

Another Chance to Die

Chapter One

Book One in the *Man In The Middle Series*

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HISTORICAL NOTE

Michigan was the first state in the U.S. to “go dry.” The Damon law of 1916 took effect on May 1, 1917, nearly three years before national Prohibition under the Volstead Act commenced on January 17, 1920. This factor, coupled with the Detroit area’s close proximity to Canadian alcohol distributors, gave Michigan’s criminally-minded a significant head start as well-organized rum running and bootlegging gangs. History records that approximately seventy-five percent of America’s illegal alcohol came in from Canada via Detroit and other areas of Michigan. Taken together, these circumstances were the foundation for Michigan’s lawless and bloody Prohibition years, with events that rivaled or eclipsed those in New York or Chicago during this era.

Synonymous with Michigan’s violent history during Prohibition was the Purple Gang. They are credited with at least five-hundred kills, surpassing even the murder scorecard of Al ‘Scarface’ Capone. The Purples’ unblinking ferocity is known to have scared the cunning and ruthless Capone away from operating in the Detroit/south eastern Michigan area. However, for several years he partnered with them to distribute his personal brand of whiskey called Old Log Cabin.

Perhaps ironically, Michigan was the first state in America to repeal Prohibition.

75% of all illegal liquor trafficked into the U.S. during Prohibition came in from Canada, largely in the 28 mile expanse between Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie.



1 mi.
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CHAPTER 1: THE GAMBLE

Grosse Pointe, Michigan, October 1923

The silent night erupted into the staccato of tommy guns. Crackling rounds peppered everything in their path. Shots slammed into tall trees at the large property's edge. The target of this barrage was one Allen Nieber. While tonight was not the first time he had stared down death, it was the first time he knowingly risked its infinite embrace.

Intent on contacting the ruthless bootleggers and racketeers known as the Purple Gang, he had first ssurveyed their primary hideout from a safe distance. One of his many sources as crime reporter for the *Detroit News* had tipped him to this lavish estate in the affluent suburb of Grosse Pointe.

Prohibition was in full swing. What a blessed time to be a newspaperman—God love the crime beat. The Purples were in his sights as Michigan's top criminal organization. Although alert to the danger of approaching them uninvited, this gang could be a gateway to front page stories under his byline. The one thing he wanted more than anything in the world.

Scanning the Purple's Tudor-style mansion, he hoped his tipster had played him true. It had to pan out because tonight represented a rare opportunity. And time was tight. A squad of cops could swarm this place anytime. *I'd better hustle.* But, knocking on the fierce gang's front door might bring a hot blast of lead

instead of a warm welcome. This venture called for a clever approach and the kind of luck he had come to count on.

Faint light threw out the shapes of two armed men posted between the house and a tall fieldstone wall surrounding the stately property. His gut clenched as he considered how this could go. And, just how far ahead of the cops was he, anyway? Part of him warned against this risky plan, but his dominant voice—the one he'd been listening to all his life, said, *now or never*. Adrenaline spiking, he legged it closer to the estate. A few long, stealthy strides and Nieber was in front of wrought iron gates both decorative and serviceable to guard against the uninvited. Except, at this moment, the gates were wide open. Ah, how sure of themselves these Purples were.

His foot then brushed something soft that smelled like all the autumns he remembered. What the hell was it? His hand as a shield, he struck a match. An enormous mound of leaves mingled with twigs and small rocks were piled high at the end of the driveway. Could this be the diversion he needed for the guards he'd spotted? Praying so, he raised his right leg in a violent upward kick. The mixture launched toward the sky with surprising velocity and plummeted to earth with equal force, the rocks pinging as they hit each other and the ground. Certain this had drawn the attention he sought, Nieber whipped off his snap-brimmed fedora and dove behind the perimeter wall. 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 prevailed, broken only by wounded branches falling on the ground. The shooters had to believe they had drilled holes in any possible intruders. Nieber lay grateful and still for several beats, then his natural impatience asserted itself. Too soon to make himself known? His gut said: NOW. Standing, he yelled, “Abe Bernstein? It's Al Nieber from the *Detroit News*. I'm here to save your ass.”

A voice sailed from 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—the gang guilty of high crimes and no misdemeanors. In a confident tone, he shouted, “I have information you need and we don’t have much time. Leaving my gun here. Can we talk?”

Bernstein said: “Let him come up, boys. I don’t know 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 left his Remington .45 near a bend in the perimeter wall. Despite the chill air, his palms were sweating and the back of his neck was damp. His meet with the Purples could go one of two ways—the worst case didn’t bear imagining.

Leaving the safety of the thick wall, his first brush with death, at age six, flashed into his mind. A speeding motorcycle had careened into he and his mother on a Detroit sidewalk. In seconds, she crumpled to the ground, her skirts billowing out like a fan. *Dead, before his eyes.* The shocked and sorrowed young Allen sustained a hip injury in the incident. This did not impede his growth to an imposing six-foot-one, but caused a slight hitch in his gait. Few people ever noticed.

Senses on high alert, Nieber now wiped sweat off his neck with a handkerchief, replaced his hat, and tilted the brim just so. He stepped lively up the driveway toward the Purple Gang’s domain. Well armed men dangling smokes stood in a tight group as he approached the front terrace. A man beckoned for him to come up. *That’s gotta be Abe.* Nieber steeled himself—he’d handle this as he handled everything, on his own terms and without fear getting in his way. As Nieber came closer, the gang leader appeared amused and asked, “What, you want an interview?”

“Good Christ, no. Bootlegger ‘Black Jack’ Meacham got himself highjacked and shot dead tonight. I want to warn you a squad of cops are hunting *you* for the murder. In fact, the sheriff’s office could show up here anytime.”

“Old ‘Black Jack’ bought it, huh. Too bad. And they want to pin it on me. Where’d you hear that?”

“Can’t give out my sources—against my code. But I’m sure you didn’t do this one, thanks to another source, and I’m willing to help alibi you. I’m acquainted with Tom Kelley, county’s chief homicide detective.”

The Purples’ leader narrowed his eyes, peering straight into Nieber’s piercing blue ones. “We have a code, too, and it 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 looked without flinching into Bernstein’s eyes, sizing him up. Likewise, Bernstein appeared to be assessing the newspaperman. Addressing the assembled group, he said, “This guy has some balls coming here, don’t ya think?” None of the gang responded. But one man, standing just behind Abe Bernstein, darted dark looks at Nieber. This gangster seemed to resent his presence on their turf, another reminder he was courting danger arriving at the Purples’ lair without invitation.

Face-to-face, it was obvious the reporter and gang leader were cut from different bolts of genetic cloth. Nieber was young, tall and carried a well-proportioned frame. His facial features were symmetrical and offset by sandy blond hair and fair skin kissed with a touch of ruddiness, gifts from his Dutch family tree. Bernstein was small in stature, slight in build. The was true of his brothers Ray, Joe, and Izzy, along with most of the Purple Gang’s members. Abe Bernstein’s visage was darker than Nieber’s, a hallmark of his Russian-Jewish roots.

The crime boss said, “We don’t truck with you boys from the rags, but *maybe* you’ll be an exception. Okay, yeah, so, whaddaya want for this tip? Make it quick.”

Quick was never a problem for Nieber. “To trade a little confidential information when opportunity presents itself, like tonight. Could benefit us both.”

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

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

Nieber saw what looked like genuine surprise flash across Bernstein’s face. “Well, boys, impressive,” the gang leader said, his voice awash in sarcasm. “So, seems like this fellow is a flatfoot *and* a news hound. If we should shoot him, don’t hit the copper side—could cost more to make it go away. Then 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 looked like he might laugh, but then his expression darkened. “That might be real good for your health. Just suppose we trade information sometime. We’ll have to see, and you can bet it won’t be about *our* operations, Mr. Reporter.”

Nieber sensed his next response would be 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.” The crime boss took several pulls of the proffered smoke while Nieber waited. “So, you’re saying 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 though his expression betrayed no anxiety. Experience had aught him discretion was the better part of valor when outnumbered. So, he gave Bernstein nothing but a slight smile that signaled agreement. Then, with a much cooler confidence than he momentarily felt, he made himself do a slow stroll back to his now all-time favorite wall. He picked up his weapon in one smooth move and brushed off the autumn leaves that dared cling 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 this night. He hoped like crazy this gamble would pay in big dividends.