

LBRIS

We know
books

SYCAMORE GAP

A DCI RYAN MYSTERY

LJ ROSS



PENGUIN BOOKS

their minds intoxicated. A man wearing a long animal pelt threw his hands aloft and chanted, calling to his Master. The Circle swayed and followed his call.

One of their number was missing, a fact which had not gone unnoticed.

CHAPTER 1

Sunday, 21st June 2015—The Summer Solstice

It was a perfect day for walking. The morning had broken and washed the sky in technicolour; palest lemon blending into brazen orange and deep, dark ochre. Wispy clouds were scattered here and there but, for the most part, the day was clear and the air was crisp.

Colin Hart had been up well before sunrise, allowing himself time to hike the trail and to enjoy the view from the top of the fells. He had been to this special corner of the world before, but the beauty of it never aged. The landscape undulated all around him, old as time and scarred only by the presence of the long stone wall built by Hadrian.

Alone, he stood a little longer appreciating the scenery and took a sip of water from his flask before tucking it safely back into its specialist holder. He checked the laces on his top-of-the-range hiking boots. Satisfied that all was in order, he turned away from the hypnotic sun and continued

to walk along the track, which ran beside Hadrian's Wall from the Roman fort of Housesteads in a westerly direction all the way into Cumbria. He knew that a lot of visitors probably walked on top of those ancient stones, unable to resist the allure, but he was someone who went by the book. What would happen if everyone flouted the rules? The stones would crumble away to nothing and there wouldn't be anything left for the next generation to enjoy. That's what would happen, he thought righteously.

He continued to meander along the worn trail, idly wondering how many centurions had stomped the ground before him. Sprigs of lavender sprouted from the gaps in the stones and clumps of heather bloomed purple, infusing the air with their scent. Tiny white flowers had risen beside the pathway and he wondered how they had found their way to this remote spot. He enjoyed the feel of his lungs labouring as he walked the inclines and felt the momentary fear of falling as he traversed the dips. Eventually, he slowed and came to rest under a large, leafy sycamore tree whose roots had grown thick and strong. He fished out a postcard with an artsy photograph taken of this very place and was content.

Colin shifted his backpack and shuffled down to rest against the wall. Under the shade of the tree, he looked out across the valley and thought about the errands he had yet to do when he returned home, mostly for his mother. He shifted uncomfortably and rubbed at the back of his neck. The stones were sharper than they looked. Unable to

find comfort, he half rose, intending to move further away, when his eye caught sight of something shiny. Intrigued, he pushed his face closer to the wall and wished for more light.

His prayers were answered as the morning came to life at that very moment. Sunlight washed over the wall and he saw it fully then, the glint of silver between the cracks.

Excited now, he began to tug at the stones and then froze guiltily. He shouldn't be tampering with the wall, like this. It wasn't right.

But the silver winked at him.

All hesitation forgotten, he put his weight behind the stones until the first one began to shift and give way. Emboldened, he started on another, then another...

His hands covered in dust and chalk, he fell backwards and stared at the hole he had made in the wall and, beyond that, to what lay in its cavity. A silver bracelet, mostly dulled with age, hung loosely from the wrist of what was once a person. Now, all that remained was a pile of desiccated bones, shoved haphazardly inside the hollowed-out space. A skull stared back at him with empty eyes and a gaping jaw.

Colin scrambled away and thought about putting the stones back, pretending he had never found the body. Wouldn't it be better just to carry on with his life? He didn't like to become involved in other people's dramas, other people's problems. He sat on the dewy grass and gnawed at the inside of his lip, thinking about what to do for the best. It wasn't too late to go home, close the doors behind him, and try to forget what he had seen, was it?

No. He shook his head. He should not be a coward.

He fished around one of the inner pockets of his jacket and pulled out his mobile phone.

No signal.

Resigned and with the heavy, sick feeling in his stomach of a man whose life had just changed irrevocably, he headed back towards civilisation.

While Colin Hart trudged the lonely road back to his car, another man was taking advantage of a rare Sunday morning lie-in. Eyes still closed, Detective Chief Inspector Ryan struggled against the demonic hangover which had made itself very much at home inside his head. The nerves between his eyes throbbed and there was a distant ringing in his ears. Feebly, he grasped at the sheets and pulled himself upward.

He risked opening his eyes and everyday objects became reality. A bed. A wardrobe. Some sort of jingle-jangle wind chime which hung in front of the window that was thrown wide open to the morning breeze. His eye caught a movement and he braced. He saw a man, wild-eyed and rough around the edges staring back at him from the oval mirror above the dresser.

Why had he let Phillips talk him into the whisky? A “quick pint”—he was sure that was all he had agreed to by way of celebration.

Yesterday, Ryan had received a call from the ecstatic parents of Detective Constable Jack Lowerson to say

that their son had finally emerged from his coma. Last Christmas, none of them had held out much hope that Jack would ever regain consciousness, following the attack on Holy Island which had plunged him into darkness and robbed him of six months of his life. There was now the hope that, one day, Jack would remember who had been responsible.

Ryan dragged his legs over the side of the bed and stood up.

Then, sat back down again with a thud.

“Too soon,” he muttered with a heavy dose of self-pity. “Much too soon.”

Before he could move again, the bedroom door swung open and brought with it the dreaded sound that had wakened him.

It was Chaka Khan on the radio this morning.

Looking like she was every woman and more, Doctor Anna Taylor stood in the doorway tapping her foot to the rhythm and regarded him with a mixture of pity and amusement. She set a tall glass of water on the dresser beside two aspirin.

“Good night?”

He let out a heartfelt sigh and stood on legs that felt as wobbly as Bambi’s.

“I’m not sure that’s the word I would use to describe it,” he muttered. “Water. Need water.”

Anna grinned. Watching him prowling around the bed like a bear with a sore head was comedy gold. This was the first

time she had seen the illustrious DCI Ryan reduced to a physical wreck and she wasn't above a bit of baiting.

"I thought we might go for a long walk along the river today, after we stop by the garden centre."

He winced.

"Or, we could go shopping. I need some new shoes and handbags."

"I don't think—"

"Maybe we could offer to babysit the kids next door. It would be good practice," she continued, layering on the icing.

"Anna," his voice croaked, and he snatched up the water, gulping it down in three swallows. "The terrifying thing is that I don't know whether you're joking."

He refocused and took stock. The muscle at the side of her mouth was twitching. Dark eyes twinkled.

"Oh, you're a real comedienne."

"People tell me that all the time, but it never gets old."

He slunk towards her smelling faintly like a brewery. Even crumpled and worse for wear, it was remarkable how he managed to look so good. Thick, black hair stuck out at interesting angles and she watched him run a hand through its length. There was a layer of stubble on his jaw, which was rugged rather than unkempt. Then, there were those bright, silver-grey eyes which killed her every time.

All mine.

Smugly, she crossed her arms and tilted her chin up at him. He came to stand in front of her, swaying a bit.

"You smell like something that crawled out of a cave," she said, deadpan.

"Flattery will get you everywhere."

"I could light a fire on your breath."

"Stop, you'll make me blush." He smiled slowly now, with intent.

"You could use a shower," she sniffed.

"That's an excellent idea." He edged her backwards, towards the en-suite bathroom. "One thing you should learn about me is that I have an excellent recovery time."

"Oh, you're going to need it."

Detective Sergeant Frank Phillips was dreaming of a feisty Irish princess with long, red hair. He stormed the castle, fought off the shadowy figures surrounding it and rescued her from a fate worse than death, for which she was *very* grateful...

Just as things were becoming interesting, he was rudely awakened by a sharp spray of cold water.

Detective Inspector Denise MacKenzie stood above him and for a pleasant moment he imagined her wearing the flowing dress of his dream. Like a baby, he held his arms out to her and smiled toothily.

Denise tried hard not to laugh. There was a half-naked, middle-aged man sprawled in her bathtub. He looked like death and smelled even worse. Her fingers itched to turn on the shower spray again.

"Frank," she snapped. "What the *hell* are you doing in the bathtub?"

"Gimme a kiss."

She watched him pucker up, chuckling to himself.

"Frank Phillips, I'm warning you. I'm not a woman to be putting up with drunken layabouts."

"But, you're *Irish*," he said innocently.

Denise flicked the shower spray to the coldest setting.

Fortune decreed that the Control Room of the Northumbria Police Constabulary dispatched DCI Ryan and DS Phillips to the remote part of Hadrian's Wall known as Sycamore Gap. The discovery of unidentified human remains qualified as a police matter, unless they were classified as being 'of antiquity'. That meant that somebody with the requisite authority needed to haul their sorry arse out of bed and take a look. Since the other detectives of the Criminal Investigation Department were busy looking into the usual rounds of manslaughter and GBH following drunken brawls over the weekend, it fell upon Ryan and Phillips to disregard their allocated day off-duty and take a drive into the hills. Most likely, the remains were ancient and he could happily pass them over to an archaeologist for examination, Ryan thought.

The drive out west of the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne was scenic. Centuries earlier, men had laid the track for a long, straight road in that direction and although it

was now tarmacked, it still followed the same course. The 'Military Road' as it had come to be known took Ryan along a route parallel to Hadrian's Wall, past reservoirs and rolling green fields populated by fluffy, well-fed sheep. When he saw the brown sign marked 'Housesteads Roman Fort', he slowed for the turn.

His attention was immediately drawn by two distinct facts: first, an inordinately large number of vehicles were crammed into the visitor's car park. Roman history wasn't *that* popular at eight-thirty on a Sunday morning. Second, his sergeant seemed to be wearing fancy dress.

Slamming out of the car, he naturally gave priority to his most pressing concern.

"Phillips? What in God's name are you wearing?"

Catching sight of the new arrival, Frank raised a cup of take-away coffee in greeting. "Morning, boss."

Ryan appropriated the coffee. "You look like the back end of a bus." It was always a comfort to know that there was someone out there who felt worse than him.

Phillips scowled. "You were the one who suggested that we go and celebrate."

"Not my fault that you can't hold your liquor."

"Can't...?" Phillips was momentarily lost for words. "It wasn't me who nearly fell flat on his face, boyo."

"The pavement was uneven." Grinning, Ryan eyed the floor. "Speaking of all things ridiculous, I repeat, what have you got on your feet?"

Phillips pointed one of his toes, dainty as a ballerina.

"These? They're my old walking boots. Got a bit of a hike ahead of us and you know me—always come prepared."

"You look like you've stumbled out of the circus. Besides, we're not scaling Kilimanjaro."

"We'll see who's laughing once you've walked up that hill in your City-boy shoes."

"Uh huh." Ryan took a thorough look around him. "Did I miss something? Why the cavalry?"

"It's the body," Phillips replied. "Older than your usual DB but apparently it still looks fairly recent. Could go either way. Besides that, the skeleton's been stuffed inside the wall."

"Inside?"

"Aye, that's the long and short of it. Some bloke found the body as he was having a morning stroll."

"What? He just *happened* to burrow inside the wall right where a body had been buried?" Ryan was incredulous. "How long is the damn wall? A hundred miles?"

"Eighty-four," Phillips put in.

"Close enough. Eighty-four miles of Roman stonework and this bloke decides to tamper with that bit in particular? What's his story?"

"Ask him yourself—he's sitting in the back of that car." Phillips thrust his square, bulldog face in the direction of one of the police cars. "But he says he went for a walk and decided to stop under that big tree for a break and a Kit-Kat. He was sitting there and saw something silver shining through a gap in the stones. He had a forage and, lo and behold, he found more than he bargained for."

"He's pretty shaken up," Phillips added. "Can't stop apologising about moving the stones. Practically wants to put himself in handcuffs for it."

Ryan blew out a breath and stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

"Stranger things have happened," he said. "What about the rest? I see Faulkner amongst the crowd."

"Yeah, Faulkner's ready to start whenever you are." Phillips referred to the Senior Crime Scene Investigator. "We've got a lot of bored scientists standing around him. There's a team of archaeologists and a forensic anthropologist is on her way, but she's driving down from Edinburgh, so she'll be a while yet...there's Ambrose, the entomologist." Phillips ticked them off his broad fingers and screwed up his face in concentration. "We've got a forensic dentist on hand if we need one and the pathologist is on standby."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "A lot of fuss, don't you think? I thought we were going to have a quick look at the remains and see if they're a job for CID. No need to bring the entire department along for that, it's a total waste of resources. Who gave the okay?"

Phillips pulled a face. "There's a shedload of bureaucracy with this one. Over there," he said, making a discreet gesture in the direction of a statuesque woman dressed in sharp clothing. "She's the National Heritage archaeologist, curator or whatever they call it—the regional bigwig. The minute she got a whiff of something amiss over here she hoofed it."