

Chapter 1

It was raining that fateful night, as Diana and her husband Teddy were driving to Pennsylvania. They had left that early afternoon, but due to terrible weather conditions, it was taking much longer than expected. Teddy had also insisted on taking the scenic route, rather than taking the expressway. He was soon regretting his decision to do so, as their three kids started yelling and screaming from the backseat.

“We have to be getting to the Pennsylvania border soon,” Diana commented, trying to raise her voice above the commotion in the backseat. “We’ve been driving for what seems like forever.”

“Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere,” Teddy said, fumbling with a map. “I couldn’t see a damn thing through all this rain.”

“Look, it’s getting late. Maybe we should stop for the night,” Diana suggested. “Maybe the rain will let up by tomorrow.”

Suddenly, their two year-old son, Christopher, threw a stuffed animal at Teddy’s head. He laughed hysterically as it bounced to the floor.

“Yes, it’s definitely time to stop,” Teddy replied, irritably.

Diana looked out her window and saw an old sign off to the side of the road. A hanging tree branch was blocking the first few letters of the word, but the letters that could be read were: SYLVANIA. A large painted arrow pointed to the right below the name.

“Teddy, turn here,” Diana instructed. “That sign said Pennsylvania. This must be a turnoff of some sort.”

Tommy, their five year-old son, looked out at the sign, as a flash of lightning lit it up. He saw the tree branch fall away from the sign, revealing the name: Transylvania. He stared at it as they drove past it, seeing the letters as nothing but gibberish.

Teddy turned down the pitch black road, unable to see but two feet in front of the car. His black-rimmed glasses slid down his nose, and he quickly pushed them back up. He felt exhausted, but in a strange way, he seemed alert and focused.

The thunder roared, silencing the children for a split second.

A howl followed.

Sarah, their six year-old, asked, "What was that?"

"Just the wind," Teddy replied.

Sarah scooted away from the window, closer to Tommy.

The rain came down heavier, blinding Teddy's vision completely.

"Diana, I can't see a thing," Teddy said, sounding a little panicky. "I need to pull over."

Lightning flashed, and Diana could see that they stopped in front of a dark castle. There was a light coming from one of its windows. She squinted to look at it closer, amazed to see a castle out this way. She also noticed the road they were on ended at the castle.

"Teddy, did you see that?" Diana asked.

"What?" Teddy asked, rubbing his hands together to keep warm.

"We stopped in front a castle. This road goes nowhere," Diana said, a little confused.

"A castle, huh? Maybe it's an inn, and we could stay the night," Teddy suggested. "I'll pull up a little closer."

Teddy started the car again and drove up the road a little further so they were closer to the castle entrance. He then parked a final time, and removed the key from the ignition.

"I'm scared," Sarah said, looking out the window at the darkness.

Diana turned around and looked at her. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Now put your jacket on. You too, Tommy."

Teddy got out of the car and took Sarah's and Tommy's hand as they got out of the car. Diana got out of the car and opened the back

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door. She unhooked Christopher from his car seat, picked him up, and closed the back door. The family hurried up to the front porch, so they wouldn't get too drenched.

An old-fashioned lamp hanging by the front double-doors lit up.

"It's haunted," Sarah said, shaking.

"It's probably some sort of motion censor," Teddy said.

Diana saw a sign above the door that read: Eripmav.

"What an unusual word," she commented.

"It's probably the family name," Teddy told her.

Diana looked around and suddenly felt a little uneasy. Teddy noticed and smiled.

"I'm sure the inside will look better than the outside," he assured her.

"Yeah," Diana agreed. "Go ahead and knock, before we all freeze."

Teddy saw a large metal knocker on one of the doors. He knocked loudly, and it echoed.

"Nobody's home," Sarah said.

Just then, the front door slowly creaked open. A tall, handsome man came to the door. He looked elegant in an old-fashioned black suit, with a white shirt, black vest and jacket, and a long black satin cape with a deep red velvet trim. His hair was black, slicked back without a hair out of place. He held a lit candlestick.

"Good evening," the man said, his tone as pleasing as his appearance.

"We apologize for bothering you so late," Teddy said. "As you can see, the rain is blinding, and we need a place to stay for the night. Do you rent rooms?"

"Always for a lost soul," the man replied.

Teddy glanced over at Diana, a bit bewildered.

"I am Mr. Eripmav," the man introduced himself. "Please... come in."

"Thank you," Diana replied, intrigued by the man.

Teddy entered first, followed by Sarah, Tommy, and Diana. They found themselves in an ornate foyer, lit by a hanging chandelier. A

large, mahogany staircase stretched out in front of them, leading to the second floor. A pair of ornamental gargoyles sat on the end of the banisters. A few pieces of antique furniture decorated the rest of the foyer.

“You have a lovely home,” Diana commented, “and a very unique name.”

“It’s a family name,” Mr. Eripmav told them. “I come from a long line of...Eripmavs.”

Diana smiled politely.

“Your suit is unique too,” Teddy said, sounding a little rude. “Looks hundreds of years old.”

“I will show you to your room,” Mr. Eripmav said, ignoring Teddy’s comment. “Follow me.” He started up the stairs, and the family followed.

Suddenly, a loud, wicked cackle could be heard from upstairs.

“What was that?” Diana asked, nervously.

“That was just one of our guests,” Mr. Eripmav told them. “She gets a little slaphappy from time to time.”

“Oh, there are more guests here?” Diana asked, almost sounding relieved.

“Many,” Mr. Eripmav replied. “They’re sort of visiting indefinitely.”

Mr. Eripmav led them to a large wooden door. He took a large, metal key out of his pocket and unlocked it. He entered the room and lit a few lanterns hanging on the wall. The room was cold and dusty. Cobwebs hung in the corners. It looked like it hadn’t been inhabited in years.

“This is your room,” Mr. Eripmav told them. “There is a rope above the bed. If you need anything, pull it. Good night.”

“Oh, um, Mr. Eripmav, when should we pay?” Diana asked.

“In the morning,” Mr. Eripmav said, standing in the doorway. “Good night.”

He left and closed the door behind him.

Sarah and Tommy hovered close to Diana, frightened.

“Well, there isn’t much light, is there?” Teddy asked, going further into the room.

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“Not much heat, either,” Diana remarked, holding Christopher closer to her chest.

Teddy spotted a string hanging down in the middle of the room. He pulled it, and a light bulb came on above them. However, the light bulb was red and cast an eerie glow over their room.

“Wow, psychedelic,” Teddy said, chuckling a little.

“It would probably be warmer in the car,” Diana commented.

Suddenly, another howl was heard, only now it sounded right on top of them.

“That sounds awfully close,” Diana said, walking over to the window. “There’s a full moon tonight.”

“That’s when the weirdos come out,” Teddy teased.

“What?” Sarah asked, her little face distorted into a look of worry.

“Daddy’s just kidding,” Diana said, giving Teddy a look. “Anyway, even weirdos don’t howl at the moon.”

“I don’t know, Diana,” Teddy said. “Some do.”

“Why do you have to argue with everything I say?” Diana asked irritably.

“I only argue with you when you’re wrong,” he retorted.

“You’re on thin ice.”

“Let’s just go to sleep.”

“Fine,” Diana agreed. “You can sleep on the floor.”

“Are you insane?” Teddy snapped. “These floors are filthy.”

Diana looked over at the doorway and saw Mr. Eripmav standing there. She found it odd that she didn’t hear the door open, but that was soon masked by the embarrassment she felt that Teddy had criticized Mr. Eripmav’s home.

“Breakfast is at eight,” Mr. Eripmav reported. “That is all.”

“Mr. Eripmav,” Diana said, approaching him, “I hate to be an inconvenience, but is there any heat in the castle?”

“I don’t care for heat,” Mr. Eripmav told her. “Cold preserves the body, gets the blood flowing.”

“Oh, all right,” Diana said politely, but his words crept her out a bit.

Mr. Eripmav left the room and shut the door.

“Speaking of weirdos,” Teddy commented.

“Hush,” Diana scolded. “You’ve already insulted him by putting down his home.”

“I insulted him? How can you tell? Is the man capable of showing an expression?” Teddy remarked.

“I can’t believe how rude you’re being!” Diana snapped. “You are *definitely* sleeping on the floor.”

“You’re taking that freak’s side over mine?” Teddy asked, shocked.

“You can’t insult someone who is being hospitable,” Diana replied, disapprovingly.

“Oh, right, God forbid I insult Count Dracula out there!” Teddy yelled.

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on, Diana. Did you see his outfit? The cape? The man obviously has issues,” Teddy remarked.

“He just dresses elegantly. He probably was raised here, with a different lifestyle than most of us know. Maybe his family were immigrants with a different culture than ours. Really, Teddy, you don’t have to be quite so inconsiderate about things,” Diana scolded.

Teddy rolled his eyes.

Diana sat down on the bed and set Christopher down beside her. Sarah and Tommy climbed up on the high bed as well.

“Did you get the room key?” Diana asked.

“No, I must be too ‘inconsiderate’,” Teddy remarked.

Diana rolled her eyes and pulled on the rope above the bed.

A few minutes later, Mr. Eripmav entered the room. “Yes?”

“Hi,” Diana said, a fake smile upon her face. “I believe you forgot to give us our room key.”

“I didn’t forget,” he replied simply.

“What do you mean?” Diana asked, confused.

“There is only one key that operates all the doors in the castle. It’s the master key or...skeleton key. I keep it in a safe place, so guests can’t steal it. Your door does lock from the inside, so you’ll have your privacy,” Mr. Eripmav explained.

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“O...kay. Thank you,” Diana replied, uncomfortably.

Mr. Eripmav left the room once again.

Teddy raised an eyebrow at Diana. She looked at him.

“A skeleton key?” she asked. “I have to admit, Teddy, that does seem rather peculiar.”