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PROLOGUE

The phone in Frank Zimbalist III's empty office kept ringing.

One female caller, pleased with the Zimbalist Holistic Recliner, offered to perform a number of potentially pleasurable acts on Frankie.

There were a few inquiries about buying the Recliner for institutions, and whether wholesale rates were available.

But most of the messages were from the same people: Dr. Gary Huff, or the representative from BeWell Enterprises, or that lady Frankie had met at the Sober Living Solutions conference in Tucson, or half a dozen other people who had Zimbalist Holistic Recliners.

The first message from each party was polite and professional. Some of the callers spelled out their names or repeated their phone numbers slowly, to make a busy man's job returning phone messages that much easier.

They were certain, after all, that selling the remarkable Zimbalist was a demanding job.

But as the number of unreturned messages from each party increased, the politeness and professionalism fell away.

By the fourth attempt, the callers barely contained their frustration. Some threatened that Frankie would be hearing from a lawyer. Some pleaded tearfully for him to please call them back.

All wanted to understand what the Recliner was telling them. They wanted to know what it was designed to do and whether they were using it in the right way.

One whispered, menacingly, that the Zimbalist had revealed his

true purpose in life. If he fulfilled that purpose, it would be very unfortunate for Frankie.

But then there were the calls from Dr. Gary, who always remained calm, evenly modulated, patient. Dr. Gary did not believe in getting angry over the phone. He left the same message every time.

When Frankie nervously called in for his messages at the end of each day, he never knew what craziness he might hear on the other end of the line.

But Dr. Gary's voice was always professional and kind.

Because of this, even though Frankie Zimbalist was on the run from a bunch of patent lawyers and ex-wives and other bloodsuckers, Dr. Gary was the only one he considered calling back, the only one whose number he had written down. Once he could be somewhere for a few days and just think. Once he could get himself together and away from all the revelations the chair that bore his name had given him, he swore, he promised, he included in his prayers every night before he started drinking, he would "call that Huff guy back. Out of all of those sonsabitches, God, he's the one who deserves to know the truth."

Imagine that the mystery of your existence was revealed, your life laid out clearly before you, every decision already made, every success and failure illuminated.

Would you then have a purpose?

Why do we long for the knowledge that will ruin us?

From *A Lifebuilder's Journal*, Dr. Gary Huff

CHAPTER ONE

“No, Ezekiel, I’m afraid there’s simply no evidence at all that you have ever, or will ever, be attractive to anyone. But you will have a very long life indeed. It says so right here on this graph.”

Dr. Patel pointed to an ascending green and blue line on the report. “This axis represents your age potential. As you can see, you may make it past a century, maybe longer. Barring unforeseen accidents, of course.”

“But . . . no love?” his wheezy little mother wheezed. Bebe was short, not quite stout. If only she’d had red hair and blue eyes, and a higher voice and less chapped lips. If only she tried a little harder, her mother said. But Bebe was trying as hard as she could.

“Afraid not. Not a pinch. But look, if you want to know the truth, most of my patients are in the reverse situation, and they aren’t happy.”

Thirteen-year-old Ezekiel had faked every answer on the Longevity Assimulator and picked random responses on the Life/Love Experience Multiple Choice. He had thought, while taking these tests, that he didn’t want to know a) whether he would live long, b) whether he would find love, or c) whether science could measure either of these things.

But now, he was not so sure.

A teeny part of him, a part he didn’t even know he had, rose up like a snowdrop into the cold light. Ezekiel saw in a flash the life that would stretch out around him: an endless boring shade of blinding white, forever unbroken by a bright green flash, the frenzy of affection for which he so desperately longed.

His mother knew his lovelessness couldn't be something genetic, because even though she and his father were divorced, they had loved each other. Once.

But perhaps these results did explain why she had such a hard time understanding her son.

“Not find love? You? Those tests sounds like a load of malarkey,” Ezekiel's father Joe, who lived in Vermont, said to him over the phone later that night. “Nobody knows what's happening next week, son. No one knows what's happening tomorrow. I'm sure you'll live a long, happy life.” Joe settled back and put his feet on an ottoman covered in fake tiger fur.

Besides the fact that his son was miserable, and his ex-wife was a loon, so far, 1979 had been a great year for Joe. He lived with his beloved second wife Charlotte. He managed a small inn, and he liked his job, mostly. It was quiet there, no matter what time it was.

He tried to offer some fatherly advice, but Joe's consistent physical absence from Ezekiel's life rendered it worthless.

“Dad said those tests were a load of malarkey,” Ezekiel told his mother.

This was the longest string of words that Bebe had heard from her son in months.

“Oh, really?” she coaxed, folding old winter coats for the swap meet.

“He said no one knows what will happen.”

Bebe knew her ex-husband was wrong; he had to be. He had made so many poor decisions over the past ten years that nothing that came out of his mouth could be trusted.

How could he doubt Dr. Patel's predictions or the power of their insight?

Certainly, Ezekiel was progressing. Here her son was actually talking to her.

Something must have thawed in him, or righted itself to continue on its path. Something must have stopped growing or started. He must have changed.

He just had to.