

Author's Note: In the Cumberland Creek timeline, this short story takes place between SCRAPBOOK OF SECRETS and SCRAPPED.

Happy Birthday Elizabeth

Vera placed her swollen feet on the stool as she sank bank into the chair. A long drawn out sigh escaped from her hulking body. She took in the scene before her—a fire in the fireplace, beautiful log cabin walls with quilts hanging on two of them, a rocking chair next to the stone fireplace. One of these days, Vera was going to learn how to quilt.

"I didn't think it was a good idea for you to come to this retreat," Sheila said.

"Good Lord, Sheila. It's only thirty miles from home," DeeAnn said, as she sat a plate of muffins on the table.

"Get those away from me," Vera said, turning her face toward the window, which offered a view of the lake, and colorful autumn trees surrounding it.

DeeAnn tsked as she moved them to another table.

"It's all I need to gain another pound," Vera said. "I can barely move as it is."

"Thirty miles of twisty country roads," Sheila said to DeeAnn, ignoring the conversation about muffins and weight.

"I'm fine," Vera snapped. "Just pregnant. I'm not due for another few weeks. So chill out Sheila."

DeeAnn and Sheila exchanged a look.

"What was that all about?" Vera said, an octave higher than her usual.

"Nothing," DeeAnn said and walked over to the fire, which the group had deemed DeeAnn's responsibility. She poked around at it.

Sheila sat down on the huge plaid couch next to her. "You're just not yourself, dear."

"Well, who the hell is?" Vera said after a few minutes. "After everything that's happened...I'm not sure I've processed it all. Then there's this," she patted her stomach.

The Cumberland Creek Scrapbookers had been planning this retreat for months. It was the only weekend they could all get away at the same time together. They rented a cottage at Sherando Lake, which was a part of the George Washington National Forest.

"You'll be fine. You've got us," Sheila said.

Vera rolled her eyes. "Look at us. We are a mess. We came up here to scrapbook and..."

Why was Vera being so grouchy? It was true that she was more moody than ever. With all of the tensions in their lives, along with the upheaval the recent murder created, they all felt a need to get away. Vera's nerves were shot after the whole murder ordeal. Newcomer Annie was shaken, as well. They were all hoping to never have to deal with another murder again.

But so far, Sheila was driving Vera crazy by her fussing, DeeAnn was driving Vera crazy with all the goodies she was baking, Annie mostly went for long walks alone by the lake, and Paige sulked at the scrapbooking table alone. Why was she the only one scrapbooking?

Vera was worried the group was falling apart. They'd been together seven years as a scrapbooking crop—others coming and going but Sheila, Vera, DeeAnn and Paige were the main stays. Sheila and Vera had grown up together. Paige was a few years younger than them in school, but their families all knew one another. DeeAnn was from Minnesota—had married a local man, moved to town and opened her own bakery.

Since Maggie Rae's murder, things had been tense within the group. It was almost as if making those scrapbooks for her family sapped all the creative energy from them too. They were adrift in their projects and lives.

But nobody had been more tense than Annie, the newcomer who thought she was moving to a sweet, bucolic place, not a town where your neighbor gets murdered in her basement. Annie had been stalked, too. Turns out by an "innocent" man who was troubled. She was so gorgeous that it was a wonder more men didn't stalk her. Well, mused Vera, she was a bit intimidating, too. Sharp. Said what was on her mind. Just then, Annie walked back in the house after another one of her walks, looking like a glowing, windswept goddess. "It's just so beautiful out there," she said dreamily.

Vera grunted. She had always loved Sherando with its hills and lakes and thick forest surrounding it. But she was in no mood to talk about its beauty. Truth was, she wasn't feeling well. She been feeling bloated and cranky for months, it seemed, but today it was different. She tried to fight off heartburn and back pain with Tylenol and anti-acid. It seemed like everything she ate made her hurt.

Looking at Annie, so tall and thin, made Vera want to heave. She was so over being pregnant. The charm of it wore off weeks ago.

"What are you working on over there?" Sheila said to Paige.

"Just an album for Randy," she said. Randy was Paige's only child, who had grown up and moved away. His father disowned him when he found out he was gay. Paige was trying to patch things up—not easy.

"How's that going?" Sheila asked.

"Oh well," she waved her hand. "You know. Randy and I are getting along fine over the phone. We spent that weekend together and had such a blast. But Earl?" She shrugged.

"He'll come around," DeeAnn said. "I mean Randy is his kid, too."

Paige frowned. "I hope so. But he's been so brainwashed about gay people. And I suppose it's harder for a man to come to terms with a gay son."

Vera didn't get that at all. She'd never tell Paige, but she thought her husband Earl was an idiot. But of course her own soon-to-be-ex-husband was not much better. But she was proud of Paige for forging ahead and patching up things with her son herself—without Earl's blessing.

But sitting here, pregnant and without a husband, she didn't want to hear this conversation at all. Something about it rubbed her the wrong way. You just never knew what kind of child you were bringing in to the world. Gay. Straight. Manic. Gifted. But Vera believed it didn't matter—that you loved and supported your kid no matter what.

Vera saw Paige running her fingers over the page she just finished. The title was "Mother & Son." It was surrounded by different photos of them together. One of when he was still a baby in her arms.

"Aw now," Sheila said. "Look at that."

"I can't wait for this baby to get here," Vera said, feeling more hopeful as she looked at Paige and her page. Look. They survived the baby years, the toddler years, middle and high school, then college. Surely she could manage.

But she'd be managing without a husband.

Oh, Bill wanted to be a part of it all. She was sure he would be—but not in the same way Earl was with Paige and Randy. Her mother, Beatrice, would help as much as she could, too. But she was no spring chicken. Fear ripped through her as it often did ever since she'd been pregnant. She just wanted to scream: "What kind of a sick joke is this, God?"

She'd always wanted to have a baby, but at 41? Alone?

"Me, too," Sheila said. "It's been awhile since I've had a baby to play with. I can't wait."

Sheila had four of her own. One was heading for college next year. One was heading for high school—one in middle school, the youngest in elementary.

"Funny, you somehow think of them as an extension of yourself. But they really are their own people. And sometimes it's not something you planned on or even ever imagined," Paige said, sort of to herself.

"I'm glad you're getting to take some time away," Annie said, changing the subject, as she looked at Vera. "Try to get as much rest as you can, while you can. We'll all be there to help you out. But this peace and quiet, here, in these mountains...well, once you become a mom, you'll see these moments are fleeting."

Annie sat down at the scrapbooking table and fingered through some paper. DeeAnn joined her.

Finally, Vera thought, everybody is at the table. Well, everybody but her. Maybe it was going to be okay. Maybe they would survive as a group—after the weeks of them investigating the murder and now the trial and with all the gruesome details it revealed about Maggie Rae and her family life. Would anything be the same again?

"You know, that's true," DeeAnn said, sifting through an envelope of photos and papers. "But I've never regretted having kids. I'm so proud of mine I could burst. Doesn't mean there hasn't been times I wanted to wring their skinny necks," she said and laughed.

Annie laughed along as Sheila joined them at the table.

"Are you all actually going to crop at this scrapping retreat?" Vera said. "How about that?"

"Of course we are!" Sheila said, with a little too much cheer in her voice.

Annie went to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. "Anyone else?"

"I'll take one," Paige said. "I need it. Dealing with Earl about Randy has set my nerves on edge. I want him to come home for Christmas. Randy wants to come home. But Earl is all like 'what will people think? What about the church?'"

"Those are good questions," DeeAnn said, after a moment.

"What?" Vera squealed, rolling herself out of her chair. "It's nobody's business is what I say."

“Now, wait, Vera,” DeeAnn said, putting her scissors down. “Paige and Earl live here. They’ve been at that church forever. God knows what will happen if Randy walked through those doors.”

Vera waved them off as she walked up to her chair at the table.

“Man, my back just aches,” Vera mumbled, before sitting down.

“That chair going to be okay?” Sheila said, getting up from hers.

“Sheila, sit down. Good Lord,” Vera said.

Annie reached over and turned the radio on—Alison Kraus was singing. That was one singer they all agreed about so they left it on the station. They wouldn’t get much choice in these mountains anyway.

They all began to dig through their papers, photos, books, and a photo escaped from Vera’s unruly pile. It was Maggie Rae, smiling at the camera, sitting on a swing, must have been in high school, maybe college.

Tears suddenly stung Vera’s eyes as she looked up at DeeAnn.

“We did good by her,” DeeAnn said, in a hushed tone.

Sheila reached out and grabbed Vera’s hand. “We certainly did.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over it,” Vera managed to say.

“Me neither,” Annie said from across the table. “I keep thinking about her kids.”

“I just wish...we could have stopped it,” Vera said.

“Shhh,” DeeAnn said. “Nothing we could do about that.”

“We just didn’t know,” Paige said.

“But we need to be more aware,” Annie said.

Vera nodded. “Yes. Hopefully, nothing like this will ever happen again in Cumberland Creek. But let’s make a pact to be more vigilant. There were signs. Let’s not ignore them any more.”

They all nodded in agreement.

Vera felt her body give off a great heaving sigh as the tension in the room seemed to disappear.

Damn, she was hungry. She started to get up to get a plate of raw veggies that was on the kitchen counter. The room spun and she sat—or rather—fell back into her chair.

“Vera?” Sheila was on her like white on rice.

“Just got a little dizzy. I’m sure it’s my blood pressure,” Vera said. “Something I’ve had to deal with for a few months, now. All this extra weight. Fifty pounds!”

“Are you sure?” Sheila said, reaching for her hand.

“Yes,” Vera said and took a deep breath. “Help me up. I just want that plate of veggies.”

“I’ll get it,” Annie said.

But as Vera stood, leaning on Sheila—a woman half her size—pain ripped through her back and lower abdomen as large gush of water came pouring out from her. It was in a great puddle on the floor.

“Oh great,” Sheila said. “Just great.”

“Shut up, Sheila,” Vera said.

“What?” DeeAnn and the others stood and raced to Vera’s side.

“I just lost my water,” she said, sounding much more calm than what she felt.

“Whoa,” Annie said. “We need to get you out of here.”

“Okay,” Paige said. “We can do that. Let’s just get cleaned up and packed up and leave.”

“We better do it quickly,” Annie said.

“Of course,” Sheila said.

“I mean,” Annie said as she pointed at the window. “It’s snowing.”

“That’s just a little skiff,” DeeAnn said, a Minnesotan who knew her snow. “I’ll drive. It will be okay.”

Supplies thrown into to their crates. Clothes heaped into their suitcases. Bags zipping. Food placed into containers and bags.

And the snow started to come down with big fluffy flakes against a gray sky and huge evergreens. Clumps of snow hung on to the green branches.

A white dusting covered the roads. Better that it happen now than later, Vera thought. But still, she wasn’t due for another three weeks. She took a deep breath, trying not to panic. The weather casters had not called for snow—though it was November and her mother had warned her about the possibility.

“What on earth is wrong with you? What if we get a snow storm? You ready to have that baby holed up in a cabin with nobody to help you but those crazy scrapbookers?” Beatrice had said.

Damn her. Why did she always have to be right?

Vera couldn’t call Bill, couldn’t call her mother, as there was no cell service until they were down off the mountain.

Somehow, Beatrice was already at the hospital. Someone had managed to call her.

How did Vera miss that?

And Bill was nowhere to be found.

“Where is Bill?” Vera managed to say, after she caught her breath from a contraction that gripped her and her mother grabbed on to her hand.

“He’ll be here,” Bea said.

“Now, we see you want a natural childbirth,” the nurse said as Vera was placed into a wheelchair, with the scrapbookers swarming around her, like she was their precious queen bee. Of course. Her friends would always be there for her. She warmed.

Beatrice harrumphed.

Another pain tore through Vera, along with her stomach getting as hard as a bowling ball.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she said between breaths. “Give me what ever drugs you’ve got.”

Later, as she held her daughter, with her mother and Bill on either side of her, she was awash in emotion and warmth. She fell hopelessly in love with the sweet girl-child in her arms.

“What did you decide for a name?” Bill asked. “What do we call her?”

“Elizabeth,” Vera replied.

A strange sound came from Beatrice—something between a sob and a gasp. “My Mama’s name.”

