

1

A three-year-old girl sat uncomprehendingly as her father shook the hand of his best friend. She didn't understand why her mother was inside the rectangular box. All she knew was that they were supposed to bring her baby brother home today.

"Condolence, Pare," Atty. Sandoval said, patting his friend on the arm. "Ganyan talaga, may unforeseen complications ang panganganak. I know my words sound hollow because no words will ever be able to assuage your pain. Magsabi ka lang kung ano'ng maitutulong namin."

"Salamat, Ferdie. Sapat nang nandito kayo para damayan kami."

"How's the little girl holding up?"

"Hindi niya naiintindihan ang mga nangyayari," Atty. Carbonel replied, looking at his daughter whose eyes were wide with wonder as she looked at the throng of people who came to pay respect to her mother.

Francoisca Carbonel was well-loved by the employees of their company. She was always kind, approachable, and was generous to a fault.

"Dito kami matutulog ng mga bata para may kasama kayo," Atty. Sandoval said.

Atty. Carbonel felt his eyes water at his friend's support. "Salamat, Ferdie."

"Pare, noong namatay ang asawa ko, ang buong pamilya n'yo ay sa bahay namin tumira nang ilang linggo. Hindi na tayo iba sa isa't isa, ano ka ba."

Atty. Carbonel nodded in reply and looked at Lee Ann. She

was sitting on a chair by his side.

“Kaya mo ’yan. Nandito lang kami,” Atty. Sandoval added.

Lee Ann stared at the crowd as she squirmed under the layers of the white satin and tulle that one of the maids made her wear.

“Dad,” she called, but he only glanced at her as another guest arrived. She tried again. “Dad!”

“Lee Ann, behave. Dad has to attend to the guests,” he whispered.

She squirmed more. “Thirsty,” she said, but he ignored her. The tulle under her satin dress felt itchy and she wanted to approach the box where they placed her mom to wake her up. “Mommy!” she called. “Mommy!” she repeated.

Her mom always knew what to do. Her mom always knew when Lee Ann was thirsty and she was thirsty now.

“Mommy!” she called, louder this time.

“Shh, anak,” her father reprimanded her gently. But he did pick Lee Ann up.

“Mommy!”

“Ako na po, Tito.” A teenage boy approached, taking Lee Ann from her father’s arms.

“Salamat, Nick,” Atty. Carbonel gratefully said, patting the teenager’s shoulder.

“What do you want, Lee Ann?” the teenager asked. “Are you hungry?”

“Water po,” she replied.

He smiled at her. “Lee Ann has learned her po and opo,” he teased.

She grinned as he led her towards the kitchen. He asked one of the maids for a glass of water and they smiled dotingly at him.

His name was Nickolai Sandoval, Atty. Ferdinand Sandoval’s eldest son. He was quite the boy wonder—accelerated twice, a born charmer, and a debater like his father, witty like his mother. At fourteen, he was already a high school senior and head of their

school paper. People praised him for his commanding presence, saying that he'd inherited the legendary Sandoval charisma.

"Thank you po," she said after drinking.

"No longer thirsty?" he asked.

She handed him the glass of water after. Lee Ann had gulped down nearly half of it.

"Opo," she answered. "But aren't you supposed to say 'you're welcome' because I said 'thank you'?" she asked, much to his amusement.

"You're welcome, Lee Ann," he said. He was impressed at how grown-up she sounded.

Lee Ann was only three, but she sounded like she was older. "Very good," she said.

"You don't sound like a baby," he teased.

She stared at him. "I'm a baby," she argued.

"Yes, but you don't talk like one."

"Because Mommy said I shouldn't mumble, that I should speak clearly instead, like a lady," she reasoned.

Nick smiled sadly. He lost his mother two years ago and he understood how confusing it must be for the three-year-old child.

No matter how grown-up you talk, you're still a child, he thought, taking pity on the girl.

"Is there anything else that you want to do, Baby girl?"

"I want to see Mommy," she said, and his pity tripled.

"Where's Kuya Alex?" she asked, referring to Nick's little brother.

"He's with Dad, your Tito Ferdie," he replied.

Lee Ann nodded. He led her to the front of the house where her mother's remains were laid.

She stared at the rectangular box again, puzzled why her mother still hadn't woken up yet. She was at the hospital when they covered her mother with a white blanket. She had protested, telling everyone that her mother might not be able to breathe.

"Why isn't Mommy waking up?" she haltingly asked Nick, and

he took her small hands in his.

He crouched down beside her to be eye-level with her. "Your Mommy is in heaven with my Mommy," Nick said.

She frowned. "No! My Mommy is right there, inside that box!" she declared. "There!" She pointed at the box again.

Nick's expression softened as he hugged Lee Ann to his chest. "Remember what I told you before about stars? That they are Mommies, Daddies, and everyone else that everyone loves?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Your mommy is one of those stars now," he said. "She will watch over you from up there so you remain a good girl, okay?"

"No," she replied.

Nick chuckled as he chuckled her under the chin. "You don't want to be a good girl?" he asked.

Lee Ann shook her head. "I want Mommy here," she uttered with a pout as her lower lip started to tremble. "I want Mommy here, not up there," she repeated, her eyes starting to fill with tears.

He smiled at her tenderly. "Mommy is here," he said, putting a hand against her chest. "She's in your heart, so that means she is wherever you are. Do you understand?" he asked as her tears fell one by one. He took a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe away her tears. Lee Ann closed her eyes, willing for her tears to stop falling. "Hey, stop crying," he whispered as her thin shoulders shook.

"Lee Ann is now alone," she sobbed.

"No, that's not true. Lee Ann is not alone because Lee Ann still has her dad."

"But it's different. Dad's always at the office and he doesn't play with Lee Ann. I want Mommy. Mommy said she'd never leave Lee Ann."

"Lee Ann's mommy did not leave her and she'd be watching over her."

"But I want someone who'll watch me down here not from up

there,” she stubbornly said.

“Kuya Nick will take care of Lee Ann so she won’t feel alone,” he said, gathering her in his embrace.

“No. I want my Mommy.” She pushed him away.

“You don’t want Kuya to take care of you? Now, Kuya Nick is sad,” he said, scrunching up his face. “Now you’re going to make Kuya cry.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled as she cried harder. “I’m sorry, Kuya,” she hiccupped. “Please don’t cry.”

“Kuya will stop crying as soon as Lee Ann stops crying,” he said, and nearly laughed when she bit her lower lip to prevent her sobs from spilling as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Why are you crying?”

“Because Lee Ann is afraid,” she miserably said. She’s always been afraid about a lot of things—lightning, darkness, being alone.

“Why are you afraid? Aren’t you brave?”

“No,” she sobbed.

He smiled. “Lee Ann is brave. In fact, Lee Ann is the bravest girl Kuya Nick knows. But just in case Lee Ann gets scared, she doesn’t need to worry because Kuya Nick will be there for her,” he said.

She looked at him. “How can you be there for Lee Ann when you don’t live in this house?” she asked.

He laughed at her quip affectionately. “Because Kuya Nick is in Lee Ann’s heart, too, so Kuya Nick is wherever Lee Ann is. If you’re afraid, you only need to think of Kuya Nick and he’ll come running to you, okay?” he convinced her. Her brows furrowed. “You don’t believe me?” he asked.

Lee Ann just stared at him.

“I will make sure that you will never feel alone or lonely. I will take care of you,” Nick continued.

She then nodded and wrapped her little arms around his neck. “Thank you, Kuya Nick,” she murmured, and his heart just melted.

“You’re welcome,” he answered. “Lee Ann will never feel scared again, right?” he asked, and then pulled away from her.

She nodded.

“Is that a promise?” Nick continued.

Lee Ann nodded again.

“I want to hear you say it,” he said.

“I promise I won’t be scared,” she recited.

He patted her head affectionately. “Very good.”

“But, Kuya, do you promise to stay with Lee Ann even when she’s no longer afraid?” she asked.

He looked at her and smiled. “I promise.”

Lee Ann beamed and he took her into his embrace.

Nick felt a wonderful sense of gladness, not realizing that Lee Ann held on to his words even as years passed; not comprehending that even then, he meant the world to her; not recognizing the adoration in her eyes, *the adoration* that would take years to extinguish; and not grasping that her affection for him would grow as she got older.

And all because he promised.