

Behind the Curtain

Part One

This is the penultimate story in a series. If you haven't been following, the stories go in this order:

Supply and Demand

After the Wall

Mean Streets

Bug Spray

Brothers in Arms

Behind the Curtain

This story series will complete soon with 'Atlas'

Tristan Carmichael brushed a speck of ash off the perfectly pressed leg of his trousers and tapped his cigarette into a heavy glass ashtray. He picked up a china cup, savouring the jasmine scented steam before taking a sip. The winter sunlight shone cold upon his manicured garden, but his study was warm, the open fire crackling behind him. He turned over the page of the document he was reading then looked up as his secretary knocked on his half open door.

"Yes Julia, what is it?" He watched her walk across the room, admiring the curve of her legs.

"You asked me to notify you if anyone from Phoenix Foundation overlapped with any of your business engagements, Sir." Julia stopped in front of Carmichael's desk, trying not to breathe in the cloud of smoke around him.

"Ah yes," Carmichael sat back, setting his papers to one side.

"Representatives from Phoenix will be attending the Wellforce Remote Areas Vaccine Project launch party on Friday, Sir." Julia watched Carmichael nod and grind out his cigarette into the overflowing ashtray. "Shall I confirm that you will not be attending?"

"Yes," Carmichael took off his reading glasses and polished them on his handkerchief, "I think I'll retain my status as an anonymous benefactor for now."

*

"No way," Seeley took the pin out of Freddie Hawkins photo and laid it on the desk, "If brains were dynamite, Hawkins couldn't blow his own nose."

"Harsh, but probably true," MacGyver frowned at the remaining photographs, "I've never really seen him as the brains of the outfit either, who's next?"

"Gunter Schmidt," Seeley folded his arms and stared at the photo, "He's smart, he's got all the connections, and none of the morals. He strikes me as the type to be holding Atlas."

"Except that he was trying to bring Atlas down too," MacGyver took down Gunter's photo, placing it next to Hawkins.

"Or so he said..." Seeley frowned.

"It's not him," MacGyver shook his head, "And, like Hawkins, he's now dead and Atlas is carrying on just fine."

"True," Seeley indicated the next photo, "And our next contestant is?"

"Aloysius Caesar Jones, also known as Sundance." MacGyver chuckled, "You should have seen his face when me and Billy cornered him making the worst assassination attempt I've ever seen." He shook his head, "No, Sundance is strictly small time, and he's currently behind bars. He tried to scare me with a story about his bosses but so far as I know, we haven't been able to track who he's been working for."

"Hmm." Seeley took a swig of his coffee. "That bothers me, we should have been able to pick up on a greasy gangster's greasier boss with no trouble. Let's come back to him."

"OK. Next on the hit list are Wellforce's Dr Gregory and our very own Marcus Davison, devotee of dirty money." MacGyver took a sip of his own drink, frowning at Davidson.

"Both pretty classy guys." Seeley rubbed his chin, "But Gregory's doing his time upstate, so he's no longer involved, Davidson on the other hand..." He shrugged.

"Let's leave him up too," MacGyver took down Gregory, leaving Davidson next to Sundance. "Who's left?"

"Steve's CO, Command Sergeant Major Wilkes and Camp Parks." Seeley raised his mug again, but found it empty. "I'm inclined to think they were used as pawns too, but we did find that name in the files." He frowned, "What was it again?"

"Carmichael." MacGyver wrote the name on a piece of paper and pinned it to the board.

"Ring any bells for you?"

"Not so far." Seeley picked up his mug and headed for the break room. "But we can keep looking, right?"

"Right." Mac folded his arms and tried to work out what would link these people together.

*

"Have I mentioned how much I hate wearing a tie?" Mac pulled at his collar, uncomfortable in the warm room.

"Six times so far," Nikki murmured, smiling at a passing dignitary. "You look good, Mac."

"Thanks," MacGyver tweaked the tie once more and gave up. Catching sight of himself in the mirror, he decided that while the black suit and ponytail made him look and feel like an off-duty bouncer, Nikki looked stunning in her emerald green cocktail dress. He smiled politely at another diamond wearing matron, whose gaze lingered on him for just a little too long. "How much longer?"

"Just the final speeches." Nikki took a glass of sparkling wine off the nearest waiter's tray, "And the public thank you to our shyest benefactor."

"Yeah." Mac frowned. "Who would know who Wellforce's anonymous donation actually came from?"

"Wellforce directors, I guess," Nikki shrugged. "Maybe Pete, as a Phoenix director, but not necessarily."

"Unless he or she has contributed to other Phoenix projects..." Mac turned as Dr Ortega started her speech, deciding he would try to find out.

*

"Why are you so hung up on this?" Seeley looked at MacGyver around the monitor, looking at the untidy stacks of paper and half-finished gadgets on Mac's desk with distaste.

"Because whoever it is, they've bankrolled the very project that we can link to Atlas."

MacGyver dumped an oscilloscope and a length of cable on his desk and pulled a wad of

folders out of the drawer. "If they bankrolled Wellforce for this, they've got the money to fund other projects."

"Ask Pete?" Seeley caught a sliding stack of papers before they could spill over on to his desk.

"I did." MacGyver pulled out the Wellforce report, shoving the rest of the folders haphazardly back into the drawer. "He said he didn't know, but he'd try to find out."

"Ok," Seeley pushed the papers back, steadying the heap. He turned around, seeing that MacGyver had added a piece of paper with a question mark to the noticed board in the middle of the photo.

*

"MacGyver?" Come in a minute, would you?" Pete heard MacGyver pause outside his office, turn and walk in through his door.

"Pete, I'll never know how you do that!" The light in the room brightened again as MacGyver sat down and Pete smiled at the blurred outline of the man before him.

"Wouldn't do to tell you all my secrets, would it?" Pete heard MacGyver chuckle.

"I guess not. What can I do for you Pete?" MacGyver watched Pete fold his hands on his desk, looking down.

"I was able to find out the name of Wellforce's anonymous benefactor, but he's really very serious about staying out of the limelight." Pete unlaced his fingers and looked up. "If I tell you who he is, and his name gets out, it would seriously jeopardise our relationship with him. What do you need his name for?"

"Ok." MacGyver leaned back in his chair, hooked his foot over his knee and drummed his fingers on the side of his sneaker. "That's kind of complicated. I'm trying to work out who might be running Atlas, and I can't follow the link back from Wellforce without knowing who was involved."

"Ah." Pete nodded. "Of course, but I can't imagine this man being involved in anything bad, let alone anything as evil as Atlas." He shook his head. "This is a truly good man, MacGyver, he's inherited a fortune and built several more with skill and hard work, and then ploughed most of it back into worthy causes. Of all the people I can think of who'd have the money to fund something like Atlas, this man is the last one I'd consider."

"Ok, Pete." MacGyver held up his hands. "He's one of the good guys, I get it. Could you tell me his name anyway, if only so I can rule him out?"

"You won't tell anyone else?" Pete frowned. "I trust Seeley as much as I trust you, but there is absolute need for secrecy here."

"Understood." Mac nodded. "We won't tell anyone."

"Wellforce's benefactor is Tristan Carmichael." Pete frowned as he heard Mac's started movement. "What is it?"

"Uh, Pete??" MacGyver ran his hand through his hair, "We may have a problem."

*

"So, how'd he take it?" Seeley put down the report he'd been holding and looked across at MacGyver.

"About as well as you'd expect," MacGyver sat back in his chair, "But once he'd calmed down, he did say that if we could find some evidence of wrongdoing, he'd be prepared to listen."

"Uh huh," Seeley drummed his fingers on the desk, "Any idea what he'd consider valid evidence?"

"We'll pretty much need the smoking gun!" Mac shook his head, "He's got a lot of respect for Carmichael. Also, he said to tread carefully, we're poking around in a political minefield here."

"I'll bring my velvet gloves..." Seeley waggled his fingers and returned to his report.

MacGyver frowned at the noticeboard, deciding that he should probably take Carmichael's name down before Pete's spider sense told him it was up there. He replaced it with a note that just read 'C', putting it in the middle and arranging the other photos around it. Then he shuffled through the papers on his desk, pulling out Wellforce's Dr Gregory and pinning him back to the board. He sat down again, trying to work out how the others would be linked to the mysterious benefactor.

"Seeley, do you still have friends in the FBI?" MacGyver scratched his head. "I'm struggling for a place to start here and I wondered if you know anyone who could do a little digging?"

"Maybe." Seeley took out his phone. "What do you want to know?"

"Just if the name Tristan Carmichael flags up anything." MacGyver shrugged, watching Seeley nod.

"Ok, I'll see what I can do." He pointed the phone at MacGyver, "I'm not guaranteeing the information will come for free, favour for favour is how it works, you ok with that?"

"I'll chance it," Mac nodded.

"Ok then." Seeley rose and went outside, typing a number and putting the phone to his ear.

*

The late afternoon sunlight slanted through MacGyver's office window, warming his back. He rubbed his eyes, tired after searching all day, stretching the kinks out of his back. Seeley had gone home, his FBI contact having assured him she would get back to him tomorrow with any information she could find. At first glance, Carmichael seemed to be an outstanding philanthropist. He'd contributed generously to humanitarian efforts and medical research in both the USA and abroad.

Famine relief, education, disaster aid and medicines for a number of notable diseases had all benefitted from his largesse and he seemed to have a particular interest in vaccines and the prevention of epidemics. Deciding he was too tired to make sense of it today, Mac shut down his computer and left for home.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN PART TWO

MacGyver thought about Atlas and Carmichael all the way home, queuing through the LA traffic and smog that made all the cars in the distance hazy. Tristan Carmichael seemed blameless, apart from an occasional hint of scandal found in some of the sleazier tabloids. Not scandal that had ever found its way into the more serious newspapers though, which he concluded meant either that the story had been squashed quickly, or that it had never really existed in the first place.

MacGyver pulled the Jeep into his driveway and turned off the engine. As the Jeep's rumble stopped, he became aware of shouting and got out, going around the back of the apartment to investigate.

"Mac! Thank God! Help!" Jack Dalton flattened himself against the back of the building as Mama Lorraine brandished the yard brush at him.

"You stay there! MacGyver – I've got him cornered." Mama Lorraine glanced across at MacGyver, fierce triumph on her face, "Do you want him, or can I have him?" She advanced another step and Jack squeaked, trying to press himself further into the corner next to the garbage cans.

"Mama! Let him go, please!" MacGyver stepped forwards, laying a hand on the brush.

"Are you sure?" Mama Lorraine frowned at Jack, white faced and with his hat tipped over one eye, "He looks dodgy to me!"

"Oh, he's dodgy," MacGyver ignored Jack's indignant glare. "But he's harmless and he's my friend." He tugged gently at the brush but Mama Lorraine refused to let go. "Please?"

"Well, alright then." Mama Lorraine lowered the brush. "If you say so..." She watched Jack scramble out of the garbage, straightening his hat and scooping up a duffle bag as he hurried around to the front of the building. "Mac, you've got some odd friends."

"Oh, I know it!" MacGyver grinned and saluted Mama Lorraine, "Thank you for letting him go!"

*

"What were you thinking?!?" MacGyver set down a mug of coffee that Jack picked up with shaking hands. "Why were you trying to break into my house? I thought you were off running a wrestling extravaganza!"

"Absolutely." Jack blew on his coffee and took a sip. "And it was doing just fine, and then the yakuza got involved and then a rival gym set up across town, and then health and safety took a distinct dislike to my premises." He shook his head, "Then Panama Frank got married to a truly terrifying woman about this big." Jack held his hand out about five feet above the ground, "And she told him to pack it in before he scrambled his brains, then there might have been a disagreement over at crowd-please sequence that went a little... sideways and the fight that followed trashed all the dressing rooms. After that, the business went into a bit of a decline." Jack took off his hat and scratched his head. "So, I decided maybe wrestling wasn't for me and I should stick at what I'm good at."

"Uh huh." MacGyver sat back on the couch, resting his tea mug on his knee. "And what would that be?" He asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Flying! Was there doubt, amigo?" Jack jammed his hat back on his head and spread his arms wide, "Dalton Air lives again!" He tipped his arms and made the sound of a Spitfire diving on the enemy, "And you, you lucky devil, are just in time to get in on the ground floor of this highly profitable start up venture!" Jack waggled his eyebrows.

"No." MacGyver took a swig of tea, "Not this time Jack."

"Oh, come on Mac!" Jack dropped his arms. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I've got adventure enough here at home right now, Jack." MacGyver ran his free hand through his hair. "I gotta see something through before I take on any new projects, highly profitable or otherwise."

"Can I help?" Jack sat forwards, his expression earnest.

“Uh... Not with this. Sorry Jack.” MacGyver shrugged, seeing Jack's disappointment. “Won't you be too busy with Dalton Air anyway?”

“It's...um...still in the planning stage, so to speak.” Jack grinned. “Needs a little cash injecting into its engines before the business can really take off, I guess you could say.”

“You bought another wreck, didn't you?” MacGyver buried his face in his hands. “Even after what happened last time, you bought a wreck!”

“A prime renovation opportunity!” Jack sat up straight, taking a deep breath. “Which, when full realised and...uh...reassembled, will form the – “He broke off as MacGyver held up a hand.

“Let me guess, you've bought a wreck, you've spent your last dollar trying to get it fit to fly, and you turn up on my doorstep with the bag because it's too cold to sleep in the plane and you don't have anywhere else to go. Am I right?” MacGyver ran his hands through his hair and sighed, “Ok, Jack, welcome to Casa MacGyver, guest room is on the left.”

*

“I'm still surprised Pete went for this.” Seeley stopped his Lexus at the traffic lights and adjusted the cuffs of his dress shirt.

“Me too.” MacGyver pulled the elastic band holding his ponytail tight and polished his glasses on his waiter's apron. “But your friend turning up the fact that the name ‘Carmichael’ is known to the FBI probably had something to do with it.”

“Probably.” Seeley put the Lexus in gear and the powerful car pulled smoothly away from the intersection. “That Carmichael has a twin was something of a surprise though. I didn't see that one coming.”

“Me neither.” MacGyver squinted through the lens of his glasses, then put them on. “Troy and Tristan, I wonder how alike they are?”

“Hard to say,” Seeley shrugged, the expensive fabric of his tuxedo settling perfectly back on to his shoulders. “And even if they're identical to look at, it doesn't mean they're identical in character.” He glanced in the mirror and accelerated around a van, the purr of the engine barely changing as the car built up speed. “Although my limited experience of obscenely rich people suggests that neither of them will have completely clean hands.”

“Mm.” MacGyver checked his apron pocket to make sure the bug was secure, “Was your FBI friend able to tell us which deeds belonged to which twin?”

“Nope.” Seeley pulled into the hotel driveway and joined the queue of expensive cars. “They both only ever use their surname and initial so there's no way to untangle which ‘T Carmichael’ is which.”

“Pity,” MacGyver unfastened his seatbelt, “Well, time for Dexter to go wait tables.” He opened the car door and stepped out, “See you on the inside.”

“See you.” Seeley watched MacGyver walk around to the back of the hotel.

The ‘Dexter Fillmore’ disguise was simple but effective. MacGyver walked differently, slouching took inches off his height and the ponytail and glasses changed the shape of his face. The waiter's outfit would help him to blend in too and hopefully no one at the World Hunger Council fundraiser would recognise him. Seeley touched his pocket, where his own bug sat next to his forged invitation. With one Phoenix operative on each side of the party, they would have little trouble planting at least one of the bugs on Carmichael.

Seeley moved through the glittering crowd, poised and perfect in his tailored tuxedo. He nodded to other guests, looking right at home with a glass of champagne in his hand. He picked up a canape and turned, surveying the room as he bit into it, looking for Carmichael. Seeing him near the door, deep in conversation with a woman wearing a fortune in diamonds, Seeley swallowed the last of the canape and made his way across the hall.

MacGyver balanced a tray of canapes on one hand, working his way around the hall. Stepping around a rock star and an oil baron in a massive hat, he saw the back of Carmichael's head as the man disappeared through a door. Setting down his tray, MacGyver worked his way through the crowd and opened the door. A glance told him the corridor behind it was empty and he turned as something tapped him on the shoulder. "Young man!" The dowager set her cane back on the floor and stared at him over her half glasses. "This will never do!" She held up her empty champagne glass. "No Ma'am," Giving her his best "Dexter" smile, MacGyver took the glass from her and turned as if going to get a refill.

Seeley followed Carmichael across the hall, catching up with him as the man arrived at the cloakrooms. He brushed past, slipping the bug into one of Carmichael's overcoat pockets just as it was handed to the attendant. Carmichael turned away from him to continue his conversation and Seeley drifted away unnoticed.

MacGyver stooped to pick up a dropped canape, looking all around as he stood up again. He spotted Carmichael, still wearing his overcoat. Carmichael took off his coat, draping it over one arm and MacGyver stepped forwards.

"May I take your coat, Sir?" MacGyver held out his hands and Carmichael dumped the overcoat onto them without looking up. "Thank you, sir." MacGyver took the overcoat, slipping the bug into a pocket before delivering it to the cloakroom. The attendant nodded as MacGyver told her who the coat belonged to and hung it up next to another identical coat. Returning to the hall, MacGyver caught Seeley's eye and nodded. Seeley indicated that MacGyver should follow him and went through an archway into the corridor beyond. "Got him," MacGyver grinned, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Put it in his overcoat pocket."

"That's what I did, I didn't see you though." Seeley turned, looking back into the hall, "Ah." "Ah? What Ah?" MacGyver stepped sideways, following the line of Seeley's gaze, "Oh...Ah..."

On the other side of the hall, two men greeted each other, identical in every way, their height, appearance, clothes and even body language the same.

"That's just freaky," Seeley shook his head, watching the twins mirror each other's smiles while applauding politely as the first speaker stepped onto the lower stage in the corner of the room.

"Yeah," MacGyver frowned, folding his arms, "So now we've each bugged one twin, but we have no way to tell which is which."

"Looks that way," Seeley rubbed a hand over his face, "I say we listen to them both, try to work out which is which from what we hear."

"Why is nothing ever that simple?" MacGyver pulled the band from his hair and shook it out.

"Beats me," Seeley put his hands in his pockets and they turned to leave.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN PART THREE

For a week, they'd listened to the Carmichael twins' bugs without learning anything about ATLAS. Although Willis' custom-made bugs were good, they'd been unable to determine which twin was which from the snatches of conversation and phone calls they'd heard.

Then one of the bugs had stopped working...

Now all they could hope was that the remaining bug belonged to Tristan Carmichael and that something about ATLAS would surface soon.

"Shhh," Seeley pressed the earpiece closer to his ear and closed his eyes, listening. "I think we've got something here." He scribbled rapidly on his notepad then held the pad up for MacGyver and Willis to see. At the top of the page, Seeley had written one word...

'ATLAS'

MacGyver gave him the thumbs up and then left the room with Willis so that Seeley could listen to the rest of the conversation without interruption.

Ten minutes had never taken so long to pass.

"Pay dirt!" Seeley high fived Willis as he came into the break room, "Okay, right," He shuffled his notes, "Carmichael, whichever one we've got, is meeting up with the general organising the ATLAS project."

"Did he mention ATLAS by name?" MacGyver sat forwards in his seat.

"Yes," Seeley turned the page in his notepad, "Here, yes. 'I'll expect an update on when ATLAS will be ready to go' There it is." He smacked the notepad with the back of his fingers and grinned.

"When?" MacGyver drained his tea and stood up.

"Saturday, three pm, Dodgers Stadium," Seeley nodded, "Take me out to the Ball Game."

*

"Do you see him?" MacGyver murmured into his walkie talkie. The stadium was empty and he felt very exposed lurking in the bushes outside the wall.

"On approach," Seeley's voice was equally low, "You got the general?"

"Oh yeah," MacGyver peered between the branches at the general, sitting on a park bench and pretending to read a newspaper. He scanned the surrounding bushes and trees for movement, but saw nothing. The general put down his newspaper and turned at the sound of a car. A black Lincoln pulled up outside the stadium and a man got out, opening the door for Carmichael. Carmichael got out and stood by the car, pulling on his gloves and looking around as though enjoying the view. He smiled on seeing the general and crossed the grass to sit on the bench. In the bushes, MacGyver raised his camera and photographed the two together.

“Coming up now.” Seeley’s voice was quiet.

“Grady, good to see you,” Carmichael’s voice lacked accent or compassion.

“Mr Carmichael,” General Grady nodded briskly.

“And how are you progressing with *your* part of *my* project?” Carmichael glanced around, his gaze lingering on the bushes where MacGyver hid, and on the top of the wall surrounding the stadium. MacGyver frowned at the man who had accompanied him, trying to place where he’d seen him before.

Seeley eased himself forwards in the long grass and swept the area with binoculars. He and MacGyver has been in position for an hour and he couldn’t shake the feeling that they weren’t alone. He watched Carmichael talking to the general and followed his gaze to where MacGyver hid and then to the top of the wall. He refocussed the binoculars on the top of the stadium, but saw nothing.

“Stay still, Mac – he just looked right at you.” Seeley murmured. He swung the binoculars back again, studying the man who had accompanied Carmichael, still standing next to the car. “His little friend looks alert too.”

“Coming along well, Sir. Should be ready in eight weeks.” The general glanced at Carmichael, trying to judge his reaction. “The aeroplane is being converted for the payload, but it’s complicated work, and taking time to complete.”

“Eight weeks.” Carmichael pursed his lips. “I’d hoped for sooner. You really must put more effort in, Grady.”

“It could be done sooner, Sir, but to do so would leave a trail that could implicate all of us.” Grady blinked when Carmichael glared at him, but didn’t look away.

“I see.” Carmichael pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one, not offering one to the general. “Then eight weeks it is.” He breathed out smoke through his nose, which curled away in the cold air. “I shall be pleased to see an end to the... nuisance that has plagued me all these years.” He stood, looking down at General Grady. “You have everything you need, yes?”

“Yes sir. Just...” Grady looked up into Carmichael’s cold stare.

“Well?” Carmichael took another drag on his cigarette.

“I would like to confirm that my own exit strategy is in place, Sir.” Grady swallowed as Carmichael continued to stare at him.

“You’ll be well taken care of, Grady. I’m disappointed that you doubt that.” Carmichael stared for a moment longer before grinding out his cigarette under his heel and turning back towards the car.

MacGyver lowered the camera, having taken all the photographs he needed. The tape recorder capturing the conversation whirred quietly in his pocket and he reached in to press the ‘stop’ button. He glanced through the leaves at the man by the car, who was looking straight at his bushes. The man’s eyes narrowed. MacGyver gasped, suddenly realising where he’d seen the man before. The last time he’d seen the man, he’d been in Berlin, fleeing from a sniper and with Gunther Schmidt’s blood still on his hands! He’d been chased across the city and cornered in a dank alley, had a terrifying fight with this man, a knife expert, and escaped by dumping him down a coal chute!

Moving as slowly as possible, MacGyver keyed his walkie-talkie.

“Seeley, we may be in trouble here. The man by the car is Klaus Muller, knife for hire, and I think he may have spotted me. Keep a lookout, last time I saw him, he was travelling with a sniper partner.”

“Great.” Seeley scanned the roof of the stadium again. “If there’s someone up there, they must have been here before us, because we didn’t see anyone else come in.” He glanced up at the roof again, then down to MacGyver’s bushes. “Angle’s not that great from up there, but it’s the only high point that wouldn’t have trees in the line of sight. Either’s there’s no sniper, or they might just have missed us on approach.” He looked across at the car again, seeing Muller stripping off his gloves and reaching into his pocket. “Mac! You’re blown! He’s seen you!”

“Damn!” MacGyver zipped the tape recorder into his pocket and stuffed the camera inside the front of his coat, the strap holding it securely around his neck. “Cover me – I’m going to have to make a run for it. We can’t let this evidence fall into their hands!” He glanced through the leaves, seeing Muller striding towards him. “Now!”

MacGyver ran out from behind the bushes, zigzagging as a shot rang out from the roof. Seeley fired upwards, his bullet striking sparks off the metal railing and causing a flurry of movement from the rooftop. Carmichael and Muller spun around, ducking at the sound of shots. Muller grabbed Carmichael, hurrying him back to the car, but Carmichael shook free of his grip and opened the driver’s door.

“Get in!” He yelled to Muller, who jumped into the shotgun seat, and the car roared off across the parking lot, chasing MacGyver.

Seeley shot again as the sniper’s rifle reappeared over the edge of the roof, then sprinted across the grass and burst through the gate and up the stairs.

MacGyver glanced over his shoulder, sprinting flat out across the parking lot and plunging into the bushes and scrub at the edge of the stadium. He heard the car crunch off the road and start crashing through the undergrowth, engine revving hard. He flinched as a bullet whined past his head, followed immediately by the flat crack of a pistol shot. He slithered down a hill, seeing buildings through the bushes ahead of him. Leaping the low fence into the nearest back yard, belonging to a café, he heard the car screech to a halt and turn. Leaning against the side wall of the café, panting hard, MacGyver heard the engine rev again, and the squeal of tires turning the corner towards him.

“You gotta be kidding me!” MacGyver took a deep breath, looking around him. Glancing up, gauging how long he had before the car reached him, he spied a ten-gallon drum by the café’s back door and reached for it, tipping it over and rolling it towards the road.

Seeley flattened himself against the wall of the stairwell as another shot chipped the plaster near his head. He heard a stealthy footstep, much nearer than before. The sniper had to be close, just above him...

The car screeched into view just as MacGyver unscrewed the lid of the drum. Waste cooking oil poured out of the drum and across the road. The car’s front wheel caught the edge of the slick, and Carmichael sawed wildly at the wheel as the car spun out of control. Muller, hanging out of the window, fired again but his shot went wild and he had to grip the edge of the door to avoid being thrown out of the car. He lost his grip on his gun, which

clattered onto the road and fell down a drain. MacGyver dived into the front yard of the house across the road. He burst out from between the houses and hurdled the fence into a schoolyard. Behind him, Carmichael wrestled the car under control and swung the wheel left, speeding down the road and doubling back along the next street. Seeing a flash of movement, Muller yelled and Carmichael rammed the schoolyard fence. Hearing the crash, MacGyver ducked behind the school kitchen, dodged behind a tall dumpster and pushed.

Heart hammering, Seeley took a deep breath and swung around the corner of the stairwell, gun blazing. He ran forward, he knocked the sniper's gun barrel up and her bullet slammed into the ceiling. He grabbed the sniper by the throat, punching her in the gut with his other hand. The sniper cried out, but kicked him hard in the knee and brought the rifle around in a vicious arc, catching Seeley across the temple and knocking him down. Stars exploded in his vision and he felt as much as saw the sniper leap over him. He grabbed her foot as she sailed overhead, and she crashed down, hitting her head on the corner of the wall and collapsing on top of him. Seeley pushed and kicked, shifting her off him and wobbling to his feet, using the wall for support. He touched his head, feeling blood trickle down his face, and looked out of the nearest window. Tire tracks ran across the car park and disappeared into the scrub at the edge of the stadium. Seeley shook his head, trying to dispel the dizziness, and set off down the stairs, stopping only to handcuff the unconscious sniper to the metal bannisters.

Carmichael braked hard as the dumpster rolled into view just ahead of him, then swore and accelerated, ramming it out of the way. He caught sight of MacGyver running up the slope and crossing the road at the top. He gunned the car up the steep slope, ignoring the crunch of metal as the car crested the top and bumped over the narrow road and into the park on the other side. MacGyver heard the roar of the car engine and the scrape as the car crossed into the park, the revving that indicated Carmichael was bogged down in the mud at the edge of the park and then a yell as Muller spotted him.

"There he is!" Muller, once again leaning out of the car window, pointed at him and Carmichael sent the car surging forward. Panting for breath, MacGyver forced his tired legs onward.

Seeley reached the bottom of the steps and set off across the parking lot to his car, parked out of sight near the road. Dizziness made his world tip and swirl, blood running into his eyes and making it hard to see. He paused for a moment, hanging onto the side of his car as the world echoed and darkness crept into the edges of his vision.

"You can't pass out now, Atkins, you have to save Mac!" Shaking his head to clear it, Seeley got into his car and set off after MacGyver.

MacGyver dodged through the trees at the edge of the reservoir, the car close behind him. Picking the densest undergrowth slowed him down, but meant the car could not follow exactly, but had to run parallel to him. To his right, cars flashed past on the freeway, going far too fast for him to flag down a lift. Ahead, the road curved around, disappearing behind the brow of the hill. MacGyver forced himself up the steep slope, turning when he reached the top and running along the chain link fence. He risked a glance back, seeing the car only yards away. He had a brief glimpse of Muller's bloodthirsty grin, and Carmichael's intense concentration, then he spun back around and leaped for the fence. He stumbled on landing,

the car showering him with stones and loose earth as Carmichael rammed the fence just behind him. MacGyver ran headlong across four lanes of traffic, ignoring the screeching brakes and honking horns. Behind him, he heard another crash as Carmichael's car smashed through the barrier and careered across the road. The sound of the engine was so loud, it seemed to fill his whole world. He'd almost made it across the road when he felt a massive impact. He was momentarily aware of flying through the air, he smelled dirt and blood as he skidded across the ground, then there was a moment of weightlessness before the shock of landing in the freezing river, swollen with snowmelt, stole his consciousness away. Carmichael screeched to a halt and Muller leaped out, running to the edge of the road and peering into the river below. The water rolled and boiled, running fast and deadly. Muller looked downriver, seeing MacGyver surface for a moment, limp and pale, before the current sucked him under again and carried him away. Muller returned to the car, nodding to Carmichael.

"He'd dead. Nobody could survive that." He glanced back at the river as Carmichael rammed the battered car into gear and pulled away into traffic amidst a chorus of horns, and gestures from scandalised drivers. "We have to find a different car. This one will attract too much attention."

BEHIND THE CURTAIN PART FOUR

Following MacGyver's escape route was easy. Following the trail of tyre tracks, broken branches and debris, Seeley was able to track him through a small housing estate and into Elysian Park. Stopping the car at the base of a steep hill, Seeley climbed up past a set of deep tyre tracks and stood at the top, looking out across the freeway ramps. The tracks continued down the embankment, and two police cars were blocking part of the freeway and the smashed concrete barrier that separated the lanes of traffic. Looking through his binoculars, Seeley could see scrapes of black paint on the barrier between the road and the river, and he felt his heart sink. If MacGyver had gone into the river, he was likely to be dead. The current could be heard even over the traffic noise, the river higher than usual even for this time of year, racing along faster than a man could run. Seeley forced himself to stay calm, panning his binoculars over the scene, trying to capture every detail. The car tracks he had followed plunged down onto the road, the concrete scored where the metal fender had hit and dragged along. The car had braked sharply, leaving a streak of rubber on the pavement, then turned and hit the concrete wall at an angle, scraping along before braking hard and coming to a halt. Then the car must have driven away, because all that was left was a scatter of broken headlamp glass, shining in the lights of the police cars. "Mac, where the hell are you?" Seeley lowered the binoculars.

Slithering back down the slope to his car, Seeley had to pause and breathe deeply with his hands resting on the hood as a wave of dizziness overtook him. He swiped blood from his temple with his sleeve, unlocked the car and got in. He unfolded a street map of Los Angeles over the top of the steering wheel and traced his route with a finger.

"OK. Assume Mac went into the river here..." He moved his finger. "The river runs south, so he'd be heading towards..." He followed the line of the river, snaking under road bridges and through the train yard. "OK." He put the car into gear and drove out of the park, heading for the other side of the river and the road that ran alongside it. "Hang on, Mac. Cavalry's coming!"

*

Carmichael got out of the cab, leaving Muller to pay the driver. He had been silent all the way back, too angry with their failure to speak. Muller and the sniper, Olga Schneider, had been given a chance to redeem themselves after their failure in Berlin, and they had let him down. Failure was something he tolerated rarely once, and never twice. He turned and saw that Muller had disappeared from view, and shrugged. He would arrange for them to disappear permanently later on. At least the thorn in his side, MacGyver was now dealt with.

*

Seeley drove slowly alongside the river, ignoring the fury of the drivers behind him. Night was starting to fall, and the shadows under the bridges were dark. He turned off the main road to stay closer to the river, and drove past industrial buildings. Stopping at each of the road bridges he came to, he leaned over the guard railings and shone a flashlight under the arches, hoping to see MacGyver washed up in the storm debris that collected there. Climbing fences and dodging through gaps in the walls, he got as close to the flooded river as he dared, leaning out to check in the deepest shadows. He shouted himself hoarse, his voice lost in the roar of the rushing water.

Pulling up at the end of a dead-end road near the train yard, Seeley got out of his car and continued on foot. The coil of rope he'd pulled out of the trunk of his car bumped against his back with every step, and his flashlight and gun were heavy in his pockets. He staggered, concussion making him feel as though he was on a fairground ride. Using the fence for balance, Seeley made his way along the river bank towards the San Bernardino freeway. Stopping at a narrower bridge before the freeway, Seeley climbed the wall and fence separating the river from the train yard and shone his flashlight under the bridge. He squinted, seeing something pale at the edge of the flashlight beam and wishing he'd brought his binoculars from the car.

He climbed over the fence, creeping alongside the rushing river and gripping the rusted chain link with one hand.

"Mac?" Seeley blinked rain out of his eyes and crept closer, seeing something pale caught in the heap of washed up sticks and garbage against the bridge pillar. He moved closer, the water rushing past his boots and tugging at his legs. "MAC!" Lashing the rope to the fence and swinging out over the water, Seeley reached for the pale hand he could see tangled in the sticks. He braced his feet against the sloping concrete side of the river bank and pulled.

MacGyver came free from the debris in a rush. The current tugged at him, swirling in his hair and pulling him down. Seeley heaved, inching him out of the water.

"Mac! Help me out here, buddy!" Seeley's feet slipped on the wet concrete and he gripped MacGyver's sleeve tighter. MacGyver remained limp, his eyes closed. Seeley wrapped the rope around himself and reached down, pulling MacGyver out of the river by his coat. Water poured out of his clothes as Seeley hauled him up the bank, rolling him through a hole in the fence and down onto the concrete of the train yard below. Reaching out with shaking fingers, Seeley felt for a pulse on MacGyver's neck, but found nothing.

“Come on buddy, don’t do this to me.” Seeley tried again, his hands numb with cold. He rolled MacGyver onto his side and thumped him on the back. “Come on Mac, breathe!” He pulled MacGyver onto his back again, tipping his head back ready to start CPR. “Dammit, don’t do this!”

MacGyver took a long, wailing breath and his eyes flicked open. He thrashed in Seeley’s grasp, retched and then threw up, bile and river water splashing across the concrete. “YES!” Seeley punched the air, putting an arm around MacGyver and helping him to sit up. “AAH!” Blood ran down MacGyver’s face from a cut on his eyebrow, and his face contracted in pain as he reached towards his leg. “Don’t!” Seeley grabbed MacGyver’s hand before he could touch his leg. Even in the fading light, Seeley could see that MacGyver’s foot was twisted at a strange angle. “Leave it alone, OK?” He reached into his pocket, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw that his phone had stayed dry. Without letting go of MacGyver, he dialled 911.

*

MacGyver was awake when the paramedics loaded him into the ambulance. He remembered Seeley telling him he’d see him at the hospital, but then the painkillers kicked in and the rest of the journey was a blur.

He woke in hospital, to a nurse calling his name and shining a light in his eyes. He swiped at the light, squinting in the glare, and the nurse held his hand away from his head, warning him not to touch his stitches. He was aware of a dull, far-away ache in his leg and the sick dizziness that signalled a concussion, but he drifted away again without remembering how he’d been hurt.

*

Seeley limped down the hospital corridor, morning sunlight shining in through the windows. He knocked on MacGyver’s door, grinning when he heard MacGyver answer. “Morning, sunshine!” Seeley smiled, hiding his concern at how bad MacGyver looked. He was sitting up in bed, the stitches tracking across his eyebrow surrounded by a bruise, livid against his pale skin. The bedcovers bunched over the plaster cast holding his broken ankle in place. MacGyver coughed, holding his ribs, and his voice, when he spoke, was hoarse. “Hey Seeley, how’re you doing?” MacGyver sat up a little straighter, the movement making him wince. “Better than you!” Seeley shook his head. “Man, you look rough...” “You’re no oil painting yourself!” MacGyver indicated Seeley’s black eye, and the cut snaking back into his hair. “Touché.” Seeley straightened his stiff knee, leaning back in the hospital chair. “I’m just glad to see you’re OK. That was touch and go for a minute there.” “Yeah, so I hear.” MacGyver’s smile faded. “Thanks for that – I think I owe you.” “I believe you do.” Seeley inclined his head. “How long are they keeping you here for?” “Until they’re sure that my brains aren’t totally scrambled, and that taking a bath in the Los Angeles River hasn’t given me pneumonia.” MacGyver shrugged, carefully. “Or Weil’s disease. Or maybe Bubonic Plague...” He shuddered. “It was pretty foul in there.”

“Well, you certainly drank enough of it.” Seeley frowned. “How much do you remember, Mac?”

“It’s coming back to me.” MacGyver ticked off points on his fingers. “I remember running through the park, and being chased by the car. Carmichael was driving. I remember being shot at to begin with, but I guess Muller dropped his gun somewhere along the way.” He shifted his leg, holding his breath as his ankle stabbed at him. “I remember running across the road, and I remember how cold it was, landing in the river, but I don’t remember being hit, and I don’t remember being washed up at the bridge.” He shook his head. “I’m kind of pleased about that part, actually.”

“Mm.” Seeley nodded.

“Hey, did you find the car?” MacGyver sat forwards. “It must have been easy to find – how many Lincolns with that kind of damage can there be?”

“No sign.” Seeley shook his head. “And even though I radioed in to Pete to tell him about the sniper I left handcuffed to the stadium stairs, by the time the police got there, she’d gone.” He sighed. “Atlas cleaned house pretty well.”

“Damn.” MacGyver shook his head, then looked up. “How about the camera and the recording? Did I still have them when you pulled me out of the river?”

“You did, but the water had ruined both.” Seeley shrugged. “Sorry, Mac.”

“So, we still haven’t any proof that Carmichael is behind ATLAS.” Mac leaned back against the pillows. “And we have only eight weeks to bring Atlas down.”

“Yeah.” Seeley looked at MacGyver, thinking that their chances were a lot slimmer with MacGyver laid up. “Still, we like a challenge, don’t we?”

“Sure.” MacGyver smiled, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

*

“Here we go, amigo.” Jack stowed MacGyver’s crutches in the back of the Jeep and helped him get in. He got into the driver’s seat and started the Jeep, pulling out into the traffic without looking first. Horns honked and MacGyver flinched.

“Hey Jack – mirror and signal before you manoeuvre, OK?” He looked in the rear-view mirror to see a taxi driver gesturing angrily at them. “Let’s get home in one piece, OK?”

“Sure, Mac.” Jack glanced across at him, worried. “Whatever you say.”

Arriving at MacGyver’s house, Jack leaped out and grabbed MacGyver’s bag and crutches, helping him out of the Jeep and opening the door for him. Relieved that none of his nutty neighbours had seen him arrive, MacGyver hobbled into the house and sat down on the couch. The hospital had cleared him of pneumonia, but the headache from his concussion lingered and he was soon exhausted.

He accepted a glass of juice from Jack, who sat down opposite him.

“So, what happens now?” Jack pushed back his cap and scratched his head. “I got most of the story from Secret Squirrel, but it sounds like the baddies are still out there, and ready and willing to take another shot at my best co-pilot. Am I right?”

“Secret squ...? Oh, Seeley. He’s called Seeley, Jack! Hopefully not.” MacGyver rested his broken ankle on the coffee table, rubbing his leg above the cast. “Phoenix is putting out the story that I was killed and that the police are close to finding my attackers.”

“Except is isn’t true, is it compadre?” Jack frowned. “Not even a little bit true. What happens if they work it out?”

“Then I guess they have another try!” MacGyver ran a hand through his hair. “What do you want me to say here, Jack? I can’t just forget about this, no matter how scary they are, no matter how close they came to –” He broke off, shaking his head. “ATLAS have to be stopped, Jack. That has to happen.”

“They absolutely do.” Jack sat forward. “But you have to sit this next bit out, amigo. You have to let your friends help you out this time.” He indicated MacGyver’s broken ankle.

“While I don’t for a moment doubt your ability to punt bad-guy posterior and take bad-guy names on one foot, you’ll do a much better job of it when you’re healed. Right? Right?”

“I guess.” MacGyver nodded, then looked up. “But we’re on a timetable here, Jack. ATLAS are going to spread superbugs goodness knows where, and they’re going to do it in eight weeks! Time off to recover is a luxury I just don’t have!”

“Agreed.” Jack nodded, and MacGyver frowned in confusion. “But Mac, there’s another reason this next bit has to happen without you – you’re dead, remember? You and I both know that faking being dead doesn’t work if you’re still in the room!” He watched MacGyver think about this, realising that Jack was right. “So, whether you like it or not, you’re on the bench for now. Go visit Sam in South America, go to the cabin, go anywhere that’s safe and out-of-state for a bit. Comprende, compadre?”

“Yeah, Jack. Comprende.” MacGyver nodded, admitting defeat. “I’ll do it. And I think I know where I’ll go...”

To be continued in ‘Safe Haven’