

Heroine Complex

By Sarah Kuhn

Chapter One

I am not a superhero.

This was the only thought I could muster when a cupcake with fangs launched itself at my head.

“Evie, duck!” The voice rang out through the sugar-laced air. “And whatever you do, don’t stop filming!”

“I’m on it, boss!” I yelled. I bobbed out of the cupcake’s path and flung myself behind a counter, my tailbone colliding with the floor of previously pristine bakery Cake My Day. That floor had been a spotless expanse of ivory up ’til about fifteen minutes ago, when a posse of demons leapt through their portal of choice, assumed pastry form, and started acting like a bunch of assholes.

I peeked over the countertop, tightening my grip on my phone. Its plastic case was slippery with palm sweat. It was a cold sweat, though. No warmth. *Never* any warmth if I could help it.

I finally located my boss, held the phone aloft, hit “record/livestream” on the video app, and managed to get her in frame as she spun around to deliver a solid roundhouse kick to another fanged cupcake. When confronted with the power and sheer stylishness of her thigh-high leather boots, the cupcake split in half, sending frosting pinwheeling outward.

I couldn’t help but imagine her name popping up over this bit of footage in cartoony bubble letters:

AVEDA JUPITER

She is a superhero.

Aveda landed from the kick, her ponytail making a heroic “whoosh” sound as it flipped through the air. Her lithe frame was encased in a skintight confection of black leather and silver spandex, just glittery enough to fall on the right side of the “tacky” divide. With her raven hair pulled into a tight ponytail and her eyelashes heavy with silver mascara, she looked like an intergalactic cheerleader.

Personally, I thought the whole ensemble screamed of overkill, but what did I know? I was wearing jeans, a hoodie, battered Chuck Taylors, and a t-shirt with a cartoon duck on it. I was not exactly an authority on looking fabulous.

I was, however, an authority on using my phone to document *Aveda* looking fabulous. As her personal assistant, it was my duty to fulfill her every need, cater to her every whim, and get splattered by demonic cupcakes. Usually while cowering behind countertops.

I was pretty good at all of these things, but right now I was mostly good at getting splattered. A cupcake landed with a *splooosh* next to me and sank its tiny fangs into my wrist.

“Hey!” I protested, wincing at the sharp stab of pain. I batted the cupcake toward my foot and kicked it hard. It skittered across the floor, then snapped its fangs at me right before smashing against the bakery’s back wall and exploding into a blizzard of crumbs.

“Yeah, fuck you, you ’roided out Cakey Monster,” I muttered, narrowing my eyes at the remnants of the stupid thing. “Why’d you have to imprint on something so messy?”

I surveyed the damage to the bakery. Letta Wilcox, Cake My Day's hopelessly emo owner, wasn't going to like this. She'd worked hard to make the place a wonderland of calorie-laden carbohydrates, a haven where San Franciscans could stuff their faces with everything from delicate petit fours to hearty cakes, all topped with sparkly frosting. Adding to the fairyland vibe was Letta's collection of porcelain unicorns, a rainbow menagerie of beasts that dotted the countertops and lurked behind the tower of cookies in the display case.

Now the whole place was trashed: the cookie tower had toppled, the display case was a pile of glass shards, and the frosting was fucking *everywhere*.

And the evil cupcakes kept coming, spitting themselves out of that just-opened portal with the force of tennis balls being relentlessly whacked over the net by a Wimbledon-caliber superstar.

I pressed my hoodie sleeve against my wrist, sopping up blood oozing from the demon bite. A solitary bite was nothing to worry about, but if I wasn't careful, those cute little cupcakes would scent my blood, swarm me like piranhas, and chomp me to death. No matter what form the portal demons took, they were always insatiable in their need to eat everything in sight. And they loved human flesh the most.

Recently, Aveda had tried to capitalize on this by slashing a cut next to her collarbone before going into battle so the demons would scent her blood, go after her, and *boom*—she'd take 'em down. I found this a bit extreme, but she'd waved me off, noting that “a little blood is a small price to pay when it comes to saving human lives.”

Well, when you put it *that* way...

“Evie!” Aveda's voice pierced my thoughts. “I told you not to stop filming!”

“Like I said, I’m on it.” There was no trace of annoyance in my tone—only soothing placation. It was a tone I’d spent the last three years perfecting. (And luckily, I’d made the decision to livestream without sound. Aveda’s fans didn’t need to know that she usually *required* soothing placation during battle.)

I turned back to the screen, attempting to hold my phone steady as Aveda blasted through a series of cupcake missiles with a single punch. I had just managed to zoom in for a particularly flattering close-up when a figure clad in a frothy lace dress smashed into me, her head clonking against my shoulder. I nearly dropped the phone.

“Oops! Sorry, love!”

“Watch it, Lucy.” I readjusted my sweaty grip. “This primo footage of our fearless leader is being broadcast live to thousands of San Franciscans. You know, for all her fans who want to feel like they’re right here with us. Watching the amazing Aveda Jupiter kick demon ass in person.”

The “battle livestream” had been Aveda’s idea. I knew she was hoping her fans would be particularly wowed by a spinning backhand move she’d recently added to her repertoire. It looked pretty awesome to me. Then again, all of her moves looked awesome to me, mostly because I couldn’t conceive of doing them without falling on my ass.

“And I’m here to help with that,” Lucy purred, gesturing at my phone. “If only to get Miss Fearless Leader to stop yelling at you for two seconds. I was merely attempting to slide in next to you in cool superspy fashion.” She fluttered her eyelashes and flashed me the patented Lucy Valdez Smile of Supreme Innocence.

Others might be taken in by that smile, given Lucy’s tiny stature and typically adorable ensemble: vintage frock, knee-high stockings, patent leather Mary Janes. For

me, the effect was somewhat ruined by the knowledge that she had six daggers of various sizes concealed on her person. And possibly some nunchucks. As Aveda's weapons expert, personal trainer, and occasional bodyguard, she was in charge of such things—but I was pretty sure she carried all that stuff around on her days off, too.

“Has boss lady tried her spinning backhand yet?” Lucy asked. “She insisted on prolonging last night's training session way past both our bedtimes just to make sure she had it exactly right.”

“I think it's coming...now.” I gestured to Aveda as one last mob of cupcakes swarmed her, their fangs tearing at her costume. She took a step to the right and whirled into that forceful spinning backhand, taking them out one by one: *Splat! Splat! Splat!*

Frosting exploded everywhere. I ducked, but managed to hold my phone steady.

The effect of the move was stunning. It was like watching old school Wonder Woman Lynda Carter go into her trademark spin. Only instead of emerging with a costume change, Aveda racked up demon kill points.

Aveda glowered at the mess of the bakery. “Take that you be-frosting-ed fiends,” she growled.

Hmm, not her best catchphrase. I mentally patted myself on the back for the whole “filming without sound” thing.

An eerie silence descended over us as the portal closed, its glittery gold haze narrowing into a thin line, then disappearing entirely.

“Looks like all is quiet on the baked goods front,” Lucy said, gesturing to our suddenly silent surroundings. “So...yay?”

“Yay,” I agreed, tapping “end” on my phone screen, cutting the livestream. “Our little friends got bored with their latest toy pretty quickly this time ’round. Though the clean-up crew still has to come in, make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

“I didn’t miss anything,” Aveda said, brushing frosting remnants from her sleeves. “Now let’s see the footage. You recorded in addition to livestreaming, yes?”

“Yes,” I said, passing her the phone. “And you know, you also saved the world again and stuff. Maybe take a moment to enjoy that.”

“It was nothing.” She flashed me her dazzling Aveda Jupiter Smile of Triumph—the one the public loved so much—then focused on the screen. She liked to study every kick and punch the moment battle ended, as she was “in the right headspace to properly focus on bettering my fighting skills.” For a moment, she beamed, her pride in her moves evident. Her expression warmed further as she watched herself land in position, watched her ponytail fly like a glorious flag behind her.

“Yes! Nailed it,” she said, tapping the screen as her spinning backhand replayed. “Oh, what’s this?” She frowned as my phone emitted a series of “dings.”

“That’s to alert me about your name being mentioned on Twitter and other social media platforms,” I said, taking the phone back from her. “Since this is the first time we’ve attempted a ‘battle livestream,’ I thought you’d like to see the immediate fan reactions.”

“Clever, Evie,” Aveda said, peering over my shoulder. “So what are they saying?”

I pulled up the app that tracked social media mentions and scrolled through.

“Thank u for saving the city again, Aveda! We love u 4ever!”

“Whoa, the demons took CUPCAKE form this time? That is crazypants from crazytown!”

“Good thing we have Aveda Jupiter around to keep this crazytown from being eaten alive!”

“Maybe cut the close-ups next time, though. Am I the only one who noticed...her face?”

I tried to hit “close” on the app, but it was too late.

“My what?” Aveda gasped in my ear. “What’s wrong with my...”

She whipped around and peered at her reflection in the ruined display case. Finally, I saw it, this thing that was about to upset her more than a whole army of ferocious cake monsters ever could. It was a bright pink half-sphere dotting her left cheekbone, the one sour note in her otherwise flawless visage.

Oh, no.

Oh, shit.

It was—

“A. Zit,” she hissed, her voice low and cold. I could tell she was milliseconds from blowing up, but trying to rein herself in.

Ugh, how had I not noticed the zit? I kept a full complement of makeup stuffed into my various hoodie pockets in order to prevent moments like these. The little fucker must have bloomed in the heat of battle.

Okay, okay, maybe I could still keep her from falling into the impending rage spiral...

“You’re covered in demon bites,” I said, soothing voice in full effect. I gestured to the blood dribbling all over Aveda’s costume. “How is one little zit worse than that?”

“Wounds are heroic. Zits are weakness!” she snarled, flinging her arms out. Her hand smacked into a porcelain unicorn perched on the counter, sending it on a death-defying leap to the floor.

“Whoa.” Lucy came to the rescue, catching the poor unicorn just in time.

“That is not a saying. That is not a *thing*,” I said. But as I scrolled through the social media mentions, I could see that the public—at least the nastier ones who seemed to delight in posting their word vomit on the internet—agreed. Mixed in with the glowing remarks about Aveda’s city-saving skills were various snarky comments about the “monstrosity” on her face. Had she even bothered looking in the mirror before going into battle? Maybe that’s what scared the demons off? Perhaps she’d been indulging in a few too many actual cupcakes lately? Come to think of it, her costume *was* looking a little tight on the backside...

There was even an #AvedasGinormousZit hashtag. And it was already trending.

“Did anyone mention my spinning backhand?” Aveda asked. Underneath the steel of her tone lurked something else: a thread of genuine hurt that no one had bothered to notice the thing she’d nearly killed herself perfecting. The thing that would help in her quest to, you know, save the city.

I kind of wanted to hug her, but showing her I’d glimpsed any weakness would only hurt her more.

“Let me see what I can find,” I said, scrolling through the app again.

“No. Forget it!” she growled. “Dammit. I’ve been working on that move for months. It takes down three times the demons three times as fast. I *timed* it.”

“I know,” I said, trying to make my tone even more gentle, more calming. “I’m sure everyone will see that once they’ve had a chance to watch the footage a few times. Speaking of which, we can digitally remove the zit from all rebroadcasts. And it’s really not that bad—”

“Not that bad?” Aveda’s arms reached full-on flail as her voice twisted into a hysterical squeak. “You know Little Miss Reporter Maisy will focus on this shit rather than the fact that I just took down a whole portal’s worth of demons. And what about the fan meet-and-greet tonight? Or the benefit tomorrow? My face has to be perfect! *All of me* has to be perfect!”

She shook her head emphatically, as if this would banish all zits ever from planet Earth.

“Get your priorities in order, Evie!” she shrieked. “This is a complete disaster!”

Seething with frustration, she yanked her hair out of its ponytail and scrutinized her expression once again in the display case. “Where did you even come from?” she snarled at the blemish. “I haven’t eaten French fries in *seven years*.”

One of her flailing hands swept out, knocking a whole parade of unicorns to the floor. This time, there were just too many of them: Lucy only managed to save a couple from plummeting to their doom.

Aveda whipped around, pointing an accusatory finger at us.

“And sometimes,” she said, “I just *really want French fries*.”

With that, she turned and stomped toward the door.

“Are you coming?” she barked over her shoulder. “I have to greet my public. And *then* I have to get back to work.”

I could already hear her muttering under her breath about the different techniques she was going to apply to the spinning backhand to make it absolutely flawless. So powerful, no one would be able to say jack-shit about any imperfections that dared show up on her face next time.

“My word.” Lucy gently placed one of the unicorns she’d saved on the counter and patted its head. “Given the choice, which would you rather face, darling: an Aveda Jupiter tantrum or our sugary little demons?”

“The demons,” I muttered without hesitation. We both watched as Aveda flung the bakery door open with such force, the foundation of the building seemed to shake.

“Always the demons.”

Chapter Two

“You kind of have the world’s worst job.”

A reporter said this to me once while waiting for Aveda to make her grand interview entrance. I was scrubbing at an especially nasty patch of demon goop on Aveda’s leather pants, my face twisted in concentration as I battled the crusty ooze.

“Maybe,” I retorted. “But I’m kind of the best at it.”

It was a quippy response to a quippy observation, but it was also true. Much as I might joke about preferring the demons, I was the only person who knew how to handle Aveda’s canyon-sized diva mood swings. And what can I say? I was proud of that.

She took care of our fair city and I took care of her. I was her babysitter, confidante, and therapist, all rolled into one. The way I saw it, I was doing my civic duty and getting paid for it.

Yes, I realize that’s not how “civic duty” works.

“Is that why you don’t quit when you’ve gotta clean disgusting shit like that?” the reporter pressed.

Well, sure. Also 1) I needed a steady job to amass enough cash so my little sister, Bea, could go to college, and the well-paid pickings for PhD Program Dropouts Who Only Have Experience Working in Academia were basically nonexistent and 2) said job gave me the routine and “safe space” I required to maintain my sanity and 3) Aveda had saved me pretty much every time I’d needed saving. And there had been one time in particular when I’d *really* needed it.

I may have been a total cowering-behind-countertops type, but I was also very loyal.

I didn't say all that to the reporter. Instead, I gave him a conspiratorial smile, like, "Look, my superhero-adjacent life is just as fabulous and cray-cray as your wildest imaginings, sir! It's way too exciting to quit! And you can print that shit!"

He did not print that shit. I was a little disappointed.

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There was a crowd to greet us when we emerged from Cake My Day. Lucy had herded the bakery's customers outside when we'd arrived on the scene and they were still milling around, buzzing about the terrifying nature of demon pastries. They'd been joined by a slew of fans and press types. Luckily, Cake My Day's heavy white curtains had prevented anyone from witnessing Aveda's snit (zit) fit.

When the door flew open, everyone cheered.

Aveda adjusted immediately, plastering a smile on her face. I noticed her brush her hair over her cheek, covering the zit. She beamed out at the crowd, glowing with heroic charm and grace. You'd never know that just minutes earlier, she'd been smacking porcelain unicorns around.

"Saved us from the demon swarms again, didn't you, Aveda?" a girlish voice piped up from the crowd. Maisy Kane, founder of San Francisco's popular gossip blog Bay Bridge Kiss, elbowed her way to the front. "What would we do without you?"

"That's a question you'll never have to answer," Aveda said. "Protecting San Francisco is my duty, my love, and my life."

A pleased murmur rippled through the crowd and I couldn't help but smile, even though I knew Lucy was rolling her eyes behind me. That was one of Aveda's patented sound bites. She spit it out at every press conference and the public ate it up like, well, cupcakes.

"Were there any demon escapees this time? Any increased danger to the city my readers need to know about?" Maisy tilted her head, her hair—light pink, quite a change from last month's forest green—swaying back and forth. "Because I'm sure none of us want a repeat of the incident from last month. You know, wherein two demons somehow escaped from their portal site, bred like bunny rabbits, and proceeded to utterly destroy the sourdough bread factory by the waterfront."

"As you must remember, I evacuated the factory and eradicated the demons before anyone was seriously harmed," Aveda said, standing up a little straighter. Her hair fell away from the zitty spot. I reached over and discreetly brushed it back into place. "And that incident occurred because a misguided citizen happened upon a pair of demons who imprinted on stuffed toy kittens and thought he could keep them as pets. He's lucky his lapse in judgment only cost him a hand."

The crowd nodded in agreement. That idiot citizen *had* been lucky. His actions served as a useful reminder: no matter how cute the portal demons might appear, they were vicious little motherfuckers.

"'Only cost him a hand'—oh, Aveda! You are a gosh-dang hoot!" Maisy giggled, easily transitioning from hardnosed reporter to eager fangirl. She peered at Aveda from behind the (probably fake) lenses of her cat-eye glasses. "We so have the same sense of humor. It's like we're best friends!"

She nudged her actual best friend—Shasta, owner of hip local lingerie boutique Pussy Queen, who was glued to her side. Shasta was nearly always glued to Maisy’s side, but like me, she tended to blend into the background. Unlike me, I got the sense this wasn’t intentional. “Shast! Aren’t I always saying how we’d be best friends?”

“Yes,” Shasta said, her eyebrows rising into the impenetrable fortress of her Bettie Page bangs. “Always.”

I tried to catch Shasta’s eye to give her a nod of sidekick solidarity, but she avoided my gaze.

“In any case, it’s important to remember my key tips on demon-related safety,” Aveda said. “Number one: if you witness a portal opening, evacuate immediately and contact Aveda Jupiter, Inc. The easy-to-remember number—”

“Clean-up crew’s here,” Lucy whispered. I turned to see Rose Rorick leading her team into Cake My Day’s side entrance. As head of the San Francisco police department’s Demon Unit—a special squad in the Emergency Service division—Rose was responsible for cleaning up any leftover mess after Aveda had saved us all yet again. That meant capturing and/or squashing lingering demons, collecting any supernatural detritus they might have left behind, and scanning the area to make sure the portal was totally closed. I gave Rose a little wave and she responded with a stoic head nod. I grinned. A stoic head nod from Rose was the equivalent of a bear hug from someone else.

“Hey.” Lucy nudged me. “How much longer is Boss Lady going to pontificate for?” She nodded at Aveda, who was still droning on about demon safety measures.

“She has two more points to cover,” I whispered back. “And be forewarned: once we’re away from her adoring public, The Aveda Jupiter Tantrum will be back in effect.”

“The zit has not been forgotten,” Lucy murmured.

“The zit will never be forgotten. All other zits shall cower in fear and immortalize it as their one true god.”

“Goodness.” Lucy giggled. “Such drama.”

It was total drama. But when it came to The Aveda Jupiter Tantrum, there was nothing but drama.

Here’s the thing about The Aveda Jupiter Tantrum: just like the leaves on trees and the frost on mountains, it has a natural life cycle. It’s no good trying to truncate or disrupt said life cycle. The frost will come back harder and you’ll be buried underneath the snow and probably forced to cut off a limb in order to survive.

The only thing to do was wait.

After we’d wrapped up the Q&A, Lucy and I wordlessly trailed behind Aveda as she stomped her way back to “Jupiter HQ”—a crumbling Victorian in the lower Haight—and tornadoed into the second floor gym. Staring at the sticky trail of demonic cupcake frosting she left in her wake, I heaved one very long, very gusty sigh. I’d have to clean that up later. And demon-based fluids had a persnickety way of dribbling into the scratches gracing our weathered hardwood floors. They stubbornly wedged themselves there until I flopped onto my stomach and picked them out with my fingernails.

Aveda’s boots would also require meticulous hand-washing, I realized, remembering how they’d gotten covered in frosting during battle. That job was always a pain. The buttery leather was delicate and I needed to make sure it survived the cleaning without getting scratched. Otherwise, she’d just go buy another pair.

Thanks to personal appearances and endorsement deals, Aveda Jupiter made a more-than-decent living. Unfortunately, she was phenomenally bad at managing her money and thought nothing of dropping a few thousand bucks on shoes that were identical to the dozens of pairs she already owned. I wasn't about to complain since she overpaid me quite handsomely for my menial assistant duties, but I tried to keep her in line by coupon-clipping, balancing the books, and doing everything in my power to ensure she didn't actually *need* another pair of boots.

That reminded me: bills were due in a couple days. Yet another thing to add to my ever-growing to-do list. Said list existed only in my head, a giant mental bulletin board containing a mish-mash of multicolored sticky notes with my tasks, Aveda's schedule, and various notations I'd made tracking her mood swings and Tantrum info. To anyone else, it would probably look like a mess, but I knew where everything was. I kept fastidious track of each sticky note and its place on the board and I made sure the pieces that represented my tasks were checked off in a timely manner. My mental board wasn't as flashy as Lucy's extensive knife collection, but it kept HQ running in a reasonably efficient manner.

I reined in my sighs, trudged up the stairs, and plopped myself outside the gym door, prepared to weather the storm. I needed to be ready to provide support whenever The Aveda Jupiter Tantrum wound up to a big finish, and self-pity was definitely not part of the equation.

"Here, love: sustenance." Lucy returned from her foraging trip to the kitchen and plunked a bowl of Lucky Charms into my hands. "But let the record show: I highly disapprove of you eating that garbage for every meal. You must have scurvy by now."

I inhaled the intoxicating scent of processed sugar and chemicals. “Then why are you enabling me?” I dipped a finger into the bowl, searching out the nefarious purple marshmallow bits and casting them aside.

She sat down next to me, primly tugging her lacy hem over her knees. “There’s nothing else in the kitchen. Which means I have to starve.”

“I’ll put extra kale and kale-like things on the shopping list for you,” I said, giving my cereal one last purple-check. It was all clear, so I dug in, savoring the way the sawdust-like texture crunched against my teeth. “Wasn’t Nate supposed to do a grocery run last night?”

Thwack!

The sound of Aveda’s fist smacking into her boxing bag jolted us out of our conversation.

I suppose I should be grateful The Aveda Jupiter Tantrum usually involved heavy working out rather than whining, but Aveda’s intensity when it came to attaining the physical perfection required of a superhero was a little scary sometimes. Not to mention the fact that she had a tendency to destroy boxing bags at the rate of roughly two per Tantrum.

Much like the boots, they added up.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwackthwackthwack!

Better add “budget for new boxing bags” to the to-do list, then.

“I’ve told her she can’t go so hard after a demon takedown,” Lucy said. “Her muscles are cooked. Should we go in?” She nodded at the door.

“Not yet.” I shoveled more cereal into my mouth and got a bite that mixed pink and green marshmallows with the perfect ratio of sawdust bits. “We don’t have to get her out for the party until 7 p.m. and we have...” I checked my watch. “Approximately twenty minutes ’til she cycles through her rage levels, embraces a feeling of helplessness, and asks for my assistance.”

“Or you could storm the gym, tell her to stop acting like a perfection-obsessed loon, and take a stand against her piling all her diva crap onto you.” Lucy idly twisted one of her long, honey-colored locks around her finger. “Just for example.”

“The ability to accept any and all diva crap is a highly-valued skill in personal assistants.” I scraped my spoon across the bottom of my bowl, scavenging for stray sugar granules.

Lucy snorted. “Then you must be *very* valuable. But really, darling, the way she lit into you during her little screaming jag today—”

“Luce. We’ve been over this. Saving the city from packs of bloodthirsty demons is stressful; sometimes she needs to vent. And my special gift in life is knowing how to absorb, defuse, and contain said venting. I am an expert at handling her and this is *how* I handle her.” I set my empty bowl to the side and checked my watch. “And we’ve got eighteen minutes left, so let’s get back to more important things. Like the groceries. Did Nate forget to go to the store?”

Lucy sighed, apparently willing to let the matter drop for now. “He’s been buried in his basement lair for the past twenty-four hours. Obsessively mapping out our latest round of demon portals, trying to find a pattern.”

I rolled my eyes. “The pattern is that there is no pattern. The pattern is also that he needs to remove the gigantic stick from his ass and go on the damn grocery run.”

Lucy smiled. “Not to mention the fact that he should be thanking you on a daily basis for even having a basement lair to call his own?”

“Have I ranted that rant before?”

“A few times, love.”

“Mmm.” I closed my eyes and allowed my head to fall back against the wall—then winced when a new series of angry *thwacks* rang out from behind the gym door.

“Then I’ll spare you.”

It was true, though: full responsibility for Jupiter HQ went to me. I found the Victorian, I scouted it, and I got the small business loan that allowed us to buy it off its former dot-com millionaire owner three seconds after the internet bubble burst. The instant I saw its faded pink wallpaper and scratched floors, I knew it was perfect—weird and rickety enough to project proper superhero mystique, but cozy enough that Aveda could call it home. It also had something very few San Francisco living situations do: space.

Enough space for Lucy to knock out a few walls and make the second floor into a makeshift gym. Enough space for Nate Jones—Aveda’s physician, demonology expert, and annoying non-getter of groceries—to forge a creepy mad scientist lab in the basement. And most importantly, enough space for the small arsenal of workout equipment, beauty products, and high-end designer shoes that made Aveda...well, Aveda.

I heard a series of determined grunts from the gym. That meant Aveda had moved on from the bag to her push-up/pull-up/sit-up routine. I checked my watch again. She must be reaching her final rage level, which meant about seven more minutes.

“Why are you two loitering out here?” A gruff voice boomed down the hall. “We need to debrief regarding today’s attack.”

“Or maybe,” I said, frowning at the black-clad figure striding toward us, “*we* need to remember when it’s our turn to get groceries, Nate.”

Nate came to a stop, his 6’4” frame looming over us like an angry tree. He crossed his muscular arms over his broad chest and glowered at me through deceptively mild-mannered-looking wire-rimmed glasses. Given that his face was made up of sharp angles—from the high cheekbones to the too long nose—his glower tended to be pretty intimidating. Lucy claimed his incongruous combination of brawny physique and uptight, nerdy demeanor made him “weirdly hot in that cute scientist meets broody thug way, if you’re into that kind of thing.” Given her own preferences, I knew she wasn’t, so I was pretty sure she was just saying that in the hope that I’d suddenly take notice and smash myself on top of him.

Lucy was very invested in my non-sex life. You know, in that she encouraged me to drop the “non” part. Maybe because she thought I needed extracurricular activities that didn’t involve Aveda. Or maybe she wanted me to chime in with my own juicy details when she shared her exploits. Honestly, I was happy just to listen.

In any case, I wasn’t into the Nate kind of thing, either, especially since our working relationship contained so much glowering. I met his dark eyes without flinching.

“And before you make your next not-so-incisive observation: we *are* working,” I said.

“Did you get the stone?” he asked.

“There wasn’t one.”

His glower deepened. “There wasn’t one or you didn’t bother to look for it?”

“We were a little busy with the demonic cupcake fighting to look for anything. And as you haven’t even bothered to notice, our boss is in the middle of a crisis.” I pointed to the gym door. The grunts had intensified. Push-ups/pull-ups/sit-ups were almost done; kettlebells would be next.

He raked a hand through his unruly shock of hair, making it stand on end. “I’ve told you: those stones are crucial to my research.”

“And I’ve told *you*: the number one priority for this organization is Aveda. It’d be nice if you expressed some facsimile of concern for her well-being after a big demon battle instead of fixating on your ‘experiments.’” I actually made air-quotes around “experiments.” Something about his condescending, know-it-all tone always brought out the contrary three-year-old in me. “And anyway, if we missed a stone, Rose will send it to us.”

“Which will take at least twenty-four hours, which is time that could’ve been spent studying the specimen—”

“If finding the stones is so important, why don’t you join us on the missions? Get your hands dirty.” I gestured to my frosting-spattered jeans. “Actual field work might be better research than, say, locking yourself in the lab and ignoring the rest of us for days on end.”

He stiffened. “And what, exactly, do you know about scientific research? Unless you mean researching Aveda’s favorite shade of lipstick.”

“There’s definitely a science to that.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I knew he didn’t get my jumbled mental bulletin board way of doing things. If something wasn’t written down in an official-looking spreadsheet, he thought it didn’t count.

Hmm. Maybe if I scrawled “get the damn groceries” on one of his spreadsheets, he’d consider it a task worthy of his notice.

Anyway, I was only half joking about the “lipstick science” side of things. My job might not seem important to him, but considering his severe lack of interpersonal skills, I doubted he’d be very good at it.

His glare shifted to the side. “What’s this?” He grabbed my hand and pushed my hoodie sleeve up, revealing the welt on the inside of my wrist.

“One of the cupcakes bit me,” I said, pulling away. “No big deal.”

“I have a salve for that,” he said, grabbing my wrist again.

“I don’t need a salve.” I yanked my hand away and tugged my sleeve down. “It’ll heal on its own.”

“It’ll heal faster if you use the salve—”

“Let’s get back to worrying about Aveda,” I interrupted. “She’s the one who was in the thick of battle and all?”

He frowned, looking like he wanted to say something else. Instead, he abruptly switched topics. “Letta Wilcox is in the foyer. She’s waiting for you to tell her what the portal means for the future of her bakery.”

“Shit.” I glanced at my watch for the umpteenth time. “I need to be here when Aveda’s done. Otherwise, her rage cycle will loop back up to the top again. And that’ll keep her working out ’til at least 3 a.m.”

“I can talk to Letta.” Lucy scrambled to her feet, her pixie-ish features taking on an enthusiastic cast.

“Hey.” I hopped up and jutted an arm out, blocking her. “Stick to the script. No trolling for dates.”

Her eyes widened with unconvincing innocence. “I would never...”

“Right. You think I haven’t noticed the big, flirty eyes whenever we stop by Cake My Day for a communal cookie? Which you then don’t eat?”

“She’s a redhead,” Lucy said, as if that was a perfectly acceptable defense.

“Can we save this round of slumber party gossip for non-work hours?” Nate said.

“Can you save your man-bitchery for no time ever?” I shot back.

“I will be perfectly professional,” Lucy said. “Remind me: what is ‘the script’?”

I pasted a soothing smile on my face and clasped my hands in front of me, going into my well-rehearsed act.

“So your place of business has been selected by the Otherworld as a demon portal site,” I droned. “Really, it’s nothing to worry about. I realize your first reaction might be complete and total panic, but I ask you to remember the facts...”

I held my hands out in the manner of a children’s show host about to impart a Very Important (And Super Calming) Lesson.

“Yes, the very first Otherworld portal—the one from eight years ago—made a total mess of San Francisco, and yes, the demons who came through were of a distinctly

humanoid variety and may have been part of an invasion attempt, at least according to our most respected demonology scholars. But those demons died pretty much immediately upon entering our world and we haven't seen anything like them since. The demons who have come through every subsequent, way-less-crazy portal are very different—not at all humanoid and usually take the form of the first thing they see, albeit with the added bonus of fangs and/or claws. And while they're still totally dangerous, they aren't smart enough to organize any invasion-level plans. Plus, Aveda Jupiter always takes 'em down.”

I paused here for another reassuring smile. I sometimes threw in a hand pat at this juncture, but decided Lucy would improvise her own touchie-feelies.

“And?” Nate prompted.

“And...sometimes, the demons will bring a distinctive-looking token with them when they slip through: a piece of stone with gibberish scribbled on it.”

“Not gibberish!” Nate protested. “Possible messages from the Otherworld.”

“Gibberish,” I said. “Gibberish that’s never given us any actual useful information. If you happen to spot one of these, please collect it and send it to Aveda Jupiter, Inc., so our resident annoying scientist can log it in one of his many spreadsheets.”

“I’m assuming I can switch up the wording a bit,” Lucy murmured.

I studiously avoided Nate’s thunderous gaze, winding up to my big finish.

“It is unlikely that your portal will reopen: once the thing closes, it seems to be a done deal. That said, the fact that you played host to a real, live Otherworld portal often means your establishment will become a sought after tourist attraction, much like that

drag bar on Turk that weathered a vicious attack from demonic high heels, so...congratulations! Should you have any further problems, feel free to call, email, or tweet us here at Aveda Jupiter, Inc., and we will be happy to perform any necessary acts of superheroism.”

“‘Congratulations’?” muttered Nate. “Really?”

“It’s an ironic ‘congratulations,’” I said. “Breaks the ice.”

“That is the most illogical thing I’ve ever—”

“Because your grasp of human relations is so amazingly—”

“Guys.” Lucy waved her arms, her lacy sleeves flapping like excitable snowflakes. “I got it. I—”

“*Eviiiiie.*” The wail came from deep within the gym, the cry of an animal stranded in the desert with no food or water or high-end moisturizer.

That wail was the final stage of The Aveda Jupiter Tantrum.

And that was my cue.

ZITASTROPHE!**Aveda Jupiter Conquers Cupcakes...But Falls To Face Volcano!**

by **Maisy Kane, Bay Bridge Kiss Editrix**

Bonjour, 'Frisicans! Your pal Maisy was first on the scene today when Aveda Jupiter dispatched the dastardly demons gracing the latest Otherworld portal. The little bastards took on cupcake form this time, and I nearly fell into a diabetic coma from the sugar shock of it all! (Kidding! Diabetes is no laughing matter—get yourself tested!) Even though A.Jupes had things well in hand, I must express a smidge of concern for her health. Girl seems to have developed a monster blemish on her face—and at exactly the wrong moment, what with the big ol' party happening tonight!

As my readers may recall, Mayor Mendoza is set to present everyone's fave superheroine with the key to the city—an honor her fans have been clamoring for forever! They're already lined up around the block, eagerly awaiting the ceremony and fan meet-and-greet, wherein A.Jupes will sign autographs and be her usual fabulous self...or as fabulous as she can be, considering that crazy-ass zit! (A, honey, call me! I can recommend an ace skin care regimen.) My sources say we'll also be getting appearances from a pair of San Francisco's finest local celebs: Tommy Lemon (Mr. Big Time Movie Star) and Stu Singh (The Gutter's beloved old codger of a piano player). And of course, your pal Maisy will be on the scene to document the most thrilling goings-on and face volcano eruptions! (Kidding! But seriously, A, invest in some decent blush.)

Shasta's Corner! *Shasta (Maisy's bestie) here. Don't forget: all organic lace bras are 50 percent off at Pussy Queen this week. Come on down and prepare to get*

down. (Editrix's Note: Shast, that "joke" is as fresh as a pair of granny panties. Not kidding.)

Chapter Three

This is gonna be a bitch to clean up.

Yes, fine, I'll admit it: My first thought upon entering the gym was not very assistant-y.

It was a total mess, though. As I'd predicted, two loyal boxing bag soldiers had fallen to Aveda's merciless blows. One was still hanging from the ceiling by its ropes, determined to stay at least sort of upright. Unfortunately, a hole had been punched clean through the middle. The other had been knocked free from its moorings and was deflating on the floor in a sad pile of black vinyl.

Weights, jump ropes, and Aveda's fabulous boots were scattered all over the sweaty mats that covered the floor. I allowed myself a mournful look at the boots, which were now smeared with a sticky mix of frosting, blood, and the sand that had once served as the boxing bags' filling. Definitely not salvageable. Not even if I gave them the most meticulous of hand-washings.

Sand had also gotten all over the floor. It crunched under my feet as I made my way over to Aveda. She was sprawled against the far wall, glaring steadily at the bag with the hole in it. As if the sheer power of her glare would somehow make the zit vanish and render her whole and awesome again.

I tried to summon the words to tell her she was still awesome, zit be damned. To remind her of her bravery and city-saving mojo and the fact that she was strong enough to punch a hole through an entire boxing bag.

But none of that would register until we'd fixed the zit problem. For Aveda Jupiter, anything less than perfection at all times and in all areas was bullshit. And it was my job to fix the bullshit.

"It's...still...there," she growled, pointing to the zit. "I have to go to that party tonight. What am I going to do?"

I knelt down next to her and studied the zit, doing my best to hide my dismay. It had grown brighter and more toxic-looking over the past hour, meaning she'd picked at it.

"Okay," I said, reaching into the depths of my hoodie pocket. "We're gonna full coverage foundation this bitch." I pulled out a makeup compact and dangled it in front of her, as if trying to hypnotize a cranky cat with yarn. "This stuff is like magic."

"Right." Nate hulked his way into the gym. "And clogs the pores to such a degree that you will continue to develop skin imperfections in the same area for years to come."

"Stop! Helping!" I sang out, popping the compact open and dabbing makeup on Aveda's cheek. I might be able to get a glamour for her later, a bit of actual magic that would further conceal the blotch and enhance her overall look, but this would have to do for now. Slowly but surely, the zit faded underneath a hefty layer of Skin Tone #67 until it was nothing more than a barely visible spot. Aveda's shoulders relaxed, her expression turning peaceful under my ministrations.

Now we were safely into the aftermath of the tantrum: that moment of serenity before she whiplashed back to imperious mode, conveniently forgetting that an obstacle had dared cross her path in the first place. I felt my own shoulders relax as she leaned into me like a toddler getting food swabbed from her face.

Naturally, Nate had to interrupt our nice moment.

“What,” he growled, “is that?”

“What?” My eyes swept over Aveda’s face. “Do you see another zit?”

“No.” He brushed stray sand out of the way and lowered himself to the floor next to Aveda’s feet. “That.”

I turned to where he was gesturing, prepared to roll my eyes at whatever minor source of irritation he’d managed to pinpoint.

Instead, my eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets.

Aveda’s left ankle was...well. It barely looked like an ankle at this point. It had swollen into an angry, mottled sphere that looked ready to rise up, detach itself, and club the rest of her leg to death.

“Did she fall at the bakery?” Nate demanded. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Of course not!” I snapped. “She never falls—wait, did you fall?”

I swiveled back to Aveda. She was holding one of her hands up, trying to use her telekinesis to levitate the compact away from me. Telekinesis was her actual superpower, but it was so weak, she could barely do anything with it. We downplayed it in all our press materials, and she rarely showed it off in public. Her ass-kicking abilities, as she’d be quick to remind you, came from hard work, intense physical training, and an obsessive willingness to avoid carbs.

The compact twitched between my fingers, but didn’t move farther. I handed it to her.

“I didn’t fall.” She examined her concealed zit in the compact’s mirror. “Well. Not at the bakery.”

Her voice was disinterested, as if Nate and I were discussing something unrelated to her. “I might have slipped while I was practicing a jump-kick combination.”

She gestured vaguely at the sand-covered floor.

“But it’s no big deal. I just need to rest for a minute.” She shut the compact and met my eyes. Her gaze was regal, fully restored to pre-Tantrum imperiousness.

I remembered what Lucy had said about her muscles being “cooked.” Apparently, she had finally pushed them too far.

“But...but...” I sputtered, gesturing to her ankle. Nate probed the blob with his fingertips. “Aren’t you in pain?”

In an instant, the imperiousness turned to steel.

“Aveda Jupiter does not feel pain.”

I couldn’t think of a good comeback. Over the years, Aveda had trained and honed and sculpted her body into a perfect weapon, impervious to heat and cold and all manner of demon attack. I was convinced she had also figured out how to block her sweat glands since perspiration never seemed to grace her brow.

That was why something like a zit was so monumental. Her body had found a way to disobey her.

It seemed like she had always been this way, commanding and unbreakable. It was easy to forget that before she was Aveda Jupiter, she was little Annie Chang—that when we first met, we were nothing more than a pair of perfectly average five-year-olds growing up in the East Bay suburbs. We’d initially come together over the fact that we were the only Asian Americans in Mrs. Miller’s kindergarten class and our parents sent in food for afternoon snack that the other kids deemed “weird.” In Annie/Aveda’s case, it

was her mom's handmade soup dumplings, pockets of boiling-hot meaty yumminess our classmates rudely shunned for scalding their tiny little mouths. They made fun of Aveda for days, claiming she had tried to "burn their faces off." A week later, my dad took it upon himself to craft spam musubi, which he proudly referred to as "the one true Japanese American cuisine." Personally, I found it to be the perfect comfort food, the spam-nori-rice combination salty and savory and hearty in a way that spoke directly to my soul.

My classmates did not agree.

No one would touch the musubi on the basis that the spam looked pink and fleshy enough to be "human meat" and also "seaweed, ew." I could still remember my face getting hot, the start of tears burning behind my eyes, as the rest of the kids started up a chant of "HU-MAN MEAT! HU-MAN MEAT!" The spam glistened in the light, all sweaty and gross from sitting out for so long.

And then little Annie/Aveda pushed her way to the front. Her pigtails, usually perfectly symmetrical, were askew and her eyes were lit with something I now recognized as a potent brew of rage and bravado.

"Human meat looks absolutely delicious to me!" she'd screamed.

And then she'd proceeded to gobble down every single freaking spam musubi while the rest of the class watched. She was like a tiny child version of the Tasmanian Devil crossed with Pac-Man. In the midst of her cramming snacks into her mouth, she'd looked over and given me a nod: *This is for you, okay? I'm doing this for you. Because I remember what it was like when they made fun of me.*

All the attention and the whispering from the other kids had transferred over to her, the assembled five-year-olds switching easily from mocking me to regarding her with a mix of shock, fear, and “dang, that girl is *crazy*” awe.

I’d held her hair and rubbed her back when she’d thrown it all up in the bathroom right after. It was the first time she’d saved me. The first time I’d comforted her afterward. It bonded us for life.

We were inseparable after that, which meant we were also together that fateful night so many years later. We’d both just turned eighteen—our birthdays were within a week of each other, but we always had our joint celebration on hers—and were in the process of getting drunk on cheap wine from Mrs. Chang’s secret stash. I’d anticipated passing out on the shag carpet of Aveda/Annie’s bedroom mid-tipsy-giggle.

I did *not* anticipate an earthquake that sloshed our crappy wine all over the carpet and opened up that first big portal to the evil alternate dimension known as the Otherworld. Or that said portal would result in a bunch of San Franciscans getting superpowers.

Demonologists later hypothesized that the powers had been somehow transferred to humans from the demon corpses found around the portal wreckage and while “superpowers from badass demons” sounded way cool in theory, the vast majority of the powers turned out to be pretty unimpressive. Like, barista Dave down at the Sunny Side Café could subtly alter the temperature of a room if he thought about it hard enough, but all that really meant was he never had to pay for air-conditioning. Or, you know, local vintage boutique owner Shruti Dhaliwal found she had the ability to grow her hair as long

as she wanted on cue—which enhanced her unique signature style, but wasn't exactly world-saving.

The actual number of superpowered San Franciscans was fairly low—less than a thousand—but that didn't stop certain wild-eyed individuals from trying to claim they had suddenly gained powers whenever a new portal opened up. These claims were always disproved, chalked up to wishful thinking or flat-out fabrication. The smaller portals, it seemed, just didn't have the same juice.

Aveda's power was just as weak as the rest, yet where others saw party tricks, she saw an opportunity to finally pursue her true calling: protecting the people of our fair city. She'd been quick to loudly and firmly establish herself as the city's sole hero.

That's right: she'd basically called dibs.

A couple other wannabe heroes tried to challenge her, most notably our old junior high acquaintance Mercedes McClain, who'd been gifted with a sort of “human GPS” ability. But Aveda trained harder and longer and was always first on the scene whenever a new portal opened up. Plus, she had better outfits. The public loved her immediately.

With “protecting San Francisco” off the table, others blessed with superpowers took a variety of paths, but none of them involved fighting the supernatural. Mercedes, for instance, relocated to Los Angeles, refashioned herself as “Magnificent Mercedes,” and used her “human GPS” ability to foil carjackers and put an end to dangerous high-speed chases. My friend Scott Cameron's power enabled him to access and manipulate bits of Otherworld magic, so he made a decent living selling spell-casting services online—usually to people looking to ensnare their crush of choice with a love token. (I

liked to refer to him as “the Sorcerer Supreme” after Marvel Comics’ magic-wielding Doctor Strange, which he thought was funny even though he didn’t get the reference.)

And as for me...well. The less said about me, the better.

“Nathaniel, get me a bandage,” Aveda said, snapping her fingers. “I should start prepping for the party.”

“You’re going to need some kind of crutch,” I began.

Nate snatched a towel from the gym’s rack, folded it into a neat square, and slid it under Aveda’s ankle. “She’s not going anywhere,” he said. “This looks like a severe sprain.”

“So it’s not broken,” I said.

“It might as well be,” he said, getting to his feet. “I’m going to get my supplies and patch her up and then we’ll move her to the ground floor bedroom.”

“No,” Aveda said, her mouth flattening into a thin line. “The party tonight is a must.”

“No parties,” he said. “You have to stay off your feet, and for much longer than tonight. No fighting, no workouts, no nothing.”

“I can’t do nothing!” she snapped. “I’m a beacon of hope to this city. They depend upon me and I must maintain a certain image of heroism for them. And they’ve been anticipating this moment—Aveda Jupiter triumphantly holding that symbolic key aloft—for *months*. Imagine how it will look if I don’t show up!”

“Maybe there’s a compromise,” I said.

“No.” Nate’s tone took on an air of finality. “Aveda needs to take this seriously or risk permanent damage to that ankle. She will sit here and breathe and that’s it. Likely for four to six weeks.”

He frowned at me, as if all of this was my fault. “Don’t let her move until I get back.”

And with that, he stalked out the door.

“I keep telling him he needs to work on that bedside manner,” I said, attempting to lighten the mood.

Aveda didn’t hear me. Her eyes were glued to Nate’s retreating back.

“No,” she hissed. “This is not happening.”

I laid a soothing hand on her arm.

“There must be a solution here. Maybe we can Skype you in for the party.”

“No!” She sliced a defiant arm through the air, nearly smacking me in the chest.

“I have to be *present*. A face on some shitty little computer screen isn’t going to make my fans feel special. They want *me*, Evie. In person, interacting with them.”

She planted her hands on the floor and attempted to push up, her face turning purple from the strain.

“Don’t just sit there,” she growled. “Help me!”

“Nate said not to move,” I protested. But I was already allowing her to drape her arm around my neck, was already hauling both of us to our feet as my undeveloped muscles screamed at the weight of her body sagging against me. She wouldn’t stop trying to stand until she saw it was impossible, so I might as well speed up the process.

“I can walk,” she insisted. “I’ll show him!”

I managed to drag us into a standing position. We were a two-headed monster, me quaking uncertainly as I battled to keep us upright.

“To the door!” she rasped, her arm tightening around my shoulders.

I attempted to sway forward, but it was no use. Our two-headed monster configuration could barely stand, much less move. I made it half a step then felt my legs give way as my foot slid through the sweat-and-sand mess coating the floor.

“Gaaaaaaaah!”

I wasn't sure who cried out, her or me, but suddenly we were both on our asses and her face was twisting in pain. She disentangled herself from me and tried to push herself up again.

It didn't work.

“Dammit!” she shrieked, pounding her fist against the floor. She leaned back against the wall, biting her lip. Her eyes locked on mine, frustration swirling in their coal black depths.

“Okay,” she said. “So I can't stand up. Apparently.”

“Right,” I said, as if she had come to this very smart conclusion on her own. “We should wait for Nate to come back. Then we can figure out a game plan.” I hesitated, not sure how to bring up the next bit. “And we'll need to call Mercedes.”

“What? That is the last thing—”

“Aveda! You just admitted you can't even stand. And if you're incapacitated in any way, we're supposed to call her so she can temporarily take over demon-fighting duties. Otherwise, the city—”

“The city needs Aveda Jupiter,” she sniffed. “Not some half-assed imitation.”

“Are you afraid your fans will suddenly convert to Team Mercedes? Because that’s crazy—”

“Yes.” She interrupted me a little too quickly. “It *is* crazy. It is also of utmost importance that my fans feel safe and me being my usual invincible self is what makes them feel that way. I’ve never taken so much as a sick day. And I’m not about to start.”

She frowned. And slowly, the frustration in her eyes morphed into something else: a shrewd glint, a spark of something that was very likely an idea.

Oh, God. Not an idea.

“Evie,” she said, “remember the summer between third and fourth grades? When we got obsessed with that one movie?”

Now she was in a reminiscing mood? “*The Parent Trap*? Mills, not Lohan?”

“Yes. We borrowed each other’s clothes, got the same haircut...”

“Serenaded everyone in our general vicinity with an off-key version of ‘Let’s Get Together’? I remember. What does that...”

Her lips curved further. She cocked her head to the side, waiting for me to figure it out.

Wait. Panic flared in my chest. I swallowed hard, shooing it away. Panic was not in my wheelhouse.

But surely she wasn’t suggesting...

“Evelyn Tanaka,” she breathed. “You can be *me*.”

Okay, so yes. She was *totally* suggesting that.

“Um.” My voice was calm and controlled, even as my hands fisted at my sides. “Let’s discuss the many reasons why this is a bad idea. Number one: we look nothing alike.”

Though we’re both twenty-six years old, my dark brown tangle of curls was the antithesis of Aveda’s smooth sheet of raven hair, my freckled nose the blotchy version of her clear skin. Her eyes were a startling black, mine a half-assed hazel. Her features were angular and elegant, mine rounded off and occasionally cute. We did have similar builds—short and slender—but hers was one straight, athletic line and mine curved here and there, punctuated by decent-sized breasts and hips.

“We’re both Asian,” she said dismissively. “That’s enough for some people.”

I rolled my eyes. She was Chinese, I was half-Japanese. Even our Asianness didn’t match.

“And doesn’t Scott have something that will help? Some kind of glamour token thing?” she added.

“What about after the party? I can’t fight. I can barely run without keeling over. And I don’t exactly have your charisma.”

“I know, but—”

“The point is, I definitely can’t be you for four to six weeks.”

She waved a hand. “I’m sure Nathaniel’s exaggerating the seriousness of my injury; I should be back on my feet by tomorrow. This’ll just be for tonight. So I keep my promise to the fans.” She smiled brightly, a bit of that trademark imperiousness creeping back into her eyes. “Aveda Jupiter *always* keeps her promises.”

I took a deep breath, forcing my hands to unclench. My palms had gotten sweaty again. I had to pull out the last weapon in my arsenal: the biggest reason this absolutely, positively was not going to work.

“Can we please remember I can’t be the center of attention? That kind of thing puts way too much pressure on me,” I said, making my voice extra calm, extra soothing. “Everything else, whatever you need—someone to clean costumes, someone to clean toilets, someone to hold the wind machine so your hair blows out behind you in the most becoming fashion—I’m here. I’m always here. But we’ve talked about why I need to stay out of the spotlight. Especially at something like a party. With all those people. We’ve *talked* about that.”

“Don’t be such a drama queen,” she said. “It’s just the fans. They’re perfectly normal. Regular schmoes!”

“Aveda—”

“And you’ll have Lucy with you. She’ll keep back the worst of the lot.”

“*Aveda*—”

“Please.” Her hands clamped on my shoulders. “Please, Evie. I’ve always been there for you, haven’t I? Now I need you to be there for me.”

Her gaze bored into me, single-minded and intense.

I felt my resolve start to crumble. The truth was, she *had* always been there for me. After the spam musubi incident, she’d declared herself my playground protector. Any would-be bullies who so much as looked at my crayons was greeted with a blood-chilling glare and an “Oh, I *wouldn’t*.” She’d held fast to that role through the years, fiercely guarding my lunch money once we graduated to first grade, making sure my hair

didn't look totally stupid at our first high school dance, and insisting on having "a nice little chat" with the funeral home when they'd tried to charge me up the ass for Mom's burial. (I was pretty sure the "chat" had been neither nice nor little—after that, the funeral home director cowered whenever Aveda so much as looked at him.)

And of course, she'd been there for that night three years ago, when *I* was the one tantruming and she was the one doing the comforting.

She'd saved me yet again.

"Are you listening?" She shook me a little. "You're the only person I can trust with this. Evie, please..." She hesitated. I looked up, meeting her gaze. The intensity had faded and her eyes were pleading, almost teary. "Remember," she said, "we're like *The Heroic Trio*...except there's only two of us. You remember that, right?" Her voice quavered a little.

I sighed, covered one of her hands with mine, and squeezed. "Of course."

Seeing that shred of naked vulnerability flaring in her eyes...well, it was disconcerting. And it reminded me, suddenly and viscerally, of our days as totally mundane pre-teens, stealing booze from her parents and watching *The Heroic Trio* on a loop. It reminded me of that flash of hurt I'd seen earlier, when she'd asked if anyone had mentioned her spinning backhand.

It reminded me that I was probably the only person who knew that piece of her—the piece that was *capable* of being hurt—existed.

"All right." I gently extricated my shoulders from her claw-like hands. "I'll do it. But this has to be the only time. Okay?"

Her head bobbed up and down, her eyes flooding with relief. “Yes, yes, of course. Like I said, Aveda Jupiter always keeps her promises.”

“And as far as *The Heroic Trio* goes: this means I’m the Michelle Yeoh,” I added. “This settles it once and for all.”

She let out a surprised, croaky laugh. “Fine,” she said, a trace of amusement creeping into her voice. “You’re Michelle. And I love you for it.”

I gave her a half-smile and slumped against the wall. My jeans felt gritty with the sand from the destroyed boxing bags.

It’s just another task, I thought. *Just another thing for Aveda. Add it to my to-do list.*

I had a sudden flashback to that reporter telling me I had “the world’s worst job.”

But dammit, I thought, squaring my shoulders, *I’m still the best at it.*