

A Blossom of Bright Light

Chapter 1

There are decisions you make in life without realizing you are making them. They don't even seem like decisions at all until you're suddenly bounding along, breathless as a husky in the snow, farther and farther from some elusive fork in the road where it all could have been different.

Had he seen the fork or even had an inkling it was there, Jimmy Vega could have saved so many things that night. His relationship. His conscience. A life. Had he thought with his head instead of points considerably farther south, he would have chosen far differently. It would have changed everything—because it wouldn't have changed anything at all.

It was a Saturday evening in late October, a time when the trees flame with color and the leaf peepers form conga lines on the highways heading north from New York City. There was talk of a dusting of snow in the forecast. Lights flicked on early from windows decorated with carved pumpkins and paper ghosts cut by children itching for Halloween.

Normally Vega would have clocked in at work by now, but he'd switched tours with Teddy Dolan so Dolan could take his kids to their adoption agency's fall dinner tomorrow. Normally Vega's girlfriend of five months, Adele Figueroa, would be fetching her nine-year-old daughter from gymnastics, but Sophia's best friend had begged the

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girl to sleep over. As a result, a rare and beautiful thing opened up on their calendars: a whole fourteen hours to spend together. Alone.

They knew how they were going to spend it, too. A log in Adele's fireplace. Chinese takeout. Coronas and limes. Marc Anthony and Shakira on the stereo. The evening stretched out before them like a vast blue ocean waiting to be explored.

One minute, Adele was sitting with Vega in her funky, adobe-colored dining room, holding a fortune cookie playfully out of his reach, breaking off bits of it and rolling them around oh-so-suggestively on her tongue. The next, her phone was ringing in the kitchen, harsh and insistent. It was eight p.m. They'd been together just over an hour.

"*Puñeta!*" Vega slumped in his chair, the air suddenly gone out of him. He always fell into the Puerto Rican street vernacular of his youth when he got frustrated.

Adele rose and shot him a warning look. "It could be Sophia, you know." Vega had to remind himself that they were on different sides of the parenting divide. Vega's daughter, Joy, was eighteen, a freshman at the community college. He'd have fallen off his chair if she'd called him on a Saturday night.

It wasn't Sophia. It was Rafael, the evening manager at La Casa, the Latino community center Adele had founded ten years ago and given up a promising law career to keep afloat. Not to mention her waste of a Harvard degree.

Vega could hear Rafael's panicked, rapid-fire Spanish through the receiver. Something about Jazmin, his six-year-old daughter. It sounded like she'd gotten hurt.

"Oh my goodness," said Adele. "Do you think the thumb is broken? Can she move it?"

Vega already had an idea where this conversation was headed. He blocked the doorway of the kitchen and waved furiously at her like she was standing on a cliff, about to jump.

“You’re not covering Rafael’s shift tonight, Adele. Tell him to close the center early if he has to take Jazmin to the emergency room.”

Adele ducked under Vega’s arms and walked back into the dining room. The table was littered with half-empty takeout cartons and palm-sized packages of soy sauce. Two brightly painted Mexican candlesticks sat among the ruins, their tapered candles still glowing with promise. She leaned over and blew them out. Ribbons of smoke curled from their snuffed wicks. Just like Vega’s evening—up in smoke.

She spoke into the phone. “Did you try Luis? Is he available to take the shift?”

More panicked words from Rafael. Adele turned her back. “Of course you have to go. Can he speak to me tomorrow?” Vega had a sense this wasn’t just about Jazmin anymore.

“Close the center,” he said again.

Adele ignored him. “So is Zambo there now?”

Zambo. That was all Vega needed to hear.

“Oh no. No way, Adele. You’re not going in for that drunk.” All the cops and social workers in the area had Zambo stories, and as a county detective, Vega had heard every one. Zambo wasn’t his real name. Vega didn’t even know his real name. Everyone just called him Zambo, short for *patizambo*—“bowlegged”—in Spanish. He was a homeless alcoholic from someplace in Central America with a penchant for religious delusions and a long string of petty misdemeanors that never quite rose to the level of deportable offenses. Vega was betting he’d just walked into La Casa with some new claim that God had personally singled him out for something other than an extra case of communion wine.

More chatter from Rafael.

“Zambo says he just saw Jesus.” Adele listened, then

corrected herself. “The baby Jesus. In the arms of the Virgin Mary. In the woods behind La Casa.”

“*Coño!*” Vega cursed loudly enough for Rafael to hear. “Every time that mutt gets a couple of drinks in him, he thinks God’s sending him an Instagram.” Some of the local cops took bets on where Zambo would have a religious delusion next. Once he claimed the Virgin Mary spoke to him from behind the Slurpee dispenser at the Subway on Main Street. Another time, he saw Her at the Laundromat over on Sunset. He considered the Mobil gas station owned by two turbaned Sikhs to be sacred property because he saw the head of Jesus in an oil stain there.

Oddly, Zambo never seemed to see Jesus or Mary in church. Then again, Vega had spent years as an altar boy, and he’d never had anything that would qualify as a religious experience in church either.

“Tell him to lay off the extra-strength lagers,” Vega called out.

Adele’s mouth went slack. She slid a glance in Vega’s direction. He expected annoyance. He was behaving like a child. If she chewed him out later, he’d take his lumps without complaint. But what he saw instead stopped him cold. Not anger. Or frustration. Or any emotion with a shred of heat in it. No. There was something more tepid and sad in the watery set of her big, chestnut-colored eyes, the slight downturn in her full lips, the slow exhale from her chest. This was disappointment. And it sliced right through him because he understood that this was not the first time lately she’d given him that look. It had been building. Somewhere in the dim recesses of his subconscious, he knew that. But he hadn’t realized it fully until now.

Nothing had been said, of course. It was telegraphed in her shortened embraces, the way she no longer sent little “thinking of you” texts, or returned his with only *xs* or

smiley faces at the bottom. Sometimes he'd catch her lost in thought. He'd tense and wait, but the words never came. People brought their troubles to Adele. Adele brought her troubles to no one—sadly, not even to him. Maybe because he was the source.

She cradled the phone to her ear and grabbed some plates off the dining table. Then she walked the stack past Vega into the kitchen and dumped them into her deep, cast-iron sink. Vega grabbed the cups and bowls and followed. Adele had a dishwasher, but the sink was so big, she and Vega always did their dishes by hand. Vega loved the routine. It reminded him of when he was a little boy in the Bronx, watching his mother and grandmother in the kitchen. Just thinking about his mother brought an ache to his heart. She'd been gone eighteen months now, murdered in a botched robbery in the Bronx. The police had yet to arrest a suspect. Every month, he called the station house for an update on the case, and every month, the only thing that changed was the name of the detective in charge.

"So I take it Zambo wants to show me the spot behind La Casa where he had his vision," Adele said to Rafael over the clatter.

La Casa was only a five-minute drive from Adele's house. Taking her there was no trouble at all. But Adele wouldn't walk behind the center and come right back. She'd chat with clients and restock the copier and clean out the refrigerator and answer the half dozen e-mails that seemed to come in every hour at that place. And she'd be there until midnight. She might as well have kept her promising Wall Street law career for all the hours she put into that place.

Vega came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He pressed himself into her body and breathed in the scent of her—vanilla and limes and something entirely her own. He massaged the muscles on either side of

her spine, then brushed her silky black hair away from her neck and ran his lips down the contours. She shivered in response. He wanted more than anything to make love to her in front of the fireplace tonight. He wanted to buy sweet rolls and strawberries in the morning and dip them in whipped cream that they'd lick off each other's lips.

He wanted her to look at him like she used to.

"Don't go, Nena," he whispered. He was the only man she'd ever let call her "baby" in Spanish. "Tonight belongs to us."

She closed her eyes and exhaled a prayer over the phone that was disguised as a question.

"You think this is just another one of his hallucinations?" she asked Rafael.

Vega wanted to tell Rafael to do what he should have done in the first place and kick Zambo out. That mutt was probably only at La Casa because it was cold out tonight. Too cold to make trouble and chance having the Lake Holly police pick him up and dump him in neighboring Wickford like they always did when he got on their nerves.

"You can talk to Zambo tomorrow," Vega whispered into her neck, his breath hot and moist on her skin.

Vega untucked Adele's blouse from her jeans and snaked a hand inside, letting his fingers tease at the elastic of her underwear. Her body grew sweaty and liquid to the touch. There was a catch in her breathing, a moment when he had her, really had her, the way he used to. He could sense the wave breaking over her. Soon she would be bobbing in the current, her thoughts pulled out with the tide. He could feel them receding in the foam, a mere blip on the horizon. In an hour, they would lie in the afterglow of their lovemaking and forget they'd ever harbored any other thoughts.

Going . . . going . . .

She pushed his hand away.

“Fine.” Vega raised his arms in a gesture of surrender. “Some drunk means more to you than I do.” He stomped to the door.

“Rafael? Can you hold for just one moment? One moment, I promise.” Adele put the phone down and followed Vega to the front hallway. “Jimmy, please. Something’s wrong.”

“No kidding.”

“No, I mean with what Rafael’s telling me. Zambo’s never said anything quite so specific before. He called the woman he saw in the woods ‘the Lady of Sorrows,’ like the Catholic church in town.”

“It’s just another term for the Virgin Mary, Adele.”

“I know that. But this doesn’t sound like one of his usual rants. I feel like I should check it out.”

“How ’bout what I feel? That place has got you on a chain, Nena. Every time somebody over there needs you, you go running back. I’m tired of it.”

Vega grabbed his jacket from the coat tree. It was a bluff. He wasn’t leaving. Not really. He’d drive her over to La Casa and sit in a corner, hunched and sulky, checking his e-mail and playing games on his iPhone until she was ready to leave. He knew when they’d started dating last May that her life wasn’t her own. He’d tried hard to be happy with whatever part she gave him. God, he’d tried. But he was a man, after all. And he wanted her. Just this once, couldn’t *he* be the focus of her attentions?

Adele blinked at him. There was no disappointment for once in her gaze. Only longing. She walked over to the table and picked up the phone.

“Listen, Rafael? I—can’t come in tonight. I’m sorry—I just can’t. Close down the center. Tell Zambo I’ll speak to him another time. I hope Jazmin’s thumb isn’t broken. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

Vega tossed his jacket back on the coat tree and scooped

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up Adele the moment she clicked off the call. He could barely contain his excitement as he buried his head in her chest and felt the pleasing give of her flesh. He was seventeen again, awash with the thrill of a woman's body. Awash with the thrill of Adele. "You won't regret it, Nena," he breathed into her hair, his voice husky with yearning.

Never in his life had he been more wrong.