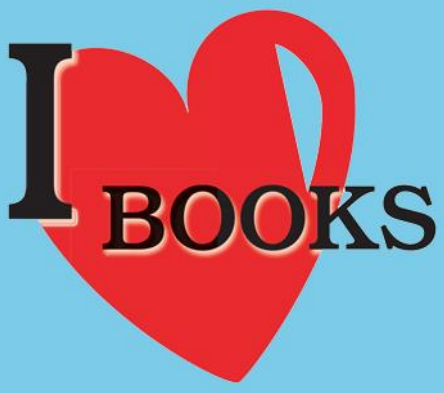


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Opening extract from

Lady Helen
The Dark Days Club

Written by

Alison Goodman

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Chapter One

WEDNESDAY, 29 APRIL 1812

In the sun-warmed quiet of her uncle's library, Lady Helen Wrexhall spread the skirt of her muslin morning gown and sank into the deep curtsey required for Royal presentation: back held straight, head slightly bowed, left knee bent so low it nearly touched the floor. And, of course, face set into a serene Court smile.

"Your Majesty is correct," she said to the blue brocade sofa doing duty as Queen Charlotte. "I am the daughter of Lady Catherine, Countess of Hayden."

Helen glanced sideways at her reflection in the glass-fronted bookcase that lined the wall: the best place in the townhouse to view the whole of her tall self. The curtsey was good – it should be, after so many weeks of practice – but she sounded far too surly. She tried again.

"Yes, Your Highness, I am indeed the daughter of Lady Catherine."

No, too jaunty. She rose from the curtsey and dropped the folds of her gown, opening her fingers into long spreads of frustration. Her aunt had told her to find a tone that acknowledged her connection to Lady Catherine, but also maintained a dignified distance from it. A great deal of meaning

to place upon a few words. She backed a few steps away from the blue silk bulk of the substitute Queen. Flanking Her Majesty were two matching brocade armchairs: the Princesses Mary and Augusta. Helen eyed the makeshift Royals, already sensing disaster. Tomorrow she would be curtseying to the real Royal ladies, and there could be no room for awkwardness or mistake. She had to have an answer ready about her mother, just in case Queen Charlotte mentioned the infamous Countess of Hayden.

It did not seem likely. Ten years had passed since Helen's mother and father had drowned at sea. Surely Lady Catherine would not be on the mind of a Queen burdened by a mad husband and a profligate son running the country to ruin. Helen pressed her palms together. Even she could not remember much about her mother. Lady Catherine's name was only uttered as a reproach in her aunt and uncle's house, and her brother never mentioned their mother any more. Yet that morning at breakfast, Aunt Leonore had suddenly told Helen to practise a graceful answer to a possible Royal inquiry. Perhaps the Crown never forgot a noblewoman whose name was shrouded in rumour. Especially when those rumours were wound tight around the word *treason*.

One more time then. Helen held up the edges of her gown and glided into the low obeisance. "Yes, Your Majesty. My mother was Lady Catherine."

That was better; the less said, the smaller the chance of making a mistake.

Helen lifted her face to receive the Royal kiss on her forehead, rose from the curtsey, then gathered up her imaginary train and backed away from the sofa – the most difficult manoeuvre in the whole Court Presentation. Lud, she hoped she did not trip or lose control of her curtsey tomorrow. It was the first official Queen's Drawing Room since the King's madness had returned

two years ago, and there had been a desperate scramble by mothers to secure their daughters a place on the presentation list. Aunt Leonore, who had lost her own daughter and only child at birth, had been at the forefront of the rush, and Helen had duly received her summons from the Lord Chamberlain. What if she wrecked the whole enterprise by stumbling? For a moment, she saw an image of herself sprawled on the polished Palace floor, the huge old-fashioned hoop skirt standing up around her like a frigate in full sail.

Helen sat on the sofa and slumped against the stiff cushions. It was no good dwelling on possible mishaps; she had done all that she could to prepare for the day. Her dance master had drilled her interminably on every movement of the ceremony. He'd even brought in his dainty wife to demonstrate how to slip a porcelain *bourdaloue* – shaped, amusingly, like a lady's slipper – up under the hoop of her Court gown in case she needed to relieve herself during the long wait to be called. Now *that* was a difficult manoeuvre, Helen thought, her unruly sense of humour rising into a smile. Especially in a screened corner of a Royal State Room. What if someone dropped one? Her imagination conjured the sound of smashing porcelain and the stink of warm, spreading piss. No, that would not be so funny. And she, for one, was not going to tempt fate. Tomorrow morning she would drink *nothing*. At least, nothing after her cup of chocolate.

On that sensible resolution, Helen turned her attention to the stack of ladies' magazines her aunt had left on the gilt side-table: an unsubtle reminder to find a riding dress that she liked. She picked up the new edition of *La Belle Assemblée* and curled her legs under herself on the sofa, tucking the hem of her gown around the soft soles of her kid slippers. Aunt would take a fit if she saw her sitting in such a graceless way, but she felt

so twitchy – so unbecomingly lively – that it was best to keep herself folded up as tight as a new parasol.

It was a bad case of presentation nerves. Nothing more.

She stared fiercely at the magazine, as if it could rid her of the knowledge that these *nerves* had appeared long before any thought of her presentation. They had started at least six months ago, just after her eighteenth birthday, a deep energy that made her follow her curiosity beyond the bounds of propriety. She had made midnight forays into her uncle's study and his private papers; paid breathless visits up to the silent attic stacked full of chairs; even danced a lone, wild reel in the billiard room. All, she had to admit, for no reason beyond the thrill of it, and the need to rid her body of this unseemly vigour.

The other explanation for her nerves sat at the back of her mind like a hundredweight: her mother's blood. Although never said aloud by her aunt and uncle, the fear that she would have her mother's wild streak had sat heavily upon their faces when they first took her in. Even then, when she was only eight years old, the implication had been clear to Helen: she must be on guard against her own nature. After all, it had been her mother's reckless pursuit of intrigue and excitement that had killed her and her husband, leaving their two children orphaned. Helen thought she had escaped that legacy of restless energy. She had read Mr Locke, and found his radical philosophy – that men created themselves from the sum of their own experiences and choices – far more amenable than the idea of a predestined nature. So, she told herself firmly as she turned pages, this worsening of her nerves did not mean she was like her mother. It was just a normal response to the prospect of curtseying before the Queen.

She lingered at a fascinating article about mythology, then resolutely flipped to the fashion pages, stopping at the

illustration of an impossibly elongated woman in a bright green riding outfit. Helen clicked her tongue. Apparently the fashions for Spring 1812 were to be more military than the army itself. The taste for black braid and frogged clasps had run wild.

"Barnett, where is my niece?"

Aunt Leonore's voice carried through the townhouse hallway to the library. Helen jerked upright. According to the gilt clock on the mantel, only twenty minutes had passed since her aunt had left to view the latest caricatures at Ackermann's Repository of Arts. It was usually a two-hour expedition; something must have happened.

She heard the butler's lower tones directing his mistress to the library, and then the increasing volume of her aunt's voice as she approached, talking as if she were already in the room. Helen swung her feet to the floor. Three quick flicks smoothed out the telltale creases in her muslin. She positioned the magazine on her lap and gave one last tug at the high waist of her bodice. The double doors opened halfway. Barnett stood for a stately moment in the gap: a well-judged pause in which a person could uncurl herself. But for once Helen was ready. The butler's eyes met hers in warm collusion, then he pushed the doors fully apart and stepped aside.

Aunt Leonore entered mid-sentence, still clad in her scarlet pelisse, working one blue glove from her hand, and trailed by Murphett, her lady's maid. "… you won't credit this, my dear, but I am sure it is the truth. I would not have given it a moment's notice if only Mrs Shoreham had the telling of it, but I met Lady Beck and you know I have the highest faith in her…" Aunt Leonore paused, searching for the right accolade.

"Her spies?" Helen supplied. She sent a quick glance of thanks to Barnett as he bowed and quietly backed from the room, drawing the doors closed.

Aunt Leonore stifled a smile. "You know very well I was not thinking such a thing. Her *prudence*." She held out the glove. Murphett promptly stepped forward to drape it over her arm.

"So what did the prudent Lady Beck tell you?" Helen asked, her curiosity sparking.

For an instant, Aunt Leonore's excited smile locked into a strange, stiff grimace. It was such a brief pause in the quicksilver of her expressions that Helen almost missed it. She focused more closely on her aunt's face: the grimace was gone, replaced by a tiny sideways pull of her mouth and a drawing around the eyes. Some kind of unhappy realisation, quickly hidden. Helen knew she was right: reading expressions was her one true accomplishment. When she concentrated properly on a face, her accuracy was startling and a little disturbing. It certainly made her aunt and uncle uneasy, and they had forbidden her to voice her observations about anyone, especially themselves. Girls were meant to paint screens, sob out ballads and play the pianoforte, not see through the masks of polite society.

"It is very cold out today," her aunt said. "I hope we do not have another spring like last year."

The abrupt change of subject silenced Helen for a moment. Aunt was definitely hiding something. She tried again. "What did Lady Beck say to bring you back so soon?"

Her aunt started work on the other glove, her eyes finding *La Belle Assemblée* on Helen's lap. "Did you find a riding habit you like? We must discuss the design with Mr Duray this week if we want it before the Season truly starts."

The tightness around her aunt's mouth – a clear refusal – stopped Helen asking a third time. She would wait until Murphett left the room.

"I have found nothing I like," she said. "The gowns this Season are all so overdone."

She wrinkled her nose, belatedly remembering that she had resolved not to do so any more. She knew it was not her best feature, being a little on the long, narrow side, but then she was painfully aware that almost everything about herself was on the long, narrow side. As well as being much taller than average, she was scarecrow-thin according to her older brother, Andrew, although her friends assured her she was celestially slender. Even so, Helen had a mirror and she knew she was a Long Meg who definitely did not look adorable when she wrinkled her nose.

Aunt Leonore pulled the second glove free. "You would dress yourself like a Quaker if I let you."

Helen held up the magazine, still open at the offending illustration. "But look, at least twenty-five frogs on the bodice alone. Is it too much to ask for a dress that won't scare the horse?"

Aunt Leonore gave her loud cackle – the one that had earned her the title "Lady Laugh" amongst her friends and "Lady Hee-Haw" amongst her enemies. "Not this Season, my dear. It is all military flim-flam."

"Bonaparte has a lot to answer for," Helen said. "First Europe, and now our fashion." She flipped the magazine closed and rested it on her lap.

"You really do have your mother's grim sense of humour." Aunt Leonore lifted her chin as Murphett unbuttoned the bodice of her pelisse. "God rest her soul."

Helen kept her eyes down, feigning interest in the magazine's cover. It was best not to show any response to the rare mentions of her mother, especially those concerning shared traits. They were never meant as a compliment.

"Promise me you won't make such deplorable jests at Almack's," her aunt continued.

"No jests," Helen promised dutifully, but could not help

adding, “Perhaps I should not speak again until I am married.”

Her aunt gave a soft snort. “That would certainly help my nerves.” She held out her arms, and Murphett deftly pulled the scarlet coat free. “No, my dear, I don’t want you to be silent. That would be just as bad. Promise me you will have some proper conversation ready for your dance partners. And make your little quips less political. It does not do for a girl your age to be so aware.” She settled on the sofa next to Helen.

“Will that be all, my lady?” Murphett asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

As Murphett curtseyed and exited, pulling the doors closed, Aunt Leonore’s face sagged into the worn pathways of her fifty-four years. She tweaked and smoothed the folds of her blue walking dress, the rearrangements bringing a waft of rose perfume from the fine crepe. Helen saw the fussing for what it was – procrastination – and studied her aunt’s features again. A mix of sadness and anxiety.

The sadness disappeared, replaced by irritation. “Do stop staring, Helen.”

Helen picked at a loose thread in the binding of *La Belle Assemblée*. “What is troubling you, Aunt? Something has taken the excitement from your news.”

“You read me, didn’t you?” her aunt said. “You know your uncle and I have asked you not to do so.”

“I am sorry. I could not help seeing it.”

Aunt Leonore sighed, part resignation, part concern. “I suppose I cannot hide the truth; it will come to your ears soon enough. When I came in, I suddenly recalled that you have more than a passing acquaintance with Delia Cransdon. The news is about her, I am afraid. Now, I don’t want you to get upset. Tomorrow is such an important day.”

Helen stopped pulling at the thread, her hand stilled by a

sudden sense of foreboding. While Delia was not her closest friend – that special place belonged to the Honourable Millicent Gardwell – she was nonetheless one of Helen's cronies from her year at Miss Holcromb's Select Seminary. "Delia is not ill, is she?"

"Worse," Aunt Leonore said, pity drawing down the corners of her mouth. "Three days ago, she ran off with a man by the name of Trent, and there has been no marriage."

Helen's breath caught in her chest. If it was true, Delia was ruined. "No. That is not possible."

Or was it? Helen thought back over the last few months and had to admit she had seen despair growing in her friend's eyes. Delia had made her debut the Season before last, but had received no offers of marriage. She had none of the essential *three* – beauty, high connections or fortune – and, at twenty years of age, knew she was coming to the end of her opportunities. She had even confided in Helen and Millicent that all she could see ahead was spinsterhood and its associated humiliations. Had that bleak future forced her to run away with a man who was little more than a stranger?

Helen shook her head. "I cannot believe Delia would do such a thing. Lady Beck must be mistaken."

"Her housekeeper had it from the Cransdons' cook," Aunt Leonore said, sealing the truth of the matter. "It seems Delia and this Mr Trent were discovered in a public house, in Sussex of all places. You know what that means, don't you? Sussex is in the opposite direction to Scotland; they were not headed towards the border to be married." She clasped her hands together, the pressure pushing purple into her knuckles. "I suppose I must tell you all, since it will be the talk tomorrow. Lady Beck says your poor friend was found covered in blood."

"Blood!" Helen rose from the sofa, unable to sit quietly

alongside such terrible news. "Was she hurt?"

"Apparently not."

"Then whose blood was it? Mr Trent's?"

"My dear, prepare yourself," Aunt Leonore said softly. "The man committed self-murder. He used a pistol, in front of Delia."

Suicide? Helen closed her eyes, fighting back the horror that rose like bile into her throat. The worst crime – the worst sin – of all, and Delia had witnessed it. Unbidden, her mind conjured a vision of her friend's face splattered with blood, mouth open wide in an unending scream.

"And there is something more," her aunt continued, rescuing her from the terrifying image. "A groom from the public house vows he saw Mr Trent through the window, lit from within as if he had those new gas candles under his skin. He says Mr Trent," her voice lowered into breathy significance, "must have been a ghoul."

"Ghouls do not exist, Aunt," Helen said sharply, finding comfort in the solid ground of rationality. She did not share her aunt's fascination with the demons and ghosts of Gothic novels. Yet the shocking image of blood and fear still resonated through her bones. She walked across to the front window and stared out at the everyday activity on Half Moon Street, as if seeing the row of townhouses and the aproned oyster man delivering his barrels would somehow rid her of its grisly echoes. Poor Delia. How she must be suffering.

"Did she ever say anything about Mr Trent?" Aunt Leonore asked. "He did not seem to have any connections, and no one has any knowledge of him. It is all very strange. One could even say unnatural." She clearly did not want to give up the idea of supernatural intervention.

"Delia never mentioned a Mr Trent," Helen had to admit, "and I'm sure she would have told me if she had a suitor. It

cannot be more than a fortnight since I saw her last." She made a quick count back to the last pre-Season assembly they had both attended. "No, it has been over a month." She turned from the window. "I saw her despair growing, Aunt. I should have called on her more often, but I have been too busy with these silly preparations."

Even as she uttered the word "silly" Helen knew it was a misstep.

Aunt Leonore drew a deep breath. "They are not silly preparations. Tomorrow must be perfect in all ways. *All ways*. Come back here and sit down. I have nightmares of you loping around like that in front of the Queen."

Since every move in the presence of Queen Charlotte was strictly controlled by the Palace chamberlains, Aunt Leonore's horror was not going to come to pass. Nevertheless, Helen returned to the sofa and lowered herself onto the very edge of the seat. Perhaps if she sat very still, her aunt would not be compelled to launch into another lecture about the importance of a young lady's Court Presentation.

"Preparation is the key to elegance," her aunt continued, "and although we may not be beauties, we can be celebrated for our elegance. It lasts longer than beauty and…"

Helen clenched her hands in her lap, trying to squeeze away the urge to spring up and pace the room as her aunt talked. Poor Delia must be beside herself.

"… aside from a girl's wedding day, her presentation is the most momentous day in her life. It is a declaration to society that she is a woman and ready to take on a woman's responsibilities. Are you listening to me, Helen?"

"Yes, Aunt."

Of course she knew that her entrance into society was important. Yet the initial excitement of stepping into the wider

world had long been overshadowed by the fact that it was all aimed at her own marriage. Not that she was against marriage; quite the contrary. It brought with it a household and the greater freedoms of a married woman. No, what grated was her uncle's intention to arrange her betrothal by the end of the year, as if an alliance in her first Season would prove that his good *ton* had finally overcome the taint of her mother.

Perhaps she was being singular again, but she wanted more than just one Season to meet the men of her circle. At present, she could claim only one truly congenial acquaintance amongst them – her brother's closest friend, the Duke of Selburn – and while he was very personable, one man of nearly thirty years of age was hardly a full exploration of possible life mates. It seemed patently obvious to Helen that no one's real character could be discovered in a few months of balls and parties – even with her special talent to read expressions – yet that was how many matches were made. Millicent, who had also secured a place on the presentation list, had no qualms about a quick betrothal, but poor Delia had understood Helen's stance. Indeed, when they were all at Miss Holcromb's, three years past now, it had been Delia who had always tempered their daydreams with the knowledge that once a choice of husband was made, it was final. There could be no appeal to law or family.

Helen straightened at the memory of Delia's caution. What had made her friend forget her convictions and rush into such an unfortunate and tragic alliance?

"Aunt, I cannot reconcile this with the Delia that I know," she said, turning the conversation back to the plight of her friend. "I cannot understand it at all."

"No one can know the secrets of another person's soul," Aunt Leonore said. "Perhaps she was unbalanced by her feelings."

"Delia is not the kind of girl to be sent mad by love," Helen

said. She looked at the clock again. It was only a quarter past two – still time to make a call. "I know you want me to rest, Aunt, but may we call on the Cransdons? Please. Delia must be distraught."

"I am sorry for your friend's unhappy situation, Helen, but you cannot associate with her now. You must know that."

Helen sat even straighter, this time in protest. "I cannot abandon her."

"You are a sweet girl, but the family has already left for their estate. I could not sanction a visit anyway. Not now." Aunt Leonore pressed her hand over Helen's, the chill of the spring day still on her skin. "You do understand that it is best that she is removed to the country. Her fall is the talk of the town; staying here would be intolerable for her poor family. She would be the object of every quiz's gaze and society's disgust."

"I will not let her think I've turned my face," Helen said.

Aunt Leonore glanced at the closed doors and lowered her voice. "Write her a letter, then. I can allow that. And I will make sure your uncle franks it before he hears of the scandal."

"But, Aunt, Delia was going to come to my ball. And she was to make up one of my party at Lansdale for Michaelmas."

"I am afraid that is all in the past."

"Please, say she may still come to Lansdale."

"Good Lord, child. After this, your uncle would not hear of it."

"Surely we have enough credit to survive a visit from one girl," Helen said, unable to hold back the sharpness in her voice. "On Uncle's own estate."

"I am thinking of you, Helen. I cannot allow you to be associated with such wanton and ungodly behaviour."

"But in country society she will not be—"

"I am sorry." Helen saw real regret in the slump of her

aunt's shoulders. "You cannot afford to be associated with *any* scandal. You know why."

Helen bowed her head. She did know why: the daughter of Lady Catherine would be watched by the *beau monde* for any sign of bad blood. Even by association.

"You do understand, don't you?" her aunt added.

"Yes, of course."

Aunt patted her hand. "You are a good girl. I have always said it."

They both looked up as clattering hooves sounded on the narrow street outside. A smart phaeton passed recklessly close to their front window, two straining greys in the traces. For a moment, the brash eyes of the high-seated driver connected with Helen's, his wild exhilaration leaping across the well-ordered room. Helen found herself leaning forward, as if dragged into the wake of such abandon. What if she just ordered one of her uncle's carriages and caught up with Delia on the open road? A mad idea, but it flared hot for a moment in her veins.

"Someone should put a stop to such wicked driving in Mayfair," Aunt Leonore said, glaring at the now-empty street. She gave Helen's hand one last squeeze. "Write the letter, my dear, but do not dwell on your friend's disgrace. You must put it out of your mind."

"I will try," Helen said, and, as she had done many times in the last few months, quelled the inner fire that rushed through her body. Although she did not want to admit it, she could not escape the thought that it was her mother's blood that burned within her, nor the fact that it seemed to be getting stronger.