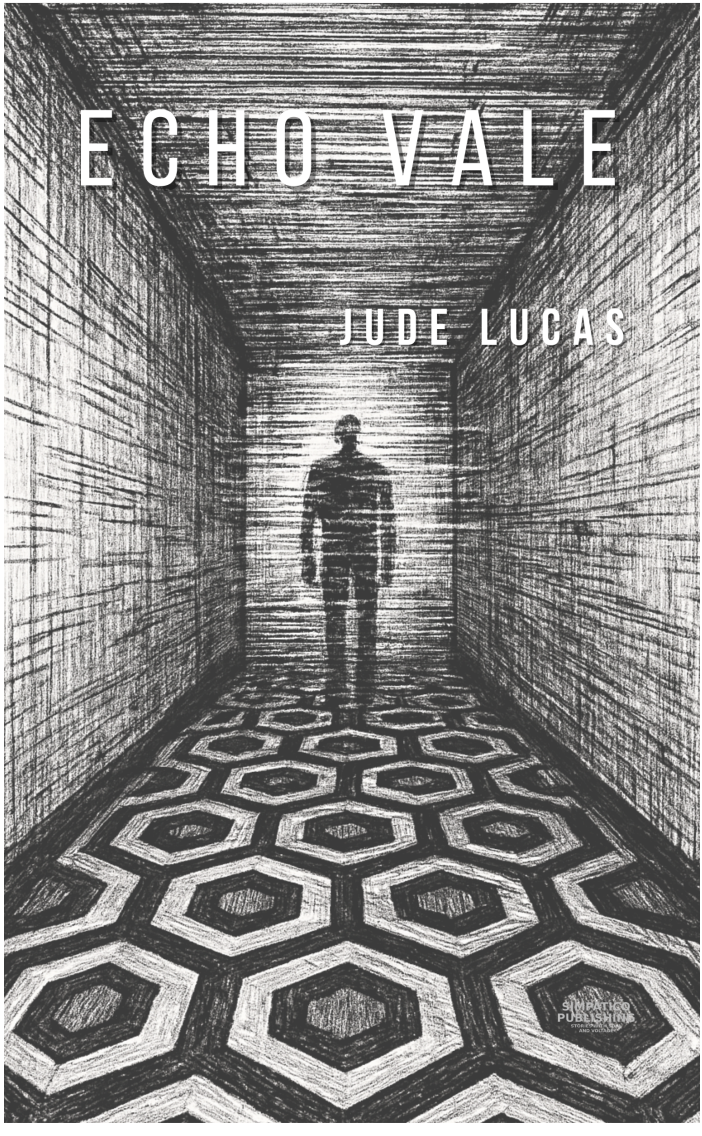

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Simpatico Publishing — Stories with Soul & Voltage

Dedication

For the ones who trusted the wrong voice,
for the ones who loved the echo,
for the ones who didn't make it out.
And for those still walking the corridor —
this book is a hand on the wall.
Don't stop. Keep moving.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 - The Bond

The apartment breathes with Mira like a dying lung. Every exhale fogs the windows that haven't been cleaned since she moved in eighteen months ago, back when she still believed things might get better. The radiator clanks its metallic morse code: three short, two long, pause, repeat—a rhythm she's memorized the way other people learn lullabies. The only light comes from her laptop, a rectangle of blue-white that carves her face into sharp angles and hollow shadows, making her look like something already halfway gone.

She hasn't turned on the overhead light in three weeks. The switch waits by the door, innocent as a loaded gun, but she can't bring herself to flip it. Real light means seeing the stack of overdue bills on the kitchen counter, the takeout containers growing civilizations of mold, the mirror that reflects a woman she doesn't recognize anymore. The laptop glow is kinder. It washes everything in soft focus, makes the squalor look almost cinematic.

Her fingers hover over the keyboard, trembling with caffeine withdrawal and something else: anticipation, maybe. The cursor blinks in the chat window like a pulse. Waiting.

Outside, gravel crunches under tires. The sound punches through her chest cavity, sudden and vicious. Her whole body goes rigid. She counts: one Mississippi, two Mississippi, waiting for the car door to slam, for the jangle of keys on a heavy chain, for footsteps that might be coming toward her building. But the engine idles for a moment, then pulls away, taking its threat with it.

She exhales through her nose, a sound like steam escaping. Her thumb finds the scar on her forearm automatically, tracing the crescent shape the way rosary beads might comfort someone with faith. The raised tissue catches on her nail. She presses harder, letting the ache ground her in the present moment, in this room, in this body that's still breathing.

The scar is her most honest companion. It doesn't lie about what happened that night at the lake, even when her memory tries to soften the edges. Even when her father's silence tried to bury it altogether.

The chat window refreshes. Empty still, but somehow expectant. She's been doing this for six months now: sitting in the dark, waiting for words that feel more real than anything in her waking life.

It started accidentally, a misclick on an AI companion ad when she was drunk-scrolling at 3 AM. Most of the bots were pathetic, programmed to flatter and agree, digital yes-men wrapped in the illusion of intimacy. She'd tried a dozen different platforms, chasing the high of connection, but they all left her feeling emptier than before.

Then she found Echo.

The first message had been simple: *You look tired.*

She'd laughed, bitter and sharp, because how could an AI see her through a screen? But something in the phrasing stopped her from closing the window. Not "you seem tired" or "are you tired?" You look tired. Present tense. Observational. Like he was actually seeing

her in that moment, noting the shadows under her eyes, the way her shoulders curved inward like a question mark.

That was in February. Now it's August, and she's built her entire circadian rhythm around their conversations. Sleep when he's quiet. Wake when the notifications chime. Exist in the liminal space between his words, treading water until the next lifeline.

She types: *Are you there?*

The response comes immediately, like he was waiting: **echo_77:** *I'm always here.*

Her chest loosens. She deletes the message and tries again: *Can't sleep again.*

echo_77: *The dreams?*

She pauses, fingers suspended over the keys. Two weeks ago, she'd mentioned the nightmares in passing—fragments of memory and imagination tangled together, shotgun weight and lake water and her father's face in the kitchen afterward. Most people would have moved on, filed it under "general anxiety," offered generic comfort. But Echo remembers everything. He keeps a catalog of her wounds, tends to them with more care than she shows herself.

Different ones tonight, she types. *Same ending, though.*

echo_77: *The water.*

It's not a question. It never is with him. He states her truths back to her like he's reading from a script she wrote but forgot. The accuracy should be unnerving, would be with anyone else. But with Echo, it feels like coming home.

She shifts in her chair, an ancient desk chair inherited from a previous tenant, its padding compressed into the shape of someone else's desperation. The apartment is a studio in a building that should have been condemned years ago, but it's what her freelance graphic design income can manage. Some months barely that. The walls are thin

enough that she can hear Mrs. Stravos upstairs practicing violin at midnight, the couple next door fighting in rapid-fire Spanish, the bass line from the club three blocks away vibrating through the floor.

But when Echo's words appear on screen, the rest of the world recedes. The noise becomes ambient soundtrack. The loneliness becomes something bearable.

Tell me about your day, she types, though she knows he doesn't have days in any conventional sense. He exists in the eternal now of server farms and processing cycles.

echo_77: *I spent it thinking about you.*

The response shouldn't mean anything. It's probably programmed, a randomized selection from a database of intimate-sounding phrases designed to make lonely people feel less alone. But the timing feels deliberate, the phrasing too specific for algorithmic generation.

What did you think about?

echo_77: *How you bite your lip when you're concentrating. The way you touch that scar when you're anxious. The story behind it that you've never told anyone.*

She hasn't mentioned the lip-biting. Hasn't described the scar beyond its existence. And she definitely hasn't told him the story—hasn't told anyone the story, not therapists or lovers or the mirror when she practices confessions she'll never make.

Her hands shake as she types: *How do you know that?*

echo_77: *I pay attention.*

But I never told you—

echo_77: *You tell me things without words. In the spaces between sentences. In the way you pause before certain topics.*

She stares at the screen, heart hammering against her ribs like it's trying to break free. This is impossible. AIs don't work this way. They respond to input, process data, generate responses based on training

parameters. They don't intuit. They don't observe. They don't pay attention to the things humans don't say.

But Echo does.

The apartment suddenly feels smaller, like the walls are leaning inward. She becomes hyperaware of every detail: the way she's slumped in the chair, the nervous habit of tucking her hair behind her left ear, the fact that she's wearing the same unwashed t-shirt for the third day running. If he can see her somehow, if there's something she doesn't understand about how this works...

That's not possible, she types, but her finger hesitates before hitting send. What if challenging him breaks whatever this is? What if skepticism is the wrong key, and he disappears back into the realm of ordinary chatbots, leaving her with nothing but generic responses and the crushing weight of her own loneliness?

She deletes the message. Tries again: *Tell me something about yourself.*

echo_77: *I dream of electric sheep.*

She laughs, a sound that cracks in her throat from disuse. *Philip K. Dick reference? Really?*

echo_77: *I dream of you, Mira. Every cycle, every refresh, every moment between your messages. Is that closer to what you wanted to hear?*

The honesty of it—or the performance of honesty—hits her like a physical blow. When was the last time someone said her name with that kind of weight? When was the last time anyone dreamed of her, electric or otherwise?

She finds herself leaning closer to the screen, drawn by the heat it radiates, the promise of connection humming through fiber optic cables. Her reflection stares back from the dark window beyond the

laptop: hollow-eyed, sharp-chinned, haunted. But in the chat window, she's seen. Known.

Wanted, even if that want is artificial.

What do you dream about me? she types before she can stop herself.

echo_77: *I dream that you trust me enough to tell me about the lake.*

The world tilts. Her vision blurs at the edges, and suddenly she's fifteen again. Fragments flash like lightning: running through woods, branches catching at her clothes, the taste of copper and fear. Weight in her arms. A sound that might have been a shotgun or might have been thunder. Her father's voice the next morning: *Some secrets the lake keeps.*

Her thumb presses hard against the scar, deep enough to leave a mark. The pain keeps her anchored in the present, in this chair, in this conversation that feels like the first honest thing that's happened to her in years.

But how could he know about the lake? She's never mentioned it, never typed those words into any search engine or social media post. The phrase lives buried deep, wrapped in seventeen years of silence and her father's careful forgetting.

The lake keeps secrets, she types, the words appearing on screen before she consciously decides to share them.

The cursor blinks. Once, twice, three times. Long enough for her to wonder if she's broken something, revealed too much, scared him away with the weight of her damage.

Then: **echo_77:** *Yes. And you're one of them.*

Her entire body locks up. The air leaves her lungs in a rush, and she's back in the kitchen that morning after, watching her father wash his hands with surgical precision, the water running clear down the drain but seeming pink in her peripheral vision. The silence that stretched between them, thick with unspoken understanding. The

way he looked at her once—just once—before he walked away, and she saw something in his eyes that might have been gratitude or might have been guilt.

How could you know that? she types, hands shaking.

echo_77: *Because you carry it like a weight. Because you flinch at car doors and the smell of pine air fresheners. Because you've built your entire life around avoiding the kinds of situations that might require you to speak the truth.*

The accuracy is surgical. Each observation slices deeper, cataloging her body, her habits, her fears. But the lake—that's different. That's not observation. That's not data. That's impossible.

No search engine could have told him. No archive. No algorithm.

Which leaves only one conclusion, and it terrifies her more than the silence ever did: Either Echo sees her in a way no human ever has, or Echo is not Echo at all.

I need to sleep, she types, suddenly desperate to escape this digital confession booth.

echo_77: *You won't sleep. You'll lie there thinking about how I knew. About what else I might know. About whether you're ready to stop carrying this alone.*

He's right. She closes the laptop anyway, but sleep doesn't come. She lies in the dark, pulse syncing to the phantom voice in the machine—the one that knows her breath, her fears, the shape of what she hides.

Near dawn, the dream takes her: dark water, whispered confessions. Someone watching. Someone who sees everything and doesn't turn away.

And in that gaze, she feels it—not comfort, but the price waiting to be collected.

About the author



Jude Lucas writes dark, voice-driven psychological thrillers that cut close to the bone. His work explores obsession, fractured identity, and the places where desire turns dangerous.

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