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DEDICATION

To my family,

And to those who never stop believing in justice,

Even when the system doesn't.

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I am grateful to everyone who contributed to the birth of this story. And to the readers who keep my pen alive.

PROLOGUE

The rain fell heavily that night. Fast, steady drops hit the windscreen of the black Toyota Highlander parked outside the courthouse. Inside the car, someone sat still, watching. Judge Adaobi's courtroom lights were still on, even though the court had closed for the day. From behind the dark glass, the person picked up a phone and slowly typed a message.

"I know what you did. Stop pretending."

A moment later, the screen showed a single tick. Sent.

Inside the building, Adaobi looked at her phone as it vibrated, not knowing her life was about to change completely.

The person in the car let out a breath and placed a thick file on the seat beside them. Inside were papers and pictures. Evidence. The kind that could destroy reputations, break trust, and bring down one of the most respected judges in the state.

For years, her robe had protected her.

Now it would be the reason she falls

CHAPTER ONE

The Message

The courtroom was silent as Justice Adaobi delivered the final verdict.

Her voice, calm but firm, echoed through the high-ceilinged courtroom.

“On the charge of financial misappropriation, this court finds the defendant guilty.”

The gavel hit the wood. The case was closed.

As the crowd murmured and the lawyers shuffled papers, Adaobi rose from her seat, dignity in every step. Clad in her black robe and rimless glasses, she was a symbol of order in a city where justice was often bought.

She walked back to her chambers, nodding politely at clerks and officers. Inside, she dropped her robe and reached for her phone.

One new message.

She opened it.

I know what you did in 2010.

N10 million or the world finds out.

You have seven days.

No name. No number.

Her heart skipped. Then again. And again.

She sat down slowly, her hand trembling. 2010. A year she had buried in her memory. A year that could ruin everything.

She stared at the message. The strong, unshakable Adaobi was suddenly a woman under fire.

And this time, she couldn't take it to court.

CHAPTER TWO

TRACES OF 2010

The message burned into her mind all night. She didn't sleep.

At 6:00 a.m., Judge Adaobi was already at her desk, files unopened, laptop untouched.

Only her phone sat before her, the message still there.

She didn't delete it. She couldn't.

Instead, she opened her locked drawer and pulled out a faded envelope. Inside it: a photograph, a single name, and a copy of a police report.

She whispered to herself, "I told no one."

But someone knew.

She dialed a number. It rang twice before a young voice answered.

"Good morning, ma. Who is this?"

"It's Adaobi. I need to see you. Urgently."

"Is this about what you mentioned last year?"

"No. This is different. It's happening again."

She hung up, took a deep breath, and walked to the window. Below, the city buzzed with life, cars blaring, horns screaming. But up here, everything was quiet, too quiet.

For the first time in years, Justice Adaobi felt hunted.

CHAPTER THREE

ECHOES IN THE COURT

Monday came too fast. The courthouse buzzed with its usual rhythm, lawyers arguing in hallways, papers shuffling, the echo of polished shoes on tiled floors.

But Judge Adaobi noticed everything now.

The way Chike, her assistant, avoided eye contact. How the court clerk, Uduak, hesitated before handing her a file. Even the lingering glances from the young intern she didn't remember hiring.

She sat at the bench like always, calm, commanding, but inside, she was scanning every corner of the courtroom. The message hadn't come again. No calls. No follow-up. But the silence was even more dangerous.

At recess, she returned to her chambers and locked the door.

She pulled out a flash drive.

It held a single file: "Case_1107_A.Ugwu"

The file was sealed, hidden from public record, buried ten years ago. It wasn't just a mistake, it was a choice. And someone had found it.

Her phone buzzed. Another message.

"I see you're trying to dig. Careful now, Your Honour. Some graves aren't meant to be reopened."

This time, there was a photo attachment. It was taken this morning, her entering the courthouse.

Adaobi's hands froze.

Whoever was behind this wasn't just watching her past.

They were watching her now.

CHAPTER FOUR

AN UNSEEN HAND

By evening, Adaobi sat quietly in her car, parked at the far end of her compound. Engine off.

Phone in hand.

She stared at the photo from the latest message:

Her robe. Her bag. Her steps. Captured without her knowledge.

Her mind raced through possibilities. Only a handful of people knew where she parked.

Fewer had access to her chambers. But someone was playing a long, quiet game.

She texted just three words to her contact:

“It’s worse now.”

Then she stepped out and walked into her house like everything was fine.

The next morning, a brown envelope waited on her desk.

No return name.

Inside were copies of the same police report she thought had been destroyed in 2011. The one tied to a disappearance. A cover-up. And a name she swore she’d never hear again:

Uchenna Okoye

She swallowed hard.

Uchenna wasn’t just a memory.

He was the one man who knew her biggest secret. The man who had vanished. Presumed dead. The case buried with a quiet bribe and a willing silence.

Now... it was all coming back.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE INK BENEATH THE PAPER

The archives room was cold.

Judge Adaobi had requested a private review session, a rare favor from the Chief Registrar.

She claimed she needed old files for “research.” No one questioned her. After all, who dares question a High Court judge?

Row after row of dusty metal cabinets lined the underground storage. The scent of old paper and forgotten cases filled the air.

She found what she was looking for:

Case File 1107 – Uchenna Okoye

The file was supposed to be empty. She had removed everything a decade ago.

But now... there was something inside.

A black envelope.

Her hand hesitated. Then she opened it.

Inside: a folded newspaper cutting, dated March 8th, 2010. The headline read:

“Young Political Aide Vanishes in Dispute Over Missing Evidence”

And under it, stapled to the article, was a small handwritten note:

“You remember how the body was never found?”

Adaobi’s knees went weak.

They weren’t bluffing. This person had not just information, but physical proof tied to the disappearance. Proof she thought had been destroyed.

She turned the note over. Something was scribbled on the back.

A name.

A name she hadn’t heard in years:

Inspector Dibia

A former police officer. Retired early. Disappeared just after the case faded. Some whispered he took a bribe and ran.

But now... he might be a missing piece.

Or a ghost.

Adaobi tucked the note into her jacket, locked the file cabinet again, and walked out, heartbeat pounding.

The blackmailer wasn't just reminding her of the past anymore.

They were directing her next move.

CHAPTER SIX

THE GHOST COP

It took Adaobi three days to trace the name: Inspector Dibia.

Retired. No forwarding address. Pension claims frozen. One report even listed him as “missing.” But a call from her investigator, Tamuno, brought a lead.

“Judge,” he said, voice low, “he’s alive. Quiet, but alive. He runs a private fishing shed in Port Harcourt. Goes by another name now, Uncle D.”

Without notifying anyone, Adaobi took an early weekend trip out of Lagos. She arrived alone, dressed in plain clothes, the kind she hadn’t worn in years.

The riverside compound was rusted, worn out, and peaceful. Birds chirped. Boats floated lazily. Not a soul looked like a former police officer.

Then he stepped out.

Old. Grey-bearded. Limping slightly.

But those eyes, cold, calculating, still held the sharpness of a man who once wore a badge.

She said, “Inspector Dibia?”

He said nothing.

Then, calmly, “You shouldn’t have come. They’re watching me too.”

She froze. “So it’s real.”

He looked over his shoulder and whispered, “You thought the cover-up was clean. But someone else saw it. Someone who never forgot.”

Adaobi’s voice was tight. “Who?”

He smiled bitterly. “That’s the thing about shadows, Your Honour. You only see them when it’s too late.”

Before she could ask more, he handed her an old, folded paper.

“Take it. You’ll need it soon. But leave now. And next time... come armed.”

He turned and disappeared into the shack, locking the door.

Adaobi opened the paper in her hotel room.

A hand-drawn map.

With one word written in red:

“REMEMBER.”

Chapter Seven

Tamuno Joins The Case

Adaobi sat quietly in her living room, the lights off, her phone in hand.

The map Inspector Dibia gave her sat on the table. It showed an old building in Lagos, abandoned years ago. She wasn't sure what it meant. But she knew one thing now:

She needed help

The next day, she called Tamuno, a private investigator she trusted. He used to be a police detective, but now worked alone. He didn't ask questions. He just listened.

"You think someone is spying on you?" he asked calmly.

"Not just spying," Adaobi said. "They're blackmailing me. They know everything about my past."

Tamuno nodded slowly. "I'll check your house and office. But you must act normal. Let them think you're still afraid."

He came that same evening and searched her office, her laptop, even her home Wi-Fi. Then he paused.

"Who has been in your chambers recently?"

"My assistant. The court clerk. And a few junior lawyers."

Tamuno pointed to a light fixture on the ceiling.

He brought out a small tool, unscrewed it, and pulled out a tiny black dot.

A hidden camera.

"It's been here for months," Tamuno said. "They've been watching and listening."

Adaobi's hands began to shake. "How many more?"

"We'll find out. But Judge... this is bigger than just money. They're building something against you. You're not their only target."

Adaobi leaned back into her chair. Her past wasn't just chasing her.

It was already inside her home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PAST REVEALED

The walls of Adaobi's mind finally gave way.

She had fought the memories for days, gripping them like a sealed file she vowed never to open again. But secrets, like wounds, always find a way to bleed. And tonight, the bleeding refused to stop.

The year was 2010.

She was younger then, just starting her legal career. Still full of fire, ambition, and fear. That night, Uchenna had come to her apartment uninvited. Angry. Accusing. Drunk.

He said he had something on her. That he would "finish her name" in Enugu. That he knew how she got her first win in court.

They argued. He pushed. She pushed back.

Then came the fall.

A sickening sound. The crack of skull against tile. The silence after.

He didn't move.

Adaobi froze for what felt like an hour before calling her closest friend, someone who would understand, someone who owed her. Together, they cleaned the blood. They wrapped his body. They carried him to the river under the cover of darkness.

No police. No confession. No funeral.

They buried Uchenna in more than water. They buried him in silence.

And it worked. For years, it worked.

Until now.

Now, someone knew.

The messages. The photos. The name Uchenna in blackmail. It wasn't random. Someone had found the truth, and was holding it like a knife to her throat.

Adaobi walked to her window and stared out into the Enugu night, her hands shaking.

For the first time in years, she felt like a criminal, not a judge.

She turned slowly and looked at the black robe hanging on her wall. The very symbol of justice she wore each day now mocked her. Behind the judgments and verdicts, behind the speeches and headlines, she too had something to hide.

And someone was ready to expose it.

CHAPTER NINE

THE RED GAVEL

Adaobi's footsteps echoed as she climbed the stairs to her apartment. It was late, and the court session had drained her, another long day filled with arguments, evidence, and whispers behind her back. The pressure from the blackmail was getting heavier, but she managed to keep her face straight in public.

Barely.

She unlocked the door and stepped inside.

Silence.

She flicked on the light.

Then she saw it.

Her breath caught.

There, in the center of her dining table, sitting perfectly upright on a stack of court papers, was a gavel.

But not just any gavel.

This one was red, deep red, like it had been dipped in blood. Shiny. Freshly polished.

Wrong.

Adaobi stood frozen in place, the door still open behind her. She didn't move. Didn't blink.

Every part of her mind screamed the same thing:

Someone has been inside.

She knew what the gavel meant. It wasn't just a symbol of her position, it was her authority.

Her courtroom. Her power.

And someone had just used it to send her a message:

"You're not in control anymore."

Her eyes darted around the room. Nothing else seemed touched. No broken windows. No

signs of a break-in. Whoever left it knew what they were doing. They wanted her to feel watched, to feel violated, but not robbed.

They wanted her to feel owned.

She slowly stepped toward the table. The gavel was placed neatly, deliberately, right where she couldn't miss it. She reached out and picked it up.

Cold.

Heavy.

A slight carving on the base of the handle made her pause. She leaned in.

Four letters:

“U.D.A.C.”

Her heart dropped. She didn't know what it meant, but it was meant for her.

Her phone buzzed.

One new message.

“Justice is not your shield anymore. 24 hours. Or everything breaks loose.”

She dropped the gavel. It hit the floor with a wooden thud, rolling under the table.

Adaobi didn't chase it. She couldn't. Her knees were too weak.

The blackmailer had walked through her house. Touched her things. Left a warning right in front of her face.

This was no longer about fear.

This was war.

And her robe would not protect her.

CHAPTER TEN

COURT OF DISTRACTION

The courtroom felt different today.

There were no alarms ringing, no security breaches, and yet Adaobi knew something was off. Her eyes scanned the public gallery. No strange faces. No signals. Just quiet stares and restless feet.

Still, she could feel the pressure building like steam behind the walls.

The case before her was simple enough, an inheritance dispute between siblings. But even as the lawyers spoke and the evidence was presented, her thoughts wandered back to the red gavel... the carved letters... the message on her phone.

She hadn't slept. And it showed.

She misread a section of the law.

She asked the same question twice.

She forgot to admit one exhibit into the record.

And the lawyers noticed.

So did the press.

By afternoon, whispers had spread like wildfire. "Judge Adaobi seems distracted." "Not her usual sharpness." "Is something wrong in her chambers?"

Then it happened.

As court recessed, her clerk hurried toward her, phone in hand. His face was pale.

"Ma," he said softly, handing it to her. "This... just came out."

Adaobi's hands shook as she scrolled.

A blog post. From a gossip site with a wide reach.

Headline: "Top Enugu Judge Under Pressure? Source Says She's 'Emotionally Unstable' Amid New Corruption Probe."

She didn't need to read the full text.

It was filled with lies. Hints of bribery. Allegations of past favors. No names, no proof, but enough to start a storm.

Someone was feeding the media false stories.

Someone was making her look like she was crumbling, and worse, like she had something to hide.

She looked up slowly, scanning the courtroom again.

Someone in this room could be watching her for the blackmailer.

Or someone was the blackmailer.

Either way, her greatest enemy had stopped hiding in the shadows.

They were now attacking her in broad daylight.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE OLD FRIEND'S LETTER

Rain drizzled over Enugu like a warning.

Adaobi sat by her window, sipping cold tea, her mind a battlefield. The article had gone viral. Colleagues were suddenly distant. Calls she usually received in the morning never came. The judiciary was many things, but silent when scandal hovered was not one of them.

Her reputation, once as firm as concrete, was now cracking like old paint.

Then, just before noon, a courier arrived.

No name. No number. Just an envelope with her name printed in blue ink, neatly, almost respectfully. She opened it, expecting another threat. Another riddle.

But what she found cut deeper.

A handwritten letter. Brief. Familiar handwriting.

“Adaobi,

The past was never meant to stay buried. You brought this on yourself. Some sins return, not because of hate, but because truth has been denied too long. I can't watch you lie to the world anymore.

A friend.”

Her hand trembled.

The writing. The tone. It wasn't the blackmailer's usual cold and calculated threat. This was personal. Emotional. Almost... disappointed.

She read it again.

“A friend.”

Not “The Blackmailer.” Not anonymous threats. Someone she knew, someone close, was watching her fall and believed she deserved it.

She rushed to her old files, flipping through documents, photos, journals. She began listing names in her head:

Nnenna, her roommate from law school.

Chuka, her former assistant who quit without warning.

Barrister Ogwu, who once asked too many questions about 2010.

Or... could it be the person who helped her back then?

Whoever it was, they had waited 15 years, not to destroy her career, but to punish her conscience.

That made them more dangerous than any blackmailer.

They were not after money.

They were after her soul.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE HIDDEN CAMERA

Tamuno arrived at Adaobi's house just after 8 a.m., wearing a cap low over his eyes and carrying a slim black bag. He had barely spoken over the phone, only saying, "We need to sweep your office. Today."

Adaobi didn't argue. After the letter, the blog post, and the red gavel, she was no longer interested in pride or privacy.

They drove in silence to her private chambers beside the Enugu High Court. The building was quiet, early, cold, innocent-looking.

Tamuno moved fast. His movements were precise, almost rehearsed. He unplugged electronics, scanned air vents, examined light fixtures, and finally, dropped to his knees beside the bookshelf.

Adaobi stood behind him, arms crossed, heart pounding.

Then he paused.

He reached behind the lowest shelf, pulled out a pen-sized device, and held it up.

"Here it is," he said quietly. "A wireless micro camera. New model. Very clear resolution. Someone's been watching... for months."

Adaobi stared at the object. Something inside her cracked.

"How long?" she asked.

Tamuno turned the device slowly in his hand. "From the wiring and placement... maybe six, seven months. Maybe more."

Her blood ran cold.

Every document she reviewed. Every private call she took. Every late-night breakdown.

Someone saw everything.

She backed away, almost tripping over the carpet. "Check my desk. Please. I need to know

if that's the only one."

Tamuno didn't speak. He was already moving.

Within fifteen minutes, he uncovered two more: one behind a wall painting, another inside a fake smoke detector above her chair.

Adaobi sat down hard.

This wasn't just blackmail anymore.

This was surveillance. A full operation. Someone had turned her office into a trap.

Tamuno placed the devices on the table gently. "Whoever did this knows what they're doing. This isn't some cheap setup."

Adaobi stared at the cameras.

And then she whispered, almost to herself:

"It's someone close. Someone who knows this place too well".

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A NAME APPEARS

Tamuno stayed late into the evening, dismantling the rest of Adaobi's office like a crime scene. By nightfall, he had found no more cameras, but the damage was done.

Her private world had been exposed.

Adaobi sat alone after he left, the cameras laid out on her desk like dead insects. She didn't touch them. She couldn't.

She turned her attention to the old files again, the ones from 2010. Uchenna's name was now a poison on every page, but something inside her told her to look deeper. There had to be something she missed.

And then she found it.

Tucked inside a folded police report, yellowed at the edges, was a small note she didn't remember seeing before. It was scribbled in messy handwriting on torn paper.

"If anything happens to me, find Emeka. He won't stay quiet forever."

Her heart skipped.

Emeka. Emeka Nwokedi.

A name she hadn't heard in years.

He was Uchenna's cousin. Quiet, observant. Always in the background. He was there the night of the fight, but left before things escalated. Or at least... that's what they thought.

Could he have seen something?

Could he have known the truth all along, and waited for the perfect moment to strike?

She grabbed her phone and dialed Tamuno.

He picked up on the second ring.

"I need you to find someone," she said, voice steady. "His name is Emeka Nwokedi. Related to Uchenna. I want to know where he is, what he does, who he talks to, and if he's been in

Enugu recently.”

There was a pause. Then Tamuno replied, “That name sounds familiar. Give me a few hours.”

Adaobi hung up and leaned back in her chair.

For the first time since this nightmare began, she had a name.

A direction.

A possible face behind the blackmail.

But with every answer came another layer of fear, because if Emeka had waited all these years to strike...

Then he wasn't just after money.

He wanted justice.

Or revenge.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE INFORMANT

It was just past 7 p.m. when Adaobi received the message.

Unknown number. Simple text:

“Someone wants you to fall. You’re not the only one. Meet me. Discreetly. Behind Holy Spirit Cathedral. 8 p.m.”

No name. No threat. Just a quiet pull toward something deeper.

She hesitated for a moment, then changed her clothes, left her phone behind, and took a different car. She knew it could be a trap, but if there was even a chance of real answers, she had to take it.

The cathedral grounds were nearly empty, the evening mass already finished. She walked slowly toward the side gate, her heels clicking softly on stone. A figure stood under the large tree behind the vestry, hooded, head low.

“Judge Adaobi,” the voice said. Male. Soft but firm. “Don’t look shocked. You’re not the first they’ve come for.”

She didn’t answer immediately.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I used to work with them. The ones behind this,” he said. “Your blackmailer is part of something bigger.”

Adaobi’s chest tightened. “What do you mean, them?”

“A group. Small. Well-organized. They target judges. The ones with secrets. Corruption, mistakes, covered-up crimes... They find them. Record them. Use the truth as a weapon.”

Her voice dropped. “So I’m just... the first?”

He nodded. “The test run. If they break you, the rest will collapse faster. They want the judiciary to look weak. Dirty. Replaceable.”

“And Emeka?” she asked quickly.

The man was silent for a long moment. Then: “Emeka is involved. But he’s not alone.”

Adaobi felt her stomach twist.

“How do I stop them?”

He finally looked at her. “You don’t. Not with silence. Not with fear. You either expose them, or they finish what they’ve started.”

She blinked. “Why are you helping me?”

He turned to leave. “Because I was supposed to be next. And I’m tired of hiding.”

Then he disappeared into the shadows.

Adaobi stood alone beneath the tree, the wind picking up through the cathedral walls.

For the first time, she realized this wasn’t just about her past anymore.

It was about a system.

And the war had only begun.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE OFFER

The offer came the next morning.

It wasn't a threat this time. It was a deal, bold, final, and cold.

Adaobi opened her office drawer to find a slim envelope. No name. No markings. Inside was a flash drive and a printed letter. Typed in bold:

“Final Offer. N20 million. Or the recordings go to Channels TV, Premium Times, and the National Judicial Council. You have 72 hours.”

She didn't move for a long time.

She stared at the words as if they might change on their own. Her hand clutched the envelope so tightly her knuckles turned white.

The price had doubled.

So had the danger.

She plugged in the flash drive carefully, no internet connected, and opened the folder.

What she saw made her knees weaken.

Video clips.

One showed her pacing alone in her chambers, crying.

Another: her on a call months ago, speaking vaguely about “the night in 2010.”

Another, worst of all: her touching the edge of the red gavel, whispering Uchenna's name.

Whoever was behind this had been listening, watching, collecting, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Tamuno stood silently across from her as she finished. He had arrived earlier, sensing something was wrong. Now he saw it for himself.

“They have enough to ruin you,” he said quietly.

Adaobi nodded. “Yes. And that's exactly why... I won't pay.”

Tamuno blinked. "What?"

"If I pay," she said, standing up slowly, "they'll come back. Or someone else will. If I let fear drive me now, then I've already lost."

Her voice trembled, but her eyes were steady.

"They want me silent. I'll speak."

Tamuno studied her. "You're going to go public?"

"I'll admit the truth," she said. "Before they weaponize it."

He hesitated. "That could end your career."

Adaobi looked down at her robe, folded neatly on her desk.

"It may end it," she whispered. "But it won't bury me"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE TRAP

The High Court's annual judicial dinner was held at the State Hall, Enugu, a formal evening of toasts, polished speeches, and quiet politics under chandeliers. Adaobi had attended every year since she became a judge, but tonight, she wasn't here to celebrate.

She was here to hunt.

Tamuno had arranged everything: a hidden mini camera inside her handbag, a motion sensor in her car, and most importantly, a tracker attached beneath the lining of the folder she would "accidentally" leave behind.

It was bait. Elegant, deliberate, and laced with risk.

Inside the folder were fake copies of confidential court documents, including one that seemed to reference Uchenna Okoye and a forged confession letter. It looked real. Real enough to attract whoever had been following her all this time.

The guest list included fellow judges, court staff, clerks, secretaries, people who passed her in the hallways every day. Any one of them could be the blackmailer or working for them.

She smiled through every handshake, toast, and photograph, her mind scanning every expression, every glance that lingered too long.

By 9:12 p.m., she stood, excused herself quietly, and walked away, leaving her handbag on her seat and the folder inside.

Tamuno watched everything from his car outside, laptop glowing on his lap, headphones in his ears.

Minutes passed.

Then, movement.

Someone approached the table.

A man in court cleaner's uniform, face half-covered by a cap, pretending to clear plates. He hesitated at Adaobi's chair. Looked around.

Then his hand dipped into her bag.

Tamuno's screen blinked. Tracker activated.

He bolted from the car.

Inside, the cleaner slipped the folder into a brown envelope and walked calmly toward the service exit.

He didn't make it.

Tamuno stepped in front of him in the hallway and flashed his ID. Two security men closed in from behind.

"Where did you get the instructions?" Tamuno asked sharply.

The man's eyes darted. "I... I don't know who sent it. I get money. They text. I collect."

Adaobi arrived, heels steady, robe fluttering behind her.

She looked the man dead in the eyes. "You're not the one pulling the strings."

He nodded nervously. "I swear... I never see them. Only receive money. Account transfer.

They don't talk, only send message."

Tamuno turned to her. "They're careful. But this was a mistake."

Adaobi stared at the envelope in his hand.

The trap had closed.

But the true blackmailer... was still out there.

Watching.

Planning.

Waiting.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE FACE IN THE CROWD

The man in the cleaner's uniform sat in the interrogation room of the courthouse basement, sweating through his faded collar. His name was Lucky. Mid-30s. Hired just six months ago.

No criminal record. No obvious connections.

But Tamuno wasn't interested in his history.

He wanted the name behind the texts.

"Tell us again," Adaobi said, calm but sharp. "Where do the messages come from?"

"I swear, ma," Lucky replied, voice shaking. "It's always a new number. They never speak.

Just text instructions and money, sometimes cash, sometimes account deposit."

Tamuno dropped a printout on the table. "We traced the last account used to send you money. It was opened with a fake ID, but the face... it was familiar."

He turned the sheet around.

A photo.

Adaobi stepped forward slowly. Her breath caught.

Emeka Nwokedi.

Older now, bearded, wearing glasses. But it was him.

Uchenna's cousin.

The one who disappeared after the incident in 2010. The one the old police file warned about. The one she should've gone looking for a long time ago.

Tamuno leaned in. "We found a grainy image of him at the judicial dinner. He was there. In the crowd. Disguised. Watching."

Lucky's eyes widened. "That's him... That's the guy. He's the one who pays me!"

Adaobi clenched her fists. "Where is he now?"

Tamuno straightened. "He booked a flight to Abuja last night. But... he didn't board. We

believe he's still in Enugu. Hiding. Watching us react.”

Adaobi nodded. Her voice dropped low.

“Then we turn the chase around.”

They had a name. A face. A connection. And now, they had a trail.

For years, Emeka had waited in the shadows, building his plan.

Now, Adaobi was stepping into the light.

And she wasn't afraid anymore.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE VERDICT

The press conference was held at the Enugu State High Court press hall, small, whitewalled, and packed beyond capacity. Reporters filled every corner. Judges, legal assistants,

and court workers stood in stunned silence.

The cameras clicked before Adaobi even stepped up to the podium.

She wore no makeup. No wig. No robe.

Just a plain black dress. The symbol of her story. Her guilt. Her truth.

Tamuno stood to the side, expression unreadable.

Adaobi took a slow breath and began.

“Fifteen years ago, in 2010, I made a mistake. A man named Uchenna Okoye died during an altercation. It was not premeditated, but it was covered up. I was involved. And I have lived with the weight of that truth ever since.”

Gasps echoed through the room.

“I have served as a judge, sworn to uphold justice. And yet, I have carried a hidden shame.

In recent months, I was blackmailed. Monitored. Threatened. Forced to relive every detail of what I buried.”

“But today, I stop hiding.”

The room went still.

“I am not proud of what I did. But I will not allow anyone to weaponize my guilt to destroy others. I have submitted myself to the Judicial Council and will cooperate fully with any investigation.”

“Let the truth be the punishment. Let the truth be the freedom.”

She stepped back.

No tears. No dramatics. Just peace, and the deep silence of a burden finally dropped.

Reporters shouted questions. Cameras flashed wildly.

But Adaobi no longer flinched.

Outside, Emeka Nwokedi watched from the crowd, face half-hidden beneath a cap. The confession hadn't ruined her.

It had freed her.

And in doing so, she had destroyed the very power he held.

He slipped away quietly.

He knew it was over.

EPILOGUE

Six months later, peace had found her, softly, without announcement.

Judge Adaobi now lived in a modest bungalow on the outskirts of Nsukka, where the mornings were quiet and the evenings gentle. The noise of courtrooms and sirens had been replaced by birdsong and the hum of distant market chatter.

She had stepped away from the bench, not out of shame, but by choice. The robe she once wore with pride now hung untouched in her wardrobe, a reminder of battles fought and won not just in court, but within herself.

Each morning, she took long walks through the dusty village paths, greeting neighbors by name. Some recognized her; others only saw a kind woman with wise eyes and a soft voice. Adaobi had started teaching again, quietly mentoring a group of young law students at a nearby college. She saw in them what she once saw in herself: a hunger for justice and a fear of compromise.

And sometimes, in the stillness of late afternoon, she sat beneath the old udala tree in her yard, sipping palm wine and smiling, not because everything had turned out perfect, but because she had survived it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Black Robe, Blackmail was born from a deep curiosity about the power and fragility of justice. As someone who has always been fascinated by law and its human consequences, I wanted to tell a story that would ask: What happens when the person meant to uphold justice is the one being judged?

In crafting this novel, I drew inspiration from real societal issues, particularly the silent pressures faced by judges, the weight of public expectations, and how secrets can threaten even the most principled people.

I was creatively influenced by both international and Nigerian courtroom dramas. Movies like *The Judge*, *A Few Good Men*, and *The Lincoln Lawyer* gave me insight into how layered and intense legal narratives can be. But just as impactful were local films like *The Arbitration*, which showed how justice, ambition, and personal interest often intersect in a Nigerian context.

Though this story is fictional, the questions it raises are real: What is justice without truth? Who watches the watchman? And what happens when silence becomes complicity?

Thank you for reading. May this story linger in your thoughts, long after the last page.

Madu Kingsley Chidubem

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madu Kingsley Chidubem is a Nigerian writer from Alum Inyi, Oji River Local Government Area, Enugu State. He studied at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, where he developed a strong foundation in both Accounting and Education, two fields that shape the depth and direction of his writing.

Black Robe, Blackmail is his debut novel, a gripping story that blends mystery, truth, and African culture in a way that speaks to both young and adult readers.

When he's not writing, Kingsley enjoys teaching, deep conversations, and, on more relaxed days, a good argument and a glass of palm wine.

Follow him on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/share/1CCENehE3p/>

Contact: kingsleyvitalis8@gmail.com