



## Stone Stone



Night Shift Publishing

Prelude to a Haunted Evening
A Haunted Regency Teaser
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Smashwords Edition

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Highfield Park, Buckinghamshire ~ October 1, 1816

Lady Hope Post dropped into the chair at her dressing table and grinned at the brown package from Miss Margaret Baxter in her hands. Of course, the package wasn't really from Henry's maiden aunt. But he couldn't send her a package under his own name, now could he?

They'd exchanged letters all summer long in such a fashion. Hope sending letters, scented with rosewater to Miss Margaret Baxter of Chivelesworde Abbey in Leicestershire, while Miss Baxter was actually residing in northern Yorkshire with another side of the family altogether. And Henry, as Miss Baxter, sent her one love letter after another, and the sheer number of them were enough to make Hope swoon.

But this was more than a letter. *This* was a package. And her fingers nearly shook with excitement as she fiddled with the cord to open the blasted thing. But there was nothing for it. Henry had outdone himself in the wrapping. So she leapt out of her chair, crossed the room to her small sewing box and retrieved a pair of shears she hadn't used in quite some time. After all, Henry found needlepoint a rather tedious chore, and so Hope didn't see why she should have to participate in the activity any longer. After they were married, she certainly wouldn't have to do so, and there was no need to pretend to enjoy it now.

She rushed back to her dressing table and very carefully snipped the cord around the package as well as the edge of the brown paper to open her gift at once.

A little jewelry box spilled out onto the table and Hope touched a hand to her heart. It was no wonder he'd tied it so securely. What in the world had he sent her?

She quickly opened the little box and gasped. She couldn't help it. The prettiest pear-shaped emerald and diamond earbobs glistened in the late afternoon light and quite took her breath away.

"Heavens!" she whispered and removed one of the emeralds from the box and held it up next to her ear so she could see her reflection in the mirror. Then she turned her head this way and that so the jewel could catch the light from different angles. They were the most beautiful earbobs in the world.

After admiring the stone a moment more, Hope returned it to the box and opened the note that accompanied the gift.

My Dearest Hope,

Every day that am I away from you, I find I miss you even more desperately than the day before. Though it is a poor substitute, at least I have my memory of your smile and laugh to keep me warm at night while we are apart.

I eagerly await the chance to hold you in my arms once more at the Marisdùn Castle masquerade, and hope that you will forgive the boldness of my gift. I could not resist having these earbobs made for you as the color of the emerald reminded me so much of your dazzling eyes.

I do hope you will wear them that night so that I might find you more quickly amongst the crowd, allowing us to spend as much time as possible in each other's arms.

Until we meet again, I am your humble servant,





Prestwood Park, Buckinghamshire ~ October 11, 1816

Lady Patience Post launched herself onto her friend Lady Veronica Ashbee's four-poster and sighed. "I do wish you could travel with us." The journey to Cumberland would be so much more fun with her dear friend, after all.

Veronica shuddered. "I don't think I'd enjoy staying in a haunted castle." Then she sat on the edge of her bed. "Do you really think it's haunted?"

Oh, Marisdùn was quite haunted. Patience was certain of that. While her brother Quent might be prone to exaggeration from time to time, her oldest brother Braden was about as staid as one could possibly get. And it had been Braden's now wife who had completely vanished into a garden hedge last year with the aid of a malevolent spirit. Patience wasn't quite certain how they got Callie back on this side of the veil, actually. Her brother and his wife had been rather vague about the whole thing. But they were of a mind as far as Marisdùn's haunting went. "Braden says it is."

Veronica winced. "Why don't you stay here with me, instead? We would have a wonderful time with everyone else off to Cumberland. And there are no ghosts at Prestwood Place."

Tempting as that might be, not everyone else was going to be off to Cumberland. "Mama will still be at Highfield. If I don't go with Quent and the others, I'll be stuck at home with Mama." She almost shuddered herself at

the thought. Her mother, after all, was not the warmest of ladies on her best day. "Besides, we've vowed to help Quent find his vanished angel. So I have to go."

"Vanished angel?" Veronica frowned. "Who is that? A ghost or something?"

Drat! Patience shouldn't have said that. Keeping secrets really was most difficult. "Possibly," she hedged, as she wasn't one to lie. But then, she'd already told Veronica part of it. She could trust her friend with the rest, couldn't she? "He's fallen for this angel, Veronica," she confided, dropping her voice to a whisper. "He just doesn't know who she is."

"And she might be a ghost?"

"Who's to say at Marisdùn?" Patience said, warming to the story. "She waltzed with him last year at the Samhain masquerade. And she kissed him before vanishing."

"Vanishing like a *ghost*?" Veronica's brow creased even more. "Into thin air, you mean?"

"No, no, into the crush of people," Patience assured her friend. "He's been looking for her ever since, but it was..."

"A masquerade," Veronica supplied.

"Exactly. Dratted masks and all that. So he's decided to duplicate last year's festivities right on down to the guest list in the hopes that his angel will reappear. Isn't it romantic?"

"You weren't there last year."

And neither were Patience's identical sisters Hope and Grace either, but... "Well, he knows none of us are his angel. But we're to help him look for her during the masquerade. The more eyes the better, you know?"

"I can see Grace helping, but Hope..."

"Will probably find a way to escape off with Lord Kilworth, who *will* be there, unfortunately."

"Why in the world would your brother invite *him* after that romp through the Serpentine?"

Patience breathed out a sigh, remembering the unfortunate scene from the last season. It was a wonder Hope still had a decent name to recommend her. "As I said, Quent's duplicating the guest list, and..."

"Certainly he doesn't think Lord Kilworth is his vanished angel," Veronica giggled and dropped onto her side beside Patience. "What a surprise that would be."

Patience winced slightly. "I do believe the earl may have brought a companion or two along with him last year." At least that was what she'd heard Braden say, though she wasn't supposed to have heard him say it.

Veronica looked as though she smelled something awful, and Patience couldn't help but giggle at her expression. "And does Hope know that?" she asked.

It never mattered what one told Hope about Lord Kilworth. She was desperately in love with the scoundrel and nothing anyone said made a whit of difference one way or another. "I'm certain Grace and I will have to keep one eye on Hope and one eye on the crowd for Quent's angel the entire time."

"Well, now I am curious to know if he'll find her. You'll have to write me after the masquerade and tell me how the great angel hunt goes."

"And do write me. We'll be at Braewood Manor in Ravenglass. I'll leave you the direction."

"I thought you said, you were going to be at Marisdùn." Her friend looked completely confused all of a sudden.

"For one night we will be. But once Braden and Callie arrive, we'll have to join them at Callie's brother's for the duration. I think its Braden's attempt to keep Hope away from Lord Kilworth."

"Well, that could work," Veronica said, sounding hopeful about the whole thing. "Oh, I can't wait to tell Oliver about all of this."

Tell her brother? Patience gulped. She wasn't even supposed to have told Veronica. If Quent found out... "You must promise not to tell anyone."

Her friend shook her head. "I won't tell anyone. Just Oliver. He can keep a

secret."



Highfield Park, Buckinghamshire ~ October 12, 1816

It was all Lady Grace Post could do to keep from grinding her teeth in frustration. There was, after all, no good reason in the world why Oliver Ashbee, the infuriating Earl of Prestwood, should be at Highfield. After all, there was nothing for him at The Park, as she was very aware.

Honestly, if he had any decency at all, he would keep himself at Prestwood Place and...Well, stay there forever. And yet Oliver had no decency at all, it seemed as he was once again standing just inside the threshold of the music room at Highfield Park and smiling at Grace with that slightly wicked smile of his. That smile that long ago robbed her of her good sense.

"Don't let me stop you," he drawled, and gestured to her pianoforte. "I do love to hear you play."

As though she would let him stop her from doing anything she wanted. Grace pushed off the bench. "Alas, I am through playing and am quite finished in here. Do excuse me." She started to brush past him, and would have succeeded if he hadn't put out his arm to stop her.

"Running from me again, Grace?"

Only as fast as she was able. Not that she'd ever admit that to anyone, most especially *him*. "How arrogant you are to think everything revolves around you, Oliver."

"I learned quite some time ago it does not." He heaved a sigh. "Are you really headed to Cumberland?"

Not that it was any of his concern, but Grace nodded anyway. "Tomorrow."

"For Quent's masquerade?"

Certainly *Oliver* wasn't going to be judgmental about a masquerade. "Indeed. He convinced Mama and Braden that we will have a delightful time." And that she and her sisters wouldn't get into any trouble, not that she was about to say part aloud.

"And help him search for his missing angel?" Oliver's piercing blue eyes focused on her, and if she was more foolish, the intensity of his stare would have robbed her of her breath.

But Grace was far from foolish, at least she wasn't any longer. "He told you about his angel?" Her brother hadn't really told anyone except their family and his closest friends, and she hadn't thought Oliver qualified as the latter.

"Some girl who waltzed with him, kissed him and then disappeared at last year's Samhain masquerade," he replied as though he was quite in the know. And, somehow, he was, though that didn't make any sense at all.

"Yes, well, Braden thinks the girl is a figment of Quent's imagination."

"What do you think?" he asked, and she hated that the scent of his sandalwood shaving lotion invaded her senses. He would be much easier to get over if she never had to see him again.

"I think Hope, Patience and I will have a delightful time in Ravenglass whether there is a missing angel to be found there or not."

"At haunted Marisdùn Castle?" His eyes twinkled, blast him. She wasn't even trying to be charming. Couldn't he stop his eyes from twinkling in her direction?

"Don't tell me you're afraid of ghosts, Oliver." Grace lifted her brow rather haughtily.

His smile turned up at the edges. "I'm afraid of you falling prey to the

worst sort of villains in Cumberland. Dark corridors in haunted castles... and scoundrels like Kilworth lurking about. Do be careful."

She barely kept from snorting. She wasn't about to fall prey to *Kilworth* of all the blasted rakes in England. If only her sister Hope wasn't quite so enthralled with the man. But that was neither here nor there. "If I have learned to keep myself safe from the blackguards of Prestwood Place, I am certain Marisdùn Castle won't be a challenge at all."

"Am I a blackguard now?" he asked softly.

He was worse than a blackguard and he knew it, and she absolutely hated that the softness of his voice could still make tingles race across her skin. "I would rather face all the ghosts, phantoms and tortured souls who reside at Marisdùn than to ever encounter *you* again. And, yet, here you are at Highfield, once more, anyway."

"Just be careful, Grace. The place is dangerous from what I hear."

Her brother's castle could be teeming with spirits and it would be far safer for Grace to be *there* with them than to be alone with Oliver Ashbee *here*. "No need for concern. Besides—" she finally pushed passed him into the corridor "—I'm certain you should be much more concerned about your *intended* than you should be about me."

Then she strode down the corridor and was relieved that she hadn't stumbled or that her voice hadn't cracked during that entire exchange. Falling in love had been torturously painful for her, but it didn't have to be that way for Quent. If her brother had any hope of finding his missing angel at Marisdùn Castle, Grace would do anything she could to help him find her. And at least she'd be far away from Oliver Ashbee in the process.

Tomorrow morning. They'd leave at first light and she could put some distance between herself and the completely unavailable Earl of Prestwood.



Lord Quentin Post frowned slightly at his old neighbor, standing outside the music room. It had been quite an age since he'd landed eyes on Prestwood. He'd never quite understood what his brother had seen in the man. "Braden taken to playing piano these days?"

Prestwood smiled, stepping closer to Quent. "What has it been, a million years?"

"Give or take a thousand, I suppose." He offered his hand to his brother's friend. "How are you, old man?"

"Wonderful, wonderful. Hoping to get Braden's opinion on Cleasby's stud."

Nobody in their right mind would want Cleasby's stud. The man didn't know the first thing about cattle. "And what did my brother say?"

"Haven't seen him yet. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

"Well," Quent laughed. "I did horrible on the circuit this year, worst I've ever done. And I *still* finished heads and tails above Cleasby. I wouldn't buy a thing the man has to sell. Not one thing."

"Good to know."

Why in the world was Prestwood interested in a stud anyway? He'd never showed any interest in stocking his stables. "Planning on joining the circuit?"

He shrugged slightly. "Possibly. Anything to distract from *ennui*, you know?"

No one stocked their stables as a distraction from *ennui*. A man stocked his stables because he was driven to do so. Because the thrill of the race was

in his blood. Because of the speed, the dirt, the adrenaline pumping through his veins. *Ennui*. What a ridiculous thing to say. "Yes, well, best of luck with that." He started down the corridor.

But Prestwood fell into line beside Quent. "I understand you're headed off to Cumberland tomorrow."

Quent nodded, not that he was going to get into the particulars with Prestwood. "Yes, Braden's gifted me with the place and I may take up residence there." But at the moment, Quent could only think about finding his angel. It was almost upon them, his masquerade. It was almost time to welcome half of London into his haunted castle again and hope that one of his many guests was his angel in disguise. It was well past time that he found the girl, drew her into his arms and kissed her once more.

"You're taking your sisters this year?"

Damn. Was Prestwood still there? "It took a solid year, but I finally convinced Braden that they should be allowed to attend. They're looking forward to it, each of them."

"You're not worried about their safety?" the earl asked, sounding quite a bit like Braden, actually.

"If I was worried about their safety, I wouldn't suggest they attend." And really, it was none of Prestwood's concern anyway.

Luckily, Quent's older brother Braden chose that moment to exit his study, and he greeted Prestwood much more warmly than Quent had done. "Ah, Oliver! I was hoping that was your voice I heard."

Quent nodded briefly to his brother and Prestwood and started for the family wing. He found all three of his sisters in a small siting room. Hope was dashing off a letter. Patience was working on her needlepoint and Grace looked to be in a temper, though if any of them were to be in a temper, it was usually Grace.

"Are you all ready for the morning?" he asked the room at large.

Three identical smiles flashed on the triplet's faces.

"Never more ready to leave Highfield than I am now," Grace muttered,

mostly to herself.

"I'm hoping for a grand adventure." Patience said. "After we help you find your angel, of course."

"Of course," Hope agreed, her green eyes rounded in abject innocence. "We will not rest or even think about ourselves until your angel has been found."

Innocent, Hope was not. "No Kilworth," Quent reminded her. "I gave my word to Braden."

Hope looked offended all of a sudden. "Quent! Do you honestly think I'm thinking of myself when you have an angel that needs to be found?"

There was no doubt in Quent's mind that Hope's own interests were in the forefront of her mind, but he really could use all the help he could get in Ravenglass. "No Kilworth," he repeated, though he didn't really have to worry about the scoundrel, did he? After all, his friends David Thorn and Sidney Garrick would be around to keep an eye on the triplets too. And, of course. Braden.

Quent bit back a laugh. Why was he even worried about Kilworth? Braden wouldn't let Hope out of his sight. "And your help in searching out my angel is quite appreciated."

Just one more night until they were on the road to Ravenglass. Just one more night until he started for his own castle. Just one more night, and then he'd be that much closer to the one girl who had haunted his dreams for nearly a year.

But one more night was going to be one devil of a wait...

Don't miss the search for Lord Quentin's angel in <u>ONE MORE HAUNTED</u> <u>EVENING</u>.

## About the Author

Ava Stone is a USA Today bestselling author of Regency historical romance and college age New Adult romance. Whether in the 19th Century or the 21st, her books explore deep themes but with a light touch. A single mother, Ava lives outside Raleigh NC. She travels extensively, always looking for inspiration for new stories and characters in the various locales she visits.

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