

CHAPTER 17: CRUISE BAE
(MARIAH'S VOICE/POV)

Seeing Madison walk into that restaurant was wild. I mean, I definitely wasn't expecting that, but more importantly I wasn't expecting myself not to get up and fight my way out of that booth. Kierra saved both of their lives that day, let me tell you that.

But seriously, it took me a while to get over the fact that not only had Alex tricked me, but he tricked me *with* his wife! I mean yeah, I probably would have never agreed to meet with them if he came to me and asked me politely. But I got good reason and you all know it! How would you feel if—you know what? I'm not even going to ask that question. It's not important now.

I got home with the baby, and I will admit I felt kind of...alone. I guess. Not dismissing Kierra or anything but slobbery baby lips and poopy diapers aren't the best company. No matter how much I love kissing her cheeks and making her give me those baby giggles, being with her versus being with adults is just different. My life had been pretty mundane since she was born. It was work—no traveling because I couldn't bring myself to do it—home, work, home. And Alex was the only shakeup to that monotony.

I missed having him around on the daily. We just vibe, you know? Even when we're not talking or goofing around, our quiet is comfort. When he leaves, I feel some type of way. Madison mentioned she panics when he's with me. Well, I feel used. It's weird, but true. It's not because he goes back to his wife and home...well, okay. Yes! It's because he goes back to his wife and home and it just all feels so icky!

I have been racking my brain trying to figure out why right after Alex and I both came after he seduced me—that's right, I said seduced me—I immediately felt this 'oh no' feeling come over me. Like it was over. It was all he wanted and I wanted more. He'd stay for as long as he could, but that night when Kierra was sick was the longest I was able to have him. Let's just say, things weren't fair.

When Madison gave me the paperwork and I started to look over the throuple stuff, the thing that caught my eye was the division of time. Because I damn for sure wasn't getting enough. And maybe that was my fault at first because I told Alex he and I were done, but once the gloves came off and he was digging all inside of me I started to feel some type of way! Can you blame me?

Of course he gets the sweet end of the deal. Two coochies, no fighting. Well, not on my end. After meeting with Madison, I think she knocks him upside his head when she's not telling him to go to hell. Ha ha! The girl is sweet, but she definitely don't sound like she plays around. I can respect that.

There's that word. Respect. It's what I desire; both to give and to receive. When she sat across from me and guided me through this whole throuple thing, I was surprisingly receptive. If it had just come from Alex, especially alone, I don't know. It all would have seemed suspect. But she...she made it feel like it was something nice.

Hell, maybe I was just excited to pack my damn bags and go on a free cruise! He didn't choose Carnival either, Alex sprung for the Princess experience and I'm all the way down for it. At this point, if I'm being honest with ya'll, I ain't got nothing to lose and maybe a whole new world to gain. Alex and I aren't just tied together through Kierra. We're a soul tie, two kindred spirits that should be together. But I realized when I saw Madison sitting next to him—holding my baby, mind you—I felt like I wasn't the only soul tie he had. I mean how could I expect him to just turn off a decade old marriage covenant? How could I think it was realistic that he was ever going to be over her?

Through our conversations when we were trying to build our relationship, he never disparaged her character. He just pointed out how deeply upset she'd get and how she sometimes had trouble communicating exactly what she felt, and so it came out as blind rage. But when things were good between them, they were all the way good. And when he told me she was what he prayed for as a young man, ya'll I basically tossed my hands up at the situation.

I realized this situation made me look at the complexities and the nuances in relationships. And that sometimes, especially when you're single for a long time, it's hard to understand how a relationship will bring out another side of you. A side you never thought to explore because your single ass didn't have to! It's easy to be on the outside looking in and say I'd never accept this and that, and that's what I had done my whole adult life.

Which is why when Kierra made her appearance, I was so hard on myself. Unnecessarily so. I had put these external expectations on my life, and allowed other rules—the rules of family and even the rules of total strangers I'd never meet—dictate the way I gave my love. But now, it was time to do something different, so that I could escape the wheel of insanity called “the norm”.

I'd been on cruises before, remember my mother is a cruise queen. But apparently this was Madison's first and she was super excited. After the awkward discussion at the restaurant she and I exchanged numbers so that we could coordinate the trip. We even planned to participate in the ship's white night. She thought it was corny at first, but I told her to trust me. She didn't want to miss out. The cruise was going to have a pajama party, a fancy captain's dinner, the whole nine. So, I had to school her on what to bring and what to expect.

The day came and I arrived to drop off my baby in exchange for Madison. It felt weird leaving with her and ya'll, that car ride was awkward as hell! She put on Christian music. I mean...what?!

It made me chuckle. She said she was nervous about the flight, and she was always afraid of being out in the middle of the ocean, so I could understand her wanting to call on Jesus. I even made it a little less awkward by joining in and singing with her for a little bit. I mean I may not be super religious, but I love me some Yolanda Adams too. So, we had a moment there. And on the plane she let her hair down a little with some rum and coke. She ordered me one, telling me I looked like I could use a drink too. This girl's got some balls. But she was right, I needed a drink because this whole situation had my panties in a bunch.

I was trying not to be awkward, but she was awkward, and the whole situation was awkward and it was just awkward! I don't know how else to put it. A few times during the flight to Orlando's port I envisioned myself kicking Alex in the pants, not knowing that years later I'd be thanking him for this moment.

We settled into our cabin and waited for the cruise to take off. I found myself feeling a little bit like a mommy guiding Madison through the onboarding process. She followed me like a puppy, and asked me a lot of questions. And after a while she started to feel like less of a nuisance and more like a travel buddy. Something I'd never had. Traveling with Janet and my mom was always a mess. It was always my mom's way or the highway. She organized everything, had an itinerary and if you weren't on her program you got yelled at. Which is why I stopped traveling with her years ago. And Janet was like a bump on a log. She took the passenger princess thing to an extreme. But here, I felt like my experience and know how was finally being recognized.

Alex had even sprung for a room with a balcony. I had to give him his props. I was feeling relaxed and into the moment as the ship took off, and things started to get awkward in a different way. Madison is a great roommate. She's neat, and doesn't take too long in the bathroom. But being with her in these close quarters was hard at first. I mean, she's more of a free bird. If you know what I mean? It didn't take long before I'd seen her titties. And don't get me wrong, I'm not a prude or anything, but I mean I just have never been the girl that did nudity with my gal friends. I don't know. I guess it's no big deal but, it was...hard not to look at her.

I could see why Alex held on to her. Not just because she caters to your every need, and once she gets to know you she even anticipates it, making life so much easier. But when she's naked and vulnerable she looks like she's just someone you can melt into. She asked me if her nudity made me uncomfortable, I lied and said no. It was uncomfortable, because I found myself admiring it.

Getting ready to go to the club on our first night was a turning point. Madison came out of the bathroom totally naked for the first time and I had to sort through what I was feeling. It definitely wasn't an attraction. *I'm straight as an arrow*, I thought to myself. But she has this presence that makes you want to admire her; the way you admire Michaelangelo's David. Nobody's standing in front of David getting all moist—I mean if you do then I ain't gonna kink shame—but this was more of an appreciation for the beauty of the human body. And I think I was comparing myself to her. Comparing our physical differences, and wondering what Alex felt when he was with me versus when he was with her. I had to shake that shit off. As he shimmied herself, sans underwear, into a tight black dress and all I could think was *Yolanda Adams who?! Ha!* I don't know what she was planning for the night with all that access under that dress.

"Can you zip me up?" She asked, and I didn't want to at first. This was the closest we had gotten so far. Even closer than sitting next to each other on the airplane. There's something about standing behind a person, the person in front is telling you they trust you. They're vulnerable, unable to see your intentions. I don't know if I was able to be trusted yet, and I know for damn

sure I wasn't about to turn my back to her, unless I was just asking to be placed in a chokehold. Madison stood, her hair moved out of the way, submitting to my will. I zipped her up slowly.

"I'm sorry." She said, and I stopped mid zip, halfway up the curve of her back.

"What?" I didn't think I'd heard her right.

"I said I'm sorry. I don't know if Alex told you this, he probably didn't knowing him, but I've known that he is in love with you for over a year. And when he let me know his feelings for you, I should have reached out. I definitely should have reached out when the baby was born. I should have..." She trailed off and turned to me. "I should have gotten to know you sooner, but I was stuck in my feelings."

Damn. That's the most honest thing I've ever heard from a woman. *What is she up to? Is she trying to make me put my guard down? Cause I will knuck if she bucks!* That's all I could wonder.

"Things were messy, but I hope we can straighten it all out." She nodded as she finished. Her red lipstick looked like a beacon to her lips, and I found myself watching them move as I soaked in every word. She was sincere as hell, and I wasn't ready for that shit. I wanted to be prickly, hard to turn over, or turn out. But Madison wasn't going to make it easy to play hard to get.

"I'm sorry you had to deal with Alex alone for so long." I blurted out and a laugh came along with it. Her lips parted into a smile so bright, and before we both knew it we had broken out into this infectious laughter that was part pain, part hurt, and part relief.

"Ain't that the truth." She said, between chuckles. And at that moment, I knew we were going to get along.

In the cruise ship club, she and I fished for men to dance with. But none of them seemed appealing. And besides that, the dialogue flood gates were opened and me and Mariah preferred to ask each other questions while we drank instead of invite yet another set of problems into our lives via the men swarming around us. Instead we opted to dance together. To slow songs, to fast songs; When the strings for the very first cords of Back that Ass Up rang out, we both gave each other a big oooh shit look and showed each other just how we can back it up, and oh did Madison back that ass up.

The night became a blur of fun, and I swear I couldn't finish my drinks fast enough before Madison had another one in my hand. For a Christian woman this girl sure could knock them back!

The night gets hazy, the songs get slower, and Madison and I get closer.

CHAPTER 18: JUST ONE KISS
(MADISON'S VOICE/POV)

We're having fun, just having fun. That's what I reminded myself every day. There's something about being out in the middle of the ocean that really takes all your troubles away. It's like being caught up in a whole different world, and this planet doesn't feel real when there's no land around. So ain't no wonder that as the days went by, I started to feel more and more outside of my normal self. Know what I mean?

I mean, who ever expects to be playing shuffleboard with their husband's mistress and enjoy it? It's definitely something I didn't see coming, but on our fifth night together I realized I preferred being on my first cruise with Mariah than being with Alex. It was just different. Alex is okay to travel with, but he's more impatient with me sometimes. He just takes over and doesn't include me in stuff. Mariah actually taught me how to cruise! She said her mother goes often, so she grew up cruisin'. She's an expert in a lot of stuff.

I got over the whole man stealing thing a long time ago. One of the sisters in church told me that a man can't be stolen. He's got to be open and willing to go. But he can be tempted, like Christ was tempted by the devil. And it's up to him, like Christ, to resist and lean on Father God or to fall. That's what I thought happened to Alex all of those times. He was too weak to resist the temptations, and so he fell. And nobody can blame a man for that because it's not technically his fault. When you place a Jezebel spirit, or a temptation demon on a situation, it takes away the ownership and accountability. I saw Mariah as a Jezebel spirit, preying on Alex and forcing him to stray.

Boy, was I wrong. And I had to think to myself, as I stood on our balcony and watched the endless waves roll by, what else had I been wrong about? Is seduction real? Of course! I might even consider myself a seductress sometimes. I seduced Alex. I can admit that. Yup, I sure did. He was moving slow at first, I think it's cause he knew I had a kid. And I pulled him in with my body. A man can't resist, I knew this. I started to research stuff and practiced it on him, and he loved it. Not to mention everything I learned with Dante, I upped the ante on Alex. When he wasn't drained in my bed I was filling his belly with good food. I didn't learn that from my mom, I learned that from my grandma. My dad's mother, grandma Mabel. She was old school with beautiful wrinkled brown skin and shock white hair. She was always in the kitchen with a pot of something on the stove and an apron around her waist. And she told me the way to a man's heart is to keep his balls empty and his stomach full. That's how she kept Earnest for over 50 years.

And I lived by that, but over time I found out the hard way that the way to his core is way more complicated than that. I mean, the best way I can describe the way I dealt with Alex was through DMX lyrics! *Give a dog a bone, leave a dog alone, let a dog roam and he'll find his way home*. Now that part I did get from my mom, because she was always there for my father no matter what. And it paid off because when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, he took care of her. He was by her side during the chemo. He rushed to get the bucket when she needed to vomit. He paid the bills and made sure she didn't have to worry about a damn thing.

That's kind of what I have with Alex. I know he wants something deeper, I guess. But we don't really get into the regular emotional conversations—I mean we didn't until Mariah came along. But we were sort of this old married couple from the very beginning. I didn't need to say much to him, I knew what he wanted and what he needed. I put it down in the bedroom and in the kitchen, and I made sure I fed him spiritually. He was out there facing a lot of stuff, a lot of temptation and it got to him, but thank God I was taught to be patient and kind because I could have left him a long time ago. But if I did, I wouldn't be here on this cruise ship.

I know some of ya'll are thinking that's not a good thing! But trust me, now that I have hindsight it is. In that moment though, I was struggling at first. I was nervous about the whole thing cause I hate flying. I never been out in the middle of the ocean! And I mean, I'm with her. It felt like I was literally walking into the fire at first. But I had to remind myself I asked for this, and I had to push myself to get into the mindset of seeing how I connect with her.

I think I shocked her at first. She's all shy with her body. But I ain't! It's just being naked. Alex calls me an exhibitionist. But if Eve hadn't disobeyed God, we'd all be naked and free! I was so glad when Gabriel finally moved out so I could be around my house the way God made me. I guess I get that from my mama, but when I realized how uncomfortable she was that first night I came out of the bathroom, I backed off.

We did activities together, got wasted and slept in. It was a true vacation with no worries. And yeah, I apologized to her on the first night. I had to go ahead and get that out of the way because it was weighing on my heart for a while. I was being selfish with Alex when it came to the baby. But it hurt me, the thought of him bringing her home. It was just too much. I can only take so much! I was grateful that he didn't force it, but I imagined it painted a real bad picture for me to Mariah. Like I'm petty or something, and she needed to know I ain't that. I just don't want his affair baby in my house when I'm still trying to have one with him myself!

And I had to change that mindset too. She wasn't an affair baby...Alex and I were broken up. All the way up. Not talking. Not living together. Definitely not having sex. We just didn't do the paperwork. Marriage is complicated, it's not just black and white, and it's definitely not just a matter of paperwork. You can be broken up, completely out of love with someone and living separate lives while the government calls you married. That's because marriage isn't man's law, it's God's law, and the moment he laid down with her and entered her behind my back, he divorced me.

A man shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Kierra is the embodiment of that scripture. She's that one flesh. Alex and I never became one flesh in that sense, and it hurt too deeply. I had to work through handing him over to his spiritual and fleshly wife. I had to wait to see if he was going to declare to me and to God if I was still his wife or if he wanted to move on, but he had technically already taken on a second wife. I know that's not what ya'll wanna hear. Ya'll don't see making children as a way of connecting two people, but it damn sure is. Forever.

If you've ever done any kind of ancestry you're looking for your blood bonds over anything else. And even if those relationships didn't work, if there are kids involved that person

that went to the wayside was still added to that family tree. They don't go away, they're blood. That's what I had to come to terms with. That's what I had to realize. He went and created a branch to the family tree.

I'm not saying that paper marriage without kids is less than. I'm just saying that a hundred years from now, someone is going to be connecting themselves to Alex and Mariah but not me. And that part hurt. That's real. Sometimes we don't want to say the real stuff out loud, especially in the church, but I needed to say it. And I needed to make sure Alex understood it. I think he got it, but I don't know. He lives more in a gray area, and it seems like Mariah does too, so they probably don't understand where I'm coming from on this.

But anyway, I say all that to say that if I wasn't willing to leave, then I had to think differently about all of this. My situation wasn't much different from Sarah in Genesis, and as Mariah slept in the bed next to me, I read the scripture and prayed to God for guidance. So yeah, at first it was hard. I got over fears; physical fears and emotional fears, and I got to know her and I had to change my mind about her. She wasn't a Jezebel spirit out here bewitching husbands, she is a woman that wants to be loved all the way through.

She fell for a man that presented himself in a certain light, and that's not her fault. She was the one that was seduced! Yes, men can seduce as well, and that's what Alex had done. Now she wasn't completely off the hook with me, because she knew from the moment I came to that apartment door that he was legally married, even if divorce papers were "signed". So, the fact that she chose to stay is on her, but she didn't step out on her marriage, Alex did. So, I had to apologize to her.

After that we started to kind of let loose around each other. She's a lot of fun, knowledgeable. A little rigid, but I was able to get her to loosen up after a while. She even got used to seeing me naked. I mean, I HAD to stand on that balcony nude and feel the ocean wind on me, I had to. She just laughed at me. I asked her if she wanted to join me, she said no. And that got my mind to wondering, just how free can this woman be?

I wanted to see her open up more and relax. I mean we're on a vacation compliments of Alex, we had to live it up! She showed me the technical stuff about the cruise, and I showed her how to enjoy it. When she told me she never laughed so hard in her life, that felt real good. During the day we explored the ship and enjoyed as many activities as possible, and at night we got to know each other.

Mariah likes to open up and analyze things. She asks questions that make you think about what you just said. She calls it going deeper. And I get that, but hell after being so surfacy in my life for so many years it was kind of hard to talk to her at first. It's like she wanted to know parts of me that I didn't even know myself, so it made me side eye her when she'd dig deeper. I didn't know if she wanted some dirt on me or what. But I started to see that she actually wanted that treatment too. She wanted someone to go deeper with her, to ask her tough questions so she'd open up.

We talked about almost everything. Dating, goals, dreams, sex. And when she asked me a question I made sure I asked her the same thing. If she wanted to know something about me, I figured she wanted to expose it about herself. I became a mirror for her. But part of me couldn't help but to think about what she also opened up to Alex about. Was it the same thing? Had they had similar conversations? Was it these moments of emotional back and forth that made him want to make love to her?

She's easy to talk to, to open up to, and before you know it, you're telling her all your deepest, darkest secrets. The stuff you vowed to keep to yourself. And it doesn't even feel like she's judging you like a psychiatrist or anything. She's definitely not writing down notes or nodding her head as she tries to diagnose you. It just feels like she really wants to know the real you. And for some reason after a conversation with her it feels like a release.

It took me a couple of days to realize I was feeling the way I used to feel with Trish. Talking to your best friend is like talking to a vault. I didn't feel shy or like I was going to be called stupid for thinking the way I thought. I mean, Mariah is like a wordsmith so if she was calling me stupid I didn't know it! After a few days it felt like I was talking to somebody I had known for years. And at night I stopped praying for patients with my husband's handmaid and instead prayed for God to take away the thoughts that were starting to come back to me, the ones I had buried and prayed away.

But they were coming on too strong. The excursions on the beach, the Mai-tais and margaritas, the dancing and late-night fun, it made me feel like I was enjoying all of this with my partner. Not just a friend, but a partner. All that was missing was the physical touch. And I had to pull myself away from wanting it, but it was all coming on too strong.

On our fifth night as we walked down the long hall past the other cabins to our own, Mariah walked a bit ahead of me. She was talking about how she was thinking about going natural, but she didn't have time to spend on her hair as it is. She was thinking about getting loc'd, and with Kierra's curly pattern she wondered if she should loc her hair too. I reached out and touched her hair. She'd ditched the straight extensions or the silk press that she said she normally swears by in exchange for customary vacation braids on this trip.

As she opened the cabin door with the key card I played in the braids and told her she seemed like she liked to switch it up too much. One week it's a silk press, the next week it's a wig, after that it's cornrows that sweep back into a bun. She likes variety, even though she has her usual, even if she doesn't switch it up, she likes that the option to be there. She said I was right.

We laughed about our hair troubles and how we might just want to shave it all off. And I played with her braids, framed her face with them and restyled them right then and there. I told her locs would be gorgeous on her, just like all the other styles. She asked me "What do you do with this?" as she put my hair up into a wild ponytail for me. I told her I just let it do whatever. It doesn't grow super long, but it likes to go wide, wild and free. I just have to tame it for work. She said my hair fits my personality, and I agree. The same for her. There are many sides to Mariah, different looks and they all draw you in. And in that moment, I couldn't blame Alex.

She stood in front of me as I sat on the edge of the bed, playing with my curls, I guess reciprocating my playfulness. We mirror each other so much! Before I knew it my hands moved to her hips. She stopped, but she didn't say anything, so I figured I was on the right path. As she stood between my legs, the only thing that blocked my lips from hers was the flowy halter dress with the Hawaiian flowers she was wearing that night. I felt her pulling me in. She didn't stop touching me, her hands rested on my head, her fingers still playing in my hair, massaging my scalp with her fingertips. The room was quiet, but the ocean outside the open balcony door was loud as hell, and so was her breathing. I watched her stomach move with each breath, and how it moved faster as my palms reached her ass. I looked up at her, and she met my glance. We locked into each other. My mind was racing, and I know hers was too, but it was like we couldn't move away from each other. I waited for her to tell me to get my hands off of her, to tell me I'm being weird. But she said nothing as I gripped her and pulled her hips closer to my face and breathed in the love below.

“Can I kiss you?” Is all I could say.