

## RED'S TALE

"Okay, so wow! That was way better than I expected."

"Thanks, I think," Shane replied.

At that moment, he was far too busy looking out of the window to be paying attention to the woman rambling on from the bed. Did he enjoy what had just happened? Of course. But now, all he cared about was not becoming a statistic. Yeah, Southeast D.C. was at a peak level of gentrification, but being a white boy killed by a black man for being in the wrong place was something that did not interest him.

Shane Peterson was a thirty-one-year-old night manager at a Hilton property near Pentagon City in Arlington, VA. His fire engine red hair and matching goatee made him easily identifiable in most instances. That, plus the fact that he had a very expressive face and a laugh that seemed to come out of a cartoon. However, it was when he was hanging out with the dudes that he grew up with that he truly stuck out, at least to visitors.

Red, as he was known to his boys and a very select few around the Mississippi Avenue area where he grew up, was essentially a native Washingtonian. Having moved here with his mother from Iowa at age seven, the Southside was what he claimed, and it him, because he never tried to be something that he wasn't—Black. A major reason that he was in the situation he was in at this very second.

"No, seriously. I wasn't lying when I said I had never slept with a white boy before. Check that off the bucket list," she said with a laugh. "Although I was kind of expecting you to be a little more submissive and passive."

"That's what they all say..." he mumbled while peeking out of the blinds.

"What you say?"

"Huh...nothing."

Shane grabbed his phone off the woman's nightstand and looked at the most recent tweets from a promoter that he knew from the area.

There was a Welcome Home party being thrown for a hood celeb who was released last week, and the location of this joyous occasion was an only-if-you-know-what's-up nondescript strip club in Greenbelt, MD. The kind of place that you would drive or walk right by since it had no signage and was located in a small warehouse district.

"I feel out-of-pocket even asking this, but when are we going to do this again? Hey, you going to Randy's thing tonight?" the woman said in his direction, laying across the bed like a teenager.

"Hell, are you?" he replied, snapping his head around in surprise. *This old bird is something else.*

"You know it. I gotta support my nephew, Press. He's the one putting the party together."

*I gotta support my nephew, Press,* Shane said in a mocking tone in his head. *Just my damn luck.*

Press, short for Pressure, was the promoter responsible for any and all events being thrown at the hoodiest of hood spots in Prince George's County, MD. He also had a lock on all things stripper (read "stripper," not "topless dancer") related that took place in DC, PG County, and suburban Baltimore. It was all thanks to connects from his former life as the muscle for a big-time dealer back in the day...allegedly.

In short, Press wasn't to be trifled with, and most people knew that. He wasn't the hothead that he was when he was younger, but several folks found out the hard way that he was only one bad memory away from reverting. Which was why Shane was now thinking, *how in the fuck is it going to look that I'm laying the goods to his aunt??*

The insatiable older woman rolled over the bed to where Shane was standing and ran her hand across the front of his boxers, breaking his train of thought.

"Whoa, lady!" Clearly, she was looking for another round, while Shane was looking for a lifeline by way of Press' movements on social media because, of course, this aunt lived in Greenbelt and only a quick fifteen minutes from the club.

"Like I said, you shocked me, baby. You act like you've been with a black woman before."

*Once or twice*, he thought while smiling sheepishly in her direction. *Think, Shane, think!* A text came through on his cell while he was looking at Twitter. Opening the message, he saw that it was his boy, Shawn. The timing couldn't have been better as Shawn was the super plug. He knew a little about a lot, where all the blind spots were in random places, and always had an answer for anything.

**Shawn:** Ey, you sliding thru Drillers tonight? Press got a party set up for Randy's coming home party

**Shane:** EY, I'M IN A JAM MOE. I NEED YOU

**Shawn:** Wassup, you good? Where are you, what's going on?

**Shane:** At this chick's house in Greenbelt

**Shawn:** Okay. Is she married and hubby coming home or what?

**Shane:** Not quite...

**Shawn:** So, what? Her woman on the way through? I mean I know we aren't supposed to hit women but, if she pulls out on you...bruh. Don't let me find out you got fucked up by no chick lol

**Shane:** Nah, it's worse. The chick in question is Press' aunt

**Shawn:** MOTHERFUCKER, WHAT!? YOUNG, KILLLLLLL! YOU SERIOUS? HAHA! YOU WILD AS SHIT RED! YOUNG! HAHAHAAAA!

**Shane:** Think about what I just said. Shawn! Help!!!

**Shawn:** OH SHIT! You know you gotta fill me in later right? Damn, okay. Uh hold on, I'll hit you right back

Shane waited, something far beyond impatiently for his boy Shawn to hit him back. The crew took to calling Shawn "Hendog," later shortened to Hen, when they were younger because it was all that he ever drank. While everyone else was sampling all types of liquor before they were legal, Shawn fell in love with Hennessy and stayed loyal. But he found out about the nickname one day and threatened to cut everybody off from his connects. Needless to say, they never called him that again. To his face, anyway.

Shawn called Press to see if he needed any help or extra supplies for the party. This allowed him to find out where he was currently so he could relay the information to Shane. Turns out he was at Beltway Plaza in Greenbelt, less than five minutes from his aunt's apartment.

After texting that info back to Shane, Shawn told him that he had a cousin not far from the Plaza. He'd send her to pick Shane up and bring him back to Southeast D.C., where they both lived.

**Shawn:** Two things real quick. If you touch my cousin, I'm putting these hands on you, Red, for real. And you need to be by the old Gold's Gym at the Plaza now! My cousin drives a dark blue Altima. You might want to be early to meet her. Not for her benefit, but because it's nothing for Press to slide by his auntie's spot. Greenbelt ain't that big. Text me when y'all get up

**Shane:** {incoming green message bubble}

**Shawn:** STOP TEXTING AND GET YOUR ASS OUT OF THAT APARTMENT MOE! With that bamma ass Android!

As he threw his clothes back on, Shane delivered his usual story to the woman that he always gave to women that he had sexed on the humble. The sad thing was that he had used the same story so many times that a court stenographer's report wouldn't be as accurate as this most recent retold version.

"Hey, so, look," he started. "I think you are fine as shit. But you know we can't take this public even on some 'hey, wassup' type of vibe. I mean, the world has changed, but it ain't changed that much. You're a bad older woman that runs in some circles a little too close to mines. And could you imagine the pressure and BS you'd have to deal with from your girlfriends and everyone else for messing with a younger *white* boy? I don't know if you could live that down, and honestly...I wouldn't even want that for you. As for me, I'm cool. You wouldn't do anything but make me look good and raise my stature."

He always said the very last line while caressing their face.

"I'm not saying this can't ever happen again," he continued, "because shit. You know what you're doing, for a black girl," he said, playfully switching around her white boy statement from before. She laughed to herself at his shot. Even still, the look on Shane's face as he let his gaze swim over her curves under the sheet almost proved counterproductive to his current situation.

True, people knew Red. But in the areas he ran in, that visual would have been a lot to handle and explain, what with the likelihood that the women he chose to entertain probably had nieces and nephews that he knew in some capacity. Besides, this wasn't exactly the Baltimore inner harbor.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, really laying the dramatics of his stellar performance on thick. "Okay. Look, I'ma slide out. Thanks for giving a white boy a chance. Ey, man, you are bad as shit, though. Lemme get outta here before I fall in love or something. I'll see you around though, that's a bet."

And just like that, Shane, or Red as the people around the way called him, was peeking out of the woman's apartment door and sprinting down the hallway to the furthest stairwell away from it. Outside of the building, he looked left then right before jogging towards the plaza to meet Hen's cousin. *That was way too close*, he thought to himself.

Shane's mom moved them to the District of Columbia from Iowa when he was only seven years old. To those keeping score at home, the present-day Southeast looked nothing like it did back then. Sure, there were certain parts of the Southside that you still needed not to venture into if you weren't from there, but the major difference between then and now was that in the nineties, there was no such thing as gentrification.

When you grow up in a black neighborhood with black friends and around black women, you're going to take a liking to all things black when it's time to do so. And after spending time at his friends' houses growing up in households run by single black mothers that had older black sisters and/or had fathers who worked late, Shane's appreciation for black women was inevitable.

Growing up, one of the biggest benefits to Shane being the only white boy in a black area was that curiosity worked both ways. He had his first real sexual experience at thirteen, beating most of his closest friends to the punch because of it. After all, fast teenagers existed everywhere, and he welcomed the offerings from his female peers. On the other hand, thanks to a random trip over to Good Hope Road during Spring of 2003, a single encounter changed his outlook on women forever.

Of Shane's crew, Slim was the "too cool for school" one. His older brother was the same way; their whole family was. They were like urban royalty in their part of the city. His mom was a petite Dominican version of Mrs. Parker from the movie *Friday*. Every man that laid eyes on her wanted her but knew not to approach. Slim's pops, known only as Rock to his peers and fans alike, was the alleged drug dealer that Press used to work for back in the day. And two things that you did not want were issues with either of them.

After a game of thirty-three one afternoon, Shane ran inside of Slim's house to grab some water from the basement fridge. As soon as he reached the bottom step, he could hear what sounded like moans and grunts from a room in the back.

He tried his best not to investigate, and he almost succeeded. But just as he grabbed two bottles and was headed back towards the stairs, Slim's grandmother appeared from the darkened now slightly illuminated hallway, headed straight towards the refrigerator, seeming to freeze time with her stride and him with it.

Ms. Ramos was five feet and one inch of unmistakable lust. And honestly, if it weren't for the fact he knew she was his boy's grandmother, Shane would've mistaken the woman for a twenty-something in the poor lighting. Now mere feet from where he stood, she still held the same ageless face that he was used to when he came over. But the warm smiling eyes he was used to were replaced with a wild, feral look, and the silk tie around her waist might as well have just been there for decoration.

Beneath her floor-length silk robe was nothing but golden-brown flesh, covered in a faintly noticeable sheen of perspiration that appeared to make her glow despite the dim lighting. The fabric clung sinfully to every smooth curve of her body, curves that put to shame his favorite video vixen from his youth, Gloria Velez.

Shane looked down toward the floor, embarrassed, and apologized profusely, but not before the aroused nipples on her small breasts commanded his attention, daring his mind not to wonder about their color in contrast to the rest of her amazing body.

Michaela Ramos was drop-dead gorgeous. And that was before his gaze caught one last sight that almost eroded the last of any resolve he thought he had.

The full plumpness of the lips below her waist were what truly confused his inexperienced mind. They didn't look like anything that he had ever seen in magazines or from girls his own age, arousing him far beyond any level he'd experienced in his young life. And his embarrassment shined through like a beacon through his now shamefully reddened skin.

"It's alright, papi, you didn't know. But you do now, right?" the older woman commented with a grin, feeling somewhat sorry for his obvious uneasiness.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry, ma'am," was all that Shane could muster at that moment.

Moving to close her robe, she stopped as she noticed his erection betraying him and smiled wickedly. The older woman did not come close to hurting for confidence. Nonetheless, she enjoyed the added ego boost from the flustered teen. So, to show her appreciation, she opened the fridge and bent over slowly to reach the bottom shelf, brushing the free-flowing material back and over her waist.

The bare ass that taunted Shane as she grabbed two bottles of water and closed the door left his mouth devoid of all moisture.

"I'm killing him in there, papi," she said to the boy, noting that he had not moved an inch from where he had been standing. "You can go back outside now," she said with a smirk, flicking the lights back off and returning to the darkness from which she came.

Shane tripped over his own feet, taking the basement stairs two at a time, trying to get out of there. Once outside, he broke into a dead sprint home, right by his friend without a word. True, Slim was his boy. But how do you say to your dude, "Bruh...your grandmoms is fine as shit. Pardon my erection?"

From that day forward, he took a special liking to more mature women. And despite not having his first real experience with a woman older than him until age twenty, the desire just seemed to grow. Meanwhile, back in the present day, Shawn seemed to be having a mental breakdown over Shane's explanation.

"Yo, this shit here. Okay, so you met Ms. Vicki..."

"Victoria," Shane corrected, referring to Press' aunt.

"Ey, fuck you, Red. Ms. Vicki ain't but a few years younger than my momma. I'm calling her Ms. Vicki. So, you met Ms. Vicki at Gillian's baby sister's birthday party?" Shawn continued.

"Yeah."

"And at some point, y'all exchanged info...for what again? So, you could run errands for her or something?"

"Nah. So we could get up."

Shawn just looked at his longtime friend with a look of disbelief, outlined in a smirk. He couldn't decide if he was curious, concerned, or wanted to laugh at this entire situation. His brain simply refused to process it. "What you mean, get up?"

For the next twenty minutes or so, Shane explained in as little detail as possible how the ordeal with Press' aunt came to be. But each time that he mentioned something that seemed mundane to him, Shawn would respond, "Wait, what? Young, go head!" Punctuating every syllable in a tone that was #DCasFuck, as if Shane's actions were not mundane at all.

"Yeah, bruh. Shit normally doesn't get this hectic."

"Huh, man! Wait, what?" Shawn cocked his head to the side and looked at Shane curiously. Putting his phone down, he cut off the text that he was working on and moved to the edge of the couch.

"This is the first time some shit like this has ever happened," Shane repeated with different wording.

"Keep talking, moe," Shawn said in a serious, more attentive tone.

If he didn't know better, Shane would have thought that his boy was upset with him. But the only things that could upset Shawn were either of his kid's mothers, anyone talking about his beloved Dallas Cowboys, and dry chicken wings.

Shane explained how his situation with Press' aunt was not a one-time thing but instead his norm. That he had been dating women his age sporadically since he and his boys had all hit their twenties, but nothing serious ever happened because, simply put, they irritated him.

"Older chicks are just different."

"Right. So who else in the crew knows this shit, Red?"

Shane had to stop and think for a second. "No one, come to think about it."

With the crew, unless one of the guys was serious about a woman, she wasn't brought around, period. Anyone other than the one fucking her rarely even knew that she existed. There were a select few women that they grew up with that would hang out with them on occasion, but as far as the women that any of them were just dating or just getting down with, no real interaction with the squad.

"You know I gotta tell the fellas, right?"

"I mean, you don't have to," Shane replied.

"My bad, you're right. So, you gonna be mad if I tell the fellas?"

"Nah. I mean, it ain't a secret. It's just that nobody ever asked."

Shawn had already fired off a group text to Ty and Slim, letting them all know that they needed to stop by his apartment earlier than planned to hear some news. This was not going to be just another pregame session. Shawn turned to face Shane suddenly as a wave of curiosity washed over him.

"You ever ran through anybody in my family, bruh?"

"No! Come on, Hen, I mean Shawn! I wouldn't do that. That's foul!"

"Shit, I had to ask. What about any of the fellas?"

Exasperated, Shane threw his hands up and leaned back on the recliner.

Silence rested between the two friends for a beat before Shane realized that Hen was quietly staring at him.

"No, man. Damn!"

"So you saying the women in my family ugly, cuz?"

"What? No! I mean...you know what I mean."

Shawn threw his head back and burst into a throwback Def Comedy Jam audience member laugh. "I'm fucking witcha, Red. I'll be right back."

Once his boy was out of sight, Shane looked at his watch then pulled out his phone. There was no way in hell he was going to that party tonight. *That much is for certain*, he thought while scrolling through his Instagram feed.

Something else for certain was that these next couple of hours were going to be brutal once the rest of the fellas fell through. There was no way around that. The good thing, he figured, was that the worst was behind him. Shawn was the comedian out of the crew. But dealing with him solo was much easier than when everyone was together. The dude could be ruthless at times.

A knock at the door broke Shane from his thoughts as he rose to his feet. “Hen...Shawn, door!”

“Answer it then, Red, shit. I’m Facetiming with the youngins,” he replied, referring to his video chat with his kids.

Opening the door, Shane looked down at a petite woman with a wild reddish-brown mane, freckles on her nose, and skin the color of cappuccino foam. Her flat stomach was on full display between the top of her low-rise jeans and the bottom of an altered women’s Redskins jersey, cut just below the middle of what once was a number 47.

“Is Shawn home?” she asked in a tone dripping with mambo sauce.

“Uh, yeah. He’s in the back, but he’s kinda busy right now. I can tell him you stopped by.”

Shane didn’t recognize the woman but thought she favored someone that he knew. He just couldn’t pin down who it was. Just as he was about to ask for her name, his boy’s voice resonated from down the hall.

“Who was that at the door?”

He mouthed to her, ‘What’s your name?’

‘Zakiah,’ she silently returned.

“Zakiah!” he yelled over his shoulder.

“Fine lil’ youngin’ with big hair and a tight body?” Shawn shouted from down the hall.

Taking a step back from the door, he playfully looked her over from head to toe. Zakiah, as he now knew her to be, was, in his opinion, built like a trained dancer; small breasts, flat stomach, toned arms, and a tiny waist. But it was her legs that truly told the tale. She wouldn’t classify as thick by any means, but her legs, in Shane’s mind, definitely had seen a routine or two on a ballet barre.

Exaggerating his approval of what he saw, she laughed silently at him. “She a’ight!” Shane said aloud with a grin. Her mouth fell open as she stepped forward and punched him in his shoulder.

“You tripping. Zak is bad as shit, Red,” he said, coming around the corner, pulling an 80s University V-neck tee down over his head.

“I know. She’s still here,” Shane replied with a laugh. “Ey, I’m about to run home right quick and take a shower.”

“Come back, Red!” Shawn said to Shane’s back, making sure his friend knew that he had a roasting coming that there was no hiding from.

“I am, man, damn.”

“I’m serious,” Shawn said as he coolly slid his fingers inside of the waistband of Zakiah’s panties, pulling her close to him, the thin plastic of what he eased inside now pressing against her soft skin.

Shawn bent his long lanky frame down and began kissing the petite beauty on her neck and collarbone slowly as his cell vibrated on the table behind him. Their arms now intertwined around each other’s waists, his visitor slipped two crisply folded bills inside his back pocket.

They stayed like this in his doorway for a few more minutes before she left and got back into the car waiting for her at the curb, perfectly pulling off the usual transaction yet again. Hen wasn’t a major dealer by any stretch, but again, he was the guy who knew everyone and how to get any and everything. Today’s request? Ecstasy. Something slight and easy to conceal.

A block from his apartment, Shane was still shaking his head at his near encounter outside of Shawn's gate. After their earlier discussion, he figured that he might as well let his boy know that one of his fans was right outside.

He wasn't sure of the relation, but the beauty Zakiah that he met at his boy's door earlier was somehow related to the slightly older woman in the driver's seat. He was sure of it. She had sat up and took a hard look at him when he closed the gate and neared the curb. When he saw her eyes and her lips, he recognized her instantly. Smiling, he pulled his cell out and thumbed in a quick text before putting the thumb and pinky from his right hand to the side of his face in her direction.

**Shane:** Ey real quick. I don't know who the youngin' Zakiah rode over here with, but the bird in the driver's seat, that's one.

"Those goddamn freckles," Shane thought aloud, entering his building. As per usual, whenever he ran across a past conquest out in public, Shane had winked and held his finger to his lips. The targeted woman always responded in kind without fail, normally displaying a small smile followed by a look of bashfulness that they probably hadn't used in decades. Meanwhile, the fellas were already leaving Shawn's place about to head over to Shane's.

"Let me get the aux cord since you ain't got Bluetooth in this old bitch," Slim said coolly to Shawn.

*Yeah, but I know who would probably try to slide in the old bitch you call abuela, motherfucker,* Shawn thought, tossing the cord in the backseat.

"So, you gonna give us the tea on Red or what?" Ty asked from the passenger seat. "It's nothing too over the top, is it? He ain't get nobody pregnant or nothing, did he?"

*Nah, if he got any of these chicks pregnant, he'd be on the news. Damn, Maury,* Shawn thought to himself.

"Nothing crazier than you asking about the tea, I hope," Slim said, glancing in the big man's direction.

"Yeah, you been spending too much time around your cousin's shop, Biggie," Shawn added.

"I can't help it," Ty replied. "Between all the chicks and gay dudes in there, 'tea' is like every eighth word. Besides, it's either working at the shop or back to **knocking motherfuckers out,**" he said in both their directions with a change in tone on the last three words.

Ty, a.k.a. Big Ty or Biggie, was a lifelong friend of everyone in the crew and with that would never lay a finger on his boys. But the fact remained that at six foot three and three hundred-plus pounds, with a bid on his record, and a history...you just never knew when a joke may have gone too far. Biggie was a whole lot of dude to have mad at you.

"Red, tell these motherfuckers what's what, please!" Shawn yelled out of the lowered window as he arrived with the duo, pulling his car up to the curb in front of Shane's apartment complex. With a shake of his head, Shane slid off the mini wall in front of the building and walked over to the car.

"I'm not going to the party tonight," Shane said, dapping up Biggie through the window in the front passenger seat then Slim through the back window.

"Young, tell 'em why, though," Shawn shot back, putting his car in park.

Slim opened the rear passenger door and turned his body to the side, letting one leg out of the car, resting his foot on the curb. He cocked his head to the side and sighed. "Please tell us what's good before I hit this dude."

Biggie opened his door and climbed out of the front seat to stretch out his massive frame. Shawn got out as well and came around to the passenger side, sitting on the hood, his smile broad and overly obnoxious.

Shane sighed. "So, I may have run up in somebody related to Press..." he started.

Slim just shook his head and grinned. Biggie's eyes popped out of his head, and Shawn just kept pushing. "But who, though?" he insisted.

"His aunt," Shane replied dryly.

"The fuck!" Biggie blurted out.

Shawn almost slid off the car laughing while Slim's mental wheels seemed to be turning. Shane noticed this and patiently waited for the more reserved of the group to respond. Just as he raised his head to speak, however, a dark blue GMC Yukon came rolling up the street blasting "Bodysnatchas," a classic Rare Essence go-go record.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Shane said under his breath, noting the driver.

Shawn walked around to the street side of his car as the big truck approached, slowing to a stop in the middle of the street. Once in park, he leaned against the passenger side door of the truck and reached through the open window, dapping up Press. The two of them exchanged some brief conversation before he stepped back.

It was moments like these where Shane wished that he was several shades darker. His uneasiness shined through like a beacon with the reddening of his skin.

"Ey, y'all sliding through tonight, right?" Press asked the group.

Both Slim and Biggie replied affirmatively. Shane, on the other hand, stayed non-committal, using his job as an excuse. He knew for a fact that he wasn't going, just like he knew for a fact that Press' aunt and anywhere from three to five other women that he'd slept with would likely be there. *Drillers* was way too small for that kind of familiarity. That was the worst thing about hole-in-the-wall spots. One way in, one way out.

"Ey...so you're Shawn's hotel connect, right?" Press asked in Shane's direction.

"Nothing too heavy, but I get comps on occasion. Wassup?"

"I need to treat my old lady. She—"

Shawn failed at stifling a laugh at the mentioning of 'old lady.' At that, Press cut his sentence short and shifted his attention toward the lanky man's direction.

"My bad," Shawn said after clearing his throat.

Press went on to describe what he was looking to do, and Shane assured him that he would look into taking care of it. After telling him to reconsider coming through to the party, the little big man put the truck back in drive. Bending the corner and speeding off, the volume on "Bodysnatchas" could be heard from over a block away, rivaled only by the rumble of the engine.

For the next hour, Shane ran down his taste in women to Biggie, Slim, and Shawn, all while they walked to and from the liquor store on MLK, a couple of blocks away from his apartment.

Of the three men, Biggie found it the hardest to process the info despite his best efforts. "Ain't it wrinkled, though?"

The comedian in Shawn just could not let go of joke time. “Bruh, Rihanna could walk through this bitch, and Red would ask her for her grandmama’s number.”

But Slim seemed to get it, at least loosely. During their trip to the store and back, the two of them made eye contact on two different occasions. Both times, Shane nodded approvingly at women his boy nonverbally asked about in passing. Of course, it didn’t hurt that Slim had had a tryst or two in his past with older women, so he understood.

“Older women just know what they want. They’ve experienced both the good and the bullshit. They don’t assume anything and have no problem being upfront with you,” Shane answered when asked, “What’s the attraction?” by Biggie.

“Yeah, okay. Rapid-fire, Red, let’s go. Rihanna?” Shawn asked.

“Come on, bruh, it’s Rihanna! What the hell?”

“Amber Rose?” Biggie threw out.

“I wanna say no, big homie, out of respect for you and your love for that woman,” Shane replied thoughtfully. “But for the sake of this exercise, yes. Tennis ball head Amber, though. Not the long weave version.”

“Facts,” Biggie replied, dapping up his boy.

“Rosario Dawson?” Slim asked.

“Slim?” Shane replied while giving him a blank look.

“Hey, I had to ask, my guy,” he replied with a laugh.

“Jill Scott?”

“You already know, Biggie. Long as she fix me some griiiiiiiiits in the morning,” he mimicked in reference to her hit “The Way.”

“The Gonzalez twins?” Shawn asked with a dramatic pause, leaning forward.

Slim and Biggie both looked at each other and shrugged, having never heard of them.

“Shit, are they even legal?” Shane replied.

“Aw, here you go,” Shawn responded, throwing his hands up.

Slim pulled his iPhone out and googled the name as Biggie leaned over his shoulder to get a closer look.

“No, I’m serious. Did they graduate college yet?” Shane asked with conviction.

“Iono, but if not, they gotta at least be juniors by now,” Shawn replied.

“They bad. Body for days. A touch on the young side, but eh,” Shane shrugged.

“Damn!” Slim said aloud, finding their Instagram account. Biggie nodded slowly in approval.

“So, if you like all of them chicks, how can you be attracted to a grandma, Red? That shit don’t make sense,” Shawn asked with genuine intrigue.

Sighing, Shane replied, “I don’t like grandmas. At least, not the ones that look like grandmas. Listen. Rapid-fire,” Shane blurted out in exasperation. The other three nodded.

“Nia Long?”

In unison, “Hell yeah!”

“Jada Pinkett-Smith?”

“Yup.”

“Jennifer Lopez?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d risk it all, my guy,” Slim added on top.

“Angela Bassett?”

Slim and Biggie both nodded slowly in a very exaggerated fashion. Shawn, on the other hand, paused.

"You been drinking already, Hen?" Shane asked. "If Angela Bassett walked around the corner right now and passed us...you trying to tell me you wouldn't take a second look?"

"I mean, yeah, I guess I would. What's your point?"

"Nia, Jada, and Jennifer are all in their mid-to-late forties. And Angela Bassett is 60. When I say I like older women, I don't mean walk with a cane, moomoo-wearing knitters. I'm talking bad joints that you have to card to know their age. They act young without trying to be young."

Slim and Shawn both responded with totally different levels of understanding.

"I feel you, Red," Slim said, nodding and clearly still thinking about the examples given.

"The fuck?" Shawn exclaimed, still clueless.

After shaking his head at Shawn, Shane shrugged and attempted to change the subject. Shawn pulled out his phone and became lost in every one of his social media apps. Biggie sipped off his Rock Creek pineapple, and Slim started scrolling through playlists. Thirty to forty more minutes passed before the group parted ways.

"You seen Biggie?" Slim asked, looking at his watch.

"You know that dude fell in love with Marci's thick ass soon as she walked in around ten," Shawn replied. "After she got off the main stage, he pulled her into VIP. He gotta be up to about seven straight lap dances by now," he said, shaking his head.

"We like what we like, my guy."

"I guess. Hope he finessed some type of discount or deal because shit," Shawn said.

"Nah, I hear you loud and clear. I know that salon money ain't moving like that."

The pair laughed and looked over the half-wall at the slightly elevated VIP section. It was filled full of women of different shades, shapes, and varying levels of glitter lotion, straddling, flirting, bouncing, or caressing men and a few ladies. Working overtime to get a piece of that one-on-one inflation on the dollar change.

Marci stuck out like a sore thumb amongst the other strippers in the section, thanks in part to her big wild blonde hair and five feet eight inches and two hundred and twenty pounds of perfectly toned, all-natural frame. And right underneath her was Biggie, grinning from ear to ear.

As Slim and Shawn were shaking their heads at one another, Press' aunt walked in their direction. Stopping and pulling out her phone, she glanced at either side of them, then walked by without saying a word.

"You see that?" the usually extra calm Slim asked in shock.

"Nope," Shawn replied, refusing to entertain what he'd just witnessed.

Not too soon after, Zakiah walked up and squeezed Slim's ass before saying wassup to Shawn.

"You gonna introduce me to your boy?" she said, staring at Slim with pure sex in her eyes.

"You know who this is, Zak. Stop playing."

"But I don't knooow him, though, Shawn."

"Z, this is the homie, Giancarlo. I call him Slim, but you don't knooow him, so call him Giancarlo. Slim, this is Zakiah."

"Happy now?" Slim said in her direction with a grin, his eyes shamelessly dancing across her frame.

"Not yet," she replied with a wink. "Shawn, thanks for earlier," she said, referencing their earlier meet-up.

"Ain't shit," he replied, looking at a chocolate brown stripper sucking the life out of the man of the hour on the main stage.

"Have you seen my aunt?" Zakiah asked them both.

"Was she on the side of a milk carton recently? What the hell? Who is your aunt? I'm trying to enjoy the show, Z, damn!" Shawn replied.

Zakiah punched Shawn in the arm and turned to Slim with her phone in her hand. "This is what she looks like. We came to the spot tonight together. I'm about ready to go, but I drove. Not trying to leave her."

Slim looked at the picture and noticed the resemblance between the woman and the newly introduced Zakiah. *She looks like her older sister*, he thought. Same shape, same freckles, the older of the two was just fifteen or so pounds heavier with more hips.

"You got another picture? The lighting on this one ain't the best," Slim lied, his brain starting to piece together a theory.

The younger woman pulled up her aunt's Instagram account and showed the first picture to him. It was a shot of her in a romper on a boardwalk with a cup of Rita's Italian ice in her hand. The hashtags underneath? #livinglifelikeitsgolden #40f9ne.

"Ey, Hen, look at this pic of Zakiah's aunt," Slim said. He was willing to bet good money that he knew exactly where she was.

Shawn cut his eyes at his boy before glancing at the pic. "Damn! Your auntie is 49?" he asked aloud in her direction.

"Good genes in my family, babe. So, have you seen her in here tonight? She wasn't even trying to come out, but after we left your house earlier, she was hype as hell to slide through."

Shawn looked over at Slim, who looked down at the ground with a silent laugh that he was trying to hide. The tall man looked down at her and said no, but that he would keep an eye out. Once she walked away, he looked over at his boy and exclaimed, "Ain't this 'bout some shit."

Realizing what was probably happening, Shawn pulled his phone out and quickly scrolled through his received text messages from earlier, clicking on the last one that came in from Shane hours prior. The last several words confirmed his suspicion.

**Red:** ...but the bird in the driver's seat, that's one.

Recalling events from earlier that day, when Zakiah showed up at his house and Shane left, Shawn commented harshly, "This motherfucker here!" in a hushed tone.

"Shit, can you blame him, though?" Slim replied, shaking his head.