

Another Chance to Die:

Historical Crime Novel

Man in the Middle: Book One

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

CHAPTER 1: THE GAMBLE

Grosse Pointe, Michigan, October 1926

Gunfire shattered the silent night. Crackling rounds peppered everything in their path and plugged pine trees edging the estate. Allen Nieber, crime reporter for *The Detroit News*, incited this barrage. On purpose.

Still earning his stripes on the crime beat, he wanted the Purple Gang—Detroit’s top criminal organization—as a source. These were the guys other gangs most feared, and the law couldn’t prosecute because no one dared testify against them. Approaching the Purples without invitation was risky, but Nieber had an offer the gang leader gang couldn’t refuse. Right?

Whatever it took, he’d finagle his way onto the Purples’ estate and meet their leader—one Abe Bernstein. He wasn’t going home empty-handed.

He was ready to reconnoiter the gang’s home base. A source had tipped him to their palatial four-acre Grosse Pointe estate. The Purples’ presence here puzzled him. Were they camouflaged in this old-money neighborhood or standing out in defiance?

Gazing at a moon partially obstructed by a fast-moving armada of clouds, Nieber lifted powerful binoculars. An outline of the gang’s impressive mansion came into view. Clad in a long black overcoat, soft-soled shoes, and a dark, flat cap pulled well down on his brow, he resembled a cat burglar. That was fine—he’d move like a cat and steal a meeting with Detroit’s fiercest gang.

A frisson of excitement coursed through him. If things worked in his favor, the Purples could be a gateway to explosive stories the other newspapers in town would kill for. More than anything, he wanted front-page scoops under his byline. The hallmark of success in his world.

Time was tight. A squad of police might barnstorm the Purples' premises any moment. With that in mind, he crept closer to the gang's estate. Raising the binoculars, Nieber sighted two guards positioned between the mansion and a high, white-washed stucco wall. They bore weapons with a distinctive silhouette. Tommy guns—the latest in killing machines. The hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention. Ignoring this, he trained his binoculars on a stone terrace illuminated by tall gas lamps. A large knot of men congregated there. The infamous Purple Gang.

His gut clenched. Quit while he was ahead? His dominant voice—the one he'd listened to all his life—said: "Now or never." Adrenaline spiking, he legged it closer. At the driveway's entrance, he encountered towering wrought-iron gates. They stood open. These Purples were very sure of themselves.

Nieber stepped closer to the gates. Crunch. He froze, expecting a reaction from the guards. One that never came. But he might not be so lucky with his next step, so he bent low behind the wall and struck a match. He'd nearly stumbled into a massive mound of leaves mingled with twigs and those small rocks used in garden beds. Nieber crushed the spent match and smiled. He'd found his way in.

Thought became action. He raised his right leg in a violent upward kick. Leaves launched skyward with surprising velocity and plummeted to earth with equal force. Rocks collided, pinging as they plunged to the ground. Certain the guards would react this time, he whipped off his cap and dove behind the perimeter wall. He took care not to land on the Remington .45 in his right pocket. Flattened on the ground, he counted: one, two...

Savage gunfire burst out of the Tommies aimed—thank you, God—at the scattered pile of lawn trimmings. A smoky silence followed, broken only by splintered branches falling to earth. The gunmen went quiet, too, probably worried they'd shot up lawn and trees for nothing. His life might turn on being right about this.

Using the wall as cover, he lay still. Until his natural impatience asserted itself. His gut said: “Go now!” Standing, he yelled, “Abe Bernstein? Nieber from the *Detroit News*. Here to save your ass.”

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

Nieber assumed this question was from Abe Bernstein, the Purples' leader. He shouted back, “Got information. Not much time. Leaving my gun—can we talk?”

He heard Bernstein say, “Let him come up, boys. Don't know how we didn't make him dead, but we can always make him dead later.”

Nieber parked his binoculars and weapon near a bend in the perimeter wall. Despite the chill air, sweat covered his palms and the back of his neck. He dabbed them with his handkerchief, then stuffed it in a pocket. He stood, smoothed out his coat, and replaced his hat, tilting its brim just so. First impressions are important.

Senses on high alert, he moved inexorably toward the ruthless Purple Gang.

To his surprise, the men on the terrace were all nattily dressed. One of them beckoned him to come up. Abe Bernstein, he presumed. Reaching the terrace proper, Nieber steeled himself for the next step. With studied insouciance, he stuck out his hand for a shake. Abe ignored it and shot him an amused look. “What, you want an interview?”

“No. ‘Black Jack’ Meacham was hijacked, shot dead tonight. I’m here to warn you a squad of cops like *you* for it. They could come for you tonight.”

“That lousy bootlegger bought it and they wanna pin it on me? Where’d you hear that?”

“Can’t share my source—against my code. But I know you didn’t do it, thanks to another source. I can alibi you. Acquainted with the county’s chief homicide detective.”

The Purples’ leader narrowed his dark eyes, peering into Nieber’s steel blue ones. “Our code don’t include trust. Why should I listen to you?”

“You can trust me or see if the cops show. Your choice.”

Nieber sized Bernstein up. Likewise, Abe stared him up and down. Then he addressed the assembled group. “This guy has some balls coming here, yeah?” None of the gang responded. But one of them, standing to the right of the leader, darted dark, disdainful looks at Nieber. This gangster appeared to resent his presence on their turf.

Face-to-face, Nieber judged Abe as not much older than his twenty-three years. Similarities stopped there. His tall, sturdy frame was topped with sandy-blond hair and complemented by fair skin with a touch of ruddiness. In contrast, Abe’s visage was dark. A hallmark of his purported Russian Jewish roots? A low forehead accentuated a moon-round face. And he was small in stature, slight in build. So were all the men on the terrace. Noting this gave Nieber a shot of confidence. Until he remembered looks can be deceiving.

Abe’s next words quickened Nieber’s pulse. “We don’t truck with you boys from the rags. So, whaddya want for this favor?”

“To share confidential information when it benefits us both.”

Bernstein didn’t respond. Instead, he drew back with an appraising expression. “Why’s a newspaper guy got a piece?”

“Deputized by the sheriff’s department.”

Surprise flashed across Bernstein’s face. “Well, boys, impressive. This guy’s a flatfoot and news hound. If we have to shoot him, don’t hit the copper side.” Abe laughed at his own joke. No one, including Nieber, joined in. The gang leader’s expression darkened. “Mr. Reporter, you mighta done me a service tonight. How’d ya find us?”

“Can’t say. Me, already forgot this address.”

Bernstein snorted. “Very smart.” He offered Nieber a half-smile. “We might trade information sometime, but not about our operations.”

“Interested in whatever information you care to share. 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.” This guy Joe scowled but fulfilled the request. The crime boss took a vigorous pull from his cigarette and blew out an impressive stream of smoke. A satisfied look came over him, one Nieber understood. He was a heavy smoker, too.

Abe turned to him. “You’re sayin’ if I give you somethin’ no one finds out where it came from, yeah? You know what happens to schmoes who cross us, right?”

Nieber’s heart rate shot up. This chat took longer than expected. He didn’t want to be there if the sheriff’s department swarmed the place. Adopting an even tone, he said, “Count on my discretion.”

Abe inclined his head toward him, then turned away to talk to one of his men. This was the cue Nieber waited for. Breaking off their conversation had to be Abe’s move. Deference to this king of crime was an unwritten rule.

Displaying a cooler confidence than he felt, Nieber left the terrace and retrieved his gun and binoculars. He strode toward his automobile parked down the street, fighting the slight hitch sometimes present in his gait.

Once in the car, he drew in a big breath, then blew it out. What a kick. He'd played with fire without getting burned. He wouldn't spill what he'd just done to his boss, the city editor, but he might tell him when he could connect the gang to a big, exclusive story. They both lived for those, whatever the source.

He sat back and lit a cigarette to celebrate the potential success of his meet and greet with the Purples. He had to get to a telephone fast and wave off the sheriff's department from going after Abe on the Meacham murder. This would create a slice of trust and, he hoped, the promise of a future association. His smug expression faded when an alternative scenario presented itself.

If the cops and Purples ever had the unlikely occasion to compare notes on tonight, how long would it take for his number to come up?