

Hand of Belenos

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This is a work of fiction woven through real places.

The River Earn flows through Crieff, Scotland. The James River winds through Virginia. The Graham and Drummond clans have deep roots in Highland history. These places and names are real, and they are honored here.

But the characters who walk these lands, the events that unfold along these rivers, and the gifts passed through these bloodlines are born of imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

McKenna Chapel, Dugald Wynd, and McKenna's Glen exist in the heart of this story, if not on any map.

James Bend, it's surroundings and the James Bend Medical Center are also born of imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Chapter One

THE WIND ALONG THE RIVER EARN sliced like an unseen dagger. Whipping from North to South, the tempest sent a chill through everyone who ventured out that day, Clan be damned. Folks in the surrounding villages bundled up, shielding themselves from the cold, and it only promised to worsen.

Late fall, the leaves were stripped from the trees. They stood like barren giants in the distance on the hills. Nothing to stop the winds from blowing down from the mountains.

Dugald pulled his deerskin wraps tighter and clasped the Penannular bearing the Graham Clan Badge. It held the skins over his shoulders and around his neck. The gusts filled unseen voids.

This winter will be hard. Our harvest crop, plentiful most seasons, failed us. Dugald searched the skies. Many have so little, help each other, we will.

It's always been this way in the Highlands. Difficult winters. Difficult weather. Difficult harvest. Difficult decisions. "Do I feed the cattle that later feeds me?" Dugald pondered out loud. His breath fogged in the bitter air. "Or do I feed my family?"

"'Tis an impossible decision." A new, unnerving choice hung over the valley.

Drummond hands labored these fields for centuries. Sound men. A clan built on strength. Now, the Graham Clan came down from



the western mountains. He gazed to his right, towards the hills, then back to the Drummond Village in the east.

In the distance, a wisp of smoke from a chimney rose to the heavens.

“They’re weak. We haven’t brought our wood in yet.” Dugald scoffed under his breath.

But they’ve worked the earth for hundreds of years. Through the skirmishes when the Graham Clan first arrived. Through the uneasy agreements between the two to exist together in this lush but harsh landscape.

“God d’int mean for us to perish, but He d’int mean for them to be so close.” Unpleasant memories were like the gusts in the air, plentiful and bitter.

“We couldn’t rid ourselves of the British Drummond bloke last year. What a belligerent sot he proved to be. He must’ve come from their village. Glad we sent him on his way—back to London. Godspeed to the likes of him!”



Dugald reached his destination, the only pub in the county—the only neutral place where men can be men and steel themselves from the misery of the early winter and block the blabbering of women and the bickering of children always underfoot.

Dugald entered and settled at a corner table near several members of the Drummond clan—*if closer their odor might pierce my nostrils*. He cast his eyes out the window beyond.

A few wore their Drummond tartan, and the flames danced,

keeping the room warm. Dugald gritted his teeth and begrudgingly admitted—the chill left his weathered face.

They kept to themselves, ignoring Dugald—*fine with me*. All he wanted was to be left alone and drink his mead.

One of the rabble announced, “Why ‘ave the fire? Go out like a newborn and frolic the day away!” Angus chirped, “Bollocks, Fergus! Bleating like a crippled goat, you, to be sure!”

Manly humor and banter—it didn’t change, no matter your clan affiliation. Man bests man—or dares one to do better. A smirk came to Dugald’s face.

At the Drummond table, a man caught Dugald’s eye—*keeping to himself, like me*.

When the rancor settled down, Dugald overheard him say, “It’s been two years, two years since I lost my two bairns—precious to me. And now? My oldest is sick. I fear he caught the Scarlet. My thought is he won’t make the winter. T’is a sadness I canna bear, lads...” his voice trailed off.

His clanmates kept silent and respectful.

Winter in the valley? Punishing, and their bones would bear witness to its cruelty. The spartan cemetery nearby had its share of souls buried within who could speak to it.

As Dugald sat, focusing on gnarled fingers gripping the cup, he felt a tug. Not on his clothing or even his arm, but from within, not a slight feeling, but one that bore power. He looked around, but no one was present.

Do not ignore the pull when it calls to you...

He recalled words that had swirled in the dreams that haunted his

nights.

Answer the pull when it bids you to follow...

He didn't understand that which was pulling him. He saw nothing. He observed nothing. All around was the same, yet the pull grew stronger.

Answer the pull at a slight cost to you. Do not answer the pull begets a greater cost to all...

Dugald could no longer ignore what he heard, both within his head and from around him. He stood, walked to the man, who studied him up and down with a harsh eye.

His voice changed from fatherly-tinged sorrow to one of utter disdain. "Ha' ye come to gloat, Graham?" he sneered.

The remaining Drummond clansmen arose from their seats, uncovering their broadswords in their sheaths. The floor would feast upon his blood if he broached the line.

Dugald spoke with purpose, "Aye, we stand with opposite clans, but together as men." The furrow in his brow framed the seriousness of his words.

"Take me to y'er boy. We've not the time to ponder..."

The Drummond male stared in disbelief, but Dugald stood resolute. His words bore the honor that both respected.

Kieran Drummond rose and obliged the request.



The group travelled down the path to a humble structure. Kieran said, “This be me hooze. The boy be upstairs.” Coughing echoed from above them as the door opened. The Drummond men’s eyes fixed on Dugald like hawks on the hunt. They prayed for a reason to lay blade to skin.

As the group stepped inside, Dugald turned to Kieran and said, “I g’ my word, no harm will come t’ the boy. T’ will be alright.” Kieran could not deny him, but could not believe him. The Drummond men started forward to stop Dugald, but Kieran raised his hand and stopped them from moving closer.

Dugald stared back at the group, wheeled, and disappeared up the stairs. Footsteps... muffled voices... then the coughing stopped.

Confusion came over the group’s faces. *What transpired? Is all lost? Why is it so quiet? Pray—the wind ceased howling!*

They traded stares, then moved as one towards the stairs when the running of feet across the floorboards froze them where they stood.

Down the stairs came the son, in his bedclothes! The child ran to his mother and embraced her. “Mother!” he cried, turning. “Father!” They stood in stunned awe. Fergus clutched the crucifix hanging around his neck and kissed it.

Dugald struggled down the stairs. He stepped in front of the group. They parted, revealing Kieran holding his child, tears streaming down his face. Dugald limped to him, reached out, grasped his forearm, and said, “We be on opposite Clans, but this is a gift I can give but this once. Once through your door, opposite clans we must return.”

He walked past the others. They bowed their heads—reaching out to touch his outer deerskin wrap as he passed. Angus blessed himself after touching his sleeve.

Dugald moved through the door, using the frame to steady his weak legs. Now outside, he turned back for one last survey of the awestruck Drummond men.

Kieran raised his hand towards him. His eyes had disbelief etched upon them. Dugald nodded his head, then set his sights on his village ... and disappeared down the path.



Chapter Two

THE SUMMER SUN beat down on Duncan's face.

Working in his yard ranked high among his favorite things to do—not confined by walls, a classroom, a gym or a locker room. Alone in the open air, with no phones, no rabbit-eared televisions, nothing to take his focus from the job at hand.

But this? At 11 years old? *Mom sentenced me to yard prison, with hard labor no less.*

Mulch. Piles of it. No—mountains. Still, he loved the aroma. The pine and bark... that earthy outdoor aroma called to him. It filled his lungs as he drew a deep breath.

“Mom!!”

“Mooom!!!”

McKenna stuck her head out the kitchen window.

“Do I have to spread all of this? It'll take forever! I wanted to go play with Timmy!”

“Duncan Graham, you get to work or I'll call the lad and his family t' tell them where t' come for your waaake! Sure as y'er standin' there, I'll dig the grave myself!” Her Scottish accent snapped through the air.



Duncan understood that when that voice cracked like a whip, no back-talking or arguments happened. You do what Mom says. You do it now, not later. Duncan knew the rules. *She always made up for raising her voice like that. Maybe this time she will make cookies as a surprise.* He hoped so anyway.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he answered as he positioned the wheelbarrow to put in the first load. Shovelful after shovelful, wheel the load over to her prized flower bed, spread it out on his hands and knees.

He ran the checklist in his head nonstop—ten times.

Uh-hh. Oooh boooy.

Not a good day to wear a bright colored T-shirt. Duncan stared down at the soiled garment—then peeled it off. The sun warmed his skin and made it glisten in the sunlight. Sweat matted his long, wavy brown hair. The sun twinkled off the red highlights.

If I am working outside, I might as well tan.

So lucky I don’t burn... He didn’t have the typical pasty white Scottish complexion.

Duncan had heard the name ‘Black Scot’ before, but he didn’t understand it at first. Having a darker complexion and dark tresses ranked high on the list of lucky traits. Duncan never sunburned. Ever.

Five hours on the beach, and everyone else would dash for cover or sunscreen. Duncan was immovable, throwing his frisbee around with the dog in the sweltering heat.

His mother wrapped her pride in her “Little Dark Warrior” like a shawl on her shoulders. Blessed from birth, something that defied odds, yet here he stood. A gift. A blessing. A...

“Haaaay!” Duncan glanced up to see Timmy.

“Heeeey!” Duncan leapt up and started play-fighting with his friend.

Timmy backed up and raised his fists. Prepared and ready, complete with his meanest face, he dropped his crutch to the side and waited to get tackled.

Down they went, laughing, rolling and wrestling. Duncan took care, knowing Timmy’s legs lacked strength...but somehow, Timmy always won. They both knew Duncan let him win, but they didn’t care.

This was livin’. This was summer. This is the way life is supposed to be.



He remembered back to when Timmy was stronger. Playing catch, his arm ranked as one of the best on the block. And Duncan constantly challenged him to try and throw farther, adding a little distance each time. Timmy never failed.

One time, though, Timmy couldn’t. The ball fell well short of where he stood. So Duncan baited him to do it again. It came up short again. And again. And again.

Timmy must have been tired or something. Duncan mentioned it in passing. Timmy admitted to being sore for a week or so. They didn’t think anything of it.

A couple of weeks later, out on the tire swing, the two of them goofing around—Timmy fell off—crashed really hard on his back. It scared him more than it hurt. Duncan ran to him and stared at the fear etched on Timmy’s face. Duncan asked him what had happened.

He couldn't hold the rope tight—and didn't know why. His hands musta slipped.

Timmy showed up at school on the first day of classes, using a cane—everyone's shock registered on their faces. He ranked high as an athlete, but now he didn't go outside for recess. Various kids volunteered to get lunch from the cafeteria and bring it to the classroom, saving him that long walk.

He was absent a lot, too.

Duncan didn't understand and didn't know how to help. They adjusted the way they played, getting closer so Timmy didn't have to work as hard...or they did things that didn't take a lot of effort. He wanted to be with his friend.

No brothers, sisters or extended family in their age range nearby. Just the two of them lived in the neighborhood.

The boys saw when Duncan's dog got hit by a car—they sobbed together.

Duncan sat with him after Timmy's first crush, when she said to Timmy's face that she liked someone else. That scar ran deep.

They went bowling together—swimming, bike riding and hiking up the small hill in their neighborhood.

Now it seemed like a mountain never to conquer again.



Without warning, something poked him in the back. Timmy wielded the crutch. Snapping out of the daydream, he thrust his hands in the air.

“I surrender!!!” Duncan shrieked. Timmy got him again—and down they went, laughing into the grass. They lay there for a moment, basking in the sun.

Duncan started, “Hey, you wanna help me move some mulch? You can sit and push it around as best you can... and I’ll bring it over in the wheelbarrow.”

“Sure!” Timmy craved to do something... no matter how little. He sat right where Duncan put him, adjusting his position and spreading it out. Not perfect, but it wasn’t meant to be pristine—it just happened.

Timmy attacked his task using his crutch, combined with the rake on the ground next to him. Duncan grinned every time he brought a new wheelbarrow full over.

He was trying to bury Timmy, but Timmy kept up, at least for a little while. They laughed, grabbed handfuls and tossed mulch snowballs around. Timmy started to slow down... so Duncan slowed down as well.

Soon though, Timmy called him over. “Help me up,” Tim said, weary from all the activity. Duncan’s jaw clenched for a second and in the next second, he was helping his friend off the ground.

“I think I need to go lie down and rest... but thanks for letting me try, Dunc!”

McKenna witnessed it all from the kitchen window. Her heart broke for the boys, but it never showed. Those were Timmy’s tears in her eyes.

“Moooom, I’ll be right back—going to walk him home!” Duncan yelled.

“Okay, Lad,” McKenna replied.

“Bye, Miss Drummond!” Timmy yelled as he waved.

“Goodbye, Timothy. Say hello to your parents for me! Tell them I’ll call soon.”

“Sure will!” Timmy answered. He loved when she called him Timothy.

The lad calls me Miss Drummond, the least I can do is return the favor.

She watched from the window as the boys moved down the street—Duncan on one side, the crutch on the other.

“Puir wee scone.” *Poor child indeed.* Tears started to roll down her freckled cheeks. “‘Tis a sin he doesn’t d’serve.”



Chapter Three

MCKENNA REACHED for a soft dishcloth and wiped her eyes and cheeks.

You emotional ninny, you know better than to question God's will.
Have empathy—yes, but not sorrow. It's not the Drummond way.

Her memories trickled back to her, like a stream in the Highlands, so long ago.

The Drummond way. The Highlands. The hardship. The suffering.

The shame.

A girl of 18? In love with The Provost? Of a different clan? Impossible! Never to be!

But there he preached. Perfection. Outside at the Graham Village square, tending to his flock. The parents and children all congregated around him, listening raptly.

Ethan spoke with such conviction and passion. Not of fire and brimstone, but of love, caring and understanding. He bade his followers not to hate. It is a useless emotion as it solves nothing.

“Hate not unto the Drummonds. Embrace them,” Ethan said with quiet resolve. “If they question your intent, answer them with your goodwill. If they suspect your motive, prove to them you have



no desire to take from them. If they say they do not need your help, do so anyway.”

Ethan paused, set his eyes on his parishioners and waited for a voice of disagreement. None came. They revered this man. They lived his words and wore them like protective armor.

Suddenly, the crowd started to murmur and turned towards McKenna. She didn't feel threatened. She had no fear. The Provost spoke words of solace, and she was drawn to the message. It was not a message on the lips of most men.

“Come, join us. All are welcome at our table,” said the Provost.

His gentle reassurance pulled her in. She sat in an empty chair and listened. His voice floated, lilting and hypnotic. Driven by duty, anchored in faith—*and as handsome as an Angel could be*. McKenna's cheeks flushed and gave her away.

Ethan spoke to her after the service. In fact, all came to her and talked to her. How could this be? *I've been told my whole life these people are to be feared*—she contemplated—*but I have nothing but love for them*.

My clan doesn't speak this way. But in softer moments, alone with her Father, he professed not to understand the hatred of man. *It appears there are others who think this way*.

She visited often, and the villagers affectionately called her Kenna. Ethan took to whispering that term of endearment as well.

Ethan spoke softly to McKenna late one night, “I will come to you before your village. I will let them view the man, not the Standard. Put faith in me, I believe all to be good, no matter their clan. Either I will be lauded or shunned. God's Plan will be made known to all present... and I will accept His will, whatever it may be.”

McKenna feared the worst for her love but placed her belief in him and his words. That trust and confidence gave him strength as he bade her farewell. She disappeared into the mist with only her lantern to guide her.

It felt like a whirlwind; it was perfect—until it wasn't.



A Drummond Clan member named Aswan witnessed her coming back from the Graham Village late that evening. Early the next day, he proclaimed in the Village Square that the Drummond's name had been soiled.

The men of the hamlet swore to take up arms. The womenfolk would punish her for her misdeeds.

In the Graham village, Ethan set forth as he promised, unaware of the maelstrom he would enter.

McKenna protested her innocence to all who came to judge... The crowd steadily grew. Women hissed and spat at her feet. The men gathered in a small group, plotting their revenge.

We can arrange raids! Burn their stored hay! Open their fence line and let loose their cattle!

The sound of hooves drew closer. Ethan circled the Village on his mount. He rode right to the clachan centre, where McKenna stood in judgement atop the large wooden dais.

Dismounting, his cape billowed beneath a gleaming breastplate. His warrior gauntlets beat against it, drawing attention from all present.

A silence fell on the group as he continued striking his chest. *Madness had overtaken him...* when he suddenly stopped, focused

upon the crowd. He turned to meet McKenna's gaze.

Ethan took her by the hand but spoke to those gathered.

His voice commanded them to listen.

"I come to you not to be your adversary. I come to defend this woman. She has done nothing for you to cast guilt towards her. She has done nothing to dishonor the great Drummond name," he thundered, their attention frozen.

"It is not for Man to judge who is right or wrong. The Almighty makes that decision when we go before him on our own Judgement Day."

"I come to your Elders this day to ask their acceptance of the Graham Clan as brothers under God, the way it is meant to be," Ethan continued.

Ethan turned to Lachlan Drummond. "This"—he swept his hand across the landscape—"is yer land. As guests, the Graham Clan came and sought safety from the hills. Both clans have learned to live together. I implore your kindness to let us remain in harmony."

He removed his warrior gloves, then peeled away the linen wraps beneath, baring his hands to the cold.

One hand pressed to the armor over his heart. The other reached toward the sky.

"If peace cannot be granted, then I place my faith in Dugald Graham to lead me beyond when you strike me down and spill my blood on the very earth he trod upon."

With one swift motion, he stripped the breastplate from his body and flung it to the ground. It landed with a sickening crash against the rocks and mud.

With steady breath, Ethan drew his sword—not to brandish it, but to offer it. He ran its edge across his palm. A thin ribbon of blood beaded along his skin. He planted the tip of the blade in the dirt.

Lachlan stared in silence. He searched the eyes of his fellow clan members. Weary men, willing to stand if needs be. Proud men.

Then he spotted a boy, young and innocent, looking towards McKenna, crying her name. They both had the arm wraps of the same family. The child dried his eyes on his sleeves then stood in defiance, as a Drummond male should.

This verity shall not be his verity—Lachlan’s silent prayer lifted to the Heavens.

Then, with disdain, he removed his gloves, stripped his hands bare, and let the gauntlets fall to the ground. Armor no longer mattered.

Ethan reached up and placed the hilt in Lachlan’s hand.

Ethan’s hand touched Lachlan’s briefly. Little did Lachlan know, Ethan had touched his heart as well.

Under their feet, the earth tasted Ethan’s blood as it dripped from his hand.

And Ethan knelt.

The crowd held its breath. The wind stirred the Graham banner Ethan had planted, yet the Drummond standards stood still—heavy in the hush.

McKenna looked upon love, willing to surrender everything for what he believed in.

Lachlan stared down at the man before him, then at the sword.

A man pressed forth from the gathering towards Ethan. His steps were slow. His gaze pierced armor and cloth alike.

Alastair, brother to Aswan, the accuser, ranked as the most respected warrior in the Drummond Clan: a shrewd tactician, Master Archer and second to no one with the sword. A hawk was etched deep into his breastplate, signifying his cunning and lethality. He moved with uncertainty and with perplexed glances, fighting his own internal moral compass.

To witness him so unsure unsettled many present.

He approached and spoke with passion, “We have lore, ‘ave been told the stories. My great-great-grandfather passed them to my great-grandfather, he passed it on to his son. My grandfather passed it to MY father. My father passed it to me.”

“Every Drummond knows the Myth — we call him Dugald Albios.”

“T’was generations ago that it was relayed by Kieran Drummond, a story passed down to us and guiding us to this daay.”

“You call to the name of Dugald, but you bear witness that he be GRAHAM?”

Ethan did not look up. He would not move from his position of fealty.

“Aye, from my lips to any God who cares to hear my testimony. A Graham he is.”

Gasps rippled across the crowd. Lachlan stared at the awe in his kinsman’s eyes. The Clan Chief studied his men’s faces, scarred over the years. Women clutched their children close with fear. The breeze stirred the leaves, not crushed into the mud by soggy feet. Alastair

and Lachlan glanced at each other, bewildered.

His gaze lowered to the hilt, a simple blue jewel affixed to its pommel, the grip wrapped in deep forest green twine. Lachlan, unsure, gripped it with both bare hands and lifted the weapon above his head.

He appeared ready to strike, but instead, snapped the edge onto his unprotected, weathered palms and drew it across his own hand.

He dropped to one knee and proclaimed for all to hear, “The stories passed down to me, etched into my soul, but I never believed it to be true. And now, a man comes, and... I..” Lachlan choked on his words.

“I’ve never seen a man as pure and full of love until this very moment.” His gaze locked on the man before him—Ethan’s head still bowed to accept his fate. “Rise and have no fear of me.”

Lachlan stood, grasping Ethan in the traditional warrior’s clasp, known to those who have stood in battle.

Lachlan pleaded, “Provost Graham, it is my most reverent request that you minister to Clan Drummond as you tend to Clan Graham—your word is true and intentions are pure.” He looked directly at Aswan, “Many are in need of light and goodness.”

A collective breath left everyone present, McKenna included. She could love Ethan the man, while honoring her name and the man who brought peace to the Valley that day. Little did they realize there were Dark Forces yet to come.

The Provost left the village, and McKenna continued with her life, visiting both villages with Ethan, as his consort. As Fall wilted to Winter, she showed that she was with child—but not yet wed.

She dared not soil his name, so she requested Ethan to secrete her

away to a village some distance from Lochlane. The Provost made sure no harm came to pass, but the Graham Midwife feared the worst.



They were a long way from proper care. She began having difficulty with the pregnancy... shortly followed by false labour pains. Her bed, which was harsh, uncomfortable, and yet unavoidable, confined her to an unjust cage.

The Midwife pleaded, “Kenna, lass, I fear for you and The Provost’s issue. I have great fear for you both!”

The Midwife summoned The Provost, who came to McKenna’s side and stayed with her for two weeks’ time. Her agony was almost too much to bear, but he was always present to calm her. His gentle touch soothed and steadied her.

The Midwife confided her fear—the baby may be an Angel in the breeze before a Child of the earth.

McKenna showed no outward sign of her distress. She swore Ethan would not bear any encumbrance. *He offered to die for me; I shall not shame him with a lack of courage.*

In private, she wept and prayed for God to intervene and take her burden.

Then, one day, the baby moved, and with it came a calm unlike any she could recall. No more pain. No more fear.

Her apprehension disappeared. She called out for Ethan.

He came from outside, but before he could mount the stairs, McKenna birthed a boy, complete in every way. Kenna had no pain,

no cries in labour, indeed, no difficulty at all.

She counted fingers and toes, made sure the limbs were whole and strong. The child had a wonderful dark complexion and a tuft of reddish-brown hair. He did not cry; he did not squirm. He had an awareness that she had never seen.

And in the door, The Provost witnessed his progeny. Perfect, healthy and alive.

The Midwife, herself clad in Graham Tartan, took the child, cleaned him up and presented him back to McKenna, swaddled in a Drummond cloth and wrapped in a Graham Tartan blanket.

She said to McKenna, “M’Lady, your bairn... of both Clans.”

The Provost looked on with pride, as well as sadness. He realized what this birth meant for his young love. Shame, ridicule and judgment would follow her, unjustly. He would not stand for that, for his Kenna.

After several days, Ethan confided in his son’s mother. The stories and hopes they had shared in confidence, now threatened to haunt them in love.

The weight of her past pulled at the very core of the Unity they had both hoped for. He swore to send her to safety, to live in peace, away from judgment, removed from the scandal. Ethan Graham took his oath; she would be given the means to survive and thrive.

McKenna wept, but understood the implications of what faced them.

She affixed her eyes on Ethan, his gaze thick with the tragedy he must carry by this choice. Her face was lined with sorrow, but steeled by the duty she must now face.

Words between them would have been as hollow as a bell without a striker.

With a gentle kiss on his hand and a caress of her cheek, she turned him towards the door and bade the man she loved farewell.

The room quieted. Ethan's footsteps faded away. Soon, the hoof falls of his horse faded into nothingness. McKenna faced solitude borne of love and devotion.

The Graham Midwife appeared carrying a bathing vessel. She took her time, cleaning the streaks of tears on McKenna's face with the soft cloth. She held the new mother close, providing some comfort in the empty and barren room.

She asked, "What will you call him, Mu'um?"

McKenna answered with purpose, "This is Duncan—'Tis my little dark warrior."



A voice called out, breaking her dream.

McKenna focused her eyes. Duncan was returning from Timmy's house. She met him at the side kitchen door when it opened.

With cookies.

