NEFARIUM

Written by

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FADE IN:

INT. MANSION - STUDY - 1898 - NIGHT

A fire rages in a 19th century fireplace in a dark room bordered by bookshelves, a bar, fancy furniture, and numerous framed portraits.

CONRAD McALLISTER (50s) passes the fireplace on his way to a phonograph. He jots a few lines into his journal and tucks it into his jacket pocket.

On the phonograph, Conrad plays a dark, heart-pounding orchestration in the vein of “Morceaux De Fantasie, Op. 3: II. Prelude in C-Sharp Minor: Lento.” Clicks and pops resonate as the record begins to play.

Conrad picks up a crystal snifter of Cognac, takes a whiff, closes his eyes, and sips. He winces.

Conrad walks the length of his Victorian era study, passing each portrait hanging between bookshelves.

The portraits contain Elizabeth, a young frowning girl. In the first, she’s a baby, she’s three in the next, and six in the next. The last portrait shows Elizabeth at age eleven, flanked by her parents -- Conrad and his lovely wife, Katherine. The girl’s frown is more of a scowl in this one; she is pretty, but haunting.

Conrad touches the woman in the painting.

CONRAD
I’m sorry.

Conrad sobs and drinks.

A CHILD’S FOOTSTEPS CAN BE HEARD RUNNING ALONG THE FLOOR UPSTAIRS.

Conrad jumps; he’s startled, but not surprised.

Below the family portrait hangs an antique revolver, which Conrad acquires. He checks the chamber for bullets. Satisfied, he downs the drink, sets the snifter aside.

EXT. MANSION - 1898 - NIGHT

The 19th century mansion stands alone. The firelight emits from within, and the moonlight frames the house in the darkness. Another flame ignites from behind the glass near the front door.

INT. MANSION - GRAND FOYER - 1898 - NIGHT

Conrad, lantern in tow, walks into a beautiful grand foyer with a majestic staircase. He looks up to the landing. THE SOUND OF A DOOR SLAMS SHUT AND ECHOES THROUGH THE HOUSE.

Conrad creeps upstairs.

INT. MANSION - SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY - 1898 - NIGHT

Conrad heads down the hall to Elizabeth's room.

CONRAD
Elizabeth?

He opens the door.

INT. ELIZABETH'S ROOM - 1898 - NIGHT

THE RECORD ECHOES THROUGH THE HOUSE FROM THE STUDY.

Emotionless, Conrad shines the lantern around the room.

The room is colorful, designed like an early century carnival. Shelves on the walls create a spiral of dolls, each elegant and likely very expensive.

A well-worn doll that resembles Elizabeth sits on the floor next to a beautiful canopy bed. Conrad sits on the floor, places the doll to his forehead, and sobs. He sets it aside.

Conrad pulls out his revolver and sets it down beside him.

Conrad takes a pipe out of his velvet jacket and lights it with a match. A sudden breeze blows out the flame. Conrad tries again to the same effect.

Conrad catches something in his peripheral; it slowly waves the flames out. As he looks over his shoulder, he sees a grown woman's feet -- it's KATHERINE; she hangs from the ceiling, and her legs sway enough to fan the flames out.

Conrad falls back.

CONRAD
No... I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

Conrad's eyes dart to the bed, where a dark, shadowy figure in the shape of ELIZABETH (11) holds the doll. Conrad only gets a glimpse of her when his wife's body sways forward. After a couple of sways, the figure is gone.

Conrad aims the gun. A CREAK is heard behind him. Conrad's eyes drift up, and his head turns to see the shadowy Elizabeth figure behind him.

The Elizabeth doll sits at the edge of the bed now, as though she has the best seat in the house for a public execution.

A GUNSHOT rings out. Blood splatters across the doll's face.

CUT TO BLACK:

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - PRESENT TIME - DAY

A BON JOVI-LIKE 90S TUNE PLAYS AS A MAN, A WOMAN, AND A YOUNG GIRL SING ALONG.

The source of the music, a white SUV hauling a trailer, winds around mountainous roads in a plush West Virginia landscape.

The SUV speeds past a road sign that reads "Welcome to Devil's Fork, West Virginia".

JUSTINE (17) hangs her head from the rear passenger window. Her blonde hair whips in the wind and slaps against her squinty eyes and aloof frown. She wears a male's athletic letter jacket with the name "Kevin" on it. It's large on her.

INT. PRUITT'S SUV - DAY

Justine drags her head back in to watch her family, the Pruitts, rock out to the song. JOSEPH (mid 50s) thumb-drumbs the steering wheel and sings along while his wife, MARGOT (late 40s), sings backup beside him. MADISON (11) bounces in her seat beside Justine and head-bangs wildly.

MUSIC BECOMES RADIO STATIC. Madison and her parents groan.

JOSEPH
Oh, come on!

MARGOT
Really? Before my air guitar solo?

Justine rolls her eyes and laughs.

MADISON
Boooo!

JOSEPH
Welcome to life in the sticks. Dead spots everywhere.

JUSTINE
What did you expect? Moving us all the way out to the middle of butt fuck redneck cousin-fucker central!

Madison gasps.

Margot covers her eyes, embarrassed.

Joseph shoots Justine a disciplinary grimace in the rearview.

JOSEPH
Really, Justine? You know she's like a tape recorder.

JUSTINE
What's a tape recorder?

JOSEPH
Ha. Ha.

MADISON
And what's cousin-fucker central?

MARGOT
Madison!

Joseph gestures -- "see?"

JOSEPH
It's a phrase I don't want to hear from either of you for the rest of my life, okay, sweetie?
(to Margot)
You, either, honey.

Margot is careful not to let her kids see her laughing.

JOSEPH
She gets that sailor talk from you, you know that, right?

MARGOT
No idea what you're talking about.

Margot playfully flashes Joseph the double barrel middle fingers and mouths the words "mother fucker". She smiles and shoots a wink to Justine who catches the whole thing.

Justine smiles. Her eyes drift to her phone -- no bars.

JUSTINE
So, wait -- our cell phones aren't going to work, either? How am I supposed to talk to Kevin?

MARGOT
Oh no, you'll be forced to interact with your family. The horror!

Justine grunts.

JOSEPH
You'll live. It's just for the summer. And just you wait. You're going to love this house so much, you won't even want to leave by the time our new house is built.

MARGOT
He fed me that line, too. The jury's still out.

Margot smirks at Joseph.

JOSEPH
You're gonna love it, too. You may even thank Pam for letting us stay there.

MARGOT
Don't push it.

JOSEPH
Serious. It's huge. Plenty of places for Justine to brood.

Justine flashes a snarky smirk.

MADISON
Can I brood too?

MARGOT JOSEPH
No! No!

Joseph, Margot, and Madison chuckle.

EXT. MANSION - DAY

Joseph pulls the SUV onto a long dirt road that leads to a huge 19th century mansion sitting atop a massive plantation.

JOSEPH
(parking)
Welcome home.

Madison claps with excitement. She's the first to get unbuckled and race to the house.

Joseph hops out and heads to the trailer.

Margot and Justine get out and look at the property. Justine's eyes widen. Margot puts her arm around her.

MARGOT
Well? Whaddaya think?

JUSTINE
(coolly)
It's creepy. But, it's okay. I guess.

MARGOT
I guess.

The two head to the house.

Joseph opens the trailer and holds a handful of luggage.

JOSEPH
Hey, I could use a hand...

He sees he's alone.

JOSEPH
(sigh)
Typical.

He closes the trailer.

INT. MANSION - GRAND FOYER - DAY

Margot takes in every detail in the foyer as Madison excitedly races from room to room.

MARGOT
Maddie, slow down.

MADISON
This is so cool! Justine, look at these stairs.

Justine pops out of the kitchen.

JUSTINE
They're just stairs, goober.

MADISON
Where’s my new bedroom?

MARGOT
Probably upstairs. You can decide who gets what, but no fighting or --

The girls nudge each other as they race up the staircase.

JUSTINE
I call first pick.

MADISON
I want first pick!

MARGOT
-- or I’ll make you share a room!

Margot is alone. She sighs and wanders deeper into the house.

INT. MANSION - SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY - DAY

Justine and Madison split up and fling various doors open to reveal a closet, a dance room, and a restroom.

The girls laugh and wrestle each other to the first bedroom door. Justine has Madison in a headlock and opens the door with her free hand. The girls stumble in.

INT. ELIZABETH'S ROOM - DAY

Victorian style children's furniture and a beautiful canopy bed. Not much has changed, including the spiral of shelves and dust-covered dolls.

Justine releases Madison as they enter.

MADISON
Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god! Dibs on this one! It’s all me!

Madison hops onto the bed and jumps up and down. Justine rolls her eyes.

JUSTINE
It sure is.

MADISON
Look at this bed! It’s like a princess bed!

JUSTINE
It's called a canopy bed and it's not really my style. Have at it.

MADISON
Sweet.

Justine’s eyes drift to a stain on the floor. It’s dark, but you wouldn’t know it was blood just by looking at it...

Justine heads out.

Madison hops off the bed and heads to the shelves of dolls. She gasps in wonder and scans them from left to right. She sees one vacant spot raises a curious eyebrow.

INT. JUSTINE’S BEDROOM - DAY

Plain and simple room with Victorian style furniture. The window is open.

Justine enters. Her eyes are immediately drawn to the vanity mirror. She checks out her reflection.

JUSTINE
I guess this will do.

Justine opens the top drawer of the vanity and sees a small black and white photo of Conrad, Katherine, and Elizabeth holding a frowning doll. She reaches for the photo...

A small bird flies into the room and suicide dives into the hardwood floor.

Justine jumps and turns to see the corpse. A breeze runs through her hair. She looks up to see the curtains flapping over the open window.

JUSTINE
What the fu...

Justine nudges the bird with her shoe. Definitely dead.

A shadow in the shape of Elizabeth passes in front of the second floor window, causing Justine to gasp and look toward it. Nothing is there.

INT. STUDY - DAY

Joseph escorts Margot inside. He sets a large box down near the couch and gestures to the room.

It’s similar to its original appearance, but with some added wall outlets and a newer record player.

JOSEPH
And this is the library. Or study. Or, your new office?

Margot sees an antique typewriter on a desk in the corner.

MARGOT
Wow. So much cozier than our balcony in D.C.

JOSEPH
Come on, give it a chance. You’re going to be spoiled in the new house -- even the toilets have USB ports. And, who knows? This environment could be a great inspiration for your book.

MARGOT
I’m not writing Dracula, honey.

Margot sees the record player and plays it.

JOSEPH
Oh, classical. Dig that.

MARGOT
I mean, it’s no Bon Jovi.

JOSEPH
You have no appreciation for the classics.

MARGOT
I appreciate you, don’t I?

They exchange goofy, sarcastic grins, embrace, and kiss.

JUSTINE (O.S.)
Dad!

MARGOT
Her Highness beckons.

JOSEPH
To be continued.

Joseph turns to exit. Margo slaps his butt.

JOSEPH
(in the hallway)
On my way your Majesty!

Margot laughs and heads out to the hallway.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Margot pulls a coffee cup out of a box and takes it to the sink. She turns on the faucet. The water hisses out and the faucet shakes violently.

Margot hurries to turn off the faucet. She stares dumbfounded for a moment, then hesitantly turns it back on again. After a few seconds the faucet rumbles and spews a thick neon yellow fluid. Margot shuts off the faucet and jumps back.

MARGOT
Joe! We're gonna need a plumber!

EXT. MANSION - BACKYARD - DAY

Joseph turns the corner with Justine’s dead bird dangling from his hankie. Justine and Madison follow close behind.

MADISON
Can I see it?

JOSEPH
No, you can’t see it.

JUSTINE
It’s just a dead bird.

MADISON
What kind of bird?

JOSEPH
I think it’s a can...

The three of them stop dead in their tracks, agape.

The lawn is full of dead birds, mostly yellow canaries.

ETHAN (O.S.)
Canary.

Joseph and the girls spin to see, ETHAN, 80's, dressed in farm clothes and overalls, behind them.

JOSEPH
Yeah. We apparently have a yard full of them.

MADISON
What happened to them, daddy?

JOSEPH
I’m not sure, sweetie. Maybe our new friend can tell us.

ETHAN
Ethan. I live next door.

JOSEPH
Joseph Pruitt. These are my daughters Justine and Madison.

MADISON
Some people call me Maddie.

Ethan’s lips curl into a cordial smile for Maddie.

ETHAN
(to Joseph)
You’re not the new neighbor.

JOSEPH
Uh, no. That would be my sister, Pam. She’s turning the mansion into a bed and breakfast. We’re just staying until our new house is built in the city. Probably going to make a few improvements while we’re here.

Another bird drops.

JUSTINE
Seriously, what’s up with that?

ETHAN
We have a lot of those little buggers around here. It's not uncommon for them to fly into a house or a window.

MADISON
There’s so many.

ETHAN
When the mines closed, the miners set the canaries free. Over time, they multiplied.

MADISON
Why do miners have so many birds?

JOSEPH
They used to use canaries to detect dangerous gases in the mines. If the canaries died in their cages, the miners knew it wasn't safe.

ETHAN
Canaries can live up to fifteen years old. Sometimes twenty. I figure years of mining these lands weakened the birds over time.

JOSEPH
Broke down generationally you mean?

ETHAN
Stranger things have happened. So you know a thing or two about mining. History buff?

JOSEPH
I build houses. Kind of a family business. I guess you could say this isn’t my first mining town. But I’ve never seen anything like this. Should we be concerned about living here?

ETHAN
I’ve lived on this land my whole life, and aside from my high blood pressure and aggressive bladder, I’m as healthy as the come.

Ethan coughs as though he may have black coal poisoning.

Joseph and Justine smile awkwardly.

ETHAN
(turning to leave)
Well, I’ll leave you to it.

JOSEPH
Oh, hey -- Ethan. We are planning to barbecue this weekend. You and your family are welcome to join us.

ETHAN
No family. It’s just me. Wife and kids... wasn’t in the cards for me.

JUSTINE
Any cousins?

Joseph clenches his jaw, tries not to glare at her.

ETHAN
No.

JOSEPH
Well, I hope you can stop by.

ETHAN
(tipping his hat)
Evening.

Ethan departs.

JOSEPH
Really, Justine?

She shrugs with a proud smirk.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Margot wipes a table. Joseph carries a big box in.

JOSEPH
Who knew we had this much shit? Did you buy more after we moved out?

MARGOT
Obviously. The whole reason I quit my job is so that I'd have more time to shop.

JOSEPH
I knew it.

MARGOT
Hey, come look at this.

Margot leads Joseph to the sink. She runs the water. It comes out clear and normal.

JOSEPH
What?

MARGOT
Give it a second.

Nothing changes.

JOSEPH
... Okay...

MARGOT
Gotta be fucking kidding me.

JOSEPH
What?

MARGOT
It was coming out yellow earlier. Like a thick stream of artificial popcorn butter.

JOSEPH
Uh-huh.

MARGOT
I'm serious! It was disgusting!

JOSEPH
Well, it could've been worse. You could have had to shovel two dozen bird corpses into the trash can.

MARGOT
What?

JOSEPH
Nothing. The lines haven't been run for a while. You probably cleared the pipes already.

Joseph's cell phone rings. He answers.

JOSEPH
(on the phone)
Hello?

Margot turns the faucet off, and then on again. She runs her fingers through the water with a confused face.

JOSEPH
(on the phone)
Pam? I can barely hear you. The signal sucks... Uh-huh. Sure. When?

Margot shakes her head and turns off the water. Water drops continue to drip from the faucet.

JOSEPH
(on the phone)
Okay. We'll see you then.

Margot overhears this and scowls.

MARGOT
(to herself)
Oh, hell no.

JOSEPH
(on the phone)
Pam?

Joseph hangs up.

JOSEPH
Lost her.

MARGOT
What was that? She's coming here?

JOSEPH
Yeah, there are some changes to the blueprints or something -- I couldn't really hear her.

Joseph tries to embrace Margot, who pulls away.

MARGOT
You said we wouldn't see her while we were here.

JOSEPH
I know, babe. It'll just be for a few days. So, behave.

MARGOT
You know she judges me for quitting my job, right? Your mom told me. Pam thinks it's silly and irresponsible for me to try to write a book while you take on all of our financial obligations.

JOSEPH
Well, she never said any of that to me. And, even if she had, it's not true. You're talented, you're going to write a great book, and once you sell it, I'll quit my job and you can be my sugar mama.

Joseph wraps his arms around Margot and kisses her neck.

MARGOT
Pfft. In your dreams, mister. I'll make you get two jobs.