

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. They slammed into several pine trees at the large property's edge. Somehow, no shots had lodged in the soft flesh of the barrage's target: young Allen Nieber, crime reporter for *The Detroit News*.

Nieber had put himself within range of this lethal firepower with great purpose. Still proving himself at the newspaper, he wanted an in with Detroit's top gang of bootleggers and racketeers. Known around town and in the press 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 the ruthless crew 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 hoped.

He'd planted himself a safe distance from the gang's home base to do reconnaissance. A source had tipped him to this location: a massive Grosse Pointe estate in the Tudor style, complete with steep gable roofs and half-timbered walls. The Purples' presence in this area surprised him. Were they camouflaged in this old-money neighborhood or standing out in defiance?

Nieber gazed at a moon partially obstructed by a fast-moving armada of clouds. He lifted the powerful binoculars he had snagged from his father's office. An outline of the Purples' impressive domain

came into view. He was confident he couldn't be seen or heard thanks to his long black overcoat, soft-soled shoes, and the black, flat cap pulled well down on his brow.

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 stories under his byline. Stories the other newspapers in town would kill to get. He wanted that more than anything in the world.

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

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

His gut clenched. *This really is the Purples.* Part of him wanted to retreat, to run back to his automobile. 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. They must bar entry to the uninvited, like him. At the moment, they were wide open. *These Purples are cocky.*

He took a step and froze. A rustling sound threatened his stealth. Then autumn's earthy smell rose up to meet him. He had a sense of what was near but wanted to be sure. He stooped behind the wall and struck a match. He'd nearly plunged into a large mound of leaves mingled with twigs and small rocks. Crushing out the match with his heel, he considered. *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 pinging as they hit the ground. Certain this maneuver would draw a reaction from the guards, Nieber whipped off his cap and dove behind the perimeter wall, careful not to land on the gun 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 shooters had to believe they'd drilled holes in any intruders.

Nieber lay grateful and still for several beats, then his natural impatience asserted itself. *Too soon to make myself 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 these questions were coming from Abe Bernstein, head of the Purples—a gang guilty of high crimes and no misdemeanors. He shouted back, "I have information you need. We don't have much time. Leaving my gun here. Can we talk?"

He heard Bernstein say, "Let him come up, boys. Not sure 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 parked his Remington .45 and the binoculars near a bend in the perimeter wall. Despite the chill air, his palms were sweating, and the back of his neck was damp. Grabbing his handkerchief, he dabbed the moisture and stuffed the rumpled cloth in his 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 stepped lively up the driveway, heading inexorably toward the infamous Purple Gang.

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

Approaching the man who'd signaled him, Nieber stuck his hand out for a polite 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, the sheriff’s department might show up here anytime.”

“That bastard bought it, huh? Too bad. 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 this, thanks to another source. I’m willing to 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. “We have a code, too, 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 and fair skin kissed with a touch of ruddiness. All gifts from his Dutch family tree.

In contrast, Abe Bernstein’s visage was dark—a hallmark of his Russian Jewish roots. His face was round, a shape accentuated by a prematurely receding hairline. He appeared to be somewhat older than 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. Nieber felt safer. 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.”

Quick was not a problem. “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. “What’s a newspaper guy doin’ carrying a piece?”

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

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 changed. He said, “That’d be real good for your health. Suppose we trade information sometime. We’ll see about that, but 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.” This Joe guy scowled but moved to fulfill his brother’s 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 any schmoes who cross us—right?”

Nieber’s heart thudded and sweat formed on his neck and palms. He hope nobody noticed. It was past time to go; Abe had kept him too long with the talking. Experience had taught him discretion was the

better part of valor when outnumbered and offending Abe was foolhardy. So, he wordlessly directed a slight smile and a nod at the gang leader. Abe must have taken that as agreement because he inclined his head toward Nieber in a kingly manner then turned away to talk to one of his men.

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

Retrieving his revolver and the binoculars in one smooth move, Nieber brushed off the few leaves that clung to his 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 needed a telephone fast to 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?