

R. A. Spratt

FRIDAY BARNES
Undercover

PUFFIN BOOKS

Chapter 2



A Call in the Night

THUD, THUD, THUD!

‘Aaagh!’ Friday woke up suddenly. It took her a moment to realise that there was someone knocking at the door. ‘Who’s that?’ she wondered.

‘Shhh,’ mumbled Melanie as she rolled over and tried to get comfortable. ‘If we’re quiet, they’ll go away.’

‘Friday, I know you’re in there!’ called a recognisable voice. It was Parker. A boy so hapless he often needed Friday’s help to get him out of scrapes.

‘Go away, Parker,’ said Friday. ‘It’s the middle of the night.’

‘Really?’ said Parker. ‘My watch says it’s 8 pm. I’m pretty sure it’s right, because we just finished dinner . . .’

Friday tried putting a pillow over her head to drown out the sound.

‘And . . . I don’t think 8 o’clock is the middle of the night,’ Parker prattled on. ‘I’m pretty sure midnight is the middle of the night. I’m not good at maths, but I think that’s still four hours away.’

Friday looked at her own watch. It read 8.04 pm. ‘How long have we been asleep for?’ she asked. She’d been so tired and in such a deep sleep she’d lost her bearings. It must only have been a couple of hours.

‘Not long enough,’ grumbled Melanie.

‘. . . I think 8 o’clock is more early evening,’ Parker was still talking. ‘It’s hard to tell because people eat dinner later here in Italy, so maybe for them it’s late afternoon.’

Friday’s head felt thick with exhaustion. Her body was achy too. It had been a crazy day, and apparently it wasn’t over yet. She swung her feet out of bed.

‘Noooo, don’t do it,’ protested Melanie.

‘If I don’t, he’ll never stop talking,’ said Friday as she opened the door. ‘What trouble are you in now?’

‘Oh, it’s not for me,’ said Parker. ‘Not this time, anyway. It’s Binky.’

‘Binky?’ said Melanie. This news woke her up. ‘But he’s not here.’

Binky was Melanie’s older brother. He had moved to Oslo to be close to his girlfriend, Ingrid, who just happened to be the Crown Princess of Norway. This was an arrangement the King of Norway only tolerated because Binky had agreed to serve two years in the Norwegian army to demonstrate his devotion.

‘No,’ agreed Parker. ‘He’s on the telephone. Can you believe it? The nuns have one of those old-fashioned type of phones. It’s actually attached to the wall, by a cable! It’s like something out of an old movie. Anyway, he rang them up because he wanted to talk to Friday.’



Friday was soon jogging up to the office off the main courtyard. She would have run faster, but Melanie was with her, and Melanie didn’t run, not even

when it was her brother in trouble. Melanie's legs and lungs were just not capable of it. Plus, Melanie had enough faith in her friend's detective abilities to know that a couple of seconds' delay was unlikely to be crucial.

When they got to the cloisters, Friday spotted the phone. It did look antique. Apart from the technology being old, that colour of olive plastic had not been fashionable for many decades. The handset was hanging down by its cable. Friday scooped it up. 'Hello?'

'Friday, is that you?' asked Binky. His voice was crackly. Friday wasn't sure whether that was because he was calling long-distance, or because the telephone was a museum piece.

'Yes, it's me. Melanie's here too,' said Friday. Melanie had caught up and was standing alongside Friday, her ear pressed to the handset so she could listen in. 'What's the problem?'

'Oh, thank goodness I got hold of you,' said Binky. He sounded very upset. 'I'm in a terrible mess.'

'What's happened?' asked Friday. There was a delay on the line, so it was awkward knowing when to speak and when to listen.

‘They’ve locked me up. I’m in a jail cell,’ said Binky. There was definitely a sob in his voice as he got these words out.

Friday felt a lump in her throat. She knew too well how awful it was to be in a jail cell. Sitting in a room doesn’t sound that bad, but sitting in a room you can’t leave, not ever, because powerful people have decided that you are bad – that is a horrible feeling.

‘Binky, it’s okay,’ said Friday. ‘Just tell me what happened, and I’ll try to help.’

‘I’m up on charges of *pliktfraskrivelse*,’ said Binky.

‘What’s *pliktfraskrivelse*?’ asked Melanie.

‘I don’t know!’ wailed Binky.

‘I don’t speak much Norwegian,’ said Friday.

Melanie had taken out her phone and looked it up. ‘Here it is . . . it means “dereliction of duty”.’

‘It does? Oh no!’ said Binky. ‘They don’t like it in the army when you do that.’

‘Did you do it?’ asked Friday.

‘I don’t know,’ said Binky. ‘I don’t even know what “dereliction” means.’ He was sounding emotional again.

‘It means a shameful failure to fulfil your duties,’ said Friday.

‘Oh,’ said Binky.

‘Did you fail to fulfil your duties?’ asked Friday.

‘Well, I can see how they might think that I did,’ said Binky.

‘What did you do?’ asked Melanie. ‘Or not do?’

‘I was on guard duty,’ said Binky. ‘And when you’re on guard duty it’s very important to guard your post. Guarding is meant to be the focus.’

‘Yes,’ said Friday. There were lots of things she might have said here, like ‘duh’, or ‘no kidding’, but her main goal was not to frighten Binky so he could get the rest of his story out. She kept it simple. ‘So what happened?’

‘They found me outside my guard post,’ said Binky. ‘Lying face down in the snow.’

‘I can see how they might take that as a dereliction of duty,’ said Friday.

‘Yes,’ agreed Binky.

‘Were you taking a nap?’ asked Melanie. She was a great napper herself, and Binky was her brother, so perhaps it ran in the family.

‘Oh no,’ said Binky. ‘Well, actually . . . I guess in a way . . . yes. But it wasn’t a nap I wanted to take. I was knocked unconscious.’

'By who?' asked Friday.

'A polar bear,' said Binky.

'You were knocked unconscious by a polar bear outside your guard post,' said Friday. She was repeating what Binky had said back to him because it sounded so crazy she wanted to be sure she had not misheard.

'Yes,' said Binky.

'I can see why they don't believe you,' said Friday. 'That does sound really unlikely. Are people often knocked unconscious by polar bears in that area?'

'No,' said Binky. 'At least, I don't think so. My Norwegian isn't that good. And sometimes the other fellows don't tell me things because they think it's funny.'

'This doesn't sound good,' said Friday.

'I know,' said Binky. 'My commanding officer is very cross with me. I'm facing a disciplinary hearing on Tuesday morning. If I'm found guilty, I'll be dishonourably discharged from the army. And Ingrid's father won't let her go out with someone dishonourable. If I can't be with Ingrid, it will break my heart.' He had definitely started crying now.

'You need a lawyer, Binky,' said Friday. 'Right now.'

‘Oh, I’ve got one,’ said Binky. ‘But he says he can only argue with the evidence he’s got and, because I was unconscious, it’s a mystery what happened. As soon as he said that – I thought of you. You’re so good at solving mysteries. Friday, please, you will help me, won’t you?’

‘Of course,’ said Friday. Binky was such a good soul she couldn’t let him down.

‘We can fly out to Oslo straightaway,’ said Melanie.

‘Oh, thank you, Melanie,’ said Binky. ‘Thank you, thank you. I’m sure it will be all right if you and Friday come to help. And if it isn’t all right, I’ll feel much better if you’re here to talk to. Everyone is so cross with me. It’s horrible.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Friday. ‘We’ll get to you as quickly as we can.’