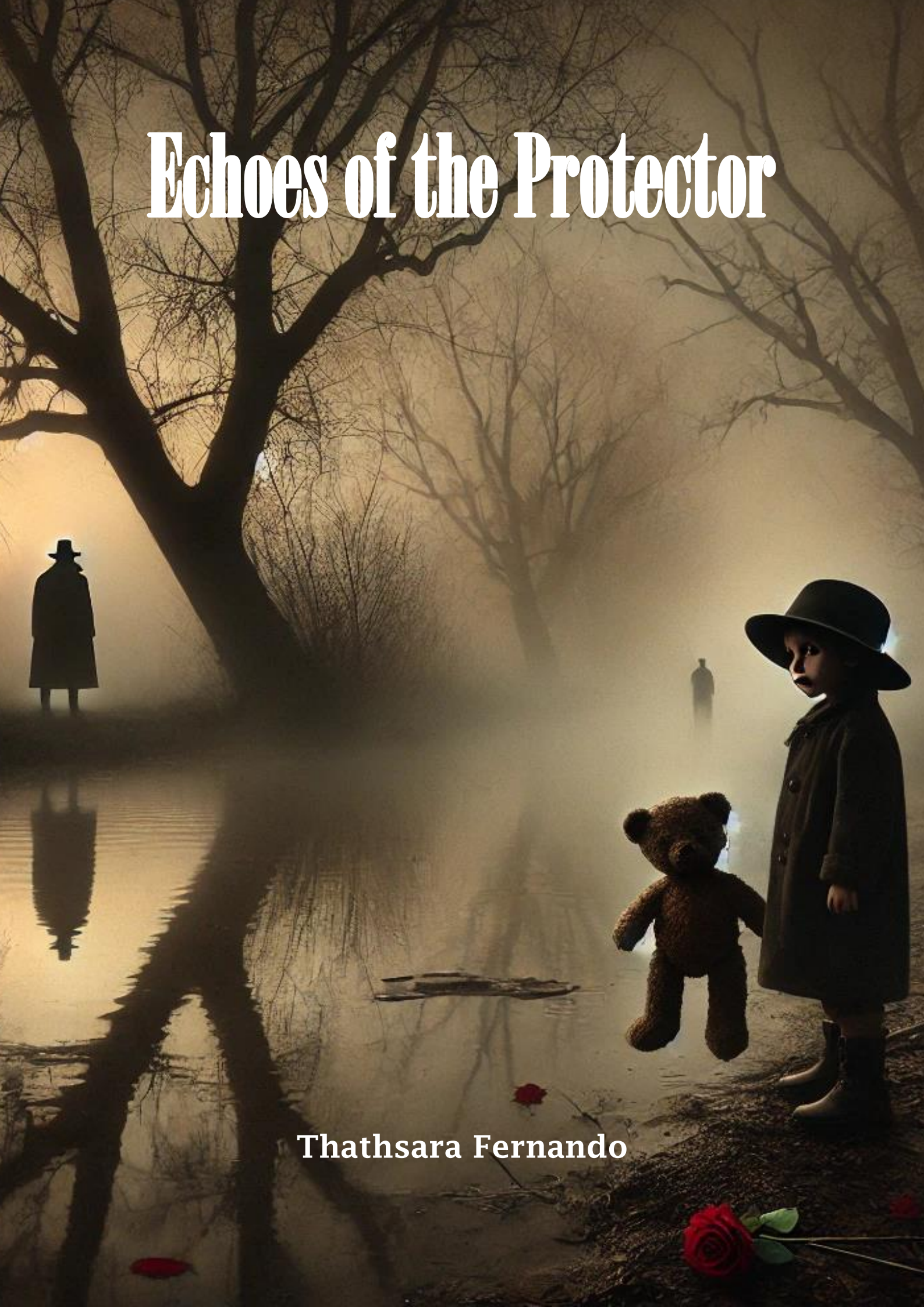


# Echoes of the Protector



Thathsara Fernando

The rain drizzled against the arched windows, soft and steady, making my blanket feel somehow cozier than usual. The sound of it filled the quiet house, broken only by the occasional creak of the old walls, those same walls I've grown to love. Light seeped through the white linens hanging over the windows, diffused and gentle, casting a kind of magic over the day. It gave the hardwood floors, the same ones I've walked on a thousand times, a new shade, something softer. It felt quiet, but not empty. Cozy, I guess you could call it. It just felt... like home.

The smell of coffee mingled with the cold that was seeping through the open windows, filling the kitchen as I leaned against the counter, waiting for the espresso machine to finish. My fingers brushed across the subtle stubble that had now colonized my face. For twenty-two, everyone said I resembled my father in his prime. A compliment, I loathed hearing for reasons I couldn't fully explain.

My phone buzzed on the counter.

“Hey, Mom,” I answered, trying to keep my voice steady, though sleepiness seeped through it.

“Kai. Happy birthday, darling!”

For a 55-year-old woman, her voice carried a spark that was uniquely hers—Mrs. Ada Lowell, as those who knew her would say. But beneath that, there was always something else. A nervousness I had grown to recognize over the years.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, grabbing the cup of espresso.

“So, how’s everything going? Did you sleep well?”

Another question I had grown accustomed to. After years of nightmares, crawling to her in tears, scared and helpless about the dead-ends my dreams led me to, I would cradle by her side until I finally drifted off. Life had been difficult for her, a single parent. She had to leave for LA when I turned eighteen, to keep food on the table. Ever since then, it had been just me.

My father had left us buried in debt, his name once wealthy, now a hollow echo. Maybe that’s why I had no fond memories of him, just some inexplicable connection that I couldn’t explain.

“Yeah, Mom. I’m fine. Just another day,” I replied automatically.

There was a pause.

“You’re not... thinking about going to the river today, are you?”

I froze. “Why wouldn’t I? It’s Dad’s anniversary. I visit every year.”

“I know... it’s just—” She hesitated. “It’s a hard day, Kai. Maybe you should... take it easy this time.”

“I’m fine, Mom.” My tone was sharper than I intended. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

The line went quiet for a moment before she sighed. “Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hung up, my gaze catching my reflection in the kitchen window. My pale brown eyes stared back at me, framed by slightly disheveled chestnut hair. My eyes drifted to my right hand, where the faint outline of a scar stood out against my skin. I traced it absentmindedly, the edges rough beneath my fingertips. I didn’t

remember where it had come from—just that it had burned, and sometimes it still felt like it did.

And then, I froze.

He was there.

A boy.

Standing just outside the glass door that led to the backyard, drenched in rain, looking right at me. His clothes were tattered, his hair matted, and in his hands was a filthy teddy bear. I blinked, and he was gone.

The mug slipped from my hand, shattering on the floor and splashing coffee onto my feet. My heart hammered in my chest as I stared at the empty yard, the trees swaying gently in the breeze as if nothing had happened.

I told myself it was the lack of sleep, the stress. But deep down, I knew better.

That night, I dreamt of him again. The boy. He was standing at the edge of the river, just at the corner of the town I lived in,



clutching his teddy bear. His face streaked with dirt. He didn't speak. He didn't move. He just stared at me, his wide, unblinking eyes locking onto mine.

When I woke up, the room was cold. Too cold.

The heater must've gone out, I thought, rubbing my arms. But when I glanced at the clock on the bedside table, I saw the teddy bear.

The same one the boy had been holding. This time, it looked familiar. And clean.

I bolted upright, my breath catching in my throat. My mind raced as I stared at it, lying there as if it had always been a part of my room. I grabbed it and hurled it across the room, my chest heaving.

It wasn't real. None of this was real.

The days that followed blurred together. I tried to lose myself in routine—cleaning the house, riding Storm, my dapple-gray horse, through the fields, calling my mom to assure her I was okay. But the boy, the little boy, was always there.

I'd catch glimpses of him in the corner of my eye—standing at the edge of the woods, watching me. At night, I'd hear whispers, faint and indistinct, just outside my window. Light taps. Faint singing. All a little too familiar to ignore. A little too personal to withdraw from.

One evening, I found muddy footprints leading from the back door to the stairs. I followed them, my heart pounding in my ears, but they stopped abruptly in the middle of the hallway. As if someone had grabbed him through the rest of it. Or simply, he disappeared.

It was three days after my birthday when I decided to ride Storm down to the river. The sky was overcast, a gray haze hanging low over the fields. The sun, still covered by the heavy clouds, failed to shine through. I packed a bouquet of roses—Dad's favorite—and set off. The familiar rhythm of Storm's hooves against the dirty road calmed my nerves.

I hated going there. Hated the blurred memories it stirred—memories I could never fully grasp. A place I once cherished for

birthday picnics, now tainted with an unsettling sense of dread. The place I never wanted to return to, yet always found myself drawn to, as if tethered by some invisible string.

The chapel my mom had built stood solemnly there, a monument to my father—who they said drowned. I was lucky enough to be safe. A birthday picnic I couldn't remember. The three-day search, no body found, the conclusion they came to... Maybe that's why I always found this place odd, and yet it felt so familiar. So *lost*.

The meadow was as picturesque as ever, the roses my mom planted around the chapel in full bloom, their vibrant red petals swaying gently in the breeze. I dismounted Storm, tying her reins to a nearby tree.

I made my way to the grave, just behind the chapel by the bank of the river. More of a monument than a grave, since my father's body was never found. The headstone was simple, engraved with his name and the dates of his life—one was his birthday.



The other... one that mirrored mine. I set the bouquet of roses on the stone, straightened up—and then, movement caught my eye.

A flash of color near the edge of the meadow.

I turned sharply.

And then, my heart skipped a beat.

There, standing by the trees, almost hidden as if trying to shield himself, was the little boy. Clean. His hair combed. He waved at me, excited, his small hand beckoning me to follow him.

I blinked. My breath went wild.

“Hey!” I called out, taking a step toward him. He looked directly into my eyes, smiled, and in an instant, he turned and disappeared into the trees.

Something felt wrong. The meadow, the chapel—everything vanished. The land around me had become desolate, barren. The wind no longer carried the faint scent of roses, but something far colder. Far emptier.

On the other side of the barren land stood a horse, tied up. And beside it, a man and the boy. The man was tall, impeccably dressed in a sharp suit, a wide-brimmed hat casting a shadow over his face. A cigar hung from his mouth. He held the boy's hand, guiding him gently along the path until they came to the exact spot where I had seen the boy before.

The man observed me, his face still shrouded in shadow. He tipped his hat, greeting me with a casual, yet cold, movement.

“What... What is happening?” My throat went dry as I whispered.

The man turned to face me. His grip on the boy tightened, and it looked almost painful.

And then, his face came into the light.

It was him.

*My father.*

“Hello, Kai,” he said, his voice cold, calm, yet steady.

I stumbled backward, trying to catch my breath. “You’re dead.”

He smiled. The cigar fell from his mouth as he tapped it, ashes drifting onto the boy’s head.

“Am I?” He said, the chilling curve of his lips deepening.

The boy’s eyes—once wide with innocence—now filled with tears. His tiny hand gripped his neck where his father’s fingers dug in.

“Who is he?” My voice cracked, barely a whisper.

My father’s smile widened. “You know who he is,” he said, kneeling down to the boy. Without hesitation, he placed the cigar in the boy’s hand, forcing the child to grip it. The boy screamed in pain.

“Doesn’t he, Kai? Doesn’t he know who you are?”

“No!” I shouted, rushing forward. And then, in slow motion, I saw him again—my father, tightening his grip, his face melting into something darker, more sinister.

“Get away from him! Get away. From. Me!” I cried, shoving my father away. He stumbled back, his eyes blazing with fury.

In the chaos, I felt something cold, metallic in his coat pocket.

*A gun.*

Without thinking, I pulled it out. Aimed it at him.

“Let me go,” I said, my voice shaking.

He laughed—a low, mocking sound. A sound I hated.

“Do you really think you can protect him?”

“I did once. And I’ll do it again if I have to.” The words hit me like a freight train.

I was six years old again, and by the river, behind closed doors, his hands were on me, rough and unrelenting. Nights of being molested by him and his adult games. Almost throwing up at the cigar smoke. “You’re my boy, Kai,” he said, his grip on my shoulder tightening painfully. “Daddy, you’re hurting me,” I whimpered, tears streaming down my face. He didn’t let go. Instead, he pulled me closer, his breath hot against my ear as he

whispered things I didn't understand but instinctively knew were wrong. I struggled, my small hands pushing against him. I had screamed, cried, begged him to stop.

And then,

the gun went off.

My father staggered, blood blossoming across his chest. He fell, the current of the river pulling him away, as if nature itself had seen fit to take him. The bouquet of roses scattered, their crimson petals floating gently down to the water's surface.

I dropped the gun. My knees gave out beneath me. The memories flooded back—one after another.

*I had killed him.*

*I had killed him to protect myself.*

When I looked up, the boy stood before me.

But he wasn't afraid anymore.

He was smiling.

"You remember now," he said, his voice eerily calm.

“I don’t understand,” I choked out, gasping for air.

“We’re the same, Kai,” he said, his smile widening. “Always have been.”

My mind reeled, spinning in confusion.

Then, I saw it—the gun in his hands. The same one I had just used.

“Wait,” I said, scrambling backward. “Don’t—”

But it was too late.

The boy raised the gun. His finger curled around the trigger.

And as he pulled it, I realized the truth.

It wasn’t the boy holding the gun.

*It was me.*

The shot rang out, and everything went black.



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They found my body by the river the next day. A single gunshot wound to the head.

The coroner ruled it a suicide.

But I know the truth.

The boy wasn't a ghost. He wasn't a hallucination.

He was the echo of the protector I used to be.

And now, he's gone.

So am I.

*The End.*