Stripped

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Extract

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One

Elonda scanned Flamingo Road with the practiced eyes of a turkey vulture, lazily circling the desert landscape and hunting for prey. She spotted her quarry a half-block from the Oasis casino and sized him up.

He was tall and tan, like a surfer washed up in the city, with wavy blond hair that hung below his ears and wrap-around silver shades. Young, maybe twenty-two. He wore a loud, untucked short-sleeve shirt with the buttons done wrong, a loose-fitting pair of white shorts, and dirty sneakers with no socks. His cocky walk told her he had money in his pocket. He wore sunglasses at night, and behind the shades she knew his eyes were on the hunt, too, just like hers.

His head swiveled in her direction. He saw her and grinned.

Her cop radar wasn't going off. Cops didn't walk – they pitched the girls from inside their unmarked, air-conditioned sedans. Only the newbies fell for them.

Elonda sauntered across the wide street, raising her hand to stop the speeding cars and flashing the drivers with her white teeth and a jiggle of her breasts. There was plenty of traffic at one in the morning. The city operated on jungle

rules: feed under the cool cover of darkness, and find a patch of shade to sleep through the hot days.

On the opposite sidewalk, she ducked into the doorway of a magic shop. She pulled a bottle of K-Y from the back pocket of her jeans and squirted some on her fingers. Sucking in, she squeezed a hand inside her skin-tight pants and lubed up. She did a little dance, rubbing it in. A trick of the trade. *Oh, I am so wet for you, baby.* Although most guys weren't looking to pole her these days. They were too afraid of AIDS or too klutzy to get inside her standing up. So they went for the mouth music.

With the grease between her legs, Elonda flipped her hair back and listened to the rap of the multicolored beads dotting her corn rows. She tugged on her feathered pink tube top until the black crescents of her nipples peeked through. Finally, she popped a wintergreen mint on her tongue. Another little trick. Guys loved the cool burn of the mint in her warm mouth.

She eased back onto the sidewalk and scoped out the street, looking for competition. But she was alone, just her and the bad boy. The lights of the Strip shone like fire across the freeway. On this side of I-15, where casinos spilled over from Las Vegas Boulevard like an overflowing box of popcorn, the Gold Coast and Rio shimmered on the north side of the street, and the Oasis tower loomed a block away. But where she was, Flamingo was dark, nothing but an empty lot and the old cinder-block magic shop butting up to the street.

Elonda leaned her shoulders against the shop window, her hips jutting out, and casually nibbled on one painted nail. Letting a slow smile creep onto her face, she turned her head and drank him in. He was headed right for her, his feet trampling on nudie brochures littering the street. No hesitation. This wasn't his first time.

As he got closer, her eyes narrowed. He looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. He wasn't a regular – she hadn't done him before. But she began to think she recognized his face, maybe from one of the tabloids. Behind the shades, it was hard to tell. But Elonda studied him long and hard, because a celebrity paying for sex from a Vegas hooker might be worth some serious cash from someone.

He stopped right next to her. 'Hey.'

His voice was young and carefree. Bored. Slurred.

'Hey yourself.' Elonda reached out and slid a finger inside his shirt, making a circle on his chest. 'Don't I know you, baby?'

'You ever been to Iowa?' he asked.

A hick with a familiar face, she thought. Damn. 'A lot of cows and corn there, right? And shit on your shoes? No thanks.'

Elonda cast her eyes up and down the street, looking for Metro patrol cars. The traffic came and went – Hummers, limos, pickups, beaters – but there was no one who would hassle her. A block away, near the Oasis, she spotted a man standing by a bus stop, looking bored, checking his watch. In the other direction, no one at all. The coast was clear.

'Suck or fuck?' she asked.

He didn't answer, but stuck out his tongue and flicked it at her. She smelled gin wafting from his mouth. Elonda gave him a price, and he dug out two crumpled bills from his pocket. She laid her palm on his chest and nudged him backward into the doorway of the magic shop. Elonda got on her knees and unzipped him. She glanced up. His eyes were closed. She saw a couple days' worth of yellow stubble on his chin.

She began counting in her head. That was her little game,

something to pass the time, like the office workers who listened to their iPods while they typed all day. One, two, three, four. No guy had ever made it to one hundred. Most didn't make it to ten.

He took a few seconds to stiffen. That was the gin, she figured. But she worked her magic, and his body responded. She heard a low rumble in his throat, a purr of pleasure. When she glanced up from her work, she saw his mouth had fallen open.

Thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four.

He was already close. She could feel his hips moving, starting to thrust, and she sucked harder and moved her head faster.

Thirty-nine.

Elonda heard something clip-clop nearby, the sound of heavy boots on the sidewalk. Someone was heading their way from the casino. She looked up again, but the farm boy was already on another planet, and he didn't hear a thing. Clip-clop, clip-clop. She didn't really care. She got peeped all the time and heard the shocked whispers from people who secretly wished she was on her knees in front of them. If he looked their way, let him enjoy the show.

Forty-five, forty-six. The farm boy was getting ready to blow.

The tapping of the boots came up directly behind her in the doorway, and then they stopped right there. Elonda heard a rustle of fabric and a strange metallic click. The john's eyes were still closed, and he moaned loudly.

It was creepy, that man standing behind her, watching them. She got a bad feeling. The hairs on her neck pricked up, and she knew he was still there, even though she couldn't even hear him breathing. She could feel his eyes. A cloud of

menace engulfed her. It was the kind of sixth sense you got after enough time on the street.

Elonda let the man's shaft slip from her mouth. She bit her lip and looked up, but she wasn't going to look back, not for anything. Immediately, the john's eyes snapped open, his lips twisting into an angry scowl. Then she watched as he spotted the stranger behind her.

'What the—'

His anger became slack-jawed surprise. His eyes widened. She saw his face register disbelief.

Then he didn't have a face any more.

The loudest sound Elonda had ever heard detonated in her ears like the cap being blown off a volcano. The farm boy sprouted a third eye, and his head fell forward, so she could stare right at him and see up into the hole burrowed into his skull, a red river pouring out of it. As she watched, he crumpled into a pile and collapsed on top of her, pinning her to the ground. Blood streamed over her, rippling like worms across her skin and seeping into her clothes. She smelled urine and shit as his bowels evacuated.

Finally, Elonda remembered to scream. She closed her eyes and unleashed a screeching yell that went on and on until she ran out of breath. No one seemed to hear. None of the traffic stopped. All she heard was the sound of footsteps again, going away now, heading back down the street as casually as they had arrived. Clip-clop, clip-clop.