

## PART I: BREAKTHROUGH

*Sunday, May 30*

*Medeopolis, USA*

### Chapter 1

When the strange icon appeared on his monitor at three o'clock that morning, Ed Grayson took it as a sign of his own ignorance.

It was a red wheelbarrow icon. Its long handles were hoisted by a companion icon, a small boy in blue overalls.

Wheelbarrow and boy were flashing on and off. Above them, in sunshine yellow letters, shone the word NEWS.

Ed had bought a home computer only two weeks ago, and the language of icons was new to him. He tried two of the manual indexes. Nothing about a wheelbarrow. The 800 help lines, Ed reflected, would be asleep by now. He stared at the screen, rolled his chair back, and considered the situation.

Ed had expected to see the routine white envelope labeled E-MAIL CENTER so that he could attach a file to his e-mail, a task still misty with novelty for him. The file was important: a chart of comparative health insurance policies for the fifteen employees of Grayson's Lumber. Ed

wanted his new partner, George Vlahos, to find this chart on the office computer first thing Tuesday, after the holiday.

Tomorrow, Memorial Day, was set aside to remember the loyal dead, but Ed's health insurance charts were to protect those still alive. The latest swarm of health policies came with such a thicket of rules--eccentric payment schedules, IRS filings, compliance notices--that chaos seemed inevitable. Most employers bailed out and chose a single HMO or PPO. Not Ed.

George had told Ed it was crazy to insist on a *choice* of health policies for all their employees. No law required them to give a *choice*.

Ed knew that.

Then George had challenged Ed that if he wanted to set up multiple health insurance records, he should just get his own home computer and try it himself.

Ed had done just that.

Ed Grayson, sixty-six years old, admitted that he was a depression baby and he thought like one. He had spent his childhood listening to the barely employed friends of his parents talk around the kitchen table, and he had heard about being a slave to some pitiful excuse for a job that took all your strength in exchange for beans and pan bread, constant debt, the charity of friends, and no money for the doctor. As a child, Ed had sworn to himself that no employees of his own would ever face these conditions. He would rather send himself to the poorhouse.

Ed loosened his bathrobe, rubbed the back of his neck, and gazed at the blinking red wheelbarrow icon. The boy at the handlebars appeared to be a real worker, not unlike Ed himself as a boy.

He remembered his journey out of boyhood, working for others and then hiring workers himself to build a modest lumber business. Years ago, when the health insurance companies had first offered group rates to employers, Ed had worried about staying solvent. He had called together his four employees, laid out the numbers for them, asked them what they wanted to do, and taken the measures they suggested. The business had wavered for a few months, and recovered.

Ed was childless. That was a sorrow to him, but it did keep his attention on the business. He had grieved with his wife Shirley through three miscarriages and a failed operation. He had watched her fight depression, earn her chemistry degree, and land a manufacturing job at Primo Pharmaceuticals. Years had passed, and adoption had not happened. Ed's fifteen workers were all the children he was ever going to have.

Ed shifted his feet on the rug and dabbed at the crooks of his knees, where the sweat beaded. In a few more years, he told himself, I'll sign the business over to George, and he can be as hardass as he likes. Myself, I'm not trading people's health for dollars.

Anyone looking past the rainsoaked maple trees and through the study window of Ed's silent house would have seen a small, sallow man in a worn nylon robe and sweatpants, with only a monk's rim of hair to help secure his glasses behind his ears.

Ed closed his useless manual, faced the red wheelbarrow icon, and admitted to himself: I know next to nothing about computers. Any move I make now will probably be the wrong one.

The wheelbarrow flashed back at him, as bright red as ever. The working boy flashed beside it. NEWS, proclaimed the yellow letters.

Ed sighed. He clicked on the icon.

The screen turned itself to a skyblue banner that told Ed, WELCOME TO THE WEB. Before he could react, this message vanished and a text appeared framed in midscreen. It began:

*IMMORTALITY NEWS*

*No more disease, no more decay,*

*No more grief from wasting away!*

*Just slug this down and you're in luck*

*Unless you're hit by a Mack truck.*

Following this bit of doggerel was a paragraph that contained not sentences but ingredients, it seemed, strung end to end with numbers beside them. Ed scrolled down the text, a few dozen lines. Some of these must be organic compounds, he thought. Look at all those C's, O's, and H's, and the bonding marks. And there were other terms, some of which Ed knew. Melatonin, for instance. Coenzyme Q10. Echinacea. Oils of garlic, broccoli, evening primrose. Ginkgo biloba extract. Grape seed extract. The rest of the stuff almost made sense to Ed, but not quite. What was melatonin Z, or Z2? Powdered spelt? Cytosine-coded? Rantes? What was a biloliter?

Then there was that phrase at the end: THE DOSE OF A LIFETIME. What fool would believe this? Ed wondered, and yet he thought, Shirley can identify the organic molecules, if they are real.

Ed was holding himself in check, musing about all these possibilities, when the wheelbarrow-and-boy icon reappeared, red and flashing, beneath the text frame. This time it carried an instant memory of himself, barefoot, more years ago than he cared to count, wheeling grain to the feeder. He could feel the soles of his feet on the warm clay.

In the next moment, Ed was surprised to notice himself bolting up the steps to the bedroom.

Shirley could tell him. He leaned over, breathless, and whispered at the ear of his sleeping wife, "Shirley. You have to come see this. Now. Please."

She ran a soft hand over his chest as she left the bed. Her placid "whatever" sounded as though she had been lying awake, or if not, it was no matter.

Shirley fitted the sidepieces of her thick glasses over her ears. Together she and Ed returned to the study. Displayed on the computer monitor was only the familiar white envelope icon. It said, E-MAIL CENTER. Shirley put an arm around her aging husband's waist.

"What did you want me to see?" Shirley asked, with a friendly yawn. The computer clock read 3:17 AM.

## Chapter 2

Sarah Freihoffer, of 1933 Cross Street, Medeopolis, was also awake in the pre-dawn hours that morning. Sarah often stayed up later than was good for her.

As a member of a family practice law firm, she specialized in custody law, especially cases that involved alleged child abuse. Whenever she believed she had a real shot at preventing some so-called adult from hacking away pieces of a child's soul and body, she went for it. She could not leave it alone, even if she had to spend night after night at her computer screen, threading case law into her arguments until she could finally close her eyes for an exhausted hour, before a late run to the courthouse.

The older she got, the harder these all-nighters were on her system, and some nights she imagined she might just fall through the grate of hormone pills and caffeine and find herself in a sifted heap on the rug. Those nights she would tell her system to get over it already, to compensate, make it up, fill in. Outside, the moon would set, the birds would sense a lift in the darkness and uncoil their heads, and Sarah's mind would still be ringing with the sounds of the visible and invisible blows swelling her case files. These sounds had not diminished as the years had passed.

She had been awake since 11:30 Saturday night, when one of those recurring Helen dreams had hauled her upright and propelled her, coffee in hand, over to the activated blank monitor where she usually did her best thinking. In the dream her daughter Helen, who in reality had just graduated Medeopolis University with a teaching certificate and a promised job teaching third grade--Helen, wonderful Helen, with her fountain of black hair and her unblinking eyes--was lashing out at her own future children.

The dream Helen excoriated them with insults, slapped them raw, hurled them against walls. Half a dozen weeping and stunned dream children with oddly familiar adult faces that Sarah could not quite bring into focus. The dream Helen was clearly on a roll, enjoying herself, and Sarah's horrified shouts to get Helen's attention sounded puny as she crossed out of the dream. In the same embarrassed moment Sarah had become conscious of her freshly laundered pillowcase, Aaron's comfortable snores, and the small mewings from her own mouth, sounds that could threaten or hold no one.

In the wake of this recurrent dream, Sarah brought out her usual explanations as she stared at the blank screen: unacknowledged pressures, resentments, rages; the bureaucracy, the court system, herself, Helen, her clients the victims, her clients the perpetrators. True, Helen had said to her once, "Mom, were you too easy on me? Didn't you ever want to whup me up 'side my haid? Ha, ha," and more than once, "Mom, I think you'd care more about me if I was *abused*." But Sarah had expected that, she had attended to that.

More likely, her dream reflected a habit of visualizing her more timorous associates in the firm as themselves frightened children,

quoting the noninterference clauses to her once again. She had come to believe it was to save themselves from being yelled at, overturned, or mocked by the parental arbitrariness of the law. Out of the ghosts of her colleagues' own past abuses, real and present abusive parents were condoned and given strength. With each turn of the world, abuse had the power to keep its power. It was disgusting.

"My wife Sarah, she saves the world," her husband Aaron the businessman would say at parties they could not avoid. "She rescues one little child at a time. Only fifty million more little children to go." Aaron set her up this way to guarantee questions and a flow of conversation directed away from himself. Sarah had never been sure whether this bothered her or not.

By midnight, when her computer gave its hourly rooster call, Sarah was cradling her second cup of coffee and deciding just to go ahead and rough out the Johanssen brief. Her mind had apparently ruled itself in session for a while. The brief wasn't due for a week, but it was time to test her thoughts. She was free until the potluck tomorrow night. She could forget the myrtle plantings and sleep until noon, then shop for the chicken rosemary.

All right, how to work the case law for the Johanssen boy? Sarah took up her glasses, tinted aviator lenses that felt to her as broad as shields. She encircled her neck with the cord she had fastened to them—a burgundy lanyard that Helen had made years ago at summer camp. All the clean hours of the AM were there before her like unmarked pages waiting for the smooth strokes of reason. She would give them enough reasons to choke them, enough reasons to force their rag doll consciences to sit up and do the right thing.

In a few hours she had almost finished grouping precedents, and had found two *Law Review* articles that detected a shift in policy on the relative weights of the emotional and physical welfare of the child. She had written, "Recent court rulings have held that the child's best interests are safeguarded not only by . . . "

When the violet characters in her clock monitor program shifted from SUN 2:59 AM to SUN 3:00 AM, her computer's hourly rooster did not crow. Instead, the computer's microphone announced in a cheerful young child's voice, YOU HAVE MAIL! and a blinking icon appeared in the left margin of her text. Was that a crib? A child's crib, in a lustrous white. And peeping above the bars, a chubby toddler's eager face, one curl waving from its head like the Kewpie doll she had loved when she was two years old. The toddler held a smiling teddy bear.

This is a hallucination, Sarah told herself. Yet the crib icon refused to disappear, and then beside it, with a motion like waving sea grass, her own text appeared transformed. Now it bore the title COHEN AND CRIB V. WORLD and the subtitle YOUR TEXT HAS BEEN PRESERVED, followed by a pleasant enough poem, a series of numbers and formulas, and the signature: REGARDS FOREVER, IMMORTALITY NEWS.

It could have been her maiden name on the screen that brought on the panic, Sarah later supposed. The name *Cohen* always brought to mind all the Passovers since her father's death, when they would leave the door open for Elijah and she would picture her father striding through it. Sarah flung herself out of the chair, ran to the front window, and parted the brocade curtains. Was her neighborhood still there, the lawns, the comfortable homes, the night held down by streetlights on poles?

Three houses down, at the Klamperers', she saw an ambulance in the driveway, spurning out red and white light from its flashers while Carmela Klamperer followed two paramedics and a stretcher down her front walk. Neither Carmela's husband nor the two children were anywhere to be seen.

Oh, thought Sarah. She stood there for a few minutes while the flashes stabbed at her eyes. No doubt such lights would cause any number of strange shapes to float by in a person's reactive vision. Could that be it? I have seen only ambulance lights mixed with fatigue, she theorized, and waited for the courage to return to her computer. Poor Carmela. Her husband Stephan had risen fast enough in managed care administration to afford the house on Cross Street, but their two blonde children, a five-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter, appeared miserable much of the time, serious-minded like Carmela herself. Stephan had a bleeding ulcer, then? An early stroke? But then Stephan himself, with their daughter, appeared in the doorway, as Carmela climbed into the ambulance. Sarah's heart fell.

When she returned to the screen, the odd message was there, unchanged. The radiant toddler and teddy bear faces watched her above the lighted crib. So then, she thought as she pressed her temples with her lower palms, what was this? Immortality, from the almighty technology center? She might agree to that, as long as she could add a codicil of eternal freedom from abuse. She ran FILE to choose PRINT.

FEED PAPER, the print instruction replied. She inserted a sheaf of paper into the hopper and clicked on PRINT again. Out of the printer

came the last unfinished page of the Johanssen brief, the same page that she now saw on the screen.

Could I please be a little more crazy? Sarah pleaded to herself.

### Chapter 3

At 2:57 that same morning the dispatcher's call reached the Medeopolis Hospital Ambulance Service: "1938 Cross Street, five-year-old male, household accident, possible third-degree burns." In the wait room, Houston Pratt recapped his apple juice and stood it on the paperback copy of *Huckleberry Finn*. He made it out the door and got his butt into the shotgun seat of the ambulance in no time flat.

Carlos, the EMT, had already started the engine. He sped the van along the wet and empty streets while Houston asked Francine, the dispatcher, to fill him in. "Yeah?" answered Houston. "Yeah, yeah?" His syllables were low and careful, next to the blistering siren cry. They passed a pharmacy secured with a steel grate, a line of shabby row houses, a Burger King, a Home Depot, a Wal-Mart, and an A&P, all closed. They turned down a boulevard with a median strip that would have been green in the daytime. Larger houses here, with yards.

"Some fool knocked over boiling water onto their kid," Houston reported to Carlos. "Additional pan of hot oil maybe fell on him too." He set the radiophone back in its holder. "The father hammering on Francine about what do to before we get there. Name is Klamperer." Leave it to Francine to talk the guy through, unless he was just too know-it-all to listen.

“Nice time for a debate,” Carlos replied.

“You got to hope the angels won.” Houston hung up an IV.

At 3:04 they glided onto the silken-surfaced driveway of an imposing Tudor colonial, one of many in this neighborhood. Gingerbread houses, they called them. Carlos cut the engine and popped the back doors in one motion, while Houston circled around to pull out the stretcher.

The front door to the house was ajar as though someone had been keeping watch through the screen. Beside the foyer was a small girl in a nightgown, half backed into the coat closet. Everything you say is just more for a child to deal with, Houston thought, and simply nodded, but Carlos told her, “We’ll help your brother, *chiquita*.” They hustled toward the loud voices beyond.

In the kitchen Houston heard the woman going at the man with that ragged voice that white women use when they want to yell but somehow can’t. “He thinks you’re blaming him!” the woman rasped. “It’s not *his* fault!” Her chin stood out, cocked upwards toward the man through thicknesses of black hair.

“Utter nonsense,” the man said, in an even tone. “I was just being logical. Don’t make me look like the monster here.”

“Shove. . . your . . . logic!” The woman’s scream was a whisper.

Between them was their son, propped against the kitchen stool. His body shook, each shudder more violent, as though his arms might fling themselves from their sockets. His small torso had been wrapped in wet bath towels, along with part of his head. One unharmed eye stared out from the cold towels. Houston knelt down before the boy, to explain. But the boy was far within; he was seeing and hearing no one.

“We’ll take care of him now, ma’am.” His head at the boy’s chest, Houston listened. A breath, another breath. No wheezing. Hold off on intubating, then. From its clear cover, Houston unfolded the burn sheet, papery and azure blue. He used it to swaddle the boy, his touch loose. Guide him onto the stretcher, head raised, unburned cheek at the pillow. Houston listened again: still breathing. The mother watched, her upturned arms dangling open at their elbow hinges.

On a hunch, Carlos tried to speak to the woman in Spanish, inquiring the cause of the burns, but she did not seem to hear. Instead, the father was gesturing to explain: steam pot, mother nursing a cold, briefcase open on counter. Also a frying pan coated with vegetable oil, yes heated, yes burner turned on, he had no idea why. Child sneaks in, appears between her and the stove, startles her. Briefcase shuts onto the pot handle. All comes toppling.

The man had found the time to put on slacks and a polo shirt, Carlos saw, and to comb his blonde hair behind his ears, and to line up items on the counter for his demonstration: pot, pan, briefcase, cooking oil, eucalyptus oil. A stick of butter, half in its foil wrap and smeared with finger marks, had left a trail on the counter edge. No, responded the man, they did not apply butter to the skin; they had been instructed not to, for some reason.

Houston, securing the stretcher clamps, felt his throat constrict as the man spoke. Yeah, the guy was calm, yeah, helpful sure enough. You don’t tell this white man anything he don’t know, he thought. He gonna tell *you*. Carlos finished with the questions, and they were out of there, the usual way, the mother in the ambulance, still in her robe, the father coming later in the car.

They slid along the night streets. Houston talked into the radiophone again, then checked the IV. Get those fluids in, let that boy's system float through this time. The woman was not saying a thing. Houston looked at her. High cheekbones like a cliff, the rest of her face in a slow fall, casting about for something to grab on to.

Houston told the woman, "Good thing he's not in shock, ma'am, and I bet he can still hear you. It's all right, you can go ahead and tell him what a good boy he is."

The woman's eyes welled up at once. "He *is* a good boy," she said.

"A good boy and a strong boy," said Houston. "He'll make out just fine."

Training for the main event, you see, in the fight that was coming down. Houston thought about it. He saw the kid alive years from now, scar down along his ear, tight-lipped against his old man about some damn fool thing, the mother at the sidelines and dead set for the boy. These days his wife Carinne would wrap their own two kids up tight in her arms and tell them, "What am I going to do with you?" His grandmother had always had the same question for him as a kid, after some scuffle at the playground, or some big hoopla at the school, or some present he had picked out for her. She would cover up his ears with the palms of her hands and pull him towards her. Her hands were always damp, and the house always had a creosote smell. "Mmm-mmm!" she would say, her smile asking it too, "What am I going to *do* with you?"

When he and Carlos had delivered the boy and returned to the wait room, Houston opened his *Huckleberry Finn* to a folded-down passage.

“So is that a racist book, or what?” Carlos asked him, pressing his directions into the coffee machine buttons.

“Damn if I know,” Houston answered. “Luther had words about it with his teacher and asked me to check it out, so I’m checking it out. Got the parents’ meeting at the school a week from Tuesday.”

“Yeah,” said Carlos, “I saw it in the papers. We’re on shift that Tuesday night.”

“Yeah, we are. I’m trying to swap with somebody.”

“Let me see,” said Carlos, bending over Houston, “where are the racist portions, *mi amigo*?” He sat down in the next chair. “Didn’t I read that book in school?”

“Yeah, and I did too. Forgot most of it,” said Houston. “Luther says it’s not just parts, it’s spread out through the whole book. See, right here the two of them, Huck and Jim, are talking.”

“Mm,” said Carlos. He blew along the coffee surface to make it ripple.

Houston kept going. “See, they’re headed down this river here on this raft, talking about white men.”

“*Tell* me about it,” said Carlos. “No news there.”

