

IZ

By: Krystale Jane'l

“Daaad, it’s just a party.” Elijah threw his hands up in the air in exasperation.

Dani Harlocke handed Walter Harlocke his cup of coffee as he reached from behind the *Tuskaloosa Chronicle*.

“No son of mine is going to a house party with a bunch of coloreds.”

She put a piping hot stack of pancakes on a plate. She paused and looked at Walter Harlocke in disbelief.

“Walt! Did you forget Sylvia and I used to be real good friends?” She slid the plate of pancakes over to him.

Walter dropped the paper. His face was stern. The years had aged him and the gray hair around his temples reflected that. He rolled up the sleeves of his police uniform and reached for the syrup.

“He’s not going. If he wants to have a party, we can have one right here.”

“Did you really call them coloreds?! It’s not 1957, Dad!?”

Walter Harlocke ignored his son and proceeded to smother his pancakes in syrup.

“Sit down and eat your breakfast, son. Your mother put the cinnamon and vanilla in the pancakes just like you like them.”

Elijah Harlocke flopped down in the chair beside his daddy. Walter was unbothered as he dug into the stack of pancakes with his fork. Dani placed another stack of pancakes in front of her son.

Everyone knew Elijah was Dani and Walt’s pride and joy. God took his precious time giving them Elijah. After 4 miscarriages, they finally welcomed their baby boy, and that was the day God had smiled down on them and put His own reflection into little Elijah Gregory Harlocke.

Dani Harlocke took off her apron and sat beside her husband at the kitchen table. Dani daintily ate the small portion of eggs with one slice of grapefruit on her plate.

“Is that all you are going to eat, honey?” Walter asked.

“Yes, it’s a new diet. I need to lose a few pounds.” Dani was still a beautiful woman even in her older years, she had aged gracefully.

“You look fine, honey...real men love something to hold on to...at least I do.” Walt winked and Dani playfully threw her napkin at him.

Elijah pretended to gag.

“Dad can you at least think about the party? Everyone is going to be there. I swear I won’t ask for anything else!” Elijah made one last attempt to plead with his father.

“No, and that’s final.” Walt stood up from the table. Dani nervously finished her grapefruit and began to clear the table.

“We had a black President...times aren’t like they used to be, dad.” Elijah snatched his backpack from the back of the kitchen chair.

Walt's face began to change to a deep red. Dani cleared her throat. Politics was a touchy subject for Walter because he didn't understand how they let a black man win the election twice.

"Honey, you are going to be late for school."

She cleared the table and began washing the dishes.

Dani knew Walt would not tolerate any kind of back talk and trying to calm Walt down after his fuse was lit would be futile.

"Yeah, son...I think you better go. I'm not having my son frolicking in some black man's house! It's just is... what it is. This conversation is over."

"Their neighborhood is nicer than ours...what could happen?!!"

Walt stood up from the table and glared at his son. Elijah let the screen door slam behind him.

"Walter, don't you think you are overreacting?"

"Elijah isn't going anywhere with Jackson! No son of mine is getting entangled in nothing that involves those people! I SAID NO AND THAT'S FINAL!"

Dani threw the dish towel down on the table.

"Walter Benjamin Harlocke! I know you are set in your ways just like your daddy, but maybe if you became a little more open minded to change, you wouldn't be in this mess! Folks are saying that you intentionally shot the Baptiste's boy. Did you ever stop to think how this madness affects me or our son?! The whole town is talking about it."

She wasn't too sure why Walt had felt threatened enough to pull the trigger on an 11-year-old boy.

Walter didn't care. He had come from a long line of proud white men. His daddy would roll over in his grave if he knew his grandson was friends with the coloreds, and he would probably flip over twice if he knew that St. John Hospital's chief surgeon was a black man. Time's had changed over the years, but Walter's perspective hadn't.

"Sweetheart, I am sorry. Elijah is too naïve to understand it is what it is, and that's it. I overreacted; Elijah has other friends besides Jackson...it just is what it is." Walter pulled her close to him.

Walt Harlocke might not have openly admitted his distaste for African Americans, because it came so natural to him. It was his preference just like ordering a fried bologna sandwich with mayonnaise instead of mustard. He didn't hate black people and he was far from being a racist.

"I don't understand either, Walt. Good luck today," Dani said halfheartedly.

Walt smoothed the wrinkles out of his uniform and grabbed his keys.

Walt had enough influence in Southern Louisiana that no Internal Affairs would find him guilty of any misconduct...especially not when it came to a little black boy trespassing on a white man's property to steal pecans.

It was something strange about that morning. Dani felt anxious as soon as Walt left. For some reason she started to cry. It wasn't because of the fight they had, but it was something lingering in the back of her mind that was unsettling. Dani quickly dried her tears as she walked up the stairs.

It's nothing. Everything will be fine.

"HE MURDERED MY SON! Vonte is gone...he is gone..." Mrs. Baptiste was hysterical as they dragged her from the conference room. She was sobbing uncontrollably. The weight of the Internal Affairs decision had been too much for her. She collapsed on her knees as the Pastor of her church and attempted to pick her up.

Walter shook hands with 2 out of the four hearing panel participants. He was cleared of any misconduct. His attorney gathered some papers and put them in his briefcase.

"We beat that one, Don. Now on to win the trial." Walter clapped his attorney on his back. His attorney grinned from ear to ear. This wasn't the first time he had been called into a hearing for Walter about his police conduct.

They opened the door. There were crowds of people in the hallway.

"Wait, we are going to have security escort you gentlemen out. This hearing caused quite a stir. They are protesting outside. The press is everywhere." The mediator from the hearing panel dialed a number.

"All of this for a kid?"

The kid was trespassing. How was Walter supposed to know he was pulling out a bag of pecans and not a gun? What else was he supposed to expect from a black kid stealing? He did what any police officer was supposed to do. His life was in danger. He followed the Use of Force Policy. It wasn't his fault Blacks can't follow the rules.

"He was still someone's child...an innocent child," one of the judges on the hearing panel rolled her eyes as she packed her purse.

"Well, he still broke the law. I'm sorry I did my job, Sheila. It just is what it is."

"The question still remains...if he was white would you have taken that shot?" Sheila glared at him and picked up her coat and briefcase. She quickly exited the room.

It was the first time Walter had to use his weapon.

If you asked Walter, if blacks wanted to steal and act like savages, they could do that in their liquor stores and ghettos on the other side of town. Black people didn't belong in their neighborhoods. They brought the property value down. He wished he could have afforded to buy the house Dani wanted two houses from where the Carver's lived. He probably would have been able to had it not been for all the complaints in his file that had stopped him from becoming the police commissioner.

Two security guards entered the room. They escorted Walter, his attorney, and the rest of the hearing panel to the back stairwell. Walter could hear the crowds calling him names amidst a sea of sobs for the late Vonte Baptiste. Just as they made it to the stairwell door Walter felt someone pull him backward. He was staring into the eyes of Mrs. Baptiste.

Her eyes were just a bottomless black abyss of agony, pain, and pure hatred as she had finally broke free to confront the man that took her son from her.

Her hand gripped his arm so firmly her light brown knuckles turned almost white. He inched backwards.

“Every bit of pain you have caused you will feel...Walter Harlocke...You will pay for your sins against my people.” Mrs. Baptiste said in her native Louisiana Creole Southern drawl.

Her sister and other two children pulled her away from him.

The security guard quickly ushered him through the door and down the stairs to the parking deck. Walter was still somewhat disheveled. There was something disturbing about Mrs Baptiste’s warning.

“You didn’t hear a word I said,”

Walter hadn’t noticed his attorney was standing beside him.

“No, my mind was just wandering.”

“Do you want to go have a drink? Let’s celebrate another win for our police department.” He loosened his silk tie and threw his suit jacket in the back of his red Porsche.

Donald Sharp, was a prominent sleaze ball of an attorney. He was every bit of a racist, but unlike so many of their friends, Donald didn’t try to hide or pretend that he wasn’t.

“Dani and I had a little fight. I’m going to head over to Sicily’s and pick her up some fresh lilies.”

“Suit yourself.... I’m going to go have a martini and see what kind of trouble I can cause with some hot little thang.” Don rubbed his hands together mischievously. Don’s family was one of the wealthiest families in town, and he used that to his advantage.

“I bet you will.” Walt got in his pickup truck and drove off.

Walt bought a bouquet of Dani’s favorite flowers and chatted with the florist for a few moments. He could feel cold stares and hear whispers coming from some of the citizens as they did their local shopping.

Walter entered the police station. The Baptiste boy’s shooting had not only caused tension at home, but also between him and some of the officers at the station.

Most of them stood by their oath, “To Serve and Protect” Their loyalty remained with their brothers in blue, but the African American officers and much to his surprise, a few of the other officers did not take Walter’s side. You could feel the tension whenever Walt was at the station. Most of the police department was relieved when he left.

He closed the door to his office. He lost track of time quickly. As the day faded, it was almost sundown when Walter grabbed the flowers and shut down his computer. Walter left the police station in a hurry.

Bill Sherman wasted no time buying a 6 pack of beer for the ride to his farm on the outskirts of town. He came barreling down the street in his beat-up Ford pickup. Bill had one hand on the steering wheel as he opened the can of beer. The top exploded and flipped out of his hands onto the floorboards of his truck where it rested with 4 empty cans. Bill reached down to grab the now half –empty can just as Walter Harlocke crossed the street.

Bill's pickup truck crashed into Walt with so much force Walter flipped up in the air before coming down in the middle of the street. The glass flower vase crashed on the concrete. Bill was startled as he looked up. He looked in his rearview mirror to see Walt's body laying still among the broken glass in the middle of the road. Bill slammed his foot on the accelerator and sped off. His heart was racing. He squeezed the beer can until it was crumpled over in his hand. Beer ran down his hands and arm. He didn't notice as he began to panic.

It was an accident...Harlocke can't be dead...and if I go back...they will lock me up. He will be fine. He's outside of the police station and someone will find him. I can't go back...it is what it is...

Jackson Carver Jr. heard the screech of tires and a loud thud just as he was exiting the store with, Kimberly, his girlfriend.

“What the he--” Jackson dropped the bag of groceries.

“Oh my God! It's Sheriff Harlock!” Kimberly exclaimed.

“Kim, call 911!” Jackson pushed Kim back in the entrance of the store and ran to where Harlocke's limp body lay. More onlookers came out of the various businesses to see what the commotion was about.

He was almost unrecognizable. He barely had a pulse. Jackson cradled Harlocke's head in his lap covering his varsity jacket in his blood. There was a crowd gathering

“Did anyone see who did this?” Jackson heard someone say.

“No, we were coming out of the store when we heard someone speed off.” Kimberly responded.

“Where is the ambulance?”

“They are on the way son,” Mr. Johnson the mechanic said.

Jackson was shaking. All he could think about was the fact he had his best friend's dad's blood on his hands. He knew what kind of man Walter was, and he knew about Vonte' Baptiste, but nobody deserved this.

“He's not breathing,” Jackson barely whispered.

Walt was about to enter the courtroom for the Vonte Baptiste trial. He wasn't sure how much time passed. Years seemed like minutes and minutes felt like eternity. He was recovering, but since the incident, he didn't remember much. It was like somehow every moment added up to this moment, at the courthouse.

The new courthouse had been renamed, IZ. He wasn't even sure what that meant because everything seemed so strange now. He couldn't remember small details like the way Dani's hair smelled

or what he had done five minutes before entering the courthouse, yet here he was, but at least he was alive.

Walter stuck his police badge in his pocket and adjusted the collar of his suit. He stepped into the elevator and was surprised that there was a black boy standing in the elevator. He was dressed in a red jacket with the words, "IZ" written on the pocket and on the red and gold hat that adorned his hat.

"Hi sir, welcome to IZ. What floor, sir?" The boy looked familiar, but he just couldn't remember.

"4th floor. I didn't know they had a door man at the courthouse..."

The door closed and the lights started to flicker and the elevator rapidly moved down instead of up. Walter was startled and braced the walls of the elevator.

"What is going on?!"

"Judgment, Wallie. You don't remember me, do you?" The doorman said calmly.

He pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to him.

Walter gasped. It was Joey Thomas. Joey had been his best friend when they were kids. Joey's parents lived on the opposite side of town in the black neighborhood. There was no color when it came time for the boys in town to meet at the field to play baseball. Walt's mind flooded with memories as he looked at the crumpled-up paper in his hands of the picture he had drawn of him and Joey holding their baseball bats. Walter's daddy had found the drawing of Walter and his friend colored in with the brown crayon. Walter got the worst beating for being "a nigger's friend." That next day Walter's and his dad marched straight to the softball field and confronted little Joey.

"Are you friends with this nigger, Walter?"

Walter remembered the beating he endured earlier that day and quietly said,

"No. I ain't friends with a nigger."

He looked at the crumbled-up drawing and the boy who hadn't aged. He never saw Joey again.

"I'm sorry."

"That's how it all started. You were conditioned to have hate in your heart the very moment your dad saw that picture. You got the worst beating of your life for using a brown crayon."

The elevator kept going.

"I don't hate anyone! Is this a joke?"

The elevator stopped as abruptly as it began to descend.

"That's what they all say, Wallie. No, this isn't a joke. This is your trial. This is what you came for, right?"

"What happened to you, Joey?"

"We moved after your dad humiliated me that day. My dad found a job in New York. I became a professional baseball player."

The elevator dinged and slowly opened.

“How is this possible?”

“Things change when time stops. I’ll see you soon, Wallie.” Joey winked and the door closed. Walt wasn’t sure how he got out of the elevator, but there he was.

He turned around and he saw his beautiful Dani twenty years younger in the parking lot of Robert E. Lee High School with Sylvia Turner, that was her name before she married Jackson Carver.

“How can you even think to marry Walter? Walter and his family are some of the most hateful white people in this city. They hate black people! Walt hasn’t been on the police force for very long and he’s already harassing some of the boys from the Southside! My brother said Walt was on patrol the other night when they stopped him for no reason!”

“I love him. Walt isn’t like that, it’s just his daddy and the rest of his family.”

“Dani, I can’t believe you said that! I can’t be friends with someone who thinks it’s okay to be married to someone who doesn’t like me because I’m black. What does that say about you?”

“What does that mean, Sylvia? You know I’m not like that. You are my best friend.”

“Maybe Walt is making your true feelings come out, and I can’t be a part of that. You do know Walter’s grandfather and dad participated in several harassment incidents, and they say his daddy lynched a black man back in the day ...”

“Allegedly, Sylvia...Allegedly.”

“Congratulations on your marriage, Dani. I wish you the best, but I can’t support that...maybe Walt is just making you see who you really are...that’s why you love him. Bye, Dani.” Sylvia handed Dani a bracelet and walked away.

“Sylvia! Wait!” Sylvia didn’t look back.

“That heart best friend bracelet in Dani’s jewelry box. I didn’t know Sylvia had the other half. I didn’t know they were that close...”

“It’s a lot you don’t know, Wallie, it’s time to go, ”Joey whispered to Walter.

They were back on the elevator. The elevator began to ascend rapidly. Walter gripped the elevator walls. The lights flickered once again as beads of perspiration formed on his forehead.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened to reveal the police station.

“What is going on? Joey, this isn’t real. This can’t be!”

Walter was looking at himself sitting at his desk. He was reading over a report one of the officers had submitted. Walter was speechless. It had to be Déjà vu. This was exactly what Walter had been doing the day before the accident.

Walter was so surprised he backed up towards the elevator, but the elevator was gone.

“As you can see, hate is a festering sore that spreads to everything around you...keep watching, Wallie”

Officer Parker walked in Walter’s office.

“Sheriff, I need to know why I wasn’t promoted. I have been at this station for over four years, I completed all of the training and passed my firearms course with 100 percent. I’ve never had any complaints or write ups. Why would you pick Officer Givens over me?!”

“Officer Parker, you may have all the skills, but Officer Givens is more equipped for the position. I shouldn’t have to explain myself to you. Officer Givens has an excellent reputation with the governor and he was recommended by the Commissioner for the position.”

Officer Parker frowned.

“Excellent reputation! He has a complaint filed almost every week on him! He probably can’t even pass a physical exam! Sheriff, I bust my ass here every day. I take my job seriously. I took this job to make a difference, but my salary is lower than all of my male counterparts. I work twice as hard and you assured me that I would be promoted to Lieutenant.”

“No, I said you exceeded the qualifications for the position and would be the best candidate. I never promised you anything. I’m sorry, but it is what is... Now, if you excuse me...I need to get back to work.” Walter looked over his glasses.

Officer Parker sighed and closed the door behind her. She grabbed her jacket and walked outside. Officer Parker lit a cigarette and took a long drag. She pulled out her cellphone.

“I didn’t get the promotion. He picked Givens. I know...you were right. I came to this police station to make a difference. It’s bad enough my own community looks at me like I’m a traitor, but for once I thought I would be judged by my qualifications and good work ethic, not because I’m a black woman. I’m going to request a transfer.

We will have to take out a loan. I honestly, don’t know how we will be able to afford our house note now that Gerald won’t be able to work. That raise was going to help us out a lot. I’ll probably pick up some extra shifts and get a few side jobs. No, sis.... we will be fine. You know he has his pride. I didn’t tell him about the promotion because I know how he is. He wants me to quit especially since they have been egging our house since the shooting of Vonte Baptiste.

We will make a way. Gerald’s rheumatoid arthritis is bad, but they said his disability will kick in and that will be a big help. We just need to make it until then. I gotta go. Don’t worry about me. Yes, I’m REALLY going to apply for the transfer. It’s time for us to leave this city.

I love you, let me finish up here.”

She put the butt of her cigarette out on the side of the building and went back inside. Walter and Joey looked on. Walter was in disbelief.

“I didn’t know her husband wasn’t working anymore. Gerald is a hard worker.” Walter stammered.

“Why didn’t Erin get the job, Wallie? She is one of your best officers. You signed and recommended Givens for the promotion, and you lied to her and said the commissioner recommended him. Why did you lie?” Joey asked.

“She is one of my best officers, but our police force isn’t ready for a black woman. Givens has been on the force for 17 years. He deserved it.”

“Givens has more complaints than any other officer on your squad, he barely passed the firearms training, and he hasn’t met all of the annual training requirements, but you signed off on him saying he did. Why?”

“How do you know that?”

“Why. Wallie?”

“BE-cause... we have to watch out for our own. Givens isn’t going to run our police force to the ground making exceptions for the blacks and trying to protect them. She would protect her own, and then they would think they could run all over this department.”

“You don’t believe that. You still don’t want to admit the truth?”

“Hatred and Love, are both choices. It’s time for you to make a choice.”

They were back in the elevator. The doors closed and opened. This time they were in the hospital room. Dr. Carver was standing over him in the hospital bed. Dani was in tears.

“Dani, I did everything I could. There is swelling on his brain. There was a lot of internal damage. I want to be realistic about this. I know this is a hard decision to make, but we have to know if you want us to resuscitate”

“Where is Elijah?” Dani asked between sobs.

“Jackson is trying to call him again.” Dr. Carver answered.

Tear streaks ran down Dani’s face.

“That’s me! I’m dying?!” Walter tried to run to Dani.

“She can’t hear or see you.” Joey grabbed Walter.

“It’s time to find Elijah,” Joey said solemnly.

They were back in the elevator and it dinged.

They were in Elijah’s room.

Elijah’s phone rang, but he ignored the call.

“I’m not missing this party.”

Elijah grabbed a black hoodie and threw it on. The sun was beginning to set and it was warm. This was a perfect night for a party.

Elijah walked downstairs, grabbed the bag of snacks he promised Jackson he would bring for the party, and left.

He put his hoodie over his head and began to walk. He took the shortcut through some of his neighbor’s backyard to get to Jackson’s house.

He heard tires screech.

Elijah had his headphones in and couldn’t hear anything.

“The town is going crazy since Sheriff was cleared. Dispatch, we found the suspect who vandalized the pawn shop. The suspect is a black male wearing a dark colored hoodie... Over.” The police officer talked into his walkie talkie.

“Boy, do you hear us talking. Stop walking!” The other officer shouted.

Elijah had his head down and turned around at the sound of shouting.

Elijah was so startled he took off running.

“The suspect is running on foot!”

The officers began to run. Elijah ran and then turned around. He reached in his pocket to grab his phone.

“Hey! It’s me. Eli-----”

Three shots rang out.

Elijah crumbled to the ground. Blood began to pour from his chest, side, and thigh.

“NOOOO!” Walter screamed. Walter tried to run to Elijah but the more he moved forward he seemed to be back in the elevator.

“It’s Walt’s boy! Why the hell did you start shooting?!”

“He fit the description! He reached in his pocket! I thought he had a gun!”

The police officers ran to Elijah’s side. Elijah was sputtering blood from his mouth. His blood ran down the street.

“Hold on son. Dispatch! We need a medic ASAP! We have a white male down. WE NEED A MEDIC NOW!” the older of the two officers shouted in his microphone.

“I didn’t know...I didn’t know... He had a hoodie on and he was in this neighborhood.”

“Rookie, there’s no time for this now. He is losing blood. I think he---s gone.”

“NOOOOO! NOT MY SON! NOOOOO!” Walter was beside his son. He picked up Elijah’s head and laid his blood-soaked body in his arms. Elijah’s lifeless eyes looked back at him. His blood began to soak Walt’s suit as he cradled and rocked his only son.

“No! No! Not my boy. Not my boy!” He was almost hysterical.

“Wake up son. Wake up.” He gently shook Elijah

“They are going to pay for this.” Walter cried.

“Why should they? Did you pay for Vonte Baptiste? Did you know Vonte was only trying to get some pecans for his mother to make her pies for the church bake sale? The stores were closed and he didn’t think anyone mind if he got a few pecans from the Hilshire Estate.” Joey kneeled beside him.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry.” Walter cried.

“What’s your choice, Wallie?” Joey leaned down beside him.

“Do you choose your life or your son’s?”

“My son! Bring him back! Please bring him back!”

The police officers couldn't see or hear them as they waited for the ambulance and other officers began to arrive.

“Love is a choice...It's time to go back, Wallie.” Joey gently pulled his hand.

“I can't leave him. I can't leave...” They were back in the elevator. Walter continued to cry. He looked down at the blood from his only child on his hands. He looked down at his hands He could see Ms. Baptiste's hands as she cradled Vonte in her arms.

“I'm so sorry. Take me. TAKE ME!”

Walter balled up in a fetal position and closed his eyes tightly.

“Always choose love. Love changes things and has no color, Wallie.” He heard Joey say in his ear.

“Dad! Dad!” Walter Harlocke opened his eyes. Elijah, Dani, Dr. Carver, and Jackson Carver Jr. were peering down at him. He was in the hospital hooked up to what seemed like a million machines. He couldn't talk but he started to cry.

“Walter! He opened his eyes! Baby!” Dani kissed him repeatedly.

“Be careful. He has a long way to go, but he is going to make it.” Dr. Carver smiled. He started to cry and tried to speak.

“Walter, we thought we lost you twice, but we were able to stop the internal bleeding. You have a long road to recovery ahead, but Walt, you are tough.”

Dr. Carver turned to walk away and Walt grabbed his hand. Tears flowed down his face. Dr. Carver was quite surprised.

“Thank you, Dr.” he said barely above a whisper.

Walt never made a full recovery so he retired from the police force. With his recommendation Officer Parker was promoted as the new Sheriff. That day he traveled to IZ changed Walt for the better. Walter Harlocke learned that choosing race over character was more than just a preference. It was the decision to choose hate over love...and that just is what it IZ.