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Play It Forward  
by  
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**Chapter 1**  
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Much of the trouble started when that video I made, but didn't *really* make, hit the Internet.

I was on my second round of Grey Goose and tonics with my best friend Kyle and his long-time love, Bernard. It was a seventy-degree Sunday evening in June, just before the large rush of *younger* Black guys made their way into The Abbey in West Hollywood, just before the ambient lounge music transitioned to the current hip-hop songs. Though we enjoyed a good time out, we enjoyed it with the company of other thirty-somethings, and at a time of day when we could actually hear our conversations above the sound of music.

Kyle, Bernard, and I were this close to winding down our time together, as we all worked and had somewhere to be on Monday morning, when Bernard, trouble-maker that he is, brought up the long-gone Clinton-Obama rift of 2008. He knew how to get me started, and thus delay our departure.

“I still can’t believe you voted for that lady, Malcolm,” Bernard said rather loudly, his cocktail swirling but never spilling out of the glass in his left hand. “I am still holding that against you. You lost your Black card with me.”

“Oh gosh,” Kyle said and rolled his eyes. Everyone knew Bernard loved a debate... and trouble. Kyle could be equally dramatic. That made them a good match for the past eight years. “Here we go again. That was almost a year ago. Give it a rest.”

“No worries,” I said. “I’m not going to get into it. We all know Hillary was much more experienced and ready for day one on the job than Barack was.”

Bernard rolled his eyes and continued, “How can you say that? Most of her alleged experience was on her husband’s watch.”

That’s when I noticed my phone ringing. A call from my sister in Indiana. A downer much like the political debate Bernard was trying to reel me into again. I wasn’t feeling having this political commentary over cocktails, especially for an election competition a year behind us.

“Having that inside knowledge of how things work and how to make things happen *is* experience,” I said. “It’s called social and cultural capital, but it’s all a moot point. Election is long over. We made history and Barack is the man.”

“True, but I’m a long way from forgetting,” Bernard said with a laugh. Raised his glass to mine and we toasted. Political rivals in our minds, but friends because he loved my best friend Kyle. “To unity... and change.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I said reluctantly, and toasted with Bernard and Kyle. Noticed a lot of our thirty-something acquaintances were being replaced by twenty-somethings. That tended to happen just around seven on Sunday evenings at The Abbey. “The kids

are starting to arrive, and I want to be gone before it gets too crowded and all that drama that comes with them starts. And I definitely don't want to see anyone from LADS."

"Amen to that, girl," Kyle said and placed his almost-empty glass on a nearby table. "I don't know how these kids stay out all night on Sunday, as if they don't have to work or go to school on Monday. I'm already going over my to-do list in my mind."

"Please, baby," Bernard interrupted. "Most of them don't have job. Trifling little things. So glad I'm not on the market now."

Bernard kissed Kyle on the cheek, and they gave each other that look lovers give when they want to do couples things in bed later. I felt like quite the third wheel, though it's something Kyle and Bernard would never say out loud. We'd been doing our Sunday afternoon meetings at The Abbey for years, even before Black people started taking over Sundays.

"I don't know how they can afford these fifteen dollar drinks like they do," I said. The Abbey was known for its pricey mojitos and martinis of all flavors, but most people ignored the prices, as the bar was the best place to see and be seen in gay and gay-friendly L.A. We were all playing Hollywood, even if it wasn't our reality. I'd exchanged my standard khaki pants and button down for something a little more casual and Abbey-worthy. Hollywood, I could never quite fit the part or find myself paying for those designers and labels that many wore... just because. I'd never been the fit-in-just-because type.

"Okaaaay."

"Most of them are pretending to be someone's stylist, assistant, or an actor, or whatever," I said. "You wouldn't believe how many 'models' and 'singers' come into

LADS for the free food vouchers... oh, okay, go ahead and make out while I talk guys.” I did air-quotes around the so-called careers of the young men I encountered in my day job.

Bernard whispered a sweet-nothing in Kyle’ ear and pulled him closer. Eight years and still happy. Still making out with each other like day one, they looked like two chocolate drops joined at the hip.

As my friends hugged and kissed each other, out of the corner of my eye I could see a group of young brothas, probably in their early twenties, staring and pointing our way. First, I thought it was the rare surprise of seeing Black-on-Black romance in West Hollywood that caught their curiosity and attention. Black guys were friends, not potential love interests, in West Hollywood. I was sure none of them had had any Black romantic couples as role models, but then again I couldn’t assume anything these days. My work with young, Black gay men at the LADS organization opened my eyes that not everyone grew up middle-class with two parents like I did. The job definitely challenged my upbringing and comfort zone. Nothing was a surprise. Anything could happen, and often did.

Much like it did when one of the twenty-something men, dressed in a black v-neck t-shirt, gray shorts, and black Oakland Raiders hat, nodded his head at me as a directive to walk his way. I excused myself from Kyle and Bernard, as they were on their way to third base and ignoring me at the moment, and walked across the room toward the massive fireplace near the front of The Abbey where brotha stood.

“Hey,” I said.

Didn’t know much else to say. His presence intimidated me a bit. Young, athletic, cute, masculine brotha. Definitely not the type that would put me in his target

demographic. I knew he had to be a good ten years younger than me. But I wasn't looking for any type of romantic relationship, so shyness and intimidation wasn't necessary. As I got closer to him, I could tell he loved Hanae Mori cologne. Smelled good on him.

“Whaddup bro?”

“Not much,” I said.

He held out his free hand to fist bump mine.

“What you up to?”

“Just about to head out,” I said, deepening my voice, shortening my phrasing, performing masculinity “Came in earlier with a couple buddies over there.”

“Damn thas too bad,” he said and smiled. Nice set of pearly whites contrasted beautifully against his rich mahogany skin. “You looking good, bro.”

“Thanks,” I said, and replied like a nerd, “You don't look so bad yourself. I like your cologne.”

This small talk on looking good was definitely a set-up for a one-nighter, since we hadn't even exchanged names yet. After a couple Grey Goose and tonics, I could have been game, had brotha not looked like some of the clients I served at LADS. I wasn't going to turn into one of those thirty-something mid-life-crisis cases who got off on picking up guys who could be their younger brother, cousin, or worst yet, son. Back in my twenties and early-thirties, when I was single and desperately looking for *anyone*, and working at the bank, I would have taken a guy like this home for the night. No questions asked. No background check. Sometimes no names exchanged. That's how I'd ended up with a string of ex's whose lives were the social issue of the month. Now, I was happily

single and looking for more than a one-night-only kind of arrangement. And I definitely wasn't looking for drama or to help someone else solve their drama. That was only for work.

"Turn around for me man," he said. Snapped me back to reality from my dating flashback.

I smiled and said, "Excuse me?"

"I wanna see what you working with up close."

"You talking to the wrong guy," I said. "I'm not like that."

"Oh, so it's like that then?" he said. "Thas okay man. I seen your ass halfway across the room. I knew it was you. Thas whassup."

He nodded and pursed lips at me. Like he was sizing me up. I knew the look, having been around the block myself over the years. But I didn't know this young man, his history, health status, or motive for sizing me up.

"How about names?" I said, wanting to change the subject and get us on track to normal conversation. I'd pretty much determined I wasn't going to do anything with him beyond The Abbey. "I'm Malcolm. You're?"

"Just call me Compton for now," he said and nodded.

"As in... from Compton?" I said, a little confused, and waited for a response or explanation. None came. I'm such a nerd at times. Silence. "All right."

One of his friends brought back three drinks from the bar, and handed two to Compton. Berry martinis in tall glasses.

"Take a sip," he said. "I want you all liquored up tonight, man. Thas whassup."

“Thanks,” I said, to be polite. “But no thanks. I don’t take drinks when I haven’t seen them getting made. And I’ve already had two. Gotta drive.”

“Two for me then,” he said. Chuckled. Tossed the straw out of one drink, and gulped down about half in one swallow. “You one of them proper niggas, huh? That’s cool. I know them proper niggas like you get freaky in the sheets.”

I hated the whole, tired conversation about who speaks like what. Kinda like how who votes for whom in primary elections a year ago validated one’s membership in the Black community. I knew it – the talking proper conversation – was a class thing, how people valued education as children, how people sized up community allegiance. But this was not the time for giving Compton a sociology lesson. Nor was I very keen on befriending a guy who, like many other young men without social skills, communicated his desires through sex talk and conquests.

“Compton, you don’t know me and I don’t know you,” I said. “I understand you’re young and probably don’t know a lot about how real men want to be treated and approached, but the talk about sex. Not so much.”

He put his berry martinis in an empty spot on the fireplace ledge and pulled out his iPhone.

“I know you well, Carlton,” he said and ran his fingers across the face of the phone. Even though we were almost twenty years past *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* TV show, the character Carlton was still synonymous with being a proper-speaking Black nerd, even though I didn’t think Carlton was a nerd.

My phone rang again. My sister, again, from Indianapolis. Must be urgent. No one calls long distance, over and over, without some kind of emergency. I knew something had to be up.

“It’s Malcolm,” I said, correcting Compton again. “Hold on a sec. I gotta take this. Be right back.”

I walked toward the patio door at the front of The Abbey. Just a tad quieter than inside, but quiet enough for a thirty-something not to have to shout in the receiver of a cell phone.

“What’s going on, Marlena?” I said. Don’t laugh at my sister’s name... our mom loved *Days of our Lives* back in the day.

“It’s your nephew, that’s what’s going on,” she said. She sounded pissed off, once more, about Blake, her oldest son, my only nephew. Again, don’t laugh at my nephew’s name... my sister loved *Dynasty* as a teenager.

“What did Blake do now?”

“He’s still spending all his god-damn time on that damn Internet, meeting all kinds of strangers,” Marlena said. “I just walked in on him getting head from this boy from down the street he went to high school with ... and the house reeked of weed. I can’t take it no more.”

My sister Marlena had always had a difficult time with Blake. Her other kids, the twins girls, were angels compared to their older brother, born in Marlena’s senior year of high school.

“So you’re calling me for what?” I said. I mean, I knew she needed to vent. Who wouldn’t, after catching their nineteen-year-old son getting a blow job from a neighbor.

“I’m tired of his Black ass... YOU HEAR ME, BLAKE, TIRED OF YOUR BLACK ASS... I SHOULD HAVE PUT HIM OUT A LONG TIME AGO,” Marlena yelled to me, and I assume, to Blake who’d probably slammed his bedroom door and wasn’t paying attention to his mother. Why Marlena hadn’t followed though on our family’s “eighteen and out” rule was a mystery to me. We’d all known, including Marlena with her new baby back in the day, that it was expected we’d be out of the house after high school senior year, preferably at a college, but for sure working and in our own place.

“Hold on Marlena,” I said. “Let’s talk about this.”

It was my standard line to use with people who were having a dramatic moment. I knew hearing themselves out would help calm them down.

“Ain’t nothing to talk about, Malcolm,” Marlena said. “I can’t put up with his trifling ass no more. I’m sending him out to California for the summer to stay with you, since he wants to be a rapper... AIN’T NO SUCH THING AS A GAY RAPPER, BLAKE.”

“You’re what?” I asked. I was sure I hadn’t heard Marlena correctly. The “gay rapper” thing threw me off a bit.

“I *said* I’m sending him out to California for the summer,” Marlena said. “What? You can’t hear now, Malcolm? Trying to play LIKE YOU DON’T HEAR ME LIKE BLAKE DOES?”

“Calm down,” I said. “Are you for real? Things that bad?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “You got a problem with it?”

Sunday evening, on a busy patio at The Abbey, wasn't the time to go through the list of reasons why having my nephew stay with me was a bad idea. So I started with just a few.

"Hel-LO," I said. "I'm working, busy all the time, running LADS, never home. And my place is so small. And what makes you think he'd want to spend his summer with his thirty-five year-old uncle?"

*And why would I want to spend my summer with a nineteen-year-old, when I see them everyday at work?* is what I really wanted to ask Marlina the dramatic.

"You work with the gays," she said. "Maybe you can straighten him out. I mean, not straighten him out like that, but help him get his life on track. If anybody can show him the way, I know you can. I'm done. I'M DONE!"

"Why can't he stay with momma?" I asked.

"Momma's old," she said. "He'll get over on her quicker than me, and she'll just let her first grandbaby do whatever."

"Marlena," I said and sighed. "I'm far from perfect."

"Please?" Marlina said. "I'm tired. I'm sending him out there."

Compton walked out the patio door and toward me. With my sister putting me on the spot, and Compton looking kinda good in that black v-neck as he walked my way, I was ready to give Compton a one-night-only after The Abbey, or at minimum, a WeHo-Hello in the parking structure around the corner. Sometimes, one-nighers aren't just about the sex. Sometimes they're a momentary denial to help get through life's realities.

"Whaddup man? You coming back or what?"

“Okay,” I said. And realized I’d answered both Marlena’s and Compton’s requests.

“Thanks, then we’ll talk tomorrow,” Marlena said, just as Compton replied, “Cool, see you inside.”

“Wait,” I said and realized I’d committed to both a summer to my nephew Blake/ and a continued conversation with Compton. Neither was a choice of my own fruition, but I knew it wouldn’t hurt to give Blake or Compton a bit of my time.

I met Compton in the spot where I’d left him a few minutes earlier, in front of the fireplace. He’d finished the first drink his friend had given him, and was well into the second. All in a matter of ten minutes or less. Mess.

“Anyway, Compton, I’m heading back to my buddies,” I said. “Good meeting you. Have a good one.”

“Wait,” Compton said and wrapped his free arm around my waist, while his hand drifted lower to my butt. “I wanna show you something, man. Look.”

I removed his hand and moved a step away.

“I know what you want to show me,” I said. “Not interested.”

He put the iPhone screen in my face, his arm around my shoulder. Squeezed. If I were planning to sleep with him, it would have felt... sexy. His touch was strong.

I saw the homepage of an amateur X-rated site uploading, and then two seconds later... I was doing something pornographic with my mouth to...

“Oh my God,” I said. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s on GayClick,” Compton said and whispered/slash/slurred in my ear. “You gone work my shit like that? I could use some bomb head.”

“Hell no, I’m not working your sh...,” I said. “What site is this? How did you get this video?”

“Hold on a sec,” he said. “This is how I recognized yo ass across the room.”

Two seconds later, I was on screen doing something pornographic squatting up and down over...

“What the hell?” I said. “I’ve seen enough.”

“Me too, but there’s about six or seven more,” he said and grinned. Slid a hand down to my butt and groped again. “You gone twerk that ass for me like you did in the video? Thas whassup man.”

“Are you crazy,” I said and pulled away from Compton’s grasp. “You don’t even know me. That’s not me.” I knew it was me. But *how*... that was another question.

“You gone let me hit that, right?,” Compton said. “Playin all Carlton and shit, but fuck like a porn star.”

“Fuck you,” I said.

“I like it when you’re hood like that,” he said as I walked back to Kyle and Bernard. Watched Compton and his friends looking at the screen and getting a kick out of those videos with me in them. Videos I never EVER made.

“I gotta get out of here,” I said. Felt like I was about to faint or vomit, but kept it together.

“Why? What’s up?” Kyle said.

“What did that kid do to you?” Bernard asked. “I’ll go fuck him up.”

And I knew he would. Kyle too. But that's not what I wanted. Well, I did, but I also wanted to be able to return to The Abbey for future Sundays... years from now, after guys with iPhones with videos of me were no longer in the picture.

"I can't show my face in here again," I said. "I'm out."

I walked through the crowd, past Compton and his friends who jeered and whistled as I whisked by, and out the front entrance of The Abbey. I'm sure they all thought I was some kind of porn star or sexual acrobat. Maybe back in the day, pre-2000s, like before camera phones, sex tapes, paparazzi, and things that lived forever on computers, that kind of reputation might have been cool, because it was all just based on word-of-mouth, and not based on technology that could create a permanent marker of your reputation.

Not today. As a man in my thirties. With responsibilities. Role modeling. Clients. And a nineteen-year-old nephew coming to L.A. to spend the summer with me.

I looked for "him" in the long line of men waiting to get in the club. Not my nephew. But the one who sold me out online. Sometimes he would make an Abbey appearance on Sunday evenings, when he knew I'd probably be gone home and he wouldn't have to face me. He wasn't in line. No sign.

Meant one thing. He was at his place with the one he left me for.

And that's where I knew I'd be heading before I went home to my place.