

CHAPTER 1: THE GAMBLE

Grosse Pointe, Michigan, October 1926

The rat-tat-tat of Tommy guns shattered the night's silence. Crackling rounds peppered everything in their path and plugged three tall pines at the estate's edge. The person who incited this barrage was Allen Nieber, crime reporter with *The Detroit News*.

Still earning his stripes on the crime beat, he wanted Detroit's top criminal gang as a source. Known as the Purple Gang, these guys were the most feared by other gangs, the ones the cops couldn't catch and no one would dare testify against. Approaching them without invitation was risky, but Nieber had a plan.

Step one was reconnoitering their home base. A source had tipped him to the palatial, four-acre Grosse Pointe estate. Standing just outside its perimeter, Nieber found the Purples' presence here puzzling. 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, he lifted 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 on his brow, he looked like a cat burglar. That was okay—he'd move like a cat and steal a meeting with Detroit's most notorious gang.

A frisson of excitement mixed with fear coursed through him. If everything went to plan, 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. Ultimate success in his world.

Step two had to be perfect. Time was tight. A squad of police could swarm this place any moment.

With that in mind, he crept closer to the estate. Raising the binoculars, he spied two guards positioned between the mansion and a high, stucco perimeter wall. Bearing Tommy guns. Nieber trained the binoculars on a stone terrace illuminated by tall gas lamps. A large knot of men congregated there. This was the Purple Gang. In all its criminal glory.

His gut clenched. Quite while I'm ahead? His dominant voice—the one he'd been listening to all his life—spurned this cowardice. It said: now or never. Adrenaline spiking, he legged it closer.

At the driveway's entrance, he encountered massive wrought iron gates. A barrier against cops and other crooks? Probably. At the moment, they stood open. These Purples are very sure of themselves.

Nieber slowly approached the gates. Crunch. He froze. No reaction from the guards. Great. But dare he take another step? He had to know. Bending low behind the wall, he struck a match. He'd nearly stumbled into a large mound of leaves mingled with twigs and small rocks. Crushing out the match with his heel, he smiled. Found my 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 leaf and rock pile. A smoky silence followed, broken only by splintered branches falling to earth. The gunmen went quiet, too.

Nieber assumed they were embarrassed for shooting up some lawn and trees for nothing. His life might turn on being right about that.

He lay still until under the protection of the wall until 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 over the wall. "My ass needs saving? What can I do for you, Mr. Reporter?"

Nieber figured these questions were from Abe Bernstein, head of the Purples—a gang guilty of high crimes and no misdemeanors. He shouted back, "Have information in your interest. Time is tight. 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 we can always make him dead later."

Nieber parked his weapon and binoculars near a bend in the perimeter wall. Despite the chill air, sweat covered his palms and the back of his neck. He wiped them with his handkerchief, then stuffed it in a pocket. He stood, smoothed out his coat, and replaced his hat, tilting it just so. First impressions are important. Senses on high alert, he moved inexorably toward the Purple Gang.

The men he'd seen on the terrace formed a tight group. To his surprise, they were all natty dressers. One of them beckoned him to come up. Abe Bernstein, he presumed. Reaching the terrace proper, Nieber steeled himself for step three.

Feigning 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 and shot dead tonight. I'm here to warn you a squad of coppers are hunting you for the murder. They might swarm this place any minute."

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

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

The Purples’ leader narrowed his dark 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 see if the cops show. Your choice.”

Nieber sized Bernstein up. At the same time, Abe stared him up and down. Addressing the assembled group, he said, “This guy has some balls coming here, yeah?” None of the gang responded. But one of them, standing to the right of the gang leader, darted dark, disdainful looks at Nieber. This gangster resented his presence on their turf. Ignoring him, Nieber directed his attention to Abe.

Face-to-face, Nieber figured Abe was close to his twenty-three years. It was obvious that was their only outward similarity. His own tall, sturdy frame topped with sandy-blond hair, complemented by fair skin with a touch of ruddiness, was in direct contrast to Abe’s dark visage. A hallmark of his Russian Jewish roots? A low forehead accentuated Abe’s 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 are often deceiving.

In an impatient tone, Abe said, “We don’t truck with you boys from the rags. So, whaddaya want for this, uh, favor? Make it quick.”

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

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

“Deputized by the sheriff’s department.”

Surprise flashed across Bernstein’s face. “Well, boys, impressive. This fellow’s a flatfoot and news hound. Glaring at Nieber, he said, “Mr. Reporter, you mighta done me a service tonight. How’d ya find us?”

“Can’t say. Me, I’ve already forgotten this address.”

Bernstein snorted. “That’d be good for your health.” His expression darkened. “We might trade information sometime, but it won’t be about our operations.”

Nieber sensed his response could either seal or scuttle any future deal. “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 Joe guy scowled but fulfilled the request. The crime boss took a vigorous pull off the proffered 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 pulse quickened. Their chat had taken longer than expected. He didn’t want to be there if the sheriff’s office showed.

In an even tone, Nieber said, “You can count on my discretion.” He followed this pronouncement with what he hoped was a reassuring smile. In a regal manner, the gang leader inclined his head toward him and then turned away to talk to one of his men.

Nieber blinked. This was the exit cue he’d been waiting for. It had to be Abe’s move, not his. Deference to this king of crime was an unwritten rule of the game he’d just initiated. Displaying a cool confidence, he turned to retrace his steps toward his automobile parked two blocks south. He fought to control the slight hitch sometimes present in his gait. A sign of weakness could undo the performance he’d just given.

On the way out, he retrieved his revolver and the binoculars. When he’d put distance between himself and the Purples’ estate, he drew in a big breath, then blew it out. His nerves settled back into place. With giddy relief he began to whistle—a sign he was satisfied with the evening’s work. It had been a kick.

He'd played with fire and walked a fine ethical line. Now to wave off the sheriff's department. Fast.

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