

American Dream Part 1

“So I press this and then it’ll... Damn. What did I do?” Detective Kate Murphy ran a hand through her hair and sat back in the chair. “I’m used to Restoretool now, it doesn’t work like this.”

MacGyver reached past her to press a different key. The screen cleared and, line by line, the grainy photograph resolved into a clear image. Information scrolled down the side of the screen – the time of day the photograph was taken, the direction the photographer had been facing, their estimated height and a wealth of other information. Kate leaned closer to the screen to study the face revealed in the photo.

“You can zoom in on the part you want to look at too. Here.” MacGyver scooted his chair closer to the keyboard and highlighted the face in the picture. The computer whirred and a close up of the face appeared.

“That’s so sharp, you can almost count the pimples on his chin!” Kate shook her head at the young man in the picture. “I hate working gang crime, you see so many lives ruined because guys like Carlos here can’t resist the temptation of the easy buck.”

A detective moved aside as she stood up and walked across to the printer, waiting for the machine to spit out the image.

“You’re right, MacGyver, this is much better than Restoretool. We’d be happy to trial it here. Just let me know what else you need and we’ll get it set up.”

“Thanks, Kate.” MacGyver leaned closer to the screen, then turned, calling to Kate as she disappeared into the next room. “How did Carlos get involved with the gangs, anyway?”

“Hmm?” Kate returned, carrying two cups. “Grew up with uncles and brothers running drugs, got into the family business as soon as he got into double digits. You know the drill, MacGyver – drugs in his schoolbag, no-one suspects the kid, moved up to dealing a couple of years ago and now here we are and he’s running the crew.” She blew on her coffee and took a sip, setting the other cup down next to MacGyver. “And before you ask, yes, every effort was made with him to break the cycle. Some kids are just bad all the way to the middle. You can’t save everyone.”

MacGyver picked up his drink, studying the face on the screen. Flat, hostile eyes stared out of the photo, the young man’s slicked back hair, neck tattoo and the chains hanging from his duster signalling his gang status. MacGyver clicked back to the original photograph. Carlos sat on the steps of a derelict building, smoke from his cigarette curling up past his hand, his mouth open and his expression furious, photographed in the act of dressing down another ganger. The butt of a gun poked up from the waistband of his jeans.

“I don’t believe anyone’s all bad, Kate.” MacGyver got up and collected his papers, casting a last glance at the screen. Carlos glared back at him, dark eyes angry. “We’ll need to set up cameras where they can’t be found and vandalised, somewhere we can get back to in the morning to collect the film. Then it’ll take the machine a couple of hours to scan the tapes for movement and clean up the relevant sections. After that, it’s you and me and whoever else can be spared going through the tapes and picking out the images we want to look at in more detail.” He flipped the cover on Kate’s

folder, reading the Dymo Tape label on the front as he drank his tea. "South Side Samurai? That's what they call themselves?"

"I know, right?" Kate smiled back at him, but there was little humour in it. "They fancy themselves as warriors, the top tier even carry swords. Go figure..." She moved the files and unrolled a map on the table. "Here's where we'll be."

MacGyver spent the afternoon in borrowed overalls, placing cameras with the help of two Phoenix techs dressed as power company repairmen. Climbing the poles to 'fix' the transformer cans and attach the cameras drew a certain amount of attention from local kids, some of whom wore the South Side Samurai's distinctive dusters. MacGyver was aware of hostile eyes on him, of being followed as they worked their way around the area. Waiting at the bottom of a pole, MacGyver looked around the street. Rubbish rotted in the corners, a drain had overflowed and the buildings had a run-down, scoured look, with peeling paint and boards over broken windows. A tattered curtain twitched in a second floor window and he caught a glimpse of a thin child in a dirty undershirt. The only car on the street was up on cinder blocks, graffiti bright across its rusted paint. A gust of wind swirled the dust and carried with it the sound of sobbing. Looking up at the tech setting the camera, MacGyver saw a figure crouched on a rooftop opposite. The figure stared back at him for a moment, then stood and turned, long coat flaring out behind it as it walked along the roof and out of view.

Cameras set, they returned to the van and headed back to the Foundation. MacGyver was glad to get back to his own part of Los Angeles, the sunshine in Venice Beach seeming so much brighter and warmer than it had in South Central. He looked around as he drove home, trying to imagine what it must be like to live in a place where it wasn't safe to leave your house, where the gangs owned the streets and 'police' was a dirty word. He shivered, despite the warmth of the evening.

His answer machine was blinking when he got in.

BEEP: "Hi Dad, I'll be out of town for a few days, got a story to cover out in Bakersfield. It'd be great to go to a game this weekend though, if you're free. Let me know, ok? Bye." MacGyver smiled. That would be good.

BEEP: "Mac! Compadre! I got this great idea. Don't hang up! I got this map, never mind how, and I _"

MacGyver shook his head, hitting fast-forward. Jack and his hair-brained schemes could wait.

BEEP: "MacGyver? I hope this is the right number. I wasn't sure who else to call and I need... Please call me back, it's 555-2131. I just... Um..." CLICK. MacGyver frowned and replayed the message. The voice and accent were familiar, but he just couldn't place them. He lifted the receiver and dialled.

The phone burred in his ear for a long time. He was about to hang up when the person on the other end picked up.

"Hello?"

MacGyver blinked, recognising the voice.

“Zia?!”

American Dream Part 2

“Zia?!”

“MacGyver? I didn’t know if you’d still have the same number...” There was a pause and MacGyver heard a sniff and a rustle. “It’s good to hear from you.”

“Yeah, you too. Are you OK? You sound kind of...” He listened to white noise hissing on the line.

“Zia? You still there?”

“Yes. Yes I am. I don’t want to bother you, MacGyver, but I didn’t know who else to call. I...”

MacGyver heard the sniff again, followed by a sigh.

“Zia, I’m never too busy to talk to a friend. What’s wrong? Is Ahmed OK?”

There was a long pause.

“I don’t know, MacGyver.” When Zia spoke again, her voice was very small. “He’s... I can’t... Can I meet you somewhere?”

“Sure. Where are you?” There was a sigh on the other end of the line and MacGyver frowned.

“South Central. How about Gino’s? Do you know where that is?”

“I’ll find it. Meet me there in half an hour, OK?”

MacGyver put the receiver down and stood staring at it. He hadn’t heard from Zia and Ahmed in a long time. They’d stayed in touch after he’d helped them to escape from Afghanistan and start a new life here in America. Ahmed was a bright boy and a hard worker, even if he’d had a lot of catching up to do – he hadn’t been to school before and the American school system had come as a bit of a shock to him. Zia had found work and last time he’d spoken to them, they’d seemed to be doing well. But then he’d had a run of assignments abroad, they’d both moved house and, as often happens, they’d lost touch. MacGyver frowned, adding up the time that had passed. Ahmed must be almost grown up now, he’d looked about ten when they first met, which would make him nineteen or thereabouts now. MacGyver combed his hair with his fingers, picked up his jacket and headed out.

Driving through the dusk, MacGyver’s thoughts turned to the first time they’d met. He’d still been working for DXS then, on assignment to recover a fallen satellite from behind enemy lines. He’d found the satellite and recovered the data when a group of local bounty hunters had caught up with him. They’d shot down his makeshift hang glider, and him in the process, he’d crash landed in a stream, breaking the glider and his arm with it. He’d been dazed and bleeding when Ahmed had found him; the kid had taken a huge chance in rescuing him and Zia had taken another in allowing him to hide in her house while he recovered. He’d been delirious, and even now the only things he

remembered from those first few days were pain and, the smell of jasmine flowers. MacGyver was sure he'd have succumbed to infection or blood loss without their help. He owed them his life.

He slowed, scanning the dingy shop fronts. He pulled in to the kerb outside a run-down cafe, half a dozen dented tables reflecting pink from the fly-specked neon sign above. Two elderly Hispanic men in undershirts and trousers shiny with grease watched him over the rims of their cups. MacGyver nodded to them and opened the door. The cafe smelled of cooking oil and over-boiled coffee, warm and bitter. Zia sat at a corner table, headscarf pulled up over her long hair. She looked up as MacGyver's shadow fell across her table, smiling and holding out her hands to him. He slid into the booth opposite her, took her hands and kissed her on the cheek. Beautiful, but thinner than he remembered, with dark shadows under her eyes.

"Hey,"

"I'm so glad you came, MacGyver, I didn't know what to do." Zia tightened her grip on his hands, pressing her lips together and looking down.

"What's happened, Zia? What's wrong?"

She took a shaky breath and opened her mouth to speak. Struggling, she shook her head and sighed.

"I'm not sure where to start. Ahmed's always been such a good boy, always helpful, always hardworking. Coming here was a dream come true for him – a new start where he'd have chances I could never have given him at home. And at first it was so good."

MacGyver nodded, encouraging her to continue.

"But it's hard, starting again in a new place. Not everyone is pleased to see foreigners and we soon learned not to tell people where we are from. I lost my job, we had to move and we didn't have enough money. Ahmed understands, he knows I'm doing my best and he doesn't blame me for things being difficult, but it's hard for him to see his friends have everything when he doesn't. Especially when I tell him that they only have more because they're willing to do bad things to get the money."

MacGyver frowned. He had a nasty feeling that he knew where this story was going.

"Why didn't you tell me? I could have helped and –"

"No." Zia cut him off sharply, a challenge in her eyes. "You gave us this chance. It's up to us to make it work now."

MacGyver sat back. Pride and wanting to manage everything by yourself were things he understood well. Asking for help was something he found incredibly difficult too.

"But you called me today, which means there's something you want me to help with. What's Ahmed got himself into, Zia? What do you need me to do?"

Zia slid her hands out of MacGyver's grip. She folded them around her coffee cup and stared down, as if she might see the answers in the murky liquid.

“Ahmed has a new group of friends,” she said hesitantly, “They’re different from his school friends. They’re... wild. He sees that they have cars and money and that people are afraid of them, that they are powerful, and he wants that for himself. For us. He wants us to have a better place to live, and a car, and for people not to look down on us. But I know how they earn this money, MacGyver – they sell drugs and hurt people.” Zia looked up, her eyes haunted. “Ahmed says that he knows it’s wrong, but that there isn’t another way to get what we need. I think he has become part of this gang, even though I’ve begged him not to.” A single tear rolled down her cheek, she brushed it away with the end of her scarf, her eyes red.

“You want me to talk to him?”

“He looks up to you. He listens to you.” Zia nodded. “He might take your advice where he doesn’t take mine.” She reached across the table and took MacGyver’s hand again, her fingers warm from the cup. “It’s good to see you again, MacGyver. It’s been a long time.”

“Too long.” MacGyver smiled back at her. “Of course I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you.” Zia rose and looked at him for a long moment before leaning down to kiss him on the cheek. She walked out of the cafe and MacGyver turned to see her disappear around the corner. He shook his head. Zia was a friend in trouble, nothing more. Whatever connection they’d had before was long past.

But when she’d bent to kiss him, her hair had smelled of jasmine.

MacGyver pulled into the police station car park, gathered his gear from the back of the jeep and went inside.

“What time do you call this?!” Kate frowned at him from behind her desk.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry. Morning, detective...” MacGyver set his boxes down, pushed his sunglasses up onto his head and fished a mangled object out of a box. “One of the cameras got damaged last night and it took a bit of recovering.”

He laid the pieces on her desk and Kate picked one up, running her thumb over a cut edge.

“Damaged! Sliced in half, more like!” She picked up the other piece, fitting them together. “Where did you find it?”

“That half was nailed to the top of a dumpster, this half was inside the transformer can we’d fastened it next to. At least now we know what caused the power outage down there last night.” MacGyver fed a disk into the computer slot and waited for it to boot up. “These guys aren’t playing around, I think we need to be more careful next time.”

“No kidding.” Kate set aside the ruined camera and turned to her own computer. “We did get some good shots from the other ones though. We should be able to bust some of these scum for possession and dealing now. Here, have a look.” She turned the monitor and pressed a button.

The picture cleared, revealing a group of three young men. Two wore long coats, one had his hood pulled up and one had been snapped handing a small package over to the third. MacGyver reached past Kate to zoom in on the hooded youth's face. Line by line, the grainy image resolved and a familiar face looked back at him.

Ahmed.

American Dream Part 3

"That's Carlos in the middle. See there's something under his coat there, making it stand out like that? He's carrying a sword. What is this, the Middle Ages?" Kate popped the disk out of her computer and loaded another. Beside her, MacGyver stared at his own copy of the first photo.

Ahmed.

Involved with a gang.

The South Side Samurai.

Zia had been right...

"With these photos, we've got enough evidence to move on this gang. Most of the time they're real careful, but we can get them off the streets for sure this time." Kate sounded cheerful. "We can use your program to clean up the background, work out who's in the window up there as well as the three we've got right here. You recognise any of them?"

MacGyver frowned at the image. Was the youngest kid buying the package of drugs from Carlos? He couldn't see any money in his hand. Was the kid taking them to pass on to someone else?

"MacGyver? You listening to me?" Kate stared at him for a moment longer, then shook her head. These think-tank types were an odd lot. Give her ordinary, L.A cops any day, at least you knew what they were thinking.

To MacGyver, the kid seemed sad, too young to be wearing gang colours and carrying drugs, with eyes that looked a thousand years old. Ahmed, off to the side, looked uneasy. Carlos was focussed on the kid, the same expression that MacGyver had seen on the previous photo – cruel and arrogant. The tattoo on his neck stood out above the collar of his coat, displaying his allegiance.

"Earth to MacGyver! Are you receiving me?!" Kate stood next to him with her hands on her hips. "See anyone you know there?"

MacGyver blinked. Should he tell Kate he recognised Ahmed, or deny all knowledge? He knew he was a rotten liar and she was watching him close...

"Kate, do you really believe that these kids are beyond saving? Totally beyond?"

"Carlos? Yeah." Kate stood behind him, looking at the picture. "He got into this as soon as he could. We'd caught him skipping school, shoplifting, tagging and so on way before that. Never sorry, vicious temper, took a swing at a patrolman with a switchblade when he was nine. Said his uncle gave it to him, and having arrested the uncle for assault, I believe him."

“What about the others?” MacGyver’s voice was quiet, and Kate looked closer at him.

“Maybe, maybe not. Most of these kids know what they’re getting into. You know one of them, don’t you?”

MacGyver squirmed in his seat.

“If I did, would you be willing to let me talk to him before you go in and bust them? I guarantee that this kid isn’t bad.”

“The little kid is one of your Challenger’s Club hard luck cases, isn’t he?” Kate folded her arms and stared at him.

“Uh, not exactly. It’s complicated...”

“Look, I know you think you can save everyone, MacGyver, but this gang isn’t like the kids you’ve dealt with before. Most of them are hard-down mean ones, the next generation of lifers, you know?”

“Yeah, Kate, I hear you, but —” MacGyver stopped as Kate carried on over him.

“The leaders of this particular warband are real, honest to God psychos, MacGyver. They carry swords! Who does that? Guns are a dime a dozen in this neighbourhood, they’re normal, no matter how much we may hate that, but carrying a sword is some kind of twisted honour thing for them. You only get respect in this gang if you’ve killed someone with three feet of cold steel!” Kate stopped, biting back on whatever she’d been going to add. MacGyver watched, shocked at the depth of her fury.

“Mac, one of the South Side Samurai cut a patrolman last month. Four of them cornered him and they tried to execute him. The doctors stopped counting how many stitches it took to put him back together. These ‘kids’ are the bad ones, they’re the ones who’ll turn into the next...” She stopped, gripping the edge of the desk hard enough to whiten her knuckles.

“The next Dr. Zito.” MacGyver finished for her. Kate nodded.

“I can’t let that happen, MacGyver. I can’t take the chance that you trying to rescue him tips the gang off to our plans and they scatter. I won’t lose Carlos for the sake of one kid who knew damn well what he was getting into.” She shook back her hair and glared at him. “We’re setting up the bust for tomorrow. After that, you can try and find your hard luck case. But if we get him first, he’ll stand for his crimes. Understood?”

MacGyver nodded, but didn’t dare meet Kate’s eyes.

MacGyver spent the rest of the day analysing camera footage. He tried to call Zia when he went out to get a sandwich, but she didn’t pick up the phone. By the evening, he was desperate. He made a detour on his way home, driving through South Side Samurai territory to see if he could find Ahmed, but night was soon upon him and he had to give up the search.

Arriving home, he called Zia again, letting the phone ring and ring. He was just about to hang up when she answered.

“MacGyver?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Zia. Listen – you were right about Ahmed and he’s in real trouble. Is he there now?”

“No, he said he’d be back later and went out. MacGyver, I’m afraid for him. What’s going to happen?” MacGyver could hear the fear in Zia’s voice.

“Zia, can I come over? I need to talk to him when he gets back.” MacGyver listened to the line hiss. Silence. For a second he wondered if she was still there. He opened his mouth to speak...

“Yes.” She said, her voice trembling.

MacGyver scribbled down the address, grabbed his keys and headed out. He picked up Chinese food and drove to South Central, parking near where he’d found the vandalised camera. Zia watched him arrive from an upstairs window, coming down to meet him and locking the door securely after letting him in. MacGyver climbed the scuffed stairs to her third floor apartment, shabby but clean.

“When will Ahmed get back?” MacGyver dished out food onto two mismatched plates, shutting the boxes on Ahmed’s portion to keep it warm.

“He said around eleven. He washes up at a restaurant and that’s where he should be tonight, but I’m afraid he’s gone out with the gang instead.” Zia pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, looking very small in the threadbare room.

“Does he always get back when he says he will?” MacGyver set the plates on Zia’s small table, pulling out her chair for her.

“Yes. He’s a good boy.” Zia stared at the food. “This is kind of you.”

MacGyver waved his fork with a smile, around the last mouthful.

“I was getting some anyway. Besides, if I eat all this, I’m going to get fat!” He glanced over, pleased to see a tiny smile tug at the corners of her mouth.

“America is so strange.” Zia stirred her noodles and held one up, watching it slide off her fork. “I’m grateful that we’re here, but I still feel like I don’t belong.”

MacGyver nodded, the sensation familiar to him his time living abroad with the army.

“For instance, there are plants and animals living here, in places I didn’t think anything could live. All this concrete...”

“Oh, I don’t know, you don’t have to drive too far to find wild places. If you go out past...”

MacGyver stopped, watching Zia laugh, then blush. “What is it?”

“I don’t drive! I daren’t learn, the freeways terrify me!”

MacGyver laughed too.

“Oh, come on – it can’t be nearly as frightening as driving in Afghanistan! Between the state of the roads, the local bandits and the chances of running over a stray mine, give me the 405 freeway any day!”

Zia smiled, tracing the pattern on the edge of her plate with her finger.

“I thought you were going to die, you know?” She looked up at him. “The day Ahmed brought you to us.”

MacGyver nodded.

“Me too. I don’t remember much, just falling and Ahmed helping me onto the horse. Then I remember waking up in your house.” He looked down, lining up his fork with the edge of the table and straightening the takeout box. “I didn’t mean to kill Khalil, you gotta know that.”

Zia stared down at her hands.

“I know. I hated him so much, but even so...” When she looked up, her eyes were bright with tears. “He won’t hurt anyone else now.”

MacGyver sighed, knowing she was right.

Zia laid a hand on his arm. MacGyver looked up, meeting her eyes and seeing kindness there, she didn’t condemn him for killing Khalil. Kindness, and... something else. Zia got up and stepped round to MacGyver’s side of the table. She tugged his hand gently and he stood up. Placing a hand on the back of his neck, Zia pulled him down into a kiss.

MacGyver tangled his hand in her long hair, returning the kiss. The spark they’d both felt half a world away was still there, still bright despite the years passed since then. Zia slid her hands up his back, holding him close. He looked down at her, dark eyes questioning. Zia smiled up at him.

“I missed you, MacGyver.”

MacGyver woke to a dark, unfamiliar room and the insistent beep of his watch alarm. He turned to the warm weight lying on his arm, seeing Zia still asleep next to him. He raised his other arm in front of him, the glowing hands on his watch showing it to be a little before ten.

“Hey,” He brushed Zia’s hair off her face gently, smiling as she stirred awake.

“Hey,” She returned the smile, tightening her arm around his waist.

Zia held onto MacGyver for a moment longer, then sighed and rolled away. They dressed in silence, both thinking about Ahmed and the mess he’d got himself into.

A little after eleven, they heard the street door slam and footsteps on the stairs. Zia took a deep breath, settling herself at the table and folding her hands tightly in front of her. A key scraped in the

lock and a tall young man let himself into the room, turning to lock and bolt the door behind him. He pulled down his hood, shrugged off his long coat and turned around.

MacGyver's first thought was how different Ahmed looked. Even allowing for the fact that he'd grown from a child into a young man, there was a hardness and a wariness about his face that hadn't been there the before. With a bandanna knotted over his head, chains and bootstraps, Ahmed looked every inch a ganger.

"Hello Ahmed," MacGyver smiled and started to stand up. "How're you doing?"

Ahmed stared back at MacGyver, his expression shocked. Without speaking, he turned back to the door, picked up his coat and left.

"Ahmed?" MacGyver crossed to the door, just in time to see Ahmed pulling his hood up as he rounded the first turn on the stairs. Ducking back into the apartment, he grabbed his own jacket and set off in pursuit.

"Ahmed! Wait up!" The last sound MacGyver heard as he ran down the stairs was Zia sobbing.

American Dream Part 4

"Ahmed! Wait up!" MacGyver ran down the stairs two at a time. He wrenched the front door open, looking up and down the street. A flicker of movement caught his attention and he saw the tail of a long coat disappear into an alleyway.

Mindful of where he was, MacGyver forced himself to slow and glance into the alleyway rather than running straight in. South Central alleyways could hold any number of terrors, and he had no intention of falling foul of a random mugging. The glance showed him an indistinct figure walking through the steam from a grating. Steam billowed in the breeze and when it cleared, the figure had gone.

MacGyver jogged down the alleyway, looking into every doorway. He'd almost reached the end when a hand reached out and grabbed the front of his shirt, yanking him sideways into a narrow passage. The hand slammed him up against the wall and another clamped hard over his mouth. MacGyver brought his knee up as fast as he could, but his assailant moved to one side, staying in the shadows.

"Don't do that, MacGyver." Ahmed shook his hood back without letting MacGyver go. "I'm not going to hurt you." He stared at MacGyver for a moment longer before releasing him and stepping back.

MacGyver straightened his shirt and rubbed the back of his head where it had knocked against the wall.

“What are you doing?!” MacGyver’s voice echoed in the narrow space.

“Ssh. Not safe here. What are *you* doing?” Ahmed leant back against the opposite wall, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Trying to find you. You’re in a world of trouble, Ahmed.” MacGyver rubbed his chin. “That’s a pretty good grip you’ve got there, by the way.”

Ahmed ducked his head, and MacGyver saw his fleeting grin. Then the ganger mask was back in place.

“I can handle my own trouble, MacGyver. But you can’t come here again. They’re watching me, they don’t trust me yet and I can’t have you bringing trouble down on my mother.” Ahmed cast a wary look at the alley mouth. “You need to go.”

“Uh-uh.” MacGyver folded his arms. “Not until you tell me exactly what you’re playing at. Your photo came up in some work I’m doing with the police, Ahmed. You and Carlo and some kid. They think you’re part of the South Side Samurai and they’re going to arrest you. Where will your mother be then?”

Ahmed hunched down inside his coat.

“Did you tell them who I was?”

“No, Ahmed. No, I didn’t tell the police who you are. You’re my friend and I wouldn’t do that, even though I probably should have. You running with the gangs now, is that it?” MacGyver leaned forward. “What happened, Ahmed?”

“It’s a long story.” Ahmed looked down and scuffed at the cracked concrete.

“So, shorten it. I got the beginnings of it from Zia anyway.” MacGyver glanced at his watch. “Time is a luxury you don’t have, Ahmed. L.A.’s finest are going to be beating down the South Side Samurai’s doors tomorrow night and I have to be at the precinct at nine o’clock sharp or Detective Murphy is going to know there’s something up. She knows I recognised someone in that photo, but I didn’t tell her who. Start talking, Ahmed.”

Ahmed looked up at MacGyver, then at the alley mouth. He scrunched his hands deeper into his pockets and sighed.

“I want to live the life we talked about. The one with cars, and hamburgers and baseball. The American dream, the one we thought we could have when we came here. You know what we got? People who hate us because we’re not Americans and won’t give us jobs. Buying things from thrift stores and managing without. Seeing everyone else having more than us because we won’t break the law to get it and they will. And the people who have the most are the gangs.” Ahmed shifted from foot to foot, staring at the ground.

“So you joined one to get the good life.” MacGyver stared until Ahmed looked away and nodded.

“Just until we get enough money to move away. Then we can start over somewhere new where people are nice, and my mother won’t be scared all the time. The gangs pay a lot, MacGyver, a hundred dollars for moving a parcel only this big.” Ahmed held up his hands. “I can earn enough in only a short time, and then we can go. I know what I’m doing. It’s just for a little while.”

“You do know what’s in those parcels, right?”

Ahmed nodded.

“And you know that what you’re doing is wrong.” MacGyver watched Ahmed nod again. “And you know what’ll happen if you get in any deeper with this gang?”

Ahmed sighed, blinking hard. MacGyver watched his street-tough act fall away, leaving behind a frightened young man. Ahmed looked up at MacGyver, seeming smaller, almost vulnerable.

“I have no choice. We can’t go on like this. We need –” He broke off, pressing his lips together. MacGyver folded his arms, thinking hard.

“What if I had another way?”

“There are no other ways. I tried everything.” A spark of anger flashed in Ahmed’s eyes. “Everything, MacGyver.”

“Yeah, everything except asking your friends for help.” MacGyver watched Ahmed stare back for a second, then sigh and nod, the fight having left him.

“OK. Just how deep are you in with this gang? I may have an idea...

“Morning MacGyver.” Kate Murphy narrowed her eyes as she surveyed the unkempt troubleshooter. “You look like you slept in your clothes.”

“Uh, kinda...” MacGyver rubbed at the stubble on his chin and tried to stifle a yawn. “How are your plans coming for the South Side Samurai?”

Kate turned in her chair to look at him. Sure enough, he looked as shifty as he sounded.

“We’re a little short on firm information, but we got a good idea of where to find them thanks to your photos. What’s with you?”

“Um...” MacGyver ran a hand through his hair, sat down in the chair opposite her desk and picked up a pen, which he tapped against the desk. “How about if I could get you that information you need?”

Kate frowned at him, reached across and took the pen out of his hand.

“I knew you were up to something. This is about the kid in the photo, right?” Kate watched him nod reluctantly. “Uh-huh. And I suppose you want to cut some kind of deal for him, yes?” She sat back, studying him. “I thought so. Let me get this straight: You want leniency for a drug-running ganger, a member of the most vicious crew this city has seen in a long time, a psycho-in-waiting for CARLOS

FREAKING HERNANDEZ FOR PETE’S SAKE!” Kate stood up, leaning over her desk towards him. MacGyver leant back as far as his chair would allow. The room had gone quiet, the other detectives now listening in. “HAVE YOU ANY IDEA WHAT YOU’RE ASKING ME TO DO HERE? YOU’RE ASKING ME TO GIVE A FREE PASS TO THE NEXT DOCTOR ZITO!” Kate stopped for breath, became aware of the attention she was getting and sat down again. “And if I were to agree, MacGyver? What do I get in return for turning your pet psycho loose on the good people of South Central, huh?”

MacGyver looked up, meeting her furious glare with a calm smile.

“You get Carlos freaking Hernandez...”

“You better be sure about this” Kate Murphy crouched down next to MacGyver behind the dumpster, her gun already drawn. MacGyver didn’t reply, concentrating on the voices he could hear on his headphones.

Across the street, inside a derelict apartment block, Ahmed was talking to some of the South Side Samurai. The signal from the microphone he’d sewn into Ahmed’s hood was good, and he was confident the wire wouldn’t be found. The gangers were waiting for their boss to arrive, trading tall stories, insults and threats. To MacGyver, Ahmed sounded stilted and nervous, but so far the other gangers didn’t seem suspicious of him.

A motorbike pulled into the end of the street and MacGyver folded himself even tighter into the space behind the dumpster. Beside him, Kate tensed, seeing Carlos dismount and swagger up the steps. The door opened without him having to knock and he went inside. In the silence that followed, the echo of his heavy boots on the stairs could clearly be heard.

Kate reached across to MacGyver and pulled his headphones away from his ear, leaning close to share the ganger’s conversation. The banter ceased as Carlos entered the room and started talking. His voice was even and soft, MacGyver and Kate had to strain to hear his words. He spoke to each ganger in turn, praising their successes and pointing out where they could improve with almost fatherly concern. He was polite to all but the last ganger. Then, as though a switch had been thrown, he unleashed a blistering tirade of abuse. The ganger stammered an explanation in Spanish, but Carlos cut him off, switching languages without a pause and continuing his vicious verbal assault. The sound of a slap rang sharp over the headphones and Kate flinched.

There was a moment of quiet, Kate and MacGyver could hear Ahmed’s nervous breathing. Then Carlos started talking again, sorrowful that one of his gang had let him down like this, sure that none of his other ‘family’ would fail him now. He started to outline his plans for the next shipment of cocaine and Kate pressed the headphones closer to her ear.

“This is it! This is what we need!”

“Yeah, I know. Ssh!” MacGyver repositioned the headphones so that he could hear too, checking that the tape was spooling in the recorder. Confession captured, MacGyver risked a glance out from behind the dumpster to the boarded-up second floor windows. “Come on, Ahmed. Get out of there now...”



Carlos's smooth voice rose as he finished his explanation, dismissing his gangers. MacGyver heard a lot of excited chatter and gangers footsteps clattered down the stairs. They emerged from the doorway a few at a time, looking carefully around before melting away into the shadows between the buildings. The patrolmen hidden there would pick them up without raising any alarm.

"Where's your kid?" Kate peered around the edge of the dumpster. "Why hasn't he come out with the others?"

MacGyver pressed his headphones closer to his ears, straining to hear over the street noise and the chatter of police radios. A rustling noise. Quiet footsteps. Ahmed's breathing. Carlos whispering, too quiet to hear his words. Then Ahmed's voice, pleading.

"No! I wouldn't! I swear... You know I—" A burst of deafening crackling exploded over the radio and MacGyver snatched the headphones off. Carlos's voice was clear and loud, even through the distortion.

"You betrayed me! You! And I had such high hopes..." Another burst of crackling, a ringing, metallic slur and the radio cut out.

MacGyver sprang out from behind the dumpster and sprinted across the street. In an upstairs window, Kate saw Ahmed backing away. Carlos appeared a moment later, a shaft of sunlight catching the drawn sword in his hand as he stalked Ahmed.

MacGyver wrenched at the door handle, backed up a step and kicked hard. The battered door burst inwards and MacGyver disappeared up the stairs, Kate racing after him. She reached the last corner on the stairs just as Carlos turned towards MacGyver, bringing his sword round in a short, vicious arc. MacGyver jumped back, the tip of the sword just catching the front of his denim jacket.

Kate thumbed the safety off her gun and took aim. Where had Ahmed gone? She couldn't see him. In the centre of the floor, Carlos stalked MacGyver, padding after him with catlike grace. MacGyver backed across the floor, eyes darting left and right. What could he use to disarm Carlos? Three feet of steel was no joke even in unskilled hands, and Carlos had clearly been practicing... MacGyver took another step back and his legs bumped against a broken-down couch. He chanced a glance down.

"Carlos Hernandez, you are under arrest for narcotics offences and assault with a deadly weapon. Drop the weapon and put your hands on your head!" Kate levelled her gun at Carlos's head.

The split second it took for Carlos to register Kate's presence was enough for MacGyver. Snatching up the old sheet covering the couch, he twisted it into a loop and used it to lasso the end of Carlos's sword. He pulled the sheet, yanked the sword out of Carlos's hands and threw it across the floor.

Ahmed ran in from behind, landing a solid punch in the gang leader's back. Carlos fell to his knees, but scrambled straight up again, this time with a switchblade in his hand. He slashed at Ahmed, spitting and swearing in Spanish. Ahmed backed away, eyes wide with fear. MacGyver stepped up behind the ganger and looped his sheet over Carlos's head, right across his eyes. As Carlos spun towards him, MacGyver let go of the sheet and punched him in the nose as hard as he could. He lost his balance with the force of the punch and both men sprawled on the floor. Kate stepped forwards, pointing her gun straight at Carlos, but the ganger was out cold.

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Ahmed reached out a hand to MacGyver and pulled him up, grinning.

“You haven’t lost your touch, MacGyver!” He mimed throwing a rock with a sling and clapped MacGyver on the shoulder. Kate looked from one to the other in confusion.

“Ah, it’s a long story, Kate.” MacGyver shook his punching hand, flexing his fingers. “That always hurts more than I think it’s going to.” He turned to face Kate. “So, what happens now?”

“Well,” Kate bent to handcuff Carlos and frisked him for weapons, depositing four more knives, a blackjack and a knuckleduster in a small heap. “As soon as this scumbag comes to his senses, I take him into custody and start processing the rest of the gang that my boys are bringing in.” She straightened up. “And, much against my better judgement, you and ganger-for-a-day here get to disappear.” She walked up to Ahmed and stood toe to toe with him. “So you better disappear good. If I get so much of a sniff of your name being linked to gangs, drugs or anything else I don’t like, I will...” Kate waved her fist at him and MacGyver laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Kate? Calm down. There won’t be any trouble, I guarantee it. And thank you.” MacGyver smiled down at her, took Ahmed by the elbow and steered him away.

“Where are you taking us?” Zia turned to MacGyver. He glanced at her and smiled before turning his attention back to the road.

“Job interview. Sort of.” He indicated and turned into the parking lot of a brightly painted concrete building. A group of kids playing basketball stopped to watch them pull in, and the eldest one came jogging over. A middle aged woman walked down the steps, smiling broadly.

“MacGyver! So good to see you! You must be Zia and you must be Ahmed.” She held out her hand to Zia. “I have just the job for you, honey – we have an opening for a family support worker, for families from the Middle East. You think you could help me out with that?” She winked at MacGyver and led Zia away.

“Thanks, Gloria,” MacGyver turned to the basketball player. “Hey, Breeze. You think you could make use of Ahmed here? He’s uh... between jobs at the moment.”

Breeze nodded, grinning.

“Oh yeah. The handyman work here is never done. You any good at kitchen repairs?”

“I can learn.” Ahmed shrugged and followed Breeze into the Challenger’s Club. Breeze’s voice floated back to MacGyver, leaning on the Jeep outside.

“You’ll like it here, Ahmed. Pay’s OK and it’s an honest dollar, bro. This is a paycheck that doesn’t come with trouble attached. And I *know* you know what I mean...”

“MACGYVER?” Gloria shouted from inside. “YOU COME IN HERE RIGHT NOW! I GOT WORK FOR YOU TOO!”

Grinning, MacGyver propped his sunglasses on his head and walked up the steps.



“Yes, ma’am!”

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