

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING MEN



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CHAPTER ONE

It was another one of those North Perth days – long, hot and heavy, like a sunburnt giraffe who has overindulged on cheesecake. I lounged in my tiny office with my feet on the desk, rifling through papers and trying to convince myself that I was busy. The insipid airflow from the fan barely made a dent in the oppressive heat. I suppose I should introduce myself at this point – my name is Meridian. Meridian Sleuthus, P.I. I'd like to say I was the best P.I in this old town, but it probably wouldn't be true. I had earned a name for myself however, as being thoroughly tenacious once on the trail... the trail of a good donut and cup of coffee, that is. Seriously though, despite living a simple life (largely through necessity), there hadn't been many cases I couldn't crack once I put my mind to it, and if my mind failed me, a decent brick was usually enough to crack any case I came across.

Anyway, as I sat contemplating my scruffy shoes and my equally scruffy career, there was a knock at door. I glanced up to see what appeared to be the outline of a rather stylish woman in the rippled glass of the window. Always one to appreciate female company (not to mention the prospect of payment), I leapt from my chair, frantically trying to make my papers seem professional. Opening the door, I invited the lady in. She seated herself in front of my desk, twisting her hands a little nervously.

“What can I do for you madam?” I inquired.

“My name is Franklee O'Noteworthy,” she answered, “and I've got a mystery I need solved.”

“You've come to the right place then,” I assured her, “what's your problem?”

“Well, my fence keeps falling down, the living room desperately needs a new coat of paint, my husband never helps do the dishes and I've got rather a bad case of hem...”

“Err, excuse me,” I interrupted, “is this the mystery you came to see me about?”

“No, of course not,” she replied somewhat indignantly, “but you asked me what my problem was.”

“Oh, I see,” I responded lamely, “well, why don't you tell me why you're interested in my services.”

“Well, it's like this,” Mrs O'Noteworthy said, “I am the conductor of a choir. A very good choir in fact – the famous Gay and Lesbian Singers of WA. I've been offered a lucrative recording contract for them if I can just whip them into shape by the end of the year. The problem is, all of our men have gone missing.”

“Missing?” I asked, “What do you mean by missing?”

“Gone, vanished, disappeared, absent, awol, not here,” she clarified, “you see at the start of the year, we were down on our usual number of males, so we invited a few who had taken a break from the choir to return. This is where it becomes strange,”

Franklee lowered her voice to a whisper, “every single week we would have one of the guys turn up and then we'd never see them or hear from them again afterwards.”

“Perhaps they just didn't want to return,” I suggested, but Franklee was incensed.

“Whist,” she cried, confirming my suspicion that she was indeed a high-class dame. I mean, who says things like ‘whist’ nowadays? “No,” she continued, “it's definitely suspicious circumstances. Four weeks in a row this happened – it's too much to be a coincidence! No, something has happened to these men and I want them back, or at least to know what happened to them,” she added. “Besides which,” she confided, “some of the choir members have been acting rather strangely lately. There is

definitely something going on here and I want to know what it is. I have to warn you though that it might not be an easy job – this is no ordinary choir.”

“Well, Mrs O’Noteworthy,” I said.

“Franklee, please,” she said.

“Well Franklee, my dear,” I continued, “I don’t give a damn how hard it is, I’ll take the case. Give me all the information you have and I’ll look into it. I’ll call you in a couple of days and let you know what I’ve come up with.”

“Oh thank you,” Franklee cried, “it’s such a relief. I’ve been so worried that I think I’ve developed hem...”

“No problem ma’am,” I cut in, (praise always makes me jumpy), “P.I Sleuthus is on the job.” As I ushered Franklee out, I mentally kicked myself – “on the job.” It made me sound like an actor from a cheap, C-grade Hollywood flick, and a constipated one at that. I made a note to try to sound more sophisticated in future.

Over the next couple of days, I looked at the information that Franklee had left. I made a few calls, did some research and talked to some of my sources. B.B Queue had left town it seemed, after a beef with Mayo over who was covering the burger flipping in which part of town. Chilli usually had some hot gossip, but he was nowhere to be found. Nor was good, old Tommy, who was usually a pretty reliable guy. Finally, I caught up with Sweetn Sour who told me that good, old Tomato had wanted some spice in his life, had hitched up with Chilli and the two of them were cooking up something, though she didn’t know what. Apart from that, I didn’t get much sense from Sweetn. She’d been dating Pork, who’d dumped her for Apple and she’d gone and gotten fried on rice again. Plum ducked for cover when she saw me coming, and Mint looked like a lamb being led to the slaughter - I figured he was having one of his fits of paranoia and steered clear. If Satay knew anything about the situation, he was sticking to his plea of ignorance. Offering more money didn’t help – he said he wouldn’t work for peanuts, so I eventually gave up and went home.

I couldn’t sleep that night. It did seem that this case was going to be a tough nut to crack. Franklee was going to call the next day and I had nothing to tell her. And yet, surely it couldn’t be that hard – how much could a bunch of simple singers have to hide? After fitful hours of tossing and turning in bed, I came up with a plan – I’d just have to go undercover. Having made that decision, that was exactly what I did right then and there.

The next day, I told Franklee that I’d gained enough information to think that the case warranted a deeper investigation and ran my plan for infiltrating the choir past her. I needed details and the only way to get them was to work from the inside. Fortunately, I’d sung in a choir in my youth, so I thought I could pull off the deception convincingly. Franklee seemed more than happy to agree and as I hung up the phone, I knew it was time to let my hair down. After rummaging around in my broom-closet cum filing system, I found my suitcase of disguises and just what I was looking for – my long, black, curly wig. Trying it on, I decided I looked choir-ish enough and I headed off to my favourite café for a congratulatory donut. I figured that once I was inside the choir, this job would be as simple as do, re, mi. After all, I’d just start at the very beginning (the very best place to start), and work my way up the scale of suspects until I uncovered the discordant desperado who was deviously damaging the dynamics of the choir’s dazzling director. Yes, I told myself, with my superb sleuthing, the GALS chorus would soon be back in full voice again.

CHAPTER TWO

Thursday night arrived quickly, right after Wednesday in fact, and I found myself outside the North Perth Lesser Hall – home of illustrious Gay and Lesbian Singers. I made some last minute adjustments to my wig and marched in. I had decided to assume a false name and Franklee introduced me to the choir as Melody Dohfirst. I was warmly welcomed by the seemingly happy singers, took my place in the alto section (having been advised by Franklee that the sopranos were sometimes a little scary) and joined in the singing as best I could.

As the night progressed, I got the distinct feeling that although everyone appeared merry enough, not all these gals were gay. I watched and listened closely throughout the rehearsal and talked to as many people as possible during the tea break. By the end of the evening, I had a good general idea as to who everyone was. Back at home, I made some notes about my first impressions of the choir members.

To begin with, there was Toenail Flour, a decidedly shady character whom I immediately put high on my list of suspects. She just had a look about her which suggested she was up to no good. Quite the opposite to Toenail was a woman called Bobbin Halo whose powers of delegation I was already in awe of. Under all her curls though, something inside me whispered that this dame was no angel. Jungle Jo, as she was affectionately called by the choir members was certainly someone to be aware of. Apparently, this tough cookie had rescued the choir from several life-threatening encounters with the dangerous wildlife of the Perth sewers. I figured she'd be a good person to make friends with, however I suspected she could possibly make an equally powerful enemy.

Sally Scribbles, the group's rogue journalist, was another one to keep a sharp eye on. Her notebook accompanied her wherever she went, and she guarded it like a squirrel guarding nuts (although there didn't seem to be many nuts around this joint). I knew that sooner or later, I had to find a way to see what was in that notebook!! Then there was Tricky Tones, who sang bass along with Judy Blues. Franklee had told me that this deep-voiced duo were fabulous, but she still wanted the men back in case Tricky and Judy weren't able to be at a performance or something. I didn't entirely trust Tricky – after all, someone who sings bass, soprano and everything in between with equal ease must have some secret up her sleeve. Judy, on the other hand, I'd hardly noticed. She sat at the back with her hat pulled over her face and her trench coat collar turned up. If I hadn't known better, I'd have said she was the detective around here, not me. At any rate, she appeared harmless enough, although as everyone knows, appearances can be deceiving.

My attention was caught by a dizzy blond called Cherry Koosumptuous, whom I suspected had a somewhat sharper wit than what she portrayed... but then again, maybe not. That was something to put on my 'wait and see' list, along with Franny Fairdeal's honest presentation. Although she looked like a gal of integrity, in this business you learn that everyone has something to hide! The books were kept by a lady by the name of Bizzie Lee, whose efficiency was somewhat baffling. She had a way of bustling around and getting things done before one even noticed that they needed doing. Apart from getting the milk and tea however – that was the domain of

Jeeves. Franklee was right – this was no ordinary choir. I'd only rarely come across a choir with their own butler before, and certainly never one who could sing soprano too. Of course, you know what they say about the butler. It may be just a cliché, but sometimes where there's smoke, there's an arsonist. Someone else who had a specific role was the pianist, known by everyone simply as 'Fingers' (though her last name was Wineman). I resolved to find out how she acquired her nickname, suspecting that it might possibly provide a clue to this curious case. And speaking of cases, I'd already found out that Fingers used to play the violin, a fact which made me even more suspicious of her.

In the alto section, everybody seemed to rely on a quiet woman called Eliza Neverwrong and indeed it appeared that she was. Yes, Eliza was a 'good girl' alright – always practiced, always knew her lyrics and never missed a beat. Those in the crime industry like myself though, know that it's often the 'good girls' who are the most devious. Cornelia Cobb was another quiet one. This woman was sweet, but she didn't give much away – an occasional corny remark was all you were likely to get until she trusted you. Belle Babblemaster on the other hand, was pretty keen to give everything away. I figured she'd be another useful person to make friends with. Perhaps she could even help me get a peek at Sally's sacred notebook. Still although she had plenty to say about everything, the question remained as to whether any of it mattered. Another alto was Debeat Handsworth. Debeat was the self-appointed percussionist of the group who always ready with her shaker, and this gal had a reputation for being good with her hands in more ways than one!

Moving back to the sopranos, Debris Barnacle was someone who seemed to be frequently in trouble. Perhaps it was the strain of being around hundreds of rowdy brats all day and having to keep up the appearance of a respectable teacher, or perhaps years of teaching had given her a streak of insanity. Whatever the case, Debris was a shipwreck waiting to happen. I resolved to put her on my list of 'unpredictable people.' I decided to put the last soprano on that list too. Roley Debacle seemed to cause a stir wherever she went, and controversy followed her like a bloodhound on the trail of a man with a pocket full of sausages. Roley was something of a mystery and I had the sense that there might well be more to this gal than met the eye. Finally, there was the only man left in the choir – Neville Hearty. Nev was definitely something of a character. He seemed to lap up the attention of what he called 'his lovely ladies,' even though the lovely ladies in question were lesbians. Being the only guy around made Neville a top candidate on my list of suspects and I knew I'd have to steel myself to his inexplicable charm in order to find out more about him.

Well, what a cast of characters. It seemed that I'd have my work cut out for me after all – my hands were going to be full, with more than coffee and donuts until I closed this case. After just one night, I was able to gather that beneath the surface of this harmonious choir lurked a tangled web of passion, intrigue and secret plots... and that was just over which songs should be sung at the concert! (On top of the mystery of the missing men, it seemed I'd walked into an underground war between 'Trouperites' and 'Caravanians'). I decided that before the next rehearsal, I needed to find out more about the mysteriously vanishing men. Perhaps I'd ask one of my oldest sources, Soy. He was hard to get hold of because he was so often down the beach marinating in the sun, mostly with some chick called Honey. Still, if his information didn't just fry, it usually stirred up my cases. It was worth a try...

CHAPTER 3

The story thus far: Meridean Sleuthus, a P.I has been approached by a glamorous woman named Franklee O'Noteworthy, the conductor of a famous choir – the Gay and Lesbian Singers (GALS). She engages the services of Sleuthus to find out what has happened to the men of the choir, who have mysteriously vanished one after another. Sleuthus decides to join the choir to find out more information. Disguised in her long, black wig and under the pseudonym 'Melody Dohfirst,' Sleuthus meets the choir members and begins her difficult task...

During the week, I did a bit of research on the three missing men. There was Jimmy Heel, Gabriel Bleakly and Bertie Blaze. Jimmy was a dashing young fellow with a weakness for web-cams. His wet, wild and wicked adventures on the world-wide-web had earned him the nickname of 'Jackpot Jim' and a semi-guru status amongst his less expressive friends. He seemed to be a well-liked fellow though, without any noticeable enemies or compelling reasons for disappearing. Gabriel, on the other hand, worked for the tax department, which naturally made the majority of Perth his enemy. A brilliant and talented but somewhat troubled man, Gabriel played the piano with a skill which was rumoured to rival the greatest musicians in the world. He had a classic artistic temperament and suffered from chronic perfectionism – both of which could easily have caused him to withdraw from the choir and disappear for a while in a fit of melancholy. I needed to look further into his situation. Finally, Bertie Blaze was a brazen, vivacious guy with a love of the limelight and flair for expansive drama-queenish outbursts. Although people felt like switching him off from time to time, he had a wide circle of friends and was generally liked (or at least tolerated). His generosity, friendliness and sense of humour made up for most of his other flaws. All in all, my information didn't amount to much. I hadn't uncovered any skeletons in their closets – and none of them were currently residing in closets, nor any deep, dark secrets... not yet anyway. I just had to hope that I'd learn more from choir members.

Before choir on Thursday, I carefully reviewed my notes from the previous week and made a list of the people I wanted to talk to first. On the top of my list was the infamous Neville Hearty, however when I arrived at the hall on Thursday, Neville was no-where to be seen. The choir members who were there were all a-buzz though, talking about Debris Barnacle, so I decided to listen in. It seemed that Debris had recently become a celebrated author, having published an article on the subject of teaching boys to read. She'd also given an impassioned speech on the same subject at a prestigious educational conference. I could understand Debris' excitement, however there was a fanatical gleam in her eyes which made me a little suspicious.

I started thinking – perhaps Debris had become so obsessed with her mission of improving the reading ability of males, that she'd kidnapped the GALS choir boys in order to force lessons of literacy upon them. It was a definite possibility. Although if that was the case, why hadn't she taken Neville too, I wondered. Maybe he was just too much trouble for her to be bothered with. Teaching was, after all, a difficult job.

I tried it once myself, actually. Some years ago, my nephew's school asked me to come and teach a workshop to some kids about detective work – part of a careers program or something. As usual, I'd researched the situation thoroughly, and gotten advice from teacher friends of mine as to best teaching practice nowadays. I thought the workshop went fine, but the principal didn't. He wouldn't even tell me what I'd supposedly done wrong when he screamed at me never to return to the premises again. It wasn't until later

that one of my friends explained that calling kids “asshole” when they got a question wrong wasn’t what holistic education meant, and demonstrating my special headlock-nosetwist manoeuvre on a student wasn’t their idea of “hands-on” education. I don’t know why they were complaining – the girl was fine once she regained consciousness. So was the boy I thumped with a piece of paving, not hard of course and he only spent a week in hospital – a small price to pay for learning the number one rule of detective work; know your enemy. He now has first-hand experience that anyone approaching menacingly with a hard, sharp object is likely to be your enemy – it was relevant to real life and concrete – what more did they want? I even got the kids involved in ‘active learning’ when I fired my gun – you should have seen those kids get active in a hurry. Anyway, bad luck to the education system if they don’t appreciate me, I say.

Speaking of knowing your enemy though, I decided that I needed to think about the perpetrator’s psyche – what kind of a person kidnaps (or possibly even kills, though I didn’t want to assume the worst just yet) a bunch of boys from a choir? Clearly a desperate one!! I noticed that Neville had now rocked up and resolved to talk to him during the break as we were about to start our warm-ups. The first half of our rehearsal was interrupted when a heated debate broke out about which song we should sing as an encore at our upcoming concert which was to be held in the sleepy South West town of Denmark, as part of the annual Festival of Voice. I realised that I’d probably have to go with the choir if I was to maintain my disguise convincingly. Opinion was divided into four main camps – those who thought we’d definitely get an encore and that we should sing ‘St Louis Blues,’ those who thought we’d get an encore and should sing ‘Can’t Help Lovin’ That Gal,’ those who thought we wouldn’t get an encore so we shouldn’t worry and those who thought that if we didn’t get an encore, they’d personally storm the audience wreaking havoc until we did get one. Things threatened to get violent as some members started calling the ‘we probably won’t get an encore brigade’ traitors and accusing them of high (and low) treason. It was Fingers who stepped in to save the day, pointing out with impeccable tact that perhaps we should leave it until the concert to see what happened and then allow Franklee to make the decision if necessary. Yes, Fingers was a tricky character – that nimble tactfulness could well be covering a much more deceptive mind.

I had more important fish to fry though and while we sang, I cast my mind around for any lines I could use to lure this slippery character into revealing a few pearls of info. If I could just find the right questions, he’d be hooked. I knew the conversation had to be handled carefully, or Nev would either just clam up or slip through my net. Still, I had the mental mussels to go with the flow and not be caught by red herrings. It wasn’t easy making these plans while rehearsal was going on however – Fingers was muttering about the piano needing a tuna, Debeat and Bobbin (who were sitting behind me) were whispering about the whale of time they’d had at their last events committee meeting – something to do with see-weed apparently, and Sally Scribbles was whiting in her notebook and then floundering because she’d only caught the tail end of what was being said. It was just as well Eliza was such a squid, as she could fillet Sally in. Roley was baiting Toenail who wasn’t at her flippant best, as she had a touch of the flu – a bit of a cod and sore trout. I was beginning to wish the whole evening would just fin-ish. Ms O’Noteworthy was waving her both hands frantically and I was getting to the point where if she told us how important it was to ‘sing upwards and keep thinking shark’ one more time, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself quoting from *Gone with the Tide* – “Franklee Scallop, I don’t give a clam!”

Fortunately, the tea-break did finally come and I worked my way over to the kitchen where Nev was getting a cup of tea. It was there that I witnessed a strange transformation. Instead of his characteristic, “chuck us a Corona luv” to whomever was closest, (usually followed by “what, only tea? Who forgot the bloody beer then?”), Nev was quietly making tea with every appearance of good manners and indulging in intelligent conversation with Roley, Belle and Cornelia. I could scarcely believe it and when I heard Belle call Neville ‘Lesley,’ I was sure I must be dreaming. I kept listening and watching but I didn’t see any of Nev’s usual jocular banter, nor his surreptitious slaps on the bottom of any ‘lovely lady’ going past.

I must admit, I was entirely puzzled and wandered over to see if Debeat could shed any light on the subject. She could, and she explained that Nev had always been a bit of a bad boy in his youth and even now was considered rather a rascal. She said that Nev sometimes got tired of keeping up his reputation as a lady’s man and a rogue and so he’d created an alter ego – Lesley Loveheart, who was a good girl and who could do all the polite and civilized things Nev just couldn’t do in public without destroying his image.

CHAPTER 4

Well, that new development certainly caused my train of thought to shift tracks. If Neville periodically *became* a lovely lady, what did that mean about his possible motivation – getting rid of men he’d seen as competition for the ladies? I wondered whether this Lesley Loveheart could be a secret which the guys had found out about and were using to blackmail Nev with and hence another motive for his culpability, however Debeat informed me that Lesley wasn’t exactly a secret, as Neville often used this persona to do solos and special items at concerts. She also hinted that Lesley had a bit of an obsession with fruit and vegies which had nothing to do with eating. Her favourites were apparently citrus fruit of various kinds, although she was also fond of melons apparently. I had to admit that I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of this unexpected and unusual information, so I did what any logical person would do with something unknown – I decided to ignore it.

I turned my attention then to the next suspect on my list – Jeeves. I figured I might as well consider the obvious. Perhaps Jeeves was disgruntled with her role as butler and had taken away the men in an act of protest. I sidled up to her and commented on the bike she rode everywhere, which proved to be a tactical error. Once she started talking about bike riding, it seemed there was no stopping her. Her stories were fascinating and it seemed she’d ridden all over the world – along the Great Wall of China, right up the outside of the Eiffel Tower (though she’d needed a big run-up for that, she said), through the tunnels of the Pyramids and even across the Great Barrier Reef. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was, but it seemed that something about her story just didn’t add up. I resolved to do some more research at home. Still, I did manage, just as the tea-bitch rang to signal the end of our break, to ask her about her role as butler. It seemed she’d volunteered for the job as it gave her a chance to practice riding whilst balancing a bottle of milk on her helmet, a pack of biccies in one hand and 24 coffee cups in the other – a feat she’d wanted to perfect for some time. She was also grateful for choir’s friendship and wanted to urn her keep. So, that threw my butler theory out with the used tea-bags.

The rest of the rehearsal passed uneventfully and I was thinking about who I wanted to talk to next week when I left. As I walked to the car park behind the hall, a shadowy

figure suddenly grabbed me and pulled me into the dark laneway nearby. Startled, I whipped into my karate stance, ready to wax on and wax off with this ruffian, but the figure hissed at me before I even had time to blink (let alone catch a fly with chopsticks).

“Shhh, don’t wax. It’s me, Judy.”

She stepped a into the light a little so I could see her. “Judy, what are you doing?” I said angrily, “I almost turned you into chop suey with my black-belt karate moves.” I figured it didn’t hurt to let her know I was dangerous (you don’t want to mess with a world-champion bluffer like me) in case she’d tried anything else.

“Shhhh,” she repeated, “I’m not supposed to be here, but I felt I had to tell you.”

“What?” I answered, completely confused, “tell me what, and who doesn’t want you to tell me, and why me anyway? I’ve only been in this choir for two weeks!”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said impatiently, “look, I can’t stay here long. The thing is, I know that you’re a PI here to look into the disappearance of the men...”

“What men? What are you talking about – I’m just here to sing.”

“Pull the other one – it’s got bells on it,” she answered, “and a horn, a tambourine, castanets and two maracas. Look, at the moment, I’m the one that’s offering to sing, now do you want the info or not?” I debated playing innocent and denying her accusations, but I didn’t think it would do any good, besides which, I was desperate for a lead.”

“Alright then,” I said, “spill the beans.”

“And ruin my new trench coat? I don’t think so, but here’s the story - once upon a time...”

I was surprised to find that Judy really had a rather wry sense of humour when you got to know her a little better. “Umm, I think I’ve heard that one,” I interrupted, “and this is hardly the time for playing games.”

“Oh damn. I was really hoping to challenge you to ‘rock, scissors, paper’ tournament,” she said, “but perhaps I’ll just stick to playing the fool. Seriously though, this is what I’ve heard. It’s only a rumour mind you, and naturally I don’t remember where I heard it, but I’ve heard that the guys got tired of GALS and decided to run off and join the Band of Angels. Naturally they knew they’d probably be strung up as traitors if the more militant of our members found out about that, so they’ve lain low and kept quiet.”

“Hmm, interesting,” I mused, “so this Bag of Angels, where can I find them?”

“Actually, they’re going to be in Denmark while we’re there,” Judy said.

“How convenient,” I muttered to myself. “Listen Judy, are you going to tell the others about me, or do they already know?”

“No, they don’t all know,” she answered, “only one, and Franklee as well I guess. But that one has reasons for not wanting me to talk to you, and if she finds out I told you this, well, I don’t know what she’ll do, but it won’t be nice. You’ve got to promise to keep this investigation quiet,” she begged.

“Well, you can count on that,” I said, “but if you’re in danger, why did you tell me and who...” I trailed off as I realised that she’d disappeared into the night again. It seemed that behind the sweet sounds of their songs, these singers had more sinister secrets than were seen on the surface of their sparkling and sociable smiles – sneaky and sly psyches skulked behind the seductive stage-presences of at least some of these superb-sounding but suspicious sirens.

So, the proverbial plot was thickening like week-old porridge, but on the positive side, GALS’ approaching trip to Denmark provided the perfect cover for investigating this Bond of Anglicans, or was it the Bunch of Angles, or maybe the Bevy of Anglers? Well, whomever they were, it didn’t sound they were up to much good. I drove home more determined than ever to get to the bottom of this case.