

The Dowager's First Match

A Langford Hall Prequel

by Honoria Vale

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My dear reader,

Before there were masquerades, before there were Christmas house parties with guest lists I curated like a general planning a campaign, there was a single snowbound December and a single, trembling spark of an idea. Everyone supposes I was born a matchmaker.

The truth is gentler than that. I became one in a draughty drawing room at Langford Hall, the winter I was four-and-twenty and quite certain I knew nothing at all.

Let me tell you how it began.

The snow came down over Langford Hall the way grace sometimes does—quietly, all at once, and far more thoroughly than anyone had thought to prepare for.

Honoraria, Duchess of Langford, stood at the long window of the green drawing room and watched the carriage drive vanish beneath it. She had been a duchess for fourteen months and a widow's friend for rather longer, and she was beginning to suspect that the two roles were going to collide before the week was out.

The lanterns along the avenue had been lit early against the gloom, and their light lay gold on the fresh snow, soft as spilled honey. Evergreen boughs framed the window where the gardeners had pinned them that morning, and the whole room smelled of pine sap and the cloves studded into the oranges drying on the mantel. It was, Honoraria thought, exactly the sort of evening that ought to mend a heart. If only the heart in question would cooperate.

The heart in question belonged to Mrs. Catherine Ashby.

Catherine had arrived three days prior, a war widow of nine-and-twenty with a spine like a fire iron and eyes that had forgotten how to be surprised by anything. Her husband, a captain, had not come home from the Peninsula, and Catherine had folded her grief away as neatly as she folded everything—linens, opinions, the corners of her own wanting—and had come to Langford for Christmas because Honoraria had insisted, and because she had nowhere else that

would have her without pity.

Pity, Honoria had learned, is the one gift a proud woman cannot abide. Far better to give her something to do.

And so Honoria had done a reckless thing. She had also invited the new vicar of Langford-under-Hill.

The Reverend Mr. Daniel Wren was not what one pictured when one pictured a vicar. He was tall and a little stooped, as tall men who read too much often are, with ink perpetually shadowing the side of his hand and a way of going very still when he was thinking, as though stillness might let him hear something the rest of the room had missed. He had buried Honoria's husband. He had done it with such plain, unhurried tenderness—no hollow phrases, only the right words spoken slowly—that Honoria had decided then and there that the man's heart was far too large to be left rattling about a cold vicarage alone.

He arrived for dinner shaking snow from his shoulders, apologizing for the weather as though he had personally arranged it.

"You needn't apologize for God's housekeeping, Mr. Wren," Honoria said, and had the satisfaction of watching the corner of his mouth betray him.

She seated them across from one another. Of course she did.

Candlelight pooled on the silver and turned the wine to garnet. Honoria, who had spent fourteen months learning to manage a duchess's table, let the conversation drift where she steered it—to books, because Catherine pretended not to love them and Mr. Wren could not pretend otherwise.

"I confess I find most sermons unreadable," Catherine said, in the cool, testing way she said most things now. It was not quite rudeness. It was armor.

Mr. Wren considered her over the rim of his glass. "So do I, Mrs. Ashby," he said. "Which is why I try never to write one down. A sermon read aloud is a letter. A sermon spoken is a conversation. People can tell the difference, even when they cannot say why."

Catherine's fork paused, the smallest hitch, the kind only a woman watching very closely would catch.

Honoria was watching very closely.

*There, she thought, with a little leap of something she
could not yet name. There it is.*

The snow did not stop.

By the second morning it had drifted against the south doors and buried the lane to the village, and Mr. Wren, who had meant to walk home after dinner and had been overruled by the weather and his hostess in roughly equal measure, found himself a guest at Langford Hall whether he willed it or no.

Honorina was not above gratitude to Providence when Providence did her work for her.

She arranged things. A duchess can arrange a great deal when she sets her mind to it and looks innocent while doing so. She discovered that the library wanted reorganizing and that Mr. Wren had a scholar's hands for it; she discovered that Catherine had a memory for where every book belonged and a sharp eye for a mislaid folio. She put them in the same long room with a fire and a great many shelves and a quantity of work that could not be hurried, and then she invented urgent business with her housekeeper and left them to it.

She did not eavesdrop. She wishes the record to show that she did not eavesdrop.

She merely happened to require something from the corridor outside the library a number of times over the course of the afternoon, and the door was not entirely closed, and sound carries in an old house.

"—he used to read to me," Catherine was saying, at one point, in a voice Honorina had never heard her use. Lower. Unfolded. "James. My husband. Dreadful poetry, mostly. He hadn't any taste at all." A pause. "I have not been able to open a book of poetry since."

The fire ticked. Honorina stood very still in the cold corridor, ashamed and unable to move.

"Then we shall not touch the poetry today," Mr. Wren said. Gently. Not pushing. Only making room. "There is a great deal of history on these shelves, and history asks nothing of the

heart. We can begin there. The poetry will wait. It is patient, on the whole. It has waited centuries for far worse readers than you."

And Catherine laughed.

It was a small sound, rusty at the hinges, as though she had to remember how. But it was a laugh, and Honoria pressed her hand to her own mouth in the dark hallway and felt absurdly, enormously close to weeping.

On the fourth evening, there was mistletoe.

Honoria would like to be clear that she did not hang it. The footmen hung the mistletoe; it was a custom of the house; it had hung in the doorway between the music room and the gallery every Christmas for sixty years. That it happened to hang precisely where Mrs. Ashby would pass on her way to retrieve the shawl she had left—a shawl Honoria had perhaps, possibly, nudged from a chair onto the gallery floor with the toe of her slipper—was a matter between Honoria and her conscience, and the two of them had come to an understanding.

Mr. Wren was already in the gallery, standing at the dark window with his hands clasped behind him, watching the snow come down silver in the moonlight.

Catherine stopped in the doorway.

Honoria, from the shadows of the music room, held her breath.

The firelight from the gallery hearth caught the edge of Mr. Wren's jaw just so as he turned, and for one impossible second the snow beyond the window might as well have been a field of white roses in June. Catherine's silk shawl—recovered now, clutched against her—slipped a half-inch against her bare wrist, the cool whisper of it, and she felt it then, watching this quiet, ink-stained man look at her as though she were not a thing to be pitied but a thing to be *known*: the tiny, treacherous click of something falling into place.

She did not move. Neither did he.

"There is mistletoe, Mrs. Ashby," Mr. Wren said at last, very low, "above your head."

"I am aware of it, Mr. Wren."

"I would not presume."

"No," Catherine said. "You never do. It is the most maddening thing about you." And then, because grief makes some women brittle but had, against all odds, begun to make this one brave: "I rather wish, just this once, that you would."

He crossed the room. The clove-warm air, the firelight, the snow falling and falling beyond the glass. He did not take her in his arms like a man in a novel. He lifted her hand—the one not strangling the shawl—and pressed his mouth to her knuckles, slowly, the way he did everything, as though it were a sentence he wanted to be sure of before he spoke it.

When he straightened, her eyes were wet and her chin was high and she looked, for the first time since she had come to Langford, entirely alive.

And that, Honoria thought, retreating into the dark music room with her heart going like a drum, is that.

Now. A confession.

I have told this story many times over the years, and I have always been tempted to end it there—in the gallery, with the snow and the mistletoe and the kissed hand. It makes a tidier tale. But you and I are going to be friends, you and I, and friends do not lie to one another about how love actually behaves.

It did not end in the gallery. It very nearly ended badly the next morning.

For Catherine woke the next day appalled at herself.

Honoria found her at dawn in the breakfast room, already dressed for travel, already armored, already folding herself back into the small cold shape that grief had taught her was safe.

"The lane is impassable," Honoria said, pouring chocolate as though nothing were the matter.

"I shall walk."

"You shall freeze."

"Better that than—" Catherine stopped. Her hands, Honoria noted, were not quite steady. "I forgot myself last night. I am a widow. I had a husband I loved. I have no business—" She set down her cup with a click. "It is too soon. It will always be too

soon. James has been gone two years and I still reach for him in the dark, and it is not *fair* to that good, patient man in your library to offer him a woman who is more than half a ghost."

And here, my dear reader, is the moment I have built this entire story to give you. Because the young duchess I was—four-and-twenty, certain she knew nothing—opened her mouth to say something soothing and conventional, and instead heard herself say the truest thing she had ever said.

"Catherine," Honoria said. "He does not want the woman you were before. He has never met her. He looked at the woman you are *now*—ghost and grief and rusty laughter and all—and found her worth crossing a room for. You are not betraying James by being loved again. You are only proving that he taught you how."

The breakfast room was very quiet. The snow had stopped at last, and the early sun came through the frost on the windows and laid a path of pale gold across the floor, straight to where Catherine sat with her gloved hands pressed to her mouth.

"How," Catherine said, unsteadily, "do you know such a thing, at your age?"

Honoria had no idea how she knew it. She only knew that she did, the way one knows the weather is about to turn—a pressure behind the breastbone, an instinct older than experience. It was the first time she had ever felt it. It would not be the last.

"I haven't the faintest notion," she admitted. "But I am right. I find," she added, a little wonderingly, "that I am almost

always right about this particular thing."

They were married in the spring, in the little church at Langford-under-Hill, with the hedgerows white not from snow but from hawthorn blossom. Catherine wore primrose yellow and carried no ghosts at all that anyone could see. Mr. Wren forgot half of his own carefully unwritten vows and had to be prompted, twice, and did not seem to mind in the least.

Honoriasat in the front pew and wept without dignity and decided, somewhere between the vows and the ringing of the bells, that she had found the thing she was for.

She had a great many years ahead of her, and a great house, and a position that let her see the whole glittering machinery of the ton turning beneath her like the works of a clock. She knew, now, what she would do with all of it.

She would find the lonely ones. The brave, frightened, folded-up ones. She would put them in the same long room with a fire and a quantity of work that could not be hurried, and she would invent urgent business with her housekeeper, and she would leave them to discover what she had already seen.

One must never underestimate, she thought, watching the new Mrs. Wren laugh in the sunlight, the power of a determined woman with a little mistletoe and a great deal of time.

It was her first match.

It would be very far from her last.

And there, my dear, you have it—the beginning of everything. Every match I have made since began in that snowbound winter, when I learned that the heart does not need to be whole to be ready; it needs only to be brave, and given a warm room, and left in good company.

I have a great many more stories to tell you. There is a Christmas house party at Langford Hall where the guest list is rather more deliberately chosen than anyone suspects—a duke who made a dreadful mistake beneath the mistletoe once before, and the woman he never stopped loving. That is where I should like you to go next.

But I run ahead of myself. For now, welcome. Pour yourself something warm. Pull your chair to the fire. The next match is already beginning, and I should so love for you to watch it with me.

With the warmest regards,

Lady Honoria Langford *The Dowager* (whose adventures are faithfully recounted by Honoria Vale)

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Ready for the first magical night in the Dowager's world?

*Meet the duke and his mistletoe mistake in The Duke's
Mistletoe Mistake — Book One of the Langford
Christmas House Party series.*

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