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BY HANNAH NICOLE MAEHRER

*Assistant to the Villain*

*Apprentice to the Villain*

*Accomplice to the Villain*

# ACCOMPLICE TO THE VILLAIN

HANNAH NICOLE MAEHRER



PENGUIN BOOKS



*Once upon a time...*

**E**vie Sage's first month working for The Villain had been rather unconventional, though at least not cataclysmically shocking. A spilled cauldron brew here, a poisoned intern there. But there *had* been a few strange...incidents. The most recent being her summoned into work two hours early for a meeting she was almost certain could've been a short message sent through the ravens.

*Find better things to complain about, Evie! Like the hand you found in the reuse bin last week!*

Although that had at least given her the opportunity to ask the boss if he *needed an extra set of hands*. The frank horror on his face had caused her to laugh so hard, she nearly made herself sick.

It was mildly disconcerting that he was more offended by her harmless jokes than the foreign limb he'd lobbed in with the discarded parchment—Becky *hated* when they mixed anything in with parchment recycling—but she digressed.

Sighing and wiping the sleep from her eyes, she watched as the invisible barrier around Massacre Manor wavered underneath her fingers. Her attention flickered to the rising sun leaking color into the still-darkened sky. It looked as though someone had spilled orange and pink inks onto a dark-gray tapestry—pretty, if anything could be so before eight in the morning.

Marv, the Malevolent Guard at the front gate, gave her a gentle wave, and she smiled brightly at him, blowing a kiss that pinked his cheeks. "Good morning, Ms. Sage! Early bird gets the worm?" His normally wild hair was contained underneath a red leather helmet while Evie's was plaited to the side, a few loose hairs pulling free around her face as they swayed in the early-morning breeze.

She stepped back as the large wooden door slid open with a familiar creaking, the damp chill of the entrance hall cooling her cheeks and filling her senses with the smell of wood burning and musty walls. "More like the early bird doesn't get fired...and knowing the boss, that would be literal, I'm afraid."

Marv's chortle sounded behind her as her heels clicked on the stone floor, the torchlight brightening the room and warming it against the morning air. A low groaning echoed from the other end of the large, open space, near the only corner that was shrouded in darkness.

Her brow furrowed as she waved a hand forward. "Hello? Whatever creepy sound you're trying to make, can you kindly do it under the torchlight so I can see you? That way I can scream properly."

"Sage?" The rasp of The Villain's voice caused a tingle of sensation to move down her spine. "You shouldn't be here," he grunted out, his dark shape inching toward the edge of the shadows that cloaked him.

She huffed and quirked a brow, folding her arms and pushing her thick braid behind her shoulder. "On that, we agree. I should still be in bed, curled up with my favorite nighttime companion."

She thought she heard him choke. "Companion?" There was an odd sound of warning in the word that made her shiver just slightly.

"Yes." She crossed her arms. "His name is Mr. Muffins."

"Mr. Muffins?" She could see his shadow inching closer to the light, his voice gruff and laced with confusion. "You're laying with a man called Mr. Muffins? Who in the deadlands is named something so ridiculous?"

She bit her lip to keep from smiling at his obvious outrage. "A teddy bear I've had since I was six."

There was a long silence before a flat word broke it. "Oh."

She snorted and walked closer, as did he, finally washing himself in the light of the torches and the colors seeping into the room from the rising sun. She halted a few feet from him, eyes widening when she saw his face, words falling off her tongue before she could think better of them. "Wow, you look... terrible."

The cobwebbed logical part of her brain sighed and rolled over so it wouldn't have to witness what came next.

The boss's normally tailored stubble was overgrown into a near beard, his shirt untucked, his hair mussed, and his normally pressed pants wrinkled beyond reason. "I beg you not to shower me with compliments, Sage. I hardly know what to do with them."

Worry wove itself into the bottom of her stomach. Even his dry commentary seemed off, almost guarded. Clearing her throat, she stepped closer to take in the rest of him. Purple under his eyes, flexed fingers, tensed

jaw, pulsing vein in his forehead.

She frowned and *tsked*. "Did one of the interns say good morning to you again? I *told* them pleasant greetings were strictly prohibited."

He shut his eyes for a moment and flattened his mouth into a firm line, like if he pressed hard enough, he could crush whatever emotion was about to show itself on his lips. "As much as I enjoy blaming others for my mistakes, I'm afraid there is no one to blame for my unkempt appearance but myself." His dark eyes roved over her soft orange day dress, the distaste at her color choice obvious in the tightening of his fists at his sides. "And you, I suppose. For having the gall to witness it."

The door suddenly slammed closed behind them, and Evie jolted, clasping a hand to her chest and her racing heart. "I hardly think it's fair to blame me for anything, when you were the one who requested me here so early in the first place."

He frowned deeper—if that was even possible—which made him look even more beautiful—

*If that was even possible.*

Annoyed and tired, she lost her patience at waiting for him to catch up to her. "You sent a raven..."

When he stared blankly at her, she continued to bumble out words, her mouth eager to get every thought out of her head to make room for the new ones. "It showed up at my window at four in the morning and scared the living daylights out of me. With a note saying we had an early-morning meeting about something urgent?"

A low hum sounded from his closed lips. It cleared any remaining tiredness from her system, like cauldron brew but better, warmer. "I don't recall writing or sending... My restraint is at a low this morning, Sage, and apparently my memory as well. I must have written it before I was fully lucid. Please disregard the raven."

Clanging metal sounded from the back courtyard—likely the Malevolent Guards getting in some morning exercise with their lethal weapons. Fitting, as she was now imagining grabbing something sharp and stabbing her boss in the toe. "Disregard? You couldn't have *disregarded* before your damn bird cut two and a half years off my life?"

"That's an alarmingly specific number," he said, planting his hands against his tapered waist.

"It was alarming for me, too," she deadpanned, snickering as he glared.

"I keep a tight rein on my magic, and I think sometimes when I sleep, when my body relaxes, it stirs uncomfortably and makes it difficult for me to continue resting."

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A pang in her chest she identified as sympathy made her anger dissolve like shadows in the sunlight. "I'm sorry to hear that. Is there any way I can help?"

His jaw went slack. "Help...with my death magic? The magic that sends most people running and screaming?"

She blinked innocently. "I can do that *after* I help if it'll make you feel better."

His incredulous expression could so easily morph into a laugh, if she just pushed him a little further...

But of course, as Evie's calling card, disaster had to strike first.

Doubling over suddenly, The Villain breathed heavily into his knees. "Damn it all. My hands burn, and my arm..." He reached up to grip his arm, circling his biceps.

Her hand fell lightly atop his, trying for gentleness with a man she was certain was scarcely used to it. And sure enough, his response was violent and startled. So startled that he jerked away like she'd laid an open flame to his skin. "Sage, are you mad? I'm dangerous right now."

"I know," she said softly. "You haven't had your cauldron brew yet."

"You are not amusing," he wheezed.

Evie inched closer, angling her body down just a bit to meet his face. "My goodness, but that's nothing to cry over. I think *you're* as amusing as dry wood, and you don't see me bursting into tears."

His face softened as he looked up, perplexed, then shook his head, but in a gentler way. "Sage. How on earth did you get here?"

She folded her arms. "I walked."

"That was rhetorical," he said, sounding almost unaffected, his voice losing its strain.

"Those questions are the most fun to answer."

He sighed; it was one of defeat. She knew it well. "Why is that, Sage?"

Evie propped a hand on her hip to angle herself lower. "Because it annoys you."

The harsh sigh out of his lips could almost be counted as a laugh if she was clever enough with her imagination. When he brought himself back up to full height, rubbing his knuckles in soothing motions, the last points of tension on his face finally smoothed back into his normal flat expression.

She couldn't see his magic—nobody could, and likely nobody ever would—but she could feel something very dark moving about the room with them, smaller than it was moments ago, but still something that should've made her shrink away in fear. Instead, she felt settled in it, almost...comforted?

She stayed where she was. "Is it any better, sir?"

His head turned toward her slowly, dark brows slanted downward. "Yes. It is. How did you..."

She shrugged, eyes flicking up to the glisten of sweat on his forehead. "I find that it's more difficult to focus on pain when you're distracted, and I excel at being distracting."

Pulling a yellow handkerchief from her pocket, she boldly stepped forward and began dabbing at his skin, leaning on his arm with her other hand for leverage. The man was taller than was sensible.

She made a note to start wearing a higher heel.

To make lecturing him more efficient. No other reason.

Gooseflesh rose on his exposed forearm, the chill from the room obviously setting in after the adrenaline fled his system. "Th-Thank you, Sage." He pressed the bright cloth to his knuckles, the color contrasting harshly with his all-black attire. "I'll return it promptly. Clean, of course."

She shook her head, smiling gently. "Keep it. You need more color in your wardrobe anyway."

He nodded, processing the words as if scribing updates to their inventory logs. "Very well."

A small ribbit sounded from the other side of the room, and Evie's eyes followed it until she caught the gleam of Kingsley's shining crown and the glow of his golden eyes. The frog's oddities had grown on her in her short time in the office, his charming little signs a darling addition to what was turning out to be rather bloody work.

Literally.

"Good morning, Kingsley. Aren't you looking handsome today?"

Another ribbit followed her pronouncement, and her boss rolled his eyes in annoyance. Too many pleasantries, clearly. "He looks like he's up to no good. What are you doing down here, Kingsley? Trying to make another escape attempt?"

"Maybe he was checking on you," Evie suggested, the last word fading away slowly when the boss shot her a glare. She took a few careful steps back, veering closer to the stairs, closer to Kingsley, who was scribbling on his small board with a vengeance.

"Not likely," the boss said flatly, moving around her and taking two large strides up the stairs, a creak following in his wake. Which, she mused, didn't make much sense—there should be no creaking. The stairs were stone.

"What is that?" she asked, looking from side to side for the source. Foolish. She should've looked up.

"Sage!"

Before she could take another breath, she was being tugged forward like a

rag doll, a startled scream leaving her lips when a large crash sounded behind her. She coughed at the dust that was kicked up and the sudden stream of light coming in through the roof.

"Are you injured?" the boss asked, the low timbre of his voice pulling her from the adrenaline making her mind race. His dark eyes were scanning her, his large hands on each of her shoulders. It brought her back to their first meeting in the forest. She'd thought the shock of his touch would fade as time trickled by... No such luck.

She only managed to nod before he pulled his hands away, stalking toward the ruined slab of roof that had nearly clobbered her. "Shall I send for someone to repair the roof, sir?" she asked carefully, amazed at how steady her voice sounded when her heart was beating out of her chest.

"You were nearly crushed, and you're asking about the roof?" He stared at her, mildly outraged.

She shrugged. "Still not my most life-threatening day on the job, believe it or not."

Something went dark in his face, darker than normal. He stared at the hole in the roof for a few seconds, taking deep, steadying breaths. "You're still new, Sage. Worry not. There's time."

She laughed, and his face pinched the way one would respond to eating a sour grape. "So, uh. What happened to the roof?"

"The manor is old. It was likely natural wear. Some rusty screws probably giving. I'll have it looked over by someone in the office and get the hole repaired. This won't happen again."

She hummed. "Too bad. Near-death experiences are a very efficient morning jolt."

"Stick to the cauldron brew, Sage. Specifically, for me. Even more specifically, on my desk, in twenty minutes. But be careful getting around this mess."

He kicked at the broken piece of roof like it had deeply offended him, and Evie took it as her cue that she was dismissed. She lightly skipped around the debris, coughing a bit when her feet kicked up extra dust. Something slid under her shoe, a tiny ringing from it as it slid across the floor. She nearly stumbled over another as she leaned down to pick them up. The metal glinted in her hand. Screws. Not at all rusty. In fact, they looked perfectly intact.

"I told you to be careful." The words stopped her, and when she turned to look at him, he appeared older than she knew he was. Weighed down by some burden he'd never share with anyone but himself.

She smiled brightly, trying not to take offense when he winced. "I'm a terrible listener."

"That'll get you into trouble someday, I think."

She scrunched her nose before spinning around, her dress swishing about her legs as she made for the stairs to get them both a cup of cauldron brew. Kingsley hopped beside her, expertly balancing a sign in one webbed toe, whatever word he'd been trying to convey earlier written plainly.

DANGER.

She smiled small. "Little late for that warning, Kingsley."

Gently straightening his crown, she continued up the stairs. She called back cheekily, tossing the screws through the air, and the boss caught them with ease and frowned down at them. "I think my terrible listening will actually get *you* into trouble someday."

She almost stopped again at a sound. It was as if The Villain was whispering something behind her.

Something that sounded an awful lot like...

*"It already has."*



## CHAPTER I

## KINGSLEY

There were severed heads hanging from the ceiling...and one of them belonged to Trystan Maverine.

Alexander William Kingsley awoke with his tiny heart pounding in his slimy green chest. The cushions on his small, gilded bed were pressed under his webbed toes, and he glanced down from his perched resting spot at the sleeping man on the bed, relaxing only slightly when he saw Trystan Maverine's chest moving in a smooth rhythm, a slight snore escaping his best friend's nostrils.

A horrid nightmare. That was all it was.

Alexander wouldn't pay it any heed, lest he drive himself mad trying to communicate what he'd dreamed one bloody word at a time. It was morning, birds were chirping happily outside, and he'd awoken...

Another day in the body of a frog.

It was another nightmare entirely—or at least, he used to think so. Over the decade he'd spent mourning his life as a man, Alexander had come to find several useful things about his predicament.

1. There were no exhausting expectations of always being gallant and chivalrous (because who in their right mind would expect a frog to be either of those things?).

2. He didn't have to fill silences with useless conversation. (He actually found that in most instances, a single word sufficed quite nicely.)

3. He was small enough to sneak around the manor to wherever he wished in order to keep a close eye on his friends (and it could not be overstated how much his friends *needed* keeping a close eye upon).

4. People often forgot that he was once human, leaving them unguarded in confessions, secrets, even feelings. (Every day was fresh entertainment!)

5. And finally, and certainly most enjoyable, was watching his best friend—

The Villain—a man who Alexander had never thought would open up his cold, closed off-heart, fall truly, deeply, and wildly in love with Evie Sage.

A screech sounded down the hallway, and Trystan startled awake as Alexander just had moments prior. “What in the deadlands? Who is screaming?” he grumbled gruffly, turning to Alexander with a flat expression. “It's one of the Sage girls, isn't it?”

It had been two weeks since the Valiant Guard had attacked the manor, since the pregnant guvre had been taken, and since Evie's mother, Nura, had returned from being in hiding among the stars. Two solid weeks of Evie and Trystan not speaking—in part because of the erratic impact Evie seemed to have on Trystan's magic, and in part, Alexander was certain, because the two would sooner knock their heads together than confront their unspoken feelings.

Or, as Alexander had begun referring to their silent avoidance of each other—*torture for the masses*.

Trystan grumbled, throwing back the covers and donning the shirt strewn over the chair by his new desk. Somehow, the movement was timed to near perfection with Lyssa Sage barreling through the door, giggling and skidding to a hard halt when she saw the scowl on Trystan's face.

“Evie said if you make faces like that, it'll get stuck that way, Lord Trystan,” Lyssa said, giving Alexander a tiny wave.

Alexander lifted his webbed foot and waved back. Lyssa Sage was a constant delight, as were all children who'd yet to be touched by the horrors of adulthood.

And the depravation of common sense.

“Good. I prefer my face this way,” Trystan grumbled, tucking the ends of his shirt into his loose trousers as Lyssa went to tug open the dark drapes over the windows.

The girl frowned at him as early-morning light streamed in. “You prefer it like that? Why?”

“I like to look angry and intimidating,” Trystan said, sticking a foot into each of his well-worn boots.

Lyssa pressed her lips together before muttering, “But you don't. You look like you need to use the bathroom.”

Inwardly laughing, Alexander furiously jotted down a word on one of his signs—a difficult feat when Trystan had first presented him with the idea, filling the office area and every room with baskets of the little signs and chalk for Alexander's use alone. The first few times, his handwriting had looked abysmal, but after ten years of practice, no one ever had trouble deciphering what he wanted to say.

He held up his sign proudly.

YEP

"I will throw out every one of those blasted boards right now!" Trystan bit out. It was an empty threat—one Trystan had thrown around countless times over the years and one Alexander knew his friend would never dare follow through on.

"Lyssa!" Another light voice echoed down the hall. "There's breakfast for you in the kitchens!" Alexander identified the voice as that of Evie Sage, The Villain's newly promoted apprentice.

If Alexander had not already recognized the person attached to the voice, he need only look at how rigid Trystan had become at the sound, like one more word would break him in two.

"Are you coming for breakfast, Lord Trystan?" Lyssa blinked at him, then gave Alexander a wide, innocent smile.

Trystan stared hard at the door, like he was willing Evie to stay far away from it. But Alexander knew his friend's internal war well enough to understand that Trystan was simultaneously wishing her to walk through it. This had become, in Alexander's opinion, a masochistic ritual over the past two weeks.

Admittedly, "The Villain" had been sneaking looks at the young woman all along; this wasn't new. They'd started as curious glances, like studying a lab specimen, then begrudgingly moved to intrigued staring, and then to the current stage—pure agonizing, desperate glaring. The past two weeks, however, had taken the man's self-inflicted torture to a new extreme. In the last fortnight, The Villain had crept around corners, lingered in doorways, and pressed his ear against any wall she was on the other side of.

All not especially different from before...

*Except for the groaning.*

"I'll take breakfast in my office." Trystan halted halfway to the door. "Is your sister...coming to retrieve you?"

Lyssa shook her head innocently. "No. She's just returning from an errand."

Trystan's expression did not change, but his eyes became more alert, his gaze sharp on the little girl, though it gentled as he bent a knee to match her height. "What do you mean, little villain? What errand?"

Lyssa shrugged and gestured an arm toward the door where Evie's voice had just sounded. "I don't know. She just said it was off the property with Keeley and that I couldn't go."

Alexander was not surprised at the clench in Trystan's jaw or the obvious worry shadowing his dark eyes. The manor had been located, and Evie's face was plastered all over Rennedawn on a WANTED flyer with a generous award attached. The only protection they had now to ward against the Valiant Guard was a grove of thorns planted by a black-market gardener, which had proved to be an efficient deterrent for the king's men thus far, but outside the manor

doors...the danger was real. And it was great.

Still, Keeley—the head of The Villain's guard—being present was an indication that Evie would likely have been in no serious danger. The young woman had been placed in charge for very sound, very violent reasons.

Logically, Alexander knew he need not worry. He suspected Trystan might know this, too, and though Alexander was a frog, not a mind reader, when you spent every moment of every day for ten years straight watching, you became somewhat of an expert observer. But that hardly mattered.

No expertise was required to look upon Trystan Maverine and know that the feeling boiling within him was the purest sort of anger.

But Trystan didn't showcase any of that emotion to Lyssa, who looked at him with concern, her big brown eyes homed in. "Since Evie is so busy, shall we do our tea party today, Lord Trystan?"

Trystan looked relieved at the subject change as he nodded, a small movement upward tugging at the corner of his lips. "I suppose I can postpone my afternoon target practice."

Lyssa squealed and made her way to the door—hopefully not knowing the target at said practice was the interns.

As both Alexander and Trystan watched Lyssa Sage's dark head disappear, a somber mood descended upon the now empty and joyless space. Trystan sighed before moving to open the armoire and pulled out what Alexander knew was something of great import to his friend.

The scarf Evie had given him at their fateful first meeting sat in Trystan's hands, and Alexander watched with a painful sympathy as Trystan brought the scarf up to his face and closed his eyes.

It was too sad even for a cursed frog to watch.

Alexander Kingsley turned his attention to the floor while his friend mourned a fate that Alexander swore he could prevent.

If only he were human enough to stop it.



## CHAPTER 2

## THE VILLAIN

Trystan Arthur Maverine took torture quite seriously, but the past fortnight was a newfound low even for him.

Attempting to stay away from Sage was akin to a horror spectacle he'd seen performed at a theater a few years prior: bloody, awful, and forcing him to question his ability to make sound decisions. The door was cracked open, and the morning buzz of the workers trickling in made an ache form near his temples. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to close it.

Because while Sage was on the other end of the wide office space—and though he had to strain to accomplish it—he could still hear her humming.

He couldn't close the door...and risk missing it.

Even if the sound ravaged as much as it healed.

The low din of the office beyond grew louder, the telltale sign of some new tidbit of gossip that would be in Tatianna's ear before the day ended. He didn't care to know; his foul mood had plowed through any sense of social decorum he might have had. Not that much had existed inside him even before he'd extracted himself from Evie for their own good. Sage believed their separation was in the name of protecting his magic, but in truth, he didn't care about that. He cared for nothing but preserving the fragile thread between them without destiny cleaving it in two.

*Evie Sage is meant to be your downfall, and you her undoing.*

Destiny monsters were rare; most considered them mere myths. Creatures that existed before the creation of the magical continent, watching, waiting for the gods to paint it in magic and color.

The destiny monster at the Fortis Family Fortress had announced the tragedy of their future as if it were absolute, but Trystan declared to himself he could avoid it...if he avoided *her*.

His chair screeched against the stone floor as he threw it back so far it slammed into the wall. Wood creaked beneath his fist as he gripped the door by the edge, but before he could slam it closed and bring himself the peace he desperately craved, the entry to the main office space opened.

And what he saw bent the knob beneath his hand.

Sage appeared at the entry, one shapely pants-clad leg moving in front of the other, giving him no choice but to pull the door to his office open wider, treading away from his safe haven, the same space where her desk had once sat.

The ice pixies were wafting cool trickles of air through the office vents to compensate for the cloying heat outside. It brushed against the skin at Trystan's neck to chill him. But it made no difference. It all felt like it burned.

Sage stepped inside, the loud conversations lowering to mumbles as she began her walk down the middle of the office floor, straight for him. He tried to remain unmoved despite the purpose in her eyes as her hips swayed, and she looked directly at him for the first time in thirteen and a half days.

He folded his arms and leaned against the doorway, waiting, watching, trying for indifference. Meeting the challenge in her eyes with one of his own. Only wavering when Trystan noticed a few gazes from other workers—lingering on the way Sage's pants clung to her or the way her hands clasped behind her back, on how she thrust her chest up at a soul-rendering angle, or on the small curl of her red lips as she was stopped by one of his finance men. She politely pushed past him when he leered down and whispered something in her ear that made her cheeks pink. It was only a flash of discomfort as she continued past the man.

That was enough.

*Finally*, he thought maniacally. *An excuse to burn every arithmetic book within a ten-mile radius.*

Sage's laugh knocked through Trystan's inner tirade as she bumped her hip against the finance worker gently. Too gently, if you asked Trystan. She needed to use more force...or a pickax.

Trystan made a note to have one left in her office later with a blue bow on it.

Keeping his distance from her didn't mean he couldn't gift her with weapons—that shouldn't tempt fate or destiny or whatever fucking force decided that together they would be each other's downfall and undoing.

As if she sensed the turmoil of his thoughts, Sage's light eyes lifted back to Trystan's. His practiced stoicism was well in place, if the answering ice in her expression was any indication. She hated when he was emotionless. Little did she know, beneath the blank expression was so much feeling it was practically

coming out his ears. It was horrid.

She stopped in front of Trystan, too close for comfort, too close for breath. “Good morning, sir.” Her curls were pinned back with little strands left out, teasing the sides of her face.

She hadn’t addressed him directly in a fortnight, and those three words had his black heart lodged in his throat.

“Good morning, Sage.” Trystan swallowed, almost wincing at the hoarseness of his voice.

Without standing on ceremony, she thrust a small page of notes wrapped in brown thread against his chest. It was then he saw why her hands had been clasped behind her back: it wasn’t simply to torture his senses. At least, that was what Trystan inferred, looking down at her gentle fingers with more curiosity than horror.

“I’ll ask about these documents you presented me with, Sage, but first I think I’d rather address the giant in the room.”

Gods help him, she looked confused as her brow furrowed and her nose scrunched. “What?”

“Your hands,” Trystan said wryly, gesturing at them. His patience was walking a tightrope with no net below.

*Surely she knows it is obvious.*

Sage looked down, her suddenly white cheeks the only indication of something amiss.

“What about them?”

Trystan’s eyebrows shot toward his forehead. “Is there any particular reason?” He scrubbed a hand down his chin.

“For what?”

“That they’re covered in blood?”



## CHAPTER 3

### EVIE

In all honesty, Evie’d had more than enough time to wash the blood from her hands before returning to the manor.

But that would not have been half as satisfying as looking her boss in the eyes for the first time in two weeks, her expression even-keeled as he gazed upon her with alarm and concern, an awkward silence settling between them.

That was fine. Evie was well acquainted with awkward. They were old, dysfunctional friends.

“Oh. *This* blood?” She made a show of examining her hands, turning her wrists, scanning them from all angles. Her acting was exaggerated, bordering on animated, but the goal wasn’t to fool The Villain.

It was to drive him out of his gourd.

She shrugged, privately relishing the twitch in his eyebrow. Brushing a curl away from her eyes, she tilted her head curiously. “Why do you ask?”

The twitch turned into a full-blown jerk of his head, and she nearly jumped with glee. Oh, how she had missed this—pulling emotional reactions out of him until he looked ready to combust.

*Don’t torment the boss, Evie!*

*Unless you think of a super fun way to do it!*

“You’re a menace,” he growled.

She smiled demurely as she dipped into a small curtsy. “How kind of you to notice.”

There was a pause as The Villain took a deep, bracing breath. He was hanging on by a final fraying nerve, and one more push could have him snapping like a twig beneath her boot.

She frowned inwardly to herself. What she was doing...it occurred to her that it was rather cruel.