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# FRIDAY BARNES

No Escape

## Chapter 1



# Two Years Later

Melanie Pelly and Dr Belcredi were sitting in a very grim waiting room. The floors were linoleum, the walls were an unpleasant greeny-white and the plastic chairs were bolted to the floor. There was a long counter on one side of the room, beyond which administrative staff got on with their jobs, ignoring those who waited.

The waiting room had two doorways. One that led to the outside world. And the other, an internal

door, that led to the country's highest security juvenile detention facility. Melanie and Dr Belcredi sat waiting for this door to open.

Melanie was fidgeting with the green pork-pie hat she held in her hands. She would have preferred to be sitting outside in the car. She could sleep in the car. No-one could sleep in chairs this uncomfortable, not even her. But she had not seen her best friend in eleven months. She had to be supportive.

Dr Belcredi sat in silence. As a headmaster, it was very important that she maintained her dignity. There was something weird about the Pelly girl that encouraged honesty. Now was not a moment for emotional honesty. Who knew what state Friday would be in? Dr Belcredi was the grown-up here. She had to keep it together.

Dr Belcredi really wanted to look at her watch, but she knew she'd looked at it three times already in what couldn't have been more than ninety seconds. So, she was spending the time willing herself to have better self-control. She was just about to give up and glance down at her wrist, when they heard the thud of a heavy metal door closing, then footsteps in the corridor on the other side of the wall.

The door swung open. And there she was. Friday Barnes. She looked small. A little thinner since they'd seen her last. Her big baggy brown cardigan looked even bigger and baggier. She was holding a plastic bin liner full of her possessions. They barely filled the bottom of the bag.

Dr Belcredi needn't have worried about being embarrassingly emotional, Melanie beat her to it. She burst into tears, ran to Friday and wrapped her in a big hug.

'If you'll sign here, here and here,' said the corrections officer behind the desk. 'Barnes will be officially released into your custody.'

Dr Belcredi scratched out her signature. The officer took the form and went back to her computer. For her, these desperate emotional scenes were literally just another day at the office. Not worthy of a smile, a frown or even a second glance.

'Shall we go?' asked Dr Belcredi. Her voice hoarse to her own ears.

'Yes, please,' said Friday, quietly.

Melanie still clung to Friday's arm as though she was afraid to let her go and they headed towards the exit.

‘Where are you taking me?’ asked Friday.

‘Back to school,’ said Dr Belcredi.

Friday stopped walking. She looked about, as if seeking an alternative. ‘I don’t want to go back.’

‘Friday,’ said Melanie. ‘You’ve got no place else to go.’

Dr Belcredi glanced back at the corrections officer behind the desk. She had looked up from her computer.

‘Let’s step outside before we talk about this,’ said Dr Belcredi.

Friday nodded, catching her meaning. Overheard conversations could be dangerous. She’d learned that the hard way. When they stepped outside it was colder than she was expecting. There was a light drizzle. It felt good on her face.

‘We’ve tried to communicate with your parents,’ said Dr Belcredi. ‘Your uncle Bernie even went to Switzerland to see them. But they’re at a sensitive stage of their work and they weren’t able to be here themselves.’

Friday smiled a grim smile. ‘Yes, I had a phone call from my brother, Orion,’ she said. ‘Their research is being funded by a tech firm that develops military

equipment. They can't be associated with any terrorist connections.'

'But you were exonerated,' said Melanie.

'Only conditionally,' said Friday. 'Just because I didn't mean to do it, doesn't mean I didn't do it. There are some crimes you can never get expunged from your record.'

'But they can't arrest you again,' said Melanie.

'Yes, they can,' said Friday. 'My case never made it to trial, therefore, I can be re-arrested for the same crime at any time. Double jeopardy doesn't apply. And the laws governing terrorist charges are different to regular laws anyway. They can hold you for longer, surveil you without a warrant, trawl through your metadata, and do the same for all your known contacts. No-one near me is safe either.' She was becoming agitated as she spoke.

'Come back to Highcrest,' said Dr Belcredi. 'Focus on your studies. Put all this behind you. Even if it's only for a semester, or a year. You've been through a lot. Enjoy the peace and quiet of campus.'

Friday snorted. 'I've only been gone for eleven months. I haven't forgotten what Highcrest Academy is like. It's definitely not peaceful or quiet.'

‘Well, come back while you figure out what you’re going to do and where you’re going to go,’ urged Dr Belcredi.

‘Mrs Marigold has been taking an online pastry course,’ said Melanie. ‘Her blood orange tarts are to die for.’

Friday stared at the concrete by her feet. She didn’t want to go back. She didn’t want all those memories.

‘Where are you going to stay tonight if you don’t come with us?’ asked Dr Belcredi. ‘You’re only fifteen years old. You need a guardian.’

Friday realised she really did have no choice. She might have been released. But she wasn’t really free. Not now anyway. She got in the car. As they drove away, they sat in awkward silence for a long while.

‘I brought your hat,’ said Melanie, remembering she still had it in her hands. The brim was noticeably more ragged now, where she had been nervously fiddling with it.

‘Thank you,’ said Friday. She took the hat but didn’t put it on.

‘It’s a shame Binky graduated,’ said Melanie. ‘You could always rely on him to get into trouble and have a case for you to solve.’

‘I’m giving that up,’ said Friday.

‘What?’ asked Melanie.

‘Private detection, solving mysteries, that stuff,’ said Friday. ‘I’m not going to do that anymore.’

‘No way!’ said Melanie. ‘But that’s who you are. It’s how you think. You solve problems. You can’t help yourself.’

‘Not anymore,’ said Friday. ‘I’m not getting mixed up in other people’s troubles.’

‘But what are you going to do?’ asked Melanie. ‘You’ve got a giant brain. You can’t do nothing with it. It’s like having a racehorse and keeping it in a broom closet.’

Friday frowned at this analogy. ‘Are you accusing me of cruelty to animals, and my brain is the animal?’

‘Maybe,’ said Melanie. ‘You tell me. You see, you’ve found a puzzle to work out already.’

‘No,’ said Friday, firmly. ‘I’m going to focus on my studies.’

‘Criminology?’ asked Melanie.

‘No!’ said Friday and Dr Belcredi in unison.

‘The terms of Friday’s release are very clear,’ said Dr Belcredi. ‘She has to abandon her PhD in

Criminology. She isn't allowed to pursue further studies in the field for twenty-five years.'

'I used my time inside to teach myself Ancient Greek,' said Friday. 'I've decided I'm going to dedicate myself to working on a translation of *The Iliad*.'

'Really?' said Melanie. 'But I thought there were lots of English translations of *The Iliad* already.'

'I'm not translating it into English,' said Friday. 'I'm translating it into rap.'

'Rap?' said Melanie.

'Hip hop, slam poetry,' explained Friday.

'Oh, I know what rap is,' said Melanie. 'I just didn't realise you did.'

'Whatever,' said Friday.

Melanie was stunned. She had never heard her friend say something so banal before. Perhaps prison had changed her.

Friday knew she was being rude. Melanie and Dr Belcredi had gone to a lot of trouble to look after her while she was inside, and now were picking her up when no-one else could. But she couldn't make herself respond appropriately. She wanted to be alone in a closed room, which ironically was what she had spent a lot of time doing for the last eleven months.

It wasn't their fault. She shouldn't be punishing them with her sullenness. That was the type of thing Ian would do. Just thinking about Ian made Friday's heart hurt. She had to snap out of this, she knew she was being pathetic. She girded herself and made a conscious effort to try to make small talk so this whole dreadful situation was less awkward.

'How's Harrison?' she asked. She desperately wanted to change the subject and she reasoned that asking Melanie about her boyfriend would be a happy topic her friend would be glad to talk about.

'We broke up,' said Melanie.

'Oh,' said Friday. She had somehow managed to make an awkward situation even more awkward. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be,' said Melanie. 'It was no-one's fault. Harrison moved to Guatemala. We tried to make it work. But it was too hard to keep up a long-distance relationship. The Guatemalan postal system isn't good enough.'

Melanie seemed unnaturally unruffled about breaking up with her first boyfriend. Friday sometimes suspected her best friend of having much greater depth of character than even she had considered.

There were subtleties to Melanie's simplicity that were very impressive. She had either Zen-level wisdom or a mind like a sieve. It was hard to tell which, but occasionally Friday got a flash of insight that it wasn't the sieve.

Friday realised she had fallen into truculent silence again. She racked her brain trying to think up appropriate topics for conversation. She wondered if Melanie and Dr Belcredi would like to talk about Homer's use of rhythm through dactylic hexameter. Luckily Friday was saved by Melanie, who was much more gifted at small talk than she would ever be.

'But Dr Belcredi and Malcom are still an item,' said Melanie. 'So that's lovely.'

'Pelly, it's not appropriate for you to discuss the private lives of staff members,' said Dr Belcredi without taking her eyes off the road. Friday got the sense that Dr Belcredi had had this conversation with Melanie before. 'It's especially inappropriate to gossip about someone when they are sitting a metre away from you.'

'I'm sorry, Dr Belcredi,' said Melanie with a total lack of remorse. 'But Friday seems a bit down and everyone loves a good love story.'

Dr Belcredi snorted.

‘The only problem is,’ continued Melanie. ‘That Malcom is three months overdue on his latest novel.’

Friday struggled to untangle the meaning of what Melanie was saying. ‘I don’t follow,’ she said.

‘He’s so happy to be in love with such a wonderful woman as Dr Belcredi that he’s got writer’s block,’ explained Melanie. ‘He can’t think up horrible brutal adventures for his pirates anymore.’

‘Pelly!’ exclaimed Dr Belcredi. ‘This conversation is wildly inappropriate!’

‘He’s too besotted,’ continued Melanie. ‘He can’t get Dr Belcredi out of his mind.’

‘One more word and you get detention for a week,’ said Dr Belcredi.

‘But Friday deserves to know,’ protested Melanie. ‘If she hadn’t stopped Malcom from going to jail that first time she met him handcuffed to the bench at the police station, then you two never would have met and fallen in love.’

‘Why doesn’t he just write a love story?’ asked Friday.

‘What?’ said Dr Belcredi.

‘Well, if he’s too in love to write his regular pirate-based action adventures, then why doesn’t he write a love story?’ asked Friday.

‘Ahh,’ said Melanie. ‘Because he’s waiting for a happy ending. Dr Belcredi won’t agree to marry him.’

‘Detention for two weeks!’ snapped Dr Belcredi.

‘Oh,’ said Friday, nodding as she began to understand. ‘Because her first marriage was a failure, so she is worried she does not have the skills to make it work on a second attempt.’

‘Barnes, please don’t make me give you detention before I’ve even got you back on school grounds,’ said Dr Belcredi.

Melanie reached across and squeezed Friday’s hand. She was clearly aching to give her friend another big hug, but knew she should hold back out of respect for Friday’s total inability to cope with public displays of affection. ‘You see, things are never dull at Highcrest,’ said Melanie. ‘You’re going to enjoy being back.’

Friday smiled. Melanie’s friendship did make her feel warm, the way no brown cardigan ever could.

‘I’m just worried,’ said Friday, struggling to find words that fit the tsunami of emotion that was inside

her. ‘I don’t think I can face people talking about me and staring. It was hard enough fitting in at Highcrest the first time, but trying to fit in again, when I’ve been locked up on terrorist charges for eleven months, is going to be unbearable.’

‘I know it must seem that way,’ said Melanie. ‘But you’ve got to remember how narcissistic the kids at Highcrest are. Yes, you will briefly be the centre of attention when you get back. Some of the younger students will never have seen you before, so they won’t believe at first that you actually wear cardigans that ugly. But after twenty-four hours you’ll be a part of the furniture again, and some other poor sap will singe their fringe off with a curling iron or wear jeans from Kmart and everyone will forget about you while they bully them.’

‘There will be no bullying of anybody,’ said Dr Belcredi. ‘I have implemented the gold standard in anti-bullying strategies. I won’t stand for that culture to continue at Highcrest.’

‘Yes, you tell yourself that, Dr Belcredi,’ said Melanie. ‘You are doing a wonderful job, trying your very best. It’s not your fault that humans generally, and teens in particular, are horrible, self-absorbed

and cruel. I know everyone wants you to implement an anti-bullying strategy, but no-one seriously expects it to work. Running a school is one thing, but you can't change the fundamental reality of human behaviour.'

'I wish I could change your behaviour,' grumbled Dr Belcredi.

Friday sighed. 'I'll just have to stick it out. At least in juvie bullies never took things too far.'

'Because the guards were strict?' asked Dr Belcredi.

'Because the inmates were,' said Friday. 'You never knew who'd shank you with a sharpened toothbrush when you least expected it.'

'Did anyone try to shank you with a toothbrush?' asked Melanie.

'No,' said Friday. 'Although, the prison psychologist lunged at me once because I kept correcting her grammar.'

'Actually,' said Dr Belcredi, 'I have been thinking about the challenges you face re-assimilating to school life.'

This only made Friday sadder. That everyone was apparently thinking about her epic levels of social dysfunction.

‘I’ve got a suggestion I want you to consider,’ said Dr Belcredi. ‘The history students are doing a two-week trip to Italy as part of their studies. I think you should go too. It will be a wonderful opportunity for you to see so many of the places you’ve been reading about, and a way for you to assimilate to being back with your peers away from the school environment.’

‘That’s a lovely idea!’ exclaimed Melanie.

‘No, it’s not,’ said Friday. ‘I can’t go to Italy.’

‘Why not?’ asked Dr Belcredi. ‘I’ve got your passport. You are allowed to travel.’

‘And we’re going to Florence,’ said Melanie. ‘So, you’ll be able to see Uncle Bernie and, of course, Ian!’

‘I’m not going,’ said Friday.

‘Oh dear, this is all too much too soon, isn’t it?’ said Melanie. ‘But think of your new baby cousin. Little baby Bella. Don’t you want to give that sweet little baby a cuddle?’

‘No,’ said Friday. Babies horrified her. To her mind they were simply miniature inarticulate people with no bowel control. She did not understand the attraction at all.

‘The trip goes to Pisa and Siena,’ said Dr Belcredi. ‘You’ll visit the Forum and the Plaza Argentina where Julius Caesar was assassinated.’

Friday thought about this for a moment.

‘I can’t believe it,’ said Melanie. ‘She’s more intrigued by visiting a place where a general was stabbed 2000 years ago than she is in seeing her baby cousin.’

‘It’s academic,’ said Friday. ‘I can’t go. I don’t have any money left. I spent everything on legal costs and paying protection money to the daughter of a bikie so I wouldn’t get beaten up in jail.’

‘You should have thought of doing that while you were at Highcrest,’ said Melanie. ‘I’d love to see a biker’s daughter put Mirabella Peterson in her place.’

‘I’m sure we can arrange a scholarship . . .’ began Dr Belcredi.

‘No, no more scholarships,’ said Friday. ‘I just want to be left alone.’

As with many people who are not very in touch with their emotions, Friday tended to speak with little inflection in her voice. It wasn’t a monotone, but it wasn’t far off. So, to hear her say these words with so much genuine feeling in her voice was

gut-wrenching. Dr Belcredi fell silent. This was a big day for Friday. As headmaster, she really wanted to see her go to Italy, believing it would be good for her to get away and see family. But now was not the time to push.