

Author's Note: This short story takes place in the Cumberland Creek timeline after SCRAPPED.

A Cumberland Creek Christmas Conspiracy

Paige cradled the new baby. Soft. Warm. Smelling of fresh diapers and milk. She pulled him close, feeling the weight of the boy. He was a good size, chubby in the way that some babies were. It was a good chubby. A solid chubby. He looked at her and cooed, reached for her hair.

"What a good boy you are," she said.

Evan was only about a month old. Paige had just dropped off a spaghetti dinner for the family. Shelley asked if she would watch him while she took a shower.

Of course, Paige could not say no. Spending a few minutes with this baby was heaven for her.

She held him closer to her face. "Aren't you beautiful," she said. It was true. She was not one of those women who gushed over every baby. But this one? He had the most beautiful blue eyes, and cherubic lips, and was just as pleasant as he could be. He regarded her with alert curiosity.

"Happy boy," she said. As the words formed in her mouth, something caught in her throat. "Happy boy."

A horrible welling started in her chest. *Randy. Where are you? Will you ever come home to us?*

"Paige?" Shelley said as she walked in the room with a towel wrapped around her head. "Are you okay?"

"Oh yes," Paige said, sniffing, red-faced. "I'm just a little nostalgic with Christmas coming and all."

She wiped a tear away as Shelley handed her a tissue.

"You can come over and help with him anytime," Shelly said, sitting next to her on the green flower-print couch.

"Thanks, that's so sweet of you. I think I'll do that. What a precious boy," Paige said.

She and Shelley were separated by at least twenty years. Some things about parenting might have changed, but taking care of babies probably had not. She was thrilled to be able to offer her services to the young mother.

Shelley seemed awfully young to be having a baby. Paige looked at her and recognized the new-mother weariness, but there was not a wrinkle in sight. She was twenty-eight-years-old, the same age as Randy. In fact, they had gone to school together. She mulled age and time over in her head. Hell, she was twenty-four when she had Randy, younger than Shelley. And she'd not been blessed with another baby.

She glanced around the room at all the new-fangled baby equipment—jumpers, stroller, huge high chairs, piles of toys and blankets. It looked like Shelly had enough stuff for an army of babies.

She sighed. "I think I better get going," she said and handed the boy back to his mother.

As she walked back to her home, Paige tried to think of other things. Things other than babies. Things other than Randy. She remembered the baking she planned to do that afternoon, the way she would give all her friends and neighbors a holiday treat, and did she hear over the radio this morning that they might get snow?

Later, Paige slid out the pumpkin bread from her cranky oven. She needed a new oven and planned to get one just as soon as they paid off the loan for the new truck. Every year since Randy left, she found herself baking herself into oblivion. She sent boxes of goodies to her only child and she fattened up half of Cumberland Creek, as well.

"That smells so good," Earl said as he entered the kitchen, opened the fridge and got himself a beer.

She smiled at her husband. It was a weary smile, but it was smile. They had been through a lot together over the years and she prayed they would get through this Christmas like the others since Randy left. Each year it seemed harder, instead of easier.

"Well, you know I have the touch when it comes to pumpkin bread," she said.

"Yeah," he said, exiting. "You can bake anything," he said from the next room.

He was distracted by a sporting event on television. Was it football? Hell, she didn't know and she didn't care.

Two more days until Christmas break and she was a free woman for two weeks. She had a few more papers to grade and she was done, done, done.

She placed the loaves of pumpkin bread on her cooling rack and would wait a few minutes before getting the deep orange loaves out of the pan. She looked out her window as she stood there. Tiny flakes of snow floated in the darkening sky.

DeeAnn hated to see the snow coming. Even though she could walk to her bakery, her customers often could not. It was one of her busiest times of the year. People in Cumberland Creek loved their baked goods for Christmas. Coconut cakes. Date bread. Fruit cakes. Orange chiffon. Pecan rolls. She had even gotten in some orders for chocolate pie. *Take that, Pamela's Pie Palace*, she thought and grinned.

Her daughters would be getting home soon, if this weather was agreeable. She stopped herself from giving Karen a call. If the roads were slick, she didn't want Karen to be on her cell phone. It was even unwise for her sister in the passenger seat to be droning on the phone—it irritated Karen so much. One of her daughters was studying to be a nurse, the other a social worker. Imagine that.

"You heard from the kids?"

She turned to face her husband.

"No, and it's snowing."

"It just started. They will be fine," he said.

"I'm also worried, kind of, about Paige," she said.

"Yeah, that Earl is a hard case," he said. "Coffee?"

She nodded and watched as Jacob started to make another pot of coffee. DeeAnn sat at her oak kitchen table.

"I know you're worried about her," he said. "It's not a good situation."

He switched on the coffee pot as the scent of the coffee filled the room. He took two mugs out from the cupboard.

"I don't know what the big deal is," DeeAnn said. "He's gay. So what?"

"Well, I've often wondered how it would be to have a gay child. God knows, ours are not gay and they give us grief as it is," he smiled.

"Ain't that the truth?" Dee Ann said. Their oldest daughter had started having sex way too young and they had fear of becoming grandparents too early. But so far it turned out okay. Two girls in college. Both on the pill during high school, which was hard enough to take. Lawd, DeeAnn didn't know about birth control pills when she was in college, let alone high school. But times had changed.

Jacob poured the steaming coffee in to mugs and sat one in front of her. He sat down across the table from her. It was the first piece of furniture they bought together. Old. Beat up. But DeeAnn couldn't bear to part with it.

"I guess I would be upset if one of our kids was gay," he said.

"What? Why?"

"Life is hard enough, you know? I don't know many gay people, but I do know it ain't easy for them," he said.

"But you'd surely not disown them, like Earl did," DeeAnn said.

"Well from what I hear, Randy did a bit of disowning, as well," he said.

"True enough," DeeAnn said, after a moment. He was always headstrong, that one. The statement made DeeAnn squirm.

"What's going on? What are you up to?"

Her husband knew her too well.

Just then, a car horn sounded as their daughters pulled into the drive way.

Sheila heard the horn, so she knew DeeAnn's girls had made it home. They were always the loudest bunch in the neighborhood. And Sheila sat across the table from Donna, her high school senior, wondering if she would ever make up her mind about what college she would attend and what she would major in. Frosty the Snow Man played on the big screen television in the living room, where the rest of her children were gathered.

Donna was trying to decide between majoring in design or education.

"I'm not sure I want to teach and I have always felt like you shouldn't teach unless you really want to," she said and then took a big drink of eggnog.

"It would be a good way for you to make a living until your art career takes off," Shelia told her.

Young people never saw the forest for the trees, Sheila thought. Her daughter was a talented painter and had the artistic temperament, unfortunately, to go along with it. She had a lifetime ahead of her to paint. But she needed a way to earn a living that was not dependent on Sheila or her husband. Not that either one of them planned to retire soon, but they did have four other children to support.

Donna ran her long fingers along the chilled glass.

"I love your eggnog, Mom," she said, with a look on her face that made her look like she was about six and made Sheila blink away a tear.

She knew Donna was afraid, that this was the root of all of her indecision. Maybe her husband was right, it would all work out and she should stop fussing. The fact that Donna was graduating a year earlier than most kids her age didn't help. She'd skipped one grade, even though she started school even younger than most.

It's just that Donna had already been offered a full scholarship to Carnegie Mellon University to study art and design and, well, what Sheila would have given to have such an opportunity. She had to quit school because her parents had run out of money and there was no financial aid like there is today.

So this made the decision a bit tricky.

And also there was "the boyfriend," who would be attending James Madison University, a school close by. Sheila had made that same mistake. Oh now, not a mistake because she and Steve had a great marriage. But she didn't realize then that she had shut out any other opportunities. And Sheila had been a talented art student herself.

As Sheila was preparing her oldest daughter to go off to college, her best friend Vera was dealing with a baby and loving every minute of it. Some women longed to continue those baby years. Not Sheila. She hated it.

"I know you love it. That's why I made it," Sheila said, then after a moment. "Let's not stress out about this decision. You'll know what's right when the time comes."

Just then, Jonathon, her youngest son came marching into the kitchen. "How many more days until Santa comes?" he squealed.

"How many times do you need to ask that?" Donna said and laughed.

"Look at the calendar," Sheila said. "You know how to count."

"I can't wait," he said and reached for Donna's glass of eggnog.

She grabbed it. "Oh no you don't this is mine. Get your own."

"Now that's the Christmas spirit," Sheila said, laughing. "I'll get you a glass, sit down."

The next thing she knew her kitchen filled with her family all wanting eggnog and cookies.

She sighed. "I guess I'll have to make more if I want to have some on hand for guests."

"I guess you will," said Steve, her husband, then reached out and hugged her. "Good stuff," he whispered.

She grinned. Was he talking about the cookies or the hug? He winked. Hmm. The way to a man's heart: eggnog and cookies.

Just the phone rang. She picked up.

"It's time," DeeAnn said on the other end of the phone.

"Are we sure about this?" Sheila said. "I mean, it could go so wrong."

"Well, you agreed to it, just like the rest of us. You better get to my place, pronto," DeeAnn said.

Sheila took a deep breath.

When Paige's phone rang, she was turning over the hot bread pans and sliding the pumpkin bread loaves out of them. So Earl answered the phone.

"Okay," he said. "I'll tell her."

"What?" Paige said, looking up from her bread.

"Your friends say they need you at DeeAnn's Bakery," he said and shrugged.

"Need me? What the—"

"Sounded pretty important," he said.

A million thoughts came to her. Was Beatrice okay? Vera's baby, Elizabeth? But meeting at the bakery...that didn't make much sense. If something terrible had happened, they would have told her to meet them at that person's house—or the hospital, god forbid.

She washed her hands and toweled them off.

Must be a baking situation, she decided. She reached for her purse and headed for the door. Maybe DeeAnn had just gotten a huge order in and needed them to help out.

The snowflakes had gotten larger so she decided to take off on foot with her sturdy boots, through her little town. Two blocks and she was nearly at Cumberland Creek proper. The empty streets were covered in snow that sparkled and gave off a soft blue cast. Sunday evening. Nobody was out, except her heathen scrapbooking friends. She grinned. She walked past the frozen fountain, the Chinese restaurant, the local history museum, and Vera's dance studio, and there was DeeAnn's bakery, lit up like the beacon it was to her and her friends, as well as the townsfolk who enjoyed a good scone or muffin.

Damn, the cold was not her friend. She bundled her scarf even tight around her neck and face.

She turned to look at the town from this angle. The streetlights, the storefronts, and empty road just looked like the front of a Christmas card. She turned and opened the door.

There stood the Cumberland Creek scrappers and Beatrice, gathered around a few of the tables that held an array of fancy Christmas cookies, looking like little jewels glistening.

"Well, how do?" Beatrice said.

"What's made you so happy?" Paige said.

Like the Red Sea, the women parted and sitting at the table behind them was Randy, grinning.

“Hello, Mom.”