

## PROLOGUE

*WHEN THEY SAW the armed men in the middle of the road, blocking their way, it was already too late. The jeep was running downhill and there was no stopping it in time. The old man driving the vehicle slowed it down, but the armed men had already aimed their guns.*

*The first volley of fire hit the windshield, breaking the silence of the early morning. The driver changed gears and drove the jeep backwards. Another round, and the man sitting beside the driver slumped. Then the driver too. The shooting stopped only when the jeep came to a standstill.*

*“Mangadye ‘ta (Let us pray),” the woman sitting behind the driver said. She took out her rosary. “Let us pray because they will kill us all.”*

*“No, let’s run!” another passenger, a young man, said.*

*“Our Father in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,” the woman started.*

*The shooting started again as the armed men marched toward the vehicle. Bullets felled the young man who was trying to jump from the jeep.*

*The others continued praying.*

*Someone was hit, then another. The driver, who was still alive, shouted. “Cover yourselves!” There was blood all over the vehicle.*

*“Let’s keep praying,” the woman encouraged her companions. She used her body to try to cover a young woman sitting in front of her. (The attempt worked; the young woman was the massacre’s lone survivor.)*

*The firing stopped. The armed men peered inside the vehicle. The wounded passengers were still praying.*

*The rifles spit fire again. Then there was silence.*

*One of the armed men approached the vehicle. He took out a big bolo called a barong and hacked away at the passengers. He wanted to make sure everyone was dead.*

*It was Valentine's Day, 1999.*

*ON THE NIGHT before the massacre, the woman who would pray the rosary as she lay dying sang the responsorial psalm during the anticipated Mass in their village.*

*Afterwards, the priest congratulated her for the "great performance," and teased her about the new dress she was wearing. "Don't worry, Father. I will never wear this again," the woman answered in kind.*

*She had been a village catechist for nine years. With her daughter, she had helped Christians in their village prepare for baptism, confirmation, weddings, even deaths. They also helped other villagers, especially women, earn through livelihood projects.*

*The woman needed to attend an Alay Kapwa seminar the next day in the city and had to travel almost seventy kilometers over a rugged highway. Her daughter wanted to go with her, but the priest said there was no more place for her in the vehicle.*

*"Don't worry," the priest said. "They will come back immediately."*

*That night, after the Mass, the mother went to her daughter's house.*

*"Why did you come, Nanay? You have to leave at four in the morning. It's already nine," the worried daughter said.*

*"I just want to see you," the mother said, hugging her daughter tight.*

*"Nay, you're so sentimental!" She was not used to her mother's display of affection.*

*“I don’t have a jacket for tomorrow,” the mother said.*

*“You can use mine,” the daughter offered.*

*“No, don’t worry. Yours is new. It might get ruined.”*

*“Nay, it’s all right. Even if it gets ruined, I won’t mind because it’s you using it,” the daughter insisted. She handed her mother a P100 bill for her to buy food in the city, but the older woman did not accept the money.*

*“Don’t worry. I will be back immediately,” the mother said.*

*EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, at around 5 a.m., the daughter passed by her mother’s house on her way to church, where it was her turn to read the responsorial psalm. When she reached the house, her father told her Nanay had already left for the city with the other catechists. The daughter decided to go back home, where she saw her husband preparing coffee in the kitchen.*

*She went inside the bedroom and kissed her small daughter. From the window, she saw a woman running toward the house. It was her aunt, crying.*

*“The priest’s jeep was ambushed!” the woman said, panting.*

*“But who will ambush the priest’s jeep?” the daughter asked, unbelieving. “Relax, auntie.”*

*“It’s true. All the passengers are dead,” the older woman wailed.*

*The young woman went out of the house and ran to the church to get more news. Along the way she heard people saying: “You said she was killed? Why is she here?”*

*It was then that she started crying. People had mistaken her for her mother.*

*She heard people talking, saying everyone was dead.*

*The Mass started, but she could not read the responsorial psalm. She was crying in a corner of the church when the priest fetched her and seated her in front.*

*“Shhh,” he said. “If they survive, you are the one who will die because you cry like there’s no tomorrow,” the priest teased his friend.*

*In the middle of the Mass, just as the priest raised the bread and the wine for consecration, the jeep that had taken the dead bodies from the ambush site arrived. The people laid the bloody, muddied bodies on the ground, outside the church door.*

*The priest went on with the Mass, even as the people started crying and wailing.*

*Someone had survived the ambush, the rumors spread quickly. The daughter prayed and hoped that it was her mother. She continued paying attention to the priest, although people were already standing and milling around the corpses outside.*

*“Look at them! Look what they did to the bodies,” the young woman heard people saying. It was the last thing she heard, before she lost consciousness.*

*When she woke up, her father was hugging her. She looked around her. People inside the church were all crying, including the priest.*

*“I could not accept that my mother had died,” she said much later. Even during the wake, she did not go near her mother’s coffin. When she finally saw the jacket she had lent her mother the previous night, it bore bullet holes all over.*

*Outside the church, the young woman saw men laughing. She recognized some of them. They were her neighbors.*