

## Cold Turkey

### Part One

#### Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> December

Nikki pulled another length of tinsel out of the cardboard box, humming along to 'Silent Night' playing on the radio. Disentangling the tinsel from a holly wreath, she dragged a chair to the corner of the room and stood on it to fasten the tinsel to the doorframe. She stretched up on tiptoes, pushing a tack into the wood, with the tail of the tinsel draped over her shoulder. She turned to view the room, pleased with the tree and the decorations looping across the ceiling. She glanced into the kitchen as the oven timer pinged, stepped down off the chair and opened the oven door. She had just set down a tray of cookies when the telephone rang.

"Hello?" Nikki pulled off her oven glove, dumped it on the counter and shifted a box of fairy lights off the couch. "Yes, this is Miss Carpenter, how can I..." She sat down, the colour draining from her face. "What do you mean, gone?" She shook her head, eyes widening as she listened to the voice on the phone. "And you don't know... You mean you just let him leave?!" Her voice grew loud, harsh against the gentle music in the apartment. "I know it's not a prison, but..." She took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. "Did he say where he was going? I see, and you have no idea where he could be?" She bit back a curse. "Thank you for letting me know." The caller hung up, leaving Nikki staring at the phone. She replaced the receiver, put a shaking hand to her mouth, then buried her head in her hands and cried.

#### Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> December

"Is there anyone here who DOES have a Christmas tree?" Willis set down his lunch tray, looking around the Phoenix Foundation canteen table. "Seeley?"

"Nope. Mozart climbs it and eats the pine needles. Then he throws up." Seeley took a swig of coffee.

"How about you, Mac?" Willis sat down, puncturing his juice box with the straw.

"Not so much." MacGyver swallowed a mouthful of beans. "I'm not really a Christmas kind of guy. Santa Luisa Mission have one though, and I'm spending Christmas day there, so it sorta counts." He shrugged.

"Are you helping out this year too?" Helen laid her fork down and wiped her mouth with her napkin.

"That's right." MacGyver forked in some more beans, chewed and swallowed. "They run a soup kitchen all day and Doc said he could use an extra pair of hands. Sam's going to help too."

"That sounds lovely." Helen smiled and turned to Willis. "And to answer your question, yes – I do have a Christmas tree."

"Finally!" Willis grinned, then turned to Nikki. "So, which are you, Nikki – Elf or Grinch?" He blinked, surprised at her answering glare.

"Just leave it, Willis!" Nikki stood up, leaving her untouched lunch tray behind.

“Wow... Grinch.” Willis watched her go.

“Definitely Grinch.” Seeley took another bite of meatloaf, watching the canteen doors swing shut.

“Yeah. Except usually, she’s an elf...” MacGyver frowned, picking up his empty tray and setting off after her.

By the time he’d returned his tray and fought his way through the lunchtime crowd back to Nikki’s office, she’d already left for her afternoon’ assignment.

### **Friday 22nd December**

“What’s going on with her?” Willis glanced at his watch as Nikki stowed her bag under her desk and sat down. “She was late yesterday as well.” He glanced across at MacGyver, his expression worried.

“I don’t know.” MacGyver watched Nikki boot up her computer, the screen-light darkening the shadows under her eyes. She rubbed a hand across her forehead, frowning as though she had a headache and sighed.

“I asked her yesterday if she was OK, and she almost took my head off!” Willis shook his head. “I mean, she’s pretty fierce even on a good day, but just lately? Nuh-uh!” He shook his head again and ducked back behind his computer as Nikki looked their way.

“Huh.” MacGyver watched as Nikki pulled a strand of tinsel off her monitor, wadded it up and threw it in the bin. She typed for a moment, her fingers hitting the keys hard, then frowned at her work and erased it. MacGyver rose and went to the break room. He poured a mug of coffee and placed a doughnut on a napkin, carrying both back into the office and putting them down on Nikki’s desk.

“You looked like you could use some breakfast.” He smiled down at her, trying to hide his shock. Up close, Nikki looked bad. Her eyes were red rimmed, her face pale. Fatigue painted dark smudges under her eyes and her clothes were rumpled.

“This doesn’t look like your idea of a good breakfast!” Nikki smiled as she picked up the doughnut, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“Well, you also looked like you could use the sugar.” MacGyver shrugged, waving a hand towards the coffee. “And the caffeine. Are you OK?”

“Fine.” Nikki looked down at the doughnut in her hand, setting it aside. “Just tired.”

“Yeah, all that Christmas preparation can really take it out of you...” MacGyver watched Nikki glance at the tinsel in the bin and sigh.

“Mac, I get what you’re doing, and it’s good of you to be concerned.” Nikki looked up, meeting his worried gaze. “But I really am fine. I’ve just got a lot on at the moment.”

“Work stuff?” MacGyver looked at the cluttered desk, spotting a report which should have been handed in two days ago.

“Home stuff.” Nikki’s voice was quiet. MacGyver frowned, recalling that Nikki lived alone. Perhaps Christmas was especially difficult this year, missing a husband who should have been there celebrating it with her...

“Nikki, if you want you can spend Christmas with us.” MacGyver stopped, unsure of what to say next. Nikki opened her mouth to reply, then her eyes filled with tears and she looked down, shaking her head.

“No.” Her voice was quiet. “Thank you, but no. I’ve got things I have to do.” When she looked back up at him, the tears had gone.

“OK, if you’re sure...” MacGyver waited until Nikki nodded and then drifted back to his desk. Willis caught his eye and shrugged.

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“Merry Christmas, everyone! Pete picked up his briefcase, waved to the Phoenix staff still in the office and then left, leaning on his driver’s arm as they walked down the icy front steps. MacGyver glanced across the nearly empty office as he shrugged into his jacket, seeing Nikki still at her desk.

“C’mon Nikki, this will all still be here after the weekend. No-one’s going to sweat an unfinished site report now!” He waited, hands in pockets, until she looked up at him and nodded.

“I guess you’re right.” Nikki sighed and shut down her computer. Checking her cell phone, she put on her coat and dropped it into her pocket.

“You expecting a call?” MacGyver held the door and then followed her through.

“Kind of.” Nikki pulled her coat tighter around her as a cold gust of wind blew. In the sodium lights of the car park, she looked grey and worn.

“Nikki, seriously – what’s wrong?” MacGyver stood in front of her.

“Nothing. Excuse me, please.” Nikki stepped to the side, but MacGyver stepped too, preventing her from walking away. “Mac, get out of my way!” Nikki’s tone was angry.

“Nikki, I’m your friend. I’ve been worried about you all week – you’re late, you look like you haven’t slept in days, you’re not eating, you can’t stop looking at your phone...” MacGyver gestured helplessly. “Something’s wrong and I want to help. Let me help!”

“I’m OK, Mac, I...” Nikki broke off, pressing her lips together. “I just... I can’t...” She shook her head. “I have to go, Mac!”

“Let me help, Nikki.” MacGyver’s voice was quiet. Nikki shook her head again, then her face crumpled.

“It’s my stupid, asshole little brother!” Her voice was angry as much as upset. MacGyver opened the door of Harry’s Chevy pickup and Nikki got in, scrubbing tears off her face with her coat sleeve.

“What’s happened?” MacGyver got into the pickup and started the engine, cranking up the heat.

“He’s had a... problem for a few years.” Nikki took a wad of Kleenex and blew her nose. “But I’d got him into a rehab facility here in LA and he was doing really well. I thought this time he’d kick it for good, you know?”

“Drugs?” MacGyver frowned as Nikki nodded.

“Heroin. Yeah, I know.” She caught MacGyver’s eye, her expression mirroring his. “He was doing so well, he was getting clean and then I get a phone call Wednesday evening, and they tell me he’s gone.”

“Gone?” MacGyver raised his eyebrows. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.” Nikki raised her voice, imitating the nurse on the phone. “This isn’t a prison, Miss Carpenter, and Matthew is free to leave if he chooses.” She shook her head. “I’ve spent the last two nights driving around the city looking for him. The facility is supposed to call me if he shows up, but so far...” She shrugged.

“Do the police know he’s missing?” MacGyver held up his hands at Nikki’s blistering glare. “OK! OK! Just checking”

“I know, sorry.” Nikki shook her head. “Officially he doesn’t count as a missing person for another... four hours.” She glanced at her watch and sighed, folding her hands in her lap. “So now I go home and wait, in case he comes to my place, or I go out searching for him and worry that he’ll show up at my apartment and find it locked. She shook her head. “Why couldn’t he just stay put?”

“You want some company?” MacGyver put the pickup into gear and drove across the parking lot to Nikki’s car. “We could cover a lot more ground if we both search, or if you decided to stay home, you wouldn’t be waiting in alone.”

“Actually, yes.” Nikki nodded. “That would be great. But that ruins your evening too.”

“No plans.” MacGyver shrugged. “I’d be happy to help.”

“Thanks, Mac.” Nikki got out of the pickup and fished her keys out of her pocket. “Follow me back, and I’ll find you a photo of Matt, OK?”

## **Part Two**

### **Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> December**

“C’mon, c’mon, pick up the phone!” MacGyver opened one eye to see Nikki pacing back and forth across her living room with the phone held to her ear. He yawned and blinked, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. They had spent most of last night searching for Matthew and finally given in around three. Nikki had insisted that MacGyver stay at her place rather than drive all the way across the city to his own apartment. He sat up, the blanket sliding off his shoulders, and stretched the cricks out of his back. At the movement, Nikki turned.

“Any luck?” MacGyver swung his feet off the couch, yawning again and pushing a hand through his rumpled hair. Nikki shook her head, busy redialling the rehab facility’s number. “OK.” MacGyver pushed the blanket off his knees and stood up. “Where’s your bathroom?” he nodded as Nikki pointed without taking her attention from the phone, and crossed the room. He closed the bathroom door behind him, hearing Nikki slam the receiver down and swear.

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When MacGyver came out of the bathroom, Nikki had spread a map of LA out on the kitchen counter. "Here's us." She pointed at a coloured dot on the map. "And here's Matt's rehab." Another dot. "I've searched this area pretty well, and... What are you doing?" She looked up at MacGyver for the first time, seeing him opening her fridge and taking out eggs and milk.

"I'm making breakfast." He set down the eggs and turned to face her. "Neither of us will do our best work if we're running on empty, and I'm guessing you haven't eaten yet." He nodded as Nikki shook her head. "I thought I'd make pancakes. You got any flour?"

"That cupboard." Nikki smiled as MacGyver turned to the cupboard, a tea towel slung over one shoulder. "And thank you. There are strawberries in the fridge." Nikki breathed in the homely smell as the batter began to sizzle.

"That's the spirit!" MacGyver grinned back at her and flipped the pancake.

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"Are you going to report Matthew missing here, or near the rehab facility?" MacGyver swallowed the last bite of pancake and laid down his fork.

"Near the facility, I think." Nikki picked up her coffee with a shaking hand. "I should be used to this by now. He's been in trouble ever since we were kids, but having to report him as a missing person, I just..." She shook her head and sipped the coffee, cupping both hands around the warm mug.

"Yeah." MacGyver sipped his tea, unable to imagine how Nikki might feel.

"And there's a good chance they won't really look for him." Nikki pushed the remains of her pancakes around her plate. "LA is hip-deep in missing junkies."

"Surely not!" MacGyver stood up and collected the plates. "Everyone matters, including people who've made... questionable choices." His expression was indignant and Nikki smiled as she looked up at him.

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"I can't believe I've just heard the police – the POLICE! – say that!" MacGyver stopped on the police station steps and turned as if to go back inside.

"I told you." Nikki grabbed his sleeve. "To them he's just one more missing junkie." Her tone was bitter but unsurprised.

"He's a person! With the same rights as everyone else!" MacGyver glared back at the precinct doors.

"Yeah, he is." Nikki started down the steps, turning back to MacGyver and waiting for him to follow her. "Come on, Mac – I can get some more searching done while the daylight lasts."

“I’ll help.” MacGyver stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets and followed. The city was so big, so much territory to cover. And there were only the two of them.

Only two of them...

“Nikki, wait!” MacGyver hurried to catch up with her. “I have an idea!”

### **Christmas Eve**

“And then she said no!” MacGyver ladled out a bowl of soup and handed it to the homeless man at the front of the queue. “Here you go, fella.” The man nodded his thanks, picked up a bread roll and found a seat at one of the long trestle tables in the Santa Luisa Mission hall.

“Do you know why?” Doc tipped his pan of soup to get the last ladleful out and turned to the stove. “I’m sure many of my regulars would be glad to help.”

“Yeah, I know.” MacGyver handed another bowl of soup across. “I think she’s embarrassed about him. I guess she doesn’t want a whole lot of strangers knowing... that her brothers made some bad decisions.”

“He’s still alive, right?” The owner of the gravelly voice was wearing at least three overcoats and a rainbow of grubby knitted scarves, despite the heat in the room.

“As far as I know, yes.” MacGyver nodded, trying to decide if the person before him was male or female.

“Well then.” The scarves rose and fell in a shrug. “If he’s alive, he can be found. Ain’t no shame – we all done things we ain’t proud of.” The figure nodded, took a bread roll and shuffled away.

“Mo makes a good point.” Doc watched the figure sit down at the table nearest the heater. “Where there’s life, there’s hope.”

“Yeah.” MacGyver put down his ladle and untied his apron. “Can you manage without me for a bit? I want to get Nikki down here, so she can see people aren’t going to judge her, or judge Matthew. They’ll just want to help find him.”

“Sure.” Doc smiled, reaching out his hand for the apron.

“Oh, Doc?” MacGyver shrugged into his jacket, winding his scarf around his neck. “Is Mo short for Maurice or Maureen?”

“Ah.” Doc smiled and shook his head. “I’ve never asked!”

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“No, Mac. I told you, no.” Nikki folded her arms.

“Give me one good reason why not!” MacGyver ran a hand through his hair and frowned. “Even if we work together, we can’t cover the whole of the city. There’s no way!”

“He’s my brother. I found him before, I’ll find him again.” Nikki’s voice shook.

“No, you won’t.” MacGyver sat down on Nikki’s couch. “LA is about five hundred square miles, even assuming he’s still here...” he tailed off, shaking his head.

“He’s here.” Nikki sat down beside him, folding her hands tight. “He has to be.”

“So, the more people we have searching, the sooner we’ll find him. Let us help, Nikki. Please.” MacGyver watched her start to say ‘no’ again, then think about what he’d said.

“Why would they do this?” She wrapped her arms around herself as if cold. “They don’t know him.”

“But some of them know what it’s like to *be* him.” MacGyver’s voice was gentle. “And none of them want to see anyone else having as hard a time as they are.” Nikki nodded, still tightly curled up on the couch. She looked up, seeing MacGyver waiting for an answer. She swallowed hard and nodded again.

“OK, Mac.”

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He dreamed of water.

In his dream, it was dark and cold, washing over his feet, smelling of dirt and despair. The air around him was cold too, echoing with the formless howl of the wind. He saw himself from far above, a tiny figure huddled on the floor of a broken building, the water lapping the tilted floor on all sides.

A dark shadow flew over him, blotting out the stars. It circled the building in a lazy arc, its teeth and claws needle-sharp and glinting in the chilly moonlight.

The water washed over his outstretched hand, the foam at its edge seething and bubbling, stinging where it touched his skin. He pulled his hand back, curling tighter in on himself.

The dark creature above him made one more leisurely circle, then dropped. Frozen to the spot, he watched it hurtle towards him, black scaly lips pulled back and needle-teeth exposed. He could smell its acrid, chemical breath.

Matthew opened his mouth and screamed.

He came awake thrashing, shoving away the tattered curtain that served him as a blanket, clawing it off his face. It had rained while he’d slept, blowing in through the broken window to wet his jeans. He opened his eyes, the squalid room striped orange and black in the streetlight.

Where was he?

He must have had another blackout. The nurses at New Day Rehab said they should gradually stop happening, the longer he stayed clean, but so far he’d seen no sign of this.

He looked around, seeing other sleeping people, a girl slumped against the wall with her eyes half open and a blissed-out expression, an overturned coke can and a discarded needle, glinting in the sodium glare. Had he used? How could this have happened?! His eyes widened and he pulled

frantically at his sleeves, disorientated when he found his arms already bare. Why was he out here in just a t-shirt? The air was so cold that he could see his breath cloud white.

Where was he?

He sat up, looking around himself, feeling for new punctures in his arms. He didn't feel high, and he relaxed a fraction. But now that he was awake, need scratched at the back of his mind... Doing just a little would clear his head, help him calm down so he could work out where he was, and what had happened to him. He ran his fingers over his arms again, feeling the skin rough and ridged, but whole. He remembered leaving rehab, unable to take any more stories about other people's efforts to get clean and their falls back into addiction, but after that, his memory was blurred.

He was cold. Where was his sweater? He'd definitely had it on when he left, even though people had laughed at him for wearing it. Nikki would be mad at him for losing that...

Where was he? He reached out and picked up the syringe, holding it up to the light. A dab of liquid, amber in the streetlight, remained in the plastic barrel.

Doing just a little would help him figure it out, wouldn't it?

Wouldn't it?

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"I'm not sure about this, Mac." Nikki stopped at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the Santa Luisa Mission. She stepped to the side, allowing an old man to pass, bumping his pull-along shopping bag up the steps behind him. He grinned at her, showing mossy dentures.

"Everyone wants to help. You'll see." MacGyver put an arm around Nikki's shoulders and climbed the steps, pulling her with him. He held open the door and Nikki walked inside. As they stepped into the hall, everyone turned to look at them.

"Is this her? We'll find him, honey!" A man wearing a tattered raincoat waved his spoon and MacGyver waved back.

"We know all the places!" This from a bone-thin youth, hastily swallowing a mouthful of bread.

"Don't worry, Chica!" An elderly man in a carefully darned sweater smiled a kind smile and a younger, long-haired man sitting next to him nodded.

"Mac, she's pretty! Hey!" A man was cut off mid wolf-whistle as Mo clipped him around the ear.

"Ignore him, sweetheart. He don't got no manners, but he got sharp eyes, so we tolerate him, OK?" Mo glared at the man, who muttered something Nikki didn't catch and concentrated on his soup.

"OK..." Nikki looked around, taking in the roomful of concerned faces. She smiled, feeling a little of the pressure lift. "Thank you, thank you everyone!"

### **Part Three**

#### **Christmas Eve**

“So, I took the liberty of calling Sam, who said he’d round up some transport so we can search further, faster. I hope that’s OK.” MacGyver blew on his tea and sipped.

“The more the merrier, I guess!” Nikki spread her map out on one of the trestle tables and Doc’s regulars gathered around to look.

“Where’s the rehab again?” Mo followed Nikki’s finger. “OK, I know that neighbourhood. Me and my glamorous assistant here can take that part. Right, Alphonse?” The man Mo had smacked earlier nodded.

“What he look like?” Alphonse held out a grimy hand for the snapshot Nikki passed him. He looked at it, then passed it to the next person round the table. “What he wear?”

“Uh... New Day rehab centre said he had on a Christmas sweater. It would be the one my Mom knitted for him, I guess – red with a green Christmas tree on it.” Nikki sketched the design in the corner of the map.

“OK, good.” MacGyver leaned over, pointing at the Centre. “So, Mo and Alphonse start here. Leonard, you and Jose do the area around the Good Samaritan shelter.” He moved his finger and glanced up, seeing Jose nod. “Doc, you and Sabrina take north of the rehab centre, but be careful who you talk to, OK? That’s a bad neighbourhood.”

“Uh-huh.” The bone-thin youth brushed her hair out of her eyes. “I been there before, Doc. I’ll keep you safe.”

“Thank you, my dear.” Doc smiled at Sabrina, who smiled shyly back. Then he frowned, looking at the door. “What is all that noise?!”

“Cavalry’s here!” MacGyver opened the door, expecting to see Sam and his girlfriend Andy. “Woah...” Santa Luisa’s yard was full. His landlord, Mel’s, decrepit Cadillac was parked next to the pickup. Kelly’s scooter was parked behind that, with Sam’s motorcycle and sidecar and MacGyver’s motorcycle tucked in beside them. Mel paused in wrestling a pair of wedged bicycles out of the Cadillac to wave to MacGyver, and Mama Lorraine bustled up the steps to plant a kiss on his cheek, before enveloping Nikki in a hug. Two Hell’s Angels roared into the yard and a hippy on an electric bicycle cruised in, exchanging a high five with Mel.

“Mel, what the...?” MacGyver ran a hand through his hair, lost for words.

“Well, I got talking to Sam, and...” Mel gave the stuck bicycle a tug. “And it sounded like you could use all the help you could get.” Another tug. “So, I banged on a few doors, and called a few friends and voila!” A final tug and the bicycles came free, pitching Mel into the middle of the Hell’s Angels, who caught him and disentangled him from the bikes. “Thanks, fellas.”

“This is great!” MacGyver watched his neighbours file up the steps and disappear into the building. Then he frowned. “Hey – how did my bike get here?”

“Andy.” Sam straightened up from the sidecar. “I gave her your spare key. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“No problem, son.” MacGyver glanced back through the Mission’s doors as the noise level inside rose. “Shall we?”

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The convoy through LA drew little attention, Angelinos being used to the strange and unusual, and they came to a halt outside the New Day Rehabilitation Centre. MacGyver helped Leonard and Jose unload the bicycles out of the back of the pickup and they set off. Faces appeared at the windows as the Hell's Angels roared away, and Kelly and Wyatt the hippy followed more slowly on the scooter and the electric bike. Eventually only MacGyver and Nikki were left.

"Let's do this." Nikki got into the pickup and shut the door. MacGyver watched Andy, Mo and Alphonse disappear around the corner on his motorcycle, Alphonse hanging on grimly in a makeshift trailer improvised from a shopping cart, some scaffolding and two of Mo's scarves. He got into the pickup and started the engine.

"OK Nikki, you're navigating." He put the pickup into gear and pulled out into the traffic.

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"No." Matthew pulled his shaking fingers away from the syringe and wrapped his arms around his knees. Shutting his eyes so he didn't have to look at temptation, he tried to catalogue what he could with his other senses, the way his counsellor had taught him.

What could he hear? The rattle of a railroad car. Distant traffic. A couple arguing in Spanish somewhere close by. Water dripping.

What could he smell? The remains of a damp fire. Smog, catching in his throat and making him cough. Excrement...

Matthew opened his eyes. He had to get out of here. Wherever 'here' was.

Placing an empty burger box over the syringe to hide it from view, Matthew stood up. He was stiff with cold. How long had he been here?

He staggered to the window and looked out, careful not to cut himself on the broken glass. Was he still in LA? The view outside gave no clues. He sat down, his legs wobbly. If he wasn't in LA, there was little chance of finding anyone he knew, or anyone who might help him. And if he couldn't find anyone to help him, there was little chance of him staying clean...

Was he still clean? He looked down at his arms, seeing no punctures. His eyes were drawn back to the upturned box and the bliss within, whispering to him from underneath...

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"Nada." Mel shook his head as MacGyver and Nikki pulled up next to the battered Cadillac. Beside Mel, Doc shrugged helplessly.

“Sorry, Dad. We’ll keep looking.” Sam turned off his bike engine and took off his helmet.

“Don’t give up, Nikki.” Mama Lorraine’s voice was stern. “We’ll find him. There are plenty of places left to check. Right, Sam?”

Nikki’s despair grew as each team reported in. After the last pair, Leonard and Jose, had reported no success, Nikki slumped forwards with her head in her hands. “This is hopeless, Mac!” Her voice shook. “This time he’s really gone, isn’t he?”

“Who are you looking for?” A voice floated down and MacGyver stuck his head out of the truck window, trying to see who had spoken. “I’m up here.” MacGyver looked up, seeing a pale young woman leaning out of one of New Day’s second storey windows.

“Hi.” MacGyver smiled.

“Hi yourself.” The young woman blew a cloud of cigarette smoke out, adding to the smog. “Who’re you looking for?”

“Matthew Carpenter.” Nikki got out of the pickup and looked up. “You know him?”

“Uh-huh.” The girl took another drag on her cigarette and flicked the butt away. “What you want with him?”

“He’s my brother.” Nikki shoved her hands in her coat pockets. “He left here and he’s probably in real trouble by now.”

“Yeah.” The girl leaned on the windowsill, looking up at the sky. “Whole city’s full of trouble, just waiting to be found!” She looked back down at MacGyver and Nikki. “You find him, you tell him Christa says hi, OK? I like that boy.”

“Do you know where he might have gone, Christa?” MacGyver stepped out of the pickup.

“If he’s gone looking to score, he’ll have gone to see Copperhead Joe.” Christa took her elbows off the windowsill, preparing to go back inside.

“Where would we find Copperhead Joe?” MacGyver called up, and Christa stuck her head back out.

“Del’s.” The window banged shut, leaving MacGyver staring up at the back of the curtains.

“Cryptic...” One of the Hell’s Angels shook her head.

“Right!” Sam looked around the group. “Anyone know where Del’s is?” He watched everyone shake their heads, exchanging worried looks. Behind him, he heard a curse, followed by quick footsteps.

“Nikki, wait up!” MacGyver hurried after her, catching up as she banged on New Day’s front door.

“Hello? Open up, please!” She banged in the door again and stepped back as a light came on in the building.

“Can I help you?” The door was answered by a nurse wearing a cardigan over his uniform. He glanced at the crowd at his front door and frowned.

“I’m Nikki – Matthew Carpenter’s sister. Please – you have to help us!” Nikki reached out, taking hold of the nurse’s sleeve.

“Ah.” The nurse gently disengaged her grip. “You’d better come in.” He stood aside, allowing everyone to troop inside.

“We’ve been searching for Matthew, but we haven’t found him yet.” MacGyver shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned on the edge of the nurse’s desk. “We spoke to Christa just now, and she might have given us a good lead. Are you familiar with a drug dealer named Copperhead Joe, or somewhere called Del’s?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” The nurse folded his arms. “Copperhead Joe is well known around here, and he always seems to stay one jump ahead of the police. Del’s is one of the places he hangs out. I can give you the address, but I doubt you’ll find Matthew there – he may have chosen to leave here, but he was doing really well and he was very keen to stay clean.” His gaze shifted to Nikki. “He talks about you all the time.”

Doc produced the map and the nurse marked Del’s on it, giving directions for getting there. Just as he finished, the door buzzer sounded.

“I have to go, but good luck finding Matthew.” The nurse paused with one hand on the doorframe. “Please let me know if you find him, OK? I’d like to know that he’s safe.”

The group gathered around the map. MacGyver divided up the area surrounding Del’s between the teams, rolled up the map again and turned towards the door. Leaning against the frame was a haggard young woman wearing a grubby Christmas sweater.

“Where did you get that?!” Nikki’s voice was high and loud. The girl looked down and plucked at the sweater as if seeing it for the first time.

“This isn’t mine...” The girl’s voice was dreamy and far away.

“Damn straight!” Nikki started forwards, but Sam grabbed the back of Nikki’s coat, meeting her glare calmly.

“Miss, where did you get the sweater?” Doc pointed, his voice gentle.

“I didn’t steal it!” Panic surfaced through the drugged haze.

“I’m sure you didn’t. MacGyver cast a warning look at Nikki. “Just tell us where you got it, OK?” The girl looked down, stroking the knitted front of the sweater. When she spoke, her voice was quiet.

“I got it off a dead man...”

## **Part Four**

### **Christmas Eve**

The girl looked down, stroking the knitted front of the sweater. When she spoke, her voice was small.

“I got it off a dead man...”

“NO!” Nikki’s hands flew to her mouth. Andy and Sam each put an arm around her as she sagged. Mo, nearest the door, took the junkie by the elbow and steered her outside, pulling the door shut behind them. MacGyver hesitated, torn between looking after Nikki and finding out more about Matthew. At a nod from Sam, he turned and slipped out of the room. Looking up and down the hallway, he spotted Mo and the nurse sitting with the junkie at a small table. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but shut it again as Mo raised one gloved finger.

“This is Trudy and she is very, very high.” Mo frowned at the girl, who seemed fascinated by the ceiling. “Pacing up and down, asking her stuff and waving your arms around isn’t going to make her remember things any faster, so if you want to help, sit down and just listen.” Mo shoved a chair towards MacGyver with one booted foot and turned back to Trudy. Trudy took a deep breath and her eyes focussed, returning from somewhere very far away.

“Tell us about the sweater Trudy.” The nurse prompted,

“Sweater...” Trudy looked down, then back up, her eyes scared. “He was dead!”

“How dead?” Mo ignored MacGyver and the nurse as they turned to stare. “Today-dead or long-time-dead?”

“Oh.” Trudy blinked, trying to think past the psychedelic parade in her head. “Today-dead. Christmas eve dead.” She giggled and her gaze slid away. “We wish you a merry Christmas,” She sang softly.

“was he stiff or bendy?” Mo patted Trudy on the cheek. “Stay with me, OK honey?”

“Bendy. Like a big doll!” Trudy made puppet movements with her arms, then sighed.

“Then either he’s dead and he’s been that way since soon after he left here, or she’s mistaken and he’s still alive.” The nurse murmured to MacGyver, who shook his head in confusion. “Rigor mortis doesn’t last forever.” The nurse turned back to Trudy, missing MacGyver’s stricken expression.

“Did he make any noises?” Mo took Trudy’s hand and squeezed her fingers.

“No, no sound. Sssh...” Trudy freed her hand and put her finger to her lips. “But when I borrowed his sweater...” She sat upright, momentarily present. “I didn’t steal it! I only borrowed it because I was colder than him!” She blinked slowly and subsided again. “But after I borrowed it, he was all shivery.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “All shivery.”

Mo stared at MacGyver and mouthed ‘He ain’t dead!’, jabbing a finger at the Trudy – the girl – she was wrong! Matthew wasn’t dead, he was alive!”

“Do we know where Matthew was?” MacGyver watched the nurse lead Trudy away.

“Eh... Not so much.” Mo shrugged. “We got a pretty good idea of the area because Trudy buys from Copperhead Joe too, but after that?” The scarves rose and fell in a shrug.

“Let’s take a look at the map again, see what we can piece together.” MacGyver took the map from Doc and spread it out again on the desk. “OK, Mo – shoot.”

“Well. She came out of Del’s and headed for the big dog.” Mo sniffed, looking around the group.

"I know!" Kelly raised a hand. It's across from the police station. It's a burger stand shaped like a giant hotdog."

"OK, good." MacGyver moved his finger on the map. "What else?"

"She walked through the rainbows, and then she fell down in them." Mo leaned forward to study the map.

"Garage." Mel nodded. "Took my car there once, they got oil all over the sidewalk outside." He glanced at Kelly. "Oil on a wet sidewalk makes rainbow patterns. Slippery too." He pointed to a spot further south. "Here."

"Right." MacGyver slid his finger across the paper. "Next?"

"She walked past the sideways house, but not as far as the black hole." Mo scratched and shrugged. "Hell if I know..."

"Anyone?" MacGyver looked around, but no-one spoke up. "OK, it's a start. Let's start at the garage and split up to search around there. Mel, you're leading. Everyone ready?"

\*

Matthew stared at the upturned box, hearing it call to him. He screwed his eyes shut and stuffed his fingers in his ears, but he couldn't block it out.

"No..." His voice was a desperate whisper. "No..."

\*

"OK, keep a lookout for anything that could be a sideways house." MacGyver put the pickup in gear and followed Sam and Mama Lorraine away from the garage.

"Whatever that is." Nikki wiped condensation off the window with her sleeve and stared out. They drove down the shabby streets. Boarded-up windows and grimy neon signs slid past the truck windows, anonymous figures hurried along in the gloom between the tall buildings.

"Half this street looks like it should be condemned!" Nikki blew on her hands to warm them, not taking her eyes off the street.

"I reckon the buildings are pretty much holding each other up!" MacGyver leaned forwards, looking at an old wall leaning heavily against the building next to it.

"Yeah..." Nikki frowned. "Could that be what she meant by 'sideways'?"

"Maybe." MacGyver brought the pickup to a halt. "How about that one?"

"Right!" Nikki opened the pickup's door, standing on the step to get a better view. The building at the end of the row leaned crazily against some stout poles. Its roof met the building next to it at a

sharp angle, and cracks ran down the height of the brickwork. Rusty railings separated it from the street, bent and twisted.

“Trudy went past the sideways house.” MacGyver waited for Nikki to come back inside the truck before moving off again.

“But she saw him before she got to the black hole.” Nikki sighed and shrugged.

“I might have found it.” MacGyver flicked the headlights onto full beam, the light shining off a ‘road closed’ barrier at the end of the street. Beyond, in the gathering dusk, a sinkhole had torn a gaping hole across half the road.

“We must be close!” Nikki turned to MacGyver, hope in her eyes. “Pull over!” MacGyver parked the pickup in a space behind a dumpster. Handing Nikki a flashlight, he got out and stepped over the low fence into the yard of the first building.

They shouted themselves hoarse calling for Matthew.

The first building proved empty, just a shell with something green and foul-smelling coating the walls. In the second, they disturbed three junkies and the largest cockroaches Nikki had ever seen. In the third, Nikki almost fell through the floor when the rotted boards collapsed under her weight.

\*

Matthew’s eyes snapped open. He must have fallen asleep because he’d dreamed he heard Nikki calling his name. He sighed, feeling tears prick. Nikki couldn’t be here, she didn’t know where he was. Matthew scowled, angry with himself for getting in yet another mess. This time, even he didn’t know where he was.

Hearing a man shout, he turned in the direction of the voice. Had the man shouted his name? He unplugged his fingers from his ears and listened.

“MATTHEW!” The man’s voice, nearer this time.

“MATTHEW!” Matthew drew in a great, wailing breath as he recognised Nikki’s voice. He heard Nikki cough, then shout again. “MATTHEW!”

“HERE, NIKKI! I’M HERE!” Matthew stood on wobbly legs.

“MATTHEW! KEEP SHOUTING!” The man’s voice again, and a thud as someone threw their weight against the door Matthew could see through the holes in the ceiling above him.

“NIKKI!” Matthew could hear her calling back to him, and saw the door shudder as she kicked it. There was a pause, then a splintering crash as Nikki and a tall man burst through the door and stumbled into the room above him. Nikki gasped as she saw the gaping hole in the floor, and the man threw himself to the side to avoid falling down it. His weight made the floor shake as he landed, dust sifting down through the cold air.

“Nikki, stay back.” The man got to his knees and moved closer to the hole, lying down to peer over the edge. “Matthew, right?” He grinned down and Matthew nodded. “Pleased to meet you. You stay there a minute, while I figure out a way to get you up here, OK?” There was a brief

conversation that Matthew didn't catch, then the man poked his head over the edge of the hole again.

"Can you see anything down there? Can you tell me what's in the room with you?" The man turned, said something to Nikki and Matthew heard her walk back across the room. Matthew looked around, noticing for the first time that he was alone.

"I see a cloth. Um... And a door leaning on the wall." He squinted up through the dusty air.

"OK, good." The man leaned all the way down the hole, looking into the room. "Is there anything you could rest the door on, make yourself a kind of a step? You're too far down for us to reach and pull you out."

"Oh. Um..." Matthew looked around. "No."

"No problem." The man disappeared and Matthew heard him dragging something across the floor above. "I'm going to drop these down the hole as carefully as I can. Stay out of the way, OK?" there was a scrape and a clank and the man lowered an oil drum down the hole, leaning so far that Matthew figured Nikki had to be holding his ankles. The drum bounced off the floor when it landed, and Matthew stood it on its end, holding on as a wave of dizziness overtook him. "Matthew? Matthew! You OK? Can you throw me the cloth?"

Matthew listened to the sound of cloth ripping, then stood out of the way as a chest of drawers was lowered next to the oil drum.

"Can you lay the door on top of those?" The man watched him do it, hanging upside down with his long hair making a shaggy halo around his head. "Good. Now climb up on it and catch this." Matthew reached out, catching a makeshift rope knotted together from the old curtain, a knitted scarf and a length of cable.

"I've got it!" Matthew knotted the rope around his waist and took as firm a grip as he could, willing his cold hands to hold on. The man disappeared and Matthew felt a tug on the rope, followed by a curse he recognised as one of Nikki's favourites and an almighty heave. For a moment he dangled above the floor, reminded with a rush of vertigo about his dream, and then strong hands were pulling him up through the hole in the floorboards.

"Matt, thank goodness!" Nikki swept him up in a hug, then stepped back and punched him hard on the shoulder. "You're a scumbag, you know that?! You had me scared to death!" She hit him again, then hugged him, tears streaming down her face.

"Hi Matthew, I'm Mac." The tall man smiled and held out a hand. "Come on, let's get you back and share the good news!"

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## **Christmas Day**

Matthew, showered and dressed in clean clothes, watched Nikki putting up Christmas decorations. Santa Luisa Mission was full, and he was shy of talking to so many new people. The one in charge, Doc, was arguing about sandwiches with a brightly dressed woman wielding a ladle. Two bikers, an

overage hippy and a young man who looked a lot like MacGyver were heling with the decorations. A bubbly girl and a massive person wearing several coats were organising a group of homeless people into singing carols. The large room was warm, steamy where the radiators were being used to dry coats and gloves, and the noise was incredible. Matthew was glad to fade into the background and jumped when MacGyver sat down beside him. For a moment MacGyver watched the room too, taking in the scene.

“You’ll get used to it” He grinned. “It’s a bit much to begin with, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Matthew nodded, hunching down inside his sweatshirt and pulling the sleeves over his hands.

“Why’d you run like that?” Matthew glanced sideways at MacGyver’s question, but saw only concern in the brown eyes.

“Um...” Matthew looked down at his feet. “I just needed to be on my own, you know? I know everyone’s trying to help me, and I’m grateful, but... Just too many people. And I wanted to sort myself out without relying on everyone else yet again.” He sighed. “Guess that didn’t work out the way I planned.”

“Uh huh.” MacGyver studies Matthew. “You use?”

“No!” Matthew’s answer was quick and sure. “No, I’m staying clean this time.”

“Glad to hear it.” MacGyver stood up. “You gonna stay with Nikki for a while?”

“Yeah.” Matthew looked across at Nikki, stringing tinsel along the tops of the windows. “She’s been so good to me. I don’t want to give her any more trouble, you know?” He shook his head. “I haven’t even got her a Christmas present. What kind of brother am I?”

“I think she’ll forgive you.” MacGyver smiled down at Matthew. “The best Christmas present you can give her is to stay clean. Look her in the eye, tell her you’re going to do it and mean it, OK?”

“OK Mac, I will.” Matthew smiled back and stood up, holding out his hand. “Thank you, MacGyver, and Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Matt.” Bypassing the hand, MacGyver pulled the boy into a hug, then released him and gave him a gentle push towards Nikki. He watched Matthew cross the room, and speak to Nikki. She listened carefully, then ruffled his hair and kissed his cheek.

“Merry Christmas, Mac.” Doc handed MacGyver a cup of cocoa and a cookie. “I think he’ll make it this time, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” MacGyver blew on his cocoa, watching Matthew pick up a length of tinsel and hold it out to Sam. “I think he’ll be just fine. Merry Christmas, Doc.”

