

# DEADLY CITY

Ivar Jorgensen



# DEADLY CITY

**By Ivar Jorgenson**

Illustrated by Ed Emsch

*You're all alone in a deserted city. You walk down an empty street, yearning for the sight of one living face—one moving figure. Then you see a man on a corner and you know your terror has only begun.*

He awoke slowly, like a man plodding knee-deep through the thick stuff of nightmares. There was no definite line between the dream-state and wakefulness. Only a dawning knowledge that he was finally conscious and would have to do something about it.

He opened his eyes, but this made no difference. The blackness remained. The pain in his head brightened and he reached up and found the big lump they'd evidently put on his head for good measure—a margin of safety.

They must have been prudent people, because the bang on the head had hardly been necessary. The spiked drink which they had given him would have felled an ox. He remembered going down into the darkness after drinking it, and of knowing what it was. He remembered the helpless feeling.

It did not worry him now. He was a philosophical person, and the fact he was still alive cancelled out the drink and its result. He thought, with savor, of the chestnut-haired girl who had watched him take the drink. She had worn a very low bodice, and that was where his eyes had been at the last moment—on the beautiful, tanned breasts—until they'd wavered and puddled into a blur and then into nothing.

The chestnut-haired girl had been nice, but now she was gone and there were more pressing problems.

He sat up, his hands behind him at the ends of stiff arms clawing into long-undisturbed dust and filth. His movement stirred the dust and it rose into his nostrils.

He straightened and banged his head against a low ceiling. The pain made him sick for a minute and he sat down to regain his senses. He cursed the ceiling, as a matter of course, in an agonized whisper.

Ready to move again, he got onto his hands and knees and crawled cautiously forward, exploring as he went. His hand pushed through cobwebs and found a rough, cement wall. He went around and around. It was all cement—all solid.

Hell! They hadn't sealed him up in this place! There had been a way in so there had to be a way out. He went around again.

Then he tried the ceiling and found the opening—a wooden trap covering a four-by-four hole—covering it snugly. He pushed the trap away and daylight streamed in. He raised himself up until he was eye-level with a discarded shaving cream jar lying on the bricks of an alley. He could read the trade mark on the jar, and the slogan: "For the Meticulous Man".

He pulled himself up into the alley. As a result of an orderly childhood, he replaced the wooden trap and kicked the shaving cream jar against a garbage can. He rubbed his chin and looked up and down the alley.

It was high noon. An uncovered sun blazed down to tell him this.

And there was no one in sight.

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He started walking toward the nearer mouth of the alley. He had been in that hole a long time, he decided. This conviction came from his hunger and the heavy growth of beard he'd sprouted. Twenty-four hours—maybe longer. That mickey must have been a lulu.

He walked out into the cross street. It was empty. No people—no cars parked at the curbs—only a cat washing its dirty face on a tenement stoop across the street. He looked up at the tenement windows. They stared back. There was an empty, deserted look about them.

The cat flowed down the front steps of the tenement and away toward the rear and he was truly alone. He rubbed his harsh chin. Must be Sunday, he thought. Then he knew it could not be Sunday. He'd gone into the tavern on a Tuesday night. That would make it five days. Too long.

He had been walking and now he was at an intersection where he could look up and down a new street. There were no cars—no people. Not even a cat.

A sign overhanging the sidewalk said: Restaurant. He went in under the sign and tried the door. It was locked. There were no lights inside. He turned away—grinning to reassure himself. Everything was all right. Just some kind of a holiday. In a big city like Chicago the people go away on hot summer holidays. They go to the beaches and the parks and sometimes you can't see a living soul on the streets. And of course you can't find any cars because the people use them to drive to the beaches and the parks and out into the country. He breathed a little easier and started walking again.

Sure—that was it. Now what the hell holiday was it? He tried to remember. He couldn't think of what holiday it could be. Maybe they'd dreamed up a new one. He grinned at that, but the grin was a little tight and he had to force it. He forced it carefully until his teeth showed white.

Pretty soon he would come to a section where everybody hadn't gone to the beaches and the parks and a restaurant would be open and he'd get a good meal.

A meal? He fumbled toward his pockets. He dug into them and found a handkerchief and a button from his cuff. He remembered that the button had hung loose so he'd pulled it off to keep from losing it. He hadn't lost the button, but everything else was gone. He scowled. The least they could have done was to leave a man eating money.

He turned another corner—into another street—and it was like the one before. No cars—no people—not even any cats.

Panic welled up. He stopped and whirled around to look behind him. No one was there. He walked in a tight circle, looking in all directions. Windows stared back at him—eyes that didn't care where everybody had gone or when they would come back. The windows could wait. The windows were not hungry. Their heads didn't ache. They weren't scared.

He began walking and his path veered outward from the sidewalk until he was in the exact center of the silent street. He walked down the worn white line. When he got to the next corner he noticed that the traffic signals were not working. Black, empty eyes.

His pace quickened. He walked faster—ever faster until he was trotting on the brittle pavement, his sharp steps echoing against the buildings. Faster. Another corner. And he was running, filled with panic, down the empty street.

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The girl opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. The ceiling was a blur but it began to clear as her mind cleared. The ceiling became a surface of dirty, cracked plaster and there was a feeling of dirt and squalor in her mind.

It was always like that at these times of awakening, but doubly bitter now, because she had never expected to awaken again. She reached down and

pulled the wadded sheet from beneath her legs and spread it over them. She looked at the bottle on the shabby bed-table. There were three sleeping pills left in it. The girl's eyes clouded with resentment. You'd think seven pills would have done it. She reached down and took the sheet in both hands and drew it taut over her stomach. This was a gesture of frustration. Seven hadn't been enough, and here she was again—awake in the world she'd wanted to leave. Awake with the necessary edge of determination gone.

She pulled the sheet into a wad and threw it at the wall. She got up and walked to the window and looked out. Bright daylight. She wondered how long she had slept. A long time, no doubt.

Her naked thigh pressed against the windowsill and her bare stomach touched the dirty pane. Naked in the window, but it didn't matter, because it gave onto an airshaft and other windows so caked with grime as to be of no value as windows.

But even aside from that, it didn't matter. It didn't matter in the least.

She went to the washstand, her bare feet making no sound on the worn rug. She turned on the faucets, but no water came. No water, and she had a terrible thirst. She went to the door and had thrown the bolt before she remembered again that she was naked. She turned back and saw the half-empty Pepsi-Cola bottle on the floor beside the bed table. Someone else had left it there—how many nights ago?—but she drank it anyhow, and even though it was flat and warm it soothed her throat.

She bent over to pick up garments from the floor and dizziness came, forcing her to the edge of the bed. After a while it passed and she got her legs into one of the garments and pulled it on.

Taking cosmetics from her bag, she went again to the washstand and tried the taps. Still no water. She combed her hair, jerking the comb through the mats and gnarls with a satisfying viciousness. When the hair fell into its natural, blond curls, she applied powder and lip-stick. She went back to the bed, picked up her brassiere and began putting it on as she walked to the cracked, full-length mirror in the closet door. With the brassiere in place, she stood looking at her slim image. She assayed herself with complete impersonality.

She shouldn't look as good as she did—not after the beating she'd taken. Not

after the long nights and the days and the years, even though the years did not add up to very many.

I could be someone's wife, she thought, with wry humor. I could be sending kids to school and going out to argue with the grocer about the tomatoes being too soft. I don't look bad at all.

She raised her eyes until they were staring into their own images in the glass and she spoke aloud in a low, wondering voice. She said, "Who the hell am I, anyway? Who am I? A body named Linda—that's who I am. No—that's *what* I am. A body's not a *who*—it's a *what*. One hundred and fourteen pounds of well-built blond body called Linda—model 1931—no fender dents—nice paint job. Come in and drive me away. Price tag—"

She bit into the lower lip she'd just finished reddening and turned quickly to walk to the bed and wriggle into her dress—a gray and green cotton—the only one she had. She picked up her bag and went to the door. There she stopped to turn and thumb her nose at the three sleeping pills in the bottle before she went out and closed the door after herself.

The desk clerk was away from the cubbyhole from which he presided over the lobby, and there were no loungers to undress her as she walked toward the door.

Nor was there anyone out in the street. The girl looked north and south. No cars in sight either. No buses waddling up to the curb to spew out passengers.

The girl went five doors north and tried to enter a place called Tim's Hamburger House. As the lock held and the door refused to open, she saw that there were no lights on inside—no one behind the counter. The place was closed.

She walked on down the street followed only by the lonesome sound of her own clicking heels. All the stores were closed. All the lights were out.

*All the people were gone.*

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He was a huge man, and the place of concealment of the Chicago Avenue police station was very small—merely an indentation low in the cement wall behind two steam pipes. The big man had lain in this niche for forty-eight hours. He had slugged a man over the turn of a card in a poolroom pinochle

game, had been arrested in due course, and was awaiting the disposal of his case.

He was sorry he had slugged the man. He had not had any deep hatred for him, but rather a rage of the moment that demanded violence as its outlet. Although he did not consider it a matter of any great importance, he did not look forward to the six month's jail sentence he would doubtless be given.

His opportunity to hide in the niche had come as accidentally and as suddenly as his opportunity to slug his card partner. It had come after the prisoners had been advised of the crisis and were being herded into vans for transportation elsewhere. He had snatched the opportunity without giving any consideration whatever to the crisis. Probably because he did not have enough imagination to fear anything—however terrible—which might occur in the future. And because he treasured his freedom above all else. Freedom for today, tomorrow could take care of itself.

Now, after forty-eight hours, he writhed and twisted his huge body out of the niche and onto the floor of the furnace room. His legs were numb and he found that he could not stand. He managed to sit up and was able to bend his back enough so his great hands could reach his legs and begin to massage life back into them.

So elementally brutal was this man that he pounded his legs until they were black and blue, before feeling returned to them. In a few minutes he was walking out of the furnace room through a jail house which should now be utterly deserted. But was it? He went slowly, gliding along close to the walls to reach the front door unchallenged.

He walked out into the street. It was daylight and the street was completely deserted. The man took a deep breath and grinned. "I'll be damned," he muttered. "I'll be double and triple damned. They're all gone. Every damn one of them run off like rats and I'm the only one left. I'll be damned!"

A tremendous sense of exultation seized him. He clenched his fists and laughed loud, his laugh echoing up the street. He was happier than he had ever been in his quick, violent life. And his joy was that of a child locked in a pantry with a huge chocolate cake.

He rubbed a hand across his mouth, looked up the street, began walking. "I



wonder if they took all the whisky with them," he said. Then he grinned; he was sure they had not.

He began walking in long strides toward Clark Street. In toward the still heart of the empty city.

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He was a slim, pale-skinned little man, and very dangerous. He was also very clever. Eventually they would have found out, but he had been clever enough to deceive them and now they would never know. There was great wealth in his family, and with the rest of them occupied with leaving the city and taking what valuables they could on such short notice, he had been put in charge of one of the chauffeurs.

The chauffeur had been given the responsibility of getting the pale-skinned young man out of the city. But the young man had caused several delays until all the rest were gone. Then, meekly enough, he had accompanied the chauffeur to the garage. The chauffeur got behind the wheel of the last remaining car—a Cadillac sedan—and the young man had gotten into the rear seat.

But before the chauffeur could start the motor, the young man hit him on the head with a tire bar he had taken from a shelf as they had entered the garage.

The bar went deep into the chauffeur's skull with a solid sound, and thus the chauffeur found the death he was in the very act of fleeing.

The young man pulled the dead chauffeur from the car and laid him on the cement floor. He laid him down very carefully, so that he was in the exact center of a large square of outlined cement with his feet pointing straight north and his outstretched arms pointing south.

The young man placed the chauffeur's cap very carefully upon his chest, because neatness pleased him. Then he got into the car, started it, and headed east toward Lake Michigan and the downtown section.

After traveling three or four miles, he turned the car off the road and drove it into a telephone post. Then he walked until he came to some high weeds. He lay down in the weeds and waited.

He knew there would probably be a last vanguard of militia hunting for stragglers. If they saw a moving car they would investigate. They would take

him into custody and force him to leave the city.

This, he felt, they had no right to do. All his life he had been ordered about—told to do this and that and the other thing. Stupid orders from stupid people. Idiots who went so far as to claim the whole city would be destroyed, just to make people do as they said. God! The ends to which stupid people would go in order to assert their wills over brilliant people.

The young man lay in the weeds and dozed off, his mind occupied with the pleasant memory of the tire iron settling into the skull of the chauffeur.

After a while he awoke and heard the cars of the last vanguard passing down the road. They stopped, inspected the Cadillac and found it serviceable. They took it with them, but they did not search the weeds along the road.

When they had disappeared toward the west, the young man came back to the road and began walking east, in toward the city.

Complete destruction in two days?

Preposterous.

The young man smiled.

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The girl was afraid. For hours she had walked the streets of the empty city and the fear, strengthened by weariness, was now mounting toward terror. "One face," she whispered. "Just one person coming out of a house or walking across the street. That's all I ask. Somebody to tell me what this is all about. If I can find one person, I won't be afraid any more."

And the irony of it struck her. A few hours previously she had attempted suicide. Sick of herself and of all people, she had tried to end her own life. Therefore, by acknowledging death as the answer, she should now have no fear whatever of anything. Reconciled to crossing the bridge into death, no facet of life should have held terror for her.

But the empty city did hold terror. One face—one moving form was all she asked for.

Then, a second irony. When she saw the man at the corner of Washington and Wells, her terror increased. They saw each other at almost the same moment. Both stopped and stared. Fingers of panic ran up the girl's spine.

The man raised a hand and the spell was broken. The girl turned and ran, and there was more terror in her than there had been before.



She knew how absurd this was, but still she ran blindly. What had she to fear? She knew all about men; all the things men could do they had already done to her. Murder was the ultimate, but she was fresh from a suicide attempt. Death should hold no terrors for her.

She thought of these things as the man's footsteps sounded behind her and she turned into a narrow alley seeking a hiding place. She found none and the man turned in after her.

She found a passageway, entered with the same blindness which had brought her into the alley. There was a steel door at the end and a brick lying by the sill. The door was locked. She picked up the brick and turned. The man skidded on the filthy alley surface as he turned into the areaway.

The girl raised the brick over her head. "Keep away! Stay away from me!"

"Wait a minute! Take it easy. I'm not going to hurt you!"

"Get away!"

Her arm moved downward. The man rushed in and caught her wrist. The brick went over his shoulder and the nails of her other hand raked his face. He seized her without regard for niceties and they went to the ground. She fought with everything she had and he methodically neutralized all her weapons—her hands, her legs, her teeth—until she could not move.

"Leave me alone. Please!"

"What's wrong with you? I'm not going to hurt you. But I'm not going to let you hit me with a brick, either!"

"What do you want? Why did you chase me?"

"Look—I'm a peaceful guy, but I'm not going to let you get away. I spent all afternoon looking for somebody. I found you and you ran away. I came after you."

"I haven't done anything to you."

"That's silly talk. Come on—grow up! I said I'm not going to hurt you."

"Let me up."

"So you can run away again? Not for a while. I want to talk to you."

"I—I won't run. I was scared. I don't know why. You're hurting me."

He got up—gingerly—and lifted her to her feet. He smiled, still holding both her hands. "I'm sorry. I guess it's natural for you to be scared. My name's Frank Brooks. I just want to find out what the hell happened to this town."

He let her withdraw her hands, but he still blocked her escape. She moved a pace backward and straightened her clothing. "I don't know what happened. I was looking for someone too."

He smiled again. "And then you ran."

"I don't know why. I guess—"

"What's your name."

"Nora—Nora Spade."

"You slept through it too?"

"Yes ... yes. I slept through it and came out and they were all gone."

"Let's get out of this alley." He preceded her out, but he waited for her when there was room for them to walk side by side, and she did not try to run away. That phase was evidently over.

"I got slipped a mickey in a tavern," Frank Brooks said. "Then they slugged me and put me in a hole."

His eyes questioned. She felt their demand and said, "I was—asleep in my hotel room."

"They overlooked you?"

"I guess so."

"Then you don't know anything about it?"

"Nothing. Something terrible must have happened."

"Let's go down this way," Frank said, and they moved toward Madison Street. He had taken her arm and she did not pull away. Rather, she walked invitingly close to him.

She said, "It's so spooky. So ... empty. I guess that's what scared me."

"It would scare anybody. There must have been an evacuation of some kind."

"Maybe the Russians are going to drop a bomb."

Frank shook his head. "That wouldn't explain it. I mean, the Russians wouldn't let us know ahead of time. Besides, the army would be here. Everybody wouldn't be gone."

"There's been a lot of talk about germ warfare. Do you suppose the water, maybe, has been poisoned?"

He shook his head. "The same thing holds true. Even if they moved the people out, the army would be here."

"I don't know. It just doesn't make sense."

"It happened, so it has to make sense. It was something that came up all of a sudden. They didn't have much more than twenty-four hours." He stopped suddenly and looked at her. "We've got to get out of here!"

Nora Spade smiled for the first time, but without humor. "How? I haven't seen one car. The buses aren't running."

His mind was elsewhere. They had started walking again. "Funny I didn't think of that before."

"Think of what?"

"That anybody left in this town is a dead pigeon. The only reason they'd clear out a city would be to get away from certain death. That would mean death is here for anybody that stays. Funny. I was so busy looking for somebody to talk to that I never thought of that."

"I did."

"Is that what you were scared of?"

"Not particularly. I'm not afraid to die. It was something else that scared me. The aloneness, I guess."

"We'd better start walking west—out of the city. Maybe we'll find a car or something."

"I don't think we'll find any cars."

He drew her to a halt and looked into her face. "You aren't afraid at all, are

you?"

She thought for a moment. "No, I guess I'm not. Not of dying, that is. Dying is a normal thing. But I was afraid of the empty streets—nobody around. That was weird."

"It isn't weird now?"

"Not—not as much."

"I wonder how much time we've got?"

Nora shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm hungry."

"We can fix that. I broke into a restaurant a few blocks back and got myself a sandwich. I think there's still food around. They couldn't take it all with them."

They were on Madison Street and they turned east on the south side of the street. Nora said, "I wonder if there are any other people still here—like us?"

"I think there must be. Not very many, but a few. They would have had to clean four million people out overnight. It stands to reason they must have missed a few. Did you ever try to empty a sack of sugar? Really empty it? It's impossible. Some of the grains always stick to the sack."

A few minutes later the wisdom of this observation was proven when they came to a restaurant with the front window broken out and saw a man and a woman sitting at one of the tables.

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He was a huge man with a shock of black hair and a mouth slightly open showing a set of incredibly white teeth. He waved an arm and shouted, "Come on in! Come on in for crissake and sit down! We got beer and roast beef and the beer's still cold. Come on in and meet Minna."

This was different, Nora thought. Not eerie. Not weird, like seeing a man standing on a deserted street corner with no one else around. This seemed normal, natural, and even the smashed window didn't detract too much from the naturalness.

They went inside. There were chairs at the table and they sat down. The big man did not get up. He waved a hand toward his companion and said, "This is Minna. Ain't she something? I found her sitting at an empty bar scared to



death. We came to an understanding and I brought her along." He grinned at the woman and winked. "We came to a real understanding, didn't we, Minna?"

Minna was a completely colorless woman of perhaps thirty-five. Her skin was smooth and pale and she wore no makeup of any kind. Her hair was drawn straight back into a bun. The hair had no predominating color. It was somewhere between light brown and blond.

She smiled a little sadly, but the laugh did not cover her worn, tired look. It seemed more like a gesture of obedience than anything else. "Yes. We came to an understanding."

"I'm Jim Wilson," the big man boomed. "I was in the Chicago Avenue jug for slugging a guy in a card game. They kind of overlooked me when they cleaned the joint out." He winked again. "I kind of helped them overlook me. Then I found Minna." There was tremendous relish in his words.

Frank started introductions which Nora Spade cut in on. "Maybe you know what happened?" she asked.

Wilson shook his head. "I was in the jug and they didn't tell us. They just started cleaning out the joint. There was talk in the bullpen—invasion or something. Nobody knew for sure. Have some beer and meat."

Nora turned to the quiet Minna. "Did you hear anything?"

"Naw," Wilson said with a kind of affectionate contempt. "She don't know anything about it. She lived in some attic dump and was down with a sore throat. She took some pills or something and when she woke up they were gone."

"I went to work and—" Minna began, but Wilson cut her off.

"She swabs out some joints on Chicago Avenue for a living and that was how she happened to be sitting in that tavern. It's payday, and Minna was waiting for her dough!" He exploded into laughter and slapped the table with a huge hand. "Can you beat that? Waiting for her pay at a time like this."

Frank Brooks set down his beer bottle. The beer was cold and it tasted good. "Have you met anybody else? There must be some other people around."

"Uh-uh. Haven't met anybody but Minna." He turned his eyes on the woman

again, then got to his feet. "Come on, Minna. You and I got to have a little conference. We got things to talk about." Grinning, he walked toward the rear of the restaurant. Minna got up more slowly. She followed him behind the counter and into the rear of the place.

Alone with Nora, Frank said, "You aren't eating. Want me to look for something else?"

"No—I'm not very hungry. I was just wondering—"

"Wondering about what?"

"When it will happen. When whatever is going to happen—you know what I mean."

"I'd rather know *what's* going to happen. I hate puzzles. It's hell to have to get killed and not know what killed you."

"We aren't being very sensible, are we?"

"How do you mean?"

"We should at least act normal."

"I don't get it."

Nora frowned in slight annoyance. "Normal people would be trying to reach safety. They wouldn't be sitting in a restaurant drinking beer. We should be trying to get away. Even if it does mean walking. Normal people would be trying to get away."

Frank stared at his bottle for a moment. "We should be scared stiff, shouldn't we?"

It was Nora's turn to ponder. "I'm not sure. Maybe not. I know I'm not fighting anything inside—fear, I mean. I just don't seem to care one way or another."

"I care," Frank replied. "I care. I don't want to die. But we're faced with a situation, and either way it's a gamble. We might be dead before I finish this bottle of beer. If that's true, why not sit here and be comfortable? Or we might have time to walk far enough to get out of range of whatever it is that chased everybody."

"Which way do you think it is?"

"I don't think we have time to get out of town. They cleaned it out too fast. We'd need at least four or five hours to get away. If we had that much time the army, or whoever did it, would still be around."

"Maybe they didn't know themselves when it's going to happen."

He made an impatient gesture. "What difference does it make? We're in a situation we didn't ask to get in. Our luck put us here and I'm damned if I'm going to kick a hole in the ceiling and yell for help."

Nora was going to reply, but at that moment Jim Wilson came striding out front. He wore his big grin and he carried another half-dozen bottles of beer. "Minna'll be out in a minute," he said. "Women are always slower than hell."

He dropped into a chair and snapped the cap off a beer bottle with his thumb. He held the bottle up and squinted through it, sighing gustily. "Man! I ain't never had it so good." He tilted the bottle in salute, and drank.

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The sun was lowering in the west now, and when Minna reappeared it seemed that she materialized from the shadows, so quietly did she move. Jim Wilson opened another bottle and put it before her. "Here—have a drink, baby."

Obediently, she tilted the bottle and drank.

"What do you plan to do?" Frank asked.

"It'll be dark soon," Wilson said. "We ought to go out and try to scrounge some flashlights. I bet the power plants are dead. Probably aren't any flashlights either."

"Are you going to stay here?" Nora asked. "Here in the Loop?"

He seemed surprised. "Why not? A man'd be a fool to walk out on all this. All he wants to eat and drink. No goddam cops around. The life of Reilly and I should walk out?"

"Aren't you afraid of what's going to happen?"

"I don't give a good goddam what's going to happen. What the hell! Something's always going to happen."

"They didn't evacuate the city for nothing," Frank said.

"You mean we can all get killed?" Jim Wilson laughed. "Sure we can. We could have got killed last week too. We could of got batted in the can by a truck anytime we crossed the street." He emptied his bottle, threw it accurately at a mirror over the cash register. The crash was thunderous. "Trouble with you people, you're worry warts," he said with an expansive grin. "Let's go get us some flashlights so we can find our way to bed in one of those fancy hotels."

He got to his feet and Minna arose also, a little tired, a little apprehensive, but entirely submissive. Jim Wilson said, "Come on, baby. I sure won't want to lose *you*." He grinned at the others. "You guys coming?"

Frank's eyes met Nora's. He shrugged. "Why not?" he said. "Unless you want to start walking."

"I'm too tired," Nora said.

As they stepped out through the smashed window, both Nora and Frank half-expected to see other forms moving up and down Madison Street. But there was no one. Only the unreal desolation of the lonely pavement and the dark-windowed buildings.

"The biggest ghost town on earth," Frank muttered.

Nora's hand had slipped into Frank's. He squeezed it and neither of them seemed conscious of the contact.

"I wonder," Nora said. "Maybe this is only one of them. Maybe all the other big cities are evacuated too."

Jim Wilson and Minna were walking ahead. He turned. "If you two can't sleep without finding out what's up, it's plenty easy to do."

"You think we could find a battery radio in some store?" Frank asked.

"Hell no! They'll all be gone. But all you'd have to do is snoop around in some newspaper office. If you can read you can find out what happened."

It seemed strange to Frank that he had not thought of this. Then he realized he hadn't tried very hard to think of anything at all. He was surprised, also, at his lack of fear. He's gone through life pretty much taking things as they came—as big a sucker as the next man—making more than his quota of mistakes and blunders. Finding himself completely alone in a deserted city

for the first time in his life, he had naturally fallen prey to sudden fright. But that had gradually passed, and now he was able to accept the new reality fairly passively. He wondered if that wasn't pretty much the way of all people. New situations brought a surge of whatever emotion fitted the picture. Then the emotion subsided and the new thing became the ordinary.

This, he decided, was the manner in which humanity survived. Humanity took things as they came. Pile on enough of anything and it becomes the ordinary.

Jim Wilson had picked up a garbage box and hurled it through the window of an electric shop. The glass came down with a crash that shuddered up the empty darkening street and grumbled off into silence. Jim Wilson went inside. "I'll see what I can find. You stay out here and watch for cops." His laughter echoed out as he disappeared.

Minna stood waiting silently, unmoving, and somehow she reminded Frank of a dumb animal; an unreasoning creature with no mind of her own, waiting for a signal from her master. Strangely, he resented this, but at the same time could find no reason for his resentment, except the feeling that no one should appear as much a slave as Minna.

Jim Wilson reappeared in the window. He motioned to Minna. "Come on in, baby. You and me's got to have a little conference." His exaggerated wink was barely perceptible in the gloom as Minna stepped over the low sill into the store. "Won't be long, folks," Wilson said in high good humor, and the two of them vanished into the darkness beyond.

Frank Brooks glanced at Nora, but her face was turned away. He cursed softly under his breath. He said, "Wait a minute," and went into the store through the huge, jagged opening.

Inside, he could barely make out the counters. The place was larger than it had appeared from the outside. Wilson and Minna were nowhere about.

Frank found the counter he was looking for and pawed out several flashlights. They were only empty tubes, but he found a case of batteries in a panel compartment against the wall.

"Who's there?"

"Me. I came in for some flashlights."

"Couldn't you wait?"

"It's getting dark."

"You don't have to be so damn impatient." Jim Wilson's voice was hostile and surly.

Frank stifled his quick anger. "We'll be outside," he said. He found Nora waiting where he'd left her. He loaded batteries into four flashlights before Jim Wilson and Minna reappeared.

Wilson's good humor was back. "How about the Morrison or the Sherman," he said. "Or do you want to get real ritzy and walk up to the Drake?"

"My feet hurt," Minna said. The woman spoke so rarely, Frank Brooks was startled by her words.

"Morrison's the closest," Jim Wilson said. "Let's go." He took Minna by the arm and swung off up the street. Frank and Nora fell in behind.

Nora shivered. Frank, holding her arm, asked, "Cold?"

"No. It's just all—unreal again."

"I see what you mean."

"I never expected to see the Loop dark. I can't get used to it."

A vagrant, whispering wind picked up a scrap of paper and whirled it along the street. It caught against Nora's ankle. She jerked perceptibly and kicked the scrap away. The wind caught it again and spiralled it away into the darkness.

"I want to tell you something," she said.

"Tell away."

"I told you before that I slept through the—the evacuation, or whatever it was. That wasn't exactly true. I did sleep through it, but it was my fault. I put myself to sleep."

"I don't get it."

"I tried to kill myself. Sleeping tablets. Seven of them. They weren't enough."

Frank said nothing while they paced off ten steps through the dark canyon that was Madison Street. Nora wondered if he had heard.

"I tried to commit suicide."

"Why?"

"I was tired of life, I guess."

"What do you want—sympathy?"

The sudden harshness in his voice brought her eyes around, but his face was a white blur.

"No—no, I don't think so."

"Well, you won't get it from me. Suicide is silly. You can have troubles and all that—everybody has them—but suicide—why did you try it?"

A high, thin whine—a wordless vibration of eloquence—needled out of the darkness into their ears. The shock was like a sudden shower of ice water dashed over their bodies. Nora's fingers dug into Frank's arm, but he did not feel the cutting nails. "We're—there's someone out there in the street!"

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Twenty-five feet ahead of where Frank and Nora stood frozen there burst the booming voice of Jim Wilson. "What the hell was that?" And the shock was dispelled. The white circle from Wilson's flash bit out across the blackness to outline movement on the far side of the street. Then Frank Brook's light, and Nora's, went exploring.

"There's somebody over there," Wilson bellowed. "Hey, you! Show your face! Quit sneaking around!"

Frank's light swept an arc that clearly outlined the buildings across the street and then weakened as it swung westward. There was something or someone back there, but obscured by the dimness. He was swept by a sense of unreality again.

"Did you see them?"

Nora's light beam had dropped to her feet as though she feared to point it out into the darkness. "I thought I saw something."

Jim Wilson was swearing industriously. "There was a guy over there. He ducked around the corner. Some damn fool out scrounging. Wish I had a gun."

Frank and Nora moved ahead and the four stood in a group. "Put out your lights," Wilson said. "They make good targets if the jerk's got any weapons."

They stood in the darkness, Nora holding tightly to Frank's arm. Frank said, "That was the damndest noise I ever heard."

"Like a siren?" Frank thought Jim Wilson spoke hopefully, as though wanting somebody to agree with him.

"Not like any I ever heard. Not like a whistle, either. More of a moan."

"Let's get into that goddam hotel and—"

Jim Wilson's words were cut off by a new welling-up of the melancholy howling. It had a new pattern this time. It sounded from many places; not nearer, Frank thought, than Lake Street on the north, but spreading outward and backward and growing fainter until it died on the wind.

Nora was shivering, clinging to Frank without reserve.

Jim Wilson said, "I'll be damned if it doesn't sound like a signal of some kind."

"Maybe it's a language—a way of communication."

"But who the hell's communicating?"

"How would I know?"

"We best get to that hotel and bar a few doors. A man can't fight in the dark—and nothing to fight with."

They hurried up the street, but it was all different now. Gone was the illusion of being alone; gone the sense of solitude. Around them the ghost town had come suddenly alive. Sinister forces more frightening than the previous solitude had now to be reckoned with.

"Something's happened—something in the last few minutes," Nora whispered.

Frank leaned close as they crossed the street to the dark silent pile that was the Morrison hotel. "I think I know what you mean."

"It's as though there was no one around and then, suddenly, they came."

"I think they came and went away again."