

Bug Spray

Part One

“This sounds really good, Pete.” MacGyver watched the credits roll on the Wellforce Pharmaceuticals promotional video. “They’re making real progress, if their sales pitch is to be believed.”

“They do seem to live up to the hype.” Pete nodded. “Which is why Phoenix is funding their latest research project. A way to treat tuberculosis without needing months of expensive antibiotics would be a godsend for a lot of Third World countries.”

“And how!” Willis leaned around Pete to look at MacGyver. “Do you know how many deaths could be prevented by access to something like that?”

“Oh yeah.” MacGyver nodded and put down the Wellforce leaflet he’d been reading. “Pete, when do we get started?”

“Right now.” Pete handed out reports on the research project whose progress they would be checking out, and the meeting became a discussion of the project so far.

Behind MacGyver, on the desk, the breeze from the open window fluttered the leaflet and the first page turned. Underneath a photo of scientists hard at work, the title read ‘Fight for a healthier future with Wellforce’.

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“How much further is it?” Willis turned the map again. “Are you sure we should have turned left back there?”

“Pretty sure.” MacGyver guided the Jeep around a tight bend and up a hill. “There should be a turning just... Aha! Here we are.” He spun the wheel and they pulled up outside a gateway, a cluster of single-storey buildings visible through the trees.

“It looks so small, to be doing such important work.” Willis shaded his eyes against the sunbeams slanting through the pines. “Then again, small can be mighty. I mean, the germs they’re fighting here are pretty scary even to something as big as a human.”

“I guess.” MacGyver slowed the Jeep, looking at the research facility buildings. “But we beat them, don’t we? I guess I prefer being the bigger guy in the fight!” He turned the Jeep into a parking space, they collected their bags and headed into the building.

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The research facility seemed bigger on the inside. Halls and corridors, laboratories and clean rooms merged into one as Lucy, an excited intern, gave them a tour, talking non-stop about how much she

was enjoying spending a term here as part of her post-graduate programme. She was familiar with Phoenix's work elsewhere as well as at Wellforce, and had heard of Willis. Willis, not used to being seen as a celebrity, warmed to her straight away and MacGyver hung back, observing everything going on around him as Willis and Lucy's conversation moved into branches of science with which he was unfamiliar.

MacGyver was impressed by what he saw. The labs seemed to be run well, all the employees were working hard and were confident to answer his questions. He spotted Dr. Caroline Ortega, the project's leader, across the lab. She grinned, returned his wave, and signalled 'be with you in a minute' as she listened to a scientist making his report.

"MacGyver!" Dr Ortega strode across the lab to meet him, smiling and holding out her hand. "Is it really six months since I was at Phoenix, presenting my idea?"

"Yes ma'am." MacGyver shook her hand with a smile. "Just here to see how you're getting along."

"Of course." Dr Ortega shoved her pencil into her messy bun, where it stuck out at an angle. "We're spending Phoenix's money well, you know – we're really onto something here. Let me show you."

They spent the morning going over the research completed so far, and explaining the next steps. MacGyver and Dr Ortega collected Willis, who had been taken step-by-step through the practical side of conducting the research, and Dr Ortega left them in the canteen having their lunch.

"Looking pretty good, I reckon." MacGyver ate a forkful of bean casserole, finding it tastier than he'd anticipated.

"Uh-huh." Willis smiled at someone over MacGyver's shoulder and MacGyver turned, just in time to see Lucy wave shyly at Willis, blush red and turn back to the rest of her table.

"The research, Willis! The research is looking pretty good" MacGyver grinned as Willis blushed too, then looked serious and concentrated on his dinner. MacGyver gestured with his fork. "You know you have gravy on your tie, right?"

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After dinner, they went up to Dr Ortega's office, where they were given space and access to a computer.

"Help yourselves, gentlemen." Dr Ortega smiled as she collected her files and went out into the lab. "Have a good afternoon."

MacGyver moved a photo on Dr Ortega's desk to make room for his own paperwork. The photo showed a boy of perhaps ten years old, with a smile just like Dr Ortega. He was wearing an oversized Judo gi and standing on a podium, holding a trophy. The boys wearing second and third place medals were much larger, though they looked about the same age, and MacGyver found himself wondering how Dr Ortega's son had been able to beat them. The boy must be very skilled, MacGyver thought, to be able to overcome such large opponents. He put the photo on the windowsill and booted up the computer as Willis spread out the printouts they'd brought from Phoenix.

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“Something’s not right here.” Willis scrolled down the column of numbers on his computer screen and frowned.

“What’s wrong?” MacGyver set aside his page of statistics and leaned across to read over Willis’s shoulder.

“Here.” Willis pointed at the screen. “This part of the research hasn’t been started yet. It isn’t due to start until January, so the equipment hasn’t been bought yet. But look here:” He pressed a key and the screen changed. “Here it shows that everything’s been purchased and paid for already. Both of these records can’t be right.”

“Hmm.” MacGyver reached over Willis’s shoulder, clicking between the two sets of data. “Does it appear on anyone else’s inventory?”

“Nope.” Willis sat back and folded his arms. “I checked. Twice. No-one else here has bought that equipment. It’s just vanished.”

“Things don’t just vanish.” MacGyver stood up and crossed to the window, running a hand through his hair. “It must be a mistake.”

“Some mistake!” Willis shook his head. “Have you seen the price tag on these things?!”

MacGyver looked, letting out a low whistle as he worked out how much the equipment was worth.

“And this equipment is used for...?” he raised his eyebrows and looked at Willis.

“Corralling germs.” Willis frowned. “Which makes sense if you’re trialling medicines – you need some captive germs to test your prototypes on. But no-one else’s research is at that stage right now. Either live testing is way off in the distance, or they’re past it and on to human volunteer trials. You know, for monitoring side effects and stuff.”

“Replacing old equipment, maybe?” MacGyver put his hands in his pockets and paced the office.

“Maybe. But this is top of the line gear. You only need this if you’re dealing with next-level, apocalypse-on-your-doorstep kinds of germs.” Willis took his glasses off and cleaned them on his handkerchief. “Anyway, why would you charge it to this project? Makes no sense.”

“No.” MacGyver reached the end of the office and turned. “Maybe we should dig a little deeper here, see if we can trace the purchase back.”

“We could ask Dr Ortega.” Willis put his glasses back on and blinked through them. MacGyver glanced through the glass door at Dr Ortega, talking with a colleague and peering down a microscope. Surely she couldn’t be involved in anything shady...

“No.” MacGyver pulled up a chair and sat down next to Willis. “Not just yet. Let’s see what we can find...”

Part Two

Wellforce Pharmaceuticals had a good track record. They'd been involved in developing new water purification techniques and more efficient air scrubbers to capture pollution from factory chimneys as well as a wide range of new medical drugs. Their rate of unwanted side effects was lower than average and their safety statistics were impressive. In the fifteen years Dr Ortega had started there, not one lawsuit had been brought against her department, a record unbroken by any of the other major pharmaceutical companies in California.

Willis had learned from Lucy that an internship at Wellforce had made her the envy of her fellow students, and that the training she had received there was excellent. On the face of it, Wellforce were a really good company, working hard with the best people and state of the art equipment for the betterment of mankind.

But digging into their accounts told a different story. Over the last two years, equipment had been purchased and subsequently gone missing many times. The containment system that had appeared on Dr Ortega's department record had been carefully buried in the code, along with another six such 'disappearances'. Halfway through the afternoon, Willis had become convinced that Dr Ortega hadn't been involved and, when MacGyver asked her about it, she confirmed that the 'germ herding' equipment had not been bought, echoing Willis's opinion that it would not be required for the kind of work her team were doing.

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"So what have we got?" MacGyver set down Willis's coffee on the table and sipped his hot chocolate.

"These." Willis spread out several printouts. "Someone's been buying these things and then losing the purchases in the system. Specifically in Dr Ortega's department so that Phoenix is footing the bill." He shook his head. "If you add it all up, it puts her department way over budget. No wonder Pete asked us to come take a look."

"How would she NOT know about this?" MacGyver watched Willis shrug as he reached for the coffee.

"Because she can't see it." Willis tapped a key and rolled his chair away from the computer. "Here – sign in as Dr Ortega and you'll see what I mean."

"Sign in as Dr Ortega...?" MacGyver pulled his chair forwards and looked sideways at Willis. "She gave you her passwords?"

"Um... Not exactly." Willis blushed. "You see, most people's passwords are pretty easy to work out if you –" he caught MacGyver's indignant glare. "You know what? Never mind." Willis reached out and tapped at the keyboard. "You're in."

Frowning, MacGyver pressed the key and accounts data filled the screen. He leaned forward to read the columns of fine print.

"Willis, one day your off-limits hacking skills are going to get you into real trouble." MacGyver glanced down at the papers on the desk. "But it looks like it isn't today. You're right, none of this is visible to Dr Ortega. As far as she can see, they're right on track and right on budget." He glanced at Willis. "Can we backtrack this? Find out where it's all coming from?"

“Maybe.” Willis leaned in to the keyboard and started typing.

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“Any luck?” MacGyver popped his head around the office door some hours later.

“Yeah.” Willis pushed up his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “It wasn’t easy to find, but they track back to this account. No name, unfortunately, that’s not here – I’ve been through everything. Looks like it’s been happening for the last three years or so though, so we might be able to narrow it down to people who’ve been here that long.”

“OK, good.” MacGyver sat down, pulling the printouts towards him. “What could you make with this bunch of stuff, anyway?” He scanned through the highlighted entries on the inventory, then frowned and read them again, making notes on a piece of paper. He sat back and ran a hand through his shaggy hair. “Willis? I think we have a bigger problem.”

“How much bigger?” Willis sounded distracted, scrolling through screenfuls of data.

“Much bigger.” MacGyver drew an elaborate diagram on the paper and handed it to Willis. “If anyone puts all these puzzle pieces together, they could make one of these...”

Willis stared at the paper and frowned, then his eyes widened.

“That’s not for brewing up new medicines!” He stared at MacGyver, his expression horrified.

“That’s for brewing up...”

“New germs!” MacGyver’s face was grim. “It’s for brewing up new super-germs – and Phoenix has unknowingly been funding it!”

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MacGyver stepped into the shower, letting the hot water soak his hair and beat on his shoulders. He and Willis had checked their work and decided to tell Pete before involving Dr Ortega. The conversation had left Pete as shocked as MacGyver and Willis were. How dare someone use the Phoenix Foundation as a cover for such a terrible crime?

He poured shampoo into his hand and washed his hair. Pete had promised that he’d get onto it first thing in the morning, and that he’d let MacGyver and Willis know what to do next as soon as possible.

MacGyver rinsed the soap out of his hair and scrubbed the rest of himself clean. He stepped out of the shower to hear his cell phone ringing.

“Hello?” He held the phone away from his ear, trying not to drip water onto it.

“Mac!” Sergeant Cooper’s voice boomed out of the speaker. “How the hell are you?!”

“Cooper? Hey, long time, no see, right?” MacGyver dried his hair, then cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder as he dried the rest of himself. “I’m OK, kinda. Out on an assignment at the moment.” He balanced on one leg to dry his foot. “What are you up to?”

“Also out in the field. Where are you?” Cooper’s voice had regained all the buoyant confidence MacGyver remembered from Vietnam and he smiled to hear it.

“Just outside San Diego.” MacGyver swapped the phone to his other shoulder and dried his other foot. He wrapped the towel around his waist and sat on the edge of the motel room bed.

“Son of a gun, so am I!” Cooper sounded delighted. “How about we meet in the middle? I know a great place.”

“Uh... Sure.” MacGyver glanced at the files spread out on the bed, aware of how much work he had to do. “Where do you want to meet?”

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MacGyver parked the Jeep and walked down the busy street, looking for the bar Cooper had chosen. He hadn’t wanted to come out, feeling down after such a bad day and wanting to get more work done, but he felt his spirits lifting at the prospect of seeing his old friend.

“Mac! Over here!” Cooper looked better than when MacGyver had last seen him. Bringing Hawkins to trial and seeing him pay for his crimes had done Cooper a lot of good. The fact that Hawkins had been murdered soon after in prison didn’t sit well with MacGyver, but Cooper regarded it as the fate Hawkins deserved.

“Hi.” MacGyver put out a hand, but Cooper pulled him into a hug. They found a table at the back of the room and ordered drinks.

“No whiskey?” MacGyver raised his eyebrows as Cooper’s lemonade arrived.

“Nope.” Cooper took a sip. “I quit. The booze wasn’t doing me any good, so I took a leaf out of your book.” He held up the glass. “This is as wild as I get these days!”

“Good for you.” MacGyver smiled at his friend. Cooper was looking well, lean and tanned and clear-eyed, free of the shadows that had haunted him for so long.

“So what brings you to sunny San Diego?” Cooper leaned forward.

“Just work.” MacGyver sat back, realising how much the job had taken out of him. “Auditing a research project that Phoenix is funding. You?”

“Chasing down another of Hawkins’ dirty deals.” Cooper caught MacGyver’s warning expression and spread his hands. “An army pension fills my pockets but it doesn’t fill my days. A man needs a hobby!”

“Sure.” MacGyver drained his lemonade. “Just be careful which rocks you flip over, OK? Some of the things you find under there could have teeth!”

“Duly noted, Corporal.” Cooper raised his glass.

They stayed far longer than MacGyver had planned, talking about old times and new ventures. Cooper had tracked and exposed a number of Hawkins’ dodgy dealings, stopping small scale scams and helping the police on a handful of occasions. By the time MacGyver returned to his motel room,

he was feeling much more cheerful. But the stack of files held his attention until late into the night, and he woke in the morning unable to shake a sense of foreboding...

Part Three

MacGyver parked the Jeep in Wellforce's lot and he and Willis sat staring at the low buildings. Willis cleared his throat.

"I'm actually not sure I want to go to work today." He glanced sideways at MacGyver. "I've never thought that before."

"Yeah, me neither." MacGyver unclipped his seatbelt, still staring at the building.

"It's not that I didn't know this kind of thing went on..." Willis shifted in his seat. "But this time it's personal, you know? Phoenix are involved."

"It grinds my gears too." MacGyver nodded. He sighed and cracked open his door. "So we find a way to stop it, we make sure everyone knows Phoenix doesn't fund this kind of research, and we carry on. Business as usual, right?" He got out of the Jeep and lifted his bag out of the back.

"Right. Business as usual." Willis smiled, but the worry in his eyes remained.

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"OK, what do we know?" MacGyver met Willis in the spare office they'd been given to use, halfway through the morning.

"Right, well." Willis sat down, squaring his stack of files. "We know it's —" he glanced around him. "We know it's superbugs." He continued in a whisper. "So the equipment they're using needs to be kept cold. It also needs to be kept in a sealed room, for safety in case there's a breach."

"Good. So we can find out where in the building it's being stored." MacGyver broke off as Willis shook his head.

"What if it's not being stored here?" Willis pushed up his glasses and shrugged.

"Let's hope it is!" MacGyver's expression was grim. "If it's not, we've little to no chance of finding it!" he turned around, picking up a tray of bottles of chemicals and placing it on the desk between them.

"Once we've found it, we can tag the equipment with this." He held up a bottle of clear liquid. "We paint it onto anything that can be picked up, onto clean-room suits, onto anything that will be used in that area." He dipped a paintbrush into the liquid and quickly daubed some onto Willis's hand.

"Hey!" Willis drew back his hand, looking indignant.

"As you can see, it dries clear." MacGyver ignored Willis's protests and attempts to wipe the stuff off his hand. "But shine a blacklight on it and... Voila!" he shone a purplish flashlight on Willis's hand, which glowed white. It also lit up the smear on his sleeve and the mark where he'd tried to wipe the liquid off onto his trousers. He switched the flashlight off and the marks disappeared.

“That’s actually pretty good!” Willis leaned forward, studying the labels on the bottles. “Does Dr Ortega know you’ve borrowed all her stuff?”

“Um...” MacGyver looked sheepish. “I won’t tell her if you don’t! besides, it’s for a good cause. I’m sure she’d understand. Pretty sure, anyway...”

Willis set to work finding the likely location of the superbug room and MacGyver set up his chemistry equipment on the desk, to make a larger batch of the invisible glow-paint.

“Hey, Mac?” Willis turned away from the computer.

“Yeah?” MacGyver looked up from pouring chemicals.

“What if we get exposed to the superbugs?” Willis looked worried. “When we’re tagging all the stuff.”

“We should be OK.” MacGyver put down the bottle. “We’ll be careful, but that equipment is state of the art. If they’d had any leaks, people would’ve started getting sick before now. I checked with your friend Lucy –” He grinned as Willis blushed, “And no-one has. We should be OK.”

“OK.” Willis looked unconvinced. “I think I might have found where they’re keeping it...” He waited until MacGyver crossed to the computer and then pointed to the map on the screen. “There’s no reason for the temperature of this room to be so low, and it has a biohazard seal on the door.” He tapped some keys. “And according to the room plan in Dr Ortega’s computer, it should be empty.”

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MacGyver peered around the corner before darting down the corridor. In a borrowed lab coat and with his hair tied back and his ‘Dexter’ glasses on, he hoped he would pass unnoticed as just another lab tech. Few enough of the Wellforce employees had seen him that his improvised disguise worked, and he reached the right door without being spotted. He frowned as he saw the keypad next to the heavy door, then felt in the lab coat pockets and fished out a stick of chalk. He scraped dust off the chalk with his penknife, collected it in his hand and blew it gently at the keypad. Enough stuck to the right keys that could guess at the code, getting it right on the third try. The door swung open on silent hinges, allowing him to slip inside.

He repeated the chalk trick on the inner door, taking a nerve-wracking five tries to find the combination. Hoping he hadn’t set off any silent alarms, MacGyver went through the door and closed it behind him.

The superbug equipment looked surprisingly ordinary. A machine about the size of an oven sat on a trolley, plugged into the mains. The clear lid allowed him to look in at racks of test tubes, filled with yellow fluid. The hum of the machine was loud in the still, cold air and, as MacGyver watched, there was a click and gas hissed into the chamber, curling around the test tubes.

MacGyver shivered both from cold, and horror at the innocent-looking set-up carrying it’s deadly load. He pulled the flask and brush out of his pockets and painted everything he could reach with the invisible paint, backing out of the room and painting both door handles and keypads as he left.

Leaving his lab coat over a chair in an empty lab, he tugged the band from his hair, slipped his glasses into his shirt pocket and tried to look nonchalant as he walked back up to his borrowed office.

When he got there, Willis was talking to Dr Ortega. Without explaining what they'd found, Willis was talking about the project in general and how much benefit it would bring once completed. He looked relieved to see MacGyver return.

MacGyver walked quietly in, dropped his flask and brush into his bag and went to join them.

"MacGyver, how nice to see you!" Dr Ortega turned to greet him. "Been for a walk?"

"Yeah." MacGyver smiled back at her. "Just wanted to get some air. This sure is a busy building, Dr Ortega."

"Caroline, please." She put down her files and sat down. "It sure is – we have seventeen different research projects running at the moment."

"So every lab's in use?" Willis turned away from the screen.

"Almost." Dr Ortega nodded. "There are a few rooms in this building that aren't being used, The project using them finished a while back and we haven't needed the space. They're smaller, and no-one needs biohazard storage at the moment, so..." She shrugged.

MacGyver nodded. There was no hint of deception in her body language.

"So they're empty?" Again, MacGyver watched Dr Ortega, looking for signs that she might be lying.

"Empty and locked, yes." Dr Ortega frowned. "Is there something going on her that I should be aware of? You two seem suddenly very suspicious!"

MacGyver glanced at Willis, who nodded.

"Caroline, we've found some... anomalies in your computer files. Adding them together, it looks like someone's been siphoning money out of your project – Phoenix's project – and using it to fund the development of superbugs." He ran a hand through his hair, watching the colour drain from Dr Ortega's face.

"No!" Dr Ortega's hand flew to her mouth. "Do you know who? What is it? Where is it?! What can we...?"

"Caroline, please." MacGyver held up both hands. "Willis can walk you through what's happened, but right now I've set a trap to catch the people involved and I need you to find a way to keep everyone in the building at the end of the day. Can you do that?"

"Yes. Yes I can do that." Dr Ortega nodded. "I'll call a full staff briefing. We do it every time we get a new project in, so it won't seem odd. Will that do?"

"Perfect." MacGyver nodded. "Make it for half an hour before shutdown this evening. By then, anyone who's going to fall into my trap will be well and truly in it!"

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Outside the office door, a lab tech slowed down to listen. He heard Willis explaining how he and MacGyver had traced the problem the system, and how MacGyver had tagged all the equipment

with invisible paint. He frowned down at his hands, wondering if it was on him already. He listened to the rest of the conversation, then drifted silently away.

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“This is not a normal staff briefing.” Dr Ortega stood at the reception desk in the entrance hall. “Some of you may have been exposed to a chemical today which, while not dangerous to your health, should be removed before leaving the building.” She indicated MacGyver. “My Phoenix Foundation colleagues Mr MacGyver and Mr Willis will check. Please form orderly queues and be ready to show them your hands.” She took a step back and beckoned to a security guard. “Have we got everyone?”

“Almost. Just rounding up the last few now.” The security guard nodded to her and moved away.

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The biohazard door closed, and the two figures beside it exchanged a grim nod. One hurried away down the corridor carrying a cardboard box while the other, the lab tech who’d listed in on Willis earlier, headed for the nearest restrooms. Minutes later, they both joined the crowd in the entrance hall.

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The lines shuffled forward. Each employee held out their hands while MacGyver and Willis shone blacklights on them. Once checked, they were allowed to leave.

The next man stepped forward, presenting red, scrubbed hands. Willis played the light over his hands, wrinkling his nose at the strong smell of bleach the man emitted, but the man didn’t glow.

“OK. Next, please.” Willis looked at the thinning crowd and exchanged a worried glance with MacGyver. The next man stepped forward. MacGyver held the flashlight above his hands, and both the hands glowed white.

MacGyver caught the eye of one of the security guards, who escorted the man away. Dr Ortega followed them out of the room, looking furious.

“You son of a-“ Dr Ortega pulled back her fist and punched the man in the face. She stepped forwards to follow up with another punch, but one of the security guards blocked the way. “How could you!” Dr Ortega hissed over the guard’s shoulder as the man was led away. “Sam Gregory, you should be ashamed of yourself! You’re a disgrace to science! You’re fired!”

The hall was silent as she strode back in. MacGyver and Willis checked the remainder of the staff, but no-one else’s hands glowed white. The police arrived and Dr Gregory went with them, followed by Dr Ortega, keen to give a statement.

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MacGyver and Willis left a short time later, stopping to let a mail truck rumble out of the facility ahead of them. They drove to a nearby diner and chose a booth at the far end.

“Here’s to catching bad guys with weird science!” Willis held up his milkshake and they clinked glasses.

“Bad *guy*, anyway. MacGyver took a sip of his drink and shook his head. “I guess I’m just having a hard time believing he was working alone.”

“Yeah.” Willis took a bite of his hamburger, chewed and swallowed. “Although once he had it set up, it wouldn’t take much maintaining. That’s the beauty of it – almost totally automated germ production.” He put down the burger. “That’s actually really scary...”

“It sure is.” MacGyver ate some omelette and salad, forehead creased in a frown. “I mean, you could take that stuff off your hands with ammonia, or sodium hypochlorite, but you’d have to know it was on you...” He shook his head. “I should just be happy we caught him. I’ll call Pete this evening and let him know, and we should be back in L.A in a couple of days.”

“Hoo-rah.” Willis grinned and popped some fries into his mouth. Then he frowned and stopped chewing. “Sodium hypochlorite...” He swallowed and frowned at MacGyver. “Bleach, right?”

“Right.” MacGyver nodded his head, spearing a tomato with his fork.

“One of the guys I tested smelled of bleach.” Willis shook his head. “I didn’t really look at him, just figured him for a cleaner or something... I’m sorry, Mac.”

“We’ll let Dr Ortega know.” MacGyver finished his salad and pushed the plate away. “He could just have been the janitor, like you said. I don’t see how anyone could have known what we were doing, do you?”

“I guess not.” Willis stirred his ketchup with a fry. “I sure hope you’re right...”

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Across town, a man with sore-looking hands reached into his pocket, pulling out a scrap of paper. Hands shaking, he dialled the number on the paper and waited.

“Hello?” he listened to the silence on the other end of the line. “Hello? Dr Gregory said I should call this number and tell you what happened at Wellforce today...”

Part Four

Across town, a man with sore-looking hands reached into his pocket, pulling out a scrap of paper. Hands shaking, he dialled the number on the paper and waited.

“Hello?” he listened to quiet breathing on the other end of the line. “Hello? Dr Gregory said I should call this number and tell you what happened at Wellforce today...”

He told his story uninterrupted and when he had finished, he could hear breathing on the line. Then the voice spoke, and the man listened.

“Yes, it’s gone. Went in the mail truck this afternoon.” He listened again. “Their names? Oh sure. They’re called Willis and MacGyver. From the Phoenix Foundation.” He nodded. “MacGyver, that’s right.”

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“How’s it going?” Dr Ortega came into the office, shutting the door behind her.

“Well, I’ve managed to backtrack it a bit further, and it looks like Dr Gregory has links to an organisation called Atlas. That mean anything to you|?”

“No.” Dr Ortega shook her head. “Should it?”

“No clue.” Willis shrugged. “That’s as far as I can get.” He turned around as the office door opened. “Mac, does Atlas mean anyth... Whoa, careful!” He grabbed a handful of paper towels and used them to mop up the coffee MacGyver had just spilled.

“Willis –“ MacGyver’s tone was sharp. “Did you just say ‘Atlas’?”

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“So that’s it, Pete.” MacGyver switched his grip on the phone and waved his free hand in frustration. “And now it looks like Atlas is involved. That name has been cropping up all year and now here it is again!” he took a deep breath. “Sorry, Pete. It’s just... Yeah.” He sighed again. “So what happens now?”

“Well, Mac, “ Pete sounded worried, “Now we wait for the police to deal with Gregory and you two finish up at Wellforce. We have to carry on as if everything’s going according to plan, at least until we decide how we’re going to handle it.”

“What happens when it gets out that Phoenix has – however accidentally – been funding biological weapons?” MacGyver lowered his voice, even though no-one was around.

“I’m meeting with the rest of the directors this afternoon.” Pete sounded tired. “I’ll call you this evening and let you know how it went.

“Ok Pete, thanks.” MacGyver hung up and went to oversee the superbug machine being dismantled. He arrived just in time to see the germs in their test tubes being bagged for disposal. He frowned through the window, unable to remember whether there had been five trays or six...

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At the end of the afternoon, MacGyver and Willis climbed wearily into the Jeep. MacGyver cranked the seat handle, moving the seat back far enough to accommodate his long legs, and set off for the

motel. He frowned, wondering why it needed changing at all. No-one else had been driving the Jeep, after all... he shrugged, dismissing the thought.

“Can you drop me downtown?” Willis asked. “I’m meeting Lucy and some of the other students for coffee.” He looked shy. “They want to hear about our environmental work.”

“Oh really?” MacGyver grinned. “You going to tell them about the time you got stuck in the quicksand?”

“No!” Willis sat upright and blushed. “I thought you’d forgotten about that!”

“Not a chance.” MacGyver pulled up at the kerb. “Have a good time, OK?”

He was about to set off again when the carphone rang.

“Hello?”

“Mac? Cooper! Hoped to catch you.” The voice in his ear was tinny, not the usual clear tone.

“Hey Cooper, how’re you doing?” MacGyver looked up at the clouds building in the sky, wondering if a storm was interfering with the phone reception.

“Good. I’m good. Listen – do you mind meeting up? I’ve got some information I think you’ll find interesting.” Cooper sounded really keen, making MacGyver feel even more tired.

“Uh, sure. How about we meet back at my motel? I’m pretty beat...” MacGyver waited, hoping that Cooper would take the hint and agree to meet up tomorrow instead.

“No problem!” Cooper sounded pleased. “Just give me the location and I’ll meet you there.”

MacGyver told him the address, and directions to find it. They agreed to meet in an hour, giving MacGyver time to stop for takeout Chinese food. He pulled up outside the motel just over an hour later, seeing Cooper’s car parked out front, empty.

He’d just got out of the Jeep, balancing the bag of takeout and his Phoenix files, and shutting the door with his foot, when the world exploded.

Instinctively, MacGyver dived behind the Jeep, ducking and covering as debris rained down around him. He turned to see dust and smoke rolling out of what had been his motel room, a jagged hole blown in the wall and window glass glittering on the pavement.

“COOPER!” MacGyver yelled, coughing on the dust. “COOPER!”

*

The police and crime scene investigators took all evening to finish their work.

MacGyver was checked out by the ambulance crew, asked for a statement and was then left while the work was carried out.

Willis, arriving in a cab around eleven, found MacGyver sitting on the hood of the Jeep and staring at the hole in the motel.

“Hey.” Willis sat beside him on the Jeep. “I came as soon as you called me.” He nodded to the policemen. “Do they know what happened?”

“He’s dead.” MacGyver didn’t look at Willis. His voice was faint, shocked and hoarse.

“Cooper? The army buddy you met up with yesterday?” Willis flinched. “Mac, I am so sorry...”

“They knew I was here. They knew he was coming.” MacGyver coughed, voice rough from the dust and smoke. “How did they know, Willis?”

“Who, Mac? Who would do this?” Willis was worried, MacGyver sounded very far away. When MacGyver turned to face him, Willis blanched at the pain and anger he saw there. MacGyver spoke one word:

“Atlas.”

*

MacGyver and Willis arrived late to Wellforce the following morning. They’d spent the remainder of the night at Willis’s motel, with MacGyver sitting in the chair and staring at the darkness.

MacGyver had insisted on taking the Jeep to pieces before they got in it again, in case of a hidden bomb, and had discovered the bug in the carphone. Furious with himself for not realising someone had been tampering with his car, he’d crushed the bug under his shoe before Willis could rescue it for analysis.

Since then, he’d behaved like a man sleepwalking, responding to questions and going through the motions of his job on auto-pilot. Only once had he turned to Willis, in the middle of an unrelated discussion, his voice quiet.

“That bomb was meant for me.”

Willis hadn’t known what to say to that, especially when a phone call from the police confirmed that the bomb had been wired to MacGyver’s motel room door handle. If MacGyver hadn’t been stuck in traffic, and had made it to the motel before Cooper, he would be dead.

All through the morning, one train of thought ran through MacGyver’s head: ‘Cooper’s dead because of me. Atlas wants me dead. Atlas is too big to fight, and I’m putting my friends, my family in danger by being near them. I can’t beat Atlas. I need to be away from those I care about...’

He did his work, spoke to Dr Ortega, and Willis, and the lab techs, and read Willis’s report on the computer surveillance programs he’d discovered and removed from Wellforce’s network, but it all seemed far away and unreal.

When the telephone rang, it made him jump.

“It’s for you.” Dr Ortega handed MacGyver the receiver. “Director Thornton.” Her expression was worried.

“Pete.” MacGyver blinked, as though just waking up.

“Mac, are you OK? Willis told me what happened. That’s terrible! Mac – Mac?” Pete stopped, waiting.

"I can't... I don't want to talk about it, Pete." MacGyver blinked hard, this time feeling tears prick his eyelids. "Just tell me what we're doing next."

"Well, that's the thing, Mac." Pete sounded equal parts embarrassed and angry. "Phoenix have been offered a very generous donation in return for keeping this quiet. Some of the directors are of the opinion that we should take it." He sighed. "I'm fighting it, but I'm in the minority here!"

"Pete, you can't!" MacGyver's face showed emotion for the first time. "Keep quiet?! That goes against everything Phoenix stands for!"

"I know, Mac. I know." Pete sighed. "The problem is the amount of money involved – the argument is that with so much, we could do everything we ever wanted to, help as many people and projects as need us, do so much good..."

"In return for allowing superbug research to go on under our noses." MacGyver's voice was harsh and scornful.

"I agree." Pete fell silent and MacGyver listened to the static on the line. "I'm going to keep fighting but Mac – I can't promise you that I'm going to win."

"I understand." MacGyver put the receiver down with a gentle click. He left his hand on the phone for a moment, then drew a breath and turned back to Willis and Dr Ortega's faces as though nothing had happened.

"Dr Ortega, you were saying?"

*

The drive back to L.A was silent. Willis had called Pete and been filled in on Phoenix's dilemma, and was as silently furious as MacGyver. When MacGyver pulled up outside Willis's apartment block, Willis thanked him for the ride and paused as he got his bags out of the back of the Jeep.

"I'll see you in the morning, Mac." He waited, but MacGyver made no response. Eventually Willis gave up, patting the side of the Jeep and moving away. "Thanks again, buddy."

He was half way to his front door when he heard the Jeep start up and drive away.

*

The following morning, MacGyver was out before sunrise. Leaving the Jeep in his garage, he packed a rucksack and headed out to Phoenix on the bike.

He let himself in to the building, there even before the cleaners arrived, and took the stairs up to his floor. He stood, looking at his desk for a moment before picking up the photo of Sam he kept there and stowing it inside his jacket pocket. He turned and left, his sneakers making no sound on the carpet.

He went up to Pete's office and across to his desk. He took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and propped it on the computer keyboard. Someone could read it to Pete when he got in. His fingers brushed across the Wellforce leaflet on the corner of the desk, and then he was gone.

MacGyver fired up the bike and walked it back out of his parking space. He paused, looking at the sleek, modern home of the Phoenix Foundation, then turned and rode north.

To be continued in 'Fight Club'...