

## The Predictors

"Sign here, and here please...then initial here."

Freddy signed away as instructed. He didn't bother to read the fine print, or the large print for that matter. His mind was already made up. So he unscrewed his vintage Waterman pen (adorned with a broadleaf gold overlay) and signed the paper.

"Okay, what's next?" Freddy asked.

"Just one more place to sign," she said, flipping the pages of the contract. She noticed his pen. He declined the plastic ballpoint in favor of this wonderful old model. *It was classy,* she thought. *This guy gets up in the morning and after getting dressed, tucks an elegant pen in his jacket. No, not classy...sexy.*

"Can I ask you a personal question?" she asked him.

"Only if I can ask you TWO personal questions in return," Freddy replied with a slightly naughty smile. She was cute, and Freddy liked to flirt. Her spaghetti-yellow hair swam over her shoulders, and down her back to the shoulder-line. The sun barrelled through the large office windows, illuminating the

thin strands of her hair which trailed away from the otherwise orderly formation of shampooed mane. She seemed to glow, as she moved about her paperwork. Her body twisted and turned like a carnival in full swing. And she smelled like pink cotton candy.

She snickered, "Why do you get two questions in return for one? Bad trade for me."

"Well..." Freddy said, "Give the customer what he wants, isn't that how the saying goes?"

"I think it goes, 'keep the customer satisfied,'" she replied.

"Even better," he said, no longer concealing his unabashed flirtation. Then he noticed her finger: no wedding band. He smiled a sugarless, wicked smile.

"You're silly Mr. Upton," she returned, pointing to another section which required his signature. She swiveled her chair from side to side as Freddy took his pen and again signed his name. "But you're right about keeping the client...satisfied. And you're my client. As of that last signature--you're mine. So yes, I'll grant you two questions for the price of my one."

"Outstanding," Freddy said, sitting up in his chair, his back straight, his hands perched gently on his thighs.

"So who goes first?" she asked.

"I'll go first," Freddy replied, leaning in towards her, resting his body's weight on his folded hands. "First question, what's your name?"

Her face reddened. She leaned in close to Freddy, looking over her shoulders to make sure no one else was watching, or listening to them. "You know I'm not supposed to tell you that. It's best you call me Predictor 18-A."

"I don't think so. If you're not gonna tell me your name then I'm afraid I won't be able to answer that personal question you have lined up for me," Freddy said.

She again looked over both shoulders, and leaned in ever closer. Their noses were almost touching now, "Hannah...my name is Hannah," she whispered.

Freddy said, "There you go Hannah, not so hard right?" He paused. *What a beautiful name*, he thought. Freddy had a crush on a girl named Hannah. This was back in high school. *Hannah Vogler, was her name. I wonder what happened to her?* Freddy thought.

Freddy, now lost in a sweet recollection of Hannah Vogler, stared off into the ether. Hannah 18-A interrupted, "And your second personal question Mr. Upton. Do you have one?" She asked impatiently. After all they still had a lot of business to

finish. And it was Friday afternoon. Not that she had any major plans for the weekend.

"Second question," Freddy said with returning confidence, "would you like to have a drink with me tonight? A friend of mine is having a little party at a tavern in the West Village. How about, after you've sentenced me to death, we go out and snag some face-time over a couple of beers?"

Hannah's smile (now peppered with displeasure) began to fade. Another customer was hitting on her. It happened all too often for Hannah. She didn't mind it most the time. But it once got her into trouble. She was reprimanded last October for flirting with her client, what was his name? Mike...Doctor Mike Calaf. He lived on the Upper East Side. He was wooing and she was...well she was swimming in it. She smiled at him and flowered for him. But the administrator had noticed, and reported her bad behavior. Now she was wary about clients who flirted with her. Just two days ago it had happened with the client from Stockbridge. But he was easy to rebuff. Freddy on the other hand, Freddy Upton was different. He wasn't going to be as easily deterred. Heck, he had already gotten her name, her real name. No one called her Hannah at work. She was Predictor 18-A, not Hannah. And yet here she was. Freddy knew her name and

had asked her out. And what's worse, she wasn't sure she could turn him down. If anyone found out that she, a respected predictor, had met a client after work for a drink...well that would be the end of that job. A job she trained so hard for. A prestigious, sought-after job, which her girlfriends would die to get. She was a predictor for The Life-Time Company. She even owned some stock. And her shares were outperforming (as the company was growing).

Finally, Hannah mumbled a reply, "You wanna have a drink with me. Hmm. Can I think about that for a few minutes?"

"Of course Hannah," Freddy said, "that's fair enough. Okay so you get one personal question you can ask me. Fire away."

"Well..." she said, pausing to phrase the question as simply as possible, "Why do you want to know your AOD?"

Freddy considered for a moment. He took one of her hands in his and she immediately pulled it away. She scanned the room for anyone who might have seen. Her head rotated nervously to the left, then nervously to the right. No one seemed to have witnessed the incredibly inappropriate gesture. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Oh shit. Sorry. I don't want to get you in trouble. Sometimes I have a problem with impulse control," Freddy said.

Hannah, now uneasy and annoyed, sat back in her chair and pushed it away from Freddy.

Freddy, seeming not to notice said, "I'm not sure why I want my AOD. I just do. Maybe it's so I can plan better. How long I need to work, and when I can retire. If I have 50 years left, I might work my butt off for the next 20, then stop and smell the roses for the remaining 30. Does that work for you as an honest answer?"

"Is it an honest answer?" she replied.

"I think so," he said.

"Okay, works for me, and almost makes sense." Hannah was a bit more relaxed and sought to get back to the business at hand. So she pushed a black button which protruded from the waxy wood of her desk. A small red disk rose slowly from a nearby console as Hannah began to read the Life-Time disclaimer.

"The test you are about to take will enable Life-Time Inc. to estimate your AOD or Age Of Death. The age at which you will die. It's accurate with a margin of error of up to two years. This means, for example, if your AOD is 56, you may die at age 54 through 58. Or you may die at 56, just as predicted. Do you understand this and do you have any questions regarding this limitation?"

"Nope," Freddy said.

Hannah continued, "This test has not been evaluated by the FDA. There are limits to the accuracy of the AOD score. AOD cannot take into account acts of God or other random events such as but not limited to accidents, homicide, suicide, drug overdose, reckless behavior in general, fire, floods or acts of terrorism. Do you understand this stipulation?"

"Yup," Freddy said.

Hannah continued, "While most clients process their AOD without complications, there are those who suffer psychological adverse effects from it. Approximately 6% of clients who receive their Age Of Death develop mild to moderate depression. 2% develop severe psychosis and approximately 0.4% of our clients commit suicide. If you find yourself suffering near-term depression, or thoughts of suicide, you agree to report back to me in order for Life-Time to enable you to receive a psychological evaluation. This evaluation will be provided free of additional charge. Do you understand this stipulation? And do you have any questions for me before we continue?"

"Nope," Freddy said.

And that was that. Hannah pressed a button on the desktop panel and the red disk began flashing red then white. Hannah

instructed Freddy to place his finger on the flashing disk and to be prepared for a small pinch followed by a sucking sensation. He followed the instructions and within a minute, the test was done.

"How long will it take to get the results?"

"About an hour. Life-Time Labs will analyze your blood and will estimate the age of your death. I can have the results emailed to you or sent via text if you prefer."

Freddy smiled, "Five grand for a text message, pretty impressive. I need to pick up some Life-Time stock."

Hannah laughed. Now that business was near concluded, she wanted to flirt again, "Well, it's a bit more than a text message you're getting. You're getting twenty years of research by Life-Time scientists. You're getting the power of foresight; a look into your future. To me, five grand seems pretty reasonable Mr. Upton. As you know Mr. Upton, our list of celebrity clients is long--and they're all satisfied customers."

Freddy, now half-grinning, half-sneering, said, "Well put, Hannah. You win. If Johnny Depp is happy, who am I to complain? Okay, so one hour to kill. How about I take you out for that drink while I wait. I am meeting up with a few friends down at

Monty's Tavern, over on Greenwich Street. Save me the embarrassment of showing up dateless."

Hannah sneered, "I don't know about this Mr. Upton." But behind the reluctant exterior, she was all smiles. *What good luck!*, she thought, to have met such a dashing yet confident man. At work no less. Why she didn't need to do a thing. She simply sat at her desk and let the universe do the rest. Why sign up for Match.com or J-Date when all you had to do was let the cosmos take over? *Thank God I never signed up for Match.com.* Here she was, being invited to a party, by a handsome, wealthy stranger, who obviously liked her. Just look at that suit, was it Zegna? *And don't forget his pen. This guy is a class act.* And HE LIKED HER! At least he liked the way she looked. And that was always a good place to start. Of course, she would show him what an amazing woman she actually was. Yes, there was a brain behind that pretty face. She couldn't wait to get to know Mr. Freddy Upton from North Salem, New York, a bit better. Unless, of course, the test revealed something terrible. *With my luck, he's gonna die next year.* Or worse, the knowledge of his own Age Of Death will send him into a horrible depression. Its happened before, many times. She'd seen it. A customer flips out after getting his text, or email with his AOD. People *think* they want

to know this stuff. But when the results are in some can't hack it. The weight of that information, of knowing your Age Of Death, can be too much. Especially when the news is bad.

*I'm overthinking this, I'm psyching myself out. Perhaps I should have that damn drink with the man and see how it goes? Yes, makes some sense. One drink won't hurt. And it's not like he's inviting me to his apartment, or anything untoward like that. It's a bar filled with people, for Christ's sake. A private party, he said. Maybe a birthday party for one of his buddies.*

"Well Mr. Upton, you drive a hard bargain, but I've gotta admit there is something about you I like. One drink, while we wait for your test results. I'll even have the email sent straight to my phone. I can get the test back in 30 minutes; sooner if no one is on break."

"Wow, move over Domino's," Freddy said.

"I've just gotta get someone to cover for me. Shouldn't be hard. Go ahead and get a head start on that drink. I'll find a colleague to watch my desk for the afternoon, while you leave. That way, we won't be seen walking out together. Text me the name and address of the bar and I'll meet you there in 15 minutes."

Hannah offered Freddy a polite handshake and a valedictory wink. Freddy thanked her for her time and was off. She gathered up her things and turned off her computer. After procuring coverage for the afternoon, Hannah went to the bathroom. Soon Freddy's text message came through: "Monty's Tavern, 6642 Greenwich Street. What's your drink?" Hannah didn't reply. She hoped her disregard would be interpreted as reluctance by Freddy. In the bathroom, she checked her hair and applied a new coat of red lipstick. She washed her hands and made sure her blouse wasn't too wrinkled. Next, she took the elevator down to the lobby and made her way to the street.

The city air bordered on tropical, and felt great to Hannah after a long day in the air conditioning. The building never got it right; it was always too cold. Hailing a cab during rush hour took a while. It was Friday afternoon, which meant an exodus of Manhattanites cutting out early to begin the commute to the Hamptons or the Berkshires or home to the burbs of Long Island and Westchester. When she finally caught the green NYC taxi, she took it downtown, to Monty's Tavern. She couldn't wait to see Freddy.

A note taped to the door read, "Monty's Tavern, closed for a private party." The door was ancient, probably original to the

building. It might have been a hundred years old. Yet despite its age, it seemed vibrant, and...creepy? Was that it? It reminded her of the bathroom doors at the Pirates Of The Caribbean ride in Disney World. For a moment, she considered getting out of there. Catching a cab and heading home. Instead, she pulled open the heavy pirate door; a draft of cold air whooshed out. From inside the tavern, she heard laughter and loud, mirthful banter. No doubt Freddy and his band of merry friends were already flying high on the alcohol and that special freedom that only a Friday afternoon bestows. Hannah was giddy, but she hid it well and proceeded to stroll on inside.

"I'm really glad you made it," Freddy said, greeting her from his barstool. He got up and walked over to her, taking both her hands in his. He walked her to a table where they sat.

"How could I miss the chance to have a casual drink with such a handsome gentleman, and then tell him when he is gonna die?"

"Abso-flogging-lutely. What's your pleasure?" He asked.

"I'll have a Pinot Grigio. Thank you Mr. Upton."

Freddy called over to a waiter and ordered two Pinot Grigios, "I think you can call me Freddy now. No one from work

is watching us, I promise. This is a private party. All these people are friends."

"What are we celebrating anyway?" Hannah asked.

Freddy paused, then smirked, "My long life. At least I hope we are. So you better not let me down."

Hannah shifted uncomfortably in her chair, "I won't let you down. It's just...I thought maybe it was a birthday party or something."

"Nope," Freddy said, "only a group of friends gathered to see how this test turns out. Really it's just another excuse for me and my pals to drink too much."

"Oh, I get it. Well, that makes sense. But what if the results..."

"Don't come out like I hoped they would?" Freddy asked.

"Yes," Hannah carefully replied.

"Well then I'm gonna get real drunk and keep hitting on you."

Hannah smiled, or reproduced a smile. The rest of her face expressed the true concern which fumbled around in her head.

*What if his Age Of Death is next year, or last year? I'll ruin his party.*

One of Freddy's friends approached the table. From his slurred speech, Hannah surmised he was three sheets to the wind. He put one hand on Freddy's shoulder and one hand on hers. He studied her for a moment with eyes that couldn't quite focus on her.

"Wow, you're pretty, ain't she?" The drunk man said, or asked. They weren't sure if it was a question or statement of fact. Freddy laughed and introduced him.

"Hannah, this is my pal Jason. We call him The Hammer. I've known him for a long time."

"Why The Hammer?"

"Cause," The Hammer replied with a sloppy, almost incoherent slur, "I really know how to pound. Wanna find out for yourself?"

"Okay there Hammer, take it easy," Freddy interrupted, getting up from his seat to walk The Hammer back to the bar, calling the bartender to fetch him another round. He whispered something in The Hammer's ear that made them both smile. Then he was back at the table. "Sorry about that. He's wasted. Obviously."

"Obviously," she said, smiling, "When he's sober, thank him for the compliment. I'm charmed. I think."

Freddy picked up his glass and downed his wine in one heroic swallow, "Will do. Jason has good taste in women, but can't hold his liquor for shit. I apologize for his bad behavior."

"Let's change the subject," Hannah said.

"Yes, let's. I meant to tell you when you walked in how pretty that blouse is. You've got a great sense of style. You put yourself together from head to toe. Not many gals know how to do that these days. Except of course, for that necklace."

Hannah was instantly startled and her face reddened with embarrassment, "What's wrong with my necklace? My mother gave me this."

"It's not real gold," Freddy said, eyeing the yellow chain and its pendant which dangled between her breasts. When she caught him studying it, she snatched the pendant in her hand.

"Of course it's real gold. Are you a jeweler or something? This necklace means a lot to me. Why would you insult it?"

"Hannah, I'm not trying to insult you. I swear it. I'm being honest with you. Take it off and drop it in this water glass," Freddy said, sliding over a half-empty water glass.

"Drop your necklace into the water, and I'll prove it's not real gold."

"How can you do that?" Hannah angrily demanded, "Are you a fucking magician?"

"In a way I am. You'll see," said Freddy, "drop it in this glass and watch me do a magic trick."

Just then Hannah's phone beeped. She looked down at it, then hesitantly looked back up at Freddy. "It's your AOD. It's ready."

Freddy replied, as if he had not heard her, "Forget the AOD, we're talking about your necklace. I'm about to prove I'm right about that hideous thing. It's about as real as Pamela Anderson's tits. Here's how my magic trick works. You put the necklace in the glass. If it's fake, it will fizz at first, then simply dissolve into the Pellegrino. If on the other hand, I'm wrong, and it is made of gold, then It'll remain intact and undisturbed."

Hannah said, "What are you talking about? It doesn't work that way. And why do you give a shit anyway? Who cares what it's made out of? Your stupid score is ready. Don't you want your Age Of Death? Isn't that why you've spent all this money and wasted my whole day? I hope this wasn't some elaborate scheme to get a date with me, cause I'm gonna let you in on another

prediction...your chances with me have dropped to zero percent. So let's go over your score, so I can leave."

Freddy paused and stared at her. His willing smile was gone and for the first time, he seemed a bit annoyed at her, "Well...I'm sorry to hear that Hannah. I just wanted to show you a trick. Call it a gag. I didn't mean to piss you off. I was messing around. If you don't want to see my magic trick then just go ahead and forward me my--"

"Here," Hannah interrupted, pulling the chain off, over her head. She dropped it into the glass of Pellegrino and watched it gently sink to the bottom. There was no reaction, no fizz. The necklace didn't magically dissolve. Not that she expected it to. But she did, for one second, spy a cruel smile flicker across Freddy's face. Then it was gone. And in that moment, she was afraid. But why? Sure the guy turned out to be a total dipshit, but so what? She wasn't going to leave with him, or ever see him again for that matter. There was no reason to be worried for her safety. She was in a public place. Of course the place was full of his friends...*don't be a scared little girl.*

She said, "So where's the magic trick?"

"First, my score," Freddy replied.

"But you said...oh forget it," Hannah said. Her momentary sense of fear was replaced but annoyance and a subtle, slow burning anger. She picked up her phone and clicked the screen a few times and read his score, first to herself, simply out of habit. Her hand fell almost lifeless to her lap, with the phone in it. She stared at him with utter confusion.

"Bad news?" Freddy asked, beaming with delight.

"The test...it didn't work...there must be a problem with the lab."

"Really?" Freddy asked, "well tell me anyway. What's my Age Of Death?"

"I told you Freddy," she countered, still bewildered and perplexed, "there's a mistake with the score. It says your AOD is five hundred years from now."

"Wow," said The Hammer, from his bar seat, "It does work. That's awesome." Funny thing is...he wasn't slurring his words anymore. Maybe funny...wasn't the right word. Suddenly the room was less noisy. In fact, it was stone-cold silent. Everyone in the room had heard that last remark. And everyone was looking at her...smiling.

The Hammer approached the table and put BOTH hands on her shoulders now. She tried to pull away, but he was strong and she

barely budged against his grip. Hammer pulled the phone out of her hand and studied the email. He looked at Freddy and said, "Amazing Frederick. The marvels of modern technology."

Hannah looked woefully at Freddy.

"You see Hannah," Freddy said, "Not all blood is the same. Much like wine, there is Lafite Rothschild and there is dog piss. The more vitality in a lifeline, the better the blood. It nourishes better, it tastes better. Before your company came along, it was basically a hit-or-miss proposition. We took what we could get. But now, with access to your database we will be able to pick and choose. You will help us select the most juicy specimens, the Lafite's of the world."

"Taste? Nourishes? What are you talking about Freddy?"

"You don't get it do you, Hannah?"

She looked at him, seemingly as confused as ever. But she knew. Deep down, she knew. She eyed her necklace softly sitting at the bottom of the water glass. Her gold necklace. She cased the pendant on it and thought about reaching for it. But it was pointless to try. It was only a few feet in front of her but it might as well have been in Boston. Still she stared at it. The gold chain, the yellow glimmer of the cross, which now seemed larger than life, magnified at the bottom of water glass.

"Oh Jesus" Hannah gasped.

"Nah, let's leave him out of this," The Hammer said, picking up the glass by the stem, making sure not to get his fingers near the cross. He took the glass away.

"Will it hurt?" Hannah asked.

"No" Freddy said, "or as you said, 'you'll only feel a small pinch then a suck. And it will all be over.' By tomorrow, you'll see this thing in a whole new light. You'll be happy. I promise."

"And my Age Of Death, it'll be like yours?" she asked.

"It sure will. 500 years, possibly longer."

"And I'll give you guys info about our clients? About their AOD scores?"

"Yes, you'll tell us which clients have the best blood " Freddy said, "and you'll do it willingly. Hungrily, I assure you." With that his teeth started to grow. First they elongated, then they thinned out, until they were two rows of hypodermic needles. His gumline began to bleed. His eyes turned dark yellow and his irises disappeared, transforming into two amber dimes.

Hannah thought about the pirate door. She somehow knew it was locked. The sign taped to it had changed too. It now read, "Closed." She wished she could open it and run out of there.

"What's your real name?" Hannah asked.

"Why, it's Freddy like I said. Frederick Von Burn Hamilton Schoedermurn, Prince of Darkness, or whatever cliché your species has for me. At your service."

She could feel the bar closing in on her. The Hammer began gently pulling her hair back, exposing her neck and her pulsing, jugular veins. The others were there too. Surrounding her, ready to taste her. "Maybe I should have signed up for Match.com after all," she said.

THE END