

SCARECROWS

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“**T**hat’s mine,” Cody said, hoping he sounded tough—if he did, maybe he wouldn’t have to take them on. “Give it back.”

The tough tone didn’t work. “Newbie wants his little cap back,” Rich, a senior and the biggest of two kids said, sneering. He held Cody’s cap high, higher than Cody could reach.

“Give it back to me now,” Cody said.

“Or what?” said Joey, the other kid. He was smaller than Rich, but not by much, which still made him bigger than Cody. “You gonna fight Rich for it? Be a big mistake, cap-boy. Maybe the last one you’d get to make. Ain’t that right, Rich?”

Cody felt his stomach tighten, and hoped he wouldn’t puke. He felt tears trying to rise too. Cody thought puking would be better than crying, but he didn’t want to do either, not in front of those assholes. All he wanted was to get his cap back.

His dad’s cap. It had the Atlanta Braves *A* on it, but they never called it the Braves cap. It was the *Chemo Cap*. Cody had been with his dad, not long after Dad’s hair started falling out. He’d helped Dad pick it out. For a while they’d thought about something with a funny or positive saying on it, or a stupid drawing, but finally Dad had thrown an arm around Cody’s shoulders and pulled him close.



“Y’know, Code, my man,” he’d said, “let’s go with Atlanta. Once we’ve got this thing beat, I’ll treat you to the Braves in the World Series next year. All four games. They’re going to sweep it. I’ve got a feeling.”

The Braves didn’t even make it to the postseason the next year, but they still did better than Cody’s dad. He didn’t make it even close to the start of the season. Last thing he did was put that cap on Cody’s head. Cody never took it off, except he had to today—first day of school in a new town, and no caps allowed in class. But the minute the bell rang and he got outside, he’d put it on. Didn’t even have time to get it settled just right—Dad wore it tilted a little to the left, and so did Cody—before Rich grabbed it.

“Well?” Joey said, his voice hard. “You gonna fight Rich for it or not?”

“No need to fight,” Rich said, still holding the cap high like a pennant in a game of capture the flag.

“No,” Cody said, “there isn’t.”

“Watch your tone,” Joey said.

“Easy now,” said Rich. “Let’s all just settle down a little while I explain to—”

Cody waited a split-moment before saying, “Cody.”

“Right. To Cody here that he doesn’t have to fight for his little cap. Not that fighting would do him any good anyway. But there’s no need. We’re going to give Cody a chance to *earn* his cap back. Got a little job that even he ought to be able to handle.”

“What kind of job?”

Rich leaned close, his nose almost touching Cody’s. “Be at the baseball field tonight at midnight. Not one minute later.”

Rich stood up and made a show of putting the cap on his own head. “If you’re too scared to show up, don’t sweat it. I sorta like the way this feels.”

“Looks good on you, too,” Joey said.

“Midnight,” Rich repeated before he and Joey walked off laughing.

Cody waited until he was sure they—or anybody else—couldn’t see him before ducking around the far corner of the school, finding some bushes, and puking his guts out behind them.



Cody snuck out his bedroom window and made it to the baseball field with a couple of minutes to spare before midnight. Rich and Joey were already there, leaning against Rich's red Mustang at the edge of the outfield. Rich was wearing the Chemo Cap. Cody hated the way the cap looked on him—it made him feel like he'd let his dad down. But he kept his anger hidden and walked straight to the two assholes.

"I want my cap back," he said. "What's the job?"

"Gonna set the night on fire," Rich said, lifting a gasoline can and shaking it.

Cody could hear the gas sloshing. When he stepped closer he could smell it. The smell made him want to hurl, but he was done with puking. He looked at the cap on Rich's fat head. He was ready to do anything to get it back. Now, watching Rich put the gas in the trunk, he wasn't so sure.

"Get in," Rich said. "Front seat—between us."

Cody got in. Rich started the car while Joey climbed in on the passenger side, digging Cody in the ribs with a hard elbow as he did. Cody gave him one back, more to see what would happen than to do any damage, and was surprised when Joey didn't do anything.

Rich put the car in gear and peeled across the outfield, the tires kicking up divots. Cody hoped there weren't any cops around—it was bad enough that Mom moved them to the sticks, farm country, to be near her sister, and bad enough had already been made worse by Rich and Joey, and would undoubtedly take another downward turn or two whenever they got wherever they were going. He didn't need a cop tagging him, along with Rich and Joey, for vandalism.

But there weren't any cops, or even a school night watchman nearby to hear Rich peel off, so they got away clean. Rich drove fast and had them outside the town limits in a few minutes, picking up speed as they headed out into farmland.

"You know about the Corn Witch?" Rich said.

"Jeez!" said Joey with a nervous laugh. "Gives me the sheebie jeevies just hearing that name."



“*Heebie jeebies*, you dumb shit,” Rich said, no nervousness at all in his laugh. Only contempt.

“Heebie jeebies, okay then,” Joey said. “Gave me them, too.”

“Good. Have some more. Corn Witch. Corn Witch. Corn Witch.”

“What’s a Corn Witch?” Cody asked.

Rich raised his eyebrows and grinned, the Chemo Cap rising as he did, his face spooky in the dim light from the dashboard instruments. Cody hated him wearing that cap.

“Not what,” Rich said. “*Who*.”

“All right, whatever,” Cody said. His voice sounded tougher. “Who’s the Corn Witch?” He turned to Joey and said directly to him, “Stupid name. Corn Witch.” He was sure Joey flinched when he said it.

“You won’t think it’s stupid if she ever gets hold of you,” Joey said. “Will he, Rich?”

“No,” Rich said softly. “He sure won’t.”

“Why’s that?” Cody said.

“Because she hasn’t fed for a while. For a *long* while.”

“She’ll be *real* hungry,” Joey said.

“So what is it you want me to do? Burn the witch at the stake?”

“You couldn’t get close enough,” Rich said. “Nobody ever has.”

“Never,” said Joey.

“Why not?” Cody asked.

“She’s... *protected*,” Rich said.

Cody listened.

“She lives in an old house, a hundred years old, maybe two. She’s lived there as long as anybody can remember, and maybe longer than that. Nobody knows because nobody’s ever been to it. You can’t get close because of the... *scarecrows*.”

Rich said the word in what he must have thought was a spooky voice, but he just sounded dumb to Cody.

“She has a circle of scarecrows around her house, and they... protect her.”

“Scarecrows?” Cody said, making the word sound as unspooky as possible. He thought about laughing out loud, but didn’t.



“You heard me,” Rich said. “And you’ll see them in about five minutes, and you’ll know what I mean, so just shut up until we get there.”



The house was old, dark—power and telephone lines ran along the road, but made no trip to the house; *the Corn Witch lives off the grid*, Cody thought—set back from the road and surrounded by cornfields nearing harvest. Rich pulled the car onto the shoulder and wasted no time getting out. Cody followed. Joey took his time, and Cody suspected Joey would have preferred to stay in the car.

Rich popped the trunk and got the gas can; handed it to Cody. “Come on,” Rich said, and stepped into the field, moving slowly among the tall stalks. Cody followed him close, but Joey held back several steps.

Cody’s eyes adjusted to the darkness of the nearly moonless night by the time they reached the first scarecrow. Squinting, Cody saw the silhouette of another in the distance, and beyond that, the barest hint of another. He turned his head the other way and saw the same figures, links in the chain of scarecrows that surrounded the house.

Cody stepped closer to the nearest scarecrow. It looked like it had been there a long time. Somebody put a lot of trouble into making it, and had made it to last.

Rich tapped Cody on the shoulder and handed him a lighter. “Burn it down,” he said. “Burn the fucker to the ground and you’ll be one scarecrow closer to getting your little cap back.”

Cody put the gas can on the ground and reached out to the scarecrow. He felt something like a shock when his fingertips touched the rough, weathered fabric that covered the straw and corn shucks the scarecrow was stuffed with. The stuffing rustled and crackled, dry—it would burn fast. Cody pressed his hand more firmly against the scarecrow and the shock gave way to a warmer current of memory:

Cody and his father watching *The Wizard of Oz* when he was a little boy. Cody told his dad the scarecrow was his favorite. “Mine, too,” Dad



had said. "Always has been, always will be." That was Dad, always had been, always would be—didn't need a cap for that.

"Burn it!" Rich said.

Cody reluctantly took his hand from the scarecrow and turned to face Rich. Joey was a few steps back—he wasn't going to get close to the scarecrow even before it was on fire.

"Burn it!"

"No," Cody said. He dropped the lighter on the ground.

"What?"

"You heard me. I said no. Fuck this. Keep the hat."

"You pussy. Scared little pussy! You ain't getting the cap back, and you're gonna be walking back to town."

"Beats riding with a couple of shits like you two," Cody said, and took a step past Rich.

"Burn it, you pussy," Rich said again.

Cody turned to him. "You want it burned, asshole, burn it yourself. Or are you afraid of the Corn Witch? Is that it? Too scared to burn it yourself? Who's the pussy in this field? Not me."

Cody stepped past Rich again. He heard the gas sloshing in the can when Rich picked it up, but didn't look back, just got ready to haul real ass in case Rich did something truly stupid like trying to douse him. Cody didn't think Rich would light him, but he wasn't completely sure, and was ready to run.

"You think I'm scared?" Rich said, almost shouting. "You think *I'm* the pussy? I'll show you who's the pussy."

The scent of gasoline grew stronger and Cody heard it splashing.

"Joey," Rich said. "Grab that lighter and give me a hand."

"Come on, Rich," Joey said. His voice weak. "Let's get out of here. I thought I heard something. Let's just go."

"Jesus! *Two* pussies walking back to town! Either get over here and give me a hand or you're walking!"

Joey didn't move.

Cody stopped beside Joey and turned to look at Rich. "Let it go," he said. "Keep the fucking cap and leave the scarecrows alone."



“Fuck the both of you,” Rich said, and thumbed the lighter to life.

The scarecrow burst into flames when Rich waved the lighter under its chin.

Rich took a quick step back to keep from being burned, but he didn’t move fast enough.

Engulfed in flames, the scarecrow’s arms reached out and grabbed Rich. Blazing hands lifted him from the ground. Cody had never heard anything as horrible as Rich’s screams.

The scarecrow raised Rich’s writhing body high above its head and shook him hard three times.

Rich was still screaming when it threw him into the circle of scarecrows. Something dark and immense rose up and took Rich from the sky before he landed, and a moment later the screams stopped.

Cody and Joey ran.



Rich’s car keys must have been in his pocket, so Cody and Joey walked back to town. It took them until nearly dawn, but neither of them spoke a word the whole way, any more than either of them had looked back to see how long the scarecrow flames illuminated the sky.



Cody snuck into his bedroom, but couldn’t sleep. When he heard his mother stirring, he went through his own motions, showering, dressing, and getting ready for school. He told her he thought he’d ride his bike to school today, and she said she thought that sounded like a good idea.

Rich’s Mustang was still parked on the shoulder of the road when Cody got to the cornfield. Cody laid his bike on the ground and stood still for a moment. In daylight it was easy to see how the scarecrows encircled the house. Cody took a deep breath and walked into the field.

The scarecrow, when he found it, showed no signs of having been burned. The fabric wasn’t scorched, the arms, covered with flames last



night, bore evidence only of years—How many? Decades? Centuries?—of sunshine and rain, hot weather and cold, growing seasons and winter seasons.

There was no sign of the gas can, and Cody felt sure there would be no sign or trace of Rich anywhere in the field.

The only difference, the only thing that told Cody this was the scarecrow he'd seen last night, was the Atlanta Braves baseball cap that rested on its head.

Cody looked at the cap for a long moment, then reached up to adjust it so that it was tilted slightly to the left, the way that cap was meant to be worn.

The bike ride back to town didn't take anywhere near as long as the walk the night before.