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## The Scarecrow's Bride

by Marina Fitch

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**Author’s Note:** “Sometimes a song overwhelms me, creates a yearning that removes me from the world. That doesn’t begin to explain the feeling—words never will. Often these are songs that are beautiful in and of themselves, but that I find much more powerful because of the choice of musicians, instruments and approach. “The Scarecrow,” sung by June Tabor on her *Abyssinians* album, is one such song.

It was years before I attempted to write about the images and emotions this song inspired in me. The story came slowly at first, then I met someone who helped me understand the heart of what I had written. After that it was easy.”

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EMMA GREY CAME TO ME in spring when the Earth still bore the scars of the winter storms. Early flowers—clover, milkmaids, poppies—bent beneath the wind as the old woman skirted patches of snow. Mother and I watched from the window. “You will be married in a week’s time,” she said.

I smiled, remembering the promise Gerard Malins made to me in the woods: to marry me despite my withered leg. I hugged the crutch to my side. “Is that why Emma comes?” I said. “Or will Ger ask me himself?”

Mother turned from me. “He will not,” she said. “You are to be the scarecrow’s bride.” I grasped my crutch tighter. In a village of nearly four hundred, surely there was someone else. “But Tess Dunne’s Mary is blind and Ginny Frye’s Anne has one arm—”

Outside, footsteps shuffled to a halt on the doorstep. “Your father and I couldn’t offer a dowry rich enough to please Ger Malins’ parents. A man wants money, they said, or a woman who can work beside him in the fields.”

Mother opened the door. A breeze preceded the old woman, a breeze that tasted of honey and rainwater. Emma tucked a lock of white hair beneath the wrap of her shawl. The strand tumbled free, curling along her plump, florid cheek. With a grunt, she clutched the doorjamb and pulled herself inside.

She blinked, peering at Mother through milky eyes. “Mollie Scarecrow died last night,” Emma said. Then she turned to me.

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Dressed in white, my hair garlanded with apple blossoms and red poppies, I rode the bridal cart through town. The scarecrow rode beside me, its button eyes agleam with sunlight as its head listed to and fro. Its right arm flopped onto my good leg, its gloved fingers splayed across my thigh. I lifted its arm by the sleeve and set its hand in its own lap.

The jingle of the bells that hung from the horse’s bridle tolled the passing of my dreams: never a home nor children, never a man to love me. Near the village green, I saw Ger Malins with a girl of fourteen, a girl whole of limb. Ger looked away as we jangled past, the scarecrow and I; he stepped away from the girl. My eyes stung with unshed tears. When another jolt threw the scarecrow’s hand across my thigh, I let it stay.

“Hurry,” I whispered to the three men leading the horse, but they had their backs to me. We clattered on, leaving the village behind. At a lone cottage at the far edge of the fields, we stopped.

Squat and white, the house crouched before the field and sky, its thatched roof darker than the rich, sprouted earth. A tangle of vine clung to one wall. I twisted the folds of my white dress. This forlorn cottage was no longer Mollie Scarecrow’s. It was mine.

While the other man reached for the scarecrow, Thomas Halpern helped me from the cart. A stout middle-aged man with a nimbus of white-blond hair, he gestured for me to lean forward. His hands locked around my waist and he lifted me from the seat. He stroked the small of my back with his fingertips. I trembled,

imagining those hands caressing my cheek, my shoulders, my breasts. I grasped his arms. He looked down at me and the arch smile faded from his lips. Pity muted his eyes. He set me down, then reached for my crutch and handed it to me. I tucked it beneath my arm. Lifting my chin that I might appear tall and straight, I nodded to him. "Thank you," I said.

He looked away. "Not at all."

I turned and walked up the path.

Emma Grey and Thomas Halpern's wife, Nora, met me at the door. Nora bobbed her fair head, blinking her tiny eyes so that she looked like a hare. I brushed past her without a word. A table stood at the window, set with a vase of milkmaids and blue-eyed grass. At the hearth, a fire flickered red and inviting, its flames curled along the sides of an iron pot. A bed nestled against the far wall, the bedclothes folded back, dried rose petals scattered across the pillow. I pressed my hand into the pillow. The crushed petals burst with scent. "Welcome home," Emma said.

I drew back my hand and went to the window. In the field, the men clamored around the pole, pushing and pulling the new scarecrow into place. Emma said, "The pantry is well-stocked. You won't want for anything. Someone will stop in each day to see to your needs."

The men bound the scarecrow's shoulders to a crossbar so that his arms hung from the elbows as if broken. "My needs?" I said. "And will you send a young man?"

The wind caught the scarecrow's head and flung it to one side. The men laughed. "To see to your material needs," Nora said. "And what would you want with a man? Someone to scold you and pull at you, to wink at the girls behind your back?"

There were nights of pain in Nora's eyes. I looked away.

"You will have many husbands, Chloe Scarecrow," Emma said. "A new one each year who requires only that you mend his clothes when the birds pluck at them or the winds tear at them."

The men stepped back from the pole. "And after this one," Emma said, "each will be your own creation."

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The field flourished under my care of the scarecrow. Early on, I learned how little attention the straw man required: a patch here, another there, a bit of straw to plump its arms. Whenever a rip appeared, I had but to ask the men to lower the scarecrow from the pole for an hour or two. During the day, people worked within shouting distance and many stopped by briefly to gossip. Even Ger stopped by once or twice. Perhaps, I prayed, my residence here would be a short one. But in the

dark hours of the night, with nothing but the wind for conversation, I thought about Mollie Scarecrow.

Mollie Scarecrow was a hunchback with a club foot. As children, we sang about her, about how no man would have her. She sat alone at night, the old people said, and patched her husband's ragged clothes. Each winter she asked for clothing, scraps of cloth and straw, and each spring she presented the new scarecrow to the people of the village. By creating and ensuring the life of the scarecrow, she ensured the fertility of the fields.

On celebration and feast days, someone drove the ceremonial cart to fetch Mollie Scarecrow for the festivities. Just as her husband's watchful presence blessed the fields, so her presence assured the fruitfulness of a marriage or promised a baby long life. Each year she grew quieter and more bitter, until at last she refused to come. Brides and mothers went to her to ask her blessing, many returning to comment on her aloofness. People shook their heads, saying, "Why is she so ungrateful? She wants for nothing. She is well provided for."

As was I. But I wanted to do more than watch over the village without taking part.

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The air smelled of rich summer must. Sunlight baked the soil, drying it so that it crumbled beneath my hands. I pried a weed from the dirt and set the plant on the cloth at my side.

"A lovely garden, Chloe Scarecrow," someone said.

I shaded my eyes with my hand and looked up into the face of Thomas Halpern. "Thank you," I said. "It's a small garden, but it could well feed two."

Thomas squatted beside me. "Feed them and satisfy them. You're a clever woman, Chloe Scarecrow."

His arm brushed mine as he reached across me to pluck a weed from a row of onions. He drew his hand back slowly, his fingers straying along my arm. "Perhaps you can contribute something to the wedding feast," he said. "No doubt you will be there to bless the marriage."

My heart stilled. "And who is to be married?"

"Why, Ger Malins, in three weeks' time."

The breath went out of me. I gazed at the garden, at the vegetables and herbs that sprouted along the widely-spaced, mounded rows. The garden bore far too much food for one, far too little for a growing family. I raised a fisted hand. My knuckles shone white; dirt squeezed through my fingers. I looked out across the field of corn and glared at the scarecrow, grown thin in the summer breeze. It flapped and shuddered in the wind, its head lolling back, pinned between the pole and crossbar. I

flung the dirt aside and snatched at my crutch. I pulled myself to my feet.

“You will go to the wedding?” Thomas said, rising.

My jaw ached as I gritted my teeth. “I will. It’s is my duty.”

“I can come for you, if you like,” he said. He touched my cheek.

“I would not,” I said, stepping back. I pivoted on my crutch and, with one last hateful glance at the scarecrow, retreated to the cottage.

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Two nights before Ger Malins’ wedding, Mother came to me. She sat across from me, stirring her tea and blowing on it, stirring it again. “Will you go to the wedding?” she said.

I pushed my cup aside. “I will.”

“It is your duty,” she said, “as the scarecrow’s wife.”

“Mother, I will go.”

“I know it will be hard for you to bless Ger Malins and his bride,” Mother said. “But you must go. You must.”

I took her hand. “Mother—”

She started, turning from the window with a haunted look. “Your father and I didn’t wait. He said nothing would come of it. He promised.”

I let go of her hand. “Didn’t wait?”

“She was ill, Mollie Scarecrow was ill, on our wedding day. Everyone said we should wait until she was well enough to come, but your father said no. And when I conceived a month later, he claimed Mollie Scarecrow had no more power than a fly in a web. We never asked her to bless you.”

A chill invaded my very marrow. “How could you—”

“You were a fine, healthy baby,” she said. Her voice faded to a whisper. “My only baby.”

“You grew strong ... Then the illness came.”

Mother stared out into the night. “You must go.”

She rose, jarring the table. Both cups spilled. She pulled her shawl from the peg by the door and wrapped it about her. With her back to me, she said, “I must go.”

I made no move to stop her. In the deep, aching silence that followed, I

watched the once-straight candles twist and melt into pools of wax.

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The scarecrow wasted with neglect. By late autumn, it hung in tatters from the pole. Its head split, straw spilling from the gash like golden blood. I thought to go to it then, but as I gathered my mending basket, Ger and his wife strolled past, hand in hand, through the stubbled corn. They stopped beside the pole. Ger's wife fingered the scarecrow's sleeve. The wind whipped her dress, pressing it against her rounded belly. She rested a hand on her stomach then let Ger lead her away.

A week later, Emma Grey said, "The scarecrow is old and useless. It is fortunate it survived the harvest. Now you must make preparations for a new scarecrow."

"A man of my own creation," I said. "No doubt I must call this one husband too?"

Emma gazed at me evenly. "Just treat your new husband better than you did the last. The fields would be barren without a scarecrow to watch over them. Is there anything special that you wish?"

When my cheeks stopped burning, I said, "A blue jacket and white trousers. And two buttons, the color of black sheep's wool."

An indulgent smile crossed her face. "And wool?"

"If possible."

Emma's milky eyes disappeared in the wrinkles of her smile. She nodded, then picked up an onion from my table. "Such a lovely garden, Chloe Scarecrow," she said, "and every bit as bountiful as Mollie's."

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Emma and Thomas brought the bundle of clothing, rags and wool hours before the first snow. My excitement surprised me. I held the jacket to the window and wondered at the broad shoulders that would fill such a coat. Of a deep royal blue, the jacket showed wear only at the elbows and along the hem. The white trousers were fine and unpatched. A ball of uncombed wool peeked from the top of one glove.

"Will they do, Mrs. Scarecrow?" Emma said.

I folded the trousers. "They will."

"If you need anything else," Thomas said. He gazed at me, his eyes aflame. A thrill fanned through me.

Emma slipped her arm through Thomas', and, leaning into his stocky frame, steered him toward the door. "We had best be off," she said, "or we shall be forced

to wait out the storm. Look after your husband, Chloe Scarecrow.”

The door banged shut behind them. Draped over a chair, the blue jacket seemed suddenly shabby.

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Through the long winter nights I sewed, fashioning the scarecrow’s head from a bag of cloth. With beet juice, I applied a mouth below the brown button eyes. I combed the dark wool, stitching it along the crown so that it hung in waves across the forehead. I embroidered a nose with pale thread. “A handsome man, my husband,” I told myself as the needle wove in and out of the cloth.

I imagined my husband. With broad shoulders and thick, strong hands, he stood a full head taller than I. A sailor, he promised to take me away from this cottage. He promised to take me to the sea. We would build a life for ourselves far from people who saw me as a poor lame thing. And no one would call me Mrs. Scarecrow again.

His lips would burn against mine. His hands would caress the slope of my back, grasping my buttocks as he pulled me closer still. Then his fingers would glide along the backs of my thighs, stroking and kneading the whole and the useless leg. And he would not turn away.

“Chloe,” he would say, and only that.

I made my husband a heart of red cotton embroidered with my name so that he would love only me.

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In early spring, when the breeze ruffled the tender shoots of corn and wheat, Thomas Halpern and Joseph Dunne strode across the field and pulled the thing from the pole. The old scarecrow fell to the ground in a swirl of tatters. The two men stepped over it and hoisted the new scarecrow into place. The new one was stouter than the last; I hoped it would take the wind longer to rob it of its form. Nor would it ever bow its head to the wind, not with the ash wand I had inserted in its neck.

From my garden, I watched the men. Thomas glanced over his shoulder at me. Joseph rose from a crouch, the remains of the old scarecrow cradled in his long, twig-thin arms. A frown of concentration dulled his hatchet-like features. He nudged Thomas and the two of them walked across the field to join me. “Are you ready, Mrs. Scarecrow?” Joseph said.

I nodded. In the field, the new scarecrow stood tall against the afternoon sky.

Joseph smiled patronizingly. “You had best fetch a shawl. It will be cold when we bring you home.”

“I’ll fetch it,” Thomas said.

“A black one if she has it,” Joseph said, laying the rags in the back of the cart. “Out of respect.”

We rode to the village in silence. As we clattered between the houses, everyone fell in step behind us and followed us to the green. There, a large stack of wood waited. I glanced at the heap of straw and tattered cloth in the back of the cart. Mollie Scarecrow had mourned each scarecrow, wringing her hands and wailing over their crumpled bodies. I felt nothing for this bundle of scrap.

Joseph halted the cart. He and Thomas dismounted, then lifted me from the seat. People pressed against me, offering condolences and patting my shoulder. Mother approached but turned away when her gaze met mine. I never saw Father. Somewhere in the early dusk, children sang about Chloe Scarecrow and how no man would have her. Matronly voices silenced them.

Emma drew me aside and patted my hand. “I’m sorry about your husband.”

“But I have another,” I said, “who waits for me at home. All he requires is that I mend his clothes.”

“Yes, so you have,” said Emma.

We stared at each other until someone handed me a glass of ale. Emma nodded and walked away.

Across the green, old Martin Dunne tucked the fiddle under his chin and lifted his bow. He played a slow air. The tune lilted and fell. Joseph set a tankard of ale at his father’s feet, but the fiddler never once looked down. His bow glided from the first tune to the next, brightening the green with song.

Now and then, people hovered beside me and spoke to me in polite, halting words. “It looks to be a good spring,” Nora Halpern said. Then men bent over the wood, placing the branches and kindling just so. Ger Malins circled the heap of dried wood, torch in hand. “How is the garden?” asked the man next to me. I pressed my lips together. Ger Malins touched the flame to the wood four times, then stepped back. Stout with motherhood, his wife joined him in the glow of the firelight. Ger smiled at the tiny babe in her arms. “Will you bless the child, Mrs. Scarecrow?” someone said.

“I have,” I said, and turned away.

The women of the village gathered ‘round me then and led me to a small pyre just beyond the flames. The remains of the scarecrow lay there, its flattened arms crossing its chest. “You may say one last farewell to your husband,” Emma said.

I leaned on my crutch, grasping it with both hands. The heaviness of my heart gave way to hatred. I glared at the rags before me. Jaw clenched, I looked up at Emma. “May God forgive you and welcome you,” I said. I tilted my chin. “My husband.”



Emma fixed me with an understanding look. Then she nodded to Thomas and Joseph. While old Martin Dunne played a dirge, the two men lifted the pyre and placed it on the flames. The fire crackled and sparked, consuming the scarecrow. As the ashes caught in the swirling smoke, the fiddler slid into a lively tune. Soon everyone of able body took a partner and danced upon the green.

In the small hours of the morning Joseph and Thomas came to where I sat alone by the coals. At my feet lay snapped twigs and torn bits of cloth, whatever had fallen within my frustrated, enraged reach. "We'll take you home, Chloe Scarecrow," Thomas said. Joseph blinked.

Joseph fell asleep before we rattled out of the village. His head lolled against my shoulder. I pushed him away. Thomas watched the road ahead. "Yours is a lonely life, Chloe Scarecrow," he said. "You are too fine a woman for such a fate."

I swallowed.

His voice soothed me. "You are too young, too fair of face," he said. "Ger Malins is a sorry fool to have allowed them to imprison you in that cottage."

My shoulder quaked with each shallow breath. Biting my lower lip until I tasted blood, I looked out over the moonlit fields.

"I would never have allowed such a thing," Thomas said. "Never."

A tear slid down my cheek.

He clucked to the horses, reining in just outside the garden. He cupped my face in his hands. "Chloe," he said. Then he kissed me.

Warm and probing, the kiss tasted of tears and blood. Still its sweetness filled me.

He pulled away. Although moonlight illuminated his smile, a shadow hid his eyes. He nodded toward Joseph, then climbed from the cart and held out his arms to me. He grasped my waist, spinning me once before he set me down. He reached for my crutch and handed it to me. Arm in arm, we walked to the cottage.

On the doorstep, we kissed again. His fingers strayed along my bosom. Thrilled and frightened, I brushed at his hand. He squeezed my breast. A moan caught in my throat; my body ached for him. Then I remembered Nora's suffering face.

I pushed him away. "No. You're a married man."

He pulled me close. "Chloe, Chloe," he said. "Why think of such things?"

His hand followed the curve of my back to my buttocks. "Thomas," I said. "Thomas, please."

“I will not come again if you send me away now,” he said. He turned, his face illuminated by the moon. A mixture of triumph and pity sparkled in his eyes. “Never again. You are a fine woman, Chloe. It would be a shame to waste that. No one else will have you, only me. No one else can see beyond your useless leg—”

I ground my teeth, growling low in my throat. “Was it pity, then, that caused you to seek me out?” I said. “As no one else would have me, I would be glad of any attention? Even that of a man who twists my loneliness to his own ends?”

He spat. “You must learn to take what charity you can, Mrs. Scarecrow, or be satisfied with nothing!”

With that, Thomas stalked away. He climbed into the cart and turned the horses’ heads, then flicked the reins. The horses started, lunging forward. Poor Joseph Dunne jolted awake with a cry, clutching at Thomas as the cart flew down the lane. I cradled myself with one arm, a chill anger quaking through me. Even so, I burned to have some man touch me as he had.

I opened the cottage door, then glanced back at the scarecrow, fine and stout in the moonlight. Leaving the door ajar, I skirted the garden and hobbled across the field. My crutch caught in the furrows, my lame foot plowing the soft earth. I stopped beneath the scarecrow. The breeze lifted his hair so that it curled around his cap. His eyes glinted like stars. I held my breath, my lower jaw trembling as I willed the tears away. I stood tall and straight, my head erect, and mustered the strength to steady my voice. “When will you come lie with me, Husband?”

The scarecrow smiled with his beet-red mouth and his button eyes. I turned and plodded home.

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That night, the door creaked open. My throat cinched shut. I listened to the hum of crickets until their music stopped, cut short by the door’s closing. A silhouette waited by the window. The figure walked toward me, the coals lending it a golden sheen as it neared the hearth. I inhaled and lay still, slipping my hands from under the bedclothes, my fingers ready to rake Thomas’ face when he bent over me.

The figure knelt beside the bed, its broad shoulders bowed over me. A hand rested on my good leg. “Chloe?” he said in a voice as green and unformed as spring.

It was no one I knew.

“Chloe, are you awake?”

I slid my leg from under his hand. “Who’s there?”

He laughed and leaned forward. With his thumb and forefinger, he pinched my chin playfully. “Only your husband, Mrs. Scarecrow.”

I sat up and inched away until my back met the wall. “My husband is a thing

of straw and cloth.”

Hurt colored his voice. “Chloe...”

“Light the candle, then,” I said. “Let me look at you.”

He rose and took the candle from the bedside table, then bent over the coals to light the wick. I shifted so that I could see out the window. Only the blue coat hung from the pole. To delay him, I said, “And who is my husband?”

“You want to know my name?” he said, surprised. “Why?”

Dread and desire quickened in me. I wanted more than his name—what, I wasn’t sure. “Because I want to know.”

“Darrell,” he said, and slipped into bed beside me.

His warmth startled me—that, and the press of him against me: his legs, his arms, his soft belly, his member. I shivered with the strangeness of it. He lifted the hair from my shoulder and said, “We will do nothing, if you choose it. Just let me hold you tonight.”

I nodded but the nearness of him and his sweet, clovered scent excited me. With my fingertips, I traced his chest, tickling the downy hair along his breastbone, straying to touch his nipples. I stopped, afraid of the power building in me. He cupped my cheek in his palm, then stroked my temple, bending over to kiss me, full and long. I drew back, then nipped his jaw and we kissed again. Hesitantly, I pulled him to me. We loved one another.

Afterwards, I cried. He brushed the hair from my face and kissed my cheek. I clung to him, burying my face in his neck. My tears pooled in the hollow of his throat. He caressed my neck. “Chloe,” he said.

“Hush,” I said, setting a finger to his lips. “Say only that.”

We loved each other again.

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I awoke alone. Two dents hollowed the pillow; a piece of straw rested in the farthest. Clutching the collar of my dressing gown, I crept to the window. My husband swayed on the pole, his arms flapping in the breeze, his button eyes gazing out across the spring fields. I wondered, could he see me? The wind caught his hat and tipped it a bit. I raised my hand. Joseph Dunne trudged into view and returned my wave. I hurried from the window.

I sat on the bed, staring into my entwined hands. Had I dreamt it all or had Darrell come to me? I picked up the bit of straw and spun it through my fingers. The imprint of his head, his scent rising from the tumbled bedclothes, the ache between my thighs, all of it assured me that he had been there. I dressed and went outside.

Men and women drifted to work, their eyes clouded with last night's drink. A few greeted me with sullen nods. Ger Malins passed by, stopping at odd intervals to pinch the bridge of his nose. He stumbled, shivering as if to rid himself of the previous night. Pity filled me, nothing more.

I walked across the field and stopped before my husband. His features, outlined in small, careful stitches, remained still and passive, but his mouth seemed redder, a little bruised. I touched my lips and felt a smile form beneath my fingers.

“And will you come to me every night?” I whispered.

In my imagination I saw those stained lips twitch into a smile. I blushed and walked back to the garden.

“Can you believe it?” I heard one of the men say. “No more than a child and here she is talking to the thing as Mollie Scarecrow might have done.”

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My husband came every night, striding across the fields after the workers had gone home. He would let himself in, then sit beside me. He said little, although he had a way of looking at me, with his head tilted forward and his eyes reflecting the firelight. A smile played across his lips that seemed to say, “No need for words, Chloe—it is just us two.”

He laughed easily, a kind laugh like leaves tumbling in the wind. I asked him once why he laughed so often and he said, “Because it is good to be here—and because you wanted my name.” I giggled then, nervously. He pulled me to him and wrestled me into his lap, nipping at my neck and shoulders until I nipped his back. Delighted, he turned my face to his and kissed me.

One night, as the fields ripened with early summer, Darrell pulled his chair next to mine. He gazed at me. “And what will you do with my name?” he said.

“Use it to call you in from the fields,” I said.

“Oh?” He grinned and placed a hand on my knee. His shirt sleeve rode up, exposing his right forearm. Thinner than the left, the wrist bore a weeping gash. I touched the skin above the cut. “What is this?” I asked.

He poked it. “The effects of time and weather.”

Shaken, I rose. My good knee threatened to give way. “It needs tending,” I said.

Darrell caught my hand. “Wait—will you put salve on it? It will do no good.”

I sank into my chair, staring at the wound. Beneath the watery gloss, the exposed muscle was golden, not red or pink. “Tomorrow, then,” I said.

The next day, I trudged across the fields, the mending basket slung over one

arm. I tugged at Joseph Dunne's elbow. "I need you to lower my husband from the pole," I said.

Joseph set his hoe aside. He glanced at my husband, then he glanced at me. "There is nothing wrong with the scarecrow."

"Please," I said. "Just lower him."

"Ger, Edwin," Joseph said.

I sat at the foot of the pole. The men lowered Darrell into my arms. Light and insubstantial, his body radiated the warmth of the sun. I lifted his arm, then probed the tear with my fingers. A bit of chaff puffed from the split cloth. I reached into the mending basket and withdrew a wad of straw. I stuffed my husband's arm, plumping it, then sorted through the basket, nudging aside scraps and bobbins until I found the packet of needles.

Later, as I tied off the thread, Thomas Halpern strolled by. Although he avoided tripping over me, he did not look at me. I shivered; had I looked into his eyes, I thought, I would not have seen myself reflected there. I stroked my husband's coarse, cotton arm.

That evening, by candlelight and hearthlight, I studied Darrell's face. A tautness replaced the fleshiness of youth—he looked to be a man of twenty-five or twenty-six. Around his eyes, lines foreshadowed age. As I reached to touch his hair, still dark and fine, he took my hand and pressed it to his cheek. His eyes sparkled. Rising, he lifted me from my chair and carried me to bed.

In the wake of our lovemaking, I compared his kisses to those of real men, to those of Ger Malins and Thomas Halpern. His were sweeter, kinder than theirs. His tasted of summer. His hands, tracing my face and the curl of my body, glided over me without Thomas' desperate need or Ger's clumsy shame. But he was not a man, he was not real....

Darrell propped himself on one elbow and gazed down at me. He sketched a line with his finger from my chin to my throat. Sadness softened his eyes. "You don't believe in me, do you?" he said.

Confused and guilty, I clasped his hand, twining his fingers. "Darrell—"

"Hush," he said. "Say nothing."

He kissed me, pulling me close. He tasted of salt.

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"A lovely day for a wedding," Emma said, sipping her ale. "And a lovely evening for a dance."

The couples laughed and swayed on the commons before us, the bride and

groom leading the chain of dancers through a reel. I twisted my hands. I had fulfilled my duty, I had witnessed the vows; now I wanted to go home. Beyond the village, beneath the full moon, Darrell waited in the late summer fields. Waited, and no doubt wondered where I was. Until Joseph and Thomas had tapped at my door, I had forgotten about the wedding.

Emma smirked. “Thinking of your own husband, Chloe Scarecrow?”

I resisted glaring at her. I leaned over and reached for my glass of ale.

“How lucky you are,” Emma said. “The rest of us can only hope to marry once, but like Mollie you can look forward to a new husband every year.”

I straightened, leaving the ale untouched. “Did Mollie Scarecrow know her husbands’ names?”

“Did she name them?” Emma said. “Not that I ever heard. But then, she had so many.”

With a rustle of skirts, Nora Halpern sat beside me. Her cheeks flushed with anger, she chipped at the leg of the chair with her fingernails. Thomas stalked toward us, weaving between the dancers, until Nora turned her back on him. He stopped, his hands brushing tight circles along his thighs. The dancers shuffled in front of him, hiding him from view.

“I caught him with the Morris girl,” Nora said. “He had a hand on her arm. Only a matter of time before it roved elsewhere.”

“You see how lucky you are, Chloe Scarecrow,” Emma said. “No one will ever tire of you.”

Nora’s nostrils flared. “He never tired—” she said, then bowed her head. Tears caught in her lashes.

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Thomas and Joseph drove me back to the cottage. All the way home, Joseph hummed a phrase of melody, singing a word or two whenever Thomas growled at him. I sat between them, hugging my crutch to my breast, afraid to speak. They reeked of soured ale, and, between Thomas’ black mood and Joseph’s flippant gaiety, I trusted neither of them.

Joseph reined in at my gate and stretched his legs. “Well, Mrs. Scarecrow,” he said, “half a minute and I’ll give you a hand—”

“I’ll see her to the door,” Thomas said. His voice could have pierced steel.

Joseph wrapped the reins around his fist. He nodded.

Thomas hopped from the cart, raising a clap of dust. He pulled me roughly from the seat and dragged me to the door. Squeezed between the doorframe and his

chest, I held my crutch between us like a crucifix. He leaned forward to kiss me. I pushed him away. My good knee buckled and I pitched forward into his arms. He grasped me by my shoulders, his fingers digging into my flesh as if drilling for bone.

“Listen, Mrs. Scarecrow,” he said between gritted teeth, “you must be a saint or a whore to live so far from the village and not go mad. We both know you are no saint.”

I tried to wrench myself free but he held me fast. “Joseph!” I shouted. “Joseph Dunne!”

Thomas drew back his hand and hit me. I raked my nails across his upper lip, catching his nose. He stumbled back. With the doorframe to bolster me, I swung my crutch in his face. “I will do worse! Then how will you explain yourself to Nora?”

He wiped his upper lip with the back of his hand. “Whore,” he said. He stormed away.

I let myself into the cottage and leaned against the door. I listened: Thomas growled at Joseph while Joseph hummed his bit of tune. The horses’ hooves receded into the distance. Slowly, the crickets’ voices rose in song. I hobbled from the door, shaken and enraged, then sank into a chair. The crutch trembled in my hands. I set it aside.

The door opened and Darrell entered. Even by moonlight, I could see the angry set of his brow. He shut the door behind him. He stood in the center of the room, his arms folded across his chest, his head tilted back. Comforted by his anger, I forced a smile. “You needn’t worry,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“Are you?” he said sharply.

“He did not hurt me.”

“He?” my husband said. “Oh, ‘he,’ is it? So that is where you’ve been.”

I gaped at him. “It is not. I’ve been to a wedding.”

“To a wedding.” He nodded. “Ah! To seek someone else?”

“Darrell—”

“Someone who doesn’t need mending?”

“I mend you because I want to—”

“You mend me because they expect it!” He grasped me by the shoulders, his fingers digging into my flesh.

I kicked at him with my good leg, my foot scraping his shin. We tumbled to the floor in a heap. My elbow smacked the hearthstones.

Darrell groped for me. “Chloe, are you all right?”

I cradled my throbbing elbow and curled out of reach. “Get away from me! I never want to see you, any of you, ever again! Nora is right, you’re all the same! Go away!”

“Chloe—”

“Go away!” I shrieked. I felt along the floor for something to throw at him, but found nothing. The door opened and shut. Between sobs when I gasped for breath, I could hear the crickets singing to the full moon.

\* \* \* \*

The first night, I locked my door with a chair. He did not try the knob; that hurt a little. The second night, I set the chair in front of the door. The third night, I left the chair by the hearth.

During the day, I ignored him, keeping my back to him while I worked the garden. The people who passed the cottage on their way to and from the field barely nodded to me. A few stared, squinted at me and pursed their lips. Only Joseph Dunne stopped to talk. I finally asked him, “Joseph, what have I done that everyone is so cold?”

He gazed into the clouds, shading his eyes with his hand. “Those scratches on Thomas Halpern’s face,” he said. “He told everyone you clawed him because he wouldn’t bed you.”

My stomach knotted. “It’s a lie! Joseph, I called out to you—”

“They don’t believe me. Thomas claims I was drunk.”

That night I locked the door with the chair again.

\* \* \* \*

The summer sky, an angry gray, pressed down on the fields next morning. The wind rippled through the corn, spinning free the loose leaves and stirring the dust. “Rain by evening,” I said to myself.

People passed the cottage on their way to the fields. Two men stopped at the foot of the pole and gazed up at the scarecrow. I turned away, until one of them laughed. I peered over my shoulder. One of the men stretched to tug the lapels of my husband’s blue jacket, then hopped a little and tossed something at his cap. I groped for my crutch and struggled to my feet, but the men had already loped away.

Lightning split the sky, followed by a sudden rain. The lashing torrent drove people from the fields. I retreated to the cottage and brewed a cup of tea. Through the window, I watched the rain pummel the earth, then subside. A threatening stillness followed; the clouds massed tighter and darker. The storm waited, gathering strength.



I glanced at my husband. Let him drown, I thought, then pushed the tea cup aside and leaned toward the window. A fox, stealing through the corn, passed my husband, then circled back to crouch at the foot of the pole. It leapt at him, clawing his legs and ribs in an attempt to gain purchase. It fell, then leapt again. It tore at his jacket before it scabbled backward and dropped to the earth. It ran. My husband teetered from the pole at an angle.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. I grabbed the mending basket and hurried to the field. I hopped more than ran, my lame leg trailing as my crutch sank in the mud. I skidded on the straw at my husband's feet and looked up. One leg hung in tatters while the left shoulder of his coat flapped open, exposing the lining. I set the basket down and balanced on my good leg. With my hands on my husband's hips, I steadied myself. A lump formed in my throat.

"If I pull you down, I might well pull you apart," I said. "Darrell, you must help me."

A wind whipped my hair into my eyes and I let go of him. I shook my head, combing at my hair until I could see. My husband slumped at the foot of the pole, his button eyes beaded with rain. On his cap rested a handful of cherries. I looked again at the rent in his jacket. A smear of red juice outlined its tattered edge. Seething, I snatched at my basket and sat beside my husband. "Fools," I muttered, brushing the cherries away. "Idiots and fools."

Only a little straw nested in the bottom of the basket. I tore leaves from the nearest cornstalks to restuff my husband's leg. I then patched his thigh with scraps of old skirts and aprons, sewing quickly, ever attentive to the clouds above us.

With the leg mended, I examined the rest of him. A scratch on his cheek warranted three stitches, one gloved finger needed two. The jacket still hung from the pole; I dismissed it. I sat with him, holding the straw-stiff hand until a drop of rain spattered on my arm. "I must go inside," I said. "I think it best you come in, too."

I grasped the pole and pulled myself to my feet. By the time I reached the cottage door, I was soaked through. I stirred the hearth fire and waited. Soon the door creaked open. Darrell leaned in. He bit his lip, then stepped inside. "Come in, Darrell, and warm yourself," I said.

He shut the door. Absently, he rubbed the scar on his cheek. "Chloe—"

"Come, warm yourself," I said, looking into the flames.

He joined me at the hearth. He touched my hand, tentatively, and when I didn't withdraw it, laced his fingers through mine. "Forgive me," he said. "When I saw you leave that day, I feared you would not come back. When you did, all that fear turned to anger—"

"I forgive you."

“I worry sometimes that I’m not enough for you. Some nights, your hands seem to measure and weigh me, as if to compare me—”

I placed my hand over his mouth. “Darrell,” I said. “I forgive you. Do you forgive me?”

“Always,” he said. He smiled, relieved. The lines around his eyes deepened. My husband was a man in his thirties, weathered by the sun. The autumn and winter rains would cripple him. Come spring, my husband would dwindle to torn rags and crumpled straw. Far older than the months that bound him, he would stoop beneath the weight of the seasons until, his head cradled in my lap, he looked up at me one last time before the wind scattered him across the snow.

I pulled myself into his arms and clung to him. Until spring, he was mine. He hugged me, then lifted my chin. His smile faded. “Chloe, what’s wrong?”

I held my breath, then exhaled. “Nothing. I’m just glad you’re here.”

Summer turned to autumn. The scent of ripe corn hung on the breeze. Thomas Halpern’s face healed and with it people’s scorn. A few spoke to me, hesitantly at first, then freely, teasing me about my frail husband. I even went to the harvest dance, only to overhear Emma Grey comment, “She is more like Mollie Scarecrow every day.”

But Mollie Scarecrow never loved Darrell. I waited for Joseph Dunne and Ger Malins to drive me home.

And Darrell aged. With each storm, he grew thinner and more pale until I could barely remember my young husband of the spring and summer. Yet his kisses remained sweet and his ways kind. He spoke more, as if to compensate for his failing body, enchanting me with stories about the animals and birds that inhabited the fields, and about the people who worked around him. He soothed me with remembered pleasures: the day I first bid him come, the week it rained every day and I asked him to remain indoors...

One morning before the first snow, I convinced Ger Malins and Joseph Dunne to remove my husband from the pole. My basket well-lined with straw and cloth, I set about trying to heal the season’s wounds and make my husband young again. I plumped him with straw, patching the smallest rips and frays. Just as I tied off the thread after applying a patch to his knee, my fingers tore through his thigh. Brittle with rot, the cotton could take no more. I called to Joseph and bade him replace my husband. He did so, carefully, but my husband’s arm ripped under his grasp.

The snows came. Each night Darrell seemed to fade before my eyes. A stooped man with sheer, mottled skin and bright eyes, he held me as if it hurt to clasp me as he once had. His breath was shallow and his laugh a wheeze. Two nights into the New Year, he plodded to the cottage, then sank into a chair and dozed.

I dragged my chair next to his and watched him sleep. A tracery of veins throbbled at his temple. I took his hand.

He started awake. "Have I been sleeping?"

"You have." I squeezed his hand. I pressed my lips together, decided to ask, decided not to, decided—"Darrell, will you come again? When the men hang the new scarecrow from the pole, will it be you?"

He smiled sadly. "No."

"Just one year...?"

"I am the scarecrow," he said, "and the seasons are killing me. Come spring, I will be gone." He leaned forward. "But Chloe, promise me—remember my name. And remember that I can only give you what you ask."

I gazed at the withered hand in mine. "Did you know, while I was making you, I dreamed you were a sailor and that some day you would take me to the sea. I embroidered my name on your heart so that—that..."

He pressed my hand. "I know," he said. "I know."

As I held him that night and listened to his rustling breath, I pondered his words, "Remember my name." What if, I thought, by naming the new scarecrow Darrell, I could somehow bring him back...

I awoke the next morning. My husband dangled from the pole, his limbs askew. That night, he did not come, nor the next, nor ever again. I set about building another scarecrow, begging another pair of white trousers and another blue jacket. Emma sent a skein of white wool. I dyed it black. The buttons she sent were blue. I sent word to her that I needed brown. Joseph returned with her reply. "Emma said that like each man, each scarecrow is different," he related, "as Mollie Scarecrow knew."

After Joseph left, I sat on my bed and stared at the blue buttons on my palm. The new scarecrow's legs lay at the foot of the bed, his hands on the table. As *Mollie Scarecrow knew*. I flung the buttons across the room. One of them shattered. I grabbed the trousers by the ankles and shook them until straw littered the cottage. A few pieces fluttered into the fire. They burst into flames and quickly turned to ash, as short lived as my husband.

"Mollie!" I shouted to whatever spirit haunted the cottage. "Did you love your husbands as I do? Did they come to you, men of flesh for a few brief hours, only to die come spring? Mollie! Did you ever tell anyone? Of course not, how could you, why would anyone believe you?"

I dreamt of Mollie that night. "You knew," she said, "you knew my husbands came to me. You knew the first night your husband came to you. But you were

afraid of me. You refused to believe that we would become the same person.”

“We are not,” I said. “You never loved Darrell.”

Mollie shook her head. “Spare yourself. It is easier to let them go if you do not name them.”

The next morning with the sun sparkling on the snow, I walked to the pole and took Darrell’s right hand. “How can you love me now?” I said. I held his hand until the chill seeped through me. Some days I just stood beside Darrell, other days I talked, creating futures that eddied around us like snow-flurries. My toes purpled and scaled with the cold, but still I went. When the palm of his right hand tore, I held his left. I feared spring. In spring, the people of the village would come for my husband.

\* \* \* \*

I held the door, blocking the men’s entrance. Ger Malins and Rory Coates hung back, stamping their feet and glancing about them. Joseph Dunne nodded to me. “Good day, Mrs. Scarecrow,” he said. “We’ve come for the new scarecrow.”

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. “There is no new scarecrow.”

Color drained from Joseph’s face. He snatched at Ger’s arm. “Go,” he said. “Fetch Emma.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose and turned to me. “It is spring. We need a new scarecrow. The old one is little more than rags.”

“There is no new scarecrow,” I said. I shut the door. I brewed a pot of tea and waited for Emma.

An hour later, without so much as a knock, Emma flung open the door. She stamped into the cottage. “Where is the new scarecrow?” she said.

I gestured for her to sit. I nudged a cup of tea toward her and squared my shoulders. “I want no other husband,” I said.

“Are you mad? Look at it, look at your ‘husband’! It is old, worn. What good is it to you or to us? Are the fields to go unprotected?”

I glanced out the window. Joseph and Rory lowered my husband from the pole. “I will not have another,” I said.

Emma slapped the table. “But you shall and many of them. Mollie Scarecrow lived for that. Of course she mourned the passing of each husband, but think what she had!”

“Yes, a grief for every year,” I said. “I cannot face this loss each spring.”

Darrell’s limbs, flat and limp, swayed as Joseph carried him across the field. I inhaled. The breath hurt. “Please, Emma,” I said. “Leave this one for me. I will make you another, just leave this one for me.”

Her face softened. “We cannot leave the fields unprotected. Can you make a new scarecrow tonight?”

I glanced at the stuffed torso and hands shoved beneath the bed. A head and legs, that was all the new scarecrow needed. “I can,” I said.

“Then I will leave this one for one night,” she said. She took my hand. “Chloe, the old scarecrow is dead.”

The truth of her words shrank to a hard knot inside me.

Emma squeezed my hand and rose. “It is no use to you or to us, except as ash to bless the fields.” She went to the door and leaned out. “Joseph, bring the scarecrow here. We will delay the bonfire for one night.”

Joseph carried my husband inside. He questioned me with a look. “Just there,” I said, pointing. He lay Darrell on the bed.

\* \* \* \*

In the small hours of the morning, I cradled the new scarecrow’s head in my lap and knotted the last stitch. I sucked my bleeding fingers. With its hair brushed over the broken button, the scarecrow had a wild, rakish expression. A smile might tame it somewhat, I thought. Setting the head aside, I searched the pantry for beets but found none. I picked up the head and drew a mouth with my own blood. I attached the head to the body.

“Stay here by the hearth tonight,” I said. “Tomorrow I will be yours.”

Fully dressed, I climbed into bed beside Darrell. Faded straw peeked out of the countless rips and tears; his hair hung thin and colorless. Yet his eyes still shone.

I touched his cheek. “How can you be dead?”

I slept. I dreamt that Darrell pulled me close and kissed the nape of my neck, all the while murmuring in my ear. His breath was light but warm. At dawn I woke, rolling over to face him. Darrell smoothed the hair from my brow.

I sat up. “Darrell?”

His smile lent his sunken cheeks a fullness they did not have, while his eyes, caught in a mesh of wrinkles, glittered in the pale light. “It’s been so long, Chloe,” he said. His voice was as brittle as crusted snow.

I took his hand and pressed it to my cheek. “Not dead?”

“Near it. Hush, Chloe, don’t cry. It is the way of the seasons.”

“Damn the seasons! Darrell, I will keep you here and nurse you—”

“To health? Chloe, it is too late.” He shifted a little and winced. He squinted at

the hearth. “You have made a new husband.”

“Emma and the others forced me to make him.”

He gazed at me with affection. “Forced you? No. All of your life you’ve let others decide your fate—for the good of the fields, for the good of the village, because that is the way it has always been. You must ask for what you want, Chloe.”

My mind filled with visions of empty fields surrounding an empty village. “And if in doing so, I destroy the village?” I said. “I can’t do that.”

Darrell pinched my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “But just now you were willing to damn the seasons,” he said.

\* \* \* \*

We dozed. In the late morning I woke, my fingers entwined with those of a dry, rotted glove. I set Darrell’s hand by his side and crawled from the bed. My mind numbed, I paced between the old scarecrow and the new until the jangle of the cart stopped before the cottage. I sank to my knees.

Emma knocked and entered, followed by Joseph and Rory. She smiled. “There,” she said, pointing to the new scarecrow.

Without a word, Joseph and Rory carried the straw man from the cottage. Emma went to the bed. She crossed Darrell’s hands on his chest as if readying him for burial.

The scream building inside me threatened to burst my lungs. I stood and eased myself between Emma and Darrell. “Emma,” I said, “he still lives.”

She patted my hand. “No, Chloe, he does not.”

“But he does! Emma if you burn him now, I’ll never get over it—”

“But you will,” Emma said soothingly, reaching around me to straighten Darrell’s collar. “Mollie did—”

I brushed her hand aside. “I am not Mollie Scarecrow.”

“No?” Emma said, her face puckered with spite. “You might as well be! The two of you inventing loves for yourselves, clothing the scarecrow with dreams! And how can you imagine this thing as a husband? How can you want this ancient bundle of rags?”

A tear trickled down my cheek; I clenched my teeth. “And what of Mr. Grey?” I said. “Now that he is old, will you give him up? Do you wish that you had as many husbands as Mollie Scarecrow?”

Emma stared at me. With a snort of disgust, she walked to the door and forced it open. “Joseph, come and take this thing away,” she said. “The bonfire is

ready.”

I followed her outside. “No, Emma, please!”

“Will you come to your husband’s funeral, Mrs. Scarecrow?” she said.

Joseph and Rory squeezed past us and entered the cottage. I held my crutch in both hands to keep from shaking. “This is not a funeral,” I said. “It’s an execution.”

Emma turned to me. “Will you come?”

The two men carried my husband to the cart.

I nodded.

“Your shawl, Mrs. Scarecrow,” Emma said.

My voice shrilled. “No. You will leave without me.”

“Mrs. Scarecrow—”

“You will! And then you will take him to the commons and burn him alive!”

Emma sneered. “Rory, fetch Mrs. Scarecrow’s shawl.”

I rode with Darrell in the back of the cart. I cradled his head in my lap, stroking the last of his hair, tucking loose wisps of straw into his limbs. My tears flowed unchecked, splashing onto his face, and I imagined him crying, too. I murmured to him, I sang to him, I straightened his shoulders to make him more comfortable. In my mind, I remembered him young, I remembered him old, and realized that young or old, I loved him.

The cart rattled to a halt. I peered through blurry eyes at the pyre adorned with the first spring flowers: milkmaids, blue-eyed grass, poppies, wild mustard. To the right, Rory set a torch to the bonfire. The scent of wood smoke stung my nostrils. I stroked my husband’s hair. “No,” I whispered. “Not like that. Not you.”

Three women crowded beside the cart. The first, Ger Malins’ wife, said, “Come, Mrs. Scarecrow, let us prepare the scarecrow.”

I slapped her hands away and clutched at Darrell’s chest. His upper body pulled away from his legs.

I screamed and drew back. The women took him then, lifting him by halves from the cart. Numbed, I watched them attach his legs to his waist, patting loose straw into place and folding under a frayed seam. The fire crackled behind them. Darrell’s eyes gleamed in the firelight.

I lowered myself over the side of the cart. Joseph caught my arm before my lame leg folded beneath me. He handed me my crutch. I limped to the pyre and

knelt, touching my husband's lips. I brushed at the corner of my eye with the back of my hand, then looked up at the three women. "Please," I said, "let me keep this one."

Ger Malins' wife knelt beside me. She touched Darrell's cheek. She looked up at someone standing behind me. "Why not?" she said. "What harm is there?"

Emma Grey stepped into view. "What harm?" she said. "How can we properly bless the fields? It has always been like this. Ger, lay the pyre in the coals."

Ger shook his head. "Let her keep this one."

Thomas Halpern shoved his way between the women and the pyre. Three scars shone white along his upper lip. "Play the dirge, Martin," he said, glaring at me, his eyes bright with triumph. "Let us lay this sorry bundle of scrap to rest."

He forced me aside, then hefted the pyre. Darrell fell into his arms. Legs spread wide, Thomas lifted my husband over his head.

I threw myself at Thomas Halpern's feet, clawing at his shins with my nails. He kicked himself free. He staggered, then dangled my husband over the flames.

"Darrell!" I shouted, wrapping myself around Thomas' calf. "Dear God, as you love me! Darrell, save yourself!"

Thomas backhanded me across the temple. White light and a shower of sparks burned across my closed eyes. I held my breath, swaying to ease the pain. "Darrell!" I said again, his name a comfort. "Stop him!"

The air filled with the sound of crickets on a warm night. Shrill and frantic, their voices sought words. The sparks faded from my vision; I pressed my palms to my eyes. The crickets sang still louder. "Darrell will be coming soon," I said. "Young and strong as spring. He will come home."

The crickets chorused at a fever pitch. "Stop them!" they said. "They will cast each other into the fire!"

I opened my eyes, blinking to focus on the confusion around me. Surrounded by a half-circle of people, two men grappled before the bonfire, arms locked around each other's shoulders. The blond man stomped at his foe's instep. The dark-haired man pulled away only to be reeled once more into the blond's embrace. They staggered nearer the flames.

Ger and Rory broke through the half-circle and snatched at the men. Ger held the blond, pinning his arms to his sides. "Thomas!" Ger said. "Stop or you'll both be killed!"

With a wrench, Thomas tried to break free. Ger held him fast. Thomas glowered at the dark-haired man, then paled, his eyes widening. "What is this?"



Thomas said. “Who are you? Where is the scarecrow?”

Darrell took a step back. Again my husband of the late spring, he felt along his arms, squeezing and pinching, a grateful smile flitting across his face. The crowd whispered and hummed. I laughed, giddy with wonder and grasped the skirt of the woman next to me. “Darrell!” I said, holding my arms out to him. “Come home with me!”

He stepped toward me. Then someone seized his arms.

Gaunt and tall, the young man wore clothes very like Darrell’s. He looked at me. His callow, indistinct features contrasted with the definition of his red mouth. A lock of brown hair hung over one eye. He combed the lock aside with his fingers. One eye was clouded and blind, the other blue.

The new scarecrow turned to Darrell. “You have seen your seasons,” he said. “This year is mine.”

Darrell withered before my eyes. His shoulders stooped and his head bent, the skin sagged from his weary frame. His hair thinned, sloughing from his scalp. The new scarecrow offered his arm and Darrell took it. Together they walked toward the bonfire.

I took a step and fell. Emma caught me and held me. I shivered, my teeth chattering. “Not—not like this,” I stammered. “Not like this.”

Emma prayed. “God help us,” she said. “Please.”

Darrell looked over his shoulder at me. “What do you want, Chloe?” he asked.

The new scarecrow jerked to face me. Uncertainty dimmed his good eye. Empathy kindled in me: we were both crippled, both young, both frightened. His boyish features radiated promises of strength and passion while Darrell’s worn visage offered quiet and decline.

But Darrell’s brown eyes held depths of affection. How long would he live? I wondered. A few months, a few weeks, a few days? The new scarecrow promised a year. Like real men, Darrell could make no promises.

I bit my lip. And what of the fields? Without the scarecrow, they would be barren, and without the scarecrow’s wife, so would the women. But why couldn’t the village pick a new bride each year to make and marry the scarecrow?

I imagined the new scarecrow’s embrace, his arms firm and well-muscled, as each new scarecrow’s arms would be; *as it always had been*. The new scarecrow stepped toward me. “You have given me your blood,” he said. “Your promise.”

I lifted my chin. “But I have given Darrell my heart.”

The new scarecrow collapsed, a man of rag and straw. Its head rested on the edge of the coals. Darrell knelt. He pulled the scarecrow from the fire. As he extinguished the sparks along the straw man's crown, Darrell grew younger until he was again my husband of the late spring. He rose and came to me. Blood oozed from a scratch on his hand.

Emma released me. Darrell lifted me to my feet. "Chloe," he said, and only that.

I kissed his neck. Arm in arm, we walked past the stunned, silent people. No one stopped us as we left the village to follow the road through the spring fields.