

# Scareboy

by Kyle Mewburn

## Chapter One

Nobody suspected Edan was secretly making a scarecrow in his bedroom.

His mum would be furious if she found out.

"Your room isn't a stable," she'd grumble. "I've got better things to do than sweep up straw all day."

But if he made his scarecrow in the yard like he was supposed to, Pickle was bound to see it. Then he'd know Edan was entering the scarecrow competition, and find some way to ruin it. Like he did every year.

This year Edan was determined to win the competition. Which is why he had to keep his scarecrow a secret until the very last minute.

First he smuggled some old clothes, material, buttons and thread out of his mum's sewing room. Which wasn't as easy as it sounds. The sewing room was a DISASTER AREA. There were mountains of old clothes ready to tumble down like an avalanche if you breathed too loudly. And buckets of buttons were piled up like wobbly termite mounds in every corner.

(Edan didn't think it was fair he had to tidy *his* room if his mum never had to tidy the sewing room. But he never told his mum that!)

Then he sneakily borrowed a hammer, some nails, pliers, wire, a bottle of craft glue and two broomsticks from his dad's workshop. His dad wouldn't notice anything missing ... unless he had another sweeping accident and needed a new broomstick.

And for the last week, he'd been spending every free minute building his scarecrow. Every afternoon when he got home from school, Edan stashed his books and his lunchbox in the letterbox and stuffed his schoolbag with straw from the garden. It was the only way to sneak straw upstairs to his room without his mum noticing. As long as he remembered to retrieve his lunchbox before his mum packed his lunch in the morning, she wouldn't suspect a thing.

But the trickiest bit by far was lying to Pickle. Pickle wasn't very smart. But he had a sixth sense about lying.

"About time you put your scarecrow up, hey, worm?" Pickle asked every morning at school. His eyes narrowed suspiciously and his nose crinkled like a rat smelling rotten meat.

"I'm not making one this year," Edan always lied. "What's the point? You always win anyway."

It was true, too. What Edan *didn't* mention, was the bit about Pickle only winning because he always sabotaged Edan's scarecrow. One year he spray-painted its face. And last year he stole all its clothes. Edan couldn't prove anything. But they both knew who was responsible.

Pickle laughed. It wasn't a very friendly laugh.

"What can I say?" Pickle said. "I'm the best scarecrow maker in the universe!"

As the big day drew closer, Edan felt his hopes growing. He thought his idea to build a pirate scarecrow was very creative. The judges were sure to give him extra points for originality. It looked incredibly scary, too. Edan couldn't wait to see Pickle's face when he won first prize. Pickle was going to be very angry when he realised Edan had out-smarted him. Lucky the

school holidays started the next day. With any luck, Pickle might have forgotten about getting revenge by the time they got back to school.

But with only one more day left to go, disaster struck.

## Chapter Two

Edan hardly slept a wink. He spent half the night planning the finishing touches to his scarecrow. Another half imagining the judges sticking the winner's ribbon on his scarecrow's chest. And a third half dreading what Pickle would do to him after the holidays. Which was one half too many! No wonder he was so tired when his alarm rang.

By the time he dragged himself down to the kitchen, his mum had already made his lunch.

"Where's your lunchbox, sleepyhead?" she asked, shaking his empty schoolbag. Pieces of straw sprinkled onto the floor.

Edan answered with a massive yawn, then heaved himself to his feet.

His mum was very surprised when Edan didn't head back upstairs. Instead, he trudged down the hallway and out the front door. His mum was close behind, trying hard not to giggle. She thought he must be sleepwalking. He plodded down the steps and along the path.

As Edan halted at the letterbox, his mum opened her mouth, ready to yell - "I said *lunchbox*, not *letterbox*." What a funny story she'd have to tell her friends at the gym later. But her mouth snapped shut when Edan stuck his hand in the letterbox and fished out his lunchbox and a pile of schoolbooks.

Edan's mum stood speechless in the doorway as Edan retraced his steps. He handed her his lunchbox on the way past. Then returned to the kitchen table and slumped over his porridge.

Everything else was just a sleepy blur. Edan forgot to double-check his room to make sure there was no evidence lying around to make his mum suspicious. And he forgot to make sure his scarecrow was safely hidden at the back of his closet, covered with a blanket.

In fact, he didn't give his scarecrow a second thought until he was halfway to school. By then it was already too late.

As soon as Edan was out the door, his mum dragged the vacuum cleaner up to his room. It looked like a pigsty ... as usual. But she preferred to think of it as a challenge.

She swept through like a tornado. She scooped smelly clothes off the floor into her washing-basket. She swept toys into the toy-box. She whipped off dirty sheets and whooshed on fresh ones on. Dust clouds flew. Spiders scuttled away to safety. And bits of straw retreated into every nook and cranny.

*How does one boy manage to drag so much straw into the house?* she wondered as the vacuum-cleaner wheezed across the carpet. Then something hard went rattling into the nozzle. She switched the machine off and gave the hose a flick. A button went shooting across the floor.

*It must have fallen off one of Edan's shirts,* she thought. *I better sew it on right away, before I forget.*

She went to the closet to look for the button-less shirt.

As she turned the knob, something went CLONK! inside.

*What on earth was that?* she wondered.

She swung the door open ...

A leering pirate lunged out of the cupboard at her. Its eyes were dead as a zombie's. She didn't know what to do. She'd never been attacked by a pirate before. Or a zombie. Should she scream? Or run? Or play dead? (No, that was for bears!)

Before she had a chance to do anything, the pirate toppled onto the floor, spilling straw everywhere. When she realised it was just a scarecrow, she burst out laughing. What a ninny she was to imagine there was a zombie pirate hiding in Edan's cupboard!

She lifted the scarecrow by its broomstick support.

"Naughty scarecrow," she said, smiling. "You know you're not supposed to be hiding in cupboards scaring people."

She studied the scarecrow closely. It was very realistic. It looked almost alive. Edan had done an amazing job.

"Come on, Mister Scarecrow," she said. "I'll take you outside where you belong."

She carried the scarecrow downstairs and leant it against the front fence. Then she followed the trail of straw back inside.

### Chapter Three

Edan's stomach gurgled nervously all day. Every time he glanced up, Pickle gave him a nasty smile. There was no way Pickle could know about Edan's secret scarecrow ... was there?

As soon as the final bell rang, Edan raced home. When he saw a pirate waiting by the letterbox, he let out a loud moan. "My scarecrow!" There was

no time to wonder how it got there. He had to get it back upstairs before Pickle saw it.

He only got as far as the front porch. The door opened. And there was his mum, arms folded across her chest, blocking his way.

"No you don't, Mister," she said. "I almost had a heart attack when that thing jumped out at me. What on earth was it doing in your closet?"

"I was trying to keep it a secret," Edan said. "I didn't want anyone copying my pirate idea." He couldn't tell her the real reason because she'd insist on calling Pickle's mum.

"I thought it was a bit strange you weren't entering the competition this year," his mum said. "But I think it's safe to stick it up now, don't you? There's not enough time left for anyone to copy."

"Can't I keep it in my room one more night?" Edan begged.

"Definitely not."

"How about in the garage?"

"I've just finished cleaning it."

"But mum ..."

"Is it finished?"

"Sort of. But ..."

"No more buts, Edan," his mum said, rolling her eyes in exasperation.

Edan reluctantly did as he was told.

As soon as his scarecrow was standing proudly beside the letterbox, Edan felt his confidence returning. He was sure to win the competition this year. His scarecrow was so life-like. It looked like a real mean, snarling pirate.

Edan stood guard all afternoon. He didn't know what he'd do if Pickle and Gobber turned up. Luckily, there was no sign of the scarecrow vandals.

He would have stood guard all night, too, but his family always went out for pizza on the last day of term. It was a tradition. Edan's dad was very big on traditions. And Edan loved pizza.

Edan had a great time. It almost felt like a celebration.

As soon as they got back home, Edan hurried to the front window and peered outside. He didn't realise he was holding his breath until it escaped in a loud sigh. His scarecrow was still there. He started to smile with relief. But it froze as a cold shiver suddenly ran down his spine. It wasn't the chilly night air that made him shiver, either.

He was sure he'd tied his scarecrow to the fence beside the letterbox on the left side of the gate. Now it was standing on the right side.

Scarecrows couldn't move ... could they?

Edan's eyes were bulging like boiled eggs as he crept down the path. He didn't want to be alone in the yard. There were too many spooky shadows. He couldn't see his scarecrow clearly in the pale light. But he could see enough to know something was wrong. Very wrong.

The gate creaked loudly as Edan squeezed through. His mouth was dry and his knees were wobbly as jelly. With every step his feeling of doom grew. By the time he was standing in front of his scarecrow, he hardly dared look. He took a deep breath. Slowly lifted his head.

A loud, ghostly groan gurgled up from the bottom of his shoes. His scarecrow was a mess. Its belly was stuffed with pinecones. Straw was oozing from every split seam. Instead of a pirate hat and eye-patch, it had a red clown's nose and a curly wig.

Worst of all, it had a big dopey smile painted from ear to ear. It looked so silly, it wouldn't scare a sparrow, let alone a crow.

And he doubted there was enough time to fix it before the judging.

## Chapter Four

Edan got up very, very early. He wasn't going to let Pickle win without a fight. He sewed another eye-patch and a pointy pirate hat. They weren't half as good as his first ones, but they'd have to do. He removed the pinecones from his scarecrow's stomach and re-sewed the seams. But no matter how hard he scrubbed, he couldn't wipe the dopey smile off its face!

In desperation, he nearly asked his mum for help. But he didn't. If she found out about Pickle's sabotage, she'd march over to Pickle's house and make a huge fuss. That was the last thing Edan needed.

After breakfast his parents were going shopping. Edan didn't have time to go shopping. But his parents would never allow him to stay home by himself either.

"Can I go to Jake's place instead?" he asked, in his best pleading voice. Jake was his best friend, and he only lived three houses along the street. "I promised I'd help him finish his scarecrow."

"Alright," his mum said. "But make sure you're home by lunch."

"I will," Edan hooted.

Edan sauntered down the street towards Jake's house. He was in no hurry to get there. When his dad honked the horn, Edan turned and waved. He kept waving until his parents' car disappeared around the corner. Then he hurried straight back home and continued scrubbing his scarecrow's dopey face. If he could just wipe that ridiculous smile off, there was still a chance he might win the competition.

He was so busy scrubbing, he didn't notice Pickle and Gobber standing by the gate until they started laughing.

"What a dopey looking scarecrow!" Pickle hooted.

"It's nearly as dopey looking as wormboy," Gobber snorted.

Edan's heart beat faster. There was nobody home, and no escape. Hopefully if he ignored them, they'd get bored and go away.

"Didn't he say he wasn't entering the competition this year?"

"That's what he said."

"You don't think he was lying, do you, Gobber?" asked Pickle.

Edan held his breath.

"Look, Pickle," Gobber snorted. "The little liar's pants are on fire!"

"We better call the liar brigade!" said Pickle.

Then they started making siren noises.

Edan stared straight ahead and tried to ignore them. The wailing got louder. And louder. Edan's face got redder and redder. What were they up to? Finally Edan couldn't bare it any longer.

As he glanced up, two giant water balloons came sailing over the fence. Edan was a sitting duck.

*SPLAT!* One waterbomb exploded over Edan's head.

*SPLAT!* The second waterbomb crashed into the ground at Edan's feet, spraying his pants with muddy water.

Edan was drenched from top to bottom. Pickle and Gobber ran off sniggering.

The house was locked, so Edan couldn't go to his room to change into dry clothes. The garage was locked, too, so he couldn't hide. And he'd probably catch pneumonia if he stayed outside in the cold in his soaking wet clothes. He was already starting to shiver.

There was only one solution. He stripped his scarecrow, then ducked behind some bushes.

He felt ridiculous wearing a pirate costume. But with any luck, his clothes would be dry before the judges (or anyone else) came by. Then he could change back and nobody would ever know.

As he went to drape his wet clothes over the fence to dry, he had a brilliant idea. His clothes would probably dry a lot quicker if the scarecrow wore them. So he yanked his jeans over the scarecrow's thick legs, and did up the zipper.

"Who's ever heard of a scareboy?" he grumbled as he tugged his shirt over the scarecrow's arms and started doing up the buttons.

One ... Two ... Three ... F ...

One second Edan was fiddling with the last button. The next, he was tied to a broomstick cross, staring across the street at Mrs Dullard's roses. He tried to struggle and squirm free. But not a single muscle so much as quivered.

*Did someone drug me?* he wondered. *Or whack me over the head?*

Then he heard someone whisper - "I'm a boy." And there was something very, very familiar about that voice.

Edan couldn't turn his head, but he glimpsed a figure dancing in the corner of his eye. Then he noticed a pirate-shaped shadow coming closer.

Suddenly a grinning pirate jumped in front of him. "Boo!" it yelled.

If Edan's eyes weren't already as wide as shiny buttons, they would have sprung open in surprise.

*It's me,* he thought. *Except it can't be me - because I'm here!*

He looked harder. It looked exactly like him, except ...

... except he didn't have such a *big dopey smile!*

*The scarecrow,* Edan gulped.

"Hello, scareboy," the scarecrow said.

Edan tried to blink, but his eyes were glued open. He tried to speak, but his lips were sewn shut.

"You're sure to win that stupid prize now," the scarecrow laughed. "I bet the judges have never seen such a scary looking scareboy before!"

Edan felt like crying. But no tears came.

## Chapter Five

When Edan's parents came home, the scarecrow rushed to greet them.

"Why have you got such a big smile on your face?" his mum asked.

"I'm just happy to see you," the scarecrow said, then gave her a big hug. "When's lunch? I'm starving!"

"I'd like to check out your scarecrow first," his dad said.

Edan tried to squirm or yell or do *anything* to let his parents know what had happened. But he was stiff as a statue.

"Look at the expression on its face!" his dad chuckled. "That'd scare anyone!"

"It certainly scared me," his mum agreed, a bit embarrassed. "It looks amazingly life-like. You can't even see the stitching."

*Ouch!* Edan whined inside as his mum plucked and tugged at the invisible stitches.

*Oof!* Edan grunted silently when his dad gave his stomach a sharp poke.

"You stuffed it pretty well, too," Edan's dad agreed proudly. "It even feels real. I reckon that competition's in the bag."

"But I thought it was going to be a pirate," his mum said.

The scarecrow started to squirm. But a loud voice interrupted - "Yoo-hoo!" Five judges with clipboards came hurrying towards them.

"Are you the boy who made this scarecrow?" a skinny woman with a floppy straw hat asked. She looked a bit like a scarecrow herself.

"Yes," the scarecrow replied.

"Congratulations! You've won this year's competition. Nobody's ever made a scareboy before. It's very original and so life-like. And what a horribly scary face!"

The scarecrow grinned from ear to ear as he accepted the winner's certificate. Then a judge pinned a huge ribbon to Edan's chest.

*OUCH!* thought Edan.

"Ouch!" went the scarecrow, rubbing his chest.

"Come on," Edan's mum said. "I'm making hamburgers for lunch."

Edan's stomach grumbled. But everyone was talking so loudly, nobody heard.

Edan stood out in the yard all afternoon. But he was seldom alone. Lots of people came to admire the winning scarecrow. They were all very impressed. Nobody had ever seen such a scary face before.

Sometimes people poked his belly or tugged at his leg. (Which wasn't very nice!) And one little brat pulled down his pants. (Which was really embarrassing!)

All-in-all, it was hot, tiring work being a scarecrow.

As night began to fall, the scarecrow came to see him.

"Don't worry," it whispered. "I know it's not much fun. But look on the bright side - you finally won that stupid competition! Well done! Now it's time for my dinner."

The night was very chilly. Edan would have got goosebumps if he had any skin. He wished he'd put on a cardigan when his mum said. As the lights started going out along the street, Edan started feeling a bit scared. He missed his night-light.

*I'm more of a scaredy-cat than a scarecrow,* he thought sadly.

The neighbourhood fell quiet. Nothing stirred. But he wasn't totally alone. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see other scarecrows standing guard at every gate.

*Oh well,* he thought. *Everything will probably be back to normal when I wake up.*

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," a voice suddenly echoed in his head.

Edan realised straight away who it was. "Scarecrow?"

"Who were you expecting? Your fairy godmother?"

"You can read my mind?"

"Of course. But it's not a very exciting read."

"The joke's over," Edan thought, trying to sound brave. "If you swap back now I promise I won't let anyone throw you on the compost heap. Not ever! I'll put you up in the back garden and you can stay there forever."

"That's awfully nice of you," the scarecrow said in a voice that made Edan gulp ... well, as close to a gulp as he could manage in the circumstances! "But I think I quite like being a boy. So as soon as nobody's looking, I'm going to chuck you on the fire. Then I'll be a boy forever."

Edan could tell he meant it, too.

But there was something important the scarecrow *wasn't* telling him. A scarecrow can't destroy its maker. It had to get someone else to do it! And until it did, it couldn't change its clothes, otherwise it would become a scarecrow again.

"You'll never fool my mum and dad," Edan declared.

The scarecrow chuckled. "They already like me *much* better than you. They're always saying how nice it is to have a happy smiling son around the place instead of an old grumbleguts."

Edan knew it was a lie ... at least most of it. But as soon as he was alone, a horrible thought kept whirling around his head like a ghost.

What if it *was* true?

## Chapter Six

"Edan dear, don't you think it's about time you took off that pirate costume?" Edan's mum kept asking all evening.

"Can't I just keep it on a while longer?" the scarecrow said in his sweetest voice. "P-l-eeeeeeee-a-s-e!"

"Go on, luv," his dad agreed. "Just one night, eh? It can't hurt."

"Alright then," his mum agreed. "But only one night."

The scarecrow hugged her tightly. "You're the best mum in the whole world!"

Edan's mum beamed from ear to ear. It had been a long time since Edan said something so nice to her.

"But you better go outside and give yourself a good dusting," she said when she noticed his seat was covered in straw. "I don't want you carting any more straw through the house."

The scarecrow went outside and tried to shake off any loose straw. But the more he shook, the more straw came out. If he kept shaking he'd end up an empty pile of clothes!

Suddenly a flashlight flickered in the front yard. Scarecrows weren't scared of anything. So he went to investigate. When he saw Pickle and Gobber, he gasped. They were halfway through undressing Edan! His jeans were around his ankles, and two shirt buttons were already undone. There was no time to lose.

"Put those clothes back on," the scarecrow hissed as he hurried over.

"Well, look who's here," Pickle sneered. "It's Captain Dogface."

Edan had never been so happy to see Pickle in his life. Pickle never did what he was told. If the scarecrow told him to stop, he'd definitely keep going. Then Edan would be free! (At least he *hoped* so.)

"We're just making your sissy scarecrow look pretty," Pickle said, holding up a frilly pink nightie.

He waited for the scarecrow to protest, but it laughed instead.

"That's a good idea!"

"Huh!?" Pickle and Gobber were so surprised they'd didn't even try to stop the scarecrow re-buttoning Edan's shirt and pulling up his jeans.

"But I've got a much better idea," said the scarecrow. He stepped closer and started whispering in their ears.

Edan couldn't hear much, but he heard the word "fire" a couple of times. He didn't like the sound of that. He liked it even less when Pickle and Gobber laughed.

"Maybe you're not such a sissy after all," Pickle said.

"What a stunt!" Gobber agreed. "We're going to be legends!"

"OK, I'll see you tomorrow night then," the scarecrow said.

"What are you up to?" Edan thought as soon as they were alone again.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," the scarecrow said. His smile was so evil, Edan shivered inside.

Edan thought and thought all night. His mind was awirl with cunning schemes and magic escapes. The only problem was, none of them would work if he couldn't move.

He woke up feeling terribly tired and stiff. But he couldn't stretch. And he couldn't yawn.

*Mum and Dad will figure out what happened eventually, he thought. That scarecrow can't fool them for long.*

That thought made him feel better ... until the sound of laughter floated out the kitchen window. It sounded like his mum and dad were having a jolly good time with the scarecrow. Edan was always too tired in the mornings to do anything but grumble. So his parents just let him slump grumpily over his porridge. He regretted that now. The scarecrow was trying really hard and his parents sounded so happy.

*Maybe they'd be better off with the scarecrow instead of me, he thought sadly.*

Maybe being a scarecrow wouldn't be so bad either. He wouldn't have to go to school. Or tidy his room. Or eat brussel sprouts. All he had to do was hang around in the yard scaring birds all day.

But there were lots of things he'd miss too. Like pizza. And chocolate fish. And TV. And cuddles with his mum. And making stuff with his dad.

And ... And ... And ... The more he thought about it, the more things he realised he'd miss. That wasn't even counting the millions of things he'd never even tried yet. Like caviar. Or surfing. Or hunting for ghosts.

He was always too scared to try stuff like that. What a wimp he was! But now he realised there was nothing to be afraid of. The night was just dark. Spiders were just ticklish. (Except for poisonous ones, of course.) And Pickle and Gobber were just mean.

*When I'm a boy again, he promised, I'm going to ...*

Then he remembered the scarecrow whispering to Pickle and Gobber. They were up to no good. He was sure of that. But he wasn't sure there was anything he could do to stop them.

## Chapter Seven

Sundays before holidays were always the busiest days in Edan's house. There were so many things to be done before they could leave. Edan always dreaded it. He hated helping with chores. So he spent the whole day moaning and groaning and slacking off. It took him so long to get anything done, his parents always gave up in the end.

"You're as slow as a wet week," his mum would say. "It'll be quicker to do it myself."

But the scarecrow didn't know that. And he was determined to be the perfect son - at least until Edan was out of the way. He didn't want them suspecting for one second that he was a scarecrow.

So he mowed the lawn at a jog.

"What a performance!" his dad whistled. He'd never seen Edan do *anything* so fast before. "I think you can do the lawn all the time from now on."

He was only joking. But the scarecrow didn't know that.

"I'd love to," the scarecrow said with a big smile, even though he was terrified the mower would cut off his foot and send straw shooting everywhere. "Mowing's fun!"

"Alright then," his dad shrugged. "It's a deal."

The scarecrow thought if he did things really fast he'd be finished sooner. But he was so keen and helpful, his parents kept coming up with more chores for him to do.

"Are you sure you're not overdoing it?" his mum asked after a while. She looked a little worried. She'd never seen Edan so helpful before. And she'd never seen him do *any* chore with a smile on his face! Usually he had to be nagged for ages, then he'd drag his feet and grumble.

"He's alright, aren't you son?" his dad said with a wink. "Look, he's not even sweating yet!"

Which was true. But only because scarecrows *can't* sweat.

"Shouldn't you put on something cooler, dear?" his mum asked. "That pirate costume looks terribly hot."

"I'm alright mum," the scarecrow said.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," his dad laughed. "How about washing the car next?"

"I'd love to," the scarecrow said with a huge smile.

And that's how things went all day. By the time the scarecrow had washed the car, swept the paths, weeded the garden, and finished a thousand

other chores besides, he was exhausted. He'd never been so happy to see the sun going down.

*Not long now, he thought, and I'm in the clear.*

Edan's parents were so gullible. He'd fooled them easily. They never suspected for a second he wasn't a real boy. There were a couple of tricky moments. Like when Edan's mum suggested they finish early and go eat ice-cream.

It sounded like a good idea, until she said : "But you're going to have to have a bath first. I'm not taking you anywhere in that dirty pirate costume."

The scarecrow gulped. "Maybe later," he said. "I'd really like to finish all my chores first."

Edan's mum looked at him suspiciously. She'd never once heard Edan turn down ice-cream before.

"You can always keep going when we get back," she suggested.

"But then I'll just get all dirty again," the scarecrow argued.

"You're going to have to get out of that pirate outfit sooner or later," she said, but with a smile that meant she'd given up. It was nice to see Edan so happy. What a difference winning that scarecrow competition had made!

"I will tonight after my bath," the scarecrow said with a big smile. "I promise."

## Chapter Eight

"Phew!" the scarecrow said when it came to join Edan beside the gate. The sun was just setting and shadows were crawling across the yard. "I'm glad that day's over. They've had me working like a slave!"

"You better get used to it," Edan thought.

"What do you mean?" the scarecrow asked suspiciously.

"That's what my life is like EVERY day," Edan lied. "At least during the holidays. You wait and see what it's like when you go back to school and get loads of homework on top of all those chores! Mrs Backstabber is a real slave-driver. One week in her class and you're going to wish you were a scarecrow again!"

The scarecrow sighed. It was such a weary sigh Edan almost felt sorry for him. "I thought being a boy was all fun and adventures."

"I used to think being a scarecrow was easy, too," Edan admitted. "But it's a lot harder than it looks."

"You can say that again," the scarecrow agreed. "It's *exhausting* standing out in the weather all day through rain, hail, snow ..."

"Snow?" Edan interrupted.

"Well, it *could* snow ... some day," the scarecrow grumped back. "Anyway, where was I?"

"Rain, hail and snow ...," Edan suggested.

"That's right! And what about all those UV rays from the o-zone hole? Not to mention birds pooping on you all the time! And what thanks do you get? None! As soon as summer's over, you get tossed onto the compost heap!"

"And it's very lonely," Edan agreed.

The scarecrow looked at Edan.

Edan looked at the scarecrow.

"Maybe we could make a deal?" Edan suggested hopefully.

"I don't know," said the scarecrow. "I still prefer being a boy than a scarecrow. And only one of us can be a boy."

Edan's head sank.

"Let's sleep on it," the scarecrow said. "Maybe we can come up with a solution by morning."

It sounded fair enough. So they said goodnight.

They forgot all about Pickle and Gobber.

The scarecrow pretended to have a bath, then covered his pirate costume with his dressing gown and went to say goodnight to his parents.

"I think I'll go to bed early," he said.

"Are you feeling alright?" his mum asked, concerned. She usually had to drag him to bed.

"The poor lad's tuckered out, that's all," his dad said proudly.

"Yeah, I'm exhausted," the scarecrow admitted.

"You were very helpful today," his mum said. "You're normally so ... so ..." She was going to say lazy, but then she decided against it. She gave him a big kiss instead. "I'm very proud of you."

The scarecrow frowned. So every day *wasn't* like today after all? Which meant Edan was lying!

"Good night," he said. Then hurried off to bed.

He had a lot to think about. Something had been bothering him all day. Buzzing around in the back of his head like a mosquito. He knew it was important, too. Deadly important.

If he could only remember what it was ...

But he was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

The scarecrow was having a lovely dream about skiing down an ice-cream mountain, when he saw someone standing far away on the horizon. For some reason he knew it was his friend. So he started walking towards him.

He walked and walked, but no matter how fast he walked, he didn't seem to get any closer. But he kept going because he knew it was very important he get there.

The sun was beating down. There were no trees or shade anywhere. And he had no water to drink. With every step he got hotter and hotter.

A bird flew overhead. It looked like a vulture.

When he lifted his hand to shield his eyes, it burst into flames. He went to put it out with his other hand. But it was burning too. He tried to run, but his legs were crackling with flames.

He was burning up!

"Oh no!" he cried as he bolted awake.

Now he remembered what it was bothering him. When the judge pinned the ribbon to Edan's chest, HE FELT IT TOO! At the time he thought it was just a prickle, or a bite. But what if it wasn't? What if ...

He sprang from his bed and raced downstairs. There wasn't a moment to lose.

## Chapter Nine

Edan lay crumpled and motionless, face-down atop a pile of scarecrows. He couldn't see much, but he could tell he was at the quarry. When Pickle and Gobber turned up an hour earlier, he didn't know what they planned to do with him. But it wasn't long before he got a terrible inkling.

"Where's worm?" Pickle wondered.

"He probably chickened out," Gobber said.

"Yeah, that'd be right," Pickle said as he started untying Edan from his broomstick cross.

He was a lot heavier than they expected. Much heavier than any other scarecrow they'd stolen that night.

"This'll go up like a rocket," Pickle chuckled as they dragged Edan away down the dark street.

When they reached the quarry, they started making a big fire. Edan couldn't move. He couldn't scream. He couldn't even sweat! The fire crackled and spat embers into the sky. Shadows danced around the scarecrow pyramid.

Suddenly Edan felt something yank at his arms.

"C'mon!" Pickle grunted. "I reckon it's hot enough."

Gobber grabbed Edan's legs. They half-carried, half-dragged Edan over to the fire.

"On the count of three!" Pickle yelled, as they started swinging Edan back and forward. "ONE ... TWO ..."

"STOP!!!" a familiar voice yelled.

"Well look who's here," Pickle growled.

"Go away, worm," Gobber said. "We don't need your help."

"I've changed my mind," the scarecrow said. "I don't want you to burn those scarecrows after all."

"Ha!" Pickle laughed. "Listen to him! He thinks he's the boss!"

"Go away before someone gets hurt," Gobber growled.

"You don't frighten me," the scarecrow said. "I've dealt with magpies scarier than you."

As the scarecrow strode closer, Gobber dropped Edan's legs and swung his fist. It slammed into the scarecrow's belly. But it didn't stop. It kept right on going and came out the other side. It felt like there was nothing inside but straw.

For a second, Gobber stood frozen on the spot, blinking like he'd woken up from a nightmare. Then the scarecrow laughed.

"You wouldn't mind removing your fist from my stomach, would you?" the scarecrow chuckled. "It's very uncomfortable."

Gobber eyes widened in terror. A tiny yelp escaped his trembling lips. Then he spun on his heels and fled.

Pickle was still dragging Edan closer to the roaring fire.

"Help!" Edan thought as loudly as the flames licked his feet.

The scarecrow snatched Edan's legs just as Pickle went to tumble him into the fire. "Let go," the scarecrow yelled.

"Make me," Pickle sneered.

The scarecrow tugged one way with all his might. Pickle tugged the other. Back and forward like a tug-o-war. Then, without warning ...

SNAP! Edan split in two.

The scarecrow tumbled backwards with Edan's bottom half. Pickle fell to his knees with the top half. Edan's head slammed into the ground and knocked him out cold.

The scarecrow stood up, shaking his head. He felt dazed and confused. And there was a huge, throbbing lump on his forehead.

Pickle sneered. He looked very pleased with himself ... until the scarecrow smiled an evil smile. Without warning, the scarecrow gave the lump a mighty slap with the palm of his hand. A jet of straw blew out his ears. And when he took his hand away, the lump was gone.

That's when Pickle started feeling scared. "Don't hurt me," Pickle moaned as the scarecrow stalked closer. Tears trickled down Pickle's cheeks.

"If you promise to return all these scarecrows where they belong, I might let you off lightly," the scarecrow said.

"I will," Pickle said, a stream of snot running out of his nose and down his chin. "I promise."

"And I better not catch you bullying anyone ever again, either," the scarecrow threatened. "Or you'll have me to deal with."

Gathering up Edan's two halves, the scarecrow headed home. He trudged slowly, deep in thought. But as a plan started rising like the dawn sun, his steps quickened.

## Chapter Ten

"C'mon sleepyhead," a voice called, loud enough to wake Edan up.

Edan stretched and rubbed his eyes. Halfway through a yawn, he bolted upright. He could move! He leapt out of bed and went to look at himself in the mirror. He opened his mouth. Stuck out his tongue. Bent down to touch his toes.

"I'm a boy again!" he whispered in amazement.

But if he was a boy ...

He rushed to the window and looked outside. The scarecrow was standing beside the gate, stiff and proud in its pirate outfit. A winner's ribbon was stuck to its chest. But how ...?

The last thing Edan remembered was Pickle and the scarecrow playing tug-o-war. He'd felt like he was going to be split in two.

"Hurry up, Edan!" his mum called up.

"Let's get this show on the road," his father added. "Don't want to get stuck in traffic."

Edan quickly got dressed and ran downstairs.

"Good morning, Mum," he chirped, throwing his arms round her neck.

"You're a little ray of sunshine this morning," his mum beamed. "I thought you'd be really tired and grumpy after all that work you did yesterday."

Edan stretched his arms. He didn't feel tired at all.

"Hi, Dad!" Edan cheered as his father came in carrying fresh cream buns from the bakery. He was hiding something behind his back too.

"How's my little helper today?" his dad asked, ruffling his hair.

"Great!" Edan smiled.

"Looking forward to doing a bit of fishing this arvo?" his dad asked with a strange smile.

"Yeah! I'm going to catch a whopper!" said Edan.

"Do you reckon this might help?" his dad asked as he whipped his hand from behind his back.

"Wow!" Edan said. It was a brand new fishing rod.

"We thought you deserved a reward for all your hard work yesterday," his mum explained.

They laughed and chatted all through breakfast. Then they packed the car. But just as they were ready to leave, Edan jumped back out.

"I just want to say goodbye to my scarecrow," he explained.

"OK," his mum said.

"But don't be long," his dad added.

Edan didn't know what to say, or what to think. He couldn't imagine why the scarecrow decided to swap back. Maybe he just missed being a scarecrow?

"Thanks," he said. He hoped the scarecrow could hear him.

He was just about to say goodbye, when he noticed something peculiar. The scarecrow wasn't wearing the pirate pants Edan had made. He was wearing a pair of Edan's jeans.

He leant closer.

*That's strange,* Edan thought. *I don't remember making that big stitch right around the middle either.*

And was he imagining it, or did the scarecrow look different somehow? There was something ...

Then it hit him. The big smiley face was still there, but it didn't look so dopey anymore. It looked ... well, kind of happy. Satisfied, even.

Suddenly his dad honked the horn. Edan shrugged then hurried over to the car. He'd probably never find out what happened.

Just like he'd never find out how he got that strange zig-zag scar around his middle. A scar that looked a lot like a stitch. Or why his legs sometimes felt incredibly itchy - almost like his pants were full of straw. Or why birds always fluttered away in a panic when they saw him coming.

But he didn't mind. He was just glad to be a boy again.