

# *The Shade of the Mango Tree*

Copyright © 2026 Anthony Stovold

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or distributed in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise — without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for brief quotations used in reviews or other non-commercial critical works as permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organisations, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or to real events is entirely coincidental, except where historical facts or publicly documented events have been incorporated as part of the narrative.

The author has made every reasonable effort to ensure the historical information contained within this book is accurate at the time of publication. Any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the author.

First published in 2026.

**Author:** Anthony Stovold

For information about the author and forthcoming titles, visit:

[www.peter-anthony.co.uk](http://www.peter-anthony.co.uk)

## *Prologue*

La Victoria, Bohol  
March 2052

The first few feet had been easy.

Beneath the shade of the old mango tree, two local men worked steadily, lowering themselves one at a time into the widening shaft while buckets of spoil were hauled to the surface by rope. They had dug wells this way for most of their lives. It was slow, hot work, but the land usually rewarded patience with clean water.

By early afternoon the shaft was already four feet deep.

Zan climbed down the ladder, wiped the sweat from his forehead and drove his spade into the damp clay.

He stopped.

Something had changed.

The blade had met a resistance that wasn't the familiar scrape of limestone or the tangled grip of tree roots. It felt softer... yet strangely solid.

He knelt and laid the spade aside.

Using his fingers, he carefully brushed away the loose earth.

Something pale emerged.

At first he thought it was a root, bleached white by years beneath the soil.

Then the curve became unmistakable.

He froze.

Junior looked down from the top of the shaft.

"What is it?"

Zan didn't answer.

He continued brushing away the clay until the hollow of an eye socket slowly appeared.

Only then did he look up.

"You'd better come down here."

Junior climbed carefully into the well.

For a long moment neither man spoke.

"A dog, perhaps?" Junior said at last, though he sounded unconvinced.

"Perhaps," Zan replied quietly.

But he already knew it wasn't.

Beneath the old mango tree, the earth had begun to surrender one of its oldest secrets

## *Chapter One – The New Well (2052)*

So when the dry weeks settled over La Victoria and the pump began to cough air between gulps, she told Zan, "We'll put a new well beyond the Mango Tree, down by the field. The ground is lower there, and it will save your back considerably."

Zan, Peter and Alma's right-hand man, who at sixty-seven still possessed the build of a man who had laboured honestly all his life, inclined his head. "I shall bring my cousin Junior, Ma'am. We can begin tomorrow, after breakfast."

And so it was settled, with the quiet efficiency that had characterised Alma's household for as long as anyone could remember.

The following morning arrived with the merciless heat peculiar to Bohol in the dry season. By half past nine, the two men had cleared a circle of scrub just beyond the generous shade of the mango tree. It was not, strictly speaking, virgin ground. For years the family had used this spot as a repository for garden refuse, fallen branches, and the general detritus that accumulates on any well-kept property. It lay perhaps a metre lower than the main yard, convenient and discreet, hidden from casual view by the spreading limbs of the ancient tree.

The cicadas, those tireless musicians of the tropics, had already begun their daily concert.

The morning passed in the steady rhythm of shovel, pick, and bucket. The upper layer yielded easily enough, a mixture of old topsoil, decayed leaves and years of discarded garden waste. Beneath it the ground became heavier, the clay clinging stubbornly to the spades. By midday the shaft had reached almost waist height. After a brief meal beneath the mango tree they climbed back down and continued. By early afternoon the excavation was already four feet deep.

Zan drove the spade into the damp earth and paused.

Something had changed.

The blade had met a resistance that wasn't the familiar scrape of limestone or the tangled grip of tree roots...

He knelt and laid the spade aside.

Using his fingers, he carefully brushed away the loose clay.

Something pale emerged from the earth.

At first he thought it was a root bleached white by years beneath the soil.

Then the curve became unmistakable.

He stopped.

Junior looked down from above.

"What is it?"

Zan didn't answer.

He kept clearing the earth until the hollow of an eye socket slowly appeared.

Only then did he look up.

"You'd better come down here."

"A dog, perhaps?" Junior ventured, though his tone suggested he did not quite believe it himself.

"Perhaps," Zan replied, but his voice had acquired that peculiar quietness that comes when a man begins to understand that his day has taken an unexpected turn.

For a moment, the field itself seemed to pause, as though listening.

Years earlier, when the ground had been raw and the house nothing more than surveyor's string and half-set posts, another man had stood on this same patch of earth. Fresh concrete scented the warm air. Somewhere beyond the trees a voice had risen in anger, another answering just as sharply. Then came a sound impossible now to place with certainty, a heavy thud, perhaps, or something dropped onto timber. After that, silence reclaimed the field.

Before dawn someone had worked there in the darkness. Earth disturbed. A tool dropped and not retrieved. Earth replaced. By sunrise there was little to see, and within months foundations, walls and gardens had begun to erase what memory remained.

The ground, as it transpired, was rather good at keeping secrets.

Working with the careful deliberation of men who have begun to suspect the gravity of their discovery, Zan and Junior widened the circle. More bone appeared: the graceful curve of what might have been a skull, a tangle of smaller joints, the unmistakable line of a forearm. Fragments of cloth, grey and degraded, clung to the soil with the tenacity of old gossip. And at the edge of the hollow, half-buried, lay a length of rusted metal fused around what had once been a wooden handle.

Not a knife. Not a bolo.

A chisel. The sort carpenters use to coax dovetails from recalcitrant wood.

Zan wiped his palms on his shorts and stood, his knees protesting slightly. He looked back toward the house, where the mango leaves trembled gently in the morning heat.

"I shall call Alma," he said.

Alma came at once, her hair caught up in a workday scarf, seventy-two years old and as steady as the ground beneath her feet. She did not step into the circle. Instead, she peered from its edge, her face revealing nothing that she did not wish it to reveal. Then she crossed herself with the practiced efficiency of one for whom such gestures are as natural as breathing.

"Call Letecia," she said. "Ask her to come home."

Letecia Ramos answered on the second ring.

She had inherited her father's curiosity but chosen a profession all her own. After graduating in forensic science from the University of Strathclyde, she had joined the forensic unit in Cebu, where her eye for detail had earned quiet respect among colleagues who knew better than to ignore her instincts.

"Don't touch anything," she said. "I'm leaving now."

The ferry from Cebu cut through the channel with the clean precision of a well-honed blade. The island rose to meet it, all green shoulders and white light, offering the promise of familiar air.

Letecia, now thirty-three years old and carrying a single overnight bag (her laboratory coat still folded neatly inside), stood by the rail and tasted salt on the wind.

The telephone call had been admirably brief.

Zan: "We have found bones. Near the field."

Alma, in the background: "Come and see first. Before we report the matter to the barangay captain."

From Getafe she took a van along the coast road, past banana stands and brightly coloured washing strung like cheerful flags across porches. When the driver turned into the narrow lane that led to the house, the familiar structure appeared as it always had, though perhaps a little older. The paint had been gentled by sun and salt air, the veranda swept to within an inch of its life, and the mango tree, vast and generous, threw shadows the size of fishing boats across the yard.

At the gate, a woman was waiting.

Letecia recognized her immediately from photographs, though they had never met in person. Renne, short-haired, quick-eyed, fifty-two years old, possessed that particular quality of watchful intelligence that comes to those who have spent their lives observing the world through a camera lens. The camera in question hung from her neck at present, currently switched off.

She was Peter's granddaughter, daughter of Rachel, his eldest child from his first marriage in England. Rachel had been born in 1971 and had moved to California as a small girl with her mother, Isobel, after the divorce. She had died in France some years prior under circumstances that had left their own shadows. Her mother, Isobel, had followed her to the grave only the previous year, in 2024.

Renne carried her late mother's particular brand of kindness like a lantern in the dark, and something of her grandfather's quiet determination as well, though she had known him only through letters and the occasional video call across the years and miles that had separated them.

"Welcome home," Renne said, with a small smile that carried both warmth and uncertainty. "If I may say that, when I am the visitor here, and you are the one who actually grew up beneath this roof."

"Home is where the heart is," Letecia replied, returning the smile with genuine feeling. "And you have come back to discover the place our father loved."

Renne nodded slowly, her eyes moving past Letecia to take in the house, the sprawling mango tree, the landscape that had occupied such prominence in their shared father's final years. "After Mum died, I realized there were pieces of my own story I had never seen, connections I had never made. This place is one of them. Our father, your father when you knew him, but mine only through absence, he wrote about this house, this tree, as though they were characters in a novel. I wanted to understand why."

"He died when I was nine," Letecia said quietly. "But I remember him here, on that bench, every afternoon. He belonged to this place."

"Then perhaps I can borrow a bit of that belonging," Renne said. "Half-sisters separated by an ocean and a generation, but sisters nonetheless."

They embraced then, two women bound by a love that had outlasted the man who had first taught it to them, connected by blood and loss and the peculiar geography of families that span continents and complications.

Together they walked beneath the spreading branches of the mango tree, toward the house where Alma waited, and toward the mystery that would, in its unfolding, bind them more closely than shared parentage alone ever could.

Alma met them on the veranda steps. She kissed their cheeks and pressed cold glasses into their hands with the quiet authority of a woman accustomed to managing crises with tea and common sense.

"Drink first," she said. "Then we shall go and look."

They crossed the yard in a straight line, the way people do when they are trying very hard not to think too much. The air beneath the mango was ten degrees kinder; beyond its sheltering edge, the light struck white and merciless from freshly scraped earth.

The circle of the proposed new well lay open like an unasked question.

"We stopped digging," Zan said, raising one weathered hand. "Used the spade like a spoon after that. Disturbed nothing more." He pointed to a shallow shelf cut into one side of the excavation. "If you look there, Mrs. Ramos, it is clearer."

Leticia crouched at the rim. She did not touch anything. Not yet.

The bones lay precisely where the soil had released them: the radius and ulna, the cupped bowl of a pelvis. The skull was not immediately visible, either deeper still or displaced by time and weather. Near what had once been the ribcage, half-buried, a metal shaft caught the sunlight through a heavy patina of rust.

She slid a small penlight from her pocket and allowed its narrow beam to trace the edges.

"These have been here a considerable time," she murmured, more to herself than to the others. "Decades, certainly. No soft tissue remains. Weathered, but sheltered enough to maintain some structural integrity."

"Since the old owner's time, do you suppose?" Alma asked.

"Before you, almost certainly." Leticia nodded toward the rusted tool. "Do not touch that, please. We shall bag it exactly as it lies."

Renne stood a little back, taking in the pattern rather than the individual pieces, a photographer's habit. "I was reading your father's notes last night," she said quietly. "He purchased the house in 2019. The construction was completed in 2009. There were men sleeping on site back then, I believe."

"The carpenters kept watch," Zan confirmed. "Tools were precious."

Letecia glanced at him. Zan's face held more than his words conveyed. There was old worry there, and older loyalties. She had grown up reading that face as one might read a familiar book.

"We shall keep this quiet for a few hours," she said with decision. "I shall document what we can observe. Then we call the barangay captain. If we begin with order, we may yet end with it."

No one offered any objection.

She unpacked her modest field kit: evidence flags no larger than matchboxes, a roll of white twine, and the inexpensive but faithful camera she carried for work that never reached the gleaming laboratories of the city. As she sketched the circle and marked the first reference points, her mind performed its calculations without conscious effort: the angle of the forearm, the alignment of the pelvis, the depth at which cloth still clung stubbornly to bone.

She noted the soil composition: years of garden waste, layered and compacted, washed downslope during the rainy seasons, then trapped again by vegetation. A shallow burial, hidden less by careful intent than by the patient, indifferent work of passing time.

When she reached the chisel, she did not attempt to lift it. Instead, she cleared around the metal with a folded strip of cardboard until the full implement lay exposed: long, square in cross-section, the wooden shaft rotted away where weather and perhaps other substances had conspired against it. A maker's stamp still showed faintly on one flat surface: a tiny star and two letters.

"Local manufacture," Zan observed, crouching beside her. "The Trinidad workshop. The old man has passed, but his grandson continues the business. They still make these, though we call the larger ones bolos."

Letecia's mouth formed a thin line. "Then this tool has a cousin somewhere in someone's records," she said. "That is useful."

She sat back on her heels and allowed her eyes to soften slightly, so that the individual pieces might arrange themselves into a larger pattern.

An accidental weapon, perhaps?

A convenient hollow?

Panic first, then the long, quiet, methodical work of concealment?

Behind her, Alma released a breath she had not realised she had been holding.

"There were no police reports when we purchased the house," she said. "Your father checked most thoroughly. He kept every paper."

Renne nodded slowly. "Sometimes fear is the only thing people leave behind."

They stood together in the heat, listening to insects stitch the air back together with their invisible thread. A rooster crowed, belatedly, as though catching up with the morning's agenda. From the road came the cheerful honk of a tricycle and a child's bright laughter.

Life moved past them, untroubled and intact.

But here, beneath the generous shade of the mango tree, the past had begun, at last, to speak.

2009 – During the Build

In 2009 the house was not yet a house. It was merely a skeleton of posts and concrete, the air perpetually sharp with lime dust and the acrid smell of wet cement. At night it stood in isolation above the rice field, illuminated by lights strung precariously from a generator, tools locked away as securely as circumstances permitted. Someone always slept on site. Experience had taught the foreman that materials possessed an unfortunate tendency to vanish if left unguarded.

Eladio Villaverde had been the one designated to keep watch. He was a carpenter by trade, steady with his hands, possessed of a reputation for arriving early and departing late. He appeared to enjoy the quiet hours after darkness fell, the peculiar sense that during those silent watches, the work belonged to him alone.

But on that particular night, he announced that he was unwell. It was a Sunday. No work was scheduled. It would be quiet.

"I shall swap with you," he told Jun, pressing a small torch into the younger man's hand. "Just this once."

Jun was younger by perhaps more than a decade, broad-shouldered, quick to laughter, not given to asking inconvenient questions. A night's wages was a night's wages, after all.

Eladio departed before dusk.

On that Sunday, the twenty-eighth of June, he rode north, away from the building site, toward a small hamlet called Liberty near Bien Unido. A friend of dubious character kept a hut there beside a derelict fish farm. The ponds had long since gone sour and useless. The roof, however, still held. Inside there was a serviceable bed, a table and dresser of the most rudimentary sort, some rum, a crate of empty bottles that spoke of previous occupants, and cigarettes left behind by other men who had wanted very much not to be seen.

Jun had shown Mira how to use the Nokia mobile telephone he had purchased, instructing her with careful precision to position herself so that her visitors would be facing the hidden camera.

They had discussed the arrangement with the practical efficiency of young people who understood that money solved problems, and that certain men, particularly married men, men of standing in the community, men with reputations to protect, would pay handsomely to ensure their activities with a fifteen-year-old girl never came to light. It was, Jun had reasoned, a form of insurance.

What transpired in that isolated hut by the abandoned fish farm would be considered by the authorities not merely as indiscretion but as something far graver. Mira's age alone rendered every visitor vulnerable to charges that could destroy careers, families, and futures. The camera merely ensured they paid appropriately for silence.

This particular instruction had made her late for her appointment with Eladio, but Mira, being Mira, arrived nonetheless barefoot, in just T-shirt and skirt and laughing as though she were considerably older than her fifteen years. She had learned that particular tone already, the one that suggested both availability and indifference in equal measure.

Men listened when she used that voice. She knew that much. What neither she nor Jun yet understood, what perhaps no pair so young could properly comprehend, was the precise cost of being listened to by precisely the wrong men, men who understood that the consequences of exposure were so severe that alternative solutions might seem preferable.

Eladio had given her money at first for inconsequential things: shoes, food, telephone credit. He told himself it was kindness, that he was helping a struggling girl from a poor family. He told himself a great many things to obscure what he knew to be true: that he, a man of forty with a family, was visiting a child in secret.

Over time, the nature of the exchange had altered, as such arrangements inevitably do, and now the moment had arrived when he wanted Mira, naked on the bed, so he could have what he had been paying for all along.

What followed was neither romance nor love. It was secrecy, and fear, and the particular species of agreement that only ever flows in one direction, an agreement that, should it become known, would see him reviled by his community and quite possibly imprisoned.

When Mira realised that Eladio, or one of the others, might have made her pregnant, she did not weep. Instead, she counted. Weeks. Days. What she possessed and what she did not.

She possessed evidence that could destroy multiple men.

What she did not possess was the understanding that such evidence could also destroy her.

She did not speak to Eladio immediately.

She told Jun first, as was natural given their arrangement. Jun, who had believed himself in control of the situation, who had imagined the camera provided leverage and protection, now understood with uncomfortable clarity that circumstances had advanced beyond his management.

Mira boasted to a school friend, another girl who understood instinctively how information might be traded like any other commodity. That girl mentioned it, with apparent carelessness, to an older cousin. The cousin, whose nickname was Al, listened with considerable care.

Men who listened carefully often kept notes. And notes, in time, became demands.

Jun approached Eladio directly, holding the mobile telephone not as a threat precisely, but as evidence of what could be proven. What he sought was simple enough: continued financial support for Mira, for the child, for the complications that Eladio's actions had created.

What he received was something altogether different.

Jun did not laugh when Eladio attempted to dismiss him with excuses and evasions. He had invested too much in this arrangement, had planned too carefully, to be sent away empty-handed.

It was this insistence, this refusal to simply disappear as young men of his station were expected to do, that sealed his fate on the concrete steps that night.

The Concrete Steps (2009)

Jun waited until the generator's persistent noise dropped to a lower register and the building site settled into its nocturnal configuration. The air carried the mingled scents of wet cement and river grass. Somewhere in the darkness below, frogs had commenced their nightly disputation.

Eladio was securing the tool chest when Jun stepped forward from the shadows.

"I need to speak with you," Jun said.

Eladio startled, then frowned with evident displeasure. "Not now."

"It will not take long."

Jun maintained an even tone. He had rehearsed this much, at least. Anger, he knew, made men careless, and carelessness in such circumstances was exceedingly dangerous. He had learned that already, though he was young.

Eladio released a weary sigh and set the padlock down upon the ground. "What is it, then?"

Jun raised the mobile telephone. Not threateningly. Not held close. Simply enough to be visible in the dim light.

"You promised," he said with careful precision. "For the baby. For Mira. You said you would provide assistance."

Eladio's eyes moved to the telephone, then away again with studied indifference. "I gave you money."

"Once," Jun replied. "Then nothing further. You instructed me to wait."

The silence that followed possessed a quality of weight. In the distance, a dog barked along the road, its voice carrying through the humid air.

"You should not be holding that," Eladio said at length. His voice had altered subtly. Thinner now, stretched tight over something harder beneath.

"I did not wish to," Jun answered. "But people talk, you understand. Someone informed me that you would deny everything. That you would claim I was fabricating lies."

Eladio moved closer. The concrete steps behind him remained raw and unfinished, pale as bone in the moonlight.

"You do not understand the situation," he said, his voice dropping to something approaching confidence shared between conspirators. "You believe such a thing protects you?"

"I believe it protects her," Jun said simply. "That is sufficient."

Eladio reached for the telephone.

Jun withdrew his hand instinctively. "Do not."

The word landed with unfortunate force.

What followed occurred with the terrible swiftness that characterises moments which alter everything. Eladio lunged forward. His foot encountered cement dust and lost purchase. His shoulder struck Jun with sufficient violence to expel the air from the younger man's lungs.

Jun stumbled backward, attempted to maintain his balance, felt the edge of the concrete step catch his heel with fatal precision.

There was a sound, sharp and final, bone meeting concrete, and then the night seemed to fold inward upon itself.

When Eladio recovered his senses, Jun lay sprawled at the base of the steps, eyes half-open, breathing in shallow, laboured gasps, blood already darkening his hair in a spreading stain.

"Eladio." The voice came from nearby, sharp with alarm. Paeng's voice. "What have you done?"

"I did not," Eladio whispered, his own voice barely recognisable. "He fell."

Paeng looked at Jun's motionless form, then at the mobile telephone lying near the young man's outstretched hand, its small screen still faintly glowing.

"How much evidence does he possess?" Paeng asked with the practical efficiency of a man accustomed to solving problems.

Eladio shook his head helplessly. "I do not know."

Paeng's jaw tightened with decision. "Then we discover what there is to find."

They lifted Jun between them. He groaned once, a low, wet sound that spoke of internal damage, then sagged into unconsciousness again.

"Not here," Paeng said quietly. "Someone will hear."

They took the irrigation path, away from the generator's lights, toward the abandoned fishponds where voices disappeared into water and reeds and the general indifference of nature.

Jun returned to consciousness as they dragged him through the mud. Not fully. Not with anything approaching clarity. But enough to understand, with the terrible lucidity that sometimes accompanies mortal injury, that whatever he had believed this encounter to be, a conversation, a negotiation, a line he might draw and defend, had already concluded in a manner quite different from his intention.

What transpired at the fishponds was brief and without ceremony. When it was finished, Paeng retrieved the telephone and examined its contents by the light of Eladio's torch. He deleted what required deletion, then dropped the device into the dark water where it disappeared with scarcely a sound.

"We cannot leave him here," Paeng said. "They will search the ponds first."

Eladio, who had been standing motionless, seemed incapable of speech.

"The site," Paeng continued, his voice assuming the quality of command. "Beyond the mango tree. The ground is already disturbed there. Garden refuse. No one will notice fresh digging."

They carried Jun's body back through the darkness, two men bearing a burden that would prove considerably heavier than its physical weight. Paeng had thought to collect a chisel and spade from the unlocked tool chest. The ground beyond the mango tree yielded easily, softened by recent rain. They worked quickly, without conversation, and when it was done, they scattered branches and garden waste across the disturbed earth with the care of men who understood that their lives now depended upon the quality of their concealment.

"In the morning," Paeng said, "you will tell the foreman that Jun failed to appear for his shift. You will express surprise. Nothing more."

Eladio nodded, though whether he fully comprehended remained uncertain.

"Go home," Paeng instructed. "Wash. Sleep if you can. Remember only that he fell, and that when you went to summon help, he had vanished. Young men run. Everyone knows this."

In the morning, Eladio reported to the foreman that Jun had not appeared for duty. People shook their heads with resignation rather than surprise. Young men departed without notice. Young men fled responsibilities, particularly those involving women and unborn children.

When Mira's pregnancy became undeniably visible some months later, the village arrived at its own conclusions. Jun was the father, surely. Or perhaps his brother. It was a neat explanation, requiring no further investigation, demanding no uncomfortable questions.

The house continued to rise, wall by wall, window by window, into its intended form.

Seasons passed with their customary indifference.

The earth kept what it had been given, and asked nothing in return.

And then, one dry morning forty-three years later, the ground was asked, at last, to surrender its secret.

Letecia rose from her examination, brushing dust from her knees with absent precision. "We shall cover it with tarpaulin for the night," she announced. "I shall telephone the barangay captain at dawn. We shall conduct this properly, without gossip, without crowds gathering. Whoever he was, he deserves the dignity of a name."

Renne lifted her camera, regarded it thoughtfully, then lowered it again. "May I record interviews after you have spoken with the captain? Not the remains themselves, but people's memories. If there is family somewhere, they may require more than an official report."

"Later," Alma said gently. "First, we honour the place itself."

Letecia looked toward the house. In the deep shade of the veranda, her father's bench occupied its familiar position, a strip of paint worn smooth where a hand had rested through a thousand quiet afternoons. For a moment she saw him there with perfect clarity, the half-smile, the patient eyes, and felt steadied by the memory.

She turned back to Zan. "When precisely did you say the construction was completed here?"

"Two thousand and nine," he replied. "They worked at night during certain weeks. The foreman engaged one of the carpenters to serve as night security."

"And other men passed through," Alma added carefully. "Labourers from the road. Temporary workers."

Renne's voice carried the particular caution of one navigating delicate territory. "We are not accusing anyone, you understand. We are merely establishing what truth can be demonstrated."

"Truth is what returns when one digs," Alma observed with the quiet authority of age. "Everything else is merely speculation."

A wind moved through the upper branches of the mango tree, and the leaves responded with a sound resembling distant rain. The light shifted; the circle of the shallow excavation became a bowl of shadow, then bright again as clouds passed. Letecia felt it then, that old, familiar stillness that came to her only when professional duty and personal love occupied the same space.

"Very well," she said with decision. "Zan, please fetch the tarpaulin. Renne, assist me in marking the perimeter properly."

They moved with the practiced efficiency of a small household long accustomed to cooperation, each knowing precisely where to place their hands. When the excavation had been covered and the tools stacked in proper order, Alma stood for a moment at the rim and whispered a prayer that did not presume to invoke a specific name.

As they walked back beneath the spreading canopy of the mango tree, Renne touched Letecia's arm lightly. "You will identify him," she said with quiet confidence. "You always do."

Letecia glanced upward through the green cathedral of leaves, the same eternal sky visible beyond, and felt the island settle around her like a familiar, well-worn shawl.

"We shall endeavour to do so," she replied. "And if the truth lies buried, we shall meet it halfway."

From the field, the tarpaulin moved softly in the breeze, a small flag marking a secret kept overlong. The afternoon bent gradually toward evening, and somewhere not far distant, the first star waited patiently for the light to loosen its hold upon the sky.

Al Sent a Note

The note was brief in the extreme. Folded twice. Slipped beneath a door with the practiced discretion of one accustomed to such communications.

*You pay, or I talk.*

Eladio knew with perfect certainty that the demands would not cease. Blackmail never did. It merely learned to calculate in progressively larger figures.

The subsequent message arrived late one evening, without ceremony or preamble. *Ten thousand. Same place.*

No greeting. No explanation. None was required.

By this juncture, Eladio had acquired sufficient information regarding his correspondent. The cousin's sobriquet was Al, borrowed from an American gangster of notorious reputation whom he half-admired and largely misunderstood. He dealt in cocaine when supply permitted, pharmaceutical pills when it did not. He was sufficiently loud to attract notice, sufficiently careless to believe himself somehow protected by his connections.

Eladio composed his reply in the manner he had established previously.

*"I have one puppy remaining. Would you like it?"*

It was their agreed signal. Acceptance. The money would be deposited in the customary location: folded into a paper bag and dropped into the refuse bin positioned outside the massage parlour in Trinidad. Sufficiently public to pass unnoticed. Sufficiently private to escape scrutiny.

That evening, Eladio proceeded with deliberate care. He deposited the money as arranged, then did not return home as might have been expected. Instead, he repositioned himself near the rear entrance and settled into patient observation. The wire already rested in his pocket, coiled and smooth to the touch. His breathing remained steady and controlled. Waiting, he had learned through bitter experience, was the moment when mistakes occurred most frequently. He had no intention of committing one.

Al arrived by tricycle, as was his custom.

Someone must have been at the front, observing, reporting his movements. Someone always was in such arrangements. Al entered the massage parlour, emerged moments later with the paper bag secured beneath his arm, already permitting himself a smile of anticipated satisfaction. He failed entirely to observe Eladio stepping up behind him with silent purpose.

The wire formed a loop in a single, practiced motion. Tightened with efficient brutality. No words were exchanged. The struggle concluded with remarkable swiftness.

Eladio lifted the body, now merely an awkward weight requiring disposal, onto the tricycle, engaged the engine, and departed. The road leading to the beach lay empty in the late hour. Fishing boats rested pulled up on the sand, dark shapes against darker water. One of them belonged to his extended family. He had prepared it earlier in the day with chain and additional wire, nothing that might float or return to shore bearing inconvenient evidence.

He transferred the weight with methodical care. Removed the wallet. The mobile telephone. Anything that might speak later, as objects sometimes do when examined by sufficiently curious authorities.

Far out from shore, where the seabed dropped away precipitously and the coastal lights lost their comforting proximity, he committed the body to the depths. It disappeared without sound, leaving scarcely a disturbance on the black surface.

On his return journey, he exercised particular cunning. He did not secure the boat properly to its mooring. Instead, he left it drifting, engine silenced, an unanswered suggestion floating on the tide. By morning, people would construct whatever narrative suited their understanding best. Panic. Hasty escape. A man who fled when pressure closed in around him.

Eladio had served, on occasion, as a police informant when such service advanced his interests. This circumstance proved no different. He contacted his usual intermediary with information that Al was a dealer of some significance, that a substantial shipment was anticipated, that the authorities should investigate with appropriate urgency.

They did so with gratifying promptness.

In the days that followed, rumours travelled with considerably greater velocity than verifiable facts. Al had vanished completely. The police were conducting inquiries. Some said he had fled to Mindanao. Others suggested he was concealing himself, waiting for attention to move elsewhere. No one thought to search beneath the sand or beyond the reach of the tide, where the deep water kept its counsel with admirable discretion.

Eladio returned to his customary employment, quieter now in demeanour, certain of only one thing with absolute clarity.

What had commenced as a demand had concluded as a decision.

And in the particular calculus of men who have already buried one secret, the addition of a second seemed less a transgression than a logical progression, a necessary measure taken to preserve what had been so carefully concealed.

The earth beneath the mango tree held Jun's remains with patient silence. The sea, equally obliging, had accepted Al's body into its darker keeping. Between these two elements, earth and water, Eladio Villaverde had distributed his crimes with a symmetry that might almost have been described as artistic, had the subject matter been less grim.

He slept poorly, but he slept. He worked steadily, and his hands remained as reliable as ever. If his nephew Paeng observed any alteration in his uncle's manner, he chose not to remark upon it. Complicity, after all, creates its own peculiar bond, a silence shared between men who understand that speech offers only danger.

The years advanced. The house beneath which Jun lay buried. changed hands, acquired new occupants, witnessed the ordinary drama of domestic life. Children grew. Gardens flourished. The mango tree spread its generous shade over family gatherings and quiet afternoons.

And beneath it all, patient as stone, the past waited for its moment to speak.

That moment would come, as such moments invariably do, not through confession or divine intervention, but through the prosaic agency of thirst, and the simple human need for water drawn from a well that had not yet been dug.

## *Chapter Two – Paper and Steel*

### Morning Light

By dawn the mist had lifted from the rice fields, leaving a film of silver across every blade of grass, as though the night had decided to depart with a flourish of theatrical beauty.

From the house came the gentle hiss of water heating for coffee and the soft, domestic click of cups being arranged on saucers.

Letecia was already outside, her boots sinking into grass still wet with dew. The tarpaulin she and Zan had positioned the previous evening sagged slightly beneath the weight of overnight rain. She touched it with careful fingers, checking for pooling water, then knelt and lifted one corner with the deliberation of one who understands that evidence, once disturbed, can never be perfectly restored.

The soil beneath remained dark and cool to the touch. The excavation appeared smaller in the morning light, as though night had exaggerated its dimensions in that peculiar way darkness has of magnifying significance.

She withdrew her camera from her bag, steadied it against her knee, and began a methodical circuit of photographs: angles, distances, every detail that might fade from memory once the barangay authorities saw fit to proceed with their official processes.

Behind her, the unmistakable aroma of fried rice drifted down the garden path.

Alma's voice carried from the kitchen with maternal authority: "Anak, you require proper food before you engage in battle with government bureaucracy!"

Letecia smiled without turning. "Later, Mum. I must capture the morning light while it remains favourable."

She paused, adjusted the lens with practiced precision, then added more quietly, "It is kinder to the subject."

By seven o'clock, the first tricycle rattled up the narrow lane and came to rest beside the gate with a final, emphatic cough of its elderly engine.

Captain Ortega descended with the careful dignity of a man whose years and position entitled him to move at his own pace. He smoothed his shirt over a belly that time had rendered generous, followed by a young aide who carried a clipboard and possessed the anxious demeanour of one who suspects he may be inadequate to whatever task awaits him.

"Doktora," Ortega said, touching the brim of his hat in courteous acknowledgment. "I am informed you have discovered human remains."

"Not I, Captain," Letecia replied with scrupulous accuracy. "The land has chosen to reveal them."

He nodded slowly, taking his time to extract and light a cigarette before approaching closer to the covered excavation. "No sense in causing unnecessary alarm among the population," he observed, exhaling thoughtfully. "We shall maintain discretion, yes? The last circumstance I require is half the barangay arriving with candles and the inevitable manufacture of rumours."

"Precisely why I contacted you first, Captain."

She drew back the tarpaulin once more and indicated the shape within the soil with a gesture of professional economy. "One individual, adult male, interred more than forty years past. Observe the degree of corrosion on the metal implement? Local manufacture, a chisel with square edge, quality steel. Whoever performed this burial did not arrive with a considered plan. They merely required the ground to close over their action and maintain silence."

Ortega released a long breath through his teeth. "So we may eliminate the theory of an American treasure hunter, at least. That particular rumour may be laid to rest."

Letecia permitted herself the ghost of a smile. "We may confidently rule out that possibility."

The young aide raised his mobile telephone to capture images, his angles careless and inconsistent.

Letecia said with gentle firmness, "Perhaps it would be preferable if I managed the photographic documentation. These records must maintain proper standards of consistency."

The young man flushed deeply and withdrew, chastened.

Alma arrived bearing the coffee pot and a collection of paper cups, Renne following behind with her camera not yet activated.

Ortega accepted coffee with an expression of profound gratitude. "You prepare it admirably strong, Ma'am Alma. Perhaps that explains why your mango tree never succumbs to age or disease."

"It thrives on gossip, Captain," Alma replied, pouring herself a cup with practiced ease. "You provide ample nourishment with each visit."

The small gathering laughed, and for a moment the morning resumed its ordinary character: roosters proclaiming territorial claims, the honest smell of earth, the comfortable exchange of pleasantries.

Then Ortega set down his cup and adopted a more official tone. "We shall need to transport the remains to Trinidad, to the police station. Perhaps the city pathologist can confirm what you have already determined. I shall arrange for my truck."

"The city pathologist is not available this week," Letecia informed him. "He is attending a training course in Tagbilaran. I can document everything comprehensively here and arrange proper transport subsequently. We conduct this process once, with appropriate care. We do not subject the dead to unnecessary disturbance through repeated handling."

He studied her for a long moment, weighing the quiet authority in her voice more than the content of her words, then inclined his head in agreement.

"Very well, Doktora," he said. "Provide me with a written report for the official record."

They departed for the barangay hall after breakfast: Letecia, Renne, and the Captain compressed into the tricycle, bouncing along the road between patterns of coconut shadow and brilliant sunlight.

The hall possessed the distinctive aroma of floor polish and damp paper that characterises government buildings throughout the islands. A single ceiling fan rotated above the Captain's desk with hypnotic persistence, redistributing the warm air without materially altering the temperature.

A clerk emerged from a side room carrying a precarious stack of folders secured with rubber bands that had gone brittle with age and tropical humidity.

"Building permits," he announced with evident pride. "Or what remains of them after various administrative challenges."

Ortega gestured expansively. "Show the Doktora. She possesses an appreciation for documentary evidence."

The clerk spread the folders across the desk, each bearing official stamps and annotations in the looping handwriting that characterised an earlier generation of civil servants. The dates extended back two decades, the ink fading to the pale colour of weak tea.

Letecia examined them with methodical care. "You maintain these in chronological order?"

"Mostly through fortunate accident," the clerk admitted cheerfully. "The typhoon last year performed a certain sorting function. The documents that remained dry rose to the top, while those that achieved a more sacred condition through water damage settled below."

Renne concealed a smile behind her hand.

The Captain leaned forward with interest. "The residence of Alma Mabesa and Peter Rawlins, the Doktora's late father, should be documented somewhere. The year 2019, I believe?"

The clerk offered an apologetic shrug. "If such a document existed, it has achieved invisibility. Perhaps it was never properly filed. You understand how these matters proceed. The builder promises to complete the paperwork next week, and next week acquires a philosophical quality, becoming a destination that never quite arrives. Such occurrences are not uncommon."

Letecia said softly, "They continue to occur with remarkable consistency."

The Captain chuckled with the satisfaction of one who has long since made peace with such inefficiencies. "It represents the local approach to temporal progression, Doktora. We employ the term 'mañana'. It does not signify tomorrow precisely. It merely indicates... not yet. Do not concern yourself excessively. Time possesses a curious habit of eventually returning what has been temporarily mislaid."

When they returned to the house, Zan had positioned the chisel on a folded towel with the reverence one might accord a religious artifact.

The implement caught the afternoon light, revealing itself as a dull, scarred length of metal with the wooden handle long since rotted to nothing.

Letecia crouched beside it, camera already raised.

"Steel," she observed. "One can read its history, if one possesses the knowledge."

Zan nodded with certainty. "You should speak with the Santos family in Trinidad. They manufactured chisels for half the island. There is a mark, you see? That small star? They employed it before the war, when quality still signified something beyond mere commerce."

Renne adjusted her camera strap. "Is the original craftsman still living?"

"The grandson continues the business. Tano Santos. He is somewhat younger than myself, but he received instruction from men who were true masters of the craft."

Letecia wrapped the chisel in clean cloth with appropriate care. "Then we shall visit him tomorrow."

That evening, after young Munchi had been settled for the night and Alma had retired to her room, Letecia sat on the veranda with Renne beside her.

The air hung thick with the scent of mango flowers. Somewhere in the encompassing darkness, a gecko produced its rhythmic clicking, nature's metronome marking the passage of tropical night.

Renne spoke first, her voice thoughtful. "It possesses a certain strangeness, does it not? Something buried before any of us had even met, choosing to reveal itself now, after so many years."

Letecia nodded slowly. "Things remain concealed until circumstances determine otherwise."

"Will you inform the newspapers?"

"I shall file the required official report," Letecia replied. "What the press chooses to do with that information lies beyond my authority or concern."

Renne smiled, a slow, weary curve of her lips. "Mum would have liked you enormously."

Letecia gazed out toward the yard where the tarpaulin gleamed faintly in the moonlight, a pale rectangle marking where the earth had surrendered its secret. "She does still," she said quietly.

The two women sat in companionable silence while the great tree whispered above them, conversing with the night breeze in its ancient, patient language. The darkness felt full again, not oppressive, not melancholy, merely full in the way that significant moments possess weight without necessarily imposing burden.

Tomorrow would bring paper and steel, the next modest piece of a story the island had been holding in its soil for more than four decades, waiting with the infinite patience that only the earth can muster for the precise moment when truth might at last be spoken.

## *Chapter Three – Paperwork and Steel*

The road to Trinidad wound through low hills where bamboo groves clattered in the wind with a sound resembling polite applause. Letecia sat behind Zan, who piloted the rather battered tricycle with the confidence of long familiarity, the wrapped chisel resting across her knees like some peculiar species of cargo. The morning sun retained its freshness, but the air already shimmered with the promise of considerable heat to come. Renne occupied the pillion seat, camera slung ready, capturing fragments of roadside life as they passed: women beating rugs with rhythmic efficiency, a vendor selling ice in blue plastic bags, a dog sleeping with perfect contentment in a doorway.

They arrived at the police post shortly before nine o'clock. It occupied a position beside a bakery and consequently possessed the curious dual aroma of sweet bread and engine oil. Within, electric fans rotated with languid inefficiency, stirring more dust than air. Sergeant Mateo, a lean man with careful, observant eyes, glanced up from his ledger.

"Ah, the Doktora from La Victoria," he said with recognition. "Captain Ortega sent word by radio. You have brought us a problem, I understand?"

"A modest one," Letecia replied, setting the cloth-wrapped parcel upon his desk with appropriate care. "Human skeletal remains, discovered on family property. Likely interred since approximately 2009. I require only to log evidence formally and trace the maker's mark on this implement."

Mateo unwrapped the cloth as though it might contain something sacred, or at least deserving of respect. "Forty-odd years," he murmured thoughtfully. "That predates half my constables by a considerable margin." He rotated the tool slowly in his weathered hands. The metal had darkened with oxidation, but along one edge the stamp remained faintly visible: a five-pointed star positioned above two letters.

"Santos & Sons," he identified immediately. "They forged everything from fishing hooks to church hinges. The original establishment still operates near the river, I believe."

"Then we shall commence our inquiries there," Letecia said. "May I sign the chain of custody documentation here, maintaining temporary possession until we reach the foundry?"

Mateo slid a form toward her, already partially completed. "Record it however you deem appropriate, Doktora. We merely require something officially documented before the inevitable rumours commence circulation."

Renne offered a wry smile. "Once matters are committed to writing, people cease disputing the facts."

Mateo chuckled with the wisdom of long experience. "Not in this climate, I assure you."

The foundry occupied premises behind a row of mechanic shops where the air shimmered with welding sparks and rang with the percussion of metal against metal. Within, Tano Santos, bare-armed, grey-haired, a man constructed entirely of calluses and memory, was hammering at a length of iron that would eventually become a gate latch.

When Letecia introduced herself, he set the hammer down with surprising gentleness, as though it might shatter something fragile in the past. "You have discovered one of our pieces?" he inquired. "No one has employed that particular maker's mark since my grandfather's time."

She unwrapped the chisel. His eyes softened with recognition. "Star and twin S," he confirmed. "Yes, indeed. We sold perhaps a dozen implements similar to this one to the construction crew building a new residence in La Victoria, must be forty-odd years past now. Eladio Villaverde served as the carpenter. A capable man, quiet in his manner. He drank somewhat, but who among us did not in those days? He came here to replenish his tool collection before commencing each major project."

"You remember him with clarity?"

Tano smiled without apparent irony. "I remember every hand that paid in full and on time."

He rubbed his thumb across the rusted surface with the familiarity of long craftsmanship. "When we stamped this steel, I was twenty years of age. We employed high-carbon stock in that era. It did not bend or break easily under stress."

Letecia nodded, more to herself than to anyone present. Steel, unlike men, held its shape and told no lies.

Renne filmed briefly: the rhythmic gleam of the forge, Tano's lined face haloed by heat and flickering light, then lowered her lens respectfully. "Do you know if Eladio Villaverde still lives?"

Tano hesitated, his expression becoming more guarded. "Last intelligence I received, he resides beyond Ubay with his daughter. His eyesight has failed considerably. He still breathes, however. You will locate the house by the sound of chickens, I should imagine."

He rewrapped the chisel with something approaching reverence. "Inform him, if you would, that we forged tools for construction, not for burial."

On the return journey, the tricycle rattled and the wind carried the mingled scents of hot diesel and sea salt. Renne leaned close so Letecia might hear her over the engine's persistent noise.

"Do you suppose he knew what he was creating?" she asked thoughtfully.

"The smith?" Letecia shook her head. "We never truly know what our work becomes. We create something straight and true, and someone employs it for purposes entirely sideways to our intention."

Renne smiled thinly. "That occurs with considerably greater frequency than anyone cares to admit."

When they reached La Victoria, Alma was sweeping the veranda with her customary thoroughness. Munchi ran down the path, barefoot, her laughter as bright and clean as the tin roof catching sunlight. Letecia lifted her daughter easily, breathing in the wholesome scent of soap and sun.

"Did you discover the truth?" Alma inquired.

"Only its beginning," Letecia replied. "A name for the steel, not yet for the man who wielded it."

Alma nodded as though this represented entirely satisfactory progress for a single day. "One does not hurry such matters," she observed. "They proceed at the same measured pace as old women and small children."

They ate late: fried chicken, rice, dried fish, and mango slices cold from the refrigerator. After dinner, Letecia arranged her notes in proper order: measurements, soil composition, estimated post-mortem interval of forty-four years, allowing for seasonal variation. The chisel lay beside her lamp, wrapped once more in its cloth, waiting with the patience that only inanimate objects can truly master.

Renne worked at the adjacent table, cataloguing video clips on her laptop. The blue light flickered across her features like distant lightning. "I was considering," she said quietly, "naming my documentary piece 'The Weight of Tools.' It seems appropriate for both our endeavours."

Letecia smiled with genuine appreciation. "An excellent title. But please do not display the remains themselves."

"I shall not. Only the hands of those who work."

"Whose hands?"

"Everyone's," Renne said simply.

They sat together in companionable silence until the ceiling fan began to produce a rhythmic clicking sound and the night insects commenced tuning their small orchestra. From the yard came the slow, patient creak of the mango branches swaying in darkness. Somewhere beneath them, in the soft dark soil, the past waited for its final witness.

Letecia closed her notebook with quiet finality. "Tomorrow," she said, "we travel to Ubay."

The decision, once spoken, acquired the quality of inevitability. Eladio Villaverde, carpenter, drinker, purchaser of quality tools, now an old man with failing eyes and chickens for company, would receive visitors. Whether he would receive them with relief or terror remained to be determined.

But he would, Letecia thought with the calm certainty that characterized her work, receive them with truth. One way or another, after forty-four years of silence, the ground had begun to speak, and men would be obliged to listen.

### *Chapter Four – The Confession That Isn't*

The road to Ubay ran westward with the morning, traversing peanut fields and modest dwellings adorned with laundry that flapped in the breeze like so many flags of truce.

Zan operated the tricycle as though it were a solemn promise he intended to keep, steady and unhurried in his progress.

Renne occupied the sidecar with her camera resting in her lap, lens carefully capped against the dust of travel.

Letecia sat behind Zan, one hand resting lightly on the cargo rail for balance, the chisel wrapped in clean cloth positioned at her feet like evidence awaiting judgment.

They turned onto a narrower lane bordered by papaya trees and cascades of bougainvillea in vigorous bloom. A chorus of chickens announced their arrival with considerably more enthusiasm than discretion before the house itself came into view: a small bungalow constructed of concrete and evident care, its roof patched with two distinct shades of corrugated tin that spoke of repairs made across different seasons.

A woman emerged, wiping flour from her hands.

"Good morning," she called from the doorway with the particular wariness of one accustomed to unexpected visitors. "You are either lost or hungry."

"Both, perhaps," Renne replied, offering a disarming smile. "We are seeking Eladio Villaverde."

The woman studied them with frank assessment, still wiping her hands on her skirt. "I am Nelia," she said at length. "My father rests during the morning hours. He wakes slowly these days. Come. Be seated."

They complied with her instruction.

Nelia brought water in glasses that had evidently enjoyed previous lives as jam jars, their commercial labels still faintly visible beneath the waterline. Coffee followed shortly thereafter. No questions were posed as yet. Only when the cups had been reduced to half their original contents did Nelia turn toward the interior room.

"This is Eladio," she said with simple dignity. "If you possess questions, you may ask them. If they prove to be the inappropriate sort, you will finish your beverages and depart."

The elderly man sat positioned by the window, his eyes clouded with the particular opacity of advancing cataracts yet somehow alert nonetheless, hands folded in his lap as though still awaiting instruction from some unseen foreman. He tilted his head toward the sound of their voices with the practiced efficiency of one long accustomed to navigating the world through sound rather than sight.

"Visitors again?" he inquired, his voice possessing the dry quality of much-used paper.

"Yes, Tay," Nelia confirmed. "From La Victoria."

Letecia introduced herself with appropriate formality. She identified their place of residence. She explained the reason for their visit. She did not, however, specify precisely whom they were seeking beneath the ground.

Eladio inclined his head once in acknowledgment.

"A considerable time ago," he observed. "Many things occurred at that house during its construction."

"Some of them did not occur," Letecia replied gently. "That is precisely why we are here."

Silence settled over the small room like dust after disturbance. Chickens continued their perpetual disputation in the yard. Somewhere nearby, a radio crackled briefly into life, then expired.

Eladio rubbed his palms together with slow deliberation, as though attempting to warm them despite the tropical heat.

"I abandoned my post that night," he said at last. "That much is indisputably true. I felt shame regarding it then. I feel shame now."

"Did Jun assume your duties in your absence?" Letecia asked.

"Yes."

"And when you returned?"

"He had vanished."

"Did you search for him?"

Eladio hesitated. Not extensively. Merely enough to be perceptible.

"I made inquiries. People informed me that he had fled. Young men flee when they experience fear."

"Fear of what precisely?" Renne asked.

Eladio shook his head with what might have been regret or merely fatigue. "I possessed no knowledge of that. And I did not pursue the matter further."

The old man sat with remarkable stillness, as though he had been carved from the same wood as the chair that supported him.

"I did not observe Jun's death," he said finally, each word selected with the care of one navigating treacherous terrain.

"I did not hear him cry out in distress."

And I did not place him in the ground."

He folded his hands together more tightly, the knuckles whitening with the pressure of his grip.

"However, I was not surprised that he never returned."

That, Letecia reflected, was likely the most accurate statement he would provide them. It was not precisely a confession, but neither was it an exoneration. It occupied that peculiar territory between the two where truth resides when it cannot be spoken directly.

Nelia rose from her chair with the decisiveness of one accustomed to managing difficult situations.

The audience had concluded, and it had ended with dignity intact on all sides.

She regarded Letecia with an evaluating gaze, weighing her character, and appeared to locate whatever assurance she required.

"You will not film my father," she stated with quiet firmness. "You will not transform him into a subject for public curiosity."

Renne covered the camera with her palm in a gesture of protection and promise.

"I will not," she confirmed. "Only the wind. Only the honest work."

Nelia released a breath she had perhaps been holding since their arrival.

"Provided that the man you discovered receives his proper name."

"We shall make every effort," Letecia assured her. "We begin with the watch and the belt buckle. Men who possess only one item of quality to their name are frequently remembered by that very thing."

Eladio raised his water glass at last to his lips, and the glass trembled very slightly against his teeth, the only visible acknowledgment of what this conversation had cost him.

"You will excavate him with appropriate care," he said. It was not quite a question.

"With respect," Letecia answered.

He nodded once more, as though finally consenting to be old, to be tired, to carry his burden no further than this doorway.

"Take the road that passes by the sugarcane fields on your departure," he advised. "The alternative route is currently impersonating a river this month, with considerable success."

They offered their thanks and stepped back into the white brilliance of late morning.

The tricycle engine engaged on the second attempt, coughing briefly before settling into its familiar rhythm.

As Zan maneuvered them back toward the lane, the small house receded behind them in a shimmer of heat, the chickens immediately reclaiming their interrupted argument as though time itself had been merely delayed for the duration of those few critical minutes.

Renne waited until they had achieved a respectful distance from the property.

Then, softly: "He did not confess. Not in any legal sense."

"He revealed as much as circumstances permitted without destroying his daughter's peace," Letecia observed. "At eighty-four years of age, he understands precisely how much truth a human body can carry without breaking beneath its weight."

"And what will you carry forward?"

"The bones," Letecia said. "And a name, if such a thing can be discovered. After that, the town may carry the remainder of the burden."

They encountered a stretch of particularly rough road. Gravel struck the underside of the vehicle with sounds like light rain against tin.

Beyond the fields, the sea revealed itself briefly, a strip of brilliant blue, then concealed itself once more behind a curtain of palm trees.

Ahead, La Victoria awaited with its tarpaulin and its measured, methodical work.

Letecia touched the bundle at her feet, the chisel wrapped and silent, and experienced that odd, familiar sense of peace that accompanies a day which has surrendered what it could, neither more nor less than truth permits.

Steel and paper would convey them to the next stage of investigation. After that, there would be a watch to clean with careful solvents, a belt buckle to inquire about in shops that remembered accessories more clearly than the men who wore them, and perhaps a ledger tucked away in some dusty corner of Trinidad where a single line of faded ink might yet whisper a forgotten name.

"Home," Zan announced over his shoulder, as though reading her thoughts.

"Yes, please," she answered, and the word contained within it a field, a tree, a bench, a child, and a grave; a house that had learned across the years to hold every species of weather, both meteorological and emotional, with equal grace.

### *Chapter Five – The Notice Arrived Folded Once*

The notice arrived folded once, with the austere economy characteristic of official communications.

No envelope. No postage stamp. Merely a single sheet of paper conveyed by a young officer who maintained his cap clutched in both hands as he stood upon the threshold, as though the gesture might soften what he had been dispatched to deliver.

Nelia accepted it from him without speaking.

Her father occupied his customary chair by the window, hands resting upon his knees, listening to the cicadas wind themselves into their afternoon crescendo with the practiced attention of one for whom sound had become the primary source of information about the world.

"Is it a matter of money?" Eladio inquired.

"No," Nelia replied.

She unfolded the paper and read it aloud, for her father could no longer see with sufficient clarity to trust the words independently.

"Order for custodial interview," she recited, her voice maintaining admirable steadiness. "In connection with the death of Jun. Regarding recovered remains."

The room itself did not alter.

Only Eladio's breathing underwent transformation, becoming shallow and measured.

"So," he said after a moment's consideration. "They have discovered him."

"Yes."

He nodded slowly, as though confirming something he had already accepted in the private chambers of his conscience.

"When is this interview to occur?" he asked.

"Tomorrow morning."

"Good," he said with what might have been relief. "Mornings possess greater clarity."

Nelia's voice wavered despite her efforts at control. "They indicate it may lead to formal charges."

Eladio permitted himself a faint smile. "Everything leads somewhere, eventually. That is the nature of time."

She knelt before him then, pressing her forehead briefly to his knee in a gesture of filial devotion and desperation combined.

"You need not go," she said urgently. "You are elderly. They understand that."

He lifted her chin gently with two weathered fingers, forcing her to meet his clouded gaze.

"I have already remained among the living longer than I deserved," he said quietly. "Allow them to finish it."

The young officer shifted his weight, visibly uncomfortable with this display of private emotion.

"We shall arrive early," he said. "So that the process will not be unduly difficult."

Eladio inclined his head. "I thank you for that consideration."

After they departed, Nelia prepared tea that she subsequently did not drink.

Her father slept in his chair, the official paper resting on the table beside him, folded carefully back into its single crease, as though even in repose he sought to maintain order.

He did not wake again.

## *Chapter Six – The Second Guard*

### Jun's Shadow

The municipal records office in Trinidad had been constructed with the practical aesthetic of a bunker designed to withstand an assault of paperwork rather than artillery.

Concrete walls, no windows that opened to admit fresh air, a single electric fan engaged in the futile enterprise of relocating hot air from one corner to another.

Letecia occupied a metal desk submerged beneath bound ledgers, each marked in faded ink with administrative precision: "Employment Permits – 2008–2010."

Renne maintained her camera in its capped state. "Are you confident the name will be recorded here?" she inquired.

"No," Letecia admitted, "but something of significance will be."

She turned the pages with methodical care until her thumb arrested its progress on a column of half-legible entries. The lines possessed the uneven quality characteristic of documents written by whoever had possessed the pen during a particular week.

There it was:

*Villaverde Construction / Night Security (Jun ?)*

The question mark had been inscribed directly into the ledger, a permanent record of administrative uncertainty.

Beside it, an additional notation: *Temporary replacement. Paid cash.*

"Temporary replacement," Renne read aloud. "That represents Eladio's arrangement."

Letecia transcribed the line into her notebook with careful precision.

Under the heading "remarks," the clerk had inscribed:  
*Recommended by Paeng Villaverde.*

The identical foreman Eladio had mentioned during their previous interview.

She closed the volume gently, treating it with the respect due to evidence. "Very well. We have established the connection."

Outside, the air possessed a welcome freshness after the stifling interior.

Zan waited with the tricycle, engine idling, prepared to proceed.

They drove several kilometres to San Isidro, a hamlet composed of wooden houses and perpetually hanging laundry, seeking Paeng Villaverde, Eladio's nephew, now in his eighties.

He occupied a position beneath a corrugated awning, surrounded by grandsons engaged in repairing a boat engine with the casual expertise of those for whom such labor constitutes daily routine.

When Letecia explained her identity and purpose, he released a single laugh, short and without genuine amusement.

"Still discussing that ancient house?" he said. "It should have collapsed by now, surely."

"It remains standing," Letecia observed. "And so does the question of what transpired there."

He dismissed his grandsons with a gesture, then indicated that she should be seated.

"I engaged Jun," he stated without hesitation. "The boy came from Calape. Strong, desperately requiring money. I paid him what was fair."

"What occurred that night?" she asked directly.

Paeng did not respond immediately. He gazed past Letecia toward the rice paddies, their water surface dulled by afternoon light, as though the answer might still be visible there, waiting to be properly observed.

"Eladio was scheduled to assume the night watch," he said finally. "He approached me that afternoon. Claimed he was unwell. Fever, stomach complaint. Requested if we might arrange a substitution."

"So you altered the watch arrangement," Letecia said.

Paeng nodded. "Jun was young. Robust. He desired the additional compensation. I instructed him to sleep on the construction site, precisely as Eladio customarily did."

"At what hour did Jun arrive?"

"Before darkness fell. Tools had been arranged. Generator secured with lock. Everything appeared entirely normal."

Letecia waited with the patience that characterized effective interrogation.

"When morning arrived," Paeng continued, "the tools remained in position. The house stood quiet. Jun was absent. One shovel missing. One tarpaulin vanished." He shook his head with what might have been regret or merely fatigue. "I assumed he had appropriated them. Fled to Cebu as some young men do when employment becomes inconvenient."

"And Eladio?"

"He claimed ignorance. Stated that Jun had never appeared for duty. I believed him without question."

Renne stood at a modest distance, camera lowered but ready. She contributed nothing verbally, understanding that silence often elicited more than inquiry.

Paeng shifted in his chair, the wood creaking beneath his weight. "Later that same day, someone mentioned a vagrant from the barangay. Manuel Cordero. Struck by a bus near the highway. He possessed the habit of sleeping in transport vehicles, doorways, any location offering shelter from weather."

Letecia glanced up sharply. "And that became the accepted explanation."

Paeng's mouth compressed into a thin line. "It possessed convenience. A dead man already accounted for. Individuals like Cordero expire every month. No one poses questions. No one expresses gratitude when you refrain from adding complications."

"Did you report Jun as missing?"

Paeng shook his head. "Report what precisely? A rumour? A boy who failed to appear for employment? The property owner desired the roof completed. Payroll obligations were due."

Letecia extracted from her folder a small transparent evidence envelope and positioned it upon the table. Within lay a brass buckle shaped like a fish, cleaned and properly labelled.

"Did Jun wear this?"

Paeng leaned forward until his breath created condensation on the plastic surface. His eyes softened with recognition.

"Yes," he confirmed. "He claimed it brought fortune. Polished it with coconut oil. Perpetually joked that the fish kept him safe when crossing water."

"He did not cross much water that night," Letecia observed.

Paeng's hands settled flat upon the table, veins raised like dry irrigation channels.

"Then it is verified," he said slowly. "The vagrant killed him."

"Perhaps," Letecia replied. "There was violence. Someone experienced panic."

Paeng looked up with sudden sharpness. "And my uncle?"

"Eladio lied," she stated without embellishment. "About his presence. About who worked that night. About what transpired afterward."

Paeng closed his eyes once. When he reopened them, no surprise registered in his expression.

"He lied to maintain silence," he said. "He always believed silence cost less than truth."

Letecia did not respond immediately. She produced a photograph, copied from a brittle payroll sheet pinned inside an antiquated ledger.

Six men stood before the partially constructed house. Eladio at one extremity. Paeng positioned beside him. Between them, Jun, younger than the others, tool belt positioned low on his hips, smiling at the camera with the confidence of youth.

In his hand, the chisel caught the camera flash.

"Do you recall when this was captured?" Letecia inquired.

Paeng studied it with the intensity of one attempting to resurrect memory. "Several days before he vanished. That was Eladio's chisel. Jun borrowed it. Claimed the handle on his own had developed cracks. Promised to return it the following morning."

He slid the photograph back across the table with deliberate slowness.

"It appears he did."

They drove homeward without conversation.

Halfway back to La Victoria, a monsoon shower swept across the road with tropical suddenness, hard, thorough, then vanished again as though it had never occurred.

The scent of wet dust filled the tricycle's interior.

Renne broke the quiet first.

"So that represents the conclusion? Manuel Cordero killed Jun, buried him, and was subsequently struck by a bus while attempting escape?"

"Perhaps," Letecia said. "We still lack certainty regarding whether Manuel Cordero killed Jun or whether another party was responsible."

"Do you believe there exists another grave?"

"Possibly near the first. Possibly beneath the brush we have not yet cleared."

She gazed out at the green landscape, where the rain had already evaporated as though it had been merely imagined.

"Forty-four years," she said. "That constitutes a considerable duration to carry such knowledge."

"He revealed what circumstances permitted," Letecia observed. "No more than that."

Zan emitted a short grunt of acknowledgment. "As long as the mango continues to produce fruit, people allow the remainder to pass unexamined."

When they reached the house, the sky had achieved clarity, rinsed pale and open.

Alma waited on the steps with three cups of coffee and an expression that did not require verbal inquiry.

"You have identified him," she stated.

"Sufficient portions of him," Letecia replied. "What remained after time."

Alma nodded once. "That will suffice for today."

Letecia glanced back toward the field, where the excavation lay covered and quiet, maintaining its position.

The light was departing, but she could still discern the rise of the mango branches beyond it, dark silhouettes against the last colour remaining in the sky.

"I suspect," she said, primarily to herself, "we may be required to excavate somewhat more extensively."

The past, it seemed, was not yet finished speaking.

## *Chapter Seven – The Letter to the Priest*

Three days later, an envelope arrived with the late post, brown, soft at the corners, the ink already fading to grey with the particular melancholy of correspondence that has waited too long to be sent. It carried no return address, only Letecia's name inscribed in an elderly man's careful script, each letter formed with the deliberate precision of one for whom writing has become a laborious undertaking.

Inside were three items: a folded letter, a rosary missing one bead, and a brief note from Nelia Villaverde.

*Doktora,*

*My father requested that this be delivered to you. He stated that truth should not rest in only one place.*

*Please return the rosary to the church in Tagbilaran when your investigation is concluded. It belonged to the girl.*

*Nelia*

Letecia read the letter beneath the weak illumination of her desk lamp. The paper possessed the faint aroma of camphor and aged wood, as though it had been stored in a drawer that held other forgotten things.

*Father Luis,*

*It has been many months since the house in La Victoria was completed, but my hands have not forgotten that night, even if my mouth never discovered words adequate to confess it.*

*I left my watch duty to a younger man, Jun. I told myself I was unwell. In truth, I went to see a girl I should not have approached. Her name was Mira. She said she would inform her mother. I said I would send money. I did not.*

*When I returned at dawn, the construction site was quiet and the boy was gone. The others said he had fled to Cebu, frightened of something. I accepted that explanation because it allowed the day to continue.*

*I do not know what would have occurred if I had remained at my post. Perhaps he would still be alive. Perhaps not. I only know that I was not where I was meant to be.*

*Father, I have not confessed because I do not know which sin to name. The abandonment of duty. The taking of what was not mine. Or the silence that followed. Each feels heavier than the last.*

*If anyone should come asking questions, tell them only this: I did not forget the boy or the girl. I simply exhausted my supply of courage before morning arrived.*

*Eladio Villaverde*

Letecia set the letter down and rubbed her eyes with the weariness of one who has read too many such documents. Outside, frogs were commencing their evening cacophony, the sound of lives too small to concern themselves with the weight of the past.

Alma entered quietly bearing coffee.

"More old ghosts?" she inquired.

"Old," Letecia confirmed, "but still restless."

Alma regarded the rosary with the knowing gaze of one familiar with such objects. "You know whose that was?"

"Mira's," Letecia said. "He took it from her that night. Perhaps accidentally. Perhaps not."

"Then she remains part of this narrative."

"She always was."

Letecia turned the final page over. On the reverse, in a hand considerably less steady than the rest, was a single line written later, perhaps years later:

*The boy will want answers when he grows. Tell him his father worked with wood and shame in equal measure.*

She sat back in her chair. "The boy," she said aloud.

Renne glanced up from her laptop. "What boy?"

"Mira's child. Everyone assumed he was Jun's. He was not. Eladio knew. So did Mira."

"And presently?"

"Presently," Letecia said, "he is a man somewhere on this island. Perhaps he has already heard that we discovered the remains."

Renne frowned. "Do you believe he will seek you out?"

"Would you not?" Letecia said. "He has spent his entire life with half a story."

Later that night, she opened the barangay census records. Under "Buenavista District, Poblacion Sur," one name distinguished itself:

*Ramon de los Santos Villaverde, age 43.*

Occupation: driver. Address rendered illegible beneath a smear of ink.

She inscribed the name into her notebook and circled it once.

The pencil left a faint groove in the paper, like a path waiting to be followed.

Outside, a gecko clicked twice, the island's modest way of offering affirmation.

Letecia closed the ledger and spoke the name aloud, testing its sound.

"Ramon Villaverde."

A man constructed from paper, steel, and someone else's silence.

The Girl Named Mira

The tricycle's engine maintained its steady rhythm as Zan steered them toward Trinidad, past fields where carabao flicked their ears against flies and boys fished from the irrigation ditches with the patient optimism of youth.

Letecia kept one hand on her hat, the other on her folder.

Within were the photographs, the accumulated notes, and Eladio's letter, physically thin but heavy with significance.

Beside her, Renne held her camera, lens covered. The road possessed too much brilliant light for filming.

They stopped at a small carinderia beside the market, the species of establishment where a hand-painted sign promises "Best Halo-Halo in Town" and the ceiling fan generates more noise than breeze.

Letecia arranged her papers upon the formica table, ordered iced coffee that arrived consisting primarily of sugar, and began posing quiet questions.

In a place like Trinidad, history travels by oral transmission rather than written record.

One does not search; one listens.

The elderly woman at the counter proved willing to listen in return.

She remembered the year the new house was constructed in La Victoria, the foreign owners, the noise, the money that circulated briefly for a few short months.

When Letecia mentioned a girl named Mira, the woman's eyes sharpened, as though someone had lifted a curtain on an old theatrical stage.

"Mira de los Santos," she said finally.

"Laundry girl. Pretty but never possessed of shyness. Too young for what she understood, but she worked with diligence. She washed the builders' clothes, fetched meals from the sari-sari store. All of them noticed her. One of them paid her excessive attention."

"Eladio?" Renne inquired.

The woman shook her head. "Perhaps initially. Then there was another, a boy who guarded tools at night. Jun, I believe. Always whistling. They said she liked the sound. Perhaps she liked the boy. When the employment concluded, she departed. Pregnant, some said. Others claimed she went to her aunt in Buenavista."

"Was there trouble before she left?" Letecia asked.

"Only gossip. That constitutes trouble sufficient."

The woman wiped her hands on a cloth. "Her family maintained silence, sold their small parcel of land, moved inland. If you wish to locate her now, you inquire in Poblacion Sur. There is a laundry establishment called Clean Wave. The proprietor's name is Mira Ramos."

Renne looked up with mild surprise. "Ramos?" she said, smiling slightly. "Like you."

"Coincidence," Letecia said. "Or perhaps irony. There are too many Ramoses to enumerate."

They finished their coffee and thanked the woman, who dismissed them with the caution every barangay mother extends to strangers:

"Exercise care regarding what you discover. Some names carry their own ghosts."

The road to Buenavista cut through sugarcane plantations and low hills.

By mid-afternoon, they located Clean Wave Laundry, a narrow establishment facing the sea, with shirts suspended on wire lines and a faint aroma of soap and salt.

Behind the counter, a woman in her late fifties glanced up from an iron.

Her hair was streaked with grey but remained thick, her hands quick and assured.

Letecia introduced herself without embellishment.

"We are tracing an old narrative from La Victoria. The construction of a house in 2009. We are seeking someone named Mira de los Santos."

The woman's mouth curved, neither quite a smile nor quite denial.

"That name belongs to another life," she said.

"Now I am Mira Ramos. If the story is old, it should be allowed to rest."

"We are merely attempting to understand what transpired," Letecia said.

She placed the letter on the counter without opening it. "This indicates that the man who should have been on duty was absent. Another assumed his place. Something went wrong."

Mira's eyes moved to the paper, then away.

Her face did not alter significantly, but her voice lost its practiced polish.

"Wrong things occurred every week in that period. Houses were constructed hastily, men worked while intoxicated, nights were long. That boy, Jun, he was not bad, merely restless. He desired to leave the island, purchase a motorbike. He claimed employment in Cebu awaited him. Then he was gone."

"You knew him?" Renne asked.

"I knew the sound of his whistle," Mira said. "Half the town did. He would sit beside the road, play the same tune like a bird seeking its mate."

She set the iron upright, switched it off. "I waited a month for him to return. He did not. So I departed as well. One does not remain where one is not wanted."

Letecia nodded. "Did anyone ever pose questions?"

"No one desired to," Mira said. "The foreman claimed Jun stole tools and fled. The police lacked petrol to pursue a ghost. And the old guard, Eladio, he maintained his silence. Perhaps he thought the boy was dead. Perhaps he preferred not to know."

She regarded Letecia now with curiosity. "You are not police. Why excavate bones from so long ago?"

"Because they rest beneath my field," Letecia said simply. "And the man deserves a name."

Mira nodded, folding a clean sheet with the precision of habit.

"I remember one detail," she said. "Jun wore a belt with a brass buckle shaped like a fish. He claimed it was his lucky catch. If you discovered that, you discovered him."

Renne glanced at Letecia. That matched the inventory precisely.

The buckle had been among the remains.

"Thank you," Letecia said. "Would you object if I recorded your contact details, in case we require confirmation of dates?"

Mira inscribed a number on a scrap of receipt paper. Her handwriting was strong, steady.

"If you identify him, inform him I married twice and learned to whistle for myself," she said. Then she added, almost as an afterthought, "And if you excavate more than bones, do not inform me. The past is already paid for."

Outside, the sea lay flat, tin-blue beneath the late sun.

They rode back in silence until Renne finally spoke.

"She possesses greater fortitude than anyone we have encountered."

"Survival renders people efficient," Letecia observed. "She is not grieving, she has balanced the accounts."

Renne looked down the road ahead. "What now?"

"We examine the records," Letecia said. "Determine whether Jun ever reached Cebu. If not, he never departed the island."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," Letecia said, "there is still one ghost missing from that excavation."

The tricycle rattled onward, the sugarcane yielding to dusk.

Behind them, in the little laundry by the sea, Mira Ramos returned to her ironing, pressing the creases flat, one life at a time.

## *Chapter Eight – Ramon*

By mid-morning the heat had flattened the day into submission.

The mango tree cast a precise circle of shade, its leaves scarcely stirring in air that had grown thick and still. Zan was engaged in repairing the water line, Renne cataloguing photographs for the official report, when a tricycle arrived at the gate and came to rest with a final cough of its engine.

The driver extinguished the motor and sat for a moment before dismounting, as though gathering resolution for what lay ahead.

He appeared to be approximately forty years of age, solid through the shoulders, hair cropped short in the practical manner of one who works with his hands. He wore a mechanic's shirt faded to the indeterminate colour of rain-washed concrete.

When he stepped through the gate, his eyes moved immediately to the ground where the tarpaulin covered the excavation, as though drawn by some instinct he could not quite name.

"Someone informed me you discovered human remains here," he said without preamble.

Letecia descended the veranda steps, wiping her hands on her jeans with the absent efficiency of one interrupted in domestic tasks.

"We did indeed. And you are?"

"Ramon."

He hesitated before adding, as though the surname carried weight, "Villaverde."

Zan straightened, the wrench still gripped in his hand. "Villaverde?" he echoed, the word possessing sudden significance.

Ramon inclined his head in confirmation. "From Buenavista. My mother's name was Mira de los Santos."

That settled over the assembled company like dust after an explosion.

Renne's camera hung useless at her side, forgotten in the moment's gravity.

"Please come inside," Letecia said with quiet authority.

He did not accept the chair she offered. Instead, he stood with arms folded, eyes moving systematically over the walls, the shelves, the framed photograph of the mango tree captured in an earlier decade. Everything appeared somehow familiar to him, though he had never before crossed this threshold.

"I heard that Eladio Villaverde worked this land," Ramon said. "People possess long memories regarding such matters."

"They remember a great many things," Letecia agreed. "What precisely did you hear?"

"That he left my mother with a child she did not seek," Ramon said with careful precision. "And that his tool was discovered where a man should not have been buried."

Letecia studied him with the professional assessment that characterized her work. The jawline, the pause before speech, the way he held himself, familiar patterns, shaped harder by circumstance and time.

"The man we discovered is not your father," she said directly. "We believe it to be a worker named Jun."

Ramon's mouth compressed into a thin line. "And the individual who placed him there?"

"We do not yet possess that certainty."

He nodded once, as though he had anticipated no other response. There was weight in the gesture, the accumulated heaviness of questions carried too long.

"The remains are not those of your father," she repeated, ensuring clarity. "We believe the deceased to be a young worker named Jun. He vanished during the same week the house construction was completed."

Ramon's eyes narrowed slightly. "And the one who killed him?"

"We do not know. Not yet."

He released a small laugh devoid of humour. "Forty-four years and still nobody possesses knowledge. That represents this island entirely. Nothing remains hidden, yet nothing achieves resolution either."

Letecia permitted the silence to settle naturally before inquiring, "Why have you come here now?"

"My mother is dying," he said with the flat finality of one who has accepted the inevitable. "Cancer. She kept a letter. Claimed it was from him, from Eladio. Said that one day I should locate whoever was excavating in this ground and inquire what they had discovered."

"Do you have this letter?"

He extracted a folded sheet from his pocket. It was aged, creased into squares, the ink thin and brown with the passage of years. He handed it to her without diverting his gaze.

Letecia unfolded it with appropriate care. It was a copy of the document Nelia had sent, Eladio's letter to Father Luis, but the final line had been altered, written in a different hand:

*The boy will want answers when he grows. Tell him he came from a man who knew how to build but never how to stay.*

Letecia raised her eyes from the page. "Your mother wrote that addition."

Ramon confirmed with a nod. "She said some matters do not require sending to achieve completion."

"What do you seek from this investigation?" she asked.

"I wish to know if he remains alive," Ramon said. "And if he does not, I wish to stand where he stood and know that he has finished paying his debt."

"He is alive," Letecia informed him. "Elderly, blind, quiet in his manner. He resides in Ubay with his daughter."

Ramon's jaw tightened visibly. "Then I shall go to him."

"Do not approach him in anger," Letecia cautioned. "He has already punished himself more severely than anyone else could accomplish."

"You believe that renders it acceptable?" Ramon asked, his voice acquiring an edge.

"No. It merely signifies that you need not carry his burden in addition to your own."

Ramon looked past her, through the doorway toward the mango tree, where sunlight was fragmenting through the branches in thin, moving lines like water through a sieve.

"My mother used to say that trees remember what people forget," he said quietly.

"She was correct," Letecia replied. "That particular tree remembers everything."

He regarded her for an extended moment, as though weighing the veracity in her voice, then refolded the letter and returned it to his pocket with deliberate care.

"I shall visit him," he said. "Then I shall return. I wish to know what you discover when you complete the excavation."

"We shall inform you," Letecia assured him.

Ramon turned, mounted his tricycle, and engaged the engine. He did not glance back as he departed, but the sound of the motor persisted long after he had vanished from view, a dull, steady note fading down the road like a question left hanging in the air.

Renne came to stand beside her employer. "Do you believe he will harm the old man?"

Letecia shook her head. "He does not yet know what he desires. Perhaps that is worse."

Zan wiped his hands on a rag, his expression thoughtful. "Are you going to warn Eladio?"

"No," Letecia said. "He constructed his life from silence. Let us observe what he does when the silence finally ends."

She turned back toward the house, leaving the others to their tasks. Behind her, the mango tree stood patient and ancient, its roots deep in soil that had kept too many secrets for too long.

The past, it seemed, was not merely speaking now. It was walking, riding a tricycle, carrying a letter in its pocket, and heading toward a reckoning that had been forty-four years in the making.

## *Chapter Nine – The Second Dig (2053)*

By the time the second excavation commenced, the mango tree had begun to fruit once more.

Small green bulbs hung from the branches, hard and unripe, precisely the same colour as the clay that filled the trench below. It was as though the tree itself were participating in the investigation, offering silent testimony to the cycles of growth and decay, burial and revelation.

Letecia stood at the edge of the excavation, gloves donned, clipboard balanced against her hip with the practiced efficiency of one accustomed to such work.

Renne crouched beside the pit with her camera, the lens capturing the slow, methodical rhythm of archaeological procedure: brush, trowel, brush again. Each movement was deliberate, careful, the sort of patience that separates professional investigation from mere curiosity.

Zan maintained the spoil heap with meticulous neatness, talking softly to himself in the manner of men who are half-submerged in their own thoughts, conducting an internal dialogue with the work itself.

"It feels peculiar," he observed. "Excavating the same location twice."

"Truth conceals itself in layers," Letecia replied without looking up. "One must clear each stratum to perceive the shape of what lies beneath."

The first skeletal remains had been removed weeks prior and dispatched for cataloguing and analysis. This time they were widening the excavation to trace the boundary of the burial, seeking what Eladio and his associates had left behind in the darkness of that long-ago night.

At half past ten, Renne called out with restrained urgency.

"Metal," she announced.

Letecia descended into the pit beside her with careful footwork. The object lay just beneath the clay lip, small, corroded, the colour of rusted blood.

She applied her brush with gentle precision until the shape emerged: a narrow band of metal, twisted but recognisable.

"A watch strap," Renne identified.

Letecia nodded. "Same manufacturer as the one on record. Jun's."

She rotated the fragment and observed the faint outline of an engraving: *Santos & Sons, Cebu*.

The identical maker's mark as the chisel.

"Steel and paper," Renne said quietly. "It always returns to those elements."

They logged it, photographed it, sealed it in an evidence bag with appropriate documentation.

An hour later they discovered the clasp, brass, simple in design, worn smooth where the tongue had created friction through repeated use.

Then, deeper still, something else entirely: a length of thin copper wire that lay across the remains like a sentence interrupted mid-phrase.

"Not a tool," Letecia said with certainty. "Binding."

Zan frowned, disturbed. "He was restrained?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "At minimum, once."

She crouched closer, employing the brush to free the remaining clay from the ribcage with archaeological delicacy.

The wire had been looped around both wrists and fastened with a twist, not expertly executed, merely expedient.

"Whoever buried him was not interring a stranger," she said. "They were concealing a mistake."

The Hut by the Canals

Letecia touched the copper wire gently with the end of her brush.

It produced a small, metallic sound, the distinctive note of something that had once been tightened in anger, or fear, or quite possibly both.

Zan stood beside her, visibly uneasy. He had observed dead pigs secured in similar fashion for roasting, but never a human being.

"Not a tool," Letecia murmured. "Not an accident either."

She leaned closer, tracing the arc of the wire around what remained of the wrist bones. It had been twisted with fingers rather than pliers, the turn uneven, one side tighter than the other. Hasty. Improvised.

A reconstruction began to form in her mind, not imagination, but the methodical assembly of evidence into narrative, built from years of crime scenes, textbooks, case files, professional training.

She sat back on her heels, releasing a slow breath.

"He did not flee," she thought. "He was taken."

The fields surrounding them rustled with late-afternoon wind. The mango tree cast a long, steady shade across the excavation. Somewhere in the distance, a child called out, not in distress, merely the ordinary sound of life continuing.

Letecia closed her eyes for three seconds, not to imagine but to reconstruct.

*A hut. Dark. The faint gurgle of irrigation water behind it. Rain dripping from a patched roof. Two men. One boy.*

She opened her eyes once more.

"We must map the perimeter," she said quietly. "He was not killed here at the burial site. He was brought here. Afterward."

Zan's mouth compressed into a grim line. "Where first, then?"

Letecia stood, brushing clay from her knees with absent efficiency.

"Where they could raise their voices," she said, "and no one would hear."

She indicated the old irrigation path, the one that curved behind the rice fields, abandoned since before Typhoon Odette in 2021.

"Down there," she said. "The old canal huts. Near the fishponds."

Zan swallowed visibly. He knew those structures. Everyone did. Teenagers occasionally concealed themselves there to drink. Fishermen had once stored nets there. And once, years ago, someone had discovered a fighting cock tied to a post, forgotten by a gambler who owed money to the wrong individual.

Letecia set her tools aside and wiped perspiration from her brow.

"Come," she said.

Renne looked up sharply. "Do you believe Eladio was responsible?"

Letecia shook her head. "No. His account possesses internal consistency. But someone arrived subsequently, perhaps Paeng, perhaps another member of the construction crew. Someone who experienced panic because of something Jun had done or said."

She leaned back, resting her hands on her knees. "We shall have the soil samples analysed. If there are traces of oil or tool lubricant, it will indicate whether he was near the workshop when the violence occurred."

Renne regarded the watch fragment once more. "Forty-four years in the ground," she observed. "Still keeping time in its fashion."

Letecia permitted herself a faint smile. "Truth maintains its own chronology."

"Now we must discover where Jun's night concluded."

They proceeded toward the overgrown path, each step carrying the weight of something beginning.

The ground remained damp from the previous night's rain, sufficiently soft that each footprint held its shape momentarily before relaxing back into the earth.

Zan walked slightly ahead, machete held low, cutting only what required cutting, nothing wasted.

Grass brushed their calves. Damselflies, fat from the season, bobbed over puddles left by overflow from the irrigation channels.

Letecia had walked this route as a child, following Peter down to the fishponds. In that earlier time it had been mud and frogs and water that flashed like broken glass. Now the same path possessed a different character. Not menacing precisely. Merely heavy in a manner she could not quite articulate.

"Fishponds are quiet today," Zan observed.

They usually were.

The ponds stretched wide and shallow across several acres, old commercial installations fed from the river by wooden sluice gates that still stood but rarely functioned. Once there had been milkfish and tilapia. Now there were weeds, mosquito larvae, and the occasional heron picking its way through the shallows as though it had forgotten its purpose.

The nearer they approached, the more oppressive the air became. Still water retained heat like a sealed vessel. Even the wind seemed reluctant to penetrate.

Ahead, the first pond revealed itself, green and motionless, scattered with fallen palm fronds. A bamboo post leaned at an acute angle, remnant of some boundary that no longer possessed significance. Near it, the path widened slightly, as though two men had once stood there in confrontation.

Letecia felt the hairs rise on her forearm.

Zan noticed. "Are you well, Ma'am?"

"Yes," she said. "Merely... this feels familiar somehow."

They crossed a plank bridge, warped and splintered but still serviceable. The water below was murky, but ripples indicated where small fish fled from their shadows. Children had once caught them in plastic cups. Jun probably had as well.

"Do you believe he came here willingly?" Zan asked.

"No," Letecia said without hesitation. "But I do not believe he resisted initially. He thought he still possessed options."

The path narrowed once more. At the bend, trees crowded close, acacia and coconut and wild almond, and the shade consumed the light entirely.

Then she observed it.

The hut.

Low. Half-collapsed. Crouched above the water, supported by three stubborn posts and one that leaned as though exhausted. The roof had been patched with tarpaulin secured by rocks. The doorway hung open. No curtain. Nothing to prevent the darkness within from spilling outward.

Zan stopped and lowered his machete.

"It has been years since anyone occupied that structure," he said.

Letecia advanced until the pond lay approximately one metre from her boots. She could smell the hut now: damp bamboo, aged wood, stagnant water. The sour edge of a place that had kept secrets because it possessed no alternative.

"This is the location," she said with certainty.

"How can you be certain?"

She did not answer immediately. The copper wire on Jun's bones had already directed her here. As had the twist marks. As had the manner in which the restraint had been applied hastily, by hand rather than with proper tools.

It was darker inside than appearances from the path suggested.

Once within, the air thickened, retaining the smell of stagnant water and old bamboo. The floor inclined slightly toward the rear wall, warped by years of dampness. A single beam crossed the ceiling, scarred where wire had been twisted tight and subsequently cut away.

Letecia halted just inside the doorway.

"Here," she said quietly.

Zan glanced about. "Nothing remains."

"Sufficient remains," she replied.

She moved slowly, not searching but reading the space. The copper wire around Jun's wrist bones had been neither decoration nor accident. It had been restraint, applied rapidly, removed with equal haste. The uneven twist testified to fingers working under pressure, without tools, without care.

She crouched near the rear post. The bamboo there was polished smooth at knee height, the sheen different from the rest, dulled by repeated contact. Rope burns leave impressions long after rope has vanished.

"He was kept low," she said. "Not standing. Sitting, or on his knees."

Zan shifted his weight uneasily. "For what duration?"

Letecia traced the line of the beam with her eyes, following the logic of fear. "Long enough to ask questions. Not long enough to await answers he did not possess."

On the wall, half a metre from the floor, the faintest shadow lingered where moisture had once carried something human against it. Not blood. Skin. Perspiration. Panic.

She closed her eyes briefly.

Not imagining. Reconstructing.

*A lantern suspended from the beam, the sort fishermen employed. Light climbing the walls in nervous yellow pulses. Jun restrained, wrists bound with wire because wire was readily available. Someone standing too close. Someone else pacing, angry, rehearsing demands already articulated.*

*"You informed the owner," one voice says.*

*"No," Jun answers. "I merely showed him the documents. I wanted only what was promised."*

*"You do not retain copies," the voice says. "You do not threaten men who sign permits."*

*A blow lands. Not intended to kill. Intended to persuade.*

Letecia opened her eyes.

"He did not die here," she said. "This was interrogation. Not execution."

Zan nodded slowly. He understood that distinction in the manner of people who have grown up in proximity to violence.

She scanned the floor once more, then the doorway.

"They removed him conscious," she continued. "Later. Somewhere nearer to the construction site. Somewhere they believed was more secluded."

"The concrete steps," Zan said.

"Yes, perhaps. But I suspect they suffocated him with a plastic bag over his head. No blood. No mess. Quiet."

She stood, wiping her hands on her jeans. "This is where they attempted to resolve the problem. The grave is where they attempted to forget it."

The hut fell silent once more, relieved of its burden.

"Now," she said, "we search for the item he did not bring with him."

Zan frowned. "What item?"

"The evidence," she said quietly. "The reason they restrained him. The reason he died. The proof he believed would preserve his life, but which someone else retained."

Her eyes drifted toward the horizon.

Toward Mira.

Toward the past waiting in a trunk or a drawer.

"We are going to speak with the one person he trusted," she said.

"Who?" Zan asked.

Letecia turned toward the path.

"Mira," she said.

## *Chapter Ten – The Girl Mira*

Mira, now in her late fifties, occupied a modest house positioned on the rise above the canal road, situated just sufficiently distant from the fishponds that the mosquitoes thinned to tolerable numbers and a breeze occasionally found its way through the windows.

The roof was a patchwork affair, old galvanised iron sheets mixed with newer ones, each possessing a different shade of silver, testimony to repairs made across different seasons and circumstances.

A line of washing hung in the yard: shirts, a child's shorts, a towel faded from too many rinses in well water that carried its own particular mineral character.

When Leticia and Zan arrived, a dog barked once in perfunctory warning, then recognised Zan and trotted away, thoroughly unimpressed.

Mira stepped onto the veranda before they reached the steps, as though she had been observing their approach.

She had aged into a calm species of beauty, the beauty of someone who had survived considerable difficulty quietly, without complaint, without drama. Her hair was drawn back in a single braid. Her eyes held that particular tired alertness characteristic of women who had raised children alone, perpetually watchful for the next crisis.

"Good afternoon," she said, her voice steady and carefully neutral.

She did not smile, but neither did she close the door. That represented invitation enough.

"May we sit?" Leticia inquired.

Mira nodded and gestured toward the bamboo bench positioned beneath the awning. It produced the familiar creak of wood that had been employed for years without failing when they settled upon it.

For a moment, no one spoke.

The wind pushed a stray leaf along the yard in small, aimless circles. A tricycle passed in the distance, its engine fading to silence.

Then Mira said, very quietly:

"You found him."

It was not a question. It was a fact she had been bracing herself to hear since the barangay gossip had begun its inevitable circulation.

Leticia inclined her head in confirmation.

"He was near our well. The grave was... very old."

Mira closed her eyes. Just for a breath. Not shock, resignation. The settling of something long suspected into certainty.

"I knew he did not run," she murmured. "But I told myself he had. Because that hurt less."

Leticia exchanged a glance with Zan. They said nothing, understanding that silence sometimes offers more respect than speech.

Mira drew a slow breath and stood with sudden decision.

"Wait," she said. "There is something."

She went inside. The sound of a cupboard opening. A box being lifted. Newspaper rustling.

Leticia's pulse quickened, not from excitement, but from the weight of what was approaching.

When Mira returned, she held a blue plastic box, the sort employed for home medical testing kits. It appeared almost new, sealed with yellowed Scotch tape that spoke of decades rather than months.

She sat opposite them and placed the box on her lap.

"I have kept this for forty-four years," she said. "I did not open it. Not even once."

Zan leaned forward slightly, his attention caught.

"Because he instructed me not to," Mira continued. "He said, "

Her voice caught. She swallowed and attempted again.

"He said: 'Only open if something happens to me. This is our chance for a future.'"

Leticia felt something in her chest tighten, not pain precisely. Recognition.

Mira whispered, "I was fifteen. I thought he meant marriage."

She released a soft, brittle laugh, not bitter, merely very, very tired.

"I kept the box because... because girls keep the foolish things men say. Even when they grow old."

Her hands trembled slightly as she peeled back the tape and lifted the lid.

Inside was a sealed plastic envelope, yellowed at the edges. Atop it lay a folded piece of paper bearing Jun's handwriting, uneven, boyish, hopeful.

Mira did not open it. She pushed the entire box across the bench toward Leticia.

"This is not for me anymore," she said. "This belongs to the truth."

Leticia accepted it gently. "Are you certain?"

Mira nodded with finality. "What's inside will not alter my life," she said. "But it will explain it."

She looked out toward the road. "And perhaps," she added softly, "it will shame the appropriate people."

Leticia stood, sliding the box carefully into her bag, and bowed her head slightly in thanks.

Mira watched her with eyes that had witnessed too much.

"Tell me one thing," she said. "Did he suffer?"

Leticia answered honestly, but gently. "No. Not for long."

Mira breathed out, a long release of years she had been carrying like stones.

"Good," she said. "Good."

When they departed, the dog barked once more, then settled beneath the house as though the day required no further commentary.

They did not examine the box at Mira's house. It felt inappropriate, too exposed, too raw. Truth deserved privacy.

So Leticia and Zan walked back toward La Victoria in silence, following the narrow path beside the fields, the blue plastic box secured safely in Leticia's bag.

The shadows had lengthened considerably. Late afternoon. The particular quality of light where everything appeared softer except the matters that possessed genuine significance.

When they reached home, Alma was on the veranda shelling beans. She glanced up at the box in Leticia's hands, then at her daughter's face, and posed no questions.

"Inside," she said gently. "Use Peter's table. It's clear."

They went in. The house was quiet. The mango tree outside hummed with the sound of cicadas winding themselves into the evening's performance.

Leticia placed the small box on the dining table. Zan stood by the doorway, not wishing to crowd her, but not departing either.

The lid opened easily.

Inside: the sealed plastic envelope and Jun's folded note.

Leticia unfolded the note first. Jun's handwriting was rushed, uneven, the writing of a young man afraid he would not have time to finish his thoughts.

*Mira,*

*If you are reading this, something has already happened to me.*

*Don't believe anyone who says I ran. You know me better than that.*

*There are things here that will prove what Tino and Paeng did with the land deals.*

*The owners paid full price but they declared less, kept the difference, and used fake permits so no one would check.*

*If they come to you, don't give them anything. Don't trust their words.*

*Tell someone honest. Someday. When you are strong.*

*For our baby.*

*Jun*

Leticia lowered the letter slowly.

Zan released a breath he had not realised he had been holding. "Brave boy," he murmured.

Leticia nodded once, then retrieved the sealed envelope. Beneath it in the box lay a Nokia mobile telephone and, wrapped in paper, several Micro SD cards.

Leticia looked astonished. "These probably contain video or audio recordings, proof of the fraud. Or a record of something. They require examination later."

Old tape peeled with a faint crackle as she opened the envelope.

Inside were several papers, folded twice:

1. **A fraudulent building permit**

- Barangay seal misaligned
- Signature photocopied
- Wrong lot number scratched out and rewritten

2. **A double deed of sale**

- One copy declaring ₱1.7 million
- Another declaring ₱250,000

3. **A receipt signed by Paeng**

- Payment for "permit facilitation"
- No official number
- Only a nickname initial: P. Villaverde

4. **A smaller, thinner slip**

- Handwritten list of "shares"
- Two names underlined
- **Tino** and **P.**

Leticia placed each paper on the table, aligning them in a neat row with the precision she applied to all evidence.

"Tino," she said aloud, ensuring clarity, "refers to Tino Navarro, who serves as Barangay Captain, the local official responsible for permits and community governance. His position would have made him ideally situated to facilitate such fraud."

All the while, her mind processed information, not in panic, but in the precise, disciplined manner in which she had been trained:

Motive. Method. Opportunity. Cover-up. Pattern.

All present. Every piece accounted for.

Zan leaned over the table. "Why did neither Tino nor Paeng take these?" he asked.

Leticia tapped the envelope gently. "Because they believed Jun still possessed them," she said. "He concealed them with Mira before he went to the hut that night. They never imagined he would leave anything with a fifteen-year-old girl."

"And Mira did not open it?"

"No," Leticia said. "She thought it was... romantic. About their future together."

Zan shook his head slowly, anger and pity mixing in his expression.

Leticia touched the fraudulent permit. "This," she said, "is proof the house was not legal. Not in 2009. Not in 2019. Not presently."

She touched the second deed. "This is proof the corruption continued for years."

Her hand drifted to the list of shares. "And this, " she hesitated, "is dangerous."

Zan looked at her sharply. "Dangerous in what manner?"

"It names people," she said softly. "And people who get named after forty-four years... sometimes panic."

"I have also examined the videos on the SD cards," she added, "and the content is explosive. And explosive material can be even more dangerous."

Zan's jaw tightened.

They both regarded the evidence on the table. It felt as though the room itself was holding its breath.

Leticia extracted her mobile telephone and carefully photographed each document. Then she slid each one into a large envelope, sealed it with meticulous care, and addressed it:

*FAO - Ferdinand Ramos,  
Beron & Montberry Attorneys at Law,  
Plaza Building  
Cuenco Avenue  
Cebu City*

She placed it into her bag and closed it gently.

Zan asked the question hovering in the air: "What will happen next?"

Leticia stood. Her shadow fell across the table, bisecting the evening light.

"Next," she said, "for safe keeping, and as our insurance, we post this to Ferdinand, whom I know well from my police work. And then we visit the one person who cannot ignore all the evidence we have, both here and on my telephone."

"Who?"

Leticia met his eyes.

"Tino Navarro," she said. "The Barangay Captain."

## *Chapter Eleven – The Interview*

Tino Navarro's house occupied a prominent position on the barangay road, somewhat larger than most residences, painted a hopeful pale blue that the sun had already begun to fade into something more melancholy.

Two concrete lions flanked the steps, chipped, proud, unnecessary. He had added them after assuming the position of Barangay Captain, the local official responsible for community governance, permits, and administrative matters. It was the local manner of announcing "I have achieved success."

As Leticia and Zan walked up the path, a group of elderly men playing cards beneath the camias tree fell silent. Everyone knew why she was there, or believed they did. Truth travels with considerably greater velocity than motorcycles in small communities.

Tino Navarro, the Barangay Captain himself, was positioned on the veranda, peeling a pomelo with the precise movements of a man who had always believed his hands were too important for rough labour.

He glanced up. "Ah," he said. "The scientist."

A small, ironic smile. Not friendly, defensive.

"Good afternoon," Leticia replied with scrupulous courtesy.

He gestured toward the bamboo chairs. She did not sit.

Zan remained behind her, quiet as a machete leaning against a wall, present, waiting, potentially dangerous.

Tino released a sigh. "You wish to discuss permits again? Paper gets lost. Offices burn. Storms take things. Even computers fail."

A shrug. Decades of excuses condensed into one gesture.

Leticia set her bag on the table between them. The sound was soft, but Tino flinched nonetheless, the manner in which a guilty man responds when silence arrives with weight.

"You supervised construction of our house in 2009," she stated.

"Supervised," he corrected with emphasis. "I was foreman. The owner handled the papers."

"No," Leticia said. "You handled everything."

His jaw tightened, the first crack in the facade.

She opened the bag and placed an envelope marked "EVIDENCE" on the table.

Tino did not touch it. He did not require physical contact. The colour drained from his face. And that told her everything she needed to know.

"You know what's inside," Leticia said. "And just so you entertain no misunderstanding, these are copies. The originals are with an attorney."

He stared at the envelope as though it were something alive and venomous.

After a long moment, his voice emerged thin: "Where did you obtain that?"

"From the person Jun trusted most."

His eyes flickered upward. Fear. Surprise. Then anger, but the small variety, the kind employed to conceal a larger one.

"Mira did not even know what she possessed," he said with bitterness. "She was a child."

"A child you threatened?" Leticia inquired.

Tino set the pomelo down with exaggerated care. His hands were trembling.

"I never touched that girl," he said sharply.

"I did not say you did," she replied. "But you touched Jun."

A long, awful silence followed.

Zan shifted his weight behind her, the silent warning of a man preparing to intervene if circumstances required.

Tino released a dry laugh. It wavered halfway through.

"You believe I killed him?"

Leticia did not blink. "I believe you restrained him. I believe you attempted to frighten him. I believe someone struck him harder than intended. And I believe you panicked."

The tremor in his hands grew steadier, not weakness, but surrender.

"We only wanted the papers returned," he whispered.

"We," Leticia repeated. "Paeng?"

"No," Tino said. Then hesitated. "Not only Paeng."

Another crack. A larger one.

Leticia stepped closer. "Who else?" she asked softly.

Tino's eyes drifted toward the lane, not to verify if anyone watched, but in the reflex of a man who had been looking over his shoulder for most of his adult life.

"He had copies," Tino murmured. "We thought he kept them on his person. He waved one at me once, smug little boy. Said he wanted 'a future' with that girl. A future purchased with my silence."

"You took him to the hut," Leticia said.

Tino swallowed. Nodded once.

"We restrained him," he said. "Copper wire. All we had available. We told him to reveal where the papers were."

"And he did not."

"Of course he did not," Tino said bitterly. "He thought he was playing hero. Thought he was more clever than us."

Leticia's voice remained level. "What happened next?"

Tino's eyes closed.

"Paeng struck him."

"How?"

"With the chair. Or against the wall. I don't know precisely. Jun fell."

Another pause.

"When he hit the floor, he did not move."

Leticia felt the air leave the room.

"And then?"

Tino rubbed his forehead hard, as though attempting to erase the memory.

"We panicked. Paeng kept saying: 'If the owner discovers this, we lose everything.'"

"We carried the body to the field. Buried him hastily. Took the wire. Took the lantern. Cleaned the hut. We thought the rain would hide the tracks."

"And the chisel?" Leticia asked.

Tino blinked. "What chisel?"

She studied him. He was not lying, not about this particular element.

"It was in the grave," she said.

"Well, we did not place it there." He shook his head, almost offended. "I remember every tool we took. A chisel was not among them."

That meant: The chisel was not part of the interrogation. It fell in during burial. Or someone else placed it later.

Leticia filed that information away.

Tino stared at the evidence envelope once more.

"You are going to turn me in to the authorities," he said flatly.

"Not yet."

He looked up, shocked. "Why not?"

"Because," she said, "I want you to tell the truth before someone else tells it for you."

"And that changes anything?"

"For you, perhaps not," Leticia said. "For the boy in the ground? Yes."

Tino's breath hitched, the sound of a man realising that hiding has become more burdensome than confessing.

After a long moment, he whispered: "What do you want me to do?"

Leticia met his eyes. "Tell the barangay," she said. "Tell your council. Tell your nephew. Tell the island."

"And if I refuse?"

Leticia retrieved the envelope. "Then I will."

Zan leaned close and whispered: "That's it."

Leticia shook her head gently. "No," she murmured. "That's just the break. The healing hasn't started yet."

She stepped outside into the humid evening, the sound of murmuring voices spilling behind her, the moon low and orange over the mango trees.

Soon would come police. Statements. News. Questions. Blame. Relief. Pain.

But tonight, tonight was the moment the truth finally stopped hiding.

## *Chapter Twelve – The Knot*

That afternoon the light began to soften, filtering through the mango leaves in a manner that made the excavation site appear almost peaceful.

Zan packed away the tools, Renne labelled the evidence bags, and Leticia completed her notes.

At the bottom of the page she wrote:

*Jun (surname unknown), likely homicide.*

*Cause: blunt trauma, asphyxiation, followed by concealment.*

*Secondary evidence: wire restraint, personal effects recovered intact.*

*Pending confirmation.*

She closed the file and stood, stretching her back.

Renne shaded her eyes. "So what now?"

"Now," Leticia said, "we follow the wire."

"To whom?"

"To whoever needed him silent," she said. "And to whoever tied the knot."

That night, she sat on the veranda with Alma and Munchi. The smell of wood smoke drifted from the Barbecue . Somewhere in the darkness, the frogs were commencing again, that steady background chorus that always returned when the world attempted to forget itself.

Alma looked over her shoulder. "You found what you wanted?"

"Not yet," Leticia said. "But I found where to look next."

Munchi had fallen asleep across her lap, one small hand curled against the fabric of Leticia's sleeve. The child's breathing was even, the species of peace no adult ever maintains for long.

Leticia looked toward the mango tree, its silhouette black against the low stars. Beneath it lay forty-four years of silence, and still the ground had stories left to tell.

Two days after the excavation, the evidence trays lay drying under the tin roof of the veranda. Leticia worked through the catalogue sheet by sheet, soil samples, fragments, bone dust, and the new items from the trench. Each entry was as small as handwriting could make it, precise enough for any future investigator to follow.

Zan brought coffee and indicated with his chin toward the tray. "That wire again," he said. "You think it means something?"

"It means someone restrained him," Leticia said. "Copper wire was not common for builders in that era. Too soft. Used mostly for electrical work or tool grounding."

She turned the short coil over in her palm. "But this one was wrapped twice and twisted by hand, no pliers. That's old-school work."

"Paeng's crew?" Zan asked.

"Perhaps," she said. "But I need to know who supplied copper that year."

Renne looked up from her laptop. "I can check the old trade registry," she said. "Tagbilaran hardware records extend back to 2005 if you dig."

Leticia smiled faintly. "Then let's dig."

By afternoon they were in Tagbilaran, standing in the narrow heat of Parras Street. The old hardware shop was still there, squeezed between a bakery and a tailor. Its sign, "Villaverde Electrical & Supply," had lost most of its paint but not its name.

A man in his seventies stood behind the counter, reading a newspaper. When he observed Leticia's identification card, he folded the paper slowly.

"You're not police," he said. "You're the scientist."

"Yes," Leticia said. "We're tracing a specific type of copper wire sold here around 2009. Small gauge, local manufacture. Do you still have your sales ledgers?"

The man nodded toward the back. "We don't discard anything. My brother Paeng used to handle the site deliveries then. You know him?"

Leticia met his gaze. "We've spoken of him."

He sighed. "He died in 2020. Heart. Too much coffee and no sleep."

"I'm sorry," she said, and meant it. The dead couldn't answer, but their papers could.

He brought out a box of curled ledger books. Renne took photographs of each page while Leticia ran her finger down the columns, nails, rebar, wire, fuel.

Then, there it was:

*October 12, 2009 – Sale: 15 metres, copper wire, gauge 12. Buyer: P. Villaverde, La Victoria site.*

She took a photograph and closed the book.

"Do you remember why he needed it?" she asked.

The old man frowned, attempting to sift memory from habit. "Paeng said the night guard wanted to repair a grounding line for the generator. But the owner said there was no generator. I thought perhaps he used it for binding rebar, but he never returned for the rest. Strange thing."

Leticia nodded slowly. "Strange, yes."

Outside, Renne scrolled through the photos on her telephone. "So Paeng purchased the wire. That ties him to the grave."

"Perhaps not to the killing," Leticia said, "but to the concealment. He was foreman. He cleaned up after everyone."

Zan looked back at the shop. "Then it was him who buried Jun."

Leticia's voice stayed calm. "Or someone working for him. Copper wire doesn't establish guilt. It only tells who touched it first."

Renne said quietly, "You think Paeng's son might know?"

Leticia glanced at her. "If he's alive, yes. And if he's like his father, he'll be intelligent enough to lie only halfway."

That evening, back in La Victoria, she spread the evidence photos across the table. The chisel, the buckle halves, the wire, the ledger page, fragments of a forty-four-year-old story that was finally starting to align.

Munchi wandered in, hair still damp from a bath. "What's that, Mum?" she asked.

"Pieces of the past," Leticia said. "They don't fit yet."

"Maybe they broke," Munchi said.

Leticia smiled. "Maybe. But even broken things tell you how they were made."

Alma, from the kitchen doorway, said, "And some things are better left buried."

Leticia nodded. "Yes. But not this."

Later, when the house was quiet, she sat at her desk and wrote a single line in her notebook:

*The wire leads to Paeng. But the hands that tied the knot might not have been his.*

She underlined it twice, then closed the book.

Outside, under the mango tree, the night wind moved like slow breath through the leaves, steady, indifferent, endless.

*Paeng's Son*

Tagbilaran in the late afternoon had taken on the stillness that often came before rain. The air felt held in place. Diesel fumes drifted up from the tricycles on the road below, and two streets away the sea showed a dull, metallic sheen, as though light itself had grown tired.

Letecia and Renne walked uphill to a low house set back behind a rusted gate. Bougainvillea had pushed through the wire, its branches bent and thorned, growing where it was not meant to.

A woman in her forties opened the door. She wore a faded T-shirt that read \*Cebu Pacific Logistics\* and had the lined, practical face of someone accustomed to early mornings and little rest.

"Yes?" she said.

"We're looking for Tomas Villaverde," Letecia replied. "Your husband?"

The woman nodded, her expression guarded but not unfriendly. "What's this about?"

"A forensic case," Letecia said. "La Victoria. Two thousand and nine."

The woman hesitated. Then she stepped back and opened the door wider. "He's in the back," she said. "Come."

Tomas Villaverde sat at a workbench beneath a tarpaulin lean-to, repairing a motorcycle carburettor. The parts were laid out neatly in front of him. He was lean, in his early forties, his forearms marked with small scars from years of metalwork. When he looked up, his eyes showed caution first, then recognition.

"You're the scientist from Bohol," he said. "You came last week."

"That's right," Letecia said. "We found your father's name in an old hardware ledger."

He nodded once. "People come asking about him. Always about the same year."

"Two thousand and nine," Renne said.

"Yes." He set the wrench down and wiped his hands on a rag. He did not hurry. "He talked more near the end. Said there was something he'd helped bury that wasn't his to bury."

"A person," Letecia said.

He looked at her briefly, then away. "A boy. He said he couldn't remember if the boy was already dead. Or just close."

Letecia frowned. "He told you this?"

"Yes." Tomas paused. "He said it happened at the house near La Victoria. He and another man. Jun's employer, I think. They were meant to guard tools. A fight broke out. They thought the boy was a thief. Someone fell. My father said they panicked."

He rubbed his thumb against the rag, over and over. "They tied the boy with wire so he wouldn't wake. But he didn't wake."

"So it was Jun," Letecia said quietly.

Tomas nodded. "He didn't know the name then. He only remembered the belt buckle. The one with the fish."

"The buckle," Renne said.

"The detail stayed with him," she added.

Tomas nodded again. "He said it came back to him when things were quiet."

He took a breath, steadying himself. "Once he told me, 'If they ever find him, tell the truth. I buried a boy, not a thief.'" He gave a small, resigned shrug. "I suppose that's what I'm doing now."

"Why now?" Letecia asked.

"Because he's been gone five years," Tomas said. "And because some things don't improve with keeping."

The first drops of rain fell, sudden and heavy. Renne shifted her camera beneath her bag. Tomas stood in the doorway, looking out at the road as it darkened.

"I can show you where he kept his things," he said. "There may be something left."

In the small storage room behind the house, Tomas opened a metal trunk. Inside were tools, old receipts, and a small cloth pouch. He set the pouch on the table.

"I found this after he died."

Letecia untied the knot. Inside lay half of a copper wire spool. Same gauge. Same make. The label, Villaverde Electrical & Supply, was still intact.

"He kept it," she said.

"He said it reminded him," Tomas replied. "That work can fix things. Or make them disappear."

Letecia nodded. "He wasn't wrong."

They left as the rain settled into a steady drumming on the roofs. At the corner, Renne glanced back toward the house.

"You think that's the end of it?"

"No," Letecia said. "It's what we can prove. The rest stays with the people who carry it."

Renne smiled faintly. "That's enough for most."

"For most," Letecia said.

She looked toward the dark line of cloud rolling in from the sea, its colour close to that of the earth that had held Jun for so many years, and felt the quiet certainty that there were still knots waiting to be undone.

### *Chapter Thirteen - The Report*

By morning the rain had cleared. A thin mist lay over the paddies, and the air carried a faint scent of rust and mango sap, clean but not quite innocent.

Letecia sat at her desk beneath the open window. A single lamp burned, carefully positioned, its light falling exactly where it was required and nowhere else. The house was quiet. Somewhere in the kitchen, Munchi hummed, softly, tunelessly, an ordinary sound, and therefore reassuring.

The report lay before her, almost complete. Twelve pages of plain type. No adjectives. No speculation. Locations, dates, measurements. Serial numbers. Soil depths. Wire gauge. Fibre samples. The fracture pattern of the buckle. Every detail exact, aligned, controlled. Facts, Letecia knew, had a way of refusing comfort.

Renne entered carrying two mugs of coffee.

"You've been awake all night," she said.

"Nearly," Letecia replied. "The difficulty is not the writing. It is deciding what must be said, and what must not."

Renne set a mug down beside her. "Say enough so the dead can rest and the living can breathe. Any more than that, and you start inventing ghosts."

Letecia allowed herself a brief smile. "You sound like a photographer."

"I sound like someone who knows what a frame leaves out," Renne said.

Letecia returned to the final page and read it again, with the same care she had applied the first time:

Subject: Unidentified male.

Date of burial: Circa 2009.

Estimated age: Late teens - Early twenties.

Cause of death: Mechanism cannot be conclusively determined at this stage.

Associated artefacts: Santos & Sons chisel; brass belt buckle (matched); steel wristwatch (fragment); tool pouch.

Remarks: Evidence of post-incident concealment. No indication of premeditation.

It was sufficient. It was also incomplete. This, too, was intentional.

When Alma came in to collect the laundry, she stopped at the doorway.

"You're finished?" she asked.

"Yes," Letecia said. "It will go to the barangay soon. But not yet."

Alma looked at the papers spread neatly across the desk. "So everyone will know now."

"Not everything," Letecia replied. "Only what belongs on paper." She touched her temple, then the desk. "Paper keeps the facts. We keep the meaning."

Alma considered this, then nodded. "That seems fair."

Later, Letecia walked down to the well. The soil was still dark from the rain, compacted, obedient. She poured a cup of water over the filled-in trench. It had become a habit, small, exact, and without ceremony.

"Salamat," she said quietly.

When she turned back, Renne stood by the veranda rail, camera in hand.

"You're not publishing this," Renne said. It was not a question.

"No," Letecia replied. "This is not for headlines. It is a record. For the person who finds the next grave and wonders whether truth is worth the effort."

Renne lifted the camera. "Then one photograph."

"Of what?"

"Of the ground," Renne said. "Level. Undisturbed. That is how things should end."

Letecia nodded once. "Go on."

The shutter clicked. Softly. Decisively.

That evening, Letecia printed two copies of the report. One for the barangay office in Trinidad. One sealed for the provincial archives.

On the envelope she wrote, in plain black ink:

La Victoria – Case File 2052

The Jun (Unknown) Investigation

Filed by: Dr Letecia Ramos

Status: Closed

She turned off the lamp.

Outside, the first fireflies had begun to appear among the mango leaves—brief, precise flashes against the dark. The island, patient as ever, seemed ready to forget.

Letecia, who trusted facts more than comfort, knew better. Truth, once correctly assembled, had a way of waiting.

## *Chapter Fourteen - The Man with Clean Hands*

The barangay office at Candabong stood behind a row of flowering acacia trees. Their fallen petals lay thick upon the path, a pale pink dust that softened the ground without disguising it. Letecia noted this, as she noted most things. Appearances, she had learned, were rarely accidental.

She and Renne arrived shortly after luncheon, at that oppressive hour when the air grows heavy and human thought seems to move with effort. Inside, ceiling fans turned with a languid persistence, stirring the warmth but accomplishing little.

The guard waved them through without comment.

Captain Tino Navarro did not invite them to sit.

He remained standing behind the table, his palms laid flat upon its surface, as though steadying it—or himself. The blue paint on the walls appeared noticeably fresh. Someone, Letecia observed, had been careful to clean.

“You have placed me in a difficult position,” Tino said.

Letecia did not reply immediately. She opened her notebook and glanced at a page she knew perfectly well.

“No,” she said at last. “You placed yourself there. Some years ago.”

Tino smiled. It was a thin smile, quickly assembled. "You have paper," he said. "I do not deny that. But paper is not the same thing as proof."

Letecia raised her eyes. "Paper," she said calmly, "is what courts read."

"Courts read only what they are shown," he replied. "And what they are not."

Renne shifted her weight near the doorway but remained silent.

Tino reached for the envelope on the table, then withdrew his hand before touching it.

"You understand what follows if this proceeds," he said. "Permits will be questioned. Titles suspended. Families displaced from houses they have occupied for decades."

"People have already lost things," Letecia replied. "They simply did not yet have the words for it."

He exhaled, slowly. "You believe yourself separate from this," he said. "Because you studied abroad. Because you write with care. But this land is indifferent to careful writing."

"It is not indifferent to records," Letecia said. "Nor are banks. Nor auditors."

The word settled between them.

Auditors.

For the first time, something altered in Tino's expression. Not anger. Something more practical.

"How long," he asked quietly, "before this is submitted?"

"It already has been," Letecia said. "Not everywhere. But in sufficient places."

Tino straightened. He adjusted his collar with deliberate neatness.

"You should take care," he said. "People disappear when they insist on reopening the past."

Letecia closed her notebook.

"People disappear," she replied, "when no one insists on answers."

He looked at her for a moment longer, then turned his gaze toward the window, toward the road beyond.

"This interview is concluded," he said. "Any further matters may be addressed to my legal counsel."

She inclined her head. "I imagine you will be occupied."

As they turned to leave, Tino spoke again, almost lightly.

"If I am absent for some time," he said, "do not mistake that for guilt."

Letecia paused at the doorway.

"I will not," she said. "I shall mistake it for distance."

They left him standing alone, the envelope untouched, the office excessively clean, the open windows admitting a road that led, usefully, to many places.

Outside, beneath the acacia, Renne spoke.

"Do you believe him?"

"He told the truth," Letecia said. "Not all of it."

"And now?"

"Now," Letecia replied, "we speak to Mira."

Mira Ramos lived near the coast, in a clapboard house where laundry lines hung heavy with children's clothing, bright colours moving gently in the sea air. She herself was in her sixties, her skin darkened by sun, her eyes clear and unsoftened by time.

When Letecia showed her the photograph of the matched buckle halves, Mira gave a brief, brittle laugh.

"Of course I know it," she said. "I bought it for him myself. A fish, for a fisherman's son."

She studied the image more closely. Her voice softened. "He wore it every day."

Then she leaned back, folding her arms. "They said he ran away. Said he left me with a child and a broken promise. I wanted to believe that. It made things simpler."

She brushed her mouth with the back of her hand. "I know that belt better than any of them, Doktora. I fastened it often enough to imagine a future."

Renne looked away.

"He did not run," Letecia said gently. "He died at the site. It was not your fault."

Mira's eyes filled, but no tears fell.

"So the story was false," she said. "And everyone agreed to tell it."

"Yes," Letecia said. "It was convenient."

Mira turned toward the sea. "Forty years," she said. "And convenience still prevails."

"Not today," Letecia replied.

That evening, Letecia reviewed her notes.

Jun (unknown): death accidental or homicide; concealment deliberate.

Motives: fear, corruption, convenience.

In the margin she wrote:

Some hands remain clean because others do the digging.

She closed the folder. The fan clicked steadily overhead.

Outside, the mango leaves stirred in the warm air, whispering as they always had, keeping secrets without decay.

Later still, with the house quiet, Letecia examined the documents once more. Two deeds of sale. One truth divided into two figures. A permit number reused. A signature too consistent to be chance.

The forgery was not bold. It was efficient.

"He recycled it," she said aloud. "The same paper that buried a body."

Renne nodded. "So your family's house stands on the same permission that hid a grave."

"Yes," Letecia said. "And the same man signed both."

"Innocent hands," Alma said quietly.

"Yes," Letecia replied. "On crooked paper."

The next morning, Letecia returned alone to Candabong.

The interview followed the same pattern. The same standing posture. The same untouched envelope. The same warning, the same deflection.

The answers had not changed.

Only the weight of the paper had.

That night, she added her final note:

The second grave was not soil but paper. The dead weigh the same, whichever one excavates.

She closed her laptop and listened to the frogs calling from the paddies.

The house creaked softly, as old houses do, not in protest, but in memory.

## *Chapter Fifteen – The Long Silence*

The earth behind the house was still damp from the recent rain, dark, compact, and yielding underfoot. The pit that had once contained Jun's remains was now neatly filled, the pale sand tamped down with care, as though someone had wished to restore the ground to an earlier state.

A few yards away, a second circle of disturbed earth marked the beginnings of a new well. It was not yet deep, but a faint glimmer of water was already visible at the bottom.

Junior worked there methodically, his movements economical, his shirt darkened with sweat. He was Zan's cousin and resembled him closely, the same unhurried manner, the same habit of speaking only when necessary. He had arrived from Ubay with a shovel and his lunch wrapped in banana leaves, and appeared unconcerned by the fact that bones had been found at this spot only days before.

Zan stood nearby, resting both hands on a rake.

"He says we'll have proper water by tomorrow," he told Letecia.

"New ground," he added. "Cleaner."

Letecia inclined her head.

"Mark the old place," she said. "So it isn't disturbed again."

Junior straightened and wiped his forehead.

"That's already done, ma'am."

He indicated a flat stone set neatly at the edge of the filled pit. A simple cross had been scratched into it with a bolo knife, nothing decorative, merely functional.

"Very sensible," Letecia said.

Junior smiled, slightly embarrassed.

"They say the boy was my age when he died. Bad luck, maybe. But good water now. Things even out."

Letecia did not reply. She watched him return to his work. The steady thud of the shovel continued, regular and unremarkable, the sound of ordinary labour resumed.

At the house, Alma was hanging laundry. The smell of soap drifted across the yard.

"You're going today?" she asked.

"Yes. The archive closes at five."

"You'll leave the report?"

"One copy," Letecia said. "The other stays here."

Alma nodded.

"Like Peter used to say. One for them, one for my drawer."

They stood together for a moment, watching the line of shirts move slightly in the breeze.

Extract from the Field Report of

Dr Letecia Ramos, Forensic Science Advisor.

Findings are not consistent with accidental death at the location of recovery.

Evidence supports restraint and secondary deposition.

Absence of personal effects suggests deliberate removal prior to burial.

Recommendation:

Site to be preserved pending further excavation.

Secondary location to be identified.

The provincial archive in Trinidad occupied a former convent. Its thick walls kept the rooms cool, and the air carried the smell of old paper. Filing cabinets lined the corridors, each drawer labelled in handwriting that had faded with time.

The archivist on duty was an elderly woman named Estrella. She wore her identification on a ribbon and handled the envelope carefully.

"Good afternoon, Doktora," she said. "You have a deposit?"

Letecia handed it to her.

"It concerns a death in La Victoria. Full documentation."

Estrella turned it over.

"Restricted?"

"Yes. Until requested by family or a qualified official."

The archivist nodded.

"That can be arranged."

She completed the forms, indicated where Letecia should sign, and placed the envelope into a drawer labelled Miscellaneous, Provincial Records. The drawer closed with a quiet click.

"That's all?" Renne asked.

"That's all," Letecia said.

"Then it's kept," Estrella said. "For what it's worth."

Outside, traffic passed on the road below.

"So this is how it ends," Renne said. "In a drawer."

"It's recorded," Letecia said. "That matters."

Tino Navarro did not resign.

He did not offer an explanation.

By the third morning, his house stood closed and locked, the gate secured, the concrete lions at the entrance unchanged. Accounts varied. He had gone to Cebu. He was visiting relatives. He had business elsewhere.

The council met without him. His name was used only when required.

Letecia read the minutes later. There was no reference to leave. No motion to replace him. No explanation.

Only absence.

Zan glanced at the papers.

"If you leave early enough," he said, "people stop asking questions."

When they returned to La Victoria, the well was complete.

"Good water," Junior said, "no need for a carbon filter."

They drank it. It was cool and clear.

That night, Letecia paused by the marker stone. The ground lay smooth and undisturbed.

"You're recorded now," she said quietly.

Later, she wrote in her notebook:

"The well is finished and the report has been filed."

She closed the book and turned out the light.

Outside, the frogs called, and the house settled into silence.

## *Chapter Sixteen – After the Rain*

Morning arrived clear and bright after the night's rain. The leaves were clean of dust and the air carried the smell of damp soil.

From the kitchen came the familiar sound of Alma's kettle heating. Zan was already outside. He checked the cover of the new well, tapping the rim lightly with his knuckle and listening to the sound it made.

Munchi came out barefoot, her hair in a braid that did not entirely hold. She lifted the cover and looked down.

"It looks very deep," she said.

"It is deep enough," Letecia replied.

They drew two buckets, one for coffee and one for cleaning, and replaced the cover. There was no particular attention paid to the spot now. The filled ground lay flat, the marker stone set slightly aside, visible only if one knew to look for it.

Alma tasted the water and nodded.

"It's good," she said. "Like the water we had in Anda."

She set three mugs on the table and folded a dishcloth beside the stove, a habit she had never quite unlearned.

Renne's camera hung unused from the veranda rail. She had stopped filming several days earlier and did not mention it again. Now she sat editing short, unremarkable clips, ants moving across a fallen flower, water trembling briefly in the well pipe, Zan rubbing oil into a tool handle.

By mid-morning the neighbours began to arrive. A woman from the next barangay stopped in the shade, holding her phone.

"They say new wells have to be registered," she announced. "It's online."

Alma shrugged.

"Register it if they like."

The woman laughed and stayed a while.

Under the mango tree, the household settled into its usual order. Zan worked on the bodega lock. Junior swept stray sand from the path and said he would return next week to help a neighbour with a well of his own. Somewhere down the road, a radio played a familiar song. Chickens tested the edge of the filled ground and lost interest.

By late morning the heat increased. Alma prepared mango with salt and chili. Munchi drew fish on scrap paper and named them carefully.

She looked at the marker stone.

"That one is for a boy," she said.

Letecia nodded.

"Yes."

Around noon, the barangay page updated again. Notices appeared and disappeared. Renne glanced at them and smiled briefly.

After lunch, the visits became fewer. Ramon arrived on his motorbike and stood for a moment by the yard.

"The well is good," he said. "I might need one myself."

"Junior can do it," Zan said.

Ramon handed Letecia a small envelope.

"My mother's letter," he said. "Just in case."

Letecia took it.

"Did you see him again?"

Ramon hesitated.

"Once more. He recognised my voice. He passed away before anyone could speak to him properly."

He did not stay long.

The afternoon passed quietly. Renne slept in the sling chair. Zan rested on the floorboards. Alma sewed, her stitches small and regular. Letecia sorted papers at the kitchen table, separating what would be kept from what would be stored away.

She sent a brief message to the archive in Trinidad. The reply came back shortly after, confirming receipt.

Later, Munchi insisted on playing shop under the mango tree. Leaves became money. Stones became bread. The game ended when she gave everything away.

A van full of students passed on the road, heading toward the port. Letecia watched it go without comment.

Messages arrived on her phone and were answered sparingly.

Toward evening, the boys from down the road gathered to play basketball near the rice mill. The hoop remained without a net. Ramon's son made a clean shot and returned quietly to the game.

Letecia brought out water and set it on the step. The boys drank politely. One of them glanced toward the stone.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"For someone who lived here once," she said.

He nodded and said nothing more.

Dinner was simple. Alma cooked rice and vegetables. Zan washed his hands and said grace out loud, more from habit than ceremony.

As dusk came on, conversation stayed practical. Plans were made. Favours were noted.

Later, after the dishes were washed and Munchi had fallen asleep, Letecia sat on the step with her notebook. The stone lay nearby, unchanged.

She wrote:

\*Work completed.

File deposited.

Well in use.\*

She closed the book.

Renne sat beside her.

"That's enough," she said quietly.

Letecia did not reply.

A breeze moved through the yard. Somewhere a firecracker sounded and then stopped. The pump engaged briefly and shut itself off.

A mango fell from the tree and landed softly on the ground.

Inside, she set her notebook on the shelf between Peter's old map and the rosary Estrella had given back when she filed the envelope, one bead missing, a flaw you'd only notice if you'd counted once and wanted to count again.

She turned off the light. The house settled for the night.

Outside, the well remained covered, the water level steady.

## About the Author

Anthony Stovold is a British author whose novels are inspired by a lifetime of travel, business and real-life experiences. Having lived and worked in several countries, including many years in the Philippines, he draws on the people, places and history he has encountered to create stories that blur the line between fact and fiction.

His writing combines mystery, suspense and historical intrigue with believable characters and authentic locations. Many of the settings featured in his books are based on places he knows well, while the events often grow from a single question: What if...?

Anthony is the author of *The Ramos Files*, *Under the Mango Tree*, *The Shade of the Mango Tree*, *The Second Dig*, *The Third Ledger*, *The Dry Well* and *Road to Myself*. He continues to divide his time between the United Kingdom and the Philippines, where new discoveries and old stories provide constant inspiration.

To learn more about Anthony and his books, visit:

[www.peter-anthony.co.uk](http://www.peter-anthony.co.uk)

