

## Echoes of the Protector

The place never changes—the same old books, the musky smell, the quiet minds seeking solace in words that speak the love they've never heard aloud. She was one of them, I could tell. A woman drawn to the kind of romance found in novels rather than real men, maybe because reality had disappointed her too often. Maybe that's why she didn't notice him.

People rarely did.

The quiet man with a book in his lap, his gaze fixed downward, absorbed enough to seem harmless. Men like him were always seen as sweet, unassuming. Men like him always got away with it.

But I had seen them before. And I had learned my lessons too late.

She stood by the shelves, shifting her weight from foot to foot, unaware that her dress had ridden up slightly. Unaware that every movement was being recorded. She was young, maybe in her twenties. She reminded me of someone.

The security guard stood by the entrance, chatting with a colleague, oblivious. I needed him to see.

A book tumbled from the shelf. A small thing. A tiny disturbance. A few people looked over, puzzled. But not the guard.

A chair scraped against the floor, the sound slicing through the silence. More heads turned. An old man shifted slightly in his seat, but his focus never wavered.

Then, finally—just finally—he moved too suddenly. His chair wobbled, and something clattered to the floor. A phone.

The screen faced upward, glowing with undeniable proof.

For a moment, the woman didn't react. Then realization dawned. Horror flickered across her face, her breath caught in her throat.

The security guard noticed the commotion and rushed over. The old man's hands darted forward, desperate to reclaim his device, but he was too slow. The guard got there first. He picked up the phone. Paused. The footage still played.

The whispers started then, rippling through the aisles, shifting eyes onto him.

The old man stammered, his excuses weak. But this time, there was no escape. The damage was done.

It mirrored the damage in my life—an unhealed wound, always reopening. Never addressed, only ignored. And every time, it led me back to the same place, the same name—Aunty Liyanage.

As a child, Aunty Liyanage was my refuge, the one who listened when my parents were too distant. She taught me about my changing body, reassured me during my first period, and was the first I turned to about my abuse.

At home, what began as domestic violence grew darker, with no escape from the men who claimed to be protectors. Aunty Liyanage lived nearby, and I found safety under the pretense of her tuition classes.

She took in lost girls—abandoned, neglected, abused. But she also sheltered women broken by love and betrayal. Aunty didn't just offer shelter; she restored their strength, showing them how to reclaim their lives and become protectors, not the protected.

My family never questioned it. They believed I was helping her while studying, and as long as they did, I was safe with her.

Or so I thought.

But now was not the time to think about the past. There was a woman in the bookstore who needed protecting, and for now, she was safe. The old man, however, was growing more desperate by the second. He was yelling now, demanding his phone back, hurling every profanity he could muster. The scene had shifted, from quiet revelation to loud, chaotic confrontation.

The woman was shaking, her entire body trembling with barely contained rage. “You... old enough... my father...” The words came out fractured, her voice breaking apart before she could complete her thoughts. How could anyone look at this frail old man and believe he was capable of something so vile?

“If the phone hadn’t slipped... I wouldn’t have known!” she kept repeating, as if that was the worst part of it all. As if the crime only became real because it had been caught.

But there was so much more to this. There was always more.

Why didn’t anyone ever dig deeper? Why doesn’t anyone ever take the time to—

Oh. There they were. The Gen Z preppy kid.

I love this generation. They’re relentless. They don’t let things slide. They demand justice. They are loud in all the right ways.

“I’m sure this pervert has more to hide! Check his device!” the kid insisted, standing their ground.

The security guard, almost amused, handed over the phone without hesitation. “Here you go! See what you can pull up while the police get here.”

That word—police—sent the old man spiraling. His face turned red, his breathing ragged, his body stiff with panic. He wasn’t ashamed. He wasn’t regretful. He was simply afraid.

Afraid for his future.

The irony of it.

He was worried about his future when he had stolen so many. So many young, bright futures—snatched away before they had even begun.

And just like that, the word hope filled my mind.

Hope—that's what Aunty Liyanage had been to me. The warm chicken soup she made was hope. The storybooks she gave me, the ones that lulled me into a peaceful sleep, were hope. The thick, soft blankets she wrapped around my small body were hope. The blankets, slipping away. A hand, caressing me...

"No!" I snapped back to reality, forcing the memories away. "You can't live in the past, Dharshi," I told myself, gripping the bookshelf for support. A book fell with a loud thud. The girl glanced up, confused, but saw nothing out of place, and returned to the chaos.

The door creaked open, and a policeman walked in. Lucky for the girl, unlucky for the old man—there was a station nearby, and the officer was a good friend of the security guard. Without that, it would've taken longer for the law to arrive. Maybe we should all befriend a nearby cop.

For a brief moment, there was silence. Then, the Gen Z kid shrieked in horror.

And just like that, it was out in the open.

Files. Hundreds of them. Videos, images, memes—even GIFs, if that's what they call them now. Every single one documenting unspeakable acts, each a testament to suffering, each an invasion of someone's body, someone's dignity, someone's life.

There were women, men, children—violated and trapped forever in a grotesque digital collection.

The horror in the room was thick, suffocating. The weight of it pressed down on everyone. It was the kind of horror I had felt once. The kind I knew too well.

I had felt it when I was forced down against my will. When the blanket that was meant to comfort became the weapon that restrained me. When I lost control of my body, my choices, my right to exist in peace. I had felt it when I was tied up, assaulted, broken apart piece by piece. And yet, even then, it was not the worst horror I had seen.

True horror was the shine of the blade before it met my flesh.

I had heard his voice, smooth and deliberate, as if he were reassuring me of something I should have already known.

“You’re a good girl, Dharshi, but I don’t think you’re going to be quiet, are you?”

The first cut came at my throat. The second at my abdomen.

He had to be sure. And he was thorough.

Thorough in draining the life out of me. Thorough in considering another assault, his fingers lingering just a little too long. But that was too risky. Instead, he wiped his tracks, ensured my body wouldn’t be found.

Not that anyone had bothered to look.

I had always known my family didn’t want me. It was a truth I had swallowed long before that night.

“She must have eloped,” my mom said to Aunt Liyanage when she asked about my disappearance, her voice dismissive, forgetting the times I’d been caught between her and my abusive father.

“Definitely eloped,” my father had agreed, relishing his newfound power, knowing no one was left to stand in his way.

“Glad she’s gone, she brought too much dishonour to the family,” muttered my uncle—the same man who had been caught one too many times sneaking into women’s washrooms.

It was easy to go.

Easier still, because I wasn’t entirely gone.

Some might call it a ghost. A spirit. A lingering presence. But I was still me, just without the pain. Without the burden of a body that had been broken beyond repair.

I should have moved on, but something tied me to this bookstore. The same bookstore Aunt Liyanage had brought me to when she needed more books for the children at her home. I hadn’t understood why I lingered here—why I couldn’t leave—until now.

Until I saw him this morning. Until I saw his phone.

A fresh memory surfaced, raw and unfiltered.

The shimmer of the knife wasn’t the only thing I had seen that night.

There had been something else. A phone. A leather case that opened like a book, the metallic hook catching the light for just a second. Just long enough to burn into my memory.

And now, after all this time, here he was.

Still carrying his collection of horrors.

But what power did I have now?

I would have had a better chance to fight him off when I was alive. But like this? What could a ghost do?

What could an echo of a victim do—an echo of a coward who hadn't even fought to stay alive because she knew there was no one who wanted her alive in the first place?

Until I saw him recording that woman, I didn't think I could do anything. And then—rage. Pure, white-hot rage.

I don't know what it was—energy, aura, whatever you want to call it—but it was enough to send a book flying off a shelf in his direction. People looked around, confused, but quickly turned back to their own business. How good people were at turning away from things that didn't concern them, huh?

It enraged me more. A chair scraped against the floor, loud and jarring. Still, no significant response.

I couldn't take it.

I glided over to him, stood right in front, and looked him in the eye—but he couldn't see me. That's when it hit me: he felt nothing. No regret, no guilt, no hesitation. If given the chance, he'd do it again, to this oblivious girl who had no idea about the monster beside her.

Tears burned through my rage. I screamed.

I don't know what effect it had—I can't speak for the living—but I saw the way he flinched. His fingers had twitched, his breath hitched. And then, as if something had jolted through him, he dropped his phone.

And just like that, the world had unraveled before his eyes.

The police held him down as he faked an asthma attack, gasping theatrically, but no one cared. The crowd wasn't just watching—they were angry. Some tried to hit him, strangle him, anything to make him feel a fraction of the horror he'd inflicted

His phone contained everything. Thousands of files, sickening evidence of his crimes. He was part of a global network—a Telegram group with 70,000 men from around the world, sharing tactics on how to assault women, children, even animals.

The bookstore buzzed with disbelief and disgust. This would be everywhere in the news soon, setting the world on fire. But at that moment, it was unseen, unheard of. Only those in that room bore witness to the depths of his monstrosity.

A few hours later, the woman he had tried to record was in the arms of another—arms I recognized too well. They were comforting each other.

“Aunty, I was almost assaulted today,” the girl sobbed, her voice breaking.

Aunty Liyanage held her close, but her face—her expression—was not what I expected. She looked aged, not just in years but in suffering. It wasn't fear in her eyes, nor just shock. It was something deeper.

It was pain. Betrayal. Denial crumbling into realization.

“I have been assaulted,” she said softly, distantly, her voice hollow.

“Sorry, what?” the girl asked, wiping her tears, confused.



“He has been assaulting me in my sleep,” Aunt Liyanage continued, her tone robotic. “Recording it. Sending it to all.”

The girl froze. Words caught in her throat.

Aunt Liyanage exhaled deeply, her lips curving into the bravest, most heartbreaking smile I had ever seen.

“I have seen many men in courtrooms,” she said. “Men who have taken advantage of women and children. What’s one more?” She straightened her shoulders, and for a moment, she was no longer just a woman who had been hurt—she was a warrior preparing for battle. “And this time, it’s my own husband. So, I know exactly how to do this.”

The pain in her eyes was unbearable. The betrayal etched in every line of her face was cruel. But her posture—her determination—spoke louder than anything else.

The girl opened her mouth, hesitating. “If it wasn’t for the phone that slipped—”

But Aunt Liyanage gripped her shoulders, firmly, powerfully, looking straight into her eyes.

“We still would have found out,” she said with conviction. “I believe we are protected.”

The girl swallowed, still in shock, but Aunt Liyanage wasn’t finished.

“When people ask for divine protection, they imagine some white light,” she said. “An angel watching over them, or some invisible force shielding them.” She shook her head, her voice steady. “But you know what real protection is? A slipped phone. A missed bus. A forgotten alarm. That’s protection.”

Her words shook me.

Protected.

Is that what I had been doing?

For a year, I had lingered here, trapped in this bookstore, drawn to it for reasons I didn't understand. But was this why? Had I been more than just a victim, wandering between bookshelves, mourning the life I had lost?

Had I been a protector?

Was every action I took—every book I knocked down, every chair I moved—just an echo of that protection?

I never had a voice when I was alive.

But now...

Now, my echoes had screamed.

I felt it then—a weight lifting off my chest. A warmth spreading through me.

And then, the light.

A bright, blinding light.

I knew what it meant.

I could step into it. I could leave. For the first time in a year, nothing tethered me here. Nothing bound me to this bookstore.

My job was done.

This monster had been unmasked. My echoes would live on—in news reports, in advocacy, in change. The Echoes of a Protector!

And now, at last, I could rest.

I smiled, taking one final look at the world I had protected.

And then, I stepped forward.