

Bones of the Past

Riordan shifted his weight in the wicker chair. The fall afternoon was just starting to cool as a breeze blew the first of the season's brilliant leaves across the yard. It felt good after spending the afternoon weeding the flower bed. He still needed to put away his tools, but right now it was nice to sit. It wouldn't be too many more weeks until sunny days and trees tipped with color gave way to dark nights and bare, black branches. He sighed, then thought of all the things he enjoyed about late fall days that led into winter — the warmth giving way to cold, crisp air and the smell of smoke from chimneys and burning brush. Instead of lazy evenings on the porch telling stories to friends and neighbors who stopped by, he'd be settled in at Corcoran's pub, a glass of ale in his hand and a fire in the fireplace. Porch or pub, it didn't matter. They would stop by, ask him to spin a tale or two. Old friends, relatives — both close and so distant it would take ages to trace the connection — even the occasional college student who didn't mind listening to an old man ramble.

Sometimes there were new faces to add to the familiar, people who hadn't yet heard all the stories Riordan had told time after time. One was walking down the street now. Ellie waved as she approached, her dress slacks and button-down shirt a sure sign she had just come from the Historical Society's office. The girl worked too hard, slaving away on a Saturday. Anybody else would have at least softened their dress a bit, worn something more comfortable. She was an odd one, so different from dear Becca it was impossible to believe they were related. Not that they were, of course, not by blood.

He called across the yard, "Ellie, dear, come keep an old man company for a few minutes."

She smiled, her wide mouth transforming her face into something full of joy. "Can I get another story if I ask nicely?" Her lips twisted in an impish smirk, and Riordan was reminded of her mother.

"Have you ever known me not to have a story ready to tell?" He motioned her to have a seat in one of the other chairs, and she took it, unclipping her cellphone and setting it on the table between them. She leaned her briefcase against the chair and settled back.

"You're like an unending storybook." She grinned. "I keep thinking you'll run out of stories one of these days, but Aunt Becca says you never have."

Riordan chuckled. "I don't know if I'd go that far — I tell the same tales many a time. But nobody seems to mind."

"Oh!" She sat up. "Maybe you know this. Mrs. Boylan stopped by today to donate some papers she'd found in her father's attic. She started talking, you know how she does, and she said something about Dan and dead bodies in the marsh, but didn't explain." Ellie flushed. "I was busy, and she goes on and on, so I didn't want to ask. And I wasn't quite sure if I should ask Dan about it - I couldn't tell from her comments. It didn't sound like it was anything to do with the mill project, so I wasn't sure it was any of my business. But it keeps skittering around in my head, like a bug I can't quite catch."

"Ahhh... the dead bodies in the marsh." Riordan nodded. "One of the most notorious chapters in Exeter's history. I'm surprised Becca never told you." He paused. "Oh, but she wasn't around. It was the year she was on sabbatical."

"So how did bodies get into the marsh?" Ellie asked, then frowned. "And what did Dan have

to do with it? He's a few years younger than I am - he must have been in middle school if it was while Aunt Becca was on sabbatical."

"Well, now that's a story you should hear." Riordan thought for a second. "Way back when I was a boy, you never went to play in the marsh. It's been less hazardous since Dan and Evan turned the whole town upside down with their discovery. But before that... I always wanted to explore, but my mother forbid it. The one time I did sneak down there, Officer Reilly, Dan's great-great-uncle, caught me and dragged me home."

"Is it dangerous?"

"The marsh?" Riordan shook his head. "Oh, I don't doubt there are places where you could get sucked into the muck and need help getting out or that someone could drown there if they wandered into the wrong spot. But the same is true of the quarries on the west end, and we roamed all through them as children. No, the danger in the marsh came from other sources. The marsh was dangerous because of the people who used it for their own nefarious purposes." He tapped the side of his nose.

"When you read books or watch movies featuring mobsters, everything's about the Mafia. The Italians have a reputation as gangsters and not without reason. But in this state, the Irish mob has always been at least as powerful. It's a dark, twisted side of our heritage, one that can be traced back to the Old Country and the abuse suffered at the hands of the English. Many escaped to America hoping for a new life, but crumbling towers and green fields gave way to cramped quarters on germ-laden ships. Those that survived found the Yankee establishment just as oppressive as what they'd left behind. The Puritanical Brahmins frowned upon the music and dancing, the storytelling and drinking that's such a part of our culture. Businesses all over bore signs, 'No Irish Need Apply.' Only in the mills could they find work — dirty, dangerous, ill-paid work. Like other ethnic groups, the Irish came in waves — families and villages finding towns to settle in, neighborhoods to call their own. Exeter was one of them."

He looked across to where Ellie was leaning forward, eager for more. "In Boston, the Irish organized, trying to keep other people out of their neighborhoods, preserving the new homes they had carved out of city blocks. They didn't want other groups to gain power over them as in the Old Country. This became a matter of survival, and soon Boston had an Irish mob to rival the Mafia. While the Italians expanded south to Providence, competing against and working with the families down there, the Irish mob headed west to Worcester. In both cases, the gangs needed a place where they could meet on neutral turf, someplace halfway in between. Someplace they could use for hiding and for... other purposes."

"Wait, the mob was here?" Ellie sat upright. "In Exeter, the world's quietest town?"

He waved a finger at her. "Don't go thinking that just because we're not some big city like Washington that we're some sleepy backwater. People are people, no matter the place."

Ellie snorted. "Can't argue with that — the past month has been more exciting for me than all last year in D.C." She rested her elbows on her knees, settling her chin on her knuckles. "So the mob used the marsh?"

Riordan nodded. "Many of us in town knew, or at least suspected. Stories were told, whispered from person to person. But the only ones who really knew for sure were the local 'affiliate,' and nobody ever dared ask." He paused. "Certain people you didn't mess with." He shuddered. "Not successfully."

He picked his words carefully. "This is one story I don't tell people. Your aunt's probably the only living person who's heard it, at least from me."

"I won't tell." Ellie folded her hands, her face solemn.

"Old man Donaghue, he had a mean streak. His son Steve-"

Ellie interrupted. "The mill owner? He's seemed so nice every time I've talked to him for the project."

"Yes, that Steve." Riordan turned the discussion back to his story. "Steve was only seven or eight when he brought home a puppy one time. Mutt of a dog. Scruffy, scrappy thing. Steve rescued it from a fight it was quickly losing out in the alley behind O'Learys. He paraded it through downtown, stopping by to show my father. I was clerking for him that summer, earning money to pay for law school. Steve was so excited, he was about to bust. Said he'd always wanted a dog. He was on his way to his pa's office to show him. Not 10 minutes later, my father sent me along with some paperwork for Old Man Donaghue to sign." He sighed. "Always wondered if he knew what was going to happen, sent me along on purpose."

"What did happen?" Ellie chewed her lower lip.

"I got there and didn't see Steve or the dog. Got the papers signed." He shook his head, remembering. "On the way back, I decided to cut through the alley to save time. Steve was at the end of the alley, sitting against the wall of the building next door. The dog was lying next to him, dead." He closed his eyes. "There was no blood, but no neck ever looked like that by Nature's design. And there was a dark mark on the wall, just above the dog's body."

Ellie just shook her head. "No."

"Yes." Riordan nodded. "I stopped and asked him what happened. He shook his head, tears running down his cheeks. I knelt down, getting dust all over my slacks. He told me to go away, to run before his pa saw me. Said he should have known better." Riordan swallowed. This was the part he always found toughest to remember, the part he wasn't proud of. "I told him if he needed help, to go to my father or to come to me. And then I left him there." He sighed. "After that, I always believed the whispers."

"So Steve's father..." Ellie's voice trailed off.

Riordan nodded. "I never wanted to look too closely at what he was involved in, but after that, I heard enough to be sure those links to the mob weren't just rumors. I don't know if he was an enforcer or just provided a place for people to hide when the heat was on in the city, but he was involved. My father warned me not to mention it to the chief - every time somebody tried to get him involved, nothing would happen."

"How did Steve get away?"

"About 20 years ago, Donaghue was fading fast. The mob was moving into drugs, but not around here. The college wasn't big enough back then to be a market, and they couldn't risk the attention from the state." He looked out into the distance. "It was about this time of day when I heard. I was sitting out here, writing a letter to your aunt, catching her up on all the news of the town. I wrote to her almost every day while she was gone."

"She still has the letters." Ellie's voice was soft. "I found them one day, while looking for something else."

"That's something, then," Riordan said. "As long as she still has them, I can hope one of these times she'll agree to marry me." He shook off the thought. "I didn't share much of this with her, didn't want to risk putting anything to paper." He remembered the afternoon. "It was a hot day, one of those muggy August afternoons when it seems as though fall will never come. I'd finished up early at the office, but decided the yard work could wait until later, when it had begun to cool. I sat out here, writing Becca, when young Evan went running past, Dan chasing after him, calling for him to stop. The boys couldn't have been more than 12, maybe 13. Evan's family had just moved to town at the beginning of the summer, down the block from the Reillys."

"Danny?" Riordan shoved back from the table and stood up. "Daniel."

Dan looked at Evan, gaining distance from him by the minute, then slowed and jogged back. "Mr. Boyle?" He looked down the block, where Evan had started to slow. "I really have to go. Evan..." He swiped an arm across his dripping face, leaving a dark smudge.

Riordan looked him over, saw the mud smeared across his legs, caking his battered Chucks. "You've been in the marsh."

Dan scuffed his toe, then stopped, crossing his arms. "So? Me and Evan went exploring."

"You're not running in this heat for the fun of it, are you?" Riordan sighed. "What happened?"

Dan hesitated, looking down the block. Evan had stopped and was walking back. Riordan hadn't met the boy before, just seen him around town. He was tall, lanky — the kind of kid who would be all angles until he got older, started filling out some. He'd heard tell he was the same age as Dan, but Evan had half a head on him. Dan was sturdy, the kind of kid who would be a terror on the football team when he got older. Fearless too, always had been. Anything that could make him run had to be bad.

As Evan walked up, Riordan motioned to the porch. "Come on, sit down before you drop, both of you." Dan headed up the walk, but Evan hesitated.

"I don't know... I mean, I've seen you around town. You're the lawyer, the one down by Town Hall. But..." The boy stammered to a stop, his face pale despite a deep tan.

"You can call your parents if you want." Riordan smiled. "I'll talk to them. But you can ask Danny — I've known him since he was born. His father, too."

Evan nodded, eyes wary, but slipped past him, joining Dan on the steps. Riordan leaned against the railing. "What happened down in the marsh?"

"We..." Dan paused. "We were just poking around. Honest. And then we saw this little shack, and we went to explore, but it was locked."

Evan nodded. "It looked really old, like it might fall apart in a storm, but there were three padlocks on the door, and they weren't rusty at all. And the windows weren't broken, neither."

"Did you look inside?" Even as he asked, he knew the answer. What he didn't know was exactly what had spooked them.

Dan shook his head. "The windows were high — I couldn't see. But Evan looked."

"There were a bunch of guns." Evan's words spilled out. "Machine guns and rifles and pistols, and a bunch of knives, and one of them..." He faltered. "It looked like it had blood on it."

"He yelled, and I jumped back and ended up in the marsh." Dan made a face. "It was sticky and muddy, and there were a billion mosquitos. I tried to get out, but I kept sinking. My feet were all covered in mud, and they weighed a wicked lot. And then I stepped on something hard, and I climbed back up on the bank. Something caught my toe, though, and I pulled hard and—"

"It was a skull." Evan shuddered. "Dan landed on the ground, and the skull rolled away, and it had a hole in the back."

"That's when we took off," Dan said.

Riordan nodded. "Smart thinking, lads." He frowned. Calling the chief was out of the question — Old Mike Mullally turned a blind eye to the goings-on in the marsh. Now the stables, they were another matter. He thought they might pay some attention. But he didn't want the boys involved, didn't want them in danger. "You boys listen to me. Danny, I'm calling your father, letting him know what you found. Don't either of you boys mention this to anybody. Evan, go over to Danny's house, stay there for now."

The boys nodded. Dan looked up. "Am I going to get in trouble?"

Riordan shook his head. "I don't think so, Danny-Boy. But I don't want to hear of you two ever going into the marsh again."

They both nodded. Riordan looked at them and frowned. If anyone took one look at the mud smeared all over Dan, word would get out. "Hose is around the corner in the side yard. Go clean up, get rid of that mud while I call your father."

He headed inside and dialed the Reillys' number. Eileen answered, but called Kevin to the phone without asking any questions.

"Riordan?"

"Your boy's been down at the marsh, he and his new friend."

"Hell. They get caught?"

"No, but they found a skull. Sounds like the owner of it was shot, and you know what that means, m'boy."

Kevin didn't answer, only muttered curses.

"Look, I'll take care of this, call in the staties. I've got a few friends among the troopers, and they'll make sure it doesn't get brushed under the rug. But can you work it out to keep both boys at your place tonight, until things are underway?" At Kevin's question, he replied, "Evan's parents are new in town, don't know the way things work. They hear about this, they're going to call the chief, and then nothing will happen, same way it's been before. By tomorrow, we can have the troopers out here — then Mullally won't have any control over it."

As Riordan wound up the story, Ellie sat there, her face alternating between shock and horror.

"The police chief was in on it?"

Riordan nodded. "Nobody could ever prove it, but we all knew. He looked the other way too many times. You learned — it wasn't safe to rock the boat around here back then."

"So what did they find?"

"Enough guns to arm a street gang. Dozens of knives. And bodies. The final count was 29, but they never did find all the bones for each of those bodies. There were some who said there could be even more out there." He shook his head. "Everybody knew who was responsible, but they never pinned it on anybody. After all these years, they won't. Donaghue is gone, and Steve's clean."

"You're sure?"

He nodded. "He never liked that side of his pa. After I saw what Donaghue did to the puppy, I kept an eye out, and Steve said a few things to me. He'd wanted out before the bodies turned up, but I was never sure if he'd been able to or if he'd just kept it quiet. But if he wasn't out before, he definitely got out then. Cleaned up the business, made sure none of the buildings or apartments were rented to anybody with a mob connection, and managed not to end up dead."

"So the mob's gone from Exeter now." She smiled.

"As far as we know." More than that, Riordan wouldn't say. Ellie didn't need to know his suspicions. Not yet, anyway.

Thrown Out

August 2001

Chris walked up the Reillys' driveway, wondering where Dan's truck was. He thought he was on time. He checked his watch, just in case. It wouldn't be the first time he had gotten so lost in the piece he was arranging for one of the jazz ensembles on campus that he'd lost track of time.

Dan's mother stepped outside the back door of the main house, waving to Chris. "Kevin and Dan are running behind," she said. "One of the town inspectors showed up an hour later than he said he would, so they're just finishing up on the job site now. Dan mentioned you two had a date, said to go on up."

"Thanks, Mrs. Reilly."

"How many times do I have to tell you? It's Eileen." She shook her head, but she was smiling. "You are coming to dinner next Sunday, right? It's the last one before Bridget and Maggie leave for college."

"I'll be there." A few more pleasantries, and he was able to escape to Dan's apartment above the contracting business. He understood why Dan liked living there — it was right above work, he'd rather pay rent to his parents than a landlord, and it was easily three times larger than the cramped apartment Chris rented a few blocks from campus.

When Dan walked in a few minutes later, he was dirty and covered in sawdust. "Give me 20 minutes to get cleaned up," he said.

Chris laughed. "Take your time — the movie isn't going anywhere, and I can wait for pizza." He held up the VHS tape he'd brought. Dan nodded and stripped off his T-shirt as he headed for the bathroom.

The shower had stopped when Chris heard somebody knocking on the apartment door.

"Can you get that?" Dan appeared with a towel around his waist, rubbing his curly black hair with another. "It's probably Evan." He disappeared back into the bedroom without waiting for an answer.

Chris opened the door, smiling at the familiar face. Those had been few and far between since spring semester had ended and most of his friends from the college had headed home or to Boston for the summer.

"Hey, Chris. I've got some of the softball equipment for tomorrow's game. Dan said he'd take it." Evan held up a bucket of balls in one hand and turned slightly to show the bag of bats hanging from his other shoulder. "I'm covering a shift so Chief McMahon can be at his granddaughter's birthday party."

"Dan just got home, but he should be out in a minute." Chris reached for the bucket, but Evan waved him off. Chris stepped back, and Evan set the equipment down inside the door.

"Hope everybody who promised shows tomorrow. We're close to having to forfeit." Evan frowned, then looked at Chris. "Hey, you wouldn't be interested in playing, would you? We can still add to the roster."

Chris shook his head. "You don't want me," he said. "I was the kid on my Little League team who hunted dandelions in right field instead of paying attention to the game." He pushed aside memories of his father's disappointment after those games.

Evan laughed. "Tell Dan he's got to hit a few extra home runs since I won't be there to do

it for him." Evan straightened up, as tall as Chris. "Hey, Liz is dying to get together with adults who aren't related to us — and she's starting to bug me about meeting you." He grinned and raised his voice. "She says the baby has to spend more time with his godfather."

"Oh, bite me." Dan walked into the room, worn cutoffs slung low on his hips. "She just wants to talk to somebody who can talk back - besides you."

Chris grinned. "Or Colleen's been singing your praises as a baby whisperer." He turned to Evan. "Never fails. When one of the twins starts crying, she hands him to Uncle Dan, and he's happy again."

Dan rolled his eyes. "I'm not the only one. Who usually has the other twin? But she'll stop that when she sees the little tool boxes I'm getting them for Christmas."

"Oh, tell Liz that." Evan smirked. "She'll be all over you for assuming that because they're boys, they'll like tools."

"Hey, Michelle can have one, too." Dan shrugged. "Bridget was always stealing the one Dad made me when we were little."

"Does that mean it's going to be Reilly and Kids instead of Reilly and Son someday?" Chris couldn't help but ask. Mr. Reilly didn't seem like the kind of father to pressure his kids to follow in his footsteps — better than he could say about his own father — but he'd only known the man for a few months.

Dan shook his head. "No, she just liked banging with the hammer. Mikey, maybe. Dad can just add another S to the sign." He shrugged. "You want me to drop the stuff off at your place after the game tomorrow or just hang onto it until Thursday's game?"

"You can send them home with Liz," Evan said. "She was going to bring Michelle down to watch."

"Michelle's three months old." Dan snorted. "She must be really desperate to spend time with adults."

"Hey, there's an idea," Evan said. "Chris, why don't you go to the game? Then Liz will get off my case about meeting you, and you three can go over to Corcoran's after."

Chris hesitated. "I'm..." He tried to figure out a way to refuse without having to explain.

"Yeah, come down to the game," Dan said. "You haven't been to one yet."

Chris shook his head. "That's not a good—"

But before he could figure out an excuse to avoid the game, the town fire siren went off. Two hoots, then four.

Evan frowned. "That's Millville. This time of day, probably a kitchen—" He stopped as the siren sounded again, immediately followed by his beeper. "All-call — gotta go."

Dan shut the door as Evan raced for his truck.

"Millville?" Chris frowned. "I thought I'd finally learned all the towns around here."

"It's not a town, just the name used for the neighborhood across from the old mill complex that separates the college from downtown." Dan headed for the couch, taking Chris' hand and tugging him along.

"Is that where Professor Stone lives?" He thought back. "She had all the grad students over before Christmas, even those of us who aren't in the art department." He sat next to Dan on the couch, sinking back into the cushions, Dan's arm around his shoulders.

"It sounds so weird to hear you call Becca that." Dan grinned. "That's her neighborhood." He frowned. "I hope Evan was right, and it's just a kitchen fire. At this time of day, either nobody's home or they are awake — at least no people are likely to be in danger — but those houses are jewels. It would be a shame to lose one."

Chris shook his head. "OK, Mr. History Major." He traced the white patches below Dan's eyes. "You got burned again — you've got a sunglasses line." His tanned skin was dark against Dan's.

"Ran out of sunscreen." Dan grimaced and held out the arm not wrapped around Chris. The shoulder was ghostly; the rest of the arm, slightly pink. "This burn isn't too bad, but good thing there's no game tonight. I don't need any more sun." He grinned. "Think I can get a hand rubbing on the aloe?"

"Oh, I think I can help with that." Chris traced the edges of Dan's burn — arms, neck, legs — keeping his fingers light.

"Mmmm." But before Dan could say anything else, his stomach rumbled. "Hold that thought. Let me call for pizza."

He got up and went into the small kitchen, where he called in an order. Chris followed and opened the refrigerator.

"Hey, toss me a can of tonic."

Chris shook his head at the odd term, but passed a can of Coke back. "Nobody told me I'd have to learn to speak Boston when I applied up here."

Dan grinned. "Come to the game tomorrow — after we get something to eat at Corcoran's, we can go out and get ice cream with jimmies."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Normal people call them chocolate sprinkles."

"One thing nobody's ever called me is 'normal'." Dan drained half the can. "Seriously, come to the game. Liz isn't the only one who's been wondering when they're going to meet you."

"I don't... That's not a good idea." He swallowed.

"Why not?" Dan leaned back against the counter. "It's not like this is hard-core sports. It's slow-pitch softball. It's about the only time I can hang out with most of my buddies on the Bulldogs. Between jobs and spending time with their families, they're busy. And if they aren't, I am." He made a face. "I'm glad I only have one more semester. Between classes, studying, and work, I never have enough time for anything else. I hardly have enough time to spend with you." He shook his head. "I can't imagine going back for a master's degree like you."

Chris shrugged. "You don't need one — heck, you don't need this degree for what you do. But to teach at a college, I need to finish the master's and the doctorate. I can't make a living just composing."

"Yeah, like Mom and Dad would have let me skip college. At least I wanted to go, because they would have won that fight." Dan stood up and headed for the living room, grabbing Chris' hand again as he walked past. "Besides, the history comes in handy when I'm trying to restore buildings — I like working on the older houses in town, and I want to do more of it." He flopped down on the couch, tugging Chris after him. "So, you're coming, right?"

Chris leaned into Dan as he searched for the right words. "I..." His fingers traced the scar along his right forearm, the movement so habitual it barely even registered. "I can't."

"You can't?" Dan frowned. "I didn't think you had anything on your schedule until the fall semester prep starts next week. You said this was your one break after all the summer class craziness."

Chris thought about lying, but knew he couldn't do that to Dan. "I'm available. I just..." He made himself just say it. "I shouldn't be there."

"What do you mean, 'shouldn't be there'?" Dan stared at him.

"If I go, people will know we're dating."

"Yeah, so?" Dan frowned. "They know I'm seeing somebody. It's not like it's a big secret."

Chris tried to figure out how to explain it, but finally gave up. "You wouldn't understand."

"You've got that right — I don't understand." Dan pulled back and turned so he was facing Chris, one leg hiked onto the couch. "It's not like anybody expects me to be dating a girl. Ever since I got suspended freshman year of high school for beating up a homophobic idiot, pretty much the whole town knows I prefer guys." He grinned. "Word spreads quickly in Exeter."

"See, that's what worries me." Chris sighed, his fingers still running over the scar. "Everybody knows about you. Not me. And you might be a year or two younger, but you've been out a lot longer than I have. I couldn't even admit to myself I was gay until five or six years ago. I still worry about how people will react when they find out."

Dan ran a hand through his still-damp hair. "What are you talking about? The photographer for the campus paper snapped a picture of me kissing you on Valentine's Day, and it ran on the front page. How much more outed can you get?"

"That's campus. Not town." He sighed. "A lot of things on campus don't make it off campus. And a lot of things that are acceptable on campus aren't when you take them off-campus."

"I can't argue that they're not different." Dan reached over to take his hand, lacing their fingers together. "But nobody's going to give you grief for dating me." Dan looked him in the eye. "Look, I know Virginia wasn't the most open place in the world, but Massachusetts is different. Exeter is different."

Chris sighed. "I'll think about it."

Dan opened his mouth to reply, but the doorbell rang. "Pizza." He got up and came back a minute later with the steaming box. Chris slid the movie into the VCR and turned on the TV, hoping it would be enough of a distraction.

A few hours later, they lay in Dan's bed. Chris looked at the clock and groaned. "I need to leave."

"You can stay, you know."

Chris shrugged. "You've got to get up early for work, and I don't want to run into your parents again. It was awkward enough the last time."

"It was fine the last time." Dan yawned. "When Colleen was living up here before she and Eric got married, it wasn't unusual to see him in the morning."

Chris pulled on his T-shirt. "It's still a little too close to living with your parents to not feel weird. Just because yours are more accepting than mine doesn't mean it's not the standard 'parents knowing we have sex' weird."

Dan yawned again. "I'm 23. They know I have sex. They don't care." He stretched and rolled onto his back. "If the state actually permits civil unions because of that lawsuit this spring, you might have to worry about them asking when we're going to make it legal. But they did the same thing to Eric and Colleen."

Chris wasn't even going to touch the civil unions comment. It was still such a foreign concept, he wasn't about to let himself hope. But he wasn't getting into that at 1 a.m. "Oh, go to sleep," he said.

"See you at the game," Dan said, yawning again.

But Chris didn't go to that game. Or the next one. Or the two after that. He tried, but every time he started toward the field, he found himself turning away. He made excuses to Dan, but it was obvious Dan knew they were just that.

The last time, he had almost made it to the field before turning back. When he mentioned that the next day, Dan had just sighed and asked if he would come to a cookout the next weekend.

"Becca has one every summer — most of her neighborhood and half the town are there," he

said. "She specifically told me to bring you, and my family will wonder if you're not there."

Chris thought about it for a second. He'd been to Professor Stone's house before, and she was one of the most approachable professors in the department, if not the entire campus. "I'll go." He rolled his shoulders. "And I really am trying to get to one of your games."

"Uh-huh." Dan didn't say anything else, and Chris winced.

The next night, Chris stood on the corner and listened to the sounds coming from the ballpark down the street. Dan and his friends were there warming up, waiting for the rest of the Bulldogs to finish work and get to the ball field. This was the closest he'd gotten, and he was trying to talk himself into walking that last block. He crossed his arms, the fingers of his left hand tracing the familiar scar on his other arm.

The thick August heat pressed down, too much like two summers ago. He stopped, starting to turn and head back to his apartment, but he couldn't keep doing this. Dan wouldn't be patient forever. Chris took a deep breath and forced himself to keep going, to enter the battered gate in the chain-link fence surrounding the elementary school.

He could see Dan at third base fielding ground balls from his teammates, the edges of his battered Red Sox cap dark with sweat. The pale skin on his arms was a little pink; he must be out of sunscreen again. He spotted Dan's scuffed cooler under the team bench near the first base line. The other team was playing catch in the small strip of grass between the third base line and the fence.

Chris reminded himself that if they didn't know him, they weren't likely to say the things he'd grown up hearing. If they did realize he was Dan's boyfriend, Dan said they would be fine with it. Still, Chris hesitated before making his way over. Not for the first time, he wished he'd been able to explain to Dan why he was so hesitant to come. It was too late now — Dan had just seen him and waved. Chris waved back before heading to the small metal bleachers not far from the Bulldogs' dugout.

Still, he couldn't shake the idea that this was a mistake. There were just a couple of people in the bleachers, mostly in the back row. Chris picked the end of the front row instead. If Dan was right, he wouldn't need to run. Still, he wasn't ready to put himself in a position where he couldn't make a fast exit. Not just yet. He rubbed the back of his neck and reminded himself to relax. This was supposed to be fun. He deliberately stretched out his long legs, the heels of his battered leather sandals scuffing up dust between the patches of grass. The Bulldogs were still on the field, the batter now sending balls into the outfield.

Chris settled in and watched while the team finished batting practice and then moved to the sidelines to toss the ball around while the other team took the field. Dan glugged down half a bottle of water, then tossed it to Evan, who pulled off his ballcap and dumped the remaining water over his head, soaking his blond hair, before dropping the bottle in the trash. Now Chris understood why Dan had filled the cooler with a dozen bottles just for himself before heading out. The August day wasn't unusually hot, but sticky enough to discourage movement, much less vigorous activity like a game. He watched Dan and Evan tossing the ball around, the left fielder bouncing ground balls to Dan, which he returned as pop-ups.

Something broke Dan's concentration, and he looked back toward the diamond. Chris tracked the movement with his eyes. He couldn't hear what the other team's first baseman had said to Dan, but Dan's face hadn't been that red a minute ago.

Chris had never seen Dan get mad before — even the past couple of weeks he'd been more resigned than angry over this whole ballgame stalemate. But a couple of Dan's sisters weren't nearly so restrained, and Chris knew the Reilly temper could be pretty fierce once unleashed.