



## Snowbound in the Earl's Castle (Holiday Miracles)

By Fiona Harper

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**Snowbound in the Earl's Castle (Holiday Miracles)** By Fiona Harper

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Marcus and Faith don't believe in fairy tales, but being snowed in together over Christmas feels like magic. And the best gift of all would be discovering that happy-ever-afters really can come true....

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## **Snowbound in the Earl's Castle (Holiday Miracles) By Fiona Harper Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Coming from two generations of journalists, writing was in Fiona Harper's genes. As a child she was constantly teased for having her nose in a book and living in a dream world. Things haven't changed much since then, but at least in writing she's found a use for her runaway imagination! She loves dancing, cooking, reading and watching a good romance. Fiona lives in London with her family. Visit her website at: [www.fionaharper.com](http://www.fionaharper.com)

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These were the kind of gates made for keeping people out. Faith thought as she tipped her head back and looked up at twenty feet of twisting and curling black iron. Neither the exquisite craftsmanship nor the sharp wind slicing through the bars did anything to dispel the firm message that outsiders should stay on her side of the gate.

Too bad. She needed to get into the grounds of Hads-borough Castle and she needed to do it today.

She glanced round in frustration to where her Mini sat idling, her suitcase and overnight bag stuffed in the back, and sighed. She'd had other plans for today—ones involving a quaint little holiday cottage on the Kent coast, hot chocolate with marshmallows and a good book. The perfect winter holiday. But that had all changed when she'd found an innocent-looking lilac envelope on her doorstep yesterday morning. The cheerful snowman return address sticker on the back hadn't been fooling anyone. She'd known even before she'd ripped the letter open that its contents would cause trouble, but the exact brand of nuisance had been a total surprise.

She stared out over the top of her Mini to the rolling English countryside beyond. The scene was strangely monochrome. Fog clung to the dips in the fields and everything was tinged with frost. Only the dark silhouettes of trees on top of the hill remained ungilded.

It was strange. She'd grown up in the country back home in Connecticut, but this landscape didn't have the earthy, familiar feel she'd been expecting when she'd driven out of London earlier that morning. Even though she'd adopted this country almost a decade ago, and her sisters now teased her about her so-called British accent, for the first time in ages she was suddenly very aware she was a foreigner. This misty piece of England didn't just feel like another country; it felt like another world.

She turned round and tried a smaller gate beside the main pair, obviously made for foot traffic. No good. Also locked. A painted board at the side of the gate informed her that normal castle opening hours were between ten and four, Tuesday through Saturday. Closed to visitors on Mondays.

But she wasn't a tourist. She had an appointment.

At least she *thought* she had an appointment.

She shook the smaller gate again, and the chain that bound it rattled, laughing back at her.

That was what Gram's letter had said. She pulled the offending article out of her pocket and leafed through the lilac pages, ignoring the smug-looking snowman on the back. She'd bet *he* didn't have a wily old white-haired grandmother who was blackmailing him into taking precious time out of *his* vacation.

She scanned down past the news of Beckett's Run, past Gram's description of how festive her hometown was looking now the residents had started preparing for the annual Christmas Festival.

Ah, here it was.

*Faith, honey, I wonder if you 'd do me a favor? I have a friend—an old flame, really—who needs help with a stained glass window, and I told him I knew just the girl for the job. Bertie and I were sweethearts after the war. We had a magical summer, but then he went home and married a nice English girl and I met your grandfather. I think it all worked out as it should have in the end.*

*The window is on the estate of Hadsborough Castle in Kent. What was the name of the man who designed it? Bertie did say. It'll come to me later...*

*Anyhow, I know you'll be finished with your London window soon, and you mentioned the next restoration project wasn't going to start until the New Year, so I thought you could go down and help him with it. I told him you'd be there November 30th at 11 a.m.*

And here she was.

Still gripping Gram's letter between thumb and forefinger, she flipped the pages over so she could pull up the sleeve of her grey duffle coat to check her watch. It was the thirtieth, at ten-fifty, so why wasn't anyone here to meet her? To let her in? She could have been sipping hot chocolate right now if it hadn't been for Gram's little idea of a detour.

As beautiful as the window at St Bede's in Camden had looked when the team had finished restoring it, it had been four months of back-breaking, meticulous labour. She deserved a break, and she was going to have it.

Just as soon as she'd checked out this window.

She turned the last page over and looked below her grandmother's signature. Reading the line again still gave her goosebumps.

*P.S. I knew it would come to me! Samuel Crowbridge. That was the designer's name.*

Without that tantalising mention of the well-known British artist Faith would have blown off this little side trip on the way to her holiday cottage in a heartbeat.

Well...okay, maybe she'd have come anyway. Gram had been the one stable figure in her otherwise chaotic childhood—more like a surrogate mother than a grandparent. All Faith's happiest memories were rooted in Gram's pretty little house in Beckett's Run. She owed her grandmother big time, and she'd probably have danced on one leg naked in the middle of Trafalgar Square if the old lady had asked her to.

She supposed she should be grateful that the letter hadn't started, *Faith, honey, try not to get arrested, but could you just hop down to Nelson's Column and...?*

The road that passed the castle entrance was quiet, but at that moment she heard the noise of a car engine and turned round. Thankfully, a Land Rover had pulled in beside her and the driver rolled down the passenger window.

'It's closed today,' the man in a chunky-knit sweater said, in a not-unfriendly manner.

Faith nodded. 'I have an appointment to see...' This was the moment she realised Gram had neglected to

reveal her old flame's full name. 'Bertie?'

The man in the car frowned slightly. He didn't look convinced.

'It's about the window,' she added, not really expecting it to help. The appointment her grandmother had made for her seemed as flimsy and insubstantial as the disappearing mist. But the man nodded.

'Follow me in,' he said. 'There's a public car park just up the road. You can walk the rest of the way from there.'

'Thanks,' she replied, and got back into her car.

Five minutes later, after a drive through the most stunning parkland, she was standing beside her Mini as the noise of the Land Rover's engine faded. She watched the four-wheel drive disappear round a corner, then followed the path the man had indicated in the opposite direction, up a gentle slope of close-cropped grass. When she got to the top of the hill she stopped dead in her tracks and her mouth fell open.

Beyond an expansive lawn, gauzy mist hung above a dark, mirror-like lake. Above it, almost as if it was floating above the surface of the water, was the most stunning castle she'd ever seen. It was made of large blocks of creamy sandstone, crested with crenellations, and finished off with a turret or two for good measure. Long, narrow windows punctuated its walls.

The castle enclosure stretched from the bank on her right across two small islands. A plain single-track bridge joined the first island to the shore, guarded by a gatehouse. The smaller island was a fortified keep, older than the rest of the castle, and joined to the newer, larger wing by a two-storey arched bridge.

The whole thing looked like something out of a fairytale. Better than anything she'd dreamed up when Gram had tucked her and her sisters in at night on their summer holidays and read to them out of Faith's favourite fabric-covered storybook.

She started to walk, hardly caring that she'd left the Tarmac, and started off across the dew-laden grass, running the risk of getting goose poop on her boots. The edge of the lake was fringed with reeds, and a pair of black swans with scarlet beaks drifted around each other, totally oblivious to her presence.

That bridge from the bank to the gatehouse seemed to be the only way to get to the rest of the castle, so she guessed she might as well start there. Perhaps there would be someone on duty who knew where this window or the mysterious Bertie could be found.

She was nearing the castle, walking close to the low-lying bank, when she saw a dark shape in the mist moving towards her. She stopped and pulled her coat tighter around her. The damp air clung to her cheeks.

She could make out a figure—long, tall and dark. A man, his coat flapping behind him as he strode towards her. She was inevitably reminded of stern Victorian gentlemen in gothic novels. There was something about the purpose in his stride, the way his collar was turned up. But then he came closer and she could see clearly from his thick ribbed sweater and the dark jeans under his overcoat that he was a product of this century after all.

He hadn't noticed her. She knew she ought to say something, call out, but she couldn't seem to breathe, let alone talk.

She had the oddest feeling that she recognised him, although she couldn't have explained just which of his features were familiar. It was all of them. All of *him*. And him being in this place.

Which was crazy, because she'd never been here before in her life—except maybe in her childish daydreams—and she'd certainly remember meeting a man like this...a man whose sudden appearance answered a question she wasn't aware she'd asked.

Finally he spotted her, and his stride faltered for a moment, but then his spine lengthened and he carried on, his focus narrowing to her and only her. The look in his eyes reminded her of a hunting dog that had just picked up a scent.

'Hey!' he called out as came closer.

'Hi...' Faith tried to say, but the damp air muffled the word, and the noise that emerged from her mouth was hardly intelligible.

He was only a few feet away now, and Faith stuffed her gloved hands into her coat pockets as she tipped her head back to look him in the fa...

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