

Futures

Carousel

Age is just a number. By Liam Hogan



She squints over the paperwork. “You’re new,” she drawls, as I guide the Montblanc pen in her hand.

“Yes ma’am. Alex Prenton.”

“Any relation?”

“My uncle, ma’am.”

“And where is your uncle, this New Year’s Eve?”

“Uncle Tobias is no longer with us.”

She perks up. “As in, Toby has left the law firm, or he’s shuffled off this mortal coil?”

“Both, ma’am,” I say after a pause.

Her lips quirk. “Oh, I *like* you. Though I’m sorry for your loss ... and mine. Toby was a capable lawyer and a good man. But where is Ryder?”

“Which Ryder, ma’am?”

An arched eyebrow. “*Any* of them.”

Ryder and Prenton is the law firm, but even after I followed in the family footsteps, we Prentons were outnumbered by a trio of long-in-the-tooth Ryder brothers. None as old as Uncle Tobias, and not even, depending on

how you counted, as old as our most notable client, Ms Emilia Sandor, a medical cuff still around her wrist. Legally, she’s 77. Biologically, a frosty 32.

When suspended animation was perfected, originally for cosmonauts but adopted with unseemly haste by certain billionaire oligarchs, there were worries about wealth being locked up indefinitely, about mismanaged estates, about Rip Van Winkles that time forgot. Rushed-through legislation meant a deep-sleeper lost their legal rights if they slept for more than a calendar year, if they missed the ‘opportunity’ to tick their age upwards.

So they awake, as witnessed by lawyers such as myself, and return to their cryocots 24 hours later, assuming there are no pressing matters to attend to. Matters they employ others to manage.

My job is to shepherd Ms Sandor through the necessary paperwork. Then she’ll hold a number of board meetings, setting the agenda for the next 12 months, before she and other

mega-rich sleepers party through midnight and into the New Year.

I’m paid handsomely not to have an opinion on her chosen lifestyle. “The Ryders thought it best I be introduced at the earliest opportunity,” I say.

She snorts. “In other words, their collective noses are still out of joint from the last time. So, Alex, was it? What are you doing this evening?”

“Ma’am?”

She lays a hand on my arm. “As you’re the one living partner I haven’t managed to piss off, I’d like to invite you to tonight’s festivities.”

I colour, I’m sure I do. You hear rumours. “I’m married, Ms Sandor.”

“Yes, I noticed the ring. But I may have need of legal representation.”

“Ma’am?”

She waves her hand at the stack of forms. “Rubber stamping. The tedious meetings I have after this; a chance to kick sluggardly arses. The *real* business comes this evening, mixing with others of my ilk.”

Futures

Uncle Tobias warned me that working New Year's Eve came with the job. That one partner would always be present, and the others on call, in case anything tricky came up. He even warned me to have a tuxedo ready. I miss him, terribly.

"Then I'm at your service, ma'am."
"Good. The limo will pick you up at seven."
With that, I'm waved away, the ink still drying.

"You have to remember, Alex, for me, that was yesterday."

I frown. I've been frowning a lot as I hover in her wake, sometimes being introduced, more often not, careful not to overindulge in vintage champagne. Listening to the gossip, which is mostly about who *isn't* there. Who has fallen off the carousel.

"I don't think you like me, Alex."
"Ma'am?" I squawk.

Ms Sandor grins lazily. "You probably think I'm a bit of a monster. I suppose I am; it's difficult not to be, when you're this rich. But I would hope you view my stepping through life at a year a day in a positive regard."

I'm not sure what to say about that, so I say nothing.

"My father made the fortune I inherited – and enlarged – by somewhat disreputable and short-sighted means, as I'm sure you're aware. But I, who might live for centuries, possibly millennia, can't afford to focus purely on profit. Longevity is just as important, and, with it, *legacy*."

"I have advantages in that regard. When a boss gives an order, they don't expect immediate results. But, travelling through time as I do, I see those changes. I see the direction we're heading, far better than those who regard themselves as at the helm. They pilot; I plan ahead, and make sure we stick to the intended route."

She said she needed some air, so we're out on the balcony, watching the last of the fireworks, the year less than an hour old. The red eye of a nearby crane glowers at us from the latest phalanx of half-built skyscrapers.

"You're telling me this, and invited me along tonight, because you want me to stay with the firm?"

She smiles. "*Bingo*. I knew you were a smart man. I need continuity. You're young; the Ryder brothers are on the brink of retirement, at most a fortnight away, for me. I do hope to

see you next year?"
I nod, uncertain. Astute of her to sense that, without my uncle, I was indeed considering my options.

"Well. I won't keep you any longer, Alex. My bed calls. Ah, you look surprised. My days are shaped much as yours are, there is simply a longer pause between them. And," she nods back at the party, which is already winding down, "doing this every night, gets tiring."

"I doubt we'll continue in this fashion." She shrugs. "We have, in many ways, only just begun. Forty-five years in forty-five days. Hardly any time at all."

She stands in the wreckage of another spent year, looking thin and pale and ageless. Shivers in the night air. "Who knows what the future will bring?"

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Liam Hogan reveals the inspiration behind *Carousel*.

Critics might complain that time travel is impossible, but they're ignoring the unavoidable fact that they, and you, and I, are doing it, right now. In one particular direction, at one particular speed. Altering the direction is always likely to prove more challenging than altering the speed, be it by relativistic effects or suspended animation.

I am, as ever, inspired by all who have gone before me, from H. G. Wells' *The Sleeper Awakes* (or *Futurama*, if you prefer) to Vernor Vinge's *Across Realtime*. This isn't the first 'stop and start' story I've written where the ability to hop through time is a choice, not a necessity, as it is for non-FTL space travel, like *Alien*. In *Frozen* (Alternative Truths, B Cubed Press), I suggest that everyone who loses an election would sleep until the next one, to avoid living under a government they didn't want.

But it's always more likely to be a plaything of the (super) rich. Who will, no doubt, attempt to justify their actions. I'll leave it to the reader to decide if that justification has merit. I'm not sure our lawyer, Alex Prenton, who is "paid handsomely not to have an opinion", is entirely convinced.

