

A Noise Downstairs

by Sandra Banks

The house was always creaking. It was an old timber frame house and it moved with the weather as it had done for four hundred years. It moved particularly in warm weather like this, as the dampness accumulated over the winter escaped.

But this was not the normal creaking. Creaking is a sharp sound which carries. This noise was so faint it was difficult to tell whether it was a noise or just a vibration. There were always fellow travelers in a house like this. Mice make no noise, nor do the ladybirds sleeping warmly inside because it was so easy to get in. He kept two cats to discourage mice and rats but they were outdoors cats, not allowed in. He imagined they were happily hunting in some hayfield.

He was comfortable where he was sitting in the large downstairs room, basking in the pool of sunshine on the floor. The house seemed to be gently expanding now summer was here. Visitors said the house smelled, but he could smell nothing unusual. He decided, somewhat reluctantly, to take an indolent wander round to check on the noise. The kitchen was the most likely place. No, he had not left the gas on, nor was the oven winking at him. Neither washing machine nor dishwasher showed signs of life. But then he heard the sound again, still impossible to catch hold off, just on the edge of his senses. He waited, hoping to hear it again. It was coming from below.

He did not often go down to the basement. Access was by a trap door and a flight of uneven brick stairs, usually wet and smelling of rotting seaweed. As he lifted the trapdoor a strong pungent scent was added to the general mixture.

It was not welcoming. Had something died down there? Need he need to go down? And then he heard the noise again. It was a low irregular, rumbling. It sounded a bit like a cat. Had one of them managed to get in?

He went outside to look for the narrow windows into the basement at ground level. He could see nothing. They had not been on his spring cleaning list. What he did see was the side entry to the basement. He had forgotten that. It would be easier to just open it and look inside.

He went for the key for the padlock. The padlock too had had a bad winter. He had to go back for the WD40. Finally the door opened, make a squeaking noise on its warped and rusty hinges.

There was a little light. Some rays of the strong sunlight had made it through and the dust sparkled in the current of air he had introduced, creating miniature storms. He looked back at the door he had just opened and noticed that the bottom edge was ragged. No doubt the rats had done that but she had cleverly taken advantage.

In a pool of sunlight a golden vixen lay surrounded by two very young cubs, curled up together asleep. As she breathed, a sound between a snore and a purr left her mouth. A welcome visitor. He certainly had no intention of disturbing them. The cats had obviously decided they were not taking her on and they were right.

His friends were probably right about the house smelling. He was just blind to it.

