

# GUILTY

## DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

Vol. 2 — No. 5

March, 1958

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W. W. Scott — Editor

GUILTY DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE is published bi-monthly by Feature Publications Inc., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office at 1790 Broadway, New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Holyoke, Mass., August 20, 1956, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy 35c. Subscription rates, \$4.00 for 12 issues. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts; and all such material must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All stories printed in the magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is coincidental. Copyright 1957 by Feature Publications, Inc. All rights, including translation, reserved under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in the U.S.A.

# MOVE IN, TAKE OVER

by ROBERT BOWEN

Joey tried to crash his way to top cat of the kid gang

**J**OEY SAVOIA walked over to the apartment window and stared out at the view such as it was. A desolate salt marsh and the reeking clam flats stretching into the sea. He pinched his nose and turned away in disgust.

"Jeez, Mama! Couldn't you get anything besides this stink-pot?"

Rosita Savoia straightened up from the laundry basket with her hands balled on her hips.

"You no like, eh?" she shrilled angrily. "For Joey is no good? Maybe you got monney for better place?"

"Aw, Mama, for...!"

"Maybe you got hundred doliars Mama pay judge in



Danvers? Pay so they no put Joey in prison, Hah?"

He ran his hands through his thick black hair and flung them wide.

"A mistake, Mama, and I'm sorry! Jeez, how many times I got to tell you. And I'll pay it back to you soon's I can. Every buck, I promise!"

The big woman moved over to plant herself in front of him with her black eyes snapping.

"You promise, eh? How many times you promise this and promise that? You listen what I say, Joey Savoia! Is no more acting like big shot. Is no more all the time with no good bums. You hear Mama?"

"Sure, Mama, I hear you. I'll be okay, you'll see."

Rosita Savoia stared deep and long into his eyes and gripped him by the shoulders to shake him gently.

"Is fresh start. for everybody, Joey," she said softly.

"Was no good in Danvers. Carmen she work so hard for little bit money. Joey he make bad friends and is troubles with policemen. So we come live here in Brixton where Carmen gets fine job. Say maybe is summer job for you at same place. Af-

ter summer you go to high school here and learn good for fine all the time job when you grow up. Is fresh start for everybody. No break no more promises, Joey. You be good boy and make Mama proud like little sister Carmen, eh?"

Joey groaned inwardly but smiled and kissed her nose.

"Sure, Mama, sure! I promise and I mean it. You'll see. You'll really see, Mama."

She gripped his shoulders a moment longer searching his face and dropped her hands smiling.

"Mama believe this time, Joey," she said and patted his cheek. "Is already little bit proud. Okay! Pretty soon Carmen come home and we have supper. Maybe drink little wine for start fresh celebration. You like that, eh?"

Joey laughed and kissed her nose again.

"Sure, swell, Mama! Hey, I think I'll go meet Carmen at the subway. Feel like some fresh air. Okay?"

His mother beamed. "Sure you go, Joey. Carmen like that and maybe she have news about summer job. Mama fix

fine supper for everybody. You good boy, Joey."

"Beginning right now, Mama!" he declared and went out the door and down the three flights to the street.

**F**ROM the street the building wasn't too bad looking. It was one of several brownstone fronts all in a row like blocks, but there were plenty of fresh clean curtains and drapes showing and a few window boxes of flowers to add touches of bright color to an otherwise drab picture. As a matter of fact, on the whole it was a far better looking neighborhood than the one in Danvers. But it was not Danvers and as Joey paused on the sidewalk and stared about a great big ache welled up in his chest.

A foreign land! That's where he was now or might as well be. No contacts, no pals, and no nothing. A fresh start? Mama you're so right, only not the way you think. A fresh start like a guy standing naked in the middle of nowhere. That's how he felt!

But take Danvers. Right now, right this very minute, the

gang would be collecting down by the old car barns. Chico and that real crazy dance he was always doing. Jackie with his hot dice and Sully with another of his goofy ideas how they could make a quick buck. Irish, too, if he was out of the reformatory and he should be by now. And Gyrene teaching them judo and all the other tricks he learned in the Marines before they tossed him in the brig for eighteen months and then bounced him out with a dishonorable discharge. He missed Gyrene the most. Smart, smooth, and loaded with dynamite. Cripes, the air-tight capers Gyrene worked out to keep everybody in green stuff!

Joey sighed and shook his head and started ambling along the sidewalk in the opposite direction to the subway station.

Yeah, if he'd only kept his ears open to Gyrene's words chances were he wouldn't now be here in this lousy town. At least he wouldn't have gone for a ride with Chico in that hot car and been in the crack-up. Nor would Mama have had to come up with a hundred bucks to clean his nose. And that

stinking probation cop wouldn't have had the chance to talk Mama and Carmen into moving to another town. Oh sure, maybe a lot of things, but here he was! For a fresh start and okay if that's the way it's got to be. But no goofing, Joey! No more mistakes, not even one. Fresh start right from scratch and play it real smart all the way. Like Gyrene would and . . .

It was then his thoughts slowed down enough to let him become conscious of two youths sauntering toward him. A couple of punks about his own age and close to his build. One looked like Chico and wore a real crazy yellow and black jacket. The other was fair and mouse-looking all over. Black slacks and leather jacket you wouldn't pick up off a dump even if you were that hard up.

Like a high speed camera his eyes took in all the details and then concentrated on the way the two approached him. Strolling along side by side but separated enough to take up the sidewalk with maybe eighteen inches of open space between

them. He could laugh out loud it was so funny! How many times had he pulled the same trick with Chico or Jackie or one of the others on some new punk just come into the neighborhood? Fifty times and maybe more.

Sure, spread apart just enough and stroll up on the guy. Then when real close *whamo!* The old squeeze play. Both move in fast on the sucker for the double shoulder slam and down he goes *whacko!* Then sit on him while you find out has he got anything you want and ask him questions to see if the answers are okay enough to let him up to get acquainted.

The old routine strolling right toward *him* and he could laugh out loud it struck him so funny. Gyrene, you should be here to watch. You really should!

**A** MATTER of fifteen seconds later the two other youths were but a step from him and to all appearances about to spread further apart to give him room to pass. But of course they wouldn't and of course he knew they wouldn't.

As a matter of fact, they were not even looking at him, but his own eyes were watchful and waiting. And a split instant after each youth dropped a shoulder he went into whirlwind action the way Gyrene had taught him to perfection.

He shot out his left hand with the second and third fingers forked stiff and rammed them straight into the eyes of the fair-haired youth. At the same time he shot out his right hand to hook it in back of the yellow jacket kid's head and yanked forward dropping his own head. The top of his skull smashed into the other's face and as it did he let go with his hand and brought his right knee up into the groin. His last move was to step back and grin at the pair writhing in pain on the sidewalk. One clawing at his eyes to see and the other clutching his groin with one hand and holding his bleeding nose with the other.

"You crumbs wanted to see me about something?" he asked and laughed.

The fair haired youth lowered his hands and squinted up out of reddened eyes streaming

tears. "Jesus, man, what'd we do?" he choked out.

"Nothing," Joey said and snickered. "Not a thing. Know what I mean?"

The boy in the yellow and black jacket pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped the blood off his nose and threw it in the gutter. His dark eyes smouldered with stark hatred and Joey tensed, but the hatred suddenly vanished as the youth showed strong white teeth in a broad smile.

"Beautiful, man, real beautiful!" he exclaimed and got up on his feet. "Where'd you learn that cutie? Maybe you teach Bingo, eh?"

Joey shrugged and swiveled his eyes from one to the other. "Maybe."

The one who called himself Bingo stepped back with a laugh and raised his hands in a placating gesture.

"Relax, man, relax!" he cried. "Me and Swede asked for that, so who's sore? Nobody, man! Where you from?"

"Danvers," Joey said. He grinned faintly, a tiny offering of friendliness, but kept his

eyes alert for he had often learned the lesson in Danvers. When you're not sure expect anything.

The fair haired boy grinned and pointed at his red eyes.

"That where you learned to blind a man, eh?"

"And other things," Joey told him. "You guys left yourselves wide open, you know that?"

"We know it now!" Bingo said and laughed again. "What they call you in Danvers? What's the name, man?"

Joey told him and the kid in the yellow and black jacket put out his hand.

"Press the flesh, Joey," he said. "Me, I'm Bingo Batista. Him, he's Swede Swanson. Press the flesh, man!"

Joey shook hands with both of them still keenly alert for the slightest hostile movement, but apparently it was a sincere enough gesture of a new-found friendship. A tiny feeling of warmth slid through him.

"You guys live around here?" he asked.

"Next block up," Bingo said and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Look, man, you ever hear of the Bats?"

"Should I have?" Joey countered.

"You really should, man!" Swede declared. "Hottest cats in town, the Bats."

Bingo nodded and put out a hand palm up and slowly closed his fingers into a fist. "We got it like that in this territory," he said. "Anything at all. The Bats really got it made around here. I tell you truly, man!"

Joey raised his brows slightly, but not enough to look too impressed. "Any other clubs in town?"

Bingo scowled, but quickly wiped it away with his toothy smile. "Bunches of crumbs," he said. "The Bats are it. You ask around and listen."

"Maybe I will," Joey said. He looked at his wrist watch and shrugged. "I got to shove off. See you guys around maybe."

"Wait, hold it!" Bingo said quickly. "You got a date or something going tonight?"

Joey cocked his head. "Why?"

"Maybe you'd like to meet some of the crew," the other kid said. "We kick it around every night at the Dirty Spoon."

A real cool crew, man, and after I tell 'em they'll want to meet you. How about eight o'clock?"

Joey pursed his lips and scratched his chin as if giving it deep consideration. Inwardly he was tingling slightly. It had turned out so easy. His first day in Brixton and already a couple of punks were opening the door.

"I might work it in," he finally said. "Where's this Dirty Spoon at?"

"Three blocks down and two over," Bingo said pointing. "There's an Esso station and across from it Mac's Diner. That's it. Look, I'll be waiting out front at eight. You make it, eh?"

"If I'm not tied up," Joey said and gave them each a light tap on the chest. "See you around, men," he added and walked up the street.

The other two watched him go for a few moments and then looked at each other and laughed and continued on their way.

**J**OEY reached the front steps of the brownstone at the

same time as his sister Carmen. She was inches shorter than he but three years older and pretty as a Caribbean cruise poster. Jet black hair, dark flashing eyes and roses in her cheeks, but with the mark of poise and character depth stamped all over.

"Hi, Joey!" she greeted him warmly enough despite the shadow of a frown on her delicate brows. "Who are your friends?"

"Couple of guys I got talking to," he said instantly on the defensive. "So?"

"So I only asked," Carmen said lightly and went up the stone steps with him. "Oh by the way, there is a definite chance for a summer job at the store. In the stockroom. I spoke to Mr. Busby today, he's the stockroom manager and he said they were taking on a couple of more boys. It's from seven to four with an hour for lunch, and it pays forty-seven fifty. Not bad, huh?"

Joey shuddered but didn't let it show. "Me, a millionaire!" he said with a small laugh.

"Many are started at far less!" Carmen said quickly and



took hold of his arm as he was about to open the outer door. "Look, Joey, I've never preached, you know that," she said quietly, "but please *try* not to make it so rough on Mama. Okay? She's sick, Joey. No, I don't mean she needs a doctor. She's sick inside with worry about you, and me, too, I guess. We're all she's got. Her whole world. It would kill her if anything happened to...either of us. Know what I mean, Joey?"

"Sure, I know, and stop worrying yourself," he said. "Joey's learned his lesson and it won't happen again. Not ever. So don't make it tougher always climbing his back. Okay?"

Carmen studied him a moment and nodded. "Subject's dropped," she said. "Mr. Busby's interviewing between ten and eleven tomorrow morning. I'm sure you can get a job. Okay, let's go in."

At a quarter after eight that evening Joey stood in the dark doorway of a vacant store a half block up from Mac's Diner. He had been standing there now for half an hour taking a good look at the lay of

everything and at everybody going in and out of the diner which was of considerable size and brightly lighted and apparently doing a good business for the water front part of the city.

The taxi drivers, truck drivers, dock workers, and other grownups he passed over with a glance. It was the guys his age he paid special attention to, and there were six of them inside there now. Rather, there were five inside and Bingo Batista outside walking up and down the sidewalk waiting for him. The oldest one had looked around eighteen and he was the biggest one. A couple of inches and twenty-five pounds more than him. So what? So nothing.

All in all they were a pretty fair-looking bunch and a couple of things really impressed him. With the exception of Swede Swanson they were sharp dressers. No crazy rags that shouted in your face and made you want to puke, but real sharp stuff that showed they had it made when it came to the necessary buck. The other item was that two of them had

a car. The big guy and a red-headed kid with a boot camp hair cut. A Ford and a Chevy and no crocks either. Sassy looking boats that had plenty under the hood from the smooth song coming out the duals.

Yeah, Joey, maybe it was all here just begging for you!

He grinned at the thought and stepped out of the dark doorway and walked along the sidewalk toward the diner. When Bingo saw him coming he hurried forward to meet him.

"About thinking you'd chickened out, man!" the boy cried showing his white teeth in a pleased grin.

Joey eyed him unsmiling. "Don't push it, Bingo! I said maybe I'd work it in. Remember?"

"Sure, okay," the youth in the yellow and black jacket said quickly. "Anyways, you're here now and that's it. Come on in and meet 'em. They been waiting."

**A**S Bingo spoke, he opened the diner's door and pushed Joey in ahead of him. A

half dozen men were seated at the counter, but none bothered to turn his head. Joey wouldn't have noticed anyway, for he wasn't looking. His eyes were on the end two of the booths that lined the front of the diner toward which Bingo was leading him. In the nearest booth were three kids one of them the red head with the boot camp cut. And in the end booth was the big guy and Swede Swanson. Everybody had a Coke in his hand, but not a single pair of eyes watched Bingo and him approach. The old frost treatment the way they used to do it in Danvers. Cripes, like seeing yesterday's movie!

As they passed the nearest booth the redhead and the two others still didn't look up and when they stopped at the end booth the big guy and Swede were deeply absorbed in reading the tune titles on the juke box coin meter. He grinned inwardly and wished he had a fire cracker to toss for laughs.

"Hey, Mike," Bingo suddenly broke the silence. "Here's a guy wants to meet you. Joey Savoia. Comes from Danvers.

Joey, this is Mike Kosik. And Swede, sure."

Swanson turned around and said, "Hi", and Joey said, "Hi", but kept his eyes on the big guy. A few moments later Mike Kosik turned slowly and stared up at him out of flat, slate-colored eyes.

"Hi," he said tonelessly. "Park it, man. A Coke?"

Joey nodded and Kosik looked at Bingo. "Get it!"

The kid in the yellow and black jacket scurried over to the machine and Joey slid into the booth seat beside Swede Swanson and looked casually about fully conscious of Kosik's slate eyes fixed on him. "Not bad," he said presently. "Not a half bad dump."

"Better in Danvers, eh?" Kosik challenged softly.

Joey met his eyes and nodded. "We liked privacy," he said, easily.

At that moment Bingo returned with two Cokes and pushed one across the booth table to him. Kosik nodded at it. "Want something in it? Can be had."

Joey shook his head. "Belly's full of chianti," he said and

nodded right back at the other's drink. "But you go right ahead. Break it out. Don't let me spoil the party."

Kosik acted as if he hadn't heard. He took a long pull on his own Coke and looked at Joey again.

"Bingo and Swede tell me you know tricks," he said.

"You have to in Danvers," Joey said and returned the steady stare. "What about it?"

Mike Kosik's eyes tightened but he shrugged it off quickly.

"Just wondering if maybe you could fit in," he said and yawned.

Joey grinned and said nothing. Another routine procedure Gyrene had taught him so well. When you want something never go for it. Make it come to you. He drank some of his Coke and pushed the button for "Real Gone Gal" on the juke box listings and put a nickle in. He could almost smell the three in the booth in back of him straining their ears for every word. He bobbed his head in time with the tune and when the record was half over Kosik suddenly asked. "You handle a car, man?"

"Who doesn't?" Joey countered and went on bobbing his head.

"Let's go," Kosik said presently and stood up and shoved Bingo out of the booth ahead of him. "Let's see can you. Okay?"

Joey shrugged and got up with Swede and the four of them went out to the street and over to the parked Ford. Kosik pulled some keys from his pocket and gave them to him and he slid in behind the wheel very conscious of the redhead and the other two piling out of the diner and running over to the Chevy. Three guesses what was coming up and he was certain he needed only one. The old chicken game? So Okay. It wouldn't be the first time. Nor the last!

**A**FTER ten minutes of following direction instructions from Mike Kosik sitting in front with him Joey tooted the Ford onto a long straight stretch of night-shrouded deserted highway with the white line running down the middle. For a moment he was tempted to swing over and put his left wheels dead on the white line,

but on second thought he decided to play it dumb. By now he didn't go at all for Mike Kosik so the hell with him! Let him think he was calling the signals for the big laugh.

"Get your wheels on the line, man," Kosik said a few moments later. "See can you keep 'em there. Ever try it?"

"No," Joey lied and moved the car over. "So what's hard about it?"

"Nothing," the other boy said and laughed. "Nothing at all. Just see can you keep 'em there and hold it at fifty."

"Easy," Joey said and felt like laughing himself.

Presently headlights winked on way up ahead and came barreling toward him. He couldn't see by the headlights, but he didn't have to. He knew that the redhead with the boot camp cut was behind the wheel of the oncoming car, and he also knew the car's left wheels were dead on the center line. A tiny chill touched him for an instant and was gone.

Holding the car at a steady fifty he drilled it forward and half closed his eyes against the oncoming headlights and fixed

them fast on the white line. He could tell that Kosik seated beside him was watching him like a hawk and he could sense that Bingo and Swede in the back seat were doing the same. It made him feel swell inside and he knew his left wheels were on that white line to stay. Let the redhead climb right up over the fender the Ford's wheels were staying right on the white line. Gyrene, you should be here to see this one, too!

The next ten seconds were like riding a rocket straight into the blazing glare of twin suns that were hurtling closer and closer, but the only thing Joey Savoia was conscious of was the bright white line stretching out from in front of his left front wheel. And then in the last split instant when it seemed the glaring twin suns would pierce his very eyes panic pin-pricked his brain, but before his muscles could react the twin suns had swerved to the side and gone howling by, and the white line was still there dead in front of the left wheel.

"Jeezus!"

It sounded like Swede's voice, but it didn't matter to

Joey. He swung off the white line and pushed the Ford up to seventy and glanced sidewise at Kosik.

"Something else you want to find out?" he asked and laughed.

The other boy gave him a hard cold stare and pulled down the corners of his mouth.

"Don't crowd it, man!" he said darkly. "There's some other things... when we get around to 'em. Go on back to Mac's."

The drive back to Mac's Diner was made in silence and when they got there the redhead and the two others in the Chevy were waiting for them. Conscious of all eyes fixed on him Joey got out of the Ford and handed Kosik the keys with a mocking smile.

"Thanks for the boat ride," he said. "Maybe again sometime? I got to blow now, but I'll see you around."

"Maybe!" Kosik said in a flat voice. "I'll let you know."

"Anytime," Joey said easily and started to turn away.

It was then Mike Kosik shot out his hand with two fingers forked, but his eyes had already telegraphed the move-

ment. In a whirlwind of motion Joey ducked and twisted, flung up his two hands to grab the other's wrist, and then arching his back he heaved and let go. Mike Kosik sailed through the air like a bird and fell down in a sprawling heap on the sidewalk.

His reaction to Kosik's attack had been so fast it was all over before Joey realized, and fear stabbed at his heart. He quickly leaped back a step and came up on the balls of his feet poised for a jet take-off if a single switchknife gleamed in anybody's hand. But not a thing happened. They all stood very still staring at Mike Kosik gasping for breath and struggling up onto his feet. Swift relief surged through Joey. So that's the way it was with the Bats? Everybody for himself and nobody holds his hand or wipes his nose? Okay and a break for him, but the gang in Danvers sure wouldn't play it this way. An all for one crew, those guys!

He took a deep breath and dropped down on his heels and grinned over at Kosik.

"You okay?" he asked pleas-

antly. "No hard feelings?"

Mike Kosik wiped something from his mouth and shook himself like a dog and without a word went over and got into the Ford and rode away.

For several seconds dead silence hovered over the group on the sidewalk and then the redhead with the boot camp haircut laughed.

"School's out!" he cried. "Anybody for bowling at Silver Beach? How about you, Savoia? You cats bowl in Danvers?"

Joey nodded and started to speak, but Bingo Batista beat him to it.

"Later, men," he said. "Shove off and maybe we'll join you. Joey and me got things to talk. See you."

The redhead eyed Bingo a moment and then shrugged and with a hooking motion of his arm at the others he walked over and got into the Chevy. The others piled in after him and with a blast of souped up power the Chevy took off down the street. When it was gone Bingo winked at Joey and jerked his head at the diner.

"Mug of mud, man? You got

the time, I got the things to say."

Joey thought it over a moment and shrugged. "Maybe I have," he said. "What things?"

"Tell you inside," the other said and led the way into the diner and down to the end booth.

"Maybe Coke instead?" he asked when they got there.

"Mud's okay," Joey said. "Black."

"Two blacks coming up," Bingo said and went over to the counter.

**W**HEN he came back with the two cups his face was thoughtful and for several moments he sat staring into the black liquid without speaking. Finally Joey was about to say something when he looked up and grinned broadly.

"A real cool rod pilot, man!" he said and laughed. "I tell you truly you really scared it out of me. Old stuff for you, right?"

"Kid stuff," Joey said and sipped his coffee. He put his cup down holding Batista with his eyes. "That all the Bats got

to offer?" he asked dryly. "Kid stuff?"

Bingo scowled but it went away as a sly grin tugged at his lips.

"Mike's idea," he said. "For laughs *he* thought!" He paused and wagged his head. "Man, he asked for tricks and really got 'em! Right?"

Joey shrugged. "So?"

Bingo turned his hands palms up and cocked his head.

"So Mike didn't go for it," he said. "Would any Top Cat?"

"Top Cat?" Joey echoed absently.

The other boy shot him a wide-eyed stare. "You don't read me, man? *Top Cat*. That's Mike. Up to now anything he says we do."

A little quiver of excitement rippled through Joey. He grinned slowly. "Up to *now*, Bingo?" he murmured.

The other nodded slowly and drank some coffee. "Yeah," he said presently. "So maybe something should be done about it. Know what I mean?"

"Maybe," Joey said cautiously. "That all of it? Just something? What something?" He shook his head. "You want

me to read you clear, Bingo, you send it all. Okay?"

Batista nodded but didn't speak. Instead he turned his head around and looked at the other customers arguing baseball with the counterman at the far end. Presently he turned back and leaned forward over the booth table.

"Tonight's not the only thing about Mike," he said speaking low. "Fouled up a couple of things lately like he's gone chicken. Some of the crew are starting to wonder. Know what I mean?"

Joey shrugged and waited.

"Take just now," Batista spoke again. "New guy in town gives Mike the old one-two and what happens? Anybody do something about it? The crew, I mean?"

"Yeah!" Joey shook his head. "Some crew!"

Bingo's eyes darkened. "Don't worry about 'em," he said softly. "Mike asked for something and he got it. Anybody else and you'd a had trouble. Lots of it!"

"Okay, okay," Joey said. "So?"

The other boy frowned and chewed his lower lip.

"Maybe it's time somebody took over for Mike," he said slowly. "Maybe it is."

"Meaning you?"

Batista shook his head and pointed a finger. "You, man."

Joey stared at him wary eyed. "Why me?"

"Why not?"

JOEY sipped some of his coffee and let it trickle down his throat. Yeah, why not? The words echoed about in his head and sounded better and better. Hadn't Gyrene done it in Danvers? Moved right in and taken over and anybody didn't like it was free to do something? So he wasn't Gyrene and maybe not even close but he had a good idea he could keep that crew in line he'd had a look at tonight. So why not? Because it's come too fast and all at once? Okay, so it has!

He studied Bingo's face for a few moments.

"I might give it thought," he said slowly. "Only I'm still wondering about you. You'd go for an outsider taking over? Just why? Would the rest of the crew? Just why, too?" He stopped and leaned forward his



eyes boring. "You know something, Bingo?"

"What, man?"

"It don't figure, that's what!" Joey shook his head. "It don't add up. So what's the gimmick? You tell me it. You level with it and really tell. Okay?"

Bingo suddenly laughed and put out his hands and turned the palms upward.

"Sure I level with you, man!" he exclaimed. "What else? You wonder about Bingo. Okay! You're asking yourself why don't Bingo want it? Right?"

"You're sending it," Joey said evenly. "More, man."

"Simple," the other youth said and slapped the table lightly. "Me, I like to run with the pack, see? The man up front has all the headaches and he can have 'em! Know what I mean?"

Joey shrugged and suppressed a fake yawn. "My ears are open," he said. "Keep talking."

Bingo gave another of his sudden laughs and hunched a shoulder and wiggled his hands.

"So okay, it's the two of us,"

he said. "Me and you. You got brains and know lots of things. I got brains, too, and know the angles in this territory. Between us we have it beat. We really got it made. Anytime, man!"

Joey drank the last of his coffee and held the cup out in front of him and studied it intently.

"The rest of the Bats?" he suddenly shot out the words at Batista.

"Sheep. Okay crew, but sheep. Don't worry about 'em. That'll be simple to handle."

"One other thing," Joey spoke again after a few moments of silence between them.

"I'm tuned in, man! Give."

"Kosik. What about him?"

"Yeah, Mike," Bingo said and slid his lips back in a wide grin. "He wouldn't like it. Something he don't like right now. You, man! Mike's hating your guts real good, you guess that?"

"I'm crying," Joey said tonelessly. "So?"

"So like I said," Batista replied, "something should be done about Mike. So we do it. Me and you." He stopped and

leaned way forward. "You go for a deal, man? A real sweet deal?"

"Maybe, if it listens good," Joey told him. "But who's heard it yet?"

The other nodded and winked and turned around to take another look toward the three at the far end of the counter. They were still arguing baseball and presently he turned back to Joey with a second nod.

"I got it all figured beautiful," he said softly. "A real sweet deal. A mess of the green stuff for me and you and a mess of cops for Mike. Just like that, and he ain't around any more. How's it listen, man?"

Something small and cold slid through Joey Savoia, but it was gone before he hardly noticed. He peered at Batista intently with one eyebrow arched.

"The gimmick," he suddenly said.

"Like this," Bingo told him and inched a little closer. "It's something I been conning a couple of months. Solo on my own time, know what I mean?"

He paused and laughed. "Maybe I just been waiting for you to show, man!" he breathed.

"Yeah," Joey grunted and waited.

"Place on the water front near here," Bingo said lowering his voice even more. "Boats for hire and bait and crud like that. An old guy runs it. Looks a hundred and hits the bottle like he's got to dry up the world." He grinned broadly and winked. "And he don't like banks. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, but 'do you?" Joey countered quickly. "All this about him. Says who?"

Batista looked angry and hurt. He shook his head and took a breath.

"I say I know all about him!" he whispered fiercely. "Ain't I telling it? Sure I know all about him. I was in his place a while back on an errand for a guy gives me a buck. Anyway this old boy is closing up for the night and, man, he's rolling. He really is. Stinks like a brewery, I tell you truly."

**T**HE youth stopped and wet his lips with the few drops left in his coffee cup.

"Old guy's place has two rooms, a pier shack," he went on speaking. "One where he sleeps it off and the other where he keeps his junk. There's an old desk and he keeps the green in a drawer. I seen it when he opened it to make change. Man, lots of green! Maybe a thousand bucks. Keeps it locked, but a guy could open it with his teeth. Man, you'd never have it so good on an easy touch! You still got me tuned in?"

The small voice of caution in Joey was trying hard but the mounting excitement squashed it out.

"Still reading you," he said slowly. "And it's still there? How come if such an easy touch?"

Bingo Batista looked hurt again and for a few moments he didn't speak.

"Ain't I said I know the angles in this territory?" he eventually snapped. "You think the cops love us Bats? Hell, any place gets knocked over around here the cops talk about it with the Bats *fast*, know what I mean? *Unless they got somebody to grab right away!*

It coming through clear now, man?"

Joey nodded. "Kosik?"

"Him," Bingo said and winked. "Look, an accident and I find a real easy touch. But not for Bingo. No man! I pull it alone and I'm up to here in cops. So is all the crew. It ain't worth it, see? But I'm itching knowing it's there. I even con the old guy's place a few nights to double check and it comes out the same. Half plastered when he closes up and out like a light an hour after. Once I sling a rock against the side of his place just to test, but there ain't a rumble. He's cold. Wouldn't even hear a bomb."

He stopped talking for a moment and pulled down the corners of his mouth.

"Man, I really itched for it, but I just keep itching. This cat ain't crazy. Without a sure pigeon for the cops it could blow up easy as nothing. So I forget it. Until now."

"And Kosik?" Joey grunted. "The pigeon? How?"

Batista smiled slyly and put his hands in his pocket and pulled out a silver identification

bracelet and held it up for Joey to see. The name Michael Kosik was engraved on it and below a social security number.

"Funny how things can check in," he said and laughed. "Only this morning I find this on the floor right where we're sitting. And tonight me and you are looking at it...with ideas. Know what I mean?"

Joey nodded but didn't look impressed. "Haven't heard all of those ideas yet," he said flatly.

Joey brushed the air with his hand and jiggled the bracelet.

"Okay, okay, I spell it out!" he said in a low tight voice. "Me and you pick up the old man's green and leave this on the floor. So presto, the cops take over Mike and we take over the Bats. As simple as that, and we got it made so easy, man. So simple, right?"

"Simple?" Joey echoed and gave the other a hard stare. "Kosik just goes away and that's it? No r u m b l e out of him? He won't have nothing to say where he was when the caper happens? You kidding somebody, man?"

Bingo drew in a breath and

puffed his cheeks and blew it out.

"No rumble that'll go for a thing," he said softly. "Mike's in the book plenty times. Small stuff, but in there. The cops don't like him and would they just love to hang him real high! A thing like this and they'd latch onto him so fast! Man, he could rumble like crazy and maybe even prove a little, but it wouldn't change nothing. The cops would like something on him that bad, see? I tell you truly, Mike would be standing on just air, that's all. With his record nobody'd believe him." He stopped and shook his head solemnly. "Not even the crew, you want it that straight. So how about it? A deal? Me and you take over, but good?"

Joey ran the tip of his tongue across his lips and frowned as if giving it weighty consideration, but the only answer was there all the time.

"You got a deal," he spoke it aloud. "When?"

Batista looked surprised. "Tonight, man! Right *now!* Take us half an hour to get there and maybe a little more if he ain't closed up and stiff yet. Should be. Nothing doing

in his racket after ten. "All boats in by then and he's whacking away at the bottle. Sure, man, tonight. *Right now!*"

JOEY glanced up at the diner's clock on the wall behind the counter and received a mild jolt when he saw the hands pointing to twenty minutes after ten. He should be home from the movies by eleven and that's where he'd told Mama and Carmen he was going. They'd had a lot of hot yakking about it, but he'd smoothed it out in the end. What was the place, his prison? Hadn't he promised he'd be okay from here on in? He'd go down in the morning and get that stockroom job. Was going to a lousy movie a crime? Stuff like that and in the end he got an out. But it was ten-twenty now and...

"What's bugging you, man?" Bingo's voice cut in on his thoughts. "You looking at the clock? You got a curfew or something? So what's the bug or do we roll?"

Joey gave him a hard stare and nodded. "Just checking the time. Let's roll."

At the end of half an hour Joey Savoia's feet felt as if he'd walked a dozen miles. In Danvers there were a lot of side streets and alleys, but nothing like here in Brixton. The town was lousy with them and it seemed as if Batista led the way down them all and with the stench of the water front in his nose every inch of the way, too. Neither of them spoke and for a reason that was very obvious Bingo hugged the darkest sides and carefully skirted every street light.

But by the end of the half hour Joey's feet were really starting to pop and something he couldn't put his finger on, if really anything, was gnawing at the back of his brain. So when they came to yet another corner he touched Batista on the arm.

"Look, how far now?" he whispered. "Or have you been walking us in circles, man?"

The other grinned and bobbed his head. "Sort of, but to play it smart. I know the cops' beats around here like my palm, see? Let one of them spot us and it maybe wouldn't be so good later on, know what I mean? So we went where they

ain't. But relax, we're there. Or just about." He stopped and pointed beyond the corner to his left. "Out there at the end of that pier," he said. "Take a gander. Shack's dark as your belly. Nice for us, hey, man?"

Joey peered through the night gloom in the direction of the other's pointing finger. They were standing almost at the edge of the water and at the far end of the long pier reaching out he could just see the blurred outline of a small pier shack.

"See it," he whispered. "So?"

Batista laughed softly. "So we go visit the old guy. Only he don't know it, right? Come on."

With a nod and a crooking of a finger the youth slid around the corner and walked out onto the pier. Joey hesitated a moment, not knowing why, and then quickly caught up with him and together they walked catfooted through the dark. With each step Joey took more of the exciting tingle of old times in Danvers came back to him. He gave a little bob of his head and grinned to himself in the dark. Gyrene, I get it made so easy. One day and look at me, man! Going right to

the top. Okay, Bingo is taking the ride, too, but so what? I can keep him in line once I get set and that's soon, man. Real soon! I just wish, Gyrene, you were. . . .

His rambling thoughts were blown away as Batista suddenly grabbed him and fell with him to the pier planking. Words jumped into his throat, but stopped there as the bright white beam of a searchlight swung through the night air only a foot or two above their heads and passed on out of sight. Only then did he hear the power rumble of a boat somewhere out there on the water.

"Harbor cops!" Bingo hissed in his ear. "Always poking that lousy light around but I heard 'em. Okay, they're gone now. Won't be back for a couple of hours." He peered at Joey in the bad light and grinned broadly. "Scare you, man?" he whispered.

Joey got up onto his feet and gave him a hard stare. "Next time pass a guy the rumble!" he said tightly. "I don't like surprises!"

Bingo shrugged and brushed off the front of his jacket.

"Didn't hear it soon enough, man," he said. "But no sweat, we're clear now. Come on and watch how a good man works."

A question formed in Joey's head, but a minute later when the two of them crouched in front of the door of the night-shrouded pier shack he received the answer without asking. Bingo first tried the door knob with a delicate touch and finding it locked he put his hand in his pocket and took out a skeleton key. There was just the faintest murmur of sound as it turned in the lock and then Bingo silently eased the door open and slipped inside with a jerk of his head for Joey to follow.

**S**ECONDS later Joey was through the door opening and standing in a pitch dark room with a hundred different smells and all of them of the water front variety. He sensed rather than heard Batista close the door and then at the same instant as the faint click of a switch the place was filled with pale yellow light. Pale as it was it blinded him for a split instant and just as his eyes re-

turned to focus he heard another click. A very different click than that of the light switch, but it was exactly like a clicking sound he had heard more than once in Danvers, and although his brain shouted he was crazy his blood ran cold.

He spun around quickly and he was not crazy. Bingo Batista stood with his back to the door and in his right hand was a gleaming razor edge switch-knife!

For an eternity Joey could only stand there completely dumbfounded and paralyzed with fear.

"Jesus, what...?" he suddenly gasped and choked.

Bingo laughed and reached back his other hand and slipped the skeleton key into the inside lock and turned it and put the key in his pocket.

"Yeah!" He nodded and laughed again. "Little surprise. Right, man?"

Joey swallowed and closed his eyes and opened them quickly and stabbed glances about. What he saw chilled his blood all the more and made something start to revolve inside his head. There was noth-

ing in the room, not even a stick of furniture. Dust and grime covered the floor and the one window that faced seaward was boarded up on the outside. There was nothing, absolutely nothing to use as a defensive weapon and the thing in his head revolved faster and faster.

"What the hell, Bingo?" he cried out. "What's the idea? You crazy or something? What's the play?"

The youth in the yellow and black jacket took a single step away from the door and stopped. His dark eyes gleamed and his lips parted in a triumphant leer.

"You can't guess, man?" he breathed softly. "You give Bingo the old one-two and everybody should laugh? Him, too?" He stopped and with his free hand touched his groin and then his nose. "You read me now, man? You think Bingo laughs, too, eh? You think that, man?"

Joey couldn't believe his ears and he couldn't make his tongue work either. He opened and closed his mouth several times but no sounds came out.

"You think I let it pass, a thing like that, man?" Batista spoke again. "Smart punk thinks he gets away with it? No, man. I tell you truly, *no!*"

"But you admitted you asked for it!" Joey cried as his voice came with a rush. "You said so. What the hell, Bingo? It was just one of those things. Happens all the time and no sweat. It's happened to me, too. Look, this is crazy. Real crazy! I tell you . . ."

**B**INGO stopped the rest by taking another step forward and pushing the switchknife out in front of him.

"The wrong man," he said. "You picked the wrong man, you know that now? Nobody does a thing like that to Bingo. You hear me, man? *Nobody!*"

"But why the knife?" Joey gasped as his feet began to feel like lumps of lead he couldn't move. "Why? Did I use a knife, did I? And what'll it get you to cut me up? Those guys in the diner. They saw us leave together. You cut me up and . . . Bingo, use your head! This is all crazy!"

The other youth laughed silently and pulled the silver



identification bracelet from his pocket and tossed it onto the dust covered floor.

"Crazy, man?" he mocked. "Who's crazy? Me? You? Mike? Do you read me now, man? Begin to get the pattern? *Do* you, man?"

Like a house of cards the horrible truth of it all began to tumble down in pieces inside Joey's head. And that other thing there revolved faster and faster.

"You really get the pattern, man?" Batista taunted again. "All the stuff I told you, the build up? You ate it, didn't you, man? Yeah, you really lapped it up. Mike's out and me and you in. Top Cats, right? Only no! Just *one!*" He stopped and tilted the needle point of the knife toward his chest. "Me, Bingo! You're dead. Mike fries for it. So just one Top Cat. *Me!*"

"No, you'll fry!" Joey cried. "Don't you realize? The crew bowling. They left us together. They'll guess. They'll *know* and they'll. . ."

"Stuff it, man!" Batista hissed. "Just you and Mike. That's the way it'll be. The

crew seen you clobber Mike. You think they don't figure Mike'll do something about it? Top Cats gets clobbered in front of his crew and that's the end of it for him? You crazy enough to think that, man? It's Mike and you. That's the way it'll be. Harbor cops check these old pier shacks every few days and they'll find you and Mike's dog tag. Then that'll be it. You dead and Mike never coming back. You see, man? Okay, you've had it. *Tough tiddy, right?*"

The sweat was pouring out of Joey hot and turning ice cold as it trickled down his skin. As Bingo advanced slowly the switchknife became an all powerful magnet for his eyes. The only thing in all the world. Gyrene, help me! You showed us how to take a knife, but we used fake ones. This is real, Gyrene! This is a real one and so can I remember? Can I do it like you showed? Gyrene *help me!*

The words streamed through Joey's head an unspoken prayer in a void of roaring fog. All was fog there except for one single split instant when mem-

ory whipped back to Batista throwing his blood-soaked handkerchief into the gutter with the naked hatred in his eyes. That's when he should have known and realized. Guys like Bingo and Chico never forgive or forget. They keep it hidden way down inside them until they get the chance to pay it back. Like now! Oh God, Joey, why didn't you spot it then and realize!

Like the others the words streamed through his head and were lost in the roaring fog. And then there was nothing there. Only the gleaming blade slashing through the air at him, but instinct took care of Bingo's first lunge. He leaped back and twisted away searching for a chance to dart in underneath and pin the other's arm. But Bingo knew all about that, too. He checked his lunge as quickly as he started it and came up on the balls of his feet grinning. He was having fun. This he liked. Don't get it over quick. It was much sweeter the other way. The youth's lips moved, but if he said anything Joey didn't hear for the roaring in his head and

the thunder of his blood in his ears.

The switchknife flashed out again like a striking golden cobra and Joey whirled clear of it, but not quite all the way. Fire raced across his left shoulder and part way down the arm. He heard his own voice cry out and he heard Batista laugh as the youth went into a little fancy dance step and whipped the gleaming blade back and forth in front of him.

"Stings you, man? Stings you real mean, right?"

He heard the words this time but they didn't make any sense in his roaring head. There was only the gleaming knife. That's all his brain could feel now. The knife and the fire in his shoulder. And then Batista lunged with the knife again, but this time Joey didn't just try to twist away. The things Gyrene had taught him came flashing back and he made as if to step back from the lunge, but instead he dropped half way to his knees and shot up his two hands to grip Bingo's wrist as the knife flashed by over his head.

But his hands were slippery

with sweat and he lost his grip with the right one and at the same unfortunate instant he stumbled and fell against Batista. As he did he whipped his right arm about the youth's neck and cupped his hand over the chin and yanked hard, but it was too late. His left hand slipped off Bingo's wrist and down came the needle pointed knife to plunge deep into his side.

White fire streaked through him and swirled up into his head to explode. He felt himself falling and Bingo's two hands were clawing at his face and throat and the knife was not in either hand! And then he was down on one knee on the floor and his right hand was still cupped over Batista's chin and somehow the youth was on his back across his knee and his face was so purple it looked ready to burst. With the

few drops of life's strength left in him he cupped his left hand over Bingo's chin on top of his right and then twisted and yanked downward as he let the weight of the upper half of his body drop on the youth's face. And lastly just as Batista's neck bones let go with a snap, black oblivion closed over him.

A little after midnight the duty officer aboard the harbor police boat spotted a crack of light showing through the boarded up window of the pier shack and when he investigated he found the two dead bodies in a pool of blood. And at three o'clock that morning a police cruiser stopped in front of the brownstone front and a cop went up the steps and played his flashlight over the apartment bell button cards until he came to the one marked, SAVOIA.

THE END

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