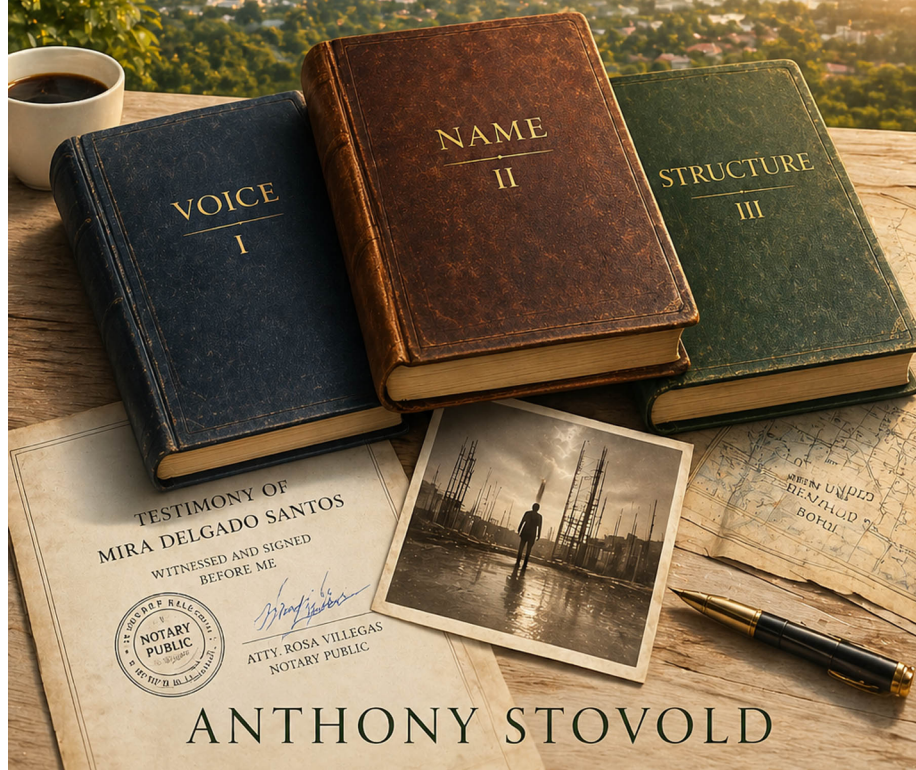


THE THIRD LEDGER

SOME RECORDS ARE KEPT.
OTHERS ARE DIVIDED.
ALL OF THEM ARE DANGEROUS.



The Third Ledger

by
Anthony Stovold

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Prologue

The package arrived one year and six days after Mira Delgado Santos died.

Inside the registry office of Reyes, Villanueva & Associates, nobody initially paid attention to it.

Dozens of legal envelopes passed through the department every day:

estate matters,

property disputes,

government filings,

quiet arrangements wealthy people preferred never to discuss publicly.

Routine protected institutions far more effectively than security ever did.

That morning the package passed through the hands of a junior clerk named Tomas Ardillo.

Twenty-six years old.

Underpaid.

Curious enough to become dangerous.

The envelope carried a second label beneath the legal routing sheet:

POSTHUMOUS TESTIMONY — RELEASE IN EVENT OF DEATH

Tomas hesitated.

Then opened the outer sleeve without breaking the seal beneath.

Inside sat:

one sealed envelope,
ten numbered memory cards,
and a covering document.

His eyes moved quickly across the first page.

Then stopped.

Miguel Saavedra.

Antonio Reyes.

Benjamin Lao.

Boike Xuân.

The names alone tightened the room around him.

He continued reading.

The testimony referenced:

recordings,
wartime land transfers,
corporate bribery,
and conversations captured without the knowledge of the men involved.

Not merely scandal.

Evidence.

At the bottom appeared a final instruction:

*ALL MATERIAL TO BE RELEASED TO APPROPRIATE AUTHORITIES
IN EVENT OF CLIENT DEATH.*

Beneath it, handwritten in blue ink:

If official release becomes impossible, Peter Rawlins will understand what must be done.

Peter Rawlins.

Not government.

Not police.

Just:

Peter Rawlins.

That frightened Tomas more than the politicians.

Because people facing death did not trust strangers accidentally.

Outside, Makati traffic drifted beneath rain-heavy clouds while office staff continued working beneath fluorescent lights and malfunctioning air-conditioning.

The world remained ordinary.

Which made the material before him feel even more dangerous.

Carefully Tomas removed the covering letter.

Folded it once.

Slid it beneath his own papers.

Nobody noticed.

Two hours later, inside a basement restaurant three streets away, another man studied photographs Tomas had taken of the testimony pages.

"The drives?" he asked.

"Still inside legal processing."

"You touched them?"

"No."

Rain hammered suddenly against the windows.

Heavy.

Immediate.

The older man returned the phone calmly.

"You understand," he said, "that powerful people do not fear scandal."

Tomas remained silent.

"They fear evidence."

That night the package continued south exactly as intended.

Legally transferred.

Officially processed.

Quietly watched.

And somewhere beyond Manila, in a house on Bohol where Peter Rawlins lived, something old had already begun moving again.

Chapter One — Delivery

The package arrived fourteen months after Mira Delgado Santos died.

The LBC driver remembered the delivery afterward because Letecia signed for it.

Not unusual in itself.

But she paused before writing her name, studying the sender's details for several seconds longer than most people ever studied parcels arriving at provincial houses.

The driver noticed because people who hesitated over deliveries usually owed money.

This woman did not look frightened.

Only cautious.

Later, when questions quietly began moving through Manila regarding missing legal documents and redirected materials, that signature would matter.

Enjoyed the sample?

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Thank you for reading.

Anthony Stovold