

## CHAPTER 1: THE GAMBLE

### *Grosse Pointe, Michigan, October 1926*

The silent night erupted with the staccato of Tommy guns. Crackling rounds peppered everything in their path and slammed into pines at the large property's edge. The man who'd incited this brief but deadly burst of firepower was Allen J. Nieber, *Detroit News* crime reporter.

Still proving himself at the newspaper, he wanted a connection with Detroit's top gang of bootleggers and racketeers. Known as the Purple Gang, they were the guys the other gangs most feared, the cops couldn't catch, and no one would dare testify against. Approaching them without invitation was risky, but Nieber had a plan.

First, he'd reconnoitered the gang's home base. A source had tipped him to its location: a palatial Grosse Pointe estate in the Tudor style. The Purples' presence here was puzzling. Were they camouflaged in this elite, old-money area or standing out in defiance?

Nieber gazed at a moon partially obstructed by a fast-moving armada of clouds. He lifted the powerful binoculars snagged from his father's office. An outline of the Purples' impressive domain came into view. Clad in a long, black overcoat, soft-soled shoes, and a dark flat cap pulled well down his brow, Nieber was certain he couldn't be seen.

A frisson of excitement mixed with fear coursed through him. If everything went his way, the Purples could be a gateway to exclusive front-page articles under his byline. Stories the other newspapers in town would kill to get. He wanted this more than anything in the world.

But his next moves had to be perfect. Time was tight. A squad of cops could swarm this place any moment, unless he warned them off. *Better get this done.*

Creeping closer, Nieber spied two men armed with Tommy guns. They stood guard between the house and a stucco wall surrounding the estate. Aided by the binoculars and several gas-lit lamps, Nieber made out a large knot of men on a raised terrace.

His gut clenched. This *was* the fearsome Purples. Part of him wanted to retreat. But his dominant voice—the one he'd been listening to all his life—screamed *now or never*. Adrenaline spiking, he legged it closer. At the driveway's entrance, were tall, intricately-patterned wrought iron gates. Probably meant to bar entry to the uninvited, like him. At the moment, they were wide open. These Purples were very sure of themselves.

Nieber took a step and froze. His footfall had caused an unwelcome rustling sound. Sniffing, an earthy autumn aroma rose up to meet him. To be sure his nose was playing him true, he bent low behind the wall and struck a match. He'd nearly plunged into a mound of leaves mingled with twigs and small rocks. Crushing the flame with his heel, he considered. *Perfect misdirection?*

Thought became action. He raised his right leg in a violent upward kick. The mixture launched skyward with surprising velocity and plummeted to earth with equal force, rocks singing out as they collided with each other. Certain this would draw a reaction from the guards, Nieber whipped off his cap

and dove behind the perimeter wall, careful 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 innocent pile of leaves. A smoky silence followed, broken only by wounded branches hitting the ground. The gun men had to believe they'd killed or scared off any possible intruders. Human nature said they'd relax their guard for a few moments.

Nieber lay still in those moments, then his characteristic impatience asserted itself. *Too soon?* His gut said: Go now! Standing, he yelled, "Abe Bernstein? It's 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—a gang guilty of high crimes and no misdemeanors. He shouted back, "Have information you need. There isn't much time. Leaving my gun here. Can we talk?"

He heard Bernstein say, "Let him come up, boys. Don't know how we didn't make him dead, but I want we should hear what he says. We can always make him dead later."

Nieber parked his weapon and binoculars near a bend in the perimeter wall. Despite the chill air, his palms were sweating, and the back of his neck was damp. He dabbed at the moisture with his handkerchief, then stuffed the rumpled cloth in his pocket. He stood, smoothed out his coat, and replaced his hat, tilting it just so. First impressions are important. Senses on high alert, he stepped lively up the driveway, heading inexorably toward the infamous Purple Gang.

The men he'd seen from a distance now stood in a tight group. To Nieber's surprise, they were all nattily dressed. One man beckoned him to come up the terrace steps. This had to be Abe. Nieber steeled himself. He'd handle this as he handled everything—shoving his fears aside.

Approaching the man who'd signaled him, Nieber stuck his hand out for a shake. The gang leader ignored it and shot him an amused look. "What, you want an interview?"

"Christ, no. 'Black Jack' Meacham was hijacked and shot dead tonight. I've come by to warn you a squad of cops is hunting *you* for the murder. In fact, cops could show up here anytime."

"That lousy bootlegger bought it and they wanna pin it on me? Where'd you hear that?"

"Can't give out sources—against my code. But I know you didn't do it, thanks to another source. I can help alibi you. Acquainted with Tom Kelley, county's chief homicide detective."

The Purples' leader narrowed his eyes, peering into Nieber's piercing blue ones. "Our code 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 sized up Bernstein. Likewise, Abe stared him up and down. Addressing the assembled group, Bernstein said, "This guy has some balls coming here, yeah?" None of the gang responded. But one man, standing to the right of the gang leader, darted dark, disdainful looks at Nieber. This gangster seemed to resent his presence on their turf. Ignoring him, Nieber directed his attention to Abe.

Face-to-face, it was clear the reporter and gang leader were cut from different bolts of genetic cloth. Nieber was tall and carried a well-proportioned frame that suggested physical power. His facial features were pleasingly symmetrical and offset by sandy-blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and fair skin kissed with a touch of ruddiness. Gifts from his Dutch family tree.

In contrast, Abe Bernstein's visage was dark—perhaps a hallmark of his Russian Jewish roots. His face was round, a shape accentuated by a low forehead. He appeared to be close in age to Nieber's 23 years. Out of sync with the gang's reputation for being the toughest of the tough, Abe, and all the men on the terrace, were small in stature, slight of build. This gave Nieber an extra shot of confidence. Until he remembered looks are often deceiving.

The crime boss said, “We don’t truck with you boys from the rags. So, whaddaya want for this supposed favor? Make it quick.”

“To trade confidential information when opportunity arises—like tonight. Could benefit us both.”

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

“I’m also deputized by the sheriff’s department.”

Surprise flashed across Bernstein’s face. “Well, boys, impressive,” he said, his voice awash in sarcasm. “So, this fellow is a flatfoot *and* a news hound. If we shoot him, don’t hit the copper side—could cost too much to make it go away. Glaring at Nieber, 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 laughed, then his expression darkened. He said, “Real smart. We might trade information sometime, but, pal, it won’t be about our operations.”

Nieber sensed his next response was critical. “I’m interested in any 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 Joe guy scowled but moved to fulfill the request. The crime boss took several pulls of the proffered smoke. “So, you’re sayin’ if I give you somethin’ no one ever finds out where it came from, yeah? You know what happens to schmoes who cross us—right?”

Nieber’s heart thudded and sweat again formed on his neck and palms. Not trusting his voice, he wordlessly directed a slight smile and a nod at the gang leader. Abe inclined his head toward Nieber in a kingly manner then turned away to talk to one of his men. He’d been dismissed.

Displaying a cooler confidence than he felt, Nieber strode back to the wall that had saved him. Marshaling his considerable will, he controlled the slight hitch sometimes present in his gait. Any sign of weakness could undo the performance he'd just put on.

Retrieving his revolver and the binoculars in one smooth move, Nieber brushed off leaves that dared cling to his overcoat. Once away, he blew out a breath and, with giddy relief, began a low whistle. *Wow, what a kick.* He'd played with fire and walked a fine ethical line. He'd better get to a telephone fast and wave off the sheriff's department.

Speaking of cops, if they and the Purples ever had the unlikely occasion to compare notes, how long would it take for his number to come up?