

My Ball Game

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Prologue: Instant Replay

“Instant replay would be triggered automatically in the following situations:

- 1) A field goal made with no time remaining on the clock (0:00) at the end of the fourth period or any overtime period that, if scored, would affect or potentially could affect, the outcome of the game.
- 2) A field goal made with no time remaining on the clock (0:00) at the end of the first, second and third periods.
- 3) A foul called with no time remaining on the clock (0:00) at the end of the fourth period or any overtime period, provided that it could affect the outcome of the game.
- 4) A foul called with no time remaining on the clock (0:00) at the end of the first, second or third periods.”

- Rule No. 13, Section I
National Basketball Association (NBA) Official Rule Book, 2005-2006

Almost one year ago...

“Bree? Can I talk to you?”

I looked up and saw Kim at my office front door, and she looked shy—okay, *wary* is the more apt term. I nodded. “Enter,” I said, a small smile on my face. Even though I had never liked Kim, I still have to deal with her—and I deal with her in the most civil way that I can. After all, she is the wife of my two-decade-old best friend, business partner, and my sometimes *almost*-brother (since he and I **DID** things that are not sibling-friendly), hotshot basketball player Darren Yu.

She entered rather hesitantly, and then sat on the chair across my desk in my day job as a researcher. My night job covers managing my restaurant that I share with Darren, which we had just established a couple of years ago, and we’re now on our way on establishing our second (and hopefully third, if the talks push through) branches. It was his dream, and I had the means of fulfilling that dream. I own 70% of that restaurant.

And yes, I save a lot of money.

Be single at 27 while having a six-figure paycheck and you’ll know what I’m talking about.

“What about?” I asked, closing the folder I was reading before she came in. She breathed deeply and stayed silent. I tapped my pen on the table as I waited for her to speak.

“I know it may sound weird, but I want to ask you something. A big, huge favor,” she said, and my eyebrows raised an inch.

Huge and big are one and the same, but I didn’t say it aloud. Maybe she meant “great” or “giant.”

“Fire away,” I said, curious.

Another deep breath. Kim is taking all the oxygen supply in my office. “I want you to stay away from Darren.”

I gaped.

I seriously did.

My jaw is on my desk.

“WHAT?” I said loudly.

She sniffled, and met my hot gaze. “My husband,” she started slowly, “is in love with you. And I can’t handle that. So please, stay away from him.”

This part here is old news, but I tried to act as if it’s surprising. So I go...

“Darren? In love with me?” I said incredulously. “He’d jump off a building first before that happens.”

What was I saying? Darren told me he loves me a few years back, but I thought that was friendly love (I know. Bull crap. Do you seriously believe me when I say this? This is me in denial.).

“And I know I warned you about him caring about me, this is absurd,” I continued.

Her eyes suddenly turned pleading. “Please, Bree. You don’t know how much he talks about you when he’s home. He even *dreams* about you and mutters *your* name in his sleep. His eyes *twinkle* at the mere mention of your name!”

“Is that the qualification now of falling in love?” I argued. “Kim, he *married* you. He stood at the altar and proclaimed his *love* for you. He even said he’ll be with you till death parts you guys,” I spat. “How in the fuck did you come up with this insane idea that my best friend of twenty frigging years suddenly had his heart beating for me?”

I still haven’t gotten over the incredibility of this situation. Okay, more like the ridicule of this favor she’s asking from me. I already managed to not talk to him for two years before, but that was another case. I knew how hard avoiding Darren was, and I wasn’t sure if I can go through that again.

Tears started to fall from her eyes, and she dabbed her eyes with a blue hanky that matches the color of her blouse. She is seriously color-coordinated *all* the time. I’m betting underneath all the clothes, she has blue bra and blue undies, too.

“For a week now, he mutters your name in his sleep. And every time he plays with Zania, all he says is you, you, and you—how you handle the restaurant—restaurants—pretty well with your day job, how you are staying single despite the numerous suitors lining outside your door, how you are fending for your family in the province but still save so much money, how you are so good to Zania because you actually stop and read books to her...” Her voice broke.

“He and I have been spending so much time together the past months, yeah,” I said slowly, all my anger building up inside me, “but you do know that it’s because we’re building *Cirque II*, right? It’s paying for all your shopping sprees.” She winced. She is a spender, that I know. You couldn’t leave her inside the mall without getting your credit card scratched so badly.

That’s why Darren had asked for my help when he wanted to build the restaurant. He knew with all the shopping Kim has been doing, his paycheck and his savings account will probably be sucked clean. And he also knew I had the money, and that I knew of his lifelong dream of owning a restaurant. So we built *Cirque*. And then... *bam!* Here’s *Cirque II*. “How would Zania’s future going to be, Bree?” was the line he used to completely snare me in.

“This is... outrageous, Kim,” I said, standing up. “I won’t do this.”

She stood up and walked over to me, her face streaming with tears. She surprised me with her next move: *she knelt before me*.

"I am asking this from you, Bree, as a mother. I can't tolerate that Zania..." Her voice broke once more.

I pulled her to her manicured toes. Damn, maybe her Jimmy Choos got scratched because of that kneeling thing she did. "Damn, is this really about Zania, Kim?" She knew I had a soft spot for their lone child. "It's just you being selfish, Kim. It is so not a secret between you and I that you seriously thought of me as a competition ever since you and Darren started going out."

She didn't speak, affirming my statement.

Well, I can seriously give her a run for her wits. Maybe if she and Darren weren't married—or maybe if Darren didn't knock her up—

Okay. Hold that thought.

I actually saw her, too, as a competition for Darren's attention.

"I don't see this as logical," I told her. She made a move to kneel before me again, and I didn't feel like a goddess this time—not even when one of your not-so-favorite people is doing the kneeling. "Don't stoop to that level, Kim. If you want me out of Darren's life, stop kneeling before me," I spat.

"Please, Bree."

I don't know how exactly I can avoid Darren. He's like... with me ever since God-knows-when. We have the same circle of friends, his family is friends with my family, he's been with me through high school and shared with me the ugliness and awkwardness puberty brought about, and he stuck with me through my tough years in college. He was there for me when I first got dumped, first dumped a guy, first fell in love (okay, this is just a list—don't expect it to be in chronological order), first got laid (he *absolutely* knew to whom, how it happened, and all the sexy details—I'd get to that part of the story in a bit), first got offered a marriage (at the tender age of 21 from my boyfriend of three months at that time—of course I declined no matter how romantic his proposal was—damn, was my ex really serious?), and first time I wanted to propose to a guy.

I was there when he first got to play college hoops, first tried out for a basketball team, first had a girlfriend (through the next, and the next, and the next... you get the picture), first played a game when he is officially earning a paycheck for it, first got drafted (he got picked third), first played a professional ball game, first had sex (he didn't tell me with whom, which is gentlemanly of him, but he just popped at my doorstep one day and said, "I am a man now"), first proposed marriage to a girl (who had the sanity—thank heavens—of turning him down), and first got a girl knocked up (I know the firsthand details to that one—and no, it's not Kim. She's the second woman he knocked up.). I also witnessed how shotgun his wedding is to Kim. I held his hand when he told his parents about Kim's situation, and he was there, holding my hand, when I told my parents that I am getting my own place (I know the gravity of the situation is not the same, but to hell with it).

Point is, he's been in—or knows about—almost every significant situation in my life, and I've been in—or I know about—every single one of his, so...

I don't know if I can do what Kim's asking me to do.

God, the things I am willing to do for my best friend.

"For the sake of saving your marriage, Kim, fine," I said finally. She was so happy she hugged me.

"But please, I seriously want you to think this over: Do you really think Darren's in love with me? I've been with him for the past years—two decades—and our relationship doesn't go beyond loving each other as best friends," I said, pushing her away in disgust. She doesn't need to know about the part that Darren and I actually had slept together, but that was an entire friendship thing, and we don't

sleep together when either of us is in a sane enough relationship. Or is it really? God, I am confusing even myself. Was it not on the day of their wedding that Darren told me—

Shit.

“I want you to trust Darren. He doesn’t deserve this much distrust, Kim. He is anything but unfaithful to you,” I finished. I wanted to sock myself. The things coming out of my mouth are severely half-truths, but I know I can justify them. I told Darren that the he and I thing will be in another lifetime, right?

I turned away, and she stood there, crying hard. “You’ve got serious trust issues,” I wanted to say, but I was so angry at her. I turned my attention to my work and tried to concentrate.

But I couldn’t.

I waited for her to leave.

I threw my glass ashtray—which I don’t use anyway—at the door when she closed it behind her as she made a (happy and) graceful exit.

Chapter One: Disqualifying Foul

“A disqualifying foul is any flagrantly unsportsmanlike action of a player, substitute, excluded player, coach, assistant coach or team follower.”

- Article 37, Section 1.1

Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) Official Basketball Rules 2008

I so miss watching basketball games.

“Bree?”

Or not.

That voice was so frigging familiar that I felt like the red carpet my boyfriend—okay, Itos and I have agreed he’s more than that—had laid out for me after he finally got me to watch my first professional basketball game in six months was pulled from under me, making me land butt-first in the cold concrete.

That six-month period is LONG, considering I am a self-confessed basketball addict and those in my immediate circle of friends are mostly basketball players and their family members (and friends). I had unlimited access to game tickets—and I can get them with just one phone call (to the proper basketball player whose team is playing). I get by my week—Wednesdays, Fridays, Sundays (include Thursdays and Saturdays if there is a game)—watching basketball games.

That’s practically where my overtime goes to.

By 4PM on a game day, I am officially out of the office—and no frigging emergency can drag me back—and on my way to my dear basketball game.

But since—

“Bree! Oh my gosh! It’s really you!”

I winced when the person that is going to get my irk turned me and made me face her. *Yes, bitch. Me. Bree. Remember? You told me to stay away from my best friend—your husband—which also meant staying away from my basketball world that I sincerely love and need,* I wanted to snap, but I stopped myself.

I breathed deeply and gave her little, angelic face a forced smile. “Oh, you,” I said in an emotionless voice. “Good to see you here.” My voice and my face didn’t really indicate that.

A few people were passing by—naturally, since the second game is still on and it’s just the second quarter. I had just gotten out of the arena since Itos and I had agreed that after his game, we’ll meet outside. I didn’t want to watch the second game after all—my best friend, whom this woman in front of me pleaded that I should stay away from, is playing in that game.

“It’s been how many months since I last saw you in a game, Bree,” Kim said, that glee still in her voice. I wanted to smack her face at this moment—and I know, I’m wondering as well where all this anger came from—but I still have dignity so I didn’t.

“Well, I haven’t been around in live games that much,” I said, still my voice inflectionless. Read: I haven’t been around in live games *when Darren plays in either the games.*

“Oh,” she said, and I succeeded in taking out the happiness in her voice. I was glaring at her, and I am not about to hide that—since it’s the only thing I can allow myself at this point. “Is it because—”

“You told me to avoid Darren?” I supplied, and she nodded shyly. “Yup,” I replied smartly. Before she could even speak, someone—and I have a very fantastic idea who—swooped down on me, grabbed me around the waist, and planted a light kiss on my lips. That was enough to make my eyes droop.

Only one person had this huge an effect on me.

There was a few cheering all around, and when I opened my eyes, almost too lazily, Itos was grinning at me boyishly.

I tiptoed and gave him a kiss of my own.

“Ready, babe?” he asked in his deep voice, and I nodded. I love his voice—nobody but me knows he loves to sing, and he sings to me all the time. Itos snaked his arm fully around my waist. Behind him I could see his teammates—that’s from whom the cheering came—and they were smiling at me. I gave them a small wave, and then faced Kim once more.

Darn it, Itos is doing a pretty good job distracting me.

“Kim, this is Itos, my—” I stopped and he gave me a smile. I always tend to do that—stop when somebody asks who Itos is to me. He leaned in and whispered to my ear, “I think boyfriend would suffice—as of this moment.” I nodded. No need to tell them the sexy, naughty details of what else Itos is to me—not in front of his teammates. No need to also be mushy at this moment. “Well, Itos is my boyfriend,” I reconsidered, and Kim extended a hand, which Itos accepted. They shook hands as I continued, “Itos, this is Kim, Darren Yu’s wife.”

“Darren Yu?” Itos said, dropping Kim’s hand altogether. “As in your business partner?”

I nearly forgot about that bit.

Ha. Ha. Forgetting that I owned a restaurant—*Cirque*—that Darren partly owned. Oh wait. It now has two branches, so I forgot I owned two restaurants—*Cirque* and *Cirque II*. I must have knocked my head really bad.

Or I am just really darn good at forgetting Darren.

“Yes,” I said exasperatedly.

“Ah. I should have known he figured a bigger, uh, role in your life. You have tons of pics with the dude,” he said, and I sighed. He didn’t know that Darren and I were best friends—after all, when I had met him, Darren and I have, well, been estranged (due to his wife).

“Ooh, mister, you’re going through my stuff, huh,” I said, my voice filled with reproach. He gave me that crooked smile that I love, so I forgave him right away. Kim’s attention was on me and Itos. She was listening intently, and I wanted her to get the courtside seats to how she ruined my life when she asked me to stay away from Darren. Well, not really ruined, since I have Itos with me now, and I maybe shouldn’t ask for more.

Itos replied, “Well, you were about to throw that box away. When I checked inside, I saw it contained pictures and other things. I kept it—and don’t get mad—but I was about to ask you about it.” The ‘things’ he was pertaining to include: a Sketchers Sports watch, tons of vampire books and DVDs (only Darren understands my vampire obsession—so it really HURT when I had to throw them away), tickets to all the games I’ve watched with or because of Darren, the pair of rubber shoes that he bought for me off his first paycheck, and the receipts from the meals when we ate out (‘out’ meaning not in our restaurant).

I was planning to give the bracelet and necklace that Darren gave me to his daughter when I see her.

I held onto things that concern my restaurants, though, but I had thought of chucking them to my attorney.

“He isn’t my ex, if that’s what you’re after,” I said, and he nodded. “I know that. Your pictures with him are all friendly,” he answered. How he knew friendly from not-friendly just by looking at pictures, I have yet to figure that one out. He sure as hell didn’t have to find out the not-friendly things Darren and I had done a few years back.

“He’s still playing, right?”

I nodded. Itos had just entered the league, a full five years after Darren had. “That’s why *she’s* here,” I said, cocking my head towards Kim. “So maybe we should let her go back to Darren’s game?” I suggested, and it was his turn to nod. He looked over me and said to his teammates, “Ready to get our cars?”

His teammates nodded, and he released me after kissing me on the lips one more time. “Wait for me in front, m’kay?” he said, and I grunted in response. He followed his teammates to the gates and left me with Kim—not my favorite moment of the day.

“You threw out the things Darren gave you?” Kim asked quietly.

“And whatever reminds me of him, yes,” I agreed. “But it appears Itos salvaged them, so I guess the correct term is that I ‘attempted’ to throw them away,” I added angrily. Kim gave me a helpless look. “Why?” she asked much too innocently, and I glared at her.

“When you told me to stay away from him because of some unproved and unfounded reason, did you think of *how* it is going to impact my life?” I said through gritted teeth. She shook her head violently. “I thought so,” I said, and I turned to leave.

“Tita Bree!” a tiny voice called out, and when I turned back tiny arms wrapped around my knees.

Oh shit.

Darren and Kim’s four-year-old daughter, Zania.

I smiled widely—the first time since I saw Kim and after Itos left—and dropped down to Zania’s level. I hugged her back, and then released her. “Hey little one,” I said, my voice and face bright. “How are you?”

“Oh my, Tita Bree! I so miss you,” she said in her little voice. She looked so much like Darren. “Why aren’t you visiting the house anymore?” Her voice wasn’t accusing, but it might have been if she were a bit older.

I looked above her shoulder and gave her mom another searing glare. And then my face softened when I turned to Zania. “I’ve been pretty busy lately,” I said untruthfully, and Zania hugged me again. “Visit me again, okay? I miss you reading me books,” she said, and I nodded. “What if I just see you at your school?” I bargained, since the school is a neutral territory. If I go to their house, I have this serious possibility of running into Darren, who is sort of still confused as to why I suddenly cut him off out of my life.

“Okay,” she said, shrugging much like how her father does.

My eyes started to well up. I had treated Zania like my own child, and it seriously pained me when Kim asked me to lay off Darren. I stood up and ruffled the kid’s hair. “I’ll see you soon,” I said, and with that I left the mother-daughter tandem, finally letting my tears fall as soon as I turned.

“Babe.”

Itos’ voice interrupted my blank state. I don’t know for how long he has been calling my name. “Care to tell me what’s bothering you?” he asked lightly. What I loved most about Itos is that he’s almost always understanding, and that he understood all my mood swings. And he is—most of the time—not pushy. He gives me the space that I want and needed—something my previous boyfriends do not do.

“I did you serious injustice when I didn’t tell you about who Darren really is in my life,” I began to say in a hollow voice. He stayed silent, and I took that as a cue to continue.

“He is my best friend—or he *used to be* my best friend,” I explained. And then I told him of Kim’s outrageous request. “Why did you stay away then?” he asked after I finished fuming. “I love Darren that much to want them to save their marriage,” I admitted. “I mean it can’t *not* work, you know? One of us has to have a happy ending—” I cut myself off when he gave me a half-glare (how is that possible, I didn’t know). “But that was when, of course, I haven’t met you yet,” I added to pacify him. Of course, Itos is my happy ending now.

I breathed deeply. “I didn’t explain to him why I was avoiding him. He waited one time the whole night outside my house, and I was pretending I wasn’t there the whole time—keeping the lights off and all that jazz. I seriously wanted him to know that his wife doesn’t trust him as much as he wanted her to, but I didn’t. It is stupid, I know,” I continued.

“Bree, he’s your best friend. All you have to do is send him a text message or something like, ‘Hey, your wife thinks you’re in love with me. To avoid further confrontations, I am staying away from you until she figures out how dumb the idea is,’” Itos said, and I shrugged. “Unless you yourself think that he’s in love with you,” he added as an afterthought.

“What?”

My shout made him swerve—I was thankful it wasn’t that traffic—okay, there isn’t *any* traffic—in his subdivision (since it’s so high end), or else we’re both seriously screwed.

He parked the car on the shoulder and faced me. “Do you think Darren’s in love with you?” he asked, the gravity of the question evident in his voice. “Honey, you won’t avoid the guy if you didn’t think—”

"I don't think he's in love with me," I interrupted, and Itos stayed silent. "Or at that time I didn't think he was."

"Now?"

"He's not," I said defensively. "Come on, Itos."

"Then *why* did you do what Kim asked of you?" he asked, frustration creeping in his voice. I couldn't tell him that at that time, I was actually... in love with Darren.

Or I think I was.

And because of that, I knew I had to stay away.

Kim had it all screwed up; I am the one who is in love with my best friend. (Let's forego the fact that Darren told me he loves me, okay? It's the "in another lifetime" rule of our friendship.)

"Because I wanted to save their marriage," I said instead, and Itos knew me too well to actually believe the words coming out of my mouth. Sometimes his knowing me too well bodes goodness, but this time, I just wish he is sometimes dumb to my lies. "Yeah, you're the perfect best friend," he said, and I detected the sarcasm in his voice.

"It happened way before you and I ever started, damn it!" I shouted, and I didn't see this coming. He was shocked at my sudden outburst, and then said, "Fine. I believe you. You did it because you didn't want whatever marriage crumbling thing to fall on you."

"Ugh," I said, obviously disgusted, and I opened the door to get out. I am seriously tired of people putting words into my mouth, and assuming that the reason why I was avoiding Darren was that because I carried an affair with him and we finally got caught. It is SICK. Seriously. You don't know how many times I've heard that buzz about me and Darren together behind his wife's back.

That is so not me, and that is so not Darren either.

"Bree—"

Itos caught up with me just as I was nearing the security guard house. I was lucky we haven't gone into his neighborhood—he lives in the very far end of his subdivision, I tell you, and there is no way out unless you have a car, and I don't have mine at the moment since I rode with Itos. He grabbed me by the arm and stopped me.

"Obviously, you don't believe me. You are lying through your teeth!" I snapped. He breathed deeply and hugged me. "You have to tell me the entire story, babe, so that I'll understand," he whispered. I tried to see through his reason, and I did. I removed myself from his hug and sat on the sidewalk. He frowned, but followed my suit. He knows I am not very fond of him looming over me—he is already so tall at six-three, and that dwarfs my five-eight frame.

I started from the beginning.

NOTE: I am putting the parts I omitted out of the Itos version so that you'll get the full picture.

Chapter Two: Three-Pointer

“A successful field goal attempt from the area outside the field the three-point field goal line shall count three points.

- 1) The shooter must have at least one foot outside the three-point field goal line prior to the attempt.
- 2) The shooter may not be touching the floor on or inside the three-point field goal line.
- 3) The shooter may contact the three-point field goal line, or land in the two-point field goal area, after the ball is released.”

- Rule No. 5, Section I
NBA Official Rule Book, 2005-2006

“Bree, this is Darren. Darren, this is Bree.”

I gave the hottie a smile. He is *seriously* a hottie. I am having my first crush at eight.

The cute boy with dorky glasses—the glasses made him ever so cuter, but he eventually chucked it for contact lenses—and a grin that made you swoon shook my hand. My mom beamed down at me encouragingly, and I nodded. “You want to play?” Darren asked almost shyly. I nodded. He tugged my hand, placed it comfortably in his, and we ran to the sandbox.

That’s when I met Darren.

“So Bree, will you come?”

We were twelve. Darren flopped down next to me on the couch and placed his arm over my shoulder, which I ducked away from him since he is sweaty from his basketball game. I didn’t know why he asks his school bus to drop him off my house—he lives two full subdivisions away—but he just says he needs a daily fill of Bree in his life so he needs to see me. That’s what happens when he decides to actually go to an exclusive school for boys. Check that: exclusive school for *Chinese* boys.

I went to a coed school because I wanted to meet people of the opposite sex.

Kidding.

“To your tryout?” I asked, when his face crumpled because I ducked. He grabbed his towel and wiped his sweat, and when I deemed he is hug-worthy, I slumped back into his arms. “Yes,” Darren said, finally relaxing. He told me there is something comforting with me near him—like everything’s safe and uncomplicated.

I wondered now: at twelve, what is so complicated?

I told him back then that I feel the same.

“Well, that would be all boys, right?” I said, and he shook his head. “Come on. Parents will be there. Mom promised to come. She’ll accompany you if you want her to,” Darren bargained, and I gave him a small smile. “Why do you need me there?” I asked. “I am not dribbling the ball for you, come on.”

He laughed. “Yes, but...” His voice trailed.

“Besides,” I added, “Patty will be there.”

I mentioned the name of his first ever girlfriend, whom he met while buying hot fudge sundae at McDonald’s. He knew that I don’t love his girlfriend to bits—she seriously thinks that, like any other girlfriend of Darren after her, I am competition. Well, maybe I am. Darren does love me to bits.

“Bree,” Darren pleaded. “Yes, maybe she’ll be there, but... she’s not you. She’s not my best friend.”

“The difference between me and her is...?”

“Well, I kiss her and I don’t do that to you,” he said, and I opened my eyes wide.

“*You kissed her already?*” I said loudly. “Dang it, Darren. We’re twelve—uh, you’re thirteen the day after tomorrow, but crap, crap, crap!” I hit him repeatedly with his wet towel, and he stopped me with his arm. He pulled me into his body and started tickling me until I was laughing my head off.

“Stop!” I screamed in between gulps of air and peals of laughter. He suddenly released me, and I rolled over the couch, falling. I grabbed his hand to stop me from falling, and he fell on top of me.

“Uh,” was all I managed to say—and I said it dumbly at that. He was so close to me—I could feel his breath on my face and his heart beating in his chest. I could smell the cologne that he steals from his older brother so that he can be more ‘manly,’ and then suddenly, I felt something around my hip region, pressing against my thigh. My eyes grew wide when I realized what it was. He was staring in my eyes and I was gazing back at his, and it was just so... surreal.

Darren blew on my face. “Boo,” he breathed, and then he rolled off me. I finally breathed when he was away from me—but that was momentarily since he pulled me up on the couch next to him again.

“Whoa, awkward,” I heard him say when I still couldn’t speak. I risked a quick glance at his pants—thank God ‘it’ was, um, gone—and nodded. “A bit,” I said in a throaty voice. He placed his arm over my shoulder again.

“It’s my birthday in a few days so that would be a very nice birthday gift to me, you know? You attending my tryouts,” Darren said, as if nothing has ever happened. I nodded. “Fine,” I said, and I closed my eyes, calming my senses.

“I want to make a deal with you,” I heard him say after a while. “Hmm?” I said, not opening my eyes still.

“It’s gonna get you awkward,” he warned.

“Hmm,” I repeated.

I felt him breath deeply. “If you turn eighteen and I turn eighteen—”

“Which one, really? You’re older than me by six months,” I interrupted, and he grunted. “In the event that we are *both* eighteen,” he clarified, “and you have no boyfriend, and I have no girlfriend—”

I just love interrupting Darren. “What, we’ll be together?”

Another grunt from him. “Will you stop interrupting me?” he said angrily. I smiled. “Hmm,” I whispered, and I waited for him to continue. He took another deep breath and said in a low voice, “Maybe you and I should... you know.”

I totally didn’t get that.

My eyes flew open and I turned to him. “We should what?” I asked.

He turned into a shade of pink. *Uh oh*, I said to myself. “Darren?” I said, albeit hesitantly. Maybe I didn’t want to know.

“Get together in... that way.”

I laughed. “You want you and me to have sex when we’re both eighteen and single?” I asked, ever so blunt. He paused, studied my face, and nodded slowly.

I hit him on the chest hard, and he winced. “Fine,” I said after a while. I knew it wouldn’t happen anyway, since he almost always has a girlfriend, and I made a serious resolution to keep in mind that I have to have a boyfriend by the time I am eighteen.

“Okay,” he said, and he inched closer to me again. We stayed that way before I heard my mom’s car pull into the driveway, and we went to doing our homework.

If ever I thought that deal that he and I had made back when we were twelve was forgotten and would never ever be fulfilled, I was wrong.

Turns out that my boyfriend of eight months—Simon—at that time was cheating on me, so whether I liked it or not, I had to breakup with him a week before I turned eighteen. Darren’s situation wasn’t any better—his gf couldn’t handle his popularity due to the entire college hoops thing. At the day of my debut, he and I are both single.

My birthday fell on a Thursday and it was a class day, and so the debut was celebrated the Saturday before that. My parents went down here to Manila from Baguio where they had settled after having an early retirement to celebrate my debut. I was fixing my things from class and was resting, watching a DVD and eating my favorite pizza in my condo unit when the doorbell rang.

I wondered who it was, and should have assumed that it would be Darren.

The clock told me it was 8 P.M. I opened the door and it was really Darren, carrying a huge, huge, giant stuffed bear with a name tag stuck to its chest: *Cirque*. I smiled. He also bought roses—white roses—because he knew I loved those roses.

I let him enter after he kissed me on the cheek.

“I thought the bracelet last Saturday was the gift?” I asked as he sat on my couch and helped himself to a slice of pizza. He turned to look at me and he glanced at my wrist, where the bracelet that had my name on it is. “That’s just one of four,” he said, and I frowned.

“Four?” I croaked. I started to count. Well, one is the bracelet, two is the stuffed bear. Maybe the third gift is the roses? So what *is* the fourth?

He tossed something in the air and I caught it reflexively. I flushed into a dark shade of red when I saw what it was: a box of condoms.

“No shit,” I said loudly. He walked towards me, his hands in his pocket, effectively framing whatever it was that he wanted me to see.

I gulped.

“What, you think the deal we made when we were twelve was forgotten?” he asked, and I nodded. “I thought you weren’t serious,” I said when he was close. He tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear. I stopped myself from shivering. His touch was... wow. After how many years of friendship, why now?

“I was,” he whispered huskily. “Well, Simon’s not around you anymore right?” he asked, and I nodded dumbly. I couldn’t move.

“And Eva broke up with me,” he continued, and his hand was already making its way down to the hem of my shirt. I couldn’t breathe.

“So, the deal... is so pushing through,” Darren said, and when I looked up to argue, he captured my lips in a hungry kiss. Boy, he sure had experience. Was it not just a year ago when he told me he’s a man already? And his long list of girlfriends probably was good for him as practice.

Damn.

He’s making me dizzy with the way he’s kissing. I pushed him away when he pulled my t-shirt up my arms, and whispered, “Wow” when he saw my, hmm, ample chest. I rolled my eyes. “Don’t I have a say in this?” I asked in a whisper, but honestly, I don’t want to stop.

“Well, you can speak, but I won’t hear,” he said, reaching behind me and unclasping my bra. He drew me in for another kiss, but I avoided it. He groaned. “What?” he asked irritably. The bulge in his pants was getting more and more noticeable, and the impatient look on his face says that he is ready to go.

I thrust the box of condoms to his chest and fumbled for his belt. “Now, that’s more I like it,” he said, and he pulled me to him, kissing me once more. I let the bra fall to the floor and his hands found something that might busy them.

In five minutes, we were both naked. He had already explored every part of my body, and had me moaning.

“I didn’t know I was—”

“The first, yes,” I supplied. I buried my face in his chest, blushing, our bodies both covered in the blankets, now in my room. I couldn’t recall how many times we did it, but the last two rounds were condom-less. Now I am thinking that was stupid—I haven’t had my period for this month yet.

“Well, at least you sure had a helluva first time. If it was with Simon, maybe it should have sucked,” I heard him say gruffly, and I hit him on the chest for a good measure. He yelped, and kissed me on the hair.

“Sorry I was rough,” he said, and I just nodded. He was rough in the first outing—real rough that I actually cried (you have to get it that he is *really* the first)—but repaid me by giving me the gentlest loving after that. We actually played around a bit, so there goes the box of condoms.

He patted my hair. “Guess that elevates my role in your life huh?” I heard him say. “I am now your best friend *with benefits*.”

I laughed at the term, which was surprisingly plural, but nodded. “So every time I feel horny and lonely, whichever comes first, given that we’re both single, I’ll give you a call and you’d come and give me loving, huh?” I asked, and he pulled me up so our faces could meet. He kissed me as a validation.

We did the deed again—and that lasted for years, so long as we were both single and available.

And yes, his role did get elevated.

And if you’re curious, no, it never got awkward, for it was purely platonic sex.

Or so he and I thought.

Chapter Three: Ejected

“A maximum of two technicals for unsportsmanlike acts may be assessed any player, coach, or trainer. Any of these offenders may be ejected for committing only one unsportsmanlike act, and they must be ejected for committing two unsportsmanlike acts.”

- Rule No. 12, Section V-b
NBA Official Rule Book 2005-2006

“Substitutes, excluded players or team followers who leave the team bench area during a fight, or during any situation which may lead to a fight, shall be disqualified.”

- Article 39, Section 2.1
FIBA Official Rule Book 2008

Crapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrapcrap.

Maybe Darren and I had one night too many.

I was in my restroom, getting ready to, um, get ready when I realized that I was a week late. Or two.

I haven't had my period in six weeks, and I am not dumb to not realize that *THAT* is not nice. (It was dumb, though, not to notice that I haven't had my period.)

Especially since Darren has a girlfriend now.

I was too engrossed in my newly found single life—my boyfriend of eight months, Paul, had broken up with me due to family reasons (as in he got another lady pregnant—I am a magnet for cheaters, I know). That same night, Darren and I hooked up for yet another “friendly” meeting—I attribute it to him being my rebound since I was so pissed at Paul. We considered it a legal meeting, since he had just gone out on a first date with his now-girlfriend Sandy back then, and there weren't any assurances that they'd continue seeing each other still.

I was so engrossed in all that shit that I didn't notice I... ARGH.

I got out of the bathroom, abandoning all the plans of taking a bath, and was almost too thankful it was a weekend. I don't have work, so I can stay in and sulk. I have time to depress myself over this impending life-changing situation. I flopped myself onto my bed, breathing slowly, wondering if another set of lungs is breathing within me.

Then again, there might not be one... YET.

No. Don't get me wrong. I am not sad this happened. I'm perfectly okay with this. Maybe I'm just a little bit scared.

Maybe I should just head to the pharmacy—

KNOCK KNOCK—

Or get the door.

I sighed heavily, picking up my body and trudging slowly to meet the person who interrupted my thoughts.

“Wow Bree,” greeted Darren, and I replied with a sarcastic smile. I knew how horrible I looked. “Ever met the man who invented the shower?” he continued, and I was too... tired to actually retort that I just let him in, and I trudged back to my room. He had just entered the room when I flopped onto the bed, closing my eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and I felt him sit on the bed next to me. He touched my hair, and I allowed him that.

“I’m late,” I whispered, and I nearly laughed when he answered, “What? Well, Bree, go get your ass now into the bathroom. I’d take you to work—oh hell, it’s a Saturday.” Even with eyes closed, I could almost see confusion fleeing his face for one slight moment. And then he said, “Oh.”

Silence.

“How late?” he managed to say after a while.

“One or two weeks, I think. I wasn’t really keeping track. I just realized it today,” I explained, and he cupped my face in his hands. I opened my eyes. “That’s good news, right?” he said, his face unsure.

I shrugged. “Maybe yes, maybe no. Darren, I don’t know,” I whispered, and he motioned for me to sit, and I did. I Indian-sat across him, and we held hands. “Are you scared?” Darren asked, and I shook my head.

“No.”

“Then why are so... sad?” He paused for a moment before he said ‘sad.’

I breathed deeply. “Not really the ideal time right now, is it? You... have Sandy, and well, I’ll manage since I’m single. How exactly can you explain to your girlfriend that around the time that you were screwing me, your innocent best friend?” I said, and he winced.

“Well, if it comes to that, maybe I’ll have to break up with her,” Darren said after a few thoughtful moments. “You *are* more important, Bree. You and—if you’re pregnant—the baby.”

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe it’s just stress, you know,” I replied, and he shook his head, a small smile on his face. “Yes, I promise that if I’d do you again, I’d use condoms,” he said resignedly. I laughed. “Hey, I’m not feeling bad about the entire pregnancy thing, okay? If I am, then good. If not, then good,” I said, and he shrugged. He pulled me into a hug.

We were silent for a few minutes, but I wondered the entire time what he really was thinking.

Darren. I got my period. See u around.

I slapped the post-it on the windshield of his car. He was still in practice, and I passed by the gym where his team usually trains, but they were so intent in the training that I didn’t want to but in. They were, after all, on the verge of getting eliminated, and I didn’t want to interrupt anything.

I didn’t write my name, for I knew he’d figure out my handwriting.

And I sure do hope that I’m the only one who’ll say that statement to him as of now, because I won’t ever have sex with him if I find that he’s screwing someone other than me (except for his girlfriend, of course—but the again, I don’t ever do him when he’s in a relationship).

I don’t remember how I felt when I saw blood trickling down my thigh as I was on my way to my car three days after Darren and I had that talk. I was wearing skirt, so I easily saw it. I thought it was my

period finally paying me a visit, but (A) blood doesn't flow that freely and that many when I get my period, and (B) it was way beyond PMS-ing painful.

I had my neighbor take me to the hospital.

The ob-gyne said I miscarried.

By golly. Doesn't take a genius to figure that one out. Fantastic.

I was five weeks pregnant. With Darren's kid.

I haven't had much sleep in the past couple of days before the miscarriage because of a company deadline.

She asked me if I had an idea that I was actually pregnant, and I said, feeling ever so stupid, that I didn't know shit. I wasn't experiencing any morning sickness, wasn't dizzy, wasn't craving... so how in the hell would I have figured out I was pregnant?

I miscarried.

Darren doesn't need to know that.

“BREE!”

I ignored the banging on my door and just stayed in my bathroom, taking in the hot water from the showers. I was still in my office clothes, and I was wet.

And frankly, I don't care.

I was eating ice cream a full week after when it hit me hard: I was supposed to be pregnant, supposed to be looking forward to having a kid, and supposed to be a mom in eight months if I didn't miscarry.

My first baby DIED.

I placed my head between my knees and cried. It feels good to cry. At least the next day I won't cry anymore, and I won't feel bad about this.

WRONG.

And then tell me *why* after I miscarried did I bury myself in my job... nearly 24/7?

Right. Because I was numbing myself.

I didn't know what really just hurts, you know? That... I lost *the* baby, or I lost *Darren's* baby.

There was a loud *crash*, and I didn't bother to even look to see who broke into my house. If it's a murderer, kill me now. I deserve to be killed. Maybe I killed my first baby. Dang.

Right. Coz I didn't know I was pregnant. Darn right.

“I was right when I thought there was something off about your note,” I heard a voice say. So it was Darren. “I'll sue you for breaking and entering,” I mumbled, and he turned off the running water. He wrapped a towel around me and tried to lift me on my two feet, but I didn't budge. He knelt beside me. Good thing he was in his shorts. “I'll have the door fixed, I promise. Remind me again to get duplicates to your house, okay?” he said, and when he didn't get a reaction, he moved closer.

“Bree, what’s wrong? What happened?” he asked, and I was touched by the genuine concern in his voice.

I just shook my head. I couldn’t find the words—or the voice—to say that “Hey, your first kid and mine? Went to heaven already.”

Darren held me by the shoulders. “Bree?” he prompted when I didn’t speak for another full two minutes. I just sobbed.

“You said you got your period,” Darren said. “Is this what all the crying binge is about? I thought it’s all good if you’re not pregnant?” He ended the final statement in an interrogative tone—he wasn’t sure if I really had said that.

I nodded. I looked up, my face wet, tears and water mingling together. “But what if I was, and it’s now gone?” I said helplessly, my voice raspy. He frowned. “What do you mean?” he asked, his voice cracking at the end, and I hugged myself. Despite the towel, I was still cold.

“I... miscarried.”

That left Darren weak. He slumped on the wall across me, not minding if he’ll get wet. “What?” he breathed. “You were... pregnant?”

I nodded. “And... I—I lost the baby.” I bawled for yet another time. Darren was still so shocked he didn’t make a move to comfort me.

“What—how?”

I didn’t speak.

“We were supposed to be parents?” he croaked. Yes, honey, rub it in.

I smiled bitterly. “I am so sorry. This so my frigging fault,” I said, and he stood up, nodding absently. I closed my eyes momentarily and when I opened them, he was gone.

Well, that’s good for the wounds, isn’t it?

Spray more acid on it while you’re at it.

Kick me more on the ground when I am down.

But then again, it’s not just me whose kid died. Darren’s son/daughter died as well.

Chapter Four: Timeout

“A time-out is an interruption of the game requested by the coach or assistant coach.”

- Article 18, Section 18.1
FIBA Official Rule Book 2008

I didn’t date for two years after that.

Not that it’s the right penalty for... (unconsciously) killing your baby, but still...

I also didn’t see much of Darren.

I was on my nth overtime when I heard the door of my office open. Usually it's the night janitor telling me to scram since I'm the only one who is in the office still. So I was just about to say, "I'll be there out in five," when my words got stuck in my throat. It wasn't the night janitor.

"So the rumor's true, huh, Bree?"

I miss Darren. Eternally and dearly miss him. And although he and I had seen each other monthly—nope, not in *that* way, I don't think I can still—and nearly every time in his games, but we never really talked. It was as if like the baby, me, and everything else... was too much to take in for him, and I almost think it was okay.

At least it doesn't confuse me.

Heard he's got a new girlfriend now.

"What rumor?" I choked out after I was speechless and stunned for five full seconds.

"That you work your ass off 24/7," he said in a matter-of-factly tone, closing the door and walking towards my desk. He saved the file I was reading to my surprise, and then shut down my laptop. And then he took post-its from the farther side of my desk, and stuck them onto the folders that I had open in front of me, and bookmarked them. He ended up making the folders look like rainbow earmarked things, and I grinned.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked, when he bagged my laptop and put me in my blazer. I was, to say the least, amused.

"And then maybe I should ask you the same thing, Bree," he said, and I frowned. "Why are you... punishing yourself like this?"

I breathed deeply. "I'm not punishing myself," I said defensively. "I just don't have anything to do, that's all. I have no boyfriend—not that I still date—but... you know." I didn't know what else to say.

Darren knelt in front of me, and kissed my tired, weary hand. "What happened to our baby wasn't your fault," he whispered. I rolled my eyes. "Really? Then why did you walk out on me, and didn't talk to me after that?" I asked, trying my best to not sound hurt, but I miserably failed.

"I don't have any sane explanations," Darren said after a couple of minutes. "It's just that... I wanted to give you space, and I wanted to... I don't know. It just hit me, you know? I could have checked on you, asked you if you are okay, if you are—"

"Ha ha, don't give me bullshit, Darren. You think it was my fault," I said soberly. He shook his head. "No. It was no one's fault," he replied, his voice hard. "Yeah," I answered unconvincingly, and I stood up, grabbing my things off my desk. He had my laptop—and I am not about to engage him into a brawl by taking it from him—so I stalked off. He sighed, and followed me.

"Remember *Cirque*?" he asked when I was pushing the button for the elevator. *Yeah, that stuffed toy that I punched so badly the night when you left me in the bathroom after I told you I miscarried.* I merely grunted in response. "Well, I was thinking... since it was our lovely... hmm, bear," he started as soon as the elevator *dinged* into life and opened. I allowed it to engulf me and him, and waited for him to continue. "Maybe we could immortalize *Cirque*."

I couldn't really get the drift, so I stared at him blankly. "Remember my restaurant dream?" he asked, and I nodded. He was blabbering it to me once every month—*how he wanted a resto, what his concept is, what he feels should work, what the perfect location is.* "Well, maybe you and I should... build one," he said, his voice tentative, "and name it *Cirque*."

I breathed deeply. "And you're bringing up this one to me, why?"

“You have the money,” he said in a you-should-know tone, and I nearly scowled. What is he talking about? He has, like, Php150,000 as his monthly salary for his first year in the PBA. What does he need me for? “Oh that’s crap, come on,” I said after a while.

“You have more money than I do as of the moment. Maybe you could, um, loan me money and then...”

His voice trailed when I started to glare at him. “You came to pick me up from work to ask me money?” I said, frustrated, and I was out of the elevator before he could even breathe another word.

“Bree, you know that I’m not—”

Darren said when he caught up with me as I got into my car. I didn’t care if my laptop was with him. I was angry. I just wanted to go home.

“Yes, you’re not here because you wanted to see me, but you’re here to ask me for money so that I can fund for your restaurant. That’s it, right?” I said angrily. He smiled, and then hugged me. “I missed how stubborn you are,” he whispered through my hair.

“Damn it, Darren,” I said, tears welling up in my eyes.

He patted my hair. “I missed you, too, Bree—all of you,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. He released me. “I’ll talk to you when you’re not too shocked about me crashing into your life once more, okay?” I nodded. “It’s just that, I wanted you to know that I am not... mad or something on you because maybe... the baby’s just not meant for us,” he continued.

I opened my car door and didn’t say anything. “Bree, you know that I love you,” he went on, “and that will always be there. You’re my best friend, and that will never ever change. I... did not go here just to beg money from you. I am springing the entire *Cirque* idea on you because maybe... if it’s not a real, breathing baby, we can have a baby that’s... like a resto or something. Something with you and me still in it.”

I looked up at him and sighed. “Oh hell,” I muttered. “Follow me. We’ll talk in my condo,” I said, and he grinned at me.

He knew he won, just like he always do. He always sweet-talks me into anything.

Cirque was born a full year after.

“Kim, this is Bree, my best friend. Bree, this is Kim, my girlfriend.”

I looked up, one eyebrow hiking an inch higher on my forehead, and had a lousy, superficial smile on. He had on his arm a *chinita* lady of maybe 24, all in her makeup-fixed beauty. I could imagine how she looks like without the makeup: *ordinary*. I wonder why Darren went for this chick.

Kim flashed me a smile through her magenta-colored lips. “Hi. Darren has told me so much about you,” she said amiably, giving me a cheek-to-cheek. I rolled my eyes at Darren to tell him I don’t like Kim, and he gave me a reproachful look. “Please,” he mouthed, and I could continue that sentence: *Please be nice to her*. When Kim was done with all her royal pleasantries, I took a step back.

“You’re together for a year now, right?” I asked Kim, and she nodded. “Fourteen months, to be exact,” she offered. She sounded really pleasant, and she’s almost nice. Almost, because beneath all that jazz, I knew she’s a bitch. I can see that, and I can smell that. And she’s just being nice to me now because I am Darren’s best friend, and she has to impress me.

“Wow. You’re about to be Darren’s longest,” I quipped, and her eyes widened at me. Damn, she doesn’t know that bit, huh?

Darren gave me a full-blown glare, which I returned with a wide smile. “Sorry. Too much information,” I said nonchalantly, and turned to head for *Cirque*’s office. I was about to open the door when I heard Kim call me over the blaring music at the resto—it’s game night.

“Bree, maybe you and I could do shopping together?” she said, unsure. I gave her the best (superficial) smile I could muster and said, “Girl, I don’t do shopping. Sorry.”

She opened her mouth in another attempt, but I quickly cut her off. “I know this is all for Darren, but Kim, please. Don’t try to be close to me just because you wanted him to think you like me. His past girlfriends all tried that, and they ended up breaking up with Darren.”

“And why is that?”

“They soon discovered that Darren cares for me too much than what they would normally allow.”

She frowned. “Is that a warning?” she asked, and I shook my head.

“I’m just telling you the truth, dear. Getting close to me would mean knowing a lot of shit that you wouldn’t want to know about Darren. We have been friends since we’re eight. We could practically sense each other five kilometers away. Getting close to me means knowing how much Darren and I have gone through together, and usually that’s all too much to bear for his girlfriends. Don’t try to compete with me, because you’re bound to lose, okay?” I said, my voice still.

Kim looked confused for a moment. “I know who you are in Darren’s life, and I am not going to replace you. I am not about to compete with you either. I just want you to give me a chance. You’re important to Darren, and I want to know everyone who’s important to him,” she said quietly after a while.

I clapped my hands. “You’ve got bonus points from me, sis. But like I said, I tend to stay away from his girlfriends. I’m bad for them,” I said sympathetically, and she nodded. I entered the office.

Yeah. I know. I sounded territorial.

Or like a jealous girlfriend.

Ex-girlfriend.

“Holy crap, Darren. You look like hell.”

Darren looked up at me from his hands and heaved the heaviest sigh ever. I closed the door to our joint office at *Cirque*, and walked over to him, kneeling before his seated form. “What’s wrong?” I asked, and he closed his eyes for a moment. “Kim’s pregnant,” he said, his voice ominous.

I was so weak I lost my balance and I fell onto the floor.

I didn’t attempt to sit up. I let the words sink in. Sixteen months, and she’s pregnant.

And I thought she was hardcore religious. Darren told me that courting her included weekly trips to Baclaran and Quiapo Church.

And then why...?

“You want the kid?” I asked instead, finally finding my voice after Darren and I stared at each other’s faces for the past five minutes.

Darren shrugged. “Maybe. It’s still mine, come on.”

I reconsidered. “I asked the wrong question. Of course you wanted the kid. You didn’t talk to me for two years because I lost yours,” I said slowly, and he gave me a grim smile. “If you want your kid’s mom to be Kim is the more apt question.”

That earned a reaction.

He buried his face once more in his hands. “I was careful this time. I used protection, for heaven’s sake,” he said, and I sighed, reaching over and patting his back. I got my answer: *No, not Kim*. He let out a sob—the first that I heard from Darren.

“There’s more?” I guessed, and he nodded.

“Parents wanted me to marry her before she blows up and gives birth.”

That sucked the air out of me.

“Hers or yours?”

“Hers.”

I breathed deeply. I closed my eyes myself and ran my hands over my face. I tried to think straight. I had to. One of us has to.

“Well, at least one of us gets the fairytale happy ending. You get the marriage, and the family,” I said in a composed and relatively neutral voice. I placed a finger on his chin and lifted his head so that his tear-filled eyes would meet mine. I gave him the best smile that I could muster. “At least one of us gets to be happy,” I whispered, and he shook his head.

“I like Kim, but... that’s it. I don’t really think I do love her,” Darren said, his voice strained. I shook my head vehemently. I have to psych him up so that he’ll push through with this. He has to get married to Kim. He has to get married to her *because* she’s carrying his kid. I don’t care how screwed up that logic is.

He has to.

“Oh c’mon, Darren. You can’t be with her in the past year and a half and *not* love her,” I pointed out. He held my face in his hands, and looked deep into my eyes. “Maybe. But I love another woman, okay?” he said gruffly. Out of sheer shock, I just nodded.

“But you have to do this,” I whispered, and he nodded. He moved closer so our foreheads were leaning against each other, and I could feel his warm breath on my face. “Yeah,” he whispered, his voice breaking. I don’t know what was more painful to him and to me: that I was telling him to marry a woman that he doesn’t really love, or that I am telling him to marry a woman he doesn’t really love even though we both know who he really does love.

We stayed that way together for a moment, basking in the silence and the pain. I didn’t know when I started crying, too, but my face is now wet with tears. And then I broke free. I kissed him on the forehead and stood up.

“Call me when you need help with your parents, okay?” I said, knowing how violently his dad could probably react, and he nodded. He stood up, grabbed me by the shoulders and backed me up until I was leaning against the door. Darren kissed me for what seemed to be the last time we are ever legally allowed to do so. He cupped my face in his hands, deepening the kiss, and I responded with as much love and passion as I could. And then abruptly, the kiss ended. I exhaled loudly, tiptoed to kiss him lightly on the lips once more, and then he stepped back.

I wiped my tears and huffed once more, and then left him.

For some weird reason, I wanted to cuss Darren for getting me into this. Being one of Kim's bridesmaids isn't what I had in mind exactly, but then again, it's *the* one thing he's asking from me. He even said he'd forego my gift—just so that I'll be one of Kim's five bridesmaids.

I don't know what he told Kim for her to actually include me in her bridesmaid list. After all, I am not at all close to her—I am close to Darren. However, I can't be one of the groomsmen, can I?

I squirmed in my lavender gown and breathed deeply. I was about to follow Portia—I think that's her name—as she walked down the aisle, which was (conveniently for the bride) long. I took a step and another, walking to the bridal march, my heart thumping in my chest.

I didn't want to look up.

No.

But since I am crazy, I did, and my eyes met with Darren's.

You wouldn't want to know what I saw in them.

You know that feeling that it's right there in front of you and you were looking for it? That feeling like it was staring at you in the face? That the moment you saw it, it's gone?

That's it.

I seriously contemplated on turning around and running to my car out of the church.

He blinked, and that look of longing was gone. I gave him a small smile when I passed by him, and he nodded.

I took my spot and thought that was the end of it.

By the time the priest asked if anyone wanted to protest the union at hand, I was sorely tempted to say I don't want my best friend to get married to the wrong woman. I had manners, so I didn't. My hands were itching with the temptation to ruin Kim's life and save my best friend's, but I knew it was wrong. I had to think of the life inside Kim's tummy.

“Do you, Darren Xavier Yu, take Kimberly Samantha Ramos to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

What sucks is that Darren had to risk that glance—that same look—at me before he said, “I do.”

I looked down on my tiny bouquet and bit my lip to stop myself from crying.

“Do we really have to?”

Darren gave me an impatient look as he pulled me from my chair. My feet were throbbing from all the walking and dancing and talking with people I more or less didn't like or wouldn't dream of encountering once more in my stay in the planet earth, but here I am, letting myself get dragged by my newly married best friend onto the dance floor.

“Oh c'mon. It's been like decades we last danced. We danced during your debut, right?” he asked pointedly, and I saw something in his eyes: a fleeting moment of sadness. Something else had happened to me and Darren the year I turned eighteen, and that eventually changed our lives. It

changed me and him. To avoid much awkwardness, I removed my hand from his and punched him on the arm jokingly. He mouthed “Aw,” and took my hand, and placed it in his. His other hand was on my waist, placing my body securely against his. He guided in me in what seemed to be *Flightless Bird, American Mouth* by Iron and Wine, and I nearly swooned. Edward and Bella’s tune when they were dancing during their prom in *Twilight*. Who had the idea of putting that in the playlist?

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against Darren’s chest. Despite the music, I could still hear his heartbeat loud and clear, and for some reason my eyes stung with tears. This is my best friend. This *is* the guy I was supposed to be having my child with if the baby didn’t decide to exit me in an unwanted fashion. This is the man I had made love to for countless of times, loved every moment of it.

He could have been the guy who should have owned my heart and my all, if one of us had the frigging guts to tell each other what we really feel.

This *is* the man who is supposed to be my husband.

Only now he got married to somebody else.

“Bree, I love you,” Darren whispered, and I nodded. “I know that,” I said, my voice thin. I tried to remember how he glanced at me when the priest ask if anyone wants to protest against the impending marriage, or how he looked at me before he said his vows. I tried to keep my eyes on my frigging bouquet the whole time after that.

“If things were different, maybe this whole ceremony, the whole wedding? It could have been us.”

I swayed to his words and felt the mighty urge of avoiding the length of the conversation and just sit down—or leave the reception. “I know,” I breathed.

He stopped and lifted my head so that my eyes would meet his. “I love you. Always. Remember that, okay?” he whispered, and I blinked, the first of my tears falling. He leaned over and kissed them dry. I gave him a small smile. “I love you, too, Darren. Always,” I whispered, and he nodded.

“In another lifetime, maybe.”

I choked back a sob. We finished the song, and then after that, just as when he was about to ask me for another dance, I broke our hands and ran to the restroom, finally breaking down.

Chapter Five: Live Ball

“The ball becomes **live** when:

- During the jump ball, the ball is legally tapped by a jumper.
- During a free throw, the ball is at the disposal of the free-throw shooter.
- During a throw-in, the ball is at the disposal of the player taking the throw-in.”

- Article 10, Section 2
FIBA Official Rule Book 2008

University Athletics Association of the Philippines (UAAP) Opening—Since I am a true-blooded Fighting Maroon at heart, I would love to watch my team as they figure in the first of two matchups on the opening day. I had patron seats courtesy of Carl, another basketball player friend whose former team will be playing in the second matchup on opening day. Thank God I have other access to tickets aside from Darren, who I am not talking to as of the moment.

I was carrying my *Go Nuts Donuts* er, donut and my coffee when I crashed into a great big wall of sheer muscle. Okay, I am exaggerating. I inhaled his scent—and boy, it was good—and looked up. He looked down on me, a wide grin on his face that made me stop. I nearly dropped my coffee.

I know this guy. He plays for the Ateneo Blue Eagles, but I can't figure out his name (credit that to not watching the games since they are usually held during my office hours). So what I did was I peeked at his blue warmer, hoping that his name was written on it. The warmer said *Hizon*.

"Oh. Hi," I said, a blush creeping up to my face because he was smiling weirdly—probably at what I did. He was staring at my face. "Hizon," I added, and he blinked. "It's Carlitos—" he stammered—"Itos."

I nodded, and gave him a small smile. "Hi Carlitos Itos," I teased, and he blushed. Seriously. I wasn't sure if I can make a guy blush anymore—except Darren on a birthday suit day—but here it is. I am making a six-foot-tall guard blush.

"You can call me Itos, Ms...?" he said in his deep voice, and I replied, "Bree."

He blinked once more. "Bree," he whispered, and it sent shivers to my spine. Ah. This guy is probably five or something years younger than I am. I heard his teammates call him, and he looked a bit torn. Wow, the guy doesn't want to leave me just yet.

"Um, can I see you after my game?" Itos asked, almost boldly. I winked at him. "Sorry, gorgeous. I'm not sticking around for the second game. I have something going after this game," I replied, and disappointment washed all over his face. I found my wallet and fished for my calling card. I flipped it and wrote my mobile phone number at the back. I handed it to him.

"Call me after the game," I said, and he nodded. "Rock the hard court, tiger," I said, waving him a goodbye. That weird smile that he first had on when he saw me was back on his face. He pocketed the calling card, and I turned to head back to the Coliseum.

An unlisted number interrupted my data encoding, and I stopped after I finished one section to answer.

There was a sigh of relief. "I thought you weren't going to pick up," said a voice that now sent tingles down my spine.

"Well, I was doing something, mister. You won, I heard?" I said, and Itos laughed a carefree laugh on the other line. "Yep," he replied, his voice perky. "So, you still busy? I'll pick you up and take you to dinner if you're up to it."

I breathed deeply. First date ever since Darren walked out my door, our (dead) baby in our heads. "How old are you, Itos?" I asked out of the blue.

"Twenty-two."

Ting, ting, ting, ting, ting!

Six years older. Dang.

"I'm twenty-eight. I am working as a researcher for the past five years of my life, a senior researcher the past two. Still want to meet up?"

Without wasting any breath or second, Itos answered, his voice straight: "Yes. Of course. Why shouldn't I want to?"

I sighed exasperatedly. "Well, I just stated the reasons, Itos."

“You told me something about yourself, Bree,” he corrected. “That won’t stop me.”

I saved what I was doing and marked where I stopped in the file I was doing. “Fine.” I gave him the name and place of the restaurant where I wanted to meet him, and he gave me the heads up. “Be there in an hour!” he said excitedly, like a kid given a candy.

I got to have it to Itos: he is prepared.

He was already in the restaurant when I arrived, and a single, long-stemmed, white rose was on my plate. I rolled my eyes.

“Impressive,” I noted, when he stood up to pull me my chair. He made sure I was already relaxed in my seat before heading back to his. He gave me a conservative smile. “Can I just be honest with you?” he asked, and I waved my hand nonchalantly. “Seriously, Itos, honesty’s the foundation of a good, uh, something,” I said, placing my hands on the edge of the table, one over the other.

“‘Relationship’ is a good word to complete your sentence,” he replied, and I just nodded for him to continue. He turned serious. “My world stopped when I saw you.”

My eyebrows inched higher. “Forgive me if I am going to be a skeptic, but... what if I’m not looking for any kind of relationship?” I asked, and before he could answer, the waiter arrived. We ordered food and were silent for a few seconds before Itos spoke again.

“Give me this date, and I’ll make you change your mind,” Itos said, and I shrugged.

“Bree, you won’t be here if you’re not in the least bit interested in me.”

I cracked a smile. “You’re cute,” I said defensively. “So start with the convincing part. Make me change my mind.”

Itos talked about himself for five minutes, but for the rest of the hour was all about me: what I do, where I graduated, my family, and everything else that I haven’t told a soul aside from Darren. The guy is *interested*, that part I know.

Itos placed his jacket over my shoulders when he saw me shiver in the night breeze. We were walking to the parking lot, and I thanked him quietly. “So, did I change your mind?” he asked, a few steps into the walk.

I looked up at him, and paused to think. “Hmm, yeah,” I allowed, and he pouted. He looked so adorable. “Come on, Bree,” he said, sounding almost a whine. I stopped in front of my Honda Jazz and was about to slide his jacket off my shoulders when he made me face him. He placed both his arms on my sides, and I leaned back against my car, not breathing. He was *THIS* close to me.

“Maybe this will,” he said, his voice husky, and his lips touched mine, gentle, undemanding at first. When I kissed back, he stepped closer, our bodies touching, and he deepened the kiss.

OHGODMYWORLDISPINNINGANDICAN’TTHINKSTRAIGHTDAMNDAMNDAMN!

I was dizzy, so dizzy that my knees buckled beneath me, and Itos held me by the shoulders to keep me up. I felt him smile under my lips, and then he released me. “I guess I did change your mind, huh?” he said, and I rolled my eyes. “Arrogant,” I muttered, and I gave him my version of a pout. He laughed, and kissed me once more, this time keeping it short.

“This is quick,” I said, when he took a step back. He nodded. “I’m sorry for that, but...” Itos began to say, but stopped. *But what exactly?* I can almost see the gears working in his head. His eyebrows furrowed, crumpling his very cute boy-next-door face. “Hey, no need to get a brain hemorrhage. I’m just telling you that everything’s quick,” I interrupted his thoughts, patting him on the shoulder. He nodded, and opened my car door for me.

“Since you’re working, can I just see you after your office hours *and* after my practice tomorrow?” he said as I entered the car. “Yeah, sure, I guess,” I said. I started the car as he was watching me intently. He was about to close the door when I blurted out, “Hey, you’re not dating anyone, are you?”

Itos smiled crookedly. “I think I am now,” he replied, and since I was still dizzy from the kiss he gave me earlier, I frowned. “*You, silly,*” Itos said, a smile hidden somewhere in his voice. He touched my cheek affectionately, and then whispered, “Drive safely, alright?” I nodded, feeling like I was the one who’s younger between Itos and I. “Call me,” he reminded, and I laughed. “Yes, father,” I teased, and he rolled his eyes. He closed the door and patted the car twice on the hood, and took three steps back.

He didn’t leave until I had safely entered the highway.

“I want to try this resto.”

I glanced at Itos, who was driving. He picked me up from my condo since it was a Saturday and I gave myself a pat on the back (for starting to date), so I didn’t head for office (not that there *should* be office on Saturday). Itos didn’t have a game today but had classes in the morning and practice in the afternoon. It was the first ever since we started going out two weeks ago (and I meant that literally going out—every single day—be it breakfast, lunch, dinner, or just coffee, or I’d watch his game and we’d talk for a couple of minutes then head off different directions) that we will be riding *together* in one car, and it felt like progress.

“What resto?” I asked, sincere curiosity in my voice. Every restaurant we had picked or coffee shop that we’ve been to had always been, well, my choice. He’d usually ask me if I have eaten at this resto, and if I have, what opinion do I have of the food? If I haven’t, do I want to try?

I know sometimes that bit gets tiring, but Itos just plainly seems to be ever so interested in everything ME.

“*Cirque?*” he said, sounding not too sure about the resto’s name. “The one at Quezon Ave. They have *Cirque II* somewhere in San Juan, I think, but the one in Q. Ave’s nearer.”

I had to stop myself from giving anything away. I wasn’t shocked he knew about my restaurants—they have been getting the *buzz* around the sports circle since we’re competing against that *other* sports bar, and we have been featured in magazines and on television. I wanted to laugh, though, that he was using the location as the description of *Cirque*—there are so many restaurants along Quezon Avenue, and I do believe my restaurant already earned a reputation that could be enough for a description. The description most apt to me is that it is my now turning seven-year-old restaurant, partly owned (again) by Darren, who I haven’t been talking to in nearly six months.

Ha. Time to go back to my resto now.

“Sure. If you want to try it there,” I said casually. He gave me a thrifty smile, and then reached out for my hand. I gave his a squeeze. I stayed silent while contemplating on what I knew of Darren’s schedule. It’s Saturday, and if he doesn’t have an out-of-towner, he’ll be at *Cirque*. That is almost always imperative.

Then again, it’s PBA off-season.

Maybe I just have to see him.

“Whoa, valet service?” I heard Itos say under his breath, and when I turned to my right I saw the familiar blue and green lights of my dear restaurant—my and Darren’s ‘baby.’ The valet at work was David, and the surprised look on his face told me he wasn’t expecting to see me there since I haven’t been that active in *Cirque* (visiting four times a week when I know Darren’s not around doesn’t really count as *active* in my dear employees’ eyes—they were so used to seeing me every single day). I placed a forefinger on my lips, and he nodded, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

David has been *Cirque*’s valet ever since the beginning, and in the past years he and I—together with all of my employees, old and new—have developed a code: whenever I do that forefinger-on-the-lips move, it meant that my date—or whoever I am with that night—doesn’t know that I am actually the owner of the restaurant they are taking me to.

It’s been eons since I last used that code.

“Good evening, Ma’am,” he said, and I gave him a curt nod. Itos came around from the other side and handed him the keys, and he placed a hand on the small of my back as we were greeted by Tina, our receptionist, who was good at hiding the shock on her face when she saw me. I figured David must have warned her, because her greeting consisted of: “Table for two, Ma’am, Sir?”

“Yes,” Itos said coolly. We followed Tina into the restaurant, and she gave us a table at the section where I, Darren, and a selected few of our friends are given—the VIP section. No, don’t get the wrong idea. *Cirque* is not *the* high-end restaurant that intimidates people into not eating and has the smallest of food servings that you didn’t know that you’ve already eaten (and yet you shell out so much money). Don’t let the valet service and the receptionist give you the wrong idea. On the contrary, the restaurant Darren had in mind was a sports bar-slash-restaurant, so the place gets raucous on game nights. The food costs around Php100 to a high of Php300, so it’s not tough on the pockets.

This Saturday night isn’t a game night, so the usual acoustic singers that we have—or our friends who want to showcase their talents or artists who want to promote their albums—are playing. “Quite a diverse crowd this resto has, huh?” I heard Itos say as he slid down next to me in the booth. ‘Diverse’ pretty much covers it—on one side of the restaurant was occupied by men and women in business suits, evidently in a serious meeting, while another part of *Cirque* had young adults and teens in their casual clothes, chatting animatedly and flashing their digicams away. Still, at the bar, were those loosening up after their hellish nine-to-five jobs. Yup. DIVERSE.

I remember someone—Darren’s friend, or was it Kim?—telling me and Darren that the entire meshing of the customers we’re catering to isn’t gonna work because it’ll confuse the people: what is *Cirque* exactly? Is it a restaurant for yuppies or for their bosses who need a place to conduct a meeting and eat? Or is it a hangout for teens and young adults or college students who just needed a place to eat? Or is it for sports fans on game days where they can watch the games with their friends? Or is it a bar?

Well, that’s why it *is* named *Cirque*. It’s a circus inside *Cirque*. (Aside from *Cirque* being the name of the stuffed bear Darren gave me eons ago.)

Look at us now, nearly seven years strong, and two branches standing.

James, the waiter assigned to this section (also evidently told of the secret arrangement), offered us menus, and he waited patiently as Itos and I thought of things to order. I was tempted to say, “The usual,” since I always had the same thing every time I go here—pasta, a slice or two of pizza, our homemade ice cream, and bottomless lemonade—but that would give the secret away. I narrated my order, and Itos told James his. “Our serving time is fifteen to twenty minutes,” James said courteously after repeating our orders.

I unconsciously tapped my fingers on the table, and Itos caught my fingers, threading mine in his. “Nervous?” he asked me, and I felt him so close—I can feel his breath on my face. I shook my head. He

placed his arm around my shoulder and I leaned against his body. I sighed. I asked myself again: What in the world did I do to get Itos?

Itos could be every woman's dream guy: he's handsome and cute, and his being a basketball player gave him that sex appeal. He's so caring and thoughtful, and it's innate—not the kind of caring and thoughtful that guys in courtship happen to be. He's intelligent and talented, and he is conceptualizing a business with his friends, and the business happens to be a restaurant as well.

Maybe that'll change when he finds out that I actually own a couple.

"What are you thinking, Bree?" he asked, and I turned to look at him. I touched his cheek with my other hand, and he cuddled closer to my hand. I felt his facial hair tickle my fingers. "I am thinking about why you are still single when I met you," I replied. Itos deserved the honesty (except for the restaurant bit).

Itos frowned. "Why are you thinking about that?"

"Well," I said, bringing down my hand from his face, "you are so... yummy—" his eyes widened at my term—"sorry, I can't find a more apt term—like... you're want-able. Like you should be on everyone's men-to-boyfriend list or something."

He cleared his throat before speaking. Apparently, he was flattered by what I said because a blush had crept to his cheeks. "Because I haven't found *the* one," he replied mystically, and I had opened my mouth to ask what he meant when James arrived with our drinks, and shortly after he brought in our soup. I frowned myself—Itos and I didn't order any soup.

"Compliments of the part-owner," James said, his tone almost apologetic. He just did what he was told. I gave him an understanding smile, and he nodded, heading back to the kitchen. I turned to where I knew Darren is, and he was at the cashier, watching me and Itos intently, wiping a glass with a dish towel. He gave me a scowl, and I rolled my eyes.

"You know the owner?" Itos asked, and I shrugged. "He's the *part*-owner," I pointed out, my voice bitter. Itos' lips became a thin line. He knew I was hiding something from him. "Don't tell me you don't know him?" I asked, and he shook his head. *Right. Remind me now that Itos spent his high school life in the United States?*

He wasn't exposed to Darren.

"The *part*-owner—" my lips twisted in disgust—"is Darren Yu. He played mean college basketball for De La Salle University, and he was drafted second nearly six years ago, and he's playing for Ginebra now," I explained, and I hated Darren as of now. He is seriously screwing up my dinner with Itos. Well, not really him per se, but the things he is doing *is* ruining my mood, which is in turn ruining my night.

"So why would he give you—and me—*compliments*?" Itos pressed lightly. I breathed deeply and tried to be patient. "Maybe he's just being friendly," I offered, and he wasn't able to say anything more because I started to slurp my soup.

Truth: Darren knows I just have a soft spot for soup.

It sucks.

The food arrived, and when I had sipped the last of my soup, Itos turned to me. "Can I talk to you now?" he asked, not sounding angry, pissed, or anything negative. I nodded. "I won't ask who Darren is," he said, "but one day you have to tell me, okay?"

“Cripes,” I said irritably, and I looked over at the cashier, and true enough, Darren was watching us. “Let’s get it over and done with, shall we?” I motioned for Darren to come over, and he passed the glass and dish towel in his hands to the girl I recognized to be Trini, and sauntered over to my table.

“Choose another date to ruin, Darren,” was my greeting, and Itos reprimanded me with a nice glare. Did I tell you he’s a sucker for all things proper? Some days I meet guys who make me feel like I’m the kid that I actually am, and not a 28-year-old lady. I stood up. “Itos, this is Darren Yu, my business partner,” I said sourly, and fantastically, my date’s eyes widened. “Yes, I own 70% of this restaurant with a *diverse* atmosphere. I also own the other one at San Juan,” I continued, quoting him.

“Darren, this is my date, Itos Hizon. He plays for Ateneo. And I am not going to see him again because you made me be the bitch that I actually am, so he’s going to stay away,” I said lengthily, and with that I grabbed my purse and left both men. I am childish, but I hate this. This isn’t my favorite day anymore.

I was nearing the backdoor exit when Darren caught up with me.

“I’m sorry.”

I felt like he meant it, but I was still in a sour mood that I replied, “For what? Ruining my life or my date?”

He held up both hands. “Hey, where is all this rage coming from?” he asked, defensive. “Look, if anyone here needs to be angry, it should be me, Bree! I haven’t seen you in ages, and you’ve been avoiding me like I didn’t score for ten games straight or like I’ve committed double-digit turnovers for three games straight!”

I winced. “Oh, you want to know why I am avoiding you, Darren?” I said loudly, my temper shooting up way above my head.

“Yes,” he said quickly. “I want to know why my best friend of so many years suddenly decided to go caput from my life.”

“Because—”

Of your wife.

I was thankful I got a hold of myself at the right moment. I stopped, took a deep breath, and blinked. I shook my head. “I can’t tell you,” I whispered, and I tiptoed, brushed my lips on his cheek and left a confused Darren standing at the backdoor exit, clutching the cheek I kissed.

I had removed my shoes when I stumbled into the elevator and enjoyed the feeling of the cold tiled floor on my way to my unit, humming a nameless tune.

“You know, even if you show me your bitchy side, or your horrible side, *or* your grumpy side, I won’t ever leave.”

I jumped—literally—at the sound of Itos’ voice. I dropped my shoes to the floor with a soft *thud* and clutched my chest, that spot above the heart. He reached out for me because he was surprised that I was surprised, but didn’t touch me. I leaned back on the wall until my heart rate slowed to normal.

“Sorry,” Itos mumbled. I nodded, and then I looked up at him. He was smiling at me weirdly.

“Okaaaaay, what is that smile for?” I asked, drawing the first word into more than two syllables. He

gave a slight jerk of his shoulder. Another blush for the guy. “You looked, um, cute, walking down the hallway,” he said, his voice soft and affectionate. I rolled my eyes.

“I showed you who I am on an off day and left you in the restaurant with my business partner, who probably left you too soon afterwards. And then you repay me by appearing at my doorstep after waiting for me for God-only-knows-how-long, and you tell me that I looked cute,” I enumerated, and I took another long deep breath afterwards. “You are too good to be true, Itos,” I concluded, shaking my head, disbelief obvious in my face.

Itos gazed at me, this thoughtful expression on his face. “I hear you, but what if I just wouldn’t give up?” he asked, almost apologetic.

“You should stop being nice to me, you know,” I said, and he shook his head. “You deserve someone who’s nice,” he countered.

“Yeah, and the moon is made of cheese,” I snapped. “Itos, be realistic. You can’t be this nice to me all the time!”

“You want me to stay away?”

“No,” I said violently. I sighed. “Can we just have this conversation on another day?” He ran his hand under his chin and exhaled loudly. I fished for my keys in my pocket and started to open my door. He stayed there and watched me.

“Okay, okay,” I said impatiently. “We’re having it now.” I turned and faced him again. He shocked me when he swooped down on me, his big hands deftly wrapping around my waist, and he kissed me, furious, angry, confused. Too much passion was in that kiss that I didn’t have time to get dizzy. I found the strength to finally push him away when I needed air.

“Itos, you can’t just kiss me whenever you want a conversation to be over, or if you wanted to prove a point,” I said angrily when he put me down on my feet again. I leaned my head against his chest, breathing heavily, while he placed his hand at the back of my neck, kneading. Tears actually sprang into my eyes.

“I like you, okay? And I hate it that I’m screwing things up because I had a complicated life and I like you so much but I have to fix it first—”

“Bree, you talk too much,” he whispered amusedly, and that effectively ceased my tongue from any further activity. “I am here. No matter who you are, what you say, or what you do—just don’t, um, murder people—I’ll like you, okay? And I sure do understand complicated lives. My parents are divorced and both of them remarried so...”

I looked up at him and he kissed my tears away. “We’ll restart tomorrow,” I promised him.

“We have a *weird* relationship,” he said, as I ushered him into my condo unit. I hummed in agreement, and I flopped onto my couch. He looked at me, torn. “I have to go, actually,” he said, and I frowned. “What are you, twelve?” I asked, and he smiled sarcastically.

“No. I am a basketball player with a curfew tonight and a game tomorrow,” he said indignantly. I laughed and stood up, prancing towards him. “Well, make me proud, tiger,” I said, kissing him lightly on the lips. I pushed him towards the door, and he groaned. “I don’t want to leave, though,” he said, and I smiled. “You said so yourself, babe. Basketball player with curfew and game tomorrow,” I reminded him, and he nodded. He kissed me on the forehead.

“You’re watching my game, right?”

“Well, I don’t have any tickets,” I said, and he shook his head, a smile on his face. “I’d take care of that, love,” he said, and he kissed me again, this time on the lips.

He left.

I slept with a wide smile on my face.

Chapter Six: Jump Ball

“A **jump ball** occurs when an official tosses the ball in the centre circle between any two opponents at the beginning of the first period.”

- Article 12, Section 1.1
FIBA Official Rule Book 2008

- a) “The ball shall be put into play in the center circle by a jump ball between any two opponents:
 - 1) At the start of the game
 - 2) At the start of each overtime period
 - 3) A double free throw violation
 - 4) Double foul during a loose ball situation
 - 5) The ball becomes dead when neither team is in control and no field goal or infraction is involved
 - 6) The ball comes to rest on the basket flange or becomes lodged between the basket ring and the backboard
 - 7) A double foul which occurs as a result of a difference in opinion between officials
 - 8) A suspension of play occurs during a loose ball
 - 9) A fighting foul occurs during a loose ball situation
- b) In all the cases above, the jump ball shall be between any two opponents in the game at that time. If injury, ejection, or disqualification makes it necessary for any player to be replaced, his substitute may not participate in the jump ball.”

- Rule 6, Section Va and Vb
NBA Official Rule Book 2005-2006

Bree. Cirque’s anniversary is in two months. We’re planning a celebration. Please. Please. Please be there in the meeting this afternoon.

I read Darren’s message for the nth time. I threw my phone back into my bag, and sighed loudly. I closed all my folders, contemplating whether or not I should go. It is, after all, *Cirque*, and I know that it meant so much more than a restaurant to me and Darren. The phone on my desk started to ring, and I pressed the loudspeaker. “Bree Sandejas,” I said smoothly, and it was my secretary. “Ma’am, a certain Mr. Hizon is on Line 1,” she said, and I told her to patch him through.

“You weren’t picking up your cell phone,” was the first line. He sounded like a whiny boyfriend or something. Ha. He *is* actually my boyfriend, so what’s the big issue?

“Hey. I don’t watch my phone the entire day,” I said, and if I was with Itos, he’d probably roll his eyes. “Should I pick you up now?” he asked, and I slapped my palm onto my forehead. *Nice. I forgot he and I have a special something tonight.*

That special something is something I have yet to find out, since my love's lips are sealed.

"Oh crap," I said under my breath, but Itos heard it. "Uh oh. You forgot about it," he replied, the sadness in his voice evident. "No, I didn't," I replied, almost too defensively. "Darren sent me a message. It's *Cirque's* anniv in two months, and he asked me—more like begged—if I could show my cute ass there for a meeting."

Three silent beats, and then, "Oh."

"That's it? Just 'oh'?"

"Well I haven't heard the word *Cirque* from you anytime in months, nor have I heard the name Darren."

"My restaurant's turning seven, babe. Like a baby. You celebrate the seventh year because it's considered to be a huge blessing to even reach seven," I explained patiently. When he still didn't speak, I said, "Itos, come on."

Nothing.

"What if you pick me up, drop me off there and we eat while I'm having a meeting with Darren and the staff, and then we head off to whatever this special something is?" I suggested. "I'll make Darren promise to keep it at a maximum of an hour."

"Move it another day," he said, and it was the first time in almost half a year have I seen—okay, heard—Itos this grumpy. I tried to run through his day in my head—team practice and... just that. So is he really just peeved that I am ruining his surprise?

"Okay," I said, stooping to pick up my cell phone. "Pick me up now then."

I ended the call with a click when Itos was midway his sentence, and I breathed deeply before pressing speed dial 3 (a.k.a. Darren). He picked up on the first ring, and he sounded so relieved when to hear my voice. "Hey," I greeted. "Can we just move the meeting to another day? Itos has something planned for me tonight and he won't spill, but he just grunted all the way when I told him I have to drop by *Cirque*. Ruins the fun," I said.

"Okay. That's fine. At least I know you had intentions of going," Darren said, almost teasing.

"Hey, I drop by *Cirque* and *Cirque II* every day!"

"Yeah. When you know that I am not here," he countered, and I fell silent.

"I figured out why you've been avoiding me," Darren said after a while. Suddenly the atmosphere was tense around me. My aura has gone black from red and orange. "Uh huh," I said noncommittally.

"Kim talked to me and told me all about it."

Oh so she came around, huh? I wanted to say, but I didn't. "So you didn't figure it out. Kim *told* you," I said instead, and he laughed. "Well, I asked her if she had any theories as to why you're avoiding me. She said she could do me one better: she knew the reason why."

"Ah," was all I managed to say.

"So you seriously believed I was in love with you?" he asked when it became apparent that I wouldn't speak anymore. *Well, you were, right?* I wanted to say, but I stopped myself. Where this conversation is heading, I didn't want to know. I breathed deeply. "Does this conversation really have to be done on the phone?" I asked back, and he said, "Yes."

“No. I didn’t think you were,” I began to say. “It’s just that Kim was so convinced that I had to just give it to her, you know?”

“Without asking me.”

“Well, you will say no.”

“What if I was in love with you?”

I stopped short. The question dumbfounded me. “Were you?” I dared to ask. Silence filled the other line, and it was telling me that the answer was yes, and I was stupid enough not to notice it.

“You’re right. This conversation shouldn’t be done over the phone. We’ll talk when we meet. Enjoy your night with Itos,” he said, his voice resigned. He knew he gave me the answer anyway.

My best friend was in love with me at the time I was in love with him as well.

Check that: He was STILL in love with me.

I guess one of us had stuck to the “*I love you always*” thing that we’ve said to each other a few years back.

“So the surprise is in your, um, house?” I said, and Itos shook his head impatiently. It was, after all, the nth time I have asked him what his surprise is. My question usually was either that or where he is actually taking me. A few minutes earlier, I had seen the familiar route to his subdivision, and now he and I are approaching the street to his house. I saw his house at the curb, but Itos didn’t stop there. He did a quick turn and we stopped in front of a two-storey navy blue and white house, its front landscaped with santan bushes and golf course-worthy grass, rocks and pebbles, and a nice fountain. I looked up at the house in its glorious beauty—it was a simple house, probably with three rooms, and it appeared to have a backyard garden.

The house had a homey feel to it, the wow-I-want-to-live-here-with-my-husband-and-kids feel.

When I turned to say something to Itos, he was already out of the car and opening the door to my side. He helped me down his car, and I frowned. “This is the surprise?” I asked, and he nodded, a hesitant smile on his handsome face. He held my hand. “Remember our first date?” Itos asked, and I nodded. “Of course,” I said with a bright smile.

“What did I tell you at that time?” he asked.

“You’ll change my mind,” I replied easily. “I’m glad you did.”

He kissed me on the cheek, and said, “Okay. Not that date. The one at *Cirque*.”

I frowned. “Maybe you should just tell me about it? All I remember was Darren ruining that date for us.”

Itos paused, and then said, “You told me I was *yummy*.” He winked at me. I nodded, blushing. “And then you asked me why I was still single. I said—”

“You haven’t met *her*,” I interrupted. He gave me a vigorous nod. “I was about to tell you why when the soup that was compliments of the *part*-owner arrived,” he said with a teasing smile on his face.

“Where is this conversation going? And what does it has to do with the house?” I asked, confused.

“The day I met you, as in the moment I saw you, I knew you are the one. Like this is it. *This is really is it,*” Itos said, his voice turning serious, and I stopped myself from smiling. He was trying to be light, because he felt like what he’s going to say will shock me out of my wits. “At that moment, I knew I got to have you. I’ve got to be *your* man,” he continued. “I had the house built the next day, after our first date.”

I gaped at him, at a loss for words. “Seriously?” I managed to say after a moment. He looked unsure because of what he was seeing on my face—I was too shocked to even try to hide whatever it was that he was seeing. “I just... love you, Bree. It’s like you’re everything gluing me to my spot, to the earth, threading every shred of reason. I know it’s too... weird,” he said slowly. He placed something small and cold in my palm and when I looked at it, it was the key—to the front door, I assume. I closed my eyes and my palm and breathed deeply.

“You love me too much, Itos,” I said when I opened my eyes.

“How do you know that too much is too much?” he asked, almost rhetorically, and I almost smiled once more. I think I heard that from *Grey’s Anatomy*, only a different version: *How do you know when too much is too much? Too much too soon?*

He probably got that from watching the series with me.

“I love you, Itos,” I said, and he enclosed me in a tight hug. I hugged him back. I loved how Itos held me together.

But he loved me, almost blindly, not knowing what happened in my past that includes Darren.

I was unfair.

Itos released me but still kept a hand around my waist, and gave me a light kiss on the forehead. “So this is our house—if you’ll allow it to be,” he murmured. I took another deep breath.

“Before you... God, Itos,” I began, but I just couldn’t put it into words. Tears suddenly appeared in my eyes, and one drop fell down my cheek.

I was crying. Because of two reasons: Itos loves me, and I don’t want to lose him.

But I have to be honest with him, and that means telling him of the past Darren and I had.

Even if it means losing him.

“Bree?”

There was genuine concern in his voice. I let out a sob.

“You *have* to know something about me and Darren,” I said, and there was this *uh-oh* look on his face. He slid his hands to my wrists, and then gave me a curt nod as a sign to continue.

“Eight years ago—before *Cirque* and *Cirque II*, before Kim and Zania, before you and me—Darren got me pregnant,” I told him, my voice ominous. “Check that: *I* got pregnant with Darren’s kid,” I said as an afterthought. For some reason, the sentence has to come off like it was me who did the action, and not Darren. The blame had to be with me, because I let it happen.

The look on Itos’ face was painful—sheer disbelief coupled with near disgust. “Where is the kid?” he asked, his voice ice cold. I pointed up in the night sky, which was surprisingly starless and moonless.

“Heaven.”

“Died?”

I nodded. “I miscarried,” I explained softly. The baby is still a sore subject for me. Itos let me go completely and leaned against his car. Whatever news I was telling him, it was taking the energy—and maybe the life—out of him.

Maybe it’s also snuffing out the love, too.

“So there was something more than you and Darren being best friends. You told me he wasn’t your ex.”

Yey. His voice sounded accusing. Damn.

I nodded. “Yup.”

“Then how come—” he began to say, but he cut himself in mid-sentence. “Maybe that’s the part I don’t want to know,” Itos reconsidered. I reached out for him but he knocked my hand away. I clutched my hand to my chest and watched him warily. “Kim sure had a basis when she asked you to stay away from Darren, huh?” he said harshly, his eyes flashing with anger. “Does she know about this, too?”

“I have no idea, but I guess not,” I said hesitantly. “Itos, after I miscarried, Darren and I stopped seeing each other... in *that* way,” I said hotly. “And I don’t *do* married men, Itos. You should know I’m better than that.”

“I thought you were also better than screwing your own best friend!”

I gasped. That statement ripped my chest apart. *I seriously wish I didn’t hear that from Itos. NOT ITOS.*

I composed myself. My face was now blank. “Maybe you should just put this house up for sale. No one’s gonna live in it,” I said, thrusting the key into his chest, and I started to walk away.

He didn’t follow.

This heart / it beats / beats for only you... / This heart / it beats / beats for only you / My heart / is yours...

I sighed and cut Hayley Williams in mid-song. Paramore’s *My Heart* tells me that Darren is calling. I couldn’t remember when he had set that ringtone in my phone, but it had always been Darren’s tone, so I’d know it was him calling.

“Hey,” he greeted smoothly, and I grunted in response. “The meeting’s tonight. That okay with Itos?”

The name—the mere mention of Itos—nearly sent me back to bawling. I got a good grip of myself though, this time.

“Yeah, sure. I don’t think he’ll ever mind what I do with my life anyways,” I responded bitterly.

“Whoa. Okay. What’s wrong?” he asked, and I stayed silent. “Yeah. Figured you wouldn’t want to talk about it,” Darren continued.

“I’ll be there later,” I said instead. I was getting my bag and my laptop for office and was aching to end the call, but Darren’s not showing any signs of letting me go just yet.

“I’m still here, Bree.”

“He told me he thought I was better than screwing you, my own best friend,” I blurted out. It’s Darren, after all. My best friend. I could tell anything to the guy, especially after he has memorized my body’s topography before.

“He didn’t,” he said in disbelief.

“Yup. I told him about you, me and the baby. He was giving me a house, and the least I can do is be honest.”

Darren cursed. “The least you can do is say yes, Bree, and not ruin his moment. He didn’t have to know about what happened between us! What were you thinking?”

I held my tongue and didn’t speak. Thank you, Darren, for telling me what a stupid bitch I was. And oh, did you tell Kim about the bit about us, too?

“Sorry,” Darren said a few seconds later.

“I am, too,” I said, and I ended the call.

Maybe I should just kill myself.

“So you’re single now?”

I gave Darren a scowl. He sat across me as we waited for the employees to finish closing up *Cirque* so that we can start the meeting for the resto’s seventh anniversary. “I don’t think he and I had *formally* broken up,” I said coldly.

“Or maybe you’re just hoping.”

I sighed in frustration. “Your point being...?”

Darren shrugged. “Well, he couldn’t swallow the fact that you and I nearly got hitched because I got you pregnant.”

I let out a hollow laugh. “More like he couldn’t accept it that I was doing you when you and I aren’t together in every sense of the word.”

He rolled his eyes. “Wow. Righteous much?”

“Itos has a point,” I said defensively. “He thinks Kim had the right to order me away from you since you and I had serious history. And that it was improper that she’s blind to that big chunk of your life.” Darren walked over to me, looking thoughtful. He placed both hands on my shoulders.

“So our history has the right to rule over our present and future, that’s what he’s saying?”

I shook my head. “He’s saying our history *can* affect what’s happening now and tomorrow. I mean, I miscarried *your* kid, and we weren’t even together when we made that kid. What does that actually say of you and me?”

I felt him sigh. “It says that when we should have had made something out of our relationship at that time, then maybe Kim and Itos weren’t in our lives now,” he said, and I let out my version of a sigh. *We’re so heading to that point in the conversation.*

“No. We’re done talking about you and me. That’s over. You have a wife and a kid, and I *had* Itos. I am not really planning for any other relationship. Maybe I’ll just stay single for life, you know,” I said, and his hands on my shoulders tightened.

“If Kim and I get separated—”

I twirled my seat to face him. “Darren. Please. Itos getting hurt is already too much. Don’t hurt your daughter, too, just because you want to be with me. We had our chance, and we didn’t make the most out of it. Suck it in. Next lifetime, remember?”

Darren looked at me, torn. And then he nodded. “I missed you. I was a coward.”

I didn’t think he meant he “missed” me as in missing a person. I think he meant he missed me, like a target. “Why do we always have to go back there?” I asked him angrily. He dropped to his knees and held my thighs together. He looked deep into my eyes. “Because I see you, and I remember how I could have had you. The fact that I know you could have been mine and I didn’t pursue you. The fact that I know that I love you and I know you love me as well, but I didn’t do anything about it.”

“In another lifetime,” I pressed. He nodded, kissed me lightly on the forehead, and I was ever so thankful that Dave entered the room.

I have a basketball game. Versus Darren’s team. Be there.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I realized it was Itos who sent the message. I had just gotten out of my car when the message came in, and when I reached my office, the receptionist handed me two envelopes. One had my name printed at the center, and I recognized it to be Itos’ scrawl. The other had my name on the upper right hand corner, and I knew that it was Darren.

I went to my office and dropped my things onto the couch, and opened Itos’ envelope first. A patron seat ticket. I recognized the letters of the seat to be behind the bench. When I opened Darren’s, I realized it contained the same thing, only this time, the ticket was for a seat behind *Darren’s* bench.

Was it just purely coincidental that I got these two tickets at the same game day? They’ve had games before, and I watch them, but Darren almost always knows that it is mandatory for me to sit behind Itos’ bench.

Is it because he knew Itos and I aren’t really what you can call okay?

Does he want me to make that choice?

I sighed heavily. I threw the other envelope into the shredder, ticket and all.

“I wasn’t sure you’re coming.”

I gave Itos a smile. I could remember the look that registered on his face when his team entered the court for the warm-ups, and he saw me, waving his team’s banner, behind his bench. He looked... relieved.

“Why?” I asked, and he placed an arm around my waist. We were at the South Gate, and I saw Darren pop from his team’s dugouts. “Well, I figured you’ll sit at Darren’s,” he replied, shrugging.

“Look, Darren is my best friend. And we nearly had a kid. Face it: he’s a huge part of my life, no matter how much we want to flip the world so that he won’t be. He’s my business partner, and he still exists in my world as my best friend,” I began to say, looking deeply into his eyes so that he could fully understand me. “You, Itos, are my future, my present, my everything.”

Itos stared at me, and then nodded slowly. “He sent me a ticket, too, but I shredded it. I wanted to be on your side,” I told him as Darren approached me and Itos. I felt Itos stiffen, and I couldn’t blame him. I’m thinking he’s imagining me and Darren tossing the sheets.

It’s not his fault he’s thinking that way.

“Nice game,” Darren said conversationally to Itos after giving me a curt nod. *Nice* was an understatement—Itos had a triple-double: 20 points, 10 rebounds, and 10 assists. It was a great game, especially since Itos’ team walloped Darren’s in the end game.

“Thanks,” Itos said, albeit coldly. I just grinned.

“You guys have to get along if you both want to be in my life,” I told them, and Darren rolled his eyes. “You do know that your girlfriend’s stubborn?” he said to Itos, and Itos chuckled. “Yup. Knew that from Day One,” he chimed in.

Darren looked at me, and then at Itos. He patted Itos on the arm. “Don’t ever let her go, okay? Take care of her. You don’t have any idea how lucky you are that she’s with you,” he said, and Itos nodded. Darren gave me a peck on the cheek before leaving. I started to walk and Itos followed, and we were both silent.

“Did he just tell me what I think he did?” Itos asked me when he was opening the door of the car for me. I looked at him and nodded. “He told you that he’s hoping you didn’t sell the house yet, because there’s a very good chance a family’s going to live in it,” I replied, and Itos smiled at me. He kissed me—I forgot how much I missed him and all of him—and when he released me, I told him how much I loved him.

The next day, all my things have been packed.

Cirque was rocking.

The center tables were pushed to the sides to pave way to a grand dance floor at the center. Darren had a friend who was a DJ, and he was in charge of rocking the place as the place was jam-packed with our ‘diverse’ crowd. Itos was behind me, arms around my waist, swaying with me in the beat. On the other side of the floor I can see Darren, doing a rocking thing of his own, with a grumpy-looking Kim standing next to him.

I am assuming they are having a fight. Dave told me it’s getting frequent, and I have to talk to Darren before I leave about it.

LEAVE.

Ha. Ha. Something Itos doesn’t agree with.

He couldn’t get it that I am going out of the country for the next two weeks because of my job and a business conference just when I had settled in our house (that is now furnished—you couldn’t imagine how nice it was to do furniture shopping with Itos—we’re like kids—and it’s not like the house didn’t have three rooms. Itos wanted to buy stuff for a *nursery* already, for heaven’s sake.). We were having a blast playing husband and wife. Itos was spoiling me to bits, and I am seriously going to miss him the entire time I’ll be away from him.

“Good evening guys. Can I just ask my dear best friend and business partner, Bree, to come up here to the stage with me?”

I was startled when I heard Darren’s voice over the speakers. The music slowed to a stop, and everyone turned to the stage. “If only her boyfriend would disentangle himself from her,” he added, teasing, and the crowd laughed. Itos removed his hug around me and held my hand as we walked towards the stage. I took the other microphone that Dave offered me.

Darren gave me a smile. “So I would like to thank everyone for coming over here at *Cirque* and celebrating the seven fantastic years with us. We look forward to more years with everyone,” he began

to say, and I winked at him. “Also, thank you—to my friends and colleagues who are in the crowd—who came to my send-off party,” I chimed in. A look of shock came across Darren’s face.

Maybe I have neglected telling him about my two-week trip.

“Whoops. Evidently I haven’t told my business partner that he’d have to man *Cirque I* and *II* for a couple of weeks as I am away on my business trip—a work-related one that is not related to *Cirque*,” I quipped, a wide smile on my face. Darren didn’t like it that he didn’t know, and he gave me a dark look. “Anyhoo,” I said, turning to the people in the audience, “as Darren here said, thank you for celebrating a wonderful seven years with us. We—along with the *Cirque* staff—are looking to seventy times seven times seven years more of this gorgeous business.”

A thunderous applause was how the audience responded, and I took the opportunity—a.k.a. Darren’s silence—to speak once more. “Thank you to Kim and Zania, for inspiring Darren in more ways than one. To my, hmm, Itos—” again, I couldn’t find a nice term for Itos—“I’m sorry I have to leave, but you have to know you’re in my thoughts all the time. To the *Cirque* staff, cheers to us. Keep up the good work!”

Another applause, and I had to shout over the blaring music: “Drinks on the house—except for minors!”

I was about to go down the stage when Darren, who decided to de-statue himself, stopped me by the arm. “You’re leaving?” he asked, sounding too accusing, and I nodded. “Hey, it’s not like I’ll never come back. You’re like Itos. Why are you both overreacting to this trip?” I asked back.

“Coz it’s the first time you’re going to be away from me and from him in such a long time?” Darren said sarcastically.

“We didn’t talk for two years after my miscarriage, remember?” I said pointedly. I saw Itos making his way up the stage, a frown on his face, wondering why Darren is almost manhandling me—his hands were tight against my shoulders. “That’s different. You are going where, exactly? When we didn’t talk, you were still around me,” he argued. I rolled my eyes.

“You have to let me go sometime, you know that, right?” I said hotly. He looked at me, into my eyes, and then nodded slowly. Itos had already popped to my side and he cleared his throat. Darren released me from his grip. “Look, she’s leaving whether we like it or not. She won’t hear any of my arguments—what makes you think she’ll listen to yours?” Itos said, and Darren ignored him.

“I don’t understand why you still have to work when you’ve got *Cirque*,” he told me, his voice in sheer frustration. I gave him a smile as I reached down to Itos’ hand and threaded his fingers with mine. “Well, this isn’t my dream, is it?” I asked him, and Darren made a sound halfway between a grunt and a groan.

“Shut it,” Itos said loudly just as Darren was about to say something more. Itos pulled me away from my best friend and placed me in a one-arm embrace. He kissed me on the hair. “Darren has a point, actually. Why work in a nine-to-five job when you have two upbeat and earning restos?” he whispered.

I just stayed silent.

“Yeah. I don’t want you to leave me—even if it’s just for two weeks,” he said with a heavy sigh. I turned my head and pressed my lips to his cheek, and he held my chin so that our lips will meet.

I wish I had cherished Itos more.

Itos pulled me closer to him, his hands going up my back, creeping slowly. I closed my eyes and let his touch warm my body. He hugged me from behind, his arms draped over my shoulders, his lips at the hollow of my throat. “Uh huh. Yeah, I figured out you don’t want me to leave,” I teased, my voice

unstable. A fire is starting to burn inside of me, and I seriously wanted to burn in this kind of fire. I had just gotten home from the anniversary party, and it's halfway past three in the morning. Itos had to leave ahead of me—as did Darren—for they have early basketball practice next morning.

“Hmm,” he murmured, making tiny kisses up my neck and to my ear. His hands crept up my neck and caressed me there, and I unconsciously let out a moan. He twirled me to face him, and I searched blindly for his lips, but he avoided me. He placed a forefinger on my lips and gave me a teasing smile. My breathing was starting to be ever so ragged.

“Oh, so no kisses?” I complained, and he laughed, his breath warm on my face. My hands went up to inside his shirt, touching whatever skin I can, warming his body as he done to mine just by sheer kissing me. “On the lips,” he concurred, and I groaned. He lifted both my arms and removed my shirt, and I did the same to him. He hugged me, held me across his chest for a moment, our naked upper bodies touching in the silence, our hearts beating as one. He kissed my hair and forehead, and then reached out behind me to unfasten my bra. He lifted me up as I am not weighing much at all, and I jackknifed my legs around his waist. His mouth went down to kiss one nipple, and my hands tangled with his hair in high hopes he wouldn't stop what he is doing. He sucked, nibbled, and kissed, and gave the other a fair treatment, and I shivered, hovering over the golden edge without even minding if Itos was anywhere near there.

Itos stopped. To my horror, he stopped. Before I could even complain, he started to walk—with me on him—to 'our' room. I aimed to kiss him again, but he ducked once more, and he nibbled on my ear. “I told you, no kisses on the lips,” he whispered hoarsely, his big hands on my back, nuzzling the flesh there. I rolled my eyes. “You suddenly develop an aversion to kissing on the lips and you punish me for it,” I whispered angrily, and before I knew it, Itos laid me on the bed with a soft thump.

It appeared he won't be speaking, and he concentrated on removing my slacks, button per button, and slid them off, his hands touching my skin in the process, and I just moaned in the fire that burned. He parted my thighs and I frowned. I looked down on him and he was trailing kisses from my ankle up to my inner thigh, stopping only when I gasped. “Itos...” I breathed, my voice wavering. I couldn't handle it.

I reached down and pulled him to me. “Do it. Now. Please,” I said, desperation so evident in my voice. He shook his head. “Later,” he whispered, and in my irritation, I closed my thighs. He laughed, and I was muttering that he was killing my buzz. I took the pillow from the bed and crawled up, ready to sleep, irritated that I didn't even get to where I should have been headed. He pulled me back down to the edge of the bed by the ankles, and lifted me, kissing me—this time on the lips. I didn't get any air, I tell you, and he was kissing me with so much enthusiasm that I went dizzy—just like the first time he and I kissed. His tongue delved into every depths of my mouth, and I knew he tasted the pizza I had for dinner, and the beer.

Itos finally let me go, and as I was breathing heavily, he whispered, “You drank and *drove*?” I shrugged. “I sipped beer. Swear,” I said, crossing my finger over my naked chest, making an X mark. He looked at me with disapproval on his face, and he parted my thighs once more. “Babe, you deserve punishment,” he said, his voice filled with warning. I giggled like a teenager. His hand was already threading the tiny piece of cloth that served as a barrier, and he pulled it down with a swift move—so swift that the fabric tore. He undid his pants and removed them, and I saw what the romance pocketbooks called as his “manhood,” ever so ready for me.

“And if the punishment is you in me,” I began to say, pulling him back down on me, “then I'd gladly take it. No matter how many times, your honor.” He rolled his eyes, and without any warning, he entered me, and I clutched onto his shoulders, meeting his thrust. I arched my body to fully welcome him, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head for a split second when he exploded in me. When I opened my eyes, he was gazing at me lovingly.

“I want you, so badly, Bree,” he said huskily, and I nodded. He was still inside me, and I moved closer, rubbing my hips against his. “I love you,” I whispered, and his lips went down on mine once more. We kissed for a while, and then he pulled out of me—much to my disappointment. He lifted me and fixed me on the bed so that he and I were lying side by side across the bed, and I turned to hug him. He looked down on me. “I don’t want you to leave,” he whispered, and I nodded.

“We also talked about that. I have to do this.”

Itos kissed me on the forehead. “Yes, babe, I know that, too.” I gazed into his eyes and I saw the sadness in them, and I touched his face, his cheek, his eyes, his nose, and his lips, memorizing every curve, dimple, and mole. His fingers went up my face as well, and he started with the mole on my nose, tracing the path to the other mole on my left ear, then on the one on my neck...

“Feels like connect the dots, Bree,” he said after a few minutes, when he had already traced the moles up to my back. He had turned me so that he can continue whatever he was doing, and he was at that mole at the small of my back. I knew I had a lot of moles, but only Itos took time at marveling at how many they were. I was feeling a bit ticklish, and the smile never left my face.

“Send-off sex?” I murmured into his chest after he and I made love for a couple more times. I didn’t know what time it was, and I probably didn’t care. “Nah,” he said, and pulling me closer and covering our bodies with the blanket. “What if I just wanted to make love to you?”

I smiled. “Well, I don’t mind.”

“I knew you wouldn’t,” he teased, his hands tangled once more in my long tresses. I yawned and he started to hum, and I cuddled closer.

I never knew that that was the last time I would ever make love to Itos.

Chapter Seven: Dead Ball

“The ball becomes **dead** when:

- Any field goal or free throw is made.
- Any official blows his whistle while the ball is alive.
- It is apparent that the ball will not enter the basket on a free throw which is to be followed by:
 - Another free throw(s).
 - A further penalty (free throw(s) and/or throw-in).
- The game clock signal sounds for the end of the period.
- The twenty-four second device signal sounds while a team is in control of the ball.
- The ball which is in flight or a shot for a field goal is touched by a player from either team after:
 - An official blows his whistle.
 - The game clock signal sounds for the end of the period.
 - The twenty-four second device signal sounds.”

- Article 10, Section 3
FIBA Official Rule Book 2008

I had just turned on my cell phone from as soon as the pilot told us that we can, and messages came in, one after the other. My trusty phone listed the messages as coming from one person: Darren. I frowned. He knew what time my plane was landing—he and Itos. Itos is supposed to pick me up, and Darren, well, is Darren. No changing that.

Call me up ASAP. As soon as your plane lands. Whichever comes first.

I nearly smiled. As Soon As your Plane lands. If it was a normal day, I would have smiled, but I knew something's off.

I pressed speed dial 3—he had always been 3—and he picked up on the first ring. “Be at the St. Luke’s. I’ll meet you at the lobby,” was his greeting. His voice was so hollow that I could drown in it if it was a swimming pool or a dark lake.

“Darren? What’s so frigging wrong?” I asked, and he was silent for a few seconds.

“It’s Itos,” he said, and that was all he needed to say. I was hailing for a taxi ten seconds later, luggage forgotten.

“What happened? Where’s Itos?” I asked as soon as Darren rushed to me. He was sweaty and his face was all... wrong. Like something hellish had happened. That face reminded me of what his face was when I told him our baby died.

And that wasn’t good.

“He’s in the operating room,” Darren said, and he quickly hugged me. I felt like he was afraid that I was going to break down from whatever he has to tell me. I didn’t move. “What happened?” I asked again, my voice hard.

“He was on his way to pick you up, but he stopped by a shop to buy you flowers,” Darren began to explain, his voice calm. “He was about to enter the car when a freak accident happened. A truck that lost its brakes rammed into another car that was approaching, and that car careened into Itos’ car.”

“His car?” I choked. I felt Darren swallow. “Into Itos,” he said sullenly.

My world stopped at that statement. “No,” I said, my voice weak. Darren was right in holding me, because at that moment my knees buckled and gave in. He lifted me and placed me on the couch near us, and placed an arm over my shoulder.

“He’ll be fine, Bree,” he whispered, and I shook my head.

“Tell me the truth. How is he?”

Darren sighed heavily. I couldn’t cry. I was just numb. “He’s...” Darren’s voice trailed. He couldn’t say it.

“He’s dying?” I braved, and he shook his head. “He’s in a critical condition,” he allowed. I closed my eyes, feeling a bit frustrated. “Is he going to make it?” I asked, and the look on Darren’s face gave it away.

I removed myself from his arms. “What O.R. is he in?” I asked, and he gave me the number. I walked to the O.R., feeling dazed and numb, and much like a zombie.

This is not the Itos I had envisioned myself coming home to: stuck to a heart monitor, a breathing machine, a dialysis machine, and some other tens of machines I don’t know the names of. The light *drip, drip* of the IV and the blood that I had donated for him wasn’t helping, and the constant *toot, toot* of the heart machine gives me creeps. His face was heavily bandaged, his body bruised all over, and a cast was around his right leg and right arm. I would have imagined coming home and being wrapped in his arms—not watching him, lifeless, inside the intensive care unit, in a coma. The doctor

told me that the impact had crushed his rib cage, and almost the entire right side of his body, and had severely affected his kidneys and his lungs.

And he was ever so blunt when he told me that Itos only has 30% chance of surviving this.

Darren watched me as I stared at Itos—my Itos—my face and eyes dry. I hadn't shed a tear ever since he had told me the news, and after the doctor gave me the percentage of my boyfriend's—now fiancé's— life. I closed my eyes. This should be a very horrid nightmare. I need to wake up from this.

“You have to rest, Bree,” Darren said, breaking the silence. I shook my head. “No, I'm staying here until Itos wakes up,” I replied, my voice final. He didn't reply, but the look on his face told me that he thinks Itos won't ever wake up—just like what the doctor said.

“He's not going to die,” I blurted out, angry. “He isn't, you hear me?”

Darren pocketed both his hands and nodded. “Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked, and I nodded. “My bags. Still in the airport. Bring any identification of mine that you can. I'll call ahead,” I said, and he nodded. He gave me a peck on the cheek after he grabbed my trusty planner from my shoulder bag, which contained my passport and every other identification papers that I have. “I'm here, okay?” he whispered, and I nodded. He kissed me on the forehead.

“Darren?” I called out just as he was about to exit the room. He turned to me. “How come you knew about Itos?” I asked, and his face changed.

It was a look of... sheer pain.

“Before you left, at *Cirque's* anniversary party, he asked me if... if he asks your hand in marriage, if I would allow it,” Darren began slowly. “And I... I said it was okay. We were planning a grand... marriage proposal... he wanted to know my opinion because he knew I know you best.”

I stayed silent.

“He called me up when he was at the flower shop. We were talking when... it happened. I heard the entire thing,” he said sullenly.

As soon as Darren left and the door closed, I broke down.

It was my twelfth day of waiting. Itos isn't making any headway, or showing any signs of springing back to life.

He isn't showing any signs that he'll squeeze back on my hand whenever I hold it, or he'll give me the tiniest of smiles when I tell him how much I love him.

The parents of Itos had called on different occasions, checking on Itos through me. His mom was the one who was dead worried—she had wanted to fly here but every other single flight has been booked.

She's coming in a week.

Itos' dad, however, was another case. He called up to tell me he'd pay for the hospital bill, and that's it. Zilch. He's footing the hospital bill. That doesn't really tell me he has affections for his son.

I hated his dad for that.

Darren was here in the hospital again with me, and he brought me my favorite pasta to sort of make me feel happy. He narrated what has been going on in *Cirque* while I nodded, pretending I was really

listening. And then he fell silent. He walked towards me, sat on the chair to my right, and placed my hand in his.

My little comfort.

“Itos proposed to me, did you know that? Despite the grand proposal that you guys were planning,” I said after a while, gazing into Itos’ closed eyes, the only ones peeking through the bandage. A sad crooked smile was on my face. “He asked me before I left. At the airport. He asked me if I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. And I said yes. I said yes, I’d be happy to be his wife and spend my living days with him. He told me he loves me forever, and I said I love him.” Tears started to flow from my eyes—tears that I had stopped in the past twelve days after breaking down.

I didn’t wipe them away.

“And then he called me just before the pilot told us to shut off our phones. He said he loves me, and I’m the only one he’ll ever love.” My voice broke, remembering how Itos sounded so happy in that phone call.

“If I knew that... that was the last conversation I’ll be having with him, then maybe I should have told him that I love him more than I had ever showed him. That I love him more than he thinks I do. That I wanted to marry him and have his kids and grow old with him in that porch in that house that he had built for me. That...” Darren gave my hand a squeeze.

I leaned in on Itos’ bed and held his hand, held onto that tiny little portion that wasn’t bruised or bandaged. “You still owe me the ring, Itos. You promised me a diamond and amethyst ring, remember? Now wake your gorgeous butt now, because I’m planning a huge and grand wedding for us. Please, wake up...”

Darren hugged me from behind, and I twisted and turned until I was able to sob in his arms. “It’s not right. He has to wake up,” I said absently into Darren’s chest. “He has to wake up, Darren. Make him wake up. Please.... I don’t care if I have to take care of him, if he’s invalid or something, he just has to wake up. I want to hear his voice, feel his hug, have him kiss me.... Itos has to wake up. He has to live. *For me.*”

There was a light knock on the door, and I divested myself from Darren’s arms, wiping my tears from the tissue he had handed me. The nurse entered, and she was carrying a small packet. She handed it to me.

“These were Mr. Hizon’s belongings, the day we admitted him,” she explained. I nodded, numb. I tried to ignore her usage of the past tense—“were”—and blocked it out of my mind. As she went to check on some of the machines stuck into Itos, noting something in his medical charts, I heard Darren ask her something along the lines of “it took you twelve days to give us his belongings?” I didn’t hear the nurse’s answer, and she did an exit. “I can’t believe it. Red tape crap,” I heard Darren mumble. I sat on the chair next to the bed again, breathing a bit heavily. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to see what Itos has in his pockets the day he was wrecked.

Darren sat beside me, silent. He watched me as I zipped open the packet, and I let the things inside it fall into my lap: Itos’ black leather wallet, his mobile phone, his car keys and house keys (his, mine, and *our* house keys), and a small black trinket. I couldn’t breathe. I knew what the trinket contains.

I turned my attention to less... life-shattering things (or so I think). I opened his wallet, and a snapshot of me and him was smiling at me from the inside. We looked so happy, and so perfect. So alive. I took out the pictures from behind that one and saw other pictures of me and him, taken at various times. He always loved taking our pictures together, and he abuses the four megapixel camera of his phone whenever he feels like it. Other pictures included his parents and siblings, another family picture, and his picture with my own family.

I wiped my tears. The calling card that I gave him the day we first met was still there, along with a bunch of his credit cards that he rarely uses. I counted the bills in the slots—always, always totaling to five thousand. I had always forgotten to ask him why it's always five thousand in different denominations.

I closed the wallet and pocketed it. I looked at the keys, and sorted them out: one key was for his condo, the other was mine's, and the others were for our new house. I remember laughing when he gave me my key duplicates to our new house—the house he had built even before he proposed. We had been living in it for the past couple of months and having fun. Itos had broached the idea of marriage for quite some time now. I asked him if he's foreseeing I'm saying yes to his proposal if he does it any time soon, and he said, "Well, I know you love me enough to say yes and spare me the misery." I kissed him, told him that I love him more than anything.

I smiled sadly. He and I have been together for a year but it all seems like we've been together longer than Darren and I have ever been friends. Itos told me in confidence that he had the building of the house start the moment he saw me. He knew I was the one: that one woman who'll be his wife, the mother of his kids, and his better half. He *knew*.

I saved his mobile phone for later, and swallowed that now present lump in my throat as I picked up the trinket. I exhaled loudly. "God," I breathed, and I popped the trinket open. Inside was a stunning diamond and amethyst ring—a diamond flanked by a couple of tiny amethyst stones on either side. Amethyst because I was born in February, and he was straddling February and March for his birthday (He was born February 29th). It was his promise, right here, and he had it in his pocket the day he was supposed to pick me up from the airport. *My ring*.

My engagement ring.

I sobbed harder. Darren knew that going anywhere near me now will just cause my sobbing to escalate so he stayed put, his arms crossed, watching me, pity and pain on his face. I shook the packet some more and a silver bracelet fell into my palm. The bracelet that I gave him in our first month together, the one I had engraved with his name. For someone who had gone through tens of relationships, I was (unbelievably) shy when I gave him the bracelet. I even joked about it. I said, "Well, here's me, marking you. You're mine." He gave me a mysterious smile, and he whispered, "I don't mind being owned. That is, if it's you who owns me and my heart."

Yeah. Itos could be cheesy at times.

I leaned back and breathed deeply, closing my eyes, letting the last of my tears fall. I have to be strong. *I have to be*.

I wore the bracelet on my right wrist and slid the ring on my finger. I marveled at how it was a perfect fit, and I smiled when I remembered Itos telling me that he had my finger sized. When I asked how, he just said, "Maybe when you were asleep."

Maybe I should stop feeling miserable.

When I opened my eyes, Darren was frowning. "Why?" I asked, and he shrugged. "I felt like I was flipping through the pages of a book or something. You were crying, and then a smile will brighten up your face, and then you'll cry again," he explained, his voice light.

"I'm just trying to think of the nice memories Itos gave me. He loved me to bits, you know?" I said, a small smile on my face. I placed the other things in the packet and slid it into my bag. He opened his arms, enveloping me in another warm embrace. "He'll be okay, Bree," he whispered.

I clung onto his words like my life depended on it.

Itos had to be okay.

Chapter Eight: End of Period

- a) "Each period ends when time expires.
Exceptions:
- 1) If a live ball is in flight towards the basket, the period ends when the goal is made, missed or touched by an offensive player.
 - 2) If the official's whistle sounds prior to the horn or :00.0 on the clock, the period is not over and time must be added to the clock.
 - 3) If a live ball is in flight towards the basket when the horn sounds ending a period, and it subsequently is touched by: (a) a defensive player, the goal if successful, shall count; or (b) an offensive player, the period has ended.
 - 4) If a timeout request is made at approximately the instant time expires for a period, the period ends and the timeout shall not be granted.
 - 5) If there is a foul called on or by a player in the act of shooting the period will end after the foul is penalized.
- b) If the ball is dead and the game clock shows :00.0, the period has ended even though the horn may not have sounded."

- Rule No. 5, Sections IIIa & IIIb
NBA Official Rule Book 2005-2006

"Itos asked me a few weeks ago if I could come here in around six months. He says he's marrying the woman of his dreams—the one he would love for the rest of his life—and I absolutely have to meet you."

I looked at Charlene, Itos' mother, and didn't know exactly how to react. She was seated at the foot of Itos' bed. She had arrived three days ago, but still Itos hadn't progressed.

It's been twenty days.

"I have never heard my son so happy, Bree. He loves you very much. I have never heard him like that ever since his dad and I got a divorce. That surely crushed him. It took me and Armand a while to convince that the divorce wasn't his fault," Charlene continued. Armand, from what I learned in our days watching over Itos, is her second husband. "He wanted me to meet you so badly because he wanted me to help you in the wedding preparations," Charlene added thoughtfully. I squeezed Itos' hand in mine, hoping he'll respond. Still nothing. I choked back a sob. Itos had already told almost everybody he wanted to marry me—or we are getting married, since he seems ever so sure that I'd say yes if he proposes (and he did, and I did say yes). Like the house that he had built the moment he and I met, he is planning on a wedding even before the actual "formal" marriage proposal happened.

He loved me so greatly.

"Thank you for making him happy, Bree."

I was about to retort when the door opened and it produced Darren, carrying a Barbie bag—pink—in his arm. The bag reminded me of Zania, and I silently wondered if he took Zania here. Zania had, after all, met Itos, and the kid had vouched for the guy. Itos liked Zania to bits as well.

Darren gave Charlene a curt nod to acknowledge her, and walked over to me, kissing me on the forehead. "Anything?" he asked, and again I shook my head. I pointed to the bag and he slapped his forehead with his palm, a smile tugging the corners of his lips. "I picked up Zania from school and took her home. I forgot that I still have the bag with me," he explained, and—for the first time in twenty days—I laughed.

And then I wish I didn't.

My laughter was just subsiding when Itos gasped, his eyes flying open—those green swirls gazing at me in panic for a split second—and then closing once more, then the heart monitors connected to his chest spewed out a flat line and wailed a continuous and heart-breaking *TOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOT*.

“Itos, NO!!!!!!!!!!”

I stood up, but Darren was quicker than I was. He slammed his fist onto the nurses’ station button and pulled me away from Itos’ bed in a vice-like grip, hugging me around the waist. I didn’t have the strength to fight against Darren, so I... stayed silent. I couldn’t react—*Itos wasn’t breathing, he isn’t breathing AT ALL*. I didn’t know where Charlene was—she wasn’t there at the foot of Itos’ bed.

THIS IS NOT HAPPENING.

The doctors and nurses arrived—Charlene following them closely behind (I later learned she rushed outside to get help)—with that machine that jerks people back to life in movies. I watched, dazed, tears in my eyes, as they charged the machine and then placed the paddles on Itos’ bandaged chest.

I didn’t know how long they had tried to revive Itos for I was already on the floor. All my strength was gone, and even Darren’s arms around me couldn’t hold the million pieces that exploded as the monitors that flat-lined were shut off and Itos was covered with that white sheet. Charlene was bawling at one corner of the room, hugging herself, as the doctor pronounced the time of death and said his insincere apologies.

My cry of despair got stuck in my throat. I watched as his mom crawled towards Itos’ bed, hugging his now lifeless body. Darren was whispering my name over and over, trying to placate me. I didn’t realize I was trying to restrain against his hold around my body, my silent cries more painful than I could actually feel.

ITOS IS DEAD.

And he took my life with him too.

“You have to eat, Bree.”

I shook my head as Kim tried to coax into sipping soup for the nth time. It was Day Three of Itos’ funeral, and even though I was against it, it will go on for a week until Itos’ dad arrives.

Kim sat beside me. “Bree, I know it’s hard, but don’t you think Itos wouldn’t want you to stop existing just because he’s gone?” she said, and I glared at her.

“Let’s see, Kim. After you told me to get the hell out of Darren’s life, Itos was the only person I had left. And now, he’s...” My lips quivered and I couldn’t finish my sentence.

“Darren’s back in your life, isn’t he? And your *not* eating is making him worry,” Kim argued. *Ah*. I thought she finally developed a liking for me, but apparently she just wants me to eat because it’s depressing her hubby that I am not eating.

I stood up and walked away from Kim before I could say something I might regret and found myself in the backroom where food for the many people who are visiting and giving their condolences are being prepared. Itos had touched a lot of lives, and he had a lot of fans. These people wanted to see him, their one last look at his handsome face that still had cuts from the accident.

I haven’t even looked—or been near his casket—ever since the funeral started.

I turned, and the moment I caught a whiff of the coffee, nausea hit.

Darren caught me as I toppled back.

“Kim told you to eat, right?” he asked angrily. I nodded, and he took a biscuit off one of the trays and placed it in my open mouth. I ate, although in all seriousness I wanted to spit it out.

“I am still here, Bree. The world’s not stopping even with Itos gone,” he whispered as he helped me to another biscuit. I feel vomit in my throat—it’s the darn coffee—but I swallowed the biscuit still. His arms were all around me, but I wanted Itos’ arms, not Darren’s.

“I love you. Your parents love you. Charlene loves you. You’ve got more than enough reasons to live, Bree,” he whispered. He offered me another biscuit, but I ruined the moment: I threw up.

It wasn’t the food.

It was the coffee.

And I knew that was a bad sign since I’ve only had an aversion to coffee *once* before.

The last time I had that bad thing about coffee was when I was...

Oh.

I breathed deeply and composed myself. This was one of those tough days, so I had to soldier through it. I was called to the podium, and I saw the rows and rows of people whose lives Itos has touched in one way or another—his former and current teammates, his coaches from way back and in college, his friends, his family and mine, a few colleagues in the PBA and in PBL that he had, Darren and his complete team, my basketball player friends and my friends, the kids from the orphanage that Itos helps every month. The staff at the restaurant Itos owns (Yes, he had built the restaurant he wanted the first time out, and he named it *Solace*. I have yet to see the place.) My heart swelled with the pain that these people, like me, had lost Itos.

It was unfair.

“I look at you, and I know that Itos had done so many good things in his life,” I began, and I took another deep breath before continuing. “Itos and I had a wonderful year together. It was something that I wouldn’t take back ever. It was the best year of my life, for I have met the most wonderful person who made me see all the good things in life. That life isn’t always about the shit and the bad, that life is good. That even in the crappiest situations, something good is out there that needs to be revealed. That year with Itos... was more than I could have asked for. I’ve had someone who was my friend, my lover, my partner, my better half, my significant other, and however else you want to call him. I had always told him that he was never just a boyfriend to me, that he was always someone great. Maybe it was the power and greatness of his love, you know? It was always pure and unselfish. Never too overbearing. How when he loves he gives it his all. So sweet. That he sees your faults and loves you for it, and even more when you correct those faults. I had never ever been loved the way Itos loved me, and I wish I did deserve that kind of love, and that I was able to reciprocate how much love Itos gave me.

During one of the nights when Itos and I would just stay silent, hand in hand, he asked me how I wanted my funeral to be. He and I have those nights when we’d ask each other silly questions and we’ll both answer no matter how strange the question might be. So he asked me if I wanted my funeral to be so serene that no one will be able to crack a smile, or just some funeral where there are people and coffee. I told him I am not thinking about it since I knew I can count on him to fix me a decent funeral. He smiled at me—remember that crooked little smile he gives people when he’s being thoughtful or that half-smile that tells you he’s being smug?” (Most of the people in the pews nodded)—“and then told me that I gave the right answer. He said he’d rather that I’d die first and that he’ll be the one in

misery because he lost me, and not the other way around. He didn't want me to experience the life without him. He said... life won't be easier if I wasn't around, but he knows I'll be somewhere, everywhere, watching over him.

I was thinking it was ironic that he died ahead of all of us. I felt cheated. The moment I saw Itos and his life leave, I felt betrayed. Like everything in me was snuffed out. I wanted to get mad coz he promised he'd stay with me. That he'll be here. That I'll be the one who'll die first, not him. But then again, there's always a reason why—behind everything. That there could just be some strange reason why I am here and he's not. And true enough, I... found out about it a couple of days ago." I paused and wiped my tears with the back of my palm. I smiled sadly.

"Itos isn't really capable of doing one thing. Yeah, I know it's impossible. Itos was so young, so good, so nice, so handsome, so talented, so everything that we all thought he can do everything, right?" I asked, and I saw a few nods from the audience. "One thing he can't do is bear a child, since he's not biologically made up to do so," I continued, my smile widening when I saw Charlene's gaped mouth, Darren's and my parents' bewildered expressions, and the shocked looks on the other people's faces.

"Yes, believe it or not, Itos left us something—or someone—to remember him by," I said, my voice cracking in the end. I felt for my tummy, and smiled through my new wave of tears. "Itos, you probably knew about this way, way, way ahead of me. Thank you for leaving me with a little angel. I promise to take care of this angel and to love him the way you loved me. Carlitos, I love you forever. Thank you for being the person that you are to me. I love you," I finished. Darren stood up and helped me down the podium and then we walked back to my seat.

I cherished the last time I saw Itos' face: the moment they closed his casket.

"Why didn't you tell me about your being pregnant?"

I gave Darren a glare, and sighed exasperatedly. He had just taken me home—by home I meant the one Itos had built for me and him, after all I had let go of my condo unit when he asked me to move in—and I was tired beyond words, both physically and emotionally. All I wanted to do is to feed myself—because I had to, not because I want to—and sleep.

"Because I just found out about it a couple of days ago," I said, flopping onto the couch. I wondered why Kim isn't really keen on taking Darren off my shoulders as of this moment. "And I am not supposed to tell you everything, should I?" I added pointedly. He shook his head.

"What do you plan to do then?" he asked, taking another course of action. I shrugged. "I'm sure that I'm keeping the baby. What I am not quite sure is how I'll live, or if I'll be keeping this house, or if..." My voice trailed. I could feel another wave of tears about to explode from inside me. I stopped myself just in time.

"You should keep the house. It's Itos' other living memory," Darren said, and he sat next to me on the couch. "And I talked to Charlene. She said she wants you have Itos' share at *Solace*, and this house, plus whatever Itos had left. All she wants if for you to give her access to her grandchild," he continued when I didn't say anything.

"Silly Charlene. Of course I'll let her know my child!" I said, a weary smile crossing my face. I leaned my head against the couch's headrest and closed my eyes. I felt Darren reach down to my hands, and he kept them in between his.

"So it's just you now," he said, and I nodded. "You'll be here for me, and I know that," I whispered, and he kissed my hand in response. "But for now, I think you should go home to your wife and kid, Darren. They need you more than I do," I said, and he sighed heavily. "Don't worry. I'll be fine," I said to placate him.

“Call me, okay?”

“Yes.”

“I love you.”

“I love you back.”

“Still in another lifetime?”

“Yes, Darren. Still in another lifetime.”

He kissed me on the forehead and I heard him close the door behind him.

I now have the loneliest three-bedroom two-storey house in the world, with Itos marking every wall, every room, every bed sheet, every chair, and every nail that was used to build the house.

Epilogue: Basketball Game

“Basketball is played by two (2) teams of five (5) players each. The aim of each team is to score in the opponents’ basket and to prevent the other team from scoring.

The game is controlled by officials, table officials and a commissioner, if present.”

- Article 1, Section 1.1
FIBA Official Rule Book 2008

“Mommy! Christoff pulled my hair again!”

A tiny pair of arms wrapped around my waist, and I just let out a happy but exasperated sigh. Another pair of feet thundered down the stairs, and then a voice said, “No, Mom. I didn’t!”

I smiled and dropped down to the level of my children, now four. Christoff and Coraline, who are fraternal twins, are the angels that Itos had left me. I smiled every time I remember that I told him once I wanted just two kids—a boy and a girl. Wish granted.

“Christoff, did you pull your sister’s hair?” I asked patiently, and the same pout that reminded me so much of Itos appeared in my little boy’s face. “She pinched me, so I pulled her hair,” he explained, pointing a finger at his sister, who was younger by him by ten minutes.

“He was getting my toy!” Coraline said, pouting. The pout, Darren said, reminded him of me when I don’t get what I want. “No, I wasn’t!” Christoff argued, and I had to play referee again to their bickering.

“Why not share?” I said, and Coraline looked at me, and then at the pictures I have on the table. “Oh, it’s Daddy!” she squealed, and she flopped onto one of the chairs. She took one of the pictures into her tiny little hands, and looked up at me, her green eyes—much like Itos’—glistening.

“Mommy, I wish Daddy’s here,” she said, and Christoff wrapped his arms around my neck, hugging me. “Me too,” he whispered.

“Well, he’s in heaven now, babies, and he’s watching over you both. So maybe he’ll like it if you guys stop fighting?” I said, and I felt Christoff nod, his chin tickling my shoulders.

“Sorry Mommy,” Coraline said, and she stepped down the chair. She hugged Christoff—also hugging me in the process—and I sighed.

“Mommy, when’s Unca Darren coming? Is he bringing Ate Zany?” asked Christoff when they both loosened their arms around me. We sat on the table, looking at the hundreds of pictures Itos left me. I didn’t know he had these many pictures until I recovered a box under the bed. I nearly grinned. Christoff couldn’t say *Zania*, so he calls Darren’s daughter Zany.

“Zania’s coming over this afternoon so she can play with you brats,” I replied, and Coraline squealed. “Yesss!” she said, punching her arm in the air.

“Unca Darren loves you, Momma.”

I turned to Christoff. He had always, always been so observant. I gave him a patient smile. “We grew up together, baby,” I explained, “and I love him, too.”

“That’s good, right?” he asked. “You love him and he loves you?”

I ruffled his hair, and that Itos pout flashed onto his face again. He hated when his hair gets messed up. “Yes, that’s good,” I answered. I kissed him on the forehead.

That’s good for now, I thought, as Coraline pushed a picture towards me, the one where Itos was kissing me on the cheek as he clicked the camera.