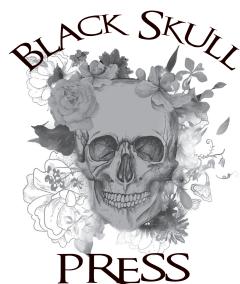


B. GROVES

Vacancy



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Contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	9
Chapter 3	12
Chapter 4	15
Chapter 5	20
Chapter 6	27
Chapter 7	31
Chapter 8	36
Chapter 9	43
Chapter 10	52
<i>About the Author</i>	54
<i>Also by B. Groves</i>	55

Chapter 1

Lacey Marshall suppressed her laughter as she listened to Scott's exasperated sigh while he struggled to calm their three- and five-year-old children down before putting them to bed.

"When are you coming home, Mommy?" Five-year-old Bella asked when Scott handed her the phone.

Lacey's heart melted with the hopefulness in her daughter's voice. Bella always had that golden touch. The touch and ability to wrap her and Scott around her tiny finger, and her little brother, Sam, would soon learn that trick, too.

Lacey heard Scott take the phone from Bella. "Yeah, when will you be home, Mommy?"

Lacey chuckled. "I'm practically through Utah. I should arrive home by tomorrow afternoon."

Lacey was deathly afraid of flying. When she and Scott were first married, they took their honeymoon in Costa Rica. Lacy had never flown before that day and after that, she swore she'd never fly again. She was convinced Scott would divorce her after the way she reacted to the plane taking off but after eight years of marriage; they were happier than ever.

She never understood her irrational fear of flying and Scott liked to make his

VACANCY

little snarky comments here and there making Lacey determined to one day conquer her fear.

Like on their present exchange. “If someone would take a plane...”

“Funny,” Lacey sighed.

Lacy eyed the road and the clouds building to the west and north of her. The forecast said a slight chance of snow, but Lacy didn’t worry since she’d driven through worse conditions.

The sun had set over the desert plains leaving Lacey with an impressive view of violet and orange for her drive. But now, she noticed the clouds moving her way from the west hindering the pretty colors.

She couldn’t wait to return home to Denver. She was drained from the desert drive. It was dull and caused her to have bouts of highway hypnosis. Her ass had gone numb from the driving.

The couple had been talking about moving out of Denver and making their way east since both their parents had retired to Florida and were not getting any younger, and they said, they better do it now while the kids were young enough to adjust to new schools.

Lacy never liked Denver. The traffic and the overpriced homes were enough for them to consider moving. She’d miss the mountains, but she preferred to live near the ocean again.

She heard Sam giggle when Scott scolded him about getting into some kind of mischief.

“It’s their bath time,” Lacey said glancing at the clock on her dashboard.

CHAPTER 1

Scott breathed a sigh of relief through the phone receiver. He adjusted the phone and said, “Call you back after I get them to bed?”

Lacey grinned. “I can’t wait.”

Scott yelled, “Come on! Let’s say goodnight to Mommy!”

Lacey chuckled when she heard the kids struggle to hold the phone while they fought over who would say goodnight to her first.

She threw them kisses and promised she would be home the next day. Scott got back on the phone, promising to call her back once they were in bed, which made Lacey stifle a giggle. Sam never stayed in bed long, he was always wandering about well into the night, but Bella would drift off right away. Her husband already knew this, but he still hoped that putting them to bed would go smoothly.

It never worked.

Lacey glanced at the time again. She should have made it home in one day, but the conference drew more of her time than scheduled and she left late in the morning. If she rode hard, she might make it home by the early morning hours, but she was dreaming. The conference had exhausted her like it did every year and stopping for the night would make more sense.

Besides, she thought as she tried to see the sky through her windshield; the clouds looked darker and more ominous than before, and that worried her a little.

Lacey observed the road as she passed trucks and other cars. She was thirty miles from the Utah/Colorado border.

As she watched another sign for Colorado fly by her on the highway, Lacey

VACANCY

spotted the snowflakes.

Ugh! It couldn't hold off a bit longer!

Okay, Lacey, she coached herself. You can do this. You have plenty of time to drive out of this storm.

Lacey pressed on the gas to speed up her time entering Colorado, but as she drove the snowflakes became heavier and whipped past her windshield as if she were putting the Millennium Falcon into warp speed.

Lacey cursed when she realized the snowstorm grew worse as she approached the border. It had been snowing harder and now she drove through in blizzard-like conditions.

Lacey slowed her car down while the wind whipped over the desert making the car rock. She glanced at the road and belted out another string of curse words.

The snow had stuck to the highway and covered the white lines.

Lacey gripped the steering wheel, knowing this was why she wanted to move to Florida. She'd never have to worry about this kind of crap there. She told Scott one time she would rather deal with the heat and humidity and the seasonal threat of a hurricane than these freak snowstorms.

Lacey's muscles tensed when a semi-truck passed her barreling down the highway. She slowed even more and drifted over to the far-right side of the road. At least, she thought she was in the far-right lane since the snow was covering the lines.

As another semi-truck passed her, she reached for her phone to call Scott.

"Hey! I'm still putting the little monsters to bed," he said.

CHAPTER 1

“There’s a freak snowstorm and I’m right in the middle of it. I’m going to have to stop sooner than I expected,” Lacey said.

The snow was blowing around the road even harder, and Lacey pressed the speakerphone. She heard Sam ask if he could talk to Mommy again on the phone and Scott told him he could in another minute.

“Okay. How bad is it?”

“I can’t see the road,” Lacey answered.

If she would have been in the room with Scott, she would have sworn she saw him frown.

“That’s weird. The forecast said all clear,” he commented.

She heard him moving around the house to get to their laptop which was probably on the kitchen counter.

“I saw the clouds gathering but thought I could beat it,” Lacey said, trying to keep her voice calm as another semi-truck roared past her spraying snow over her car.

“Where are you?” Scott asked.

“I’m right at the border,” Lacey answered. She thought she’d seen the welcoming sign for Colorado pass her, but she couldn’t remember now.

She heard Scott moving around and heard him mumble a few words.

“There’s not much. There’s a rest stop coming up. Did you see the signs for it?” He asked.

VACANCY

Lacey looked around and was relieved when she saw the blue sign for the rest stop. "Yes, in a mile."

"How about you stop there and I'll call around to see where you can stay the night," Scott said.

"Sounds good," Lacey said. She knew she could count on her husband to save the day.

"I love you and be careful," Scott said.

"I love you too," Lacey said.

She pressed the button on her cell phone and watched for the sign to the entrance of the rest stop.

She exhaled when she spotted the entrance. The place was more of a welcoming center than a regular rest stop. It looked creepy from what she could see, but at least it was better than driving through the snowstorm for the moment.

Lacey pulled into a parking space and looked around. There were a few cars scattered about and some trucks sitting in the truck spaces in back of her.

She turned back thinking she would stay in her car despite her need to pee. This stop was isolated and she didn't want to chance it.

While she waited for Scott to call her back about hotel rooms, she spotted an older couple emerge from a small camper and make their way to the brick building that held the bathrooms.

Well, if they feel safe enough, then I will too.

Lacey exited her car and drew her jacket closer to her body. She shivered as the

CHAPTER 1

cold wind seeped into her bones, and whipped through her hair. She carefully stepped onto the snow-covered sidewalk and it was no time before she caught up to the older couple.

“Do you need any help?” She asked as she walked along with the couple.

The couple turned and smiled at her. “No, we’re fine, thank you.” The woman said.

“Heck of a storm,” the old man said.

“I know. My husband said this weather wasn’t forecast,” Lacey said with a smile.

“Well, it looks like we’re packing it in here for the night,” the woman said.
“Are you heading somewhere?”

“Back home to Denver,” Lacey said. “But, my husband is trying to book me a hotel room now.”

The woman nodded. “Good. It’s not safe to keep driving all that way in this weather.”

The three entered the lobby and separated with Lacey going with the older woman and the man entering the men’s room.

Lacey and the older woman made small talk while they did their business. The older woman was complaining about her son. He didn’t like them traveling so much now that they were getting older or something.

The older woman shrugged. “I’m enjoying my retirement. Angus and I said we’ll stop when we want to.”

VACANCY

Lacey chuckled when her phone rang.

“Excuse me,” Lacey said taking her phone out of her jacket pocket.

“Sure.”

Lacey turned away and answered her husband.

“Did you get a room for me?”

“Yes, but there was only one within ten miles of where you are,” Scott said.

Chapter 2

Lacey sighed when Scott informed her about the rooms.

“No chains? I know they’re around here.”

“That’s the shitty part. The one clerk informed me that everyone stopped when the snowstorm hit,” Scott answered.

Lacey sighed. “Figures. So, where did you get me a room? Is it called The Bates Motel?”

Scott scoffed and laughed. “No. It’s a little cabin type, um, bed-and-breakfast, but they host regular motel rooms too. That’s what I booked.”

Lacey’s frown deepened. “I don’t remember seeing signs about it on my way to Vegas.”

“I guess the snowstorm is messing with the phone lines because I could hardly understand the woman, but I looked up the place and it’s there. There are great reviews too,” Scott explained.

“What’s the place called?”

“Foxworth House,” Scott answered.

VACANCY

Lacey raised an eyebrow. Sounded like a creepy, turn-of-the-century place where ghost hunters would gather for a week of trying to find evidence of spirits.

Lacey shook her head trying to focus her thoughts. Well, she didn't have a choice as she watched the snow continue to blow around outside the windows of the lobby.

“How far is it?”

“The map says from the rest stop about five miles. Once you use the exit, drive over two hills, it'll be on the other side,” Scott explained.

Lacey caught the hesitation in Scott's voice. “What? What's wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. It's just strange that when I was trying to locate it on Google Maps, it looked like a rundown building from above,” he said.

A chill ran down Lacey's spine, but she ignored it, although she didn't remember seeing any advertisements for this place and she'd been driving this road for years.

“You said a lady answered?”

“Yeah, and her directions were exact,” Scott answered.

“Maybe it changed ownership,” Lacey said.

“I guess we'll see when you get arrive,” Scott said.

Lacey walked outside. The snow and wind swept through Lacey's jacket making her shiver. She thought she'd better get going or she would have to spend the night inside the rest stop and even with the older couple there

CHAPTER 2

she wouldn't feel safe.

Scott gave her the address and Lacey promised him she would call him right when she pulled up to Foxworth House.

Lacey waved to the couple as they carefully made their way to their camper.

“Did you find a place?” The woman asked.

“My husband booked a room for me about five miles away,” Lacey explained, appreciating their concern.

“Be careful driving,” The man said.

“Thanks!”

Lacey walked over to her car, careful not to slip on the snow. She got in and waited for the car to warm up while she shook the snow from her hair.

Putting the car in gear, she turned on her GPS and pulled out of the parking lot of the rest stop.

Chapter 3

When Lacey found the exit for Foxworth House, she checked twice on her GPS to make certain she had the right one. She turned left like it said but still doubted the directions.

Scott said she would pass over two hills, and a small forest would appear.

That puzzled her. She knew she was close to some small towns, but this was the middle of the desert.

Lacey doubted Scott's directions when the street sign appeared over the second hill.

Fox Street.

That's it!

She smiled about how her husband came through for her again.

She turned onto the street and spotted lights shining in the distance.

Lacey had a hard time seeing the driveway. She bounced around in the car and slid a few times from those bumps, not sure if the driveway was dirt or needed work.

She rounded a curve and trees appeared along each side of the road, along with

CHAPTER 3

a cozy looking two-story home sitting at the end.

Lacey slowed down to an opening and was even more surprised to see the motel-like rooms sticking out from either side of the home.

She wondered if she should stay here when her gaze caught cars parked near rooms and the lights on inside the rooms.

She exhaled in relief knowing she wasn't the only person spending the night here but stayed wary of the company she might be keeping.

Lacey sighed as the snow continued to fall heavily in front of her.

Finding an empty spot to pull into, Lacey parked in front of one of the smaller rooms.

She gazed around thinking the house looked cozy and inviting on this harsh winter night.

She spotted a yellow upstairs light behind lacy curtains, and smoke coming from a chimney.

Lacey scratched her head trying to remember if she'd signs for this house on her way to Las Vegas. She traveled the highway so many times and never remembered advertisements for Foxworth House.

She placed the car in park and turned off the engine. She shrugged thinking she didn't really have a choice now; she had to stay. The snow was too thick and heavy to drive through and she wasn't about to drive back to the rest stop.

Lacey exited her car and turned her gaze to the front door. A neon vacancy sign flashed in the bay window.

VACANCY

Lacey grabbed her bag from the back seat and carefully made her way to the front door. She passed one room with a car sitting in front of the door, but mostly covered in snow.

The curtains to the room were pulled back slightly with the lamps casting a soft glow onto the gathering snow near the door.

Lacey couldn't control her curiosity as she passed the room.

She did a quick glance and saw heads turned towards the older television that looked off, but Lacey didn't stop to look closer. It was none of her business what these people were doing in their room.

Lacey moved onto the front door that had the blinking vacancy sign on the left.

This must be the lobby.

Lacey frowned, noticed some kind of scratch marks going halfway down the door. She put her hand out and traced the marks, thinking it might have been a bear, but they seemed too small. They almost looked like human nails.

Lacey tried to peer closer to the scratch marks when a voice made her jump and quickly turn around.

“Can I help ya?”

Standing near one of the outside lights was a woman holding an ax.

Chapter 4

Lacey's eyes went from the ax to the woman carrying it and her heart sank into her stomach. She didn't know what to reply to the woman.

Snow fell on an older woman, perhaps early sixties, with silvery hair peeking out from a flannel cap.

A large flannel jacket hung off a small frame, and Lacey thought how strange it was that her blue eyes seemed to glow in the darkness. She wore gloves and in one hand held the ax, and in the other held two pieces of firewood.

Lacey relaxed when she spotted the firewood.

The woman eyed her and Lacey found her voice. "Yes. My husband made a reservation for me. Lacey Marshall."

The woman grunted something and walked past Lacey to open the door to the house.

"Come in," she said, waiting for Lacey to follow her inside.

She held the door open the rest of the way for the woman to slip inside.

Lacey stepped inside behind her to what looked like a small office area.

VACANCY

Lacey closed the door behind her and turned around to gaze at the reception area.

Without the fireplace lit in the corner, the reception area might have stayed dark.

The woman maneuvered around a table and a set of chairs.

Lacey also noticed the outline of an old sofa, and a grandfather clock sat in the corner of the room, ticking away.

The woman dropped the wood and the ax by the fireplace and walked over to a large wooden desk.

Lacey waited as she mumbled about hating snow and turned on a dim lamp to illuminate the room.

The woman pulled a book from under the desk, opened it, and turned it towards Lacey. She then brought out one of those old-fashioned credit card machines and scribbled on a notebook.

Lacey almost laughed at the imprint machine. She tried to find a computer but none were around.

“Name, address, phone number,” The woman said pointing to the book while holding out her hand for Lacey’s payment.

Her curtness surprised Lacey, but she said nothing, it was only one night and she was too tired to care as she fumbled around for her credit card and then handed it to the woman.

Lacey had to squint to sign her name and all her other information in the dim light. She wondered if the other guests had the same situation.

CHAPTER 4

Lacey found an empty line and filled in the information. She placed the pen back in the notebook when something caught her eye.

She placed her finger on the line above hers and noticed the date.

Even in the dim light, the last date of a guest read a year ago. Exactly one year ago. Same day.

How odd.

Lacey looked up from the book and said, “It seems your current guests forgot to sign their names.”

The woman looked up from the old-fashioned credit card machine and peered at Lacey.

“What do you mean?”

The question surprised her. “I was just... saying... that there are other guests here, and it looks like they didn’t sign in as you told me to.”

Lacey wasn’t one to tell anyone how to run their business, but she thought it was odd that the other people in the room she passed by hadn’t signed the book as she did.

“Oh,” the woman said.

She glanced at the book and shrugged. “I’ll get ‘em in the morning.”

Why was she the only one forced to sign the guestbook?

Lacey shrugged it off.

VACANCY

Not her business, not her problem.

Lacey signed the credit card receipt as the woman instructed and the woman placed a key into her hand.

“You’re in room two,” she said. “Breakfast is 7 AM sharp. Checkout is 11 AM.”

Lacey shifted around and peered out the window. The snow still blew around outside. “What if I need an extra night? Can you accommodate me from the weather conditions?”

The woman followed Lacey’s gaze. “Sure, but we only serve breakfast.”

Lacey turned back to the woman and nodded. “How about vending machines? An ice machine?”

The woman pointed to her right. “All the way down at the edge of the rooms.”

Lacey nodded as the woman handed her a gold key.

She picked up her overnight bag looking forward to a hot shower and bed. She would call Scott to tell him she was fine once she got into her room.

Lacey was about to exit through the door when the woman spoke up. “We have a curfew here. Don’t want no trouble.”

Lacey bit her lip. Okay, they have a curfew. Maybe they had trouble in the past with guests.

“What’s the curfew?”

“Ten.”

CHAPTER 4

Lacey scoffed. “I’ll be sound asleep by ten, so no worries.”

Lacey turned and walked towards the door. She hadn’t been sure, but she thought she heard the woman mumble, “Good, you’ll stay safe.”

Chapter 5

Lacey ignored the woman's mumbling and walked over to her room, careful not to spy on her neighbors. A quick glance told Lacey they hadn't moved from the table.

They haven't moved? That's weird.

Scott had sent her two text messages while she was filling out the paperwork for the room and she unlocked the door of room number two so she could call him.

Lacey's eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she fiddled around the wall until she found the light switch.

The light hissed for a few seconds before settling into a dull glow over the room.

Lacey dropped her bag on the older table and shut the door behind her and made sure it was locked.

She hit Scott's name to call him back.

"Glad you made it," he said with relief.

CHAPTER 5

Lacey shrugged out of her jacket while switching ears to talk to her husband. “I’m fine, but the way it’s snowing, I’m not sure I’ll get out tomorrow.”

“I checked on that, it’s supposed to end in about an hour, but we’ll check again in the morning to make sure the roads are decent,” Scott answered.

Lacey smiled and asked, “Did they finally go to bed?”

“Oh, they went to bed, but are they going to sleep? That’s the question.”

Lacey chuckled but realized she was shivering. She walked over to the window and found a small heater. She realized it was off and turned the switch on.

The heater made some kind of weird grinding noise, sputtered, and warm air blasted her in the face.

At least it worked, she thought.

“How’s Foxworth House?” Scott asked.

Lacey looked around. The room was small. Even smaller than she first thought as she ran a finger over the table, she set her bag on and found a thin layer of dust.

She walked over to the bed and checked under the blanket. The sheets seemed clean but needed a wash to freshen them up. There was a weird stain on the wall near the headboard and Lacey ignored it.

There weren’t the usual motel freebies sitting in a basket near the bathroom sink. Only a lonely bar of soap. The towels looked yellowed and old and another coat of dust decorated the bathroom sink.

Lacey sighed. It was only for one night.

VACANCY

“It’ll do for tonight,” she answered.

Scott chuckled. “That rough, huh?”

Lacey walked back over to her bag to grab her own supplies and grinned. “Remember that place we stayed at in Seattle?”

“Worse?”

“Same.”

Scott laughed and then turned serious.

“Please be careful.”

“I will but I think I’m good because the owner or the clerk or whatever she was said there’s a curfew.”

“A curfew?” Scott sounded incredulous at first but the phone went silent. “She might have a good reason, though. She might have had problems with other guests.”

“True,” Lacey said. “I told her I’d be in bed by then, anyway.”

“Call me in the morning when you wake up and we’ll check on the roads,” Scott said.

“Okay. I love you,” Lacey said.

“I love you, too.”

Scott hung up and Lacey placed the phone on the table. She turned around and sighed debating whether she wanted to test the shower.

CHAPTER 5

Lacey walked into the bathroom and turned on the water. She cringed when she heard the pipes shake and the water sputter from the nozzle before it sprayed onto her hand.

She turned the rusty knob until she found the warm water.

It works. The water was clear and hot, so it looked like she would get a shower after all.

Lacey left the water running while she undressed to make sure the water stayed clear and hot.

Lacey stepped into the shower and let the hot water wash away the stress of driving home. She cringed when she saw the mold growing in the corners of the shower, but decided not to complain because it was only one night and she would never stay at this place again.

She thought maybe it was time to face her fear of flying head-on to avoid these kinds of situations in the future.

Lacey exited the shower and grabbed the towel. It was old, stiff, and covered in dust.

She sighed and threw the towel into the tub, and walked out of the bathroom. Thankfully, she was always prepared and grabbed a towel out of her overnight bag to dry off.

As she dried off her gaze drifted around the room. She realized the TV looked like it came from the 1980s and she couldn't locate a remote. She stood up, still wrapped in her towel, and tried to turn it on. The TV came on but the only thing she watched was the static dancing across the screen.

She turned the huge knob but was met with more static.

VACANCY

That explained why those people in the next room weren't watching the TV when she checked in.

Lacey turned the TV off and decided to go to bed.

Lacey dressed in her usual t-shirt and sweats and pulled back the covers on the bed.

She breathed a sigh of relief when pulling back the covers only revealed stiff white sheets and nothing jumped out at her.

Laughing off her paranoia, Lacey walked over to the window and pulled back the curtain slightly.

Her eyes drifted around the property. The snow had stopped much to Lacey's relief, and the moon was now shining down on it casting an ethereal glow around the area.

Her car wasn't too bad. It must have stopped right when she checked in, so it would be easy to clean in the morning.

Her gaze settled on the car next to hers, the one she assumed belonged to her quiet neighbors.

She hadn't noticed before, but the car looked like it sat at an awkward angle.

It looked like... Lacey's eyes drifted to the bottom of the car, but couldn't see much with her car blocking the view, but she thought those people had flat tires.

Maybe she would offer them some help in the morning if they needed it.

Wait. Another thing caught her eye. A headlight looked broken.

CHAPTER 5

Again, Lacey couldn't get a decent view because of the snow blanketing the car.

Lacey cringed. She would panic if she had that kind of situation without Scott with her.

Lacey shifted her gaze over the Perhaps a shed or some small barn on the opposite side of the house.

It would make sense since they would need to store supplies for guests.

Lacey was about to turn away when she saw someone approaching the house from the other building.

Lacey backed away from the curtain a bit and watched the figure move closer to the house. The moonlight reflected off a head and shoulders, but Lacey couldn't tell if it was the woman running the place or someone else.

The figure passed near the floodlights and Lacey only caught a glimpse of a tall figure wearing a hat and jacket.

It looked male, but she wasn't sure.

She tried to squint her eyes as she watched the person make their way past the front door and into the darkness.

She wondered if that person was another worker or the owner. Who knew?

Lacey let the curtain fall into place.

She yawned and decided to go to bed. She climbed in and turned on her phone, catching up on the news and anxious to leave to this place tomorrow. She was missing Scott and the kids so badly. She couldn't bear to be another day away

VACANCY

from them.

She swiped to her pictures and smiled at her family. She was determined to drive home the next day.

Lacey hadn't realized she fell asleep until she heard a noise outside her door.

Chapter 6

Lacey sat up in bed, her phone slipping from her palm and hitting the floor with a dull thud.

She blinked and rubbed her eyes trying to place where the noise came from.

She set her gaze on the window and thought she saw a figure move past the curtains.

Lacey sat up shaking away her sleep.

Had someone been at her door?

Lacey threw back the covers and sat up on the side of the bed. She leaned over and picked up her phone and placed it on the bedside table.

Lacey stood up and inched her way over to the window.

She frowned when she pulled it back the curtain. No one seemed like they were around.

Lacey turned away from the window and shrugged. It might have been another customer checking in or her neighbors getting something.

She didn't know why she was so paranoid about this place. The lady was rude

VACANCY

but never seemed threatening.

Lacey looked at the clock on the table. It was 10:30 PM. Past the so-called curfew.

Damn. She'd forgotten to get water out of the vending machine.

Lacey checked the parking lot again. She licked her dry lips. She needed water.

What was the owner going to do? Kick out a paying customer for breaking curfew and getting a drink? Lacey reasoned.

Lacey decided she would get her drink of water. She slipped on her boots, jacket, and grabbed her keys and some cash from her handbag.

She'd placed the room key on her keyring when she checked in earlier, so she wouldn't misplace it.

Lacey opened the door to her room and slipped outside. She locked the room behind her and walked briskly past her neighbors and past the door to the main office.

She turned her head slightly and didn't see the older woman open the door. She maneuvered around snow patches and some ice on the concrete.

She strolled past the other room and noticed someone lounging on the bed, but she didn't stop long enough to greet them.

Lacey reached the edge of the rooms and rounded the corner.

When she turned, she was swallowed in darkness except for the dim fluorescent lights of the older Pepsi machine sitting against the wall, half-covered in snow.

CHAPTER 6

She didn't like how dark it was near these vending machines, but she was so thirsty, that she would ignore the dark side of the building, get her water, and rush back to her room.

Lacey spotted another machine on the other side of the Pepsi machine.

She trudged through the snow and realized it was an ice machine. She searched around to make sure no one was watching her and cleaned off the snow and tried to lift the lid.

The lid came right up but with a loud creak that made Lacey cringe.

She couldn't see inside since the light from the soda machine was so dim.

Frowning, she reached her hand down into the ice machine to see if there was any ice.

She didn't feel the ice, but something else.

Her hand touched something clumpy, soft, and sticky.

Lacey pulled her hand back in shock and let the lid fall into place with a big thud.

She stepped back into the snow not knowing what she touched inside that ice machine.

Her breath became shallow, and her heart pounded when she felt a sticky substance clinging to her skin.

Her eyes widened in shock when she lifted her hand and held it against the dim fluorescent light of the soda machine.

VACANCY

The dark, sticky substance was unmistakable.

Lacey staggered backward and almost fell back into the snow from the shock of what was on her hand.

Fear overtook the shock as Lacey thought about what she'd touched inside that ice machine.

She kept swallowing as her mind raced from what could have been a dead animal all the way to a dead human.

Her heart pounded against her ribcage as she tried to get her mind back on track and figure out what she should do.

First, she needed to get out of this dark area.

As she turned to move, she heard something move to her right.

Lacey's throat closed. She wanted to scream, but couldn't because of what she saw in front of her.

A man stood at the end of the building holding something in his hand. The moonlight shadowed his face, but he looked over six feet tall.

Were his eyes glowing? Lacey's vision had blurred from fear, so she couldn't tell, but she would swear later that the man's eyes glowed in the darkness.

The man took a step—no—he stomped closer to her.

His arm raised up and Lacey caught the outline of an ax in his hand.

Chapter 7

The man mumbled something but Lacey's survival instincts took over and she never heard what he said.

A yelp escaped her throat as she turned to run. She didn't know where to run to and she didn't care. All her brain kept screaming at her was to run from this person who appeared out of the darkness.

Lacey turned and slipped in the snow. She caught herself and took off in a run around the corner trying to figure out where to go to escape that huge man.

The people!

She would knock on the doors.

Lacey hurried around the corner and placed her hand inside her pocket.

Shit! She hadn't brought her cell phone with her.

Lacey stopped in front of the door and saw the heads through the window. She heard muffled footsteps behind her.

She turned to see the man still shadowed in the darkness watching her from the corner of the building.

VACANCY

Tears burned Lacey's eyes.

She pounded on the door and screamed, "Help! Help me! There's a man out here ready to attack me!"

Lacey banged on the window but the figures didn't move an inch from their seats.

What is wrong with these people?

Lacey went back to the door and continued to bang on it for help. She reached for the knob as the big man stayed by the corner of the building. He moved two feet, and his face came into the light.

He looked more amused than menacing at her actions.

Lacey cried out right when the knob turned and she opened the door.

Lacey stepped inside the room, gasping for air.

"Help me, please! Some man out there is after me," Lacey said trying to catch her breath.

It only took seconds before Lacey realized the horrifying truth about the occupants of the room.

She took two more steps forward as their faces cleared from her frightened, blurry vision.

One mannequin lounged on the bed staring at the TV. It's wig falling off the back of its head.

The other sat in the chair staring at her with an arm leaning against the table.

CHAPTER 7

Lacey stood there with her mouth gaping open. She couldn't cry, she couldn't scream. Her mind raced from the moment she stepped foot onto this property.

The car of her neighbor looked old and broken down, the guest book hadn't been signed in months.

Her neighbors hadn't moved from their spots since she'd checked in. They had to be mannequins too.

The tears ran down her face. She was trapped in this room. What would that man do to her?

Gasping for air, Lacey turned around to search for a weapon.

As she tried to catch her breath, she thought of her husband and her children. If she would die tonight, she would want them to know she didn't go down without a fight.

Lacey turned to gaze at the doorway. No one stood there. Maybe she still had a chance.

No, Lacey. Focus on getting the hell out of here.

Lacey had forgotten she had her car keys but cursed when she realized that she'd left her phone and her bag inside her room.

She didn't care. She had to get out of there because her instincts were screaming at her to run as far away from this place as she could. That bad things have happened here and she would be next if she didn't jump in her car right now and drive off.

She tried to plan as she inched closer to her car. She would drive back to the rest stop and find a phone there. She would call the police and hope that the

VACANCY

older couple stayed there.

Lacey felt tears well in her eyes as her car got closer. Only a few more steps and she'd be free. She would see Scott and her children again. She would not let that crazy man get her.

Lacey stopped in her tracks and drew in a shaky breath.

How did she not see him standing there?

The tall, thin man with the ax stood at her driver's side door. He held the ax in both hands.

The light shined down on his bald head, his eyes were glowing white despite the darkness.

How did he get to her car faster than her?

Without another thought, Lacey ran through the door into the bitter cold air. She looked to her left. The man disappeared.

She turned her head both ways, looking for him, but no form came out of the darkness.

Lacey needed to get out of here. Now!

Lacey slipped and slid in the snow, but she kept on her feet as she hobbled toward her car.

She rushed by the office door and thought about going in but didn't want to take a chance with the weird man who'd been stalking her. He might have been waiting for her right inside the office and who knew what he might have done to the clerk unless she was partners with him and they killed their guests.

CHAPTER 7

The man lifted himself off the side of the car. Lacey watched in horror as the man's lips turned into a sneer.

"Guests," he said whispered. "We love guests."

Lacey frantically looked around for any means of escape. She didn't want to go into that office because she didn't know her way around and he would capture her.

Lacey's eyes turned to her left. She could run down the road, but he'd catch her.

If she ran into the desert, she'd die from exposure.

She had to figure out something. She looked for a weapon. Nothing.

Then her eyes settled on the barn across the property.

The seconds were ticking away as the big man moved closer to Lacey. She didn't have a choice, she had to run.

Either she would find some kind of weapon to defend herself in that barn, or it would be the last place she ever saw while she was still alive.

Chapter 8

Gathering all her strength and her willpower, Lacey shot off in the direction of the barn. She didn't dare look behind her. She didn't know if the big man was following her. He may have been tall, but he was thin and might catch her before she reached it.

Her heavy breathing and her small screams were the only things she heard as she ran as fast as the snow and her legs would take her.

Her breath came out in heavy puffs as she reached the doors. A floodlight turned on above her, making Lacey squint.

She realized she ran right to the double doors of the barn.

A loud male laugh echoed over the property, making Lacey almost faint from fear.

“You can't run far,” the voice said.

With her heart pounding against her ribcage, Lacey pulled the old wooden handle, and much to her relief or her horror, the door opened right up with a loud creak.

Lacey cried out as the big man came closer and lifted his ax.

CHAPTER 8

Lacey turned and ran through the door and shoved it closed to slow down the big man and give her some time to find a weapon.

The barn had one light shining down onto the hay scattered around the ground.

Shadows crept out of the corners, making it tough for her to identify something she could use against the huge man.

Lacey ran to the middle of the barn. The lower level looked empty. No weapons, nothing to help her.

Tears streamed down her face as the door opened. She tried to find another door to run out of, but there was nothing but darkness.

She whimpered as she heard a laugh behind her.

Lacey clenched her fists and looked up praying to God that her death would be swift.

Sam and Bella's faces ran through her mind, and she hoped they would grow up to be successful adults without their mom.

Scott would take good care of them, she thought, trying to find some comfort. He always had been and always would be a wonderful father.

"Scott," Lacey whispered when she pictured their wedding day in her mind.

Lacey opened her eyes and gasped.

She forgot about the big man moving in as her stomach lurched from the scene above her.

Lacey fell to her knees as the bile choked her.

VACANCY

She tried to take a deep breath, but every time she filled up her lungs, nausea would come in waves.

Hanging from the rafters of the small barn were five bodies.

Lacey only saw their feet, but it was enough to know it sealed her fate with theirs.

Soon, she would join those people hanging above her.

The big man roared as he realized what Lacey was gawking at.

“Guests,” he said.

Lacey looked down and discovered the hay and the wood floor wet and sticky with blood.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

“Welcome,” the man said, almost triumphantly.

Lacey turned and stared into glowing eyes. The big man standing in front of her almost didn’t look human. He was pale. Deathly pale. His eyes glowed in the darkness. Bits and pieces of hair clung to his head. His lips were dry and drawn into a tight smile and she couldn’t tell if he had any teeth left.

Lacey dug deep into herself for one last moment of strength. She took a step forward and yelled, “Fuck you!”

The man never flinched, he only sneered even deeper and lifted his ax.

Lacey closed her eyes and waited for the blow.

“Silas!”

Lacey opened her eyes as the female voice echoed through the barn.

The big man grunted and turned his head up in confusion.

Lacey did the same and looked up to see the clerk standing at the edge of the loft with her finger pointing down at the man.

“Silas, I marked her room,” the woman said.

Lacey had to look away again as the woman spoke. She glimpsed a face from one of the hanging bodies and a wave of nausea ran through her stomach.

The big man mumbled something and took a step back from Lacey.

He lowered the ax and seemed disappointed but didn’t try to attack Lacey again.

Lacey’s mouth hung open as the woman made her way down from the loft and stood at the bottom of the staircase.

“Go, Silas. Shoo. Get out of here and leave the woman alone,” she said. “We have another to put away.”

Lacey waited for the attack to happen but it never did.

The big man with glowing eyes turned around and with heavy footsteps, he left the barn and walked into the darkness.

Lacey didn’t know what to do next. She thought about running into the night and trying to reach her car, but the woman could have easily shot her if she had a gun.

VACANCY

The woman's mouth turned down in disapproval.

"When I said a curfew was in place, I meant it," she began.

She stepped closer and Lacey realized she was holding something in her hand. Lacey stepped back in fear but did not speak.

She looked down and realized the woman was holding a paintbrush dripping with white paint.

"My son..." the woman struggled for words. "He has problems. I can only stop him when I mark a room."

The woman lifted the paintbrush. "Or someone."

Before Lacey could react, the woman swiped the paint across Lacey's chest.

Lacey reeled back in shock at what the woman had just done.

"You're one of the safe ones," the woman said looking up to the rafters and back towards Lacey. "Now go back to your room and don't come out 'til the morning."

Lacey's eyes shot between the woman and the paint drying on her jacket several times before the woman said, "Go before I change my mind. I won't let him hurt women, but I will make exceptions."

Lacey listened to the command. With shallow breaths, she backed out of the barn.

Once she hit the cold night air, Lacey turned and ran as fast as she could across the property and straight to her car.

CHAPTER 8

To her relief, no one stood near the car and Lacey pressed the button to unlock it.

Whimpering she flung open the door and screamed when she dropped the keys on the ground.

She found them after a few seconds and hopped into her car, slamming the door shut, and starting the engine. She threw on her windshield wipers and her defroster at full blast and kept pulling the lever with the windshield washer fluid to clean off her windshield.

“Come on, come on, come on,” Lacey said, gripping the steering wheel to stop her shaking.

When one part of the windshield became clear, Lacey thanked a higher power and placed her car in reverse.

As she backed out, she could see two silhouettes standing at the barn door watching her but making no moves to block her exit.

Lacey turned the car around and skidded on the snow. As she did that, a thought occurred to her when she drove past the barn and reached the road to Foxworth House.

The silhouettes of Silas and his mother had disappeared. The barn appeared run down and dark.

Lacey checked her rearview mirror. The neon sign had gone dark along with the rest of the house. No lights or any signs of life were left at Foxworth House.

As Lacey wiped the tears from her eyes so she could see the road, she turned on the overhead light and realized the paint had disappeared from her jacket.

VACANCY

Lacey didn't care because she drove like a mad woman through ice and snow to reach the older couple. To her relief, they were there. She was even more relieved when they tiredly opened the door and let her inside where she collapsed into the woman's arms.

Chapter 9

4 months later

Lacey gripped Scott's hand as they drove closer and closer to Foxworth House.

"You know, we didn't have to do this," Scott said gently squeezing her hand back.

Lacey closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. After that night and all she'd found out about Foxworth House, Lacey had to go back. She had to see it for herself and she had to try to understand what happened to her that night.

Her mind flashed back to that night. All she'd wanted was some water, and in turn, she stumbled onto a crime scene. One where she almost became their next victim.

Or so she thought.

When the state troopers returned and asked her if she was on drugs, Lacey was stunned.

They said that Foxworth House had been abandoned for years and that they searched up and down but never turned up any bodies or any man resembling

VACANCY

Lacey's description.

Lacey felt the tears burn her eyes as she thought of how humiliated she was that night.

But, she knew what she saw and when she'd been ready, she and Scott had done some research.

In 1983, a woman covered in white paint and blood escaped from Foxworth House and managed to run onto the highway and flag down a motorist.

Police arrived and went to investigate the woman's claims about bodies hanging from the rafters in a barn at a bed and breakfast off the road.

Silas Stillwell, killed one of the state troopers and a standoff ensued.

Silas Stillwell was eventually taken down and his mother—Nancy Stillwell—was arrested and sent to prison. Scott and Lacey found out that Nancy died in prison in 2002.

Lacey's breath caught in her throat the first time she saw the picture of mother and son.

Nancy knew her son had severe mental issues, but she did everything in her power to protect him and even helped him with his crimes.

After her son had been released from a mental facility, Nancy planned her son's return. She knew that the mental facility couldn't keep her son from killing again, so she bought Foxworth House, which turned into a bed and breakfast for weary travelers who needed rest and a good meal.

To satiate her son's thirst for blood, she would choose the victims and she convinced Silas to never touch the people behind the doors marked with a

CHAPTER 9

white “X.”

They would hide the victim’s vehicles and incinerate the bodies. It worked well for years until Nancy made a mistake. A mistake that would turn their lives around forever. She’d forgotten to mark an X on a guest’s door.

Lacey found an interview with Nancy Stillwell on a Youtube video. It was only a clip, but Nancy’s words chilled Lacey to her core.

“My son and I had a deal. He would protect our business from intruders, keep the place neat and clean, and only do his deeds after ten o’clock. In turn, I gave him his victim and cooked him for him later.”

Nancy looked straight into the camera and said, “But my boy never hurt no woman. I wouldn’t let him. He was taught from a young age to respect women. I only forgot to mark her room, but it was too late.”

Lacey stopped the video and looked down at her chest remembering the splash of white paint.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Scott asked as they approached the exit.

Lacey nodded. “Yes. I need to figure out what happened.”

Scott and Lacey researched more than just the Foxworth House case. They were never really believers in the paranormal, but how did Lacey witness a crime that happened over thirty years ago?

Everyone else thought she was crazy. But Lacey turned to her husband and was eternally grateful that he believed her.

“We’ve been married for eight years, and I’ve never seen that kind of look on your face,” Scott said later after he arrived at the rest stop.

VACANCY

Lacey swallowed hard and drew in a deep breath when Scott made the turn onto the road to Foxworth House.

Lacey tried to hide her fear. She knew there was nothing to fear but the memories were still fresh in her mind and she couldn't shake them until she knew for sure she hadn't been going insane.

Lacey not only wanted closure from that horrible place, but she left her bag and cell phone there. She didn't dare ask the state trooper to retrieve it out of humiliation.

Lacey squeezed Scott's hand as he turned onto the last road.

Lacey closed her eyes trying to catch her breath and try to keep her wits about her.

She opened them again and caught a glimpse of the barn to her left, and when she turned her head, the darkened house loomed in front of them.

She hadn't noticed that night that part of the roof had caved in, and there was graffiti covering parts of the house.

Lacey sucked in a breath when she recognized the two abandoned cars on the night she checked in.

“What was the room number?” Scott asked.

“Two,” Lacey answered trying to keep her voice steady. “It was to the left of the office, near that car.”

Scott pulled up next to the abandoned car. The car had since rusted out with the tires flattened and the windows broken out.

CHAPTER 9

“Is this the car you first saw?”

“Yes.”

Lacey turned her gaze forward and spotted her room. The door was closed with the number “2” hanging by one screw.

It wasn’t coming off that night, she thought. The number was straight.

Lacey felt the reassuring squeeze of her hand and she turned to smile at her husband.

“Let’s go,” Lacey said.

The couple exited the car. The brisk air blew around them, and the only noise was the rustling of the dead leaves from the wind.

Scott gazed around. “This place had to be really nice at one time.”

“I couldn’t see much in the dark, but it must have been,” Lacey answered.

Lacey and Scott made their way to the former office, and while Lacey peered inside the smudged window, her breath caught in her throat.

The same furniture sat quietly among ruins from the ceiling caving in, and debris was thrown around. She saw more graffiti on the inside and wondered if the door was unlocked.

Lacey placed her hand on the knob and swallowed. She turned the knob and the door creaked open.

“You better stay out of there, the roof collapsed,” Scott said.

VACANCY

Lacey ignored him as her eyes honed in on the desk. There she spotted the guest book.

Stepping over pieces of ceiling, wood, and torn furniture, Lacey reached the guest book.

The elements had disintegrated some of the pages over the years, and as Lacey lifted the book, some other worn pages fell to the floor.

She only needed one page and it was front and center. Her name, the date, and the time were crystal clear.

Lacey closed her eyes and tried to push back the memories of what she witnessed that night. She tried to deny it really happened and tried to deny that she'd witnessed a historical event, but her name was written in the old guestbook.

Scott walked into the office carrying Lacey's bag in one hand, and her cell phone in another.

"You were right, they were right where you said," Scott commented. "The cell phone is dead."

Lacey gazed at her belongings. "Were the mannequins in the next room?"

"I didn't see any mannequins."

Lacey nodded and held out the book. Scott stepped closer and read Lacey's name and the date.

Scott read the other names. "Did you realize your name is exactly one year apart from the last guest on here?"

CHAPTER 9

Lacey nodded. “I realized it as I was driving away after Nancy let me go.”

Scott inhaled deeply. “Weird.”

Lacey stopped and eyed her husband. “What do you think happened, Scott? I mean you heard Nancy Stillwell yourself over the phone.”

Scott ran a hand over his face. “I don’t think we’ll ever know, Lacey. The only thing I can think of—”

Scott and Lacey turned towards the door where they spotted a state trooper pulling into the driveway.

“Shit,” Scott muttered.

“We better go,” Lacey said placing the book back on the desk.

The couple walked out of the building as the state trooper exited his car.

He was a tall older man with short gray hair and a clean-shaven face.

The officer nodded to the couple and said, “Good morning, folks. Are you aware that you’re trespassing on private property?”

“I’m sorry, officer,” Scott opened his mouth and closed it trying to think of a good story. “We heard about the tragedy here while we were driving and thought we’d stop by and check it out.”

The trooper scoffed and laughed lightly. “Y’all ghost hunters or somethin’? Cause the owner doesn’t like that kind of stuff on her property.”

“No, officer,” Lacey took a deep breath as Scott shook his head, but she didn’t listen. “Four months ago,” Lacey explained. “I stopped here because we were

VACANCY

having that freak snowstorm and I swear this place was still up and running like any other hotel along the highway.”

Lacey laughed at her own stupidity when the officer didn’t respond. “I know it sounds crazy. I purchased the room from the owner, and when I went to get some ice a man tried to attack me—”

The officer held up his hand. “Ma’am, you don’t have to explain anymore. I’ve heard that story a dozen times ever since old Silas and Nancy were taken down.”

Lacey and Scott looked at each other with dropped mouths.

“Are you telling us the truth or pulling our leg?” Scott asked.

“No,” the officer removed his sunglasses, and Lacey was struck by the seriousness of his eyes and facial expressions. “Seems those two don’t want to rest in peace and now beyond the grave, they still search for victims.”

Lacey’s eyebrows lifted. “But, Nancy told me I was safe. She splashed white paint on me.”

Without a word, the officer walked past Lacey and Scott and stood in front of one of the doors to the rooms.

“Look closely.”

Scott and Lacey peered at one of the doors. Lacey gasped when she saw the “X” painted over the doors.

“I was fresh out of the academy when Nancy and Silas were claiming their victims,” the officer commented with a shake of his head. “Nancy would make Silas spare mostly women if she liked them.” The officer turned and smiled at

CHAPTER 9

Lacey. “Even beyond the grave, she liked you.”

A chill ran down Lacey’s spine. She couldn’t listen to more stories about Nancy and Silas Stillwell. She shook her head trying to forget the memories that came creeping back on her.

“Well, thank you, officer,” Lacey said. “We’re sorry for the trespass.”

The officer shrugged. “I’ll inform the owner it was harmless. Have a safe trip home.”

Lacey and Scott thanked the officer. Lacey was shaken by what the officer had told them, but it also gave her some peace knowing she hadn’t been going insane after all.

As they left Foxworth House, a thought occurred to Lacey.

“Thank God that cop was nice to us,” Lacey said. “We didn’t get his name though.”

Scott turned onto the highway and frowned. “You know, I don’t remember seeing a name tag for that state trooper.”

Lacey and Scott looked at each other in confusion but dismissed their thoughts as just adrenaline from their visit to Foxworth House and the officer showing up.

Chapter 10

The officer watched the nice couple drive away.

He turned back to Foxworth House and let his eyes drift to the second-floor window.

Two dark figures appeared. He smiled and tipped his hat at them.

“Never thought that would happen, Mama,” he said with a short laugh. “You marked her safe, so who am I to argue?”

The man then walked over to the barn. He unlocked the padlock and walked inside.

The stale hay smell hit him, but he preferred another smell.

He walked up the stairs and entered the loft and grinned.

In the corner, a woman was tied to a pole with a handkerchief stuffed in her mouth.

Her hair stuck out everywhere, and mascara ran down her face from crying.

Her eyes widened in terror when she saw the man come up from the stairs and tried to struggle out of her bonds.

CHAPTER 10

The man put up his hands in question. “What can I do? Mama marked her safe, but not you.”



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The Soul Healer

A Reverend's call for help. A demon hunter forced out of retirement. A dangerous dance with evil.

