

# DEATH'S GRIP



*10% of author  
proceeds go to  
MS research*



*A SCIENCE THRILLER*



Ken L Gould

*Excerpt from*

# DEATH'S GRIP

KEN L GOULD

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## *A Locket Full of Ashes*

A girl of seventeen stood near the grave site, faces of sympathy on either side. The minister spoke to the gathering; his words barely registered as her thoughts were elsewhere. The first patters of rain struck the tent, and a chill ran through her. She wrapped herself further in her coat. In the distance a grayness hovered over Lake Michigan, just as it must have appeared the day her father slipped into the waters.

A lowering device held the casket over a slash of darkness in the earth, which lay ready to swallow the hollow box. Part of her wanted to run up to that box, throw open the lid, verify its emptiness. She imagined her father as they would have presented him in death, had the search team recovered the body. Inanimate matter wrapped in the finest of suits. The flesh cold, dry and rubbery. Perfume masking embalming chemicals. His eyes shut as if he were only asleep, perhaps just dreaming, imparting a false sense of a future reunion.

Funerals, she realized, were all about deception.

Death in absentia, they called it, though the phrase had no meaning to her beyond some statute in a dusty law book. He was either dead or he wasn't; the middle ground belonged to the philosophers. In the little over two years since her father went missing, a legal battle raged between the lawyers for the estate—now her estate—and the insurance company, which argued for a declaration of suicide so as to negate, or at least reduce, their liability on a seven figure policy, whose ink barely had time to dry when her father went missing. The man was distraught over the recent death of his wife, the company argued. The judge wasn't convinced. He ruled in favor of the sole heir and beneficiary and let the daughter have her inheritance. Minus attorney's fees, of course.

Even with the legal battle behind her and a funeral to bury the past, the residue of that day remained: the blood on the boat; the storm that whipped Lake Michigan into a frenzy and ripped open violent swells in its surface; clouds that spread to the horizon, strafed with lightning, thick and oily like a painting of her dreams. The abandoned daysailer drifted into shore days later. The currents must have made off with the body. They tore her father from this world by a roll of the dice—her uncle would have called it an act of God—as the denizens of the deep devoured his fleshy parts and left only disarticulated bones to drift about the connected waterways until someone came across them, which no one ever did.

Despite her uncle's view of things, to her mind God had nothing to do with it. God hadn't made the fateful decision to pilot a boat into a storm. God hadn't slammed her father's head into the hull. It was a natural weather event, plain and simple. Random, inexplicable. A brilliant biochemist forever lost to the world of science. Some were already using the word *genius*, yet beneath that were the whispers—never in front of the little girl—of madness, of a man who became,

more and more, a dangerous eccentric. She knew of those whispers yet dismissed them because her father wasn't crazy, no matter what they said.

An accident. A suicide. What did it really matter?

She was an orphan now.

The wind scoured the cemetery and beat against the tent as if the Earth itself screamed.

"Sharon."

Her uncle stood by the car, door open.

"Sharon. It's time to go."

The rain came hard now. The faces drifted away, leaving her alone with the casket.

She gripped the locket against her chest, the one containing her mother's ashes. A memory dangling about her neck. Her uncle gave her the locket for the same reason he insisted on the service, because ashes are as irrevocable as a funeral. No going back now. Leave it all in the rear view mirror. Hold onto the memories, the pleasant ones anyway, but move on. Up next, college. And from there, who knows?

A new chapter. A new family. A new life.

Yet the questions still lingered. They lingered deep in places not easily accessed and welled up every now and again to inhabit her dreams, then receded just as quickly when she awoke. Those brief encounters left behind shadowy impressions, which she quickly dismissed, because allowing those questions to the surface felt like ripping open some horrible scab.

As the car took her away, she stole one last look at the empty box that hovered over all those markers of death.

*Eight years later ...*

# I

*Where there is much light, the shadow is deep.*

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



## *Monday*

His sun glasses on, an unlit cigar in his mouth, James Dysart leaned against the back wall of the fifth floor office and waited for Ned Baker, metro editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. What passed for Ned's taste in artwork lined the walls. Behind the desk hung a framed copy of the paper's front page from September 12, 2001.

"Take those damn glasses off," Ned said, when he showed up at last. "And no smoking." He jerked the frames off James, who squinted at the sudden light. Ned handed the glasses back to him and paused, looking at his reporter closely. "You're drunk."

"And you're ugly." James held out the article he'd finished a few hours earlier as some sort of apology. "It's not lit."

Ned grabbed the papers from him and settled in behind his uncluttered desk as he glanced over the pages.

James slipped the cigar into his shirt pocket.

"You missed another staff meeting," Ned said.

“Did that apply to me?”

Ned furrowed his brow. “So. Will you blog?”

“Will you blow me?”

“Will you blog!”

“Will you blow me?”

“Damn it, James! No wonder Steph divorced you.” Ned read through the pages in no particular order, flipping them over and back. “You know, they invented something called a fax machine. Or maybe email? Just a suggestion.”

“Then how would I annoy you?”

“Or you could actually come to the newsroom every once in a while like everyone else who works here.”

“Then you’d annoy me.”

“You know, spend some quality time with your peers.”

“What peers?”

Ned frowned and returned to the pages He added as he read, “Meet your new intern.”

James glanced around. A young, half-smiling brunette stood in the doorway, her arm raised as if to affirm her status as the newly acquired property of one James Dysart, *Tribune* staff reporter. “I don’t want her,” he said as if that ended the matter.

“As if you have a choice,” Ned said.

“Give her to Curtis. That ought to irritate the hell out of him.”

Ned held up some papers from a tidy stack on his desk and waved them at James. “Do you know what I have here? Let me read a little. Let’s see, ‘By signing, I agree to indemnify the Company from any future claims.’ Blah, blah, blah. ‘I agree to protect all proprietary information.’ Blah, blah. Oh, and my favorite: ‘All writings and contributions remain the sole property of the Company.’” He slammed the papers down on his desk.

“Those words sound familiar,” James said.

“Our boilerplate termination notice. So don’t piss me off! The board - when they even bother to notice you’re still on the payroll - figures they can cut a little extra fat, make room for younger, eager fish like her, the ones who come cheap. The only value you have anymore is that damn column of yours, and that doesn’t buy much in today’s economy. Do you know what bankruptcy means? This paper just let eighty staffers go. One more won’t cause much of a fuss. Replace your name on the byline, and I doubt your readers would even notice.”

“That’s my column,” James said.

“Company property. As are you.”

“What about the Bassett story?” James’ stormy history with Chicago’s very own billionaire real estate developer Richard Bassett was the stuff of legend around the *Tribune*. James had written muck-racker-type copy on Bassett going back twenty years as the state of Illinois indicted the billionaire twice and twice failed to reel in the big fish. Now that story had taken on the whiff of political corruption as James uncovered a bribery scheme between Bassett and a city alderman. He would keep digging, of course, but both the reporter and the paper (Ned included) had been down this road before with nothing to show for it. Bassett could be a slippery sucker. For his part, he claimed Dysart had a personal vendetta against him, which James never denied, because it was true.

“This is late. Again.” Ned flipped to the second page. “You may be the self-proclaimed expert on all things Bassett, but I have other reporters on staff who’d love to get their hands on a story like this. More political corruption in the Windy City?” He leaned back for a moment, then forward suddenly. “Oh, and those other reporters show up for meetings, don’t miss deadlines and blog when asked. *Willingly* blog. Reporters who don’t give me such a goddamned headache. So you currently have two choices: pink slip or slave girl.”

“Hey,” the intern piped up.

“Maybe I’ll shop it around to the highest bidder,” James said. “I know people who’d love to have this story.”

“Name’s Sharon.” The intern held her hand out.

“I’m the only bridge you’ve got left in this town,” Ned said. “Remember that. I was best man at your wedding for Christ’s sake, a waste of my time, considering the end result. Maybe if you take on some extra responsibilities around here, I can convince the board to keep you around for awhile.”

“So I’m training my own replacement? Why are we hiring interns in the midst of layoffs, anyway?”

“Despite what you may think, you’re not that irreplaceable. She requested you, you know. Some people still look up to you, though God knows why. Just show her the damn ropes. Maybe she can teach you a thing or two about respect for authority.”

“Did you call yourself the ‘authority’?”

“Just do it.”

“Aren’t the interns the ones who clean our toilets with toothbrushes while saying ‘yes, sir’ and ‘no, sir’?”

“Okay, you win.” Ned reached for a pen. “You just won’t be content until you drive everyone from your life.”

James stared at the pen. He’d been down this road before, too, on the verge of being fired. Some stubborn part of him wanted to sign it and be done with it. But another part of him didn’t have the energy anymore to struggle back toward a living in a world where aging, unemployed journalists were a dime a dozen. He needed the paper and his editor for a little while longer, and that irritated him even more.

He put his sun glasses back on. He passed the young woman as he left the room and said, “Come on. *Intern.*”

Ned motioned for her to follow James, so she did.

A dwindling number of journalists clung to life inside the newsroom, battling against obsolescence, the clock, each other and the

editors, feeding the ever changing needs of the creatures who still required their daily fix of print journalism, creatures who were also dwindling in number. What was once a chaotic mess of reporters, photojournalists, graphic designers and interns was now a more sedated form of anarchy as the worker bees drifted away from the hive, one by one, their careers dead or dying. Some wound up at an Internet start-up, struggling to find a niche in a paradoxical market where readers wanted quality for free.

The writing was on the wall. Journalism and the *Tribune* were not what they once were. But then neither was James Dysart.

James navigated the maze of cluttered desks and computers toward his own workstation, which he seldom visited anymore. He much preferred working from home, where he could drink his whiskey and pass out at his leisure. And he much preferred pounding out his assignments on his beloved Smith Corona typewriter, held together by a bit of tape, a few jerry-rigged repairs and a stubborn refusal to enter the digital age. A bunch of pixelated screens blinking at him wasn't his idea of progress.

Every now and then he came back to the newsroom, this Mecca of journalism, to remind himself of why he didn't come here anymore.

A few dozen reporters typed away on terminals, read the morning's edition, organized notes or engaged in whispered conversations.

"Hey, Dysart," a colleague yelled. "Still working on that novel? What's it been? Ten years? Must be one helluva book."

"You're still here, Curtis? Thought they fired you just for being an asshole." He stopped when he realized the intern still shadowed him.

She almost bumped into him. "Are you fired or not? Isn't this where security escorts you from the building? Do you really make the interns clean the toilets?"

He rolled his eyes and went on to his desk. Someone had stolen his chair so he requisitioned another and sat in front of the blank

terminal. A piece of paper clung to the power button of his computer. He removed the sticker, informing him of his temporary password, which had expired several months before.

Someone had dumped a pile of envelopes across his workstation, and some of them had fallen to the floor. On top of the pile rested another contraption of the digital age, a gleaming new smart phone, company provided. He examined it, front and back. What the hell was so smart about it? Now people could annoy him by text, too? He threw it back on top of the pile.

The intern smiled at him from over his shoulder.

He gave her his best go away look and turned back to the mess on his desk. He scanned the envelopes until he found a promising one. He sniffed it and shook it next to his ear. Satisfied that it met his high standards, he ran his finger under the flap.

Sharon picked out one, too, a purple envelope that smelled of perfume. The girly script of the return address indicated some lady in De Kalb sent it. Her eyebrows rose as she lifted out a black thong. "Some things you just can't email, I guess."

He grabbed them from her and stuffed them in the garbage can under his desk. "Don't touch anything. I have a system."

"How do you tell the garbage can from the desk?" she asked.

A smattering of laughter broke out around the room.

"I only read the hate mail." He tossed more envelopes to the floor.

"Why?"

"Freaks interest me."

Sharon opened another letter. As she read it, a different expression came over her face, a combination of disgust and curiosity.

"I wouldn't let it get to you," James said. "Your name appears in print, and you become a magnet for wackos."

"Hell of a thing to call your fans," Curtis said from his desk.

"How many letters do you get exactly?" James asked him.

“It’s very descriptive,” Sharon said. “Want to hear what he wants to carve in your face?”

“Must be that piece I did on the Bears.”

Tacked along the wall around his workstation were the trophies of an aging career, clips of a column called *Goin’ Nuts*. Sharon swiped one before James could stop her. She turned away from his outstretched hand.

*Goin’ Nuts* |  
DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

By James Dysart  
Tribune staff reporter

As H.L. Mencken would have said, the “booboisie” were out in force today, the mob, the ignorami we more commonly call voters, packing their local polling place like rats lining up for a scrap of cheese. Only some politician snuck the cheese out the back and sold it to one of his wealthy friends.

Standing in line for ungodly hours of misery to vote for another useless twit whose lies we substitute for truth. That’s our lot in life. Welcome to democracy in action. The action of a day we’ll never get back again.

Next time you press a button or mark a box for president or city council member, you can smile, content in the self-delusion your vote matters. We in Chicago know better.

Remember to vote early and vote often.

”That’s rather cynical,” Sharon said. “Who’s Mencken?”

James stared at her. “What’s wrong with cynical?”

She took another clipping down. He didn’t try to stop her.

*Goin' Nuts* |  
USELESS EYE CANDY

By James Dysart  
Tribune staff reporter

The new Windows OS (that's operating system to the ignorant like me) came out today to fanfare and shrugged shoulders (that's me, shrugging). Oh, goody. More useless techno-gadgets, manipulated by consumers seeking porn more than intelligent discourse. So unzip your pants and sit awhile.

"Not bad." She tacked the clippings back up on the wall without bothering to finish the last one. "So is the cliché true? Do journalists and their editors always fight like that?"

James laughed. "Sometimes. This particular editorial relationship has some subtext. Ned and I go way back, twenty-some years, even before he had the power to fire me, though between you and me, I think he enjoys that power a little too much. I know how to handle Ned. Look, you're his idea of a babysitter. His lame attempt to keep me from my real day job, alcoholism. Which reminds me ..."

He pulled on the file drawer, beating it, tugging on it until he jerked it loose, revealing a whiskey bottle where his files should have been. The bottle was empty, much to his annoyance. "You want to talk clichés, how about an alcoholic pain-in-the-ass reporter? Anyway, like all editors, Ned is real simple to understand, so here's lesson number one. All I gotta do is bring him something worth printing in his damn paper, and he'll kiss my ass for it. Both cheeks. Not the Bassett story, though. That's old hat by now. People get immune to a constant refrain. They need something new with a bit of sparkle to it. The next story of the century or whatever. I'll come up with something."



He searched the pencil drawer and came across a small bottle, half-full. He spun the cap loose, took a gulp and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He held the bottle out to Sharon. "Don't worry, no one's getting fired. Not today. They usually do that on Friday."

She glanced about. "Not during working hours."

"Where's the fun in that? Some of the best stories have been written under the influence, even front page. Booze goes with news like . . . Bonnie and Clyde. Lesson number one. Or two. Whichever."

"Well, then. I guess I'm driving." She took her keys out and headed for the elevators. She stopped partway across the room and turned. "Come on. Stories are written in the real world."

James stared at this new curiosity as if seeing her for the first time. She was beautiful, inquisitive, full of youthful vitality. He'd been that way once. Well, maybe not the beautiful part. Something about her reminded him of someone, he just couldn't place it.

Before he left his station, he threw away his worn-out flip phone with the slightly cracked screen and broken hinge. He grabbed his new "smart" phone and followed her to the elevators.



James came out on the west side of the Tower into an alcove that led down stairs to Michigan Avenue. He slipped his sun glasses on and lit a cigar under the watchful gaze of the Nathan Hale statue, which guarded the entrance to the building.

At the bottom of the stairs Sharon waited on the back of a Harley Davidson Sportster, coated in black pearl. She held the candy red helmet out to him. "I only have one. You take it."

James thought a moment. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on. I think I'll take the 'L.'"

“Oh, come on,” she said. “Are you afraid of a girl taking the driver’s seat for a change?”

“My first ex damn near killed me on a bike. Nothing personal.”

“Pussy.” She threw the helmet to him, which he barely caught.

He glanced back at the entrance to the Tower, where the newsroom and another conversation with Ned awaited. “Oh, what the hell.” He snapped the helmet on as he stepped on the pegs and mounted the bike from the left. He made the sign of the cross. “Truth is, I don’t mind bikes nearly as much as I mind my ex-wife. Either one for that matter. Where are we going?”

“This thing isn’t really designed for two-up riding, but we’re not going very far. I’m going to show you Chicago, Harley-style.”

“Great.” James threw his cigar into a trash can as they passed it.

The bike leapt forward into the traffic of Michigan Avenue. The rumbling engine joined the other sounds of the city, the honks and whistles and whines and hisses. She accelerated north through the Magnificent Mile, where the towering hotels and aging landmarks and the shoppers with overstuffed bags blurred across his peripheral vision. Veering from lane to lane, Sharon ignored yellow lights and hardly stopped for the red ones.

“Hey,” she yelled back. “Watch the hands!”

“Sorry. Haven’t done this in awhile.”

“Hands on hips, man.”

They navigated the artificial thickets of downtown Chicago. Sharon threaded the bike through the crowded traffic of the Water Tower District, and then, without much warning, the bike broke out from among the tall buildings onto Lake Shore Drive, where the traffic picked up its pace. The huge expanse of shimmering water spread out on their right. Sharon took them north. The red arm on the speedometer eased past sixty and flicked upward suddenly toward eighty. The long, gray ribbon of road spread out in front of them, curving slightly

this way and that as they followed the contours of Lake Michigan. She urged the Harley toward ninety.

What the hell was I thinking? This girl's fucking nuts. He shut his eyes momentarily, hoping the end would come quickly. He imagined returning home safely to his aging typewriter and his half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels. Then he felt a change in momentum as the bike eased into a downward trajectory. He opened his eyes to a clear view of the watery plain of Lake Michigan and a strip of sand that hugged its edge. The Harley rumbled to a stop at a lookout point.

James eased himself off the bike. He stumbled around for a minute until he found a nearby bench, thankfully bolted to the ground. He set the helmet down and gave his breathing a chance to slow. "You know, we put stories in the paper all the time about people who can no longer be identified without the aid of dental records. Or who can only breathe through a respirator."

Sharon leaned against a railing that separated them from a gentle slope, leading to the beach. The waves broke across the sand, doling out time in steady rhythms. The wind coming off the Great Lake stirred the edges of her hair.

As James watched her stare at the water, a memory came to him, and the connection struck him. She did remind him of his first ex-wife. The dark hair, similar height and build. And the bike. Not exactly a pleasant memory, but not an unpleasant one either. "Tell me something about yourself. Where'd you grow up? Or did you grow up around here?"

She didn't answer.

"Sharon?"

A family roamed the water's edge with a Collie darting out in front of them. A young kid kicked up sand as he stretched his arm out and snatched a Frisbee midair before the dog could latch onto it. The kid ran off with it, and the Collie gave chase. A pier stretched into

the lake from a nearby dock, where boats latched in neat rows were thrown about by the steady onslaught of the waves. In the distance a sailing boat bobbed lazily like a cork on a fishing line.

“Sharon?” he asked again.

“Twenty-two thousand three hundred square miles,” she said.

He looked at her for a second. “What is—”

“The area of Lake Michigan. About the size of West Virginia. It’s only 279 feet deep, on average, with a maximum depth of 925 feet. It’s not that deep, but the water’s cold. Thirty-five degrees in the deepest parts, like a refrigerator. Bacteria grow slower at that temperature.”

James paused. “Okay. I know a lot of other useless facts about Lake Michigan, if you—”

“When a body goes under, it sinks from the weight of all that water in the lungs. Straight down. Then the pressure, as it goes deeper, forces gases from the body, so it sinks even more, sometimes all the way to the bottom. And there it stays, more dense than the water around it, until bacteria slowly fill the cavity with gases again. And up it comes, sometimes weeks, sometimes months later, but it almost always finds its way to the surface, usually not far from where it went down, though in a lake this large, strong currents might drag it miles away. Something usually washes up, eventually, unless it’s caught on something. Like an underwater tree or wreckage.”

“This conversation took a strange turn. This body have a name?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Sharon?”

She got back on her bike and circled around until she came to a stop next to him. “Get on. I have something to show you.”

He stared at her for several moments. “Doesn’t look like I have much of a choice.” He grabbed the helmet from the bench, slipped it on and got on the bike behind her. “But I’m getting a little sick and tired of being led around by the—”

The Harley jerked forward.

They tore away from the lake, heading west across the Chicago River and down the expressway, but instead of continuing on to downtown, she took the exit leading to Logan Square. She turned this way and that through a maze of streets and alleys until she came to a small path between some houses that ended under the shadow of an old three-story greystone.

Sharon locked the stand down and leapt off. She waved to a neighbor as she disappeared down a small set of stairs that led to the basement. James eased himself off the back seat and looked around at the back yard and the carports nearby. He tucked his glasses into his shirt pocket and went down the steps into the deep shadow of an enclosed entranceway. There, he found a door, slightly ajar. He pushed it open farther. "Sharon?"

"You better not have peed in the house again," she said.

A medium-sized dog with a bit of the puppy inside him leapt out from behind a door and bounded across the room to sniff the feet of the newcomer. James bent down to rub the head offered to him. The dog wagged his tail in response. "What's his name? Or her name?"

"Just got him from the shelter," Sharon said. "No name yet."

"Sharon," James said, "We need to—"

"Beer in the fridge." She led the dog into the yard.

"—Talk." He glanced around his new surroundings and wondered if he should just call a cab and go home.

A new carpet smell hung in the air of the basement studio apartment. A set of dishes, still in the box, and an order for the delivery and installation of new appliances lay on the stove under the cabinetry in the kitchen area near the main window. Streaks of white paint indicated where the recent paint job ended and where the old walls of dirty yellow took over the room. In the corner a mattress, neatly made, served as bed and couch with a flat-screen on the wall opposite

it. A coaxial cable stretched from TV to the cable box, next to the operating manuals and the remote.

He glanced around for a place to sit, when he noticed the door Sharon left ajar when she let the dog out. Inside, he noticed the edges of a desk and a book shelf half-filled, which must have been her home office.

What really drew his attention were the papers tacked all over the hutch above the desk. He recognized that paper, its texture, the distinct way it yellowed over time. He'd spent most of his adult life around the kind of cheap paper the industry used for newsprint.

As he drew closer, he noticed a familiar name on the byline.

He flipped on the light and took one down, setting the pushpin aside. The date indicated the article was published on April 11, 2005 in the *Chicago Tribune*.

## LOST ON LAKE MICHIGAN

*Search for missing student continues*

By James Dysart  
Tribune staff reporter

Stephen Hodges, a Northwestern University graduate student, has been missing since Saturday night, when he piloted a twenty-one foot Hunter daysailer into the severe weather that struck Lake Michigan over the weekend

According to Petty Officer 1st Class Brent Schofield of the U.S. Coast Guard, "No one in a vessel that small should have been out in that weather, not by himself and certainly not someone with so little experience."

James turned his attention to some of the other articles and read them in place until he got the gist of their content.

## PRESUMED DEAD

*USCG abandons search for missing student*

By James Dysart  
Tribune staff reporter

A small sailing vessel named Old Sally, last seen in the possession of Northwestern graduate student Stephen Hodges, drifted into shore late last night with no sign of its pilot. The twenty-one foot single hull daysailer evidently capsized during a violent storm on Lake Michigan Saturday night.

The owner of the boat, Dr. Gary Hume, a professor at Northwestern, couldn't be reached for comment.

While the investigation is ongoing, authorities say the most likely explanation is that Hodges was the victim of huge swells and unmanageable conditions . . .

## MORE CLUES, NO BODY

*Boat found without missing student*

By James Dysart  
Tribune staff reporter

Authorities have found signs that Stephen Hodges may have struck his head prior to going overboard, when he piloted his twenty-one foot daysailer into violent thunderstorms on Lake Michigan Saturday night.

Traces of blood were found on the hull near the stern, leading investigators to conclude Hodges may have been unconscious when he entered the water.

Efforts to find a body have so far turned up nothing. According to Capt. John Springfield of the U.S. Coast Guard, most bodies will eventually wash to the surface but some may be carried hundreds of yards offshore, if they are caught in the rip currents that can crop up along the coastline . . .

He stopped reading as he noticed another familiar name. Stephanie Kramer-Dysart of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The second ex-Dysart.

He'd met Steph when he took a temporary job at the *Tribune's* cross-town rival. In time, he returned to his roots at the *Tribune* but not before falling in love with the sandy-haired reporter. Even after they married—his second, her first—they continued to work across the city from each other, competitors to the end.

Then the long decline set in, the shouting and accusations, the broken dishes. The past could be a terrible thing to carry around inside your head.

Since the divorce, he'd made it his strict policy to avoid reading anything she wrote. Now it seemed he had no choice. He took the article down and unfolded it to its full length.

The date was older than the others: August 23, 2001.

## EXPELLED STUDENT READMITTED TO NORTHWESTERN

By Stephanie Kramer-Dysart |  
skramer@suntimes.com

Northwestern University has readmitted former graduate student Stephen Hodges into their biochemistry program. Mr. Hodges was expelled in 1993 when a fire took the life of a fellow student.

The fire blazed out of control not far from Northwestern's Evanston campus in a house where Hodges and several other students were conducting unauthorized experiments. One of those students, Chris Stuben, was rushed to the University of Chicago burn unit, where he died several days later.

The Office of Student Conduct met with Hodges behind closed doors. While the transcript of that proceeding was sealed, Hodges reportedly walked out of the meeting and away from his doctorate.



In addition to a civil suit by the Stuben family, he faced criminal charges for involuntary manslaughter, a class 3 felony in Illinois with a possible sentence of 25 years in prison and a fine up to \$25,000.

But some strange things happened in the life of Stephen Hodges on his way to obsolescence.

For one, his legal problems mysteriously went away. Both the criminal charges against him and the civil suit were dropped with no explanation.

Second, not long after he parted ways with Northwestern, Mr. Hodges was awash in private funding and began submitting paper after paper on cellular metabolism, growth and development. All his submissions were rejected by the mainstream, reputable peer-reviewed journals but some of the papers appeared in open source publications.

According to Eric Farris, a biology professor at the University of Chicago, “an advanced degree isn’t required for journal publication or any degree at all, but it’s extremely hard to be taken seriously by reputable journals without one, unless you’re at least working toward a degree. And it’s impossible to receive federal grants.”

Funding doesn’t seem to have been Hodges’ problem. Working well with others was.

Hodges become more and more isolated as those who worked under him, mostly recent graduates of Northwestern, quit one by one. Some complained of his refusal to give them credit for anything, while others cited the negative effects on their career due to their association with Hodges.

For his part, Hodges accused his former employees of pilfering his ideas, and he accused the scientific community of a concerted effort to marginalize him and his research.

Even so, his results consistently impressed even his fiercest critics.

When Hodges turned his considerable acumen toward stem cells, a controversial field already hampered by negative publicity, the criticism became even more fierce, considering his history of questionable ethical choices. Many harbored serious concerns about the nature of his private funding source. Some of his peers went even further and labeled him “a dangerous rogue”.

The powers that be at Northwestern apparently came to a different conclusion. The university had started its own stem cell program by that time. This summer, the school's Office of Student Conduct reversed its previous stance.

"Stephen Hodges is one of the brightest students this institution has ever seen," said a member of the board, who agreed to comment only on condition of anonymity. "It would be a shame if we didn't allow him to pursue a degree simply due to a past error in judgment. We want to put all that behind us."

Stephen Hodges will be allowed to start where he left off. What Hodges makes of his second chance is still an open question.

"I think he likes you," Sharon said.

James looked at the dog, then turned back to the clippings.

She stared at him from the doorway. "You know, you really should ask a girl before you invade her personal space."

He ran a finger along the aging newsprint. "How old were you?"

"Fourteen."

"Your father, I'm guessing?"

"I need your help."

"You do need help. But not mine." The dog followed James toward the front door. "I'd recommend a good therapist, but she's a marriage counselor and probably won't help much."

She cut him off at the door. "I thought you wanted a story."

"I have a story. Several. I'm going to my place to work on them." He pushed around her and jogged up the steps into the front yard.

She followed him. "Not this one. What better way to disappear? They wouldn't search that hard for you that hard, not if they couldn't find some sign of you within a week. They'd give up and go home. Eventually, it becomes a cold case. No one cares anymore."

He looked at the Harley. Maybe the nearest ‘L’ station? He took out his phone and dialed a cab. “The story’s dead. Get it? Like your father. Sorry about your luck, but it ain’t my problem. Last year, they found a diver who’d gone down in Lake Michigan twelve years ago. Twelve years! Bodies go in, and sometimes they don’t come out. You said it yourself. Maybe he got caught on something down there.” He listened to the recording telling him to wait for an operator.

“Your ex wouldn’t return my calls. Maybe she knows something. Or maybe you can find something I missed. I didn’t know where else to start. I can’t do this on my own.”

“Why not? You can ask the same questions. Maybe you’re afraid of what you might find.”

“I’m not afraid! Sounds more like you are.”

James listened to the recording again. “You write a story, you move on. You leave it in the rear view mirror. What you don’t do is follow every dead . . .” He looked into her hard eyes for a moment. “I’m not calling my ex for you. We’re much happier not talking to each other.”

“You’re not happy. You’re a perennial drunk. Not one but two failed marriages. You haven’t had a front page story, in what? Ten, fifteen years? Maybe that’s why you drink. You’re living off past glory. I think you do care about that.” When he didn’t say anything, she added, “They never did find a body.”

“Why dig up a man’s grave? Only heartache down that road, trust me. The past is better left buried, where it can’t hurt you.” The operator’s voice came on the phone. “Yes, I’d like a—“

She grabbed the phone from him and hung up the call.

“Hey!” James reached for it, but she held it away from him.

He came closer and stared into those eyes for a hint of something that might give him a read on her. He found only coldness and stubborn determination.

“He’s not dead,” she insisted.

“You haven’t been straight with me since we met. That’s okay. Everyone lies. Just remember one thing: the worst lies are always the ones we tell ourselves.” He caught her hand and held her wrist still, while he ripped the phone away. He dialed the cab company again and turned his back on her.

“Something else,” she said quickly. “Before he disappeared, the cops were looking into my father for murder. My mother’s murder. She was dying of cancer. They accused him of being involved somehow, either directly or by helping her. That investigation ended the day my father disappeared. Isn’t that worth a few questions?”

James ended the call as someone answered. He tapped the phone against his forehead. *Don’t get involved. Don’t you dare ask . . .* “Why hasn’t he been in touch with you, if he’s still above ground? What kind of father does that?”

“I’ll ask him when I see him.”

*Don’t . . .* James couldn’t help himself. Something in him refused to let go of an unanswered question, once that question had taken root in his journalistic mind. People don’t fake their deaths, not for any good reasons. Not unless they owe someone a boatload of money. Maybe a police investigation would force someone to such a drastic action. Maybe. He would have been facing years in prison. Would that be enough to push him over the edge?

Maybe.

Then there was that other nagging question. The article mentioned something about private funding. Maybe whoever gave him the money helped him disappear. Or that person might have been after him, too, like the cops. Someone with the habit of breaking femurs or making a body disappear in a boating accident. A scientist desperate for funding? Desperate for fame and glory? Perhaps her father got in bed with the wrong sort.

Maybe there *was* more to this story.

Maybe.

Or perhaps it was all nothing. A dead end, a waste of his time.  
Wishful thinking by an orphaned daughter.

Maybe.

They stared at each other until James blinked first. “Oh, hell. I think Steph moved to Vegas, where dreams go to die.”



end of excerpt

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Ken L Gould has worked in healthcare for 25 years, where he has witnessed first hand the difficulties of dealing with death and the struggles of those who refuse to let go, when the time has come.

*Death's Grip* is his debut novel. In keeping with his nomadic ways this book was written in many states and cities, beginning in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, traveling to Overland Park, Kansas and winding down in Flagstaff in the shadow of the wild mountains of Northern Arizona. He has now settled (as much as he can settle) in Portage, Michigan, next to Kalamazoo, where he still works in healthcare. He lives with a crazy dog named Dootzie and an even crazier fiancée named Angela.

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