

Chapter One

Present day: John Sutton looked at the dateline of the real estate magazine. Yep, this was the latest – it had today’s date. The acoustic sound engineer and his wife Melanie were keen to move to the countryside and escape the city rat race. He had been scouring the magazines for months for a disused church so he could set up a sound studio. The heavy stone walled building would give a much clearer and crisper sound effect than modern edifices. Sutton believed he may have found what he was after. The former church at Brighton also had a three-bedroom Rectory with adjoining stables which was a bonus. The only thing Melanie would baulk at would be the small attached graveyard containing fifteen old graves, some dating back to the 1800s. Melanie was a piano teacher who taught students from basic beginnings up to diploma level. She also helped John with background music for his recordings.

The price was right. Sutton just had to take a trip to Brighton and ensure the buildings actually met his needs.

“Mel, this could be our big chance,” John said to his wife over a breakfast cup of tea. “It looks right. We don’t want anything too big to maintain ...”

“Or too big to clean up on the inside. Does it show photos of the inside of the church?”

“No. Just the outside and surrounds. It has a three bedroom Rectory which would be plenty of room for us and there’s a bonus.”

Mel stopped sipping her tea. “A bonus? Do they throw in steak knives?” she laughed.

“Not quite. There are stables attached to the Rectory which we can use ...”

Melanie lost it. She started laughing.

“What’s up?”

“Sorry John. I had this mental picture of the parish priest making a fast getaway on horseback and leaving the Church to fall into ruin for some reason.”

“Very funny!”

“Come on, we’d better finish up and get dressed if we’re going to drive to Brighton.”

“Can’t we drive there in our pyjamas?”

“No. It might scare the villagers.”

John stood up and walked over to his wife, put his arms around her and gave her a big kiss.

“Thank you. Who knows? This could be the very thing we are both looking for.”

Within half an hour the Suttons were driving to Brighton. The large open congested highways soon gave way to the smaller unclogged arterial roads and the village lane ways. The couple drove through Brighton and was amazed at the number of houses available for sale.

“This isn’t a mining town is it?” Mel asked.

“No. We’re too far away from any colliery.”

“It’s just a bit spooky to see so many houses run down or for sale.”

“You’re right. Ahh, there it is up on the hill.”

“Typical. The Church always likes building on hills so their buildings can be seen more easily.”

The Suttons drove to the entrance of the disused church and saw the For Sale sign out the front. They parked their car in the driveway, alighted and started looking around. Fine metal mesh had been sculptured around each of the stained glass windows in an effort to protect them from loose flying rocks or other objects. The grey slate roof was covered in moss and the entrance door was locked. They started to walk to the adjoining Rectory when a car pulled up behind them.

“Hello I’m Nigel White from White Real Estate. Can I help you?” the driver asked as he alighted from his car.

John looked at the young salesman with the three piece suit, boyish looks, glasses and a big smile.

“Hi, I’m John Sutton and this is my wife Melanie. We saw this old church advertised in the real estate magazine and thought we’d come and have a look at it.”

“Lucky I came by when I did. I was on my way through the village to Brighton and noticed your car. This church has been on the market for some time.”

“It’s a beautiful old building and surrounds,” Melanie chimed in.

“Yes. It would be probably still be in full use today if it wasn’t for the choir’s bus accident about a decade ago. You know, where the bus and truck collided setting both vehicles on fire instantaneously.”

John studied the agent's face for a few seconds as he tried to remember the accident. The penny seemed to have dropped. "Yes, I think I remember. Is this the one where the children were on their way overseas ..."

"Australia, I think," Melanie finished for him. "It was one of the worst accidents the UK had ever seen."

"So the kids all came from here, did they?" John asked as he looked around.

"Yes, from all around the village. Anyway, enough of that, would you like to go inside the old place?"

John looked at Melanie and they both nodded. They followed White into the building and stood there with their mouths agape. The building was in pristine condition. The pews and organ had long gone, along with the altar and any signs of devotion. However, the building was in really good condition. The trio moved into the centre of the building and looked around. White went to say something and John put his hand up to silence him as if he was listening to something, frowned and then smiled before nodding.

"Mel, give us a few bars will you, I want to check the acoustics," John said as he looked around with a wry smile on his face.

Melanie cleared her throat and launched into a few bars of a song she knew. The sound resonated around the building. John's eyes widened, his mouth fell open and he looked at his wife. This was exactly what he wanted. He asked his wife to sing a couple of songs while he walked around the inside perimeter of the building and smiled broadly. His eyes caught the choir loft above the entranceway and he studied it for a few moments.

"Nigel, is the loft okay?"

"Yes. It's very sturdy. It would make a great occasional room. Come and have a look."

John took Melanie's hand and smiled broadly. She knew her husband had already made up his mind but went along for the ride. The three made their way up a circular wooden staircase at the end of the building and into the choir loft. It would easily fit up to fifty people as they sang the church service. The timber flooring was perfect - sturdy and not in need of maintenance. John asked his wife to sing for him one more time as he went back down the stairs and walked through the empty building listening to the sound effects. After a hearty rendition of some of Melanie's favourite songs John signalled her to stop. White accompanied Melanie downstairs to where John was standing.

“This place is outstanding,” John gushed. “It gave off a fantastic pitch and range of sounds. Yes, this would be excellent.”

“I think we’d better look at the Rectory and stables before he gets too excited,” Melanie chipped in as she took her husband’s hand.

The trio were about to exit the building when John saw a metal plaque with a photo of a choir attached to the wall and stopped to read it.

“In loving memory of the 45 members of St Dominic Savio’s Boys and Youth Choir taken to God on 3 January 2003. Forever in our hearts. Your angelic songs will never be forgotten.”

The plaque had a metal etched photo of the entire choir, Mrs Connelly and Mr Worth.

“If you decide to buy the place you can remove the plaque if you want,” White said.

“This photo was taken here – well over there, actually,” John said as he pointed to the front of the nave. “I think it should be a pre-condition of anyone buying this place the plaque remained. I bet the children were the heart and soul of this place.”

White smiled and nodded. “I never used to come to this place to worship. However, my parents did take me along for a few concerts here. This place would be overflowing with people. Whenever the boys sang here there was always I don’t know a feeling of tremendous warmth and peace. Anyway, I’d better show you the Rectory and stables.”

John took in what White said and had one last look inside the empty building before exiting. He played with his right ear. Melanie picked up on her husband’s movements.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’ll tell you later.”

White finished locking the door and walked the Suttons across to the Rectory. The former Priest’s residence was still quite functional and in good condition.

“It’s almost as if the priest had just decided to pack up and leave one day and closed the door behind him ready to return the next,” Melanie said with a smile as she looked from her husband to White. “There’s been no real move to take away whatever functional furniture was here. The priest could virtually come back today, unpack his suitcase and carry on. Mmm,” Melanie said as she looked around the building.

“Yes, it seems the priest hung onto living here until the last minute when the Church said it could no longer support him here,” White said.

“Why’s that?” John asked.

“Once the choir was wiped out a lot of the families just stopped coming here. I guess they found it too painful a reminder.”

“Ah, the positive side would be the lack of visitors to the place then,” John said as he looked at a crucifix hanging on the wall.

“Well yes, except the few visitors who come to pay their respects to those buried here? It goes with the territory I’m sorry to say but people who want to go to the graves here must have access. Don’t worry; there would be very little inconvenience.”

“Nigel, what about headstones or graves for the children from the choir, is there something here?”

“There’s a sort of memorial plaque in Brighton itself where the accident happened and the plaque inside the old church you’ve already seen. There was nothing to bury. The whole choir sort of just evaporated in the blast.”

Melanie had tears well up in her eyes as she pondered the situation. “That would be so hard for the families – not having anything to say farewell to, nothing of the boys to visit.”

John put his arm around Melanie and gave her a squeeze.

“Okay Nigel, you better show us the stables now.”

The trio moved from the Rectory to the adjoining stables. John stood mesmerised as he mentally pictured what space he would need for his and Melanie’s cars and equipment from his garage. He checked the walls and roof and looked at Melanie. She winced and knew John’s mind was made up back in the old church.

“When was all this built?” John asked.

“Somewhere in the mid-1800s I believe. I can get you exact dates if you like.”

“And has the church been deconsecrated?”

“Yes. The priest and bishop did a special service before the workmen came and removed the pews, and other bits and pieces. It hasn’t just been abandoned.”

“Let’s go back to the cars so we can exchange contact details. I think Melanie and I would like to think this one over some more.”

“Okay.”

The three made their way back to the cars where John and White exchanged details. For White this could be a serendipitous sale – if he hadn't decided on going to Brighton he may not have met the Suttons. For John and Melanie, they needed to look at their finances and discuss if they were really ready to give up their city lifestyle for a quieter life in the country – if the sales figures were agreeable, then the answer would be yes. The return trip home was something neither of the couple would forget.

“You've already made your mind up, haven't you?” Melanie asked.

“I don't know. It seems perfect enough.”

“What was playing on your mind in the church? Whether we could make it into a sound studio and still have room for music instruction?”

“No. It was weird. I believe actually I heard the boys from this church - all laughing and playing in the main body of the church when we first walked in. Later they joined you in singing.”

“You heard the spirits of the dead choir boys!”

“Yes. They were definitely there. Also, there were two adults with them, a man and a woman.”

“Were they the same people in the metal etching near the door?”

“I guess so. If they are Melanie, we could have some pretty interesting company.”

The smile on Mel's face suddenly changed as she saw how serious her husband seemed.

“Remember when I asked you to sing a few bars?”

“Yes, to check out the pitch in the stone walls and roof.”

“No. When you sang, the boys stopped playing and they listened. When I asked you to sing some of your favourite songs the church seemed to erupt into song for me as the boys joined in. It was truly wonderful. Maybe I'm losing my mind. I haven't heard spirits for quite some time - not since I was a young boy. I don't know what made me hear them tonight.”

Mel looked at her husband and put her hand on his thigh. He had not sounded so earnest in quite a while. Also, John never made up stories. He had many gifts as a person but imagination was not one of them.

“John when I sang my songs for you what did you hear?”

John pulled off to the side of the road and placed the car in park and pulled on the handbrake. He turned to his wife and had a serious face.

“At first, the boys’ voices were just a gaggle of noise – like you’d hear in any playground. When you started singing *Panis Angelicus* the boys seemed to automatically have found their pitch and joined in. You were accompanied by what sounded like a ... I don’t like saying it ... a host of angels.”

“What about when I sang *I Have A Dream* from *Le Miserables*, what happened then?”

“You had the most beautiful accompaniment but they didn’t know the song – they just hummed in unison.”

It was Melanie’s time to be shocked. She had sung a couple of her favourite songs and had felt quite at home singing in the empty church. Usually when she sang in somewhere new she became nervous.

“You know John, when I was singing both songs I felt I could feel the rhythm of the usual music accompaniment not just hear it.”

“Mel, there was one more thing. You remember I stopped at the plaque on the wall?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I heard a boy’s voice say to me ‘*don’t tell anyone you can hear us*’ – that stunned me. If I told anyone other than you I’d be considered mad!”

The pair sat in the car in silence for a full minute digesting what each other had said.

“Darling if you don’t want to go ahead with buying the place I’ll understand,” Mel said. “It may just be too weird for us both.”

“No, I would really like to go ahead and buy the place if we can talk the Church around to the right price. Even though the boys’ spirits were in the church they were happy and joyous – not evil. I think I need another visit to the church so I can run some tests with my equipment.”

“Would you be okay if in fact the boys’ spirits were haunting ...”

“Visiting, not haunting.”

“Okay, visiting the place?”

“Yes, I think so. We both have our faith and know that if the boys are still here then there’s a reason behind it. Let’s see if I can have another visit to the church one night during the week.”

“Alright!”