

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.

--MacGyve
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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.*

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