

CHAPTER 1: THE GAMBLE

Grosse Pointe, Michigan, October 1926

The silent night erupted into the staccato of Tommy guns. Cracking rounds peppered everything in their path, slamming into tall trees at the large property's edge. Somehow, no shots lodged in the soft flesh of the gunmen's target -- Allen Nieber, crime reporter for *The Detroit News*.

Nieber was in this volatile time and place with great purpose. Still proving himself at the newspaper, he wanted an in with Detroit's top gang of bootleggers and racketeers -- the guys the other gangs most feared, the cops couldn't seem to catch, and no witnesses ever testified against. They were known around town and in the press as the Purple Gang. Sure, approaching them without invitation was a risky move, but he had a plan. If it failed, it could see him dead. But not a chance in hell would it fail. He had it all worked out. He hoped.

His first move was to survey the gang's semi-secret home base from across the street. A source had tipped him to the lavish Grosse Pointe estate. Reconnaissance was required -- you couldn't just walk up to the front gate of this gang of murderous operators. A frisson of excitement and a little fear coursed through him. If tonight went to plan, the Purples could be a gateway to exclusive front page stories under his byline.

Stories the other newspapers in town would kill for. This was the one thing Nieber wanted more than anything in the world.

But his next moves had to be perfect. Also, timing might be tight. A squad of cops could swarm this place anytime. *Unless I get this done and warn them off first. But, that's part of the plan.*

Faint light etched the shapes of two armed men posted between the house and a tall fieldstone wall surrounding the stately property. Beyond that, well-lit by several torchiers, Nieber saw a stone terrace where a knot of men held drinks in one hand and cigars in the other. God, this really was the Purples. Nieber's gut clenched – this was happening. Part of him wanted to pull back, to just forget it, but his dominant voice—the one he'd been listening to all his life, screamed *now or never*. His adrenaline spiking, Nieber crept closer to the estate. He came to a pair of wrought iron gates presumably serving as barriers to the uninvited, like him. Except, at this moment, the gates stood wide open. How sure of themselves these Purples were.

With his next step, his foot brushed something soft that smelled like all the autumns he remembered. Wet leaves and what else? He needed to know, might be important. Mindful of the guards, he stooped under the wall and struck a match. He was at the edge of a mound of leaves mingled with twigs and small rocks, piled high at the end of the driveway. This might be a perfect way to misdirect the guard's attention! Trusting his instinct, he raised his right leg in a violent upward kick. The mixture launched toward the sky with surprising velocity and plummeted to earth with equal force, rocks pinging as they hit each other and the ground. Certain this maneuver had drawn the guard's attention, Nieber whipped off his snap-brimmed fedora and dove behind the perimeter wall. Flattened on the ground, he counted: one, two...

Savage gunfire burst out of the tommies, aimed—*thank you, God*—at the innocent pile of leaves. A smoky silence descended, broken only by wounded branches falling to the ground. The shooters had to believe they had drilled holes in any possible intruders. Nieber lay grateful and still for several beats, then his

natural impatience asserted itself. Too soon to make himself known? His gut said: NOW. Standing, he yelled, “Abe Bernstein? It’s Al Nieber from the *Detroit News*. I’m here to save your ass.”

A voice sailed across the wall. “My ass needs saving? What can I do for you, Mr. Reporter?”

Nieber assumed these questions were coming from Abe Bernstein, head of the Purples—the gang guilty of high crimes and no misdemeanors. He shouted back, “I have information you need, and we don’t have much time. Leaving my gun here. Can we talk?”

He heard Bernstein say: “Let him come up, boys. I don’t know how we didn’t make him dead, but let’s see if he has anything good to say. We can always make him dead later.”

Nieber left his Remington .45 near a bend in the perimeter wall. Despite the chill air, his palms were sweating, and the back of his neck was damp. His meet with the Purples could still go one of two ways—the worst case didn’t bear imagining.

Senses on high alert, Nieber bent to carefully place his gun on the ground, and used that moment to wipe the moisture off his hands and neck with his handkerchief. He stood, replaced his hat, tilted the brim just so, and stepped lively up the driveway toward the Purple Gang’s terrace. Well-armed men stood in a tight group as he approached, but one man beckoned for him to come up. *That’s gotta be Abe*. Nieber steeled himself—he’d handle this as he handled everything, on his own terms and without fear getting in his way. As he came closer, the gang leader appeared amused and asked, “What, you want an interview?”

“Good Christ, no. Bootlegger ‘Black Jack’ Meacham got himself highjacked and plugged tonight. I want to warn you a squad of cops are hunting *you* for the murder. In fact, the sheriff’s office could show up here anytime.”

“Old ‘Black Jack’ bought it. Well, ain’t that too bad. Where’d you hear those fuckers wanna pin it on me?”

“Can’t give out my source—against my code. But I’m sure you didn’t do this one, and I’m willing to help alibi you. I’m acquainted with Tom Kelley, county’s chief homicide detective.”

The Purples’ leader narrowed his eyes, peering straight into Nieber’s piercing blue ones. “We have a code, too, it don’t include trust. Why should I listen to you?”

“You can trust me or wait to see if the cops show. Your choice, Mr. Bernstein.”

Nieber looked without flinching into Bernstein’s eyes, sizing him up. Likewise, Bernstein appeared to be assessing the newspaperman. Addressing the assembled group, he said, “This guy has some balls coming here, don’t ya think?” None of the gang responded. But one man, standing just behind Abe Bernstein, darted dark looks at Nieber. This gangster seemed to resent his presence on their turf, another reminder he was courting danger arriving at the Purples’ lair without invitation.

Face-to-face, it was obvious the reporter and gang leader were cut from different bolts of genetic cloth. Nieber was young, tall, and carried a sturdy, but well-proportioned frame. His facial features were symmetrical and offset by sandy blond hair and fair skin kissed with a touch of ruddiness, gifts from his Dutch family tree. Bernstein was small in stature, slight in build. This was true of his brothers Ray, Joe, and Izzy, along with most of the Purple Gang’s members. Abe Bernstein’s visage was darker than Nieber’s, a hallmark of his Russian-Jewish roots.

The crime boss said, “We don’t truck with you boys from the rags, not like our buddy Capone. Okay, yeah, so, whaddaya want for this tip? Make it quick.”

Quick was never a problem for Nieber. “To trade a little confidential information when opportunity knocks, like tonight. Could benefit us both.”

Bernstein didn’t respond to that. Instead, he drew back and gave Nieber a hard stare. “Why’s a newspaper guy carrying a piece?”

“I’m also a deputized Wayne County Sheriff.”

Nieber saw what looked like genuine surprise flash across Bernstein's face. "Well, boys, impressive," the gang leader said, his voice awash in sarcasm. "So, seems like this fellow is a flatfoot *and* a news hound. If we shoot him, don't hit the copper side—could cost more to make it go away." Then he said, "Mr. Reporter, you *mighta* done me a good turn tonight. How'd ya find us?"

"Can't say. Another source—one friendly to you. Me, I've already forgotten this address."

Bernstein looked like he might laugh, but then his expression darkened. "That might be real good for your health. Just suppose we do trade information sometime. You can bet it won't be about *our* operations."

Nieber sensed his next response was critical. "I'm interested in any information you care to share. Anyone who knows me will tell you I protect my sources."

Bernstein motioned to the man who seemed hostile to Nieber's presence. "Joe, be a good brother and light me a cigarette." Nieber saw what seemed a flash of resentment fire in this guy Joe's eyes, but he did as requested. The crime boss took several pulls of the proffered smoke while Nieber waited. "So, you're saying if I give you somethin' no one ever finds out where it came from, yeah? You know what happens to any schmoes who cross us—right?"

Nieber's heart thudded though his expression betrayed no anxiety. Experience had taught him discretion was the better part of valor when outnumbered. So, he gave Bernstein nothing but a small nod to signal agreement. Displaying a much cooler confidence than he felt, he walked slowly back to his now all-time favorite wall. He concentrated on controlling the slight hitch often present in his gait. Any sign of weakness might spoil the performance he'd just put on. Picking up and pocketing his weapon, he brushed off the few leaves that clung to his favorite overcoat. Once away, he blew out a breath and, with a kind of giddy relief, began a low whistle. *Wow, what a kick.* He had played with fire and walked a fine ethical line. He better get to a phone fast and make good on his promise to warn the cops off. Speaking of the cops, if

they and this gang ever had the unlikely occasion to compare notes, how long would it take for his own number to come up?