

## Longest Night Part 1

“Wow, these look great!” MacGyver sat down at the table amongst the Challenger’s Club kids, picking up a brightly decorated shoebox. “What are they for?”

“Christmas presents.” Five year old Cassie stuck a glittery star in the centre of her box lid and held it up to admire the effect. “For kids who haven’t got any.” She smiled up at MacGyver, pleased with her efforts.

“What a nice idea.” MacGyver caught a falling glue pot as Cassie reached across the table for another star. “Kids here in Los Angeles?”

“Uh-uh.” Cassie concentrated on pasting her star, tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth. “Other kids.”

“Where?” MacGyver asked. Cassie shrugged, too busy to answer. He looked up, catching Gloria’s eye. “Little help?”

“We’re putting together Christmas boxes for the kids in Santa Rosa. Each box will have toys and candy in, but also essentials like soap, toothpaste, pencils and hats or gloves. Those poor kids have nothing at all after the landslide, so we’re doing what we can from here.” She smiled down at MacGyver, then her gaze wandered across the rest of the Challenger’s Club room, festooned with second hand tinsel and home-made decorations. One wall had a map of Mexico pinned up, with a Father Christmas sticker over Santa Rosa. “There’s always someone worse off than we are, isn’t there?” She beckoned to him.

MacGyver got up, brushing glitter off his jeans.

“Actually, MacGyver, I have a favour to ask you.” Mac raised his eyebrows, waiting for her to continue. Gloria hesitated, twining her fingers together. “We need a little help transporting the boxes to Santa Rosa. We have a minibus that Our Lady Church over in Compton have kindly leant us, but...” Gloria trailed off, looking hopefully at MacGyver.

“But... it needs a little work, am I right?” MacGyver watched Gloria nod and sigh.

“Father Paul’s exact words were, ‘if you can get it running, you can use it with my blessing.’”

“Ah.” MacGyver scrubbed a hand through his shaggy hair. “Well, let’s take a look. It can’t be that bad, surely.”

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“Is it bad?” Gloria peered over MacGyver’s shoulder into the engine.

“Um...” MacGyver picked up a rag and wiped grease off his hands and arms. “It’s old and gungy, but I don’t think there’s anything seriously wrong with it.” He wiped at a smear of grease on his forehead. “The battery’s dead, though.” He felt in his pockets for his keys. “I’m going to bring the Jeep around and see if I can jump start the bus with it.”

Gloria nodded, watching him go. She climbed into the minibus and sat down, placing her massive handbag on the damp seat beside her. Was she taking on too much? It was so far to go, but the plight of the children in Santa Rosa had moved her and she was sure Booker would have wanted her to

go. In her mind's eye she could see him sitting at his desk, reading pieces from the newspapers out loud, constantly dismayed by man's inhumanity to his fellow man. Booker would have gone to Santa Rosa without a second thought. He wouldn't have been afraid of the long journey, or the dangers he might face along the way.

But Gloria was afraid. She was afraid of going all that way alone. She was afraid of the people she might meet, for her destination lay deep in bandit country. She was afraid of being attacked, or having the bus hijacked. She was afraid of being killed out there. Gloria pressed her shaking hands together, telling herself not to be a coward. She took a deep breath, telling herself she would be brave and not let those children down.

She jumped as a shadow fell across her.

"MacGyver! I didn't hear you come back in."

"I didn't mean to scare you, Gloria." MacGyver looked closer, seeing how worried she looked and how tightly her hands were folded. "Are you alright?"

Gloria nodded her head, then sighed and shook it instead.

"I'm not sure, MacGyver. I know I need to get these presents and emergency supplies to the children, but I'm afraid of going there. It's such a long way and after the landslide... And it's not the safest of places to go anyway."

"Yeah, it wouldn't be in my top ten holiday destinations either." MacGyver rubbed his chin, scraping at the stubble he hadn't bothered to shave that morning. "When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow." Gloria's voice was small.

"And you're going on your own?"

"Yes." Gloria folded her arms tight around herself. "Breeze has to work, my cousin has a new baby to look after... Everyone's busy." She smiled at MacGyver, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. "Booker would tell me to be brave and just go, wouldn't he?"

MacGyver shook his head.

"No, he'd tell you to take a friend with you." He crossed to the front of the garage and opened the big doors, letting in the Winter sunshine and revealing his Jeep parked outside.

"MacGyver, I couldn't possibly ask you to go with me." Gloria's tone was firm. "I couldn't take you away from your family so close to Christmas."

"Well," MacGyver climbed into the Jeep and started it, shouting over the engine. "Sam's up in Minnesota and he's snowed in. He's fine, but knowing Mission City like I do, I think he's probably stuck until after New Year's." He nosed the Jeep carefully up to the old minibus, turned the engine off and climbed out carrying a set of jump leads. "Jack's off goodness knows where, Penny's in the middle of a musical out in Omaha, Nikki's gone back East to visit her folks and Pete's spending Christmas with his son." He attached the leads and got back into the Jeep. "So I'm a free agent. Gimme a minute here and then crank that sucker over, OK?"

Gloria tried to hide her smile as she climbed into the driver's seat. The seat gave underneath her as she untangled the edge of her skirt from the gear stick.

“Ready.”

“Crank it!”

The minibus wheezed and spluttered and then roared into life, belching black smoke. Gloria coughed and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Leave it running!” MacGYver yelled over the clattering of the old engine. He opened the door and beckoned Gloria out. “We need to build up some charge in the battery and hope it holds – it looks OK but you can’t always tell.”

“Let’s go out front.” Gloria watched the thickening smoke curl against the garage ceiling and roll out into the street. “That way we can keep an eye on it and watch for the smog police at the same time!”

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“At least it runs.” MacGYver scrubbed the last of the dirt and grease off himself in the Challengers Club kitchen sink. “Thanks.” He took the towel Gloria offered him and leant against the sink, watching the kids putting the finishing touches to their boxes as he dried his arms. Gloria followed his gaze.

“I reckon we’ll have that old bus pretty well full of presents for those kids.” She smiled. “I’m so proud of the effort everyone’s put in here. It gives me back my faith that we can make the world a better place after all.”

“All those presents should make it a much better Christmas for them.” Mac nodded. “What else are we taking?”

“Basic medical supplies, clothes and some dried food.” Gloria passed MacGYver a mug of hot tea. “MacGYver, I can’t thank you enough. You’re absolutely sure you don’t mind coming with me?”

“Absolutely sure.” MacGYver took a sip of tea and turned, almost running into a kid as he raced into the kitchen. “Hey, watch it!”

“Billy!” Gloria crouched down level with a small, scruffy boy. “Slow down, honey – you almost knocked Mr MacGYver down!” The kid stared up at MacGYver, picking at his dirty overalls.

“Sorry.”

“No problem, kid. Watcha got there?”

“Shoebox.” Billy held up a grubby box, bent and damp at one corner. It had been decorated with strips of Christmas paper wound tightly around it, sealing it shut.

“What’s in it, honey?” Gloria took the box, which was sticky underneath and smelled of stale tobacco.

“Stuff.” Billy stuck his hands in the bulging pockets of his overalls and grinned proudly. “Good stuff that kids need.”

“What kind of stuff?” Gloria put the box down and wiped at the stickiness on her fingers. Billy looked at MacGYver.

“Stuff like you use. Stuff for inventing things and fixing things and...” He tailed off as he saw Gloria shake her head.

“Billy, we’re only allowed to send certain things, and the boxes can’t be sealed shut. I’m so sorry.” She sighed, seeing Billy’s lip quiver.

“But... I made a shoebox...” His eyes filled with tears and he sniffed, wiping a grimy sleeve across his nose.

“And it was really kind of you to make one.” Gloria found a tissue and gave it to him. “How about we take it along anyway and ask when we get there? How’d that be?” Billy gave another massive sniff and then a watery smile.

“OK.” He stuck the tissue in his pocket along with the other junk and ran back out of the kitchen. MacGyver watched him go.

“Stuff like I use...?”

“Could be anything.” Gloria sniffed at the lingering mess on her hands and reached for the soap again. “He watches you fix stuff around here and he wants to be like you when he grows up, so he carries everything he thinks will come in handy in his pockets. He’s mostly too shy to talk to adults, though – I think that’s the longest conversation I’ve ever had with him.” Gloria looked sad. “His is one of the poorest families I’ve ever met, but they’re doing their best to hold it together. I worry about Billy though, he’s out roaming the streets at all hours and he picks up anything ‘useful’ that he finds. I took a heroin spoon and a rusty craft knife off him only last week.”

“Ouch.” MacGyver eyed the battered box warily. “What do you think’s in there?”

“You heard him – good stuff that kids need!” She shrugged. “I’ll hide the box in my bag once we’re on the way so he doesn’t see me do it, but I daren’t hand it over with the rest!”

MacGyver finished his tea and set the mug down.

“Well, I’m gonna head home and pack. See you in the morning.”

“See you tomorrow, and thank you.” Gloria smiled as MacGyver gave her a sloppy salute, turned up the collar of his jacket and headed out into the cold evening.

## **Longest Night Part 2**

The morning sun warmed Gloria’s face as they threaded their way through the Los Angeles traffic. The minibus had started first time and clattered its way to the freeway without any problems. ‘We Three Kings of Orient Are’ filtered through the bus’s tinny speakers from MacGyver’s cassette and Gloria hummed along.

Behind them the bus was piled high with shoebox presents and emergency supplies. Everything smelled of gasoline from the spare cans stowed under the back seat and a chilly draught blew in through a window that wouldn’t close properly, but Gloria decided that any discomfort was well worth it to bring Christmas to people who otherwise wouldn’t have one. Gloria changed down a gear and the bus roared up the hill. Beside her, MacGyver sat with a map spread out across his knees, plotting the best route to Santa Rosa. News that another landslide had wiped out the main road that morning meant a long detour into the mountains and some very unfriendly country. Once they got into Baja California, they’d have to be careful.

“OK, I think I’ve got it.” MacGyver folded the map and traced the route with a pencil. “I don’t like it,

but we should make it OK. We brought plenty of gasoline and oil, and we don't look valuable or threatening, so..." He shrugged. "I guess we'll find out."

"We'll make it." Gloria sounded more confident than she felt.

"Sure." MacGyver stowed the map and smiled. He tipped his head back and slipped on his sunglasses. "Let me know when you want me to take a turn driving." He turned up the music, humming along with the carol under his breath.

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They stopped for gas in a tiny village around noon. The waitress in the café laughed shyly at MacGyver's atrocious Spanish and watched them, wide-eyed behind the counter.

Gloria pulled her coat tight around her as they walked back to the minibus. Although the sun was bright, it was chilly and a cold wind ruffled the dry grass and whistled around the edges of the old wooden building. It would be a cold night, she thought, especially for those living rough or in tents. Gloria looked up, catching MacGyver's eye as she climbed into the passenger seat.

"Penny for your thoughts?" MacGyver's smile was warm and curious.

"I'm glad we packed warm clothes with our emergency supplies. And some of our older girls knitted gloves and hats to go in the shoeboxes too. I think it will freeze tonight and those children will need all the warm clothes they can get."

"Yeah, the temperature really drops up here." MacGyver squinted in the bright light and flipped down the sun visor. "I'd never have figured Breeze for the knitting type, you know!"

"That boy is a constant surprise to me!" Gloria laughed. "I'm just sorry no-one took a picture of him and the girls knitting away there!"

MacGyver winced as a rock jumped up under the bus, clipped by a tyre. It struck with a hollow bang.

"I miss tarmac..." He concentrated on steering the bus down the steep mountain road.

"I hope that didn't hit anything important." Gloria looked out of the window at the side of the bus.

"Me too. Still, the last hundred or so rocks haven't made a dent, so let's hope that one hasn't either." Truthfully, MacGyver was worried about the state of the roads. They were a very long way from help if the old minibus did get damaged or break down beyond his ability to repair. In his head he could hear his Grandfather Harry: 'There's no sense borrowing trouble Bud, there's plenty of that around for free!'. Taking a breath, MacGyver started singing along to the carols on the tape, forcing himself not to think about all the things that could go wrong.

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They stopped again just before sunset. MacGyver got underneath the bus with a torch, looking for damage, while Gloria refilled the gas tank from their cans. She stowed the can back in the minibus and crouched down next to MacGyver's feet.

"How does it look?"

“Well...” Mac shone the torch around, bright nicks and scrapes showing on the metal underside amid the grease and road grime. “We’ve taken a few hits but I think we’re OK.” He shut off the torch and started to wriggle out from underneath.

“Mind the cactus!”

“Right!” MacGyver shifted cautiously to his left and sat up. “Thanks, those suckers are nasty!” As he stood up, he heard an engine. Looking back up the road, he saw a car approaching slowly. MacGyver waved and smiled but the occupants of the car ignored him, studying the bus and what could be seen of its contents as they cruised past. Only the driver met his gaze, with an unfriendly stare. Once past, the car accelerated, throwing up dust and dirt behind it.

“They could at least have asked if we were alright!” Gloria folded her arms and glared at the car’s tail lights disappearing into the dusk.

“Yeah.” MacGyver ran a hand through his unruly hair and watched the car vanish around a bend. He hadn’t liked the interest shown in their bus, or the driver’s expression. “They didn’t look too friendly, though. Let’s hope we’ve seen the last of them!” He wiped grease off his hands and threw the rag into the back of the bus. “Let’s get going. We’re losing the light and I really want to get to Santa Rosa before dark. These roads are bad enough when we CAN see where we’re going!”

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“How much further?” MacGyver leaned forward in his seat, picking his way through the loose rocks on the dirt road by the minibus’s dim headlights. Living in Los Angeles, he’d forgotten just how dark the night was away from any man-made lights.

“About fifty miles, I think.” Gloria shone her flashlight on the map. “It’s too dark to see any landmarks, so I can’t be sure.”

“No problem.” MacGyver grimaced as another rock kicked up against the underside of the bus. He glanced in the rear-view mirror and caught a glimpse of headlights. He frowned. The headlights had been there the last three times he’d checked – never gaining and never falling back. He’d tried slowing down to let the other vehicle overtake but the mystery car had slowed to match. He glanced in the mirror again.

“What do you keep looking at?” Gloria turned in her seat, but the bus was piled too high for her to see through the back window.

“There’s a car some way back.” MacGyver sighed. He hadn’t wanted to worry Gloria but they were deep in bandit country now and their mysterious companion was starting to concern him.

“Well, they’re probably having just as much trouble with... OOH!” Gloria jumped as the bus bumped into a deep pothole. “...With the roads as we are!”

“Yeah, maybe...” Mac steered around another giant crater in the road only to run over some rocks instead. There was a ringing impact right under the middle of the bus and a loud clanking noise. A smell of burning drifted in and Gloria spun around, expecting to see flames.

“Damn!” MacGyver slapped the steering wheel. He changed down a gear and put his foot back on the gas, but the bus revved emptily and then coasted gently to a halt.

“What’s wrong with it?” Gloria sounded scared, but pulled on her gloves and picked up her flashlight. “Should we go check?”

“I’ll go.” MacGyver flicked a glance at the mirror, seeing the headlights stationary some distance behind them. “Stay here, OK? I may need you to try and start it again once I work out what just happened.” He took the flashlight and got out of the cab. With one eye on the mysterious car behind them, he wriggled under the bus and shone the flashlight around.

Hanging down below the bus was a metal rod. MacGyver felt his way along it, shining the flashlight up to look. He saw a bright scrape in the one broken end of the rod, matched by a similar scrape in the other end. Turning onto his stomach, he played the flashlight beam across the ground, looking for the piece that should have connected the two hanging ends.

He was about to crawl back out when he heard the quiet crunch of slow-moving tyres on the rough ground. MacGyver scrambled backwards, knocking his head on the edge of the bus as he stood up. He heard Gloria gasp and spun around, a hand to his head. He squinted against the sudden glare as headlights flashed on high beam right in front of him. A dark figure stepped into the light and raised a gun, the light catching the edge of a long barrel. MacGyver instinctively raised his hands above his head as a voice growled,

“Don’t move.”

### **Longest Night Part Three**

“Don’t move.” The voice was low and rough, with a thick Mexican accent.

“Oh man...” MacGyver blinked in the glare, trying to see the face of the man holding the gun. “We have nothing you could possibly want. We’re just passing through here.” He started to lower his hands, but the gun barrel immediately came up and MacGyver gave up the attempt. The shadowy figure stepped forwards and grabbed MacGyver’s shoulder, turning him roughly and slamming him face first against the side of the minibus. He heard the bus doors open and Gloria screamed. A brief scuffle followed, the minibus rocking and squeaking on its springs, and then Gloria was shoved against the side of the bus next to MacGyver, indignant and still clutching her enormous handbag.

“What do you want with us?” Gloria was trembling with anger and fear.

MacGyver watched two other shadowy figures move to the back of the bus and climb inside. The minibus rocked gently as they investigated the contents, talking quietly in Spanish. MacGyver’s breath hitched as he felt the gun barrel press cold against the back of his neck.

“Where you go?”

“San... Santa Rosa.” Gloria answered for him. The figure turned, backhanding her across the face.

“Shut up.” The rough voice was level and emotionless. MacGyver felt the gun press harder against his neck.

“Where you go?”

“Santa Rosa, like the lady said. You didn’t need to do that, you know!” MacGyver couldn’t keep the anger out of his voice.

“What for?”

“Aid for the landslide victims.” The pressure on MacGyver’s neck eased slightly and an exchange in fast Spanish followed. MacGyver listened, but only caught a few words. Beside him, Gloria tensed.

“They’re going to steal the bus and sell the supplies!” She whispered. She listened again. “They’re going to shoot you and take me with them! What do we DO?!”

The gun dug into MacGyver’s neck as the bandit returned his attention to his captives.

“Why you stop?”

“The bus broke down.” MacGyver shifted, the metal of the bus side painfully cold against his cheek. The bandit shouted back over his shoulder and another figure got out of the car. He switched on a flashlight and stooped to look under the bus. There was a brief argument that MacGyver couldn’t follow, involving a lot of hand waving and head shaking, and the figure got back into the car.

“He says they can’t fix it here. He needs to go back to their place and get some tools.” Gloria’s whisper was quiet, her breath clouding in the cold air.

“Shut up.” Gloria flinched as the bandit raised his hand to strike her again.

“Don’t hit her!” MacGyver clenched his fists and started to turn, but the click of the gun’s safety catch froze him in place. The minibus rocked again as two bandits got out. One carried an armful of stuff back to the car and the other pulled cable ties out of his pocket and fastened first MacGyver’s hands behind his back, then Gloria’s.

“Go front.” MacGyver felt the gun lift off his neck and a sharp push sent him stumbling forwards.

“Sit down.” The bandit grinned down at him, the flashlight showing brown teeth in a cruel face. MacGyver sat on the rough road next to Gloria, his back resting against the bus’s front wheel. He shifted as something inside Gloria’s giant handbag dug into his leg, watching as another bandit got back into the car and drove away.

Once the car had disappeared, the darkness seemed to close in on them. The night was still and bitterly cold, the stars sharp and bright above them. Mac flexed carefully at the ties holding his wrists, one eye on the gun-toting bandit watching over them. Beside him, he could feel Gloria doing the same. If only he could reach his knife... He shuffled his bottom forwards, trying to push the knife towards the top of his back pocket.

Gloria squirmed. There was just a bit of give in her bonds and she almost had her thumb free... If they could get loose, maybe they could overpower the guards and get the minibus going and escape... Somehow.

The first bandit switched his gun to his other hand and stretched his cold fingers. He stuck his free hand in his pocket and looked up the road, wondering how long it would take before his friends came back. The second remaining bandit hawked and spat on the ground, then walked around to the far side of the minibus.

Gloria wrinkled her nose as she heard the bandit unzip his trousers and a distinctive smell drifted around the bus. Beside her, MacGyver frowned in concentration, using one finger to hook his Swiss Army Knife out of his pocket. The sharp blade sliced easily through the cable ties and Gloria felt MacGyver nudge against her, passing her the knife while their guard looked up the road for his friends. He eased

back to his original position, scooping up a handful of dirt and small stones behind himself. Attacking an armed man was a risky proposition, even worse when that man had a (probably also armed) friend just around the corner. But he had to do something...

Gloria felt MacGyver tense beside her. She sawed frantically at the cable ties with the knife, nicking her finger but feeling the plastic part. She gripped the strap of her handbag, moving as little as possible.

MacGyver launched himself up just as the first bandit turned towards them, flinging his handful of dirt straight into the bandit's eyes. The bandit cursed and threw one arm across his face. He fired the gun but missed, the bullet slamming into the fender of the bus, the flash blindingly bright in the darkness. MacGyver tackled him and they crashed to the ground, the gun skidding off under the minibus.

There was a yell and the second bandit scrambled out of the sagebrush with one hand on his pants, the other fumbling his gun out of his belt. Gloria swung her heavy bag at knee height, tripping him up and sending him sprawling in the loose rocks and scrub at the side of the road. She scrambled up, ready to swing the bag again, but the bandit lay still, blood trickling down his neck and staining the rock he'd hit his head on in the wavering beam of Gloria's flashlight.

MacGyver and the first bandit rolled over and over on the dark road, punching and gouging, each unable to see the other. MacGyver grabbed a handful of the bandit's greasy hair and aimed a punch at his face. He connected with the bandit's cheekbone and the man immediately went limp. MacGyver sat back on his heels, breathing hard and shaking out his punching hand.

"Ow. Gloria, are you OK?" The weak beam of the flashlight wavered towards him.

"MacGyver? Thank goodness! I tripped him up and now I think he's DEAD!" The last word was a wail and MacGyver got to his feet, hurrying over to her. He held Gloria's hand and steadied the flashlight as she pointed it at the bandit. He was clearly unconscious but his chest rose and fell steadily.

"He's not dead, he's just taking a nap." MacGyver smiled reassuringly. "You did good." Gloria took a shaky breath.

"OK. Now what do we do?"

"Well," MacGyver turned back to the bus, shining the flashlight on the ground and picking up his knife, "Now we try to mend the bus and get out of here before these sleeping beauties wake up or their friends get back!"

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MacGyver tied up the two bandits using more of their cable ties, leaving them hidden in the brush on opposite sides of the road. Then he hurried back to the bus, finding Gloria shining the flashlight underneath.

"There's something hanging down. I can see it."

"Yeah, I know." MacGyver lay down on the cold ground and squirmed under the bus. "It's the prop shaft. I guess one of those rocks finished the job that old age and rust had started."

“Can you mend it?”

“Maybe, if I can find something to replace the broken section. We’re missing a piece.” MacGyver shone his flashlight at the shaft, cleaning the dirt out of the broken ends with his fingers. “I need something about eight inches long and two inches thick.”

“OK...” Gloria climbed up into the bus and started looking around. “MacGyver, I just don’t think we have anything.” She looked in the cubbyhole under the dashboard. “MacGyver? They took our map...”

“Oh man...” MacGyver wiped falling dirt out of his face. “OK, one problem at a time.” What could he use? He’d better come up with something fast – the rest of the bandits would be back soon, probably with reinforcements. He balanced the flashlight between his knees to free both hands to work on the bus, but the beam slid away as the flashlight slipped. Biting down on a curse, he tried holding the flashlight and one of the broken pieces in the same hand. His eyes narrowed, his gaze flicking from the flashlight to the broken shaft.

“Gloria? I’m going to need to borrow your flashlight!”

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Are you sure about this?” Gloria cast a nervous glance back towards the unconscious bandits.

“Sure as I can be.” MacGyver jammed the end of the flashlight barrel into one end of the broken prop shaft and lined it up with the other piece. “Do we have any glue?”

“Glue?!” Gloria looked around helplessly. “I shouldn’t think so.” She stepped back, tripping over her heavy bag. The bag shot backwards and hit a rock, spilling its contents across the ground. Billy’s shoebox flew out, bounced off a cactus and split open. Gloria frowned, Billy’s words echoing in her head: ‘Good stuff that kids need’...

“MacGyver? My turn for the flashlight!”

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“So what else is in the box?” MacGyver carefully applied Crazy Glue to the flashlight handle and jammed it into the other end of the broken shaft, spreading more glue around the joins.

“Well... matches, elastic bands, a soda bottle filled with something green – that’s what had leaked, by the way – a broken watch, some duct tape and a firework.”

Under the bus, MacGyver chuckled.

“Good stuff that kids need... Remind me to buy him a milkshake when we get back, he’s definitely earned it!”

“Are you nearly done? I think they’re waking up.” Gloria glanced over her shoulder, hearing a moan.

“Oh, I’m not too worried about them.” MacGyver wriggled out from under the bus, brushing dust off his jeans. He frowned, seeing a light far down the road. “THEM, on the other hand...” The light resolved into a pair of headlights coming towards them.

“Is it them?” Gloria sounded panicked.

“Let’s not find out!” They ran to the front of the bus and climbed in. MacGyver screwed up his face and turned the key.

“Here goes nothing!”

#### **Longest Night Part Four**

“Here goes nothing!” MacGyver listened as the cold engine whirred and spluttered, then coughed into life. “YES!” He put the old bus into gear and they set off into the dark. In the rear-view mirror, the bandit’s headlights dipped and swerved as they raced their car along the mountain road.

“They’re gaining!” Gloria swung out of her seat and down the swaying bus to wipe at the condensation fogging the back windows. The bus jolted over a rock and Gloria fell against the back of the bus, popping the back window open.

“Are you OK?” MacGyver glanced in the rear-view mirror before returning his attention to the rough road.

“I’m fine, but they’re definitely catching up!” There was a flash from the car and a bullet smashed the window next to Gloria, making her scream.

“Get down!” MacGyver flinched as another shot took out his wing mirror. He coaxed more speed out of the ancient bus, trying to think of a way to get rid of the bandits. If they couldn’t speed up, they’d have to slow the bandits down...

“Gloria, come up here and drive, OK? Stay low.” MacGyver waited while she crawled back to the cab. “Take the wheel.” He stood up, letting Gloria slide into the seat behind him and take the wheel. Another shot rang off the bus’s metal skin and they veered crazily across the road. MacGyver crouched down low.

“Where’s Billy’s box?”

“Under the seat. Why?” Gloria swung the bus around a bend as fast as she dared.

“I got an idea.” MacGyver shone the remaining flashlight into the shoebox, rummaging through the contents. Finding what he needed, he crawled to the back of the bus and pulled one of the spare gas cans free. Another shot shattered the back window panel, showering him with glass.

“MacGyver! The road splits! Which way do I go?” Gloria’s shout was panicked, but MacGyver daredn’t even look up.

“I dunno. Um... Left! Go left!” Hopefully they could sort out any mistakes when they’d dealt with the bandits. MacGyver hunched down as far as he could and used Billy’s duct tape to fasten the firework to the mouth of a gas can. He lit the touch paper with a match and bobbed up just long enough to dump the can upside down out of the broken window. The can bounced and skidded on the rough road, the firework fizzing and sparking in the darkness.

Half buried under fallen shoeboxes and supplies, MacGyver peered through the broken window. Stars exploded from the firework and lit the gasoline. A wall of flame roared up and MacGyver heard squealing brakes and shouting and the bandits’ car slewed to a halt. There was a screech of metal and

a bang, and MacGyver saw, bathed in the firelight, the bandits' car crashed into the rock face.

Breathing a sigh of relief, MacGyver headed up to the front of the bus.

"I think we lost them." He gave Gloria a reassuring pat on the shoulder and peered through the dusty windscreen. "Where are we?"

"I have no idea." Gloria unclenched her hands from the steering wheel and eased her foot off the gas. "We guessed at that last turning and the bandits stole our map. We could be halfway to Mexicali by now!" Gloria sighed. "Mexico's a really big place, MacGyver – if we're lost, we could be in real trouble."

"I know." MacGyver rolled down his window, trying to orient himself by the stars. The icy wind blew down his neck and he pulled his jacket tighter around him. Right in front of them hung a bright star that he didn't recognise. A satellite, he thought, orbiting close enough to be visible. He pulled his head back inside and rolled the window shut.

"We've been heading roughly south and east ever since we crossed into Mexico. If we're where I think we are, we need to head as much east as we can to find Santa Rosa. But if we miss it in the dark, we're a real long way from anywhere."

"Which way now?" Gloria pulled up at a fork in the road.

"Probably left." MacGyver opened the door and hung out, shining his flashlight into the darkness. Above him the stars glittered bright and cold. The satellite had moved, now clearly above the left fork. "Yeah, let's go left."

Gloria put the bus in gear and they swung left up an even steeper hill. MacGyver listened to the engine, privately praying that his improvised prop shaft would hold for long enough.

"Which way?" Another fork in the road showed up in the dim headlights, frost glistening on the tall cactus beside them. "Maybe right?" MacGyver tried to calculate angles and distances in his head.

"Are we following that star?" Gloria's tone was amused and MacGyver laughed.

"The satellite? No. Besides, if we were then it's got to be behind us now..." He trailed off, peering through the grimy windscreen at the bright point of light now hovering above the right fork. Gloria smiled, easing the bus along the rough track.

"I think after the trip we've had, we're due a little Christmas magic. What do you say?" She looked across to see MacGyver shaking his head.

"It may not even be the same one as before." He looked back, but no satellite shone through the broken rear windows. He turned around again. "If we get another choice, we should probably keep heading uphill – Santa Rosa's pretty high in the mountains."

"OK." Gloria steered around another bend and slowed as a turning came into view. She smiled when she spotted the bright light above the steep track and turned to MacGyver.

"Still think it's a satellite?"

"Yes!" MacGyver held up his hands. "But we're going that way anyway, so I guess we follow your Christmas star!"

The dirt road wound higher up into the mountains, getting steeper and narrower. Gloria changed

down to first gear and they crept up the track, loose stones and dirt falling away under their wheels. At the top of the ridge the track forked again.

“Which way?”

“Left...” MacGyver sounded unsure. “I don’t think we’re far from Santa Rosa but I can’t see any lights.”

“They may not have power back yet.” Gloria stared through the glass, seeing the star hanging above the right fork. “I think we should go right.”

“Because of the satellite?” MacGyver tried to keep the doubt out of his voice. “Gloria, I don’t think...” He broke off, hanging onto the seat as Gloria nosed the bus up the narrow track.

“Satellites don’t move around like that. You said so.” Gloria’s tone was firm. “It’s guided us well so far, so I’m following it. I have faith.”

Man, I sure hope you’re right – if we find out we’re on the wrong road it’s going to be impossible to turn around.” MacGyver frowned at the steep cliff face picked out in the headlights.

“I have faith.” Gloria stared ahead, guiding the bus around another hairpin bend. Straight ahead, the bright star twinkled in the dark sky.

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An hour later, they ran out of gas.

Gloria refilled the tank from the last of their spare cans and MacGyver checked the mended prop shaft.

“Let’s hope it’s not much further.” He brushed dust off his jeans and stood up, blowing on his hands to warm them. The night was bitter cold and silent. He gave the satellite a doubtful glance, still shining brightly ahead of them, and then his gaze wandered across the dark landscape, now showing just a hint of dawn on the horizon. He blinked and looked again.

“Gloria? Do you see what I see?” He pointed as she moved to stand beside him.

“Lights! MacGyver, we’ve found it! We’re nearly at Santa Rosa!” She pulled at his jacket sleeve and hurried to the front of the bus. “What are you waiting for?!”

MacGyver pushed his unruly hair out of his eyes and shook his head at the satellite, shining brighter than ever above a small cluster of lights not far away.

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They arrived in Santa Rosa just as dawn was breaking. The landslide had levelled half the village and although repairs were underway, a lot of people were still living in tents straggling across the hillside.

Father Juan greeted them at the doorway of his church. The church itself was filled with people, some asleep or injured and others wide awake and keen to help with unloading the bus.

“How did you find us?” Father Juan listened to MacGyver and Gloria’s story as he passed out shoebox presents to the children. He watched them exclaim over the simple gifts with a delighted smile.

“We followed a star.” Gloria handed a present to a kid who looked a lot like Billy and turned back to Father Juan.

“There’s a satellite orbiting, and it happened to be in front of us a lot.” MacGyver put down the crate he was carrying and rubbed his cold hands together. Father Juan exchanged an amused glance with Gloria.

“And where is your satellite now?” Father Juan looked up at the lightening sky and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his oversized woolly cardigan. MacGyver looked up too, but the satellite had disappeared.

“It was right here...” MacGyver spun on the spot, looking for the bright light. Father Juan nodded.

“Or maybe God sent you a star to follow just like he sent for the shepherds and the wise men, hmm?” He grinned and turned back to the pile of presents, leaving MacGyver frowning at the sky. Beside him, Gloria stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Merry Christmas, MacGyver.”

Behind, in the church, someone switched on a radio and the sound of Christmas Carols filled the cold morning.

“Yeah.” On the horizon MacGyver saw a bright point of light flash once and then disappear. He smiled. “Merry Christmas.”