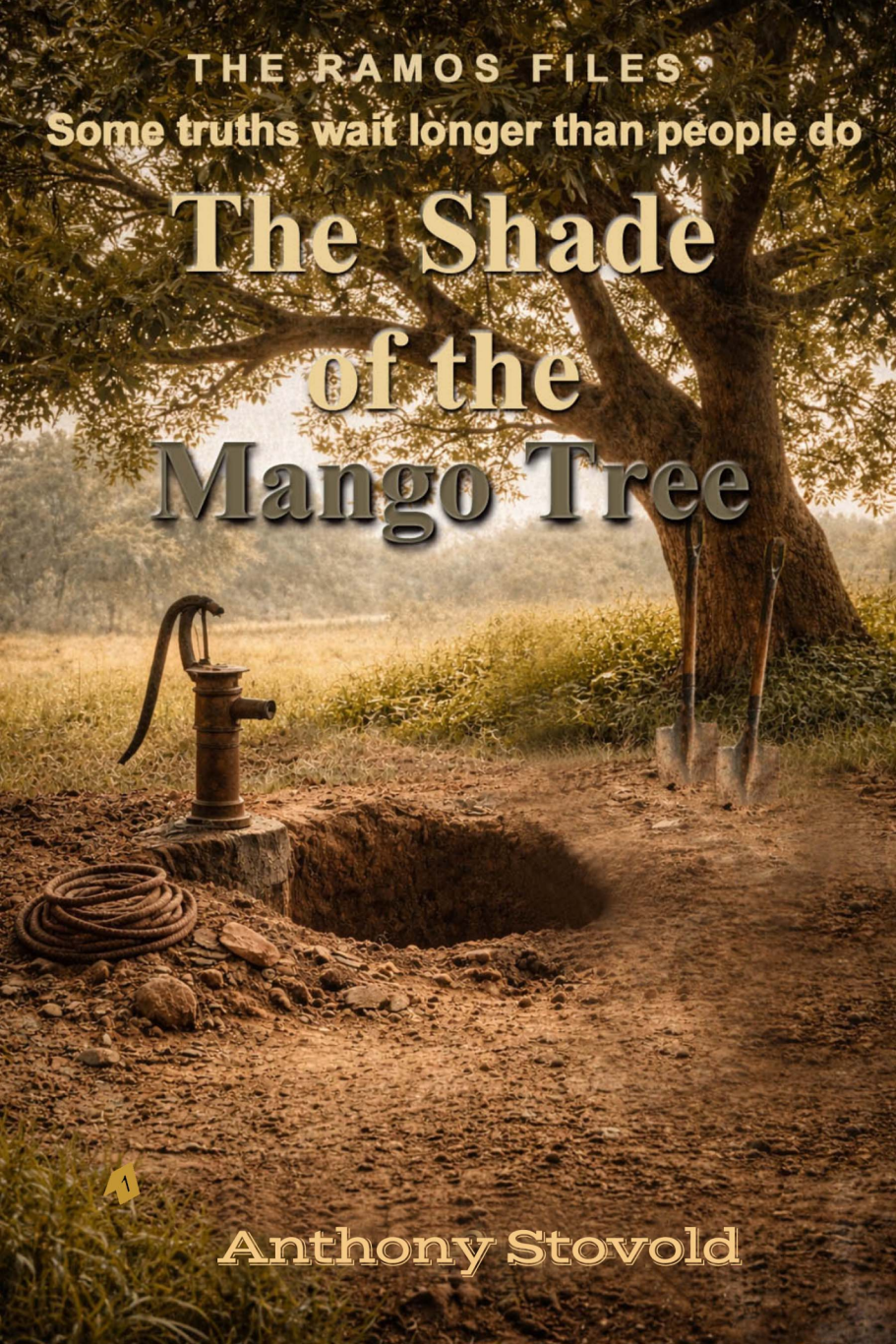


The background of the cover is a photograph of a rural scene. A large, leafy mango tree stands on the right side. In the foreground, there is a hand pump with a coiled hose on the left and a dirt path leading towards the tree on the right. Two shovels are stuck in the ground near the tree's base. The overall tone is warm and golden, suggesting late afternoon or early morning light.

THE RAMOS FILES •

Some truths wait longer than people do

The Shade of the Mango Tree



Anthony Stovold

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The Shade of the Mango Tree

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First published in 2026.

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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."

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Thank you for reading.

Anthony Stovold