

ALEX WESTMORE

ECHO RETURNS

AN ECHO BRANSON INVESTIGATION: BOOK 2

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Content Warning: Natural disaster, death, assault, gun violence.

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CHAPTER 1

“OH...” DANICA WHISPERED, edging closer to me as we stared at the wreckage. Not in a million lifetimes could I ever have envisioned that my beloved New Orleans could ever again look like a waterlogged maze of death and destruction. Nothing I had seen on television the day before could have prepared me for the complete and utter obliteration before me. The stench stung my nostrils. Debris floated lazily past, destination unknown. Remnants of lives swirled in a cesspool of gunk and sewage that made my eyes water.

Or were those tears?

One didn't need to be an empath to feel the sorrow and distress of a flooded city.

If the sight didn't break your heart, the stench would.

“You okay, Clark?” Danica reached for my hand as though we were two field medics staring at a battlefield with no idea of where to begin to staunch the flow of blood. “Clark? Talk to me.”

Clark isn't my real name. My foster name was Jane. As in Jane Doe, a baby nobody wanted. I was one of many Janes caught up in a broken system I escaped as quickly as I could. I changed my name to Echo shortly after I ran away from a mental hospital when I was fourteen. Long, ugly story. Anyway, sometimes our names fit us, and sometimes they don't.

Mine didn't.

Jane Doe.

God, how I *hated* that name.

Dani understands. She's been calling me Clark for several reasons; first off, I'm a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which is normal

enough, I suppose, if you're a comic book fan and know that Clark Kent is a reporter and also Superman. The second and *real* reason is, like Superman, I have powers.

Not superhero powers, like x-ray vision, but they are *definitely* paranormal.

My name now is Echo Branson, and I am an empath. I can feel people's emotions, sense their intentions and desires. I can tell when someone is lying and when they're telling the truth. It's a power I was born with. It is my greatest gift and my heaviest burden. Emotions are something people choose to show or share with others, so I often feel like an emotional trespasser when I absorb someone else's emotional state.

Ten years ago, I came to the Louisiana Bayou to learn how to control my powers and not let them run my life. I fell in love with the river folk and the uniqueness of the swamp. There is no place in the world quite like it, but at this moment, my powers were absorbing loss, sadness, and despair. "I... I just can't believe this. Where is the help? Where is the government? FEMA? Anyone?"

"I hate to mention the obvious, but it looks like we're it. I mean, we may be all they've got."

It's never easy being different, but at times like these, standing among the ruins of what was once the beauty of New Orleans, I'm glad I have a special ability that enables me to help.

And these poor people needed some serious help.

"The news reports haven't shown how bad it really is," Danica said softly. "Not even close."

Years ago, the damage from Hurricane Katrina had been complete: the destruction, total. This hurricane, Hurricane Abigail, was Katrina's ugly little sister, and she packed a wallop just as great. Only this time, she came back to a city barely rebuilt from last time. While there hadn't been as many deaths so far, the death toll still topped just over a thousand, and was rising.

"I thought Katrina was bad," Danica whispered. "But this one... this feels personal."

"Like the gods hate us or something."

"Or something."

My heart cowered in a dry corner for fear of what lay around the next bend. Whole streets were submerged under filthy water lapping noisily at broken windowsills like the flicking tongue of a snake. TV and online videos could not convey how wickedly evil this disgusting water was. Like a giant serpent slithering through the streets of my adopted home, the water had cruelly snatched both the living and the dead in big, gaping jaws.

Winding its way through every nook and cranny, the murky water polluted everything it touched, leaving an alien-like slime and mold spores clinging to everything in its path. Things you never expected to see floated in that sickening water, bobbing up and down like miniature buoys. In the five minutes that we stood on the crest of a hill overlooking the carnage, we saw a toilet seat, a golf shoe, dentures, a dead cat, and several wooden picture frames. There were toys, Tupperware, and tires, among other things and, at the moment, I was staring down at a floating photo of five small children. "This is heartbreaking," I uttered, barely above a whisper. I had to raise my mental shields to protect myself from the overwhelming sadness around me. I think we both were having troubles speaking loudly with such a somber vision surrounding us.

Suddenly, a young Black man made his way through the water pushing, of all things, a refrigerator. It was as if we had fallen down the rabbit hole and into an upside-down world. Nothing I saw made any sense to me. I'd seen the YouTube videos of Katrina, and it felt like a disaster movie, but this? This was all too real.

"Can we give you a hand?" Danica asked.

"Hey." He nodded as he waded by us. "Thanks, but I got this." Inside the hulled-out refrigerator were two little girls, maybe five or six. I had to blink several times, trying to fit the pieces together into some sort of sense. This was as real and as ugly as life gets, and I knew Dani and I had arrived none too soon.

"You okay?" Dani asked softly.

I imagined her repeated question was like a skipping record; she just didn't have the words... but who did? No one, not even the reporters who'd been on the beat last time something like this has happened, had the right colors on their palette to accurately paint the grotesque portrait before us.

No, our major news stations might have shown borderline propaganda to drive home the ‘necessity’ of our troops always being overseas, but heaven forbid they report the truth about what had happened to one of the most beloved cities in America; beloved and forgotten by a government too entrenched in useless wars and partisan bickering to come to the aid of its own people.

That was why we were here; to help people like this young family floating by in the hull of a refrigerator.

“I got my lil’ ones all right, but ain’t nobody seen my wife.” Tears rolled down his cheeks to add to the grimy water. “Ya’ll know Chantal Peterson?” He was not talking to me. He aimed his question at Danica. *I* was just some skinny white woman standing with her mouth agape. I turned slowly toward Danica, as if seeing her for the first time.

When you’ve known your best friend for over a decade, you naturally take some things for granted; things like her ethnicity. We’d both gone to an all-girls Catholic school in Oakland, California and then to Mills College. Surrounded by Black people and having one for a best friend doesn’t give you the automatic ‘anti-racist’ card many folks think it does. It was the people sharing Danica’s heritage, not mine, who had taken Abigail’s beating the hardest. Suddenly, I wondered what this must feel like to Danica to see the injustices of our still very segregated country.

Yes, I could have read her, but I’d taught her how to put up a psychic shield to protect her thoughts and feelings from me. Long ago, in this very place, I had spent hours working with Danica so she could have the privacy of her true feelings whenever we were together.

Being the best friend of an empath has its drawbacks. When we were fourteen, I had my first empathic episode that nearly drove me to an irreparable mental break. One asylum and a thousand miles later, I ended up in the bayou of Louisiana where I was tutored by one of the most powerful supernaturals in the world. And though I spent the next four years learning how to control my powers, Danica never abandoned me, nor did she ever tell a living soul what I was. Instead, she embraced the new and improved me, my new and improved life, and my bizarre powers by coming often to visit in my four-year stint on the bayou. In doing so, she learned more about supernaturals as

well as how to protect herself against mental and emotional invasions from empaths and others like me.

And there were *many* others like me.

“Did you see his eyes?” she asked softly. “That’s what hopelessness looks like.”

I nodded. One would have thought things would be different after Katrina, but the Trump years had reminded us how deep our systemic racism ran. Danica may not have been poor, but she was still Black, and the injustice of what was happening here hit her hard.

And that was when I knew what my story would be and the angle I would take to reach the most people.

Danica looked over at me. “Thinking about your story?”

I nodded. “Are you sure some of me isn’t rubbing off on you? I was just thinking about what you said. It all feels so hopeless, doesn’t it?”

Danica nodded slightly. “Katrina showed us nothing. These people are still being treated like they were in the nineteenth century. What’s your angle?”

As an investigative reporter I’d been sent here, like thousands of other reporters, to inform the country on what was *really* happening to New Orleans after Hurricane Abigail blew in and decimated the entire Gulf Coast; only, I was different.

Unlike most of the other reporters trying to get access to the emergency zone, I had more ins and connections than my colleagues could ever dream about. I *knew* these people, this city, that river.

And that was why my story would be different. These people, *my* people needed help, and if the government wasn’t going to do it, the American people would. The American people always had; we just needed to know the truth before we could act. We needed to know that any progress we’d made before the last presidency had been obliterated, leaving people of color once again on the fringes. It wasn’t a new story, but if it would help – even a little – I had to try.

As an empath, getting to the truth was somewhat easier for me than it was for ‘naturals’, someone without powers. *My* powers allowed me to sniff out the lies and see the truths, and I had come to New Orleans to write a piece that would accomplish both things in an effort to galvanize the American public to act for the disenfranchised.

“Personal stories. My guess is that most reporters will come at us with the whole enchilada. Data doesn’t reflect this horror, Dani. It isn’t what makes Americans get off their asses to *do* something. It’s personal stories that create empathy.”

“Creating empathy? Now that’s right up your alley.” Danica sighed. “Stories like a father pushing his two daughters in an old refrigerator?” Looking away, Dani made a sound like a bird chirp. “I’m sorry, Clark. I know I should have snapped a photo, but...”

Putting my arm around her shoulders, I pulled her to me. “But nothing. You did the right thing.”

Danica pulled away and wiped her face. “How can we get pictures of this... this... mess without exploiting these people’s misery?”

I shrugged. “Maybe we don’t. Maybe we wait until someone says, *hey, get a picture of this*. We’ll know when the time is right.”

Nodding, Danica slipped the cell back into her waterproof fanny pack. As my best friend, she had volunteered to come, but she didn’t work for The Chron.

She didn’t need to.

In college, Danica majored in computer science and developed a security software program that eventually made her millions. With that money, she opened a firm called Savvy Software, where she continued making big bucks while also funding a number of non-profits in the heart of Oakland, California, where we went to college.

When I told her I was coming to New Orleans, she put her business on autopilot, packed a small bag, and met me at the airport. *That* was the kind of friend she was.

“We should have brought some masks or something. That stench is awful.” Danica looked down at me. At six feet tall, she towered over my five-foot four-inch frame. “You feeling any of this?” She turned and I followed her gaze. Two men were struggling to keep an old woman in a wheelchair above the waterline. The wheelchair teetered this way and that as they fought to keep it balanced. It would have made a great photo to accompany the first part of my story, but I couldn’t do it.

“No. I can’t. I’ve got maximum shields up.”

Danica nodded. “That’s wise. You need to have a clear head if we’re going to be of any use.” Danica sighed loudly. “Who’s picking us up?”

I shrugged. “Melika just said to watch for Bones’s boat.”

Bones had always reminded me of the legendary boatman on the river Styx. His dilapidated boat carried everyone from the outskirts of the city to the deepest, most inaccessible parts of the bayou. The rickety vessel was somewhat scary, but it was Bones who looked a hundred and two years old and carried as much wisdom of the river as anyone in Louisiana. He knew the fingers of the delta better than any man alive, and I trusted him with my life.

I always had.

“He never comes this far up.”

I nodded. “All the rules are being bent; don’t you think? Things are different now.” I sighed, feeling the pressure of sorrow against my chest. “Guess they’ll never be the same.”

“We can’t just stand here, Clark. We have to *do* something.”

I nodded. “Come on.”

Danica and I waded into the soupy water up to our waists to help the two men with the wheelchair. The water was lukewarm, and shit was floating in every layer. It was awful. It wasn’t until we were able to set the wheelchair down on the soggy grass that we realized the old woman was dead.

“Try not to get scratched by all this fucking detritus,” Danica said. “This water will infect any open wound.”

Looking over the old woman’s head at Danica, I knew I needed to get her out of here. Something happens to people once the feeling of hopelessness subsides. “Dani?”

When her eyes met mine, I could see a fire burning beneath them. *Here comes the rage*, I thought to myself. I didn’t need to lower my shields to feel it – it was written all over her face.

She shook her head. “We have to do *more* than report a story. These people need our help *now*.”

She was right, of course. I had used the same logic when trying to convince my boss, Wes Bentley, that he needed to send me down here. Although to be honest he didn’t take much convincing. Three months earlier, I had broken an international story that pretty much made me

the Golden Girl of The Chron (a pseudonym given me by the *Los Angeles Times*). In the three months since that story broke, I'd had two other stories of national merit. Wes knew I had been courted by every major newspaper and television station in the country, so keeping me happy was in his best interest. What none of them knew was that I was coming with or without the newspaper's backing. I hadn't come for any story.

I had been summoned.

For the first time since I left the bayou, my mentor Melika had sent a summons; and when Melika calls, you don't keep her waiting. Every super knew that we would forever be obligated to the bayou and those still living here, like one feels toward family, but I didn't feel an *obligation* to come back.

It was my duty and my desire.

We *were* family with Melika our matriarch; our queen bee had buzzed, and the call to arms couldn't be ignored. Most of us had wanted to get down here *before* Abigail landed, but Mel would have none of that. She wanted to make sure we were all out of harm's way and were adequately packed and ready for what was to come. Given her supernatural connections, it wouldn't have surprised me if a seer or clairvoyeur had warned her. Something of this magnitude had surely been seen by someone who receives premonitions (a precog in our lingo). Whatever the case, Melika had forbidden any of us from rushing into the eye of the storm, thereby giving us a chance to get our affairs in order first.

For me that meant getting my assignment, making sure someone would come feed Tripod, my three-legged cat, and explaining to the man I had been dating for three months that I needed to go home and wasn't at all sure when I'd be back.

"Is that them?"

Shielding my eyes, I watched the familiar canoe-shaped boat as it made its way down what used to be Jefferson Avenue. Danica and I were standing on a strange little incline that rose about two feet above the water. I had seen Bones maneuver the boat in about a foot of water, so I had complete confidence he could get to us without any problem.

"Zack is with him."

“I thought Jacob Marley was going to be here.”

I frowned. “You’re right. Maybe he had a harder time getting here.”

Danica’s eyebrows rose. “Harder than we did? I don’t know, Clark. That wasn’t the best fourteen hours of travel I’ve ever experienced.”

If we hadn’t have run into a Canadian Mountain Police (I kid you not), who took a fancy to Danica, we’d still be waiting at the airport. I may not have known where our government was (I had a pretty good idea it was somewhere warm and sandy), but I *did* know there were other countries coming to our rescue, just as they had done during Katrina.

“Damn, that guy just keeps growing,” Danica murmured. It had been a few years since she had seen him, and he had, indeed, continued to come into his own.

Zack was a TK, the acronym for telekinetic. As with most paranormal powers, it’s all about energy. TKs can use the energy surrounding an object to lift it or push it. Hell, Zack could bend rebar in the shape of a pretzel if he really put his mind to it.

When I first met Zack ten years ago, he, like I, had just come into his powers. Now, at 26, he was an incredibly handsome man, standing well over six feet tall and all grown out of his awkward teenage ways. Even from where I stood, I could see his carrot-red hair sticking out from under the baseball cap he always wore.

The last time I saw him, we were in Atlanta for his college graduation. Those of us who went through our training in the bayou never missed each other’s special moments, no matter what the cost. And if we didn’t have the money for plane fare, Melika would send us a ticket. She felt it was important for us to stay connected, because the truth was, no one would ever truly understand us as much as those who also possessed special skills.

“That red hair never settled down, did it?” Danica mused.

“Not really.” Though his hair had not, *he* had. Zack had grown up thinking he was a freak, but once Melika taught him how to control his abilities, he eased back into normal life better than most of us and was now a scout for the Atlanta Braves. He had a fiancée and a baby girl he adored.

"I'm a little surprised he came," Danica said, fanning herself. The fumes were beginning to take form as the heat made the stench even more unbearable.

"Melika must really be worried about what's happening down here if she tore him away from his family."

"He's a mover, that's going to be useful in this mess. His powers aren't so flashy that he's at too much risk of getting caught." Danica waved to Zack.

Risk of getting caught.

Danica well knew the dangers of using our powers in public. If anyone suspected what we were, if there was ever a time when someone could actually *prove* our existence, we would all be in mortal danger. What the American government, or any government for that matter, would do if they had a super in their ranks was a scary notion. What if a telepath didn't *want* to spy on people or listen in to important thoughts? Would they be forced?

You betcha.

And if we weren't forced, we'd be poked and prodded like some new bug under a microscope. Even normals would eventually be affected, as scientists would find some way to test people to see who had powers. Then we would trot right to where governments would try to *create* supernaturals.

So yeah, we knew the score, and it wasn't pretty.

As if on cue, Zack moved his arm as if waving back to Danica, and a small bookshelf floated swiftly out of their path.

I nodded to Dani, who pulled out her cell phone and snapped a few photos of Zack and Bones in the rickety boat.

Lowering the camera, Danica looked over it. "How old is Bones now, anyway?"

"Three hundred and twelve?" We both chuckled. "Ancient or not, he's the best boatman there is. He could have found us blindfolded."

"Thank god for that. I don't know how much longer I can take it out here."

"The heat or the smell?"

"Neither. My heart. I've never seen anything like this. All the money I have, and it can't do a damn thing to help these folks right now. I feel so helpless."

“Just wait, Dani. When it comes time to rebuild...”

“Fuck that, Clark. They need help *now*. Some of these people have just started rebuilding after Katrina. This will wreck them.”

Before I could say anything else, Zack leapt from the boat, waded over to where we stood, threw his arms around my waist and lifted me up. “Here’s my favorite feeler!”

I squeezed him tightly. His shirt was soaked and mine stunk of this sewer water, but neither of us cared. “It’s great to see you,” I said when he put me down. “Though I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“No doubt. This is seriously effed up.”

“Effed up? What are you, two? You can say the word.”

He turned to Danica and gave her a less enthusiastic hug, but a big one nonetheless. “No, but my daughter is, so I’ve got to mind my mouth.” He held Danica’s hands in his. “You get more beautiful every time I see you.”

Danica lifted an eyebrow. “The Braves pay you well for your bullshit?”

Zack tossed his head back and laughed, an unfamiliar sound among this carnage. “Very well, actually.”

“How’s Melika?” I asked. After Abigail landed, we were all worried about Mel’s house and the aftermath. Most of the homes along the river were made of wood and needed patching and reparations every year. Not Mel’s. Like Bones’s house, hers was built from cemented cinder block, but as we had seen, nothing was impervious to the powerful water.

“She’s been better,” Zack replied. “This has really wiped her out emotionally.”

“Her house?”

“Still standing. The bayou folks are pretty safe. The levees don’t affect people that far out. They’re already helping each other locate animals and repair downed walls.”

“Good.” Inhaling deeply, I asked the question I wished I had bitten back. “Is he here?”

Zack nodded. “Are you kidding? Of course. Tomas came down days before Abigail ran ground. Typical of him to go against the grain. When everyone was leaving, he was coming. Pissed Melika off

something awful. You know how she is, but Tomas insisted he come and batten down the hatches. Bones was telling me that Tomas pulled Mr. Wyatt out of his house just before it blew over. Ever since I can remember, he's always been a reluctant superhero."

I was certain Zack was referring to the time he got us in trouble in town by showing off his powers to me. When some thugs started harassing us, Tomas came to our rescue and kicked some ass. He was Dirty Harry, John Wick, and Deadpool all wrapped into one, only without the sense of humor. Tomas was one of the most powerful telepaths on the planet. He spent his life collecting new supers, studying from gurus from all over the world, and keeping track of all of us in times like these. He was a mentor and a brother to each of us.

He was also my ex-boyfriend.

"What about Jacob? Is he coming?"

Shaking his head, Bones pulled the boat closer. He looked more like a blackened skeleton than a man. "The boy can't get through from d'airport. Too many dead. Too many wantin' to talk to 'im."

Zack and I stared at each other. "I hadn't thought of that. He must have gotten bowled over."

Bowled over was super-speak for having your shields busted down. All super-sentient power, whether it's empathy, telekinesis, clairsentience, or straight up telepathy, required us to erect psionic shields to keep all the feelings and thoughts of others out of our consciousness. Without shields, we'd go insane from the sheer amount of mental noise bombarding us. Construct shields was the first lesson we all learned from Melika; not how to control our powers, not how to strengthen or use them, but how to protect *ourselves* from naturals and supers alike. The amount of mental noise from a crowd of people could be devastating. In times of sickness, stress, or exhaustion, our shields could fail us, and all that noise would come crashing in. It sounded like trying to watch four different movies at the same time.

I had seen what happened to someone when that noise couldn't be stopped. It wasn't pretty, and I harbored a secret fear of someday becoming that.

As a necromancer, or someone who can converse with the dead, Jacob Marley was highly in tune with the death and destruction

around us. It didn't surprise me he couldn't handle the onslaught of newly departed spirits.

"I'll see if Tomas can find him and help him get through. We need to get to Jacob *fast*."

"Let's get you out of the sun first, Echo, so you can concentrate better." Zack handed our backpacks to Bones, who was leaning on a long pole called a 'gator getter.

"The folk need me help. I'll be back. Go higher. I'll meet you there."