

The Dare
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BOOM! Scree! Scree! BOOM!

Thunder rumbled overhead and streaks of lightning split the night sky in two. Simon clutched his blankets with tight fists and drew them up over his head. He hated the sound the eucalypt branches made in the wind as they scraped against his bedroom window. His mother often said he imagined things, peculiar things. His teacher once wrote on his report card that he had a vivid imagination, but he didn't think it was written in a positive way because she still gave him a D for story writing.

But sometimes things were real, like the skeleton trying to claw its way into his room tonight.

Those weren't branches scratching at the glass but its long, bony fingers. He could see them during bright flashes of lightning. Huddled beneath the blankets, he listening to the thunder and the skeleton scratching outside, wanting to come in and strangle him. Only when he thought he might suffocate did he slowly peal back the blankets so he could take a deep breath and glance around his dark room.

With every fibre of his being, he tried to stop thinking scary thoughts. Through sheer exhaustion he drifted off to sleep, tossed on a sea of troubled dreams where he was chased across a moonlit field by dozens of frenzied skeletons.

When Simon awoke in the morning, he was lying on his side facing the window. A thin branch swayed in the breeze. The sun was bright and warm as it streamed into his bedroom, forming golden puddles on his rug.

The skeleton was gone.

He walked to the window and gazed across the cornfield. At the corner of the rows of corn stood an old scarecrow with its arms stretched out either side of its straw body. It looked crucified, like Christ, with its unseen head lolling forward beneath a black, wide-brimmed hat scored with holes. On its straw body hung a black, tattered coat with a single, silver button, and faded black trousers sat twisted on its straight, pole-stiff legs.

Simon blinked. That's strange. It's never faced the house before. And he'd

never noticed the shiny silver button on its coat before either. Maybe last night's wind moved it out of its usual place.

Simon slipped into his school uniform and raced downstairs with his schoolbag banging against his left shoulder. Scott, his older brother, was already sitting at the kitchen table eating toast. Mum was popping more bread into the toaster. Dad wandered in with a cup of coffee and sat down. He smiled at Simon.

'Storm keep you awake last night?' he asked.

Scott snickered as he buttered his toast. Simon frowned.

'Not really. Slept like a baby.'

Scott laughed. 'That's because you are a baby!'

'I am not!' snapped Simon, balling his right hand into a fist under the table.

'That'll do boys!' Mum called from the kitchen.

Simon hated his brother's teasing and tense silence reined while they ate. Oblivious, Dad read the paper and drank his coffee.

'Dad, did you move the scarecrow yesterday?' Simon asked.

Dad folded the paper and looked at him. 'No, why? Is it still there? Hope the wind hasn't knocked it over.'

'It's still there,' Simon said. 'It's just facing the house now.'

Scott laughed. 'That's because it wants to get you Simon! Woooo!' He used a spooky voice and wiggled his fingers in front of Simon's face. Peeved, Simon pushed his hands away and glared at him.

Dad placed the paper down and looked at Scott. 'You heard your mother. That'll do.'

Simon knew if he just ignored him, Scott wouldn't tease him as much. But no matter what he said or did, his older brother always managed to push his buttons. If only he wasn't so small for a twelve-year-old. Four years older, Scott was already as tall as their father, well-built and good looking. Several girls at his school even had their eyes on him. Miserably, Simon bit into his toast and

looked out the window. He glimpsed the scarecrow's hat above the waving corn. *I shouldn't have mentioned it.*

Upstairs, Scott cornered him. 'Hey Simon, are you scared of that old scarecrow?'

Simon frowned. 'Why should I be?'

'Because old Jimmy told me it was cursed.'

'He did not! You're a liar!' Simon glared at him. He tried to hold his emotions in check. They were boiling over. 'The scarecrow's harmless and you know it!' When did Scott ever talk to old Jimmy, anyway? He was an Aboriginal worker Simon's family had inherited along with the farm years ago.

Simon had seen him wandering through the cornfields or washing at the water tank behind the house, but he had never spoken to him. Jimmy's skin was dark as coal but his hair was long, white and wispy like summer clouds. His dark eyes looked straight into your soul. Simon's Dad had been too soft to fire him and now he was part of the place, allowed to sleep in a meagre room in the barn and given a small wage, which Dad handed him each Friday in an envelope.

Scott shrugged. 'Suit yourself. But don't say I didn't warn you.' He then shoved Simon up against the wall. 'Tell you what, if you think you're so brave, I dare you to go and take its button after school.'

Simon tried to swallow the gravel in his throat.

Scott smiled fiendishly. 'If you don't, I'll spread the word that you still wet your bed at night.'

'That's a lie!'

'Yeah, but they won't know that.' Scott sneered. 'So, how about it?'

Simon hung his head. He felt trapped. The kids at his school were cruel and could taunt forever. 'Alright, I'll do it! Let go!'

'That's a good boy,' Scott said, released him and gave Simon's head a rough smack.

All day at school, Simon's thoughts were on the scarecrow. He imagined it lifting its head. Did it have a straw face under that black hat? Or a wizened

pumpkin one with eyes, nose and a mouth carved long ago into its faded orange skin? Or was there a skeleton beneath that coat, a real person who had been killed and placed on a stake to resemble a scarecrow? He didn't want to think about it and tried to concentrate on his maths.

Eating his lunch was impossible with skeletons scratching inside his skull. He sat on the sideline of the boys' footy game and told them he didn't feel so well when they asked him to join in. It was a lie, but hey, it was kind of true. His teacher remarked on how pale he looked after lunch and agreed he was unwell. He lay on the stretcher bed in sickbay. But that was worse as he had the whole afternoon to imagine terrible things. In the end, he dragged his feet back to class, his mind overwhelmed by trepidation.

On the bus ride home, Simon thought he was going to throw up. It was only a short ride and then he would have to prove himself to Scott and fulfil the dare. He tried to think of ways he could get out of it. Maybe if he told his parents he hadn't been well at school Scott might show compassion and let him off. Or maybe he could sneak into their house unnoticed, the back way, and talk to mum in the kitchen until dinner time. Or maybe Scott had forgotten all about the dare; Simon knew he hadn't. His brother was indiscriminately nasty and would carry out his threat if he didn't get that silver button.

At last, the bus slowed down and idled near their gate while he got off. He noticed Scott waiting for him near their mailbox, schoolbag on his shoulder and huge grin on his tanned face. Simon's heart sank into his school shoe. He gave a ragged sigh, picked up his schoolbag and dragged his feet off the bus.

'Hey bro. Ready for your dare?' Scott hooked a painful arm around Simon's shoulders. 'The scarecrow's closer from here than from the house.'

Simon felt sick. He nodded. 'Yeah.'

'Come on then.'

Scott dragged his brother along, his strong arm like a leach about Simon's neck. Simon shuffled along like a captive. He didn't want to face the scarecrow at all! He wanted to lash out with his fist and scream and kick at Scott. But he was too frozen with fear to do anything. Finally, Scott halted and removed his arm. He clamped his hands on Simon's shoulders and looked into his frightened eyes.

'Now, I know you are brave and would like to do this on your own,' Scott said with a smug grin, 'so I'll leave you here. Remember, all you need is his button

and I'll be satisfied. To make it easy on you, I'll carry your bag home. Got some scissors?' He waited as Simon fossicked for a few moments inside his pencil case for his scissors. Scott smiled. 'There, now you're all set. See ya later bro.'

Simon watched his brother stroll down the dirt road to their house carrying both school bags. The sun was low and afternoon shadows from the surrounding eucalypt forest were beginning to creep across the top of the field. Among the cornstalks he thought he saw a dark face. He stood frozen, wondering if it was just a shadow. Except for the wind rustling through the corn, there was silence. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves.

It was a short walk through the corn aisles to where the scarecrow stood, though Simon had never been there before. His feet moved by themselves. Soon he came to the corner where the scarecrow stood.

Simon stopped.

His mouth was dry and his heart was thumping a rapid beat. For a long time, he stared at the scarecrow, at the black hat perched on top of its downcast head, at the shabby black coat with the shiny silver button. The rest of the effigy was just very old straw stuffed into the long sleeves of the coat and faded legs of the black trousers. On its feet were old black boots encrusted with age-old mud. Lifting it above the waving stalks of corn was a pole up its back.

Simon stared at the hat, imagining it lifting and a wicked face smiling at him just as he reached for the button. *Stop that!* He told himself. *It's just straw.* Even so, the fear was real and threatened to send him running. He took another deep breath, stepped up to the scarecrow and cut off the silver button.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew through the cornfield and the coat, bereft of its only button, swung open to reveal the scarecrow's chest of straw. Terrified, Simon turned and ran without stopping in the direction of his house. A cruel wind nipped at his heels as it hurried after him, flinging dirt through the cornstalks. He didn't stop running until he reached the front door. He swung it shut behind him and latched it.

Panting, he stared through the screen at the rustling stalks of corn in case he was pursued. Then he bounded upstairs to look at the scarecrow from his window, to see if it had followed him. It was still there, its coat flapping in the wind. Simon let out a long breath and sagged against his bed. The button was still in his fist.

Relaxing his fingers, he stared at it, at the rough-edged, weather-beaten button. It was nothing special, but he knew he had to give it to his brother. Not wanting to face him, Simon crept into Scott's room, placed the silver button on his desk and hurried out.

That night, another storm swung in from the north. Thunder boomed over the farmhouse and the wind howled like a banshee. The branch outside Simon's window scratched on the glass and again he hid beneath his blankets. During the night, a blood-curdling scream rang through the farmhouse. Simon's eyes snapped open in alarm. His heart raced as footsteps ran past his bedroom door. He could hear the voices of his parents and Scott's loud cry. *Scott??!*

Simon clambered out of bed, opened his door and blinked at the lights switched on in the hall. Scott was crying hysterically and Mum and Dad were trying to calm him down.

'I tell you a horrible voice came from outside my window!' Scott screamed. 'Someone was calling, "give it back! Give it back!" over and over.'

'There's no one there, son,' Dad said.

Simon hurried back to his room and peered out the window, through the curtain of steady rain at the scarecrow. A shadowed figure with long, wispy white hair was moving back into the cornfield away from their house. A broad smile spread across Simon's face and he clambered back into bed.