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SEVEN BRIDGES

A DCI RYAN MYSTERY

LJ ROSS



PENGUIN BOOKS

PROLOGUE

London

Summer, 2007

Ryan knew he was not alone.

The front door clicked softly shut behind him and he stood completely still, listening intently. Nothing moved inside the immaculate Georgian townhouse; not even the air, which seemed frozen as he hovered on the threshold clutching a set of door keys tightly in one fisted hand like a lifeline.

Or a weapon.

Sun shone through a stained-glass window in a stream of rainbow light, lending the stark, white-washed walls a cheerful hue. Dimly, he heard the hustle and bustle of traffic and people outside and wondered again whether he was making the right decision.

Old doubts began to creep in.

It was not too late to change his mind.

It was not too late for *her* to change, if she really wanted to. He believed that people were essentially good; it was only their behaviour that was bad. A person could change, with the right help, the right support...

Eyes that were shadowed through lack of sleep and stress closed briefly as he thought back over the last few months. He remembered every painful encounter and every broken promise; every ounce of hurt that had almost robbed him of family, friends and, most shameful of all, his own identity.

His eyes opened again and were filled with renewed purpose.

There would be no turning back and no more second chances. His life was his own to choose, and he chose freedom.

His fingers relaxed, and he looked down at the keys before setting them on the hallway table. He wouldn't be needing them again.

"Jen?"

He called out to her and waited, head cocked to one side.

The silence was deafening.

He took a deep breath and strode purposefully towards the stairs, intending to retrieve his things quickly and quietly. Detective Inspector Jennifer Lucas was supposed to be on-shift at this hour, which was what he was banking on.

And yet, the same creeping sense of dread followed him upstairs, icy fingers crawling along his spine.

He sensed her, long before he saw her.

She stood just inside the bedroom—a room they had once shared together—eyes wild, teetering on the very edge of sanity. Her hair and clothing were unkempt and, behind her, he noticed make-up strewn around the floor, an upturned mattress and the remnants of the clothes and belongings he had come to reclaim.

She held a police-issue firearm, trained directly at his chest.

"Jen."

He stood rigid, not daring to move—hardly daring to breathe—while her hand remained steady, eyes almost black and filled with hate.

"I heard a rumour today," she rasped. "It seems that you're leaving the Met and moving north; that you've requested a transfer and it has all been very hush-hush. I told them it wasn't true, that there must be some mistake. But I see now that I was wrong."

Ryan looked at her with those devastating grey eyes, seeing past the weapon, past the threats and straight through to her very core. She could *feel* the change in him, had begun to realise it weeks ago but hadn't wanted to accept it.

She would never accept it.

"You're not going anywhere," she said.

The silence lengthened.

"I'm leaving," he said quietly.

She let out a brittle laugh.

"You're nothing without me. *Nothing.*" she spat. "You'd be stacking files in the basement of Scotland Yard, if it wasn't for me."

Ryan didn't bother to argue that he'd progressed through the ranks of the Metropolitan Police on his own merit. There was nothing to be gained and his priority was to remove the immediate threat.

"Put the gun down," he said, holding out a hand to take it from her.

In response, she jabbed the weapon towards his chest and he stumbled backwards, throwing out a hand to stop himself tumbling down the stairs.

"You've found someone else, haven't you? That's it, isn't it? Did she make you feel like a man again, Ryan?" He watched spittle foam at the corner of her mouth. "Or maybe it's your sister—always whining after you, moaning about how you never see her any more. Maybe she wants a little more than brotherly love from you, eh? Is *that* it? It's always the same with people like you, Little Lord Fauntleroy, born with a silver spoon in your mouth and a poker rammed up your backside!"

Ryan felt disgust roll in his stomach.

"I'm going to turn around and leave now," he said, very softly.

"Let's not forget your bitch of a mother," Lucas continued as if he hadn't spoken, gesticulating wildly with the gun. "Does she miss breastfeeding you, Ryan? Can't she stand to know you love another woman more than *her*?"

Ryan looked her squarely in the eye.

"I don't love you, Jennifer. I never did. I realise that now," he said, enunciating each word clearly. "For a while, I was

infatuated with you and I mistook it for love. That was my very grave error."

The air thrummed with tension and then her face twisted into something grotesque. To his horror, she suddenly raised the weapon to her own head.

"What do you say now, Ryan? What would you say if I pulled the trigger and splattered my brains all over that wall? Wouldn't you grieve for me, love? Wouldn't you wish you could try again and live happily ever after?"

But Ryan had walked this road many times before. For months, he had lived on egg-shells, worrying about whether he would be responsible for Lucas taking her own life if he should ever break free from the spider's web she had woven and into which he had stepped willingly.

He didn't quite know when the truth had eventually dawned but, when it had, it struck him like a thunderbolt: the last thing she would ever do was commit suicide. She loved herself, and only herself, far too much for that. All this time, she'd dangled the threat of it to keep him close, to keep him at heel and try to control him.

But not this time, he thought. *Never again.*

He heard her ragged breathing as she stood there with the sun at her back and her face in shadow. The image burnished itself onto his memory, never to be forgotten.

"Goodbye."

His chest contracted with fear as he turned his back on her, expecting at any moment to hear the hard echo of a gunshot and the searing pain of a bullet tearing into his flesh.

But there were no shots fired and, as he reached the foot of the stairs, he glanced back to find her watching him from the landing with a calculating expression. The weapon was gone from her hand and she was fully composed, her face having donned the mask that the rest of the world recognised and respected.

Her lips twisted into an ugly smile.

“Wherever you go, whatever you do, I’ll be watching you,” she whispered. “There won’t be a corner dark enough for you to hide in because, one day, I’ll come for you again. Never, ever forget that you’re *mine*. I made you.”

Ryan sent her a long, pitying look, then stepped outside to breathe the fresh air and forge a new life from the ashes of the old.

CHAPTER 1

Northumberland

Saturday 10th February 2018

Ten years later

“Howay, man, that’s not a real word.”

Detective Sergeant Frank Phillips slumped back in his chair and folded his arms mutinously across his belly, which was comfortably full after enjoying a roast dinner with all the trimmings.

“I assure you, ‘*qi*’ is a real word.”

Detective Chief Inspector Maxwell Finlay-Ryan rested his elbows on the dining table, sensing victory was near.

Phillips glanced down at the Scrabble board and then back into the innocent face of his friend, his button-brown eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"If that's a real word, what does it mean? Just tell me that."

Ryan cleared his throat, embarrassed to find that in all his years of using 'qi' as a secret weapon against worthy adversaries, he'd neglected to look up the meaning.

"Well, ah, it's obviously of Chinese derivation—"

"Aye, and that's shady n'all," Phillips put in, jabbing an accusatory finger in Ryan's general direction. "We're playing a game in England, not bleedin' Shanghai..."

From her position at the other end of the table, Doctor Anna Taylor-Ryan turned to her friend with a look of sufferance.

"Top up?"

She waggled the bottle of vintage champagne she'd opened to celebrate their first dinner party in the new home she and Ryan had built together. Its foundations stood on high ground in the picturesque village of Elsdon, on the edge of the Northumberland National Park. Every wall, window and door had been chosen with care to showcase the beauty of the landscape, which undulated in shades of green and brown as far as the eye could see. When the sun rose in the eastern skies and burned away the thick darkness that had fallen overnight, she would watch it from the comfort of their bed and wonder how in the world she had come to be so fortunate.

But now, she basked in the warmth of the log-burner crackling away in the corner of the room and enjoyed an evening with their closest friends.

"It'd be a shame to let it go flat," Detective Inspector Denise MacKenzie replied.

They clinked glasses and MacKenzie took a sip of the bubbling liquid while she studied her fiancé, who was by now arguing over the pronunciation of 'qi' in Mandarin, in his heavily-accented Geordie dialect.

"I never knew Frank was such a board game fanatic," she mused.

"Neither did I," Anna said, eyeing Ryan with similar humour. "It'll be a shame to beat them both, one of these days."

MacKenzie sent her an appreciative smile.

The doorbell interrupted them, ringing loudly once, twice and then in one long, persistent wail that grated on the nerves.

Ryan caught his wife's glance and rose from his chair in one smooth motion.

"I'll answer it," he said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder before moving quickly towards the front door. "It's probably nothing."

But when he checked the peephole and saw who stood outside shivering in the night air, he knew instantly that there was something very badly wrong.

"Jack?"

Ryan opened the door and came face to face with Detective Constable Jack Lowerson, whose pale face

appeared like an apparition against the dark sky at his back.

A couple of years ago, Ryan had taken the younger man under his wing, mentoring him through the ranks of CID and had come to think of him not merely as a colleague or a friend, but as a brother. They'd saved each other's lives in the line of duty and he'd been an usher at Ryan's wedding to Anna the previous autumn.

But they'd barely exchanged a handful of words in recent months, despite Ryan's best efforts to heal the breach. There was a distance between them now, a burning disappointment that festered in his gut and which he had tried and failed to dispel.

How could Jack fail to see the danger?

The friendship and respect they'd once shared had been built on a foundation of sand, it seemed. It had only taken the arrival of one woman to destroy it; a woman Ryan had known long ago, when he had been young and naïve himself. He knew what their new superintendent was; knew what she was capable of, and had tried to warn his friend, to explain. But his advice had fallen on deaf ears. Eventually, there had been no choice other than to let nature run its own course.

All of this flashed through Ryan's mind in the seconds it took for him to realise Lowerson was suffering from extreme shock. He was shaking badly, his whole body racked by involuntary shivers and his eyes were wide, their pupils like pinpricks in the glare of the safety light overhanging the porch. Petty disagreements and thoughts of past disappointments fled as compassion overrode all else.

"Jack? What's happened?"

Ryan reached forward to grasp Lowerson's arm and pull him into the warmth of the house, already opening his mouth to call out to the others when his eye fell on a spattering of red stains marring the other man's suit jacket. The words died on his lips and his eyes turned cool and flat as automatic training kicked in.

"What's happened, Jack? What's wrong?"

Lowerson's teeth were chattering so hard he could barely get the words out. His fingers gripped Ryan's forearms as he fought for composure.

"It's Jen—she's, she's... Oh God—"

"What's happened to Detective Chief Superintendent Lucas?"

Ryan's voice was remote, and he hated the sound of it, even to his own ears.

"Who is it?"

Anna rounded the corner and came to a halt when she spotted the newcomer, surprise flitting across her face, followed swiftly by a broad smile. Ryan watched the play of emotions and felt a sharp burst of love for her; for her natural warmth and willingness to forgive, forget and welcome an old friend into their home.

But she hadn't spotted the blood. Not yet.

"Jack! Oh, my goodness, you look frozen. Come in and see the others; Frank and Denise are here, too. Ryan," she said, as she nudged him with her hip. "You should have told me Jack was coming, I'd have made you peel some more carrots—"

Anna's friendly welcome trailed off when she caught sight of what Ryan had seen, moments before. Her eyes flew up to his and then she turned back towards the dining room to seek out the other members of the Criminal Investigation Department.

"I'll—I'll get the others."

Ryan turned to Lowerson and spoke urgently, compelling him to answer.

"What's happened to her, Jack? Tell me quickly."

"She's d-dead," came the choked reply. "I-I... You have to believe me, Ryan, I didn't do it, I—"

"Did you call it in?"

"I—"

"*Did you call it in?*" Ryan growled.

Lowerson shook his head numbly, scrubbing tears from his eyes.

"I—no. I just drove here, I'm sorry. I didn't know where else to go...I didn't hurt her. I couldn't—"

"Don't say anything else," Ryan said sharply, while his mind worked overtime.

Phillips and MacKenzie rounded the corner with a clatter of heels.

"Jack, lad. What's the trouble?" Phillips enquired, moving forward as if to embrace him.

But Ryan held him back with a look and reached into his pocket to retrieve his mobile phone, swiftly calling up the direct line for the Control Room. Once the number was ringing, he thrust the phone into Lowerson's hand.

"Make the call, Jack."

Phillips began to protest but then comprehension dawned. The man was covered in blood and had come to Ryan rather than going through the proper channels. He swore inwardly, already calculating what the cost might be.

"He's right, son. You need to ring it in."

"*You've reached the Northumbria Police Control Room. Would you like to report an incident?*"

Lowerson let out a sob, leaning heavily against Ryan who held him upright with one strong arm, staring at a point somewhere above his mousy brown head.

"This is—this is Detective Constable Jack Lowerson. B—badge number—" he stopped, shock having temporarily affected his memory. "I can't remember. I'm sorry. But I'm calling to report an incident. It's—it's DCS Lucas. She's dead. I think there was an accident... Or maybe—I don't know. I don't know."

He was almost hyperventilating now, and Ryan took the phone from him, rapping out his details for the telephone operative and ordering a couple of first responders to attend Lucas's home.

When the call ended, he found that MacKenzie held a couple of plastic bags in her gloved hands and he nodded his silent thanks.

"Jack, we need your jacket."

The man's eyes were dark pools of misery, matched only by the silent heartbreak each of them felt as MacKenzie led him towards the bathroom.

"Come on now," she murmured. "Anna's put the kettle on and we'll get you a nice cup of sugary tea."

As they disappeared into the downstairs cloakroom, Ryan and Phillips exchanged an eloquent look.

"Sweet Jesus," Phillips muttered. "D'you think he's—"

"I don't think anything until I've seen a crime scene," Ryan said. "I'll put a call through to the Chief Constable. They need somebody senior to oversee the first response, if there's anything to find."

Phillips nodded.

"She can't keep either of us on the investigation," he warned.

"I know. But she'll still need somebody making sure the scene doesn't turn into a circus."

"What about Jack?"

"MacKenzie will have to take him in," Ryan replied. "There's nothing else for it. You know that, as well as I do."

Phillips nodded sadly.

"Aye, I know. I s'pose I was hoping..." He shrugged heavily and then shook his head. "I'll have a word with Denise."

Ryan stood for a long moment watching his sergeant's burly figure retreating down the corridor, his balding head bent in defeat. He thought of the dinner they had shared and wondered how long it would be before they laughed like that again.

CHAPTER 2

It was almost nine-thirty by the time Ryan drove south along the A1 towards the city of Newcastle upon Tyne. At his side, Phillips occupied the passenger seat and stared sightlessly out into the night, watching the flicker of headlights flare up against the glass.

"How'd Morrison take it?" he asked, eventually.

Ryan thought back to the difficult conversation he'd had with their Chief Constable. Sandra Morrison had been enjoying a quiet Saturday night in with a rom-com and a Chinese takeaway, no doubt congratulating herself on having finally restored calm productivity to the Criminal Investigation Department after two years of turbulence.

He'd been sorry to burst her bubble.

"She's a professional," he said, blithely ignoring the stream of expletives she'd emitted when he'd first relayed the news. "Morrison was shocked, but she took it in her stride. We're to oversee the first response while she gets in touch with Durham CID, then hand over to whoever they send, no arguments."