

# Dig Two Graves

## Excerpt

I make my living by teaching about the past, the very long-ago past. The Classics. Greece. Rome. Latin. *Amo amas amat* and all that. And what I've learned, after years of my own study, and seven years on the job, is this: what happened *then* isn't really so different from what happens *now*, except for the toga and armor part, the laurel leaf crowns and royal purple robes. Then and now, people want things, and they do whatever they have to do to get them. They take what isn't theirs. They hurt people. They kill people. Dead language, dead people: some things never change.

That's what I teach my freshmen Intro students, just so they can't say I didn't warn them: if you want to learn the classics, if you want to learn Greek and Latin, really learn it, get inside it, you're signing up to learn the language of revenge.

They love that part. Revenge.

I thought I did a pretty good job of teaching it, until I actually lived it. Those books don't have a clue what they're talking about.

I've had offers to tell what happened; calls from the morning shows started coming in the day the very first article hit the local newspaper, and then got picked up by AP. Some publishers have flirted around about a book, but they want it now, red-hot. Fresh off the presses, and the front pages. One even offered to give me a ghostwriter to hurry it along, but I want to write it all on my own. I let somebody else write *Herc Holt: My Story* thirteen years ago, after winning the gold medal in Sydney, and I spent the next thirteen years regretting my mistake. Starting with letting them use that cursed nickname, "Herc." Herc for Hercules. I was never a Hercules, except in the headlines, and I knew it better than anyone. Maybe by playing around with such a heroic name—taking what wasn't rightfully mine—I offended the gods.

I certainly offended...*him*.

I took what wasn't mine. I took his life. At the very start, and...at the end.

I'm getting ahead of myself. Running too fast, running toward the future, to keep from being here. Right here. Now. I've always done it, and now it's time to stop.

In the old days, right after the first Olympics, if you offended the gods, they put your name on a statue outside the stadium. It was called a *zane*—a statue of Zeus; it was his face that passersby saw, but with an inscription of your wrongdoing. A god's face, your crime; adding up to a warning to others who might be tempted to do the same.

The worst part, besides the public humiliation? You had to pay for your own fucking statue.

That's *my* punishment, my *zane*. I may not have a statue, but I'm still paying.

But the night it all started, there wasn't any of that. There was no pain, no paying, no blood. There was just birthday cake and melting ice cream, and the smell of wax candles that had just been blown out, and Skip.

My daughter. My life. My everything.

My "I love you more."

## CHAPTER ONE

They came to the party with blood on their hands.

That was Skip's idea, my crazy thirteen-year-old's, inviting my friends and fellow professors to wear red paint on their palms. It was her nod to the infamous way I start my first class of every semester—my "blood on the page" speech. I have my Intro to Classics students bring in their favorite book, and it can't be any of the *Harry Potters* or *Twilights*. No magic wands or vampires, I say; it has to be real. That's why I *do* allow *The Hunger Games*. (Pause for laughs then, waiting to see which among them know that ancient civilizations are the *original* Hunger Games.) The kids read from their chosen book, then one by one come up, dip their hands in a tray of water-soluble, *Nightmare on Elm Street* red paint, and mark the passage with their palm prints. All those little creases and lifelines, from lives that have barely begun.

I can only imagine the calls back home to their parents after that first day.

*He had you do **what**? We're spending \$40,000 a year to have you mark up a perfectly good book?*

But nobody ever dropped out after that first class; more people usually show up for the next one, to see if there's still room to enroll.

*You're the guy with the blood, right?*

*Yep, I'm the guy with the blood.*

And I'm the lucky guy with the daughter who knew how to throw a helluva party on the day I turned both thirty-nine and got tenure. The year 2013; I could never forget how old Skip was because she grew up in tandem with my Olympics; they were both Y2K babies. The year we thought everything might go haywire. But it had been the best year of my life, before now. Standing by the marble island in our kitchen, I looked out at all the people in the den—my fellow professors, staring back at me with their silly red palms—and I thought, "I'm one of you now; I've joined your ranks. I don't ever have to worry about providing for Skip again."

Skip could read my mind, we were that close. My eyes got a little watery; whether it was tears forming, or the vodka tonic I'd already had, I didn't know, but she headed me off at the pass.

"Daddy. Puh-leaseeeee..."

Could anyone but a thirteen year old stretch out a single-syllable word so far?

Could anyone but a thirteen year old make her old man collapse with pride and happiness?

I knocked a fork against my rocks glass. "All I can say is..."

She raised her eyebrows, a Groucho imitation from the Marx Brothers movies I'd taught her to love as much as I do, and I read her mind too: *Please. Don't embarrass me. Don't get sappy on me.*

"All I can say is"—*Don't do it, Daddy, don't do it*—"...this looks like a serial killers' convention. Get washed up. And don't use the good towels, which Skip probably put out since she knew company was coming."

Laughter. Fun, drinks, cake, laughter. All of us together.

Skip corrected me, and I knew I'd done okay by her. "I put out *moist towelettes*. By the guest book." More laughter. I swear she'd been practicing that, for days. Maybe the whole party was just an excuse for her to say "moist towelettes," in front of a room full of academics. My string bean. "Please put your palm print on the page, then sign your name and tell my dad how much you love him, just like I do."

So now it was okay for the *kid* to get all schmaltzy.

A round of *ahs* and applause from a roomful of beaming, red-palmed people, for Skip, and I could tell it meant everything to her. She was at that awkward phase, part newborn colt with long legs going every which way, her emotions the same; and part done it all, seen it all, you're embarrassing me. Patti and I had taught her to read at five; she'd had to grow up fast, too fast, at eight, and sometimes, she seemed like she was seventeen. Too smart and clever. Because of her height, people sometimes thought she was about to graduate from high school. Sometimes I was the only one who could still see my little scared girl, deep down inside.

She'd put together this whole party, mostly by herself. For a few weeks before, I'd find her hanging out in the Classics department office with Genna, our administrator, whenever I'd come in after class. (The whole campus was her playground; I loved giving her that. Hide and seek in the bowels of Sherman Hall. Dress-up in the theater department.)

"Anything wrong? Need me?"

"No," Skip would say, then roll her eyes. Not a mean eye-roll, like most thirteen-year-olds; more like a "can't you see we're doing something you're not supposed to see—so please play like you didn't see it?"

When I'd left today, Genna had tipped me off about the surprise party I was supposed to act surprised at. "Whatever happens, just tell her the cake is

delicious. I offered to buy one, but she wanted to make it from scratch. Just ignore the mess in the kitchen; I'll help her clean up."

But I didn't have to lie. The cake was delicious. German chocolate, my favorite. We sang "Happy Birthday"—and then "Happy Tenure"—then I blew out the candles, all thirty eight of them. Winding me. The old Olympic champ, winded at thirty eight. The scent of match sulfur in the air, Skip picking out the candles and putting them aside, to lick the icing off of later.

"Really? It's okay? You don't taste the burnt part?" That was Skip-as-colt, so insecure. So wanting to do everything perfectly. So thirteen. Squinting through the thick lenses of her glasses. "There are all these ingredients you've got keep track of and like a million different bowls, so the evaporated milk part got a little burned while I was mixing the batter part and..."

"... and I loved *every* part of it." I grabbed her in a headlock and gave the top of her head a big sloppy smooch. "I'm gonna have seconds. And then I'm gonna have thirds tomorrow morning for breakfast. *That's* how much I love it."

"That's not even the best part. Wait 'til you see your *real* present." Now, she switched to mistress of ceremony mode, in her pretty dress. Skip didn't wear dresses; only jeans and hoodies. But tonight, she wore a dress; Genna helped her pick it out. I wasn't very good in that department. "Okay, everybody. Now for your in-flight entertainment..."

Skip pressed a button on the remote and the title *This is Your Life, with Muscles*, popped up on our flat-screen TV.

"Jeez, is this what I..." I began.

It was.

There I was at twenty-two, racing along the college track. Long dark hair flying behind me. Strong. Able. Untouchable. Muscles powerful enough to get the job done better than—oh, say, anyone else in the world. Four years later, in 2000, twenty six years old and finally ready, that's what they'd called me: *the best athlete in the world*. That was after I won the decathlon in Sydney—with skills that were of absolutely no use *except* for winning a gold medal: throwing a javelin, a shot put, throwing *myself* over a bar that got

raised, literally, higher and higher, until there was no one else left who could jump over it.

"Whoa. I think you missed your calling." That was Randi Tanglen, Junior Faculty, English. The students liked her even more than they liked me, and they liked me a lot; she'd gotten tenure the year before.

"No, it called. I just...hung up," I said, knocking back more of my vodka tonic, lime pulp catching on my teeth. It soured the sweetness of the cake icing, for just a second.

They'd all thought it was a joke when I first applied for the teaching job here, my alma mater. Why else would a guy who'd been on a box of Wheaties want to come back to Canaan College, their little Ivy wannabe just south of the Vermont border? It was a school that produced doctors and lawyers, low-level politicians and other college professors, not world-class athletes. It was strange that I'd even been there in the first place, as a student; even stranger that I'd come back. But I didn't want to use my body anymore. It hurt too much. I wanted to use my head; that's why I'd gone to Canaan in the first place. I'd always wanted to something to fall back on: my brain was the real deal; the fact that I had a body that could do things was just a fluke. Besides, I didn't have another Olympics in me. I couldn't do four more years of training. The first four had almost killed me, and I didn't want to end up one of those fat old men, squeezed into Lycra, reliving the past. Doing inspirational speeches or getting paid to make an appearance and open a new gym somewhere. All the loonie tunes that came out of the woodwork, to cash in on your fame. Or the fortune they *thought* you had. They all thought they knew you—they'd seen you for two weeks on TV, after all—you just didn't know them.

That's why they called it the past: it was over. When I left Sydney, I'd even left my fiberglass vaulting pole behind in the tunnel that the athletes used to make their entrances. Let it be somebody else's burden. I had different things on my mind now; grown-up things. Teaching. Making a living. Paying off grad school loans. Trying to be both mother and father to Skip, after Patti died. Skip was real; the Olympics weren't. Not anymore.

And now, there it all was again, served up on my giant flat screen with Haagen Dazs and cake. I wanted to turn the damn thing off, but I couldn't. Maybe it was the booze helping me get there, but I was back in it. I was *living* it. *Reliving*

it. How much pain I was in. How gaunt and sharp my face was. I'd exercised off every extra gram of fat; I was down to a covering of skin, then muscle and bone, no padding in-between. Me, at age twenty-six, in Sydney, arcing over the pole vault bar—5.90 meters, a record—as if there were barely an impediment in my way. Everybody else saw a cocky smile; I knew it was a rictus of pain. It became the most famous Olympic poster of the last decade plus, selling even better than long-limbed Michael Phelps scissoring through the pool: my butt coming down on the winning side of the bar, legs and arms flying, a streak of upper thigh that wasn't as tan as the rest of me. In that split second of free-fall, I turned to the camera and flashed a V for Victory sign.

*'Uh oh...you can see my underwear!'* A thought bubble came up on the screen, as I watched my younger self land in a pile of plastic cushions.

"I know pop-ups are sorta three years ago," Skip broke the spell, almost apologetically, "and that one's kinda lame, but..."

"Oh. My. God."

That was Carol Daeley, the English professor who'd been on sabbatical in Cambridge the summer of 2000; not that she would have watched the Olympics anyway. But her "Oh my God" wasn't an *"Oh my God, how cute"*—William Blake scholars didn't say that—it was an *"Oh my God, look out!"*

*"YOU'RE DEAD!"* someone was screaming at the twenty-six-year-old me on the DVD.

And everyone in my living room was watching me watch it. Now.

For a second, everyone in the stands—and I guess watching at home—had thought that it was a terrorist attacking me. Munich was never far behind in our thoughts. But then they saw the colors, as an arm grabbed me. Red white and blue, in spandex. Somebody on our side.

My teammate Mark Casey, strong-arming a cameraman who tried to block him. Greco-Roman wrestling wasn't part of the decathlon, but someone forgot to tell Mark, because that's how he dug into me and pinned me to the track, for everyone to see. Every one of those thousands of people in the arena, everyone watching live on TV, and every one of the forty or so mesmerized

academics in my living room, who'd maybe seen blood on the page, but never spurting out of on one of their colleagues.

**"DEAD!"**

The cameraman who'd been knocked to the ground had the perfect vantage point for capturing the moment, and even though the crowd was screaming, the sound on the ground was perfectly clear. So was the look in Casey's eyes, as his massive right arm shot out and landed on my face. My neck whiplashed around and my head smashed into the gravel track. Then Casey ratcheted back, super-fast—God, he was good; he should have won *something*—and slugged me again on the nose, and that's when the blood hit the camera lens.

That poster sold like hotcakes, too.

*"I'm gonna kill you...."*

I clicked off the remote; I might as well have clicked off the soundtrack of the party, because, for just a moment, there was complete silence in the room. Not gradual. Immediate.

"You should'a seen the *other* guy," my old coach Sig Nielsen said, trying to fill the void. Still coaching at seventy six, he was Skip's godfather. He knew what he'd said was the punch line to some joke—and God bless him for trying to save the moment—but he forgot that I was the other guy.

"You okay?" He'd raced to my side and asked it then, and he asked me now, the very same thing. Not quite racing anymore, but getting there as fast as he could with his cane.

"That's the last thing I need right now."

That's what I'd said then too, with two more events left in which to compete, the javelin throw and 1500 meter. But I finished them, and won the gold, with the right side of my face a mottled purple and green.

I felt everyone in the room looking at me, wanting me to do something more than just whisper to Sig. So I did. "Wow. I guess somebody forgot to tell me the decathlon had *eleven* events. Nose breaking. He obviously won that round."



They could laugh and talk again, now that I was laughing too. But for me, the party was over, as if I'd just had the fight in real time.

"But wait. We're just getting to the good part." Skip grabbed the remote and punched it back on. "Look. It's me and Mom. When I was just a baby."

Back on screen, my younger self had limped away from Mark Casey, pulling off my tank top to sop up the blood on my face, and staggered to the side of the stands where my wife Patti was holding a one-year-old Skip, barely more than a bundle. Patti looked horrified, but the baby in her arms was smiling and waving a little American flag that Patti had stuck in her chubby little fingers. The cameraman knew his business; that's what was being broadcast to the world. My kid, waving an American flag, no clue what was going on. And my parents, they were there too; my father ready to attack Casey himself.

"Look, that's *me*. With Grandma and Grandpa." Skip said. Almost pleading. "I thought you'd *wanna* see us."

Skip, the *other* prize I'd gotten that year, the same year I got my gold medal. "I do, Skippy, I always do, you know that, but...wow. I wasn't expecting that. Seeing that fight all over again."

"But it just shows how jealous everybody was of you. That's why I kept it in. You always say you can't change history, and that's part of history." My daughter had an answer for everything.

"I know, hon, but..." How could I explain how painful it was to her? I changed tactics. "And seeing my parents. Seeing your mom. It just makes me sad."

"You just wanna forget about her and be with Wendy."

"Did I just hear my name?"

Talk about wrong time wrong place. Wendy. Dr. Wendy Borden, my new girlfriend of the last five or six months. It wasn't her fault she was just getting to the party late, but she paid the price. Skip hadn't expected to see Wendy here, because she hadn't invited her. *I* had—to the surprise party that wasn't really a surprise.

"And who the hell invited Dr. Doolittle?" Skip said, storming off to the kitchen, withering Wendy with a glare, as only a displaced thirteen-year-old could.

"C'mon now, Skippy..." I said.

"And why did you and Mom have to name me after peanut butter?" Her parting shot.

Great; now I was guilty about her nickname, too.

"She's usually the greatest daughter in the world," I said, a weak apology to Wendy, "and then..." "She's a teenager?" asked Wendy. "I was one too, remember? She's afraid I'm going to take you away from her. All teenage girls are in love with their fathers. Or their horses. Why'd you think I became a vet?"

Wendy was a vet in the zoology department, where I'd never ventured before I met her. Some of the other teachers had fixed us up on a blind date—truly blind; they wouldn't tell me anything about her except that they thought I'd like her. On our first date, she made me guess what she did. I could tell she liked the outdoors—she smelled like it, in a good way; she didn't have fancy fingernails—but after a few guesses, I still hadn't figured out that she was a vet and worked at the zoo here. Afterwards, I started calling her the pet whisperer, because she could make any animal better. And me, I'll be honest: the *Prof* whisperer. She made a too-young widower feel better too. She ran laps around the track with me late at night. She signed us up for couple's mud races. She didn't talk down to Skip. She took us around on her little go-cart at the zoo, which Skip liked, until she decided she didn't like anybody who liked her father back.

I was giving Wendy a little kiss—a peck, an innocent little peck, to make up to her—when Skip came back out of the kitchen and saw us. She marched straight to the DVD player and punched the eject button.

Forever after, I'll remember that whooshing sound the DVD tray made as it slid out; it seemed to take forever. And then I'll remember Skip grabbing the shiny silver disk, practically a mirror, which she'd worked so hard on, and breaking it in two.

That seemed to take no time at all.

No, *this* is the last thing I'll remember from that night: Skip—my baby—turning to me and saying, across a room full of people, fighting so hard for those tears to not spill out of her eyes, "I wish it was you who was dead instead of Mom."

Forever after, that's what I'll remember.

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