when the door to the courtroom behind him opened. He felt a breeze on the back of his neck. He smelled a woman's perfume when the breezes swept past him. A blonde, petite woman followed Jeff Howard, the pot-bellied prosecutor and took a seat at a small table. She was the court recorder. Jeff proceeded to a desk, took a paper from a pouch, and dropped it on the desk before he sat down.

"Is Pete gonna be here?" Kolt asked Dave Lovett, his attorney.

"Pete who?" Dave asked.

"Pete Downey."

"Oh, you mean the boy you was with at the coal yard?" Dave said, glancing at Kolt.

"The man I'm accused of being with," Kolt corrected.

"Whatever," Dave said in a sarcastic tone, and with a smile. "He won't be comin'."

"How come?" Kolt asked, surprised.

"I was told that the police had a little trouble gettin' him to say who was with him on the night the night watchman was killed."

"But that don't tell me why he ain't comin'."

"I told you, boy, the police had a little trouble gettin' him to talk, right up until just before he was hung."

Dave did not have to explain any farther. Kolt figured the police had made him talk. If that was true, he had misjudged Pete's friendship. Any man when pressed hard enough is likely to betray another. Kolt could understand that, and he held no grudge toward Pete.

The door to the left of the judge's desk squeaked, and the room became quiet. A short fat man dressed in a long black robe entered the room. His beady eyes peered over wire-rimmed glasses. Age lines in his face were not consistent with his full head of black hair, except for the graying in his sideburns.

The Bailiff bellowed, "Here ye, hear ye, all rise. The honorable Judge Mike Kindell presiding."

Judge Kindell sat down behind his desk. He shuffled a few papers, then he looked across his desk at the audience and said, "You may be seated."

Judge Kindell briefly glanced at the jury. "The jury is present," he said.

"All present and accounted for, your honor," Jeff said.

Dave turned to Kolt and said, "Boy, you don't have anybody here to testify for you. You're in a heap of trouble. Hell, your own family ain't even here." He grinned and whispered, "With you gone, there will be one less of your kind."

Dave had made many racial remarks before, and his last remarks threw Kolt's hopes right out the window. Kolt felt like telling Dave exactly what he thought, but much of his future rested in this bigot's hands.

He looked at the cold, angry faces of the jury and saw no softness in them, nor did he see any pity or sympathy in their eyes. They stared unblinkingly into the depths of his soul. His blood felt cold in his veins, and he knew that he was doomed. He looked from the jury to Judge Kindell.

The judge looked at Jeff and said, "Make your opening statement."

“Yes, your honor.” Jeff stood, rammed his hands into his pockets, stared momentarily at the jury, then paced several time in front of the it before spoke. “My job is to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that that nigger,” he points to Kolt, “killed a white man in cold blood.”

The courtroom spectators shouted and yelled, but the pounding of the judge’s gavel put an end to that. “Mister Howard, you will present your case without any name calling.”

Jeff turned toward Judge Kindell, “Yes, your honor.”

“Now, get on with it.”

Jeff brought his attention back to the jury and let his eyes roll over each juror. “I only have one witness, but I won’t be calling him to the stand.”

“Why not?” Judge kindell asked.

Jeff proceeded to his desk, picked up the paper, and shook it toward the judge. “Because this here is a sworn statement made by Pete Downey before he died, and it is the whole case for the prosecution, your honor.”

“Very well. Will the defense make its opening statement?”

"Yes, your honor," Dave said, getting up from his seat while brushing his hands backward over his receding hairline. His six-foot frame hunched as he approached the jury box. He smoothed several strands of gray hair behind his ear.

He paced back and forth before the all-white jury several times without speaking, letting them wonder what he was doing. The jury watched Dave with his hands jabbed into his front pants pockets. He stopped. He looked from one end of the jury box to the other. Then he began with a whining drawl. "They say that this here boy, Kolt Allison, killed Nate Campill, a white man, over a bag of coal. All they got is the word of another nigger, that Kolt was there."

Judge Kindell pounded his gavel again on his desk. "I will not tolerate that kind of language in my courtroom!" he roared, pointing at Dave. "One more time, and I'll hold you in contempt!"

"Yes, your honor," Dave said. He nodded to the judge, and then he turned back to the jury. "As I was sayin'...."

The juror's attention was now focused on Kolt instead of on the man addressing them. Their faces showed disgust, and their eyes were cold and filled with such hatred that it caused Kolt to shiver as if a bone-chilling breeze had swept over him. He needed to see a friendly face - any face, so long as it was friendly. He looked over his right shoulder. He did not see the black couple he had seen earlier. He turned quickly in the other direction. They were not there, either. His eyes lingered. He had not noticed when the black couple had left the courtroom. He did not know that they were not spectators, but workers who had taken a short break.

The chattering sound of Dave's voice echoed in the background. Dave's voice drifted farther and farther into oblivion as Kolt pondered his chance of conviction. It was high. He reflected on the colorful life he had led. *I have done whatever I wanted, and gone where I had wanted. I have been the heartthrob of many women, and done things that I later regretted. I probably will be put to death, if found guilty, or at best spend the rest of my life in prison. Either way, my life is pretty much over, and there's nothing I can do about it.*

Kolt tore his mind free from his selfish concerns to those of his family. *I wonder if the baby is a boy or a girl? What are the children doin'? How are they gettin' along? How are my parents makin' out with all of the extra mouths to feed?*

The trial was quick -- only a few hours -- and the verdict even quicker.

"Have you reached a verdict?" Judge Kindell asked.

Kolt did not want to look at the jury. Instead, he focused on Judge Kindell squinting at the jury over his glasses.

A man stood. "We have, your honor," he said.

"Bailiff," the judge said, nodding to the bailiff.

The bailiff accepted a piece of paper from the jury foreman.

Kolt straightened and hunched forward in his seat. His right hand gripped the edge of the table with such force that his hand began to tremble. He feared that the vibration of his heart might rip his hands away from the table.

Judge Kindell took the paper and pushed his eyeglasses up on the bridge of his nose. Dave Lovett sat flaccidly in his chair. He seemed indifferent to what the verdict might be. He caressed a pencil between his fingers as his sky-blue eyes beamed from his expressionless face at the judge.

Kolt forced a glance at the jurors. The verdict was in, and their pale, solemn faces spelled trouble. Their eyes were like swords, piercing his soul. Thump, thump, thump... Kolt could hear the beat of his heart growing louder and louder.

Judge Kindell raised his head and briefly looked at Kolt. Then he handed the paper to the bailiff. "Will you read the verdict?" he asked.

"Yes, your honor," the bailiff replied. He cleared his throat. "We, the jury, find Kolt Allison, the accused, guilty of murder in the second degree."

Numbness and emptiness completely consumed Kolt. It seemed as if he were sinking into an abyss, and he was merely watching as the story unfolded before his eyes. He tried to convince himself that it was simply a bad dream. Yet, he knew it was not, because he still smelled the perfume of the blonde woman sitting at the small table.

"Will the prisoner rise," Judge Kindell said.

Kolt stood.

Dave briefly grasped Kolt's forearm, his only friendly gesture toward Kolt during the trial, and a little late. The drumbeat of the jury had already rolled, and Judge Kindell was the music director. The judge leaned forward with his elbows resting on the top of his desk as he looked directly at Kolt. His eyes now seemed larger to Kolt, peering through the thick lens of his glasses. "Do you have anything to say before I pronounce sentence?" he asked.

"No, sir," Kolt replied with a slight quiver in his voice.

"There is a note from a Chief Washington Tate in your record, asking for leniency, and I will take that into consideration. You have been found guilty of second-degree murder. You will soon be transported to Ventress, the Alabama State Penitentiary in Clayton. And because of Chief Tate's request, you will spend ten years at hard labor."

## CHAPTER 69

Kolt was already dressed and lying on the top of the covers with his eyes closed when two officers approached his cell. He had not been able to sleep much that night, so he figured, *Why not gets dressed?*

"Time for breakfast," a voice bellowed. "We got a long ways to go today."

Officer Bob Wheeler, a Bessemer City deputy, followed a younger officer who carried a tray of food. Kolt swung his leg over the side of his bunk. He had not seen the younger officer before.

The delicious-smelling bacon on the tray would soon soothe Kolt's hunger, but there was nothing on the tray to soothe his mental state. For most of the night, he had tried to come to grips with spending ten years in prison. It had not worked.

"Move to the back of the cell," Officer Wheeler told Kolt. Kolt stepped backed several paces.

Officer Wheeler unlocked the cell. The younger officer entered and placed the tray on the small stand near Kolt's bunk. He exited the cell, and the young officer slammed it shut.

"When you finish, we will be leaving," Officer Wheeler told Kolt as locked the cell door. They left the area.

Their return was sooner than Kolt expected. Another officer now accompanied them. "Are you ready to go?" Officer Wheeler asked.

"Yes, sir."

Officer Wheeler started to insert the key into the cell door, but paused. He nodded to the shorter, younger officer who was with him before. "This is Officer Stu Krane," he said. Then he

jerked a thumb to the big gray-haired officer behind him. "He will help Sergeant James Lemus take you up."

Officer Krane nodded.

"Kolt," the big man said with a nod.

Kolt did not speak. Officer Wheeler opened the door, and then he stepped aside.

Sergeant Lemus entered the cell. "Hold out your hands," he told Kolt. He was a large, solid man, and was about six feet tall.

Kolt held his hands together out in front of him. The Sergeant locked the handcuffs into place.

"Come on," he said, grasping Kolt by the shoulder and guiding him from the cell and down to the counter.

The officer behind the counter pushed an open notebook in front of Sergeant Lemus. "Soon as you sign this, he is all yours," he said. He pushed a bottle of ink and a quill toward the sergeant.

"You bet." Sergeant Lemus signed the notebook.

"Thank you, Sergeant," the officer said. He handed Sergeant Lemus some papers. "Give these to the warden at the prison."

"I'll do that." Sergeant Lemus took hold of Kolt's arm and led him toward the door. Officer Krane followed. Several men outside the station moved aside when they escorted Kolt down the steps.

Officer Krane was a small man. He weighed approximately 120 pounds soaking wet. He looked to be in his mid-twenties. He slid into the driver's seat. Sergeant Lemus got in the back seat with Kolt. The car groaned into motion.

Soon the car was streaking through the open countryside. Clouds of dust folded in behind it as Kolt stared out of the window with a faraway look in his eyes. His thoughts reached beyond the colorful flowers. The old adage, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder,' meant only to Kolt that each colorful flower he passed represented steps closer to his incarceration.

White flowers of the honeysuckle alongside the road bowed and twisted with every change in the wind direction. Soon, yellow buttercups gradually merged with honeysuckles swaying together in the breeze on the hillsides that rolled upward from either side of the road. A strong gust of wind swept through the open window. Kolt blinked rapidly. Suddenly, he was back to reality. He briefly gazed at the yellow and white blanket of flowers bowing in an upward gust of wind on the hillside. He turned and found Sergeant Lemus staring at him.

"It's pretty ain't it?" the Sergeant said.

"Yes, sir, mighty pretty," Kolt said.

"They said that you killed a man over coal," Sergeant Lemus said. "But I ain't gonna ask you about that, unless you want to tell me."

Kolt looked back out the window.

"You got a family?"

"Yes, sir. I have a wife and seven kids."

"Ten years is a long time to be away from your family," Sergeant Lemus said.

"Mighty long, sir," Kolt agreed.

"Wasn't that a white man you killed?" Sergeant Lemus asked only seconds later.

"You said you wasn't gonna ask me about that," Kolt said, looking at the sergeant.

"You never mind that," Sergeant Lemus snapped, "just answer me."

"That's what they said, sir," Kolt said looked back out the window.

"In that case, you are a lucky man, gettin' only ten years. Normally, a colored man is sentenced to death," Sergeant Lemus said. "No doubt about it."

Sometime later, Kolt was thirsty and hungry. He also longed for a cigarette. He had tobacco and cigarette papers in his shirt pocket, but he did not want to ask the sergeant to roll one. He swallowed. His throat was dry. He rubbed his lips.

"You know what time it is, Sergeant?" he asked.

Officer Krane laughed. "I don't know why you wanna know that, 'cause you ain't got nothin' but time."

"Stu, don't make it any worse than it is," Sergeant Lemus said, pulling out his pocket watch.

"Okay, Sarge," Officer Stu Krane said, still grinning.

"About five after one," Sergeant Lemus said.

"Thank you."

The sign at the intersection they approached was twisted slightly.

"Sarge, I ain't sure which way to go," Officer Krane said, glancing over his right shoulder as he pulled to a stop.

Sergeant Lemus leaned over the back of the front seat studying the sign. "We go east," he finally said. "You take a left here. About four or five miles up yonder is a gas station. We better fill up there."

"Okay, Sarge," Officer Krane said. He made the left turn.

A short while later, they saw a large red sign that read: GAS AND FOOD, ONE MILE.

Soon, they pulled in at a shabby gas station that had two pumps. A car occupied the first stall, so Officer Krane pulled into the other one. At the rear of the gas station and to the left, was

Clay's Cafe. Two long glass windows ran half the length facing them. A pasture stretched out on the side and behind the building. The door was centered mid-length of the building.

As Sergeant Lemus helped Kolt from the car, a middle-aged man came out the door of the gas station. He seemed startled to see the handcuffs on Kolt's wrists.

A younger man in a dirty T-shirt came out behind him. "You come again, John," he said.

"I will," the middle-aged man said.

"Can I help, y'all?" the young man asked Officer Krane who was now out of the car and standing beside the open front door.

"Fill it up," Sergeant Lemus said before Officer Krane answered. "I'll settle-up after we get a bite to eat."

"That's fine, officer," the man said.

Officer Krane slammed the car door. "The keys are in it. After you fill it, move it over there," he pointed to a space near the building.

"Okay," the young man said.

They walked the short distance to the cafe. Sergeant Lemus held the door open for Kolt. A young red-haired woman, probably in her early twenties, was behind the cash register. She seemed uneasy when she first saw Kolt, but then she seemed to relax after seeing the officers.

"We would like to get somethin' to eat, miss," Sergeant Lemus said. A swift breeze helped slam the door behind Officer Krane.

"Okay." She grabbed two menus and led the way past staring patrons that seemed frozen in time, except for their heads and eyes moving.

She stopped near the center of the cafe. "Is this table all right?" she asked.

"It'll do fine," Sergeant Lemus said. He motioned to Kolt to sit.

Kolt slid into the booth and moved against the window. Officer Krane sat on the other side of the table, and Sergeant Lemus plopped down beside Kolt. The young woman handed the two officers the menus. Kolt looked at her as if to ask, where was his. She ignored Kolt.

"While y'all makin' up your minds, I'll get y'all some water," the woman said as she left.

The Officers thumbed through the four pages of the menu for several seconds before making a selection. "The meatloaf sounds good," Officer Krane said.

"Anything' special you want?" Sergeant Lemus asked Kolt. "What about meatloaf?"

"That'll be fine, sir," Kolt answered.

"That does sound good. I think I'm gonna have that, too."

The redhead returned with two glasses of water. Officer Krane had a fixation on the young woman's breasts. She noticed. He forced a half smile and looked away, embarrassed. She smiled and flipped her head to the side, throwing her hair back.

"Here you go," she said in a real perky voice, sliding a glass in front of Officer Krane, while maintaining eye contact. Her hand lingered on the glass. She caught herself. She quickly withdrew her hand. She placed the other glass in front of Sergeant Lemus. "What y'all wanna eat?" she asked.

"What about his water?" Sergeant Lemus nodded to Kolt.

"Oh, we can't serve him," she said, casually. She briefly looked at Kolt and rolled her eyes as she turned back to the sergeant.

Sergeant Lemus briefly studied her as she waited to take their orders. "I wanna see your boss," he said.

"What for?"

"About serving this man."

"All right," she said with some annoyance in her voice. "He's just gonna tell you the same thing I told you," she added with a flippant attitude.

"Just get him, missy," Sergeant Lemus snapped.

They watched her until she knocked on a door behind the cash register.

Instantly, a short, fat man stuck his head out the door. The woman said something to him and pointed toward them. He nodded and headed their way, with the redhead close on his heels.

The portly man smiled slightly as he approached. "What can I do for y'all?" he asked in a wheezing voice.

"I would like to get some food for our prisoner," Sergeant Lemus said.

"Well, Sergeant, you know I can't do that," he said, putting his hands on his bulky waist.

"Why not?" Sergeant Lemus asked, knowing exactly what the man was getting at.

"That's the way it is. I can bring it outside. We don't serve his kind in here."

"We came a long ways, and still have a long ways to go. He has to eat."

"That ain't my problem," the fat man said, grinning, feeling good that things seemed to be going his way. His irritating smile began to wear on Sergeant Lemus' nerves. Officer Krane did not seem to care which way the conversation went. He knew that Sergeant Lemus had a fiery temper, and there would be fireworks. He rested his arm on the window ledge.

Sergeant Lemus grabbed the man by the collar and pulled him down to his level. "I don't give a damn about how it is around here!" he roared as he slammed his other hand down on the table, spilling water on Officer Krane.

"Jesus!" Officer Krane said, brushing the water from his pants.

Sergeant Lemus was unaffected by Officer Krane's surprise. Kolt enjoyed seeing the fat man frightened. At the moment, he liked Sergeant Lemus.

The fat man trembled.

"Now you look here, you fat son-of-a-bitch! I want three meatloaf plates! One for this boy over here! One for me, and one for my partner. And I want it pronto!"

"All right, all right," the scared man said, pulling back against the sergeant's big hand.

Sergeant Lemus grinned and patted the man on the cheek as he slowly released his grip. The man wobbled off in a hurry, and glanced back at the Sergeant before going behind the counter.

"I'm sorry about your pants," Sergeant Lemus told Officer Krane.

"Forget it, Sarge. I ain't seen you get that mad in a long time."

Sergeant Lemus grunted and took a quick look out the window at a couple approaching the cafe. "It wasn't what he said that annoyed me. It was that shitty grin on his face."

Officer Krane chuckled. "You sure scared the shit out of him. Even he liked it," he pointed to Kolt.

Kolt smiled, but said nothing.

## CHAPTER 70

The smell of hot manure from a herd of cattle grazing near the road swept through the open window. Soon, the car was in open country with fields and pastures on both sides of the road. A wooded area loomed in the distance.

Kolt reflected on his past, and on his future. He tried to think of past good times. However, just as brief, the thought vanished. *I have to think of my future. What future? The only thing I can see for the next ten years is steel bars and hard labor.* He sighed, and adjusted his position.

"You look tired," Sergeant Lemus said.

"Just a little bit."

"I guess we all are a little tired. It's been a pretty long day."

Kolt had pretty much been a loner all of his life. He had deviated from that, just once, taking Pete Downey with him to the coal yard. He believed that if he had not deviated, he would still be a free man; but he could do nothing about the past. Only the future lay ahead, and who knew what that might hold.

He drew in a deep breath. The smell of manure seemed stronger. The pungent odor was a small price to pay for the refreshing breeze flowing through the opened windows.

"Stu, can you pull the front seat forward, just a bit?" Sergeant Lemus asked.

"Sure thing, Sarge." Officer Krane reached down, then jerked his body forward several times. "How is that?" he asked.

"That's much better," Sergeant Lemus said, stretching his legs out to take advantage of the extra space.

The black car rolled on in the scorching heat. Its three occupants were as unique as each unfolding mile. Two law officers who longed for the day to be over, and the other, a convicted

criminal, dreading what the day's end would bring. Each saw the same pastures -- the same farmland that faded into dense wooded areas, then into open prairies, and back to tall timber and low underbrush. For Kolt, it offered a fleeting glimpse of what he would not be privileged to see for quite some time.

A sudden hiss and a cloud of steam shot up from the hood of the car, blocking the forward view. Officer Krane slammed on the brakes. They pitched forward.

"What's wrong?" Sergeant Lemus asked.

"The radiator, I think," Officer Krane said, looking out of the window to judge his position while steering the car to a stop. Officer Krane quickly got out of the car. He popped the hood. Steam bulged from the engine.

"Goddamnit," he cursed, leaping back from the car and shaking his right hand.

"What's the matter?" Sergeant Lemus asked, opening the right car door, while keeping an eye on Kolt.

"Steam burnt my hand!"

"You gotta be careful. Is it the radiator?"

"Yeah, there is a hole in it. Probably a rock hit it."

Sergeant Lemus pointed up the road, "Tallasse is maybe ten or fifteen miles up yonder. You think we can make it?"

"No way, Sarge. There is a big hole right at the bottom. If you put water in it, it would run right out. You better take a look at it."

"Get out," Sergeant Lemus told Kolt.

Kolt got out.

"Now come around front." He watched until Kolt had reached the front of the car, then he got out.

"There is the hole," Officer Krane pointed, stepping between Kolt and Sergeant Lemus, presenting the type of opportunity you never want to give a prisoner. Always keep a prisoner constrained or in plain view by all officers.

"Stu, move back," Sergeant Lemus urgently told Officer Krane.

Stu stepped back. "Stand right over there," he told Kolt, pointing to a spot in front of the engine.

As Officer Krane began telling Sergeant Lemus where the hole was, Kolt surveyed the area. A wooded area was not far ahead. He figured he could easily get lost in the dense underbrush, if he just could make it to the timbers. He quickly dismissed those thoughts. He was handcuffed and there was no way he could handle two men, even if he did get the jump on one.

Sergeant Lemus saw Kolt surveying the area and then focus on Officer Krane's pistol. Kolt turned and looked into Sergeant Lemus' staring eyes. "You'll be dead before you reach it," he told Kolt as he patted the handle of his pistol.