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# He Loves Me Not...He Loves Me

Claudia Carroll

## Chapter One

OK, so it wasn't a Friday, but it was still the thirteenth. If Portia had never been superstitious before, she was now. As she stood in the freezing Drawing Room of her family's ancestral home, Davenport Hall, with her mother wailing in the background, she found herself idly wondering, the way you do in times of crisis, could this really be happening?

'It can't be true, my darling. It simply can't be true,' howled Lucasta for the umpteenth time that morning. 'How could he just bolt off into the blue without a byyour-leave? We were married for thirty-six years and to think that your father has abandoned me . . . ME! I was debutante of the year in nineteen sixty-six and everyone said your father was the luckiest man alive to have landed me . . .' And at the thought of her bygone youth and beauty, she spiralled off into a fresh bout of hysterics. 'I know I told him to bugger off, but how was I to know the bastard would actually leave? The one time in his worthless buggery life he actually did what I asked!'

Portia sighed deeply as she went to console her mother, yet again.

The unseasonable March sunshine streamed through the enormous bay window which dominated the room, bathing mother and daughter with warmth, which neither of them felt inside. To an outsider, they looked like an odd pair. Lucasta, Lady Davenport, although only in her mid-fifties, looked a great deal older, a legacy of her fondness for one gin and tonic too many. Her waistlength hair, which had been so admired during that debutante year, was now grey and matted and certainly hadn't seen the inside of a hairdresser's since the moon landings. Dressed in her trademark wellies, moth-eaten navy jacket and layer upon layer of heavy wool jumpers, she looked like she'd just mugged a homeless person and then ripped the clothes off their back. Yet, even though her red face was all puffy and swollen from crying, you could still tell that, in her youth, she would have been considered 'a handsome woman'.

Portia, her eldest daughter, was another story. Tall, thin and pale, with her light brown hair tied neatly behind her neck, she was as white as a ghost today. Not from

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shock, but from worry, sheer worry. As she handed her mother another fistful of tissues, she looked wearily around the room. At the filthy windows with their cracked panes; the high Georgian rose ceilings, which hadn't seen a lick of paint in decades and were now covered in cobwebs; the threadbare Persian rug on the floor, which stank to high heaven from all the generations of cats that her mother freely allowed to sleep there; and at the huge, bare, light patches on the walls, which marked where the Davenports' paintings had once hung.

In Portia's grandfather's time, the family's art collection had been quite renowned, one of the most impressive in the country. A Gainsborough and a Reynolds, no less, had hung in that room; Portia could remember seeing them as a child. She never even knew they were famous until, when she was at school, she recognized one of them from the cover of an art history book and thought: That's hanging in my house.

All gone now. All sold off, at way below their market value, to pay off her father's gambling debts. Portia sighed deeply. No point in dwelling on that now, what's done is done, she reminded herself. As she looked out of the bay window, she could see the distant figure of her younger sister, Daisy, furiously galloping on her favourite mare over the parkland surrounding the house.

It's even worse for her, the poor darling, thought Portia as she gently soothed her mother. She actually liked him.

Jack, Lord Davenport, known as 'Blackjack' because of his addiction to the game, was by now, Portia calculated, halfway to Las Vegas. Always one to do things in style, it wasn't enough for him simply to walk out on his wife and daughters, cleaning them out of the little cash they had, but, for added entertainment value, he had taken Sarah Kelly with him. Sarah Kelly was a stable hand on the estate. Sarah Kelly was nineteen.

It's all my bloody fault, as usual, thought Daisy as she galloped past the rose garden, the wild March wind full in her face, I hired the stupid little slapper. In her defence, though, it had looked like a good idea at the time. She had taken Sarah on last summer to help out during the tourist season. But I was explicitly clear about her job description. She was to help me muck out the stables and clean up horse shit, I never said anything about running off with Papa, Daisy wailed to herself, large tears now starting to roll freely down her face. How could he do this to us? How could he just run off with that thickankled shit-shoveller? She galloped on, past the old tennis courts with their nets rotting away, past the orchard and on towards the surrounding

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hills, which were still part of the Davenports' land. Whenever Daisy was this upset, there was only one place for her to go.

Davenport Hall had an equestrian centre close to the house, which at one time provided some badly needed income for the family. The idea was that visiting tourists could spend a day at Davenport Hall ('This stunning example of Georgian architecture in the heart of County Kildare' as the Bord Fáilte brochure boastfully and rather misleadingly declared). Those who were up for it could go out pony-trekking over the acres of beautiful woodland around the Hall, past the River Kilcullen with its own salmon trap, and up as far as the Mausoleum, a magnificent neo-classical monument where nine generations of the Davenport family were buried.

A stranger arriving here for the day could easily be forgiven for thinking how wealthy the family were, with all that land . . . and as for the Hall itself ! From the outside, Davenport Hall looked so grand, you'd think royalty lived there. It dated back to the mid-eighteenth century and at one time was considered the finest house in the province of Leinster. Designed by James Gandon for his old drinking buddy, the first Lord Davenport, the Hall boasted eight enormous reception rooms, a Ballroom, a Library, a Portrait Gallery (where, legend had it, Edward VII and his Irish mistress had once lost a fortune at cards), and no less than sixteen bedrooms. To the naked eye you would think that only a Lottery winner or else Michael Flatley could afford to live there. Until you opened the front door and saw the sorry state into which Davenport Hall had fallen.