

# The Dry Well

by  
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This is a work of fiction. While it draws on real people, real places, and historical echoes, some names, relationships, incidents, and details have been altered, condensed, or reshaped for narrative purposes.

# CONTENTS

Prologue
Chapter One — The Claim
Chapter Two — The Mine
Chapter Three — Fool's Gold
Chapter Four — The Finance Director
Chapter Five — Prosperity
Chapter Six — Due Diligence
Chapter Seven — The Families
Chapter Eight — The Survey Maps
Chapter Nine — The Visitor
Chapter Ten — The Offer
Chapter Eleven — The Shots
Chapter Twelve — The Leak
Chapter Thirteen — Antonio Reyes
Chapter Fourteen — The Assays
Chapter Fifteen — The Silence
Chapter Sixteen — The Guerrilla
Chapter Seventeen — Miguel
Chapter Eighteen — The Tunnel
Chapter Nineteen — The Transfer
Chapter Twenty — The Collapse
Chapter Twenty-One — Antonio's Truth
Chapter Twenty-Two — The Archive
Chapter Twenty-Three — The Dry Well
Chapter Twenty-Four — The Leaving
Epilogue

# Prologue

Eastern Bohol  
September 1945

The rain had stopped shortly before dawn leaving the hills above Jagna steaming beneath thick grey cloud while water continued dripping steadily from jungle leaves onto the canvas roofs stretched between the limestone outcrops.

Inside the tunnel the generators still operated.

Not for much longer.

Captain Nakamura stood beside the survey tables watching Filipino labourers nail shut another wooden crate marked with Japanese military inventory codes already smeared by damp and mud. Across the chamber geological maps remained spread beneath electric lamps powered by failing equipment brought into the hills months earlier when Tokyo still spoke publicly of victory.

Now nobody used that word anymore.

A civilian administrator wearing sweat-darkened white clothing entered from the outer passage accompanied by two Filipino men from Manila whose pressed shirts and polished shoes looked absurd beside exhausted soldiers and mud-covered engineers.

"The final transfer lists are ready," the administrator said in Japanese.

Nakamura nodded once without looking up from the maps.

Outside the tunnel distant artillery still rolled occasionally across the sea though everybody understood the war had already ended. American forces were returning. Japanese positions across the Philippines collapsed daily. Soon these hills would belong to somebody else.

The question was:  
to whome?

One of the Manila men stepped closer to the tables examining the marked survey sheets carefully beneath the lamps.

"These regions are confirmed?" he asked in English.

"Yes."

"Iron?"

"Yes."

"Rare deposits?"

Nakamura finally looked up.

"Our specialists are confident."

The man nodded slowly.

Behind him several more crates stood ready beside the tunnel wall carrying records, geological samples and transport ledgers accumulated across three years of occupation. Nearby another officer supervised the burning of documents considered unnecessary for transfer.

Smoke drifted heavily through the chamber.

One section of the wall map carried fresh markings added only days earlier.

Civilian removals completed.

Transfer stabilisation pending.

The second Manila visitor studied the notation silently before speaking.

"The local families?"

"Mostly resolved," the administrator replied.

"Mostly?"

A brief silence followed.

Then Nakamura folded one of the maps carefully and placed it inside a metal storage cylinder already marked for removal.

"History," he said , "rarely resolves itself completely."

Outside the tunnel warm rain began falling again across the hills above Jagna while somewhere far below in the darkness the sea moved endlessly against the coast.

## Chapter One — The Claim

The message came without context.

Not unusual in itself. Messages rarely arrived with the clarity people imagined they deserved. What made this one different was the name attached to it.

Mark.

I had not seen him in over thirty years.

For a moment I assumed it was a mistake, someone else, the same name, the kind of coincidence that happens often enough not to be remarkable. But the wording was too familiar, too direct, stripped of anything unnecessary.

"I'm coming out to see you..." "I've got something you'll want to see."

No explanation. No attempt to persuade.

That was Mark.

I read it again, then put the phone down and stepped out onto the veranda.

Morning had already settled into the day. Heat rising slowly from the wet ground after overnight rain. Somewhere nearby somebody was working, metal striking metal in a steady rhythm that carried further than it should have through the humid air. Beyond the trees the barangay road remained mostly quiet, though that never meant very much here. Movement happened without warning in Bohol. A motorbike appeared. A truck arrived. Cattle wandered where they pleased. Boundaries existed mostly in theory.

I stood there longer than necessary.

Thirty years.

People changed in that amount of time. Or disappeared into whatever version of themselves life eventually cornered them into becoming.

Mark had always resisted that.

Even when I first knew him he had been restless in a way that did not quite fit his age. Younger than me by a good margin but never comfortable remaining where convention expected him to stay. Curious, but not always careful. The kind of man who followed an idea further than was sensible simply because he needed to know where it ended.

We had lost contact without any real reason. Life tends to do that. Years pass unnoticed until reconnecting begins to feel strangely artificial.

Later, in this case, had taken three decades.

When he finally arrived it was without ceremony.

No call ahead.

No request for directions.

Just the sound of a vehicle outside the property and an unfamiliar engine cutting suddenly into silence.

I watched from the veranda as he stepped out.

Older obviously. That part was unavoidable. But still recognisably the same untidy hair. Lean. Alert. No longer too quick in his movements as though time had still not fully convinced him to slow down.

He looked up, saw me watching and smiled.

"Thought I'd find you here," he said.

"You didn't check first."

"No point. You're exactly where you said you'd be."

That was true.

We sat outside while Zan brought coffee without being asked, placing the cups between us with the quiet efficiency of somebody who understood when conversation mattered more than interruption. Mark watched him disappear back toward the kitchen before turning his attention to the rice fields beyond the house where several cattle and two carabao wandered slowly through standing water left by the rain.

"You've settled in properly," he said.

"I've survived," I replied.

He smiled at that.

For a while we spoke about nothing important. Travel. Heat. Flights. The new school being built beyond the road and the endless line of motorbikes now appearing there each morning almost no parking provision existing for any of them. The usual things people discuss while avoiding the real subject sitting patiently nearby waiting for its turn.

Mark eventually let the silence settle.

Then he said , "You ever heard of Yamashita's gold?"

I almost laughed.

Not because the story itself amused me but because I had lived in the Philippines long enough to understand that everybody had heard some version of it. Hidden tunnels. Japanese treasure. Gold buried before the surrender. Maps appearing and disappearing depending on who was drinking and who was paying.

"Yes," I said. "Too many times."

"And?"

"And I don't believe it."

That answer did not surprise him.

"Good," he said. "Neither do I."

That caught my attention more than the question itself.

Mark reached down beside his chair and lifted a weathered brown folder onto the table between us. He rested one hand on it briefly before opening it.

Not theatrically.

Deliberately.

Inside sat copied documents, photographs and several pages of handwritten notes.

I frowned.

"This doesn't look like treasure hunting."

"No," Mark replied . "Because it isn't."

He removed a folded document and slid it toward me.

The paper itself was old, or made carefully to appear old. Typed English text. Faded official markings. Several sections heavily blacked out by government censors.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"One of my less trustworthy acquaintances in London."

"That reassuring?"

"Not especially."

I adjusted my glasses and continued reading.

Most of the document made little immediate sense. References to occupation territories. Survey units. Administrative transfers. But one paragraph remained completely visible.

"Material obtained from German technical personnel indicates Imperial Japanese geological survey teams conducted extensive

mineral classification operations within occupied Philippine territories during the latter stages of the war.”

I looked up.

“Minerals?”

Mark nodded once.

“Not gold?”

“Not mainly.”

I read further.

“Particular attention appears connected to properties transferred following anti-insurgency operations against suspected resistance sympathisers.”

That sentence held my attention longer than the rest.

Transferred.

An oddly careful word.

Not seized.

Not confiscated.

Transferred.

As though ownership had changed politely while people simply vanished around it.

"This came from British records?" I asked.

Mark nodded again.

"Your father may have seen material connected to it after the war."

That surprised me enough to finally look away from the document.

"My father had nothing to do with the Philippines."

"Not directly."

"And yet here you are."

For the first time since arriving the restlessness disappeared from Mark completely.

"What if the Japanese never cared as much about hiding treasure as people later imagined?" he asked "What if they were identifying future wealth instead?"

I said nothing.

Outside, somewhere beyond the road, a dog barked continuously at nothing visible while another answered further away across the fields.

Mark leaned back slowly in his chair.

"The gold stories may simply have buried the real story underneath them."

"And what exactly is the real story?"

"I'm still working on that part."

I looked again at the document resting between us. Geological surveys. Property transfers. Anti-insurgency operations. The language itself felt cold and administrative in a way I did not entirely trust.

"This still doesn't explain why you came here."

"No," Mark agreed. "It doesn't."

He closed the folder carefully.

"Not yet."

At the far side of the terrace I noticed Zan moving slowly near the kitchen doorway carrying sacks of rice feed toward the storage shed. He was not looking directly at us but I had the distinct impression he had heard more of the conversation than either of us realised.

Mark followed my glance briefly before lowering his voice.

"The more I looked into this," he said, "the more I started finding references to families disappearing during Japanese operations in areas later connected to mineral surveys and land transfers."

"That could mean anything."

"Yes," he said . "Which is usually when things start becoming interesting."

The heat had settled fully by then. The day moving forward exactly as it always did. Children shouting somewhere beyond the road. Motorcycles passing intermittently toward the school. Dogs sleeping beneath the shade of the banana trees beside the gate.

Ordinary things.

But something had shifted.

Not in the world itself.

Only in the shape of the conversation.

I looked once more at the brown folder resting on the table between us and realised I was no longer dismissing any of it entirely.

"All right," I said eventually. "Then we start with something simple."

Mark leaned forward.

“Go on.”

“You tell me exactly what you think you’ve found.”

He smiled faintly.

“That,” he said, “is where the trouble begins.”

## Chapter Two — The Mine

Zan asked for two days off during the second week of May for the Can-ipol and Naatang fiesta in Jagna. Peter agreed immediately, Zan was to be the driver of the van the family had hired in Talibon. In seven years living in Bohol Peter had learned fiestas were not really optional occasions. Families travelled impossible distances to attend them, money appeared from nowhere for roasted pigs and karaoke systems, and entire barangays seemed capable of functioning without sleep for several consecutive nights.

Before leaving, Zan spent most of the morning helping Peter repair damage along the edge of the rice field where recent rain had collapsed part of the drainage ditch beside the bunk house they had built three years earlier for students attending the new school nearby. Peter still considered the accommodation primitive despite Zan insisting repeatedly it was perfectly acceptable by local standards.

By late afternoon Zan disappeared on his motorbike carrying a backpack, a plastic bag of clothes and two fighting cocks balanced impossibly between his knees.

The following Monday he returned looking exhausted.

Peter found him behind the house washing mud from the motorbike with a bucket and old rag while several thin dogs waited hopefully nearby for scraps from the kitchen.

"Good fiesta?" Peter asked.

Zan laughed tiredly. "Too much karaoke and beer. No sleep."

Peter nodded sympathetically.

That sounded accurate.

For several minutes neither spoke while rain clouds gathered slowly inland beyond the coconut trees. Then Zan glanced toward the road as though checking nobody stood nearby.

"Something happened near my grandfather's land."

Peter looked up from the broken water pump he had been examining.

"What sort of something?"

"They found a mine."

Peter smiled. "Gold?"

"That's what everybody says now."

Zan abandoned the motorbike and sat down on the low concrete wall beside the washing area.

"My grandmother remembers the land since she was a child. Nobody farmed there. Nobody lived there. Even before she married my grandfather people avoided it."

"Why?"

Zan shrugged. "Japanese time. That's all anybody says."

Peter waited.

"In July some men arrived from Cebu with labourers. They started clearing jungle beside the rock formation near the old riverbed. At first people thought they were looking for road stone or gravel, but then workers found an opening cut into a rock outcrop behind vines and trees."

"A tunnel?"

"A mine entrance. Very old."

Peter sat back slowly.

"How old?"

"They think before the war. Maybe American period. Maybe earlier, Spain."

"And untouched all this time?"

Zan nodded.

"After the Japanese left nobody used it again."

Peter noticed the wording immediately.

Not after the war.

After the Japanese left.

"What happened there?" he asked.

Zan scratched mud from his boot before answering.

"Stories only. Guerrillas hiding there. Japanese executions. Families disappearing. Depends who you ask."

"And the owners?"

"That's the strange part."

Rain began tapping softly against the galvanized roof nearby.

"My grandmother says one family lived there before the occupation. Then suddenly after the war the land belonged to people from Manila nobody had ever seen before."

Peter said nothing.

The same grey cow from the neighbouring property wandered slowly across the edge of the rice field behind them as though all land belonged equally to everybody.

"No papers?" Peter asked eventually.

Zan laughed softly.

"Maybe somewhere."

"And now?"

"Now there are fences. Guards. Workers sleeping there at night."

"That happened quickly."

"Yes."

Peter looked toward the darkening road where motorcycles already moved through gathering rain with headlights glowing weakly against the wet air.

"What did they actually find?"

Zan lowered his voice despite nobody being close enough to hear.

"One worker broke rock inside the tunnel and found yellow metal running through the stone, he said it was gold. Somebody posted pictures online." He smiled faintly. "After that everybody became crazy."

"Yamashita gold."

"Yes."

Peter almost laughed.

Even after decades the old stories still survived. Hidden treasure. Japanese gold. Lost tunnels. Men digging holes across islands searching for fortune.

But something about Zan's expression stopped him dismissing it completely.

"You believe it?"

Zan thought for several seconds before answering.

"I think somebody important believes something."

## Chapter Three — Fool's Gold

The first samples left Jagna three days later in the back of an ageing white pickup truck driven by two men nobody local recognised. By then the mine entrance had already become something between a tourist attraction and a religious event.

Motorbikes lined both sides of the narrow barangay road while food stalls appeared almost overnight beneath blue tarpaulins beside the entrance track.

Vendors sold soft drinks, cigarettes and grilled pork to visitors arriving from nearby towns hoping to glimpse what social media had already declared was proof Yamashita treasure existed after all.

Most returned disappointed. The entrance itself revealed almost nothing. A narrow cut through dark volcanic rock disappearing into shadow behind temporary fencing and two badly constructed guard huts made from bamboo and galvanized sheet metal.

The guards themselves looked nervous rather than dangerous. Young men from Cebu mostly. Poorly paid and increasingly overwhelmed by the number of people arriving each day.

Zan showed Peter the videos one evening while heavy rain hammered against the roof of the house in La Victoria. Online, everybody already had theories. Japanese gold. Hidden wartime tunnels. Secret Imperial storage sites. American intelligence cover-ups. One man on Facebook claimed the tunnel connected beneath the sea toward Camiguin while another insisted the Japanese had hidden weapons there before surrendering in 1945.

Peter watched silently while Zan scrolled through the endless rumours on his phone.

"And the samples?" Peter asked eventually.

"Sent to Cebu assay office."

"And?"

"Not gold."

Peter smiled faintly. "I thought probably not."

Zan nodded. "Mineral pyrite."

"Fool's gold."

"Yes."

That should have ended the matter. Instead the situation became worse.

Because buried lower inside the assay report beneath the pyrite classification sat another finding almost nobody initially understood. Trace scandium content detected within the mineral structure.

The report itself described scandium as a rare earth element used in specialist industrial alloys, aerospace manufacturing and advanced technology systems. One article somebody later shared online claimed pure scandium metal could be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars per kilo under certain market conditions.

That was enough.

Within hours social media transformed completely. Nobody local understood rare earth elements. Nobody cared about industrial alloys or aerospace applications. But everybody understood value. By the following afternoon videos across

Bohol already described scandium as a special form of Japanese wartime gold supposedly hidden during the occupation. The rumours spread faster than facts ever could.

Peter sat on the terrace the following morning reading translations on his tablet while motorcycles screamed constantly along the road toward the new school beyond the rice fields.

Beside the gate several dogs slept beneath Nissan's tricycle despite the growing heat. One scratched constantly at patches of bare skin along its neck while another puppy searched the roadside drains for scraps washed there during the night rain.

"Listen to this," Peter said.

Alma glanced up from the kitchen doorway where she was preparing vegetables for lunch.

"What now?"

"According to this man online the Japanese invented artificial gold in underground laboratories beneath Bohol."

Alma laughed softly. "People believe anything."

"Yes," Peter replied. "Usually because they want to."

By the end of the week the company claiming ownership of the Jagna property formally applied for excavation permits and mineral exploration rights through regional authorities. That was when the atmosphere changed completely.

Treasure stories were entertaining. Foreign mining companies were not.

The details spread quickly through nearby barangays. The company itself appeared Filipino owned but corporate records revealed American shareholders connected through holding groups registered in Manila and Singapore.

Few locals understood the paperwork but they understood enough. Foreigners were coming. Heavy equipment would follow. Roads would change. Land would change. And perhaps most dangerously of all, outsiders suddenly seemed interested in territory local families considered historically theirs regardless of whatever documents existed in Manila.

Public anger arrived almost overnight. Hand-painted protest signs appeared beside the Jagna road.

Protect Our Land. No Foreign Mining. Bohol Is Not For Sale. Videos appeared online accusing politicians of corruption and secretly selling provincial land rights to outsiders.

Older residents began speaking publicly about Japanese occupation stories many families had avoided discussing openly for decades.

According to Zan's grandmother the entire district had become tense. Meetings continued late into the night. Motorcycles arrived at strange hours. Unknown men visited barangay officials. And at the mine entrance itself the fencing grew higher each day.

## Chapter Four — The Finance Director

The first serious problem arrived from Manila disguised as routine banking procedure.

Jagna Minerals had appointed Keith Monk as finance director barely two weeks earlier after several foreign investors insisted the company required “international financial experience” before larger development money could be raised abroad.

At first nobody questioned the decision.

Monk appeared exactly what investors expected: confident, experienced and aggressively persuasive. An English-speaking American in his late sixties with mining finance connections stretching through Singapore, Vancouver and Denver.

He spoke constantly about strategic minerals, future battery markets and rare earth dependency while local officials nodded approvingly despite understanding only half of what he said.

But banks understood perfectly.

Especially risk departments.

The warning reached Secretary Valdez through contacts inside a Manila commercial bank conducting due diligence ahead of preliminary financing discussions linked to the Jagna operation.

Across the Secretary's desk lay a background report on Keith Monk.

Federal fraud convictions.

Ponzi operations.

Manipulated mineral valuations.

False investment structures.

Valdez removed his glasses slowly.

Until that moment he had viewed Monk simply as another useful foreign opportunist, the kind of man corporations employed whenever they needed aggressive financing structures and plausible deniability.

Now he understood the danger properly.

This was not a minor embarrassment.

This was contamination.

If the opposition, the press or worse, the President himself discovered Valdez had supported a strategic mining operation fronted financially by a convicted investment fraudster, the political consequences could become catastrophic very quickly.

Outside his office window Manila traffic crawled beneath brutal afternoon heat while television screens inside nearby buildings

already discussed the growing controversy surrounding Jagna Minerals and foreign ownership.

Valdez read further.

Several prison terms.

Multiple regulatory investigations.

Asset concealment allegations.

The Secretary closed the folder carefully.

"Who approved this idiot?" he asked.

Nobody answered immediately.

Because everybody inside the room already understood the truth.

Money had begun arriving too quickly.

Foreign investors wanted speed. Provincial officials wanted contracts. Manila families wanted extraction rights secured before public resistance strengthened further.

And in such environments men like Keith Monk always appeared eventually.

Three days later Jagna Minerals announced "executive restructuring associated with revised international financing strategy."

Keith Monk disappeared completely from all company materials within forty-eight hours.

No explanation.

No press questions accepted.

No farewell statement.

By the following week another foreign adviser had taken his place.

Richard Brooks.

British-born, Eton-educated and highly connected within international mining finance circles.

No criminal record. No prison history. No visible scandal.

Brooks arrived in Jagna wearing pale linen shirts already ruined by Bohol heat within hours while local officials escorted him around the excavation site beneath umbrellas and camera crews carefully invited to witness the visit.

Where Monk had been loud and theatrical, Brooks remained measured.

Controlled.

He spoke less about treasure and more about infrastructure.

Employment.

Regional development.

Long-term sustainability.

Investors liked him immediately.

So did Valdez.

"The new man understands discretion," the Secretary remarked after reviewing Brooks' background file inside Manila several nights later.

Miguel Saavedra smiled faintly across the table.

"Yes," he replied.

"That is exactly why he was chosen."

Far south in La Victoria, Peter knew none of this yet.

He only noticed that Zan returned from Jagna increasingly irritated by the sudden arrival of expensive vehicles, foreign consultants and provincial officials behaving as though the hills already belonged entirely to them.

"Too many important people now," Zan muttered one evening while rain hammered against the roof hard enough to shake dust from the rafters.

Peter looked up from the newspaper.

"That usually means money."

Zan nodded darkly toward the south.

"Yes," he said.

"And trouble."

## Chapter Five — Prosperity

The first thing Jagna Minerals understood properly was optimism.

Not geology.

Not engineering.

Not even politics.

People.

Within a month of receiving approval for subsurface exploratory mining the company had shifted its public image completely. Gone were the security fences, guarded compounds and secrecy that had dominated the early weeks after the discovery. In their place came banners, meetings and promises.

Large signs appeared beside the Jagna road showing smiling workers in hard hats standing against digitally enhanced mountains and impossibly blue skies.

Building Prosperity Together.

Opportunities For The Future.

Jagna Minerals — Investing In Jagna.

Nobody missed the message.

The company began sponsoring barangay basketball tournaments first. Then school supplies. Then scholarships for selected students pursuing engineering and geology courses in Cebu.

A medical outreach programme arrived one weekend with doctors, free medicines and photographers carefully documenting every handshake and smiling child.

According to Zan half the district now wore Jagna Minerals T-shirts.

Peter listened quietly while Zan described the changes over evening coffee on the terrace.

"They repaired the basketball court near the market," Zan said. "And promised to help improve the road toward the mine."

"Which probably helps their trucks more than anybody else," Peter replied.

"Yes," Zan admitted. "But people still happy."

And they were.

That was the uncomfortable truth.

Money had started arriving long before mining itself properly began. Men who had previously relied on seasonal labour or fishing now worked security, fencing, road clearing or transport. Local families rented spare rooms to surveyors and engineers arriving from Cebu and Manila.

New eating places appeared beside the road almost weekly, constructed quickly from bamboo, plywood and galvanized sheet metal beneath strings of coloured lights powered by illegal electrical connections.

By evening the district no longer felt entirely provincial.

Beer stalls remained open late.

Videoke bars expanded and so did the local bar girls hoping to find a man with money who would pay the bar fine for them.

Somebody opened a motorcycle repair shop beside the old church road and another family converted the front of their house into a small grocery store selling cigarettes, alcohol and phone credits to workers passing toward the compound.

Even the tricycle drivers had started earning properly.

Peter saw the difference himself during a visit to Jagna with Zan one humid Saturday morning. The roads were busier than he remembered. Trucks moved steadily through town carrying pipes, generators and construction materials while small groups of labourers gathered outside roadside eateries wearing company identification cards around their necks.

The mine itself remained mostly hidden behind fencing and temporary structures but the atmosphere around it had changed completely.

Expectation.

That was the word Peter kept returning to.

Expectation hung over the district like weather waiting to break.

"You see?" Zan said while manoeuvring the tricycle carefully around a parked delivery truck. "People think this will change everything."

"Maybe it will."

"Yes. Good change."

Peter did not answer immediately.

Along the roadside children sold bottled water and cigarettes to workers while several women cooked pork over charcoal grills beneath blue tarpaulins. Beyond them fresh concrete posts marked where somebody intended building a boarding house.

Further ahead another property displayed a hand-painted sign:

Rooms Available For Mining Staff.

Everything was already reorganising itself around the project.

The strange thing was that much of the optimism felt genuine.

Nobody in Jagna talked about scandium anymore because most people still barely understood what it actually was. They talked instead about jobs. New businesses. Better roads. More visitors. More money. The possibility that younger people might no longer need to leave Bohol to find work elsewhere.

For many families that mattered more than abstract environmental arguments.

Even some of the earlier protests had started fading.

Not entirely.

But enough.

A few banners still remained tied beside the roadside warning against foreign mining interests and environmental destruction, yet they now stood awkwardly between new food stalls and freshly painted stores already profiting from the arrival of workers.

Resistance became harder once neighbours started earning money.

That afternoon Peter and Zan stopped beside the public market where a crowd had gathered around a temporary stage built beneath a large Jagna Minerals banner.

Music played through distorted speakers while company representatives handed out rice, canned food and envelopes containing scholarship forms.

At the centre of it all stood a smiling woman in a white blouse introducing local officials one by one to applause from the crowd.

"Who's that?" Peter asked.

"Community relations," Zan replied. "From Manila."

Peter watched carefully.

She was good.

Not overly polished. Not arrogant. Speaking enough Visayan to sound respectful while allowing local politicians to feel important beside her. Every sentence carefully constructed around partnership, opportunity and development.

Nobody mentioned spoil heaps.

Nobody mentioned water contamination.

Nobody mentioned who originally owned the land before the war.

A local councillor took the microphone next. He spoke enthusiastically about progress, jobs and economic transformation before ending with a line that produced loud applause from much of the audience.

"For too long," he declared, "our young people have been forced to leave Bohol to find opportunity elsewhere. Now opportunity comes here."

Peter glanced around the crowd.

People wanted to believe him.

That was obvious.

And perhaps some of them were right to.

On the journey back toward La Victoria the rain finally arrived, hammering suddenly against the tricycle roof while motorcycles scattered along the roadside searching for shelter beneath stores and waiting sheds.

Zan slowed carefully near the flooded rice fields.

"You still think mining bad?" he asked.

Peter watched muddy water rushing through the roadside drainage channels before answering.

"I think," he said slowly, "that things which promise prosperity usually expect something in return."

## Chapter Six — Due Diligence

The full multi-stage approval process overseen by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Mines and Geosciences Bureau was granted quietly during the final week of September.

No official celebration followed. No politicians standing beside excavators wearing hard hats for photographers.

Jagna Minerals Inc. understood the protests around the district had not disappeared completely and Secretary Valdez had already advised the company to avoid unnecessary publicity until financing and environmental approvals became more secure.

But privately the mood inside the company changed immediately.

Because permission meant movement.

Movement meant investment.

And investment meant money on a scale far beyond anything the original Manila shareholders could provide themselves.

The first exploratory drilling contracts alone would cost millions.

Road expansion.

Transport infrastructure.

Processing facilities.

Equipment imports.

Security.

Environmental compliance reports nobody expected anybody to read properly.

The mine at Jagna had already become too large for local businessmen pretending to be provincial entrepreneurs. International capital was now required and international capital demanded something most of the original shareholders lacked entirely.

Credibility.

That was how Keith Monk entered the story.

According to the official company announcement he possessed extensive experience in mineral finance and international investment structuring.

Photographs released online showed him smiling confidently beside Jagna Minerals executives while wearing an embroidered company shirt and holding a hard hat beneath one arm as though he had spent his entire life inside mines.

Peter studied the article on his tablet while rain drifted steadily across the rice fields beyond the house.

"He looks like an actor pretending to be an engineer," he said.

Mark glanced briefly at the screen.

"That's because he's a salesman."

"Difference?"

"Good salesmen become rich."

Within days Monk began arranging meetings with banks in Manila, Singapore and Hong Kong while Jagna Minerals released increasingly ambitious projections regarding future extraction capacity and long-term rare earth potential within the district.

The market responded immediately.

Small investors started buying shares in associated holding companies while speculative articles online described Jagna as a possible breakthrough rare earth discovery for the Philippines.

Some reports became increasingly absurd. One foreign blogger claimed the deposit might eventually rival sections of Inner Mongolia.

Nobody sensible believed that.

Unfortunately sensible people rarely controlled speculation.

By October the excitement surrounding Jagna had spread far beyond Bohol.

Then the banks completed due diligence.

The report reached Secretary Valdez before sunrise.

By midday Keith Monk had effectively ceased existing.

Federal fraud convictions.

Ponzi operations.

Manipulated mineral investment schemes.

False financial structures.

Four years served in the United States federal prison system following multiple prosecutions involving speculative mining ventures and fabricated commodity forecasts.

Valdez read the summary twice before removing his glasses slowly and staring across Manila Bay through the rain-streaked windows of his office.

Until that moment he had considered Monk merely another aggressive foreign operator useful for attracting speculative investment and insulating more important individuals from direct exposure.

Now he saw something else entirely.

A liability.

Not because Monk had committed fraud in the past. Men like Monk existed in every major financial market on earth and usually remained useful to somebody.

The real problem was visibility. If journalists or opposition politicians connected Valdez directly to a mining operation involving a convicted American fraudster, every decision surrounding Jagna Minerals would immediately become politically toxic.

By late afternoon Monk officially resigned for “personal health reasons.”

Nobody in Manila believed it.

The photographs disappeared from the company website before evening.

Several planned financing meetings were cancelled quietly while Jagna Minerals issued carefully worded statements insisting the project itself remained entirely unaffected.

Which, technically, was true.

The minerals still existed.

The assays still existed.

The mine itself remained real.

Only the confidence surrounding it had shifted.

For the first time since the discovery at Jagna, people inside Manila financial circles started asking uncomfortable questions.

Who exactly owned Jagna Minerals?

How accurate were the original assay reports?

Why had provincial land connected to wartime Japanese activity suddenly become strategically important?

And perhaps most dangerously of all, who stood to profit if the value of the mine continued rising?

Miguel Saavedra paid attention immediately.

He had initially treated Jagna Minerals as another ambitious provincial extraction project unlikely to survive long-term political realities. But the combination of rare earth estimates, foreign investor interest and now financial instability altered the situation considerably.

Because instability created opportunity.

Especially for people experienced in moving between politics, banking and corporate ownership structures.

Late one evening Miguel sat alone inside his Makati office reading reports connected to Jagna while traffic lights moved silently beneath the windows far below.

Across the desk rested another name.

Antonio Reyes.

Miguel stared at it for several seconds.

Old history.

Old resentment.

Old complications best left buried.

Yet recently Antonio had started appearing unexpectedly around several holding groups connected indirectly to transport and logistics contracts near Jagna.

Nothing substantial enough to attract attention publicly, but enough for Miguel to notice.

Which meant Antonio had noticed the mine as well.

Miguel leaned back slowly in his chair.

That unsettled him more than Keith Monk ever had.

Because criminals like Monk always moved predictably. Greed made them simple eventually.

Antonio Reyes was something different entirely.

Patient.

Careful.

And still carrying the memory of Isabel choosing Miguel over him all those years earlier.

Outside the office the Manila rain had ceased and the evening sun was low in the sky while somewhere far south in Bohol floodlights now burned throughout the night above the old Japanese mine outside Jagna.

## Chapter Seven — The Families

By November the roads around Jagna no longer belonged entirely to the locals.

That was the first thing Peter noticed.

Not the trucks.

Not the drilling noise.

Not even the security checkpoints appearing beside the mine road.

It was the number of unfamiliar vehicles moving through the district beneath the brutal late morning sun. Dark SUVs with Manila plates. Rental vans from Cebu. Pick-up trucks carrying survey equipment and men wearing company identification cards clipped neatly to pressed shirts already soaked dark beneath the heat.

The entire area felt watched now.

Dust replaced mud around the excavation site as weeks without serious rain hardened the ground into pale cracked earth. Every passing truck lifted clouds that drifted slowly across nearby houses and roadside food stalls before settling over everything in a fine grey layer.

Even the trees near the mine looked tired.

Peter stood outside one of the temporary stores drinking warm beer while Zan spoke quietly with two men from Jagna he knew through his grandfather's family.

Both had recently found work driving equipment and fuel between the mine compound and Tagbilaran.

"Good money?" Peter asked after they left.

Zan nodded immediately. "Very good compared to before."

"And they trust the company?"

"They trust salary."

Peter smiled faintly.

Fair answer.

Across the road several children played basketball beside a newly painted waiting shed carrying a large Jagna Minerals logo. Nearby another building was under construction which Zan explained would become accommodation for visiting engineers from Manila and Australia.

Everything was growing outward from the mine.

Not naturally.

Commercially.

"What happened to the protests?" Peter asked.

"Still there." Zan shrugged. "But people quieter now."

"Because they're earning."

"Yes."

They continued walking toward the old church road where market stalls now sold company hats, cigarettes and cheap food beneath faded umbrellas struggling against the sun.

Several local women sat beneath a bamboo shelter discussing room rentals for incoming workers while motorcycles moved constantly along the roadside carrying labourers toward the excavation site.

Near the market entrance Peter noticed an elderly woman staring silently toward one of the company trucks.

Zan followed his gaze.

"She's related to the old family."

"What old family?"

"The people who owned land there before the war."

Peter stopped walking.

"What happened to them?"

Zan lowered his voice automatically despite nobody standing especially close.

"Depends who tells the story."

Peter waited.

"My grandmother says the Japanese accused them of helping guerrillas. Some disappeared. Some taken away. Others escaped into the hills."

"And after the war?"

"The land belonged to somebody else."

"Legally?"

Zan laughed softly.

"This is the Philippines."

Peter glanced again toward the old woman beneath the shelter.

She continued watching the mine vehicles without expression.

"How much do people actually know?"

"About the war?" Zan shrugged again. "Old people remember things. Younger people mostly care about jobs."

That answer stayed with Peter throughout the journey back toward La Victoria.

Because he realised it explained almost everything.

History mattered differently depending on age.

The older generation remembered fear, disappearances and occupation stories told quietly at night when children supposedly slept. Younger people saw roads, salaries, motorcycles and possible futures.

Neither side was entirely wrong.

Late that evening Mark arrived unexpectedly carrying another thin folder beneath one arm.

"You look cheerful," Peter said.

"I found something useful."

"Which usually means trouble."

Mark sat heavily at the terrace table while the electric fan pushed warm air uselessly around the room.

Outside the heat still lingered even after dark while somewhere across the fields karaoke continued with painful determination despite the singer possessing almost no recognisable talent.

Mark opened the folder.

"Corporate records," he said. "Or fragments of them."

Peter leaned forward.

"Jagna Minerals?"

"No. The ownership groups behind them."

That interested him immediately.

Mark removed several copied documents covered in names, holding structures and handwritten annotations.

"The Manila shareholders connected to Jagna Minerals aren't random investors," he said. "Several families appear repeatedly through different companies connected to mining, shipping, property and infrastructure dating back decades."

"Old money."

"Yes."

Mark tapped one particular surname.

Saavedra.

Peter noticed another name further down the page.

Reyes.

"That can't be coincidence."

"No," Mark agreed. "I don't think it is."

Outside the house a motorcycle passed slowly along the barangay road before disappearing into darkness toward the school beyond the rice fields.

Peter looked again at the paperwork spread across the table.

"These families were already connected before Jagna."

"Yes."

"And now they're circling the same land."

Mark nodded once.

"The interesting part is when some of the ownership records begin."

Peter looked up.

"How far back?"

Mark slid one final photocopy across the table.

Land transfer registration.

Several names had been blacked out but enough remained visible to reveal a Manila legal office connected to one of the same family groups now positioned behind Jagna Minerals.

Peter stared at the document for several silent seconds.

Transferred.

Again that same careful word.

Never seized.

Never stolen.

Always transferred.

As though history itself had been processed through paperwork until nobody remained responsible for anything anymore.

"You think the Japanese identified the land first," Peter said slowly, "then after the war ownership quietly moved into Manila hands."

"I think," Mark replied carefully, "that certain people became very wealthy from things other people stopped talking about."

The electric fan continued moving hot air around the room while somewhere beyond the dark fields dogs barked endlessly at shadows neither man could see

## Chapter Eight — The Survey Maps

The maps arrived three days later inside a cardboard tube wrapped in brown packing tape and addressed incorrectly to Peter Anthony Rawlings instead of Rawlins.

Zan found it leaning beside the gate shortly after sunrise while two stray dogs slept beneath the bougainvillea and the first motorcycles of the morning already screamed toward the school beyond the rice fields. "There's no return address," Zan said. Peter took the tube carefully. "No courier?" "Just left beside the road."

The cardboard itself looked old despite the modern tape around it. One end had clearly been sealed repeatedly over the years using different materials, cloth tape beneath newer plastic, as though the contents had passed through several owners before finally arriving here.

Mark studied it from across the terrace. "You expecting anything?" "No." "Then maybe don't open it immediately." Peter looked at him. "That's encouraging."

By nine in the morning the heat had already become oppressive. The galvanized roofs across the barangay glared white beneath the sun while the flooded sections of rice field beyond the house reflected light painfully back into the air.

Even the dogs had disappeared into shade beneath Nissan's tricycle where they lay motionless except for occasional twitching ears.

Peter finally opened the tube on the dining table while Alma prepared food nearby and Leticia sat on the floor drawing shapes on old cardboard boxes with coloured pencils.

Inside lay three folded survey sheets. Not copies. Originals. The paper itself had yellowed with age and carried the dry brittle smell of old records left untouched too long.

Japanese characters covered large sections while coloured markings crossed topographical outlines of coastline, hills and river systems Peter recognised immediately from eastern Bohol.

Jagna.

Mark leaned forward slowly. "Careful."

Peter unfolded the first sheet completely across the table. Grid references. Elevation markings. Tunnel indicators. But it was the coloured circles that drew attention first.

Red, blue and black markings appeared repeatedly beside handwritten annotations translated later in pencil by somebody else decades afterward: graphite, iron, heavy rare deposits, priority assessment.

One section near the upper corner had been underlined heavily, Area cleared following regional pacification measures.

Peter felt the same unease return immediately. Always the same language. Cold. Administrative. As though people disappeared merely to simplify paperwork.

"Where the hell did these come from?" he asked.

Mark already looked uncomfortable. "I think somebody wants us to understand this was larger than one mine."

Peter spread the remaining maps across the table and the pattern became obvious quickly. Bohol. Mindanao. Sections of Leyte.

Areas marked not simply for extraction potential but for strategic classification. Transport routes had been noted carefully beside river access, ports and railway connections existing before the war.

"This wasn't treasure," Peter said.

"No."

"This was inventory."

Mark nodded once. "Yes."

For several moments neither man spoke. The ceiling fan pushed hot air slowly around the room while outside somebody nearby hammered metal beneath the brutal morning sun.

Ordinary provincial sounds continuing completely unaware that half-forgotten wartime records now covered the table beside Leticia's crayons and Alma's cooking pots.

Then Peter noticed another detail. Small handwritten references had been added later in English beside several marked regions: transferred 1947, transferred 1948, transferred through intermediary office Manila.

He stared at one annotation for several seconds before speaking. "These aren't Japanese notes."

"No," Mark replied. "British."

Peter looked up sharply. "T-Force?"

"Possibly."

"And my father?"

Mark hesitated. "Maybe connected indirectly. Maybe not. But somebody after the war was comparing Japanese survey records against postwar ownership changes."

Alma approached the table wiping her hands against a kitchen towel. "What is all this?"

"Old mining surveys."

She glanced over the documents briefly. "Japanese?"

"Yes."

She pointed casually toward one section near Jagna. "My grandfather used to say the Japanese looked for something in the hills there."

Peter looked up immediately. "What sort of something?"

Alma shrugged lightly. "Gold maybe. People always said gold."

Mark smiled faintly. "That was probably the intention."

"To hide the real reason?"

"Yes."

Outside the house a delivery truck roared painfully along the barangay road carrying concrete pipes toward the school construction area while dust drifted slowly behind it through the white heat.

Peter looked back down at the maps. For the first time the scale of it became visible. This had never been random wartime theft.

The Japanese had been cataloguing future wealth before defeat arrived, identifying mineral regions, recording transport infrastructure and observing local political structures.

Afterwards, somehow, land ownership around certain areas had moved into the hands of connected families and corporations positioned perfectly to benefit decades later once technology finally caught up with the value buried beneath the ground.

The room suddenly felt hotter. Smaller.

Mark tapped one particular notation near Jagna. "What does that say?"

Peter adjusted his glasses carefully and read the faded English handwriting aloud.

Existing tunnel retained. Civilian presence removed prior to transfer.

Nobody spoke for several seconds after that. Finally Alma looked toward Leticia sitting quietly nearby on the floor and then back at Peter. "That sounds bad," she said softly.

"Yes," Peter replied. "I think it probably was."

## Chapter Nine — The Visitor

The first foreign investors arrived in Jagna during the second week of November just as the weather shifted again and the heat settled heavily across eastern Bohol without rain to break it.

Dust now drifted constantly along the mine road as trucks moved in and out of the compound carrying spoil plus drilling equipment, fuel tanks and construction materials beneath a pale white sky that seemed to press downward upon the hills themselves.

Most locals never saw the visitors properly.

The vehicles collecting them from Panglao International airport used darkened windows and company security escorts while

accommodation had already been arranged at a resort south of Jagna overlooking the sea.

But word spread quickly anyway because foreigners always attracted attention in provincial towns and because Jagna Minerals had become impossible to ignore.

By now almost everybody knew somebody earning money from the project.

Drivers.

Security guards.

Welders.

Labourers.

Women cooking food for workers.

Families renting rooms.

Even the small roadside stores beside the highway had started expanding stock because mining crews bought cigarettes, beer, bottled water and phone credits in quantities nobody around Jagna had seen before.

The mine was no longer simply a mine.

It had become an economy.

Peter understood that immediately during another visit with Zan. The district already felt different from only two months earlier. More crowded. More temporary.

More restless somehow. New bamboo structures appeared beside the roads almost weekly while handwritten signs advertised accommodation, motorcycle repair, laundry services and cold beer beneath sheets of faded tarpaulin hanging against the brutal afternoon sun.

Outside one newly opened videoke bar several young men wearing Jagna Minerals identification cards sat drinking Red Horse beer before midday while two bar girls barely older than students themselves laughed loudly beneath a portable speaker blasting music toward the road.

"Business good here now," Zan said.

"For some people."

"Yes."

Peter noticed he no longer sounded entirely certain.

Near the market several company banners still hung above the road promising partnership, development and sustainable opportunity while beside them local politicians had begun placing their own campaign posters despite elections remaining months away.

Money was moving.

Which meant politics would follow naturally.

As they passed the municipal building Peter noticed two unfamiliar men stepping from an air-conditioned SUV parked beneath a mango tree.

One was Filipino, sharply dressed despite the heat. The other taller, American perhaps, wearing sunglasses and carrying himself with the quiet confidence of somebody accustomed to expensive rooms and important meetings.

Zan lowered his voice automatically. "Mining people."

"How do you know?"

"Nobody local dresses like that in this heat."

Peter almost smiled.

Fair observation.

Later that afternoon Mark arrived unexpectedly at the house in La Victoria looking more tired than usual. He carried no folder this time which somehow made Peter more uneasy immediately.

"You've been to Manila," Peter said.

Mark nodded once before sitting heavily near the terrace fan. "Miguel Saavedra is moving."

"In what way?"

"He's buying into several companies connected to Jagna logistics and mineral transport."

"Directly?"

"No. Through holding groups and intermediaries."

Peter leaned back slowly.

"So he believes the mine is genuine."

"Oh, the mine is genuine," Mark replied. "The question now is scale."

Outside the late afternoon sun burned low across the flooded rice fields beyond the house while children walked home from the new school in dusty uniforms beside endless rows of parked motorcycles crowding the roadside.

"What about Valdez?" Peter asked.

"More careful now. Monk frightened him."

"That quickly?"

"Yes."

Mark accepted coffee from Alma with a tired nod before continuing.

"The problem is that once foreign investors arrive everything changes. This stops being a provincial mining project and starts becoming geopolitical."

Peter frowned. "That sounds dramatic."

"It is dramatic. Rare earth minerals matter now. Batteries. Electronics. Defence systems. Governments pay attention to these things."

Peter looked back toward the fields where the sunlight now reflected gold against standing water between the rice banks.

"And Jagna?"

"Jagna sits in the middle of it."

For several moments only the fan moved. Hot air drifting slowly through the terrace while somewhere nearby somebody cut concrete using power tools that screamed painfully across the barangay.

Then Zan spoke quietly from beside the doorway.

"My grandmother says strangers came before."

Both men looked at him immediately.

"When?"

"Before the war ended. Japanese officers first. Later Filipino men from Manila." He hesitated. "She says they talked about land ownership before some families disappeared."

Peter felt the atmosphere change instantly.

"What families?"

"I don't know exactly. She was young." Zan shrugged uneasily. "But she says after the war nobody local understood how certain people suddenly owned large areas around Jagna."

Mark watched him carefully. "Has she told anybody else this?"

"No."

"Good," Mark said.

Zan frowned immediately. "Why?"

Because by then all three men understood something important simultaneously.

The mine itself no longer represented the real danger.

History did.

And history, once people started making money from it, became an extremely dangerous thing indeed.

## Chapter Ten — The Offer

By December the mine operated day and night.

Floodlights burned above the excavation site long after the rest of Jagna disappeared into darkness while heavy equipment moved constantly behind the fencing with an industrial rhythm that carried surprisingly far across the hills after midnight.

The locals had already stopped referring to the area as the old Japanese tunnel. Now everybody simply called it the project.

That alone told Peter how quickly places changed once money arrived.

Even the roads looked different. Fresh gravel covered sections previously left broken for years while new concrete drainage channels appeared beside stretches of highway nobody in government had shown the slightest interest in repairing before Jagna Minerals arrived.

Near the market somebody had erected a large illuminated sign announcing a future commercial complex complete with restaurants, accommodation and office space for “expanding regional business opportunities.”

The mine had not yet produced anything commercially significant.

Yet already people were spending future money.

Peter noticed another change as well.

Fear.

Not open fear.

Careful fear.

People lowered their voices now when discussing ownership around the mine.

Workers still joked loudly in bars and videoke places, but older residents had become noticeably cautious whenever wartime stories entered conversation.

Several times during visits to Jagna Peter watched elderly locals simply walk away once questions drifted toward prewar land ownership or Japanese occupation records.

It reminded him unpleasantly of stories he had once heard in Spain decades earlier during Franco's dictatorship.

Entire villages remembering things collectively while agreeing never to discuss them directly.

Some silences survived generations.

Late one afternoon Mark arrived carrying a folded newspaper beneath one arm and looking distinctly irritated.

"What now?" Peter asked.

"We've been noticed."

"That sounds unhealthy."

"It probably is."

The heat still lingered brutally despite sunset approaching. Across the flooded rice fields the new school stood almost silent for once while smoke drifted lazily upward from cooking fires scattered between houses along the barangay road.

Mark sat heavily at the terrace table. "A representative approached me in Cebu."

"Officially?"

"No. Which made it more interesting."

Peter waited.

"He knew my name. Knew I'd been asking questions. Knew I was staying here."

"That's reassuring."

"He also knew your father worked with postwar British intelligence analysis connected to occupied territories."

Peter stared at him carefully. "That information shouldn't exist publicly."

"No," Mark agreed. "It shouldn't."

Alma emerged from the kitchen carrying coffee before immediately sensing the atmosphere and retreating again without interruption.

"What did this representative want?" Peter asked.

Mark unfolded the newspaper slowly. Inside sat an envelope.

No company markings.

No names.

Just thick cream paper folded once.

Peter opened it carefully.

Inside rested a single business card.

ANTONIO REYES

Below it a Manila number handwritten in blue ink.

Nothing else.

"That's all?"

"No," Mark replied. "There was also a message."

Peter looked up.

"What sort of message?"

Mark leaned back while the fan pushed heavy evening air around the terrace.

"He said certain people would appreciate discretion regarding historical matters connected to Jagna. Especially speculative interpretations unsupported by formal documentation."

Peter almost smiled despite himself.

"That sounds expensive."

"Yes."

"How expensive?"

Mark looked toward the darkening fields before answering.

"Enough."

For several seconds neither man spoke.

Beyond the road a motorcycle screamed painfully through gears before vanishing toward the coast while somewhere farther away karaoke had already begun for the evening despite the singer needing lessons.

Finally Peter placed the card back inside the envelope.

"So Antonio Reyes wants us quiet."

"Not exactly."

"What then?"

"I think he wants to know how much we understand."

That made more sense.

Peter stood slowly and moved toward the edge of the terrace where the remaining heat still radiated upward from the concrete floor.

Insects moved endlessly through the gathering darkness while beyond the fields lightning flickered silently far out over the sea without thunder reaching land yet.

"You think Reyes manipulated the assays?" he asked.

"Possibly."

"For money?"

"For Miguel Saavedra maybe."

Peter turned back. "After all this time?"

"People like Reyes don't forget humiliation."

The remark stayed with Peter longer than expected because he suddenly realised the mine itself had begun dragging old histories upward alongside the minerals beneath Jagna. Wartime occupation. Land transfers. Family rivalries. Political loyalties.

Half-buried resentments surviving decades beneath respectable Manila lives.

Exactly like the tunnel itself.

"What worries me," Mark continued, "is that everybody now assumes this is about money."

"And it isn't?"

"Oh, it's about money certainly. But not only money."

Peter understood immediately.

Control.

Ownership.

Influence.

The right to shape what version of history eventually survived.

Zan appeared near the doorway carrying cold bottles of San Miguel beer and glasses before hesitating after noticing the mood.

"Problem?"

Mark smiled faintly. "Probably."

Zan handed over the bottles and sat down carefully.

"Grandmother says more strangers arrived in Jagna today."

"What kind of strangers?"

"Older men. Manila people." He paused briefly. "One carrying old maps."

Peter and Mark exchanged a glance instantly.

"Who saw them?" Mark asked.

"My uncle near the market."

"And where did they go?"

"Toward the mine."

Outside the first distant thunder finally rolled slowly across the dark hills beyond Jagna while warm wind moved suddenly through the trees around the house.

Peter looked again at Antonio Reyes' business card resting beside the empty coffee cups on the table.

Then toward Mark.

"What happens if we ignore him?"

Mark considered that for several seconds before answering.

"I suspect," he said carefully, "we stop being observers."

## Chapter Eleven — The Shots

The first reports appeared online just after midday.

Confused.

Fragmented.

Contradictory.

Peter noticed them accidentally while drinking coffee on the terrace as heat shimmered above the flooded rice fields beyond the house and somewhere nearby a radio played distorted Christmas songs already beginning weeks too early.

At first the headlines made little sense.

Shots Fired Inside Senate Building.

Security Incident Involving Secretary Valdez.

Lockdown In Manila.

Peter frowned and refreshed the screen.

More reports appeared almost immediately. Grainy mobile phone footage. Shouting. People running through corridors. Armed security personnel pushing journalists backward while senators and staff disappeared behind sealed doors.

“What happened?” Alma asked from the kitchen doorway.

"I'm not sure yet."

By early afternoon every television network carried live coverage from outside the Senate complex.

Police vehicles blocked surrounding roads while commentators repeated the same limited information endlessly because nobody yet understood exactly what had taken place inside the building.

Mark arrived twenty minutes later already sweating heavily from the heat.

"You've seen?"

Peter nodded once toward the television.

"What the hell happened?"

Mark dropped into a chair beside the fan while Zan increased the volume.

According to the first witness statements Secretary Valdez had been leaving a closed committee meeting connected to foreign investment and mineral licensing when shouting erupted near one of the internal corridors.

Several witnesses claimed a man pushed through security barriers carrying documents while demanding to speak directly with Valdez.

Other witnesses insisted the man had a firearm already visible.

Nobody agreed on the sequence afterward.

One shot definitely struck a wall less than two metres from Valdez.

At least two more followed almost immediately.

Security officers returned fire.

Panic spread through the building within seconds.

The entire confrontation lasted less than half a minute.

Yet by evening three different versions already existed online.

Attempted assassination.

Political provocation.

Security overreaction.

Depending which channel people watched.

Peter stared silently at the television while footage replayed repeatedly showing senators being hurried through corridors beneath armed escort while journalists shouted questions nobody answered.

Then the first confirmed detail emerged.

One man dead.

Security services identified him as Daniel Reyes.

Mark sat forward immediately.

"Reyes?"

Peter looked at him sharply. "Related?"

Mark nodded slowly. "Antonio's nephew."

The television presenter continued speaking over fresh footage from outside the Senate building.

According to preliminary police statements Daniel Reyes possessed no official appointment inside the complex yet had somehow entered restricted areas shortly before the shooting occurred. Witnesses described him carrying a folder containing historical land documents connected to wartime property transfers in eastern Bohol.

Peter and Mark exchanged a glance instantly.

Jagna.

"What was he doing there?" Zan asked.

Nobody answered immediately.

The reports became stranger as the afternoon continued. Some witnesses claimed Daniel Reyes had been arguing with Valdez moments before the shooting began.

Others insisted he had been trying to hand documents directly to Senate investigators examining irregularities surrounding Jagna Minerals licensing approvals.

One security officer told journalists the dead man reached inside his jacket immediately before shots were fired.

Another claimed Daniel Reyes had already been wounded before security opened fire.

By six o'clock social media had become completely unmanageable.

Some posts declared Valdez survived an assassination attempt linked to anti-mining extremists.

Others claimed Daniel Reyes had been silenced before exposing corruption involving Jagna Minerals and wartime land ownership.

Conspiracy theories multiplied by the minute.

Hidden investors.

Foreign intelligence.

CIA involvement.

Chinese rare earth interests.

Japanese wartime archives.

Peter switched the television off eventually.

The silence afterward felt strangely heavy.

Outside the remaining heat of the day still radiated upward from the concrete while children shouted somewhere beyond the barangay road completely unaware that Manila now stood on the edge of political hysteria.

Mark spoke first.

"This changes everything."

"Yes," Peter replied. "I think it probably does."

Zan frowned. "You think Reyes tried to kill Valdez?"

"No," Mark said immediately.

"You certain?"

Mark nodded slowly. "Antonio Reyes is too careful for that."

Peter leaned back thoughtfully.

"Then why was his nephew carrying historical documents into the Senate?"

Nobody had a convincing answer.

Darkness settled gradually across the fields while the first motorcycles carrying students home from evening classes moved along the road with headlights glowing weakly through dust and heat.

Finally Zan spoke again.

"My grandmother knows that family name."

Both men looked at him.

"Reyes?"

"No. The dead man's mother." Zan hesitated. "Her family lived near Jagna before the war."

Peter felt something cold move through the room despite the heat.

"What family?"

Zan searched briefly for the name.

"Villanueva."

Mark sat perfectly still.

"That's impossible."

"You know it?" Peter asked.

Mark nodded slowly. "The Villanueva family appears in several of the transfer records."

Silence settled again.

Now the shooting looked different.

Not random.

Not political theatre.

Connected.

The dead man worked for Antonio Reyes while also descending from one of the original wartime landholding families displaced during Japanese occupation operations around Jagna.

Exactly the kind of connection somebody powerful might prefer remained buried permanently.

Outside the house thunder rolled faintly somewhere far out across the sea though no rain arrived yet.

Peter looked toward the dark fields beyond the terrace.

"For eighty years," he said, "people managed not to talk about this."

Mark nodded.

"Yes."

Peter thought again about the Senate corridor, the shouting, the gunfire and the dead man lying beneath fluorescent lights while cameras waited outside.

Then he looked back toward the television screen now dark in the corner of the room.

"I think," he said carefully, "somebody just decided the past was becoming dangerous."

## Chapter Twelve — The Leak

The documents appeared online forty-eight hours after the Senate shooting.

Not through newspapers.

Not through television networks.

Through anonymous accounts across social media platforms where blurred photographs, copied files and partial screenshots spread faster than any editor could control. By breakfast the following morning almost everybody connected to Jagna had already seen some version of them.

Old transfer certificates.

Japanese survey annotations.

Fragments of postwar legal registrations.

Lists of names.

Some genuine.

Some impossible to verify.

Some almost certainly fabricated by opportunists attaching themselves to the story now consuming Manila television for hour after hour each evening.

Peter sat on the terrace scrolling slowly through the material while heat already gathered heavily across the barangay despite the early hour. Beyond the rice fields the school road had become a permanent line of motorcycles and tricycles carrying students beneath clouds of pale dust hanging motionless in the still air.

Mark looked exhausted.

"You sleep?" Peter asked.

"Not really."

He dropped another folder onto the table.

Peter smiled faintly. "Of course there's another folder."

"There are always folders."

Zan arrived carrying coffee while Alma listened from the kitchen doorway.

"What now?" she asked.

Mark sat heavily beneath the fan. "Somebody inside Manila is leaking selectively."

"Government?"

"Possibly."

"Antonio Reyes?"

"Possibly."

Peter continued scrolling through the online material. One image showed part of an old wartime survey map almost identical to those delivered anonymously to the house days earlier. Another contained typed British notes referencing "regional pacification transfers" linked to eastern Bohol. Several names had been highlighted repeatedly by online commentators now claiming major Manila families secretly profited from wartime collaboration with Japanese occupation authorities.

Most of it looked chaotic.

Which was probably intentional.

Too much information often buried truth more effectively than secrecy ever could.

"What about Daniel Reyes?" Zan asked.

Mark rubbed his eyes tiredly before answering. "Depends which version you believe."

By now three separate narratives already dominated online discussion.

According to government supporters Daniel Reyes had attempted to assassinate Secretary Valdez before security officers acted correctly.

According to anti-government groups Reyes had been carrying evidence connected to Jagna corruption and was executed deliberately inside the Senate before he could testify.

A third version claimed the entire shooting had been staged to justify emergency restrictions around the mine and silence growing criticism of foreign involvement.

Nobody trusted anybody anymore.

That alone made the situation dangerous.

Peter stopped scrolling suddenly.

"What's this?"

Mark leaned forward.

One uploaded document displayed a partially censored 1947 legal transfer linked to land outside Jagna. Most signatures had been blurred poorly but one remained visible enough to read clearly.

Saavedra Holdings.

Below it another notation appeared in English handwriting:

Transfer completed following abandonment of prior civilian claims.

Peter looked up slowly.

"That's one of the phrases from the maps."

"Yes."

Alma frowned from beside the doorway. "What does it mean?"

Nobody answered immediately because all of them already understood.

Abandonment sounded voluntary.

Cleaner.

Legal.

As though families had simply walked away from their land politely instead of disappearing during occupation operations.

Outside the house somebody nearby started a small diesel engine that rattled painfully against the morning heat while dogs barked furiously for no obvious reason.

Mark opened the folder he had brought.

"These arrived overnight."

Inside sat printed screenshots from financial discussions connected to Jagna Minerals. Investor groups now questioned whether the company had exaggerated assay projections intentionally during early financing rounds. Several banks had already suspended discussions pending independent geological review while rumours spread rapidly that foreign shareholders were withdrawing exposure before formal investigations began.

"The market's turning," Peter said.

"Yes."

"And the mine?"

"Still operating."

That surprised him.

"With all this happening?"

Mark nodded once. "Too much money already committed. Too many people dependent on it."

Which was true.

By now Jagna itself had reorganised around the project. Workers still arrived daily. Roads still expanded. Trucks still moved through the district carrying equipment beneath clouds of white

dust while local businesses continued earning more money than most families had seen in years.

The mine might already be too important locally to stop cleanly.

Then Zan spoke from beside the terrace rail.

"My grandmother's frightened."

Peter looked up immediately. "Why?"

"She says old names are returning."

Mark watched him carefully. "What does that mean?"

Zan shrugged uneasily. "Families people stopped talking about after the war. Villanueva. Escaño. Del Rosario." He hesitated. "She says when old names return, trouble follows."

The remark settled heavily across the terrace.

Peter suddenly remembered the old woman near the Jagna market staring silently toward the mine trucks beneath the brutal afternoon sun as though watching history repeat itself slowly in front of her.

Not exactly the same.

But close enough.

His phone vibrated suddenly against the table.

Unknown Manila number.

He hesitated briefly before answering.

"Hello?"

For several seconds only static answered through the line.

Then a man's voice spoke.

"You should tell Mark to stop looking at the transfer records."

Peter felt the atmosphere change instantly.

"Who is this?"

"That's not important."

The line crackled badly.

"You're looking in the wrong direction," the voice continued.  
"The Japanese were never the real owners."

The connection ended immediately afterward.

Peter lowered the phone slowly.

Nobody spoke.

Even the fan seemed suddenly louder.

Finally Mark said, "Well."

Peter nodded once.

"Yes."

Now they were no longer simply reading history.

History had started speaking back.

## Chapter Thirteen — Antonio Reyes

The meeting took place in Cebu three days later beneath the oppressive midday heat that turned the city streets white beneath reflected sunlight and left even the air-conditioned hotel lobby smelling faintly of warm concrete and traffic fumes.

Mark had received the invitation shortly after midnight through an untraceable number.

Mr Reyes will see you at two o'clock. One hour only. Please arrive without unnecessary attention.

No greeting. No explanation. Only the name of a waterfront hotel overlooking the harbour.

"That sounds healthy," Peter said when Mark showed him the message the following morning.

"No."

Yet both men went anyway.

By early afternoon Cebu felt almost unbearable beneath the dry heat rolling inland from the harbour. Traffic barely moved. Motorcycles crowded every available space between buses and trucks while security guards slept beneath umbrellas outside banks and office buildings.

Near the port several foreign cargo vessels sat motionless against the haze beyond the water while cranes moved slowly above stacks of shipping containers.

The hotel itself belonged to the kind of discreet wealth Manila businessmen preferred. Expensive without appearing extravagant. Quiet staff.

Thick carpets absorbing sound. Men in pressed shirts speaking softly into telephones while pretending not to notice one another.

A woman wearing a cream business suit met them near the elevators.

"Mr Reyes is expecting you."

No smile.

No handshake.

She escorted them upward to a private dining room overlooking the harbour where Antonio Reyes sat alone near the windows drinking coffee beneath softly turning ceiling fans.

Peter recognised him immediately from old photographs.

Older now certainly. Late sixties perhaps. Grey at the temples. Immaculately dressed despite the heat. But still carrying the same controlled self-possession visible in earlier Manila society pictures beside politicians, business figures and embassy officials.

Antonio Reyes stood politely as they entered.

"Mr Rawlins. Mr Markham."

His voice remained calm and surprisingly soft.

Peter noticed immediately that nothing about him suggested violence or criminality. He looked exactly like what he was, old Manila wealth polished through decades of influence.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet," Antonio said.

"You made it difficult to refuse," Mark replied.

A faint smile crossed Reyes' face.

"Yes," he said. "Possibly."

Lunch arrived almost immediately though nobody appeared especially interested in eating.

Outside the windows sunlight reflected painfully from the harbour while ferries moved slowly between Cebu and Bohol beneath clouds gathering far out toward the horizon.

Antonio stirred his coffee before speaking again.

"My nephew should never have gone to the Senate."

Peter watched him carefully. "Daniel Reyes?"

"Yes."

"You don't believe he intended to kill Valdez."

Antonio looked almost offended by the suggestion.

"Daniel carried documents, not assassination plans."

"Security officers disagree."

"Security officers survive by agreeing with whichever version protects their careers."

Mark leaned forward. "Then why was he there?"

For the first time Antonio hesitated.

Not uncertainty.

Memory.

"He believed he had discovered proof regarding the original Jagna transfers after the war. He thought certain Senate investigators might still possess integrity." Antonio glanced briefly toward the harbour. "That was optimistic."

Peter said nothing.

The waiter arrived briefly with fresh drinks before disappearing again into silence.

Finally Mark spoke quietly. "Your nephew's mother was Villanueva."

Antonio looked at him sharply.

"Yes."

"That family appears repeatedly in the transfer documents."

Another pause followed.

Then Antonio leaned back slowly in his chair.

"You both still think this story began with minerals," he said. "It didn't."

Outside the windows thunder rolled faintly somewhere across the water though the sun still burned fiercely above the harbour.

"The Japanese identified strategic regions during the occupation," Antonio continued. "That much is true. But they

never intended to mine most of those deposits immediately. The war was already turning against them." He looked directly at Peter. "What mattered was future control."

"And the families?"

"Some collaborated willingly. Some simply survived however they could. Others disappeared because they stood in the way of what came afterward."

Peter felt the same cold unease returning again.

"Afterward meaning?"

"The Americans returned. The war ended. Everybody pretended a clean beginning had arrived." Antonio smiled faintly without humour. "But land ownership around certain regions changed remarkably efficiently for a country supposedly recovering from occupation chaos."

Mark leaned forward. "You're saying Manila families inherited the Japanese surveys."

"In some cases, yes."

"And Saavedra?"

Antonio looked toward the harbour again before answering.

"Miguel inherited more than he understands."

The remark lingered heavily between them.

Peter studied Antonio carefully. "Then why manipulate the assays?"

Antonio's expression barely changed.

"Did I?"

"You tell us."

For several seconds only the ceiling fans moved above them.

Finally Antonio spoke quietly.

"Because men like Miguel Saavedra only notice danger once money becomes involved."

That was the first genuinely honest thing Peter believed he had said since the meeting began.

"You wanted attention focused on Jagna."

"I wanted history dragged back into daylight before the mine became too important politically to question."

"And Daniel Reyes?"

Now, finally, Antonio looked tired.

"He became emotionally involved. That complicated matters."

"You sent him to Valdez."

"No." Antonio shook his head immediately. "Daniel acted alone that day. He believed if the transfer documents reached the correct people publicly everything could still be corrected legally."

Peter almost smiled sadly.

"That sounds naïve."

"Yes," Antonio replied. "It was."

Outside the first heavy rain finally began falling across Cebu harbour, striking the windows hard enough to blur the ships and cranes beyond into shifting grey shapes beneath the storm.

Peter looked toward the rain for several moments before speaking again.

"You still haven't answered the obvious question."

Antonio raised an eyebrow.

"What obvious question?"

"Who actually owns Jagna now?"

For the first time since entering the room Antonio Reyes appeared genuinely uncomfortable.

Not frightened.

Careful.

Then he gave the smallest shake of his head.

"That," he said softly, "is the question people have been dying over since 1945."

## Chapter Fourteen — The Assays

The independent assay report arrived in Manila under conditions bordering on absurd secrecy considering half the financial community already suspected something had gone wrong.

By then Jagna Minerals publicly insisted operations continued normally despite mounting investor anxiety following the Senate shooting and the death of Daniel Reyes.

Official statements described the situation as "temporary political instability unrelated to long-term extraction viability." Nobody inside the markets believed that anymore.

Too many questions now surrounded Jagna.

Too many leaks.

Too many dead men.

Yet the drilling continued.

Day and night trucks still moved through the hills beyond Jagna carrying equipment spoil and ore samples beneath floodlights visible for kilometres across eastern Bohol after dark. Workers still arrived each morning.

Small businesses still expanded beside the roads. Local landlords still raised rents while politicians continued promising prosperity during interviews carefully arranged beside company banners and newly repaired roads.

The mine had already altered the district permanently whether the minerals proved real or not.

Peter understood that more clearly every time he travelled through Jagna now. Dust coated roadside trees and market stalls while heavy vehicles shook buildings never designed for industrial traffic. New boarding houses appeared almost monthly beside the highway and every available patch of roadside frontage seemed to contain another bamboo structure selling beer, cigarettes or grilled pork to workers heading toward the excavation site.

Money remained visible everywhere.

So did tension.

Older residents watched the expansion now. Less openly hostile than before but less trusting too. The Senate shooting had frightened people. Not because they understood the politics fully but because violence inside Manila usually meant powerful interests had stopped negotiating politely.

Late one evening Mark arrived carrying a thin sealed envelope.

"No folder?" Peter asked.

"Trying something different."

The heat remained heavy even after sunset. Across the rice fields beyond the house lightning flickered silently inside distant clouds while insects screamed endlessly from the trees around the barangay.

Mark placed the envelope carefully on the terrace table.

"What is it?"

"The independent assays."

Peter looked at him immediately.

"From where?"

"Singapore originally. Verified again through Australia."

"And?"

Mark exhaled slowly before answering.

"The mine is real."

Peter sat back.

That part no longer surprised him.

"What about the scandium?"

"Present."

"And the other rare earths?"

"Yes."

Peter frowned. "Then what's the problem?"

Mark opened the envelope and removed several typed pages covered in geological data, concentration charts and technical summaries.

"The scale."

Peter read silently for several moments while the ceiling fan moved warm air slowly around the terrace.

The language itself remained highly technical but the conclusion became obvious quickly enough.

Commercial extraction remained viable.

Potentially very profitable.

But not remotely close to the extraordinary early projections driving speculative investment hysteria through Manila and foreign markets.

Several concentrations appeared heavily overstated in the original reports.

Some dramatically so.

Peter looked up slowly.

"They inflated it."

"Yes."

"Deliberately?"

"That's harder to prove."

Outside the house a motorcycle passed slowly along the barangay road before disappearing into darkness toward the school beyond the rice fields.

Peter returned to the report.

"There's still enough there to mine."

"Oh yes," Mark replied. "This isn't a fake deposit. That's what makes it dangerous."

Peter understood immediately.

If the mine had been worthless everything would simply collapse. Investors would retreat. Politicians would deny involvement. Jagna Minerals would disappear into lawsuits and bankruptcy proceedings.

But the minerals existed.

Enough value remained underground to justify continued extraction and long-term commercial interest.

Which meant nobody could cleanly abandon the project.

"Who's seen this?" Peter asked.

"Very few people officially."

"And unofficially?"

Mark smiled faintly. "Probably everybody important already."

That sounded accurate.

Silence settled briefly across the terrace while somewhere beyond the fields karaoke drifted faintly through the humid darkness from a birthday celebration or drinking session impossible to distinguish from one another anymore.

Finally Peter tapped the report.

"What happens now?"

Mark leaned back slowly.

"Miguel Saavedra has a problem."

"Yes."

"He raised expectations too high."

"Or somebody raised them for him."

Peter nodded thoughtfully.

Antonio Reyes again.

Not inventing minerals.

Not creating fraud entirely.

Simply pushing projections beyond reality until Jagna became too politically and financially explosive to control safely.

An old Manila revenge executed through geology, finance and public scandal.

Complicated enough to work.

"What about Valdez?" Peter asked.

"Distancing himself rapidly."

"And Jagna Minerals?"

"Trying desperately to hold investors together until production begins properly."

Peter looked again at the figures spread across the table.

Even reduced estimates still represented enormous money compared to anything most people in Jagna had ever imagined.

Enough to continue changing the district for years.

Enough to keep powerful interests fighting over ownership and influence.

Enough to keep people dangerous.

Alma stepped onto the terrace carrying cold San Miguel bottles while Leticia slept inside beneath the slow movement of the electric fan.

"You still talking about the mine?" Alma asked.

"Yes."

She glanced at the paperwork briefly. "Good news or bad news?"

Peter considered the question carefully before answering.

"I'm not sure anymore."

That was the truth.

Because the deeper they looked into Jagna the less anything resembled simple corruption or simple greed. The mine had become something larger now. A collision between wartime history, modern technology, political ambition and old family resentments surviving decades beneath respectable lives.

Outside the first warm rain finally began falling against the dry dust beyond the terrace, releasing the sudden smell of wet earth rising from the fields.

Mark watched it silently for several moments before speaking again.

"The Japanese knew," he said.

Peter looked at him.

"Knew what?"

"That one day these minerals would matter." He tapped the assay report lightly with one finger. "Maybe not exactly like this. But enough to map them. Enough to kill for ownership."

Peter listened to the rain gathering steadily outside.

Then he looked again at the revised assay figures spread across the table beneath the weak terrace light.

The treasure had never been gold.

It had been time.

## Chapter Fifteen — The Silence

The first old woman arrived at the parish office carrying a plastic envelope tied carefully with string.

Nobody paid much attention initially.

By then journalists, government investigators and mining representatives had already been moving constantly through Jagna for weeks following the Senate shooting and the endless speculation surrounding Daniel Reyes, the wartime transfers and Jagna Minerals itself. The district had become noisy with outsiders asking questions.

Most locals simply watched.

The old woman waited almost an hour before finally asking to speak with Father Benedicto privately. When she emerged afterward she left the envelope behind on his desk and walked slowly back toward the market beneath the crushing afternoon heat without speaking to anybody else.

Inside the envelope sat three photographs and a land tax document dated 1941.

By evening half the town knew.

That was how things worked in Jagna.

Nothing remained secret for long.

Two days later another family arrived carrying baptism certificates, handwritten ownership records and photographs taken before the war showing a large wooden house standing on land now fenced behind part of the Jagna Minerals transport compound.

Then another family appeared.

And another.

The silence that had survived eighty years began breaking all at once.

Peter first heard about it through Zan while sitting outside beneath the terrace fan as warm wind pushed dry dust across the rice fields from the direction of the school road.

"They're bringing papers now," Zan said.

"What kind of papers?"

"Old papers. Land records. Family things."

Peter looked up immediately. "To who?"

"The church mostly."

That made sense.

People trusted churches long after they stopped trusting governments.

Mark arrived later that evening carrying newspapers from Tagbilaran already filled with speculation about historical claims linked to Jagna. One article suggested several wartime property transfers connected to Japanese occupation zones might never have been legally reviewed after independence. Another

claimed surviving descendants from displaced families were preparing formal legal challenges against companies connected to the mine.

"That'll become messy," Peter said.

"It already is."

Outside the remaining heat of the day still clung heavily to the trees and concrete while somewhere nearby karaoke drifted across the barangay from a birthday party or drinking session impossible to distinguish anymore.

"What changed?" Peter asked . "Why now?"

Mark considered that carefully before answering.

"Because Daniel Reyes died publicly."

Peter nodded slowly.

That sounded right.

Fear remained powerful while silence felt safe. But once somebody died inside the Senate building carrying wartime documents connected to Jagna, people started realising the old stories mattered again.

And perhaps always had.

Three days later Peter and Zan travelled into Jagna where the atmosphere around the district had altered noticeably.

Journalists now moved openly around the market carrying cameras while small groups gathered outside stores discussing transfer records, old family names and Manila ownership structures with the sudden confidence people develop once private suspicions begin entering public conversation.

Near the church several elderly residents sat beneath the shade of acacia trees speaking quietly with a young woman from Manila recording interviews beside a stack of faded documents and photographs spread carefully across a plastic table.

Peter recognised the expression on many of the older faces immediately.

Relief.

Not complete relief.

But the strange exhaustion people carry after remaining silent too long.

"They remember everything," Zan said.

"Yes."

"My grandmother says people used to disappear during the occupation and nobody asked questions afterward."

Peter watched the old people near the church.

"Because they were frightened?"

"Yes."

"And later?"

Zan shrugged. "Later people became rich."

That, Peter thought, was probably the most accurate explanation anybody had yet given.

Money stabilised silence.

Especially in the Philippines where survival often mattered more than justice once enough years had passed.

Near the market entrance Peter suddenly noticed something else.

The mining trucks had stopped moving.

Not permanently perhaps, but the road toward the excavation site now stood unusually quiet beneath the brutal white afternoon sun. Several security guards remained visible near the checkpoint but equipment movement appeared slower and groups of workers stood outside shaded food stalls talking instead of working.

"Problems?" Peter asked.

Zan nodded. "Investors nervous now."

The mine itself had not failed.

That was the strange part.

Commercial extraction remained viable even after the revised assays reduced expectations dramatically. But uncertainty had entered the project now like contamination spreading slowly through water.

Too many questions.

Too much history.

Too much publicity.

As Peter and Zan walked back toward the tricycle an elderly man sitting outside a small store suddenly called toward them.

"Englishman."

Peter stopped.

The man looked perhaps ninety years old. Thin almost beyond belief. Skin darkened heavily by decades beneath the sun. Yet his eyes remained sharp.

"You're asking about the Japanese."

Peter hesitated before nodding.

The old man glanced around carefully despite the heat and noise surrounding the market.

"They didn't take the land," he said.

Peter frowned. "What do you mean?"

"They made sure other people received it afterward."

Then he looked away immediately as though the conversation had never happened.

Back in La Victoria that evening Peter repeated the remark to Mark while darkness settled slowly across the flooded fields and distant thunder flickered far out beyond the sea without rain reaching land.

Mark listened silently.

Finally he nodded once.

"That," he said, "may be the truest thing anybody has said since this began."

For several moments neither man spoke.

Beyond the house dogs barked endlessly at shadows while somewhere across the barangay road another videoke machine screamed painfully into the humid night.

Ordinary sounds.

Ordinary life.

Yet underneath it all something old had begun moving again.

Not gold.

Not minerals.

Memory.

## Chapter Sixteen — The Guerrilla

It had been a nice day but the rain arrived shortly after sunset and by eight o'clock the electricity had failed across most of La Victoria.

One moment the barangay glowed weakly beneath scattered bulbs and karaoke lights, the next almost everything vanished into darkness beyond the rain.

But not completely.

Across the fields isolated solar lamps slowly reappeared one by one like anchored boats in black water. Peter's own system continued running the bedroom fan, internet router and porch lights through the inverter Nissan had wired months earlier after another week of endless outages. The rest of the house settled into warm shadow beneath battery light and candle flame while rain hammered against the roof.

Peter sat outside beneath the terrace overhang watching water flood slowly across the edge of the rice fields while Alma searched for the torch and Leticia slept through the storm without concern.

"Brownout again," Zan said cheerfully.

"In England governments collapse over this," Peter replied.

Zan laughed.

His grandmother had arrived earlier that afternoon from Jagna together with several relatives visiting for a baptism somewhere nearby. Now she sat near the kitchen doorway wrapped in a faded blanket despite the heavy humid heat, her face lit softly by candlelight whenever lightning flickered outside.

She must have been almost a hundred now.

Small.

Thin.

Yet her eyes missed very little.

Mark sat nearby sorting through copied documents from the tunnel while the storm continued pounding across the hills beyond the barangay.

Finally the old woman spoke unexpectedly.

"You ask many questions about the Japanese."

Her English remained slow but careful.

Peter glanced toward her.

"Yes."

She nodded.

"People ask again now because of the mine."

Nobody answered.

Outside thunder rolled heavily across the flooded fields.

Then she said, "During occupation everybody lied."

The remark settled strangely across the terrace.

Mark looked up from the papers immediately.

"What do you mean?"

The old woman watched rain falling beyond the house for several silent moments before answering.

"Japanese ask questions. Guerrillas ask questions. Everybody frightened all the time."

Zan translated several Bisaya words occasionally when her English faded.

She had been perhaps sixteen during the occupation.

Old enough to remember properly.

Young enough never to escape it entirely.

"There was one man near Jagna," she continued. "Everybody say collaborator because Japanese soldiers come to his house."

"Was he?" Peter asked.

She shrugged slowly.

"He gave them food."

"That sounds like collaboration."

"Yes."

Another pause followed.

"Also he warned families before arrests."

Nobody spoke.

Outside the rain intensified again against the roof while darkness swallowed almost everything beyond the candlelight surrounding the terrace.

The old woman folded her hands carefully in her lap.

"One night guerrillas took him away."

Zan translated beside her.

"They kill him?"

She nodded once.

"In hills above the town."

Peter looked toward Mark briefly.

Then back toward her.

"But he was helping people."

"Yes."

"Did the guerrillas know?"

Another small shrug.

"Maybe."

Lightning flickered suddenly across the fields turning the flooded paddies silver for several brief seconds before darkness closed again.

"There was another man," she continued. "People say he fought Japanese secretly." Her expression hardened. "After war he became mayor."

"And he was genuine?"

This time the old woman laughed softly.

A dry tired sound.

"He steal land after occupation."

Nobody moved.

The storm itself seemed quieter suddenly.

Peter understood then why this mattered.

History inside Jagna had never separated neatly into:  
heroes and traitors.

Occupation destroyed certainty first.

Then morality afterward.

The old woman pointed suddenly toward the documents beside  
Mark.

"Japanese officers came before Americans return."

"When?" Mark asked.

"Near end."

She closed her eyes briefly trying to remember.

"They meet important men from Manila. My father see vehicles  
at night near old tunnel road."

Peter felt the atmosphere shift immediately.

"Your father told you this?"

"Yes."

"What kind of meeting?"

The old woman looked uncertain now.

"Paper meetings," she said eventually. "Maps. Land. Nobody understand."

Mark leaned forward slowly.

"The tunnel."

She nodded once.

"Afterward some families disappear from records."

Outside another burst of rain swept across the roof while frogs screamed from the flooded ditches surrounding the house.

Then the old woman said something very quietly in Bisaya.

Zan hesitated before translating.

"She says after the war people stopped asking questions because everybody needed to eat."

Silence followed.

Longer this time.

Finally Peter looked toward the darkness beyond the terrace where rain continued falling endlessly across fields and roads and wandering cattle that understood nothing about history at all.

"That," he said quietly, "may be the whole country."

The old woman heard him.

Slowly she nodded.

## Chapter Seventeen — Miguel

Miguel Saavedra had not visited Jagna once since the mine became public.

That surprised Peter initially because almost everybody else connected to the project eventually appeared there in person. Politicians, investors, journalists, foreign consultants, environmental inspectors and government advisers all arrived sooner or later beneath the endless heat and dust of eastern Bohol hoping to attach themselves to whatever Jagna eventually became.

But not Miguel.

He remained in Manila.

Which, according to Mark, was exactly where men like Miguel preferred to operate.

“Distance creates deniability,” he said one evening while watching lightning flicker silently far beyond the rice fields outside the house. “Especially when things begin turning unpleasant.”

And unpleasant was now the correct word.

The Senate shooting had changed the atmosphere surrounding Jagna permanently. What began as a provincial mining story had become a national political scandal touching wartime history, old Manila families and allegations of manipulated ownership transfers dating back to the Japanese occupation.

Meanwhile the mine itself continued operating uneasily beneath growing pressure from every direction.

Foreign investors demanded reassurances.

Banks demanded revised financial projections.

Environmental groups demanded independent oversight.

Journalists demanded records.

And now surviving descendants from several displaced wartime families demanded answers regarding land ownership around the excavation zone itself.

Too many demands.

Too many cameras.

Too many leaks.

Late one humid afternoon Mark arrived carrying printed copies of financial reports downloaded from Manila business sites before most of them mysteriously disappeared again online several hours later.

"Miguel's bleeding money," he said.

Peter took the papers carefully.

Several holding companies connected indirectly to Jagna Minerals had lost significant value across the previous week while foreign financing discussions appeared suspended pending legal clarification around ownership exposure and historical transfer liability.

"Serious?"

Mark nodded once. "Serious enough."

Outside the heat remained oppressive even near sunset. The galvanized roofs across the barangay still radiated warmth gathered throughout the day while children played basketball beside the school road beneath floodlights powered by noisy generators.

Peter studied the figures.

"These aren't collapse numbers."

"No. But they're fear numbers."

That made sense.

Markets rarely panicked because of truth itself. Uncertainty frightened them far more effectively.

Peter placed the reports back onto the table.

“What’s Miguel doing?”

“Trying to isolate Jagna Minerals from the family directly.”

“Can he?”

Mark smiled faintly. “Rich people always think they can.”

Two days later Peter finally saw Miguel Saavedra properly for the first time during a televised interview broadcast from Manila.

The man looked exactly as Peter had imagined.

Elegant without trying too hard. Controlled. Intelligent. The kind of public confidence old wealth often carried naturally after generations close to power. He answered questions carefully while seated beneath studio lights discussing national development, investment stability and the importance of responsible mineral extraction for the future economy of the Philippines.

At no point did he appear nervous.

At no point did he mention Daniel Reyes.

Or wartime transfers.

Or Villanueva family claims.

Or Japanese survey maps.

Instead Miguel spoke about progress.

Employment.

International opportunity.

Regional infrastructure.

"We cannot allow historical speculation," he said calmly during one exchange, "to undermine legitimate economic development benefiting thousands of Filipino families."

Peter switched the television off afterward.

"He's good," Alma said.

"Yes."

"That means dangerous?"

"Usually."

The following morning Zan returned from Jagna looking unsettled.

"Workers saying management changing," he said.

"In what way?"

"Some foreign people leaving. Security more strict now."

Peter glanced toward Mark immediately.

"The investors."

Mark nodded once.

"Probably."

But that was not the real problem anymore.

The real problem sat buried inside the old transfer records now spreading through Manila legal offices, church archives and media investigations. Enough evidence existed to suggest ownership around sections of Jagna may have passed through deeply questionable channels following wartime occupation operations targeting resistance-connected families.

Not enough for criminal prosecution perhaps.

But enough to poison legitimacy permanently.

Late that evening Peter received another anonymous call from Manila.

This time the voice sounded different.

Older.

Educated.

"You should tell Mark to stop trusting Antonio Reyes."

Peter remained silent.

The voice continued quietly.

"Antonio wants destruction now. Not truth."

"Who is this?"

"That's unimportant."

"You people keep saying that."

A faint sound almost resembling laughter crossed the line briefly.

"Mr Rawlins," the voice said carefully, "you still believe this concerns history. It does not. History was settled long ago."

Peter looked out toward the dark fields beyond the terrace where floodlights from the distant school grounds glowed weakly against the humid night.

"Then what's it about?"

"Control."

The line disconnected immediately afterward.

Mark listened carefully once Peter repeated the conversation.

Then he nodded slowly.

“Yes,” he said. “That sounds more like Miguel.”

Outside the night remained heavy and windless while somewhere far away machinery from the Jagna excavation site still operated beneath floodlights cutting into the darkness above the hills.

The mine had become too valuable to abandon.

Too compromised to trust.

And now, Peter realised, men like Miguel Saavedra were no longer trying to win publicly.

They were trying to survive.

## Chapter Eighteen — The Tunnel

The entrance lay half concealed behind vegetation and fractured limestone less than two hundred metres beyond the active excavation zone, though nobody approaching from the main road would ever have noticed it now.

Jagna Minerals had erected fencing across most of the hillside while heavy machinery, fuel tanks and temporary structures

dominated the visible portions of the operation beneath glaring floodlights and constant security patrols.

But the old tunnel remained there.

Waiting.

Peter stood beside Zan beneath the brutal midday heat while Mark studied the copied survey map spread across the roof of the tricycle. Sweat already soaked through all three men's shirts despite barely moving. Above them exposed limestone reflected sunlight so fiercely the entire hillside seemed almost white beneath the cloudless sky.

"You're certain?" Peter asked.

Mark tapped one section of the map. "The original Japanese workings continued beyond the current drilling area.

Jagna Minerals sealed most secondary entrances years ago after exploratory surveys, but this one was probably missed because of the collapse."

Zan looked doubtful. "And we're doing this why exactly?"

Mark folded the map carefully.

"Because somebody killed Daniel Reyes over documents connected to this place."

Fair answer.

They waited until late afternoon before moving. By then the worst of the heat had faded though warm air still radiated upward from the exposed rock and dry ground around the excavation site.

Trucks continued moving below them carrying equipment toward the compound while generators droned endlessly beneath the metallic noise of drilling operations further inside the hillside.

Nobody paid attention to three men walking above the site carrying backpacks and flashlights.

Workers had become part of the landscape now.

The entrance itself proved smaller than Peter expected. Partially collapsed and hidden behind tangled vegetation, the opening looked less like a mine entrance than a damaged drainage culvert disappearing into darkness beneath fractured stone.

Zan shone his flashlight inside and frowned immediately.

"That goes deeper than I thought."

Cool air drifted outward carrying the stale mineral smell of enclosed rock untouched by sunlight for decades.

Mark switched on another torch. "Careful where you step. Old workings collapse unexpectedly."

Peter looked at him. "You've done this before?"

“No. But I prefer not dying underground if possible.”

The first section descended sharply through rough-cut limestone reinforced in places with rotting timber supports almost black with age.

Japanese markings still remained visible occasionally along the walls beneath mineral staining and decades of dampness.

The air changed quickly underground.

Cooler.

Still.

The sounds from the modern excavation site faded behind them until only distant vibrations remained somewhere beyond the rock itself.

Peter moved slowly, flashlight moving across rough walls and collapsed side passages disappearing into darkness.

Water dripped steadily somewhere deeper inside the tunnel while bats disturbed by the lights shifted irritably overhead.

“This doesn’t feel like gold storage,” Zan said.

“No,” Mark replied. “Because it wasn’t.”

The main passage widened suddenly several hundred metres inward revealing what had once clearly been a working chamber.

Rusted rails remained partially visible beneath collapsed debris while fragments of machinery lay scattered across the floor beneath thick mineral dust.

Peter crouched beside one section carefully.

Survey equipment.

Not mining tools.

Mark noticed immediately. "The Japanese were analysing samples here."

Several steel storage cabinets stood rusting against one wall, doors hanging open after decades of decay. Most contained nothing beyond ruined papers and collapsed wooden trays but one remained partially sealed beneath fallen rock.

Together they forced it open.

Inside sat cylindrical metal containers remarkably well preserved in the dry conditions further inside the tunnel.

Japanese writing remained visible across several lids while others carried faded English markings added later.

Mark stared at them silently.

"T-Force," he said eventually.

Peter looked sharply toward him.

"You're sure?"

Mark pointed carefully toward one container.

British military inventory numbers.

Not many.

But enough.

Peter suddenly understood.

"They came here after the war."

"Yes."

"To remove records?"

"Or copy them."

The realization settled heavily across the chamber.

The British had known.

Perhaps not everything.

But enough to understand the Japanese occupation authorities had been conducting systematic geological surveys linked to strategic resource planning long before defeat.

Not treasure.

Not hidden wartime gold.

Future industrial control.

Zan moved further into the chamber suddenly.

"Here."

The beam from his flashlight illuminated another wall partly concealed behind fallen timber and collapsed stone.

Unlike the rough excavation elsewhere, this section had been deliberately smoothed before somebody painted markings directly onto the rock itself decades earlier.

A map.

Crude but unmistakable.

Sections of Bohol marked beside shipping routes and coded mineral references connected toward Cebu, Leyte and Mindanao.

At the bottom sat Japanese writing followed by English annotations added later in pencil.

Civilian removals completed prior to transfer stabilisation.

Peter felt cold despite the underground heat.

Always the same language.

Transfer.

Stabilisation.

Removal.

As though entire families vanished merely to simplify administration.

Mark examined the wall carefully.

"This is operational planning," he said. "Not mining records."

"Meaning?"

"The Japanese weren't just identifying minerals. They were identifying who controlled land surrounding them."

Nobody spoke for several moments.

Somewhere deeper inside the tunnel water continued dripping steadily through darkness untouched since the war while above them modern drilling operations still expanded through the hills around Jagna searching for the same minerals mapped here eighty years earlier.

Then Peter noticed something else near the far side of the chamber.

A smaller passage partially concealed behind collapsed equipment.

Recently disturbed.

The dust along the floor showed fresh movement.

Not workers.

Footprints.

Modern.

Mark saw them too immediately.

"We're not the first people back in here."

Zan swung the flashlight uneasily toward the darkness beyond the smaller tunnel.

"You think Jagna Minerals knows about this?"

"No," Mark replied.

Peter looked again at the fresh prints disappearing deeper underground.

Then toward the old British inventory containers.

Then toward the wall map connecting wartime removals directly to future transfers and mineral control.

For the first time since Mark arrived in Bohol carrying his documents, Peter realised something genuinely dangerous.

The past was not buried here.

Somebody had been visiting it recently.

## Chapter Nineteen — The Transfer

They returned from the tunnel after dark exhausted, filthy and carrying far more questions than answers.

The road back toward La Victoria lay almost empty beneath the humid night except for occasional motorcycles and overloaded trucks moving slowly away from Jagna beneath drifting clouds of pale dust still hanging in the warm air long after sunset.

Behind them floodlights continued burning across the excavation site while machinery echoed faintly through the hills with the relentless mechanical rhythm of something no longer capable of stopping itself.

Nobody spoke much during the journey.

Zan drove carefully while Mark sat in silence beside him holding the copied survey photographs taken inside the tunnel chamber on Peter's phone.

Every few minutes he glanced at the images again as though hoping the markings would somehow rearrange themselves into something less disturbing.

They never did.

By the time they reached the house Alma already waited awake on the terrace with cold water and towels laid out beside the table.

"You found something," she said immediately.

Peter nodded once.

"Yes."

"Bad?"

He thought about the tunnel. The British inventory containers. The wall markings linking removals, stabilisation and transfer operations across occupied territory.

Then Daniel Reyes lying dead inside the Senate building.

"Yes," he replied carefully. "Probably."

The heat remained oppressive even near midnight.

Beyond the flooded rice fields insects screamed endlessly while somewhere across the barangay another videoke machine continued torturing old love songs into the darkness for reasons nobody fully understood anymore.

Mark finally spread the printed photographs across the table.

Alma studied them silently.

"What language?"

"Japanese mostly," Peter said.

"And English afterward."

Mark pointed toward one section on the screen and zoomed in.  
"This part matters."

Peter looked again at the pencilled English notation beneath the Japanese operational map.

Civilian removals completed prior to transfer stabilisation.

Alma frowned immediately.

"That sounds military."

"It is military."

"But transfer to who?"

Nobody answered because that question now sat at the centre of everything.

Peter stood slowly and moved toward the edge of the terrace where the remaining heat still radiated upward from the concrete floor.

Beyond the fields the sky remained strangely clear despite distant lightning flickering silently over the sea.

Finally Mark spoke quietly behind him.

"I think we've been looking at this the wrong way."

Peter turned back.

"How?"

"We assumed the Japanese were planning future ownership for themselves."

"And?"

"What if they weren't?"

Silence settled heavily around the table.

Then Peter understood.

"The war."

Mark nodded once.

"By 1944 they already knew defeat was possible. Maybe probable. So the question becomes different."

Not:

How do we keep control?

But:

Who controls it afterward?

Alma looked between them uncertainly. "I don't understand."

Mark leaned forward carefully.

"The Japanese identify strategically valuable mineral regions during occupation. They remove resistance-connected families around certain areas.

Then ownership structures begin shifting toward selected Filipino intermediaries before the war even ends."

"Collaborators," Peter said.

"Possibly. Or simply people useful afterward."

Zan stared at the photographs for several silent seconds.

"My grandmother said Manila people arrived before the Americans came back properly."

Peter looked toward him sharply.

"She told you that?"

"Yes. She thought they were government." He shrugged. "Maybe they were."

Mark sat back slowly beneath the fan.

"No," he said. "I think they were preparing continuity."

The word lingered heavily.

Continuity.

Not occupation ending.

Control continuing differently.

Peter suddenly remembered something Antonio Reyes had said during the Cebu meeting.

The Japanese never intended to mine most of those deposits immediately.

At the time it sounded merely historical.

Now it sounded strategic.

Outside the house a truck shifted gears heavily somewhere along the distant road toward Jagna while dogs barked irritably beneath the sudden noise before settling again into darkness.

Peter returned slowly to the table.

"So after the war these families inherit the surveys."

"And the land."

"And T-Force discovers part of it."

Mark nodded once.

"Yes."

"Then why bury it?"

That answer took longer.

Finally Mark spoke carefully.

"Because by 1946 the world changed." He tapped one of the photographs lightly. "Rare earths barely mattered commercially yet. But anti-communism mattered enormously. Stability mattered. The Americans wanted functioning elites in place across Asia after the war, not endless investigations into collaboration and wartime property transfers."

Peter understood immediately.

History had been sacrificed for geopolitics.

Again.

Just as it had been in countless other countries after wars ended inconveniently.

"What about your father?" Mark asked.

Peter shook his head slowly. "I honestly don't know."

But for the first time he wondered properly.

Had his father seen fragments of this after the war through British intelligence analysis connected to T-Force reviews? Had he understood what the Japanese surveys actually represented?

Or had even he only seen disconnected pieces buried inside larger occupation reports nobody expected to matter eighty years later?

Alma looked again toward the photographs.

"So the mine was never the secret."

"No," Peter said.

"The transfer was."

That changed everything.

Because minerals alone created wealth.

Ownership created power.

And power surviving across generations explained why men like Miguel Saavedra and Antonio Reyes still moved so carefully around Jagna eighty years after Japanese occupation forces disappeared from the Philippines.

The tunnel had not revealed buried treasure.

It had revealed continuity.

The same families.

The same land.

The same hidden agreements simply passing from empire to republic to corporation beneath different flags and different governments while ordinary people remained largely outside the arrangement entirely.

Zan suddenly looked uneasy.

“What happens if this becomes public properly?”

Nobody answered immediately.

Finally Peter looked toward the distant darkness beyond the fields where somewhere far south floodlights still burned above the Jagna excavation site.

“I think,” he said carefully, “that depends who still benefits from the silence.”

## Chapter Twenty — The Collapse

The collapse began quietly.

Not at the mine itself.

Not underground.

Inside offices.

Inside banks.

Inside conference rooms where investors who had spent months speaking confidently about strategic minerals and regional opportunity suddenly started using words like exposure, liability and withdrawal instead.

By January the atmosphere surrounding Jagna Minerals had altered completely.

The excavation site still operated day and night beneath floodlights and dust while trucks continued moving through eastern Bohol carrying machinery, fuel and drilling equipment along roads already damaged by industrial traffic. Workers still arrived every morning. Small businesses still sold beer, cigarettes and food to mining crews. Boarding houses remained full.

From a distance everything looked normal.

But the confidence had gone.

Peter noticed it immediately during another visit to Jagna with Zan. The district no longer carried the same restless optimism that had filled the roads only weeks earlier. People still talked about the mine constantly, but now conversations lowered whenever journalists or unfamiliar outsiders appeared nearby.

Too many rumours circulated.

Foreign investors leaving.

Environmental violations.

Secret government investigations.

False assay reports.

Hidden ownership disputes.

Wartime land claims.

Each new story weakened the next.

Outside the market several workers from the excavation site sat drinking beer beneath a faded Jagna Minerals banner while arguing about delayed payments and reduced overtime.

"Before everybody wanted jobs there," Zan said. "Now some workers leaving."

Peter looked toward the hills where the floodlights above the excavation site remained visible even in daylight.

"The mine's still operating."

"Yes. But people nervous now."

That was true everywhere.

Three banks in Manila had suspended financing discussions pending legal clarification regarding ownership exposure linked to historical transfer records. Foreign shareholders demanded independent audits. Insurance underwriters requested revised geological verification. Environmental groups petitioned for

temporary suspension of extraction activity until proper review procedures could be completed.

Meanwhile journalists continued digging.

Every week new wartime records seemed to emerge from somewhere.

Church archives.

Old legal offices.

Family storage boxes hidden for decades beneath beds and inside cupboards.

Enough fragments now existed publicly to destroy the carefully managed narrative Jagna Minerals had spent months constructing around development and prosperity.

The mine had become contaminated by history.

Late one evening Mark arrived carrying newspapers and printed financial reports while heat still radiated upward from the concrete terrace despite darkness already covering the rice fields beyond the house.

"Miguel's started liquidating positions," he said immediately.

Peter looked up sharply.

"Directly?"

"No. Through intermediaries."

"Enough to matter?"

Mark dropped the reports onto the table.

"Yes."

Peter studied the figures carefully.

Several holding companies linked indirectly to Jagna Minerals had lost almost half their value across the previous month while international commodity analysts now questioned whether the political instability surrounding the project made long-term extraction commercially viable at all regardless of mineral concentrations underground.

"What about Valdez?" Peter asked.

"Publicly supportive. Privately disappearing."

That sounded predictable.

Politicians survived by distancing themselves before collapse became official.

Outside the house the night remained windless and heavy while somewhere across the barangay road karaoke drifted faintly through the darkness accompanied by barking dogs and occasional motorcycle engines carrying students home from evening classes.

Alma brought coffee onto the terrace before sitting beside Peter.

"You think the mine closes?" she asked.

Mark shook his head slowly.

"No."

Peter looked at him.

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because there's still too much value underground." Mark tapped the financial reports lightly. "That's the problem. If the mine was worthless everybody could walk away cleanly."

But the minerals existed.

Reduced estimates still represented enormous commercial value compared to almost any other extraction project in the region. Enough scandium remained present for specialist markets. Enough rare earth concentrations remained commercially attractive long-term. Enough infrastructure had already been built.

Too much money now sat buried beneath Jagna for the project simply to disappear.

Which meant the collapse unfolding around them was not physical.

It was structural.

Corporate.

Political.

Moral.

The next morning the first major resignation became public.

Two foreign directors from Jagna Minerals announced immediate departure citing “personal considerations and evolving commercial conditions.” Hours later international media connected one of them to earlier financing discussions involving Keith Monk before his removal from the company months earlier.

By afternoon Manila markets reacted badly.

By evening several government agencies denied knowledge of specific wartime transfer allegations despite documents already circulating publicly online carrying official seals and signatures impossible to dismiss completely.

Then came the lawsuits.

Three Villanueva descendants filed legal action challenging ownership history around sections of the original excavation

zone. Another family connected to Del Rosario wartime records demanded suspension of extraction activity pending judicial review.

The floodgates had opened.

Peter watched most of it unfold through television reports and online updates while outside life in La Victoria continued strangely unchanged. Children still walked toward school each morning. Cattle still wandered wherever they pleased between plots marked only by concrete boundary posts half buried in grass. Stray dogs still slept beneath Nissan's tricycle during the hottest hours of the day.

Ordinary life continuing beneath national scandal.

Then Antonio Reyes disappeared.

Not dramatically.

No arrest.

No public statement.

Simply gone from Manila society almost overnight.

Business meetings cancelled.

Phone numbers disconnected.

Office staff refusing comment.

Even Mark looked surprised.

"That's not good," he said after hearing the news.

"You think he's running?"

"No." Mark frowned. "I think he's finished what he intended to do."

Peter looked again toward the television showing fresh footage from outside the Senate building where journalists continued shouting questions at exhausted officials already denying everything before investigations had even properly begun.

"What exactly was that?" Peter asked.

Mark considered the question carefully.

Finally he spoke.

"He collapsed the protection around Jagna."

Outside the terrace warm wind finally moved through the trees for the first time in days while far beyond the fields thunder rolled slowly somewhere over the sea.

Peter understood then that the mine itself would probably survive.

Jagna Minerals might not.

Miguel Saavedra perhaps not politically.

Valdez perhaps not publicly.

But the excavation would continue eventually under another structure, another company, another arrangement between powerful people and the same land.

Because underneath all the scandal, manipulation and history one thing remained brutally simple.

The minerals were still there.

## Chapter Twenty-One — Antonio's Truth

Antonio Reyes contacted them three nights after disappearing from Manila.

Not by telephone. Not through messages. A handwritten note arrived at the house in La Victoria folded inside a plain brown envelope delivered by a young man on a motorcycle who left immediately afterward without speaking.

Mark read the note twice beneath the terrace light before passing it silently to Peter.

If you still wish to understand Jagna properly, come alone. Cebu. Friday. Eight o'clock.

No signature. No address. Only the name of an old restaurant near the harbour Peter vaguely remembered from years earlier.

"That's sensible," Peter said.

"No," Mark replied. "It probably isn't."

Yet Peter went anyway.

The ferry crossing from Tagbilaran to Cebu took place beneath heavy grey cloud and rough water driven northward by weather building slowly out in the Pacific. Most passengers slept or stared silently at phones while cargo trucks remained chained heavily below deck beside motorcycles and crates of produce moving endlessly between islands regardless of politics, corruption or scandal.

Ordinary life continued.

That thought stayed with Peter throughout the crossing.

Because despite everything surrounding Jagna, most Filipinos still woke each morning concerned mainly with food, work, school fees and survival. The mine mattered enormously to investors, politicians and old Manila families. To ordinary people it mattered mostly because it changed prices, jobs and opportunity.

Nothing more complicated than that.

By the time Peter reached Cebu the air felt thick with approaching rain. Traffic crawled painfully through the city while campaign posters, mining headlines and Senate investigations dominated electronic billboards above the roads. Even here Jagna had become unavoidable now.

The restaurant overlooked the harbour from the upper floor of an ageing colonial-era building squeezed between newer commercial developments already stained dark by pollution and sea air. Inside, ceiling fans moved slowly above polished wooden tables while rain threatened constantly beyond the open windows facing the water.

Antonio Reyes sat alone near the back.

No security.

No assistants.

No performance.

For the first time since meeting him Peter thought the man looked genuinely old.

Antonio gestured quietly toward the empty chair opposite.

"You came alone."

"Yes."

"Good."

A waiter appeared almost immediately with whisky neither man had ordered.

"You planned this carefully," Peter said.

Antonio smiled faintly. "I've had a lifetime to practice."

Outside the harbour darkened steadily beneath gathering storm clouds while ferries moved slowly through the channel toward Bohol carrying lights already glowing weakly against the approaching evening.

For several moments neither man spoke.

Then Antonio finally said, "Miguel believes I destroyed Jagna because Isabel married him."

Peter watched him carefully. "Didn't you?"

A brief smile crossed Antonio's face.

"Partly."

At least that was honest.

Antonio lifted his glass slowly before continuing.

"When we were young everybody assumed Miguel Saavedra would inherit eventually. Wealth. Influence. Political access. The usual things." He glanced toward the harbour. "Men like Miguel never truly earn power. They simply arrive near it at birth."

"And you?"

"My family had money once. Not enough afterward."

"After the war?"

Antonio nodded once.

Peter waited.

"My grandfather handled legal transfers for several Manila interests during reconstruction. Property restructuring. Ownership clarification. Recovery administration." He smiled without humour. "Respectable language for ugly things."

Peter already understood where this was going.

"The Jagna land."

"Yes."

Outside thunder rolled faintly across the harbour.

Antonio took another slow drink before continuing.

"When Daniel Reyes began investigating his mother's family history he discovered inconsistencies in the Villanueva records. Missing signatures. Sudden tax transfers. Entire parcels changing ownership during periods when surviving family members were reportedly in hiding from occupation forces."

"And he came to you."

"At first only for advice." Antonio looked down briefly at the whisky glass in his hand. "Unfortunately curiosity becomes hereditary in some families."

Peter said nothing.

The restaurant remained almost empty around them while rain finally began falling lightly against the harbour outside.

"Daniel believed the transfers could be challenged legally," Antonio continued. "I told him he underestimated how deeply connected these ownership structures remained."

"But he kept digging."

"Yes."

"And you?"

Antonio leaned back slowly.

"I realised something important." He looked directly at Peter for the first time since the conversation began. "The mine created leverage."

Peter understood immediately.

Without Jagna nobody would care about eighty-year-old wartime transfers buried inside provincial archives and forgotten legal offices. But once strategic minerals and international investment entered the story, history suddenly became expensive.

Valuable.

Dangerous.

"You manipulated the assays," Peter said.

Antonio smiled faintly again.

"Not entirely."

"But enough."

"Yes."

The honesty no longer surprised Peter.

"The minerals were real. The mine was real. But the early projections needed... encouragement." Antonio shrugged. "Greed performs predictably once numbers become large enough."

"And Miguel walked directly into it."

"Of course he did. Men raised around inherited certainty usually mistake confidence for intelligence."

Peter looked toward the rain gathering more heavily now across Cebu harbour.

"And Daniel?"

For the first time Antonio hesitated visibly.

Not performance.

Pain.

"He should never have gone to the Senate."

"But you knew he intended to."

"I knew he wanted exposure. I did not know he intended confronting Valdez directly." Antonio's voice lowered. "Daniel still believed institutions functioned honestly if presented with sufficient evidence."

Peter remembered the confusion surrounding the shooting. Contradictory statements. Security panic. One dead man carrying documents connected to Jagna.

"You think Valdez ordered it?"

"No."

"You don't?"

Antonio shook his head slowly.

"Fear ordered it."

That answer lingered heavily between them.

Outside the rain intensified suddenly against the harbour while lightning flickered white above the water beyond the ferries now disappearing into darkness.

Peter studied Antonio carefully.

"So what was all this really about?"

Antonio looked tired suddenly.

Older.

"Continuity," he said quietly. "The Japanese understood something before everybody else. The war would end eventually. Governments would change. Flags would change. But whoever controlled strategically valuable land afterward would inherit the future."

"And Manila families positioned themselves early."

"Yes."

"With help."

"With cooperation."

Peter thought again about the tunnel maps beneath Jagna. Civilian removals. Transfer stabilisation. The careful administrative language disguising disappearance and violence.

"You wanted the truth exposed."

Antonio considered that carefully.

"No," he said eventually. "I wanted ownership questioned publicly before the next generation buried everything permanently beneath corporations and international contracts."

That felt closer to the truth.

Not justice.

Not revenge alone.

Disruption.

The rain eased outside while harbour lights reflected across wet streets below the restaurant windows.

Peter finished his whisky slowly.

"What happens now?"

Antonio looked toward the dark water stretching south toward Bohol.

"The mine survives," he said. "Too much money underground for anything else."

"And Miguel?"

"He survives too. Men like Miguel always survive." A faint smile crossed his face. "Just poorer and more cautious."

Peter stood slowly.

"And you?"

Antonio Reyes remained seated beside the window watching rain drift across Cebu harbour beneath the lights of passing ferries.

"I think," he said softly, "I've finally become tired."

## Chapter Twenty-Two — The Archive

The final piece arrived from London.

Not dramatically.

No intelligence courier. No diplomatic pouch. No mysterious visitor stepping from aircraft carrying government secrets beneath rain-soaked coats.

Just an encrypted file sent quietly to Mark through channels Peter deliberately chose not to ask about too closely.

"It came from the same source?" Peter asked.

Mark nodded once. "Or somebody connected."

Outside the afternoon heat hung heavily across La Victoria while beyond the rice fields the dry season had already begun bleaching the ground pale beneath weeks without proper rain.

Even the cattle moved slowly now, gathering beneath whatever shade remained beside the irrigation ditches while dogs slept motionless beneath Nissan's tricycle avoiding the worst of the sun.

Peter watched Mark open the file on the laptop carefully.

"You trust this?"

"No," Mark replied. "But I trust parts of it."

That sounded about right.

The document itself appeared to be a postwar British intelligence summary compiled during late 1946 from several fragmented sources connected to Allied technical recovery operations in Asia following Japanese surrender.

Across the top of the first page sat a classification stamp partly obscured by age and poor copying.

TECHNICAL PRIORITY REVIEW  
FAR EASTERN RESOURCE OPERATIONS  
SECTION C — PHILIPPINE TERRITORIES

Peter adjusted his glasses.

"This is T-Force?"

"Not directly. Probably a related analysis unit using material recovered by T-Force teams and Allied occupation investigators."

The report continued in dense administrative English almost entirely lacking emotion despite describing matters Peter

increasingly realised should probably have horrified everybody involved.

References appeared repeatedly to:

geological classification operations,  
strategic mineral mapping,  
occupation-era transport planning,  
and regional transfer stabilisation following anti-insurgency actions.

Always the same language.

Cold.

Efficient.

As though entire communities had simply become logistical problems requiring administrative adjustment.

Then Peter noticed another section.

Following the declaration of hostilities between the Second Philippine Republic under President Laurel and the United Kingdom in September 1944, British intelligence priorities within occupied Philippine territories expanded considerably regarding Japanese administrative and industrial intentions.

Peter looked up slowly.

"There it is."

Mark nodded once.

“The British suddenly had direct wartime interest in what Japan was doing economically across the Philippines.”

Peter continued reading.

The report referenced the Laurel government repeatedly together with Japanese-sponsored administrative structures operating throughout occupied territory after the establishment of the so-called the Second Philippine Republic in 1943.

Several names appeared familiar now:

Laurel,  
Recto,  
occupation commissions,  
transport ministries,  
industrial planning boards.

The deeper Peter read, the clearer something became.

The Japanese occupation authorities had not behaved like an army expecting permanent victory anymore.

They had behaved like administrators planning continuity.

“This wasn’t looting,” Peter said.

“No.”

“This was preparation.”

Mark leaned back beneath the slow movement of the ceiling fan while outside somebody nearby hammered corrugated roofing into place beneath the brutal afternoon heat.

"The Japanese already understood by late 1944 that territorial control might not survive the war," he said. "So they shifted focus."

"To what?"

"Influence after surrender."

Peter stared again at the report.

One paragraph had been heavily underlined by whoever copied the file decades later.

Recovered materials indicate selected Philippine commercial and political intermediaries were identified as potentially cooperative entities suitable for post-conflict resource continuity under revised sovereignty conditions.

Peter read the sentence twice.

"Cooperative entities," he said eventually.

"Collaborators," Mark translated.

But even that word no longer felt simple.

The report itself acknowledged something Peter had only recently started understanding properly.

Not everybody cooperating with occupation authorities necessarily believed themselves traitors.

Some:

protected families,  
maintained businesses,  
secretly assisted guerrillas,  
or simply survived however they could beneath occupation.

The British analysts appeared to understand this too.

One section noted:

Distinctions between collaboration, accommodation and covert resistance frequently remain operationally unclear within provincial territories.

Peter looked toward the fields outside where Leticia now played near the veranda while Alma watched her from the shade beside the kitchen.

"So after the war everybody just..." He searched briefly for the correct word. "Continued?"

"Yes," Mark replied. "That's exactly what frightened the British."

Peter frowned.

"Why?"

"Because T-Force and Allied intelligence teams expected to find stolen assets and military records." Mark tapped the report lightly. "Instead they discovered administrative continuity.

Japanese survey systems, land classifications and industrial planning already passing into civilian Philippine structures before surrender fully arrived."

Outside the house warm wind moved slowly through the banana trees while dust drifted pale across the road beyond the property.

Peter suddenly understood something else.

"My father."

Mark nodded.

"Yes."

"He may really have seen some of this."

"Possibly without understanding where it eventually led."

That felt likely.

To men in 1946 these reports probably looked obscure and technical compared to the enormous geopolitical changes already reshaping the world:

postwar reconstruction,

communist expansion,  
American influence,  
British decline,  
and the beginning of the Cold War.

Rare earth minerals buried beneath Bohol would have seemed almost irrelevant then.

Time had changed their value.

Peter continued reading.

Near the end of the report another paragraph had been marked heavily in pencil.

Recommendation: material relating to occupation resource-transfer coordination within Philippine territories should remain restricted due to potential political destabilisation involving current postwar administrative partners.

Silence settled heavily across the terrace.

Finally Peter closed the laptop slowly.

“So they buried it.”

Mark nodded once.

“Yes.”

“Because exposing collaboration after the war would destabilise the new government.”

"And because the Americans wanted stability in Asia more than historical purity."

Outside the late afternoon sunlight burned across the rice fields almost white now beneath the dry season heat while somewhere far south machinery still operated around the Jagna excavation site searching for minerals first catalogued before the war had even ended.

Peter looked toward the distant hills beyond the fields.

Then back toward the closed laptop.

"All this started," he said, "because you arrived carrying one old file."

Mark smiled faintly.

"Yes."

Peter thought about the tunnel maps. Daniel Reyes. Antonio Reyes. Miguel Saavedra. The Villanueva families. Wartime transfers buried beneath decades of silence and development.

Then he shook his head slowly.

"No," he said.

"I think it started much earlier than that."

## Chapter Twenty-Three — The Dry Well

The announcement came quietly.

No triumphant press conference.

No dramatic collapse.

Just a carefully worded corporate statement released simultaneously in Manila, Singapore and New York shortly before markets opened on a Monday morning in March.

Jagna Minerals confirmed that revised exploratory drilling results from deeper sections of the eastern Bohol concession indicated “commercial extraction forecasts below initial strategic projections.” The statement continued for several pages using technical language so dense most ordinary readers would never fully understand its meaning.

But the markets understood immediately.

The dream was over.

Not entirely.

The mine still contained valuable rare earth concentrations. Scandium remained commercially recoverable in limited quantities together with several associated minerals useful to specialist industrial markets. Extraction operations would continue under a revised development model supported by “long-term regional resource strategies.”

Yet the enormous speculative frenzy surrounding Jagna finally collapsed.

No miracle deposit.

No Asian mineral superfield.

No geopolitical gold rush.

Just another complicated mine sitting beneath hot hills in Bohol beside roads crowded with motorcycles, roadside stores and exhausted labourers trying to earn a living.

Peter read the statement twice beneath the terrace fan while warm dry-season heat drifted heavily across the rice fields beyond the house.

Then he handed the laptop quietly to Mark.

"That's it?"

Mark nodded once.

"That's it."

Outside somebody nearby cut concrete using power tools while dogs barked irritably beneath the noise. Beyond the school road new food stalls still operated beneath patched tarpaulins selling noodles, cigarettes and cold beer to workers moving toward the mine despite everything that had happened.

Life adjusted quickly in the Philippines.

It had to.

“What happens now?” Alma asked.

Mark leaned back slowly beneath the fan.

“The mine continues smaller than expected. Investors restructure ownership. Somebody else takes operational control eventually.”

“And Miguel?”

“Still wealthy.”

Peter smiled faintly.

Of course he was.

Men like Miguel Saavedra rarely fell completely. They retreated. Reorganised. Allowed public attention to move elsewhere while lawyers and accountants rebuilt structures behind the scenes.

“What about the lawsuits?” Zan asked.

Mark shrugged.

“Some settlements probably. Some claims buried again. Some records disappear.” He glanced toward Peter. “History returning to sleep.”

That felt accurate too.

Because despite everything exposed over recent months, nobody truly expected full justice now. Too much time had passed. Too many documents remained incomplete. Too many people still benefited from uncertainty.

The war itself had ended eighty years earlier.

Most of the dead no longer even had graves anyone could properly identify.

Several days later Peter travelled alone to Jagna one final time.

The district looked strangely unchanged despite everything.

Mining trucks still moved slowly along the roads beneath clouds of pale dust while workers gathered outside stores drinking coffee before shifts began beneath the already brutal morning sun. Children still walked toward school beside endless rows of parked motorcycles and stray dogs still wandered between roadside stalls searching for scraps beneath tables.

Yet something had altered.

The fever had gone.

The atmosphere no longer carried the restless anticipation that once surrounded the project during its early months when everybody believed Jagna might become rich beyond imagination.

Now it simply looked tired.

Real.

Outside the market Peter noticed several unfinished commercial buildings already abandoned before completion. Concrete frames stood empty beside the highway while faded Jagna Minerals banners hung torn and sun-bleached above roadside fencing.

Speculation always built faster than reality.

Near the church the old woman he had seen months earlier still sat beneath the acacia trees watching vehicles move toward the hills.

This time Peter approached her.

"You remember me?"

The woman nodded once.

"The Englishman."

Peter smiled before sitting beside her beneath the shade.

"The mine continues," he said.

"Yes."

"But smaller."

The old woman looked toward the distant hills beyond Jagna.

"Still enough."

That was true.

Still enough money underground to matter.

Still enough value for companies, politicians and investors to remain interested for years ahead.

Peter sat silently for several moments before asking the question that had remained with him since the beginning.

"Did people know after the war?"

The old woman considered that carefully.

"Some people."

"And everybody else?"

She shrugged.

"People survive however they can."

The answer contained no bitterness.

Only exhaustion.

Peter looked toward the roads now carrying trucks, motorcycles and ordinary provincial life through heat shimmering above the concrete.

Then he understood finally why the story unsettled him so deeply.

Because Jagna had never really been about the mine.

Or the scandium.

Or even the wartime transfers.

It was about continuity.

Empires changed.

Flags changed.

Governments changed.

But ownership survived.

The same families.

The same land.

The same quiet arrangements passing from one generation into another while ordinary people adapted around them as best they could.

The treasure had never been hidden underground.

The treasure had been control.

And control, once established successfully, rarely disappeared willingly.

Late that afternoon Peter returned to La Victoria beneath a sky turning white with heat above the dry season fields. Leticia ran toward him immediately beside the house laughing while Alma stood smiling beneath the veranda shade and Nissan repaired a puncture beside the tricycle with patient concentration.

Ordinary life again.

Peter looked across the rice fields where cattle wandered carelessly between invisible boundaries nobody except surveyors and lawyers truly respected.

Beyond them somewhere far south machinery still operated around the Jagna excavation site beneath the endless Bohol heat.

The dry well had not been empty after all.

It had simply contained something nobody expected to find.

## Chapter Twenty-Four — The Leaving

Mark had to return to England in April just before the first serious rains returned across Bohol.

His visa would expire within weeks and, according to Mark, the Philippine immigration authorities had already acquired enough of his money over recent years without voluntarily donating more through extension fees and administrative penalties.

"I'd rather spend it repairing the house," he said.

Peter understood that.

Mark owned a small ageing property in Bridport on the south coast of England which he had inherited years earlier and largely ignored while drifting between freelance research work, temporary contracts and long periods abroad.

Now the place needed refurbishment before he could sell it properly. Damp problems. Roofing repairs. Electrical work. All the ordinary expensive irritations old English houses specialised in producing.

The irony amused Peter.

After uncovering buried wartime intelligence records, Manila corruption, strategic mineral transfers and political scandal stretching back to Japanese occupation, Mark now faced leaking gutters and British electricians.

Life rarely respected dramatic endings.

Outside the weather had already begun shifting toward the wet season. Heavy cloud gathered across the hills most afternoons before warm rain swept suddenly across the rice fields

surrounding La Victoria hard enough to flatten grass and flood the roadside ditches within minutes.

The dry season was ending.

So, Peter realised, was whatever strange period had begun when Mark first arrived carrying his worn folder of copied documents and T-Force references nobody initially understood properly.

Now the mine continued beneath revised ownership structures while Manila attention drifted elsewhere toward newer scandals and newer opportunities.

Exactly as Antonio Reyes had predicted.

Miguel Saavedra survived.

Valdez survived politically though weakened and noticeably less visible.

Several lawsuits remained trapped inside legal systems capable of delaying uncomfortable truths almost indefinitely.

And Jagna itself adjusted once again.

Because places always adjusted eventually.

The evening before Mark left they sat outside beneath the terrace fan drinking San Miguel while warm rain drifted softly across the flooded rice fields beyond the house and frogs screamed endlessly from irrigation ditches now filling steadily again after months of dust and heat.

"You'll come back though," Peter said.

Mark smiled faintly. "Probably."

"Probably?"

"Well, somebody has to make sure you don't start another political crisis accidentally."

Peter laughed.

But both men already knew Mark intended returning eventually.

Partly because of Bohol itself.

Partly because the house sale in England represented closure more than a future.

And partly, Peter suspected, because of Maria.

Mark had been spending increasing amounts of time wandering casually past Zan's family lot during the final weeks before his departure, usually carrying entirely unnecessary items nobody had asked him to buy from town. Bottled water. Bread. Soft drinks. Batteries. The excuses varied. The direction remained consistent.

Maria lived next door to Zan's relatives.

Twenty-two perhaps. Quiet. Intelligent. Long dark hair flowing down her back. She sold snacks and mobile phone credits from

a tiny roadside store attached to her mother's house. Peter had noticed immediately that Mark became considerably less cynical whenever she appeared nearby.

Even Zan had started smiling about it openly.

"She likes him," Zan said one evening after Mark disappeared once again toward the sari-sari stores near the barangay road.

"That's dangerous," Peter replied.

"Yes," Zan agreed cheerfully. "For him."

Now, sitting beneath the terrace fan listening to rain hammer softly against the roof, Peter decided finally to mention it directly.

"So," he said casually, "Maria will miss you."

Mark looked briefly uncomfortable which Peter found deeply entertaining.

"We get on."

"Yes."

Another silence followed.

"You're fifty-eight," Peter said eventually. "You're allowed to admit you rather fancy somebody."

Mark stared at the beer bottle in his hand before laughing despite himself.

"Am I that obvious?"

"Yes."

Outside lightning flickered silently beyond the hills while somewhere across the barangay road karaoke drifted through the rain from a birthday celebration already well beyond sensible volume.

For several moments neither man spoke.

Then Peter looked toward the darkness beyond the terrace where floodlights from the distant school grounds glowed weakly through the rain.

"You ever regret opening that folder?" he asked.

Mark considered the question carefully.

"No."

"Even now?"

"Yes."

Peter nodded slowly.

The answer felt right.

The mine still existed.

The same families largely retained influence.

The same land remained under corporate control.

The same political structures continued functioning much as before.

Yet something hidden had surfaced briefly into daylight.

Enough people now knew.

Enough records existed publicly.

Enough silence had been broken.

History could no longer disappear entirely back into darkness no matter how carefully governments, corporations or families managed the future.

Morning arrived beneath low grey cloud and steady rain moving inland from the sea. Zan drove them toward Jedafi while buses, trucks and motorcycles crowded the wet roads carrying workers, students and entire families somehow balanced impossibly between traffic, puddles and wandering livestock.

Near Jagna the mine road remained active though less frantically now. Security checkpoints still operated. Machinery still moved across the hills. But the fever surrounding the project had faded into something more ordinary.

Industrial.

Permanent.

At the port Mark lifted his luggage from the tricycle while rain drifted across the harbour beyond the terminal.

"You'll keep in touch?" Peter asked.

"Yes."

"And after the house sells?"

Mark glanced briefly toward the south where somewhere beyond the rain and hills La Victoria sat hidden among flooded fields and narrow barangay roads.

"I expect I'll be back," he said .

Peter smiled faintly.

"Yes," he replied.

"I think you probably will."

## Epilogue

By August the rains had settled fully across Bohol.

The roads around La Victoria flooded almost daily while rice fields stretched outward beneath low grey skies broken only occasionally by violent afternoon sunlight turning standing water silver for several brief minutes before the clouds closed again. Cattle wandered where they pleased through mud and roadside grass while motorcycles continued somehow moving entire families through conditions that would have stopped traffic completely in England.

Life adapted.

It always did.

The mine at Jagna still operated.

Smaller than originally promised. Quieter than during the frenzy of the previous year. Several foreign investors had withdrawn completely while ownership structures shifted through new holding companies and revised partnerships nobody locally fully understood anymore. Yet trucks still moved through the hills each morning and floodlights still burned above the excavation site after dark.

Enough minerals remained underground to matter.

Enough money remained to continue.

The great scandal which once dominated Manila headlines had already faded beneath newer political arguments, celebrity scandals and election rumours. Valdez remained in government though less visible than before. Miguel Saavedra appeared only

occasionally now at carefully managed business events where journalists no longer asked questions about Jagna directly.

Antonio Reyes had vanished completely.

Some claimed he left the Philippines.

Others insisted he still moved quietly through Manila using intermediaries and old connections impossible to trace properly.

Peter suspected the second version was probably true.

Certain men never disappeared entirely.

They simply stepped back into the shadows from which influence operated most comfortably.

One humid afternoon Peter stood beneath the veranda watching Leticia chase chickens unsuccessfully across wet grass while Alma shouted warnings she completely ignored. Nearby Nissan repaired roofing sheets damaged during the previous night's storm while music drifted faintly across the barangay from somebody determined the entire district should share their taste in sentimental love songs.

Ordinary life.

That phrase returned to Peter often now.

Because after everything that happened around Jagna, history, wartime transfers, T-Force files and political scandal, ordinary life still continued with remarkable indifference.

Children still went to school.

Dogs still wandered ownerless through the roads.

Roadside stores still sold cigarettes individually to customers counting coins carefully in their hands.

People still survived however they could.

Peter sometimes thought about the tunnel beneath Jagna and the Japanese maps hidden there for eighty years beneath rock and silence. The British reports. The careful administrative language disguising disappearance, collaboration and transfer beneath words like stabilisation and continuity.

History buried inside paperwork.

Perhaps that was always the real danger.

Not that terrible things happened.

But that eventually they became administrative.

Mark telephoned occasionally from England.

The Bridport house, according to him, proved structurally worse than expected and financially more irritating than any wartime conspiracy they had uncovered in the Philippines. Damp walls. Rotten floorboards. Unreliable plumbing. Peter listened patiently through long complaints while secretly suspecting the repairs now moved considerably slower than necessary.

Especially since Maria had begun appearing regularly during the calls.

Not directly.

Just nearby.

Peter would hear her voice occasionally in the background asking questions about England, weather and whether Mark remembered to eat properly.

Mark always sounded younger afterward.

The last conversation ended with Peter asking casually, "So when are you coming back?"

A pause followed.

"Probably before Christmas," Mark admitted finally.

Peter smiled quietly after the call ended.

Yes.

He thought so too.

Late that evening rain moved slowly across the fields again while beyond the hills far south faint industrial lights still marked the location of the Jagna excavation site against the darkness.

Peter stood watching them for several moments.

The dry well had never truly been dry.

It contained minerals certainly.

Money.

Power.

History.

But also something else.

Proof that the past never vanished completely no matter how deeply governments, corporations or families attempted burying it beneath paperwork, silence and time.

Eventually something always surfaced again.

A file.

A map.

A name.

Or simply a man arriving unexpectedly from England carrying an old folder nobody should probably have opened at all.