



JOHN O'CONNOR

A SIMEON LEE STORY

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SMITH

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John O'Conner stared at the words of his New Testament, but he didn't really see them. The plane roared and vibrated like a cold monster, and the passenger in the seat next to him shook with each fresh vibration. He was a well-built man, somewhere in his forties, stocky and short and sweating with his fear. He kept glancing two seats ahead and across the aisle, at a man in Middle Eastern garb. That one seemed to be sweating heavily too. John hoped it wasn't an epidemic, he just wanted to get back to his family without incident. This round of theological lectures had kept him away for four months, it was Christmas Eve, and time to be home. The plane juddered with turbulence, and the stocky passenger drew a deep intake of breath, his nails biting into his seat. John laid his New Testament on his lap.

"I usually try not to bother fellow passengers when traveling, but you, sir, need a distraction." John's Scottish brogue was strong, his voice deep, and it carried well over the roar of the airplane. The man glanced at him. Scorn showed in his soft brown eyes. He nodded at the book on John's lap.

"Know what you'll say," he said, in a rich voice with just enough of an American southern drawl to make it delightful. "Don't want to hear it."

"What is your objection to my religion?" John asked. The stranger looked at him again, and his gaze lingered a little longer. Not many still spoke to him after a direct refusal, and those who did weren't so blunt about it. "Now, don't be offended if I make an educated guess based on your physique. I used to be an army chaplain, and I ran across many who couldn't reconcile what they saw of the evil of the world with a God who is truly good. Do I hit near the mark?"

"Disturbingly," the man admitted, and a hint of interest slid into him. John nodded and launched into various theological arguments in a quick, skilled way that said he had researched the topic and knew the usual objections. After ten minutes, he suddenly stopped. The roar of the plane settled around the two men. The stocky one glanced at him. "Give up already?"

"No, only observed you aren't particularly interested in my arguments, and have probably heard them all before. I would prefer to give you my real, personal answer. But you aren't going to like it," John warned. The stranger stirred, anger taking him.

"Look, I've walked through places you can't even imagine," he said, quick and intense. "Seen things that tell me you can't have a good God, or else He's not a God at all. Gave up on Him ages ago. I've never even put up Christmas lights. No light broke into the darkness."

"But light breaks in every morning," John said. "Sometimes when we're buried underground we can't see it, but even then we know it's there." The man started, and his brown eyes shot up to study the pastor. John O'Conner had been with the Holy Spirit long enough not to wonder about it; he would probably never know why he had been prompted to use that particular imagery for this particular man. "The sun rises, the water cycle goes on, a dog's fur still feels soft, and babies laugh. Yes, the darkness is deep and evil penetrates nearly everywhere. But it is always a corruption of the good, and it never fully overruns the good things. Evil is so very hard to endure because we've seen the good and tasted it, even if it's on the very fringes. And it's God who brings the good and upholds it. It's man who brings the evil. Yes, the argument is that a truly sovereign God could outlaw all evil and stop it from happening before it starts. And sometimes He does. But we both know sometimes He doesn't."

“Speed it up?” the stocky one asked. He stayed focused on the man two seats ahead of them. That one had sweat running in rivulets down his neck, and he was shaking visibly. Turbulence shook them again, the man gritted his teeth and his nails dug into the seat as he trembled.

“We have three hours till we land,” John said, “and you need something to distract you, this has been a bumpy flight. Though not enough to warrant the seatbelt light on the entire time, as it has been. I think it’s broken. But the attendants insist on sticking to the rules and complain at anyone trying to disregard the light.” The man shot him a glare before going back to staring. John skipped to the point. “Here then is my personal answer to the objection of why evil exists in a world with a truly sovereign, good God. I warn you, it isn’t going to sit well with you. Here it is: I don’t know. And I don’t think anyone living ever will.” The man looked up at him in annoyance.

“Started this conversation to say that?” he complained, and John laughed.

“I prefer honesty to attempting to shrug off the problem. I acknowledge it is a real problem. But if we, created creatures, understood all the thoughts and ways of our Divine Creator, I would be doubtful He was truly divine. The fact we don’t understand everything is to me another proof of His veracity.” The man blinked and suddenly looked thoughtful. “You’ve heard all the arguments I can give, and you’ve seen and felt the arguments against those arguments firsthand. I don’t know why God let it happen.”

“What happen?”

“Whatever it is that drove you to where you are now.”

The stocky one’s gaze shot up to John’s bright green ones, surprise the only thing showing on his face. John O’Conner stared back with serious intensity.

“I don’t know why He let it happen. But I know from promises throughout the Bible, and what I’ve seen and felt throughout an eventful life dealing with hundreds of people, He *is* able to make good blossom out of it.” Incredulity showed on the man’s face. “It’s true. I don’t know why, or how, but I can promise you God is good and able to prove it to you.”

“Prove? How?” It came as a demand, short and almost explosive, as if he longed for it enough to be angry at an offer that couldn’t follow through.

“Accept Him. Stop fighting back and take Jesus’s offered gift of salvation as yours, with no merit of your own. I can promise you’ll find the sweetness and goodness of God if you do that in sincerity.”

The man tightened, his spine rigid and his brow drawn as he thought hard. His eye stayed on the stranger in the aisle ahead of them. The robed one seemed to be fiddling inside his robe, perhaps too nervous to sit still? John waited in silence, praying hard for the battle he could watch being waged for the stocky man’s soul. The brown eyes flew up to John’s again.

“You mean it?”

“When you truly accept God’s love is yours, it becomes yours, and that makes all the difference in the universe. He can prove His own goodness to you. It shines in brilliant beams from the mere fact of Christmas; we are not left alone in our dark. The Light of the World broke in, and died for *you*, an enemy. That is love, and that is goodness. Believe it, and the rest will come in time. Can I pray with you?”

“May.”

“What?”

“May I not ‘can,’” the stocky one corrected his grammar, and John stifled a smile.

“Actually ‘can’ is perfectly correct as *I* may pray for you all I want, but I can only pray *with* you if you agree. Do you agree?” he pushed. Again the stranger hesitated. But then he nodded, short and small, his eyes a little large in the immensity of what he was agreeing to. John dropped a hand on the man’s stocky shoulder and prayed, earnestly and simply, a believer’s prayer he had led many in during his life as a preacher and evangelist. The man beside him murmured along with the words, his voice growing husky as they drew to the end. As they finished, John gave the man’s shoulder a squeeze and sat up. Confusion drew the man’s brow tight, as if trying to understand something new, but a smile teased the corners of his mouth.

“Welcome in, brother,” John smiled at him. The flickering smile turned into a real, joy-filled grin. John watched years falling off this stranger, as the truth began to penetrate inside instead of glancing off his personal armor. The joy was brilliant, and glorious to behold, and John found himself grinning. He handed him the New Testament. “This is yours now. Study it, and find a church in your home town, one that preaches what you read in here. I’ll pray for you, what’s your name?”

The man unbuckled his lap belt, leaned down for something under the seat, and came up again with an olive green backpack. But as he shrugged into it and pulled the straps tight, John realized it wasn’t a backpack; it was a parachute. Movement caught his eye and he turned his surprise two seats ahead and across the aisle. The robed one pulled a jar filled with something pink and oozing from his robe, and held it high in one shaking hand. The other hand lifted with a snub nosed pistol. A flood of Arabic spewed from the man, as a frightened murmur rose from the passengers and John stared open mouthed. Was this a hijacking? This was a hijacking! The pistol waved, and a woman screamed.

“Lee,” the stranger said, his voice perfectly even and unsurprised. His trembling had stopped. The stranger tucked the New Testament in his breast pocket, buttoned it down, and smiled at John O’Conner. “Simeon Lee. Thanks. Pray for a soft landing for both of us, eh?”

Simeon Lee launched from his seat. The pink jar was suddenly in his hands, and the snub nosed revolver skittered across the aisles to the screams of passengers and yells of attendants trying to figure out what was going on. Simeon kicked the exit door open. A flood of air poured in, stealing everyone’s breath and icing every heart. The wind sucked and pulled, and the luggage not stowed away began to tumble through the plane and sweep out into the icy blue air. A brawny arm wrapped around the robed one, and Simeon Lee bailed out somewhere over Sweden. John O’Conner gaped, his lap belt pulling against him as the force tried to drag him out the door, and the plane rocked in the sky. He could see people screaming and arms flailing in panic. The tearing wind was all he could hear. John struggled to the window pane, looking desperately for his new brother as the plane tipped, headed for an emergency landing.

A billow of white silk spun into the sky. For an instant, John glimpsed Simeon Lee flinging the pink jark in the air, and sending a bullet from a small revolver chasing it. The bullet shattered the jar and a burst of orange flame rose in a ball, eclipsing the blue sky from John’s window. The plane rocked at the impact and everyone screamed again, with whatever breath they could find. In the light of the flames, John watched him; a stocky figure hanging thousands of feet above the

ground, holding a dangling terrorist by one ankle. But his eyes turned to the heavens far above his head, and a laugh broke from him at the sudden openness of the sky.

It seemed God was already whispering His goodness into the man's soul.

The oxygen mask fell in front of John's face, and he got back to his own reality. Which was attempting to breathe in the compromised cabin. So much for getting home with no incidents!



Two Years Later

"Another one was pushed under the door, John." Katherine held up a plain white envelope. Her hand was steady as she gave it to him, but he could see the worry on his wife. Dread dropped slowly into his stomach as he opened it and pulled out the note. Katherine watched him read it in the lights of the backstage dressing room. Her eyes flew to the children playing on the rug. Three-year-old Maggie dragged a doll through the remains of Nathan's card castle, and a cry went up from the eight-year-old. Ruth stepped in and tried to fix it, as she always did, though only five. Katherine gave a finger snap. All three voices died into silence, then picked up the fight in animated whispers.

"Is it the same as the others?" Katherine demanded.

"Yes," John said, his jaw tight. He handed her the note. "No, actually no. Still the same threats, but they're expanding to the children. Whoever the 'Cult of Taranis' is, they appear to truly want me dead."

"Or at least to stop preaching," Katherine murmured, reading over the note.

"That will not be enough, and we both know it," John growled. "If they drove me to stop preaching, they would demand I stop telling the children about Christ, and if I did that, then it would be a demand to stop my private prayers... We cannot give in to them, Katie."

"Of course not," she said, as firm as any Scot's wife. "But surely there's something..."

"The chief of police promised someone will be watching my dressing room tonight," John said quickly.

A stocky stagehand smiled as he took his break in the cold, cheerless backstage across from the door. No one nearby noticed enough to ask why. But Simeon silently wondered (as he watched the O'Connors debate through the camera feed on the Virginia police department's iPhone and listened to their worries through his earbud) if Mr. O'Conner understood how true his statement was. He certainly didn't comprehend his danger. Simeon had contacts all over the world, and one of them happened to be a professor in Edinburgh who was an expert on ancient Scottish cults. Another was a cat burglar who specialized in antique Scottish treasures and information on the lowlife in her island home. Simeon had learned much in the half-hour he stood silent and still with an iPhone connecting him to the world.

"But, my Katie, no one can find anything about this 'cult' of theirs," John sighed. *Not everyone can know Scottish professors and specialty cat burglars*, Simeon silently reflected as he watched an

actual stagehand trot to the dressing room. The O'Connors looked up sharply as a knock came on the door. Katherine's fingers tightened on the note. If John noticed he didn't mention it. "That's my cue, I'm on now." He kissed his wife soundly and turned to make his way onto the stage someone promised to kill him for stepping on. Katherine steadied herself on the reality of tomorrow, and chose to remind him of it as he opened the door.

"You promised this was the last for this trip, remember! The children need you for Christmas this year, and it's tomorrow."

"I remember," John smiled. "I won't let anyone talk me into anything silly."

And he was gone. Silly, indeed. It was the serious requests that usually got him, and how was she to say absolutely no more bringing Christ to people on Christmas day?

Katherine could hear his familiar voice rise and fall, though she couldn't make out the actual words from where she stood. Her eyes lingered on the children, playing peacefully again and murmuring their excitement over all that Christmas would bring tomorrow. (Outside the door, the stocky stagehand pulled a notebook from his pocket and began to make a bulleted list of their hopes.) Katherine let herself read the paper again. This note went further than the last two. It mentioned each of them by name, and proclaimed death for the young, too. Katherine's eyes closed as she stood rigid and fighting back fear. She channeled the fear into a prayer to the Sovereign God; *Oh Jesus, please send someone to keep us safe!*

Simeon's eyes flicked up and his pen stopped moving. Something had caught his attention... What was it? He stood stock still in the shadows, nothing moving but his eyes as he strained to recognize what a part of him noticed. The shadows were deep in the backstage of the Bentley Auditorium in the heart of Virginia. The stage and public area were elegant, intricate, filled with red velvets and shiny marble. But the backstage no one bothered to make pretty. The dressing rooms stood out as blocky wooden boxes connected in a line trailing off to the back stairs. Extra pieces of wood still rested here and there, bits the workers never bothered to clear off. Hallways and walkways ran past the rooms in a maze of busyness as stagehands worked behind the scenes. And above it all hung the guy ropes and pullies that made the magic of stage drama possible. The bright, hot lights of the stage cast darkness behind it, and everything back here hung in deep shadows steeped in the cold of the December night.

But something moved. In the darkness above the little dressing room the lines swayed. Simeon gripped a rope and scaled quickly to the top of the lofty regions above the rest of humanity. He hung near the ceiling, the rope biting through his glove and wrapped around one leg. He could hear John O'Conner preaching in his strong, Bible-thumping way. Through the earbud he heard little Maggie start to scream over a supposed offense from her brother, and a tired Mrs. O'Conner trying to quiet her. But his attention stayed on the darkness above the dressing room.

Simeon spotted the figure. Slim, graceful, a definite she, all in black and shifting down the ropes like a circus performer. A black helmet hid her face. She hung just above the O'Connors' room. And something was strapped to her back. The figure spun into a perfect summersault and landed on the wooden roof of the dressing room. She hit it soft-toed in an epic pose, and Simeon knew no one in the room heard her landing, and none of the plain clothed policemen knew she was there. He swung off his rope to catch the next, moving jungle style toward the roof. Each

rope was a careful choice, as grabbing the wrong one could bring sudden downfall to him or a sandbag on someone else. But he knew the inner workings of a backstage, and it only took him seconds to reach his position.

Simeon Lee landed on the rooftop in a soft crouch, just behind the female in black. She spun with animal ferocity and hissed at him like a cat. A sharp “shing” filled the air around them as claws extended from her fingertips. She slashed at his throat. Simeon bent out of the way, and pulled into a roll, getting in front of her. She slashed at him as he moved. He heard the swish of the six-inch blades slicing the air beside his ear as he slid to a stop.

An incendiary bomb lay in front of this strange lady. Enough explosives to take out this room and half the theater behind it. Simeon’s arm shot out and swept the bomb behind him, out of the enemy’s reach. The lady hissed again and skittered toward him like an animal. The claws slid from her other hand.

“The holy triad broken?” Simeon asked softly in old Gaelic. The lady froze, and Simeon assumed shock rolled behind her mask. “Why alone?”

“You know much,” she hissed in the same ancient language.

“God of thunder isn’t who you think it is,” Simeon stated.

A board creaked behind Simeon. He flung himself forward, catching the lady around both wrists and smashing his skull into her forehead. She reeled under the sudden impact, and it was easy for Simeon to drag her with him as he spun to face the new threat.

Another figure in black crouched behind him. Male, face obscured by a helmet, a twelve inch dirk in one hand and his other resting on the bomb. Simeon didn’t stop to stare. He rushed forward, the woman in front of him, her claws weapons in his hands. The claws slashed at the man’s hand resting on the bomb, as Simeon flung the squirming lady over his shoulder for a shield.

He felt the dirk enter. It bit deep through her, till it pricked even Simeon’s side. The lady shuddered, then went still. A careful, well-practiced killing blow. Well, darn. This man either had a nasty history with this gal, or the cult was worse than anticipated; Simeon hadn’t expected that reaction from two compatriots. He spun, and flung the body at the new threat. The man flung her away like a rag. He stayed focused on the bomb, doggone him. It was nearly set. Simeon’s hand darted for his silenced pistol. But the man saw the move, and reacted in an instant with a scissor kick aimed expertly at Simeon’s head. Simeon caught one of the man’s feet, and jerked. The man skidded over the wood. But one hand clutched the bomb, and he dragged it with him. Sparks rose around it as the metal components scraped across the roof.

John O’Conner’s voice rose as he pleaded with his listeners to come to the Christ-child. Behind him, a black-clothed enemy struck viciously at a stocky figure working in silence above a mother soothing her toddler, and sparks flew around a bomb like tiny infernal torches.

Simeon stopped dragging. He darted forward, into the enemy’s fighting space. The dirk struck out at his stomach. But Simeon expected it. As he moved he swept up a thick square of wood the builders left deserted. The blade met the wood, bit deep, and stuck. Simeon gave it a quick twist, and the dirk slid away across the roof. The enemy found himself suddenly minus his favorite weapon. His vision filled with stocky muscles and the glint of a little pistol. In a single

second, the stranger slammed his hand on the bomb, a red light flashed between his fingers, and he flung himself face forward on the pistol as he saw the aim shifting toward his shoulder.

A soft pop, a spray of helmet and human debris, and Simeon scrambled past what was left of the enemy to reach the bomb, jerking a pair of wire cutters into his hands. A red light blinked on a small display screen at the top. It showed three seconds to detonation. Simeon's wire cutters shot forward, wrapped around the blue wire, and snipped. The 2 on the display flickered, then went out. Simeon knelt tense beside it. Two seconds ticked by, and nothing happened. He let his breath out gently and muttered a prayer of thanks.

One of the lines three feet from him shifted. Simeon's eyes shot up, searching the darkness. He just spotted a large, black-clad foot disappearing through a window into the Virginia night. It seemed the last of the Triad still roamed free.

A roar of applause rose from the auditorium, and Simeon watched as John O'Conner walked back through the concrete hallway to join his family in the dressing room. The police chief stepped up beside him, and a conversation began as John opened the door and stepped in. Simeon slid off the roof, landed on his toes on the walkway, and strolled through the open door.

"—no threats were detected tonight, but I still recommend a safe house," the police chief was saying.

"Tomorrow is Christmas, we can't do that to the children if your people can't point to anything—" John broke off as he spotted the stocky figure standing silent and pristine in his black slacks and brown turtleneck sweater. John's mouth dropped to his chest, and the next words burst from him a glad shout. "Simeon Lee!"

"Remembered my name," Simeon commented, offering his hand.

"Your exit was very memorable, brother," John chuckled, shaking the proffered hand happily.

"I wondered why you showed up in my precinct and volunteered tonight," the police chief commented, his curiosity obvious. Simeon nodded at John.

"Gave me a Bible once," he said. His gaze flicked to the little family huddled on the shabby couch in the corner. "Ma'am, might want to move to this side of the room."

"What? Why?" Katherine blinked, and looked doubtfully at the five year old nearly asleep and the snoring three year old on her lap. Simeon motioned to the ceiling. Every eye went up.

A thick pool of crimson gathered in a swelling pocket of drywall. Everyone stared at it. A drop congealed and hung at the center of the pool. Simeon picked up a coffee carafe from the little counter, stepped forward, and caught the drop in the empty pot as it headed for Ruth's head. The room woke from its stupor. John and Katherine quickly herded the children off the couch as the police chief bounded outside, calling orders to his people and motioning to the roof of the little dressing room. John headed his family toward the door, but Simeon gently barred the way and motioned instead to the area near the coffee pot. The children didn't need to see the bodies taken down.

"Landed softly," Simeon commented. John focused on him and brought his mind back to two years ago with an effort.

"You did? I'm glad. What did you do with the hijacker?" he asked. His wife glanced at him, and then at the stocky, classy stranger exuding a competence that brought peace. That sentence let her place him in her husband's stories.

“Easy to get the information I needed with him dangling 2,000 feet over Lake Geneva,” Simeon shrugged. “Didn’t need him after that, left him to the authorities while I finished the business.”

The police chief bounded back in before John could ask “*what business.*” The chief’s face was a study of surprise as he spun in front of Simeon Lee.

“What happened?” he demanded. Simeon tipped his head, a twinkle springing into his eyes at the humor of such a question. “Ok, two people died and you stopped a bomb, but...” He took a deep breath, obviously calming himself down and reorienting the night with the new facts. A wordless gurgle came from John. For just a moment, when that word “bomb” connected with his family, horror overran everything inside him, and even his vision blacked. He didn’t even hear the police chief continue. “Did you notice anything useful?”

“Very competent, silent, deadly. Well-trained, didn’t give any clues who trained them. The man sought death, for himself and the lady. Found anything on them?”

“Not a thing. They only carried in the bomb and a few weapons they could have purchased almost anywhere,” the police chief said. “We’re tracing the bomb components, but I don’t expect we’ll get far. They don’t seem like the type to make it that easy.”

“Agreed. Keep me informed on findings?” Simeon requested.

“Yes, of course. But where will you be?” the chief asked.

“Home,” Simeon said. He spun with easy grace to the O’Connors. “Do me the honor of spending Christmas at my house? Not much to offer except protection. But I can offer that.”

“Yes,” Katherine said, quick and sure. Her gaze stayed fixated on the coffee pot on the couch, and the thick crimson dripping steadily into it. She didn’t know how they would get their baggage from the hotel, or what they would do without it, but... “Yes, we need the protection.”

“Bomb?” John burst out as he got his voice in order. His mind still swirled with the darkness of the evil, the fact he had almost just lost them all. “Bomb!?” Simeon glanced appraisingly over his shock and handed Katherine a sheet of handwritten note paper.

“Directions,” he said simply. “I’ll follow behind, to watch for tails.”

“Should we just drive openly there?” Katherine asked, staring at the neat handwriting.

“Yes,” he answered. The police chief looked at him sharply, his expression puzzled and a little worried. Simeon pretended not to notice.

“There’s no house number,” John said. His voice shook and he swallowed to get it back in order. His knuckles were white as they clutched his sleeping Maggie against his shoulder. “How will we know which house is yours?”

A smile slid over Simeon. It crinkled his brown eyes as he motioned politely to the door.

“You’ll know.”



Two Hours Later

"It says turn left here," Katherine reported from the note in her hand. John duly turned, and they studied the neighborhood through tired eyes. It seemed nice, filled with ordinary single-story houses and pretty trees. A pleasant little playground rolled by on their right.

"Mum, what about the Christmas tree?" Nathan's mournful voice drifted from the backseat. His sisters slept beside him, but Nathan was still up asking questions after the long drive through Virginia townships.

"I don't know," she answered for what felt like the eight-hundredth time. She was more concerned about the lack of clean clothes and pullups for Maggie, but had none of the answers. "Turn right, there." John spun the wheel, and the sedan eased into the street. "Now, how do we know the house?"

"Wow!" Nathan breathed in wonder. A blaze of colored lights cut into the darkness of their car, and John stared at a simple white house with the single tree in the yard. The entire property was ablaze. Colored lights draped the whole roof, wrapped over every tree branch, and even threaded over the yard. Thousands of bulbs, driving the dark back with an uncontestable silent joy. Simeon Lee's strained, lined, sad face when they had first met in the plane came back to John's memory, and all that those lights represented shot through him. The darkness blown apart, solid hope bound up in a real baby, blood shed for him that held him fast no matter what horrors the future held. A wet, choked laugh broke from John. They weren't left alone in the dark.

"That one. It's that one," he said simply, and pulled into the driveway sparkling with reds and greens and whites in ever-changing patterns.

The garage door rattled open for them. It was empty except for the presence of a weirdly clean electric lawn mower. John pulled the sedan inside and the garage rattled down. The beautiful lights cut off into dense darkness, and the family sat still. What now?

The door opened and a rectangle of light silhouetted the stocky form of Simeon Lee. He motioned inside. Nathan piled out, Katherine and John gathered the girls, and they trooped inside.

It looked like a realtor's display house. Everything pristine and fastidiously clean. Katherine automatically reached for Nathan to keep his dirty feet off the white carpet.

"Needs some dirt," Simeon Lee's rich voice reached her, and she looked at him. He shrugged and let a little of his armor down; Katherine saw him pulling back with a self-consciousness shyness that felt like a little boy at a new school, timidly wondering if he might make friends. "Just me here. Could really use some family dirt smears." His shoulders straightened again and he led the way to a series of bedrooms, motioning them to pick any. None of the three bedrooms seemed like his. Though it was hard to tell. Nathan trailed behind, his head drooping despondently. After the lights outside he had hoped for something in here, at least a tree! But there wasn't even a stuffed reindeer in this place. He slumped on a perfectly made bed and heaved a sigh, trying to be thankful they were all at least together and safe.

The doorbell rang. The sound reverberated through the still house. Katherine and John froze in the act of laying the sleeping girls on a bed, their eyes wide. Nathan looked up a little curiously. He found the stranger looking at him. The man winked and motioned with his head for the boy

to come with him. Nathan trotted at his heels obediently, and stood in the living room as the stocky gentleman opened the door.

Green boughs wrapped in red velvet ribbon and a giant stuffed reindeer filled the doorway.

“Ho, ho, ho!” a voice rang from outside. Nathan’s eyes widened. In a moment, a nine-foot tree pushed through, fully decorated with beautiful white balls and red ribbon, and then came *three* five-foot reindeer stuffies, with saddles, and a man with a thick Italian accent wearing a Santa suit. The beard kept threatening to fall off. Around the man workers in coveralls flowed in, carrying things. Sacks of food went into the kitchen (including a whole steaming goose), garlands draped the windows, the yule log went into the fireplace, and box after box of exquisitely wrapped gifts went under the tree. Katherine and John walked out of the bedroom in a sort of stupor and stood behind Nathan as he gaped and laughed and chattered over each new festive delight. The Italian read off a list on a clipboard in his hand as the workers walked in with each new load.

“...and five suitcases of the ‘necessities’ you ordered,” the Santa one finished. Five brand new suitcases were wheeled in front of the O’Connors, the prints and sizes obviously marking one for each of the family. John and Katherine stared at them stupidly. The man tapped an item and smiled out of the ill-kempt white bush on his face. “We made it in two hours! I gave myself the bonus you offered.”

“Good,” Simeon Lee said. He nodded at the back of the last worker walking out the door. “They get one too?”

“How much?” the Italian asked, flicking a pencil out of his pocket. Simeon scrawled a figure on the paper, the Italian gave a happy shout and trotted out, yelling the good news to the workers as he slammed the door closed behind him. A delighted cheer went up from outside. It merged with a very enthusiastic version of “Hark the Herald,” mingled with a van’s engine, and the sound disappeared down the street. Simeon secured the door, and for the first time the O’Connors noticed something personal. The door didn’t just lock. It sealed, with a snap of some sort of black metal that left not a single line of light from the outside. Simeon turned to Nathan, and something in him seemed to open and soften as he looked at the boy. He pointed at the cord hanging from the Christmas tree. The boy gave a whoop and raced for a plug.

Warm twinkling lights filled the living room as the tree lit. Simeon pressed a button on a remote and the garlands over the windows glowed with the same soft white light. The O’Connors oohed and awed appreciatively. Nathan snatched a saddle and headed for a reindeer, and John quickly stepped up to make sure he didn’t break the thing in the first go. Simeon flicked a finger at the bags littering the kitchen and looked at Katherine.

“You mind?” he asked. She snapped into housewife mode in an instant and headed to put the groceries away. Simeon moved toward his bookshelf, selected a compilation of G.K. Chesterton Christmas poems, and settled in his usual chair beside the fireplace. But he didn’t open the cover. His eye ran over the Christmas tree brushing the top of the ceiling and spilling light into the house, as the busy clinking of dishes and foodstuffs went on in the kitchen, and a little boy whooped and hallooed in an imaginary race away from an alligator... A smile teased the corners of his mouth.

John saw it there for a moment, out of the corner of his eye. But then Nathan fell headfirst off the reindeer and the next few minutes were caught up in forcing the boy to bed. When John

wandered back into the living room, no smile graced Mr. Lee's face. He sat with one leg crossed over the other, the book propped on his lap, ignoring humanity with careful practice. John let his attention go to the beauty of the tree.

"I wouldn't have believed it could fit," he said. Lee looked up at him, but made no comment. John decided to be direct. "Why did you have all the beautiful lights outside, and not even a tree in here?"

"Outside the world shares the message. Neighborhood families walk past during December to see how many I put up. Makes a point. Inside... Message is only for me."

"Yes, but that makes a point too," John said. Then he paused as he realized how true that statement was. This was a house with no woman to personalize the knick-knacks. No children to cry for a tree and muddy the carpets. No friends to need extra food in the pantry. "Did you find a church like I told you to?" John demanded. Simeon let the book close on his lap.

"I did. Good one, ten minutes from here."

"Well, have you met anyone there?"

"Know all their names," Simeon nodded.

"But do they know yours?" John pressed.

"You're nose-y," Simeon stated, but a smile hovered, and it wasn't an annoyed comment.

"Yes, I am when it's important. That's part of being a pastor, and a Scott. We don't always care about whether we offend people if we think it's important, and this is. You need other people in your life, Lee."

Simeon's eyes dropped to his lap before he forced them up to the pastor's again.

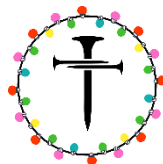
"I'll work on that," he promised.

"Really? Which one will you get to know first?"

"Pushy too," Simeon stated. He considered for a moment. "Young man there, blond hair too long, comes alone, leaves early. Think maybe needs a visit. I'll try him."

"Good. Very good."

Simeon nodded, opened his book, and went back to ignoring humanity. John gathered his wife and they went to bed. Simeon Lee still sat in his chair with his book open and the floor lamp casting its glow around him. As he stepped into the hallway John caught him looking at the Christmas tree. A look of quiet joy graced their bodyguard's weathered face.



Eight Hours Later

Christmas day dawned gray and misty, and by breakfast (perfect waffles created by Simeon and accompanied by fried quail) fat snowflakes were already falling. By the time the tantalizing boxes under the tree had been attacked, emptied, and demolished to the delight of all, the yard was a beautiful white. An hour later, as they settled at the table with a steaming goose and a variety of store-bought but surprisingly delicious delicacies, the snow had begun to pile.

The children chattered and complained and John and Katherine tried to get a polite word in around them, and not get frustrated by the constant demand of having to go back to parenting in the middle of their sentences, and Simeon watched in delighted amusement.

A bell clattered suddenly in the bedroom. It wasn't the doorbell, this was a sharp alarm. All the voices dropped into silence. Every mind went suddenly to that thick crimson dripping from the ceiling, and their appetites fluttered away. Simeon set his napkin on the table, pushed his chair back, and headed to the single coat hanging on the rack beside the door. The bell clattered again.

"What is that?" Nathan asked, his voice trembling. Simeon shrugged into his coat, checked to make sure his pistol was in place, and looked back at the table. He winked at Nathan.

"My Christmas present." He motioned to the front door as he gripped the knob. "Seal this after me. And might keep the children from the windows." Then came a rush of cold winter air, a sharp cry of furious anger from somewhere above, the door clicked closed, and he was gone.

As he stepped into the winter sun, Simeon felt a rush of moving air headed toward his head. He spun on one leg, and his fist swung. He hit solidly on a chest that was three feet wide and as deep as a live reindeer's. A black figure swung from the blow and thumped into the door with a grunt. But he flipped as he moved, and came up facing Simeon. Same black clothes, same black helmet, but on an enormous figure in the peak of fighting strength. A smile slid over Simeon as he adjusted his stance and sized up the man.

For two years he had been pushing papers around an office, only finding excitement in the rare times he allowed himself to wander the backstreets of D.C. on a private patrol. Now he stood here in the snow protecting a sweet family, and he got to fight someone built like Wallace the Bruce. His smile stretched into a grin. Man, he had missed this sort of thing.

The man leapt at him with an animal shout. Simeon spun out of the blow, and kicked the fellow in the seat of the pants on his way past. The man hit a snow drift headfirst. But he spun again in an instant. This time he came warily, more prepared. He sent a jab at Simeon's neck, and aimed a kick at where he assumed his enemy would dodge. But Simeon caught the jabbing hand in his own. He used it to jerk the enemy off balance, stepped into his guard, and pounded a knee into the man's kidney. The stranger doubled over with a groan. But on his way down his hand pivoted, grabbed Simeon's wrist, and pulled. It was a grip the old spy couldn't fight. Simeon spun down and one leg shot out in a snap kick. The enemy caught it on the palm of his hand, and sent his own kick toward Simeon's knee. Simeon dodged it, and that gave the enemy time to stagger to his feet. An animal growl rumbled from him, and the man leapt back, headed for the roof. Another smile shifted over Simeon and he ran to follow him up.

Inside, John darted to seal the door. But he didn't stay away from the windows.

"Good gracious," John muttered. Katherine forcefully kept the children in place, and the family watched as John's head moved, following the activity outside. Left, right, up, down. Then up again, and they heard a clatter on the rooftop.

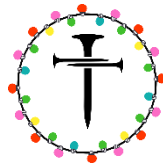
"That's not Santa Clause," Nathan swallowed. John gave an explosive chuckle of agreement.

"Aye, laddie, but this one is far better than a fat man in a red suit!" Their eyes followed the noise as it thumped and skidded over the tiles. A cascade of white snow piled in front of the back windows.

A large black-clad body tumbled off the roof and thudded into the snow. Everyone jumped and the children screamed. Simeon landed easily in the back yard beside the black one, his cheeks rosy and his expression saying he was enjoying the exercise. They watched as he tossed the black body over his shoulder, gave them a little wave, and strode off into the snow, lustily singing a Christmas hymn. The gate clicked closed behind him.

A log popped in the fireplace. Everyone stared at the window, wondering if Mr. Lee would suddenly pop up again. He didn't.

"Well... Dessert, anyone?" Katherine finally broke the silence. She gained a chorus of agreement, and headed for the kitchen.



Two Hours Later

The doorbell rang. John gripped the cricket bat he had unwrapped that morning and approached it warily, while Nathan scrambled for his new slingshot.

"Who's there?" John demanded of the door.

A figure leaned over to stare in the frosted window. The girls shrieked, and John swung the bat out of instinct, adrenaline singing in him at the shadowy figure menacing outside. The bat glanced off the bulletproof glass and nearly struck John in the face. A gnarled hand wiped away some of the frost, and Mr. Lee's face gazed in at them. A gasp of relief came from every throat. John sprung the three locks, and the door unsealed. Simeon and the police chief stepped inside, stamping snow off their shoes and blowing in the sudden heat from the fireplace.

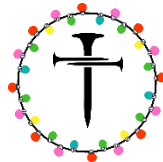
"All's well!" the police chief said without preamble. He stuck a thumb at Simeon and grinned. "This one apparently already had it figured out back at the theater. He knew there was only one more to this cult, and expected him today. The guy was singing like a pop star when Mr. Lee dragged him into our station. Seems they formed a 'Holy Triad' and worshiped some ancient Scottish god of thunder or something. They lived in the forest near enough to you to get offended by the presence of a foreign God on their territory, and formed a pact to kill you off or die nobly in the attempt. In other words, it was three crazy guys, and Mr. Lee's taken care of them for you."

"Can catch your flight home tomorrow morning," Simeon Lee commented. He let his eye run around the pleasant mess of toys and wrapping and half-destroyed boxes being used as army bases and barns and baby beds. Katherine watched him wilt, but she somehow knew it wasn't the mess. It was the thought it would leave tomorrow. But his shoulders rose again as he held up two jugs of eggnog and lifted an enquiring eyebrow.

The O'Connors caught their flight before the sun the next morning, the three children slept in their own beds that night, and all of them wondered if they had simply dreamed the whole strange holiday. They solemnly agreed, however, that Santa Clause had peppered hair, no beard, and was actually rather short.

Their theory was proved true when three very large boxes arrived from the States, and they found all three of their reindeer packed lovingly beside their favorite cardboard barns and army bases and baby beds, still filled with the animals, soldiers, and babies.

Simeon kept his promise to John O'Conner, and met with the young man at church; though it took him two months to screw up the courage for it, and even then he prodded the young man into actually doing the asking. But Simeon Lee was never more grateful for anything in his life than that meeting with Vincent Tolliver in a little coffee shop on the outskirts of D.C.



Five Years Later

“What *are* you doing?” Vincent demanded as he stared down at Gigan. The library fireplace crackled and popped in front of them, and the inventor leaned on the mantelpiece, trying to get the last stocking to stay in place. Gigan crawled in front of the inventor’s long legs, shoving unapologetically.

“What does it look like?” Gigan answered. “I am putting out the slippers.”

“Feet cold, eh?” the inventor asked. He gave an annoyed grunt as the stocking fell off again. It landed on Gigan’s head and the Frenchman sat back on his heels and looked up reproachfully. Vince chuckled. “Hey, it covers your ears nicely hanging like that, you can have earmuffs and warm feet!”

“*Non, non, non,*” Gigan said, handing back the stocking, “I am putting out the slippers for *Père Noël* to leave the oranges and sugars.”

“Say what now?”

“Christmas Eve Father Christmas leaves goodies in the slippers, of course!”

“No he doesn’t, it’s stockings.”

“Slippers, *dummkopf,* it’s slippers.”

“Will these do?” Jojo interrupted, sweeping through the library door. She held up one of her best boots and a thick woolen sock decorated with llamas wearing Christmas hats. “Though why you two insist we decorate with socks and shoes, I don’t know. Western Christmas traditions are weird.”

Gigan and Vincent looked at each other, trying to glare the other one into telling her. Peter’s soft laughter came from the ladder as he draped the last golden tinsel on the ten-foot tree. Gigan glanced over at him. His eyes narrowed.

“Why do you have the candy bowl, Peter?” he asked, suspiciously. The others quickly looked up, alarm on their faces.

“Oh don’t be so fussy, I got an extra bag,” Pete said.

“That was the extra bag!” three voices yelled up at him. Pete blinked at the empty bowl in his arms.

“Oh,” was all he could think to say.

Simeon watched from the chair beside the record player. Perry Como sang carols at his elbow, his boys and Jojo worked steadily at their own brand of decorating, and annoyed and entertained each other. He signed his name with a flourish at the bottom of the Christmas card and slid it into its envelope. Simeon set the letter on his lap and took another moment to just enjoy. Outside the wind roared and snow beat against their mountain home, and not even a star broke through the dark. But in here, the fire crackled, the tree twinkled with hundreds of white lights, and four wonderful young people glowed with a glorious brilliance of Another’s love. A smile flew over Simeon’s face, and he added a postscript to the envelope headed for a Scottish preacher.

Thanks for being nosey and pushy.

