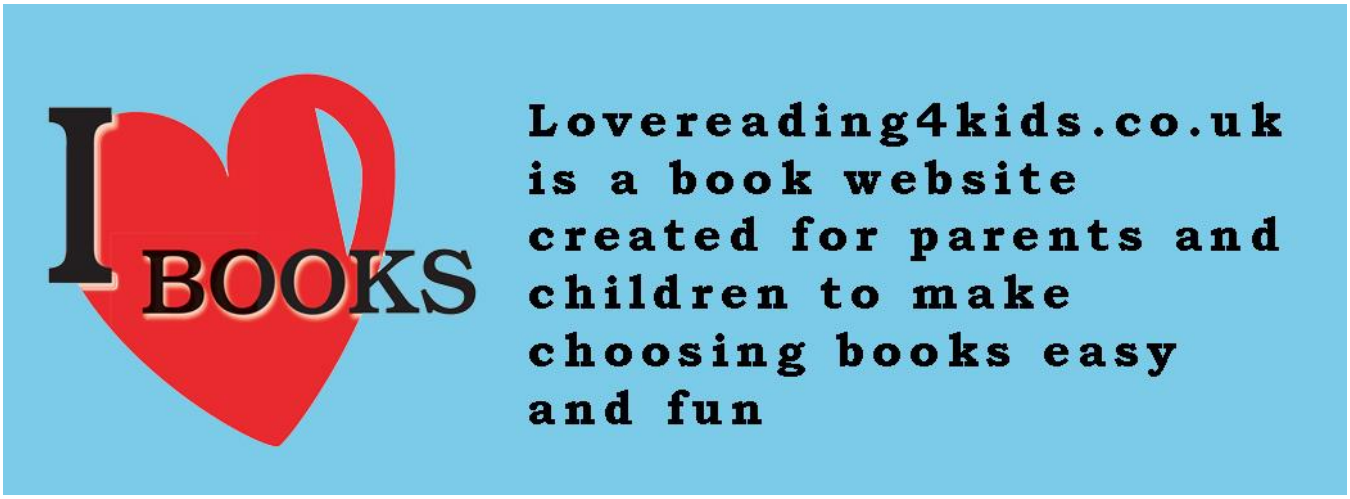


Opening extract from

The Dark Days Pact
A Lady Helen Novel

Written by

Alison Goodman

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GERMAN PLACE, BRIGHTON,
30 JUNE 1812

Delia, my dear friend,

I am now residing in Brighton for the summer season, and, according to my guidebook, your village is but twenty miles from this town. I urge you to write back promptly and name a day for me to call upon you and your parents.

I have a great deal to tell you, much of which will explain your Mr Trent's horrifying demise. I promise it will also put an end to your fear that you are going mad. All is not as it seems in this world, Delia – tricksters walk amongst us with deadly menace in their hearts – and I believe your recent encounter with this hidden realm entitles you to an explanation.

We must, however, find time to speak of this alone for I cannot offer the same explanation to your parents and restore their trust in you. It is unfair, I know, but my reasons are sound. My hope is that a formal call from myself and my chaperone, Lady Margaret Ridgewell, will soften their belief that you are ruined for decent society, and put a stop to any talk of confinement and sanatoriums.

I fear you did not receive my earlier letters. Therefore, I have instructed my messenger to place this in your hands, and yours only. He will return in two days for your reply.

Stand strong, my friend; I am nearby.

Helen

Chapter One

FRIDAY, 3 JULY 1812

At Lord Carlston's bidding, Lady Helen Wrexhall studied the gentleman walking rapidly towards them up the rise of Brighton's Marine Parade. Even at such a distance she could see that he was a thin, bitter-faced man in a sober blue coat, rather badly cut across his stooped shoulders, and an unfashionable tricorn hat drawn low over his brow.

"Can you really see him in detail from this far away?" Mr Hammond asked, squinting at the tiny figure. "He is little more than a blur to me."

"Of course she can: it is part of the gift," his sister said. "Do stop making comments, Michael."

"I can even see his expression, Mr Hammond," Helen said across Lady Margaret's rebuke. The woman was forever criticising and correcting. "I can report that the gentleman's countenance is quite sour. Probably a bad kipper for breakfast."

Mr Hammond laughed. "Bad kipper. Did you hear that, Margaret?"

"Quite," his sister said, her expression as sour as the one under discussion.

Lord Carlston thumped the ebony tip of his cane into the dirt path. "Lady Helen, focus. What do you notice about his gait?"

She smothered a sigh. So it was to be another lesson on manly pedestrianism. His lordship was adamant that she perfect a male disguise; their duties, he said, would take them into taverns and the like, and she must convince as a man. Clearly, however, she had not yet mastered her understanding of the masculine stride.

She studied his lordship from the corner of her eye. Today he looked older than his twenty-six years, weary and distant, the bold angles of his face set into stern command. The forbidding expression was becoming all too familiar. Ever since she had been cast out of her uncle's house four weeks ago, she had watched Lord Carlston retreat from the strange energy that leaped between them when they touched, pushing it behind his new role of instructor. It felt as if a shared pulse was slowly being extinguished. Yet what could she say? Nothing between them had ever been voiced, never *could* be voiced. He was, by law, still married. She must quash the energy too, although she did not know how. Whenever he guided her arm through a sword stroke or showed her how to punch, it felt as if her body were aflame.

He had noticed her scrutiny. She saw something flicker in his eyes – that pulse perhaps, not totally quelled – and then a lift of his dark slanted eyebrows called her to the task at hand. She shifted her parasol, taking refuge behind the green silk shield – *dear God, do not let him see the flush upon my cheeks* – and returned her attention to the fast-approaching figure.

"He moves his arms with vigour," she ventured. "And keeps his eyes to the fore."

"No, forget his eyes and arms. Do you see how each pace is

at least this long?" Lord Carlston's cane plunged into the dirt again, measuring a good length from the toe of his right hessian boot. "And despite those rounded shoulders, there is confidence in his upper body. You must take up more space when you walk and move with greater purpose."

Space and purpose. Helen took an experimental step alongside the flimsy fence that safeguarded the sheer drop to the beach. The hem of her promenade gown brought her up short, the sudden halt causing her touch watch to swing out on the end of its silk neck-cord and slap back against her ribs. Despite its compact size, the watch was no small weight – a product of the hidden crystal lens folded inside – and its impact left a definite sting even through her layers of muslin and lawn. She gathered up the green enamelled case and cupped it in her palm, the diamond arrow at its centre pointing to the large emerald set at the eleven o'clock mark. Lord Carlston had given her the watch to replace the miniature portrait of her mother that had contained its own lens and which she had lost to the enemy. A most forgiving gesture on his lordship's part considering the alchemy built into the miniature, and how dangerous it was to them all.

"Lady Helen?" Lord Carlston's voice sharpened. "Do I have your attention?"

She jerked her head up and let the watch drop back to the end of its cord. "Of course. More space and purpose."

She had no difficulty with the idea of more *purpose*. Surely that was just a matter of taking a longer stride – something that would be far more achievable when she was clad in breeches. Her long, lean measurements had already been given to a London tailor to sew her a pair of buckskins and all the other gentlemanly accoutrements. She was to be a fine young man, at least in the cut of her clothing. Her manner, however, was not

so easily stitched into masculinity. According to his lordship, she still needed to deepen her voice, be less careful with the placement of her arms and legs, and now also take up more *space*. No easy task since she had spent most of her life learning to control any excess gesture or movement. Nevertheless, she gathered up the hem of her gown, squared her shoulders and rocked forward onto the balls of her feet.

"For goodness' sake, you cannot go striding around with your skirts up," Lady Margaret hissed. "Someone may see."

"It is not as if she is galloping along the seafront in her chemise, my dear," Mr Hammond said.

"That may be so," his sister replied, her delicate features pinched beneath her straw-chip hat, "but it is past the breakfast hour and we are in full view of everyone's drawing rooms."

They all looked across at the row of houses that lined the Parade. Most of them were still shuttered, but enough had their windows exposed to the bright June morning to give credence to Lady Margaret's alarm.

"I doubt that one or two steps will bring us undone," his lordship told her, "but your caution is exemplary."

Helen let go of her skirts and turned towards the sea to hide her pique, her eyes fixed upon a three-masted war-sloop no doubt making its way to Plymouth before joining the newly declared war with the United States. Perhaps it could aim its cannons at Lady Margaret and her *exemplary caution* instead, Helen thought, then immediately felt churlish. The woman was irritating, but she and her brother had been valued members of the Dark Days Club for over five years, whereas Helen had only just joined the secret order that protected mankind from the Deceivers. And although Lady Margaret and her brother were not *Reclaimers* like herself and Lord Carlston – rare warriors born to fight the hidden creatures – it could not be denied

that they were also placing themselves in great danger. Not to mention the fact that they had been kind enough to take her in after she had been expelled from her Uncle Pennworth's house.

"You must weigh and consider every action now," Lady Margaret added, her severe tone drawing Helen around to face her again. "One slip and you will—"

"I am aware of it." Helen smiled through clenched teeth. "But I am obliged to you for the reminder."

Lady Margaret regarded her warily, clearly recognising the strain in her voice. They had been confined together over the past four weeks in a rented townhouse in German Place, not without some sharp words from both sides. The unhappy incarceration had been ordered by Lord Carlston as it was imperative to the Dark Days Club that Helen start her Reclaimer training in earnest. It was a time-consuming project, and his lordship had insisted that they establish a reason why such a well-connected young lady staying in Brighton would be absent from many of the town's social delights. Convalescence was the most believable excuse, and so Helen had stayed indoors alongside Lady Margaret and feigned poor health. She had also braved a visit from the proprietor of Awsiter's Baths with his foul elixir of seawater and milk, and engaged the services of Martha Gunn, a sturdy old woman who dipped young ladies in the sea for their health – both clear indicators to society that she had come to the seaside resort for her constitution and not for the busy Season.

When she had asked his lordship why they had not gone to a quieter town instead – to her mind, a perfectly reasonable question – he had merely given her an endless shark-eyed stare. One of his more maddening traits. At least her *convalescence* story was now established to his satisfaction, and this morning he was permitting them to unobtrusively walk into town to sign

the subscription book at Donaldson's Circulating Library: the very hub of fashionable Brighton life and, according to Lord Carlston, its centre of illicit information.

Helen felt her gaze drawn to him again. He was back to watching the progress of the man walking up the hill. The clean lines of his profile were set and unyielding and he reminded her of one of the Roman centurion statues she had seen in Bullock's Museum. Forever waiting for the enemy. Yet she could not forget that beyond those noble features she had seen a deep darkness within his soul. At first, she had thought it was the black mark of his wife's murder – a crime that he had never denied – but now she knew it was a slow poisoning from the Deceivers' foul energy. Every time he reclaimed a Deceiver's offspring back to humanity, the blight he ripped from its soul took root within his own. Helen knew that every Reclaimer had to eventually retire from saving souls else it would send them mad. Yet Mr Hammond had said his lordship refused to stop.

"I believe we are about to receive a visit from the Home Office," Lord Carlston said dryly, his attention still fixed upon the approaching figure. Helen looked back at the stooped man: his intention was now clearly aimed at the four of them.

Mr Hammond tilted back the brim of his beaver hat. "By Jove, is that—?"

"Ignatious Pike," Carlston said. "I recognised him when he started up the hill. Hard to mistake that deplorable Whitehall style."

Helen saw a fleeting frown tighten Mr Hammond's face, and knew he felt as exasperated as she did. If his lordship had known it was the government man all along, why had he not offered the information? He kept his own counsel too much. It was even more maddening than his shark-eyed stare.

"What is he doing here?" Lady Margaret asked.

"I would hazard a guess that the new Home Secretary has finally been informed about the Dark Days Club," Carlston said.

It was near two months since the Prime Minister, Lord Perceval, had been assassinated in the House of Commons. After much mayhem, His Royal Highness the Prince Regent had finally ratified a new government on the 8th of June, and along with it a new Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, who would, amongst other duties, oversee the clandestine Dark Days Club.

"Well, at least we do not have Ryder over us any more," Mr Hammond said.

Carlston nodded his agreement. "They could not keep him, not after he covered up Benchley's involvement in the Ratcliffe murders."

Just the mention of Lord Carlston's old Reclaimer mentor sent a crawling sensation across Helen's nape. It was Samuel Benchley who had forced her mother to absorb the Deceiver darkness within him and it had all but killed Lady Catherine's soul. He had planned to do the same to Helen, but her mother had bequeathed her a Colligat – an alchemical way to strip herself of her Reclaimer heritage – hidden in the miniature portrait alongside the Reclaimer lens. Benchley had attacked Helen in her uncle's house, bent on stealing the miniature and its power, but had been killed by the Deceiver posing as a footman in the household.

Even in the bright sunlight and warmth of the Brighton morning, Helen shuddered at the memory of Benchley's bulging eyes and popping veins as he died at the Deceiver's hands. The creature would have attacked her as well, but Lord Carlston had intervened and absorbed all of its lethal whip-energy. The Deceiver had then grabbed for the Colligat, and Helen had been forced to make a terrible choice: leap for the Colligat herself

and protect her only way to a normal life; or absorb half of the whip-energy raging through Lord Carlston and save his life but lose the Colligat.

She had flung herself atop the Earl and the intensity of that moment still sang in her blood. There had been so much power between them as their bodies locked together in an intimate embrace, which, if she were honest, had not been fuelled only by the overwhelming hold of the Deceiver energy. Even now, standing on the road above the beach, the memory of his arms around her brought a wave of heat across her skin. She found the lever on her parasol and pulled down the canopy, trying to distract herself from the disturbing images. Had she not just vowed to reject these wayward emotions?

With the parasol folded and her composure back in place, she turned her attention to the arrival of Ignatious Pike. He was taller than she had expected – the downhill perspective must have skewed her reckoning – and if he had stood straight, he would have been almost Lord Carlston's commanding height. He did not, however, have the Earl's breadth of shoulder nor his air of strength. Still, his breath was unhurried even after his rapid climb and he moved with some agility. The man was more athletic than his spindly, round-shouldered frame suggested.

He bowed to Carlston. "My lord." A cool glance took in Helen. "My lady, we are not yet acquainted. I am Ignatious Pike, Second Secretary to the Home Office."

Helen stared at him, taken aback. Was he grossly ill-mannered, or did his position allow him to sidestep the conventions of polite introduction? She looked across at his lordship, knowing he would see the question in her eyes. His answer came in the flick of one eyebrow and a wry cast to his mouth: *Acknowledge him*. So it was the latter: the man had some kind of status.

"How do you do, Mr Pike," she said, and found his gaze had narrowed into shrewd evaluation.

Two could play at that game: she met his close scrutiny with her own. It was difficult to place an age upon him. His face had a wizened quality, but his cold blue stare was bright, and his pasty skin still had the tautness of youth. No more than thirty, Helen guessed, and that was all she could glean from his sharp features. Usually she could read a person's truth within their face – it was one of the Reclaimer abilities – but this man was even more closed than his lordship.

He allowed a wintry smile of triumph to touch his lips: he had seen her attempt, *and* her failure.

"Mr Pike, I believe you are already acquainted with Lady Margaret and Mr Hammond," Lord Carlston said.

"Yes." Pike afforded the brother and sister a quick nod, before turning back to his lordship. "No doubt you know why I am here. You are requested to return to London immediately to meet with Lord Sidmouth. He has now been apprised of the Dark Days Club and its activities."

"Hopefully he will not be as corruptible as Mr Ryder," Mr Hammond said.

Pike turned a hard look upon him. "Mr Ryder made the necessary decisions to contain the damage created by Benchley and to protect the Dark Days Club from public knowledge." The hard look travelled to his lordship.

"I think we all know that those *necessary* decisions were more yours than Mr Ryder's," Carlston said. "You certainly know how to survive, Mr Pike."

"Your lordship gives me credit that I am not due."

Carlston made a small sound of disbelief. "Has our new Prime Minister been fully apprised of the Dark Days Club as well? *And* the current situation?"

Pike let the question hang between them for a moment, his icy smile appearing again. "Lord Liverpool has been fully briefed, and I assure you, he gives Lord Sidmouth his full support."

"I would not have thought otherwise."

Although Carlston's tone was pleasant, Helen heard the draw of steel within it. The two men, it seemed, were stepping back into an old battle.

Pike crossed his arms. "Neither of them is convinced by your evidence that a Grand Deceiver has arrived in England."

"Not convinced?" Helen exclaimed. "But the Deceiver who attacked me *said* he served a Grand Deceiver."

"They are Deceivers, Lady Helen," Pike said with a note of condescension in his voice. "They manage to live as humans and fool us all. Deception is their nature."

"And yet we saw a number of them working together at Bellingham's hanging," Carlston said. "You know that is out of the ordinary."

"It is," Pike allowed. "But nothing in the archives even hints that such an occurrence points to the arrival of a Grand Deceiver."

Carlston drew a breath through pinched nostrils. "Then what about Lady Helen herself? She is a direct inheritor; the Reclaimer daughter of a Reclaimer mother. That, at least, is documented."

The wave of a thin hand dismissed his lordship's words. Or, Helen thought, maybe it dismissed such a *female* lineage.

"If I remember correctly, that archive only states that a direct inheritor has powers beyond a normal Reclaimer, to stand against all that may come." Pike looked inquiringly at Helen.

She felt obliged to shake her head: she had not yet exhibited any extra powers. A small mercy in her opinion; she was having enough difficulty with the ones she already had.

"To stand against all that may come," Pike repeated. "Not a Grand Deceiver in particular; such a creature is never named. We cannot chase phantoms, Lord Carlston, especially with the Luddites rioting through the country and Bonaparte across the channel." He drew himself up. "You are expected at Lord Sidmouth's house to dine this evening, my lord. I suggest you start your journey as soon as possible."

He gave a small bow, his eyes meeting Helen's again for an odd, intense moment, then he turned and walked back the way he had come, looking neither to the left at the sea, nor to the right at the handsome row of houses. Mr Pike, it seemed, had not the time or inclination for a beautiful view.

Lady Margaret lifted her shoulders as if struck by a sudden chill. "Horrid man."

"Why does he not believe you?" Helen asked Lord Carlston. A jab of pain in her hand drew her attention to the fact that she was holding her parasol like a club, the lever biting into her palm. She eased her grip.

"Because it is I who brought the news," he said acidly. "Ignatious Pike is the bureaucratic heart of the Dark Days Club and its senior officer, yet he just delivered a summons that could easily have been carried by one of his underlings. So why did he make the journey?"

"Good point," Mr Hammond said. "Perhaps it was to acknowledge you as the new leader of the Reclaimers."

"No, he is here on some other business," his lordship said. "But what, I wonder."

Mr Hammond pulled his fob watch from his breeches' pocket. "He is right about one thing. If Sidmouth expects you tonight, that does not give you much time to get back to Mayfair. It is already near eleven thirty."

Helen calculated the journey. It had taken her and Lady

Margaret seven hours to travel to Brighton, but that had been in a coach-and-four, using the ill-matched teams that went for hire at the posting inns. His lordship had driven down in his curricle, a far lighter equipage, and he kept his own thoroughbreds stabled at the inns for each change. He could possibly make it back to London within five hours. Still, it would mean he would most probably not start his return to Brighton until the following morning.

The thought brought a small slump of disappointment. She had begun to look forward to her training. The long hours under his lordship's tutelage were never easy – he gave no quarter – but the challenge was exhilarating, and it took her away from Lady Margaret's *reminders* of her duty.

Now he would be away for a day. Probably two.

Two days without the chance of touching him.

She coughed, shocked by the thought. Could she not even last five minutes without her mind taking a lascivious path?

"I shall make London by evening, and return Sunday afternoon," Carlston said, confirming her estimate. Yet she heard something in his tone that made her observe him more closely. He was uneasy in a way she had not seen before.

He turned to address her, once more the stern instructor. "While I am away, I want you to start reading the Romford book on alchemy – pay particular attention to the binding rituals – and practise your male disguise. The pitch of your voice is coming along well, but your gait needs a lot more work. Mr Hammond, I trust you will assist Lady Helen and deal with any other issues that arise?"

Mr Hammond straightened. "Of course, sir."

"I take my leave then." Carlston bowed, then plainly bethought himself of something else and turned back to Helen, his eyes finding the touch watch around her neck. "When I gave

that to you, I am sure I told you not to wear it on your person."

"You said not to wear it on a chain." She hooked the cord around her thumb. "See, it is on silk. And you said the enamelling was made of glass and would insulate—"

"I said the enamelling *may* insulate the metal underneath from creating a pathway for a Deceiver's whip-energy. But do you really want to take the chance?"

"No."

"I thought not." His tone sharpened. "Carry it in your reticule, and listen more carefully."

Helen pulled the cord over her head, opened the tiny purse and dropped the dangling watch inside. "You wear yours," she muttered. Even to herself she sounded like a sullen child.

"I wear mine in a specially prepared leather-lined pocket in my breeches. As far as I know, ladies' gowns do not have pockets. Until they do, or you are wearing your own breeches, carry the watch in your reticule. For once, do as you are told."

Helen stiffened at the unfair criticism; she did everything she was told.

He pressed his fingers hard into his forehead. "I beg your pardon, Lady Helen. Forgive my ill humour. I clearly misled you regarding the effectiveness of the enamelling." With that, he strode away in the direction of his lodgings.

They watched his progress up the hill, each silent and unmoving as if his departure had somehow suspended them. At the corner of Camelford Street, he paused and looked back at them, then was gone.

"He is far more ill-tempered than usual," Mr Hammond said.

"It is just weariness," Lady Margaret said quickly. "They place too much upon him. It is a strain."

Helen glanced at her; she was half right. Lord Carlston

was weary and strained, but not only from the burden of his responsibilities. It was also the constant battle against the Deceiver darkness that shadowed his soul. She had seen the canker within him; had felt its corruption spreading, sapping the light from him, creeping a little deeper into his heart every time he reclaimed another Deceiver offspring. Yet he would not stop. Was it duty that compelled him to such risk, or something else?

She laid her hand on her chest where the touch watch had hung. There was only one known way to cleanse a Reclaimer's soul: by pouring the darkness into another Reclaimer and destroying them instead. It had been Benchley's despicable solution, but neither she nor his lordship would ever resort to such a heinous act.

She turned her gaze back to the empty street corner where his lordship had stood only moments before. Yet what would happen if Lord Carlston finally descended into the tormented madness of a poisoned soul?

She closed her eyes. Yes, what then?