

Mama and the Cornbread Critter

by Brooke Elliott

“Yeah, these are nice. But they ain’t nothin’ compared to Mama Dunwell’s Famous Cornbread.”

I had a hard time believing that the entries in this contest could be considered “nothing” under any circumstances. Cornbread after cornbread sat along the length of the hickory table, some mottled with green flecks of jalapeno, others sprinkled with a light dusting of sugar and honey. The ride into Stone Creek, Arkansas had been a rough and tiring one, but for this, it had all been worth it.

“What makes Mama Dunwell’s so special?” I asked, fiddling with my judge’s pass. My guide, a stout boy with thick black hair named Buck Pickens, spun on a heel to look at me, a smirk on his face.

“You can’t be askin’ stuff like that, now,” he laughed, sticking his thumbs through his belt loops. “You’ll show everyone you’re not from ‘round here. Everyone knows that Mama keeps that recipe under lock and key, got it?”

“Got it,” I said. “But she’d better come soon. I have to judge these before they get cold.”

Buck shrugged, rocking back and forth in place as the crowd around the dinner tables began to swell. They would get to eat while I was left waiting for the final cornbread delivery of the night, but I couldn’t start judging until every entry had arrived. Those were the traditions, and small towns loved their traditions.

I checked my watch, and when I looked back up to Buck, he had lost all of his calm. Now he was facing away from me, looking off into the treeline, stiff as a pointer dog on the hunt. I looked in the same direction, but my own eyes couldn’t quite make out whatever he saw over there. I moved to tap him on the shoulder, and he whirled, eyes hard and angry.

“Dang it,” he huffed, reaching into his pocket for his battered flip-phone. “There’s a cornbread critter on the loose again.”

I blinked. “A cornbread critter?”

“You really ain’t from ‘round here, huh? A cornbreadacabra’s scopin’ out the event!” Buck’s voice rose over the crowd noise.

A woman at the table gasped, and the festival attendees turned to chatter with each other like the alfalfa grass that whispered in the dry wind in the fields at the edge of town.

“Heya, Pickens,” called Mike Foner, the town’s resident librarian, “didja just say there’s a dang cornbreadacabra here?”

“I still don’t know what that is,” I had to be the butt of some kind of practical joke.

“Hush, now. We got work to do. Stick behind me, Texas.” Buck forked his fingers to whistle for the crowd’s attention. The whole group fell silent as one.

“Alright, people, we got our work cut out for us,” Buck said. “The cornbreadacabra’ll be headed right for Mama Dunwell’s house.”

A young blond southern belle cried “No!” from the audience, then collapsed into sobs and the eager arms of three infatuated farmhands.

“Pull yourself together, Dolly!” Buck called, hands on his hips. “Bout half of y’all should stick around and protect the main table. The rest oughta come with me on down to Mama’s. She’s old, and she’ll need all the help she can get. Who’s with me?”

Several people barked out “Yeah, uh huh!” and a swarm of people broke off to protect the table of cornbread. Buck grabbed my arm and pulled me along as a posse of men and women in overalls and sundresses picked chairs up and grabbed stones to head over to where the cornbreadacabra was supposedly going.

“So what is this thing? Is it like the chupacabra? Is this a part of the festival?” I asked, trailing behind him down the gravel road that led between the houses.

“Sorta. It’s less of a tradition and more of an obligation. Pest control.” Buck sighed, leaning down to snatch up a discarded baseball bat from a neighbor’s yard.

I shook my head, wondering when the residents of Stone Creek first got THIS idea, and followed the crowd. Everybody got quiet for a few moments as we stopped in front of a house with a high picket fence shrouded in the twilight of late summer.

Buck threw open the rickety gate.

On the porch, a hairless, bright-yellow coyote mottled with green flecks turned toward the crowd and snarled, backing up against the screen door. Buck stepped forward, but a thrown rock sailed past him, slamming the screen door open. The cornbreadacabra whirled, diving into Mama’s house.

“Aww, who threw that? Ya let it in!” Buck shouted. A pair of twin farmhands pointed to blame each other.

“It’s gone down the hall--right to the kitchen!” Buck shouted.

“We ain’ gon’ let it get to ‘er!” yelled one of the twins. The crowd surged forward.

“Is it going to hurt Mama?” I panted.

“Worse--it’s gonna get her cornbread!” Buck shouted.

In the kitchen, the cornbreadacabra was snarling at Mama, who held a piping hot pan of cornbread in her oven mitts.

“Mama, careful!” Buck said, readying his bat.

“Buck, darlin’, I got your text on that new phone ya got me. And trust me, I knew dang well that this bad boy would be back for more this year.”

“Do you wan’ us to take him down?” Mike Foner called.

“Ain’t needed,” Mama said, sounding huffy.

She bent down and pulled a second pan of cornbread from the oven. The whole crowd hushed as the cornbreadacabra looked at her, unsure. She placed it gently in front of him.

Then he pounced--not on her, but on the offered cornbread, chumbling and gobbling as the cornbread went down his gullet. Mama stepped around him with the other tray and shuffled up to Buck, a half-smile on her wrinkled face.

“Stop gawkin’ at me. This city girl’s got some cornbread to judge,” she said, holding up the most golden, fragrant, and gently sweet-yet-savory bread I’d ever seen. I knew, in one moment, that all of the big talk and tall tales of Mama’s cornbread had been completely correct.