

River Styx

Part One

MacGyver wasn't overly thrilled with the rickety green and white bus that was ferrying him and his companions through the dense woods. The driver was going at least sixty miles per hour, and Mac's teeth jarred with every single bump in the rough gravel road. To distract himself from the constant shaking, he glanced out the window at the endless waves of green leaves and wet logs. The forest seemed endless, almost claustrophobic compared to the dry and open spaces of Southern California. The trees seemed to spin as they rushed past, and he quickly glanced back at the other people on the bus.

"Am I the only one who feels like he's gonna be sick on this ride?" he said.

From the seat across from him, MacGyver's friend Willis nodded in agreement. "Definitely going to get sick. Probably as soon as we stop."

"It's a miracle that this bus still has a suspension at all after all of this."

"If you think the path is bumpy now, just wait until you're inside the cave," remarked the middle-aged geologist sitting behind Willis. She tucked a lock of graying red hair behind her ear as she looked up from her book with a smile. "This trail is going to seem smooth in comparison."

"Yeah, but we're not going to be going seventy miles an hour in there," Willis replied.

"I'm just so excited," said the local university student who'd been acting as the group's research assistant for the past week. "It's going to be so great to get out of the bunkhouses and into Mammoth Cave! There's no telling what we'll find down there!"

MacGyver smiled. "With any luck, our new navigational systems will help map out all your discoveries a lot faster."

The last member of the group, a lean-muscled speleologist named Daniels, shook his head.

"Maybe, but all that new technology can't replace a good old-fashioned pencil and paper."

"You've got no arguments from me," MacGyver said, cutting off Willis before the Phoenix researcher could jump in to defend his new favorite project. "But you have to admit, sometimes the new stuff can help out. At the very least, it can't hurt to have a machine there to double-check your measurements."

Daniels shrugged, but said nothing else.

MacGyver sighed and shook his head at Willis discreetly. The researcher frowned and slumped back against the bus seat, but followed Mac's lead and kept his mouth shut.

The group dynamic had been like this for days: everyone preparing for their mapping expedition down into Mammoth Cave in Kentucky and everyone excited about testing out the Phoenix Foundation's experimental navigation device---except for Ryan Daniels, the Cave Research

Foundation worker who refused to even *look* at the Phoenix equipment, let alone consider using it. MacGyver had dealt with that type of stubborn person before, but Willis was an idealist and he was proud of his creation, so naturally, he took everything personally. MacGyver bit back another sigh as he watched Willis, almost able to see the gears in his friend's head turning. Surely Daniels would come around after he saw how helpful the computerized mapping device would be...eventually.

"All right, everyone, get ready to hop out. The entrance is just ahead," the park ranger driving the bus called out. She parked the bus with a hiss of air brakes and opened the front door. The team of volunteer explorers followed her out onto the gravel and up to the cave entrance. "Remember the protocols for caving in the New Discovery area. Respect the landmarks, record as much data as you can, and above all, remember that it's safety first. The National Park Service has rescue teams standing by, but if anything goes wrong, it'll be hard for anyone to reach you once you're down into the deeper levels. I know that all of you have already gone over this during the trainings earlier in the week, but I just want to be doubly sure that you remember to be cautious. Don't forget that people have died in this cave before---lots of people. We don't have any clue what's down there in the unexplored parts, which is why we appreciate your contributions to mapping these sections of the cave---but it's also why you've got to be careful. Does anyone have any questions before you head inside?"

Silence and headshakes greeted Ranger Ellis' warnings, so she shrugged and unlocked the padlock on the steel door set into concrete. "In case you missed this during the seminar, this is one of our manmade entrances. The park service blasted it just before World War II, but the war put the tours here to a stop. After that, we decided to keep this area off-limits except to researchers. Consider yourselves lucky---not many people get to see this."

"Thanks," Willis said as he stepped through the door that she was holding open.

"Oh, before I forget," Ellis added, "Your scheduled return times have all been logged. If any of you are two hours late getting back, we'll start sending out the search parties. Happy hunting."

MacGyver zipped up his blue winter coat as he followed Daniels and Willis down the steep metal staircase. He could feel the cool cave air cutting through the Kentucky heat as the group descended deeper into the damp darkness. At the bottom of the stairs, the path was lit for a short distance by old electric lights, but beyond their range everything was black and unknown.

"All right, time to split up and start searching," said Daniels. "Professor McClure and I will take this passage to the right. We'll map it with our current equipment. The Phoenix Foundation team will map the other passage with your new navigation system."

"What about me?" asked the student assistant. "Which team am I going with?"

Daniels shrugged. "Up to you."

After a glance at the geology professor, she shrugged. "I'll go with the Phoenix team. I want to see how the new tech works out."

Daniels nodded. "Sounds good. We'll meet back here in three hours to report to Ranger Ellis."

“All right, MacGyver, I guess it’s showtime,” Willis said cheerfully. “Are you ready to switch on the INS?”

Mac nodded and reached over to unzip Willis’ backpack. Nestled inside a cocoon of a soft blanket and some caving gear was a black metal box, about six inches square with what looked like a circuit board across the top. MacGyver gently plucked the device from the pack, handed it to Willis, and zipped the pack up. Willis smiled down at his creation like a proud parent as he flipped a toggle switch and watched the red light on the side flicker on.

“Cool,” said the research assistant. “What exactly does it do?”

“It’s an inertial navigation system,” Willis replied. “It contains three ring laser gyros, three temperature-compensating accelerometers, a GPS receiver as a backup, and of course a temperature sensor and a voltage reference.”

“Basically, it’s a machine designed to be able to calculate your exact position regardless of any external factors. It can tell what direction you’re going, your speed...that kind of thing,”

MacGyver said.

The young woman nodded slowly. “So...it’s a GPS?”

Willis’ face took on the aspect of a man forcing himself not to pout. “No. The satellite receiver in this unit is just for a backup, to help in calculations *if* there’s an uplink. But if this thing functions the way it’s supposed to, it’ll take accurate measurements even without the satellite connection.”

“So, it’s a GPS without a satellite,” she tried again.

Willis smiled and nodded. “Well... Yeah, let’s go with that.” He stuck his hand out towards her with a shrug. “My name’s Willis. This is MacGyver. I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name earlier.”

“Elisa Clarkson. Hi,” she replied as she shook his hand.

“I look forward to getting to know you better, Elisa,” Willis said, just a bit too enthusiastically.

MacGyver fought off a smile. Had he ever looked that overeager and awkward when talking with a pretty girl? “C’mon, let’s check this out.”

Headlamps on, the three of them ventured forward into the unknown.

Walking for what seemed like ages, they paced through the passageway, past gypsum flowers, soda straws, and crystal formations that took MacGyver’s breath away. They paused at intervals to check on the navigation machine and take measurements, and during one of these brief rests, MacGyver found himself staring up at the ceiling of the cavern. Or rather, the lack thereof: as he looked up, the beam of light from his headlamp simply dissolved into darkness.

“Wonder how deep we are at this point?” he muttered.

“We’re about six miles underground right now,” Willis answered. “So, to answer your question, *very.*”

MacGyver whistled. “Impressive.” He shifted his gaze to the cavern wall, the rows of stalactites and stalagmites stretching out to touch each other. “Amazing what a little water can do over time.”

“Kinda creepy,” Clarkson said. “But also really cool at the same time. I’m definitely going to be in the top of my geography class for this one.”

“Oh, you’re majoring in geography?” Willis asked casually, glancing at her sideways from behind the navigation machine that he was holding like a shield.

She shook her head. “No, my major is in education. But volunteering for this cave thing was the opportunity of a lifetime---not to mention all the extra credit. I really hated Professor McClure’s class until this came up.”

“Oh.”

MacGyver hid a smile behind the flashlight that he was shining around the passageway. Willis sounded disappointed in his new friend’s lack of enthusiasm, but Mac was sure that Willis would soon find something else to like about the girl. Why not help things along and change the subject? “What else are you interested in, Elisa?” he asked with suppressed amusement as he peered between a cluster of closely-growing stalagmites.

“Hockey,” she replied, and Mac nearly hit his head on a rock as he twisted to look at her.

“Which team?” he asked, intense seriousness replacing his humor from moments earlier.

“Red Wings!”

“Calgary?”

Her thin shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Sometimes. They’re usually pretty good.” Her coffee-colored eyes glinted. “I really love it when a fight breaks out on the ice. Hockey is just the most violent sport, and I love it. It’s great for getting rid of some of that pent-up rage.”

MacGyver and Willis shared a quiet glance at each other. Slowly, Willis edged away from the pixie-like (and apparently violent) college student, shoving his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. Clearing his throat, MacGyver turned back to the stalagmite formation. How about another change of subject?

“I could be wrong, but I think there might be another passageway back here.”

“Really? Then we should explore it!” Willis said. “This could be an amazing scientific discovery!”

“I don’t know,” Mac replied. “This gap is pretty narrow, and we don’t know how far back this passage goes. It’s probably a dead end.”

Clarkson leaned past MacGyver, peering into the hole. Her headlamp only illuminated the edges of the opening, the light failing to shine against any back walls or blockages. The narrow entryway was just like the rest of the unexplored passages: a mystery. “I can fit through there,” she said. “I can see if there’s anything back there, and maybe I can find another way in so you can get through.”

Willis’ mouth twitched into a frown. “It could be dangerous.”

“I’ll be extra careful,” Clarkson replied as she adjusted her headlamp.

“Are you sure you want to go in there?” MacGyver said, an edge of caution cutting into his voice. “I’m not sure that this is a good idea. We have no way of knowing what’s back there, and Willis and I won’t be able to reach you if something goes wrong.”

“I promise I’ll keep my eyes open and I won’t go very far. Just let me try. If I don’t check it out, we won’t be able to explore it at all,” she argued.

Reluctantly, Mac nodded. “All right. Just be very, very careful, okay?”

“Okay!”

In a flash, Clarkson shimmied through the gap in the rock, her graceful legs touching the floor with a splashing sound just before her compact shoulders vanished into the darkness, dropping out of view in the newly-found cavern. As Willis and MacGyver peered through the aperture, the mens’ headlamps allowed them to see her shining a flashlight around the area.

“There’s a lot of water back here,” she said, “just puddled on the ground in places. I can hear it running behind these walls. And it’s colder here, but I can’t see anything.”

“Do you see another way in?” Willis asked.

She shook her head, causing the orb of light from her headlamp to bob around like a deranged spotlight. “Not yet, but I’m working on it. The space to my left is a wall of flowstone, but it looks like the passage in other direction runs parallel to the one you’re in, so they probably connect back together somewhere down the line.”

MacGyver nodded to himself. “All right, Elisa. You keep going down that passage and we’ll keep going down ours. See if we can find that connection point. But if the tunnel branches off or hit a dead end or something, just come back here and wait for us. We’ll all meet back here in fifteen minutes regardless. Sound good?”

“Sure,” Clarkson replied. “See you then.” Her petite hand waved goodbye to Willis before she headed down the tunnel, a wave of light slowly swallowed by darkness.

MacGyver aimed his headlight down the main passage and adjusted his backpack before beginning to walk, turning halfway to be sure that Willis was with him.

“Do you really think it was a good idea for us to split up?” Willis said after a moment or two of no sound except footsteps and distant running water.

“Not at all, but Elisa seems like she can handle herself. As long as we all keep level heads and watch our steps, we’ll be fine.” MacGyver struggled to keep a straight face. “Contrary to popular belief, you know, sometimes it’s okay to split up. Real life isn’t a horror movie.”

“What if she falls, or there’s a cave-in or something?” Willis said, worried.

“What if there isn’t? Then by not letting her help, we’d be taking away her opportunity to do something that she might love.” MacGyver scrutinized his friend for a second. “I have to wonder if you’d be so worried about her if she weren’t so pretty. If it were me going through that tunnel, you wouldn’t give it a second thought.”

Willis rolled his eyes behind his thick glasses. “You’re *MacGyver*. You can do everything. I don’t know anything about Elisa.”

“Except that you like her. Be honest with me.”

Willis shrugged and fidgeted with one of the straps on his backpack. “I barely know her.”

MacGyver smiled. “You should ask her for her telephone number before we leave here. You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t like me yet. I couldn’t do that. Could I?”

“Have a little courage, Willis! How do you know she doesn’t like you if you don’t try to make friends?”

“We should check on the navigation system,” Willis blurted.

MacGyver rushed to turn a chuckle into a cough as he reached for the zipper on Willis’ backpack and checked the machine. “Yeah, okay, whatever you say. You’re the expert.” Mac looked over the portable computer, examining the sensors and comparing the readings to the measurements he’d recorded in his waterproof notebook. “Everything looks good here, Willis. I’ll zip you back up. So far, the measurements are accurate within a couple decimal points.” After a moment, he added, “Well, either that or my math’s wrong.”

Willis laughed. “Remember, you’ve got to add first, *then* you multiply.”

MacGyver grinned. “Oh, so *that’s* where I was going wrong.”

Their good-natured bantering lasted for a few more minutes as they wandered through the cave...

But then their laughter was cut short by the sound of a scream.

Part Two

MacGyver and Willis raced back to the hidden passage as fast as they could without slipping on the smooth, damp stone. Their lights washed pale over the walls and formations, the shadows twisting sinisterly over the molten shapes. At last, they reached the entryway.

“Elisa!” Mac shouted. “Elisa! Can you hear us?”

“Yes!” came a distant shout, barely audible to her companions.

“Elisa, where are you?” Willis yelled. “Elisa!”

“Wait! I’m coming to you!” she shouted back. “I think!”

They waited for what felt like an hour before she finally emerged into the dim light of their headlamps, shivering and soaked to the bone.

MacGyver picked up on Willis’ quiet exhale of breath. A sigh of relief. He mentally agreed with the sentiment. “Are you okay?” Mac asked as Clarkson pulled herself back into the main passageway with them.

“I’m fine,” she managed to say. “I’m sorry I screamed. I didn’t mean to scare you. I was--- I was walking and I slipped into some running water. I th-think it was part of an underground river. I didn’t see it until it was too late. I lost my flashlight, and my headlamp went kaput. But at least I found the way back.”

“That’s the important thing,” MacGyver agreed. “You must be freezing. Here, we need to get you out of that wet jacket and get you into something dry.”

"You can use my jacket," Willis said immediately, before MacGyver could even finish his thought. "And we have a blanket in our backpack, too. I'll get it out for you."

"If it's n-not soaked or something by now, I have a Thermos in mine," she said.

In a few moments, they had Clarkson bundled up in Willis' coat and a fleece blanket with her Thermos of hot tea, with her purple jacket draped over a rock to dry. Not that it was doing much drying in this damp air, MacGyver noted.

"Feeling better?" Mac asked.

"Much," she replied. "I wish I hadn't taken a swim, though. I'm still so cold."

"Do you need another coat?" MacGyver asked, starting to unzip his blue jacket.

Clarkson shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I think I'm more startled than anything."

Willis nodded in sympathy. "I'm sorry that happened to you. You're a very brave woman."

She waved it off. "It's fine. I don't mind it so much. I like curling up with jackets and tea."

"You should eat something," Willis said. "You know, to keep up your strength."

Clarkson plunged her hand into her dripping backpack, sifted through a plastic bag, and held up three candy bars. "I brought enough to share."

"Thanks," Willis said with a smile. "You came prepared, didn't you? Thermos, snacks---what else did you pack in there?"

Clarkson grinned weakly. "Some notebooks, some pens, a textbook that I'll never be able to sell back to the bookstore now, batteries for the flashlight that I'll never see again, my car keys, and some sugar packets for the tea. That's about it. No blankets!"

"Good thing you had us as backup."

She nodded and nudged Willis' shoulder with hers. "Yeah, we make a pretty good team, don't we?"

MacGyver grinned as his friend looked away to hide his reddening cheeks in the darkness. "We should head back to the rendezvous point now," Mac said. "Elisa needs to get back to the bunkhouse for something dry. It's too easy to get hypothermia down here."

"But---"

Mac cut off Elisa's protest by continuing, "Besides, our time is almost up. We'll have to check in soon whether we want to or not."

"Okay, if we have to," Clarkson said, getting to her feet and wrapping the blanket closer to her shoulders.

MacGyver reached for her backpack strap, but Willis beat him to it.

"I'll carry this for you," the scientist said hurriedly.

"I can get it," Clarkson replied.

"No, no," said Willis. "I insist."

MacGyver rolled his eyes and began the trek back through the cavern, listening to their footsteps alongside him.

"How's your magic doodad doing?" he heard Clarkson ask Willis. He smiled as Willis started to tell her all about the INS, spouting off technical jargon before backtracking and struggling to phrase things in layman's terms. At least the guy was learning, right?

That was when the cave began to shake. Rumbling sounds, so low that they were creeping on the edge of perception, echoed through the tunnels. The slippery stone vibrated and trembled. The three of them lunged for nearby rock formations, struggling to keep their balance through the tremors.

MacGyver's fingers curled around the soft limestone of a stalagmite, but he couldn't get a tight grip on the slick surface. Losing his balance, his legs flew from underneath him and he landed on his back, his plastic helmet the only thing saving his head from colliding hard with the ground. As it was, the jolt was enough to knock the wind out of him.

By the time the cave had stopped shaking, MacGyver had recovered enough to sit up. He slipped the helmet off to examine it and frowned when he realized that his fall had broken the headlamp's bulb.

"You okay?" Clarkson asked, unfolding herself from a limestone column that she'd been holding in a death grip.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Good thing we're all wearing helmets," MacGyver replied.

Slowly, Willis shook his head. "What was that?"

"C'mon, Willis, we both live in Los Angeles. That was an earthquake."

"An earthquake?" Willis frowned. "But there aren't any major---" Then his eyes shone in understanding. "The New Madrid Fault. Of course. I'd forgotten about it, since there hasn't been any big seismic activity out of it in so long."

"Ummm, that earthquake felt pretty big," Clarkson said nervously.

MacGyver shook his head. "Not really. It probably seems that way to you because you're not used to it, but that was probably only a magnitude 3 or 4. Enough to shake some things around, maybe put some cracks in a few houses, but nothing major."

"But, MacGyver," Willis said, "*we are* underground right now... and that puts us closer to the hypocenter."

MacGyver nodded slowly. "I see what you're saying."

Clarkson blinked. "Okay, well, let's pretend that I'm not a geology major and that I just volunteered for this for the extra credit, and tell me what you're saying anyway."

"The closer to the hypocenter we are---the belowground epicenter---the greater the risk of damage," Willis explained.

"And it's not unusual to see rockslides in this cave," MacGyver finished.

She frowned. "So what you're saying is, we might not be able to get back out."

"What I'm saying is that we should be cautious as we make our way back, especially since there could be an aftershock," MacGyver said firmly. "No reason to panic."

"Right. No reason to panic at all," Clarkson echoed. After taking a quick sip of sweet tea, she nodded. "Let's just get out of here."

"Agreed," Willis said, taking the lead with their last working headlamp as they continued down the passageway out of Mammoth Cave.

As they walked, MacGyver fished his knife from his pocket and began to pry open the lamp on his helmet. Without a light shining directly down, the task was slow and difficult, but he managed to work on it by touch alone. The backup flashlight that he'd kept in his pocket still worked well, but having to carry it around wasn't as convenient as having the light attached to his helmet---especially since, in order to get back to the cave entrance, part of their journey would be an almost vertical climb. Since the bulbs in both lights were about the same size, all MacGyver had to do was cannibalize the bulb from the flashlight to fix the headlamp.

His two companions had been absorbed in talking to each other, so Willis jumped a little when MacGyver's lamp abruptly flashed on.

Mac grinned and placed the helmet back on his head. "Fixed it!"

"Of course you did," Willis said in wonder.

"Just in time, too," MacGyver said, looking up at the wall of rock that they'd descended from earlier. "Hard to climb with your hands full."

Clarkson took her backpack from Willis and slung it over her shoulders. "Let's---let's get cracking."

The three of them started the climb, easily finding footholds in the uneven surface. MacGyver reached the top first, and from the moment his hands curved over the top of the ledge, his heart began to sink. "This is not good."

"What's not good, MacGyver?" Willis asked, the frown evident in his voice. He pulled himself up to the ledge and stared. "Oh. You're right. That's not good."

From beneath them, Clarkson said, "Let me guess: we're s-stuck in here."

"That's right. A rockslide. It's covered the entire passageway. I don't see any light coming through at all," Willis replied.

"And more importantly, I don't feel any air currents coming through here," MacGyver added, "which means that it's blocked completely. We're going to have to find another way."

"I'm just going to stay here at the bottom then," Clarkson replied, sliding down the rock face. "How are we going to get out?"

"We'll think of something," Willis said boldly. Then he cast an anxious glance at his friend.

"Right, MacGyver?"

For a moment, MacGyver was silent. Finally, he said, "Of course we'll think of something. There's always another way. There are probably a hundred different ways out of this cave. We'll find one."

"What about the rescue team?" Clarkson asked. "Th-they'll come for us, won't they? When our time is up?"

"They'll come looking for us, all right, but it'll take them another two hours, and even then, there's no telling how long it'd take them to get past this rockslide---if they could get past it at all," MacGyver replied.

"So that's it, then. We'll have to get out on our own," Willis said.

Mac nodded. "And we might have a long way to go, so we'd better get started." After a moment's pause, he added, "Willis, why don't you keep walking with Elisa? Make sure she keeps drinking that tea and all. It'll help keep her temperature and blood sugar up, and that's a good thing, given her swim from earlier."

Willis grinned at the both of them---but especially Elisa. "Well, you heard the man!" She shrugged and lifted the Thermos to her lips. "Don't have to tell me twice."

Turning once again into the darkness, they set out into the unknown---this time, not for exploration, but simply looking for a way to escape the confines of Mammoth Cave.

"Okay, are you ready, Willis?" MacGyver asked as he spread the map of Mammoth Cave over the stone floor.

"Ready," Willis said, flipping toggle switches on the inertial navigation device.

"I hope your magic doodad works," Elisa Clarkson said.

"You and me both," MacGyver muttered, ignoring the look of indignation that Willis shot at him.

"Okay, what are our coordinates?"

As Willis read off the numbers churned out by the machine, MacGyver did his best to match up the coordinates with a landmark on the map. He marked their approximate location in inkpen with a little X. As he'd expected, their X was right in the middle of a blank area---unexplored. But Mac did catch something that gave him pause.

"Hey, Willis, take a look at this map, would ya?"

Willis shuffled over to peer down at the paper, some of it printed beforehand and some of it hand-drawn by MacGyver just hours earlier. "Of course. We're not near anything recognizable."

"Maybe closer than we think," MacGyver replied.

Puzzled, Willis blinked behind his glasses. "What do you mean?"

"Take a look at this blue line here." Mac slowly traced the line with his finger. "Look at the trajectory."

Willis tapped his chin. "If that line did actually keeps going in that direction, then yeah, it looks like it would eventually meet up with us. But we have no way of knowing if that line goes that way or not. What's it supposed to be, anyway?"

MacGyver grinned. "That's the River Styx."

Clarkson's eyes widened. "And that river goes outside! We can follow it out!"

"Exactly. Willis, you can get the coordinates for the River Styx exit from this map, and your navigation system will help us stay on the right track while we look for a way around to that river."

Willis glanced down at the little boxy machine beside his legs. "I don't know, MacGyver... I mean, this is its first real test."

MacGyver gently nudged his friend's shoulder. "It's been accurate so far. Have some confidence in yourself! Besides, if that thing helps us find a way out of here, then there'll be no denying that your navigation system works."

"I believe in you," Clarkson added.

"Well... Okay. I guess it can't hurt to try," Willis said. "Can I get a better look at that map?" MacGyver handed it to him with a smile. "We'll be out of this cave before you know it." "I sure hope you're right," Willis said nervously. He checked the map carefully and entered the coordinates into the navigation device. Then he took a deep breath. "Okay, MacGyver. This way." He pointed down a damp passageway. Damp, but it seemed to be unblocked as far as they could see. MacGyver nodded encouragingly at his friend. "Okay! That's good. Let's get moving." Willis nodded with a smile, and he and Clarkson followed MacGyver into the passage.

Part Three

"Do you hear that?" MacGyver asked as he hastily sketched the passage they were traversing onto his map. "Running water," Clarkson said, shining her light on the dripping stone walls. "We must be getting close." "There are soda straws all over the ceiling in here," Willis said thoughtfully. "We're watching the cave as it's still being formed." "It's amazing," Clarkson murmured. MacGyver nodded. "Imagine what it'll look like a thousand years from now."

MacGyver took a step forward and splashed his foot into a puddle. "Whoa!" "Are you all right, MacGyver?" Willis asked, running over to him. "Yeah, I'm fine. The water's cold and it startled me." "We must be *really* close now. The river sounds like it's right next to us." t flowstone around them. "We must be getting close. Really close."

Willis abruptly stopped, holding tight to his navigation device. "Look! I think we found it!" MacGyver shone his headlamp near Willis' and the light sent a glitter across the surface of the river as the broad stream gushed past them. "Whoa," Clarkson breathed. "Are those cave fish?" She pointed to the pale, eyeless creatures flitting about in the water, splashing away from the light. "This is really amazing," Willis said in awe. But after a moment, he frowned and asked, "But...there isn't enough space to walk along this side of the river. We're at a dead end here, unless..." "Unless we go across," MacGyver finished, deep in thought. "It doesn't look like it's very wide. We could swim across," Willis offered.

Clarkson shook her head. "I don't see how. It's moving too fast, and even though we can see the bottom, it looks really deep. Definitely too deep for me. I don't want to almost drown again." "No, it's okay," MacGyver said, getting an idea. "I have some rope in my backpack. We can use that." Clarkson glanced at Willis and whispered, "What's he going to do with the rope?" Willis shrugged. "I have no clue, but whatever it is, it'll work."

MacGyver unrolled a long coil of tough nylon rope and looped one end through the straps of his backpack, knotting it tight and testing it several times before nodding his head in satisfaction. "All right, this should do it."

"I'm lost," Clarkson said with a shrug.

Willis shook his head. "Don't worry. In a minute or two, he'll do something crazy that somehow works and then you'll kick yourself for not thinking of it first."

"Even though it's totally crazy?"

"Exactly."

Whether MacGyver heard them or simply ignored them wasn't clear, but either way, he hefted the backpack and attempted to throw it across. The first throw missed, sending the backpack splashing into the water, throwing a spray of water into the air and scattered the fish.

"Hey! Leave the cave fish alone!" Clarkson scolded.

MacGyver cringed. "It was an accident. I'll be more careful this time."

Willis leaned over the water as MacGyver prepared for another throw. "Sorry, fish! We just really need to get out of here."

"What exactly are you trying to throw at?" Clarkson asked.

MacGyver shook some droplets off his backpack and glanced at her. "See those two stalagmites along the edge of the water there? If I can throw this over them, then my backpack will be lodged behind them while the rope can go between them."

"Like a grappling hook?"

"Exactly," MacGyver said with a nod. "And then, we can hold the rope while we cross the river so that we won't get caught up in the current."

"Okay!" Clarkson said with an undercurrent of excitement in her voice. "So, just pretend that the stalagmites are your favorite hockey player and you're tossing him your gear because he has to get ready for the game."

MacGyver tossed the backpack behind the stalagmites, tugged the rope until it was taut, and grinned. "I think I'd rather pretend that the game is over and the Rangers have just won the Stanley Cup."

Clarkson returned the grin. "Are you throwing down a challenge? If you want the gloves to come off, they'll come off!"

"Yeah, if we could get out of this cave first before we start some kind of hockey adrenaline fight..." Willis interrupted. "I don't mind, really, but if you both fell in the river, I'd only be able to pull one of you back out."

MacGyver nodded. "You're right. We need to keep moving. Okay, who wants to go first?"

"W-well, uh---I'll go first," Willis said, putting on a brave face.

"Are you sure?"

Willis nodded. "Yes. I'm sure."

“How are you going to get your magic doodad across?” Clarkson asked, crossing her arms. “If you drown it, we’ll lose our map.”

“It’s mostly waterproof, and my backpack has a plastic lining. I think it’ll be okay,” Willis replied. Clarkson nodded. “I guess it’ll have to be.”

Willis nodded to her, took a deep breath, and grabbed the rope. “Here goes nothing.” Slowly, he put one foot into the water, then the other. “It’s cold.”

“I know,” Clarkson said with a grimace. “You can do it!”

Feeling like thousands of needles were jabbing into his body as he sank into the icy water up to his neck, Willis began to swim across the river, kicking to propel himself along as he clutched the rope in one fist, methodically moving closer to the stalagmites and rock floor on the other side of the Styx. The current tugged at his body and his clothes, making him cling to the rope even more tightly. “So, Elisa,” he managed to call out as he swam, hoping to get his mind off the cold. “What’s the first thing you’re gonna do when you get home?”

“Play with my puppers,” she said without hesitation. “My dogs are my babies. When I get out of here, the first thing I want to do is get back home to them. How about you? What’s the first thing you want?”

“A really long, hot shower,” he replied. “Mac?”

“Hawaiian pizza,” MacGyver answered. “No ham, extra cheese.”

“Pineapple on a pizza isn’t natural!” Willis spluttered, almost inhaling an eyeless cave shrimp in the process.

“Aw, c’mon, Willis! It’s a fruit! It’s one of the most natural things out there,” Mac said defensively.

“Whatever,” Willis muttered as he dragged himself, soaked to the bone, out of the water and onto solid rock again. Then he tossed his end of the rope back to his companions. “Elisa?”

Clarkson shot a glance at MacGyver and shook her head. Her dark hair had come undone and fell in waves around her face. “I really don’t want to do this.”

“I know you don’t. I’m not too keen on it myself. But we don’t have much of a choice.” MacGyver paused. “It’s going to be okay.”

Clarkson steeled herself. “Okay. I can do this.”

Mac nodded encouragingly. “Right! You’ve got Willis waiting for you over there, and I’m right behind you. You can do it. We’re all going to get through this together.”

She nodded, grabbed the rope, and plunged into the water.

“You can do it, Elisa!” Willis called from the other side. She began to swim towards his voice.

“You’re doing great,” MacGyver’s voice rang out behind her. “You’re almost there!”

“Almost there,” she echoed, reaching out for the opposite side.

Then the earth began to shake.

“Aftershock!” Willis cried.

“Get down and grab onto something!” MacGyver called, flattening himself against the ground.

Elisa latched onto the rope with both fists until her knuckles turned white, sucking in a lungful of air and holding her breath as frigid water roared over her head in powerful waves.

Then, she heard a cry of terror and a loud splash, but she couldn't see who had fallen into the water with her.

“Willis!” MacGyver shouted. “Grab the rope!”

Willis fought to keep his head above water, kicking desperately against the current with arms flailing. After several horrifying seconds adrift, he felt his fingers brush nylon and he snagged the rope, holding on with all his strength to avoid being swept away by the rushing water. His knee smacked into the hard surface of a half-submerged rock and he pushed himself above water.

After seeing that Willis was fairly safe, MacGyver began to look around for his other companion. She was still clinging to the rope in the middle of the river, bobbing up and down with the tumultuous waves.

“Elisa, are you okay?” MacGyver called out.

She pushed her head above water again and yelled, “I'm fine!”

“See if you can get over to Willis! He's on that rock to your right!”

Shaking, the college student resumed her task of swimming through the water, this time moving slightly to the right to reach Willis' rock. The swiftness of the river and the churning water made staying on course even more difficult, but finally she was close enough that Willis could help her onto the rock.

“I've got her, MacGyver! Are you okay over there?”

“I'm all right,” MacGyver replied. “Do you think you can make it the rest of the way across?”

Willis tested the rope and then looked down at the river. “I think so. We're only a yard or so away from the other side.” Then he looked back at MacGyver. “But what are you going to do? Can you make it across with the water moving fast like this?”

“I don't have a choice. When you and Elisa make it back to solid ground, toss me the rope.”

Willis nodded. “Okay, Elisa, follow me.”

Mac watched and waited as they quickly crossed the narrow gap between the river rock and the cave floor and climbed over stalagmites to safety. Then Willis said, “MacGyver? Are you sure about this?”

“No,” he admitted. “Just toss the rope.”

Willis picked up the waterlogged nylon cord and flung it back to MacGyver.

Mac caught it before it could drop back into the river and slowly waded into the Styx.

The river may not have been very wide, but it was deep; it wasn't long before the water was up to his waist, and then up to his shoulders, and then so deep that he couldn't touch the bottom. In the areas not skimmed by his still-surviving headlamp, the water looked almost black. And it was cold. Very cold. He'd expected that, but the icy pinpoints stabbing all over his submerged body still took his breath away. Holding fast to the suddenly frail-looking nylon tether that kept him anchored to land, MacGyver began to swim across the River Styx.

"You're doing great, MacGyver!" Clarkson's voice echoed in the empty cave.

"Yeah!" Willis added. "You've only got a few feet left to go!"

MacGyver, focused entirely on the treacherous swim, was almost able to touch the other side when the strap on his backpack-turned-anchor finally snapped and the rope slipped loose. He yelped in surprise as his safety line broke free, but his years of skill and experience kicked in and he struggled forcefully against the surge of the current.

After what felt like an eternity, MacGyver felt hands grabbing for his shoulders, and soon he was sprawled, drenched and dripping, alongside Willis and Clarkson on a slippery bank of limestone.

"Let's never do that again," Clarkson said breathlessly.

"Pizza and hockey instead," Willis agreed.

Mac nodded. "And dogs. Friendly ones."

For several moments, they were all silent, catching their breath and calming their nerves, and the only sound in Mammoth Cave was the dull and steady roar of the river.

At last, MacGyver said, "Willis, why don't you check to see how the INS is holding up?"

"I'm a little afraid to look," Willis confessed as he unzipped his backpack. Then he went through a careful checklist of every part of the machine. "The GPS is shot, but everything else seems to be working fine. The mechanical gyroscopes and the other non-electronics are unharmed so far."

"That's great!" MacGyver said, retrieving his one-strap backpack from the stalagmites. "Let's see how close we are to the exit."

"Thank God for waterproof paper, right?" Clarkson commented as Mac and Willis began to check their location on the map.

"We're close!" Willis shouted, relief evident in his voice. "We're *really* close, actually."

"We were right. If we keep going down this passage, it'll take us out!" MacGyver said.

"Yes! Let's get going!" Elisa cheered.

MacGyver smiled. "Lead the way, Willis."

Willis returned the smile as he wiped some water droplets away from his face. "Sure."

Step by step, Willis walked along the strip of smooth rock between the stone wall and the river. "I think I see daylight up ahead!" "I see it, too," MacGyver said. "Just a little farther."

Part Four

The number of yards between the three of them and the exit dwindled, and before long, the daylight coming from the mouth of the cave shone brighter than any light they'd seen in hours.

"It almost hurts my eyes, but I didn't realize before how much I miss the sun," Clarkson commented.

"Me, too," said Willis cheerfully.

MacGyver alone wore a frown. "I wish I could be more optimistic about this, but as close as we are, don't you think we should be seeing more sunlight than this?"

"Surely you don't think this exit could be blocked, too?" Willis asked, worried. MacGyver said, "I'm not sure. All I'm saying is that we need to keep our eyes open."

The closer they got to the cave entrance, the more the pit in MacGyver's stomach grew. Finally, the three of them were close enough to clearly glimpse the crevice in the cave that the river flowed through---and the enormous tree that had fallen right in front of it.

MacGyver reached out and touched the bark of the fallen tree, taking in the tangle of splintered branches and the wide trunk that made the three-foot-tall crevice into a three-inch crack. He gave the tree an experimental shove, and the others soon jumped in to help. Nothing. It didn't budge.

"That's not good," Clarkson said. "What're we going to do?"

"First, we're not going to panic," Mac replied.

"MacGyver, I'm panicking," Willis informed him. "We can't get past that tree by ourselves, and there aren't any other close exits that we know of. Let's face it: we're stuck."

"So, what's the worst case scenario here?" Clarkson asked nervously.

"The rescue team will look for us. Eventually, they'll find us," Willis said. "Right?"

MacGyver took a deep breath and slowly blew air out through his mouth. "Yeah, but they expected us to wait at the rendezvous point, which is blocked off. Now they won't know where to find us. It could take them even longer to get to us."

"How long has it been since we were supposed to meet with them?" Clarkson asked. "We had three hours to explore and then they were going to look for us if we were two hours getting back to the rendezvous point. That's five hours total. How long have we been down here?"

Willis checked his watch. "Six."

Clarkson brightened. "So they're looking for us by now. That's good, right?"

"Sure, but even if they knew our exact location, they'd still have to get through that rockslide, and that could take hours or even days," MacGyver said.

Willis sighed. "What I'm hearing from you, MacGyver, is that whether we turn back and try to make it back to where we started, or whether we stay here and wait for someone to notice us behind this stupid tree---either way, we're not getting out of here for at least a couple days."

"That's about the size of it," Mac replied, running a hand through his hair. "We need a way to move this tree."

"But how, MacGyver?" Willis said. "We're in a cave. Look around you! We've got limestone, some gypsum salts, potassium nitrate, uh, a quartz formation over there---just rocks! None of this is going to help us get out of here. We're at a dead end with no resources. What can we possibly do?"

"Uh, guys?" Clarkson said suddenly.

"Yeah?" Willis said.

"Is it just me, or is the river getting wider?"

MacGyver and Willis automatically looked over at the Styx. The water was rushing as fast as it had been during the aftershock, and the edges were beginning to swell.

"Uh-oh," Willis said.

"What does the uh-oh mean, Willis?" Clarkson said warily.

"It means that water from somewhere is draining into the river, making the water level rise. And with the tree blocking the exit, the water's coming into the river in a rush and leaving in just a trickle, so it has nowhere to go."

"Uh-oh," Clarkson said. "What do we do?"

"We get rid of the blockage," MacGyver said.

"Once again, how? We have nothing," Willis said.

"Not nothing!" Quickly, he searched through his soggy, broken backpack until he found the waterproof container of matches among the supplies that he'd brought along. Holding his breath, he popped open the lid and felt inside---then he grinned in relief. The container hadn't leaked. "Elisa, exactly how many sugar packets do you have in that backpack of yours?"

Shrugging, she reached into her backpack and held up the plastic bag of snacks. "A lot. I like *really* sweet tea."

"Get out as much sugar as you can find," MacGyver commanded, opening his Swiss Army knife to a wide blade and moving over to one of the cave walls, which was covered in crystallized minerals. Carefully, he began to scrape away at the delicate formations until some of the crystals fell like dust into the cupped palm of his free hand.

“Potassium nitrate?” Willis said. Then he blinked and adjusted his glasses. “Potassium nitrate and sugar is an explosive combination.”

“Not necessarily *explosive*. Just...very flammable. Did you ever make homemade rockets as a kid?”

“No. Did you?”

MacGyver paused for a moment before he answered. “Only until I got caught. The fuel that goes into amateur rockets is basically the same as what I’m trying to make: saltpeter and sugar. They call it rocket candy.”

“Rocket candy? Are you serious?”

“Sure.”

Willis looked over at Clarkson. “Is he serious?”

She grinned. “I honestly have no idea, but rocket candy sounds really delicious.”

Mac grinned as he weighed the handful of mineral dust in his palm. “It sounds good, but don’t eat it. Okay, Elisa, are you ready with that sugar?”

“I have 13 packets. Think that’ll be enough?”

Willis’ eyebrows flew upwards. “Why would anyone possibly need that much sugar?!”

“This is the South,” she said as if that explained everything.

“Willis,” MacGyver said, and his friend instantly turned to him, alerted by the sudden seriousness in his voice. “Willis, listen... You’re right. Potassium nitrate and sugar is a dangerous combination, even in small amounts. That’s why I think we need something to help contain and direct the reaction.”

“Like what? What do we need?”

“Well, I’m not seeing many loose rocks in this area, so ideally, I’m going to need a piece of metal.”

“But we don’t have any metal.”

“Yes, we do.”

Several seconds later, Willis stepped backward as MacGyver’s point sunk in. “No. MacGyver, no. I can’t take apart the INS. Not after I worked so hard to build it. I--- I put the entire thing together myself, from the motherboard down to the last fitting.”

MacGyver put his free hand on Willis’ shoulder. “Look, I don’t need the whole thing. Just the external casing. The motherboard, the gyroscopes---all that stuff can be saved, and you can put those parts into a new one.”

“Well...” Willis said slowly, “I guess this field test has given me some ideas for a redesign anyway...”

“That’s the spirit,” Clarkson added. “You can make a heavy-duty magic doodad next time. Besides, if you can help us get out of here? You’ll be my hero.”

Willis sighed. “Okay, MacGyver. I’ll take the INS apart.”

“You’d better hurry, because the water’s already up to my ankles,” Clarkson said.

MacGyver reached for his Swiss Army knife, opened the screwdriver, and passed it to his friend. "Don't worry, Willis! This was still a successful test."

"A successful failure, you mean," Willis huffed as he removed the screws that held the internal components of the navigation device together and removed the metal framework.

"C'mon, Willis. That's what they said about Apollo 13, too, and that turned out okay."

"I guess," Willis said begrudgingly. Gently, he placed the components into his backpack and handed the empty, lidless box of metal to MacGyver.

"Thanks, Willis," Mac replied. "Trust me, you'll feel a lot better once we're out of here!" He poured the saltpeter into the box first, then gestured for Clarkson.

She sloshed through the cold water, now knee-deep, and offered him the handful of sugar packets. "At least there's no risk of being pulled by the current here, right?"

"That's what I call looking on the bright side. Tear those open and pour the sugar on top of the saltpeter." After she had poured the sugar in, MacGyver carefully mixed the two powders together. "This isn't ideal, but it's going to have to work." He wedged the box between the cave wall and a thick branch wider than most of the gaps inside the cave, with the makeshift rocket candy facing the rough tree bark. "Okay, Willis. Hand me a match, and be ready to stand back."

Willis nodded and gave his friend the match, then pressed himself against the opposite wall with Elisa in tow.

"Okay, the rocket candy is supposed to burn up part of the tree, right?" she asked.

"Yeah," Willis said.

"What're we going to do if it doesn't work?"

"Look on the bright side," MacGyver said. Then he lit the match. Slowly, he eased it toward the homemade rocket fuel. He released the tiny stick over the top of the powder, then jumped back as fast as humanly possible in the rising water.

As soon as the diminutive flame grazed the powder, the saltpeter and sugar mixture ignited into a small but roaring blue and purple blaze, oscillating in colors and spreading across the dry leaves on the branch first before slowly eating its way across the bark.

Within minutes, the colorful rocket candy inferno had eaten away the top half of the fallen tree. A few minutes more and it finally burned itself out, the saltpeter and sugar fuel exhausted. A few tendrils of orange flame still crackled and seared the trunk of the burning tree until the escaping river gushed past and extinguished the fire.

Wide-eyed, Willis gaped at the remains of the half-destroyed tree. "Wow." He felt something move against his leg, and glanced down. An eddy in the calming river had sent the INS' metal frame sailing back to him. He picked it up gingerly, testing to be sure that it had cooled before

lifting it and holding it up to the light. His jaw dropped. Besides scorching the sides of the metal box, the saltpeter fire had melted a hole the size of Willis' face in the bottom. "Unbelievable. I knew that glucose and potassium nitrate would produce an exothermic reaction, but I never knew that it would be this---this incredible!"

MacGyver shrugged. "Welcome to my world. C'mon, let's get to the ranger station and get some dry clothes. I think we've had enough explosions for one day!"

After a short hike up a forested hill, the trio emerged---shivering and looking as though they'd been drowned---at the end of the trail that led back to the visitors center.

"Do you hear that?" MacGyver asked. Then he pointed to an ATV that was rumbling down the trail ahead of them. "Hey!" he shouted, waving his arms.

The ATV skidded to a halt. Ranger Ellis jumped off and ran towards them. "MacGyver! Willis! I'm so glad you three are all right! The ranger teams have been looking all over for you, above ground and below."

"We were trapped by the earthquake," Willis said. "There was a rockslide that blocked us off from the rendezvous point."

"But we made it out just fine," MacGyver added. "How's the other team doing?"

"Looking for you," Ranger Ellis replied. "They found the rockslide after you-all were late in meeting up with them, and they've been trying to find a way to get you out ever since. But somehow you made it just fine on your own!"

"How long were we gone?" Clarkson asked.

Ranger Ellis glanced at her watch. "About five hours."

"Five hours?! Wow!"

MacGyver shrugged. "I guess time flies when you're exploring one of the world's biggest caves."

Ranger Ellis smiled. "Come on, let's get you three into the ranger's station and we can all compare notes while we get you into something dry!"

A short while later, both teams of cave explorers were sitting around a conference table in warm, dry clothes with now-empty boxes of pizza scattered around them.

"And finally, the chemical fire burned away enough of the tree for us to escape," Willis said. MacGyver grinned as his friend finished sharing the tale of their adventure.

The other team leader, Ryan Daniels, leaned forward in his seat. "That's quite a story there!"

Willis nodded. "We did have one casualty though."

"Oh?"

Surely, Willis retrieved the burned-out shell of the INS, showing everyone the charred hole through the bottom.

"I'm sorry," Daniels said finally. "I know how much that machine meant to you."

"The good news is that we salvaged most of the parts," MacGyver said, "and the INS has had a completely successful field test. As a matter of fact, we never would've found the River Styx exit without it." He nodded at his friend. "Willis should be proud."

Daniels cracked a small smile. "Yes, he should."

"Well, I suggest that you all go back to the bunkhouse and get a very long night's rest. Everything else can wait until morning," Ranger Ellis said.

"Agreed!" Clarkson said with an enthusiastic nod.

As the two teams of cave explorers filed out of the room, Willis made his way over to her. "Um, Elisa?"

"Yeah?" she said with a smile.

"I was wondering, um... maybe---maybe you'd like to exchange telephone numbers? You know, so we can, um, stay in touch?"

She smiled. "Of course! I'd like that."

Willis beamed. "You would? Really?"

"Sure! And we should all go out to eat sometime. I know all the best restaurants and coffeehouses. You, me, MacGyver, and my fiancé!"

"Yeah! That sounds---wait, what?"

Clarkson nodded with a grin. "It'll be great! All four of us. I can't wait to introduce him to both of you. He'll never believe it. You can even show him the rebuilt version of your magic doodad!"

"Great. Right. Yeah."

"Okay, well, I'd better get going. I need to give him a call and tell him everything that happened. I'll talk to you later, Willis!"

Still smiling, she bounced away, leaving him behind with a box of gyroscopes and mechanical parts.

MacGyver nudged Willis' shoulder. "Don't worry. Someone else will come along. You want some pizza?"

Willis glanced down at the pineapple-covered slice of pizza in the box that MacGyver was offering and shuddered. "No, thank you. I'm going to take a long shower and forget this day ever happened. And then I'm going to build a better navigation system. And this time, it'll be MacGyver-proof." With that, he grabbed the parts and walked out."

MacGyver smiled and finished eating, then wandered outside to stand at the edge of the trail. Beneath the boulders and forest, he stood there alone with the Green River sinking into the mysterious darkness of Mammoth Cave and the River Styx.