

I Die Daily

By H. Wolff Salz

Cop McCabe was a coward who was too yellow to run.



IN THE fog-choked darkness, the warehouse loomed like a spectral bluff. Not a sound broke the brooding midnight silence.

Joe McCabe was sure the stool pigeon's tip that Lou Fox and his boys were working the Sayer warehouse tonight was a bad steer, until he and Detective Sergeant Allister stumbled over the lifeless figure of Officer Jordan in the cobblestoned alley! The patrolman had been shot in the back, a typical Lou Fox touch.

A strange truck stood at the loading platform, and confirmed the obvious conclusion that the warehouse crooks were at work within the ancient mildewed building.

Joe McCabe saw Sergeant Allister grope for his gun. His heart began to pound with a fierce, painful velocity. He opened his mouth to suggest that maybe one of them had better go back to the car and radio headquarters for assistance. Instead, he clamped his mouth shut, biting into his lower lip to keep from speaking.

He knew he was scared stiff. It was that same paralyzing fear that had always numbed his body at the first whiff of danger. The fear that made him hate himself.

It had always been that way. He remembered how it had been when he was a kid of ten, and Butch Cleary, the block bully, had demanded a piece of his candy bar. Joe had been afraid of Butch. But he would have died if the crowd of kids who

had been drawn to the impending battle like flies to sugar had realized how scared he was. He had waded into Butch, landed a couple of punches, then found himself stretched on the sidewalk with a swelling, bleeding nose.

Butch got the candy, but the other kids helped Joe to his feet, enthusiastically pumped his back, and praised him for his bravery in standing up to Butch. They had never discovered what a coward he was.

Then in high school, Joe remembered the fear that had seized the pit of his stomach when Judy Allister had asked him if he was going to try for the football team. But he had been even more afraid of her scorn if she discovered that the mere thought of football scrimmage frightened him.

He had gone out for the team, made it, played each game with a dread that numbed his body. Somehow he had managed to do things the right way at the right time and they called him a star. Neither Judy nor his teammates had ever learned the truth.

Now, he was on the detective force, teamed up with Sergeant Mike Allister, the most fearless cop on the force; a man who was said to hate a coward with a cop's badge as much as he hated rats like Lou Fox. And it was Judy Allister, Mike's daughter, whom Joe wanted to marry. That was why he had tried so hard to get on the force in the first place. Judy had always said that the man she'd marry would be like her dad.

Joe McCabe's teeth bit deeper into his lip. What a fraud he was! Trying to pass himself off for a man like Mike Allister, a

man who didn't know the meaning of fear!

Joe felt Sergeant Allister's grip on his arm.

"Draw your gun, son. Those rats are up on a higher floor on the other side of the building. That's why we don't see any lights. We'll give them a surprise party."

The palm of Joe's hand was sticky as he fumbled for the gun in his shoulder holster. Like a man walking in his sleep he found himself moving forward at Allister's side.

THE warehouse loading door was unlocked. Sergeant Allister eased it open, shouldered inside. A pulse hammered in Joe's ears as he followed. A single weak bulb burned at the foot of the dusty wooden stairway. The single, gate-protected elevator shaft was dark. The freight elevator was evidently parked at an upper floor.

Sergeant Allister's eyes were bleak, hard, as he moved without hesitation to the narrow stairway. Not a sign of fear showed on his set face. The man was made of solid granite!

Joe prayed the sergeant wouldn't look back at him. He knew his face must be chalk white. He dreaded the look of contempt that would come over Allister's face if he glanced at him and realized the truth.

The brittle ancient wooden steps seemed to creak loud enough to awaken the dead as they inched upward. Joe knew that he and the sergeant would be clay targets for a hidden lookout in the gloom overhead. The sergeant, though—he was oblivious to the lurking danger.

The wild, desperate urge to turn and scuttle for safety ran through Joe's aching body like a searing fire. Yet, somehow, he managed to keep a step behind Allister. He had to go forward with the sergeant! He'd die of shame if Allister ever discovered the

truth.

Suddenly a startled face appeared from around the bend at the landing overhead. At the same instant Joe heard the reverberating report and saw the spurt of flame. Something like an angry bee sang past his head. Behind him he heard the slug rivet into decaying wood.

Sergeant Allister's gun barked at almost the same instant. The face overhead disappeared. The sergeant pounded upward and Joe found himself moving along with him.

They rounded the bend, triggering at the rapidly scattering figures in the gloom. There were three of them, diving for the protection of huge packing cases that crowded the low-ceilinged room.

Joe fired at one of the scurrying figures, saw the man nose-dive to the floor and lie still. He heard a startled, pained gasp to his left. He saw Sergeant Allister crumple to the floor, and leaped to his side.

Allister's face was white. "Got me on the kneecap—never mind—go after those rats!"

Joe heard a loud, splintering crash of glass. His head jerked up in time to see the two unharmed members of the Lou Fox gang plunge through a window at the opposite end of the long room. The fire escape, he realized.

Somehow, he found himself pounding across the floor towards the shattered window. He threw one leg over the sill. Below, in the darkness, two figures were visible, darting like monkeys down the steep steel ladder.

He plunged out on the landing, clattered downward. A spurt of flame blossomed below. A hot gust of air fanned Joe's face. He triggered at one of the figures, heard a scream of terrified agony. The figure detached itself from the steep ladder, plummeted downward, and

disappeared in the darkness.

The other figure reached the second floor landing. Darts of yellow flame spurted in rapid succession from his gun. Joe flattened himself against the steel stairway, then realized he was a perfect target standing where he was. He clattered rapidly downward, toward the figure below, triggering as he descended. The answering shots ceased abruptly.

When he reached the second floor landing, the figure lay in a crumpled, motionless heap. Joe bent, looked upon the twisted, white face of Lou Fox. He was dead.

When he returned to Sergeant Allister's side a few moments later, the sergeant was sitting up, twisting a blood-soaked rag around his knee.

Joe couldn't control the quivering of his lips as he told the sergeant that Lou Fox and his gang were through for keeps. His knees were suddenly weak.

Sergeant Allister managed a twisted, pained grin. "Son, you're what I call a man after my own heart. It took real guts to go after those rats out there on that fire escape."

This was too much for Joe. He laughed suddenly, an hysterical uncontrolled laugh.

"You're talking about guts and me?" he cried. "You've got no idea, Sergeant! I'm the biggest fraud you'll ever meet! I was scared stiff every minute we've been in this building! I've been scared stiff all my life of anything that smelled like danger! The only thing that's kept me from showing it is that I'm even more scared of being called a coward!"

Sergeant Allister grinned. "Sure, danger scares you, son. What do you think it does to me?"

"You! Why, you're the guy they say doesn't know what fear is!"

Sergeant Allister's right eyelid drooped in a roguish wink. "That's a reputation I got burdened with years ago. And all these years I've been scared to death the other guys would find out what a fraud I am. Everyday I die of fear. Fear, son? Why, that's part of courage. Real guts is when you've got the sense to be scared like hell and still have the moxie to deliver the goods."