

Chapter 22

When Desmond, Cierra, and Bob came back into the station a few minutes later I was under control. I greeted them with a small smile and Desmond related to me his version of events. They had indeed been at his house playing video games, just like I'd thought. And then around midnight they'd gotten bored and, after checking to make sure his grandparents were asleep and his mom still at the hospital, they'd gone cruising in his grandparents' car, just as I thought might have happened.

They'd had no intention of going to the party. The boys knew about it, of course - the whole school knew about it - but as I'd told Bob earlier, Desmond and Miles never felt comfortable at school parties because they always felt out of place. They knew they stuck out and if anything bad happened, they knew they'd be blamed, which according to Desmond is exactly how things went down.

"We weren't going to go, I swear," Desmond reiterated. "We were driving down Delmar, checking out Milano's and Puzzle's. It was kind of quiet, actually, for a Saturday. Everyone was at that party." Desmond shrugged like I knew what he was talking about, and I nodded. "When Miles' phone rang, we thought it was you, to be honest."

It should have been me, I thought.

“But it was Sarah.” Desmond shook his head, as if still in disbelief. “It didn’t make sense that she was calling. You know, ‘cause they have history and all.” Desmond looked embarrassed, like maybe he’d said too much.

“Yes, I know. Miles asked her to homecoming and she turned him down.”

Desmond nodded, and then continued. “I didn’t hear what she said. We were rocking some XXXtentacion, but Miles looked upset when he got off the phone. He told me to turn around and go to the party.”

“But why?” I asked.

Desmond shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t ask. My boy tells me to go somewhere, we go.”

Desmond made it sound like Miles called all the shots, when in my mind, it was usually Desmond that was in charge. I shifted my weight on my feet. “You didn’t press him?”

Desmond shook his head and held up empty hands. “I just turned around and we headed to the party. Like I said, the music was too loud to do much talking anyway. I knew where to go – everyone at school had been talking about the party for days – and it didn’t take us long to get there. The only problem was that when we did, there was nowhere to park.” Desmond looked over at his mom and she returned a steady stare. “I told Miles we should just leave, but he said we couldn’t. He said we *had* to go in.”

I felt myself getting angry at Desmond for blindly driving to this party and not asking Miles any questions about why they were going. I couldn’t understand why he hadn’t argued his best friend out of it. What had Sarah possibly said to make Miles want to go at all?

“Miles got out while I looked for a spot. He said he couldn’t wait. He said it was important.” Desmond shook his head, as if he still didn’t understand. “That was our first mistake – splitting up. I knew it was wrong at the time, and I didn’t want to do it, I swear Mrs. Z, but there was nowhere to park and Miles insisted.” Desmond took a breath and his mom reached over and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I couldn’t just leave gramps’ car anywhere.”

Desmond was looking for absolution from me, for some sort of forgiveness, and I had to dig deep to give it. I nodded and Desmond continued.

“Miles went in without me. I don’t know much about what happened after that. I eventually found a place to leave the car and went in after him, but I’d lost him by then. The party was insane. People everywhere. It wasn’t just our high school either, there were dudes there I’d never seen before. When I got past the front door I spotted Miles, but he was already headed up the stairs. I called to him, but he couldn’t hear me. He went on without me.” As he said this Desmond’s voice, surprisingly, broke.

“It’s ok,” Cierra said to her son.

“Why didn’t you go after him?”

“I couldn’t. That’s what I’m telling you. It was crazy in there. I knew it would be better to just wait by the door. That way when Miles was ready to leave I’d be there – he wouldn’t have to search to find me. So I stood just inside the house – easy pickings for when the police showed up – and hoped Miles would come back soon.”

“How’d you get arrested on a drug charge?” I asked, accusation involuntarily tinging my voice.

Desmond rolled his eyes. “It happened so fast. Someone called the cops and when everyone realized they’d shown up, it was mass panic. People were screaming and pushing to get out. Before I knew what was happening, Carson had come up behind me and was stuffing his hand down my pants, trying to hide his bag in my underwear.”

“Carson did what?”

“He was getting rid of his stash. In my pants. Of course he would choose me.” Desmond shook his head, and his mom nodded.

I turned to Bob. “They’re framing our boys. That’s what they do at that school, frame our boys for everything that goes wrong.”

“Like when they got suspended last year,” Cierra added. “They didn’t even start that fight, yet they were the ones that got suspended.”

I nodded in agreement, and Bob looked from one to the other of us.

“What happened last year?” he asked. “Tell me everything.”