

Whiskey Sour



Fiction by Jeffrey Harrison

Nico took a last drag off his Marlboro and then flicked it into the gutter, before entering Club Noir. It was just after noon, hours before any patrons would be showing up for the glamorous nightlife it proudly offered. He sidled silently up to the bar, where his sister Selma sat, but after a moment realized she was too enthralled with the dance rehearsal taking place on stage to notice he'd arrived. She'd been like this all month, staring at the lead showgirl with heat in her eyes and a smile that Nico recognized all too well: Selma had her mind set on getting something that she wanted and nothing would stand in her way. Her blatant hunger for the female dancer was heinous!

With a final glance, Nico turned away from his sister in disgust, moved down to the shadowy end of the bar and signaled Hal, the bartender. He needed a hair of the dog to clear the sour taste in his mouth that had nothing to do with last night's bout of drinking.

"The usual, Nic?" Hal asked, flicking open his Zippo with single deft hand and lighting the new cigarette Nico had just placed between his lips.

"Yeah, make it a double. Day's not starting out great," he grunted.

Hal complied without hesitation; Nico's foul moods were to be avoided. There was a heated electricity in the Italian's dark eyes and he looked to be itching for a fight. As soon as the shot was poured, Nico snapped it back. The fiery liquid detonated in his gut, sending out heady fumes that woke him up. Better than coffee! The moment his tumbler thudded back down on the worn wooden bar, another was poured for him.

Clinking his gold pinkie ring, the one with the flashing ruby, against the glass, he looked over the man standing across from him. Hal was a beefy guy, but it was all rock solid muscle. The way he moved his broad shouldered body spoke of coordination, awareness of self and space. Nico admired the agility in the way he flicked the clean glassware from out of the small rotating dishwasher and back up to hang from the racks above the bar. Hal was a fighter—he'd proven himself that in the ring many nights this past month. It was a skill that was making Nico some nice cash.

Watching him go about his mundane tasks, Nico caught himself staring at how the material of the crisp white shirt strained over bulging biceps with each movement, how impossible it seemed the sleeves



were able to be rolled up over the thick forearms covered in dark hair, and the way the buttons strained over his chest, threatening to pop off and expose more of his hairy pecs. Unsettling thoughts pushed at the back of Nico's mind and he flicked his eyes away from the flexing arms, instead meeting the man's eyes, which were a startling green, jumping out from beneath black eyebrows. Hal caught his glance and smiled. Nico hastily swigged back his forgotten drink, shoving the dirty, unwanted thoughts of the bartender away and focusing again on his anger at his sister. He *would not* be like *her*!

"Here," he said, pushing a fat white envelope discreetly across the bar as another double of amber liquid was poured into his glass. "Your cut from last night."

"Thanks." Hal took the package and, after a moment's realization it was too bulky to fit in his pocket, jammed it down the front of his pants. Nico's hunger was re-ignited as he watched the white paper packet disappear below Hal's belt, watched as his thick fingers and thumb vanished momentarily from sight behind fitted black cotton to readjust the now sizeable bulge. When Nico looked up, it was into Hal's eyes again. Sweat broke out on Nico's

brow and he jerked his gaze to the stage, downing his refilled drink.

"Careful no one thinks you're packin' heat, 'cuz a package that size can get you in a lot of trouble." The fire from the booze rushed straight to his face this time, as he stumbled to clarify. "Of cash. A package of that size of *cash* can get you into a lot of trouble."

Hal chuckled and poured the Mafioso another. "I'm here until delivery, then I'm off until tonight. Want me to swing by the gym? Maybe we can go over the details of my next fight?"

Nico kept his gaze fixed on the dancers cavorting about on stage. "Yeah, sure, if you want. Come by around five and we'll get you all set up." Feeling back under control, after his momentary loss of it, he nodded toward the stage. "That's one sassy act, ain't it? A dancer like that would be a prize acquisition."

"Sure would," Hal replied, emptying the glass ashtray and giving it a quick polish with his rag before setting it back down on the bar, "if you're into show girls." Nico glanced back at the bartender, and now it was Hal's turn to look away. Was he blushing? "Don't get me wrong, Cherie is something else, but I've always found showgirls a little too high strung for my tastes."

"Oh yeah?" Nico asked, suddenly intrigued. "And what exactly are your tastes?" he pried, the words out of his smart-ass mouth before he could stop them.

Hal met Nico's deep blue eyes and held them this time, each man daring the other to be the first to look away. "I prefer someone solid, down-to-earth. Confident in what they want."

The sudden heat smouldering between the men threatened to boil over as Cherie's number climaxed on stage. The moment was obliterated though, as Selma's old fashioned glass slammed into the bar. "Hal! Another Whiskey Sour!"

"Yes, ma'am," Hal answered and hastened to obey, breaking his gaze with Nico first.

Nico furiously stubbed his smoke out, tossed back the remainder of his drink—including the half melted ice—and stalked out of the bar, angrily crunching on the cubes.

Hal glanced in the mirror behind him after he set down Selma's fresh Whiskey Sour and saw the beads of sweat on his upper lip. So much for playing it cool—he'd almost blown it with Nico. *What the hell was he doing?!*

Months he'd spent working the club for a chance to get some face time with the notorious younger Moretti sibling. The staff at Noir were a tight knit family, so he'd had to start out in the dish-pit, sweating it out in the raunchy back waiting for the opportunity of a staff promotion to come his way. Sure, his buddies on the force had provided the opening by "finding" the stash of cocaine on Marco the second rung bartender. And sure, he was conveniently scheduled to be unloading the day's liquor delivery when the club suddenly found itself short a bartender; however, it had still taken weeks in the new position before Nico had done more than grunt at him.

After nights of small talk over scotch on the rocks, Nico had finally sized him up, playfully grabbed his bicep and asked him if he knew how to throw a punch. Hal cringed at how eager he'd been to join the young Don down at the gym to spar. It had been the break he and the police department had been waiting so long for, is what he told himself at the time. Finally they were getting close to one of the Moretti siblings. Selma had proven impossible to approach, as obsessed as she currently was with

Cherie, the dancer. Nico had been their Plan B, and it was through his sports betting—especially his illegal bare-knuckle pit fights—that proved to be their best in. Things were going exactly as planned, so again, he looked in the gold framed mirror, past the reflected bottles of booze and stared himself hard in the eye: *Had Nico just hit on him? Had he just flirted back? This jeopardized the whole mission! What the hell was he doing?!*

"Yo, delivery's here," said the burly driver, popping his head through the kitchen door just past the bar. Hal nodded and followed the guy out back. A couple hours of mindless grunt work would get his mind back on the job.

At home two hours later, Hal showered the sweat off from unloading Noir's weekly delivery of beer kegs and liquor and then spent the better part of another hour getting ready to meet Nico. He needed to be wired for his chats because there was no telling when the Mafioso would say something they could use as evidence against him. Hal had quickly learned that the normally tight lipped man was quite free with his shop talk when he was at his place of business—the gym. Dancing around the ring sparring, however, left precious little place to put the delicate, but powerful little transmitter. After much experimentation, it was finally set up so the small battery pack nestled at the top of the cleft of his butt, safe from the rigors of the ring, while the mic was threaded through with the drawstring of his shorts and hidden behind the thin material where he knotted them to keep them up. So far it had worked for the most part, no hits below the belt and all, but the rules were pretty much non-existent for fights when the gloves were off. There was no opportunity to fix a mic broken in the ring because of a wild punch. They'd lost a whole post fight chat with Nico the week prior because of just such a calamity.

When Hal arrived at Mickey's, Nico was already suited up and in the ring, waiting for him.

"You're late," Nico said, smacking his gloves together and hopping about on the balls of his feet. "Get him gloved up, Mickey, and let's get this show on the road!"

Hal tossed his bag ringside, unzipped and shucked his threadbare grey hoodie and thrust his hands out for Mickey to slip his gloves on so they could be

laced and taped. Tonight's fight must be something special to have Nico all wound up and eager to get sparring.

"So I think my sister has a thing for that dancer, Cherie," Nico said, immediately throwing an aggressive flurry of jabs at Hal's head, as soon as the bartender had ducked between the ropes and come within striking distance of the lean Mafioso.

"Yeah, I figured so," Hal answered back, dodging the first series of punches and throwing back his own.

"You did, did you?" Nico danced away and Hal mirrored his movement, curious where this unexpected stray topic was headed. "So, what do ya think of that?"

"Don't really think of it at all, I mean live and let live, right? That's always how I've felt." Hal replied, going in for another barrage of blows.

Nico was caught off guard by Hal's response and he took the blows to his abs before finally dropping his gloves to protect himself and dancing away. "Live and let live? Really? That's all you have to say about that?" Nico's return right hook came out of nowhere and popped Hal solidly in the face. He saw stars as he retreated across the room. Nico came fiercely after him. "You have no qualms with my sister wanting to get involved with another woman?" Another salvo of punches chased Hal backwards into the ropes.

"We here to talk about who your sister is interested in bedding, or are we here to talk about us?" Hal huffed, suddenly pressed to keep up his guard.

"Us?!" Nico stopped dead. Before Hal could pull the punch, he clocked Nico hard enough to land the Italian on his ass. The tension in the ring skyrocketed. "What about us?" Nico growled, spitting the blood from his newly split lip across the space between the two fighters.

"Tonight's fight?" Hal replied, momentarily at a loss. "What do we have planned for tonight?"

Nico narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw tightly, grinding his teeth. "The fight. Nothing to talk about. You go in and you win. Like always."

Hal stuck out his gloved hand offering to help Nico back to his feet, to restore some form of peace that seemed suddenly to be shattered. A moment passed with Nico just glaring at him before taking the proffered help and springing back to his feet again. "No specifics?" Hal pressed. "I mean, you

haven't even told me where it's going to be, or who I'm facing."

"Why you always gotta know all the details? Why don't you let me worry about 'em?" Nico barked, clearly agitated now.

"Hey, Nic, I didn't mean to piss you off. I just figured that what your sister is up to isn't really any of my business."

"Well I'm making it your business and I'm asking you—ah, to hell with you—forget it!" Nico spun on his heel and stalked out of the ring, tearing the tape off his gloves with his teeth and shoving Mickey out of his way when the older fighter tried to help him through the ropes and out of the ring.

Not once in the month of sparring, of idle chatter inside the ring and out, had Hal ever seen Nico this worked up. For the first time in his life, Hal was completely at a loss as how to react. It was clear though that something had to be said, because Nico was definitely on the edge of losing it, and that could cost him the whole mission. Hal followed Nico to the change room. He found him furiously punching one of the lockers, bare knuckled, his gloves having been launched across the room into the showers.

When Hal put a gloved hand on Nico's shoulder to try and calm him down, the Mafioso violently spun on him, grabbing him fiercely by the waistband of his shorts to pull him face-to-face with the gun that was suddenly in his hand.

Hal stared into the barrel of the gun. Nico looked down at the wire and battery pack that had torn loose when he'd grabbed Hal's shorts, snapping the drawstring. Hal's shorts hit the tiled floor of the locker room.

"What the fuck?!" both men cried.

Nico looked incredulously at the small transmitter in his hand. "You're a goddamned pig?!" he roared.

A multitude of emotions fought across the handsome Italian's face—none of them good. Fury at being set up, then surprised confusion eating away at the anger until it crumpled into a look of naked hurt. Standing there in his jockstrap, the muzzle of a gun jammed into centre of his forehead, Hal did the only thing that could save both their sanity. *Fuck the mission*, he thought. He kissed Nico Moretti like his life depended on it.

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