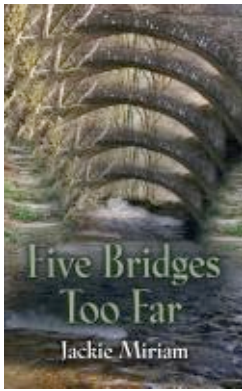




Five Bridges
Too Far

Jackie Miriam



Five Bridges Too Far is the gripping, intriguing tale of six young characters who go about their mischievous daily lives before bewitchment confronts them. The gang travels the time portals of their teenage years before five face the glamorous challenges of high-end ambition. How many causeways can the Bridge chums successfully negotiate? How many gangways are able to support the impetuous headiness of youth before they inevitably founder? Find out in FIVE BRIDGES TOO FAR.

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Jackie Miriam



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First Edition

Dedication

To the great book-thumbing sea of readers
across the world who delight in the joys of the
printed page.

May the days of the Ptolemaic library at
Alexandria prosper long, shielded from the
ever present threat of oblivion because of
modernity and man's piteous bureaucracy.

CHAPTER 1

Liz walked purposefully from a tiny ramshackle street on the outskirts of the old industrial town of Merrowfield which had always been known as the *Bridge*. There was no real bridge in evidence but the entrance to this antiquated stone-built cul-de-sac had two prominent buttresses on either side and the resident teenagers continually spanned the flats of the eight foot columns with a four yard length of lignum which measured four inches wide and three inches thick. Good quality timber had been available for decades and this substantial piece must have been used in the past as a supporting strut in the retaining wall of a dock mooring or canal bank.

The long hardwood plank just stretched far enough to span the two stone pillars, making a sort of bouncy high wire for swinging on, and, if you dared, for balancing along to the opposite end. The council was in the process of building new family houses in the area but the Bridge had escaped demolition owing to the unyielding personalities of the half dozen families resident therein. Few people ever dared to approach them and even fewer council officials could hope to broach the subject of an imminent exodus to foreign climes.

The youngsters like Liz, who lived at the Bridge were oblivious to all such dilemmas. They simply got on with the things they had always done such as playing

the part of the daring Blondin along the wobbly plank of wood they would place on either side of their lofty entrance columns. The kids had salvaged an old timber ladder which they would prop against a buttress in order to scale its notable height while other tearaways whisked it to the opposite side to do the same thing immediately afterwards, hauling up the other end of the gang plank and placing it on the mirroring pier. Some of the old timber rungs had fallen away leaving behind only the malleable strengthening wires to support the kids' carefree feet as they ascended near vertically to the ledged areas above. No one cared about the missing rungs. No one cared about anything at the Bridge just as long as their street-based adventures could take place without obstruction or interference.

The clothing of every family member was old and of very poor quality and cleanliness was not something which figured highly on anyone's list. The parents had no possessions to speak of and the young uns looked like urchins who were allowed to do whatever they wanted to do, whenever they wanted to do it. They might have had no goods or money but they had their wobbly plank on which to balance from one side of the street to the other. And to the children, that's all that mattered.

Liz's pace along the newly constructed roadways increased with the anticipation of getting to the intended destination some half mile away. The new

construction area joined another old section of town which also retained its hundred and fifty year old dressed stone houses which were similarly scheduled for clearance during a planned second phase of demolition, a few years hence. Tucked between some humble terracing in this inconspicuous street was a hidden pathway known as Black Jack's Alley where Liz made a rapid ninety degree turn into the mysterious alley between. The path meandered sharply uphill until it emerged eighty yards further on in the middle of another ancient terrace overlooking a filthy stream thirty yards below.

Slipping through the large gap in the rusty iron safety railings, Liz dropped face downward to the ground and virtually abseiled the grassy slope using outstretched arms and clawing hands. At the bottom, the question cropped up once again as it had nearly every day for the last twelve months. Could he, a twelve year old, leap from this elevated embankment edge clean across the polluted brook onto the muddy verge the other side. And could he do it in one piece without plummeting into the foul brew in the process?

The six foot drop seemed exceedingly challenging and the span of the stream, wide. And there was very little ground available to get an excellent run up which made things all the more difficult. But Liz was a runner, a jumper and a tightrope walker of local notoriety. But also a fifty-length swimmer, a scree scrambling endurance fiend and someone who could climb a

ninety foot oak tree blindfolded. Surely a twelve foot river puddle wouldn't be a problem. Suddenly, a voice called out from a figure standing on the first bar of the two-strand railing above. "Hey Lizard. What are you doing down there then? Are you doing it? Can I come down?" Liz wheeled around and crouched low in case the intruder was a policeman or a teacher or someone else in authority. But he realised it was only his mate Hubert Magridge who must have spotted him disappearing into Black Jack's Alley ten minutes earlier. There was no way Huey would have known that Liz was about unless he had seen him trot into Black Jack's, for the brook provided near invisibility to anyone standing on its near bank. He knew Lizard would have to be in the copse nearby or else over the edge of the railings and up to something crazy.

Liz's confident but hushed voice ascended to Huey on the blue bars way above his head. "Yeah, man. But be quiet. We're bound to get done if we're caught down here. Get your backside down here, quick!" That was something easier said than done for young Hubert who wasn't as agile as the wily Lizard, who as his name suggested could have crawled down vertically, head first. He slipped through the railings and placed his feet tentatively on the grassy slope which instantly fell away very steeply. "Dig the sides of your shoes in and zigzag down," recommended Liz. "It's much too sharp a drop for you to come down in a straight line. You might slip and roll right down into the god darn drink." Hubert cringed at the thought for the Bridge street

gang had always contemplated what it might feel like to end up in the shallow but stinking river bed. So he took his time to slowly descend in alternating forty five degree movements until the slope finally levelled out at the bottom where he stood up straight again alongside his pal Lizard.

“So you’re doing it then,” enthused Hubert.

“I donoo,” grumbled Liz. “It’s a hell of a jump and that’s for sure! And how am I going to get out of that telephone exchange compound over there?” The small river was skirted about on its far bank by a dense thicket of trees and bushes and there seemed no way out further upstream or downstream. Directly opposite however, it was possible to scale the shallow incline where trees were fewer and shrubbery scant, except this route encouraged the trespasser to enter a strictly no-go business enclosure. “I’ll be able to pick my way up through there,” said Liz pointing, “but then I’ll be in the telephone yard right away.” The Exchange was occupying the site directly opposite the area where the boys stood and it was hard to see any fast escape route over the tops of the trees which bordered the curtilage.

There were two high fences to the left and right but remarkably, none at all overlooking the Howler brook. The company must have concluded that no one would ever dream of slithering down the precipitous embankment opposite and certainly not wading through the unthinkably dirty culvert in order to

trespass into its operating area. So it simply hadn't bothered to complete the fourth side of its perimeter fence, relying instead on the distinct natural wooded camouflage already in place. Lizard had often found his way to the front entrance of the telephone Exchange but he had never ventured into the vehicular entrance and around the sizeable building.

It simply wasn't possible to accurately map the escape route from the front of the building any more than from the river bank or even the one-sided terrace high above. "I should be ok though," Liz foretold. "I'll just have to run like hell through the yard, around the corner between the offices and those huts and out the front gate. That's if I don't get caught trying to find the route between all those outbuildings."

"Yeah. You'll be alright I'm sure," said Hubert confidently. "But..."

"But what Mags?" urged Lizard.

"What if you land in the water near the bank and your shoe comes off and it gets soaked or you can't find it in the stinking water? Or your hurt your ankle on a submerged stone? You won't be able to run very much if that happens."

Liz thought for moment - - - "Oh sod it. I can't be worrying about all that. I do it or I don't do it!"

Huey was for once in possession of the starter's pistol. "Ok Lizard. Go for it," he commanded.

"Right o - - - I will," Liz flippantly retorted. Liz was only able to step back about five feet before he was tight up against a near vertical wall of soil and grass. He instructed Huey to climb back up the embankment and nip around the long way towards the Exchange entrance in Stanley Street. He said that Mags would take much longer to get there than he himself would take to jump across the stream, so he would probably run into him half way along the pavement if they both kept to the right side of the main road. But he wasn't to start climbing until the leap had actually been made in case it was unsuccessful and Mags would have to call for help.

At that moment, Liz fixed his eyes firmly on the opposite bank and rocked back and forth from foot to foot in order to maximise his rhythm and composure. After four such motions he hurtled forward with all his force and flung himself into mid air with arms and legs flailing wildly. He hit the ground with a notable thud but he had just made it onto the muddy verge the other side which turned out to be soft enough to cushion his landing perfectly.

Liz stood bolt upright and turned around to Hubert and screamed out - - - - - "YEAAAHH!" Liz wasted no further time with his instructions to Huey. "Right Mags. Get your ass up that embankment and around to

the main street and I'll catch up with you there in ten minutes." The two boys met up near the butcher's shop half way along as Liz had anticipated.

"Stone the crows, Lizie," cackled Huey. "That was one humdinger of a jump my man."

"Wasn't it ever Hubey," gloated Liz.

"How did you get out of the telephone yard?" his chum enquired.

"It wasn't a problem," indicated Lizard. "There's a couple of tree branches you can grab to pull yourself up the last bit into the compound. After that I ran across the yard and whipped around a few corners and out in a flash. I don't think anyone even saw me from a window." Liz dipped into his pocket and pulled out a couple of bubble gums. "Here you are Mags. Let's get back to the Bridge and tell the others I've cracked it. We can make some plans to return to the Howler next Saturday with the boys and have another go at it."

CHAPTER 2

The Bridge was occupied by three poor families who knew no wealth but had plenty of backbone and pluck. There was only six dilapidated houses in total, three on either side of the dismal narrow cul-de-sac which was stopped-off within the short distance of forty five feet by a huge and ugly stone wall. The monstrosity towered above the far end of the tiny street like a fearsome beast guarding the rear of the interrelated community. The children were of all ages from toddlers running around the enclosure in towel napkins and no shoes to frenetic seven year old ragamuffins who were scrabbling in the dust one minute and fighting lions and jaguars in the coliseum of Rome the next. There were older youths too and the mums and dads, grannies and granddads all lounged in front of their humble dwellings with nothing in the world to do and all the time in universe to do it. And there was Lizard.

Every member of this poverty-stricken rag-tag bunch was tough, and they were all viewed by other town residents as the *hard-knocks* of the area who simply weren't to be messed with. Although he was aged just twelve, Liz was no exception. He tended not to spend much time at home, choosing instead to slip out to be with his friends or to wander on mountains alone, tackling steep scree slopes, difficult traverses and even solo rock climbs without rope, piton or karabiner. Liz knew the golden rule of any such activity is never to

venture out alone. A simple fall could result in a person lying in the grass needing urgent assistance but not having the remotest chance of getting it. He was aware that only a year ago a confident fifteen year old lad called Toby disappeared for forty eight hours without returning to his mother's home, something that had never happened before.

The boy Tobin didn't have a friend in the world so he turned his attention solely to *very difficult* to *severe* grade rock climbs whenever and wherever he could. Two days later he was found dead at the foot of the old Fairfields limestone quarry beneath an especially difficult ascent route known as the Black Sausage. The fall broke the youth's body and his otherwise un-mourned passing broke his poor mother's heart. But Liz was fearless and no such thoughts were ever allowed to even enter his unyielding, wild and impetuous head.

It was a wonderfully warm summer Saturday and the six chums always hooked up at the swings in Palmer's Park. The swings was their meeting H.Q, the place to commence any sort of adventure, and Saturday morning was the very best day to do something crazy and exciting. The play area comprised swings with large frames, stout chains and timber seats, plus a squeaky see-saw and a substantial roundabout known as the *spider*. The Bridge gang showed little interest in the kiddy-wink see-saw where a few mothers sometimes brought their toddlers for a gentle rock-and-

ride. But the swings and the spider were a different matter. The spider was not so much a spider as a spider's web made of very stout parallel tubular bars and a middle and inner area of thinner bars linked up to make small and even smaller triangles. The general idea was to sit on the parallel outer bars and have a kind mum push the roundabout gently in circles. But there was none of this for Liz and the other boys. There was *much* more fun to be had.

The swings held their own special challenge and were certainly not used to swing upon in a genteel fashion. So far on this particular Saturday morning, the play area was devoid of any other people and the boys made a bee-line for the six whiplash machines, jumping onto the wooden seats feet first and whisking themselves to and fro with great rapidity. When each arc was at three quarter tilt, they all flopped down mid flight and continued the momentum from a seated position. Liz's swing was catapulting back and forth as was Bruiser's and Toots, Legs and Ellis's swings too. But Mags, as always, was lagging behind. In reality, Mags was none too keen to extend his swinging angle to its maximum or barely to half that ferocity for he knew exactly what was to come in the next few seconds.

At precisely the right moment when at least five of the boys were swinging mightily in unflinching unison, Liz started to count loudly – “one - - - **two** - - - **THREE** - - - - - ” The counts were bellowed out on the backswing and at the end of the fourth forward

motion all six boys let go of the chains and hurled themselves into the heavens. They shot upwards and forwards like human cannon balls to the point where they descended like parachutists without canopies. The whole thing was a contest to see who could end up farthest away on the grassed area beyond, but there was never any doubt about the eventual winner. Whilst they had to be so careful to time their release perfectly and to fly forward accurately towards a precisely controlled landing, they also had to ensure they did not collide in mid air or during the final descent. It always went well and no one ever seemed to get injured. The highly athletic Liz was always the one who made the greatest distance with most of the others coming a close and commendable second.

All except young Huey that is. Mags was happy enough to tentatively jump off his swing and make a few yards of distance before turning around quickly to catch the whiplashing catapult so the writhing serpent didn't rush back and knock him senseless from behind. The rest appeared to leap some colossal yardage and then descend from the sky like a pack of gibbons sweeping majestically to ground from tall forest trees. The landings invariably required a few forward-roll gymnastics to take the sting out of the impact though the five lads quickly rose to their feet in hoots of uproarious laughter. It was as if they were mocking the park keeper, any posh boys who lived sensible stable lives and teachers, policemen and anyone else who didn't understand what it took to be the Bridge gang.

Five Bridges Too Far

When all the cackling had finally abated, the six lay down on the grass soaking up the sun while deciding what to do next. Mags suddenly remembered Liz's heroic achievement from the Saturday before and jumped to his feet to proudly address the gang. "Listen you guys. I gotta tell you that Lizie done the Howler last Saturday. He jumped that bloomin' stream and cleared out through the telephone yard without getting caught. Let me tell you, he's the business."

"I'd heard a bit about this. Is that right Liz?" asked Brewer urgently.

"Yup," growled Lizard. "It's one hell of a jump though and there's no room for dropping even one inch short or you'd end up in the soup. I don't think any of you boys would make it right now. Maybe we ought to get in a bit of long jump practice from the edge of the flat cow stand on Danny's farm to make sure we can all make it cleanly onto that opposite verge. I could do it again of course but I'm not sure you boys can."

Toots chipped in. "But how far over did you get Liz? Did you clear by six inches or a foot, or what?"

"It wasn't by much, I know that," replied Liz. "I only just made it."

"What about me?" begged Wills. "You know I've got a good leap on me. Do you think I could do it Liz?"

“Maybe Legs,” pondered Liz, “you *do* have one heck of a stride on you pal, that’s certain. But there’s hardly any room for a good take-off so you **must** get the start right or you’ll be in.”

Willis came back at Liz with haste. “Well, let’s get down there man and have a go!”

“Nah,” said Liz conclusively, “I wouldn’t be happy about it. I don’t think any of you guys are quite ready. We’re all going to have to practice and then we’ll give it a bash. Ok? What about you Mags? Do you think you’ll ever make it if you have a decent bit of jump practice with the rest of us?” Hubert sat down on the grass again like a shrinking violet before he came back at his hero.

“Naw. I don’t think so Liz. You know me - - short-house Mags the terrible – an absolutely terrible jumper that is.”

“That’s ok man,” said Liz sympathetically. “I don’t want you collapsing into the river down there and disappearing in a haze of gassy stench from that wretched Howler brook.”

“Nor me,” muttered Huey. “But I’m proud of you Lizzie and I’m certain that all you boys will get the better of that stream quite soon. So where are we going this morning then?”

Lizard jumped to his feet as though to make some grand announcement when he spotted the Dane Terrace kids coming into the play area. The Daners were a bunch of posh boys from a group of streets surrounding Dane Terrace who never had anything to do with the Bridge lads. They weren't only boys either. There were two girls who went about with them quite often who were pretty nice lasses who never got into any trouble or upset anyone. And they were there that Saturday morning with four boys looking well turned out and perfectly manicured.

Even though the two groups seldom exchanged words, the former never showed aggression to the Daners, rather, just held them in contempt. That being the case, the Dane kids were confident enough to stroll into the play area and have a go on the erstwhile stationary spider. Julie and Chrissie and three of the boys sat around the edge of the giant web while the other lad leaned backwards on the outer bar in order to pick up some motion as he dug in with his heels. The spider spun around and around at a fairly gentle pace causing no aggravation to the five riders sitting astride its outer edge.

Brewer called across from the nearby grassy flat, "Hey you bods! What are you doing there?"

"Nothing special," replied Mark, the best spoken of the group. "We're just having a go on the spider here."

“Yeah. It’s all right, ain’t it,” said Brewer. Good fun really.” The Daners got on with their gentle rotations while the Bridge kids began to quietly crowd together to form a council of muttering and plotting that was out of the minds and earshot of the posh Wilhendon on the spider. “Let’s whisk ’em,” whispered Bruiser.

“Yeah, let’s spin ’em into space,” added Lizard with a quiet chortle. The Bridge boys eased off for a few minutes in order to avoid any suspicions rising in the minds of the Dane kids. But the three boys and two girls suddenly got off the roundabout and headed for the see-saw a little distance away. The fourth lad joined them as well but the oh-so-eloquent Mark changed his mind after a few paces and stepped back inside the spider’s bars for another run. He climbed into the central section of the roundabout and leaned frontwards in one of the larger triangular sections, pushing forward with his feet on the ground. It was possible to pick up much more momentum this way than by pushing the spider from the outside. But Mark made the terrible mistake of commenting into thin air how much quicker the spider could spin if you got in the middle and pushed from there.

Without a moment’s hesitation the Bridge kids strode over to the multicoloured roundabout and clambered upon it with all their number, surrounding the defenceless Mark and trapping him in his caged triangle in the middle tier. A few of them slipped into the innermost triangles close to the small football sized

orb which was mounted dead centre. Brewer quietly remarked, “Yeah. It *is* better in the middle, ain’t it - - - you know, to get a bit of movement going.”

“Well, yes,” replied the Daner nervously, “I think you’re right.”

“Tell you what,” whispered Liz. “You’ll get a much better ride on the outside bars when a few others push from the inside. Nip over that rail and sit on those two edging tubes and see how good it is going around the larger circle on the outside while we do a bit of shoving from the middle.”

Swallowing the bait hook line and sinker, Mark cocked his leg over the mid-tier rail and plonked his posterior on the stout tubular bars on the outer edge. In a flash, three of the Bridge boys jumped off the Spider completely whilst Liz and Brewer and Toots picked up the motion from the centre of the roundabout. The key to the foul deed lay in the fact that the three inner speed merchants leaned backwards inside the small triangles, digging in their heels in a backwards-style pattern. They didn’t have to move very far in small circles on the inside in order to develop enormous forces which were imposed on the poor brat sitting on the outside.

Fortunately, Mark had his legs draped either side of the bars or the consequences might otherwise have proved unthinkable.

The three steam boaters picked up momentum immediately and within an instant the spider was spinning too fast for anyone to even think about getting off. In just a few moments, the sun, moon and stars had fled from the heavens and Mark was being hurled around the circumference of some demonic black hole which was about to spit him into the irrecoverable reaches of inter-stellar space. The Bridge boys' whizzing of the Spider was relentless and the G forces suffered by the young Daner, unbearable. Mark felt his colour vanishing and his inner being turning to jelly as the roundabout spun like some rampant Catherine wheel with all boosters fired.

He felt certain this ending would mean the inevitable release of his feeble grip on the twin bars followed by an instant expulsion onto the barren patch of ground alongside where he'd likely break every bone in his body. He couldn't move or cry out or even utter a single sound. He could only lean forward to keep his head and shoulders down flat and grasp the two bars like grim death. Absolutely certain of a violent and clinical end, Mark suddenly realised that the roundabout was slowing down, coming to a complete halt in fact as the Bridge boys stopped their relentless pedalling along the ground.

The boy was riveted for half a minute, being completely unable to move. He somehow extricated himself from the spider, dropped to his knees and vomited explosively in every direction. The other

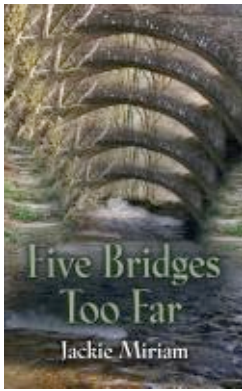
Daners hadn't fully realised what was happening until they saw their friend spewing uncontrollably while the Bridge kids rolled around on the grass in riotous hoots of laughter. Bruiser thought it was epic while the Dane bunch just gawped in bemusement. Poor Mark felt he was dying. But thankfully, his sudden bout of bad health abated and he came back to his normal self once again. He didn't stay in Palmer's one second longer, summoning the others to accompany him back to Dane Terrace as quickly as they all could manage.

"Hells bells and rattle me crowders," hollered Toots. "That was just **hey-mazing!** I've never seen anything like it nor laughed as much in my whole life."

"Well, for us," said Liz, "but it didn't seem so hot for that Dane Terrace boffin."

"My god, there's nothing surer than that," bellowed Gadge.

"Mags chipped in. "Perhaps he'll have to organise his thinking from his posterior from now on - - - haaaah! That'll teach him!"



Five Bridges Too Far is the gripping, intriguing tale of six young characters who go about their mischievous daily lives before bewitchment confronts them. The gang travels the time portals of their teenage years before five face the glamorous challenges of high-end ambition. How many causeways can the Bridge chums successfully negotiate? How many gangways are able to support the impetuous headiness of youth before they inevitably founder? Find out in FIVE BRIDGES TOO FAR.

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