

# SHATTERED ECHO

An Echo Branson Investigation: Book 1

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# CHAPTER 1

I BECAME WHAT I am today at age fourteen, and it nearly drove me insane.

They say your teenage years are an insane time anyway, but mine were the real deal. Imagine coming into a paranormal power no one believes in and you didn't even know you possessed. Imagine being semi-normal one minute and supernatural the next. Imagine what would happen to your world if, suddenly, you knew what *everyone* around you was feeling.

That pivotal moment happened one chilly November afternoon of my freshman year in high school. High school had started out great for me: I'd been in a really nice foster home with two other non-foster kids for over a year and finally felt like I was getting a fair shake. The parents were cool, the kids didn't treat me like a red-headed step-child, and life was good.

My best friend, Danica, and I were cutting through Mrs. Jorgensen's creek on our way home. It wasn't our usual route, but it was cold and we had things to do before the pep rally. Danica was a cheerleader and well-liked by everyone. Half black,

half white, she was considered almost exotic by my new family's white bread standards. We both attended a private school in Oakland, where most of the kids came from upper middle class white families. Our lack of social status was what brought us together. Danica didn't care that I was a kid with less than nothing. Color meant nothing to her because she would never fully be accepted in either community whether she was one of *the haves* or not. If the black kids didn't like her, she just flipped them the bird. If the white kids didn't like her, she would just flip them two birds. That was the beauty of Danica. She didn't give a damn if you liked her or not.

Unfortunately, on this particular afternoon, someone liked her a bit too much.

That *someone* had followed us to the creek as we walked and chatted on our way home from school. I'd recently been feeling strange so I ignored the pinpricks on the back of my neck as we neared the hole some kids had cut into the cyclone fence.

As we neared the fence, those pinpricks changed into something I had never experienced. Like a blast of hot air on every nerve in my body, something warned me the person following us wasn't just using the shortcut; whoever it was intended to hurt one of us. I didn't know *how*, but I knew it as surely as if it had already happened.

Stopping just before the opening, I whirled around to face the cause of the tingling sensation: Todd Abrams, a linebacker on our football team.

"Hey," he said, leering at Danica. He never once looked my way. I was used to being invisible.

Blinking several times, I swallowed back a small pocket of bile. The emotional blast radiated all the way to my fingertips

and toes. It was almost as if I *were* Todd. I knew *exactly* what he wanted, and how he intended on getting his needs met. If I hadn't been so afraid of Todd, I would've been scared to death of what was happening *to me*. My heart raced, my palms were sweaty, my breathing became shallow, and I knew... I *knew* we were in trouble.

"Come on, Dani. We're going to be late," I said, never taking my eyes from Todd. My hands were shaking as I reached out to push Danica through the opening before he could get any closer. I sensed his intentions through every pore in my body, as if my soul kept jumping from my body to his. When my hand reached out to touch Danica, I suddenly felt *her* emotions as well. She was merely irritated by his interruption. She didn't know what he really wanted.

But *I* did.

"Beat it, Todd. I already told you I'm not interested." She was completely unaware of the danger; completely unaware Todd had come to get something he couldn't have.

"Jane," Todd said softly, looking over at me for the first time. He had shark eyes on either side of a putty nose. "Why don't you scoot along and let me walk Danica home?"

Yes, my real name—the name bestowed upon me at birth, is Jane. Jane Doe. I was born one of many Jane Does that year and actually remained one until my eighteenth birthday when I changed it to something more fitting; something more in line with who I turned out to be.

Something which was taking me over at that very moment.

Trying to ignore the weird feelings crawling beneath my skin like a bad drug, I inhaled deeply. Was I going crazy? Was there something wrong with me? Could they tell? Danica, bless her

heart, was staring at Todd as if *he* was nuts. Danica didn't appreciate *anybody* telling her what to do or assuming they knew what *she* wanted. If she had wanted him to walk her home, she would have asked him to. Apparently, she had already told him what she *didn't* want.

Todd's lust, anger, masculine arousal and something else I couldn't put my finger on was palatable and tangible to me. I thought I was going to faint from the tornado-like sensations whirling through my mind, confusing me, disorienting me. It took my breath away, and I had to fight to stay on my feet.

When I finally pushed the emotions away, I managed to say under my breath, "Danica. Please. *Go.*" This time, I shoved her with all my might, which wasn't easy. Danica was close to six feet tall; a good six inches taller than me.

Todd took a step toward the hole in the fence and I knew it was now or never. I knew it as if he'd whispered it in my ear; he wasn't taking no for an answer.

Swinging my heavy backpack at him, I hit him square on the side of the head, knocking him away from the opening and onto the ground. Then, with one final push, I shoved Danica completely through the hole before flinging myself on top of Todd.

"Run!" Glaring at Todd, who was laying on the ground holding his bloody head, I think I lost my mind. When my bag first hit him, half my books flew out, so I grabbed the nearest, heaviest one and continued my assault. I couldn't see where Danica went, but I felt her fear as I bashed Todd's head again and again with my five-pound math book. His lust transformed instantly to anger and rage. He wanted to kill me. He probably would have.

So I kept hitting him. And hitting him.

I don't know how long I smashed his forehead, but it was long enough for blood splatters to end up on my clothes. I probably would have kept hitting him until I crushed his head into a pancake, but Danica returned with Mr. Morgan, who pulled me off Todd.

"Jane!" Danica cried. I was still swinging my math book as Mr. Morgan dragged me off, and it took every ounce of strength Mr. Morgan had to keep me from going back.

Clearly, I had snapped.

*Something* had happened to me; something big and weird and scary. I was like a wild animal completely out of control. Mr. Morgan wouldn't take his arms from around me, even when I'd finally calmed down, which was wise. I kept glancing at the unmoving Todd, wondering if I'd killed him. I didn't think that was such a bad thing.

When the paramedics arrived for Todd, they came right behind the police. I was nearly incoherent by that time. Not because of what I'd done to Todd, but because my brain was frying from all the images and emotions I was getting from Danica, Mr. Morgan, the police, the paramedics, and even the bystanders who had wandered over from the park. I was a shore on which every emotion washed upon, and I just *knew* I was losing my mind.

Apparently, the police were pretty sure of it as well, and the next ambulance came for me. I remember being strapped down and given a shot of something. It finally calmed the whirlpool of emotions sucking me under.

"Be cool, Jane. Everything's gonna be okay."

As my eyes got heavy, the emotional noises of the crowd began to dissipate, leaving me with a question repeating through my mind like a skipping record:

Was I going crazy?