



Secrets: A Vince & Hadley Mini-Mystery

by Travis Tougaw

“Don’t lose him,” Hadley said. She squinted in the sunlight, making sure she kept the burgundy camper van and their person of interest in sight.

“No passenger seat driving,” Vince said. “You’re worse than Eddie.” He moved into the passing lane and pulled in front of an ancient pickup truck that sputtered along Interstate 25 North. Several cars remained between the detectives and the van, but the van’s height made it easy to track. Vince settled back into the flow of traffic, and they continued their trek toward an unknown destination.

“I still can’t believe we took this case,” Hadley said. Vince didn’t respond, and he didn’t need to. Hadley knew one of Eddie’s catchphrases was on the tip of his tongue, maybe, “this is the job,” or “it’s got no thrills, but it pays the bills.”

The latter was more appropriate for the current case; their client had offered a large fee for them to investigate his daughter’s fiancé. “I want to make sure I know what skeletons are joining my closet,” he had said. Hadley found the concept demeaning for Monica, the client’s daughter. She was twenty-five years old and could make her own decisions about what was best for her life.

The other side of the story, though, was that Geoff, Monica's fiancé, enjoyed a more lavish lifestyle than his job as a camper van sales coordinator would afford. As if reading her mind, Vince chimed in.

"I looked into those camper vans. They sell for a lot more than I expected. There's some serious money in that industry, and Colorado's the perfect market for it."

"Geoff isn't seeing the serious money from what I've been able to piece together," Hadley said. "His boss and their investor put up all the cash for the vans and their conversion; the payoff belongs to them, and Geoff's just an employee. He's exiting." Hadley nudged Vince and pointed. Vince nodded, his normal calm self, and took the exit a few hundred feet behind the van.

The van turned left onto a two-lane highway before turning right a hundred yards later. Geoff pulled into a roadside diner. Vince drove past the restaurant, keeping his eyes straight ahead. Hadley turned as casually as she could to watch Geoff.

"He's going in," she said, breathing a sigh of relief. "I don't think he knows we're tailing him."

Vince made a U-turn on the traffic-less street and pulled into a parking space on the opposite side of the diner from the camper van. "I'll go in," he said. He got out of the car and rummaged in the backseat; he produced a black windbreaker, a pair of glasses, and a well-worn Denver Broncos cap. Hadley nodded. "Good transformation," she said. "If he noticed you driving behind him, he won't recognize you when you go inside."

"I'll text you if I need backup," Vince said. He walked across the gravel lot and entered the diner, just another customer out for a casual drive.

Hadley surveyed the parking area while she waited. It had a decent crowd for a Friday morning, mostly big trucks with a few minivans and station wagons sprinkled in. Her phone buzzed with an incoming text.

"He's meeting someone," Vince wrote.

Another minute passed and the phone buzzed again. This time, Vince had sent a photo. Geoff, potential son-in-law of their client, sat at a two-top with a man about twenty years his senior. Unlike Geoff, who dressed in jeans and a flannel, his companion looked ready for a business meeting in a dark suit, white button-down shirt, and a red power tie with a perfect Windsor knot.

Five minutes later, Vince sauntered out of the diner, carrying two cups of coffee. He opened the driver's door and handed them to Hadley.

"Plain old decaf for me," he said. "Americano with a double shot of espresso for you." He shed his disguise and shoved it into the backseat.

“What’s up?” Hadley asked.

Vince handed his phone to her and started the car. He repositioned it with a view of the camper van and the front door.

Hadley looked at the video file he had pulled up and hit play. She watched as Geoff fished something out of the breast pocket of his shirt and slid it across the table to the other man. The other man picked it up and dropped it into a pocket inside his suit coat. Neither man spoke. The other man took a bite of toast followed by a sip of coffee. A waitress appeared on screen, her back to Vince, obscuring the view. She left, and the two men remained at the table, not looking at each other and not speaking.

The other man dabbed at his mouth with a napkin and reached inside his suit coat. He slid an envelope across the table and continued eating. Geoff looked around and shoved the envelope into his shirt pocket. The video ended.

“I’m sending this to my phone,” Hadley said. “I want to grab a still shot of what Geoff gave the guy and blow it up.”

“Good thinking,” Vince said, staring at the diner’s door. “I couldn’t tell what it was. I thought he would see me filming when he looked around, but I kept moving my thumbs, so he’d think I was texting or playing Candy Crush.”

Hadley nodded. “Eddie has taught you well.”

The door opened, and the first man stepped out into the mid-morning sunlight. He looked around, turned to his right and walked across the lot. Geoff remained inside.

“It’s a USB drive,” Hadley said. “That’s what Geoff gave him.” She flashed her phone at Vince; she had zoomed in on Geoff’s hand as he slid a drive across the table.

“He’s about to leave,” Vince said. “What’s the play?”

“Let’s follow him,” Hadley said. “We know we can find Geoff again if we need to. This might be our only chance to see who this guy is.”

“Gotcha,” Vince said. He waited until he saw a red Tesla appear from between two trucks. When there was a safe distance between them, he followed the car. Soon, they were making their way back to Interstate 25, this time going south.

“He came from the same direction Geoff did,” Hadley said. “Think he’s going all the way to Denver?”

“Hard to say,” Vince answered, his eyes glued to the red car as it weaved in and out of traffic.

Hadley thought they’d lost him a couple of times, but he always reappeared. Vince kept several cars between them.

The Tesla exited at Fort Collins. Vince ended up right behind it at a red light. Hadley scribbled the license plate number down.

Ten minutes later, the car pulled into the parking lot of an office building. Vince followed it in, but when the car turned down a lane, Vince kept going straight. Hadley turned to watch.

“He parked,” she said. “See if you can point toward the building.”

Vince maneuvered into another aisle, going all the way to the end before turning down the next one and stopping the car.

“Think he sees us?”

“No,” Hadley said. “He’s not paying attention. I’m going in.”

She grabbed Vince’s windbreaker and hat from the backseat and hustled across the parking lot, entering the building seconds behind the man.

Natural light flooded the lobby, and a fountain gurgled in the center of the space. The man walked toward the left end of the building, and Hadley followed, keeping a few yards between them.

Her heart beat faster when she saw the security desk and the woman behind it in a khaki uniform. “Good morning, sir,” the woman said.

“Good morning, Pam,” the man replied, his voice at once pleasant and commanding. He continued down the corridor to the bank of elevators. Hadley kept her head high and walked confidently. If Pam suspected Hadley of anything other than being a guest in the building, she said nothing.

The elevators had a control kiosk built into the wall between them. The man tapped a button to indicate which floor he was going to, and a computerized voice directed him to elevator A. Hadley couldn’t see what he selected.

“Where are you headed?” he asked, seeming to notice Hadley for the first time.

Hadley had to think fast. She had no idea how many floors were in the building. It looked tall from the outside, but she didn’t know if that meant it had eight floors or fourteen. She wanted a high floor, so she could see where he would get off, but she didn’t want to overshoot and give away the fact that she didn’t belong there.

“Eight, please,” she said, hoping it wasn’t his floor.

He nodded and tapped the kiosk again. The voice announced elevator A for her, too.

A ding sounded and doors opened to their right. The man motioned for Hadley to go in first, so she did. In her haste to get to the building, she had left her purse, which had her pepper spray in it, in the car. If the man knew she had followed him, it could get dicey.

She wedged herself into a corner of the elevator and stared at her phone screen. The man stood across from her. The doors closed, and they rose, the floors dinging by. Hadley tried to look absorbed in her phone. The man offered no small talk.

“Floor seven,” the elevator voice announced. The man stepped forward as the doors opened. Hadley fired off a burst of pictures as she stared at her screen. The elevator doors closed and delivered her to the eighth floor.

She got off and looked around. A law office dominated the left side of the floor. To her right, she saw signs for a travel agency, a hypnotherapist, and an academic support center. Noticing a security camera above the elevators, Hadley wandered toward her right. She snapped her fingers as if remembering something and consulted her phone. Then, she started back toward the elevator.

A woman exiting the nearby restroom watched the performance. “Lost?” she said.

“I left something in my car,” Hadley replied. She strode to the wall kiosk, tapped the lobby icon, and waited until elevator B whisked her away.

Back in the car, Hadley thumbed through her photos. “He got off on the seventh floor,” she said. “I don’t know if I caught any business names in my pictures.”

“I looked the place up while you were inside,” Vince said. He consulted his phone. “The only business listed on seven is Roscoe Financial Planning.”

Hadley wrinkled her forehead. Their client was James Bainbridge, the CEO for Rocky Mountain Financial Solutions.

“Could be a coincidence,” Vince said.

Hadley rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. The guy we were hired to snoop on just happens to meet with a competitor of our client at a roadside diner in the middle of nowhere and passes something to him on a flash drive. I’m not buying it.”

“Maybe he was meeting with a potential camper van buyer,” Vince said. “The flash drive is filled with pictures and specs for his new weekend ride.”

Hadley laughed. “We’ll keep that possibility open. We meet with Bainbridge on Monday?”

“Yeah, at 5:00 p.m. He couldn’t see us sooner.”

“I want to take the weekend to ID the guy Geoff met with. We have his picture, license plate, and employer, so it shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Potential employer,” Vince said. “Maybe he’s a client at Roscoe, and he needed to check in with his advisor to see if he could afford a new van.”

“Fine, potential employer,” Hadley said.

“And, about that license plate,” Vince said. “We don’t know that he was driving his own car.” He turned and smirked. “Eddie’s not here, so I need to give you a hard time.”

“You’re doing a great job,” Hadley said. Vince had a way of reeling her in when she got excited about a case. He was right; she had gone too far into assumptions, and she needed to zoom out, look at the big picture of the case, and then dive into the details.

At 5:25 p.m. James Bainbridge opened the door to his office and beckoned Hadley and Vince to join him. He had discarded his jacket and tie and slumped into his desk chair, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. His black hair, normally perfectly in place, looked messy and tousled. He rubbed his eyes and sighed.

“Sorry about the delay,” he said. “It’s been a rough day.”

Hadley didn’t respond right away, and she was grateful that Vince stayed silent, too. Bainbridge took it as an invitation to continue, “This stays between us. Detective-client privilege.” Vince opened his mouth as if to explain that no such privilege existed, but Hadley cut him off with a quick shake of her head. Bainbridge continued, “We had a major data breach. All kinds of private information got released to a third party. My network guys can’t figure out how it happened. Everything looks secure. I’ve been on the phone all day with our top clients, regulators, the media. I guess I forgot we had this meeting booked.”

“We can reschedule if that’s better for you,” Vince offered.

Bainbridge shook his head. “No, let’s hear what you’ve found. Please don’t tell me Geoff has another family or is in with the mob or anything. I can’t handle any more bad news today.”

Hadley cleared her throat. “No bad news. At least, nothing conclusive. It’s more of a caution at this point.” She stopped, and Bainbridge leaned forward, his tired eyes widening. She continued. “Based on what we can see from the financial data we were able to gather on Geoff, he spends a lot more than he’s making as a camper van sales coordinator. We followed him yesterday and saw him go into a diner northwest of Fort Collins.”

She opened a folder and withdrew a full-page blow-up of the picture Vince took. “Geoff met with this man, who we’ve identified as Adam Roscoe. He’s the son of Lloyd Roscoe, the founder and CEO of Roscoe Financial Planning. Adam is the vice president for business development.”

Bainbridge snatched the photo from Hadley. He glanced at it and crumpled it in a ball, tossing it toward a waste basket. It fell two feet short of its mark.

“I know who Adam is,” he said. “We’ve been bleeding clients to Roscoe for months.” He dug around in a desk drawer and produced a bottle of Scotch and a glass tumbler smudged with fingerprints. “I don’t have another glass,” he said, not quite apologetically.

“We’re good,” Vince said.

Hadley let the client pour his drink before she continued. “At the diner, Geoff and Adam made an exchange. Geoff passed him a flash drive, and Adam passed him an envelope. Our working assumption is that Adam issued payment for whatever is on the drive.” She slid another photo across the desk to Bainbridge.

Bainbridge slammed his hand on the desk, making a stack of papers jump and slide onto the floor in a heap. He stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him. Hadley and Vince exchanged puzzled looks.

“Do you think we’re dismissed?” Vince asked.

Hadley paused; she could hear Bainbridge’s gruff voice in the lobby outside his door. “I think he’s coming back,” she said.

They waited another five minutes before Bainbridge stomped back into the office, followed by a heavysset man with a row of in-grown whiskers on his chin and Monica, Bainbridge’s daughter. Bainbridge introduced the man as Jeremy Nelson, his chief of IT security.

“Tell these two what you told me,” he demanded. Hadley repeated the story. As she spoke, Monica’s face grew red, and a line of sweat beaded along Jeremy’s brow.

“I can’t believe you hired someone to investigate Geoff,” Monica snapped at her father as soon as Hadley finished.

“I can’t believe that snake betrayed us like this,” Bainbridge answered.

“What betrayal?”

“He had a secret meeting with our chief competitor, and the next business day, we have a major data breach. You think that’s a coincidence?”

“How would Geoff have gotten information to share?” Monica asked, her voice rising in volume. “Do you think I gave it to him?”

“No,” Bainbridge said. He lifted himself out of his chair before flopping back into it. “He’s been around the company. The Christmas party. Fourth of July picnic. He must have gotten cozy with someone and got them to make the drive for him.”

Monica rolled her eyes and pushed past the detectives to stand by the window on the wall farthest from her father, back turned. “We don’t even know that Roscoe had anything to do with releasing the information today.”

“We have to assume he did,” Bainbridge growled. “You know what I’ve sacrificed to make this company what it is. I’m not about to let Adam Roscoe burn us down without a fight.”

“Jeremy,” Hadley said. “I have a background in IT security. Is there a report you can run to see any unusual network activity over the past week?”

Jeremy nodded. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his brow. Hadley’s grandfather had always carried a handkerchief, but she didn’t think men still did that.

“Yeah, there are a couple reports we can run. We can go back to my workstation.”

“Use mine,” Bainbridge said. “We figure this out here and now.”

Jeremy made himself comfortable at Bainbridge’s desk and logged into the admin console. Hadley watched over his shoulder noting the antiquated infrastructure and software. She would have a list of recommendations for Bainbridge when they finished.

After fifteen minutes, Jeremy pushed back from the desk. “Here’s what I can tell you,” he said. “Someone ran a large report Thursday night between 8 p.m. and midnight and downloaded it to an external drive. The timing would suggest that’s the drive Geoff had on Friday.”

Monica finally turned to face the others and snarled at Jeremy. “It might suggest it, but it doesn’t prove anything.”

“Can you see whose credentials ordered the report?” Hadley asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” Jeremy said. “The best I can do is an IP address, and that confirms that the report came from inside the company, and it was here onsite. It wasn’t a hacker, and it wasn’t someone working remotely from home.”

“Again, Geoff can’t download information from inside the company because he doesn’t work here,” Monica said, the flush returning to her face.

“Can we see who came into the building during that timeframe?” Bainbridge asked.

Jeremy offered a pathetic half-smile. “We can see who badged into suites, but we don’t badge out. It’s a one-way system.”

“What does that mean?” Bainbridge asked.

“It means, if the person who ran the report came in earlier in the day and didn’t leave, we’d have no way of knowing they were in the building at 8:00. There are piggy-backers, too. Someone badges in and holds the door open for the person behind them.”

“What about security cameras?”

Jeremy looked like he wanted to disappear. “Our download capability hasn’t been working. The cameras pick up realtime images, but they don’t record.”

Bainbridge put both hands on top of his head and breathed in huffs and puffs. “Any ideas, you two?” He gestured toward Vince and Hadley.

Vince looked at his notepad. “You mentioned losing customers to Roscoe for months. Can you tell us more about that?”

“Yeah,” Bainbridge said. “We’ve had a low conversion rate of bringing in clients we meet with or who send us online inquiries. We researched and found a lot of them went with Roscoe instead. That’s a new phenomenon. We’re bigger, better resourced, shinier building. We’re right here in Denver, and we have reach into financial networks across the country. It’s weird to lose out on a client to Roscoe. It’s almost like Roscoe knew who we were talking to, reached out to them, and poached them with a sweetheart deal.”

Hadley turned to Jeremy. “Can you run that same report, but search for the unusual activity back about six months?”

Jeremy nodded and turned back to the monitor. He seemed grateful to have something to focus on that wasn’t Bainbridge’s wrath.

As he worked, Monica muttered, “I still can’t believe you invaded Geoff’s privacy. And mine.”

Bainbridge opened his mouth to respond but closed it without any words coming out. The tension in the room increased in the silence that was broken only by the sound of Jeremy’s heavy typing.

“Look at this,” he said after what felt like a year. “We had reports on prospective clients downloaded to an external drive each of the last three months. Same deal: report was done at night on the premises.”

“How often does Geoff travel for work?” Hadley asked.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Monica snapped.

“Answer the question,” Bainbridge said, a mean edge to his voice.

Hadley moved closer to Monica and mustered as much sympathy as she could. “I’m not accusing anyone of anything, but it would be helpful to rule out Geoff’s meeting at the diner as having anything to do with this.”

Monica rolled her eyes and thumbed through screens on her phone. “He has to travel occasionally to show the model camper van to potential buyers. That’s what he was doing Friday. I don’t know what the meeting at the diner was about, but he wasn’t selling company secrets. He was selling a van.”

“What other trips has he taken?” Hadley asked, glad to have Monica talking, even if she remained defensive.

Monica kept her eyes glued to her screen and rattled off a list of the dates of Geoff's recent trips. Hadley scribbled them down.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some more work to do," Monica said. She pushed past the others on her way to the office door. "When you figure out this mess and you see that Geoff is innocent, you'll owe him a big apology. And you'll need to find yourself a new director of compliance. Consider this my two weeks' notice."

She slammed the door behind her, and Bainbridge shook his head. "I don't think she means that," he said. "She'll get over it."

Hadley wasn't so sure, but she didn't see any point in arguing it with the client. A silence settled back over the room as they thought about their next steps. Jeremy turned back to the computer and furrowed his brow. He pecked at the keys and scowled at the screen.

"What is it?" Hadley asked.

"That last report," he said. "It's too small of a file for the number of clients we have." He clacked his fingers on the keyboard a few more times and shook his head. "The parameters on the report are wrong."

"What do you mean?" Bainbridge asked.

"They excluded most of the high-dollar clients and focused on smaller ones. It's the opposite of how I'd go about it."

Vince chewed at the end of his pen before writing in his notepad. He stared at the ceiling and wrote some more.

"Mr. Bainbridge," he said. "Hadley and I would like to speak with you alone."

Jeremy cast a wary eye at him, but Bainbridge gestured to the door, and he departed. "What is it?" Bainbridge asked. He looked at his empty glass and glanced back at the Scotch bottle.

"Hadley, how closely do the dates of Geoff's camper van trips match the dates of the data breaches?"

"It's a one for one," Hadley answered. "After each breach, Geoff went out of town."

"I don't have any proof for any of this," Vince said, "but hear me out. It's a reasonable assumption that Geoff is involved in this. It would take a pretty big coincidence otherwise. Maybe he knows what he's transporting, and maybe he doesn't, but let's assume he's involved."

"I'm with you there," Bainbridge said. He ran his finger around the inside of his glass and licked the remnants off his finger.

“He has to have someone getting the information for him,” Vince said. “We’ll need to think about who he might have a connection to who could access the information and pass it along to him.”

“Could be anyone,” Bainbridge said. “We’re a big company.”

“There must be a partition in the data,” Vince said. “You know, something that would prevent people from accessing data they don’t need.”

“Sorry, Vince,” Hadley interrupted. She moved to the desk chair and gestured at the computer. “The security infrastructure is a joke. Once you’re in, you have access to everything. It’s amateur hour.” She looked at Bainbridge’s horror-stricken face. “Sorry.”

“That’s a problem,” Vince said. “Because there’s about to be another breach.”

Hadley’s eyebrows shot up, and Bainbridge dropped his glass.

“It’s what Jeremy said,” Vince continued. “Whoever stole the data went for small potatoes. Someone used that information to damage your reputation today. The smart play, the thing I would do, would be to come back for the rest of the data and use it to reach the top-dollar clients and steal their business.”

Hadley nodded. “That’s brilliant, Vince. It’s a two-step attack.”

“How do you know that?” Bainbridge asked.

“We don’t,” Hadley said. “But it’s a great assumption, and it’s the best we have to work with. Probably don’t have much of a chance of getting Monica to tell us when Geoff will go out of town again?”

“We don’t have to,” Bainbridge said. “I invited her and Geoff over for dinner this coming Friday, and she said they couldn’t make it because Geoff is traveling for work.”

“If the pattern holds, the next breach will be on Thursday,” Vince said.

Bainbridge looked at the ceiling and groaned. “So, I have three days to fix the security, or this happens again?”

“Right,” Vince said. At the same time, Hadley said, “No.” Both men looked at her.

“Don’t tip anyone off that anything different is going to happen. Not Jeremy. Not even Monica. On Thursday night, we catch the thief.” Bainbridge looked puzzled, so she went on. “We know it’s happening onsite. We know it’s happening after hours. Vince and I will come back; we’ll monitor the network, and when it looks like the breach is occurring, we’ll locate the workstation and catch the culprit.”

“You don’t know that anything will happen,” Bainbridge said. “Monica has probably already told Geoff. If he’s involved, he’ll back out before he gets caught.”

“Geoff’s just a courier,” Hadley said. “How big’s the money in this?”

“If Roscoe lured away my top tier clients, it would be at least a six-figure increase in his bottom line.”

“That’s big enough,” Vince said. “Hadley’s right. If Geoff won’t do it, whoever is stealing the data will find someone else. Maybe do it themselves.”

Bainbridge crossed his arms. “You make it sound so simple. What if these assumptions are wrong?”

“Then, you paid us to do a night of security rounds for no good reason,” Hadley said. “But, if they’re right, we can save your company.”

Bainbridge retrieved his glass and filled it half full. He drank the Scotch in a single swallow. “What do you need?”

Rocky Mountain Financial Solutions occupied the top three floors of an office building in downtown Denver. Client meetings occurred on the tenth floor, while the ninth floor housed the executive suites. The eighth floor was a maze of cubicles with supervisor offices interspersed throughout.

Vince and Hadley made their way to the top floor at noon, where Bainbridge met them. Most of his employees had departed for lunch, so nobody noticed the CEO leading the two of them to an office at a far corner. Unlike most of the offices and conference rooms on the floor, the one he selected had a solid wood door, no glass, with the blinds closed on a floor to ceiling window between the door and the wall.

“You can set up in here,” Bainbridge said. “We don’t have many meetings scheduled for today, but you’ll still want to keep quiet. This floor should be empty by 5:00. Six at the latest. Text me as soon as you learn anything.”

With that, he shut them in. A pair of dusty boxes sat on top of a desk. Vince moved them to a corner and motioned for Hadley to take the chair behind the desk. He sat in a visitor chair with a cracked leather seat.

Hadley set up the company laptop Bainbridge had acquired for her. She logged in with the administrator password and gave Vince a thumbs up that she could see the network activity. The IT infrastructure did not allow her to see what reports were running in real time. It would, however, let her know when a new media device was detected. She figured the corporate spy would run the job first, then insert the flash drive for the download. That meant, they’d have minutes to react.

She put her map of the company’s offices on the desk, and she and Vince studied it. The tenth floor had an open layout, and they’d be able to see anyone lurking at a computer after

hours as soon as they exited their office hideout. The ninth floor was also open, with spacious offices. She circled Jeremy's office. He remained a prime suspect for her, since he would have the knowledge of the network's weaknesses and how to pull the necessary data.

Realistically, the eighth floor was the most probable spot for their culprit, and it would be the most challenging. Vince and Hadley had decided to split up as soon as they got the flash drive notification. Hadley would clear the ninth floor, and Vince would start on eight. They'd each wear a Bluetooth earpiece with integrated microphone, so they could stay in communication as they worked. As soon as Hadley finished on nine, she'd join him at eight.

She marked a spot on the eighth floor, and Vince nodded. It was a bank of cubicles for the network engineers and security team. Vince would start there. Hadley would enter the floor on the opposite side, and they'd work their way to the middle.

The hours ticked by slowly. At 6:00 p.m., they ate sandwiches. Vince's phone buzzed. He looked at the screen, gave a silent laugh, and held it up for Hadley. A text from Eddie showed a picture of him holding a large trout. "Sorry to skip the stakeout, but it was worth it," the message read.

By 10:30, Hadley had passed stir crazy and needed to do something. "Let's get ready," she whispered. "Earpieces in, phones on." Vince nodded, and they geared up. Hadley stretched, midway through a sun salutation when the computer chimed. She glanced at the screen. "This is it," she said.

Vince burst through the office door, and they scanned the floor. There was no sign of anyone. They rushed to the door to the suite and entered the hallway, again finding no one. Vince led the way to the stairwell, and they descended. Hadley scanned the key card Bainbridge had given her on nine and breathed a sigh of relief when the card reader flashed green and the door opened.

With Vince continuing down a level, Hadley crept through the C-suite. Bainbridge's office was at the far end and showed no sign of activity. Hadley passed each door in succession, trying the handles, but they were all locked. She looked at the crack at the bottom of each door, as well, seeing no telltale signs of a light being on.

The suite bent at a right angle before continuing on. Hadley turned into a corridor where the offices grew smaller. At the end of the corridor, a door stood partially open, a triangle of light spilling out into the darkness.

"Vince, I might have something," Hadley whispered.

"Be careful," he answered. "I'll come up. Nothing down here so far."

Hadley started to tell him to stay where he was and keep searching the floor. They didn't have much time, and she didn't want to waste any on a false alarm.

Before she could say anything, the door swung open all the way. The light went out, and Hadley heard a figure emerge from the office.

The figure scurried away from the office, a shadow cutting through the darkness. Hadley rushed after it to catch up. The figure turned a corner toward a door, a green exit sign illuminated above it.

Hadley took the same corner. She smashed into a desk in the darkness. Off-balance, she fell to the floor, the air rushing from her lungs in a grunt as loud as an air horn in the silent office. The door opened and slammed closed.

Hadley pushed herself up and felt her way around the desk. She flipped the light switch next to the door, and pushed the door open, holding it wide to let light spill through. There were restrooms to her left and a door marked "Southwest Stairwell" to her right.

She opened the door to the stairwell and heard feet flying down the metal structure. She ruled out Jeremy moving that quickly; whoever this was, it was someone other than her number one suspect.

"Vince, I'm in the southwest stairs," she said as she descended. "Someone's ahead of me."

"I'll be right there."

Hadley continued down the stairs, watching the floor numbers pass by: eight, seven, and six. She paused at the fifth floor and heard footsteps below her. A second later, more footsteps sounded above.

"I'm in the stairwell," Vince said.

"Keep coming down," Hadley urged, continuing her downward trek.

She reached the first floor. A door led to the building's lobby. A short hallway led to a second door. She went through it and found herself running down another flight of stairs until she reached the underground parking garage.

"I'm in the garage," she advised Vince. She stood still and listened. A car door slammed below her. Flickering neon tube lights gave the garage a pale, ghostly glow. Hadley found the ramp that led to the exit and ran to it.

The car engine revved below her, and Hadley descended the ramp. The stairwell door slammed behind her.

"I'm on the ramp," she told Vince. "I'm going down."

"Be careful," Vince said.

Hadley reached the bottom of the ramp as a pair of headlights swung her way. The driver laid on the horn, but Hadley stood firm in the middle of the lane. The car continued toward her without slowing down, horn still honking.

Hadley knew she should move. She could get the plate number, and they'd have what they needed. She stayed in her place, though, afraid that the corporate spy would have taken precautions to prevent that from happening.

The car loomed larger as it grew closer. At the last moment, Hadley jumped aside, but the car veered to the left. Its right front fender clipped the garage wall at the base of the ramp. A second later, the sound of metal on metal announced a collision with a parked car.

Vince grabbed Hadley by the elbow and hauled her to her feet. "You alright?" he asked, his voice echoing in the earpiece. She yanked it out and pocketed it.

"I'm fine. This way." They ran toward the crash. They saw the car, a black Honda, mashed into a green Subaru. They paused to listen, and Vince pointed in the direction of footsteps. Across the lot, a woman ducked inside a door.

They ran to it. Hadley flung the door open to reveal another staircase. "You go down, and I'll go up," she said. She jammed the earpiece back in place as she ascended.

She followed the stairs past the top level of the parking structure and back into the building. A narrow passage wound through the back side of the building. Hadley felt for a light switch but didn't find one.

"You got anything?" she asked.

"Nothing. You?"

"Maybe. I found a hallway. I'm going to see where it leads."

"Be careful," Vince cautioned once again.

She bit back a "Yes, Dad," and started her journey.

The corridor had a concrete floor and an open ceiling, revealing pipes and conduit. Hadley's eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she moved faster, trying to hear footsteps over the sound of her own movements.

The hallway turned a corner. Hadley followed it and walked into a punch. She staggered backward, caught off guard. The woman punched her again, and Hadley went down. The woman took off.

"She's up here, Vince," Hadley said. She found her feet and took off after the woman.

The corridor turned again. Hadley slowed before she reached the corner. She flattened herself against the far wall and took a wide turn, moving quickly.

The woman lunged at Hadley. Hadley caught her wrist and pushed her backward. The woman grabbed Hadley with her other hand, and the two of them crashed into the concrete wall. The woman slipped out of Hadley's grip and kned her in the ribs.

Hadley shook off the pain and lunged forward, but the woman evaded her. The woman yelped in pain, though, as she slammed into a red box protruding from the wall. A fire extinguisher case. Hadley advanced. The woman grabbed the miniature hammer for breaking the glass and pulled it from its tether. She swung it at Hadley. Hadley ducked, and the hammer clanked against the wall above her.

Hadley fell backward and crab walked away. She looked up and finally got a good look at her assailant. Monica Bainbridge gripped the hammer, a crazed determination on her face.

She lunged at Hadley and swung the hammer. Hadley dodged again, stumbled to her feet, and rushed forward, further down the corridor. Monica followed.

"You shouldn't be here," Monica hissed.

"You have some explaining to do," Hadley answered.

In response, Monica grunted and propelled forward, swinging the hammer in front of her like a drunk trying to find a piñata. Hadley backed away, still perplexed that Monica was their culprit.

Hadley continued backward in the darkness. She didn't see the standpipe running floor to ceiling until she bumped into it. Monica moved in quickly, and Hadley was trapped between a hammer-wielding lunatic and the pipe.

Monica jerked her arm back. A sneer crossed her face, her eyes filled with meanness. As she swung her arm, Vince lumbered forward and caught her wrist with his right hand. With his left, he plucked the hammer from her and threw it behind them.

Monica writhed, but Vince kept a firm grip on her. Hadley grabbed Monica's other arm, and the three began the trip back toward the parking garage.

"I'm not the one you want," Monica said.

"I'm willing to bet you have a flash drive on you or in the car you wrecked," Hadley responded.

"That's nothing compared to what my dad does," Monica says. "Know why I'm his director of compliance? It's not nepotism. He's running scams on top of scams. He makes Madoff look like an amateur, and he needed someone he could control to help him cover it up. He didn't give me a job because he was looking out for his little girl. He hired me to look out for him."

Hadley let that sink in as they continued in the darkness.

“Why not turn him in?” Vince asked.

Monica snorted. “I’d be implicated, too. When Geoff found someone from Roscoe who would pay us for company data, I decided to cash in. No reason Geoff and I can’t have a nest egg when we start our new life.”

It wasn’t a bad plan, Hadley thought, as far as fraud and betrayal went. Geoff had a good cover story for his trips to meet Roscoe, and no one suspected Monica of working against her father.

They approached the door, and Monica stopped walking. “You don’t have to turn me in,” she said. “Whatever my dad is paying you, I can pay more. The only person who gets hurt in this is my dad, the crook. His clients are better off finding a new institution anyway.”

“It doesn’t really work that way,” Hadley said.

Vince stepped forward and opened the door. A pair of uniformed police officers stood just inside the hallway, an angry Bainbridge behind them.

Monica immediately yelled that she wanted a lawyer, repeating it over and over. Bainbridge joined in, screaming about betrayal from his own flesh and blood. In the chaos, Vince and Hadley stepped to the side and gave their statements to a third officer. Hadley was eager to get home and put the evening behind her.

“Still think fishing was more fun?” Vince asked when they finished telling Eddie the story.

“I thought this was a do-nothing case,” Eddie mused. “Sorry I missed it.” After a moment, he continued, “She took a big risk going back for the rest of the data after you guys were onto the scheme.”

“Payday was too big to pass up,” Hadley said. “Big risk for a big reward. She banked on no one suspecting her or being able to catch her until it was too late. When she didn’t see any changes in security procedures or her access credentials, she assumed the trail had gone cold and we’d given up.”

They sat in silence for another moment before Eddie spoke again. “Kind of dad who will spy on his daughter’s fiancé is also a controlling maniac who’d use her to cover his crimes. Who knew?” He laughed and pushed away from the card table that served as their conference space. He turned on the ancient coffee machine Hadley hated. “Did they arrest him yet?”

“Yesterday,” Vince said. “They’ll both get their day in court eventually, and maybe we’ll finally know how much money was tied up in all of this. They raided Roscoe, too. Lot of Coloradans are looking for a new place to put their money all of the sudden.”

“Speaking of money,” Eddie said, “please tell me you got paid before Bainbridge knew Monica was going to turn him in.”

“Not exactly,” Hadley said. Eddie turned, scowling. “He knew, but he made good on his offer to us. Goodwill gesture, I guess.”

The coffee began to percolate, and Eddie returned to his seat. “Vince’s Batson case almost got him killed. I found the Bainbridge one, and that almost did you in. Know what this means Hadley?” She shook her head. “You need to find our next case, and you have to promise that it will be something simple. Nice, easy, and safe. No one risks their life. Deal?”

“You got it,” Hadley said. They shook on it. Hadley had no idea she’d break that promise.

Check out all of Vince and Hadley’s adventures. *Foxholes* is available now in paperback and Kindle. *Captives* is available for pre-order (releasing June 6, 2024). Get all the details at <https://travistougaw.com>.