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A Noise Downstairs

by Richard Rewell

We were both tired, no exhausted. It had taken us 30 hours to get from London to the village somewhere in a remote part of Mexico. We were part of the UK's Search and Rescue Group assigned to the UN Disaster Recovery Unit.

The village was a ruin. The earthquake had done its job. Houses reduced to pyramids of rubble. Serpentine electric cables spat sparks like a neon venom. Water vomited up from holes and cracks in the wrecked roads. While overhead, the thudding of helicopter blades. And even higher, the ominous sight of a squadron of circling vultures.

Then there were the smells. That of gas oozing from fractured pipes in ruined houses and the one we dreaded. The smell of death. We should be used to it by now, it goes with the job. But we never do.

A hundred rescue workers in their luminous sky-blue jackets together with some surviving civilians clawed and dug desperately at the piles of smashed brick and concrete. Behind them in what was left of the central plaza the body bags. Hundreds, all in neat rows.

I believe I sensed it first, a far-off rumble, the ground we stood on vibrated, dogs barked, and a loud roar shook the devastated village. Then nothing. Just an uneasy stillness.

"Aftershock Rich" said my colleague Pete just as he calmly started talking to one of the civilians. His 6' – 8" frame dwarfing the local.

I waited and watched them until Pete turned to me "Up there, the house hanging off the side of the hill, the guy's convinced there's someone there though others say not. Let's give it a try."

The house's white painted boundary walls had all collapsed, ironically leaving only two elegant white columns which we passed through, stepped over the wooden gates that had been torn from the columns and entered the garden. Trees had fallen onto the drive, but we fought our way through the branches and approached the house which stood at an obscene angle. It was a mess, even the doorway was deformed taking the shape of a triangle. Regardless we entered.

'Bang' Pete's safety helmet had bashed into a protruding steel bar that stuck out from the collapsed concrete first floor. "Bollocks. That hurt." he said switching on the torch and frightening a large lizard that darted into the gloom beyond the torch's range.

I tentatively navigated my way across the sloping floor avoiding broken glass, shattered pottery and the occasional scurrying rodent.

"Rich." whispered Pete. "Look."

But I had seen it already, the body. A woman. Pete bent down and covered her face with the towel she was still clutching even in death.

"Nothing here mate. Let's go" said Pete and I turned to leave but heard something. I strained to hear, trying to detect a sound. There it was. A noise downstairs. There must be a basement.

I saw the blackness of a gap and dived towards it.

"Wait. I'll shine the torch." said Pete lumbering behind me as I fell through the gap and his torch lit up the little face.

"Well done Rich" Pete shouted as I approached the little boy, his dirty tiny face smiling and giggling as he threw his arms around my neck.

I had done my job. I was happy, so I licked his face, barked and wagged my tail.