

The Exchange

“Are you sure we are doing the right thing?” questioned Paul.

“We agreed,” began Glenda, slightly irritated by Paul’s question. “It will be our project. A project for our family, for their future. A focus for us in our retirement. Don’t get cold feet now!”

Paul pulled Glenda close, wrapping his strong arms around her and smiled lovingly. He knew she was right. She always was. And there they stood, outside the shell of a building that held the key to their future.

They had spent forever, so it seemed at the time, making up their minds and creating their vision. When visiting Glenda’s aging mother in the town, the regular dog walks had taken them down the path by the fast flowing river and past the ramshackle building that remained desolate, untouched and locked to the outside world.

Teaching had been their lives and music their passion. While Paul couldn’t sing or play a note, Glenda and their 3 children were all musically gifted. Here was a golden chance to promote live music in a sleepy, Welsh town and to inspire the locals through music and singing lessons.

The light was beginning to fade now and they were aware of the need to get to the estate agent and confirm their intention to make an offer.

Paul and Glenda were peering through the dirty windows of the building, trying to get a last clear view of the inside. They had not noticed Gladys shuffle up behind them.

She was a small, frail, hunched woman who had been making her way slowly along; her stick for support in one hand and Truffles, her small dog and her only company in the world, ambling obediently alongside her.

‘Been empty a long time,’ began Gladys in her soft, Welsh lilt. ‘No use to anyone these days!’

‘Oh,’ said Paul, slightly taken aback. ‘We have been planning to do something with it.’

‘It’s been used for so many things. None of them have lasted,’ said Gladys.

‘What can you tell us about the place,’ asked Glenda. ‘Do you have a few minutes free?’

‘Time is all I have,’ came the reply.

The three of them sat down at the nearly picnic tables, their dogs settling down peacefully at their feet.

‘When I was very young,’ began Gladys, ‘it was the Corn Exchange.’

‘Corn Exchange? What’s that?’ interrupted Paul.

'It was the heart of the village. Farmers came in with their produce, wheat mostly, to buy and sell. It was full of life. We would hurtle down here after school, in the school holidays, even during school to help out. We would also play chasing games in and out of the stalls but the farmers didn't mind.'

'That sounds like a lovely childhood,' Glenda commented.

'It was. We were allowed to stay on after the stalls had been packed away. The building was never locked up. When I was a little older, I had my first kiss in this hall. With Owen Davies it was. We became childhood sweethearts. Later we got married; married 48 years we were until he passed away.'

'Oh, dear,' commented Glenda. 'How sad!'

'The important thing is that it was the centre of village life. Now the town needs its soul back. Unless you understand that, whatever you try to do with it will be a waste of effort and money.'

Paul and Glenda looked at each other and, smiling, assured Gladys that they understood.

'I'll be off now,' Gladys began. 'If I sit here much longer I will find it difficult to get moving and Truffles needs to be fed. Good luck with your plans and remember what I said; heart and soul of the town.'

They watched Gladys disappear back up the path, the forever obedient Truffles at her heel. At the corner, Gladys turned, gave a faint smile and was gone.

'I'm not getting cold feet,' said Paul, planting a gentle kiss on Glenda's forehead. 'For Gladys and all the others with memories of the building, we will do it right and make our venue the focal point of the town.'

'So we are agreed then; This will be our project; a live music venue, teaching rooms and a café. And Gladys have given us a name;- The Music Exchange! In the old days they exchanged goods, we will use the medium of music.'

'Agreed,' came Paul's reply. 'Gladys can be our first guest of honour at the opening of the café and we will make her proud; make the whole town proud! Let's get up to the estate agent's now before it's too late.'

They slowly turned and made their way up towards the town.

The adventure had begun and there was no going back.

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Seated in the plush chairs of 'Mason and Son, Estate Agents', Paul and Glenda sat patiently while Mr. Mason, the senior estate agent shuffled the papers in the file on the derelict building.

Mr. Mason spoke first.

'So, you want to make an offer on this building? It's been empty for quite some time now.'

'Yes,' replied Paul. 'We have been thinking about it for sometime now. We plan to turn it into a music venue and a place to teach music. Also we want to have a café for the locals and the tourists who flock here, especially in the summer.'

'Our plan is to call it The Music Exchange,' added Glenda. 'We were told today that it was originally The Corn Exchange and an important centre of the community when the town was just a village. We want our venue to be just as important to today's community. We intend to give local musicians a chance to perform and will use local produce in our café.'

Still holding the file open in his hands, Mr. Mason looked directly at Paul and Glenda.

'How did you learn about that?' said Mr. Mason. 'That was a very long time ago. Only people like me who are interested in the town's history would remember that.'

'Gladys told us today,' replied Paul. 'She was walking her dog, Truffles, and stopped to tell us about it. She had such fond childhood memories of The Corn Exchange.'

Mr. Mason paused and looked, with raised eyebrows, at Paul and Glenda over the rim of his glasses.

'That's not possible,' Mr. Mason began, firmly. 'I have lived in the town all the 62 years of my life and my family before me. I think I know, or know of everyone in the town, especially among the older generation. I do not know a Gladys with a dog called Truffles.'

'But we spoke with her just now,' Glenda retorted. 'When we were outside the building.'

After regaining his composure, Mr. Mason continued.

'However, I do know of a Gladys with a dog called Truffles. I have seen photographs of them both. You see, Gladys Davies was my grandmother and she had a dog called Truffles. I have only seen the photographs because Gladys Davies died before I was born. My mother told me she died of a broken heart after her husband, Owen, died and Truffles became ill and had to be put down. Davies was my mother's maiden name'

Like a curtain closing, a stunned silence descended on the room while all 3 gathered their thoughts.