

Another Chance to Die:

Historical Crime Novel

Man in the Middle: Book One

by Claudia N. Oltean

-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 tall 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 carried risk, but Nieber had an offer this gang known for high crimes and no misdemeanors couldn’t refuse. Could they?

One way or another, he’d finagle his way onto the Purples’ estate and meet the gang’s leader—one Abe Bernstein. He wasn’t going home empty-handed.

He reconnoitered the gang’s home base. A source 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 snagged from his father’s study. 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 mixed with trepidation coursed through him. If things worked in his favor, the Purples would be a source for 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 at any moment. His next moves must be perfect.

Nieber crept closer to the gang's estate, moving with as much speed as he dared. Raising the binoculars, he sighted the dim outline of 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. Though the hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention, he trained his binoculars on a stone terrace illuminated by tall gas lamps. His brows raised. The large knot of men congregated there was the infamous Purple Gang.

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

Nieber took in a breath and stepped closer to the driveway. Crunch. He froze, anticipating a reaction from the guards. Nothing. Fearing he might not be so lucky with his next step, he bent low behind the wall and struck a match. He'd almost stumbled into a massive mound of leaves mingled with twigs and small rocks like those used in garden beds. Crushing out the match with his heel, he 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. The rocks collided, pinging as they plunged to the ground. Certain the guards would react now, 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 pile of leaves and rocks. A smoky silence followed, broken only by splintered branches falling to earth. The gunmen went quiet, too. They were probably embarrassed about shooting up some lawn and trees for nothing. His life might turn on being right about this.

He lay still under the wall until his characteristic impatience asserted itself. Too soon? His gut said: “Go now!” Standing, he yelled, “Abe Bernstein? I’m 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 figured 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 the murder. They could pull up here any minute.”

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

“Can’t spill 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.

Now face-to-face, Nieber judged Abe as not much older than his twenty-three years. All physical 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 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? Make it quick."

"To share confidential information when there's an opportunity, like tonight. Could benefit 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. Then 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 of ya." His expression darkened. "We might trade information sometime, but not about our operations."

"Interested in whatever information you care to share. 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, then 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. Their chat took longer than expected. He didn't want to be there if the sheriff's department swarmed the place. He adopted an even tone. "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 stepped off 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. Now to wave off the sheriff's department. Fast.

Speaking of police, if they and the Purples ever had the unlikely occasion to tangles because of him, how long would it take for his number to come up?