

Running for Cover:

Historical Crime Novel

Man in the Middle: Book Two

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It's A Killer When A Law Breaks All The Rules

CHAPTER 1: SKIN IN THE GAME

Club Royale and Faust Avenue, Detroit, January 1928

Allen Nieber had a poker game to lose. His nerves played the pianola up and down his spine. Forcing his features into a neutral expression, he took comfort in familiar surroundings—a private suite in Club Royale. The plush space boasted a thick turkey red carpet, upholstered armchairs, mahogany paneled walls, and a domed ceiling.

Through a fog of cigarette smoke, Nieber scrutinized the other men at the baize-topped table. Blank expressions all. Poker perfect. He began to relax.

A *Detroit News* crime reporter, a recent assignment required him to play in numerous gambling dens, ranging from the opulence of Club Royale to the sleaze of speakeasy's back rooms, all operated by criminal gangs. Already adept at poker, Nieber sharpened his skills to a finer point and wrote a series of popular front-page articles. *Sans his byline*. This anonymity was meant to protect him from dangerous characters, but it irked him. The pile of cash he won softened his irritation, especially as his boss, the city editor, never asked for an accounting of his winnings.

Tonight poker wasn't really the point. He'd lose big without anyone suspecting it was intentional. Except the two people, make it three, who were already in the know. His stomach muscles tightened.

His ploy might or might not have the desired effect, but the die was cast over a year ago when he'd finagled a meeting with the Purple Gang, Detroit's dominant, ruthless criminal organization. Nieber wanted their leader, Abe Bernstein, as a source. Driven to capture all the hottest front-page stories possible, he planned to supplement his cadre of law enforcement sources with insider information from this top criminal. It worked. For a time. He couldn't think about that now.

Waiting for the dealer to call the next round, players smoked and tiddled their beverage of choice. Nieber gazed at the butt ends of six Chesterfields in his ashtray. And the evening was young. He'd lost track of his consumption of bourbon but had the fortune to be a tall, solidly built, twenty-five-year-old with a high tolerance for alcohol.

All but one player around the table were carousing pals from both his and competing newspapers. Nieber had even invited James McGee, his arch-rival at the *Detroit Free Press*, to round out the table with guys he knew. A club employee invited the one player he didn't know, expressly to witness him losing on a grand scale.

"Mr. Nieber, may I get you another drink?" This from Carswell, an important fixture at the club who knew his preference for Old Granddad's Bourbon. Nieber nodded and shot him a warm smile. He liked and admired Carswell. He was cultured, kind, and capable.

While Carswell refreshed the drinks of the other players, Nieber cast a surreptitious glance at the guy who held the key to his gambit's success. He looked and dressed the part hoped for: short, slight of build, attired in a wide-shouldered, pin-striped navy suit and silk tie: the universal uniform of gangsters' a' la Al Capone. Nieber sucked in a breath. If this guy ran to Abe

Bernstein with news of his significant poker losses—then a whole new game would begin. One he needed to win.

Nieber brought his attention back to the table. A player sent him a sly smile. He responded with a curt nod to a pal who'd won a lot of dough off him. This was followed by McGee's brash, affected Irish tones directed at him. "So, boyo, how much will I win from ya tonight? Word is you're on a bad losing streak."

Nieber ignored the barb. McGee trying to get under his skin might inadvertently help sell the image of him as a degenerate gambler to his target player. Nieber wanted tonight to be the last time he'd have to throw a game. Though it had been his idea, he hated losing. But he owed a certain homicide detective for covering up the true story behind the death of his best friend.

Something was holding up the play. He tried to catch the eye of their dealer: Nicholas "Nicky" Nutter. He looked like a tough, which he was. He was also a professional and dressed the part: white shirt, patterned vest, black trousers, arm garters, bow tie, and the requisite green eye shade. Nieber knew him well and Nutter was an important part of the bamboozle he was running.

In a booming baritone, Nutter said, "New hand, gentlemen, and may the cards be kind to you." He often uttered these little homilies between rounds. He shuffled a new deck with such speed it sounded like a zipper being pulled.

As cards were dealt, the door to the suite opened. In walked Nieber's good friend, a trim, handsome man in a custom-tailored suit with arresting green cat-eyes. Charles McNamara.

McNamara went by Chink. No one knew why though Nieber made several attempts to find out. And struck out every time. Frustrating for an investigative reporter. Club Royale was

Chink's baby. He turned it into a first-class establishment in a city boasting several swank clubs for drinking, dancing, and gambling. On a lower order, there were untold numbers of speakeasies and blind pigs. In a recent article, Nieber reported there were about 25,000 spots to get a drink in Detroit. Some were shocked by the number. Others considered it low.

Prohibition might be the law, but it didn't rule.

Nieber peered at his new hand. His insides twisted. He couldn't believe it. Until this moment his cards had him on a solid losing streak. He was deep in the red and they weren't hearts and diamonds. Something had gone wrong. A game changer. Damn it.

He dared to examine his cards again. Four Kings. Cards he'd normally kill for. Now they were a live grenade. Nutter screwed up somehow. Nieber's right hand drifted to rub his temple. A tell. Shit. Beads of sweat covered the back of his neck. He had to do something. Fast.

What he did shocked him as much as everyone else. Leaning forward, he raised his powerful right arm and swept it across the table. To immediate effect. Cards and chips flew in all directions. Some bounced, others dropped straight to the floor. Half-filled glasses of amber liquid flipped over, soaking the table, and dousing two players.

Nieber surveyed his handiwork. Carnage.

The first reaction was a wave of stunned silence. Then the room erupted with cries of disbelief and oaths of outrage. Three players jumped up from their seats. One sat motionless, too stunned to move. McGee pointed a shaking finger. "What the hell, Nieber?"

Chink McNamara shot arrows of anger at him, throwing Nieber out of a momentary trance. He catapulted up, knocking his chair backwards. It hit the floor with a resounding crash. In a voice he didn't recognize, he yelled, "I'm out!"

“Yes, you are. Out of my club.” This from Chink, his eyes flashing. “Gentlemen, I apologize for Mr. Nieber. We’ll clean up and resume a new game shortly. Drinks on the house.”

Chink directed a hard look at Nutter. “Get him out of here. Now.”

Nieber’s lip twisted. “Sorry...”

Before he could say more, two pairs of hands grabbed him. Nutter and Carswell pulled him toward the door and none too gently. Nutter’s grip was rough and unyielding. Carswell grasped him with more gentility, in keeping with his nature and station.

In quick time, and for all to see, Nieber was hauled out of the suite and manhandled through the club. This was the bum’s rush and it hurt to the depths of his soul. The next thing he knew he was flung out the door, landing on his left side on the unforgiving, snow-packed ground.

“Damn.” Splayed on the sidewalk, his heart beat like a kettle drum. He tried to focus his roiling brain. He had to think. Nothing. Pain shot from his left shoulder to his leg and circled back. Courtesy of Nutter. Thanks, big fellow.

He sat up. His head cleared. A little. There was his automobile. Not far. He could make it. He tried to stand. Failed twice. Calling on his reserves, he regained his feet and stumbled toward his Model T. The hitch in his gait caused by a childhood accident was more pronounced than usual. Small wonder. He grimaced and patted his jacket, grunting when he felt the presence of car keys.

As he reached his vehicle, a hand touched his shoulder. He swiveled around. Carswell. Holding his black wool overcoat. “Mr. McNamara asked me to drive you home. It’s freezing. Let me help you on with your coat. We’ll sort out your automobile in the morning.”

Nieber stared at Carswell as though he'd never seen him before. He shivered and held his arms out for his coat. When the sleeve connected with his left arm, he winced. Carswell opened the passenger door of Chink's Cadillac Touring Car and Nieber melted into the soft leather upholstery. Thrusting his right hand into his sweat-dampened blond hair, he tried to think of something to say. Nothing.

Must have hit his head on the pavement.



Cruising along at a comfortable speed, Carswell broke the silence. "You all right, Mr. Nieber?"

"No, yes, I don't know. Rough night."

"Indeed, sir."

Nieber's brain popped back into place. "Carswell, we know each other too well for you to call me sir. And after tonight. Well."

Completing a left-hand turn, Carswell responded. "Anything broken, should we detour to the hospital?"

"No hospital. Just bruised."

"As you wish. You know my boss only did what he had to, under the circumstances. Feels bad about it."

"Tell him I understand, will you?"

A few minutes later Carswell asked, "What's the address of your father's house on Faust?" Nieber recited it. This might have seemed an odd question, but Carswell knew he lived

with his father and would until his upcoming marriage. Reaching the house, Carswell turned around to face him. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Tell Chink what I said. Could have driven home but thanks for the lift.”

“Happy to do it.”

Nieber climbed out of the back seat, favoring his left arm. He closed the door and tapped it to signal he was good-to-go. Carswell drove off.

Standing in his driveway, Nieber fought a strangling pressure in his chest. It eased with the realization his father’s car wasn’t in the driveway. He wasted no time climbing the stairs and downing three aspirin. Removing his coat and shoes, he flopped onto his bed begging for the oblivion of sleep. But nagging pain in his left side gave slumber a run for its money. The question rolling around in his head didn’t help.

When would the gangster at the game spill his poker debts to his boss?