

CONTENDER  
BY BRAD HANFORD

Over black, we hear sounds of NICK (mid 20s) punching the hand pads held by his older trainer LAWRENCE.

FADE IN

INT. LOCKER ROOM- NIGHT

We open on a CU of Nick doing exactly that, with a fiery and determined look in his eyes, until he's distracted by the sound of a television on in the corner of the locker room. From the obsolescence of the TV and the reporters onscreen we can tell this is taking place in the 1950s.

TV ANCHOR:

But the most intriguing storyline tonight is that of Nick Pardini, who has taken the boxing world by storm seemingly out of nowhere.

Nick looks at the TV with a bemused wonderment, until Lawrence snaps him back to reality.

LAWRENCE:

Jesus, Nick, that didn't take long.

NICK:

What didn't take long?

LAWRENCE:

I mean, one second I think you're gonna punch me through the wall, the next you're looking at that thing like a little kid.

NICK:

Excuse me, I'm a little excited.

Lawrence looks quizzically at Nick for a moment and laughs.

NICK:

What?

LAWRENCE:

You know what it is with you? It's like you're either way up here, or way down here all the time. Like

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LAWRENCE: (cont'd)  
there's no middle ground. You know  
where the fight happens?

NICK:  
Where?

LAWRENCE:  
Right here.

Lawrence stares and points directly into Nick's eyes.

LAWRENCE:  
Eye level. You ever want to really  
make it, you gotta start seeing  
things clearly, not letting  
everything send you off the rails.  
There's a reason why you protect  
your head, not your gut.

Before Nick can respond, HENRY (mid '20s), his manager and  
best friend, opens the door to the locker room and enters.

HENRY:  
Nick , I need to talk to you about  
something. Can we, uh, have the  
room, Lawrence?

Lawrence looks skeptically at the two of them, then shrugs  
and walks out. As he leaves, two imposing men in suits walk  
in past them, and Lawrence turns and looks at them with a  
deeply worried look on his face.

HENRY:  
Nick, these are associates of Paul  
De Sica.

NICK:  
Who?

HENRY:  
De Sica, you know, he's that guy I  
told you about...

NICK:  
The construction big shot?

GOON #1:  
That's right.

NICK:  
So what do you want from me?

HENRY:  
Easy, Nick.

NICK:  
No, I mean, this is just kind of a  
bad time.

GOON #1:  
We've got an offer for you from Mr.  
De Sica. We think you'd be  
interested.

Nick looks at them suspiciously, clearly becoming aware of  
what's going on.

NICK:  
Well, let's hear it.

GOON #2:  
Look Nick, you've got potential.  
Mr. De Sica knows it, we all know  
it. I mean, you move your feet like  
Baryshnikov, you can take a  
beating, and you've got a reach  
like the fuckin' Statue of Liberty.

NICK:  
Well, I'm very flattered.

GOON #1:  
But listen, Vegas knows about your  
potential too. And they've think  
there's a better chance of you  
beating this kid than of the sun  
coming up tomorrow.

NICK:  
(beat)  
So what's your point?

The two goons look at each other, and prepare to break the tough news to Nick.

GOON #2:

Look, you're going out to your most stacked odds yet. You're a great fighter, one loss isn't gonna kill your future. And this wouldn't just make you a whole lot of money today, it would make you a valuable friend in Mr. De Sica.

The four men sit in silence for a moment, until Nick turns and faces Henry.

NICK:

You let these assholes in here?

HENRY:

Look, Nick...

NICK:

What the fuck is wrong with you?  
What have we always said we'd never do?

GOON #1:

Look Nick, this is always a tough decision to make...

NICK:

No, it's not. I've already made it, and I want you the fuck out of my locker room, because I've got a fight to go win.

The two men look at each other again, and get up to walk out.

GOON #2:

Well, I guess there's nothing more we can do.

GOON #1:

You should just know that you wouldn't be here without Mr. De Sica, and this'll make it hard to

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GOON #1: (cont'd)  
get anywhere else.

NICK:  
I got here by winning fights, and  
that's what I'll keep doing.

GOON #2:  
Whatever you say. We'll leave you  
alone. Just keep in mind that our  
offer is still on the table, you  
have our number.

NICK:  
That wasn't hard for a couple of  
tough guys like you.

GOON #1:  
We're not tough, Nick. We don't  
have to be.

The two men leave and Nick and Henry are left sitting in the locker room, feeling defeated despite their rebuffing of the offer. Nick is staring intently at Henry, clearly feeling betrayed.

HENRY:  
Look, Nick...

Nick abruptly rises and flings open the locker room door. We follow him down the hall outside until he goes into the bathroom.

He paces around the room angrily, until eventually he lashes out and punches the bathroom mirror with his gloved hand, shattering it.

He stands with both hands on the sink under the mirror facing down, then looks into his broken reflection. He's interrupted by the voice of Lawrence.

LAWRENCE:  
(O.S.)  
I bet they told you it wouldn't  
matter.

NICK:  
(turning around)  
What?

LAWRENCE:  
I bet they said it would just be a  
bump in the road, you'd get past  
it.

NICK:  
Of course they did.

LAWRENCE:  
Well, don't believe it. I've been  
doing this a long time, you know,  
I've seen this shit before. You  
don't come back from doing this.  
Yeah, maybe you only lost one  
fight, but now you're the kind of  
fighter that takes dives. It  
doesn't matter if you're the next  
Marciano. You're not in business  
for yourself anymore. You're  
workin' for them.

Nick looks Lawrence in the eyes for the first time in this exchange, then looks back at his reflection. He takes a deep breath and walks out.

He walks back down towards the locker room, and we see Lawrence looking worriedly at him. Nick enters the locker room, where Henry is still seated.

HENRY:  
Look, Nick, it's fine that you  
don't want to do this, it's great.  
I never should have brought those  
fuckin' punks in here.

Nick sits down, looks at his feet, and sighs deeply.

NICK:  
You know what Lawrence just said to  
me?

HENRY:

What?

NICK:

He just told me that you don't come back from taking a dive. It doesn't matter that it's just one loss on my record, it makes me a loser for life.

HENRY:

Well, good, then don't do it.

Nick's head snaps up and he looks directly at Henry.

NICK:

Christ, don't you get what that means?

HENRY:

What?

NICK:

It means I've gotten as far as I'm gonna.

HENRY:

What are you talkin' about?

NICK:

Look. These guys, these fixers, they know what they're doing. They come to you with this on the fight they can make the most on. If they thought I was gonna keep going, they would have waited 'til they could cash in bigger.

HENRY:

Nick, come on, you're a shoo-in against that little-

NICK:

(interrupting)

Yeah, I am. I'll win *this* fight. But I'll make an enemy of all these assholes. And they obviously don't

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(cont'd)

think I can make it without them.

HENRY:

Well what the fuck do they know?

NICK:

*They know.*

(beat)

You still have their number?

HENRY:

Jesus, Nick, you're lookin' at this like a fixer, not like a fighter.

NICK:

(angrily)

No, I'm lookin' at this the way you should be, OK? Eye level. That's where I'm lookin'.

Just then, a phone rings on the wall of the locker room. Henry walks over and picks it up.

HENRY:

Yeah, it's me. No, Henry. Nick Pardini's manager.

He looks at Nick.

HENRY:

Nick?

He nods dejectedly.

HENRY:

Yeah, we'll do it. OK.

Henry hangs up the phone and sits back down.

HENRY:

It's weird, it's like they didn't even know it was me.

Nick looks at Henry, then turns and looks at his reflection in the intact mirror on the locker room door. We see the reflection come to some sort of realization. He then snaps back to Henry and starts laughing.

HENRY:

What?

NICK:

Jesus, we're acting like some type of fuckin' rubes here.

HENRY:

What do you mean?

NICK:

Look, why do you think they left so easily? Why do you think they didn't know who was calling?

HENRY:

I don't know, they're morons?

NICK:

They never fucking expected us to take the deal. They think we're smarter than that, that I'm better than that. They just wanted to put the idea in my head, I mean, they came 10 goddamn minutes before the fight. They thought it would fuck with my head, that I would lose because of it.

HENRY:

(picking it up)

Then they could get you more easily.

NICK:

Exactly. I mean, Christ, this was just a fuckin' shakedown. They didn't even think we would crack!

HENRY:

But I already told them we would throw it, I mean, there's gonna be

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HENRY: (cont'd)

hell to pay if you go out there and win that fight.

NICK:

Then I guess it's a good thing it's not them I'm fighting.

HENRY:

Look, are you sure you aren't just kinda going crazy here? I mean, no offense, but you kind of have a history of that.

NICK:

Hey, I might put it through a lot, but my head still works.

Another knock comes at the door, and Henry goes to open it. It's the same Boxing Official.

BOXING OFFICIAL:

Time to go.

Nick gets up and walks out the door and down the hall, the opposite way he went towards the bathroom. We end on him walking down this hall and into the arena.

FADE OUT

THE END