

At the end of a long dirt driveway, a large barn sits nestled on a hillside surrounded by cornfields. Despite its size, a line of trees manages to obscure it from the rare motorist passing by on the deserted country road that runs closest to it. A lone car is parked near the door, the only thing betraying the outward appearance of quiet desolation.

Inside the barn, Nikki surveys her surroundings, absently running her fingers through her mane of wild dark hair. The sleeve of her black t-shirt rises to expose the tattoos that run up and down her arm. This is not the type of meeting place she is used to. The entire barn is filled with an abundance of heavy machinery and broken-down vehicles. Old cars sit with their hoods up and spare parts are scattered about. Farm equipment lies dormant in various states of disrepair. Nikki sighs. Definitely not the usual meeting place. She pulls a cell phone from her back pocket and begins flipping through her messages as the door to the barn opens.

The man who enters is a rough-looking, medium-built muscle man. He glances around the room, his eyes moving from car to truck to car, before settling on Nikki. His gaze follows the curve of her tight black jeans up to the tattoos that slither along her forearm and across her bicep. She looks up from her phone and tosses her hair from her eyes, giving him one glance before continuing about her business. The man smiles. This one looks dangerous.

“What’s your name?” the man asks as he saunters up next to Nikki.

“Does it matter?” she responds, not even looking up from her phone.

The man shrugs. “I guess not. But I need to call you something.” He slides closer. “Will ‘Sexy Lady’ work?”

Nikki’s jaw tenses as she feels his eyes crawling up and down her body. She resists the urge to look at him, hoping he will sense her irritation and move along. “I’m here for a job,” she says.

A perverted grin spreads across the man’s face. “Oh, I got a job in mind for you.” He reaches out to touch her, attempting to brush the hair back from her eyes. Before he can even react, Nikki grabs him by the wrist and violently twists his arm behind his back. She forces him against a truck, maintaining control of his wrist. “Not interested,” she hisses in his ear.

The man laughs, not taking the obvious hint. "So, you like it rough, just like me?" As Nikki tries to put more pressure on his arm, he kicks backward, using his strength to power out of her grasp. He turns toward Nikki and smiles, obviously enjoying the challenge.

With her adversary loose and seemingly looking for a fight, Nikki unleashes a punch and kick combination. The man manages to get his arm up to block the punch, but Nikki's kick catches him solidly in the ribs. He staggers back against the truck, his sly smile melting into a violent sneer. Before Nikki can set herself in a defensive position, the man is on her. He lifts her off her feet, slamming her down on the hood of an old car next to them. He pounces on top of her, straddling her waist as she attempts to kick him off. Nikki's struggling only seems to excite him more.

"You know you love it," the man grunts as he tightens his grip around Nikki's neck. Desperate, she draws her knees up between them and kicks him back. He tumbles to the floor as Nikki quickly rolls sideways off the hood onto her feet. Before she can make a move to get away, he is on her again. He tackles her from behind, and they crash to the ground with him on top and Nikki face-down on the cold cement floor.

As Nikki frantically struggles to throw him off her back, something catches her eye under the car next to them. Even in her frantic state, Nikki is able to make out a rusted screwdriver with a cracked plastic handle laying in a pool of oil beneath the car. Resisting her opponent's attempt to turn her over, Nikki stretches her arm to its limit, her fingertips brushing the screwdriver and sliding it ever-so-slightly closer. With a desperate lunge, she is able to grasp the handle and quickly draw it toward her. Nikki's preoccupation with procuring her weapon allows her attacker to roll her over onto her back. His glee at achieving his objective is rapidly dashed as Nikki violently drives the screwdriver into his neck. The man gasps in shock as blood begins gushing around the plastic handle where the tool is buried in his throat. Nikki kicks him off of her, his back slamming up against a truck before he collapses to the ground. Not giving him a chance to dislodge the screwdriver, Nikki jumps to her feet and begins beating on him. Even as she rains blows on his head, the man struggles to his feet and finally manages to grip the handle of the screwdriver, now slick with his own blood. Nikki stops her barrage of punches, grabbing both of his hands to prevent his attempt to remove the tool and countering by

thrusting it in further. As blood begins bubbling from her opponent's lips, she kicks his legs over and over until they give out. With a gurgle of pain, he falls to the floor, barely breathing. As his hands go limp, Nikki finally slides the screwdriver from his neck, a crimson jet spurting from the wound.

"Is that rough enough for you?!" she bellows, gripping the screwdriver with both hands and raising it above her head. Losing any last remnant of control, she stabs the weapon down repeatedly into his back, his legs violently kicking at each blow. As his involuntary spasms finally cease, Nikki drives the screwdriver into her opponent for the last time, leaving it embedded solidly in his spine. Exhausted, Nikki slumps against the bumper of a truck as a pool of blood forms beneath the dead man.

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Outside, a car eases into a spot in front of the barn. Ken steps out of the passenger side, tilting back the brim of his fedora as he looks up at the giant structure that stands before him. He is well-dressed in a sport coat and button-down shirt, his expensive shoes looking out of place on the dusty driveway. "Did you bring Nikki in on this job?" he asks, eyes still trained on the front of the barn.

The driver exits the car and looks at Ken apprehensively. Duke is pretty much Ken's polar opposite. His long hair is pulled back in a ponytail and his scraggly beard hangs halfway down his chest. He wears a black leather jacket over a heavy metal t-shirt and his dusty boots perfectly match the driveway. "Look, man. I know you two don't get along...."

"She nearly got us killed on the last job. The time before that, she almost got us arrested. Not getting along is the least of my worries," Ken grumbles, slamming the car door.

Duke raises his hands, acknowledging Ken's point of view. "I know, I know. She can go a little overboard sometimes..."

"Overboard?" Ken looks at Duke wide-eyed. "She's a loose cannon who's gonna get us killed."

"I get it. But, I owe her. She's helped me out in the past." Duke sighs and closes the driver's side door. "It'll be fine. I'll keep her in line."

Ken scowls. “Alright.” A relieved smile starts to spread across Duke’s face, but it is quickly halted when Ken looks him dead in the eye. “But if she steps out of line again, I’ll take her out myself.”

Duke nods grimly and motions toward the entrance. Ken reluctantly follows him to the door. As they enter the barn, Duke smiles nervously. “It’s just a simple protection job. What kind of trouble could she get into?”

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“Oh, shit...,” Ken mutters, removing his hat and running his fingers through his hair. Having entered the barn, the two men stand incredulous at the carnage before them.

“Hey, fellas.” Nikki, still seated on the floor next to the body and an ever-expanding pool of blood, smiles at her partners. She gives them a slight wave, wiggling her blood-stained fingers. Duke, mouth wide open, starts to say something, then stops, remaining speechless.

“What the hell did you do?” Ken asks, staring in disbelief at the dead man. He starts to look up at Nikki, then does a double-take. “Is that a screwdriver?”

“He started it,” Nikki finally gets to her feet, wiping her bloody hands on her jeans.

“I don’t care who started it! We’re here for a job!” Ken shouts. “Are you crazy?”

“You didn’t see what he did to me!” Nikki shouts back.

“I don’t care!” Ken and Nikki step face to face and begin arguing, their angry voices blending into a violent cacophony that echoes throughout the barn.

As the argument continues, Duke is absently stroking his beard, thoughts racing through his mind. He finally snaps out of his trance and turns to Nikki and Ken. “Hold on,” he says. But, his partners, preoccupied with their screaming match, don’t acknowledge him. “Hold on,” he repeats, a

bit louder. But the screaming continues.

“Wait!” Duke shouts, stepping into the fray and throwing an arm between them. The disagreement ends as Nikki and Ken’s attention snaps to Duke. Their faces are still contorted in rage, but finally silent.

“Who is this guy?” Duke asks. Nikki and Ken look at the body, then back to Duke, neither offering an answer. “We’re supposed to be meeting the client. They hired the three of us. No one else is supposed to be here.”

Ken’s eyes widen. “Are you telling me she may have just killed our client?”

“I don’t know. All I know is the client was named Joe Dinalli,” Duke answers, a look of dread coming over his face. “From the Dinalli family. As in Don Dinalli.”

Ken’s eyes get even wider. “Are you telling me she may have just killed a Dinalli?”

“Who’s Don Dinalli?” Nikki asks.

Ken’s eyes look like they will roll out of his head. “Are you kidding me?”

Duke raises his hand, attempting to calm the situation and offer Nikki an explanation. “The Dinalli family pretty much has a hand in every racket in the city. And Don runs the family. He’s also...” Duke pauses, as if searching for an eloquent way to describe him before giving up. “...one sick bastard.”

“Don Dinalli once spent an entire day torturing an accountant he believed to have stolen from him,” Ken recounts, grimly. “After he finally shot the guy in the head, an assistant informed him he had the wrong guy. Know what Don said? He said, ‘I got another bullet. Find me the right guy’.”

Duke offers his own morbid example. “Don once buried his personal chef alive because the guy undercooked a steak. The chef’s standing in a pit, screaming ‘I swear it was well-done.’ Don’s just standing above him, tossing shovelfuls of dirt and saying ‘Not to my liking...not to my liking...’” Duke shudders as he finishes the story.

Nikki's gaze slowly moves from one partner's worried eyes to the other before settling on the bloody body before her.

She sighs. "Oh shit..."

"Give me a minute to think about this," Duke says, nervously wringing his hands. Ken stands nearby, scratching his head and silently debating their options himself. He slowly removes his jacket, calmly folds it, and places it on the hood of the truck next to him.

"I've thought about it," Ken announces. "I don't see any way we can explain our way out of this. So, the way I see it, I might as well be able to tell Don Dinalli I took out the member of my team who took out a member of his family." His eyes meet Nikki's for a split second before he suddenly lunges at her.

Ken manages to grab Nikki's arm, but she throws a kick to his stomach that allows her to wriggle out of his grasp. Ken drops to a knee, the wind knocked from his lungs. She races to the other side of the truck where she is met by Duke, who grabs her from behind in a bear hug.

"Whoa. Let's discuss this. I know you guys don't get along, but..." Before Duke can finish his sentence, Nikki drives the back of her head into Duke's face. He staggers back and releases his grip, grabbing his bloody nose. "I guess we don't get along either," he mutters, trying to put his broken nose back into place as Nikki takes off toward the door.

Nikki doesn't get far before she is cornered by Ken, who has recovered from the shot to his gut. She fires several punches and kicks at him, but his anger-fueled adrenaline allows him to shrug them off. He goes right for her throat with both hands, dragging her across the floor and pushing her back up against the side of an old motor home. Nikki digs her fingers into Ken's arms, but he still manages to pick her up by the neck, her feet now flailing several inches off the ground. She struggles to place a kick to his groin, but he is too close for it to be effective. She throws several kicks to the side of his body, but he manages to hold her in place. Desperate, Nikki claws at his face, attempting to drive her fingers into his eyes. Infuriated, Ken lets out a massive scream and attempts to crush her windpipe. Nikki's eyes roll back as the consciousness seeps from her body.

Suddenly, a gunshot goes off behind them, the sound echoing throughout the inside of the barn. Ken is jolted back to reality. He looks over his shoulder to see a well-dressed woman and a man in a suit standing inside the door. The man is holding a smoking gun.

“Explain yourselves!” the woman demands.

Ken lowers Nikki to her feet, releasing his hands from her throat and raising them above his head. She slumps to the ground, gasping for air. Duke stumbles over to join them. Removing his fingers from his bloody nostrils, he also raises his hands and attempts to offer an explanation.

“We were here to meet a client. There was a problem,” he admits. “He died.”

“The client? Who?” the lady asks.

Duke points to the body. “We never met before. I just knew the name. Joe Dinalli.”

The man with the smoking gun points to the lady next to him. “This is Jo Dinalli.”

“Short for Josephine,” the lady explains. She gestures to the corpse. “I see you met Vinny. My brother Don asked me to bring him in on this job. Just between you and me, I think he’s a piece of garbage.” She looks at Nikki. “I take it he got a little fresh with you.”

Nikki nods, her breathing finally beginning to return to normal.

Jo shrugs. “It was bound to happen eventually. No big loss if you ask me.”

Duke smiles nervously. “Oh. Well, I guess there’s no problem then.”

Jo slowly shakes her head and points to the three of them. “Except for the fact that all of you might be too incompetent for this job. I just walked in on the three of you trying to kill each other. How do I know you will be able to work together?”

Duke steps forward, one hand returned to his bloody nose and the other on his chest in a gesture of respect. "I promise you, Ms. Dinalli. We can work together. I give you my word."

Jo ponders his offer for a moment, appearing somewhat reluctant, but then smiles. "I guess killer instinct is a quality I look for in my employees. Alright. Let's go." She and the man in the suit turn to leave, motioning for them to follow. As she reaches the door, she turns back. "But, if I notice any one of you acting unprofessionally, I may have to notify my brother." The three new hires nod silently.

As their employer exits the barn, Nikki jumps to her feet and shoves Ken in the back, apparently not finished with their feud. Ken returns the favor, pushing her back against the motor home. The shoving quickly stops when they hear Josephine's voice call from outside. "Get rid of that body!"

Their physical violence halted, but still angrily glaring at each other, Nikki and Ken head over to the lifeless corpse. Duke watches uneasily as his two partners struggle to pick up the body, still bickering under their breath. He sighs.

As he follows them from the barn, Duke mumbles to himself, "Oh, shit."