

Sample chapters from
Secrets Never End
(Book Four in *The Ro Delahanty Series*)

Chapter Sixty-Four / Fiona Hazlett is Off Tonight

Tuesday, June 5, through Friday, June 8, 2007

Using the remote, Ro switched on the TV for the Tuesday ten o'clock news.

"Fiona Hazlett is off tonight," Bill Haeger announced casually as the camera pulled back, revealing his co-occupant behind the anchor's desk, "sitting in for her is Brett Scanlon."

Scanlon immediately launched into a report about a new attraction, a giant Ferris wheel, being added to the Fort Armstrong County Fair coming up at the end of August.

Anchors being off for an evening was not unusual, so Ro thought nothing more of it.

On second shift Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights this month, it meant Ro's days off were Wednesday and Sunday. At just before four o'clock on Wednesday, she was in her kitchen unpacking from a trip to the grocery store when her cell phone rang. The caller ID said it was her brother.

"Hi," she said, expecting an update about his new office being almost ready to move into, or perhaps another account he'd picked up for his fledging ad agency.

"Hey," Tuck said, but it was a flat greeting, like he was distracted. "Sis, you sometimes bump into Fee going out for a run when you're leaving for work at eleven o'clock." It was halfway between a statement and a question.

"Yes, from time-to-time."

"Have you seen her the last couple of days?"

Ro frowned, wondering what was up. "No. I've been on second shift the last few weeks, so don't get home until after she'd already be out on her run. I think the last time I saw her was four or five weeks ago." Fee had been alone, but Ro didn't think it was pertinent information. "Why're you asking?"

"She didn't show-up for work yesterday, no phone-in about being sick or taking a personal day; nothing. When it happened again this afternoon, the station called me to ask if I had seen her or heard anything from her. I told them no, I hadn't."

“I noticed she wasn’t on the air yesterday. But why would they call *you*?”

“Come on, Sis, you know our track record. We’re on the outs for weeks or months at a time, only to be an item again. They wondered if I knew anything...”

“I remember Fee’s taken days off before...”

“Yeah, but usually we knew why. This is different.”

“She’s never just not shown up.”

“Not as far as I know.”

“What do *you* think’s going on?”

Tuck snickered, then said, “My guess? Fee had a spat with somebody at the station and is off pouting, punishing them by denying them her exalted presence.”

“Ooo, kinda catty,” Ro said, but with a hint of pride rather than rebuke.

“Quite likely true, though.”

“Unfortunately.”

Brett Scanlon was in the co-anchor slot again for the Wednesday and Thursday late evening news. There was no mention of Fee Hazlett, which Ro found puzzling.

On Friday morning, Ro was in the apartment complex’s clubhouse fitness room. At least twice a week she visited the gym working on strength and endurance. She was on a leg lift machine positioned to look out a window at Westwynd Drive, the apartment complex’s major street, when her brother’s Miata RX7 passed by, going toward the north end. She was ninety percent sure it was Tuck because his was the only goldenrod convertible sports car she knew of in the area.

He was clearly heading for Fee’s townhouse. Ro thought about following, but then second guessed herself. Whatever might happen between them was none of her business, although there was a twinge disappointment the woman might be finagling her way back into her brother’s life.

If Tuck wants me to know what’s going on, he’ll tell me.

What she didn’t know is that would happen sooner than expected.

Chapter Sixty-Five / No-Show

Friday, June 8, 2007, midmorning

It was only a few minutes later when Tuck called on her cell phone.

“You home?” he asked.

“I’m in the fitness center. I saw your car go by; I assume on the way to Fee’s place?”

“Let’s talk,” he said.

“There’s a little coffee lounge in the clubhouse.”

“See you in five.”

At a comfortable seventy-five degrees and with clear skies, on a wonderful summer weekday midmorning the pool outside the clubhouse was noisy with moms chatting and kids splashing and laughing; Ro and Tuck had the inside lounge to themselves.

Using a single-serve machine, Ro made a cup of tea; Tuck had coffee. When they were seated at a small table, Tuck confirmed Ro’s assumption. “You’re right, I went by Fee’s townhouse. I still have a key to her place. She wasn’t there.”

“And hasn’t packed up and gone off to a new job?” Ro said.

“I’d have heard about that. Plus, there wasn’t any luggage missing.” After a pause, he added with concern but no alarm, “Ro, it looks like Fee might be missing. She hasn’t been to work in three days with no word of any kind.”

“I have to say it doesn’t surprise me.”

“I have no feelings for her anymore as a girlfriend,” Tuck said, his eyes downcast, “but I’m still worried about her as a person I once cared about. I wanted to see if there was anything hinting at what’s going on. I found her dress from Monday night’s broadcast neatly folded on the bed; her shoes side-by-side on the floor. The bed hadn’t been slept in. And one of her running suits and a pair of running shoes was missing from the closet.”

Slipping into cop mode, Ro said, “Which implies whatever happened was on Monday night.”

“It looks like Fee may have gone for her usual run and didn’t come back.”

While Ro’s sisterly protective feelings wanted to keep her brother at arm’s length from anything involving Fee Hazlett, her cop instincts were waving little red warning flags, like this whole thing could quickly degenerate into a serious matter.

“Her car was in its usual parking spot?” Each townhouse unit had its own designated space.

“Yes.”

“Tuck, even though you broke up with her, you’re probably closer to Fee than anybody else, at least around here. What do you think? Has she taken off on her own, maybe with a new lover?”

“I’m not sure what to think. You know Fee’s a drama queen. A disappearing act to make a statement wouldn’t be unheard of. But... I really don’t want to think about the alternative.”

“Have you talked to anyone about what you found?”

“Only you.”

“Has the station filed a missing person report yet?”

“If they have, they haven’t shared it with me, although I suppose it’d be the next logical move, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s what I’d expect,” Ro said, then added, “but keep this to yourself for the moment.”

Ro knew if something had happened to Fee Hazlett, Tuck having visited her place would raise suspicion, so added, “Look, my guess is sooner or later the cops will be involved. If they ask you a direct question, answer it truthfully. You probably left fingerprints behind anyway, so there’s no point in lying.”

As of when Ro and Tuck were talking, the TV station’s management had not filed a missing person report. But at two-thirty that afternoon, when Fiona Hazlett was a no-show for the fourth day in a row, that changed.

Chapter Sixty-Six / High Risk / High Profile

Friday, June 8, 2007, late afternoon and evening

At three-thirty Friday afternoon, Ross Makeever, KLEE's general manager, arrived at the Lee's Landing Police Department to file a missing person report on his absent anchor.

Based on bitter experience, cops know most missing persons turn out to not be "missing" at all. They've been on a binge, drug or alcohol induced; maybe run off with a previously unknown lover; or just wanted some alone time.

There are two kinds of missing person reports that receive immediate attention: high-risk and high-profile. High-risk means there is a strong indication the missing person is in immediate danger, like if there are known threats or witness reports of screams or evidence of actual violence. High-profile is if the missing person is prominent.

While nothing Makeever told Sgt. Craig Alsop, the shift sergeant, in their initial interview suggested this might be a high-risk situation for Fiona Hazlett, her star status clearly qualified her for the high-profile category. Which is why the sergeant immediately flagged Lt. Hugh Vinson, the second shift commander, about the situation. Vinson, in turn, walked over to the detectives' offices and waylaid his two top investigators, Sgt. Doyle Patton and Sgt. Cory Yang, who had begun clearing their desks for the weekend.

A seasoned veteran, Vinson knew what would inevitably happen when the media learned of Hazlett's "disappearance." So, to make sure the department was not behind the curve in the case, he ordered them to "drop everything and get to work on this ASAP."

Cops have a step-by-step protocol for dealing with a missing person driven by two essential precepts: the safety of the potential victim is paramount, and time is of the essence.

So, Patton and Wang simultaneously undertook the first two steps in the plan.

Patton sat with Makeever in an interview room for two hours, mining every piece of pertinent information he could. Of course, covering all the basics: the missing person's name – which he learned was actually Fanny Herzog; Fiona Hazlett was an air name – address, age, relatives, co-workers, friends.

Prior to the interview, the only "picture" Patton had of Fiona Hazlett / Fanny Herzog was what he, like so many others, had seen on the TV news, this exotically gorgeous and charismatic on-air personality, always relaxed and in control. But the woman Makeever described had a dark side: a ruthless career-climber who off-camera was erratic, ill-tempered, self-absorbed, and promiscuous.

When Patton pressed Makeever for Hazlett's romantic relationships or anyone who might have had feelings of animosity toward the woman, the emerging list was long. Of course, it included Blake Liss, the cameraman she was known to be involved with; Daniela Cepeda, the production assistant who'd been fired last year at Hazlett's insistence; and Patrick Delahanty, her on-again, off-again boyfriend. In fact, Patton twice underlined Liss's, Cepeda's, Delahanty's, as

well as several others' names in his notebook; his way of flagging them as persons of interest for priority interviews starting the next morning.

However, Patton had the comparatively "easier" job of the two detectives. While he was conducting his interview, Yang, along with two uniformed officers as backup, checked out Hazlett's townhouse in the Westwynd Apartment Complex.

Entering a residence normally requires a search warrant signed by a judge. In a missing person case, though, when time can be critical – what if the victim is injured but still alive; what if they are being forcibly restrained and tortured by a sick perp? – they can go in immediately.

Yang's job at this point was straightforward, either find the victim in her home – alive or dead – or ascertain the victim was not present, then determine if there was any obvious evidence of foul play, or barring that, perhaps any indication of where she might have gone. He needed to check out the townhouse, but with absolute minimal impact so as not to disturb any possible evidence.

Yang and his colleagues located the Westwynd resident property manager and secured a key to Hazlett's townhouse. Pulling on latex gloves, he gently handled the front entrance doorknob with two fingers and pushed the door aside with an elbow, then stood in the doorway to slowly survey the room.

"Oh, shit," he muttered.

"What?" one of the uniforms standing behind said.

Turning, he said, "I need for one of you to go get the supe. I can see what look like fresh vacuum cleaner tracks in the carpeting. I think this place was recently cleaned."

While the uniform fetched the superintendent, Yang carefully walked through the townhouse. There was no body. Nothing seemed disturbed, or out of place. If anything, it appeared Fiona Hazlett was a neat freak, and from the stuffed closets, a clothes horse.

The days of a half-dozen cops trooping through a crime scene with flashlights looking for clues, if they ever existed, are long gone. In modern police work, crime scenes or possible crime scenes are carefully and meticulously examined literally inch-by-inch by specially trained, hazmat-suited crime scene technicians dusting for fingerprints, looking for bloodstains, picking up stray hairs, scraping knife blades, gathering potential DNA specimens, photographing everything.

Just as most local PDs can't afford full-time SWAT units, they do not have evidence investigators on staff. In Iowa, those folks work for the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) of the Iowa State Police and are based out of Des Moines. When Yang returned to headquarters, he told Vinson to call Des Moines and request a CID crew be dispatched. With a body or obvious evidence of violence, they would have been summoned immediately. Since there was neither, they would probably not arrive for a day or two.

And Yang had been right. The complex manager said a maid service cleaned Hazlett's unit every Friday afternoon.

"Christ," he said, "no telling how much evidence they wrecked."