**Midnight**

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**Midnight Ch. 03: PROPERTY**

"You are going to be late for work Child."

"I will be on time Mother. I am always early." Midnight Amador softly spoke, her voice never rising up out of disrespect. She had been sewing up the sheer white curtains all night trying her best to make her makeshift dress for her meeting with the mysterious Man in Black. Not wanting her Mother to question her Midnight merely smiled and stood to close her bedroom door. "I must change." It was nearing her shift at the seaside diner named Coastal Waiters. Yet, she had final touches to make on the dress without interference. Her Mother feeling left out after being the one to show Midnight how to sew in the first place lightly knocked on the now closed door with chipped paint. An older home it certainly needed help. Quite a lot of help actually. The term shit hole came to mind.

"What are you sewing Midnight?" There it was, the questions.

"A costume Mother." Midnight resumed her station at the ages old sewing machine on her once used school desk. She hated lying but knew very well that her Mother would object to any men in her life that was not from the Rez, yet, she herself had married a man not of Santee ancestry. Her Father rarely home drank too much and worked long hours to keep his family fed and clothed. Now that Midnight was grown, he seemed to prefer being gone more than at home. Tension evident but unspoken of. In her heart Midnight knew there was more to the story.

"A costume for what? You are too old for costumes. It is June not October."

"Veronica is in a play at the theater in Sunrise Bay. The costume is for her character, a fairy in A Midsummer Night's Dream." Oh, Midnight was good. Her Mother was no reader, nor even a TV watcher so the play, nor Shakespeare meant nothing to her. Whatever threw her Mother off was to Midnight's advantage.

"You are a good friend to take time to help her. Do you need my assistance while you are at work?"

"No Mother, it is done." Five more minutes the task was going to be as good as it gets. While not perfect it was sheer as the Man in Black instructed. Even with a cute hood attached for dramatic flair. She truly hoped it was not too much. Stripping out of her clothing she adopted the dress just to see her body beneath it. It was so soft as if gossamer, in the breeze it would feel wonderful. Nipples cresting at the thought of being seen in such a manner only made her smile that much more vivid. Twisting in step to check out her cute butt she lightly caressed it over the material. Was she mad? Mad, to even meet this stranger all alone? The mystery of the tattooed man so calmly directing her yesterday from his booth made her take notice. It was as if a mental tug to her hair drew her to his aura. Being toyed with by the three fishermen although humiliating to most Midnight found it thrilling.

Ever since she was raped at 16 by an unknown man, she was fascinated by the force of sex even as she lost her virginity. Left lying in the weeds bloody and naked, her clothing shredded she processed her ordeal in ways most women would not. To most victims they would be scarred for life, perhaps she was as well, yet her scar was a rite of passage. Keeping the rape to herself possibly protecting he who took her was a departure from her boring simple life. The thrill of going back out into the world after the event fueled her desires. Awkward though she was Midnight never allowed herself to appear undesirable. Yet, no one tried to even date her, she chalked that up to her cross-breed DNA. The Santee did not like those outside their tribe. The other side of the fence was slightly different but her exposure to the flipside was still new. Obviously, she was being noticed or the three fishermen would not have taunted her so. The diner being her first job mere weeks after graduating high school was like a rose opening up in full bloom. Midnight was free to see what the world had to offer.

Changing quickly into her waitress uniform she chose to omit her underwear, in a challenge to herself to adopt what the Man in Black seemed to want. Freedom even in that simple request gave her goosebumps. Heart racing, she packed up her sheer dress into a hand bag and slipped her shoes on. Opening her bedroom door, she stepped into the kitchen and kissed her Mother on the cheek as she prepared lunch for herself. "I will be late due to meeting Veronica over her dress. The sewing machine will be put back when I return. I love you Mother."

"I love you too Daughter." Irene seemed to sense something but could not put her finger on it. "Bring home leftovers. Lobster cakes."

"If I can." Out the door she went, she had ten minutes to catch the Rez Rider bus into town. The joy of sunshine on her face gave her reason to live. In such light she thought of him. The darkness in her way, her shadow on the ground even seemed wrong in standing in, as if stepping on toes that she knew would get her in trouble. Was it possible that Midnight, her own name belonged to him? Belonged? The word made her tremble. She barely made her bus for her daydreaming.

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"Mister Sanchez?"

Nick looked up from his journal of thought, ideas, and artistic prowess. Seated outside the diner instead of going in he opted to wait on his guest by sitting in his buddies' truck, borrowed like the beach house he was residing in until settling. To his left outside the Driver's door stood a lovely if not awkward looking woman in a business suit of pale yellow and a white button down blouse, crucifix about her neck. To anyone other than Nick she was a Latin version of actress Mayim Bialik, glasses and all, even with her physical build. To him she was just a Realtor.

"Tilly Cooper?"

"Yes. Welcome to Caretaker." She extends a hand of friendship, he accepting it hesitantly, "Thank you for allowing me to be of assist in your home search. Would you like to go inside the diner for coffee and I can show you a few properties online, once I understand what it is you are looking for."

"Rather not. Hop in." He pats the door to the White 4Runner.

"It's rather warm out."

"Sweat makes money."

"I see." She hesitantly smiled. "I hope I can tap into the WIFI outside."

"Know every home on the market by heart?"

"For the most part."

"Then, let's go for a ride. I'm buying you for the day. Cancel any other appointments."

"You are my only appointment." She sighs, "If you insist." Stepping around the 4Runner she opens the truck door and climbs in, locating her seatbelt after sitting her laptop case on the floorboard at her feet. Once settled she watches Nick turn the ignition then back out of the parking spot. Reaching the exit on to the main road he stops to look both ways idling.

"Which direction is the best most secluded property?"

"The best is quite expensive, a sizeable eight acre inland island with a wooden bridge to reach it, docks on the cove for small fare. Swampland bordering it on two sides, ocean beach on the far end. Oh, and a very small two acre island just off shore within a kayaks trip to reach it. "

He puckers at the options, it sounded good, "How much?"

"I believe the latest drop in price is 2.2 million. I'm sure it's out of your..."

"Right or left?"

"Left." Her breath seemed to be taken away, "Oh my!" She grew thrilled by the possibility he might have money. With all of his tats and a beat-up truck she presumed that he might be middle class. Then it dawned on her that this man might be some fugitive or drug runner.

"Nothing illegal." He reacted to her hesitance as he turns left on to the coastal road.

"Pardon?"

"You're questioning my wealth. Nothing illegal. I earned every penny."

"I... hope my thoughts did not insult you Mister Sanchez."

"It did, but I'm over it." He smirks slightly. "Military if it settles your heartrate."

"Still?"

"No. I got out while the getting was good. Things I wanted out of life didn't fit with my career choice. Pilot by the way. Among...other things."

"I see. Excuse me if you find my reactions inquisitive."

"Trust comes. You're in a truck with a man you've never met who's taking you out into the middle of nowhere. I could be a killer for all you know."

"A-are you?" She grew leery.

He ignored her, letting her form her own opinion. "Tell anyone you're with me?"

"My husband knows. He and I own Santee Charms Realty. It used to be Cooper Realty, but my husband got tired of people mocking us. His name is Sheldon Cooper, like the TV show Big Bang Theory. Bad enough I look like Amy Farrah Fowler." She rolled her eyes and lifted her glasses up at the nose.

"No clue! Not a TV person."

"Good! A gal can only take so much ridicule."

"Depends on her soul."

"I'm not sure what you mean." She peers at the road and see's the Santee Bus at a stop, "There's my niece Midnight." Tilly points, "Would it be too much to ask if you could give her a ride the remainder of the way to the diner she works at? Seeing as she introduced us of sorts."

"Time is money. You want money?"

"Well, yes."

"She can walk." His stern attitude made Tilly bite her lip and pity this man for his arrogance.

"I... understand."

"You don't! How far out is this place?"

"Five miles further, another mile toward the beach."

"Caretaker address?"

"Harbinger Shoals has its own address."

"Interesting name."

"It used to be a reclusive plantation without the fields, more a hideaway from society I've heard. Once you see the home you will understand. Cyprus trees are beautiful out there. You will need to be aware of alligators."

"No, they need to be aware of me." He ego was almost exhilarating even to her.

"I believe it's safe to say you're quite capable of handling yourself." No response she knew she was correct in her assumption, "The road is coming up. There's a gate blocking it we'll need to open to gain access. It's been a few years since even I have been out here. I hope you don't mind a pet project I'm certain age has left it...shabby? In need of repair."

"If I like it, I'll hire locals to remodel."

"Bless you. The job market down here is stagnant. Try being a Realtor even. May I ask what brings you down here?"

"Isolation. Room to breathe. Therapy I suppose."

"Plenty of that. I hope the local teenagers haven't put roots up here. It being off the grid as they say."

"Won't be there long if they are. No trespassing shot on sight rule."

"Goodness! Wouldn't a few guard dogs be sufficient?"

"Not a pet lover."

"They make great company."

"I have company in mind."

"Oh? A future Mrs. Sanchez?"

"Not even close."

"There on your left, the gate. It's over grown almost. Oh, snakes might be a problem as well."

"I'll survive." He pulls over next to the gate, "Stay put." Getting out he first examines a rotted mailbox post on the side of the entryway, finding it needing replaced, the box itself beaten in with a ball bat most likely. From there he pulls a few weeds obstructing the rusty gates movement, then puts his back into it, hearing the hinges squeak with a piercing echo. Tilly held her ears and awaited his return. Once opened Nick crawled back in behind the wheel. "WD40!" He winked at her for the first time seeming less threatening. "You can relax Tilly I'm not the enemy. Not to you at least." She shivered just hearing that, still uncertain if being here was in her best interest. Pulling through the gate he drove through the weeds slowly, the gravel path overgrown as well. "Who owned the place last?"

"I believe it was Burle McBride! Back in 1997. It's been vacant since. His estate went into foreclosure so the Bank owns it. I imagine the deed needs dusted off."

"No offers?"

"Too much effort in getting the island cleared and the home remodeled. Someone did try but lost interest and it went right back into foreclosure. That was in 2012. One good thing is they put a new roof on it before giving up."

"That's a plus." Approaching the wooden bridge, he paused in crossing it. With Cyprus trees dangling over the entrance he fidgeted, "Bridge stable for travel?"

"To be honest? I think we should walk from here."

"In those heels?" He leered at her feet.

"Do I have much choice?"

"You do." He opens a palm toward her, "Key?"

"It's unlocked. Nobody ventures out here."

"Save those teenagers throwing keg parties?"

"Good point. Just break any lock that might have been added. If you can afford the place you can buy a cheap door knob."

"I like your style." He winces, "Stay in the truck I don't want a missing person's report to fill out if a gator gets you."

"Likewise! Please be careful."

"Jungles of Colombia, this is Sunday drive compared to down there." He gets out, "Cell service out here?" She lifts her cell and checks, "Very low signal, fingers crossed." Nodding he climbs out and looks in the trunk of the 4Runner finding a large toolbox. In it he discovered a hammer and behind the box a sheathed machete. Showing it to Tilly who glared back at him she bulged her eyes. "Piss outside, not in the vehicle. I'll be back." He slammed the hatchback down and proceeded past the 4Runner and into the thicket, using the machete to carve a path to at least see the bridge enough to cross. Without looking back, he disappeared leaving Tilly to fret for his safety and her own. The man was obviously...tainted in the head.

Stepping in short strides on the bridge for weakness he found it sturdy enough for foot travel, but hardly for any vehicles of weight. Regardless, each step over the fifty-foot expanse was taken slowly, sunlight piercing the trees offering a reasonable visibility considering the density of foliage. Seeing an eight foot gator swimming in the swampy marsh surrounding the bridge he sighed, "Afternoon Amigo! Don't mind me I might be the new owner. Best get along or you lose your happy home the hard way. I could use a new pair of boots."

Moving on at its less than threatening mood he followed the path toward the property. Trees less thick around the mainland he finally located a massive old Three-story mansion, the third story obviously an attic but with a sizeable deck off of it. Windows everywhere were broken out. Beer cans slung in the weeds proved Tilly correct in the teenage party planner assumption.

"Big place." He sighs thinking why worry about locks with all the windows out, "Suits me well so I can expand. Barn out back doesn't appear to terribly rotted away." He peers around without taking a step. Sizing up the estate from a visual standpoint he formed an opinion that this property had potential. "Works cut out for me but I'm up to the challenge. Let's see the interior. If the floors aren't caved in this could be home sweet hellhole." Steps creaky, porch not much better, he noted a porch swing dangling lopsided from a weakened hook up above on the awning. He knew immediately what he would put up in its place. With the front door splintered already he had no need to use his hammer to gain entry. Kicking the door wide he heard the chatter of a raccoon, and birds seeking refuge. "Roommates to be dealt with later."

A dining room with a busted table and chairs were in the formal dining room. Pretty easy to tell the table had been fucked on a dozen times or two. Stains everywhere, also knife carvings in the wood. "Kylie loves Jake. That's not incriminating." Moving on to the kitchen the appliances were all missing. "I guess someone needed them more than the raccoons. Bet those thieves wore masks too." Nick did have a sense of humor he just didn't show it often.

Pantry empty, laundry room as vacant as the kitchen, he found the back porch overgrown but also sturdy, nothing a few nails couldn't silent. A tool shed barely seen looked decent as far as he could tell without close inspection. Hearing the hisses of snakes, he chose to head back inside. At least the back door was on its hinges.

A den off of the living room offered him ideas, "Trophy room! Few heads on the wall, some pelts, paint...a brooding throne." He chuckled faintly with nobody to hear him, unless that coon was nearby, if so, he might be the first trophy to grace the wall. From there he found a staircase going into the basement. With so little light he found it safer to wait. Closing the door, he grumbled then reopened it. Having second thoughts his curiosity got the best of him. He did need to inspect the foundation.

Listening closely for any hissing he felt it clear enough to go all the way down. Small egress windows let in a minor ray of light, just enough to share in its openness. Other than shelving with paint cans, and canning jars the place was fairly empty. Then something caught his eye. In the concrete slab below there was a trap door made of wood. A rope handle attached to it gripped, he took the chance and discovered it to be just an old box room with a dirt floor, possibly for prisoners in the slavery days. Shelter beneath the builders notice he presumed. "That might come in handy to stash a body." He laughed recalling Tilly Cooper's fears. Truth be known Nick knew his share of dead bodies. While not a murderer by choice he had often dispersed justice the old-fashioned way. Story for another day.

Studying the walls further he realized the shelves had rooms behind them, not the best hidden but obviously a hiding place at some point. "Liking this more and more. I'll check behind the others another time." Seeing enough he headed back upstairs and closed the basement off. "Bet that was the furnace room down behind those shelves, I'm not seeing one up here." It made sense he just didn't follow the ducts.

At the staircase going upstairs he found the bannister weak from obvious weight displacement during some party. Cigarette butts on the floor he scowled, "Lucky they didn't burn the place down." Ignoring the butts, he moved up each step for wear, all seemed tight with minor creaks. At the top of the stairs he discovered a hallway and five large bedrooms. All empty save for left behind blankets on the floor. Sex most likely. Light fixtures the only real damage in the master bedroom, wallpaper shredded in two others. Spray painted words on the wall saying "Fuck the White Man!" bothered him. While Latin he was not racist. It was likely kids from the Rez venting their frustrations. Of course, with the deep South having had its share of slaves it could be the black community. His opinion they would be in their right.

Attic door located he headed up, more steps quieter than expected. At the top he found a few items cloaked in dirty dingy bed linen, an old wooden harp with broken strings caught him off guard. Evidently someone used to have talent. "Wonder why it was abandoned? Could be therapeutic maybe I'll fix it up once I get this place gutted where it's needed. I like the space up here."

Hearing chatter again Nick turns toward the balcony doors and finds one door with a broken glass pane at the bottom. Investigating it closely he spots scat on the floor. "So, this is where you're getting in. Have your fun now Bandito, you and I will cross paths." Stepping away he concluded the home had its merits.

Leaving the mansion, he inspected the porch pillars then prowled the yard. Finding a large stone fountain with water stagnant in it surrounding a decapitated statue of a fisherman he sighed, "Lost at sea even in the shallows. Might try my hand at building you a new head Ahab." Passing by bushes a patch of birds startled him by taking flight. He shook his head at them and proceeded to the overgrown barn, using his machete to clear enough away to reach its door. Opening it, more birds scattered through a hay loft opening. In the barn was a rusted 1963 Jeep Gladiator pale blue paintjob, what was left of it. Missing tires and wheels it was just a shell. He figured the motor was missing as well. "Projects everywhere."

Eying the loft he presumed more critters were in hiding so steered clear of the wooden ladder going up. No footsteps at least. Hearing the waves of the ocean in the distance he vacated the barn with thoughts on its use as more than a garage. He had plenty of room to build out here once it was groomed. A lengthy stone path leading to the island's cove was clearer than expected, likely due to kids going swimming on the property. Finding it cluttered in garbage he grumbled until he spotted the dock. "Now that's a decent dock. There's room for a nice sailboat and maybe even a seaplane if I can avoid the rocks. I could have my Cessna's landing gear ripped out and replaced with pontoons. Nice!" Fresh air coming in from the cove he discovered why the place was called Shoals. One side of the cove was a rock infested patch of water leading out to a tiny islet. Strangely he even noticed a hammock strewn between two tree trunks. "Interesting getaway."

Deciding he had seen enough he headed back for the bridge. He had been gone a good forty minutes. Tilly was probably worried he might have been eaten by a gator. On the way back just before reaching the bridge he heard a close proximity hiss that made him freeze in step. Just beneath shrubbery sat a coiled multicolored Coral snake ready to strike, if he moved he was going to be bitten. "Ready to dance Rainbeau?" He grit his teeth carefully dropping his hammer so that the snake followed its fall. Once wavering Nick slashed down with the machete and took its head off. Watching the body whip about headless he waited until it died before picking up both the hammer and the snake's body. Taking it with him across the bridge he stepped from the foliage to see Tilly nervously sitting there waiting. Spotting Nick she pepped up and looked in awe. Catching her off guard he threw the snake's body on the hood of the 4Runner making her scream then laugh over it. Tossing his tools in the hatchback he closed up shop, opening the drivers door to hop in.

"You scared the life out of me."

"Guess I am a murderer." He nodded at the serpent on the hood.

"Did you like the place?"

"Tell the bank 1.8, it's been setting empty too long. Take it or leave it."

"I'll make a call to Lowell at the bank when I get a signal." She brightened up, "I'm glad you're safe Mister Sanchez."

"Nick! I'll drop you at the diner. You can make the offer. If they agree I'll write a cashier's check tomorrow morning. Deed in hand by noon or no deal."

"I'll do my best."

"Succeed!" He glared making her uneasy. Nodding she remained silent all the way back to Coastal Waiter's. Pulling up in front of the windows Tilly grabbed her things and shook his hand. Prepared to get out Nick stopped her, "Hold up!" Pausing she watched him remove his wallet and hand her two hundred dollar bills. "Your retainer and your patience out there.."

"Thank you, Nick."

"You going inside?" He spots Midnight waiting a table but drawn to seeing he and her Aunt just outside the window. Two men sitting at her booth went unnoticed.

"Yes! I need a cup of coffee while I'm on the phone. I'll also thank my niece for sending you my way."

"Give her this." He procured another hundred, "This bill is hers. Understood?"

"I'll deliver it myself. I'm sure she will be grateful. Forgive me but I really do need to go pee." She left the vehicle and noticed the snake's body still on the hood. Fearing it even in death she stepped away cautiously. Remaining there, Nick dug under his seat for his journal and began writing in it. He waited to see Tilly enter the diner and step over to Midnight. Handing her his money, Tilly pointed at Nick before departing to the little girls' room. Midnight paused her dining gents to peer at the money, unfolding it to see writing. It read, "TITS NOW!"

Eyes flaring, she sat her order pad on their table and immediately unbuttoned her dress down to her waist, peeling the sides away she bore both tits proudly. Her seated gentlemen admiring them with a watered pallet. Nodding at her he tapped his watch then pointed toward the ocean. She understood and smiled. Curious to see if she would put them away, he sat there another two minutes. Finally, he pointed at the men and used hand gestures to inform her the men needed a delicacy not included in the diner's menu. Uncertain how best to offer them a sample she just took one of their hand's each and brought them up to cup her breasts. No resistance what so ever. One final nod Nick backed out and left her to the wolves.

Inside the two men playfully fluffed them and struck up conversation. "I like the service here." One told the other. "Was that your man out there in the truck?"

"I... don't know." A tight pinch to her nipple by the second man she shivered, "What can I get you?" The interest waned and Midnight found herself forced to button up. Hearing her Aunt returning to order coffee from the waitress at the counter she had no choice. Thankfully the two men did not make a scene. Order taken Midnight turned it in and began making drinks. Sitting at the counter Tilly held off on her phone call long enough to tell her niece what she thought.

"A dangerous man I think."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you not see the snake on the hood?"

"No." Midnight dropped her jaw pausing in pouring tea into a glass. She overlooked the snake in seeking his approval.

"With a machete. It had no head. He's a soldier I believe. Oh, wait a pilot he said. Still, I think I would be wary of him should he become a customer more often."

"He was...nice to me."

"Well...he is rich. He's buying the Harbinger Shoal's property. 1.8 million if Lowell at the bank approves it. Mister Sanchez has his work cut out for him. I'll give you a little of my commission money for sending Nick my way. Thank you, Sweetie."

"You don't have to. You just gave me his money."

"I want to. You deserve a bit of happiness."

"Do I?" She fidgeted then took the drinks out to her booth buddies. Pondering her worth she turned to see Tilly now on her cell doing business. Her back to the men she was still at arm's length. Tugging her apron string the man with the tea glass asked, "Can I get a wedge of lemon?" Not even understanding why she lifted the back of her skirt and showed them her ass. Hearing the man mumble, "Now there's a wedge that make's a guy pucker his lips." He dared to reach out and lightly caress her cheek. With a pinch he ended his tour and behaved.

"Thank you." She turned and smiled.

"Worth a nice big tip Young Lady." The man added with a wink.

Maybe she was worth something in the end.

Still not convinced.