

Haunted New Year!

By Michelle M. Pillow, www.michellepillow.com

Nowhere, Oklahoma . . .

Aunt Susan had always been a little eccentric — from her fast cars and reckless driving, her numerous seedy businesses and even more numerous marriages, to the sprawling three-story mansion on the hill. It had been commissioned and designed before the turn of the 20th Century by a friend of an ancestor.

The designer had died the day the last stone was set — or so the story went. Helen's great-grandfather moved in the next day. There was speculation as to whether or not foul play was involved due to money owed the designer, but nothing was ever proven.

Now, homeless, jobless, manless, Helen Gettsman didn't have a choice but to open the dusty, old mansion, a drafty shadow of what it had once been, and make herself at home. She hadn't been back since her Aunt died, leaving it to her in a will. The money attached to the house drew enough interest to cover taxes each year and little else. Helen had hoped the place would sell. It didn't. Buyers wouldn't even go inside.

She had no desire to live in Nowhere, the aptly named ghost



town of a place, with a population of 83 — if the decades-old sign was to be believed. But what choice did she have? The economy was in the toilet, her apartment building was sold by a bankrupt landlord, and her boyfriend of three weeks dumped her. No surprise on the last one. He wasn't really a keeper — more like a placeholder.

Outside, snow covered the ground, resting heavy on treetops and shrubs like the props of a post-card photo shoot. Aside from the

rare trail of animal tracks, the snow lay untouched. Inside, the house looked as it must have been upon building, though age and wear had taken its toll. Only a few modern advances had been added — electricity, undated plumbing, and radiant heat.

Pictures of her ancestors and their friends lined the walls and fireplace mantel. She'd studied their faces, not recognizing any of them. There was one man who'd captured her attention — in his old fashioned

clothing and happy smile. The house was being constructed behind him, and on the back of the frame she read the words, "Henry Gregory, Architect, 1909."

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Now, as she sat huddled on the musty couch, staring at the radiant heat vents encircling the bottom edge of the walls, she wondered if she'd made the right decision. The pink frills of her aunt's robe smelled of bourbon and cigarettes, but it was warm and counteracted the cool draft leaking in from the old windows. There were no neighbors, no television, no cable to hook a television to should she unpack hers.

But if there was no television, where exactly were the soft voices coming from?

Helen had been hearing them all day — giggles and whispers, floorboard creaks and groans. At first, as she unpacked, she was able to ignore them as the unfamiliar sounds of a new home. Though now, as she noticed candlelight flicker on the wall, she wasn't so sure. She'd heard urban legends of people living in the walls of old homes.

Wait. Candle? She didn't light any candles. Twisting on the couch, she looked over her shoulder. The light flicker was gone.

"Probably just a trick of the evening light on the snow reflecting in the window," she said, the sound of her voice odd in the quiet place.

"It's Official. I'm going crazy."

She began to hum softly, keeping the silence away.

"There. See."

Helen paused, listening hard. "Hello?"

No one answered. Did she really expect them to?

"What the hell did my aunt do out here all day? It's no wonder she stocked enough liquor to fuel a frat party." Helen stood, hugging the robe to her chest as she made her way through the house. This was one heck of a way to spend New Year's Eve.

Shuffling her feet, she went toward what she thought of as the wall of liquor. Nearly every known brand had been crammed into the pantry shelves. "No champagne? Fine, how about, um, this?" She pulled out a half empty bottle of bourbon. "We'll toast to Susan. Seems fitting considering this is my new life."

The liquid sloshed as she stepped toward the cupboard to find a glass. The floor creaked behind her and she swore she heard a soft giggle. Helen turned, looking carefully into every shadowed corner within her eye line. Nothing. No one.

Giving a nervous laugh, she muttered, "Stupid drafty house."

She reached for a glass.

"Drafty? This design is . . ."

This time the voice was louder and

decidedly male.

Helen gasped, dropping the glass. It crashed on the floor, breaking into several pieces. "Who's there?"

Though she waited what had to be several minutes, nobody answered. Laughing nervously, she cleaned up the broken glass and threw it away. She kept a cautious eye on her surroundings, even peeking out the window to see if there were tracks in the snow. The sun had begun to set, casting shadows on the ground.

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Carrying the bottle under her arm, she wandered into the dining room. The long table hardly seemed fitting for a household of one. Above her head was a chandelier with frozen glass droplets raining down. Just as she looked away, the light fixture moved, the glass droplets tingling lightly together. She chuckled, almost feeling relief. That had to be one mystery solved. The draft hit the fixture and caused a noise.

She set the glass down and poured a tiny bit. Sniffing the liquor, she wrinkled her nose. Heady and strong, it burned her nostrils. Knowing she might regret it, she tipped the glass back and drank. Fire burned down to her belly and she coughed, hacking at the unexpected pain.

"Just wait."

She gasped for breath, turning to grab the bottle to put it away. When she reached for the glass, she saw it had been filled to where she'd had it before. "What the...?" The burning had subsided some, but she still tasted the drink. She leaned over to look under the table. Nothing. Overhead the chandelier clanked.

Leaving the glass where it was, she backed out of the dining room. "It's official. I'm going crazy." She walked toward the living room intent on plugging in the old radio she'd



seen earlier. Helen turned the knob, gliding the dial over the stations. All of them seemed to be playing old songs — waltzes and big band music.

Then, finally finding the faint strains of a country song, she turned up the volume.

Just as she was stepping away, big band music blasted her from behind as one station seemed to take over another's airwaves. She jumped at the loud beat of horns and instantly turned the volume back down.

At first, she just listened, letting the songs flood together. Then detecting a vaguely familiar beat, she found herself swaying around the room. She began to kick, stepping back and forward with circling hands to reenact the days of the flapper. The frills on the robe bounced.

The radio signal fuzzed and a voice said, "What is that?" before the music once more took over. It fuzzed again and another voice was answering, "I haven't seen anything like that before."

Helen paused. The conversational tone didn't seem like a radio show. Was she getting cell phone

signals? Curious, she went to the radio and turned the dial.

The music faded but didn't disappear. The talking became louder.

"I do not think she is a good fit for us," a woman said.

A transparent figure leaned against the doorframe.

"I think she's pretty," a male voice answered. He had a thick British accent and the deep timbre of it made her toes curl.

"Pretty?" A nauseatingly disgusting laugh followed the woman's incredulous question. "Common, you mean . . ."

"Modern," the male corrected. Helen leaned closer, wondering who they were.

"Wait, is she listening? She knows!" the woman gasped. A cold, stiff breeze hit Helen's back, and she heard the unmistakable sound of footfall running out of the room.

Helen jumped back and let loose a small scream. There was no denying the tingling of her flesh or the sound of running feet. She held her arms tight to her stomach, not daring to move.

"They plan to greet you at midnight."

Helen made a small noise of fear. Was the British man talking to her? She didn't want to look.

"Susan has spoken very highly of you. She says you're the last of your family line. It's too bad really. You're family has always been kind to us."

"Susan?" Helen whispered. Then, closing her eyes tight, she said, "This is not happening. You're sleeping. You're drunk. You're —"

"Drunk after that small drink? Not quite, Miss Helen."

"You're sleeping," she told herself.

"This will go so much easier if you calm yourself. You will not be harmed. You're the new caretaker."

Footsteps sounded, boots on wood, and she swore they moved around the room with the voice. "I don't remember Susan being like this."

"Susan was crazy," Helen said before catching herself.

"Ah, so you are listening to me!" "Go away."

"I can't." The man's tone was droll. "I live here."

"Isn't there a light? Shoo, get out of here, go toward the light." She relaxed some, though she still wasn't convinced she was lucid. "There's, ah, good, um, things in the light."

The man laughed, the tone slightly mocking but mostly humored.

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Helen finally managed to open her eyes and look toward the sound. Her pulse quickened. A transparent figure leaned against the doorframe, a crooked smile on his lips. His dark dinner jacket, white shirt, and dark tie looked turn of the 20th Century Edwardian style.

Laced-up leather boots and a felt Bowler hat with rounded crown completed the look. He reached for the hat, holding it before him by the crown, to reveal brown hair and even browner eyes. She stared through his chest, seeing the other side of the room.

He glanced behind him as if to see what she stared at and chuckled. "I assure you, I'm really here." This time when he spoke, his voice sounded fuller, solid. "In fact, I've been here for some time."

"You look like that picture of the architect," she said.

"I am that architect," he answered with a slight tilt of his head, "Henry Gregory."

"Henry Gregory is dead."

"Yes, I am. Exactly a hundred years ago come midnight." He brushed his hand absently over his suit. "I think the years have been kind if I do say so myself."

Was it her or was the house



frowned.

"Time?" she repeated, taking a step toward where she'd seen him. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and shivered. Had she gone completely mad?

"For the party," he said, this time from right behind her.

Helen gasped, jumping slightly. "It's almost time for you to meet your wards." He motioned toward the doorway he so recently vacated.

"My wards?" Had someone told her that morning she'd be talking to a ghost, she would have laughed in their face. It wasn't that she didn't believe, just that she didn't believe

to touch his face to see if she could feel him. Her fingers fell through his cheek, and he closed his eyes briefly. Her hand tingled and she withdrew it, hesitating midair.

Somewhere in the house a loud clock chimed the midnight hour. She stared at him, watching as his features filled in. His smile became full and his eyes solid. Her hand moved forward to his cheek once more. This time, she felt him, still cool but as solid as flesh.

Before she could ask about it, she heard a loud cheering, as if a crowd of voices suddenly erupted in the dining room.

His hand captured hers. "Come. Meet your family and their friends. They're all here, generations of them come to celebrate the new year."

Helen jerked her hand away as he tried to pull her with him to the door. "But, I'm not dressed. I'm . . ." She shrugged out of the pink frilly robe, hating the fact that she wore pajama pants and a T-shirt.

He just smiled, grabbing hold of her once more as he whisked her toward her strange new future. ■

Somewhere in the house a loud clock chimed the midnight hour.

colder? Hearing a faint laughter in the other room, Helen frowned, looking past him. "What is that?"

"It's almost time." His body faded until it disappeared and she

them to be so . . . forthcoming.

The man leaned closer, and she felt a cool tingle on her face. He was handsome, and his eyes were kind. She shivered, automatically reaching

