

CHAPTER 1: THE GAMBLE

Grosse Pointe, Michigan, October 1926

The silent night erupted into the staccato of tommy guns. Crackling rounds peppered everything in their path, slamming into pines at the large property's edge. Somehow, no shots lodged in the soft flesh of the gunmen's target, young Allen Nieber.

A *Detroit News* reporter on the crime beat, Nieber was in this volatile time and place with great purpose. Still proving himself, he wanted an in with the top gang of bootleggers and racketeers in town—the guys the other gangs most feared, the cops couldn't seem to catch, and no witnesses ever testified against. They were known on the street and in the press as the Purple Gang. Sure, approaching them without invitation was risky, but he had a plan. If it failed, it could see him dead. But, he had it all worked out. He hoped.

At this moment he stood stock still on the boulevard across from the gang's semi-secret home base in Grosse Pointe. Were the Purples camouflaged in this affluent, old-money neighborhood or standing out in defiance? Nieber gazed up at a moon obstructed by a thick armada of clouds. While its dim light offered him a shadowed outline of the big house across the street, he was nearly invisible in his black overcoat with

his favorite fedora pulled well down on his brow. To see and not be seen was essential now. Only a fool would casually approach this volatile gang.

A frisson of fear and excitement coursed through him. If tonight went to plan, the Purples could be his gateway to exclusive front page stories under his byline. Stories his bloodthirsty competitors would kill for. Nieber wanted wins like this more than anything in the world.

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

As Nieber sidled closer to his destination, 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, a stone terrace held a knot of men with 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, commanded *now or never*. Adrenaline spiking, Nieber crept closer, right up to one of a pair of wrought iron gates. Presumably, they served as barriers to the uninvited, like him. Except, at this moment, the gates stood wide open. *How sure of themselves these Purples are.*

With his next step, his foot brushed something soft that smelled like all the autumns he remembered. Mindful of the guards, he stooped under the wall, and lit a match for a quick look. Filling his vision was a massive pile of leaves mingled with twigs and small rocks. What a piece of luck! Next step – misdirection. Thought became action as he raised his right leg in a violent upward kick. The earthy mixture launched skyward with surprising velocity and plummeted to earth with equal force, rocks pinging against each other as they hit the ground. Certain the guards would react to this cacophony, 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 two tommies, aimed—*thank you, God*—at the innocent pile of leaves. Then 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, right? Nieber lay grateful and still for several beats, then his natural impatience asserted itself. Too soon to make himself known? His gut said: GO 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 this query was 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 there isn't 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.”

Despite the chill air, Nieber's palms and the back of his neck were moist. He bent down to place his Remington .45 near the perimeter wall and surreptitiously wipe the damp off with his handkerchief, which he stuffed in his pocket. Standing, he replaced his hat, tilted the brim just so, and stepped lively up the driveway toward the Purple Gang's terrace. His senses were on high alert—this meet with the fearsome gang could go one of two ways, and one of them didn't bear imagining.

Well-armed men stood in a tight group as he approached, but one man stepped forward and beckoned for him to come up onto the terrace. *That's gotta be Abe*. Nieber steeled himself as he took the stone steps. He'd handle this as he handled everything: on his own terms, though his knees threatened to buckle.

Appearing amused, the gang leader looked directly at Nieber and asked, “What, you want an interview?”

“Good Christ, no. ‘Black Jack’ Meacham got himself highjacked and plugged tonight. I’m here to warn you a squad of cops are hunting *you* for the murder. In fact, the sheriff’s office could show up 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 know 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, and 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 steadily 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 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. In contrast with Nieber, Abe Bernstein’s visage was dark—a probable hallmark of his Russian-Jewish roots. His face was round, perhaps made to look more so by a prematurely receding hairline. Out of sync with their reputation for being the toughest of tough guys, Abe, along with the other Purples gathered on the terrace, were men small in stature and slight of build. Noticing this, Nieber felt a little safer. Until he remembered that looks are often deceiving.

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 the reporter. “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 tone 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. A 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 couldn’t miss the flash of resentment fire in this guy Joe’s eyes as he attended to his brother’s request. Abe 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 vastly outnumbered. So, he offered Bernstein only a small smile accompanied by a nod of assent. Then, displaying a much cooler confidence than he felt, he walked slowly back to his now all-time favorite wall. He marshaled his considerable will to control the slight hitch often present in his gait. Any sign of weakness might spoil the performance he'd just put on.

Retrieving and pocketing his weapon, he brushed off the few leaves that clung to his cashmere 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 telephone fast and make good on his promise to warn the cops off. Speaking of law enforcement, 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?