

The Honeymoon Cottage

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Groaning, Yardley Belanger dropped the pencil and stretched her back. She'd been at her desk too long today and her body didn't appreciate it one bit. She spent far too much time trying to find clever ways to play off the town name. Cemetery, Indiana. There was only so much she could do with that. Why couldn't it have been Bliss, Indiana? Or Romance, Indiana. Those names would have worked perfectly for a wedding planner. But no, Cemetery it was, and apparently Cemetery it would stay.

Sentiment and tradition, especially when it came to horrible old names, could really crowd out practicality.

Raising her arms high, she twisted this way and that, un-kinking her muscles before attempting to focus again. She

loved her work as a wedding planner, and she even enjoyed creating meals for herself, her mother and her aunt. They were tasks she'd grown into, and she took a lot of pleasure in them. She also found immense satisfaction in rehabbing their Victorian-style home.

Paying the bills, though? Not so much. And cleaning? Ugh. She really hated that. She did it anyway because she ran the business through her home, and customers expected things to be nice. Unfortunately, her mother and aunt were messy divas who forgot a cup here, a napkin there, a pair of shoes at the bottom of the stairs... Yardley had fallen into the habit of tidying up after them.

One upside to Cemetery? She loved the area, and she loved... Oh yes, she loved the Honeymoon Cottage. Opening the email window on her computer, she again scrolled through the photos that had arrived yesterday. The owner had updated things to Yardley's suggested recommendations, and it was just so incredibly beautiful. Not that it had needed much. Nestled in mature trees with wild honeysuckle all around, within a few feet of a private cove on the lake, the cottage could be utterly bare and newly married couples would still adore it.

Yardley certainly did.

Somewhere toward the front of her house, a screen door slammed. Her mother, she thought with a grimace. Or her aunt? They were supposed to be out until dinner. Right now was not a good time for her to have to deal with their constant bickering. No one could out-insult the Belanger sisters.

Seconds later she recognized the sound of her best friend's fast footsteps. Amelia "Mimi" May never did anything leisurely, including walk. She had one speed: full go.

Like a gust of fresh air, Mimi sailed into her open office space, saying, "Oh good, you're alone." She dropped into a chair as if someone had poured her there, legs stretched out,

spine slouched, elbows draped over the padded arms. Her short, curly blond hair bounced once before settling around her oval face.

Yardley grinned. “Good thing. A customer would’ve thought we were under attack the way you shot in here.”

“Time, you know,” Mimi said. “I never, ever have enough time these days.”

“You always rush,” Yardley countered. From grade school on, Mimi had left her breathless. She’d also befriended her, backed her up, offered defense and alibis, and once she’d even punched a boy for making Yardley cry. “That’s not a complaint though. I’m glad to see you. I needed a break.”

Mimi closed her big blue eyes and sighed. “Me, too.”

Yardley didn’t storm through life the way Mimi did, but her mouth often resembled a runaway train. For the most part, she’d learned to temper it, to slow down and think before speaking. But in moments of excitement? Few people could keep up with her.

Even fewer cared to try.

And around Mimi? She didn’t need to temper anything. That’s why she and Mimi were such a good fit. She loved Mimi’s energy level, and Mimi never failed to mentally keep pace with her wild ramblings.

“Not enough sleep last night?” Yardley asked. “Did the baby keep you up?”

“Well, it sure wasn’t Kevin.” One eye peeked open. “Sammy slept fine for once. She’s six months old now but Kevin hasn’t yet...” Pausing, she made a face. “It’s like I had a kid and became this sexless lump taking up space in the house.”

Yardley sympathized—with both of them. It wasn’t the first time she’d heard this complaint. “You had such a difficult birth.” With two early miscarriages prior to that. “Plus,

it took you a while to recover. Kevin was scared to death for you. Maybe he's just still worried."

"Not so worried that he doesn't want to fish at every available moment."

"Every available moment?" Yardley asked. "So that wasn't him cooking dinner the other day when I came by? Or the time before that when he was cleaning all the floors?"

"Or when he mows the lawn or does the grocery shopping or cleans my car." Blowing out a breath, Mimi groaned, "Never mind me. Kevin is great."

"He is, and so are you." Mimi could complain to her all day long and Yardley would still know the truth. Sometimes, though, a girl needed to vent. She wanted Mimi to feel free to talk to her anytime, about anything.

"The thing is, I know he *wants* to be fishing. He might not say it, but he loves being out on the boat. Probably the peace and quiet."

"If he wanted to fish, he would. A lot of guys wouldn't even ask. They'd just disappear on you. I'm betting Kevin is as busy being a parent as you are." With such an adorable baby to focus on, she doubted either of them wanted much time away.

"Right again." Mimi made a face of disgust. "I'm just horny and I have cramps."

The horniness Yardley took as a good sign. It meant Mimi was getting back to normal. But the other alarmed her. "Cramps?" she asked, sitting forward.

"My period. Since giving birth, it's like my PMS is on steroids or something. The cramps last a good seven days—before and during my period. Honest to God, I wouldn't have let Kevin touch me last night anyway." Half under her breath, she complained, "But he should have tried, damn him."

Yardley stood and snagged her friend's hand. "Come on.

We'll make that cinnamon tea you like, and I have some fresh lemon cookies that I was saving for customers."

"Customers...and best friends?"

"Exactly." With Mimi's hand held in her own, she headed to the kitchen. "Have you asked the doctor about your cramps?"

"Yup. I'm the picture of health, so no worrying."

She'd worry if she wanted to—and with Mimi's history, she had good reason for it. "Let's relax for a while. I finally got the buzzer fixed in here, so I'll hear anyone who comes in the front door—even if they don't slam the screen."

"Ha ha." Mimi dropped onto a stool at the island, close to where Yardley would heat the water for the tea.

The house, built in 1900 and updated by numerous families since then, had many challenges, but Yardley *loved* the kitchen. Little by little, when finances allowed, she'd remodeled it. Now instead of in a dinky ceramic sink, she filled the tea kettle in a copper farmhouse sink with stunning oil-rubbed bronze faucets, beneath an ornate window with cut glass panes that mimicked the glass in the upper cabinets.

Everything was fresh and new, from the cream-colored cabinets and the light fixtures to the tile and the hardware. She'd passed on updating her own bedroom at the opposite side of the entry doors to ensure she had the kitchen of her dreams.

"By the way," Mimi said, "where are Cruella and Maleficent?"

Yardley shot her friend a frown. Mimi knew she shouldn't call her mother and aunt those awful names. Not because Yardley disagreed with the comparison, but because if either of the elder women ever overheard, they'd make Mimi's life miserable.

"Shush it," Yardley said in mock warning.

Her friend shot her an impish grin full of innocence. "What? I'm always respectful to their faces."

Usually she was—except for when she took offense on Yardley’s behalf. Most of the time, Yardley didn’t think her mother or aunt even realized that they were insulting her. They threw not-so-subtle barbs at each other so often, there was bound to be a stray dart every now and then.

“They’re out until dinner.”

Sniffing the air, Mimi asked, “What are we having, anyway?”

“For dinner?” It was doubtful Mimi would get any, because she wouldn’t stay away from her daughter that long. “Lasagna. That’s the sauce you smell that I cooked earlier today. I’ll assemble it all and have dinner on the table at six if you want to join us.”

“Oh how I wish I could. No one makes lasagna like you.” She sighed. Again. “Mom has Sammy, and she’s great with her.”

“Your mom is great in every way.” Many times, Yardley had envied Mimi for her wonderful mother.

“True, true. But I’ll have to get back to the little stinker before then.” Mimi clasped her really impressive boobs. “I’m cutting back on the breastfeeding, but if I stayed away that long, I’d probably pop.”

Yardley hurried around the island and drew Mimi in for a tight squeeze.

“Hey. What’s that for?” Mimi asked, once she’d returned the embrace.

“You’re just the most amazing mom. I mean, I always knew you would be. You’re so full of love and patience. Little Sammy is the luckiest girl in the world.”

Snorting, Mimi said, “You only think that because I adore *you*.”

The casual words hit too close to home, so Yardley smiled and turned away to retrieve the cookie tin from her new free-

standing butler's pantry. "Your adoration is appreciated." So very, very much. What would her life be like without Mimi in it?

She didn't want to know.

"Adoring you was super easy and you know it. I'm weird, you're weird, it was meant to be."

"Hey," Yardley protested. "You're not weird!"

Mimi started snort-laughing and then she couldn't stop.

"Are you getting hysterical?" Her friend hadn't laughed like that in a while.

The question only made Mimi laugh harder, until Yardley reluctantly got drawn in, and soon they were both out of control cackling.

Minutes later, to the sound of the tea kettle whistling, Mimi wiped her eyes. "Ohmigod, you defended me—from me," Mimi explained, still wearing a huge, lopsided grin—at least until she softly asked, "Why won't you defend yourself like that?"

Rolling her eyes, Yardley turned away. "Everyone knows I *am* weird. Always have been." Growing up in Cemetery, she'd never seemed to say the right thing, do the right thing, or act the right way. Her mother was forever embarrassed by Yardley's "lack of social graces." It'd take more digits than she had on her fingers and toes to count the number of times her mother and aunt had reminded her that she was the black sheep of the Belanger line of females, which they blamed on the father she'd never known.

Not Mimi. From day one, her friend had embraced what she called "unique qualities." She admired Yardley's lack of fashion sense, and her less than classic features that were so different from her mother's and aunt's. She even liked the rapid-fire way Yardley strung together so many unnecessary, and often unwanted, words when she got going.

Thanks to Mimi, she'd stopped fighting her weirdness. For the most part.

Only with clients did Yardley attempt to settle into the staid trappings of a savvy businesswoman. She practiced a lot of "thinking before speaking," and at times it was almost painful.

She never had to do that with Mimi.

"Maybe you're the type of weirdo who can't recognize other weirdos," Mimi mused. "Did you ever think of that?"

"No." After Yardley poured the fragrant tea, she put three cookies on a plate—two for Mimi and only one for herself... because she'd eaten a few already.

Snatching a cookie even before Yardley got seated beside her, Mimi bit off half. "Mmm." Using the remaining half of the cookie to gesture, she said, "In a world full of cultured pearls, you, Yardley Belanger, are a rare abalone pearl. Exotic, colorful, and oh so beautiful."

Yardley's heart turned over in her chest. The really special part? Mimi meant it. When Yardley was with her friend, her troubles seemed less important and she felt happier, more fulfilled.

Joking her way out of an emotional stranglehold, Yardley said, "Just for that, you can have all three cookies."

"Awesome. I'd feel bad except that I know you have a bunch, and you're an amazing chef who can create more whenever you want to. I, on the other hand, make only boxed desserts."

Just like Mimi to minimize her many talents. "Are you feeling better?" Yardley asked.

"Perkier, for sure." She sipped her tea, gave another hum of pleasure, and finished off another cookie. "Overall, you know I adore my life."

"I do know it, but that doesn't mean you can't bitch to your best friend when the mood strikes."