

One life-changing dilemma leads to another.

BIG DECISION

"Look, it's a Monkey's Wedding!" Ivy said as a ray of sunlight sparkled through the falling raindrops. Taking a break from packing a cardboard box with clothes, she went to the window, ignoring the ugly crack in the living room wall that zigzagged from ceiling to floor.

Dan stopped sorting a jungle of tools and straightened up, hands on hips. "How can you think about monkeys when our entire house is being swallowed by a sinkhole? Stop wasting time, for fudge sake."

"Wasting time?" Ivy's voice rose as she brushed her bangs out of her eyes. "I've been up all night, while you were snoring your head off. What a nerve." Under her breath she muttered, "Should've divorced you when I had the chance."

"What?"

"Nothing. Shut up and stop wasting time."

Dan dropped the tool box he'd been holding. "Did I hear right? You're still harping on my one-night affair, as if you haven't wrung enough mileage out of it already?"

"If it hadn't been for the kids—"

"Yeah, well, they're in college now. You can fudge off any time you want. In fact, I may do just that myself. The other day—"

The house gave an ominous creak. Ivy ran to the window to see if anything outdoors looked different. It didn't, but her nerves felt frayed as she dithered over which kitchen equipment to take with them. Although they hadn't received official notice to evacuate, she knew they shouldn't have pushed their luck this far.

"As I was saying," Dan went on sourly, "when I was online the other day I stumbled upon a pretty good prospect."

"Fine, be my—" The house lurched with a crack like a high-powered rifle.

"Shit! Get the hell out of here." Dan grabbed her hand.

They ran out the front door toward the car, just as a chasm opened up and swallowed it. Ivy turned tail, not conscious of her feet as she flew out the back door with Dan at her back.

As she ran, the life of their home flashed before her eyes. The four-bedroom bungalow on five acres had been a surprise from Dan three years ago. He'd called the house a twentieth anniversary present, but it was partly to make up for his affair, which had lasted somewhat longer than one night, and he didn't know she knew it. As an

engineer for the city transportation department, he enjoyed an outrageously overpaid career screwing up major intersections, along with his marriage.

The new house had changed her mind about leaving Dan, as it was almost an exact match for the place she'd dreamed about. Besides a bedroom each for their two sons and a daughter during holidays from college, it had a separate garage with car repair tools for Dan, and an art studio for her. All this had been theirs at a fire-sale price, for the elderly owners said they were moving out of state to be with their children. Ivy remembered hearing rumors about sinkholes in the area, but no one had seemed particularly concerned, much less warned them of any dire threat.

Running from the sinkhole, Ivy and Dan found themselves in the woods at the far edge of their property. Ivy collapsed on the ground, too out of breath to cry, but Dan still had enough wind to curse non-stop. When the rumbling and the dust settled, curiosity lured them back to what they used to call home.

Seeing the house in dirt up to its waist and tilted at a jaunty angle, they stared at each other for a long moment, speechless—then simultaneously burst into hysterical laughter until the shock reaction wore off. At that point Dan called 911.

The house was cordoned off and no one was allowed near it, not even Dan and Ivy to rescue their belongings. Three weeks later, a crew arrived with ground radar and decided the sinkhole had settled enough that they could begin filling it in around the edges. Geologists evaluating the area said the unusually heavy rains had accelerated the subsidence that had been gradual for many years.

The situation was especially dire because the city had spent too many taxes on administrative salaries, and to avoid bankruptcy they needed to lay off older workers. Dan found a few more exotic words to add to his profane vocabulary, knowing he was in the line of fire, and Ivy was simply numb. They moved in with his parents on the other side of town, but all she could think about was the sinkhole they now owned instead of a house.

Ivy insisted on visiting the property every single day, as if her presence could make some kind of miracle happen. A month after the disaster rain was forecast again, and Dan advised her not to go that day.

She shrugged. "What worse could happen?" she said bitterly. "I don't even care if another sinkhole swallows me up." And she meant it. Losing everything connected with the best times of her life had made her deeply depressed, even though logic told her she ought to be thrilled to still have her life and her family.

Bundled up in her raincoat, Ivy took up her post under a sturdy oak tree that had once been fifty feet away from the house. Staring blindly at a spot near the edge of the giant hole, her eyes gradually focused on an unfamiliar object protruding from the earth. Studying it for a while, she decided it looked like a small wooden trunk, or a large jewelry box.

Curiosity got the better of her. Feeling reckless, she picked up a handy dead branch from under the tree and walked around the edge of the sinkhole until she was two feet directly above the box. With the stick she dug around it until she found a handle. Lying on her stomach, ignoring the mud soiling her raincoat, she pulled on the handle. It budged a little. Determination combined with curiosity, and a little help from the rain, worked the box free. Panting, she dragged it up to ground level.

"Damn," she said, sitting in the mud and soaking rain. The box was locked but she wanted to be the first to open it instead of having to take it to Dan. The metal padlock was rusty and felt loose, so she found a fist-sized rock and hammered away until a rush of adrenaline gave her the strength for the *coup de grâce*.

Tumbling out of their hiding place, coins and jewels littered the soggy ground. Ivy's heart missed a beat. Picking up a gold coin the size of a silver dollar she read the date, "1845" on one side, and on the reverse, "Republica Mexicana" with an eagle and a snake. There were many other gold, silver and copper coins with dates in the 1800's, along with an assortment of gold jewelry set with precious stones.

Ivy felt a shiver of guilt as if she'd stolen the treasure. "This doesn't happen in real life," she said aloud to the tree looming over her like a suspicious policeman. "Maybe it isn't real." She'd read about the Finders Keepers Law in a recent news article, and knew that if the police couldn't find the original owner she could keep it, as it was found on her property.

With all her strength she hoisted the box into the cargo space of her hatchback and drove back to her inlaws' home. When Dan returned from work she met him at the door, grinning. "Hi, honey. Guess what I found in the sinkhole today?"

He groaned. "Oh god, when will you stop obsessing about that damn sinkhole?"

Taking his hand she pulled him outside and opened the trunk of the hatchback. Covered in mud and decayed vegetation, it smelled like wet dog.

"What's this?" He wrinkled his nose.

Ivy opened the box.

Dan gulped. Gingerly he turned over some coins. "Where did this come from?"

"Where do you think? I didn't have to go down in the hole though—it was right near the top. The rain must have uncovered it."

"I guess we may as well stay married," he said. "At least, until we know if we're millionaires."

"Or until death do us part, sweetheart," she said with a teasing smile.

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