

The Top End

Part One

Hey, Pete,

I'm writing this letter from the airport in Sydney, but by the time you get it, I'm sure I'll be way out in the Northern Territory, in the middle of New South Wales. From what I hear, the mail service out there isn't exactly frequent, so I figured I'd drop you a line while I still had the chance. I'm doing the same for Sam. It may be a while before either of you hear from me again.

I've already spoken with the director in charge of the wildlife preserve, and I think you and the Phoenix board made a good choice in agreeing to sponsor this project. We can really do a lot of good here, preserving an environment that's completely different than anything else I've ever seen. I can't wait to get out in the outback and really start digging in!

I guess that's it for now. I'll write you again when I get back to Sydney and let you know how the sanctuary is doing. Until then, take it easy on the interns, huh? Especially the one who's been reading this letter to you.

--MacGyver

MacGyver squinted from the bright sunlight as he stepped out of the tiny single-engine airplane. After 4 hours on a train, 4 more hours on a massive bus, and another half hour in the air, Mac was more than ready to stretch his legs and *do* something.

He looked around him as he stepped forward through the deep red dust. Apart from a handful of dusty buildings, the nature preserve was essentially a wide-open vacant lot. Luckily, much of the space would remain that way---natural and untouched---but the soon-to-be animal sanctuary still had quite a ways to go before it would be up and running. Having fences, for starters. As Mac observed the area, making mental notes of suggestions and possibilities for improvement, he caught sight of the man he wanted to meet first: Ralph Fenech, the director and advocate for the entire project.

"---just approved some interns coming in from Brisbane and Condobolin, so with your help to get the clinic up and running, we should be able to start taking in animals in no time. Especially the wounded ones from car collisions and poaching. They'll be our first priority," Fenech said to the tall, dark-haired man standing beside him. The pair shook hands just as MacGyver approached.

Fenech caught sight of him and waved him closer. "G'day! Now, which one are you? The Phoenix fella, one of the contractors, or one of the clinic volunteers?"

MacGyver grinned and shook Fenech's hand. "I'm the Phoenix fella. Name's MacGyver."

"Good to have you with us, then! I'm Ralph Fenech, director, if you didn't already know, and this is Dr. Rex Kelly, our bloke in charge of setting up the veterinary clinic here."

"For a while, at least," the vet said, dark brown eyes glinting above a casual smile as he also offered to shake MacGyver's hand. "My work in Lachlan keeps me pretty busy most of the time."

"Lachlan is your hometown, Dr. Kelly?" MacGyver asked.

"Rex, if you don't mind. It is now. Nice place, good people. Most towns in the outback are."

"I'm looking forward to seeing more of it," Mac said with a nod. "And to seeing some of the wildlife, too. How can I help?"

Fenech clapped his hands together. "Where do I even start? We've got fences to put up, animal shelters to build, *people* shelters to build, paperwork to file, offices to clean, a veterinary clinic to set up, brush to haul... See a need and fill a need, that's all I can say, mate."

MacGyver grinned. "I think I can handle that."

By the time the sun was setting over New South Wales, the animal sanctuary was looking much better and MacGyver was looking exhausted. More than half the fences had been raised, the offices and vet clinic were nearly operational, and two barns, along with various other types of shelters, had been constructed for the animals that would be rescued and housed by the Lachlan River Wildlife Sanctuary. And MacGyver, after building significant portions of said shelters, was worn out and caked head to toe with deep red dirt and dust.

As he was heading back to the "people shelters," as Ralph Fenech called them, feeling proud of what he and the other volunteers had accomplished, Rex Kelly fell into step beside him.

"How ya going?" Rex said, watching MacGyver.

"Fine, thanks. You?"

"The same. I'm just glad that I can help out here. Ralph is an old mate of mine, so when I got his call, I couldn't say no."

MacGyver had to grin. "Sounds like we have something in common. Pete Thornton asked me to come after he convinced the Phoenix Foundation to pitch in, and I jumped at the chance."

"Ralph's proud of that, you know. The Phoenix Foundation's got a good reputation."

"I'll pass that along to Pete," MacGyver replied, his smile turning sincere. "He works hard to keep that reputation up. Always has."

"Yeah," Rex said, and the two of them were quiet for a moment. Just before they reached the bunkhouses, Rex added, "I think you might be true blue. How would you like to see a little more of the Top End before getting back to work?"

MacGyver shrugged. "Sure."

"I'm heading back to Lachlan tonight, since I have an appointment with a mastiff scheduled for tomorrow. You can ride along in my ute and spend the night in town, and tomorrow morning, I'll show you the sights. Then we'll be back here by the afternoon to pitch in some more. Are you up for it?"

"That sounds fine to me. Is the town far?"

"Just down the road."

"Great! Let's go!"

Dear Pete, MacGyver composed his next postcard in his mind as he stared out the window of Rex's absurdly large pickup truck, wincing as the Aussie swerved to avoid a kangaroo for the fifteenth time since setting out. *I'm learning a lot about Australians out here in the outback. For example, every truck needs a cowcatcher in the front, but it's not for any cows.*

"Every ute's got to have a roo bar out here," Rex said, as if a near collision with a large red kangaroo were perfectly normal---which, to him, it was. "Nasty if it darts in front like that and you hit it. Both for it and for you. That's why it's so important for Ralph's sanctuary to have an emergency vet clinic."

Kangaroos are like deer out here. Everywhere, and jumping all over the place at night. Luckily, outback roads are deserted. Literally.

As Mac watched some brush blow around like a tumbleweed in an old Western, he mentally finished off the last entry into his imaginary postcard for Pete: *Oh, yeah, and out here, apparently "just down the road" can be any kind of distance at all---including 132 miles. Lachlan, here I come... Just 87 dusty miles to go.*

Part Two

By the time Rex and MacGyver reached the town of Lachlan, population 2,168, the glowing green numbers on the truck's dashboard clock had hit half past midnight. Rex yawned, stretched, tossed the keys onto the dusty dashboard, and stepped out of the truck.

Mac followed behind, shaking his head in wonder. "Is everyone out here so laidback?"

"Most people," Rex replied with a shrug, stepping through the rickety carport to open his unlocked front door. A small sign swinging from the window read *Dr. Rex Kelly, DVM*. "Life travels at a different pace here. It's a world apart from my army days---one of the reasons I took this job."

MacGyver nodded. "I understand. A guy could get used to this."

"Yep." Rex led MacGyver through a midsize front room full of animal cages and a small desk. Three lorikeets and a bird Mac couldn't identify squawked at him while a brown dachshund puppy startled awake and began to wag his tail cheerfully. As Mac reached down to pet the little guy, Rex began to speak again.

"Make yourself at home. The vet office is the door on the right, and the rest is to the left." He casually pointed at doors with one hand while cradling a rather large bearded dragon with the other. "Kitchen, toilet, laundry, and obviously you're looking at the lounge room. Bedroom's over there. You can use it for the night. I always sleep on the couch anyway."

"That makes two of us," Mac replied. Then he gestured to the 8-inch-long desert lizard. "Are you going to introduce your friend?"

Rex grinned almost sheepishly. "This here's Sheila. Rescued her in Queensland just before I came out to the bush. She's been with me ever since. Want to hold her? She's friendly enough."

MacGyver carefully accepted the warm, scaly creature and smiled. "Hello, Miss Sheila. I think we're going to get along just fine."

"Oh, one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"If you decide to go to the toilet in the middle of the night, make sure you look out for the tree frogs. Somehow they keep getting in and they think they live here."

MacGyver looked down at Sheila and shrugged. "This is turning out to be a bigger adventure than I expected."

The two men were up by the crack of dawn, dressed in sturdy flannel and blue jeans. After helping Rex feed the miniature menagerie of animals in and around his vet's office, Mac finally asked, "Okay, so what's first on the agenda?"

Rex stroked the thick black stubble on his chin. "First up is the mastiff I have to check up on. Bill's car broke down earlier this week, so we'll have to drive out there and make a house call. After that, I have a snake handling thing at the town hall."

"A *what?!?*"

"Yeah, they have 'em every now and again," Rex said with a shrug. "It helps to have your snake certifications up to date. You see them sometimes, so it never hurts to have a refresher on how to handle them. I think there were about five or so empty slots last I heard. I'll get you signed up so you can go too."

MacGyver tried not to wince at the idea of handling his all-time least favorite reptile. "Nah, I'll be fine. I think handling Sheila is more than enough for me."

But Rex was already waving him off. "It'll be fine. You'll love it! Now, let's get going. We have a 38-mile drive to Bill's farm."

MacGyver just ran a hand through his hair. What else was he supposed to do? "When in Rome..."

"Snake Handling Certification," MacGyver read off the homemade sign taped to the town hall's single wooden door. "Are you sure about this, Rex?"

"Positive," Rex replied, pushing through the door. "We'll just be identifying and handling some snakes. Nothing to be afraid of at all."

But when the both of them stepped inside, they were greeted with a large glass tank sitting on top of a white plastic folding table. A tank full of no less than six very large, very frightening brown snakes.

"Except that," Rex said.

"What species are they?" Mac asked, his curiosity getting the better of him as he stepped forward for a closer look.

"Just Eastern brown snakes," Rex said with just a hint of sarcasm. "They're only the second most venomous species on the planet."

Mac quickly stepped back from the tank. "And we're going to be *handling* these?!"

"That's right!" said a chubby man in khakis who had just appeared from the adjoining conference room. Apparently he'd mistaken MacGyver's concern for enthusiasm, because he continued, "And not only that, but you'll be *catching* them! By the end of the next two hours, you'll be completely qualified to capture and work with these big beauties!"

MacGyver shot a glare at Rex, who'd gone a little pale in the face.

"What if we get bitten?" MacGyver asked, wondering once again what he'd somehow been dragged into.

The man in the khakis shrugged and waved him off. "Ah, well, the odds are against it. This bunch here are pretty used to humans, so you'll be fine as long as you're careful. Naturally, the nearest hospital is miles away, and besides, the antivenom itself is just as likely to kill you, so even if you did make it to the hospital alive, you probably wouldn't make it out. Just be careful, yeah?"

"Right," Mac said, resigned. As the man walked off to greet some other new snake handling trainees, MacGyver just stared at Rex. "What exactly did you get us into?"

"Not what I expected," Rex admitted.

"My hands won't stop shaking," Rex complained.

"Yeah, well, at least they're shaking around this fancy piece of paper," Mac replied, gesturing to the parchment-paper certificate in his hand. "Was being certified to catch and wrangle deadly snakes worth it to you?"

"Not really. I don't think I'm going to sleep again for a week. You?"

"Nope. And I hate to say this, but---"

"You told me so. I know. Saw it coming from a mile away." Rex shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck. "You'll help me check the ute for snakes before we get in, right?"

"Are you kidding? I'm going to be checking my Jeep every day for the next *year*."

The two of them shared a good laugh as they gave Rex's truck the once-over before starting to climb in. The laughter died down when they saw three men rushing at breakneck speed into the town hall.

"What's going on with them?" MacGyver asked.

"I don't know, but let's find out," Rex said, voice edged with concern. "The one in the front is our police officer."

MacGyver glanced at him, startled. "You mean your town only has one?"

Rex gestured around to the quiet streets and the open Red Centre sky. "Do you see a lot of crime around here?"

MacGyver shrugged, jumped out of the truck, and followed Rex back inside the building. They arrived just in time to see the three men urgently telling everyone within earshot to check their computers.

"It's definitely a hostage situation," the policeman urged the people in the now-snake-free conference rooms, people that MacGyver guessed were city employees and members of the city council. "I already checked it out, and the threat is credible. Phone lines have been cut, and the radios are down. All the computers on the city network have been hacked."

"What exactly is going on?" Rex interrupted with no preamble.

The skinny policeman whirled to face Rex with a reddened face and wide eyes. "Ransom demand, Dr. Kelly. It's been playing on a loop for the last twenty minutes. Take a look." Grabbing Rex by the sleeve, he tugged the vet in front of the nearest computer screen. Mac peered over their shoulders.

A grainy, staticky video replayed across the screen: the moon-shaped face of a young man with blond hair and soft features. The crackling image of the man grinned.

"At the time this message is being sent out to you via my special satellite uplink, it's approximately 10:21 a.m. You know what that means, mates---the bus from Condo is late again. Not that unusual, is it? After all, it's a ways away from Condobolin, and sometimes the bus arrives there late from Sydney, and on and on and on..." The face leaned in toward the camera. "But this time, the bus isn't going to arrive. Not without my say-so. My accomplices and I have got a busload of 14 tourists held hostage out here in an undisclosed location. I want all the cash in all three of Lachlan's banks emptied out and delivered in a location of my choosing---and then, *then* I'll disclose the location of the bus."

The man in the video leaned back again and continued, "I'll be leaving another message for you in thirty minutes telling you where to drop the money. After that, you'll have just fifteen minutes to deliver it. I wouldn't wait too long if I were you, though... My mates out here get a little trigger-happy, if you know what I mean." The man then scratched his chin. "What am I forgetting? Oh, yeah! The phones and radios are all cut, so your little town of Lachlan is effectively cut off from the world, apart from this little satellite connection. Sorry. Now, don't forget: thirty minutes, and no funny business. Watch your computers."

With that, the video cut off abruptly, fading to a black screen before replaying a few seconds later.

One of the city council members whistled low under her breath. "What do you make of that, Officer Poole? I've never seen anything like this before."

"Neither have I," the policeman said, tugging at his shirt collar. "What do we do?"

Rex rolled up his sleeves. "We'll figure something out."

"This is a hostage situation," Officer Poole said nervously. "What can we do? I mean, you solve a lot of problems for us all here in town, but---"

"But if there's one thing my years in the army taught me, it's to see a need and fill a need," Rex said firmly. "I won't stand around and do nothing if people are in danger."

"Neither will I," said MacGyver. When the other people in the room flashed him a surprised glance, he added, "I have a reputation for being a pretty good troubleshooter, and unfortunately, I'm not a stranger to these situations. I'm confident that Rex and I can figure something out."

"Then we don't have a moment to lose," Rex said with a nod. "In fact, we only had thirty moments to begin with---and we're down to twenty-nine. Let's move."

Part Three

"Did you recognize anything in that video?" MacGyver asked Rex as the two of them headed back to the truck. "Any landmarks or anything?"

"Yep," Rex said. "There's a big outcropping of rock about two miles out of town. It looked like that rock was there behind him, so we at least know where he was at one point. Maybe we'll find a clue."

"Or we'll find *him*," MacGyver added.

"You really think he'll still be out there?"

"No, but if there's one thing the Phoenix Foundation taught me, it's to be positive."

Rex made the drive from Lachlan to the rock in less than ten minutes. The outcropping of rock that he'd mentioned turned out to be more of an immense boulder, what looked like sandstone streaked all over with thick red dust.

"This is it," Rex said, feet sinking down into the copper-toned dirt. "See what you can find."

"There's not much here to see," Mac replied as he knelt down next to some unusual markings in the dirt. "Except maybe this..."

"I've got some footprints over here. Only one set. Looks to me like gym shoes, some kind of athletic sole."

"The same over here," MacGyver said, running his hand along the bottom edge of one of the marks. "There's some kind of indentation here, a rectangle shape. And this looks like spray paint..."

Rex stroked his stubble and shook his head. "What was he up to out here?"

"I'm still not sure," MacGyver said. He got to his feet and brushed the dirt off his knees. "I don't even know what the next step from here is. This looks like a dead end until we get more pieces of the puzzle to put together."

"Yeah... Let's get back to town and see if they heard anything else from our hostage-taker while we were gone."

They hadn't much more than rolled into town before Officer Poole spotted them and flagged down Rex's truck.

"You know, I've got a bad feeling about this," Rex said dryly.

"That makes two of us," MacGyver said. "How much more bad news can we get today?"

"I'd rather not find out." Rex rolled down the window to hear the lone police officer. "What's going on, Officer?"

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news."

Despite having the urge to let out a sardonic laugh, MacGyver managed to hide his emotions.

Rex had significantly less luck---or control. "Why am I not surprised? It's not like this day has already gone from bad to worse twice already. What's going on?"

"You remember Melinda's cat had kittens two or three weeks back?"

"How could I forget? I delivered all eight of them," Rex replied, losing his little amount of patience.

"Well, it turns out one of them got an infection and they didn't bring it in because they thought they could handle it, but---"

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Afraid not," Officer Poole said, sadly but firmly. "They're afraid they're going to lose the cat, so I need you to put on your veterinarian hat again for the time being. We still have time before the second message, and anyway the money could be replaced. The cat can't."

Rex scowled and rolled his eyes. "You don't have to preach to me about it. You already had me at 'sick cat.' Tell them to bring it to my office as soon as possible."

"It's already there."

Without further ado, Rex revved up the truck and took off at a speed that made even MacGyver nervous.

"We have a problem," Rex stated in no uncertain terms as he examined the tiny cat.

The kitten was just a little scrap of pale gray and white fur, eyes unopened, nose and paws baby pink. In contrast to the sweet, fluffy body was the angry, bleeding red sore beneath its short, wispy tail.

"Infection?" MacGyver guessed.

"Abscess. But that's not the worst of it."

"Do I dare ask?"

Rex's hardened face was grim. "I don't have the equipment I need for this surgery."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that this cat needs an emergency amputation. That necrotic tail's got to come off. And I don't have an anesthesia mask small enough to fit it."

"So we'll have to make one," MacGyver said.

"Exactly. Get me a Coke bottle. I have one beside the sink that I use for emergency water."

Mac quickly emptied the water into one of the dog bowls on the floor and passed Rex the empty plastic bottle.

As Rex cut the bottle in half, muttering that the opening should fit, MacGyver realized what his counterpart was trying to do and started grabbing the nearest roll of duct tape and a sterile latex glove.

As Rex hooked the bottleneck to the anesthesia tubing, MacGyver taped the glove to the wide end of the makeshift funnel and cut a hole in the glove. When they'd finished, Rex held his breath and slipped the glove over the tiny kitten's face---a near perfect fit.

Rex grinned as he started the anesthesia to begin the operation. "Thanks, Nurse MacGyver. You sure your calling isn't being a vet technician?"

"I think I'll stick with troubleshooting for now," MacGyver answered, returning the smile. "Fewer snakes that way. Besides, after this, we still have a ransom demand and a hostage situation to figure out."

"One thing at a time," Rex said. "One mystery at a time..."

Part Four

With the kitten safely recovering from the impromptu operation, Rex and MacGyver turned their attention back to the hostage situation looming over the entire town of Lachlan, Australia.

"Rex, I've been thinking," MacGyver said as he dropped a few dried crickets into a turtle tank in the vet's office. "Something about this entire hostage situation seems off. I've been through a lot of these, and this just doesn't seem right. Usually, there's some kind of show of force, but we haven't seen that or any of his accomplices. Not to mention that in many cases, the kidnapper will show proof that the hostages are still alive during the ransom demand, but so far, we haven't seen that either."

Rex absently stroked the bearded dragon that was curled up in the crook between his collarbone and shoulder blade. "You're right. Maybe he's an amateur."

"Or a professional of a different kind," MacGyver said thoughtfully. "We need to see that second ransom video."

"I guess this means another trip into town?"

"Yeah. And fast."

When they returned to the town hall, there was no time for pleasantries like knocking on doors---and honestly, at a time like this, no one expected them. The two men just walked through and planted themselves in front of the nearest computer screen. A secretary leaned over, nervously chewing on her pen, and commented, "That's been playing on a loop for ten minutes now. Officer Poole and the council are still trying to figure out what to do. We don't have a whole lot of time left."

"It'll be fine," MacGyver reassured her. "There's a solution to every problem."

"I sure hope so," she muttered.

As the video restarted for what was presumably the second or third time, MacGyver and Rex leaned over the desk, scrutinizing the screen and trying to take in every detail.

The video was filmed in what appeared to be the back of a box truck this time rather than a rock in the middle of nowhere, but the young man's moon-shaped face was still grinning. "By now, you should have made a definitive decision regarding my ransom demand. All the money in your banks in exchange for all of the hostages' safe return. That's not really such an unfair trade, now is it? Here are my directions for the money. About a half mile out of Lachlan on the southbound road, there's an old abandoned-looking shack. My guess is that most of you, if not all of you, know it. Send one person and one person only with the money and leave it just inside the door. As soon as I get the cash from the drop site, I'll send your bus of tourists trundling back your way. You have fifteen minutes beginning with the first playthrough of this video. Don't be late."

With that, the video cut out, only to start again a few seconds later.

MacGyver grinned. "He's bluffing."

Rex shook his head dubiously. "How can you tell?"

"I first got the suspicion when we watched the original ransom demand. His body language doesn't seem right. More like an actor than a hardened criminal. Then, we saw those rectangular indents in the ground at this guy's first location. There were spray paint marks on the ground all around them---just like the spray paint cans in the truck in the background of this video."

"What makes you think the spray paint is relevant?" Rex asked, somewhere between challenging and puzzled.

Mac grinned wider and pointed to one of the cans in the background. "Where have you seen that shade of brown before?"

Rex's eyes went wide and he laughed. "You're right! This man isn't a kidnapper at all---he's a con artist!"

In the old farm shack outside of town, Stace McEvan tapped his foot on the sagging, dust-covered floor, waiting for the swindled prize that would finally make him rich.

Unfortunately for him, he didn't expect to see Officer Poole coming in through the door with handcuffs and a Taser in place of a bag of money.

McEvan sighed, dropping his cocksure swagger. "I suppose I should go without a fight, shouldn't I? I know when I'm beaten."

Meanwhile, MacGyver and Rex opened up the truck hidden not far from the shack and grinned at the stack of spray paint cans and thin plywood signs.

Rex picked one up and shook his head. "That's a remarkably good likeness, don't you think?"

"Yep," MacGyver nodded. "And we ought to know!"

The sign read, in bright red letters, *Warning: This area is infested with deadly Eastern brown snakes! Keep away until further notice!*

Down at the bottom, of course, was a curled-up brown snake, fangs bared, in all its outback glory---a terrifying picture for tourists and locals alike.

Rex chuckled low. "No wonder that bus didn't show up. I wouldn't want to come into a snake-infested town either!"

"Luckily, now that our mystery is out of the way, we can head back to the animal sanctuary and finish putting up those shelters and that new vet clinic I've heard so much about," Mac said with a smile.

"Are you sure you want to make the trip? It's a long way back."

MacGyver shrugged. "Why not? It's just down the road!"