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## A Half-Dreamed Dream

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## A Half-dreamed Dream

By Keren Moros

Though Jean MacGuffin had never been more than ten miles from Cromartie, she was sure the sun rose more magically over the Scottish countryside than anywhere else.

Each morning, she would watch the first and thinnest ray of sunshine glow through her window and illuminate the heather she kept in a blue vase on her nightstand. Minutes later, she would walk the sheep out to the dim pasture while her black and white border collie Angus ran after them.

Sitting on a rock atop a low-lying mound of earth, Jean would watch the sheep and Angus, twirling her shepherd's staff between her palms. The sun would continue to color the horizon with shades of amber as the rest of the sky relinquished its dark hues to the daybreak, which seemed to originate between her small home and the base of the hill that formed part of the farm's eastern border. From her mound, she could see the group of oak trees swaying elegantly on the west side. The north and south sides were lined with a hodgepodge of rocks, logs from a nearby group of trees, various flowers and shrubs, and dilapidated fences, which occasional tourists loved to photograph before they walked through them.

When the sun came out completely, it allowed the grass to fully flaunt its most verdant highland green. Jean would compare that green to the color of her green boots and laugh at the frightened sheep and watch her grey and red stone house until it started to release smoke from its chimney.

On one of those typical dreich days she loved, Jean breathed in as much moisture as she could from the air. It had rained during the night and some clouds lingered, gathering to hover above the hill and cast an ominous shadow. The shadow transformed the hill into a black mass, and a rainbow appeared to take pity on it by planting a pot of gold at its base. The clouds dissipated a few minutes later, just as she saw the chimney smoke.

Jean could smell breakfast as she reached the white fence and walked to the door. The kitchen was just steps away from the door, and she saw her father Cameron clattering pans together on the stove. Ever since he hurt his back falling from the roof, he had taken to doing more of the lighter chores around the farm. Now, every morning instead of taking the sheep out to pasture, he would cook breakfast for both of them.

"Good morning, Jean," her father said. "How are they this morning?"

She laughed and hugged him. "As stupidly happy as ever, Da." She said something to this effect each morning, sometimes adding a story about how one sheep ran into another one or how one chewed on the fence for a few minutes before realizing what it was doing.

She sat at their small, green table, watching her father massage his forehead with his thumb as if trying to rub away some invisible memory.

"Ian Darrow came back today."

Something cold ran through her heart. "When did you hear this?"

"Last night at The Golden Crest. No one could stop jabbering about it. Fergus MacIntosh was saying that if Darrow so much as stepped foot on his land, he was going to let his strongest bull loose on him. We're obviously at a disadvantage as our sheep can do no harm."

She stared at her glass of milk. "Why?"

"No one knows why, dear. There're plenty of wagers but nothing for certain."

"It's been ten years since he left with his son. We thought he meant it when he said he would never come back."

Her father chuckled. “Well, we were the ones who told him not to come back. After his poor wife died of heartache, we made him leave. Drove him out, we did.”

She shrugged and shook her head briskly. “Any business you want me to take care of in the village today, Da?”

Cameron didn't question her sigh.

Jean forced herself to eat breakfast and spent the day performing her chores perfunctorily, brushing off Angus's pleas to play, and stealing glances of the hill until her neck strained and her eyes hurt.

That night at The Golden Crest, Jean sat with her father and their neighbor Mrs. Galloway in the pub's only isolated and intimate booth where Cameron sat when he didn't want to talk to anybody. It was bereft of the stone curios and parched maps that decorated the rest of the walls, and its table was shiny, perhaps because it was the one farthest from the bar.

Across from Cameron, Mrs. Galloway sat as stout as she was perpetually angry, the deep lines in her face darkened in the warm but severe light of the yellow gas lamp above them. She squeezed her bottle of ale, blanching her fingertips and making the muscles in her arms, already husky from years of pulling roots from the ground, tight and ready to snap.

She said nothing and neither did Jean's father, who was finishing his potatoes and hadn't looked at Jean except to say, “Did you ask Reverend Elton about the wool sale?”

Jean had nodded and thought she should say something to seem less quiet, but he had nodded back and started stuffing his gob with potatoes again.

Meanwhile, the ire simmered in the rest of the pub, slowly bubbling and steaming, reaching its boiling point at the bar where Cromartie was reduced to a mob. As it had done for one hundred years, The Golden Crest's stone walls reverberated with gossip—the words echoed through the stone archways and shook the whisky bottles until the wooden tables absorbed them.

“Why not let him be?” William Doherty half-murmured, looking up only briefly as he hugged his beer to his chest and shifted his weight on a bar stool. “He can do no more than he already has.”

Roars of defiance arose as Fergus smashed his mug on the counter, making his wife Moira jump. “Don't be daft, William!” Fergus yelled. “Darrow's pure evil. If he's back, it's only to make things worse and finish us off!”

“Aye,” Robin Littlegood exclaimed with a nod as sharp as his chin. “The only reason we're not barring the entrance is because of that blasted vicar.”

Robin's wife Abigail elbowed her husband in laughing agreement. Their daughter Fiona put her hands together in a mock praying stance and looked up. “We must welcome all our visitors and love our enemies,” she said in a high squeaky voice.

Amid the laughter, Fergus yelled again. “Of course he doesn't want to shoot Darrow on sight! He never did him no harm.”

Cameron glanced at Fergus and the others and looked at Mrs. Galloway. “We drove him out for stealing from us and now he comes back?” he said, shaking his head. “Tell me how that makes any sense.”

“He doesn't intend to harm us, you mean?” Mrs. Galloway answered, looking at the crowd.

“He knows he's coming back where he's not wanted,” Cameron answered. “That's odd enough. He knows we won't let him stay here, so he must have a plan.”

“Perhaps it has something to do with his late wife,” Jean said. “The house still has all her

things. They left it just as it is.”

Cameron turned to her, his brows so low they were touching his eyelashes. “How do you know that, Jean?”

Jean felt her heart freeze for a moment. She couldn’t tell him that she visited the house occasionally—or what she thought was occasionally—and peered into the rooms, imagining what it must’ve been like to live there. And she couldn’t tell him that she knew where an old spare key was hidden and had gone inside more than once.

She was going to answer something about how one of the sheep had wandered off and Angus had to chase it and bring it back, but she had been worried it would scare easily because it was still young and getting used to Angus, so she had decided to go after it and had stumbled upon the Darrow house accidentally. She hoped he wouldn’t see how ridiculous that was, especially because their flock was so manageably small that they rarely lost a sheep.

Cameron opened his mouth again but turned away from her when the door swung open, ringing bells that ushered the silence that suddenly engulfed the pub. Jean turned in her chair and peered over the top of the booth. She saw a man about her age wearing a suit black as night, crisp as a cold wind, and smoother than the wool she touched each day.

Jean’s breath caught in her throat and wouldn’t come out.

He had his mother’s green, almond-shaped eyes and light brown hair.

He looked nothing like his father.

Ian Darrow, Jr.’s smile was so small that only Jean could see it, yet it cast a spell that turned everyone to stone.

“I imagined no one would recognize me. But by the way everyone’s gawking at me, I suppose I was wrong.”

The contempt in Fergus’s eyes made the blue in them burn. “So, he sends his son to pay for his sins.”

“Hush,” Moira whispered.

Ian looked down and then back up quickly, as if putting on a mental shield to hide any vulnerability. “He hasn’t sent me. He died four weeks ago.”

A flurry of gasps and praises arose, disturbing the silence.

Ian walked to the counter and Jean lowered her head so that half her view was blocked by the booth.

“Pint of your best, if you please, Elsie.”

Elsie Dunbar, the pub owners’ pink-haired daughter, smirked and placed her hands akimbo.

“How do you know my name?”

“I remember when your hair was blond,” Ian smiled. “A pint maybe?”

Lavinia caught her daughter’s hand before it reached for the tap, and her husband Austin placed a stolid hand on the counter.

“We don’t serve Darrows here,” he spat.

Ian shifted in his stool. “This again?”

He smiled at Elsie but she gave him a hard stare as she crossed her arms. “Sorry,” she said with a shrug. She walked away nonchalantly and started shining the display bottles.

When the quiet lasted a beat too long, Moira gave Ian her unopened bottle of ale and asked softly, “How did he die, Ian?”

Ian half-frowned at her as he opened the bottle.

“His brain decided to rebel against the vile blood pumping through it. I went to him when

I heard him fall, but I couldn't do anything. His last breath was wasted cursing his banker."

Tension caught hold of another moment of silence before Ian asked, "How is Reverend Elton? Still giving the same sermon about charity each last Sunday of the month?"

Lavinia grabbed a washcloth and angrily shined the countertop. "And still using your father as the example of what charity shouldn't look like," she said, grimacing at him.

Jean knew he would ignore her. He had since the day she had refused to serve him and he had sneaked behind the counter and gotten his own drink and chips.

"Has young James managed to keep the store as well as you, Mr. Doherty?"

"Aye, lad," Doherty responded. "Though his ambitions are a little too high for me."

The Littlegoods rolled their eyes as the poison in the villagers' glares was becoming more potent.

Ian continued sipping his ale and looked around the old pub, seemingly avoiding anyone's eyes. "It looks exactly the same," he said. "The oak hasn't seemed to age." He pointed a table directly across the counter. "I remember sitting at that table when I was a boy and wishing I were tall enough to talk to everyone face-to—."

"Enough of this havering!" Fergus yelled. "What are you doing here, Ian?"

Ian ran a hand through his hair. "I thought it would be obvious," he said. "I've come back home. I imagine my house is still there, so—"

"If you're here to claim the village, we won't have it," Abigail added.

Ian put the bottle down. "Claim the village?"

"Don't play daft with us, Ian Darrow," Robin said, taking a step toward him. "Your father left an iron grip on this town, and now you've come back to make it even tighter."

"Aye," Austin said, "No piece of paper that says you own us is going to make us treat you like it. We're not your slaves."

Ian stood. "Perhaps I should just let your farm become an artificial forest, Austin? Tear down The Golden Crest to make way for trees?"

A few gasps hovered in the air. For the first time in her life, Jean saw fear in Austin's eyes.

Mrs. Galloway released her grip from her bottle and marched toward the bar. Jean felt her father glance at her as she shrank into the corner her chair formed with a stained-glass window, her heartbeat vibrating through the quilted pillowtop.

"Like in Dunbroch?" Mrs. Galloway asked. "You'd sell Cromartie to the forestry companies?"

"My father's will is quite clear. Cromartie is rightfully mine," Ian said, standing and lifting his chin at his last word. "The government wants to turn hills into forests to increase the number of trees, and they've generously offered to take Cromartie off my hands."

"So you haven't come back home after all?" Fiona raged. "You're here to drive us out?"

Ian shook. "I'm the only one who can save this village," he said through gritted teeth. "Accept that and we'll live in tense peace. Reject that, and I might change my mind about staying here."

Fergus loomed inches over Ian, his body's strength focusing into a booming voice that cracked with rage as he cursed Ian. He grabbed Ian's coat collar and Ian fought back with a pathetic flail, accidentally throwing his bottle to the ground. The others grabbed other pieces of him, shoving him toward the door as their yells intensified.

Jean shut her eyes, trying to hear his voice amid the clamoring to put him out.

"No one wants you here!"

She didn't blame anyone.

"Leave us alone!"

He reminded them too much of his father.

"A piece of paper doesn't give you Cromartie!"

As they cursed at him, Jean sighed with relief that he hadn't seen her, yet she imagined herself pushing him out of the pub into a hole as deep as the one she had tried to fill for ten years. Her throat quavered with the unsaid words she wanted to scream at him.

Out of breath, Jean fumbled against her father, answering with silence when he asked her where she was going. Wrestling against the flow of the crowd, she tripped to the backdoor and didn't stop running until she reached her room. She glanced out the open window at the moonlit hill and threw herself onto her bed, her mind running more than her legs had been.

Angus licked her hand hanging limply over the mattress. She pet his head, half wondering if he knew what had happened—if he could somehow smell that she had seen Ian again.

Jean reached for the drawers beside her bed, opening the top one. In the darkness, she felt for her journal. She took it out and smoothed her hand over the water-stained leather cover. Angus whimpered a bit as if asking to see her, so she sat up and turned on the nightlight.

"Mum gave this to me when I was a little girl, you know, Angus," she said as he rested his head on her knee and watched her hand. "She said it was to write about my feelings. But I don't write in it too much. I mostly just keep things." She opened it and showed it to Angus. He seemed to take a keen interest in the book, even if he probably didn't know what it meant. "This is a letter Ian gave me for my birthday. These flowers here—he gave them to me the same day. This yellow one is from my mother's grave and this blue one is from his mother's. See how I've pressed them here? Of course, they're a bit old now, so they don't look like flowers to you. You're used to seeing the fresh heather each morning.

"This is a primrose Ian gave me. They grow on the hill between our farms. They don't really grow anywhere else because the sheep eat most of the other flowers on the hills. This is a picture of us there." Jean turned a page. "See this, Angus? This is a letter from City University in London." She ruffled his hair. "That's a long way away. And we were going to go there together—Ian and I."

She fingered the words on the letter, feeling as they rose slightly above the plain of the paper like small hills.

July 9, 1976 . . . Dear Ms. MacGuffin . . . are happy to inform you . . . accepted . . . welcome you . . . please contact . . . congratulations . . . sincerely

"We promised each other," Jean whispered.

She looked down at Angus and saw that his eyes were half closed. His apparent loss of interest made her feel suddenly foolish for telling him her secrets. She closed the book and then opened it again quickly, thinking she had folded it the wrong way and ruined the letter.

She hadn't. The letter's pristine white mocked her as it glowed in the dim light. Jean slammed the book shut and threw it into the drawer, listening as it slid and hit a corner.

Jean wondered if she should skip breakfast, but she reminded herself not to be stupid; she had to see her father eventually.

"Good morning, Da," she said casually as she sat at the table, thinking just for a moment that maybe he had forgotten about the night before.

He placed a poached egg onto a plate.

“Good morning, Jean,” he said, his voice low. “How are they?”  
She didn’t have a story because she hadn’t been paying much attention, so she made one up.

“Molly bumped her head on my staff.”

He glanced askance at her, squinting, then sat silently, his lower lip drawn into his mouth.

“Jean, how do you know so much about the Darrow house?”

She breathed in panic, caught between not wanting to say anything and knowing it was impossible to hide.

His eyebrows met his eyelashes and the crease between his brows burrowed a little deeper into his forehead.

“Answer me, Jean.”

“Ian and I—we—you said to stay away from the Darrows, but one day we were both outside when a visitor needed help, and we started talking and—what am I saying?” She held her head and looked helplessly at him, but he stared at his food. “I don’t even know how to begin to tell you, Da.”

Angus started barking alarmingly, and then there were four steady taps at the door. Cameron stood to answer it, not looking at Jean.

Ian stood at the doorway, wearing casual clothes and holding a pan.

“Good morning, Mr. MacGuffin. May I come in?”

Cameron’s fists curled. “What do you want with us, Ian?”

“I just wanted to say hello.” He held out the pan. “I brought bannock. Despite what happened last night, we’re still neighbors. And since I may be here to stay, we may as well be friendly neighbors.”

Cameron opened the door and Jean stood fast and ram straight, as if electricity had run through her. Ian and Jean locked eyes and something between regret and nostalgia ran through their hollow hellos.

Cameron frowned as Ian set the pan down on the table.

“I need to check on the sheep,” he said suddenly, whisking through the door.

“Da, I—”

Jean looked back at him and saw that he was already stomping through the pasture.

“Is he angry?”

“Yes.” Jean looked back at Ian. “But not at you.”

Ian looked back at Cameron. “My father was always angry at me.”

Jean sighed without thinking. “What do you want, Ian?”

He turned back to her. “I need your help. I need to talk to the rest of the village. I know you’re the only one who will listen to me and help them listen too.”

“They listened last night, didn’t they?”

He looked down. “I meant that you’re the only one who doesn’t hate me.”

His words sliced through her like a cold knife, making her hot with anger. She pushed past him and walked out the door, headed to the barn. Working was the only way she knew how to get rid of the hurt.

Ian followed Jean as she stomped into the barn, grabbed a pitchfork irrationally, and started to stab the hay.

“Jean, will you listen to me? You know I’m not like my father. I’m not here to ruin everybody’s lives.”

“But you think you can just come back and threaten everyone with your control. Control

my feelings even and tell me I don't hate you when you don't know anything about me! Don't be as selfish as he was, Ian."

"They're the selfish ones! They won't even give me a chance to explain how I want to help them. Stubborn lot."

"And what did you expect? For them to fawn all over you? I'm sure threatening the Dunbars was the perfect way to come back to Cromartie in peace." She threw some hay on the ground. "We don't need you." She repeated the words she heard last night on purpose. "Your father leaving was the best thing that happened to us. Cromartie's a better village without you."

A hard breath shook him as he clenched his fists.

"Jean, this is my home. I—I tilled this soil and helped build these fences. I'm here to stay whether or not anyone wants me to. But something's happened, and I need everyone to listen to me—to do as I say."

She dropped the pitchfork and crossed her arms. "What is it?"

"I can't tell you—not now. But you must know—you who knew me. You must know that I'm conscious of the pain my father caused."

She rocked on her heels. "Knowing that won't do you any good. You don't have the power to heal."

"I can't heal, but I can repair. And I can't do that without you. You're the one I know the best. You can help me get through to them. I was angry last night, I know. I spoke irrationally. But I need another chance."

As hard as she was breathing, her voice still came out small. "I can't help you, Ian."

He turned away from her and watched the sheep in the valley, squinting as if he were trying to see something invisible.

"Jean, do you remember when we would hide and go to our hill—the hill that separates our farms but brought us together. We spent hours there. And you used to say that if our fathers didn't hate each other, you'd marry me."

"No," she lied, keeping her voice cold.

He didn't seem to hear her. "Sometimes, after a long night of working, I would think about that hill and everything I felt there. And I was scared—scared that I would never find another place like it, scared that I would never find anyone like you. With that hill in my memory, I could never be happy." He turned back to her, his brow furrowed. "I came back because of you, Jean."

"Did you leave because of me, too? You can't manipulate me with the past, Ian. That was a long time ago, and we've both changed. We can never get that back."

He looked down again, defeated.

"I've had to live with my leaving with every breath I take." He looked up again, his eyebrows upturned. "But even so, I want my home back. Can you help me? They'll listen to you."

She scoffed. "You haven't even said what you want to tell them."

"I want to get everyone their land titles."

Jean caught her breath. As angry as she was with Ian, she couldn't stop listening to him now.

"Just hand them back to us as simply as your father stole them?"

"I'm going to try. Starting with you and your da."

"You'll make sure of that? Nothing matters more to us than—"

"I swear it. You can still hate me. Just help me."



Jean's arms started shaking, and she held them closer to her chest, not wanting Ian to notice.

"You broke a promise to me once. I can't let you do that again, especially to my da."

Ian closed his eyes and sighed. "Jean, please."

She shook her head incessantly, hoping to shake away the tears as well. "No. No, no, no. No, I can't do it, Ian! I'm sorry."

"Jean, please, I—"

The sound of an engine interrupted him, followed by a crash. Jean ran outside. A silver Bentley stood over the crushed remains of the farm's border fences. One woman and two men came out of the car, dressed just as seriously as Ian had been the night before.

Jean felt uneasy. "We don't usually get visitors like these." She turned to Ian. "Ian, don't you—"

Ian's pale face, hard eyes, and pursed lips told her he knew who they were.

The visitors caught sight of Ian and their coldness told her that trouble was coming to Cromartie again.

Author's Note

This is the first chapter of a longer story for which I am still formulating the full plot. I came up with the idea for "A Half-dreamed Dream" while listening to Oliver's "Jean." Each time I listened to it, I would picture a young, innocent girl living on a Scottish hillside and dealing with the pleasant disruption love is bringing to her world.

I finally put the image to paper in my Travel Writing class. Though the title comes from the lyrics of the song, I take it as referring to the dreams and emotions that Ian and Jean will discover as they find each other again.