



Heroine Complex

By Sarah Kuhn

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Asian-American superheroines Evie Tanaka and Aveda Jupiter protect San Francisco from perilous threats in the first book in Sarah Kuhn's snarky and smart fantasy trilogy • "The superheroine we've been waiting for." —Seanan McGuire

Being a superheroine is hard. Working for one is even harder.

Evie Tanaka is the put-upon personal assistant to Aveda Jupiter, her childhood best friend and San Francisco's most beloved superheroine. She's great at her job—blending into the background, handling her boss's epic diva tantrums, and getting demon blood out of leather pants.

Unfortunately, she's not nearly as together when it comes to running her own life, standing up for herself, or raising her tempestuous teenage sister, Bea.

But everything changes when Evie's forced to pose as her glamorous boss for one night, and her darkest secret comes out: she has powers, too. Now it's up to her to contend with murderous cupcakes, nosy gossip bloggers, and supernatural karaoke battles—all while juggling unexpected romance and Aveda's increasingly outrageous demands. And when a larger threat emerges, Evie must finally take charge and become a superheroine in her own right...or see her city fall to a full-on demonic invasion.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Heroine Complex*:

"Sarah Kuhn creates characters you want to befriend, worlds you want to live in, and situations you can't begin to imagine. *Heroine Complex* is at once **fiendishly snarky yet colossally big-hearted.**" —Javier Grillo-Marxuach, writer and producer for *Lost*, creator of *The Middleman*

"**Smart, sexy, and filled with beautifully fleshed-out/kick-ass women**, *Heroine Complex* is the kind of read that sticks in your brain like a fanged cupcake.... I adored it." —Amber Benson, author of *The Witches of Echo Park*

"**The superheroine we've been waiting for; the urban fantasy we deserve.** Sarah Kuhn is the total package: comedy, tragedy, and sincerity. Grab your cape. We're saving the city." —Seanan McGuire, *New York Times*-bestselling author of the October Daye series

"Every page of Sarah Kuhn's novel delighted me immensely.... **Kuhn's writing is bouncy and engaging**, and Evie is very clearly spun into a captivating character. I also have to give Kuhn props for balancing romance and humour and drama, and making me wish that *Heroine Complex* would go on just a little bit longer." —Book Riot

"**Romance, adventure, kick-butt action sequences**, and killer cupcakes combine to make this a great example of how weird and wonderful urban fantasy can be in the right hands." —B&N Sci-fi & Fantasy Blog

"Onomatopoeias? Check. Snarkiness? Check. Kick-ass Asian-American superwomen saving San Francisco from demon-possessed cupcakes? Check and check, Kuhn's *Heroine Complex* is **a ridiculously fun read.**" —RT Reviews (top pick)

"Sarah Kuhn's *Heroine Complex* is **a delight.**" —Leigh Bardugo, *New York Times*-bestselling author of *Crooked Kingdom*

"**A fresh take on a superheroine story.** Full of wit and of course danger!... This seriously was an entertaining read. The character development was superb." —Boundless Books

"Love the humor and wacky hijinks, along with character development.... **This is everything I've ever wanted in a book!**" —Dreaming of Cats

About the Author

Sarah Kuhn is the author of *Heroine Complex*—the first in a series starring Asian American superheroines—for DAW Books. She also wrote *The Ruby Equation* for the comics anthology *Fresh Romance* and the romantic comedy novella *One Con Glory*, which earned praise from io9 and *USA Today* and is in development as a feature film. Her articles and essays on such topics as geek girl culture, comic book continuity, and Sailor Moon cosplay have appeared in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Apex Magazine*, *AngryAsianMan.com*, *IGN.com*, *Back Stage*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *StarTrek.com*, *Creative Screenwriting*, and the Hugo-nominated anthology *Chicks Dig Comics*. In 2011, she was selected as a finalist

for the CAPE (Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment) New Writers Award. You can visit her at heroinecomplex.com or on Twitter: @sarahkuhn.

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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 sploosh 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.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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