

*The Odd
Fellows
Society*



C. G. Barrett

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By C.G. Barrett

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For Maria

...and the Jesuits who made me a better person.

Brendan Lally
Dan Ruff
René Molenkamp
Ollie Morgan
Bill Sneck
Lucien Longtin

Also by C. G. Barrett

A Mouse's First Christmas: A Holiday Tail

...a children's novel

Chapter 1: Georgetown, Washington, D.C., April 1953

There was no point in screaming. Philip Cannon was a dead man.

He dashed past Healy Hall and through Georgetown University's iron gates. Behind him footsteps splattered a hollow echo across the cobblestones.

If he returned home, they'd kill him there – his wife and daughter too.

He fled past Holy Trinity Church. That's what broke him – the promise he couldn't keep: Philip clasping his baby above Trinity's baptismal font, the tumbling water, her startled wail, his vow as he pressed his lips against her wet forehead. *Hush now, Susan, for I shall keep you safe forever.*

His heel caught a cobblestone. He flew forward, his head cracking off the curbstone at the top of the stairs to Canal Road.

With a desperate moan, he staggered to his feet. He glanced down the steps, aglow with the full moon. Betrayal fused with fear.

His pursuer seized his jacket, shook him violently. "Where are they?" he hissed.

Philip wept. "Someone else will find them and you'll be finished."

He shook him again. "Tell me or die!"

Philip trembled. "You're going to kill me anyway."

A thin smile split the other man's face. Philip felt a punch to the stomach, an icicle sliding up behind his ribcage.

"You always were the brightest in the class, Philip."

Philip Cannon died staring his best friend in the eyes.

Chapter 2: Washington, D.C., February 2016

Santiago Torres clutched the string. He glanced at the white hen at its end, pecking at the sidewalk, and looked around the intersection. Where could that crazy, old woman have gone?

“I’d really like to help, but I’m terribly sorry,” he’d told her. “I have a dinner appointment in two minutes.”

The Chinese woman ignored him. She prattled on in Mandarin, pressed the string into his hand and even patted it to seal the deal.

He was sure she meant she’d be back in a moment. He looked at his cell phone. That was forty-five minutes ago.

And where the hell was Jasper?

His eyes flickered to the sky. A February cold front was arcing in from the northwest, promising either five inches of snow or torrential rain by nightfall. He sniffed the air. Wet asphalt. By tomorrow morning, the battleship gray sky would meld with all the granite and marble between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial, giving Washington the appearance of wet chalk.

Santiago avoided an amused glance of a young woman rushing down the street. Above the smile, her eyes raked him from his toes to his jet-black hair. They stopped at his angular face, the color of his abuelo’s café con leche. As far back as college, his smile and light accent seemed to make all the girls from the small towns in the Northeast melt. He reddened at the attention.

Santiago looked away toward the enormous Chinese gate at the intersection of Seventh and H in Northwest D.C. He scratched under his clerical collar, struggled to appear nonchalant. The hen

clucked and the woman suppressed a laugh. Santi felt ridiculous. Now in his late thirties, the respected headmaster of one of the capital's prep schools had suddenly become the opening line of a politically incorrect ethnic joke. "So this Puerto Rican priest was standing on a corner in Chinatown with a chicken on a leash..."

A horn wailed. A silver BMW swept erratically toward the curve, lurched to a stop. Bellows of laughter tumbled upon the sidewalk.

"Hey, Father Torres, you want some fries with that?"

He gave a wry smile, raised the string, and offered a pathetic shrug. The boys laughed like hyenas, darted into traffic again, nearly colliding with a cab.

Lacrosse practice was already out. Santiago checked his cell phone again.

What could be delaying Jasper?

Santiago turned, searched the intersection again. Parent conferences would begin back at Gonzaga in forty minutes. How could someone be so obsessive about everything in life except a clock? "I'll be on time," Jasper swore.

"Siéntate a esperar!" Santiago muttered.

A man shuffled past.

"Alex?"

"Father Santiago!" The grizzled, bearded man smiled in recognition, the teeth in his jaw notched with gaps.

Santiago's eyes flickered to the homeless man's feet. Frayed, filthy socks poked out of the fronts of battered work boots. Lashed with duct tape to keep them shut, the tops still flopped open and closed with each step.

He was about to ask Alex what he had done with the pair of shoes he had given him just last week but Santiago already knew.

He checked the time again. The six blocks back to the school would take fifteen minutes. No time for dinner. Typical Jasper. All worked up and excited. For the last month, it was either a new clue he'd put together for his annual history scavenger hunt or his insistence they sit down so he could reveal his latest thesis discoveries in excruciating detail.

Santiago simply hadn't had time.

“This will blow your mind,” Jasper said over the phone, his voice falling to a whisper. “We need to meet. I need to give you something. Something important.”

At first he thought Jasper wanted to test the difficulty of his scavenger hunt clues on him again, then Santiago caught the strained hitch in his friend’s voice.

“Are you worried about something?”

A stressed laugh. “What’s the last doctoral thesis in history that became a best seller and sparked an international uproar?”

“Why don’t you just tell me what it is?”

“Meet me at the Friendship Arch at five-thirty,” he said. “We’ll grab dinner.”

Then – typical Jasper – he simply doesn’t show up. Lost in time, his nose buried again in Georgetown’s archives.

“Whatcha doin’ with that chicken, Father?”

“I,” Santiago stuttered a fib. “I’m watching it for a friend.”

“I could watch it for you.”

The way Alex was leering at the bird, he’d be watching it over a campfire.

Santiago glanced at the chicken. It finally dawned on him. Even if Jasper showed up, he couldn’t just walk into a Chinese restaurant with a live chicken on a string.

A cold rain began falling.

With conference night over, Santiago Torres ducked back into the headmaster’s office to retrieve his cell phone from his desk. He passed through the small office of his secretary, Pearl, now gone home, and slid into his own. He crossed the room, glided around the desk and fell into the large chair.

No messages. The anxious fluttering that passed through his stomach echoed the urgent downpour pelting against the window glass. Was it just his evening’s presentation, the parents’ scattered, reluctant laughter, that unsettled him? Or was it Jasper? He usually lost track of time, but within an hour or two a harried, apologetic message dropped into voicemail.

He tapped Jasper’s number again and someone rapped at his office door.

Santiago looked up. Abigail.

He gestured for her to enter.

Abigail Byrne smiled and crossed to the chair beside his desk. Eighteen years had passed since Santi had first been captivated by Abby's laughter. Her green eyes, pale skin, cinnamon freckles and hair the color of chestnuts still made his chest ache at times. Until he caught himself and purposefully flipped thoughts, imploring God, lurking about somewhere, to fill the ache with something more possible.

Jasper's phone rang.

Santiago's hiring Abby as foreign language chair was the smartest thing he had done as headmaster. It was also his greatest challenge. Now thirty-eight, she was as beautiful, kind and funny as when they met eighteen years back. Yet still unmarried.

Abby plopped into a chair and picked up one of the metal brainteaser puzzles strewn across his desk. As she fumbled to unhitch the two pieces of metal, Santi stole glances at her blue dress. He willed himself not to look at her breasts and hung up before the phone flipped to Jasper's voicemail.

"Brother Sinclair is going to kill you, Santi."

He leaned over and took the puzzle from her. He eyed it. With a flip of his wrist, the two pieces parted and he deposited them into her hand. "No. I was smart. Instead of just giving Alex my shoes this time, I made him trade his for mine. He won't sell them again or he'll wind up barefoot."

She dropped the pieces onto his desk. "You have the puzzle's directions."

Santiago smiled. "There were no directions."

"Brother Sinclair is definitely going to kill you," she repeated. "Probably with his fancy, new vacuum cleaner."

Santiago smiled. "He won't kill me. His face will just turn red. And he'll dash off to his room to print off another message on his official stationary." Santi picked a piece of paper from his desk and changed his voice as if he were reading it aloud. "Dearest Santiago: For the fourth time in recent memory, I find myself imploring you to not remove your shoes at any time whilst in public. Under any circumstances. Not even in the bathtub. Thank you for responsibly husbanding our Jesuit community's resources."

Santiago slapped the paper above his thick eyebrows. “And then he’ll staple it to my forehead.”

Abby struggled not to smile. “That’s the third pair you’ve given away just this month. Do you know how you looked, crossing the gym floor and greeting the parents, rocking back and forth in your fancy, duct-taped construction boots? Your toes were sticking out the fronts!” She waved her hand through the air. “I can smell them from here!”

“Ah,” Santiago waved his hand. “It’s the boots, not my feet. I’m sure no one noticed.”

She scoffed. “Yes. And no one also noticed the loud flopping sounds your new clown shoes made as you walked past.” She shook her head. “You should have been a Franciscan, Santi.”

“A Franciscan? Then I wouldn’t have any nice shoes to give away. When I signed up, I did the smart thing, Abby. I joined the Jesuits, a wealthy religious order that only pretends it’s poor.”

The large file cabinet in the corner rattled. Abby’s eyebrows rose. It shook again and she looked back at Santiago. “The ghost of Henry Prosser move in?”

“Despite what Dr. Stephens says, no Gonzaga student ever hanged himself from the lights in the theater. At least no one named Henry Prosser.”

Santi was sure of it. On a fifty dollar bet with Stephens, who invoked the spirit of Henry Prosser on the opening night of every school play, he had talked Jasper into combing through the school’s records with him last summer. Of the thousands of students who had attended the school over two centuries, not one had the name.

The file cabinet shook again.

“If it’s not Henry Prosser, then you must have locked Pearl in there.” Abby stood.

“Could you blame me?”

Abby started to laugh while looking at the cabinet warily. “Are you going to open it?”

“Me? I’m terrified of ghosts. But be my guest.”

Santiago’s school thrived on its traditions and legends. Its students – even many of its faculty – placed far greater faith in them than any theological point he could offer. They were a

superstitious lot, taking great care not to step on the school seal in the main hallway. Any student who did, it was said, wouldn't graduate. Santi could force everyone in the school to study the school attendance records, but Henry Prosser's ghost would still be blamed for every theft, every practical joke.

The wind and rain rattled the windows. The cabinet shook again, a strangling noise coming from it. Abby edged over.

"Too chicken?" Santi asked.

Abby shot him a look and stepped over to the file cabinet. She pulled open the lowest drawer with a tug. A white feather floated upward and the hen's head popped upward.

Abby gasped and burst into laughter. "You've lost your damn mind."

Santiago's laughter was interrupted by his cell phone. He looked at the phone, cocked his head. "It's my brother. He hasn't called in two months." He reddened when he realized his tone conveyed annoyance. What could Nicolas want now?

Knowing he might regret it, Santi answered. His brother's greeting was perfunctory, the voice formal and chilly. When Nico finally uttered the words, when he had awkwardly dumped the terrible news into his lap, Santiago's face turned to ash.

"I'm at Georgetown now. I'll wait for you," his brother said in Spanish.

Santiago could no longer hold his phone and it slid to his desk.

"What is it?" Abby said.

"Jasper is dead."