

Running For Cover

A Historical Crime Novel

Man in the Middle: Book Two

by Claudia N. Oltean

- Prohibition Is The Law, But It Doesn't Rule -

CHAPTER 1: SKIN IN THE GAME

Club Royale and Faust Avenue, Detroit, January 1928

Nerves played the pianola up and down Allen Nieber's spine. He forced his features into a neutral expression and took comfort in his surroundings—a private poker suite in Club Royale. The plush space boasted a thick turkey red carpet, upholstered armchairs for the players, paneled walls, and a high domed ceiling. He focused on his why he was here this night. His nerves settled.

Though Nieber has played more rounds of poker here than he could count, he was breaking the law, albeit in style. Detroit, like all major cities in this time, provided gambling in venues up and down the scale from Club Royale opulence to the sleaze of a speakeasy's back room. Poker players ranged from gentleman to degenerate gamblers. In truth, Nieber was of the gentleman class, but his evening, and for an important cause, he was acting the part of an out-of-control, desperate player.

Through a fog of cigarette smoke, he scrutinized the other men at the baize-topped table. Blank expressions all. Poker perfect. Their only tell was the acrid odor of male sweat. High-stakes players often perspire.

A *Detroit News* crime reporter, Nieber wasn't most poker players. A recent news assignment required him to gamble in numerous illegal dens, most operated by the criminal gangs. Already adept at poker, he sharpened his skills to a finer point and wrote a series of highly

praised front-page articles. *Sans his byline*. This anonymity was meant to protect him from the ire of dangerous characters but, as usual, it irked him. The pile of cash he won on that assignment assuaged his irritation, especially as his boss, the city editor, never asked for an accounting or return of his winnings.

That was in the past. Tonight's game was outside his crime beat. Far outside. Poker wasn't really the point. He was here to lose big without anyone suspecting it was intentional. Except the two people, make that three, who were already in the know. His stomach clenched.

He wasn't sure his ploy would have the desired effect, but the die had been cast the night over a year ago when he'd finagled a meeting with the Purple Gang, Detroit's most ruthless criminal organization. Nieber wanted them, and especially their leader, Abe Bernstein, as a source. His plan had been to supplement his cadre of law enforcement sources with insider information from top criminals, all in the name of front-page glory. It worked. For a time. He didn't want to think about that now. He had a game to lose.

Waiting for the dealer to call the next round, players smoked and sipped their beverage of choice. Nieber gazed at the butt end 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 of the players around the table were carousing pals from his and competing newspapers. He'd even invited James McGee, his arch-rival at the *Detroit Free Press*, to round out the table with guys he knew. Someone connected to Club Royale had invited the only player he didn't know. To witness him losing on a spectacular scale.

“Mr. Nieber, may I refresh your drink?” This from Carswell, an important fixture at the club, and a person who knew him and his preference for Old Grandad’s Bourbon well.

While Carswell refreshed the drinks of the other players, Nieber cast a surreptitious glance at the guy who held the key to the gambit he was running. He looked and dressed the part Nieber hoped for: short, slight of build, attired in a wide-shouldered, pin-striped navy suit and silk tie: the universal uniform of gangsters’ ala Al Capone. Nieber sucked in a breath. If this guy ran to his boss with news of his significant poker losses—then a whole new game would begin. One he intended 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 loud, 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.” This was McGee trying to get under his skin. Nieber resisted the barb, satisfying himself with a glower at the *Free Press* man.

He hoped this would be the last game he’d have to throw. Though it had been his idea, he hated losing. But he owed a certain cop for covering up the true story behind the death of his best friend.

Speaking of the game, what 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 Nutter dealt the cards, 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 numerous 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 might as well be 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, as if on wings. 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 shocked to move. McGee pointed a shaking finger. “What the fuck, 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 gut clenched. “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. So he could think. He got nothing. It didn’t help when 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 all 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, too.



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 was asked to. Feels bad about it.”

“Tell him I understand, will you?” Nieber liked and admired Carswell. He was cultured, kind, and capable.

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.”

“All part of the service.”

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 two aspirin. Removing only his coat, he flopped onto his bed to invite the oblivion of sleep. But nagging pain in his left side gave slumber a run for its money. The questions rolling around in his head didn’t help.

Did the gangster at the game have a big mouth? He hoped so.