



CHAPTER 1

Minda Miller's footsteps echoed across the hardwood floors as she made one last pass through the empty house. Tiny Tim, her Norwich terrier, followed with a rapid clickety-click of his nails.

Under the watchful afternoon sun slanting through the windows, they checked every closet and cabinet and investigated every nook to make sure they'd left nothing behind.

Nothing, that is, but the memories. The shattered hopes. The dust of a crumbled marriage that cast a bitter patina over everything her eye scanned. Those, Minda had no intention of bringing with her. That was the point, after all. A fresh start.

She could have kept the place. After a decade and a half of scrimping to make double payments, they'd paid off their mortgage fourteen months ago. And Leonard, no doubt motivated by guilt, had deeded his interest to her. The house was hers, free and clear, to live in for the rest of her life.

But she couldn't stay here if she were to rewrite her life story. And that was what she planned to do. The new Minda didn't cling to the past. She would lift her head and step with new purpose into a new life, a new identity.

She closed the last cabinet and headed for the front door, which she shut and locked one last time. Then she crossed the broad front porch to Kay, the real estate agent, who stood on the far side, checking something on her phone.

Kay looked up. "We good to go?" She slipped the phone into her purse.

Minda handed her the key. "We are. The buyers can move in whenever they want."

Kay shook her head. "I'm sorry for all that's happened, but I'm happy to have been able to help with this phase, at least. I truly wish you the best in your upcoming adventure. Keep in touch, will you?"

Minda smiled. "Of course."

They were empty words on both their parts. Kay probably expected Minda to come running back and ask for help finding a new place. Though she liked Kay well enough, she had no intention of padding the woman's bank account with another sales commission, and she was pretty sure that was the only "keeping in touch" Kay had in mind.

Minda would give her the benefit of the doubt though. "Next time you're in T-County, stop in and see me. We can sit on the deck and watch the deer play."

Kay practiced her humor-the-client smile. "I'll do that."

After a handshake and a quick hug, they left the porch. "Come on, Timmy. Let's go for a ride." Minda opened the back of her Subaru Outback and lifted the dog into his crate. "There's a good boy. We're off for home." His short tail wagged as he licked her hand.

She got in the driver's side, started the engine, and drove off, not giving her old house a backward glance.

"That's right, Timmy." She caught his eye in the rearview mirror. "We're moving forward. Isn't it exciting?"

He whined in reply.

She followed Kay's car until it turned toward downtown. Minda continued on for the interstate.

She had to admit Kay had been a wonderful help. Knowledgeable and supportive throughout the whole process. In her twenty years as a legal assistant, Minda had seen some nightmare closings and was thankful this hadn't been one of them. Her life had been a nightmare for the better part of the past year as it was.

She passed through the oh-so-familiar neighborhoods until I-77 came into sight then took the south ramp. Toward a fresh start. Toward her new home.



The cityscape fell away, yielding to the yellows, reds, and browns of autumn foliage. Minda gazed into hills ahead, purple in the haze. No, that was rain, not haze. She was driving into a storm.

Not the most auspicious way to celebrate a new beginning. But home was still miles away. Maybe the rain would be gone by the time she arrived.

Her mouth twisted into a wry smile as she remembered the day she'd called her sister to tell her what she was doing. "You're joking, right?" Kara's voice rose in pitch. "A tiny house? Like those crazies on TV?"

Why had she expected her sister to be supportive? "I'm not saying it's for everyone, but it's the perfect solution for me right now."

"Well, I wish you luck. I have to wonder, though, if those people on the shows are half as happy with their little shoeboxes after they've lived in them for a while as they appear to be when they move in. My guess is you'll have had enough of that nonsense in six months."

Her friends at church hadn't been much more helpful. "It's never good to make major changes too soon after a loss like you've suffered. Have you prayed about this?"

"Yes, I have," Minda had told them. "A lot. And I keep sensing it's what the Lord wants me to do. Everything's falling into place too perfectly for it to be against his will."

Pastor Rob had pursed his lips. "That's not always a good indication. Adverse circumstances don't necessarily mean we should change direction, and a smooth road isn't always the right path."

"I understand that. But is there anything in the Bible about what kind of house we should live in, or what size? If it was okay to live in a tent in the Old Testament times, why can't I live in a tiny house?"

Her daughter, Amy, had emailed her from the wilds of Peru, where she and her husband served as missionaries. "Mom. Seriously? Matt and I both think you should reconsider. Pray about it some more before taking the plunge. Please!"

"I appreciate your concern," Minda had told them. And she did. She knew they truly wanted the best for her. Even Kara.

And it wasn't that she hadn't listened to their advice. She gave their arguments much consideration and prayed about it until God should have wearied of her coming to him about the same thing over and over.

But she knew he didn't mind. The Bible encouraged people to pray about everything – and to be persistent about it. So she constantly asked, "What should I do, Lord? Is it your Spirit who's put this on my heart, or is it my own idea? I only want to do your will, so please show me if I'm off track."

The more she prayed, the more she felt led to leave Canton and go back to her old hometown of New Loveland. To buy a secluded tract of land, put a tiny house on it,

and live there on the cheap while pursuing her lifelong dream of writing a novel. All the while, she'd prayed, "If this isn't what you want for me, please stop me!"

Rather than throwing up roadblocks, though, God seemed to have made the path clear. Kay had "just happened" to learn of a man who was selling off some of his acreage in the Crooked Creek valley. Minda lived not far from there until her dad moved the family to Akron when she was ten, and she had fond memories of the area. The man was motivated to sell and immediately accepted the lowball offer she pitched him.

At the same time she "just happened" to find a lightly used tiny house for sale. The sellers were the sort her sister worried about – they'd dumped a ton of money into the home only to find they hated living in it. In order to get out from under the burden, they sold it to Minda for less than half of what it had cost them to build it.

After buying the house and the property, making the necessary improvements to the site, and paying the house movers, she still had a third of the proceeds left from the sale of the place in Canton. Between that and the settlement her attorney had secured for her in the divorce, she should be able to live for several years before having to find another source of income.

And by that time, she hoped to have money coming in from book sales.

She knew how to live frugally. Her needs were modest. And if this writing thing didn't pan out, her skills as a legal assistant were highly marketable. But she wouldn't have to go back to work. She could make a go of this new lifestyle.

Now, though, as she hurtled seventy miles an hour toward it – with the door to her old life closed with finality – her confidence became a bit shaky. It didn't help that the skies grew darker the farther south she drove.

Her mind slipped back to her ex-husband. This upheaval was all his fault. After stewing for several minutes, Minda realized she had a stranglehold on the steering wheel, and she took a deep breath, trying to relax.

Thinking of Leonard always tied her in knots. When she was young, thinking about him made her feel warm and happy all over. Now, it made her heart thump for a different reason. Sometimes she feared she was on her way to a heart attack.

For the sake of her health, if nothing else, she needed to forgive him. But how could she?

The car drove into a sheet of rain, and she turned on the wipers. *Relax. Breathe. Breathe deep.*

At least here, away from the city, the traffic was light, giving her one less thing to stress over. Before long, she passed the sign saying "Welcome to Tuscarawas County."

Yes. She needed this. Needed to get away. Away from all the nastiness of the past year. Back to the basics of living.

Ten minutes later, she merged onto Route 250 and then off at the first New Loveland exit. At the end of the ramp, she peered through the rain to make sure no one was coming, then turned right. Past the truck stop, down County Road 21, and ... where was her road?

Oh, there, by the sign with the 4-H cloverleaf logo. The rain had eased, and after making the turn, she adjusted the wipers to a slower speed. She checked the odometer. Her driveway was two and a quarter miles from the corner, and she didn't want to miss it.

She knew the way to her house in Canton so well she could find it in her sleep. How many times would she have to drive to her new home before she would know where to turn without looking for landmarks?

Crooked Creek Road followed the path of the stream, and it lived up to its name. Even in the rain, the autumn scenery was stunning. Cornfields – some brown and bedraggled, some harvested stubble – lined both sides of the winding, chip seal road. Behind the tilled ground, trees sported leaves of every autumn color. Every now and then a neat house appeared, most accompanied by vegetable gardens that were all empty cornstalks and pumpkins. Around a bend lay more houses, a barn, a silo, a few hayfields. The pastoral scene helped ease some of her tension. But only some.

Ah, there was the landmark she'd been looking for. The blue garage at the foot of the hill, then the red brick American Foursquare farmhouse. Beyond the house, an old white barn towered, and the lane to her house began on the other side of the barn.

The new mailbox at the end of the gravel drive had the name Miller on the side and the house number, 3689, on the post. She turned onto the lane.

The gravel was loose, but it would soon pack down. She took it slow as she drove past the barn and up the hill, thinking for the eighth or tenth time that it could get bad come winter, even with all-wheel drive. She'd have to find someone with a snowplow, and soon.

She peaked the hill as the sun broke through the clouds, casting a rainbow across the sky. She stopped the car to take it in. The only building in sight, her tiny cedar-sided house sat like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

"Lord, I might be wrong," she prayed aloud, "but I think you're smiling upon me at last."

The above is an excerpt from the novella *First Love* by Yvonne Anderson, one of the seven novellas by seven authors in *Coming Home; A Tiny House Collection*.

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