

The Top End

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 midsized 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."

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