

VOICE WITH NO ECHO

Books by Suzanne Chazin

The Jimmy Vega Mystery Series

Voice with No Echo

A Place in the Wind

No Witness But the Moon

A Blossom of Bright Light

Land of Careful Shadows

The Georgia Skeeahan Mystery Series

The Fourth Angel

Flashover

Fireplay

VOICE WITH NO ECHO

SUZANNE
CHAZIN



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*To the Chappaqua Library, with great thanks for the
many hours I've spent reading and writing under your
welcoming roof.*

I was the quietest one.
The voice with almost no echo.
The conscience spread in a syllable of anguish,
Scattered and tender, through all the silences.
—“I Was the Quietest One” by Julia de Burgos

Prologue

He crouched behind the chalk-white wall of the mausoleum, slick with dew, and peered across the moonlit rows of gravestones. He'd followed his cousin to the cemetery on his bicycle, tracking her with an app he'd installed on her phone. She was here because of the letter. He was sure of it.

She was a tiny girl. Barely five feet tall. Four inches shorter than Erick even though Erick was fourteen and she was twenty-three. Her smooth dark hair caught the moonlight like a mirror where it lay flat on her scalp. Her long braid was tucked beneath a black puffy jacket that looked as if it could swallow her whole.

The man standing before her was much bigger. Not tall, but muscular and tattooed, like the *maras* Erick's father spoke about in El Salvador. Men born dead who spent their short lives waiting for nature to catch up. His scalp was shaved close on the sides and left thick on top, like the pelt of an animal. It was cold out tonight—early May in upstate New York was seldom warm. Yet he wore only a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. All the better to see his bulked-out arms covered in ink. To feel his power. His menace.

He'd boxed her against the side of a dark-colored sedan. The sedan's interior fabric was ripped and hanging

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at a slant across the rear window, making it impossible to see inside. Erick wondered whether the tattooed man was alone, or whether there were others with him. Maybe in the car or roaming the cemetery. It was an old and overgrown cemetery. All the names and dates on the headstones were from a century ago. Nobody set foot in the place anymore—especially at night.

The man's voice was low, but his Spanish had a guttural edge to it. He was demanding something from her. Money, perhaps. His cousin's replies were choked and breathy. She seemed on the verge of crying. Not girl-crying, the way women did over stuff like boyfriends. No. This was deeper. A full-chest heave, like someone drowning. Like the way his mother cried a few days ago when his father got that letter from Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Since then, Erick's dreams had been filled with men in flak vests and jack boots. He woke up slicked in sweat, his blankets in a tangle, certain that ICE had already taken his father away.

"Where is it?" the man shouted at his cousin in Spanish. She didn't answer.

The man slapped her hard across her face.

Silence. Hard breathing. A rustle of wind through the trees. Then a yelp. It took Erick a moment to realize the yelp had come from his own lips.

The man shoved her aside and turned in the direction of Erick's voice. Moonlight reflected off the white of his left eye. It wandered like a searchlight. Bulging. Freakish. Erick recoiled, slipping on the deep, spongy sod and falling back against a bush.

"Run, Erick!" she shouted.

A second man—big and stiff-shouldered, wearing a dark blue windbreaker—came up from behind. He lifted Erick off the ground, thrusting a forearm across the boy's neck.

The moon went dark. Voices faded.

Erick came to with his face pressed against the wet grass

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and the thrum of an engine nearby. His cousin's cries echoed in his ears. She had to be inside the sedan.

He fumbled for his cell phone to call the police as the man in the dark blue windbreaker opened the back door and jumped in. A breeze caught his windbreaker and billowed it like a sail. Erick read three white letters stitched across the back:

I—C—E

Erick couldn't call the police.

The police were already here.

Chapter 1

The building looked like a ski lodge with its sharp-angled rooflines, skylights, and red cedar siding. Only the lettering above the main doors gave its more sacred purpose away. One word, spelled out in both English and Hebrew:

SANCTUARY

The last time Jimmy Vega stepped through these doors, it was for his daughter's bat mitzvah. Joy, who couldn't speak more than a few sentences of Spanish, stood at the bimah and read Hebrew from the Torah. Words Vega, a Bronx-born Puerto Rican, didn't know and couldn't pronounce. The rabbi praised her. His ex-wife beamed. His ex-in-laws cried.

Vega hadn't been back in six years.

He was here for something much simpler on this crisp spring evening—to give his girlfriend's elderly neighbor a ride home from services. Vega found Max Zimmerman leaning on a three-pronged cane in the lobby, just outside the sanctuary hall with its cavernous four-story cupola. Zimmerman was still wearing his black felt *kippah* and deep in conversation with three middle-aged men—none of whom looked as robust as the old man. At eighty-nine, he still had broad shoulders, a full head of silver hair, and penetrating eyes behind black-framed glasses.

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When one of the men stepped back, Vega noticed another figure, also in a *kippah*, at the center of the conversation: a short, burly man with brown skin creased beyond his years and large, patient eyes.

“Ah,” said Zimmerman, catching sight of Vega. “Just the man I wanted to see.” Zimmerman beckoned Vega over. His words, like his gestures, carried an exaggerated air to them, no doubt a holdover from having to pick up English after a childhood of speaking Yiddish and Polish.

Zimmerman introduced Vega to the other men. “Detective Vega is a county police officer. He understands the law better than any of us. Also, he’s dating Adele Figueroa, the head of La Casa. So he understands the other side too.”

All the men’s eyes turned to Vega. Vega felt the heat rise in his cheeks. Just because he was dating the founder and executive director of the largest immigrant outreach center in the county didn’t mean he necessarily agreed with everything La Casa did. He loved Adele—not necessarily her politics.

“What do you need help with?” asked Vega, anxious to move the conversation away from his personal life.

Zimmerman pointed a bony finger in the direction of the front doors. “I was just telling Rabbi Goldberg and my friends on the board here that we call our hall of worship a *mikdash*—a sanctuary. What good is having that word above our doors if we don’t live the meaning?”

“Sanctuary from what?” asked Vega.

“Mr. Zimmerman made a plea tonight for us to offer sanctuary to our handyman here,” said the rabbi. He was the youngest of the Jewish men in the group, with a baby face beneath his close-cropped black beard and the wide, eager eyes of a Boy Scout behind wire-rimmed glasses. Vega had a sense the synagogue had recently hired him, this was his first congregation, and he was far more comfortable with scripture than the messiness of human interaction.

“I don’t understand,” said Vega, turning to the desperate-looking man in the center. “Do you have an order of removal against you?”

Several voices all spoke at once. Everyone, it seemed, but the man in the middle. The rabbi patted the air. “We were given one mouth and two ears, so we could listen twice as much as we speak.”

No one paid any attention to the rabbi’s words. Vega wondered if that happened often.

“We’re a synagogue,” said a heavysset man with a bald, sweaty head covered by a *kippah*. “I’m all for trying to get Edgar legal help—”

“*Legal help?*” Zimmerman cut him off. “Did *legal help* save my family during the Holocaust?”

“This isn’t the Holocaust, Max,” said a tall man with a droopy mustache and silver hair that stood up on his head like he was channeling Albert Einstein. “You, of all people, should not be comparing this to the Holocaust.”

“What, exactly, is the problem?” asked Vega.

“Edgar Aviles has worked for Beth Shalom for over a decade,” said the rabbi. “He got temporary legal status soon after he came here from El Salvador eighteen years ago when an earthquake devastated his country. Last year, the U.S. government took it away.”

“Why?” asked Vega.

“Apparently, the federal government is doing away with the program for all Salvadorans,” said Goldberg. “They’ve done the same to other groups. Haitians. Sudanese. Nicaraguans.”

Vega turned to Aviles. He was sure the rabbi and others meant well, but he wanted the man to answer for himself. Aviles couldn’t get a word in edgewise with this group.

“Have you hired a lawyer?” Vega asked the man. “Maybe tried to appeal the decision?”

“Yes,” said Aviles. “I thought my lawyer was still appealing.”

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“Edgar’s five-year-old son, Noah, has leukemia,” said the rabbi. “His wife, Maria, has lupus and can no longer work full-time. We thought he was a good candidate for an exception to the new rulings. Then, a few days ago, Edgar got a letter ordering him to self-deport immediately or face arrest.”

“Edgar,” said Zimmerman. “Can you please show Detective Vega the letter you received? You can trust him. It’s all right.”

Aviles slowly unfolded an envelope from the pocket of his suit jacket and handed it to Vega. Vega noticed that the handyman seemed more formally dressed than any of the others in the group. His white shirt looked freshly ironed. His dark suit looked like one he wore to every wedding, christening, and funeral. His wavy black hair was combed stiffly into place. Only his chapped hands gave him away. They were a working man’s hands.

Vega opened the letter. It was addressed to *Edgar Aviles-Ceren*—using his full, formal name that would have included his mother’s maiden name, Ceren. It originated in the local Broad Plains field office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the federal agency better known as, “ICE.” An apt name. No immigrant could hear that word and not shudder.

The letter instructed Aviles to call the Broad Plains ICE office immediately with proof that he had a plane ticket to return to El Salvador. Failure to do so within three days of receipt of the letter, it explained, would be grounds for immediate removal from the country.

Vega handed the letter back to Aviles. “Did you speak to your attorney?”

“He’s on vacation,” said Aviles. “His secretary says my case is still pending before a judge. How can they deport me when the judge has not heard my story?”

Vega sidestepped the question. He was no lawyer, but he knew that ICE wasn’t bound by law to wait for a

judge's decision. The agency could and did deport people while their cases were still on appeal. If the person won—a long shot in itself—they could come back. Almost no one did. It was simply too expensive to carry on the fight from abroad.

“Have you spoken to anyone at ICE?” Vega asked Aviles.

“My niece, Lissette, talked to an ICE agent. She is hopeful he can help.”

“So . . . you filed a stay through this guy?”

“A stay?” Aviles hesitated. “I don't think so. I don't think he asked for any paperwork.”

“Then what is he doing exactly?”

“I don't know.” Aviles flushed and stared at his feet. He looked like a man who was used to solving his own problems. He seemed embarrassed to encounter one where he couldn't. The immigration laws were so complex, even Vega, a cop and native English speaker, didn't understand most of them.

“Look,” said the heavyset bald man, focusing on all the other faces in the group except the handyman's. “No one's saying we can't take up a collection for Edgar's family. Help them out with food and rent and medical bills—whatever. But there's nothing else we can do.”

“Nothing is what a man does when he's dead, Sam,” said Zimmerman, dismissing the fat man with a wave of his hand. “The living must always do something.”

“Something that will send us all to jail?” Sam shot back. “Something that will get Beth Shalom and the board sued? Edgar's not even legal to work at the synagogue anymore. And you want to let him *live* here? We'll spend our endowment funding a cause that many of our members won't support.”

He waved an arm around the lobby. Brightly colored paintings of Jerusalem hung on the walls. Chrome and glass fixtures sparkled overhead. “Our congregation has

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been here for fifty years. *Fifty years*. Something like this could shut us down. You want that on your conscience?”

Zimmerman turned to Vega. “This is true?”

“It’s a violation of federal law to knowingly house or employ illegal immigrants,” said Vega. “So yes—the temple would be breaking federal law. There could be consequences, including arrests and fines. Would ICE arrest religious leaders? Break down your doors? I don’t think so. But they could if they wanted to.”

Zimmerman gestured to Vega. “See? What did I tell you?” he asked no one in particular. “Jimmy knows these things. He *knows*.” Zimmerman held a hand out to Vega. “You have a business card?”

“Uh. Sure.” Vega fished one out of his wallet.

“Good. Give it to Edgar. If he needs the name of a police officer to call.”

“Mr. Zimmerman, I don’t know that I’m going to be much help against ICE—especially if his niece is already in touch with them. They’re federal and I work for the county—”

“Better to know one officer than to know none,” said Zimmerman. “Give him your card.”

Vega turned it over to Aviles. The man tucked it into the breast pocket of his jacket. Vega met the man’s dark, soulful eyes head-on for the first time.

“Do you have other family here who can help your wife and children if you have to return to El Salvador?” Vega asked him.

“Just Lissette,” said Aviles. “But she doesn’t have . . .” Aviles motioned with his hands. He wasn’t about to tell a police officer outright that his niece was illegal. “She is also asking for help from her employer. He is an important man. Maybe he can help.”

“Who is your niece’s employer?” asked Vega.

“Glen Crowley.”

“*Glen Crowley*? Our district attorney?”

“He is a very powerful man in the county, yes?”

Glen Crowley is powerful all right, thought Vega. But with the kind of power Aviles would do well to stay away from. Crowley had won multiple reelections on a strict law-and-order platform. In all likelihood, he had no idea his wife had hired an undocumented housekeeper. If Crowley found out, he'd be more likely to fire Aviles's niece than to help with her uncle's immigration problems.

“I wish you and your family good luck,” said Vega, shaking Aviles's hand. He did not meet the handyman's gaze. In his heart, he knew.

Edgar Aviles was as good as deported.