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## Chapter One

**H**is mental processes were far too vague to be called thoughts. First came an animal awareness of self, with no attachment to the physical. Then as the mental fog began to lift, he heard above the roar in his ears his own labored breathing. Next came a general sensation of pain and the stifling odor of decayed vegetation.

He tried to open his eyes and sensed only an expanse of flat black. He wondered if he was blind. It was a vague curiosity, not yet a concern--academic.

He thrashed about as his brain reconnected to his senses and soon realized that he was lying facedown in a carpet of leaves. It was nighttime. He rolled into a sitting position, opening his eyes once more, this time to see a foggy night, dimly lit by a waning moon. Painful reverberations throbbed through his head. His eyes clamped shut again. Instinctively, he clenched his teeth.

Panic simmered, just below the surface.

Needles of pain tingled in his right arm, which felt like a dead appendage. As the blood flow began to return, he realized that he had been lying on it. He began to gingerly feel his arms, then his legs and ribs to check for broken bones and other damage. He touched several acutely painful areas but found no obvious fractures.

Slowly, he raised his eyes and began to focus on a cleared area. He saw a group of bright lights--each surrounded by a foggy halo. He closed one eye to sharpen his vision. In the distance he made out some uniformed men who looked like security guards. They were moving about a large, shapeless, mass of twisted wreckage.

He looked again at the lighted area and realized, for the first time, that what he saw there were the remains of a plane crash, even though there was very little left that resembled a plane.

It was pretty obvious from his location and condition that he had, somehow, been involved. He must have been a passenger on the plane or maybe, a victim on the ground. But his mental functions were still too dull for him to figure it out. He returned to his predicament.

It seemed that he had fallen, or been knocked, across a tree trunk; there were knots on his shins so large it felt like he had four knees. He squinted against the pain, gritted his teeth, and drew himself to his feet with the help of a small tree. Waves of dizziness, then nausea cascaded over him. He hugged the sapling for support, trying to recover his balance, and saw in the dim light that his hands were scraped and bloody.

He steadied himself and choked back the nausea.

He turned around once again, trying to get his bearings, but each time he moved it felt as though his brain kept spinning even after his head had stopped turning. Then the dizziness would come on him again. Instinctively, he put one hand to his head to steady it. There he felt a large, tender lump. Something had struck him--hard!

Feebly, he tried to clear his mind and figure out just what he was doing here. But the chirp of katydids distracted him and brought him back to his surroundings. He was in a clump of underbrush.

With this recognition, he began to notice the smell of smoke. A strong scorched odor hung in the damp, night air. It made him think of burnt rubber--that and burning garbage.

Cautiously moving closer to see more clearly, he stumbled over a piece of charred and twisted metal that lay near his feet. He wondered absently if that was what had hit the back of his head, even though the wreckage was a hundred yards, or more, away.

"Musta been a hell of a splosion," he muttered under his breath.

There appeared to be no one else around the wreckage; the rescue team must have finished their job and left the scene. Obviously they had not explored far enough from the site to find him. *Jeez! . . . wha happen t'me?*

He began picking his way along the tree line, moving *away* from the scene of activity. He didn't know why. He just did it. He made no conscious decision to vanish, but his subconscious was in control and he felt an overwhelming need to just slip away.

Chills ran up his back as fear of discovery washed over him. He was scared. But what was he afraid of? He didn't know. He only knew that he had to get away!

*. . . the hell's . . . matter'th me?* he wondered. *Wha'm I running from? . . . need help, but . . .*

These fragmented thoughts were empty considerations, for he made no move to alter his course. There was just a driving urge to get someplace where he could collect his wits and find something for his pounding head.

He stumbled on for what seemed like miles until he came to a narrow, two-lane, blacktopped roadway. He turned right, always moving away from the crash site. He couldn't figure out why. He couldn't figure out anything. His mental processes were so muddled that he was surviving with only superficial thoughts and animal instincts, as if he were very drunk. He could walk fairly well now, but his hand-eye coordination was still impaired, and he was still seeing double.

He wanted to look back, over his shoulder, but panic was overtaking him. He knew if he yielded to it, and looked back, he would begin running and looking back and running until . . .

He choked back the panic and forced himself to walk straight ahead—eyes down. He struggled to blank his mind to the fear and anxiety and focus only on his physical condition. Both shins ached, and his left hip throbbed with pain.

He shuffled along on the right edge of the pavement to avoid stumbling in the semi-darkness, and listened hard for any sounds of a vehicle overtaking him. He thought he could control the panic now—if he didn't look back.

It seemed like a deserted stretch of rural road, but still, a few cars passed by. He kept his head down and readied himself to run for cover if they gave the slightest indication of slowing.

The fog turned to a light mist and the waning moon was soon obscured. Drivers were too occupied with their own problems to pay any attention to him.

Then, just as the darkness seemed complete, he saw lights in the distance. His spirits were suddenly lifted as he moved toward them, seeking the help and comfort that they promised.