

Outrun the Wind

Phoenix Foundation Headquarters L.A Division

Angus MacGyver tapped at the keyboard so fast his fingers were almost a blur. He'd been hard at it for the past hour and a half, and so far he'd come up with nothing.

Searching for any sign of Roger Mariotte was all he seemed to do with any spare office time he got at Phoenix since the hijacking of Flight LA4177, but it would seem Mariotte was an expert at covering his tracks.

Normally, MacGyver would leave the job to the F.B.I. and police, but since Mariotte's main target had been Sam, well, that made it kind of personal.

He paused a moment and rubbed absently at his brow. It ached dully from the blow he'd taken just a few days ago, thanks to a rather fanatical neighbor named James.

That encounter, like the one with Mariotte had not exactly been on his "to do" list, and he had been left wondering exactly what he'd done to get into such scrapes before he'd even started back with Phoenix.

There was a knock at the door and Mac turned away from the screen to see Pete Thornton entering, complete with his now obligatory white cane. He seemed to be coping well with his disability, and moved around the offices with confidence.

"Still hard at it looking for Mariotte?" Pete asked, even though he couldn't see the computer MacGyver was working on.

"He's good, Pete," Mac admitted. "I haven't found a trace of him since the Boeing went up in smoke."

Pete shrugged. "Maybe it's over? Maybe the police will just quietly pick him up one day at some shopping mall and that will be the end of it."

MacGyver wasn't convinced. Mariotte hadn't tried to kill every passenger on the flight just to get at Sam, only to give in now. No, he'd be back if he wasn't stopped. The only question was exactly when?

"He hasn't finished, Pete. His kind doesn't leave unfinished business like this."

Pete was silent for a moment and then placed a hand on MacGyver's shoulder. "We'll find him. I promise. I have Nikki keeping a lookout too." He smiled. "But in the mean time, how's Sam doing?"

"Better." Mac's dour expression ticked up into a wan smile at the thought of his son. "His shoulder's still a little sore, but he's already out today looking for a place of his own. It's funny, but..."

“But no matter how old they are, or *when* they fly the nest, it still hurts, huh?” Pete nodded knowingly. “That’s what it’s like having kids. He’s not moving far, is he?”

Mac shook his head. “Nope, he’s looking for something in the neighborhood, or at least close by. I think he’s gotten to like my eccentric friends.”

Pete chuckled. “I wasn’t even sure *you* liked them after what just happened with Tallish?”

MacGyver rubbed at his temple again, remembering being locked in Mel’s beat up car as it filled with water. “I’ll get over it,” he sighed and then glanced at the manila folder in Pete’s free hand. “Something tells me this wasn’t just a social visit?”

“Well, no,” Pete conceded. “I have an assignment for you, if you’re ready? Nothing too difficult, just a little something to ease you back into things.”

“Okay.” Mac wasn’t sure what “easing back in” meant, or if he’d like it. *Please say I don’t have to play desk jockey to a pile of red tape?* “So what have you got for me?”

Pete reached out and felt the edge of the nearest empty chair. He took it and sat down, as if he was going to be awhile explaining.

“The Foundation has been contacted by a rancher from Nevada named Jill Peterson. Basically, she’s looking for some help saving a group of mustangs that other local ranchers want to round up and get rid of.”

“Won’t the authorities step in? I thought there was some kind of management for wild horses these days?” MacGyver was thinking as he spoke. Maybe this wouldn’t be a very long assignment if he only had to give a little advice and direct the rancher to the right government department.

“Jill’s already tried that. She’s spoken to the Bureau of Land Management who are technically supposed to protect the horses, but at this stage they’re reluctant to step in.” Pete handed Mac the folder. “She heard about Phoenix’s conservation work and our work with endangered species and hoped we’d be able to come up with a solution.”

“And that solution is me?” Mac hadn’t strictly been involved in this kind of project since he’d worked to stop rhinos being poached and wolves being hunted a few years back.

It was a subject that was close to his heart, but he wasn’t sure just how much he could achieve.

“I think it is, yes,” Pete confessed. “I don’t know anyone else here who is more passionate about preserving what we have on this planet. And from what Jill says, the other local ranchers think the horses are destroying their grazing land and damaging their property. They’re likely to do anything to stop that from continuing.”

“Like killing the mustangs.” Mac wasn’t asking the question, he was making a statement.

The ranchers were protecting their assets, and it looked like he was about to protect the mustangs somehow.

Nice easy, none dangerous assignment, that’s what Pete thought.

MacGyver of all people knew there was no such thing.

* * * *

Little Horseshoe Ranch Nevada

Mac swung his Jeep around a long bend in the road and then slowed as he spotted the sign for Jill Peterson’s ranch up ahead. He’d had a pretty long drive on his own, and although it had been refreshing, he’d quickly realized he’d become used to Sam’s company, and had missed it.

It was going to be strange not having Sam around once he got an apartment of his own.

Still, Mac could worry about that, and how to keep his son safe later. For now, he had a job to do, and a rancher to meet. He pulled the Jeep up just short of the main house and took a look around.

The ranch was larger than he’d expected, but not exactly South Fork. There were a few hands wandering around, tending horses, mending fences and so on, but no sign of Jill.

MacGyver tugged out his sunglasses, popped them on and headed for the entrance. There was a brass doorbell inset into the shape of a bucking bronco, so he pressed it and waited.

About ten seconds later, the perfectly painted white door swung open to reveal a small Mexican lady that looked at the very least a hundred-years-old.

She smiled broadly at the sight of MacGyver. “You must be the gentleman from the Phoenix Foundation?” She asked, inviting him in with the gesture of her hand.

“Yes, ma’am. Name’s MacGyver. I’m here to see Mrs. Peterson?”

“She’s out back.” The little woman lead him through the heart of the ranch and out onto a terrace that overlooked miles of open land that hadn’t changed since the forefathers had arrived on the continent.

Standing with her arms on the fence, looking over it all, was a woman of about Mac’s age with long flowing hair and deep brown eyes that seemed to absorb every detail of the panorama.

She turned as she heard his approach and smiled. “Mr. MacGyver I presume?” She held out a hand in welcome. “I see you’ve met Adelita?”

Mac slipped off his sunglasses. “Yes, ma’am.”

Jill seemed to find his politeness amusing and couldn’t resist her smile broadening. “Please, just call me Jill. We don’t stand on formality around here.”

“In that case, it’s just Mac,” he countered, and then nodded towards the vista Jill had been appreciating. “It’s beautiful out here. Makes you almost feel…” He couldn’t summon the words to describe the view.

“Alive?” Jill nodded and then pointed to a table and chairs. She took a seat and waited for MacGyver to do the same before continuing. “Before I bore you with the details of my crusade to save the mustangs, do you actually have a place to stay?”

Mac thought about it. He had planned on looking for a motel or hotel in the nearest town, but that was actually a whole lot further than he’d expected. “Not yet,” he admitted.

Jill poured home-made lemonade from a pitcher for them both. “Then it’s settled, you can stay here. The place is full of empty rooms that never get used. It’s time I changed that. I’ll tell Adelita to choose you one and that supper will be for two.”

“Thanks, if you’re sure..?”

Jill didn’t even bother with an answer. She was looking out across the countryside again, her eyes sparkling with what MacGyver could only describe as love for the land.

He let his own eyes follow hers, and realized that the mustangs were here, on Jill’s land, at least at the moment.

The main group was grazing happily, the lead mare taking them slowly across the countryside as he watched. She was a small brown horse, whose size hid her status among the herd.

In the distance, he noted the stallion of the group, hanging back, watching, and protecting his fold.

Transfixed, MacGyver found himself stepping down from the terrace and stepping closer to the bunch of horses.

The lead mare stiffened, her frame suggesting she may bolt at any second. Her nostrils flared as she picked up his human scent.

Mac paused and waited, but the horse didn’t run. Her eyes locked with his, and they simply stared at one another.

Jill moved to MacGyver's side – the mustangs apparently already used to her smell. “Now can you see why I want to save them? Our ancestors brought these animals here, and now a lot of the ranchers look on them as parasites. But they're part of our heritage, part of what we once called the Wild West.”

Mac didn't need telling twice. He loved nature, and he loved to see it like this – untouched and free.

“Where do we start?” He asked, still watching the horses as they moved off into the distance.

“There are three main antagonists that want the horses gone,” Jill explained with a sigh. “But the main troublemaker is a rancher named Troy Baxter. Baxter is old school. He won't listen to any humane ideas about moving the mustangs. He wants to round them up off everyone's land and send them to heaven knows where.” She crossed her arms in frustration. “I can't help but think they'll end up in some canning factory.”

MacGyver watched the pure white stallion as it galloped across the horizon. It was probably a descendant of the horses the Spaniards had brought over with them, and it was stunning as it raced across the landscape. “Don't worry. I'll talk to Baxter and the others first thing. The Phoenix Foundation is proposing to take the mustangs and place them on protected foundation land. I can't see why anyone would object to that.”

Jill huffed, and her expression said she wasn't convinced. “You have a lot to learn about Baxter. He's a man who likes his own way.”

Mac nodded. He'd met a few of those types in his time. “Yeah, well so does Phoenix, and they're a whole lot bigger than he is.”

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The Next Morning...

Setting up a meeting with Jill's neighbors had been simple enough, and Mac had hoped it was the start of things to come. How hard could it be to talk to a bunch of cowboys?

He'd soon discovered, that it was a whole lot harder than he'd expected.

As Jill had pointed out, Baxter was an unforgiving individual who simply wouldn't listen to reason.

He was a grizzled rancher of about sixty-five who reminded MacGyver of Jock Ewing from *Dallas*. His features were chiseled from time spent out in the elements, and his hair was as white as driven snow.

“Just who are you to come into this town and start meddling in our affairs?” Baxter’s blue eyes bored into Mac’s like he was drilling for oil. “We don’t want or need your kind meddling in local business!”

Several of the other ranchers bobbed their heads and murmured in agreement.

Tough crowd was an understatement, and all over a few horses.

MacGyver pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation and tried again. “From what I can see, you want the horses gone, and I can provide a non-lethal solution to that at no cost to any of you. All you have to do is allow the Phoenix Foundation on your land to collect the mustangs and...”

Baxter didn’t even let him finish. “Over my dead body! No outsider is coming telling me what to do with the property my grandpa left me!”

More agreement and nodding of heads from the other locals.

Someone at the back actually jeered.

“We just want to move the horses.” Somehow, Mac was keeping his voice level, although he wasn’t sure where the determination was coming from. “Surely it’s better for everyone..?”

Baxter thought differently. He stood from his seat, grumbled an expletive under his breath and then scurried out of the town hall at a rate of knots.

Most of the other ranchers followed suit without as much as looking MacGyver in the face.

MacGyver blew out a long, frustrated breath and began to gather the information leaflets from Phoenix he’d taken with him. Sometimes, he preferred an all-action, even dangerous assignment compared to this.

“He’s a tough old bird, isn’t he?”

MacGyver whirled around to see an elderly ranch hand that had been in Baxter’s group looking him over. The man looked ancient, and had a growth of white fuzz on his face that suggested he hadn’t shaved for a few days.

The older man offered up his hand. “My name’s Massey, Roy Massey. I work for Troy – have done since you were an itch in your daddy’s pants.”

“And you agree with his principles?” Mac questioned.

Massey shrugged and licked his lips. “Sometimes it doesn’t pay to argue with a man like Troy Baxter. Maybe that’s something you should be of a mind of too.”

MacGyver cocked a brow, surprised at what Massey was suggesting. “Are you telling me I should watch my back?”

“I’m just telling it the way it is.” Massey stuck in a slice of gum and began to chew loudly. “Let’s just say, I’d be careful around these parts who you upset. Troy isn’t the type to fool around with...”

He turned then, and ambled out the hall as if he had all day.

Mac could still hear him chewing when he was out of sight.

Had Baxter sent Massey to pass on a threat? Or was Massey actually trying to be helpful?

The weird thing was MacGyver still couldn’t see why anyone would get so all fired up over a few mustangs.

“I guess it’s time to come up with a plan B,” he spoke to no one in particular as he left the hall and headed for his Jeep.

The car was waiting for him where he’d left it, but as he grew near he spotted a note pinned under one of the wiper blades.

Mac plucked it out. It was hand-written, and didn’t have much to say:

Leave now, while you still can!

MacGyver folded the threat and stuck it in his pocket. If anything happened, there might be prints on it they could trace.

Feeling like he’d already let Pete down, he cranked the Jeep and headed back out to the old road that lead to Jill’s place.

For awhile he listened to the local radio, but even that wasn’t a distraction. All he could think about was the stallion he’d watched, and the rest of the herd so innocently grazing, little knowing what fate had in store for them.

He took a turn just a little too sharply as he drove, his mind distracted just for a second. Compensating immediately, he tapped the Jeep’s brake pedal.

Nothing happened.

Okay, this thing just came back from the shop, it should be perfect...

MacGyver pressed the brake harder, this time expecting it to respond, but instead the 4x4 simply kept rolling.

And there was another sharper bend in the road ahead.

Thinking quickly, Mac carefully steered the Jeep off the blacktop and onto the rough gravel siding just enough to try and slow it, but the turn was coming up far too quickly.

He yanked on the wheel at the last moment, trying to avoid barreling into a ditch, even if it meant doing a one-eighty spin, but the Jeep just didn't have enough turning circle to pull it off, and it careered off the track and down into the gully as if it had wings and had flown there.

The front end landed hard, and MacGyver felt the sickening thud of his own skull against the windscreen, along with the crunch of metal beneath the car.

He bounced back in his seat, the cut to his forehead from his encounter with Tallish reopened by the impact.

So much for seat belts...

Mac sat for a moment, regaining his composure. This was not exactly the way he'd expected this assignment to pan out.

He let his fingers probe his forehead and they came back bloody, but other than the bump, he was in one piece.

That was more than could be said for the Jeep – again.

Mac climbed out and shakily inspected the damage. The front right wheel was sitting at an odd angle, and when he hunkered down he could quickly see that the front transmission shaft was bent. He was going nowhere in this beast.

Great, I think this Jeep is actually jinxed. It gets busted up more than I do, and that's saying something.

He moved to the back, where the underside of the car was more accessible due to the angle he'd crashed and checked the brake lines. As he'd suspected, they'd both been cut, and rather crudely. Whoever had done it wasn't bothered about leaving marks or making a mess.

Sighing, Mac clambered back inside and reached for the car phone that sat snugly in the center console. He doubted there would be a signal on the thing, though, and he was right, it was dead.

Dejectedly, he took a wipe from the first aid kit he carried, mopped at the cut above his eye, and simply waited. How long it would take for someone to come along was anybody's guess, but he just didn't feel like walking just yet.

About half an hour later, Mac finally heard the roar of a truck and clambered from the Jeep back up to the highway.

Ironically, it was Jill that had found him on her way back from town.

As she killed the Ford's ignition she looked him over with a frown, and Mac realized he probably looked a mess. "Are you alright? You look like you had a fight with a ten ton semi and lost!"

Mac flashed a sardonic smile. “Yeah, I definitely lost.” He jerked a thumb back to the ditch. “Someone wanted to send me a message, and somehow I doubt it was over a bunch of mustangs.”

Jill climbed from her cab and looked over the ledge to the Jeep below, obviously shocked at what he was telling her. “They forced you off the road?”

He shook his head. “Nope, nothing so direct. My brake lines were cut, and pretty crudely too. I’d guess whoever did it was in a hurry.”

“I can’t believe anyone I know would go that far!” Jill put a hand to her mouth, worry lines creasing her temple. “Are you *sure* you’re okay?” Her eyes locked on the cut to Mac’s head.

“I’m good, which is more than I can say for the Jeep.”

Jill didn’t sound convinced. “Well, if you’re sure... I have a rope in the back of my truck; we can get your car out of the ditch and tow it back. I think the police should take a look at it.” She moved to get the rope, and MacGyver scrambled back into the trench to fix it to the rear tow hook on the Jeep.

After about twenty minutes of maneuvering, the 4x4 was back up on the road looking extremely sorry for itself. It took another forty minutes for MacGyver to make it towable with the buckled shaft.

When he finally pulled himself back into Jill’s truck, he was tired, and even scruffier than when he’d crashed. All he wanted was a hot shower and a warm drink.

“There’s something going on here, isn’t there?” Jill asked as she cranked the engine and headed back to the ranch. “I mean, other than those horses? No way would anyone I know, not even Baxter, try and kill you over a mustang or two. And there’s something else...”

Mac rubbed at his head absently. He really must stop getting hit on it. “Oh? Like what?”

Jill took the sharp left that lead to the entrance to her home and slowed. “Some of the damage done to my fences and land? Well, it might have looked like the horses did it, but I think it was made to look that way.”

She pulled over just past the main gates to her property and jumped out. MacGyver followed, intrigued by what was going on.

“These are some of the fence posts my guys replaced over on the south quarter. Take a look.” Jill handed one to the troubleshooter and he spun it over in his hands.

The damage could have been done by the mustangs, but like Jill, he suspected otherwise. “I think you’re right,” he admitted. “But why?”

Jill shrugged. “Beats me. There’s no real money in moving the mustangs – not even if they end up at a canning factory. It just wouldn’t be worth killing someone over.”

Mac considered it. It seemed a cheesy solution that happened every time in the movies, but the obvious answer was probably land – or rather land ownership. “Has anyone been trying to buy up land around here recently?”

Jill put a hand on her hip and looked out over her own acreage. “It’s funny you should mention it, but Billy Scott, a neighbor of mine in his eighties was going to sell to a developer a couple of months back. He’s had enough at his age and was going to live with his son in Wyoming.”

“What happened?” Mac probed.

“The developer pulled out after they heard about the “horse problem.” I guess they didn’t want involving in bad press.” Jill pointed in the distance. “Looks like our friends are back...”

The mustangs were grazing again, with some of the younger horses playfully rolling in the longer areas of grass that hadn’t been dealt with on the neighboring land.

The stallion in all its pallid glory was once again watching over them. This time a very short distance from Jill and Mac.

It seemed to sense their eyes on it and turned to face them, its right hoof pawing at the ground until a tiny zephyr of dust appeared. It snorted, whinnied and then raced off to circle its brethren.

“He’s making his mind up if he likes you or not,” Jill teased.

“Probably not,” Mac conceded. “Not very many around these parts seem to.” He smiled then, despite what had happened with the Jeep, and then he put his focus back on what had caused it. “So, I’ve heard of unscrupulous land developers doing stuff like this *to get land*. But these guys were actually put off? Sounds like they were on the level for once.”

Jill didn’t get it any more than MacGyver did. She brushed a hand through her hair in exasperation. “So who could gain from the land *not* being sold?”

“Baxter, maybe?” Mac offered up as he started to make his way back to Jill’s truck. “He does seem to be the main protagonist in all of this. Maybe he wants the land for himself?”

Jill slid back behind the wheel and shook her head. “Nope, it can’t be that. He actually gave Billy a parcel of that land to begin with. Why would he go to all this trouble to get it back?” She started up the Ford and headed back to the main house, her frown suggesting the puzzle was getting the better of her.

If MacGyver admitted the truth, it was him too. “Well, Baxter is the one who started all this and he’s the one that wants the horses gone. I’ll get Pete to check him out,

including his workers. It might not hurt to check out the other ranchers who agree with the roundup too.”

Jill bobbed her head. “Let’s just hope he finds something before anyone gets seriously hurt...”

* * * *

The Next Morning...

The room Adelita had made up for MacGyver was more than adequate, and the bed was huge. He’d taken a shower and sank into it the previous evening, dropping to sleep instantly.

He’d awoken with a headache, but then that wasn’t surprising given the lump that had appeared under the cut to his head. The pain had soon subsided into a dull ache as he sat out on the terrace eating breakfast.

The thought occurred to him that he could get used to Adelita spoiling him with her cooking – it was definitely a major improvement on Sam’s idea of breakfast, and a whole lot healthier too.

So far he hadn’t seen Jill, which was strange. Didn’t ranchers tend to get up at the crack of dawn?

He was about to ask Adelita were her boss had gotten to, when Jill stormed through the glass door to the terrace with a face like thunder.

“Something wrong?” Mac flinched as she angrily tossed down her hat.

“You bet there is! Baxter brought the roundup forward again. I knew he wouldn’t wait for the Phoenix Foundation, but can you believe he’s actually out there now hunting for the horses with that self-righteous posse of his?” Jill waved her hands in the air as if she were surrendering to the inevitable.

“There must something we can do?”

Jill paused, whirled around and stormed back into the house without answering.

Knowing what the look on her face likely meant, Mac followed her inside.

As he stepped through the doorway, he was just in time to see her reaching for, and taking down a rifle that hung over the huge stone fireplace.

“That’s not the way, and you know it. Those things are never the answer.” Mac put a hand on the barrel of the Winchester and gently took it from Jill’s shaking hands.

“Then what is?”

“I don’t know yet,” MacGyver offered honestly. “We need to get out to the mustangs and fast, and maybe I can come up with something along the way...”

“We can start by checking out where we saw them last.” Jill grabbed the keys to her pickup and raced to the door with MacGyver in tow.

The worrying question was, even if they saved the horses today, it didn’t answer why it was all happening?

He’d already been a target, but who was next?

Thinking about what had been done to his Jeep; Mac headed for the driver’s side of the Ford and held a hand out for the keys.

Jill looked like she was going to argue and maybe tell him she could drive just as good as any macho male in the county, but then her expression softened as common sense took a hold, and she placed the fob gently in his palm.

“Just hurry.” she nodded, diving into the passenger side and slamming the door with such ferocity MacGyver thought it might fall off at the hinges.

* * * *

MacGyver soon realized that finding the mustangs wasn’t going to be difficult at all. Baxter’s men were on horseback and kicking up a dust trail that could be seen half a mile away.

The professional wranglers had already managed to group the herd of mustangs in a tight corner, and were forcing them towards a dead end.

At their lead, the striking white stallion was trying desperately to protect his family, but he was falling straight into Baxter’s trap.

MacGyver could see every sinew and muscle on the horse as it raced along the ground, hoofs pounding into the earth and leaving sods of it flying through the air as it tried to escape capture.

“Now *what?*” Jill opened up the sunroof of her truck and bobbed up through it to try and shout to the cowboys thundering past on their own charges. They either didn’t notice, or ignored her in favor of the chase.

Mac hadn’t expected any differently, but there was still a chance if he could drive between the posse and the wild horses and try to push the mustangs in a different direction – hopefully back on to the haven of Jill’s land.

Spinning the Ford’s wheel around with just one hand he hit the gas and carefully pointed it in front of Baxter’s people. It was a tricky move, because he didn’t want to risk hurting anyone.

Some of the cowboys realized what he was doing and pulled up their rides, others dug their heels in, spurring their animals on to try and scoot around Jill's truck.

MacGyver poured on more gas and began slewing the truck from side to side whilst hammering on the horn.

The mustangs reacted to the sound and veered suddenly away from the dead end, their legs moving like the wind, and sweat covering their haunches.

"Its working!" Mac heard Jill's voice above the commotion and looked across to comment, but what he saw stopped him.

Troy Baxter was heading straight for them on a Skewbald that had the speed of *Seabiscuit* and wasn't afraid to hide it.

And he was aiming his rifle straight at Jill.

Part Two

Mac hit the Ford's brakes so hard it shuddered to a halt, throwing Jill sideways with alarming force.

She yelped as her ribs slammed against the edge of the sunroof and then slumped back inside onto the passenger seat, relatively unscathed.

Outside, Baxter was almost thrown from his ride as the horse staggered to a stop in front of the truck. He slithered down, rifle still in hand and opened his mouth.

Before he could fire off any comments, MacGyver was out from the cab and had grabbed him by the lapels.

"Just *what* did you think you were doing?" Mac snatched the Winchester from the elder man's grasp and tossed it to the floor. "You could have killed someone!"

Baxter huffed as his men surrounded them, still mounted on their horses. "I was aiming at the stallion you dumb son o..."

MacGyver stepped back in surprise as Jill moved between them and slapped Baxter hard across the face before he could finish.

She stared at her neighbor with steely eyes that could have belonged to a hawk stalking its prey. "The mustangs are back on my land now. Stray on there, and maybe I'll just make a mistake and *shoot you*..."

Baxter grunted but didn't grace Jill with an answer. He ran a hand across his face where she'd hit him and then licked his lips before climbing back on his horse.

He spun the Skewbald around and cantered away, the other wranglers silently following.

“I think you just made an enemy,” MacGyver sighed.

“I was an enemy the minute I took over the ranch when my husband died.” Jill ran a hand through her hair in what appeared to be a habit. “That didn’t stop me then, and it won’t now. The only trouble is we’ve only managed a quick fix. The mustangs might be back on my land, but they won’t stay there.”

“Maybe we should have a word with that guy?” Mac pointed to the edge of Jill’s property.

The white stallion was there again, watching them. The rest of the herd had vanished with the lead mare, but the stallion appeared curious, maybe even bold in their presence.

It pawed the ground again, its neck craning before it reared onto its hind legs and snorted. Then, it was gone, racing off to join its family somewhere in the distance.

MacGyver shook his head. *Was that a thank you?*

* * * *

Little Horseshoe Ranch Nevada

MacGyver was sitting back and enjoying more of Adelita’s lemonade out on the terrace. If he was honest, he’d never tasted anything quite like it, and was considering asking her for the recipe before he left.

That was, if he ever came up with a solution for the mustangs.

Right now he was trying to come up with ideas with Jill on how to keep them on her land, but it wasn’t easy. All Baxter had to do was take down a fence on purpose and wait, eventually the herd was bound to stray.

A phone began to ring in the house and Mac checked his watch. It was probably Pete calling with the information on Baxter.

He excused himself and headed inside, taking the call when Adelita offered up the handset and confirmed it was Pete.

“So what have you got for me, Pete?”

“Not a whole lot on Baxter and the neighbors, I’m afraid. Troy Baxter is squeaky clean and so are the other ranchers. I can’t believe it, but I couldn’t even find a parking ticket between the whole bunch!” Pete sounded like he was surprised, but the edge to his voice said he had more to offer.

“But you have something, right?” MacGyver impatiently prodded.

“Well, there is one name that came up with shall we say, some “bad press.” Roy Massey, the old guy you told me about at the meeting? Well he has a huge skeleton in his closet.” Pete paused, probably for effect, making Mac wonder why his old friend hadn’t gone into acting.

“And?”

Pete continued, “It seems Massey’s wife was having an affair with another man some thirty years ago, and strangely, said wife and her lover vanished from town one night, never to be heard from again. The local sheriff at the time always thought Massey had killed them, but he could never prove it.”

MacGyver took in the information. It had to be relevant somehow, but how? Could this really all be connected to Massey’s wife and lover? “Thanks, Pete, I’ll be in touch.”

He put the phone down and stood for a moment before going back outside and telling Jill what Pete had discovered.

Jill didn’t seem convinced of a link. “Even if Massey did kill his wife thirty years ago, what has that to do with a bunch of wild mustangs?” She was pacing back and forth on the terrace until Mac thought she might wear a hole in her boots.

“We have to look at this from other angles – consider things outside the box.” Mac’s brow furrowed as he pushed his mind to think laterally. “Some of Billy’s land used to belong to Baxter, and Massey *has always* worked for Baxter. What if he *did* kill his wife and her boyfriend and buried them on Baxter’s property somewhere? Then when some of that land was given to Billy, it might have caused a problem.”

“But why now? And why the mustangs?” Jill stopped pacing and stared at Mac as if he had all the answers.

“Well, nothing happened until Billy thought of selling, right? Maybe Roy Massey couldn’t risk Billy selling to the developers when he knew they’d start and dig the place up. Maybe they’d find more than they bargained for.”

“So you think the bad press with the horses was to put the land developer off? No developer, no digging?” Jill seemed to be following Mac’s train of thought. “So why keep up the offensive against the horses once the deal was off? And what about Baxter? He was real adamant about outing those mustangs.”

MacGyver took a long sip of his lemonade. “I think Massey has worked for Baxter so long he’s gotten under his skin. Baxter thinks he’s an old-timer like himself. Massey has used that to play Baxter like a puppet, getting him all fired up about the horses and damage they’ve caused – damage Massey has really done.”

Jill thought about it, but didn’t look convinced.

Maybe she'd rather slap Baxter again, MacGyver mused before continuing his theory.

“I think maybe Massey kept up his offensive against the mustangs for a second reason too. It gives him cause to go onto Billy’s land, supposedly after the horses, but really he wants a cover story to go dig up two bodies. Let’s face it, he can’t risk another buyer coming along later and still digging.”

“I guess it makes sense,” Jill admitted. “But if you’re right, doesn’t that mean Billy might be in danger now the roundup didn’t happen?”

MacGyver cursed silently to himself and scrambled from his chair.

Massey still needed to dig up two skeletons, mustangs for a cover story or not, and that put Billy in the firing line for sure.

And if Massey had killed twice before, would one more victim bother him if Billy found him digging?

“C’mon!” Mac raced into the main house, grabbed the keys to Jill’s truck and dived outside. He was behind the wheel so fast, he almost overlooked one thing.

Jill waved to him with a scowl and pointed to the front of the Ford as she too ran from the main house.

MacGyver leaned out and realized what she was gesturing at.

Both front tires had been slashed – and there was only one spare.

He could run on the rims, but it would be slow going on the dirt track to Billy’s.

Jill had a better idea. “Forget the dang truck, we’ll ride!”

She took point in a race to one of two corals to the right of the main building. Luckily, two of the ranch hands had already a couple of mounts saddled and ready to go.

Although they had no idea their charges were about to be sequestered.

Jill grabbed the first horse’s reins from her foreman without a word and sprang into the saddle like a rodeo rider.

MacGyver followed up the rear, taking the larger of the two animals – a brown mare that really didn’t look like it had a lot of speed in it.

He settled in the saddle and gently spun it around with the reins, pleasantly surprised at how lithely it moved.

Maybe he’d be able to keep up with Jill’s steed after all, but would they be in time to warn Billy?

* * * *

The Crooked Spur Ranch
Billy Scott's residence
Nevada

Billy's spread wasn't all that big compared to other local ranches, and it was soon apparent to MacGyver why he'd wanted to sell.

A lot of the land had been untended for so long, that it was little more than wild brush. The actual house wasn't as much a ranch as a glorified cabin with a wide sweeping porch, and that too had seen better days.

As Mac dismounted his mare and began to climb the steps, he had to be careful where he put his boots, the wood beneath was so rotten.

Jill followed him, also watching her footing until they were onto a firmer section of timber.

The lights to Billy's cabin were on, and Mac hoped that was a good sign.

He tapped lightly on the door and Jill scowled, somewhat bemused. "You'll have to do better than that, Billy's half deaf." She wrapped with the full force of her knuckles to demonstrate.

There was no answer, so Mac peered through the very grimy side window, squinting through the dirt to scan for the old man.

His eyes locked onto an old boot lying strewn on the floor – except, this boot had a foot, and a leg and...

MacGyver pulled away from the window and without hesitation began lashing at the door with his right boot. The wood, like that on the porch was termite-infested, and gave way easily.

Mac almost tumbled into the house as the door and frame disintegrated into a pile of splinters.

He steadied himself and quickly jogged to where he'd seen the body. He didn't know what Billy Scott looked like, but he was guessing this was the old man.

Kneeling, Mac tentatively checked for a pulse, but there was none, and from how cool Billy's skin was, he guessed the rancher had been dead awhile.

"Is he dead?" Jill didn't seem phased as she asked the question.

"Very."

MacGyver knew he should really preserve the crime scene, but he gently moved the body just enough to see how Billy had died.

The old man was lying face down, and underneath him was a pool of blood that suggested he'd met a very violent end.

From what Mac could tell, he'd been shot in the chest with a shotgun. The blast had left Billy with a gaping hole where his heart should be.

Mac winced and let Billy carefully back down onto the wooden floor. "Does he have a phone? We need to call the police and fast. Massey could still be out here."

Jill shook her head in frustration. "Are you kidding? Billy's idea of communication with the outside world was the smoke coming out his chimney. We'll have to ride to the next ranch."

She moved to the hole where the door had been and then paused, staring out across the evening sky.

MacGyver joined her, curious as to what had stopped her so abruptly.

In the distance, there were faint lights – too far out to discern the source, but close enough to know they were on Billy's land.

"That's the area of land Baxter gave to Billy years ago," Jill explained. "He used to keep a few cattle on it, but now it's just brush land. I think there might be an old barn too, maybe that's where the lights are coming from?"

"And it's most likely where Massey hid the bodies of his wife and her lover," Mac concluded. "You go make the call to the police, I'm going to check it out and see if it's Massey over there."

MacGyver slipped back into the mare's saddle, enjoying the sensation of riding again after so long behind the wheel of a car. He tugged on the reins, but Jill grabbed the horse's halter.

"Not so fast, mister! If you're going over there, I'm coming with you." She gracefully mounted her own horse without waiting for him to argue. "No macho "I'm in charge here" stuff, okay?"

Mac opened his mouth, couldn't find the words to convince Jill to do as he asked, so simply offered a "Yes, ma'am," before pointing his horse towards the lights and urging it into a swift canter.

Although he kept the lead, he could hear the pounding of hoofs behind him and knew Jill was close by.

As he approached the lights, he slowed the mare to a trot, and then pulled her up altogether.

The lights were coming from an old barn as Jill had suggested, but there was a smaller wooden structure next to it that also had light filtering through the cracks in the ancient wooden panels.

MacGyver decided it was too risky to ride any further and slid down to the ground with a grunt. He tied the mare's reins around a small boulder and then hunkered down behind a larger one to watch what was going on – hopefully undetected.

Jill followed his lead and joined him, taking shelter behind the rock. “See anything?” She asked in a low voice.

Mac nodded and then pointed to the second wooden structure. “Take a look.” There was a sledgehammer tossed on the ground beside a large, splintered hole. “I think Massey smashed his way through the sidewall rather than busting the lock. Maybe he was still hoping the mustangs would get the blame – for the damage here, at least.”

“Try blaming Billy on the horses,” Jill huffed, her eyes filled with anger. “Show me a mustang that can point and shoot a twelve gauge!”

Mac was only half-listening.

There was movement inside the dilapidated building, and from what the troubleshooter could see, Massey had an oil lamp and was attempting to dig a hole.

It was what they'd expected to see, but it still sent a cold shiver down MacGyver's spine.

How can one human being take another's life with so little remorse?

Except, Massey hadn't taken one life, he'd apparently taken three.

Jill has spotted what was going on too. “Now what? If we go for the sheriff then Massey will be long gone by the time we get back!”

“*You* wait here.” This time Mac's tone was so compelling Jill was taken aback. “I need to go stop him, but I also need to know you're gonna be safe.” His dark eyes locked onto hers and stayed there until she nodded without question, like he'd had some mad “Svengali” effect on her.

“I'll wait, just as long as you come back...”

Mac smiled cheekily as if it was a given and then was gone before Jill could change her mind.

* * * *

The oil light in the outbuilding flickered ominously as MacGyver edged his way towards the opening Massey had made.

Strange shadows danced across the blackened, molding timbers like wraiths beckoning the troubleshooter closer.

MacGyver obliged them, flattening his body against the outside wall and then craning his neck just enough to see what Massey was up to.

The cowboy was still digging furiously, muttering unintelligible words as he slug dirt over his shoulder.

Will he hear me if I go in?

MacGyver risked it, slithering himself through the gap and over the sandy floor until he was standing behind Massey, about to make a grab for the shovel.

At the last moment, Massey finally sensed he had company and spun around, brandishing his spade like a weapon.

He balked when he realized who the newcomer was, his eyes blazing with some unknown emotion. “You?” He let the shovel drop just a little, as if he were hesitating.

Mac hoped that meant Massey would see sense. “It’s over, Roy, whatever you did all those years ago, it isn’t worth what you’re doing now.”

Massey puffed out a breath as if he thought MacGyver was joking, and the edges of his mouth ticked up into a smile that looked positively demonic. “Two murders, four murders, six murders – what do I care anymore? I’m an old man, I’d never see the outside again if I did time at my age.”

Mac stayed still, his gaze switching between the blade of the shovel and Massey’s insane expression. *He doesn’t care. He’d do anything right now...*

“Jill’s already gone for the sheriff,” Mac told a white lie, but it was worth it if he could take Massey without violence. “Why don’t you just give me that and tell me what happened?” He reached for the spade.

Massey flinched back, not ready to give his weapon up yet, but apparently ready to talk. “The original plan was just to put the developers off. Then when the roundup got under way, I was gonna come here, knock down the wall, move the bodies and then burn the barn. The stampeding horses would have gotten the blame, and if Billy got in the way, well he’d have been disposed of.” He paused and chuckled wryly. “Pretty much *has* been disposed of, actually.”

“C’mon,” Mac tried again in his best soothing voice. “You’ve nowhere to run to. Give it up.”

Massey’s eyes narrowed. “Aww hell, why not...” He threw the shovel, almost throwing MacGyver off balance as he caught it.

Mac steadied himself and threw it down behind him, not letting his eyes off the aging killer for a minute.

This was all too easy.

Massey wiped his grimy palms on his very dirty jeans and then stuck his right hand up in Mac's face. "Well are you going to offer an old man a pull up outta this hole I dug myself into or not?"

MacGyver hesitated, part of his mind screaming that Massey was up to something, but he took the killer's hand anyway.

It was a dumb move, and one he should have known better than to make.

Massey used his weight to pull Mac forwards, almost dragging him down into the hole with the recently disturbed skeletons.

Mac regained his balance just in time to teeter on the edge, before Massey slugged him with a left hook, spinning him sideways and face down in the dirt.

Mac coughed out dust and sand from his mouth and pushed up and onto his feet, only to see the very lively Massey racing out of the hole in the wall.

There was a split second when the older man had vanished into the darkness of night, but then he was back again, grinning, another oil lamp in his hand. "Thought I'd bring you a little gift to lighten up your evening," he laughed ironically and then tossed the lamp onto a bale of straw in the corner of the room.

The straw ignited far too quickly, and MacGyver was forced back from the instant gush of heat it gave off. He placed his forearm over his face and made a dash for the exit, realizing Massey had doused the structure with gasoline.

The floor around him seemed to track the flames, and within seconds smoke engulfed the whole area.

MacGyver dived through the gap in the wall just in time, rolling out and across the ground outside in the hopes he wasn't on fire too.

Massey had soaked everything he'd come into contact with like a pyromaniac gone rabid.

And the fireball he'd created didn't end with the ranch buildings.

Flames were already creeping outside, into earth that had been drenched too.

Something hissed and crackled to Mac's left, and as he turned to the sound he realized it was the brush around him turning into yet another man-made inferno.

The sound of an engine made him ignore the fire for just a moment. It was Massey in his truck, and he was getting away.

MacGyver tried to run after the vehicle as it slewed from side to side to avoid the blaze, but he was no match for the V8 on foot, not even over this ground.

Massey sped away, leaving a trail of dust behind that mingled with the rising tendrils of smoke from the fire.

A fire that was growing and spreading across the ground until it would soon encircle the buildings and anyone left near them.

“MacGyver! *The horses!*” Jill was sprinting towards their rides like an Olympian, but the animals were already spooked.

As she reached them and unfastened the reins, the brown mare jerked backwards so hard it almost pulled free.

Jill held fast until Mac was able to join her and then mounted her own ride. The horse snorted and stepped from side to side in agitation, its eyes bulging with fear.

As Mac climbed on the mare, it too began to dance a waltz of fear, jiggling left and then right as it fought against MacGyver’s control.

More flames spread across the drenched earth in front of them, causing more brush to burst into flames where it too had been saturated with gas.

Jill shook her head in defeat as she struggled with her horse. “It’s no use, we’re cut off!”

Part Three

MacGyver refused to accept that there was no way out, and kicked on the mare’s sides, urging it into action even though it was terrified – somehow, even though it hadn’t known him very long, there was a trust between them.

Riding hard around the edge of the fire, he finally found a gap large enough to ride through and waved for Jill to join him.

Jill’s horse, however, was less trusting of its master, and balked twice as she urged it to leap the small gap to freedom.

She tried again, praying to whatever god was listening to let the animal calm long enough to escape.

But today, no gods were listening.

At the very last moment, Jill’s horse screamed to a halt, throwing her over its head and straight into one of the larger boulders they’d hidden behind earlier.

Rider-less, the horse panicked more, and finally, and ironically sped through the gap in the blazing brush.

MacGyver slipped from his saddle and quickly secured his mare to another rock. Then he was at Jill's side in a second. She was sitting up, holding a hand against her left shoulder as if she was in great pain.

Before he could even take a look, Jill told him what he'd already guessed. "I think it's dislocated..."

Mac glanced back, checking on the spread of the blaze before gently probing her shoulder with his fingers to confirm both their suspicions. If Jill's shoulder really was out of joint, they were in big trouble.

Jill winced, gritting her teeth as he came to a bulge under her skin – the top of her arm was definitely out of its socket.

Mac doubted she could ride, but as it happened, that was a moot point anyway.

The brown mare whinnied, making Mac and Jill look up just in time to see it pull free from the rock. It stared at them wildly, its reins hanging loose, before darting after its brethren through the gap in the flames.

"I don't think I can ride anyway," Jill mumbled honestly, the pain making her slur her words slightly.

MacGyver bit into his bottom lip. There was no easy way around it, they had to move and fast or be trapped by the brushfire.

And that meant they had to try and run.

He looked Jill square in the face, his deep eyes locking with hers. She was hurting, perhaps even not quite lucid, but he had to make her understand what he was going to do next.

"Jill, we have to move, and it has to be now." He put a hand gently on her good arm. "I'm going to pull you up, and you're gonna need to put your weight on me and try to walk as fast as you can."

Jill nodded absently.

Maybe that's a good thing; maybe she won't feel this so bad...

Feeling guilty, Mac carefully drew Jill up, throwing her good arm over his shoulder.

She cried out, but then nodded blearily. "Let's go," she panted. "Before I decide to pass out..."

Mac nodded back and headed for the ever-decreasing hole in the fire, trying not to jolt Jill as he moved.

He could hear her chest heaving with the effort it was taking, and from the smoke swirling about them, filling their lungs.

It wasn't so much walking as being dragged, but it was the best MacGyver could do to get them clear.

Once they were far enough from the burning brush, Mac slowed and looked back.

The fire was spreading rapidly over Billy's unkempt land, and at the rate it was traveling it would soon find them again. For now though, he needed to catch his breath and tend to Jill's shoulder.

Heading for a dip in the landscape, Mac did a mental calculation of how long he thought they had if no one came to their rescue. The odds he came back with didn't exactly make him feel good, so he concentrated on the here and now.

Maybe there would be something he could do to change those odds, once he'd had time to rest and fix Jill up.

There were more boulders where he'd chosen to stop and literally take a breather, and they were handily the right size to drop Jill down onto rather than putting her through more agony lowering her to the ground.

Mac slid her arm from his shoulder and let her slip down onto the rock. "How you doing?" He hunkered down so he was level with her face, watching her reactions.

"I've been better." Jill was gulping down air, but she seemed more coherent now they were away from the smoke and fumes.

"If we're going to carry on – and trust me, we have to – then I need to immobilize that arm so we don't keep jarring it." MacGyver sifted through his jacket pocket while he waited for a reaction.

"And it's going to hurt like hell." Jill's brow creased and she closed her eyes, preparing for the pain. "Just make it as quick as you can."

"I'll try," Mac promised as he finally found his trusty duck tape and began to unroll the edge.

Jill's eyes widened, probably surprised that he carried such a thing, but then as he began to strap her arm up with it, the surprise turned to agony and she bit into her lip not to yelp out in pain.

By the time he'd finished, Jill's forehead was covered in beads of perspiration, and not from the fire. Mac felt bad that he'd had to hurt her to help her, but he'd been in such situations himself, and it was better in the long run to minimize any movement.

He glanced back the way they had come, and was alarmed to discover the brush near them was already smoldering. He checked his watch, but they'd only been stationary a couple of minutes.

It's moving too fast...

“We have to get going.” Without waiting for a reply, he pulled Jill’s good arm back over his shoulder and urged her on.

Jill’s feet slid across the ground rather than walked, putting extra weight on MacGyver, slowing their progress even more.

Once they were out of the dip, it became apparent that the situation had become graver than they could have imagined.

Mac came to a stop as he realized the landscape ahead of them, as well as behind, was awash with angry orange and red flames that seemed to eat the very horizon.

While he’d been tending Jill’s shoulder, the fire had somehow encircled them. It had become so huge, in such a short while, that the troubleshooter suspected that it was no longer only their lives in peril.

This was now a very real brushfire that could endanger all the ranches in the area, and none of the locals knew it was coming to try and prepare for it.

And there’s no way to get out of here and warn them!

Jill saw the wall of flames and her body sagged in MacGyver’s arms, as if she had already given in.

He shook her lightly. “Hey, c’mon, I thought ranchers were made of tougher stuff?”

She swallowed and took down a long, tired breath. “There’s nowhere to go...” Jill’s voice was so low it was almost inaudible.

She’s right...but I’m not taking that for an answer. Not just yet.

“C’mon, we keep moving, and *we think*.” Mac tugged her forwards, and she reluctantly began to move again.

If anything, their progress was even slower than before, but while they moved, they were alive.

And while they were alive, there was still a chance MacGyver could reason a way out.

“Jill, are there any old properties out this way? Think, *and think hard*.” He was dragging her now, and soon he knew he would have to carry her completely or stop. And how long could he keep that up for? “Old barns, anything that might contain something I could use?”

“Use for what..?” Jill swayed, almost stumbling despite his grip.

“I don’t know. I can’t tell you that until I find it.”

Jill blinked as if his words were a puzzle. “I’m not even sure that makes sense...but, I think Billy’s original cabin was out here until he got the extra land off Baxter. I guess it might still be there.”

“Where?” Mac’s tone was urgent, as if he could will the answer out of her faster.

Jill’s exhausted brain didn’t have a hurry left in it, however. “I...I think it was somewhere over that rise...” With no good arm free to point, she bobbed her head in the direction she thought was correct.

Ironically, it was the only way they could go without getting dangerously close to the fire again anyway.

“Well what are we waiting for?” Mac tried to keep his voice sounding jovial. He had to keep Jill moving, keep her focused and keep her thinking that had a hope in Hades of surviving.

It took ten more minutes before they reached the brow of the small hill. But below it, sure enough were the remains of a very old cabin.

One side wall was completely gone, the chimney had crumbled into a pile of stone that now lay strewn across the brush, but there was still enough left to possibly offer up some “MacGyver tools.”

Mac’s gait increased until he finally had to give in and throw Jill completely over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift. He had to hurry.

Jill appeared oblivious anyway.

Once he was at the cabin, he found a clear spot outside and tenderly lowered her down.

“Thanks for the ride...bit on the bumpy side, though.”

MacGyver couldn’t resist a smile, but he also couldn’t waste time on banter. Pushing away the remnants of a door, he edged inside the cabin, being careful to test each floor board before putting his full weight on it.

Strangely, the timbers here seemed more solid than those of Billy’s newer home. *They don’t build them like they used to...*

There was still an old stove in the corner, covered in webs, dust and corrosion. An old picture hung on the wall, the corners curled and rotting with exposure to the elements.

But none of this was any use for Mac.

He continued to a heap of unwanted items that had been piled on the floor, probably when Billy had made the move. There was an old blue and white striped mattress, a rusted and dented frying pan, and an oil lamp that had seen better days.

Mac picked up the lamp and rolled it over in his hands.

These kind of lamps needed kerosene, but would Billy have taken it all with him?

Moving to the kitchen area of the cabin, MacGyver began to throw open the cupboards and delve into any contents that had been left.

There were old packets of food that had obviously been chewed on by rodents, a few cans and...

Mac's heart almost missed a beat as he spotted a large, very rusted can of kerosene.

But would there be anything left in it? Or indeed, enough for what he had in mind?

He let his right hand slip around it and pull it from its tomb. It definitely had weight to it, and he could hear the contents swilling around as he moved it.

Taking off the lid, he peered inside and guessed it was almost full. Still not a lot for his plan, but he'd have to work with it.

He took his plunder back outside to Jill, because now he was going to need her local knowledge to aid his plan.

Mac kneeled beside her. "I think I have an idea that might stop or at least slow the fire, but I need your help. Are there any water sources around here? Or maybe a road? Even a dirt track would do."

Jill considered it, although her expression said she was puzzled as to what he could be planning. She rubbed at her immobilized arm absently as her mind ticked over. "What good is a road or water to us?" She eventually asked, as if it would help bring something to mind.

"Because I'm hoping to create something called a backburn. If I can start small fires with this kerosene along the area in front of the blaze, anything flammable will already have been destroyed when the main fire reaches it. A road or water source is like a natural firebreak – there's very little scrub there to start with, so it'll help."

Jill nodded, finally understanding. "Well, there's an old trail that might be clear enough of brush to help, but if we go that way we're going to fry."

Mac thought so too and nodded. "A backburn is exactly what it sounds like; the small fires are designed to burn backwards towards the main fire front. We'd be trapped between the two..."

Jill shrugged and then scowled when it made her shoulder twinge. "I can't go on much further anyway, and without transport we're never going to outrun this thing. Either way we die. At least with your plan we might stop the fire spreading."

"It's a long shot at best," Mac conceded.

Jill gave him her good hand to hoist her up. “Then let’s try and change those odds.” She smiled. “Something tells me you’re the kind of guy that can.”

MacGyver wasn’t so sure about that anymore, but he was ready to try. Tugging Jill gently to her feet he picked up the kerosene with his free hand and they headed for the trail, one labored, pain-filled step at a time.

* * * *

The trail Jill had guided them too wasn’t quite as wide as Mac had hoped, and it definitely wasn’t used much anymore. That being said, there was still a definite line of terrain that was clear of shrubs and anything else that might burn.

He wiped his forearm across his soaked brow and assessed what he was about to do. There was too much land to cover with what oil he had in the can, and if he used it too sparingly then his “burn” simply wouldn’t happen.

There was no other choice but to try.

Pete, I thought you said this would be a nice easy one..?

Looking through his pockets, he tugged out his trusty book of matches and began to walk the length of the path, trickling the kerosene in just the right places to cause his “mini fires”.

Jill watched from a nearby boulder, her eyes dull with defeat.

When MacGyver was sure he’d done all he could to make things work, he walked back to her for one last word. But then, as he looked down at the injured rancher, he wasn’t exactly sure what to say.

He’d come to this town just to help save a few horses, he hadn’t expected to be saying any long, lamenting speeches about dying out here.

Jill appeared to sense his discomfort. “Just do it will you?” She sighed. “Just light the damn thing and get this over with...”

Mac opened his mouth, then thought better of replying and closed it again. He took the matches, struck one and walked to the first point he’d doused and lit it.

His breath caught in his throat as he watched and waited to see if it would catch.

There was a fizz, some smoke, and then eventually a small, glowing flame that flickered in the breeze began to grow and dance.

Mac moved to the next point, and the next until the whole line of the trail that he’d been able to prepare was smoldering and burning. As he turned to walk back to Jill, he could already feel the heat in the back of his neck, and knew they wouldn’t have long.

“We should maybe move?” Mac wasn’t sure where to, but just sitting here and dying seemed so wrong.

Jill had already accepted her fate. “Oh I don’t know, we have a good view here. Best seats in the house for the big show...”

Mac dropped down beside her and watched as his handiwork began to crackle and blaze towards the original fire. The direction of the breeze was a Godsend, helping it along its way.

The vibrant colors and waltzing tendrils were almost hypnotic to the point where he saw nothing else.

But then Mac’s ears detected a new sound. Was that thunder?

He tugged his gaze away from the backburn and looked in the direction of the sound.

It didn’t seem possible, and it certainly wasn’t rational – horses tended to *run away* from danger, and that included fires.

And yet, galloping towards them at ridiculous speed was the white mustang. Its hoofs were digging into the ground so hard that a cloud of spiraling dust was left in its wake.

It was Jill’s turn to open her mouth and then be dumbstruck.

“That’s not natural, right?” MacGyver looked at her and raised a brow.

Jill shook her head. “Not in the least. He should be going in the opposite direction...”

But the stallion didn’t seem to care. It ran up to them, pausing only a few feet away, its nostrils flaring and its large, wild eyes scrutinizing them.

It pawed the ground, snorted, and then trotted forwards.

Mac carefully stood up, slowly putting one foot in front of the other to meet it. He didn’t want to spook the horse because his mind was already considering a new option.

But that was all down to the stallion now.

Mac held out a hand, letting the animal get his scent. Would it remember him from Jill’s ranch? Did it already remember? Was that why it was here?

So many questions and so very little time for answers, and one wrong move, and it was all over.

The horse snorted again and then whinnied, but it didn’t bolt, like he’d expected. Instead, it shook its head, long mane flying wildly in the breeze, its eyes locked onto Mac.

“Easy there, fella...”

MacGyver took the ultimate risk and made a fast, but careful move to mount the stallion even though there was no saddle. He'd ridden this way before, but that had been a broken horse, not a mustang and he fully expected to be tossed to the ground.

The stallion didn't move. It was so still, so indifferent to his presence that it could have been a rocky sentinel fixed on the landscape since the dawn of time.

Mac patted the horse's neck, wondering if it actually sensed why he had come to this place.

But the game wasn't over yet.

If he was to escape with Jill, he needed to climb back down and get her on the stallion too. Would it really allow that?

This all had to be some weird fluke, and Mac wasn't sure how long it would last.

He clambered down anyway, thinking the horse would finally realize there was a brush fire approaching and canter off.

It still didn't move. It just watched them, snorting once in awhile as if it was urging them to hurry.

MacGyver tried to scoop Jill up off the ground, but it was a difficult move with her arm, and because she was staring incredulously at the horse. "I'm delirious right? Wild mustangs don't behave this way...no way. *No way...*"

"Well I'm not going to look the gift horse in the mouth, so to speak," Mac half-joked as he used all of his strength to lift Jill up and onto the stallion's back.

It moved, warily, but didn't buck or bolt.

"Easy there, fella," Mac soothed as he climbed up behind Jill and tried to steady her as she lolled forwards.

The horse ignored MacGyver and started to trot in the direction it wanted.

Mac thought about trying to direct it using small tugs on its mane, but at the end of the day he had no idea where to go to avoid the fire.

Either the horse did know a way, or it was trapped here too with them.

Apparently, it was the former.

The stallion picked up more speed, and it was all Mac could do to keep on its back and hold Jill there too.

It raced along the edge of the raging fire until finally it reached an area where the blaze was less intense.

MacGyver realized instantly what the mustang intended – it was going to jump the fire here, where the flames were smaller in height.

“Hang on..!” He tried to warn Jill what was about to happen, but before the words even left his mouth they were soaring through the air as the horse took a gigantic leap.

They landed hard the other side, and Jill bounced to the left, almost sliding off onto the scrub below.

Mac caught her at the last minute, struggling to keep his own balance as the stallion abruptly came to a halt.

The horse snorted and craned its neck to look at the humans sitting on its back.

MacGyver took its mane, and wrapped his free arm tightly around Jill to keep her seated.

He needed to get her help, and the closest place he knew of was Troy Baxter’s.

Would the stallion follow his prompts? Would it even know how?

And more to the point, can we even trust Baxter? He wondered silently.

Looking back once to check on the fire, MacGyver was relieved to see that his backburn seemed to at least be slowing the growth of the flames.

Now it was time to try and get help for Jill, and help to put out the fire for good. He kicked his heels lightly on the stallion and tugged lightly to the left on its mane.

The horse seemed to consider what to do, then settled into a light canter in the direction of Baxter’s ranch.

* * * *

MacGyver wasn’t a fan of Troy Baxter, and probably never would agree with his reasoning, but as the stallion cleared a ridge and Baxter’s place came into view, the troubleshooter couldn’t have been more relieved.

Baxter was out instructing some of his hands near a corral, and as Mac approached on the stallion Baxter couldn’t help but stop and gape at the spectacle. “Well I’ll be...”

He stared for a moment longer until he saw Jill’s lolling form, and then ran forwards, shouting a couple of his men to give a hand.

They gently took Jill from MacGyver’s grasp and took her inside Baxter’s home.

Baxter remained in the yard with an expression that said he was about to demand answers. “Just what the hell is going on?”

“It’s a long story, but Roy Massey killed Billy and then tried to cover it all up with a brush fire. We caught him in the act, but he got away.” Mac stayed perched on the stallion. It was strange, but he felt like even now he had to protect it from Baxter. “You might want to call the fire department – I tried to stop the fire but I don’t know how much good I’ve done.”

“Now why would Roy want to hurt anyone?” Baxter put his hands on his hips defensively. He seemed to ignore the news of the fire altogether.

“Because his wife and her lover are both buried on Billy’s land. We caught him digging up the remains. You must know that he was accused of it years ago?”

Baxter took off his Stetson and rubbed at his grey hair. His face said he did know. He seemed to think for a moment, and then called over another ranch hand. “Mark, get the fire department on the phone and tell them we have an out of control fire between my place and Billy’s. And you better call the sheriff too.”

When he’d finished giving instructions, he turned back to the troubleshooter. “Roy was here not fifteen minutes ago. He grabbed all his gear and sped off in his truck in one almighty hurry.”

MacGyver looked at the entrance to Baxter’s place. There was a left or a right turn. “Which way did he go?”

Troy slid his hat back on and tipped his head to the left. “He was headed towards the main highway, and there’s only one road out to that.”

Mac took a breath and let his mind tick over. Massey had a fifteen minute head start – there was no way to catch him even if Baxter had a truck he could borrow. Heck, it wouldn’t work even if Baxter had a Ferrari at this point.

And yet there had to be a way.

If Massey made it to the highway he was the type of man that could melt into his surroundings and not be caught. He was an old man people would feel sorry for. Someone people *would trust*.

Mac couldn’t let a man who had escaped justice for so many years, do it again, not after Billy’s death.

The question now, was how could he catch Massey without a miracle?

Part Four

Baxter apparently read MacGyver’s mind. “You’d need to outrun the wind itself to catch Massey now...”

Mac cocked his head, the thought of defeat suddenly giving him the answer. Massey was *driving*. That meant he was restricted by the road he was on, but if a person could travel overland, or as a bird might fly, they might just get ahead.

And if anything could outrun the wind, it was the mustang he was sitting on.

That just left one other small problem. If he could catch, or even get in front of Massey, then how could he stop a truck with a horse?

Mac gently pulled on the stallion's mane, and insanely it obeyed, doing a one-eighty so he could look around Baxter's ranch for ideas.

Some of the hands were replacing fence posts that had supposedly been damaged by the horses. It was ironic, but Mac thought this might be the answer.

He let the horse trot over without dismounting. "Can you loan me that sack, and those short sections of post with the nails still in?"

The cowboy scowled and it looked like he might actually refuse until his boss stepped in.

"Give him what he wants," Baxter grumbled. "Any man who can tame a damn mustang like that deserves even my respect."

MacGyver was tempted to admit that he hadn't "tamed" anything, and that maybe the horse simply sensed his great love for nature and animals. But then there really wasn't time for conversation, not if he wanted to catch up with Massey.

The ranch hand eventually passed him the sack with the short posts dangling from the end, and Mac managed to balance it in front of him. Keeping it there one-handed was going to be fun while at a gallop, but he'd do it, for Billy, and for everyone else Massey had wronged – including the herd of mustangs.

He tipped his head to Baxter in a silent thank you for his help, and then gently kicked the white horse into a canter that quickly developed into near flight.

MacGyver had ridden some fast animals in his time, but this stallion was up there with the best of them, even though it hadn't been officially broken.

Deep down, he still couldn't believe how it was behaving, but then he learned over the years that some things tended to defy logic.

The horse whinnied as if it knew what he was thinking, its legs skimming over the ground like it was some sallow phantom.

They reached the top of a brow and in the distance MacGyver could see the brush fire still burning. Below and to the right was the road that led to the highway.

And on it, Massey's truck careered over the blacktop, his maniacal driving suggesting he knew the chase wasn't over.

Mac nudged the stallion's side again, asking it for more speed and hoping it had the stamina and was willing.

The downhill gradient seemed to help, and they were soon passing Massey and heading out to where the road snaked in front of him.

Massey went out of view as he drove between two outcrops of rock, and Mac guessed he had about two minutes to make his move before the killer emerged the other side.

Pulling up the mustang, its coat glistening with sweat and its nostrils snorting with exertion, MacGyver slipped down and took the sack he'd brought.

Taking his spoils into the center of the highway, he tugged out the nail-filled posts and laid them out, spikes facing upwards.

It would be a strange kind of justice if it worked; because Massey would be caught by the very wood he had sabotaged to look like the mustangs had caused damage.

As the last of the posts were laid out, Mac heard the roar of a motor being pushed to its very limit. The truck was screaming as Massey floored the gas and steered out of the bend.

By the time Massey had seen the posts in the road, it was all over – his front tires torn to shreds by the sharp spikes.

Enraged, Massey continued to gun the gas, trying to drive the 4x4 on its steel rims.

Sparks danced from the road as the metal grated on its surface, but without rubber to give traction, there was no real speed either.

Massey gave in a hundred yards down the highway and jumped from the cab.

But he hadn't finished, not yet.

Pulling a revolver from his belt, he fired repeatedly in anger, without even really taking aim. Curse words spat from his mouth as he pulled back on the trigger again and again until the gun was empty.

He still pulled on the trigger, the empty chamber clicking around and around as if he were in some hypnotic trance.

Mac waited until he was sure he didn't need to dodge any more slugs and approached the old man. He was about to ask Massey to give him the gun, and use the clichéd "it's over" speech, but Massey had other ideas about that too.

As MacGyver got close enough, Massey tossed the Colt at him, and it was all the troubleshooter could do to evade being hit by the thing.

Using Mac's maneuver to his advantage, Massey took a swing at his foe, narrowly missing as MacGyver ducked sideway again.

This time, Mac swung a punch of his own, catching the old-timer square on the jaw.

Massey slumped back with just the one blow, his age making his fighting skills less than a match for MacGyver's.

Mac sighed and shook his hand, his knuckles tingling from the punch. He looked at Massey's prone form out cold at the side of his disabled 4x4, and then realized he may have a transport issue.

Spinning around to where the stallion should be, he found empty space.

The horse, it appeared, had a sense of humor, and had trotted off into the distance. It was now grazing happily, but looked up to stare as it sensed his gaze.

Mac threw his arms up in the air. "Hey, how the heck am I supposed to get home without you?" He asked the nag, even though it couldn't answer.

The stallion shook its head, flowing mane billowing in the wind, then it reared on both hind legs like a famous movie horse, whinnied, and then bolted over the nearest ridge like the wild thing it was.

MacGyver's face changed from a frown to a smile as he watched it go, and was thankful to hear police sirens in the distance.

It had been a long and very weird day out of the office.

* * * *

Phoenix Headquarters Sometime Later...

MacGyver strolled into his old friend Pete Thornton's office and waited for a reaction. Pete was honing his senses – or so he insisted, and was convinced he could recognize a person with their "scent."

To add a little fun to the proceedings, Mac had just *borrowed* a squirt of Nikki's favorite perfume and was now grinning as he wafted it around the room with his right hand.

Some people would probably think it was a cruel trick to play on a blind man, but Pete wasn't the sort to consider himself disabled by his affliction, and Mac knew he'd not take offence. In fact it would be part of the challenge.

"Mac, is that you?" Pete was smiling smugly. "That's kind of a girly aftershave for a guy like you..."

MacGyver rolled his eyes and dropped heavily into the chair in front of Pete's desk. "Did Nikki squeal on me?"

Pete chuckled. "And here's me thinking you were getting in touch with your feminine side."

As he talked, Pete shuffled carefully through some papers on his desk with his fingertips until he came to a paycheck. He offered it over to MacGyver. "You'll find this includes a healthy bonus for services rendered. You definitely earned it on this one. We had no clue it would be anything more than a little conservation work."

"You mean a murder or three." Mac looked at the check and his eyes widened slightly. It was way more than he'd been expecting, difficult assignment or not. "So what's happening to Massey?"

"Well, he's been arrested and will stand trial for both the deaths of his wife and her lover, and of Billy. There's no statute of limitation on murder." Pete shook his head. "You have to wonder why, when he could have simply gotten a divorce."

Mac shrugged. "I guess some people don't see any other answer other than violence." He noticed several letters from the Bureau of Land Management on Pete's desk and sat forward, suddenly concerned about the horses he'd tried to save. "Any news on the mustangs?" he asked casually.

Pete sighed. "We have a problem. The horses have been moved to Phoenix land, but the Bureau of Land Management has finally stepped in."

"Why am I sensing that's a bad thing?"

"Because it is," Pete admitted. "The Bureau is insisting the horses are sold to private individuals. There is apparently an over-population issue with wild mustangs, and they don't want it perpetuating by letting them roam free, Phoenix land or not."

MacGyver balked. These horses deserved to live and have their freedom, and red tape was going to take it away. "It's crazy!"

"I know, and truth be told I think the Bureau simply doesn't like it that Phoenix made them look bad with this whole situation. But that's my unofficial take. The official one is that policy dictates that the mustangs are sold in situations like this."

"There must be something we can do? Cant you pull some strings with your connections in the government?" Mac knew if Pete could, he already would have, but he had to ask – they had to have some kind of option.

Pete sounded just as frustrated. "I can't change the law, and this particular one has been in existence since 1971."

MacGyver looked at the paycheck in his hands, and the hefty bonus that went with it.

I'm freelance...not technically on the Phoenix payroll.

“Pete, you don’t actually employ me, right?”

Pete wasn’t sure where this was going. “Well, you have a contract, but I don’t actually recall you ever signing it and giving it me back after that Christmas party at the hospital...”

Mac smiled. “See, I knew there was a reason I didn’t put my name to that thing. *That* makes me a private individual, not part of Phoenix. *And that* means I can buy the horses and put them where I please. Somewhere safe maybe, like the Phoenix conservation area?”

Finally the penny dropped and Pete smiled too. “Hey, I like your thinking. I think I can arrange something along those lines.”

MacGyver handed his check back over the desk, letting Pete feel it with his fingertips. “I think you’re going to need this to make the purchase.” He stood up and turned to make for the door.

Pete apparently heard his footsteps and called after him. “Hey, I thought you went out there to save those horses anyway, not the other way around?” He was grinning as he spoke.

Mac didn’t turn back, but couldn’t resist a smile either. “Maybe,” he confessed, his mind filling with images of the white stallion. “Maybe...”

And with that he was gone, heading back outside to his bike to go take a look at Sam’s new apartment.

If it was anything like its new owner, Mac expected the place to be messy – on a grand scale.

But then, thinking about it, he did tend to hoard things too. *Hockey games, hockey shirts, hockey sticks, ski poles, cowboy movies, pen knives, Harry’s pickup, Harry’s car...*

Mac smiled. *Hmn, maybe it’s hereditary?*

* * * *

***Phoenix Foundation Local Reserve
Nevada***

MacGyver leaned on the white fence post, a bunch of paperwork clasped in his hands that said the herd of mustangs was now his. It had been a tricky deal, as the Bureau really hadn’t wanted them all to go to one person, but as always Mac and Pete had pulled it off.

Now, as he watched, the group ran free, the lead mare guiding them across the landscape as the sun began to set over the horizon.

It was like a scene from an old western, and one that he was glad to have been able to make happen.

In the distance, the stallion stood proudly watching over the other horses. He was well back from them, but close enough to join them if he perceived danger.

Hopefully, MacGyver would never be thought of as that to these mustangs. Not after what they'd been through together.

As Mac watched, the stallion started to canter towards him until it was just a few feet away.

It snorted, whinnied, and then slowly dared to walk up to the fence where he stood.

Large, intelligent eyes stared into MacGyver's like the horse was baring its soul to a friend. Then, unexpectedly, it nuzzled Mac like they had been horse and master for years.

But MacGyver would never consider himself that.

He loved these horses, yes, but they were meant to be wild, and free, and that was the way he wanted it to stay.

Mac smiled and offered up an apple to the stallion. "I guess I should say thanks, huh, fella?"

He rubbed at its nose, and it gently took the fruit and then bolted, kicking its rear hoofs in the air like a playful youngster.

"You're very welcome," MacGyver called after it with a smile.

The horse slowed, turned to glance back, and then began to gallop over the horizon as the sun finally dipped down and was gone.

The rest of the herd stirred, and with the mare at the helm they too kicked into a gallop and vanished into the enveloping darkness of the soothing night sky.

MacGyver drank in the fresh air and the gorgeous view for just a moment longer, and then turned to climb into his newly repaired Jeep.

A thirty-year-old murder had finally been solved, the mustangs had been saved, and Mac was feeling like maybe he'd done one small deed towards the bigger picture of saving the planet from its worst enemy – man.

The End