

No Threat Of Pain Or Death Could Stop
These Strange Creatures From Outer Space

TEN FROM INFINITY

Ivar Jorgensen

First Publication Anywhere

A Science-Fiction Novel

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Cover Painting by Ralph Brillhart

SOMETHING WAS WRONG

It began when a pedestrian got hit by a cab in New York City. No doubt it was the only motor mishap in the history of creation that reached out among the stars—for far out in space a signal was registered: Something has gone wrong....

And something had gone wrong, for the doctors discovered their accident patient had two hearts. It was the beginning of the discovery that the Earth had been invaded by 10 such creatures from Outer Space.

Every effort was made to learn their purpose. An orbital flight was launched to spot alien bodies—only to be destroyed in space. One of the alien men was captured—but no threat of pain or death could unlock the secret in his brain.

Something had gone wrong. And somehow, some way had to be found to make it right—before the threat of danger overwhelmed all mankind.

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Ivar Jorgensen is the pen name of a former topflight magazine editor who is now devoting his full time to free-lance writing.

He was born in St. Louis and spent most of his early years in the Midwest. Before getting into the publishing field he held a number of jobs, including those of elevator operator and theater usher.

Mr. Jorgensen has written numerous science-fiction short stories as well as several contemporary and suspense novels. **TEN FROM INFINITY** is his first full-length science-fiction novel.

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

1

It began when a pedestrian got hit by a cab at the corner of 59th Street and Park Avenue, Manhattan, New York City, U.S.A. No doubt it was the first motor mishap in the history of creation that reached out among the stars.

The pedestrian was walking south on Park Avenue, toward Grand Central Station. He was looking at the upper skeleton of the vast new Pan Am Building which blocked out the sky in that direction. But he should have been watching traffic because a yellow cab tagged him neatly and knocked him across the walk into a clump of pigeons that scattered upward in all directions.

The cab driver swore. Citizenry gathered. An alert free-lance news photographer who happened to be passing took the most important shot of his career. After a while, the ambulance came and the dazed pedestrian was pointed toward the nearest emergency ward, which happened to be in the Park Hill Hospital.

The pigeons settled back. The curious went their different ways.

And far out in space, among the yellow pinpoints we call stars, a signal was registered. The signal was of grave import to those who received it.

The signal said, *Something has gone wrong.*

From the springboard of this incident, there emerged several occurrences of note. The first in sequence took place in the Park Hill Hospital. The time of that particular ambulance's arrival was 11:15 p.m. At that hour the harvest of violence in Manhattan was being delivered to its logical granaries in the form of broken heads, slashed bodies, and dazed, shock-strained eyes. The examining rooms at Park Hill were full, and some cases of lesser import were waiting on stretchers and benches in the corridors.

That was where the pedestrian waited. Unlike others, he was very patient. He

seemed to understand that this sort of thing took time; or perhaps he didn't. At any rate, he lay staring up at the ceiling, unmoving, seemingly uncaring, until an intern named Frank Corson stopped beside his stretcher and looked down at him in moody-eyed weariness. Then Corson managed a smile.

"Sorry about the service, mister. Full house tonight."

"That's quite all—right."

Corson touched the broken leg. "I can give you a shot if the pain's hitting too hard."

"It does not—pain."

"Stout fellow." Frank Corson probed with fingers that were growing more expert day by day. "Good clean break. Not swelling, either." He touched the patient's wrist, then put a stethoscope to his chest.

Actually, he was thinking of a different chest and different legs at the time—the ones belonging to a copper-haired girl named Rhoda Kane. Rhoda's legs were far more alluring. Her chest had added equipment that was a haven of rest under trying circumstances, and Corson yearned for midnight when he would quit this charnel house and climb into Rhoda's convertible and—perhaps later—do a little chest analysis without benefit of stethoscope.

Now he sighed, commandeered a passing orderly, and went to work.

Twenty minutes later he saw his patient deposited in a ten-bed ward. He transcribed his data onto the clipboard at the foot of the bed, and looked guiltily into the hall to see how things were going. He felt guilty because he was tempted to dog it. And he did. He headed for the locker room where he punched a cup of coffee out of the machine and thought some more about Rhoda's legs.

Fifteen minutes later, Corson climbed into the convertible and leaned over and kissed Rhoda Kane. "Hi, baby. You smell wonderful."

"You smell of disinfectant, darling." She wore a yellow print dress that exposed a lot of healthily tanned skin. "Did you have a rough day?"

He leaned back against the seat and pushed his legs as far under the dashboard as possible. He sighed and closed his eyes. But then he opened them again and his face went blank.

She waited a few more moments and then said, "Honey—I'm here. Little Rhoda. Remember me?"

The vague, thoughtful look vanished as he jerked his head around. "Oh, sure—sure, baby." He grinned. "A rough one. If I'd known doctoring was like this I'd have been a nice prosperous butcher."

"Do you want to drive?"

"No, you drive. I'll sit here and look at your beautiful profile."

They drove to Rhoda's apartment—Frank couldn't afford one—and he put Rhoda at one end of the sofa and stretched out with his head in her lap. He unbuttoned her blouse, put a hand over her breast, and teased the nipple.

"Mr. Corson, you're a wolf."

"Kiss me."

"Well, I don't know," she teased.

He pulled her head down and she murmured, "Oh, darling...."

But he let go of her in the middle of the kiss and, when she straightened, the blank, thoughtful look was back on his face.

"Frank—what is it?"

The look stayed. "I don't know."

"Something's bothering you."

"It seems to be. But I don't know what it is."

"Did it happen at the hospital?"

He frowned. "I guess it must have. It's been bugging me since—"

Rhoda showed concern. "Did it have to do with a patient?"

"Patients are all I work with. Let's see—" He stopped and his frown deepened. "It was that damned accident case. Broken leg. I set it and put him in ward five. I—"

His frown deepened as he sat up. "Uh-huh. It was that damned pulse. That's it. There was something wrong. That pulse was even and steady but, Goddamn it, something was wrong!" He got to his feet. "Baby—I've got to go back to Park Hill."

"Do you want to take the car or shall I drive you?"

"You drive," he said absently as he got up from the sofa and reached for his necktie.

Frank hurried in through the emergency entrance and went to the admissions desk. A kindly, gray-haired nurse was working with papers and she dug deep into the pile in response to Frank's query.

"We didn't find much on him. An identification card with the name William Matson. Nothing else except a wallet initialed W. M. containing thirty-six dollars in cash."

"*Nothing* else?"

The gray-haired nurse shook her head. "No social security number, no driver's license, no home or business address."

"Damned odd, don't you think?"

"Not at Park Hill. We get them in here without a blessed thing but their clothing. In fact, two weeks ago the boys picked up a stark-naked blonde out of a car crash on East River Drive."

Frank grinned automatically, but the grin fell from his face like a mask the moment he turned from the desk. He went through the locker room and got his stethoscope on the way to Ward Five.

The patient known to the hospital as William Matson lay quietly on his back, staring at the ceiling. Frank checked the clipboard. There were no notations but his own. He went around the bed and stood looking down at the patient.

"Feeling better?"

"I feel all—right."

There's some sort of a speech block here, Frank thought as he bent over and lowered the sheet. "I'm just doing a little checking," he said casually. "No cause for alarm."

"I am not—alarmed."

Corson frowned slightly as he concentrated on his work. He went over the patient's torso, up and down, back and forth. At times he straightened to rest

his back and stared down into the calm, expressionless face on the pillow.

Twenty minutes passed, during which time Frank Corson checked and rechecked every inch of the man's torso. When he finished, he slowly folded his stethoscope and pulled the sheet back into place. He stared at the patient for a full minute without bringing the slightest change in the empty expression.

"Sleep well," he said, and walked slowly away.

Back in the street, five minutes later, he dropped into the seat beside Rhoda. She eyed him questioningly and when he did not respond, she asked, "Everything all right?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"What do you mean—guess so? It is or it isn't."

"There was something about a patient's heartbeat. I passed it over on the first examination, but it stuck in my mind. That's why I had to go back."

"And ...?"

"He's got two hearts."

"He's *what*?"

"He's got two hearts, my beautiful love. One in his chest, where it ought to be, and one in the center of his lower abdomen."

"You're—you're kidding."

"No, darling," Frank Corson said dreamily. "On this night of nights I found a man who is pretty rare indeed. A man with two healthy, functioning hearts."

"All right," Rhoda asked wonderingly. "What do we do about it?"

"We go home for the time being, baby—to your nice, private, wonderful apartment."

"And ...?"

"We make love," he said absently.

Les King, the free-lance news photographer, surveyed his night's work and was not happy. It had been singularly unproductive. A couple of sneak

necking shots he'd snapped during a stroll through Central Park had come through a little too pornographic to be of value. Les threw them into the wastebasket. A shot of a man leaning out of a thirtieth-floor window came to nothing because the man had pulled his head in and closed the window. He hadn't jumped. There was a picture of a girl dodging a taxi. He'd caught her with both feet off the ground and a look of surprise on her face, but with her body arced backward and both hands on her rump as though she'd just been thoroughly and expertly goosed. Too vulgar. He put the pic aside.

And the Park Avenue hit? Here it was, a shot of a guy lying where he'd dropped, with the pigeon's rocketing away. Not bad, but it lacked an angle. All that intern had found on him was a name. William Matson. No address. The hell with it.

Les sighed and dropped the pic into his file case. Then he stopped. His face went blank. He pulled the pic out and looked at it again. He felt as if some nagging thought were trying to come to the surface, but nothing clicked, so he dropped the pic back into the file and went to the cooler where he opened an early-morning can of beer before sacking out. A hell of a life, he thought, wandering through nighttime Manhattan watching for people to take their mental pants down so he could get shots of their naked inner backsides.

He finished the beer and went in to take a shower.

Funny about that hit case. The guy had the damndest expression on his face. Kind of like he was thinking, *Okay, so what do I do now?*

Fifteen minutes later, Les was asleep.

There was always a certain tension involved in Frank Corson's visits to Rhoda Kane's apartment, with Rhoda usually slightly on edge, waiting for one of Frank's outbursts.

An outburst consisted of his suddenly springing to his feet with a scowl and announcing: "Goddamn it, I don't belong here!"

Rhoda always followed the same script at the beginning of these traumas by inevitably asking, "Why, darling? Why must you say that?"

"Oh, hell, Rhoda! I don't want to hurt you but—"

"Darling, you know I'll go to your room with you if you'd be more

comfortable there."

He strode to the window angrily and, for Rhoda, there was that indescribably sweet and exciting reaction she always got from his nakedness. *Like a Greek god standing there, she thought*, and it thrilled her even though she knew she was being a little subjective about it.

She smiled with tender, understanding amusement as she realized Frank's pattern never varied. His outbursts never came until the first fierce need of her had been assuaged; this was to her liking because her need was as great.

Reacting according to current, "broad-minded" thinking and Manhattan sophistication, she regarded herself and Frank as having a "good physical relationship." Which individual need was the greatest, she had never been able to say. But there certainly was something extraordinary about it. In analyzing it, she'd arrived at the conclusion that they'd been able, on the basis of personal rapport, to function in a completely uninhibited manner; thus, some of their love-making, when lifted out of context and surveyed objectively, might have been called abnormal. Rhoda did not think so, however; or, if she did, she blocked the idea successfully by telling herself that whatever she and Frank did together was all right because *they* did it. She told herself it was good for them because they looked at it with a healthy attitude.

She could, of course, have gotten this opinion, or one in complete opposition to it, from two different psychologists, but she preferred to play it as she saw it.

She had wondered at times just how important the sex relation was in her attachment to Frank. It was of major importance, of that she was sure, but was it the key? If they drifted apart physically, would the other aspects of the relationship vanish? She thought not, but she certainly would not have been willing to put it to the test.

Frank Corson was through looking out the window now and he began pacing nervously. "Sure—so it's fine to be a doctor. It's the sure-fire answer for later in life. But what about now? What about this crawling up the ladder inch by inch?" He turned on her defiantly.

"Living on your money!"

"You aren't!"

"All right. Maybe not technically." He looked around the room resentfully.

"Using your apartment for—"

"Frank! When I have guests, do they hesitate because my apartment is nicer than—?"

She knew she'd hurt him even before his head came around and his eyes narrowed. "So that's what it really is to you!"

She'd said the wrong thing, but even as she sprang up from the bed she felt that it made no difference because he would have found something else. "I didn't mean it that way. You know I didn't."

She ran to him and laid her hands on his chest; his eyes traveled down her naked body and his mind struggled. His expression said it was a little unfair of her to come so close and stand that way, nude and beautiful and eager, in front of him, especially when he had a point to make.

"I'm a pauper trying to keep up with the rich."

She knew how to break his mood now. She smiled and pressed against him lightly and said, "Uh-huh, but what a pauper. And darling, money wouldn't change that part of it a bit."

He drew her to him violently. The impact of their bodies hurt her ribs but she gloried in the pain. She let her knees weaken and sank to the thickly carpeted floor, bringing him down with her.

She knew Frank's outburst was over—at least for that day.

Later, on the bed, he opened his eyes sleepily. "What time is it?"

"A little after ten."

"That gives us almost two more hours." He looked out over the East River.

"It's beautiful."

"Isn't it?"

"If I went right into research—took a job somewhere—I could afford to give this to you."

She thought of saying, *But, darling, I've got it already*, and decided a change of subject would be more judicious and said, "You *were* kidding last night,

weren't you?"

"Kidding?"

"About the man with two hearts."

Frank grinned a little sheepishly. He was extremely handsome and totally unconscious of it, and when he grinned that way it made him look like a little boy caught stealing jam, and Rhoda always wanted to hug him. But she forebore as he said, "It does seem a little silly, doesn't it?"

"You'd know more about that than I do. Is it silly?"

"Let's say the chances of such a thing happening are rather remote."

"You only used your stethoscope last night?"

"That was all. I went by what I heard."

"What will you do now? X-ray?"

"I'm not sure I'll do anything. The idea is so preposterous."

She regarded him thoughtfully. "It's not like you to lose interest in anything until you know the answer."

He snubbed out his cigarette. "Let's forget Park Hill and funny anatomies, baby. Let's sit on the terrace and bathe ourselves in luxury the way the TV ad says."

And that was the way things stayed for two hours. The time passed swiftly, and when Frank was finally dressed and ready for the street, he refused Rhoda's offer to drive him to the hospital because she was very late, too. He kissed her good-bye, went down the twelve floors in the elevator, and hurried out of the building.

There was no cab in sight and he began to walk. Half a block later he turned a corner and stopped dead. He was facing a man who was coming in the other direction. He stared. The man stared back. Frank automatically stepped aside, but the man did exactly the same thing, at the same time, and they did a little dance there on the sidewalk. Then the man veered around him and moved on up the street. Frank turned and stared after him, then walked slowly in his own direction.

It was the same man. It was the Park Avenue hit. It was the man he'd left in

Ward Five with a broken leg. It wasn't a brother or a cousin or a chance resemblance. It was the man himself or an exact double. And what were the percentages against attending a patient one night and meeting his exact double on the street the next morning?

They were fantastic. Like hitting the Irish sweeps.

It was the man. It had to be.

Except that he wasn't broken-legged now. He was walking across the Upper East Side, wearing that same look that was as good as anyone else's, except that you got the impression of an emptiness behind his eyes.

2

Those in the know in Washington, D.C., upon seeing Brent Taber rush to a taxi or dodge a pedestrian on Pennsylvania Avenue, could well say, "There walks power." But there were few indeed who possessed enough knowledge of the Washington inner structure to be able to make this observation.

Brent looked more like a coal heaver than a public servant with a well-oiled escalator into the White House. He appeared more able to direct a gang of dock workers than to jockey a delicate issue through the bloody jungle of national politics. Many of the people who accepted this deception did so at their peril and were not around any more. To others not so foolish, Brent Taber symbolized a completely necessary facet of a working democracy—secret government. This necessity sprang from the realization that even an open society must maintain areas of privacy or it is doomed.

Such was the man, and such was his mission of the moment—an issue of the utmost secrecy. So hush-hush, in fact, was this mission that when Brent Taber arrived at his office that morning and found Senator Crane pacing his reception-room carpet, his heavy eyebrows gathered and he began mentally checking his "tight ship" for a leak.

Senator Crane was the exact opposite of Brent, in that he looked to be exactly what he was; a figure rigidly type-cast to the role of a blustering, tactless servant of the people. Which, in Crane's case, meant that he was a servant of Crane's career and any faction of his supporters that could further it. Still, the Senator could not be called dishonest. He was merely a flexible rationalizer. He sincerely believed that what was good for Crane was good for the "folks back home."

And just now, he felt that a knowledge of what the hell was going on in Brent Taber's orbit was probably not good for anybody and had better be aired.

As Brent entered, Crane came right to the point. "Goddamn it, Taber, just

what in blazes is going on around here?"

Brent's thick lips hardly moved, a characteristic that Crane found infuriating because that was the way shady characters talked into Senatorial investigation microphones and it looked pretty bad. But Brent's words came quite clear: "Routine business, Senator—an honest effort to get a day's work done."

"You mean to tell me the meeting that's been set up here is routine?"

Brent shrugged. "Meetings are meetings, Senator."

Crane ticked it off on his fat fingers. "Pender of the Army, Bright of the Navy, Jones of the Air Force, Hagen of the FBI, Wilson from Treasury—they all trooped through here into your private conference room." He pointed pompously at his own chest. "But Crane of the Senate—"

"You forgot Birch of the State Department," Brent cut in. "Or hasn't he arrived yet?"

"—Crane of the Senate is barred! Now just what in the hell—?"

There are times for tact and times for bluntness, and this was a time, Brent decided, for the latter. "What goes on here, Senator," he said, "is none of your business. Otherwise, you would have been invited."

Crane's face darkened and Brent thought pleasantly of a brain hemorrhage blowing the top of his fat head off. But this was too much to hope for.

"Brent," Crane exploded, "I'll get you! So help me, I'll get you! Just who the hell do you think you are—demeaning the dignity of the United States Senate? Just who are you to say what the people should or should not know?"

"Decisions of that nature are made upstairs, Senator. I don't presume to possess the judgment needed in such matters."

"You're an arrogant bureaucrat! Your kind comes and goes because when you get too goddamned arrogant the people rise up in their wrath and knock you off."

Marcia Holly, Brent's secretary, was studiously transcribing some notes and Brent turned his scowl on her because, damn it, she was laughing like hell at the whole thing. And, by God, a secretary didn't have the right to laugh at a United States Senator, even with her eyes, no matter how much a congenital idiot he was.

"I'm sorry, Senator," Brent said. "If you have a complaint, please take it up with my superiors. Just now I—"

"Your superiors? And who the devil are they? Who can find them? Where do they have offices? Go around trying to find your superiors and nobody ever heard of you."

Brent half smiled as he felt a sneaking admiration for Crane. The son-of-a-bitch had a disarming quality of honesty. If he planned to knife you, he drove straight in, the knife held high.

"One of the disadvantages of being a negative personality, Senator," Brent murmured.

"Sure! You're about as negative as a charging grizzly," Crane snorted and headed for the door as though his air had been cut off.

After his bulk had vanished into the corridor, Brent turned a scowl on Marcia Holly. "And what are you snickering about."

She raised large blue, innocent eyes. "Me? I? Oh, golly. I just found a cute little Freudian slip in these notes and—"

"Shut up. Are they all here?"

"Birch of the State Department sent regrets. A duty call on the Tasmanian Embassy or something."

"Okay—and next week he'll be screaming to high heaven about being left out."

Marcia's laughing eyes agreed. "Ain't it the truth?" she marveled.

Brent strode past her and expertly mussed her sleek hairdo in a quick gesture. As he entered his private conference room, he turned and grinned at her silent fury.

Inside, they were all waiting for him, seated around a teakwood table. The wall-to-wall carpeting was wine-red. The chairs were deep and upholstered. And the men who sat in them were distinguished only by their surroundings and their uniforms. Their metal and their worth were hidden inside.

Brent moved to the end of the table and scanned them moodily. "Okay, gentlemen. I'll talk. Then if you have any questions—shoot them." He took a

deep breath and began:

"We are faced with a situation that must be kept top secret for two reasons: First, it may be the first move in an attempt to subjugate or destroy our planet; two, it is so utterly ridiculous on its face that a public announcement would be greeted by hoots of laughter from pole to pole." Brent's ugly scowl deepened at what he seemed to feel was an injustice. "Even the Eskimos would get a yack out of it."

The group waited, withholding judgment, evidently waiting to see whether or not it was a laughing matter. They were conceding nothing. Brent studied them for a moment and then went on.

"Last week, in Denver, early in the morning," he said, "a man was found dead on a residential-section street. There was no apparent cause of death. A routine autopsy revealed some peculiar things about the man's insides. For one thing, he had two hearts—"

Jones of the Air Force, a dignified, gray-haired man, paused in firing his cigar and gave the impression he was lighting his way through the darkness. Bright of the Navy, a thin man with a huge Adam's apple, allowed it to bob three times in deference to the startling nature of Brent's statement. Pender of the Army raised one eyebrow and let it fall. To a keen observer, Hagen of the FBI would have revealed prior knowledge by reacting not at all.

His mind was on the kid. He was thinking, *Christ! With all the damned miracle drugs and characters orbiting the earth in crazy capsules, they still haven't figured out a way to keep a six-year-old from getting a cold.* He remembered the kid waving from the window yesterday morning—when he'd been ordered East to attend this clambake—standing there beside Miriam, waving good-bye and barking like a sea lion. *What the hell was wrong with doctors? Why didn't they get with it on a stupidly simple thing like the common cold?*

"... two hearts and—" Brent reached to the left and pulled down a chart on a window shade-type rack that stood beside his chair, "—a rather interesting arrangement of the internal organs." He pointed with a thick finger. "You'll notice that the liver is exceptionally small, while the kidneys are large enough to service a horse. You'll note also that while the man had testicles, there is no prostrate gland."

The group waited in a kind of guarded abeyance that could be easily sensed. Their silence gave the impression that they were asking: *Is somebody kidding us?*

But there was certainly no lightness in Brent's manner. His arm dropped and he scowled at the far end of the table as he said, "Now, the blood. There was something strange about the blood—"

The door from Marcia Holly's reception room-office opened and she came in silently, followed by a white-coated waiter who set a tray on the table. The coffeepot on the tray was silver; the cups, fine china; the napkins, linen.

"—something very strange about the blood in that it conformed to all necessary specifications and yet it had a synthetic quality about it ..."

Goose pimples formed on Hagen's neck and walked gently down his spine. Nothing was missing in this setup—synthetic blood, two hearts, oversize kidneys. Hagen got a quick mental flash of a barker outside a circus sideshow: *He walks like a man. He talks like a man. But for a thin dime, folks, you can see—*

It was something to think and wonder about. And back in Chicago, he'd had lots of company. Everybody in the office that night had wondered, and you could see the vague uneasiness in their eyes as the creature sat, acting like a human being and, at the same time, like nothing from this world. You could see a vague revulsion in the people surrounding the creature. There was also uncertainty, and this from men who were required by their profession to be fairly certain about most things.

"The blood," Jones of the Air Force said. "Could it have been a—well, a new kind of plasma?"

"Hardly. You see, the variation was almost theoretical, if you can understand the term as I'm using it. Drawn from an ordinary human being, it would not have been questioned. It was just that in the light of other oddities in his man, it didn't seem right, somehow."

"Pretty vague," Bright of the Army said.

"This I'll grant you." Brent said. "Anybody for coffee?"

Nobody was for coffee so Marcia and the waiter retired and Brent said,

"Vague, I'll grant you. But let's get on with it. Two days later, a man, in every way identical, was found lying in the street in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was alive, but in a dying condition, and he succumbed on the way to the hospital. Cause of death, as in the first place, undeterminable. But the medics think it was some malfunctioning of the lungs.

"All in all, gentlemen, eight identical specimens have been picked up in various American cities. Five are dead, two more are now in a comatose condition, at last report, and may very well be dead at this time. One is still alive and relatively healthy...."

Alive and relatively healthy. The son-of-a-bitch! Hagen felt an odd senseless rage against the creature they'd picked up in a Chicago bar.

Ordinarily it would have been a simple bull-pen, night-court case—a loud-mouth drunk refusing to pay for a drink. But much of his talk, anent enemy invasion, internal destruction, and civilian chaos, had been a little too rough for the other barflies to swallow, and complaints had been made. Later, when Bureau men went around trying to get something tangible in the way of evidence, they found themselves dealing in frustration. The complainants had left without giving their names. The barkeep really hadn't heard anything. The actual charges had gone up in smoke. But by that time, Washington was very much interested. The man was questioned and it was the damndest thing Hagen had ever gone through ...

"By identical," Jones of the Air Force said, "you of course mean—"

Brent's dark, knifelike eyes sliced out at Jones. "By identical, I mean just that."

Bright's throat bobbed as the astonishing implication came home to him. "Hell, man! You mean—"

"I mean these specimens do not merely bear a resemblance to each other. They were not just similar as to organisms and physical structure. They were all *exactly* alike; as alike as eight new cars of the same make and model lined up side by side ..."

Identical. Hagen didn't know anything about that. He hadn't seen the others. But he knew that there was something frightening about the one they'd picked up in Chicago. At first glance he could have been Mr. Anybody, from

Anywhere, U.S.A. A youngish-looking forty, you would have figured, with a sprinkling of gray at the temples and a face women could have found interesting. He had the unpaunched figure of a man who had taken good care of himself; he was quietly dressed in a blue suit; he looked like a decent-enough guy who just happened to have gotten stiff on the double hooker he'd ordered and sounded off without meaning to.

In fact, he was still sounding off when they got him into the interrogation room. And when the barflies called his talk treasonable, they hadn't been fooling.

Brent said, "Identical, gentlemen, even to the finger-prints; to the very last ridge."

Pender's eyebrows tried to crawl up his forehead and disappear into his hairline. "That's utterly and completely ridiculous."

Brent smiled. "Then, at least, I've gotten one idea over to you—that a public release on this thing would be greeted with hoots of derision by the realistic American public."

"And perhaps deservedly so?"

"I think not," Brent said gravely.

Is it some incredibly ingenious hoax? Hagen asked himself the question and found no answer. He only remembered the words and the eyes and the tone of the creature that walked like a man ...

"He was our—father. They had him a long time before we—came. He was our father, and after we came they told us what we were to know and we knew—it."

There it was—that odd little break, cutting off the word at the end of each sentence. It gave the impression of a mind groping, yet not really groping; a mind sure of itself, yet wondering.

"What did you know?"

"We knew what we were—for. Our—reason. We knew what we were created to do—here."

"How many of you were there?"

"Ten of—us."

"You said, 'created to do here.' Where do you come from?"

"There."

"Where is *there*?"

At this point the man or the creature, or whatever you wanted to call him, pointed upward.

At this point, Cantrell, another of the interrogation group, turned away in disgust. "A kook! A kook with a religious compulsion. A character, and we got called out of bed to—"

"—to get you ready to be destroyed," the creature cut in.

"By fire and brimstone on judgment day?" Cantrell asked sarcastically.

"No. By rendering you helpless by—"

Here the creature swallowed, blinked and looked surprised—and changed magically. He—if it really was a he—didn't jump up and kick a hole in the ceiling or anything like that. In fact, nothing tangible happened. There just seemed to be an invisible barrier that rose suddenly around him.

Then there was the thing that chilled every man in the room; a thing as tangible as the walls and the furniture; yet a thing no man could define in words.

This was when Cantrell, a high-strung individual at best, reacted violently to the change in the creature. In an instinctive blaze of anger and frustration, Cantrell reached out and slapped him brutally across the face.

Velie, the agent in charge, also acted instinctively as he lunged forward to restrain Cantrell. But then he froze, as did all the men in the room, to stare.

It was not what the prisoner did; it was what he did not do. There was absolutely no reaction to the blow—no reaction physically, emotionally, or mentally. It was as though the blow had not been struck; as though this were some kind of a moving, breathing zombie.

So tangible, so seemingly sourceless was this feeling of loathing, that Hagen would have been sure it had affected only himself if he had not seen its effect on the others.

Yet none of them referred to it. Nor was this strange, because there just weren't any words to describe the feeling one gets from contact with a pleasant-faced, quietly dressed example of the walking dead.

Backing away from this powerful emotional reaction, Hagen forced himself onto an intellectual level, and asked himself what had brought about the change in the creature. Why had it—Hagen now had to regard the strange, walking enigma as neuter—after functioning to some extent as a human, reverted suddenly to what seemed to be its natural state?

He conceded that if he knew the answer to that one, he could be of great service to the FBI and the nation—and, no doubt to the world ...

Pender of the Army now had a question. "What information have you gotten from the surviving man?"

"Not a great deal, as yet. However, in our experiments we've learned something rather frightening."

"And what's that?"

"He is totally impervious to drugs of any description whatever."

"That's impossible!"

"So it would seem. But the sodium pentathol injection he was given could just as well have been so much water."

The group pondered this information, each after his own fashion. Then Birch of the State Department made a precise, scholarly observation. "Incredible!"

Brent smiled faintly. "One point of vital importance. We do know that there were, originally, ten of these creatures roaming the country. Eight are accounted for. The other two are still at large."

Jones of the Air Force asked, "Were all eight apprehended in large cities?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't that mean something to us?"

"Well, it's a pattern, all right, but no one's been able to give it any meaning—so far."

No one had any further comment on that point. Brent waited a moment and then threw the bombshell. "We are quite sure that these creatures are of