

From Chapter One of the *Unseen Hand of Peter Gyges*

Before he started fishing again he looked into the western sky.

He was startled by what he saw. A frontal line had claimed almost half the sky. The black clouds rolled ominously in his direction. He watched them for just a minute. They were coming in very fast and he could hear the faint rumble of distant thunder. That sound sent a shiver through him. You did not want to be out in the middle of the lake waving fishing rods in the air with lightning flashing all around you. He hurriedly pulled up the anchor and started paddling hard.

Now the wind began to pick up. Gyges noticed that it was considerably cooler than the surrounding air. Then suddenly the sun disappeared, swallowed by a long black shadow at the front edge of the storm. The water chopped immediately. Gyges dug hard against the water. He stroked faster, trying to outrun the storm to the nearest island in front of him. He was helped by the wind at his back and the canoe picked up speed. He slowed down just long enough to pick up his other marker. Then he dug hard into the water to get off the lake. Now the distant thunder had become less distant and more audible. He could also see lightning flashes in the darkening clouds behind him. His back and arms ached but he did not slow. Thanks to the wind behind him, he made it to the island before the full force of the storm broke over the lake.

He pulled the canoe completely out of the water all the way onto the island. He took out his paddle and fishing and other gear, then he turned the canoe over. Using the paddle to prop up the front end, Gyges crawled underneath it for cover. He looked out from under the canoe shelter at the ever-darkening sky and the angry lake.

The sound of thunder increased in frequency and intensity as the flashes of lightning became more prominent and frequent. He could see now huge multi-branched flashes rip through the sky. The wind increased in velocity. The pine trees at the back edge of the beach moaned their complaints as the wind bent them over. Then the rain started, a few large heavy sprinkles at first but then a heavy curtain of ice-cold rain swept east across the lake and over the island.

All of nature was in motion around him. The perfect solitude of just a few minutes ago had shattered into a thousand swirling pieces. Earth, air, wind, water, rain, trees, even the pebbles on the beach stirred in the torrent.

Suddenly a white flash shattered a large pine tree behind him and the immediate deafening thunderclap explosion forced him to hide his head under his arms. The wind and rain picked up intensity. The canoe began to rock unsteadily in the wind. Gyges dropped down the paddle so that he was

completely covered by the canoe. He put his arms through the portage spars and pulled down hard to keep the canoe from blowing away.

Now the island rocked under the full force of the storm. The wind, thunder, lightning, rain and waves assaulted Gyges's canoe on the beach. The sky was completely dark, illuminated only by the frequent flashes of lightning. The noise on the island was deafening. The wind beat the lake waves farther and farther onto the island shore. Water started to flow in under the canoe. Gyges tried to edge his shell backward but with little success. He had never been more frightened in his life.

But the canoe was not washed into the lake. The lightning cracks moved farther east. And the wind eased slightly, as did the rain. Gyges peeked out from under his shell. The sky was still night dark. But then, one of the flashes revealed a white form on the island several feet from where Gyges hid under his canoe. He started and stared out at the lump on the edge of the water. It was too dark for him to make out what it was. The storm was abating and the sky returning to dark gray from pitch black. Gyges felt safe enough now to raise the canoe high enough to prop it up with the paddle again.

He turned his attention to the white form washed up in the storm.

Gyges wondered what the storm had washed up on shore with him. A big fish? Damn big if it is a fish! Maybe a monster channel cat. It's white like the cat's underbelly. Or a sturgeon. Yes, more likely it's sturgeon, those ugly monsters from extreme depths.

He could still hear the thunder in the distance, but the sky was much lighter now and Gyges felt safe enough to crawl out from under the canoe. He sat next to it and studied the sky and then he turned his gaze back to what the depths had brought up. Unable to discern what it was, Gyges moved away from the canoe to get a closer look.

"Oh my God, it's a man! Hey, hey buddy, are you ok? Are you alive?" he shouted at the body. It did not respond to his question.

"He must be dead. Christ I should go look but I am afraid of what I'll find."

Gyges picked up a rock and threw at the body. The rock struck the body in the back. It didn't move. Gyges picked up a long stick. When he got close enough, he poked the lifeless form on the legs. No movement. But Gyges recoiled at this lack of vitality.

I knew it, he thought. Dead. Goddamn. How did he get way out here?

He cupped a hand over his eyes and scanned the horizon looking for another boat in the area. Nothing.

Unexpectedly, the sky started to darken again and the thunder and lightning that had been in the distance became more pronounced. The wind picked up again too. Gyges looked skyward. Another storm was going to roll over the island.

He looked down again at the body, nudged it with his foot and then knelt next to it. He slowly reached out his hand and touched its shoulder. Cold as hell. Gyges thought he must have been in the water a long time but he's not that bloated or discolored. Very weird.

The wind punished the trees, making them bend and moan once more. Gyges started to walk back to his canoe but cast one last look at the body over his shoulder as he turned to the canoe.

Wait, what is that on his hand?

He went back and reached out to the dead man's hand. He picked up the hand to look at it more closely.

A ring. Look at the size of it. It's big and damn expensive looking. I think there are diamonds all over it. Well pal you won't be needing this any more. No sense leaving for the fishes or somebody else to find.

Gyges tried to take the ring off of the dead man's hand but the fingers but it wouldn't budge. He tried rubbing water on the finger but the ring was on too tight.

If I'm going to acquire this prize, then I've got just one choice.

He took out his Swiss army knife from his back pocket. He opened the largest blade. He pulled the dead man's hand toward himself. Without a moment's hesitation, he cut the finger off at the knuckle where it joins the hand. He did his work quickly and cleanly as if he were gutting a deer he had killed. He washed the blood off his hands and ring in the waters of the lake. He threw the severed finger to the fishes and put the ring on his own hand. A perfect fit. What are the odds, he thought.

Just then a terrible thunderclap and flash of lightning sent Gyges scrambling for his canoe. He scurried under it and pulled it completely over his head. The sky grew completely dark once again except for the frequent lightning flashes. The wind beat the waves again onto the island shore as deeply as before. The invading waves reclaimed the body. It drifted on the surface for a moment but then sank back to the depths under the ferocious pounding of the waves.

Gyges hunkered down inside the canoe waiting for the second storm to pass. When it did, he looked out to see that the body had disappeared. He immediately looked to his hand and admired his newly found prize.