

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, owned by his good friend Charles McNamara. 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 relaxed—a little.

A *Detroit News* crime reporter, a recent assignment had required him to play in numerous gambling dens, ranging from the opulence of Club Royale to the sleaze of speakeasys' back rooms, most operated by criminal gangs. Already adept at poker, Nieber sharpened his skills to a finer point.

Tonight poker wasn't really the point. He'd lose big without anyone suspecting it was intentional. Except the two, make that three, who were already in the know. His stomach muscles tightened. Would his ploy incite Abe Bernstein, leader of the violent Purple Gang, to offer him the same deal he'd turned down the year before—to work for them while continuing his job as a crime reporter? Law enforcement would love him to do this and get enough dirt to successfully prosecute the gang for their many crimes, including murder.

He wouldn't touch this poker scheme with a ten-foot pole if he didn't owe Detroit's chief homicide detective, for keeping quiet about his cover up of the true, regretful circumstances surrounding his best friend's fatal shooting while in the company of the Purple Gang on the Detroit River. Charles McNamara played a major role in the cover up and Nieber was determined to protect him from any repercussions.

Nieber swung his thoughts to the present. His ashtray was stuffed with the butt ends of six Chesterfields. And the evening was young. He'd lost track of his consumption of Old Granddad's 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.

Nieber cast a surreptitious glance at the guy pivotal 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 reported his significant poker losses to Abe Bernstein then a whole new game would begin. One he better win.

One of his fellow players 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 actually help him. For a change.

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 his friend Charles McNamara, a trim, handsome man in a custom-tailored suit with arresting green cat eyes. He was in on the game-within-a-game being played and was bankrolling Nieber as a friend. A wealthy friend.

McNamara went by Chink. No one knew why though Nieber made several attempts to find out. He had turned Club Royale into a first-class establishment among a few others in town. On a lower order, there were untold numbers of speakeasies and blind pigs. In a recent article, Nieber reported there were 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 are 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, Chink's major domo, 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 but 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 and failed. 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. 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 his head didn't help.

How long before the gangster at the game spilled his poker debts to Abe Bernstein?