

LBRIS

We know  
books

# Phillipa Ashley

*All We  
Want For  
Christmas*



PENGUIN BOOKS

## Chapter One

Lara gazed up at the fells in sheer amazement. The first snow of the Lakeland winter had arrived at Ravendale Castle, dusting the trees with icing sugar and adding snowy hats to the statues in the gardens.

She crunched across the cobbled courtyard that led to the front of the castle. Here the view was even more spectacular, with white-robed mountain peaks soaring into a sky of washed-out winter blue.

It was a scene of perfection, and, if Lara had her way, snow would always fall exactly like this: just enough to look pretty without causing any disruption. However, as she was painfully aware, the weather in this remote part of the Lakes had never run to plan – rather like her life.

At least today the snow had made its entrance with perfect timing for the Christmas at the Castle tour that would mark the start of the festive events programme at Ravendale. The previous autumn, Lara had landed her dream job as manager of this medieval castle tucked away in a remote corner of the Lake District, and it had been her idea to run the tours, offer festive afternoon teas, and create a Christmas-tree tour through the castle's principal rooms. The highlight of the events programme would be the Winter Spectacular,

a fantastic light trail that would illuminate the grounds and hopefully draw in thousands of visitors.

Her fingers were firmly crossed, however, because the previous month a major glitch had threatened to derail their plans. Gerald, the well-loved castle maintenance manager, had gone on long-term sick leave and there was no sign of him returning – in fact, rumours had started to circulate that he might retire, though nothing official had been announced yet.

His absence had been sorely felt and meant that Lara had taken on the job of liaising with the illuminations contractors directly. On top of all her other duties as curator and events manager, it had been a big strain. Her history degree hardly qualified her as an electrical expert.

With a deep breath, she let her eyes rest on the snowy fells again, the view calming her as always, just as it had when she'd first arrived at Ravendale a year ago, nursing a broken heart and a loss that had been hard to bear.

She reminded herself that the light trail *would* happen, even if she had to give up sleep or meals for the next two weeks. And she wasn't totally alone: Ravendale had a team of enthusiastic staff and dedicated volunteers who had become her friends.

As the working day swung into action, they began to appear, pushing trolleys of supplies and equipment from the car park into the grounds.

Dull clangs rang out from the rear of the castle where the contractors had arrived to start installing the lighting infrastructure. A laundry van arrived with linen for the

banqueting hall and café, and the local postie jogged up the stone steps to the oak door and handed over several parcels to the housekeeper.

Lara felt an electric thrill of hope and excitement run through her: Christmas had finally started at Ravendale. Surely this one – her second in the job – had to be a huge improvement on the last, which she'd spent hiding her sorrows behind a professional smile.

She was about to walk up the steps to the castle when she became aware of a new sound, one that sent a different kind of thrill through her, far more powerful than anything that work could inspire.

It was the distant roar of a motorbike. Nothing unusual there: the twisting road that hugged the Cumbrian coast was a magnet for bikers looking for a spectacular route. However, this was a working winter morning in November, and no summer bank holiday. It must be someone on their way to work . . . Even so, Lara found her feet rooted to the spot as the whine of the bike changed tone. It had become louder and lower, indicating that the bike had slowed to negotiate the sharp steep bend that led down to the entrance to the castle.

Then the engine sputtered and the motorbike came into view, gliding down the gravel driveway, leaving a trail in the snow. And somehow she knew, even though he was the last person she'd ever expected to see again, that its rider was Flynn Cafferty.

He killed the engine, kicked the stand down and lifted his long leather-clad limbs off the Harley.

Her pulse rate galloped like a runaway stallion. Surely he wouldn't look like she remembered? Not the man who'd filled her dreams and fantasies for the past two weeks before riding off into a dark November morning.

He took off his helmet and pushed his thick black hair off his forehead. His smile was warm enough to thaw an icy lake and turn her limbs to butter. In answer to her own question, he was even better than she remembered. She shivered, though Flynn seemed unruffled.

'Morning,' he said, looking her up and down in amusement. 'I must say this is rather nice. I hadn't expected a personal welcome party.'

Still stunned by his appearing out of the blue, it took Lara a few seconds to reply. 'This isn't a welcome party,' she squeaked. 'I mean – um, of course you *are* welcome, but I – um – wasn't expecting you. Are you visiting in the area?' she managed, remembering that he had once been a guest at the castle, even if that one night had turned him into more in some of her wilder dreams.

He'd booked into the Haunted Halloween Sleepover and they'd ended up working together to deal with a power cut – and got trapped in the castle dungeons together for a while. Nothing physical had actually happened – although she'd wanted it to – and being stuck in close proximity to Flynn wasn't something you forgot in a hurry – or ever.

His handsome brow creased. 'In the area? No . . . Hasn't anyone told you?'

'Told me what?' she asked, her confusion growing.

'That I've accepted a job here. I'm your new technical manager.'

'You? Our new technical manager? That's not possible,' she said, her shock and disbelief overriding her politeness. 'I mean, I don't see how it *can* be possible. Fiona and Henry haven't said a word about a new person being appointed yet,' she added. The aristocratic couple whose ancestors had owned Ravendale for centuries usually kept her well informed about anything that affected her role.

'Ouch. That's awkward. Fiona and Henry assured me that they'd warn you before I arrived. Gerald has decided to retire and I've been asked to take over as head of the maintenance team and I'm going to be in charge of the light trail.' He softened his tone. 'Fiona did say you were desperate for the help . . .'

'I – I mean, we, are – but everything's happened so fast. I didn't know you were even looking for a job. I thought you were going biking across Asia.' The last time she'd seen him, Flynn had told her his plans once he was finished with his work contract at the Cornish theme park.

'I was . . .'

His dark blue eyes sparkled and Lara's stomach did a double flip. 'But this opportunity was too good to resist.'

Under that enigmatic gaze, Lara found it difficult to frame a coherent reply. Flynn had once again ruffled her outwardly calm and collected persona. 'I . . . I must speak to Fiona and Henry. I'm sure they meant to tell me, but everyone's been rushed off their feet with the light trail and the

new events programme starting.' She needed to get hold of her employers at the first opportunity.

'I'm sorry, I've rocked up with no warning. No wonder you look so shocked.'

'No. No, don't worry ...' Lara smiled, recalling that Flynn was now her colleague and she had to be professional. She was determined to regain control of the situation. After all, she was the one who'd been castle manager for the past year. Flynn was the new boy, even though he seemed perfectly at home already. 'I'm sure it's just an oversight.'

'Lara!'

One of the castle guides jogged across the gravel towards them. The tip of her nose was bright red and she was out of breath. 'Y-your t-tour party has started to arrive. I said you'd m-meet them in the great hall in a moment.'

'Thanks,' Lara said, recovering herself. 'Please tell them I'm on my way.' She left Flynn to unload his bike, hurrying through the melting snow and into the castle, trying to tame a maelstrom of emotions.

It had been barely two weeks since Halloween, when Flynn had made a dramatic entrance in a storm, arriving late and walking into the banqueting hall in his leathers. Sparks had flown between them that had nothing to do with the power failure that had plunged them into darkness. However, despite their instant connection, Flynn had ridden off back to his home in Cornwall the following day and Lara had expected to never see him again.

Since that chilly morning, she'd convinced herself it was for the best. Even so, Flynn was the only man she'd imagined

falling for since the break-up that had led to her own move to Ravendale.

After the heartbreak of the split, she'd vowed to never get involved in a workplace romance again. Now, Flynn's reappearance – and as a colleague who she'd be living and working alongside at that – had threatened to derail her all over again.

## Chapter Two

'And this, everyone, is the famous Lucky Chalice of Ravendale. It was given to the owners' ancestor by King Henry after he took shelter here on Christmas Day on his way to London. The Lake District was a wild and dangerous place in the fifteenth century and the king was grateful for the Penhaligons' hospitality. He told them that the castle would never fall and the Penhaligons would always prosper as long as the chalice remained intact.'

Having temporarily banished Flynn from her mind, Lara swept up the tour party with a winning smile. 'As you can imagine, we look after the chalice very carefully indeed.'

Every eye was on the simple glass goblet in the display cabinet. A velvet rope kept visitors at a safe distance and – just in case anyone decided to do something weird – the glass was bulletproof and built to withstand a sledgehammer.

'Bet it's worth a bomb, eh, love?' A man in a Santa hat smirked. Even though there was still over a month to Christmas, Lara didn't blame him for getting into the festive spirit early. Besides, the castle was chilly at this time of year. However, her heart sank at his comment about the value of the chalice.

'It's priceless to everyone at Ravendale,' she replied diplomatically.

'And has it ever been damaged?' barked a woman from the rear.

Lara smiled. 'Not as far as I know. Not bad when you think it's been here for almost six centuries. Shall we move on to the haunted tower and then to the banqueting hall for mulled wine and warm mince pies?'

She led her tour party down the stairs, savouring the tang of wood smoke and pine wafting up from the banqueting hall where the refreshments had been laid out on the oak table by Ravendale's catering team.

There were gasps as the guests gazed up at the vaulted ceiling with its coats of arms and floor-to-ceiling tapestries of medieval hunting scenes. The mullioned windows were filled with vases of holly and fir collected from the estate, but it was the tree that drew the biggest 'wows' of admiration. A twelve-foot spruce, it stood in the corner of the hall, its twinkling baubles and bows in shades of amber, red and gold. Lara allowed herself a quiet glow of pride, having supervised its decoration herself.

Everyone gathered around the fire, enjoying the refreshments and chattering about the castle. Lara answered countless questions about the legends and ghosts associated with the place, feeling the tension ebb from her body at last, relieved that the first festive tour of the season had been such a hit. She still hadn't worked out how she felt about Flynn returning. They desperately needed a technical manager, with Gerald now off the scene, and she had no doubt

Flynn would do a great job, but working so closely with him every day? How would she cope with that when her every cell zinged whenever she looked at him?

With a professional smile still in place, Lara said her farewells to the tour party, several of whom had booked for the Winter Spectacular on the spot. The catering staff collected the empty glasses and plates, leaving the oak table bare, save for an arrangement of greenery and the pewter candelabra.

Apart from the pop and crackle of the fire, it was blissfully silent. As she'd done many times, she almost had to pinch herself to believe that living and working in such a magnificent place was her job.

'Lara!'

Fiona Penhaligon strode across the floor towards her, a large vase of holly and ivy in her arms. A willowy platinum blonde in her late sixties, her formal title was Lady Penhaligon but she refused to let any of the staff address her by it. Her husband, Henry, was just as down to earth, considering he owned a massive castle.

Now was the moment to ask Fiona why Flynn had been appointed without her knowledge – as tactfully as she could.

'Are you all right, my dear?' her boss asked, placing the vase on the table with a concerned frown. 'I do hope your first tour wasn't too stressful. I passed some of the hordes on my way out. I must say they seemed very excited.'

'It went well,' Lara said, wondering how to introduce the subject of her new colleague. 'Um, I think everyone really enjoyed themselves.'

'Phew. That's a relief, although I can't say I'm surprised. You've worked terribly hard to organise all these events.'

'Thanks. It's always good to find that a plan works in practice. Christmas treats by the fire were very popular. Would you please thank Henry for lighting it?'

Fiona rolled her eyes good-humouredly. 'Oh, he loves lighting fires. Sometimes I worry he's a closet pyromaniac . . . Now, is there anything else I can help you with?'

Lara smiled again and took her opportunity. 'Well, I hear that you've found a replacement for Gerald.'

'You have?' Fiona screwed up her nose in discomfort.

'Yes, I – er – happen to have bumped into him earlier. He'd just arrived. It was quite a surprise.'

Fiona groaned. 'Oh, my dear, I am so sorry. It's all been so last minute. We only heard he'd accepted the job the day before yesterday and we were going to tell you, but with us only getting home from Hattie's in London yesterday evening, there hadn't been a moment.'

Hattie was one of the Penhaligons' two daughters and was a sculptor who had an art gallery in the capital.

'It's OK. I know how hectic things have been,' Lara said politely, seeing that Fiona seemed genuinely apologetic.

'Even so, we really should have warned you. Actually, we had planned to ask you and Flynn up to the flat this evening so we can all get to know each other better. Even better,' she added with a smile, 'why don't you come up to the flat at five and we'll have a glass of wine together? After all, we're all going to be working very closely together, so we want to get off on the right foot.'

*Working very closely together.* Lara's nerve endings jumped.

There was a crackle from the pocket of Fiona's ancient Barbour. 'Sorry, must get this.' She plucked a radio from her pocket. 'Hello. Jazz. Yes, yes, I'm on my way now. Give me two ticks!' She listened to Jazz for a few seconds before turning back to Lara. 'Sorry, Jazz needs me to finalise the menu for the reception. I must go. See you later in the flat. Well done, darling! You're a star.'

Lara could well imagine her friend and colleague, Jazz, tactfully trying to persuade Fiona to make a decision regarding the evening's menu. The reception was a PR and networking exercise for local suppliers, representatives from the tourist board, and hotel and accommodation providers. It had been Lara's idea as a way of showcasing Ravendale as an attraction at both Christmas and in the coming year ahead. It was important it went well and that they convinced the invitees to add Ravendale to their list of recommendations to guests.

Lara didn't see Flynn for the rest of the morning. Presumably he was settling into his cottage, and that afternoon she was busy dipping in and out of two more tours, conducted by other guides, to see how they were getting on.

As dusk fell, she took the chance to see how the light trail construction was going. The cables, bulbs and generators littered the grounds. The only illuminations at the moment were the harsh arc lights for the workforce as they hammered, banged and shouted to each other. Relief filled her. Although the trail had been her baby, she was more than happy to hand the technical duties over to Flynn.

It was past four, so after calling into her cottage to shower and change her fleece for a smart jumper, she headed back to the tower for her final and most important task of the day: checking that the Lucky Chalice had been taken back from the display case to the treasury safe after the last private tour. Lara trusted her guides, but her twelve years' experience managing historic properties and treasures had taught her never to leave anything to chance.

In the quiet of the treasury, she unlocked the safe and took out the blue leather box from among the other precious items of silver and gold. She put the box on the table and opened the lid. The chalice, about the size of a large gin glass, was nestled inside.

It looked pristine apart from an almost invisible fingerprint on its stem. Reverently, she removed it from its case, checking that the prints were the only marks on it.

She shuddered at the idea of what it was worth, yet it truly was priceless as a symbol of Ravendale and of its centuries of history. It had survived sieges, battles, family feuds and two fires.

*'Lara.'*

At the voice behind her, Lara started and lost her grip on the chalice. Time slowed down as it slipped through her fingers and tumbled through the air. With a soft thud, it landed on the oak boards between her feet.

*'Oh God, no!'*

Her cry of horror echoed around the room and her heart seemed to stop before she fell to her knees. The chalice was all that mattered now.

## Chapter Three

Flynn knelt beside her. Over the past couple of weeks, Lara had often fantasised about having him in this position but she now wished he didn't exist.

'No! Please don't touch it!' She peered at the chalice, too scared to handle it herself.

'Bloody hell . . . it looks OK, though. It doesn't seem damaged,' Flynn said.

Lara met his eyes, which were full of remorse. 'We'd better hope not.'

'Maybe it's OK? These boards aren't like tiles or stone.'

'Maybe,' she murmured, finally lifting the chalice as gently as she could and standing up. She placed it on the table carefully, worried it might slip from her unsteady hands again.

'Can I do anything?' he asked, on his feet again but keeping his distance.

'Please don't touch it!' Lara said.

Wisely, he stayed silent as Lara peered closer at the glass, inspecting the rim, the bowl, the stem. It looked intact. She let out a breath.

Impossibly, there seemed to be no cracks. It *was* intact, which was a miracle after that fall. Somebody must be looking out for her.

She squinted at the chalice and her heart seemed to stop. *No. It couldn't be.*

'I think we got away with it,' Flynn said, with a sigh of relief. 'Phew.'

Lara stared at the glass, feeling sick. 'I don't think so.'

'What?'

'Look at the base. I think it's – I think it's chipped.'

He walked over to the table. 'Where? I can't see anything.'

'Look closer. It's only tiny but it's there.' She pointed to the edge of the base.

Flynn leaned over the chalice, his dark head of hair obscuring the chalice for a few moments before he turned back to her, his lips pressed together in a grimace.

'Yeah. I hate to say it, but I think you're right. It is only minuscule, and if you weren't looking for it, you probably wouldn't notice, but I'm afraid there is a tiny nick. I am so sorry.'

Lara sat down on a chair next to the table, her head in her hands. For six centuries, the Lucky Chalice of Raven-dale had remained pristine and intact. Now, she'd done what sieges, battles, fire and flood could not achieve: ruined the most precious item that the Penhaligon family owned.

She glanced up. 'I could lose my job. I'll have to resign.'

'Whoa. Hold on. It can't be that bad, can it?' Flynn said gently.

Although on the verge of tears, Lara held them back. 'It is. I've destroyed a priceless object, the one thing that matters more to the family than everything else in the castle. I