

The Gift

MacGyver shifted uncomfortably as he slept. It wasn't a bad dream, simply the sense that although his body needed rest, his mind should be up and working on a new problem.

He couldn't quite remember, though, what it was that was so urgent.

Tiny tendrils of memory began to creep back into his fatigued brain.

An airliner on its way to L.A. that had a mind of its own and a man onboard that wanted to do something...*something bad*.

Mac moved again, his slumber disturbed by his own subconscious. He could see the bad guy's face, but he couldn't quite recall who he was, or what he'd done.

Then, in an instant an image of Sam filtered through, an image of his son lying in his own blood on the floor of the plane.

MacGyver sat bolt upright, awakening with a start at the painful memory.

And then he realized that it was over. He had been sleeping on a chair at Sam's bedside in the hospital all night, and the images were all in the past.

He blinked, rubbing at his eyes – eyes that were still so tired from events on the Boeing. Then he quickly shifted his gaze to the bed he was sitting next to.

Sam was still hooked up to a monitor, but it beeped a comforting rhythmic tone that said all was well. He still had an I.V. in too, but MacGyver knew that was to be expected considering what he'd been through.

As Mac assessed his son, it suddenly occurred to him that he was not the only one scrutinizing someone.

Sam was awake and staring back at his dad, the mischievous spark that had dwindled the night before, back in those deep eyes of his. He was still pale but smiling wanly.

“Hey,” Sam almost whispered. “Don't you have some place better to be?”

Mac's lips curled into a small smile of his own. “Nope. I needed to make sure you didn't get yourself into anymore trouble.”

Sam swallowed. “Maybe you should go look in the mirror. You look worse than me.” There was actual concern in his voice. Enough, in fact, to make MacGyver force his weary body up from his chair and check himself out in the mirror at the side of his son's bed.

His hair was bedraggled, he needed a shave, and his eyes looked like he'd been on a week-long party at the beach.

Apparently, Sam had a point.

“Why don’t you go get cleaned up dad,” Sam suggested. “Maybe let me get some sleep...”

MacGyver turned from the mirror to see that Sam had already drifted off back into oblivion. He was obviously exhausted, and the sleep would do him good.

Mac glanced at the chair at his son’s bedside, his heart wanting to stay, but common sense begging him to leave.

He reluctantly chose the latter and made his way to the door, quietly closing it behind him.

As promised, Atkins, one of Phoenix’s best operatives was standing guard outside. He nodded to Mac as he exited and then reached into his jacket pocket.

“Mr. Thornton said to give you this, sir.” Atkins offered up a hotel key. “The address is on the chain there.” He tapped a plastic fob that the key dangled from. “He also left a message that the Sacramento police have you scheduled for an interview at 10a.m. this morning at their local office in Fair Oaks, and that he’ll catch up with you later for a chat. He said you’d know what about?”

MacGyver smiled. Pete Thornton was nothing if not persistent. He wanted Mac back with Phoenix, and he wasn’t about to say no. “Yeah, I know,” he answered, giving nothing away. “I’ll talk with him this evening.”

Atkins nodded and moved back into his “on guard” stance. He reminded Mac of the Grenadiers in London outside the palace. He was all about duty – *not much personality in there that I can see...*

Mac looked at his watch as he moved off down the antiseptic smelling corridor. It was nine already. He guessed there was no time to shower before his interview, so he headed straight to the local police office.

Considering how he looked, he just hoped he didn’t get locked up for being a vagrant first.

***Mojave Springs Hotel
Fair Oaks
California***

The hotel Nikki had found was actually outside of Antelope, and it hadn’t taken MacGyver long to realize he was going to need transport to visit Sam, not to mention, get around for other essentials.

Despite it being just two days until Christmas, he’d still managed to rent a half-decent Buick. Not exactly his usual style, but he was mobile.

The hotel itself was like walking back into the past. The place was family owned, clean and very welcoming.

Mac had soon realized, however, that he actually had no luggage – and therefore no clean clothes, no nothing. He'd managed to bag a few items like a clean shirt and jeans from the local store, but he still felt kind of naked without his own items.

And that was when it had hit him.

He'd just climbed out of the shower and was rubbing at his hair with a towel when he'd spotted the date on the bedside alarm.

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It glared at him, taunting him with the fact that all his things had gone up in smoke when the Boeing had exploded.

And that included Sam's Christmas gift.

MacGyver had been so careful choosing a present for Sam, and had finally decided on a high end camera that he knew his son could use for pleasure as well as work.

Said camera was now probably a pile of molten metal and plastic, and even if it had survived, it was evidence in an ongoing investigation. No way would it be released back to them in time for Christmas Day.

MacGyver thought about it. Sam was alive, and he was going to be okay, did it really matter about a gift?

But then, this was their first Christmas together. His first Christmas *as a dad*.

Heck, yeah, it mattered that he had something for his son.

Mac quickly pulled on the new clothes he'd bought and grabbed the phone book from the bedside table.

He flicked through as quickly as possible, but there were no shops in Fair Oaks that were likely to have a replacement camera for Sam. It was a professional piece of equipment, after all.

MacGyver scanned further, but it looked like he was going to have to drive back into Antelope at the very least. Maybe even a trip into Sacramento was on the cards.

He grabbed his wallet and the hire car keys and quickly left the warmth of the hotel room behind.

MacGyver was on a mission, and he wasn't going to give up until he had the perfect gift for Sam all wrapped up and ready for Christmas morning.

* * * *

MacGyver hadn't been driving long when he'd become conscious of the fact that he probably shouldn't be driving at all. His eyes were bleary, and no amount of rubbing at them was going to help.

Truth be told, he'd only had about an hour's sleep in Sam's hospital room, and fatigue was rapidly catching up with him.

His body ached, and his mind screamed for him to turn the Buick around and go to bed.

The problem was, even if he'd wanted to, that might be a little difficult.

Mac had rushed out of the hotel so dang fast he'd forgotten to get a map, and he'd definitely not had the good sense to ask for directions.

The road signs should have been enough, right?

Except, he was exhausted, and somehow out here in the boonies, he'd missed a turn.

Mac was mentally chiding himself as he slowed the Buick, looking for anything that might tell him where he was.

The road he was on was rough and unkempt, and there didn't appear to be any signs.

He took a sharp left and then slowed again, this time not because he'd let off the gas.

The Buick's engine had cut out.

Great, it's getting dark, I'm in the middle of nowhere, and now the car has to die on me. What kind of Christmas spirit is this?

MacGyver popped the hood and took a quick look for any obvious signs of the breakdown, but the car seemed in perfect condition. There was gas in the tank, charge in the battery, and yet it was dead.

He dropped back behind the wheel and cranked again, but the engine wouldn't even turn over.

Mac sighed. It looked like he was going to have to walk, but which way?

Normally he could have at least figured which way was north with the stars, but typically, it was a cloudy night.

He locked the Buick and was about to start to walk when a pair of headlights shimmered into view in the distance.

The car bobbed violently on the rut-filled road, and it took a further two minutes to reach him.

It slowed without Mac even needing to wave it down, like it, or rather its driver, had anticipated someone being there.

It was an old beast. A bright red Pontiac station wagon with white-walled tires and a rather horrific dent in the rear.

As Mac watched, the driver's window rolled down, and he was greeted by the smile of a young and very curious woman's face.

"You really shouldn't be out here, you know? Didn't you see the signs?"

MacGyver felt a little sheepish. He was so tired he hadn't seen any signs. "Um, no ma'am," he admitted. "I got a little lost, and then my hire car just gave out on me."

She looked him up and down as if assessing him. "I guess I could give you a lift back into town. I can't leave you out here all night now, can I?" She jerked a thumb towards the passenger door, indicating he should get in.

Mac was so cold and weary, he accepted gratefully. It must have been quite a risk for her to take a complete stranger into her car on a lonely back road like this, and he appreciated the trust.

If she'd seen me before the shower, she might not have been so trusting, he inwardly chuckled.

The woman pulled away and the Pontiac began its rough and tumble journey back down the damaged highway. "My name's Molly Gregson," she introduced herself.

"MacGyver."

Molly nodded as if she'd known that. "So what are you doing lost on road like this at Christmas, MacGyver?" She navigated around a pothole and the car swayed.

"Oh, I was just heading out to Sacramento for a gift for my son." Mac thought about Sam lying in the hospital bed. He deserved his dad's time and effort after having no father for all those years.

How many Christmas mornings had Sam wished to have his mom there, or the father he didn't even know?

"You left it kind of late, didn't you?" Molly prodded.

Mac shrugged. "It's a long story, but the gift I originally bought him got destroyed yesterday. I need to replace it."

Molly seemed to think about it. “No you don’t,” she offered. “You don’t need to buy your son anything at all. The greatest gift you could give him isn’t a present; it’s not a physical item at all. It’s family. *It’s love.*”

MacGyver looked across to her and was surprised to see how philosophical she’d become. Her face was stern and her eyes glassy, like she’d turned into a human version of “Yoda”.

“That’s kinda...um, deep,” he squirmed. He didn’t know why, but Molly was suddenly creeping him out – and Angus MacGyver normally didn’t do “creeped out”.

Of course, he understood what she was saying, and in an ideal world she was right. It was just the way she’d said it, like she’d been through some experience that had shaped her into a slightly bitter, but resolved individual.

Molly appeared to sense his mood. “Oh, don’t take any notice of me. I guess I’ve listened to one too many sermons on the radio out here.” She smiled wanly. “So what are you getting him?”

Mac relaxed just a touch. “A camera – he’s a journalist.”

“We could do with a good journalist around these parts.” Molly took a turn and MacGyver finally recognized the road. “Reporters around here tend to miss things, let things slide that shouldn’t, and before you know it...”

Molly tapped the brakes and pulled the Pontiac over, leaving the engine running. The sign they were under said they were entering Fair Oaks.

“This is as far as I can go,” she apologized. “But I hope you and your son have a good holiday.”

MacGyver climbed out, shut the door and then leaned back in through the half-open window. “Thanks, you really helped me out tonight. Maybe I’ll see you again sometime?”

Molly smiled, but it was the strangest smile Mac had ever seen. A knowing smirk that sent a shiver down his spine. “I’m sure we will...and maybe you’ll be able to return the favor.”

Without saying more, she gunned the gas, spinning the station wagon around and heading out back into the night.

Mac watched her go until the Pontiac’s tail lights were just a fuzzy red mark on the darkening horizon.

He didn’t know why, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that something weird had just happened, and that it wasn’t quite over yet.

Mojave Springs Hotel
Fair Oaks
California

MacGyver took about ten minutes to walk from where Molly had dropped him off back to the hotel. It wasn't exactly a great distance, but by the time he was shuffling through the front entrance, his legs were aching.

At some point, and soon, he was going to have to get some sleep, or keel over.

Right now, Mac didn't think he was far from the latter.

First, though, he needed to grab a bite to eat, and he needed to check on Sam again. Then, he'd collapse on his bed into nothingness for awhile.

Wondering if the hospital had left any messages, he stopped at the front desk to ask the owner's wife, Pamela. She was a petite brunette of about fifty that seemed very shy given her profession.

"Hi." he nodded amiably. "Have there been any messages for me?"

Pam thought about it before replying. "Only that Mr. Thornton is waiting for you in the dining room."

Mac cringed. He thought the world of Pete, but he really wasn't in the mood for discussing his return to Phoenix. He really wanted to check on Sam.

"Thanks..." He nodded to Pam and reluctantly headed to where he knew Pete would be waiting.

As he slid into a seat opposite his old friend, Pete smiled. "About time, Mac, I thought you'd stood me up."

"And just how did you know it was me?"

Pete tapped his nose. "I've been honing my skills. They do say a blind man's other senses improve, you know?"

"You should have tried that before I showered," Mac chuckled. "Although after the afternoon I've just had..."

Pete's eyes narrowed as if he could still see and was intrigued. "Oh? Wasn't last night on the plane enough for you?"

"Well, that's what started it all," MacGyver explained. "I realized the camera I bought for Sam for Christmas had been destroyed when the plane exploded. So, I set out to go into town to buy another – and kinda got lost."

Pete's smile returned. "The great Angus MacGyver *got lost*?"

Mac groaned, and not just because Pete had used the dreaded first name. “It gets worse,” he admitted. “I got lost, and then my car broke down.”

“Sheesh, maybe I should rethink whether I want to hire you or not. Talk about bad luck!” Pete was chuckling now. “So, how did you get back?”

Pam appeared with two drinks that Mac assumed Pete had ordered earlier. A Scotch and an orange juice. Mac took the orange juice. “I got rescued. A woman named Molly in a really old Pontiac Bonneville station wagon took pity on me and gave me a ride.”

Pam almost dropped the tray she’d been carrying, and every drop of color drained from her face. She didn’t seem to care that she wasn’t part of the conversation, and joined in anyway.

“Bright red Pontiac you say?” Pam was shaking as she asked the question. “Driver named Molly? Not Molly Gregson..?”

Mac frowned. “Yeah, I think that was her name, do you know her?”

Pam pulled a chair over from an empty table and flopped on it as if her legs wouldn’t hold her. She fidgeted with her hands, almost as if she was scared. “I did know her. You see Molly went missing last Christmas Eve and no trace of her was ever found – not even that bright red station wagon of hers.”

MacGyver shook his head. “That can’t be right. I saw her just tonight. Long dark hair, pretty eyes, and I’d recognize that Bonneville anywhere.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t, but...well, everyone in town pretty much knows Molly is dead. She had a husband and two kids, she’d never just leave them, not unless...”

“Didn’t the police look for her?” Pete interrupted.

Pam nodded. “Of course, and they suspected what happened to her too, but could never prove it. Hank Riggs was the town drunk. He’d taken to harassing women drivers after he’d had one too many at the local bar. They always thought Hank went too far that night with Molly, but without evidence...”

“Do they know where she was last seen?” Mac prodded. *I can’t have been rescued by a ghost. I don’t even believe in ghosts!*

“She was doing some last minute shopping on the south side of town – right near Hank’s favorite bar.”

“Not out of town, heading anywhere near the back road with the bridge that’s out?” Mac was putting things together, but then the evidence was pulling his theories back apart.

“No, nowhere near there,” Pam agreed. “But if that’s where you got lost, you’re real lucky. There are no signs for that bridge, we’ve been telling them about it for months, and if you’re not from these parts...”

MacGyver thought about it. He hadn’t known the bridge was out, and he would have carried on driving if his car hadn’t suddenly died.

It was kind of ironic that Molly, or whoever she was had happened along right at that time.

But he still didn’t believe in spirits, even if they were the heroic type of spook.

There had to be a rational explanation, and now, he needed to find it.

Mac looked at Pam – she really thought the supernatural was at work. “Don’t worry. I’m going to find out what just happened, and who that really was in the Pontiac. I know there’s an answer, a logical one.” He patted her shaking hand to try and reassure her.

“You are?” Pete raised a brow.

Mac nodded. “Yeah, if you’ll lend me Nikki in the morning to drive me back out there. I need to try and get the hire car started anyway.”

“Sure,” Pete agreed. “Although I’m not sure what Nikki is going to make of all this...”

* * * *

MacGyver hadn’t much felt like discussing work after what Pam had told them, and Pete had seemed to understand. Either that or he sensed just how exhausted Mac had been and didn’t want to tire him further.

Mac had made a quick phone call to the hospital about Sam, and then crashed into his hotel bed.

Now, while he wasn’t exactly ready for a marathon, he at least didn’t feel like the living dead anymore.

“What exactly are we looking for out here?” Nikki probed as she drove the Phoenix Crown Victoria out of town.

Mac studied the terrain they were passing through without looking back at Nikki. He had a feeling if she knew the whole story she’d think he was going nuts, or had imagined things due to fatigue.

“Just picking up the hire car and...”

“And looking for a dead woman,” Nikki concluded.

Great, Pete told her everything.

“Depends if she is actually dead,” Mac countered. “C’mon, they never found a body or the car.”

Nikki huffed. “So she’s been driving around for a year and nobody but you has seen her? And she’d leave her kids?”

Nikki had a point, but then that led back to the supernatural theory Pam seemed to have been suggesting.

No way.

The hire car came into view and Nikki pulled up beside it. The hood was still open, and in the light of day MacGyver still couldn’t find anything wrong with it.

On a whim, he slid behind the wheel and cranked the ignition just like he had the night before. It roared into life without even hesitating.

Nikki rolled her eyes. “Are you sure you didn’t make this up to get me out here all alone? She teased.

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

It was the usual bickering game the pair liked to play.

“So now what?” Nikki put a hand on her hip as if she had far better things to do. In fact, she probably did given how much she helped Pete these days.

“You go back, I’ll catch up with you. There’s something I’ve got to see.” MacGyver went to close the car door, but she grabbed it.

“No way do you get rid of me that easy. I thought you knew me by now.” She jerked a thumb back to the Ford. “I’ll follow.”

Mac gave in and nodded. But he wasn’t about to wait. He spun the hire car around and headed towards the collapsed bridge as fast as he dare on the hole-filled road.

It took about five minutes to find what he was looking for.

The bridge was one of the old wooden, covered top designs, and it had long since given out in the middle.

Large sections of timber dangled precariously like taunting rope ladders to the roaring river below.

Mac left the car and carefully edged to the brink of the abyss the buckled bridge had created.

Lying on his stomach to get a better view, he scrutinized the remains that were hanging and swaying in the breeze.

From the marks on the timbers, the bridge had originally given out many years previously. But then, on timbers closer to the edge, there were new marks, if only he could get close enough to examine them.

Mac clambered to his feet and assessed the situation as Nikki finally joined him.

“Find what you were looking for?” She asked, taking a peek over the edge herself and squirming.

“Maybe, but I need to get down there to be sure.” He pointed to the dangling, broken beams. “I don’t suppose you have a rope in your car?”

“Do I look like the kind of girl who has a rope in her car?”

Mac shrugged roguishly. “Maybe...” He didn’t take no for an answer and popped the Ford’s trunk anyway.

Inside, was a mass of tangled electrical wiring and bulbs, that he realized were heavy duty Christmas lights.

“They were supposed to be for the tree outside Phoenix’s offices,” Nikki explained. “But they were faulty so the supplier sent another set. I was supposed to take these back. Except you interrupted with your doomsday plane fiasco and I got distracted.”

Mac ignored her and began to pull the lights out, laying them out as straight as possible on the ground. He tugged on them, assessing what kind of weight they would take, and then pulled out his knife.

“Hey, you can’t damage them. I still have to take them back!” Nikki complained.

MacGyver took no notice and sliced into the cabling anyway, cutting several lengths the same size. When he was happy he had enough, he started to weave them together to make a stronger line.

Nikki watched him, her expression saying she was slowly realizing what he was about to do. “You’re going to climb down there?” She pointed. “Using *that*? How on earth can you say you’re afraid of heights?”

Mac looked up. “I just face my fears rather than run away. And...I need to know for sure what happened out here.” He finished up his impromptu “rope” and tied one end around his waist. Taking the other end, Mac wrapped it around the front of Nikki’s car. “I need you to lower me down there real slow.”

“As long as you don’t expect me to go over the edge with you like on that mountain...” Nikki climbed back behind the wheel of the Ford and started it up.

When MacGyver had gotten into position on the bridge, she gradually let the car creep forwards, giving him just enough slack to begin to climb down, whilst taking the bulk of his weight.

Mac stepped carefully on the wood as it hung almost vertically.

The rotten laths creaked and groaned as his boots fell against them, and here and there, he could feel the wood wanting to give way. He ignored it, moving down to the section that appeared to have caved in more recently.

There were marks on the wood here that at one time would have been the brink of the timber precipice – and to MacGyver, they looked like the dark rubber streaks left by tires.

Someone had tried desperately to brake up on the bridge to stop themselves going over the rotting edge.

It obviously hadn't worked.

But why?

Mac swung carefully to the collapsed side section of the structure to examine further. There were more marks, like a car had scraped along the overpass's barrier's, or had been forced against them.

And the paint was red.

MacGyver closed his eyes and remembered Molly's Pontiac. The huge dent he'd seen in the back was consistent with another car ramming into it and forcing it forwards.

He could almost see the station wagon being pushed over the edge of the bridge with Molly inside.

Mac's eyes snapped back open and he shivered. This was all conjecture if he couldn't find enough evidence. Taking out his knife and an old envelope he had in his pocket, he scraped some of the red paint inside. That was possible proof that Molly had been here, if it matched her car.

Pam at the hotel said a local named Riggs was a suspect, but had he left anything behind to link him to this place? That was what they needed most.

MacGyver kicked off from the delicate timbers and tried to sway across to the other side of the fallen bridge. There were marks there too and he needed a closer look.

As he swayed, he felt the line he was on give just a little and he dropped slightly.

Mac felt his stomach do a flip as his gaze locked with the rushing cold water below. It looked angry and wild, white frothing eddies swirling over sections of rock and green algae.

He could only imagine what Molly had felt as her car had fallen to its doom here – if that was what had happened.

He shook away the thought and began to scrutinize the other marks he'd discovered. Another car had definitely hit the barrier. But could he match it to Riggs's?

MacGyver scraped away more paint, this time a shade of bright yellow, and was relieved when his job was finally done. He yanked lightly on the "rope".

"Ready to come on up!" He shouted loud enough for Nikki to hear over the roar of the river.

"Okay Santa..."

The "rope" slowly dragged Mac back to the remains of the bridge that were still on terra firma, and he clambered back onto solid ground gratefully. "Santa?"

Nikki shrugged. "Did you find anything?"

MacGyver offered up the envelope. "There are tire marks on what would have been the road surface of the bridge, like someone braked *hard*. And these two colors of paint are on the side barrier sections as if they'd scraped along it..."

Nikki looked at the remains of the bridge that were intact. "So the local cops were probably right? Riggs chased Molly out here, got spooked and forced her off the already damaged bridge?"

MacGyver didn't want to admit it, but all the evidence he'd found pointed to it.

And that meant the locals were right about something else – Molly was dead.

But that couldn't be right, because he'd met her out here. She'd stopped him going over this very bridge, and she'd given him a lift back to town.

But the Pontiac was dented, you saw it yourself...right where it would be dented if someone had...

Mac squirmed. He always dealt in reality, not this.

Nikki seemed to sense what he was thinking. "If Molly went over the bridge..?"

MacGyver finished the sentence for her. "Then I'm either nuts, or a ghost gave me a lift home last night..."

Part Two

**Sacramento Sheriffs Department
5484 Dewey Drive
Fair Oaks**

MacGyver had driven back from the bridge on his own in the hire car, but if he'd had company, he would have had little to say.

His mind was swirling with everything he'd discovered, and what that actually meant.

To have an open mind was one thing, but to succumb to the possibility that ghosts could exist and interact with people? He still wasn't quite ready for that.

Once he'd gotten to the hotel, he'd quickly caught up with Pete Thornton and handed over the paint samples. There was a good chance Phoenix could process them faster than the local cops – especially with how close it was to Christmas.

And besides, somehow Mac had suspected the police wouldn't be all that eager to reopen the case.

And he was right.

Right now, Mac and Pete were sitting in the office of the cop who had dealt with Molly's disappearance, and the man wasn't exactly helpful. He stared at them as if he thought they had some ulterior motive.

“Look,” MacGyver pushed. “All we're asking is that you get some people out there and check the river. All the evidence I found points to Molly Gregson's car going over that derelict bridge...”

The cop, whose nametag read Burghaus, shrugged. “You expect me to go to my boss and ask him to spend thousands of tax payer's dollars out on double time to search the river? *At Christmas?*”

“Molly has a family that deserves to know what happened to her. They need closure,” Mac argued. “And the paint I found...”

“Proves a car went over there at some point.” Burghaus countered. “Until the analysis is back, we can't confirm it was Molly's, and even if it is, then what? Look, I don't mean to be harsh, but it's been a year. Everyone knows Molly is gone. Just because the town didn't bury her, doesn't mean we haven't grieved and moved on.”

Pete huffed. “Tell that to her kids!”

“I'm sorry, but I can't sanction anything over the holiday.” Burghaus wasn't budging. “Our budget just wouldn't cover it for an old case like this.”

“Can you tell me one thing? What color was Riggs's car?”

“It was yellow, like the paint you found.” Burghaus sighed and began to fidget with a pen on his desk. “Look, we knew he'd been harassing women, but no one could identify him. If that dumb reporter had done things by the book, none of this would have happened...”

MacGyver's mind raced back to his time in the Pontiac with Molly, and to their conversation.

Mac relaxed just a touch. "A camera – he's a journalist."

"We could do with a good journalist around these parts," Molly took a turn and MacGyver finally recognized the road. "Reporters around here tend to miss things, let things slide that shouldn't, and before you know it..."

"What reporter?" MacGyver couldn't believe what was happening or how, but somehow it was all fitting together, albeit slowly.

"A young reporter from the local paper interviewed Riggs while he was drunk and feeling pretty mouthy," Burghaus explained, sitting forward in his chair now that he finally had something useful to say. "Riggs confessed to chasing the women in his truck, and to getting a kick out of scaring them. The trouble was the reporter didn't come straight to us. He just printed the dang thing the next day to get his scoop. By then, Molly had probably been Riggs' final victim."

Mac felt cold, like he had been the one who had let Molly down. But this had been a year ago, and there was nothing he could have done.

But there is now. Molly deserves to be laid to rest and her family deserves the truth.

MacGyver turned to Pete, hoping if the cop wouldn't condone a search, then maybe Pete would. "Pete, can you lend me a Phoenix helicopter and pilot for a few hours? I'd like to fly down the river and take a look. It's a long shot but?"

Pete licked his lips. "I'd love to help, but I can't sanction the use of a Phoenix helicopter by anyone that isn't strictly on the Phoenix payroll. The costs alone, the insurance issues..." There was a twinkle in his eyes as he spoke.

Mac played along. "Okay, Pete, you got me. No more discussions. I'll come back after the holidays on your terms, *if* I get a chopper within the hour to look for the remains of that Pontiac."

Pete chuckled. "I'll meet you in the field behind the hotel in thirty minutes."

"You're coming along?" MacGyver was surprised. But then, maybe his supernatural tale had intrigued Pete too.

Pete pushed up from the chair in Burghaus's office and made the way to the door unassisted. "Why not? Just because I'm blind doesn't mean I'm going to sit on my butt in my office all day. And besides," his voice softened. "I don't understand what happened to you the other night, or what you saw, but I do know there is a family in this town that needs answers."

MacGyver looked at the cop, who had been silently listening to them.

Burghaus looked almost ashamed that he'd done nothing to help, but didn't speak.

“They’ll have answers,” MacGyver promised. “Whatever it takes.”

* * * *

The Phoenix Huey had been ready even before Pete had promised, and so had Pete. They’d taken off just twenty minutes after leaving the police office in Fair Oaks. How Pete had pulled it off was anyone’s guess, but he had a tendency to be able to do the impossible, just like Father Christmas.

MacGyver looked at his old friend as the helicopter skimmed over the rippling river, and realized Pete actually would make a great Santa if he had a beard and an outfit. He smiled to himself, but thought better of making the suggestion.

“Sir, we’re coming to another bend in the river up ahead. Looks like there might be a couple of areas where a vehicle might get snagged.” It was the pilot giving information over his headset.

Mac gave the flier a thumbs up and leaned out of the open side door to scan for signs of a car.

The Huey slowed and began to more or less hover over the burbling water so that they could search more easily. The helicopter had extensive equipment on board, including infra red and heat scanners, but they weren’t much help in this instance.

“See anything?” Pete looked restless.

This was the fifth time they’d stopped to investigate a possible search area, and so far they’d all come up with nothing.

They were miles down stream from the collapsed bridge now, having passed over several other towns on the way.

Mac squinted. He wasn’t sure, but it looked like there might be something just below the surface right where the pilot had indicated.

There were lots of old and rotting logs that had caught on something under the water, and if logs could snag, than maybe a red Pontiac station wagon could too.

The problem was, it would take hours to get divers out here, by which time it would be dark. And the next day was Christmas Eve.

Mac wasn’t sure why that bothered him. Pete would still arrange for the search, no matter what the cost, of that he was sure. But it didn’t feel right.

Molly shouldn’t wait another day to have peace.

“I think there’s something snagged under the surface,” he finally answered. “I’m going down to take a look.”

“You’re *what?*” Pete sounded incredulous. “You can’t go in the water!”

But MacGyver was already prepared. This time, he’d brought his own rope, and he was attaching it swiftly to a metal rung in the chopper meant to secure cargo. Once he was satisfied with his knot, he wrapped the other end around his waist and then talked into his own headset.

“Get me as close to the water as you can, then try and stay in position. I need to find what’s caught up along with those logs...” Mac pointed to exactly where he wanted to jump out.

Any lesser pilot might have argued, but Mac knew this man – had worked with him on assignments before, and he knew just how dedicated he was.

And how skilled.

The pilot nodded and took the Huey so low the skids actually dipped in and out of the river as it gushed past. It was perfect for what MacGyver needed, and he removed his headset and dived in, ignoring how cold it felt.

The current here was stronger than he’d expected, and he needed to fight it all the way over to the crumbling tree timbers.

He caught the end of one, his hands slipping for a moment until he reaffirmed his grip on a gnarled branch. Catching his breath, he took down several gulps of air and then dived.

It was murky below the surface, but there was still enough visibility to see the outline of a car.

But was it Molly’s, or an ancient relic that had been here years?

MacGyver swam closer, kicking against the flow of the river until he could touch the metal of the vehicle. It felt cold, like death, and he couldn’t help but shiver.

At this distance, it also gave up the secret he’d been dreading.

The car was definitely Molly’s. Even the dent was there that he’d seen the night she’d given him a lift.

Pulling himself along its length, he headed for the driver’s door, his stomach churning at what he might find after a year under water.

However, the door was open, and the glass in it was smashed as if someone had been trying to fight their way free.

There was no remains, at least not here, but MacGyver knew all too well that Molly’s body could have been carried for miles, or have been snagged somewhere on the river bed, never to be found.

He felt deflated, like he had failed Molly and her family, and kicked off, swimming quickly back to the surface.

The Huey was waiting for him, sending the water around him spiraling outwards with the downdraught of its rotors.

Mac ignored it and gave the pilot a thumbs up again, this time to indicate he wanted to get back onboard.

The pilot dipped low again, until the skids were jut under the water and Mac was able to grab onto one and pull his soaked body inside.

He rolled over, tired from fighting the river, from the cold, and from being thwarted in his search.

Pete used his hands to feel for a blanket and passed it over. MacGyver took it gratefully and wrapped it around his shoulders.

He retrieved his headset and spoke to the pilot first. "Can you get us in touch with the town sheriff or police department most local to this spot?"

The pilot nodded. "Yes sir, give me a minute..."

While he worked on the task, MacGyver turned to Pete. "The car's down there. Riggs really did it..."

Pete's expression said he was feeling as down as Mac was. "Is there..?"

"There's no body. At least not in the Pontiac."

"But you figure the local cops might have found a Jane Doe, that's why you asked Mike to contact them?"

"Its what I'm hoping. To come this far and still not give Molly's family any closure would be..."

Pete didn't pull any punches. "It would suck," he agreed.

Mike interrupted. "Sheriff Dawking on the radio for you, sir."

Mac focused on his headset and the man on the radio the other end. "My name's MacGyver. I work for the Phoenix Foundation." He glanced to Pete as he said it and Pete couldn't resist a huge smile. "We're looking for a missing person and have discovered a vehicle in the river that's part of your jurisdiction."

"Your pilot just explained to me. How can I help? Apart from the obvious removal of the car..." Dawking sounded more interested than the cop back in Fair Oaks. That alone sounded promising.

“Have any bodies been discovered in the river here over the past twelve months?” MacGyver winced as he said it, but the question had to be asked.

Dawking was quick to respond. “No...” Then he paused, as if something had come to him. “At least, not any dead ones. We had a young woman dragged from the water last Christmas by a couple of locals. We couldn’t find any I.D. on her and she was in a pretty bad way. She’d taken a nasty bump to her head.”

Mac’s stomach lurched. This wasn’t what he’d been expecting, but dare he ask the inevitable? “What happened to her, Sheriff?”

The sound of the rotors whirling above his head seemed to drone on forever, even through the headset as he waited for a reply.

“We took her to the nearest hospital, but she fell into a coma. She’s still there. Poor thing never did wake up.” Dawking’s voice suggested he was genuinely upset by the whole situation.

MacGyver on the other hand, felt like Christmas had come early. Where there was life, there was always hope.

And Molly Gregson was no ghost.

He focused back on the sheriff. “Sir we believe the woman you found is Molly Gregson from Fair Oaks. She went missing right about that time. Can we arrange with the hospital for her family to come down and identify her?”

Dawking sighed. “I’ll notify the hospital. I just hope her family doesn’t get their hopes up too much. Finding a loved one is alive after all this time, only to discover they’re not likely to wake. Well, let’s just say it’s not what I’d want to hear at Christmas.”

MacGyver agreed, but then Christmas was the time of miracles, and somehow he believed Molly had already managed one – how else had he been able to meet her on that lonely highway by the bridge?

* * * *

Sutter Memorial Hospital ***6.25p.m.***

Finding Molly’s family had been a simple task for someone with Pete’s connections. What hadn’t been so simple was how to tell them what had happened.

Ritchie Gregson had seemed to take the news that his wife might be alive as if it was all a dream he would wake from. He’d told the two kids, but they didn’t really understand the implications.

They’d been thrilled by the Phoenix chopper ride to the hospital, but didn’t seem to have a clue that they might be about to see their mom after a year of her being missing.

Maybe that was for the best.

MacGyver watched from the corridor as the doctor lead Ritchie and the kids in to see the woman they'd found – the woman he knew was Molly without the family identifying her.

Somehow, Molly had reached out to him from the other side, and although he had a scientific mind about most things, he couldn't shake the sensation that he'd once experienced something similar himself.

After the fall from the car park a couple of years back, he'd had an encounter with his dead parents and grandfather – and he could put that down to one of two things, lack of oxygen to his brain or, he'd really been “on the other side” for a short while.

It was an enigma he often wondered about, and he wasn't even sure which answer he preferred.

But what had happened here with Molly, well that seemed to suggest there was something to the whole “out of body” thing so many people insisted they'd experienced.

How Molly had manifested that into a full on meet and greet with him, and had possibly even caused his car to break down to save his life, he would probably never know.

Could it be real? Could someone's *spirit* actually do these things?

MacGyver's mind flicked back to another Christmas, and another puzzle – the Madonna statue that had vanished and then reappeared later. That too had no rational explanation, and yet, even now what had occurred brought a warm fuzzy feeling to his heart.

He only wished there could be a happy ending here too.

Voices from Molly's room made him look up. The family and doctor were coming back out. There was a moment of conversation, and then Ritchie approached Mac.

His face looked sickly, like he'd taken a punch to the stomach and was fighting the urge to gag.

“Mr. MacGyver?” Ritchie had moisture in his eyes, but somehow seemed to have avoided full on tears. “I hear I owe you my thanks for finding my wife?”

Mac wasn't sure what to say. Ritchie didn't know the full story, and it didn't seem right to tell him. And besides, he'd probably think MacGyver was mad. “I just linked all the dots together and they lead me here, I guess.” He looked towards Molly's room. “Can I ask?”

Ritchie looked down at his feet, as if he couldn't look Mac in the eye. "The doctor says they don't think she'll ever wake up. Not now, after all this time. They think her brain was starved of oxygen for too long and that...well, that there's nothing left of Molly in there to fight."

MacGyver put a hand on Ritchie's arm and squeezed. "Don't give up on her. Don't ask me how I know, but there's a part of Molly still in there and she hasn't given up on you."

Ritchie looked up from the harsh white tiled floor. This time he brushed a real tear from his cheek with the back of his hand. "I won't," he promised. "I'm going to arrange to have her transferred back to Antelope Valley hospital first thing, so she can at least be closer to home for Christmas."

Mac nodded. How ironic that Molly would be in the same place as Sam over the holidays. "I might see you then. My son's in there."

Ritchie opened his mouth as if he was going to ask about Sam, but then he appeared to think better of it and scurried off to the two awaiting children that were waiting with a rather plump nurse.

MacGyver watched them go, wondering what Christmas would be like for them now.

* * * *

***Antelope Valley Hospital
Lancaster
California
The Next Day...Christmas Eve***

Mac opened the limo door and helped Pete out of the car. It was early afternoon, and both men had considered a little last minute holiday shopping, before giving into the inevitable that they both had to face their sons and admit defeat.

MacGyver could have tried another out of town excursion, but somehow after what had happened with Molly it hadn't seemed right. Her words still echoed in his head as he ambled down the long hospital corridors.

"It's a long story, but the gift I originally bought him got destroyed yesterday. I need to replace it."

Molly seemed to think about it. "No you don't," she offered. "You don't need to buy your son anything at all. The greatest gift you could give him isn't a present; it's not a physical item at all. It's family. It's love."

Mac smiled to himself as he reached for the door handle to Sam's room and carefully ushered Pete inside.

Sam was waiting for them with a broad smile on his face – a face that finally had some color back in it. He was sitting up, and thankfully the monitor and I.V.'s were gone.

“I was starting to think you’d forgotten me,” he teased. “Or found some pretty nurse...”

MacGyver raised a brow. “You mean you haven’t found one for yourself?” He teased back.

Sam shrugged and then winced when the movement jarred his shoulder. “I was kinda hoping you’d find me one for Christmas...”

Mac opened his mouth and it stayed that way for a few seconds, like a fish out of water. “Ah...” This was it. He had to confess he hadn’t actually replaced the presents that had burned with the plane. “About that...” He pulled out a chair and offered it to Pete who carefully sat down.

Then he retrieved one for himself.

Sam’s expression said he knew what was coming. “It’s okay, dad, I’m really not expecting anything. I know about what happened with Molly. That was way more important.”

Mac wasn’t so sure. If Molly was right about family and love, then shouldn’t he have been thinking about Sam? “I should’ve found time to at least get you *something*.”

“Dad, what I got you went up with the Boeing, and I haven’t exactly been able to go get you anything else either.” Sam’s face grew a little more serious, and he looked down at his hands as if what he said next was difficult. “And besides, I finally have the gift I’ve wished for every year since mom died...” His gaze locked with Mac’s. “I finally found you.”

MacGyver felt a lump rise his throat and images of Kate, Sam’s mom swirled through his mind. He hadn’t been there for his son and he didn’t deserve what Sam was saying. Even though, of course, he hadn’t known Sam had existed until a few months ago.

I should have known, I should have found him sooner...

Sam knew exactly what his father was thinking and threw a mock punch with his good arm. “Hey, will you stop beating yourself up about things you can’t change and start smiling. It’s Christmas Eve, we should be celebrating! We’re together, that’s all we need.”

Pete cleared his throat, gaining their attention. His cheeks looked quite rosy and he was smiling so broadly Mac had to wonder if he’d had a “seasonal” Scotch back at the hotel.

What Pete was grinning at wasn’t anything to do with alcohol, however.

He'd brought his briefcase in with him, and Mac had thought nothing of it. Heck, Pete took the dang thing everywhere.

But this time, it held something just a little special.

Pete opened up the case and pulled out a document which he handed to Mac.

"Jeez, Pete, a contract, on Christmas Eve?" MacGyver read it anyway.

Basically, he was back at Phoenix freelance and totally on his own terms, and with a hefty salary and bonus increase to boot. There was also a proviso for Sam to do freelance photo work for them as and when he chose.

"Yeah, well I figured we'd get the boring stuff out of the way before the party..." Pete was still smiling.

"Aww, not another one of your Phoenix office gatherings? Pete you know I hate those things." MacGyver was pulling a face that said he wouldn't be swayed. "And besides, I'm not going to leave Sam. Not today, especially."

"There's no need to leave anyone. And this isn't about Phoenix." Pete closed his briefcase. "I got to thinking about all the stuff you said. You know, about what Molly had told you. So I've arranged a Christmas party here, at the hospital. Not just for us, but for any of the patients who can attend. And those that can't will get goodies sent to their rooms. Molly was right; people should be together this time of year."

"Just how did you pull that off?" Sam asked. He wasn't used to Pete's "miracle work" just yet.

"Well I get a Christmas bonus from Phoenix so I thought I'd share my good fortune."

MacGyver nodded, thinking that he'd been right earlier to envisage Pete in a Santa outfit, after all. And this time, he had the nerve to tell him so. "Y'know, you'd make a really great Santa? A nice red outfit and a cool white beard and you'd be good to go! And no need for extra padding," he chuckled.

Pete thought about it and didn't seem at all offended. "Maybe I would! Now c'mon, we have folks waiting downstairs." He pointed with his white cane, and somehow managed to aim in the right direction of the door to the adjoining room. "You should find a wheelchair in there for Sam. I already checked with his doctor and she said it would be fine if he didn't overdo it."

"You want to party?" Mac looked at Sam, wondering if he really was up to it.

He apparently was. "Just try and stop me!"

Mac smiled. Funny how quickly you could bounce back when you were Sam's age.

He dutifully grabbed the chair from the other room and helped Sam into it. It was obvious he was still pretty sore, and scared of moving his right arm too much in case it jarred his shoulder, but he was definitely already on the mend.

Mac maneuvered the chair through the door with Pete in tow and was about to ask which way to the festivities when he realized Ritchie Gregson and his two kids were at the bottom of the corridor.

Had Molly been moved *that* close to Sam? That had to be a very weird twist of fate.

As MacGyver approached, he noted Ritchie's excited tone and that there was a doctor with them, and felt his own heart begin to race. Something was happening, and he knew it.

Something good.

He leaned over Sam's shoulder and asked. "Can you give me a minute?"

Sam was watching the proceedings in the corridor anyway, but had no clue what it was all about. "Sure...just leave the blind guy and the cripple to fend for themselves," he joked.

"Something wrong?" Pete asked, not being able to see the melee in front of him.

"Something good, I think," MacGyver whispered as he fixed the brake on Sam's chair and approached Ritchie.

Ritchie spotted Mac and couldn't contain his joy. "It's Molly! She's *awake!* I don't understand it...they said..."

MacGyver didn't have any words to answer.

Maybe he'd seen a Christmas miracle before with the Madonna, but not like this.

And yet, deep in his heart, he'd expected it.

The doctor was trying to be more reserved. "Mr. Gregson, you must understand Molly has a way to go yet."

Ritchie wasn't taking in the details. "Can we see her?" He was almost bouncing off the walls with excitement.

"Not yet Mr. Gregson, your wife is...disorientated. It happens a lot with coma patients who've been asleep for such a long time. She's talking but...not making much sense yet."

Ritchie didn't care. "She can say anything, just to hear her voice...to see her..."

The doctor tried to clarify. "She's talking about being in a dark place for a very long time, and that she's been brought home by a blonde gent in a Jeep. It sounds very

specific, very strange, but it's really her subconscious trying to justify what's happened. The dark place is, of course the coma, and her fictitious rescuer is a symbol of her waking and being freed from that coma."

Pete tugged on Mac's sleeve. "That *incredible*. That's you she's babbling about, isn't it?" He grew somber. "But how? You didn't even go out there in your Jeep. It's only just gone into the shop for repair."

MacGyver smiled. "I guess there really are some things we can't explain. But one thing I do know – Molly was right. Christmas isn't about presents, it's about family and about being together."

Sam flicked off the brake and pushed his chair forwards to be level with Pete and his dad. "From experience, I'll second that."

Mac ran a hand through Sam's hair, ruffling it playfully like he was still a kid. Maybe he always would be in Mac's eyes. Then he looked back to Ritchie and the kids as they pushed their way into Molly's room, despite the doctor's protests.

"I don't know how, and I guess I never will, but Molly saved me from that collapsed bridge, and somehow I managed to find her in return. I guess now we can both be with the ones we love over Christmas."

"So what say we make the most of it?" It was Pete, and he appeared to be itching to get downstairs. "You know, if you hurry, you might even get me to stick on a Santa outfit for the kids in this place."

MacGyver's eyes widened. "*Now that*," he chuckled. "Is something I would definitely pay money to charity to see." He grabbed Sam's wheelchair and began to push just a little faster than before, in case Pete changed his mind.

As he passed Molly's room, he couldn't resist slowing and taking a peek.

Despite what the doctor had said, Molly was sitting up, and her gaze moved to the door as if she somehow knew he would be there.

For a second, their eyes met and locked in some unspoken moment of recognition and understanding.

Molly smiled as if they already knew one another and silently mouthed the words "Thank you."

Then the connection between them was gone, and Molly returned to hugging her children.

Mac, picked up speed again, determined to see Pete in a bright red outfit. And as he pushed, he couldn't help thinking he finally understood about the greatest gift anyone could give.

The End