

# Profoundly POWERLESS

A Novel by Jenny Amara

## **Profoundly Powerless (Q2 2024 Collected Edition Chapter 01 - 09) Chapter 01**

Paul pressed his broom forward in rhythm with the music playing in the cafe. Each motion jostled a little dust into the air as Paul absentmindedly pushed a small pile of dirt and debris toward the center of the small dining area. A half dozen tables, three larger seating areas with couches, and the barista counter were the only obstacles, but Paul had worked out that the center of the cafe was the best place to gather. It left the fewest remnants behind this way.

Paul's day was progressing as they usually did on a typical Tuesday. The cafe had been busy in the morning, as was usual for a business center, but things had been quiet for the last two hours. Paul used this downtime to do his cleaning. As he was just about to collect the last pile of dirt onto his dustpan, a massive disturbance outside rattled the windows of the cafe, causing Paul to drop the contents of his hands. "Ugh, not today," Paul muttered to himself.

Standing up, Paul stood about five foot eight inches. Paul had sandy blonde hair and was in relatively good shape other than maybe a few extra pounds he carried in his love handles. Scanning the outside area through the cafe windows, Paul could see the commotion. A large semi-truck had collided with the sixth floor of the building across the street. *Every other day, something ridiculous happens like this. Can't these supervillains leave well enough alone?* Paul's thoughts were common among the powerless. More specifically, superpowerless. 20% of the world's population for the last thirty years has been born with some form of superpower. The other 80% of the population was relegated to menial jobs, while the super-powered took on a career that would complement their power.

Paul, well, Paul has a superpower. So, one might reasonably ask, "Why does Paul work at a cafe?" The problem is Paul's power; it's just not a very good one. Actually, the Superpowered Users Coalition Kimper Society (Yes, S.U.C.K.S.),

named in dedication to the first super-powered individual - Captain Kimper, cataloged Paul's power as the most useless power documented to date. They currently have 1.1, with a capital B, Billion superpowered individuals registered, 365 thousand different power sets, and Paul's is the least useful. To be clear, Paul doesn't mind that he works at a cafe. There was joy in having a short commute from his downtown apartment, and the unlimited free drinks were a nice perk. He doesn't even resent that he "won the genetics lottery" and was born a powered individual. Paul felt that it was too much pressure to put on oneself. What bothered Paul was when people learned he was "Mr. Irrelevant," a name borrowed from out-of-date sporting tradition and repurposed to mean the person with the lowest power rating in S.U.C.K.S.

Paul had heard them all, "S.U.C.K.S to be you," "Don't let his irrelevance rub off on you," "Maybe he doesn't know?" So, despite the existence of his power, he tried to pass himself off as powerless. Working at a cafe helped him keep a low profile and "pass" better as superpowerless. So, when the semi-truck collided with the skyscraper across the street, Paul did what every superpowerless person does: he sought shelter.

Soon, a swarm of panicked people rushed into the cafe and begged to be allowed into their shelter. All buildings built in the last twenty years were mandated to have an underground shelter to accommodate the maximum number of occupants plus an extra ten percent. They never passed a law about retrofitting old buildings. Those all collapse quickly, whether by disaster, collateral damage, or villainy. "This way, this way, right through here. Keep an orderly flow," Paul waved for the crowd to follow him.

"Harriet, look! Do you recognize him?" a woman whispered as she passed Paul.

"No, who was it," Harriet replied in hushed tones as she tried to sneak a peak back at Paul covertly.

*Here we go again; it's always older ones. They must have some radar for spotting me. Maybe if I turn away quick enough, they won't say it...* Paul thought as he hunched his shoulders forward while turning away from the shelter's entrance.

"That's right!" the unnamed woman loudly shrieked as she realized who was guiding people. "Mr. Irrelevant! He's mister irrelevant. I didn't realize he did rescue missions. That's so thoughtful of him to still be of service to the superpowerless."

That was all it took. The orderly evacuation down into the shelter came to a halt as everyone turned to spot the biggest loser the world had ever seen.

"Is it true about his power? How would he even know it was working?"

"I know, right..."

"I bet it's all fabricated. Fake news like Captain Kimper's supposed death."

"Hey! Don't disparage Captain Kimper, he's a war hero!"

"Yeah, I wish he were here instead."

Paul was unphased. This chorus happened every time he was recognized, but he was still a good person at heart, so he did his best to try to get people to resume their escape to the shelter. "Alright, yes, everyone. The woman's correct. I am Mr. Irrelevant, and I'll answer everyone's questions once we're downstairs safely. I'll even tell you what Lady Florence said to me when she finished testing me for powers. It was a doozy. Now, if we could resume walking, please," Paul said, scanning the cafe.

A moment later, the crowd either became bored or accepted Paul's terms as they resumed their orderly evacuation. Step, Step, slight pause while that woman gained her footing on the stairs, forward again; the monotony of watching a hundred people file downstairs wore on Paul as he held the door to the shelter open. At long last, Paul could see the end of the line. Scanning outside the cafe, Paul saw that only small chunks of debris were reaching this far from the ongoing battle. *I wonder who started this scuffle, maybe Doctor Dorian. He was suitably insane to be willing to start this. I wish these villains would get it through their thick skulls that Populous City has enough superheroes to shut down their dastardly plans,* Paul thought as the last person approached the shelter door.

She looked like the haggard older woman straight out of the cartoons Paul watched as a child. She was hunched over and wore a hooded cloak as she shuffled forward. As she got within arms reach of Paul, she reached her hand out, and Paul reciprocated to help stabilize the woman. "Oh, thank you, young man. It's so much harder to get around in my advanced years," she said as she got right next to Paul.

"Will you be ok with the stairs?" Paul asked as he saw the flash of another nearby explosion. He wanted to get the shelter door closed up. It was not safe to extend any more patience to the woman.

"In a rush, are we? I'll only be another moment," the woman said as she wobbled, lowering her foot down to the first stair. She seemed to stumble, and Paul thought he would lose his hold of the woman. She rapidly descended a few more stairs, causing Paul to lurch over as he fumbled to try and stop the downward motion. Suddenly, the woman stood tall on the third step. She was now face to face with

Paul. "Thank you, Mr. Irrelevant. You've been a perfect gentleman, but all of that will be coming to an end," with that, she stabbed Paul in the neck with a needle and depressed the plunger, injecting Paul with some unknown substance.

"What? What the Hell!?! Why did you do that? And why am I getting so dizzy... Damn it all..."

Paul's eyes shut, his body went slack, and he rolled down the flight of stairs, landing at the bottom in a heap. The sound of Paul's body hitting the ground caused an audible gasp over the crowd of evacuees. The next sound they all heard was the sound of the heavy metal shelter door shut with the distinctive sound of a pressurized seal forming. The building shook as the battle outside became increasingly violent. Before anyone could come to Paul's aid, the lights flickered and shut off.

Thirty seconds later, the backup generator turned on, restoring the lights. A few nearby evacuees regained their composure and rushed to Paul's side. "Miss, miss, are you alright?" a man asked while gently shaking Paul's shoulder.

"Huh?" Paul grumbled in confusion as he started to regain his senses.

"Oh, thank goodness. She's alive, everyone," the man announced to the crowd. A relieved sigh audibly traveled over the group.

Sitting upright, Paul was entirely out of sorts. His body hurt all over, and he could feel that there would be bruises all over his legs, arms, and back. Sitting with his knees up and arms wrapped around them, he leaned his chest forward to rest his aching body against his knees.

## **Squish**

"Huh?" Paul said aloud. *What's between me and my knees?*

Paul looked up at the perplexed man. He seemed to be nervous, or maybe he was uncomfortable with something. *Is it something I said?* Paul wondered to himself.

A moment later, another man crouched down beside Paul. "You've had a fall. Do you remember where you are?" the man proceeded to ask.

"Yeah, I'm at the cafe's shelter. We were all evacuating down here due to the super-battle on the street," Paul responded but immediately covered his mouth. His voice was off. It didn't sound right. It was distinctly feminine.

*Shit, I'm not supposed to sound like this. Is that why the other guy called me miss?*

Paul started connecting the dots. He wasn't the sharpest observer when it came to himself. Paul looked down and saw his uniform and apron stretched out away from his body in the distinctive fashion that occurs when a fabric stretches over a pair of breasts.

Paul reached his arm out to request help standing up, and the men beside him helped him. Paul took a minute to dust himself off and straighten his clothes. Fortunately, there was enough give in the clothes to accommodate his new shape. Paul had already had a hectic enough morning to have to deal with a wardrobe malfunction on top of everything else. Paul loosened the tie on his apron and pulled it off over his head. His work uniform's polo shirt stretched over two breasts that shouldn't have been there. Paul resisted the urge to reach up and feel them. He was in public. Still, he was a man. The thought crossed his mind. Then, it kept crossing his mind every thirty seconds or so.

Looking down, Paul saw his slacks stretched wide across his new figure's hips. Further disturbing Paul, his revised body seemed prodigiously gifted in the thigh area. Running his hands over his body one last time, having regained his composure, Paul turned his attention to the group.

"I'm alright, everyone, just a little tumble there," Paul announced. He used this moment to scan the shelter for that older woman who had done this to him. From what Paul could see, there were no hunched-back cloaked women. *That was just a disguise, though; she clearly could stand upright.* Paul evaluated the situation and scenery.

A few people helped escort Paul further into the shelter while waiting for the all-clear signal. As he reached the center of the room, the woman he encountered earlier approached him. The woman called Harriet started first, "You took quite a fall there, honey. Are you okay?"

"Umm, yeah, thanks," Paul answered. The sound of his voice in his head caused more discomfort. *Why does it have to be so high? I sound like I'm a Valley girl.*

The unnamed woman jumped in next. "Where's your co-worker, Mr. Irrelevant? He was helping people down, but I don't see him now."

*They don't know it's me. I guess that makes sense. I don't know what my face looks like now. Maybe I'm a cutie now. Uhh, not that it matters. I can fix this once I have a few moments to myself.* Paul's thoughts were all over the place, but he started to formulate a plan. First, respond to the concerned women.

"Oh, he's alright. I think he's around here somewhere. He just pulled off his polo shirt, so he probably looks different than you saw earlier. I think he was wearing a

tank top. So, go find the hot guy wearing these same slacks," Paul said, hoping this would distract the women long enough for Paul to make a quick trip to the bathroom.

"Hot? No, I don't think so, honey. But, you do you, girl. If he's your type, then you should go after him," the woman replied and grabbed her friend's hand. "Let's go find him, Harriet. I want to ask him some questions."

*I know what those questions are already. How does your power even work? Is that a power? When would it even come into play? Well, jokes on them. My power is precisely the thing I need to get things back to normal for myself. Though, I guess it is situational. Who would have thought this would happen to me? I've just had a chemically-induced metamorphosis into a girl, and my only power is the ability to transform back into your original body. Yes, that's a useless power when I am myself. No, I've never been able to use my power before. I'm sure I can figure it out, though. I've tried to use it before. It feels like a bit of a tingle.*

*I know it works even though there are no visible signs that it is working. One trip to the bathroom, and I should be back to my own body. Then those women can ask me all the offensive questions they want.*

Paul's plan took shape, and he was ready to set it in motion. Knocking at the bathroom door, he confirmed no one else was in there. He opened the door as quietly as possible and kept his eyes scanning for who was watching him. He didn't want people to see a girl enter and a man leave. Feeling the coast was clear, he ducked into the restroom.

"I hope she just needs to go number one..." the unnamed woman said to Harriet, who snickered at her friend's remark. "I guess she **really** had to go!"

## Chapter 02 - Practically Paula

Paul started narrating to himself as he caught his reflection in the mirror. *Ladies and gentlemen... who are now mysteriously also ladies due to a strange syringe, the story you are about to hear is true. The names are changed to protect the innocently transformed.*

*This is Populous City, New Mexico. I work here. I'm a barista, and I have a secret.* Paul paraphrased some shows he enjoyed as a kid growing up.

Squinting his eyes and focusing intensely on his intended outcome, Paul felt a slight tingle vibrate across his skin. *It's working! I'll be back to my own body momentarily.* Paul was giddy as he finally had the chance to demonstrate that he did have a superpower. It was dumb, but he had one. The fact that it was self-

...serving in this situation was acceptable to Paul. Maybe he could even report back to S.U.C.K.S. on his successful demonstration of his power. *That might get them to up my power ranking, and perhaps I won't be dead last anymore. I should document this so they will believe me. Once I'm back to myself, it's not like I will ever transform into someone else again. That was a fluke accident. One in a billion. No, one in a trillion. I would have heard if seven people mysteriously transformed into women across the globe. That would get the news cycle rolling for sure. Anyways, cheese!* Paul held his phone up and got a classic pouty-lips duck-face bratty-girl mirror selfie. He reasoned that covering as many of the cliches in one go was best.

Paul took... about ten too many selfies of himself. The camera's shutter sound on his phone almost wore out from taking so many shots of himself in various poses. Paul found the idea of a broken camera shutter funny, at least. Scientists would later remark that there were precisely three humans alive who thought this was a funny joke.

Turning his attention back to the pressing task, he searched for that innate feeling that all superheroes possessed—the sensation of exerting his superpower. A few minutes passed, and Paul only felt a similarly light tingle in his skin. Nothing was visibly happening. Paul's frustration started to build. *I guess I truly am Mr. Irrelevant, aren't I? Some power I have, huh? I can make my skin tingle. What a disaster.* Paul's thoughts carried on similarly for another few moments. Placing his hands on the edges of the sink, Paul hung his head. *I need this. I need to prove I can do it for myself. Otherwise, all the abuse over the years has been for nothing. If I can't do the one thing my power works for, then I'm not just Mr. Irrelevant; I'm Mr. Inept, Mr. Useless, Mr. Waste-of-Space. Alright, that last one wasn't my best self-deprecating vocabulary selection. So here we go. Counting down, 3... 2... 1... Change!!!*

Paul focused and channeled his feelings deep inside. He could feel it, and it was working. He was doing it, and he just needed to keep pushing. *Keep pushing. Oh, God! One more push. There it goes! It's working; don't give up now!* Paul's power washed over him. He felt a surge, and then it happened. One whisker on his chin burst out, making itself known.

A moment of silence fell over the room. A quietness replaced the heavy breathing and exertion of a moment ago. Paul stared at his reflection in the mirror. Sticking his chin forward, he moved his face from side to side to better look at the newly emerged hair.

"Yes!!!! It worked! I have powers. Awww yeah," Paul yelled out and started to do a stilted dance he had memorized from watching social media dance crazes of the last decade. With arms moving into patterned shapes and hips and legs alternately

performing some dance motion, Paul looked like a fool.

A knock came at the door, "You all right in there, miss?"

Paul immediately stopped his gyrations and shot straight to attention, "Uh, yeah. Everything is fine! I'm coming right out."

Paul surveyed the room for the next hour. He didn't want to sprout a full beard and not realize it. A cross-eyed look from someone in the crowd would tell him if his power were to increase in speed or effect. It kept him busy, at least. For a minute, he thought a woman might have given him side-eye. Then he realized she just had a lazy eye. *Stop staring, Paul. You'll give her a complex. Look away slowly, yes, that's right. Ok, good. Now, don't make eye contact again. Shit! I said don't make eye contact. Alright, she thinks I'm an asshole. Ugh...*

Before he could take another action, the all-clear lights and announcement started, saving Paul from further social awkwardness. Paul's responsibility as the most senior cafe employee kicked him into gear again. "All right, everyone, one single-file line up the stairs, please. Let's keep this orderly!" Paul projected his voice. *I hope the crowd will be willing to take orders from a Valley Girl.* Paul said, acknowledging his body's new voice. Looking down at his body, he hoped he wouldn't get run over. He was much smaller now and wouldn't be as effective at shepherding people outside.

Finally, back at the top of the stairs, Paul performed his duties to point people to the exit. It went much smoother than the evacuation. The only hiccup was the two women who never found Mr. Irrelevant. "You're doing so much better at this than your coworker," Harriet said as she passed Paul. "Yes, but dear, you'll have to go looking for him. He's nowhere to be found. We searched downstairs, but he wasn't with us," the woman whose name Paul never caught said.

"Maybe his power isn't as useless as we all suspect. Maybe he can hide from danger by turning invisible? That would still earn him a meager score from S.U.C.K.S.," Harriet said to her friend. With their exit, Paul was finally back to the usual peace and calm of his job.

The peace did not last. A strange ringtone chimed from Paul's phone as he stood by the front door of the freshly empty cafe. "Huh? What's that?" Paul asked as he inspected his cell phone. "The Kimper Society is calling me? Why would they call me?"

"Hello? This is Paul...a"

"Paula? We're trying to reach Paul Mansson. Is he available?"



"Umm, well..."

"It's a straightforward question. Is Paul available or not?"

"You see..."

"Oh goodness, did something happen to Mr. Mansson?"

Paul tried to respond, but the caller continued, "We were alerted that an under-leveled inactive-duty hero was near a super-powered incident involving two Omega-level supervillains."

"Omega-level? Wait, under-leveled? What..." Paul tried to interject again with no success. The caller continued speaking over him.

"Situations like this are exactly why this system exists. We can start preparations to notify the next of kin and surviving family members immediately. Can you let us know how Mr. Mansson passed away?"

"I'm not dead!" Paul yelled in frustration.

"Well, of course not. I'm speaking with you now. You couldn't possibly be dead. Now, I assume crushed by debris is a reasonable enough cause of death..."

"Mr. Mansson is not dead either!" Paul's frustration vibrated through every word. He wished he didn't sound so feminine. The caller on the other end would get a different experience if he still had his male voice.

"Oh, wonderful. Then I can speak with Mr. Mansson. Would you please hand him the phone?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Paul started to answer.

"We can't be back to an untimely death now, can we? Please hand Mr. Mansson the phone, little girl."

That was the last straw. Paul was going to unload on this unidentified caller. With all his strength, he yelled, "I. Am. Mr. Mansson!"

"Paul! So good to hear your voice. You don't need to yell; I can hear you just fine," the caller responded. *Had something changed?*

Paul calmed himself and replied, "I'm sorry. I was just frustrated, that's all." *My*

voice! It's back to normal. Oh, thank God. Paul was overjoyed to recognize his voice in his head again. He felt confident that he'd be able to clear everything up now.

"Not sure why you're frustrated. I was speaking with the most confounding young woman—the absolute worst. We got nowhere until she handed you the phone. Oh... I hope there's no relation. She was truly the worst; we went interminably round in circles."

"Just stop. Are we done here? You can tell I'm not dead. So we can conclude our business?"

"Almost. I'll need you to report to headquarters. You have to report on the incident and why you chose to intervene. You're much too weak to have engaged against Omega-level villains."

Paul's nerves were back on edge. He hated S.U.C.K.S. Headquarters. It's where he learned he would become the laughingstock of humanity, Mr. Irrelevant. Paul hung his head in disappointment.

"Are you still with me, Mr..."

"Don't say it!"

"Mansson."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were going to say something else."

"We'll expect you within the hour," the caller ended the call curtly.

*Shit. Where is my S.U.C.K.S identification badge? Paul wondered while he sifted through cards stored in his wallet. Grocery rewards, why do I even carry this? Government ID, fat lot of good that will do me looking like this; library card, never going back there; credit card, credit card, expired credit card; Ah, my Hero ID: Oof, not a good picture on there. I wish I hadn't gotten that haircut; it does not hold up.*

Paul built up his courage. *I'm going to get in and out. They will ask me questions, and I will answer them. It won't matter to them that I'm a woman somehow. No one will give me any grief. I look like any other 20-something young woman. I'm glad my powers worked to change my voice back. That was so annoying sounding like that. Oh, shit! My voice doesn't match my body now. I guess I'll keep my mouth shut until I have to. Or maybe I can fake it, "Hello? Testing... Can I sound like a woman?"* Paul tried to raise his voice to a feminine register. He failed horribly. He sounded like a mouse.

*That's a resounding 'no' then. I'll keep my mouth shut. No one talks to strangers in public anyway.*

Paul scanned the coffee shop. No customers had entered since the incident. *Mr. Weathers will be fine if I close up early today. It was a pretty traumatic experience. It's not every day that an Omega-level villain attacks. Only the strongest heroes are called in for them.*

"Hey, Mr. Weathers, how are you?"

"Yes, the cafe is fine."

"No, no one was hurt evacuating."

"No, I don't think you will get sued."

"Yes, I helped everyone down the stairs."

"Yes, I agree the first step can be a doozy."

"No, that's not why I was calling. I was hoping I could close up early today."

"No, none."

"Yes, it's still 3 hours early."

"Yes, I know I'm scheduled to close today."

"It's just I have to..." Paul paused. He isn't allowed to reveal his identity as a super-powered individual to others. Plenty of people recognize him, but he's still not supposed to reveal this secret.

"I have to see a doctor," Paul finished his thought. This should get his boss off his back. The threat of a medical claim would be enough to keep his boss at bay.

"Yes, I just feel a little bit woozy. Yes, ever since we came back up from the shelter."

"All right. I'll lock up on my way over. Thanks!"

## **Chapter 03 - Did you have to poke me in all of those places?**

*It sucks... It's S.U.C.K.S. Did they not notice that acronym? Paul was lamenting the necessity of his visit to the Superpowered Users Coalition Kimper Society. It was bad enough that a strange old lady transformed Paul earlier in the day. Now, because he was a registered Superpowered User of the Kimper Society Coalition, he had to debrief on the Omega-level incident due to his proximity. It sucks...*

*First off, these doors are just way too big. Why are they so big? They must be forty, maybe fifty, feet tall. It takes a stupidly long time for them to open and close. They never should have installed that automated door sensor. The doors oscillate five degrees all day back and forth as people come and go. They should open the doors at the beginning of the day and leave them open until they close for the day. Sigh...*

*Some things would be better if I could manage them, but no one takes Mr. Irrelevant seriously. I barely got a job at the cafe. Entering the "Grandest Hall of Superhero Testaments" in S.U.C.K.S. is always an ordeal. All right, here comes the 'goon' squad. Yep, run the metal detector wand all over. Go ahead, oooh, moving up awfully close to my crotch. You must be new. You know, that works without having to be so close. And next up, the "Magic wand"-wand... I can't believe they found a way to detect magical curses and traps. Thank goodness, this guy's been through this before. One more guard to go. The pat down... Eeek.*

Paul stood there with his arms out and legs spread. The guard performing the patdown tried to start up a conversation.

"What brings you to the Kimper Society today," the nameless guard said as he started by enveloping his hands around Paul's arms and patting his way over to his chest. The guard's hands grazed the edge of Paul's polo, making him uncomfortable. This guard was giving an overly thorough pat down. That light graze on Paul's chest was entirely foreign to Paul. His 'breasts' were not a familiar component of his makeup, so when the guard grazed one, it was immediately upsetting.

"I got called in. Hey! Hands!" Paul said casually but yelled at the guard for his extra-curricular touching. Paul forgot that his voice was back to its standard deep register. The guard shot up and turned his head from side to side, expecting to see a superhero about to scold him for his handsy behavior.

"Who said that?" The guard weakly asked as Paul saw the man's knees shaking in fear.

"It was me, dude. Keep your hands where they belong!" Paul answered again, making eye contact this time.

"Oh, uhh, shit. You're a guy? I uhhh..."

"Yes, I'm a guy. Can we get this over with? I want to debrief and leave."

"Umm, can I verify your ID, sir?"

Paul handed the guard his S.U.C.K.S. ID.

The guard laughed as he saw the name on the card. "Mr. Irrelevant? What the hell happened to you?"

"It's a long story... laugh it up jerkwad. I'm going to be back to myself before you know it."

"Right... I guess you kind of look like a Paul. Or this Paul at least, Paul-a."

"Don't call me that."

"Or what? You going to cry on me?" The guard decided to reassert himself with this new information about Paul's identity. Before Paul could mount a comeback, though, one of the earlier guards pulled the bully back. "You don't want to get too close; who knows if he's contagious."

"Oh shit, you're right. I don't want to catch a case of boob-i-tous," The guard scanned Paul's badge and tapped a few things on a tablet.

"Am I free to go?" Paul resigned himself just to move on and ignore these idiots.

"No, you are being redirected to the laboratory. Sorry about this part; you might have been a good girlfriend if it weren't for the fact that you're some gender-bending biohazard," the guard said with a snide attitude. As his last words left his mouth, Paul felt a hood placed over his head, and then he blacked out.

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Waking up, Paul felt odd. He was partially upright but also partly tilted back. Paul tried to move but was strapped in against whatever he was leaning against. Stretching his toes toward the ground, Paul discovered he was also suspended in the air, at least somewhat. His confusion was fortunately short-lived. A man wearing a lab coat came in with a smile. A normal smile. Not a mischievous smile that would indicate this "mad scientist" was about to experiment on Paul to some nefarious end.

"Paul, I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Giveswell. She will be running your physical and diagnosis today," the man in the lab coat announced as he reached Paul's side.

"Hi, Doctor," Paul started to respond. As he began, he was immediately interrupted by a new voice and the sudden appearance of another person in a lab coat. A shorter woman with curly pink and blue hair puffed out in all directions from her head appeared.

"Eeek, call me Kyrie. Right now, don't call me that stuffy title," the woman rapidly said. Her speech rate far exceeded usual pacing, and Paul wondered if she had even taken a breath to get it all out.

"Uhhh, Kyrie, nice to meet you," Paul responded calmly to diffuse the offense that Paul had stumbled into unknowingly.

"Nice to meet you too, but you definitely do not look like a Paul."

"Yeah, this is new for me..." Paul responded and looked down at his body. His expression told Kyrie that this was the truth. That and the fact that this person who looked like a woman was stuck staring at 'her,' or 'his,' boobs.

"How interesting. So when did you discover you can change genders? Did this happen to you today? If not, why do you go by Paul? Wouldn't Paul-ahhh," Kyrie's rapid delivery resumed, and she was about to call Paul by that name he didn't like.

"It's just Paul. Not anything else. Let's take this one question at a time. I didn't ask for this or discover it. Some old lady injected me with a weird liquid, and I turned into this."

"Interesting, then why do you sound like a man?"

"Well, have you ever heard of Mr. Irrelevant?"

"The man whose superpower is the power to transform into a man? Yeah, everyone's heard of him. Useless superpower, if you ask me. What's he supposed to do? Raise his testosterone levels and become Super-Toxic-Masculinity Man?" Kyrie asked but followed up by laughing at her joke.

"Yeah... Well, that's me. I used my power to get this whisker to grow back. See?" Paul said, sticking his chin out for Kyrie to inspect. She dutifully leaned in and squinted to try and spot what Paul was referencing. "Well, I also used my power to change my voice back." Kyrie looked quizzically at Paul for a few moments and

moved around him from side to side, poking and prodding his body with the end of the pen she was holding.

"Hey, that hurts, you know," Paul said, but Kyrie ignored Paul. She continued her inspection a moment longer, looking up and down over his body before stopping and turning her back to Paul. She stood there scratching her chin while deep in thought.

"That's so... Amazing!!!" Kyrie cheered, raising her arms over her head in celebration.

"Huh? What's amazing?"

"You're like the perfect man now!"

"What?!" Paul responded, entirely shocked by Kyrie's reaction.

"Yeah, you are the only man in the world who knows what being a girl is like. Your dating game is about to level up to a ten."

"How do you reason that?"

"Well, what's the one thing women want from a man?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be perpetually single."

"Someone that understands them, dummy! Now, you can learn what it means to live as a woman, and you will finally be the one man who understands. No more empathy as the stand-in for understanding; you will have real sympathy and... Oh my God, it will be so... hot!!!" Kyrie said and then spun around. Her energy level had gone from a nine when she popped out from behind that other lab-coated man. Now she was an eleven. Paul stared on as she spun on the tip of her shoe.

"Are you done with whatever that was?" Paul asked as Kyrie stood there vibrating while embracing herself with her arms.

Kyrie extracted something from her lab coat and came up extremely close to Paul. She lifted her hand to Paul's eye level, revealing a business card, which she then dropped into Paul's polo shirt.

"For safe keeping for later. Call me." Kyrie said with a wink before spinning around again with her hyperactive energy.

Paul could feel the card down in his shirt wedged against his breasts. *Stupid tight*

*shirt. Stupid boobs making my shirt tight. Stupid cleavage... I take that back. I just wish it weren't on me.*

"All right, shall we begin your physical? I'm sure I'll be able to figure this out in no time." Kyrie announced.

\*\*\* Six Hours Later \*\*\*

"Blood tests round 3. All tests were negative." Kyrie returned to the giant laboratory they had placed Paul into.

"What are you looking for anyways?" Paul asked and then continued, "I'm feeling like I'm running low on blood now that you've taken so much out of me."

"Simple! We're looking for any remnants of what you were injected with. Oh, and we're checking your hormone levels. Congratulations, by the way. Your power seems to be working still; your testosterone levels have steadily increased out of female ranges since you arrived."

Paul did find that to be a relief; he just wished his power worked a bit faster.

"Is there anything else you haven't checked for yet?"

"Well, we didn't check you for Omegamma radiation. Do you feel like you might turn into a giant green monster imminently?"

"What? No... what would that even feel like?"

"Oh, you'd know. It's trippy as all hell. You get all like 'Grrrrr.' Then all 'Arrggh' and you start wanting to break things. It's totally awesome. I tried it once just to see."

"You've turned into a giant green monster?"

"100%. Everyone should try it at least one time."

"I'll take that under advisement... umm, thanks?" Paul was uncomfortable at the suggestion but wanted to keep up appearances.

"Well, I don't see much other choice. We'll have to start dissecting you..."

"What?!"

"Don't worry, it won't hurt."



"Bullshit! Dissecting means you're going to kill me!"

"Psh, nahh. It's nothing so serious. We bring in Doctor Daybreak, and he pulls out all the atoms from you that aren't yours. It barely feels like anything is happening at all."

"You're talking about that floating orange guy? Couldn't he unmake reality if he wanted to? He's going to dissect me?"

"Yeah! He owes me a favor. Here he comes..."

"Hello," Doctor Daybreak announced as he phased through the lab floor.

"Hey there, Day' Dude," Kyrie said familiarly.

"How are things hanging, Ky Ky?" the formerly serious-seeming man dropped into a surf dude tone.

"You know they don't hang. I don't even have to wear a bra. You could help me with that, you know. Still a little fat from this bozo, and hook me up with some boobage," Kyrie said, pressing her hands into her chest and then lifting her small breasts.

"You know I like you the way you are, Kyrie."

**\*Sigh\*** "I know. Let's get this over with. Can you get the foreign material out of our patient, Day'?"

"No problemo," Doctor Daybreak announced, and Paul braced himself for the impending atomic dissection.

Doctor Daybreak rose an extra three feet in the air, and the molecules in the room entered a super-excited state. Paul's body felt tingly all over. Paul was waiting for the pain to start but was happy to discover Kyrie was right. Paul started to see a strange mist exiting his body and a floating sphere of glowing violet liquid formed before him.

"That was inside me? Holy shit!"

"Yeah, crazy. I wonder what it is? We know it's not in your blood anymore. Where was it Day'?"

"It was pooled inside his lower body..."

"Can you be more specific?" Kyrie asked.

"I can be... He might not want to hear it, in any case."

"What?! Where was it? Tell me." Paul naively responded.

"It was inside 'her' reproductive organs," Doctor Daybreak answered.

"Huh? I don't have my reproductive organs. They're MIA," Paul said with a high degree of certainty. His ignorance is a result of the failing educational system and the lack of proper sex education in public schooling.

"No, they aren't; they're just inside you and doing something different now," Doctor Daybreak corrected Paul. His extraordinary power gave him unique insight into the exact functioning of every cell of Paul's body.

"Like what?" Paul's ignorance persisted.

"Like getting ready to make a baby, dude," Doctor Daybreak dropped the knowledge bomb on Paul, whose expression shifted from confusion to shock to abject terror in five seconds. Kyrie and Doctor Daybreak could see that Paul was about to lose it. He was either going to scream or pass out. Kyrie's bet was on passing out.

A second later, Kyrie smiled for another reason: Paul passed out. The last thing he saw was Kyrie grinning gleefully.

## **Chapter 04 - Mundane Drudgery**

"I don't want to have a baby!" Paul shouted, recalling the last thing he had heard as he came to.

"Whoa, dude. You're not having a baby. You **\*can\*** have a baby. As in, your body is capable of it. So chill, all right?" Doctor Daybreak laid out his response in a chill surfer's vibe manner.

"Ooooooh! Can you imagine how cute she would look? Waddling around all big and pregnant," Kyrie said, squeezing her hands together, causing her body to vibrate from the excitement she was experiencing. She leaned close to Paul and continued, "Do you think you might change your mind about that?" Kyrie's expression was a mix of excitement, desire, and dread at what Paul might respond.

"What? No! I'm a guy. We just covered this Doctor..."

"Don't say that!!!"

"Uh, right. Kyrie. I'm not even seeing anyone. I have no plans to start a family, and even if I did, I don't see myself as the person doing that part. So, thanks, but no thanks.

"Aww..." Kyrie looked dejected for a moment, but only for a moment. She carried on with her exorbitant energy and enthusiasm, "Maybe... she'll change her mind." Kyrie drew out her words like a scientist exploring a possible solution, hypothesizing on a path forward.

"So, what now? You got that goop out of me; I didn't change back, obviously. Do I just go home and go about my life?"

\*\*\*\*

*I can't believe they sent me home. They didn't even give me any post-visit paperwork. Where's my 'So you suddenly changed genders' medical advisory papers telling me everything I need to know? Hrmph, so much for bedside manner.* Paul thought to himself as he approached his apartment door. He saw that something was sticking to the door as he drew nearer.

"What's this?" Paul asked aloud as he peeled a sticky note off his door.

"Hey, dummy, you weren't here. You were supposed to meet us for dinner. Mom says, 'Hi,' and P.S., you are still a dummy. Call us to let us know you are not 100% dead. Or whatever passes for familial acknowledgment these days. Love ya, Annie."

*Shit, I missed dinner night. That will take a while to live down. What do I even tell Annie? Hey, your little bro was injected with some weird substance, and it turned me into a woman in about 3 minutes flat. Oh, but don't worry, it turns out my superpower works. I'm on my way to restoring my body to its usual male self... It's just taking an age.*

Paul entered his apartment and dropped his keys and wallet on the counter. Paul's apartment was neat but sparsely populated. He had a couch, a coffee table, and an entertainment stand with a television. Each of his possessions was relatively new and minimally used. Paul spent most of his time working single or double shifts to make ends meet. He had such high hopes as he reached his eighteenth birthday: he would get tested at S.U.C.K.S. and hopefully qualify as a street-level crime superhero, which provided a lucrative salary from the city government for preventing crimes like robberies and other minor offenses.

Unfortunately for Paul, he got rated as possessing the worst superpower of all superpowered users. Now, that power was being used, but so ineffectively that Paul doubted, for a moment, whether he should even bother trying. Stopping off in his tiny bathroom, he stood staring at his reflection. He could see a few more whiskers had come in, and he now looked odd for having them on his very feminine face. *I guess I'll shave?* Paul thought as he ran his hand along his face and felt the smoothness of his skin. *That's different... I guess women do have softer skin. I never thought that I'd experience that from both sides. Speaking of experiences from the other side... I should be good to get a better look at my body now that I'm safely at home.* Paul started to remove his clothes, and he immediately felt uneasy. His legs were smooth and shapely as his slacks lowered past his boxers. He was turning himself on by seeing his feminine body. He quickly pulled his pants back up. *Nope... I'm not doing it if I can't be mature about it.*

Paul exited the bathroom and plopped on his couch to watch television before heading to bed. The reckless motion caused him discomfort as he felt the weight on his chest swing and bounce wildly as he landed. *Ouch, I guess I know why I've never seen a woman do that now.* Paul said, holding his chest. The unfamiliar touch again sent his brain signals he was uncomfortable with, and he rapidly stuck his hands down at his sides.

*TV, that will calm my nerves. Let's see what's on.* Paul pressed the power button on his remote, and the set came on and tuned to a local news broadcast.

"In other news, local citizens ask for your help finding an elderly woman tonight. She went missing during today's Omega-level villainy event, and several concerned individuals have come forward. Hi, you're on WNMT. Tell us what you saw."

"Well, Wendy, you won't believe it. We were all filing down into an evacuation room, and I saw this nice elderly woman towards the end of the line. I figured she didn't want to be rushed down the stairs, so she waited towards the back. But then, I didn't see her when we got down there. She was missing, and this woman who worked at the cafe had been pushed down the stairs to top it all off."

"That is some story, ma'am. What do you think happened to the elderly woman, and why was the employee assaulted?"

"I think it was Mr. Irrelevant. He snapped."

"Mr. Irrelevant? You're referring to the superpowered user with the lowest power rating from the Kimper Society?"

"Yeah, he worked at the cafe, too!"

"This is a serious allegation. What evidence do you have?"

"Well, Wendy, may I call you Wendy?"

"Yes, of course, ma'am. Wendy Wildwest at your beck and call."

"Oooh, Harriet, she said it. She said her slogan."

"Ma'am, if you'd tell us what you saw?"

"Right, so Harriet and I went down earlier and recognized Mr. Irrelevant. He acknowledged it, too. He was willing to answer our questions, or so he said, once we got down to the shelter. Anyways, when we were down in the shelter, we went on a search, and he was not there. We checked every nook and cranny. We're good searchers, too. We don't miss a thing. Even when we got back upstairs, he was nowhere to be found. So, if you ask me, he pushed his coworker down and absconded with the old lady for nefarious reasons. Maybe he recognized her and knew she had money, so he decided to take advantage of the situation and do her in. I don't know; I'm not a villain. You'd have to ask him what he did with that nice old lady."

"Well, folks, you heard it here first on WNMT; if you see or know anything about either of these individuals, be sure to contact the local crime tipline immediately. I'm Wendy Wildwest, at your beck and call."

Paul saw the picture of himself and the old lady from earlier in the day appear on the screen.

*Well, shit. What am I going to do about this now? S.U.C.K.S. already got my report. So they know I didn't push someone down the stairs or abduct an old woman. That doesn't help in the court of public opinion, in any case. Do I lay low? Do I turn myself in?*

Paul's phone rang with the caller identification showing 'Annie Mansson.'

"Hey, sis, I don't suppose you're calling for fun, are you?"

"You idiot. Of course not. My dummy brother is on the local news as a suspect for assaulting a woman and abducting an old lady. So, no, I'm not calling for fun. Baka!"

"Yeah, figured not. Look, there's a perfectly good explanation for what happened. I didn't want to have to do this, but you should come over. It will be clear once you do."

"Clear because I'll see an old woman hanging out with you in your tiny apartment? Is this why you missed our dinner night?"

"Umm, yes... Wait, no. There's no one else here. I didn't abduct anyone. Please don't ask me two questions without pausing. It gets confusing. Come over; I'll explain why you shouldn't be worried about me and why I missed our dinner night with Mom. I promise. I didn't do anything wrong, okay?"

"Uh-huh, well... I guess you are technically family. No one else will believe you now that you've been labeled a villain to society."

"They labeled me as a villain? Seriously? When?"

"One question at a time, right? No, not seriously. That takes an official decree. The media is ready to throw you to the wolves, however. By showing your picture, they're clearly violating the Kimper Society's secret identity provisions. So, you know, you're screwed."

"Ugh, don't you think I know that?"

"Well, it feels good to remind my dummy brother."

"Right... Please don't be late, I still have work in the morning. I work at a cafe; they open at dawn, which isn't too long from now..."

Paul hung up the phone and returned his attention to his current state. *All right, Paul, you need to get yourself prepared. It's your sister, she will understand... Who am I kidding? She will probably laugh. No, she will definitely laugh. I still resemble my male self. She will see me, connect the dots, and then laugh.*

*I wish I had something I could wear besides this. I feel so ridiculous in these oversized clothes.* Paul felt a strange swirling of energy at his thought, but it quickly passed. Scanning his room, he almost thought he saw a slight flicker of light by his bed. Paul assumed it was fatigue from his day and carried on.

*Even if I had different clothes, would they be women's clothes? I could easily throw on another men's-cut shirt. I'd still look and feel ridiculous in it. Annie will be here in a half hour. Come on, Paul, decide! Change your clothes and risk being weirded out or continue to be uncomfortable in these clothes.*

Paul steeled himself and decided he was going to have to change out of his work clothes. He grabbed a T-shirt that was on the smaller side and a pair of shorts. *Leave the boxers on, swap out pants for shorts, and don't look when you take your shirt off.* So, Paul did exactly that. He rushed through and fought every urge his male brain wanted to highlight while his female body rang out in sensations.

*That wasn't too bad, and I feel better now. I just have to do that same thing every day until I change back. Feel breasts sway as I bend over... Feel the fabric run over them... Then my legs... are so smooth... Dammit! Stop it, Paul! You can deal with this. It will be fine. It will. Now, relax until Annie gets here.*

Paul returned to his living room and sat back down on the couch. "Not turning you on again, you're just bad news," Paul said, addressing the television. Instead, Paul decided to lie down and meditate—a *few minutes of peaceful contemplation*.

Paul's thoughts swirled as he reflected on his day. Each additional event added extra burden and carried heavier and heavier tolls. Just being in the vicinity of an Omega-level villain incident would be enough to require therapy for those involved, and Paul's day just kept getting worse after that crisis. What was meant to be peaceful had turned. Paul sat up and felt himself becoming emotional. Not just emotional, very emotional. His body felt like it was trembling from how intensely he had worked himself up. That's when it all changed. Paul began to cry. It was not just any cry but a full-on tear storm. He wiped his eyes over and over as he sobbed and let himself work through whatever he was going through. After several minutes, Paul started to feel better, but then he remembered it had been a long time since Annie was supposed to have arrived. Paul's anxiety wasn't helping him. He had begun to imagine horrible outcomes that could have befallen his sister, and he felt that he might cry again.

*All right, Paul, brace yourself.* Paul thought as he placed his hand on his door's doorknob.

*Let's get this over with... Annie's tormenting can only persist for so long.*

Paul opened his apartment door and started to explain, but before he could get half his sentence out, Annie embraced him firmly in a hug.

## **Chapter 05 - Sisterly Love, Dummy!**

"I... did not... see that coming. Hi, Annie."

"Hi Paul-ahhh, I guess it's Paula now? When did you do this? Why didn't you tell us? Is this why you bailed on dinner? How long have you known you were a

woman?"

"One question at a time, Annie. Remember?"

"Hrmph, fine. Yes... When did you get all this surgery done? You look fabulous, by the way."

"I haven't had any surgery," Paul responded but was interrupted.

"This is all you? Wow, I guess you were meant to be a woman. Your body took to it like a fish to water. Oh, this is so exciting. I always wanted a little sister."

"Now, just hold on a minute there, Annie. I'm not your sister, little or otherwise. I don't even want to be a woman. This was done **\*to\*** me, not by me."

"What? What are you saying? People don't just turn into a woman overnight."

"Neither did I; it took about three minutes, I think. That old lady that I've been accused of abducting did this to me. She injected me with a weird liquid, and then I fell down the stairs. When I came to, I looked like this."

"Hold on. You were chemically transformed into a woman? And the woman that is missing is the person who did this to you? And you didn't push someone down the shelter stairs, and it was you that fell down the stairs?"

"Again, with the multiple questions, but this time my answer is 'Yes.'"

"'Yes' to which one?"

"Yes to all of them. You got it all right."

"That's absurd."

"And yet here we are."

"Well, what do we do now?"

"Hey! That's my question. I went to S.U.C.K.S. because of everything that happened today. They were not especially helpful. That said, I did debrief with them, so there shouldn't be any criminal warrants for my arrest based on these news reports. They checked the cafe CCTV streams by the shelter to confirm my report, and they saw everything go down just like I said."

"Well, that's a relief, at least. I guess my **\*brother\*** isn't the criminal I imagined him



to be."

"Thanks... Annie, you know I've been keeping my head down and maintaining a low profile. Today has been a nightmare."

"I can see why. This is a crazy story. Tell me more about this old lady. Did she say anything to you? Would you recognize her if you saw her again?"

Paul huffed again at the rapid questions. Annie couldn't help herself; she was brilliant, so her mind and questioning moved faster than conversational speed. "That old lady said the usual kinds of things until she stood up and injected me. She went from trail to imposing in a split second. As she did this, she told me she knew who I was and then indicated that I wouldn't be a man anymore. It made no sense to me at the time, but I understood when I woke up a few minutes later and caught sight of... all of 'this,'" Paul concluded his first answer with a hand gesture pointing at his breasts and then motioned further down moving his hands in and out in an hourglass shape. "If I saw that imposing face again, I'd definitely recognize her, but it's clear from what she looked like originally that she's some sort of master of disguise."

"Anyone who could do something like this will be well-funded or at least highly capable. Mastering disguises would be child's play. A transformation like the one you've undergone is just shy of being a medical miracle."

"Seems pretty miraculous to me, Annie."

"I agree; it's just that I know that there's a lot of progress being made in organ regrowth," Annie said, then paused as she held her chin in an inquisitive pose. "Theoretically, they could grow you a whole new female body. Or a male one..."

"Well, I don't need anyone to regrow me a body. My powers are working, just a bit slowly."

"Oh? Oh! That's right, your powers!"

Paul sighed, realizing that his sister had forgotten about his superpowers. That was how irrelevant they were. "Yeah, as you can hear, my voice is already back to its usual range. Additionally, I've got a few whiskers growing back," Paul said, sticking his chin out. Annie leaned in and grabbed his chin, then turned his head side to side so she could inspect his face.

"Hmm, how can I know that you did this? Maybe the syringe's contents weren't as potent as we thought?"

Paul doubted himself for a second. Just for a second, however. He puffed himself up and responded, "If you don't believe me, then I guess a demonstration is in order!"

"Hang on a second, Paul. That's not what I was suggesting..."

"I'll show you. I'll change back a little more, and you'll surely know that your brother has a superpower."

Annie stepped back, unsure about what was happening before her. She considered for a moment whether she needed to take cover. Paul positioned himself in the center of his tiny living space. Annie looked on anxiously, and Paul noted her worried expression. He assumed she was just concerned for him or his mental health, not that she was afraid of something blasting out of him and hurting her, as was actually the case.

Paul centered himself and focused all his energy and attention on activating his power again. A slight tingle was felt throughout his body. Paul became excited as he felt a more considerable swelling of energy than he had previously felt when he tried this earlier in the day. His facial expression lit up, and he looked at Annie, who seemed to have turned from anxious to terrified.

"Your... Your face!"

"What about my face?"

"Rather your jaw and chin! You look ridiculous now, hahaha!"

Paul rushed out of the room and back to his bathroom. He saw it right away. The lower half of his face had transformed back to their male attributes, and he looked ridiculous. Apparently, his skull size was one of the things impacted during his transaction, so he now had a face that was wider and larger on the bottom than on the top. Paul reluctantly returned to the living room, where Annie was working to regain her composure. It was no use. As soon as Paul was back in eyesight, her chuckling resumed.

"Yes, it's very funny, but at least I proved my point. I have a superpower, and it works—if a little unevenly," Paul said as Annie tried to stop laughing.

"I... I... believe you," Annie said, struggling to get the words out. "What is your next move then?"

"Next move? What do you think I am some superhero?"

"Well, it seems like you have a new archnemesis. Is it such a strange question?"

"Yes, Annie. I don't go around chasing people down. Even ones who do things directly to me."

"Well, I would probably if I were you. How do you know this lady won't just change you back into a woman when your powers finally get you back to being male?"

"What? What are the odds of that happening?"

"She knows where you work, who you are, and how to change you. What will you change to invalidate one of those points?"

"Uhhh, nothing?"

"That's exactly my point! She could easily return and try another scheme—or even the same one! You need to come up with a plan..."

"That's ridiculous. She probably saw the news report, like we did, and will lay low now. S.U.C.K.S. knows the truth, so I'm guessing that old lady will steer clear of me for a long time. I bet you I won't ever see her again. Five dollars?"

"Oh, you are one hundred percent on," Annie said, shaking Paul's hand. "You're right; your power is working; these aren't quite a woman's hands either," Annie teased.

Paul broke the handshake and frowned at Annie, "Not funny! I don't want to be a woman, so that's actually a compliment." Paul hoped to flip the script around and gain the upper hand.

Annie was having none of it, however. She continued to make fun of the situation. Paul was tormented for the next twenty minutes about having boobs, the need to wear dresses, and, lastly, having to sit to pee.

"Your words can't hurt me, Annie. I know who and **\*what\*** I am."

Annie finally relented, "All right. You're right. That's probably enough for one day. Are you going to go to work tomorrow looking like this?"

"I don't see what other choice I have."

"And you're going to go wearing what clothing?"

"My work uniform, of course. I have to wear it. It's required."

"That's 'Paul's' work uniform, a man's. But despite that jawline, you still look like Paula."

"Well, maybe not by morning! Maybe I'll change back more!"

\*\*\*\*\*

"Shit, I look exactly the same as last night," Paul said as he inspected himself in the bathroom mirror.

He had finally gotten over his fear of seeing his female body enough to take a shower before work. Paul would have preferred not to, but he could smell his body odor. So, finally fully nude, Paul stepped into the shower. His body sang out as the calming warmth of the water rushed over his body. Then he noticed it. All the little places and variations in sensation that Paul was unfamiliar with. Despite his willingness to shower, he had avoided visually inspecting his body below the neck. The jets of water hitting his skin made that very difficult to maintain.

Paul looked down and caught his first glimpse of his breasts. They were teardrop-shaped and about a full hand's worth in size. They were their own source of discomfort for Paul's mental health. Still, this concept was quickly discarded by the shocking reveal that the water jets hitting his nipples caused a painful reaction. Paul turned his body away from the water to protect himself. The sudden movement caused his chest to wiggle and jiggle in ways he wasn't comfortable with. So he wrapped his arms around his chest to stop the movement, but this caused his breasts to form an ample amount of cleavage, further causing Paul more distress. "Stupid body! You can't be attracted to your own **\*female\*** body, Paul."

Paul quickly went through the motions for his shower. His longer hair was a hassle to wash, causing him to spend more time in the shower than anticipated, and he was thusly rushed through his morning rituals and routines. Paul realized he would have to forego breakfast and coffee due to the extended time required to dry his hair. "Stupid body! I can't believe how fussy this all is. My hair feels like it weighs twenty pounds!" Paul braced himself for getting dressed. He had managed to wash himself... down there, but he had avoided looking or paying any attention to his lower half. He was going to try the same while getting dressed. Boxer briefs in hand, Paul rapidly pushed one leg through and leaned forward to follow through with the second. When leaning forward, Paul felt the shift in weight on his chest and nearly fell flat on his face from the unfamiliar sensation. Pulling the briefs up his legs, he shuddered as he felt the fabric run against his legs and then get a little

stuck at his larger thighs—however, the material of the briefs expanded to accommodate this. With one final tug, he pulled his briefs over his posterior and let out a sigh of relief. His polo shirt went on quickly but chafed a bit over his sensitive frontal appendages. Paul ignored this and resolved that, as a man, it was the manly thing to do to let things chafe. His pants were on, his belt buckled, and his shirt tucked. Paul was finally back in his work uniform. Accepting that this was as good as he was going to be able to do for the day, he grabbed his keys and set out for the day.

## Chapter 06 - Nothing Routine About It

“Work... Work never changes,” Paul paraphrased aloud as he heard the cafe door’s attached bell ring out its familiar cacophony. Even on a typical day, Paul’s demeanor soured on hearing the familiar sound. Today had been anything but ordinary. The looks he got from customers as he spoke to welcome them in or to take their orders were chilling. Out of a hundred customers, ninety-nine of them scowled, criticized, or insulted Paul. Having a man’s voice and the body of a woman had been too discordant for casual politeness to prevail. The litany of derogatory remarks from customers was enough to crush a person. Paul managed to get through it by reminding himself that they were only offended enough by Paul’s state to say something rude but not offended enough to leave the cafe. There was a perverse humor to be found in making them their 24oz triple-shot caramel-swirled mocha latte with extra whipped cream and, of course, caramel crunch on top. The irony of their precious drink orders was not lost on Paul.

Looking up, Paul recognized the arriving customer. It was Lee arriving in the mid-afternoon, looking like he had just rolled out of bed. Lee had attended New Mexico College with Paul, and the two young men met during their first week of classes in their first-year introductory classics lecture. Lee stumbled over another student while taking his seat in the giant hall—a lecture hall with three hundred other students. Lee’s gaff had disrupted the professor, who was just beginning his lecture, prompting him to ask the student sitting next to Lee to help pick his ‘friend’ up. Paul did as directed, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The two became fast friends. Lee liked to play games, maybe too much. Paul, well, Paul was an accommodating friend. Lee often wasted hours playing the latest Car Fetch Throttle game in Paul’s dorm room. Lee approached life with the same enthusiasm that he played the game—reckless abandon. So, saying Lee burst into the cafe that afternoon was a more accurate description. His first reaction upon seeing Paul was to hit on the “new girl.”

“Oh my, I didn’t realize someone new had started,” Lee began reaching out to take Paul’s hand into his own. Paul stood dumbstruck. “By what grace am I standing here with a woman as beautiful as you?” Lee asked, giving Paul a look that would

scare off any woman but that Lee hoped would endear him to this 'mystery' woman.

"Lee! Cut it out!"

Lee dropped Paul's hand and just about jumped out of his skin. His face was priceless. A mixture of shock, terror, and waning horniness. The next words out of his mouth said it all, "What the fuck?!"

Paul spent thirty minutes explaining the past 24 hours to his oldest friend. Lee nodded along and asked a few clarifying questions but said nothing worth mentioning here. His eyes communicated more than anything he said. They comically grew wide in shock and shrank in focus as Paul recounted the particulars of his transformation. Lee, basic as he was, went straight for the obvious question once Paul finished his story.

"So! You checked yourself out last night, right?"

"What? You want to know if I ogled my body?"

"Yeah, it's..." Lee paused as he looked up and down Paul's body uncomfortably, "... new."

"Dude, we are not going to talk about my body. I already told you it's not going to be mine for long. I am already seeing my waist expand back out."

"So you did check yourself out! I knew it. Was it awesome? Heh, it was awesome. I can tell just by looking at you. Man, I'm so lucky! We've got a man on the inside now. You can finally reveal all the secrets that women keep. We will be like gods! Gods, I say! No woman will be able to withstand our charm and wit with this new inside knowledge. They'll be like putty in our hands! Hahahaha!"

"Ok, first, you need to chill out. You're at a seven, and I need you to come back down to a three. Second, I am not magically knowledgeable about womanhood just because I have this body. The only women I've even spoken to since yesterday are my sister, that crazy scientist at S.U.C.K.S., and today's customers, who have all been rude to me. So, even if I wanted to help you on your diabolical scheme to woo women, I wouldn't be able to."

"Yeah, obviously not with that attitude, my dude. You need to immerse yourself in the process! Oh, and stop being such a prude. It's your body! Enjoy it, man!"

"Yeah, none of that is happening. I'll be back to my usual self in no time. You need to let this go."

"Ugh, fine. You can't blame a guy for trying. We've been perpetually single for years... Sorry for getting excited," Lee said, looking dejected.

Paul sighed heavily; he wanted nothing to do with this line of thinking, but he hated to disappoint his friend. "I'll keep my eyes open and ears listening for anything that might come up."

"Yes! That's amazing! You're the best!"

Lee asked for his usual drink and bolted shortly after this exchange, but Paul's day wasn't over yet. As he exited the back room of the cafe where he had been trying to use his power to further his transformation back, Paul saw a customer behaving oddly. The man heard Paul's arrival and instantly locked eyes with him and began to stare uncomfortably at Paul. As he walked behind the counter to the register to take the customer's order, the odd man kept his gaze affixed to Paul. Paul's voice quivered uncomfortably as he spoke.

"What... uhh... Can I make for you today?"

"You some queer?"

"Excuse me?"

"You deaf, too?"

"Uhh, no."

"Well, then, what's your deal? You sound like a man, but you ain't one."

"It's a long story. Did you want to order something? Or..."

"Yeah, I'm looking for this guy. You seen him?" The customer asked as he held out a picture of Paul.

Paul froze momentarily but regained his composure, realizing that the man couldn't see the resemblance to his former self. Now, Paul had to decide how to handle this. He could lie and say he didn't know. He could taunt the man and lean into his shared identity with the man in the picture. Paul relished the idea of seeing the bigot squirm, but looking at the guy, he thought better of teasing him. Paul was considerably smaller than this behemoth.

"No, can't say I have ever seen him."

"Really? He's wearing the same uniform as you are. He obviously works here."

"Nope, he doesn't work here. I'm the only person that works the whole day shift. I would know."

"Uh-huh. You know this guy's abducted an old woman last night. If you're trying to protect him, you could get in trouble too, little missy."

"Little missy? Little missy? Are you serious? Why would you call me that?!"

"What?! You don't want to be called a queer, and you don't want to be called a girl. What are you then?"

"None of your business! That's what I am to you! You need to leave now!"

"No way, you're coming with me. I'm going to collect the bounty one way or another, and you clearly are working with that idiot who abducted that rich old woman. Her company is offering a huge reward for this idiot's capture and her safe return. So, let's go!" The brutish man grabbed Paul's wrist and pulled him hard.

Paul was shocked as his body lunged forward across the counter. Paul struggled mightily, but the man's strength was too much for Paul. He easily dragged Paul across the counter and then out the front of the cafe. It was there that two grunts lifted Paul up, placed a bag over his head, and flung him into the back of a vehicle. Paul assumed it was a van, but it could have been a truck. Not a pickup but one of those trucks you see that carries money around for security firms. Paul's thoughts on the matter were scattered as he coped with the reality of being abducted.

Arriving at a mysterious location, Paul was stunned to see his surroundings when the hood was removed. He was in that scientist, Kylie's, lab.

"What the fuck?!" Paul exclaimed.

"Hey, no cursing. It's impolite for us ladies," Kyrie answered back.

"Why did you have those guys abduct me?"

"What? We rescued you."

"Rescued me? When?"

"Yesterday. Don't you remember?"



"I was here yesterday, but that was just so you could get that junk out of me. I was abducted today."

"Nope, that was yesterday."

"Not possible, crazy lady. I would remember losing a whole day."

"Uhh, let's assume you're right. You realize you're claiming to be able to remember that you haven't forgotten something."

Paul looked at Kyrie seriously and contemplated her words. He reflected on if he could have blacked out for an entire day.

"Fine. Maybe I wouldn't know. That still doesn't explain how I got here."

"We got a distress signal that some citizens saw a woman being attacked. S.U.C.K.S. sent a hero straight away, but you were already gone. Fortunately, the hero on location spotted some oil trails. He followed them to a warehouse where he dispatched with a small group of wannabe vigilante thugs. You know the type. They were a real wound-up group of powerless humans who think they know what's best. Paul did know; he knew about the powerless world intimately as a result of his closeted hero status. He regularly mingled and hid among the powerless population and was privy to how some people viewed the emergence of superheroes and superpowers.

"Yeah... I do. Why would a group like that come after me, though? I'm not out as a superhero."

"From what we can tell, there's a bounty on your head. Someone wants you brought in."

"What? Why?"

"Uhh, we don't know. Why do you think we would?"

"You've known everything else practically. Is it really that big of a leap?"

"Eh, guess not. But we aren't psychic here. Wouldn't that be cool, though?"

"You don't have any psychics at S.U.C.K.S.?"

"No, we applied to have one transferred to us. I think we're up to the low 3000s on the waitlist."

"Uh-huh, okay. So, no psychics. Got it."

"Well, you're free to go now. You seem fine. Have a good day!"

"Wait? That's it? You're just sending me home?"

"Yeah, you're not a hero. So, you go home after you are confirmed to be okay. You clearly don't have any better leads than we do. Have a nice night."

"Umm, no?"

"No? Are you telling me or asking me?"

Paul paused a moment before insisting, "Telling. I'm telling you I need more answers, and I'm not leaving until I get them."

"Right... Security! Please escort this lady to the curb."

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"I can't believe they threw me out!"

"What did you expect?" Annie asked.

"I dunno. Maybe some more support? They could assign a hero to research my case. Or show me the evidence they collected at the warehouse. Something... Anything!"

"Yup, that sounds right. The society of superheroes shares their intelligence with the victims of crimes so that they can crack the case all the time. I think you might watch too much television, little 'sis-bro.'"

"Eww, don't call me that."

"Why not? You are my sister and brother for the time being."

"Yeah... I don't like it, though."

"Welcome to the sisterhood. Lots of things other people do that we don't like and can't do anything about. This is a small penance in the grand scheme of things."

"Ungh, fine. I'm hanging up now. I'm going to go work on changing back. Goodnight, Annie."

"Goodnight, Paul-a..."

Paul groaned as he heard the silence of the call disconnecting. He retired to his bedroom first and got changed before returning to his bathroom. Standing in his pajamas with his shirt pushed out by two foreign orbs, Paul finally dedicated more attention to activating his power.

"Be a man, be a man, be a man!"

Nothing happened. Feeling frustrated, Paul slammed his fist against his bathroom mirror. A small crack spread out from where he struck the surface. Pulling his hand back, a small shard of the glass came with it. A few beads of blood formed and began to drip from the wound.

"Damn it. Why won't this just work."

He winced as he pulled the small piece of glass from his hand. The shock caused his arm to tense up, and he was surprised by a sudden burst of mass growing on his forearm. His right forearm had just reverted to a more male state. The muscles looked surprising on his more petite frame. He wasn't particularly muscular, but this was enough of a difference to look off.

Paul spent the next half hour aggressively flexing his muscles, hoping to trigger more changes. He eventually concluded that his change had been prompted by the pain of his injury. He was wrong. Several applied bandages later, Paul relented that his power didn't have a shortcut to activation. Sleep was fitful that night, but it came eventually after he was finally able to leave the events of the day behind him.

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Two weeks later...

Two weeks of insults.

Two weeks of bigotry.

Two weeks of side glances.

Two weeks of discomfort.

Two weeks of Lee's badgering.

After two weeks of continued exertion, Paul's body regained its standard form.

When he showed up for work, he was all smiles. Paul gave the first customer of the day his best customer service. He was just that happy, even at 5 a.m.

"Hi! Welcome! What can I get for you?"

"Oh, uhh, hey. I just want the largest cup of black coffee you can make me."

"Ooph, rough morning already?"

"Night... I haven't slept yet."

"Oh, man. It's pretty early... or late then."

"Yeah, it's been a tough few weeks."

"Well, this one is on the house then."

"What? Really? You don't have to do that..."

"It's my pleasure, pal. I'm having a great day, and I'd like to pay it forward to you."

"That's very nice of you, Paul."

"Of course!" Paul responded earnestly before a strange sense washed over him. Paul didn't wear a name tag. He had never seen this guy before, either. The man seemed to realize what was happening in Paul's head as he stuck his hand out, "Whatever you're thinking, don't. You need to stay right there."

"Right..." Paul wished he was a little closer to the emergency signal under the counter. The man standing across the counter could easily grab him before he could get back to it. He could probably stop a three-hundred-pound linebacker. This 'customer' was built like an 80's action movie star. Paul's thoughts should have been dedicated to keeping himself safe, but he was just frustrated. He could hardly believe how ridiculous his life had been these last three weeks. He transformed into a woman, was abducted, verbally abused, and now he was again being threatened with some unknown punishment.

"Cream is on the counter behind you. I'll stay right here..."

## **Chapter 07 - I've Had About Enough of This**

"Do I actually have a superpower?" Paul questioned privately. He had just been through this same ordeal a couple of weeks ago, and having it happen again so soon seemed more than a coincidence. "Maybe my power is 'pure dumb luck,' only

I have bad luck as my default."

"Look, Paul, you can calm down. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm... just... tired," the imposing man said before falling forward and crashing over a table.

"Holy shit!" Paul exclaimed as he rushed around the counter to check on the man. Paul confirmed that the man was still alive with a quick pulse check.

"Well, what am I supposed to do about this now?"

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Twenty minutes later, the superhero rescue squad, S.Q.U.A.D., was on the scene. S.Q.U.A.D. handled the fallout of superhero events and provided emergency medical relief to heroes in need. On arrival, Paul was quickly ushered away by several S.Q.U.A.D. members. Paul was glad they were handling this mess rather than him, though he was surprised to learn that the man who had collapsed after being more than moderately threatening to him was himself a superhero.

After twenty minutes, the Medical S.Q.U.A.D. resuscitated the suspicious man, and they shortly began discussing something official, but Paul couldn't make out the details. As his curiosity increased, Paul started to inch closer but was shocked to hear a familiar voice shout at him.

"Paul! You're back to normal! What was it, three weeks? Almost to the day! You did so awesome. You look just like your S.U.C.K.S. Profile again. I'm not sure which version of you is cuter, though, if I'm being honest. You have a classic beauty like Paula but an on-trend nerdiness as a man. I'm going to have to reflect on this... hmm..."

"Kyrie? Are you for real right now?"

"Wait just a minute..."

"Seriously?"

"Not one for patience, I see; I think that seals the deal. Paula's cuter. We need to get Paula back ASAP."

"Well, that's never happening. My power only works in one direction, remember?"

"I still have a sample of that gunk you were injected with... maybe if I..."

"Kyrie!"

"All right, all right. Can't blame a girl for thirsting..."

"Umm... I think you literally can and should. It's weird..."

"Nah, what's weird is what's up with The Roman."

"The who?"

"No, The Roman?"

"Uh-huh, I stand by my question."

"Him! That dude, he's The Roman! Superhero extraordinaire!"

"He couldn't possibly be. His hair's all wrong. It's not even the same color as The Roman's."

"You think a thing like hair color would limit a hero that draws their power from the Roman Gods?"

"No... Obviously..."

"Right... So, what did he say to you before he went crash and pow?" Kyrie said, gesturing with her hand slapping against her forehead comedically.

"Nothing, he just said my name even though I wasn't wearing my nametag. Is he psychic?"

"I literally told you we don't have a psychic on staff at S.U.C.K.S. like a week ago. Was it your brain that suffered a fall this morning or his?"

"How am I supposed to know? Things can change."

"Not that fast... He knows your name because he was assigned your case."

"What? Why would an S-Tier superhero be assigned my case?"

"It's interesting, right?" Kyrie asked, leaning in. Her words sounded too excited for how mundane the question was.

"Uhh, yeah..."

"Well, you're giving me nothing here, kid. Did you have your coffee, caffeine,

espresso, adrenaline shot, or whatever this morning?"

"Huh, Kyrie? Just get on with it. Why would S.U.C.K.S. assign The Roman to look into my case?"

"That's just it, they didn't. He volunteered. He said he saw it on the news and wanted to offer his support personally."

"Really? Then why did he come in here and threaten me?"

"Threaten you? Really?"

"Yeah, he could tell I had caught that he shouldn't have known my name. He made a whole thing of me not running away."

"Well, duh. He is not supposed to make contact with the victim of an active case he's working on. It could put you in harm's way."

"I... Didn't know that. So, is he going to get in trouble?"

"Nope!"

"After all that, you just say 'Nope?'"

"Yep, he's The Roman. He's the closest thing to royalty we have in this town. He can pretty much do as he pleases, but he's still a fastidious rule follower. Sort of goes with the territory and all."

"Yeah... That makes sense."

"So, he said exactly nothing to you and then passed out. Does that about sum it up?"

"In retrospect, I think it does."

"Cool story, Paul... Cool story..." Kyrie seemed to be moving on as she started checking Paul's body out by making orbital motions back and forth around his perimeter. It was seriously weirding Paul out.

"Can you... not... do that?"

"What? I'm a scientist. It's part of the deal. I get to observe and hypothesize about the world, and right now, you are the most interesting thing going on anywhere on this planet. You do realize you are the first person ever to change genders through

a superpower, right?"

"What? No... That can't be right..."

"No verifiable instances have ever been documented. And before you say it, no, that one-time Kimper ran into his female doppelganger from another dimension doesn't count. And neither does pink Kleton! Don't bring it up! We don't talk about that..."

"Uhh, I have no idea what you're talking about, but it sounds absurd."

"Oh, trust me, it was bonkers."

"Right..."

"So... any lingering feminine traits you want to tell me about still lingering?" Kyrie asked, practically salivating.

"No! Cut it out, Kyrie."

"Fine... Fine... But, if you do decide you want to switch back, you know how to find me."

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*Later that night...*

"That all happened in the first two hours after I opened, Annie! Today was supposed to be normal, ordinary... boring."

"Well, to me, it sounds like Paula has an admirer."

"What? Ew, no, gross. I'd never date Kyrie in a million years."

"No, not Kyrie. The Roman. Also, seriously? The Roman? You didn't get his actual name?"

"No, he has a secret identity, Annie. Also, there's no chance he's into me. He'd never even seen me before today."

"You sure about that?"

"What do you mean?"



"He's a superhero. Who can fly."

"Uh-huh, still not following."

"And has super speed."

"Yeah, I think that's one of his powers. And?"

"And has the ability to disguise himself?"

"Yeah, seems pretty much essential to keep a secret identity, so?"

"So, sometimes you are very dense. There's practically zero chance that this is the first time the super-powered, super-speedy, super-disguised man has seen you. He'd obviously be monitoring you at least some of the time in case that old woman were to show up again."

Paul was about to disagree with his sister when his doorbell rang, "Hold tight, Annie. Probably a delivery."

Paul opened the door and saw a heart-shaped box of chocolates at his feet. "Who would have left this," he thought as he brought the box inside.

"You'll never believe what it was."

"You're right, I won't. I won't even bother to guess. Just tell me..."

"It was a box of chocolates."

"What kind of box?"

"I don't know," Paul hesitated to answer.

"Uh-huh, what color was the box?"

"Uhhh..." Paul couldn't bring himself to answer.

"I knew it! He likes you! Oh, it's so cute: a superpowered man meets a man in a coffee shop 'meet-cute.' You'll tell your grandkids all about it someday."

"What!? Don't be ridiculous!"

"Don't be ridiculous? I think I'm being perfectly reasonable here. You're the one

who's denying reality. You should look for a number to call him or text him at the least. I'm sure he left it for you."

Paul looked over the box, but there was no card or visible writing on it.

"Nope, nothing, Annie. Maybe it was left at my door by mistake?"

"Mistake? Really? I seriously doubt it, Paul."

"Well, stranger things have been happening. Especially to me."

"My point exactly... Hey, I have to get going. We on for dinner with Mom this week?"

"Yeah, same time and place. I'll see you then."

Paul ended his call and continued to examine the chocolates. The box was ornate and appeared to be very high quality. Paul wasn't one to let a good thing go to waste, so he opened the box and marveled at the menagerie of luscious chocolates. They were the fanciest confectionaries that Paul had ever laid eyes on. He hesitantly selected a piece, using the utmost care to extract the delicate chocolate from the container.

Paul ate the chocolate in one bite.

"Oh my God! That's amazing. So sweet! So velvety! So much Umph! Wow!"

Paul ate five more chocolates from the dozen before finally placing the box down. "I can't eat anymore. These were probably meant for someone else. It's not fair that I'm eating their gift like this."

Paul went to bed feeling carefree for the first time in almost a month. He slept like a baby—a baby who had just eaten the most delectable dessert.

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Paul got some odd looks at work the next day. He was kind of used to it now that he'd spent the last three somewhere between a man and a woman in appearance. He filed the thought away and proceeded to be his usual helpful, friendly self as best he could be.

When he got home, he noticed a little bit of a jiggle as he placed his bag of groceries down on his kitchen counter. "Huh, that's odd. I didn't think I bought anything loose like that."

He took a minute and inspected his items. Everything seemed okay, and nothing appeared to be responsible for that sensation. Being a clueless man, he quickly rose to his tiptoes and dropped his weight. He felt a slight motion again situated on his front side. He made his way swiftly to the bathroom and raised his shirt. Sure enough, his chest looked a bit puffy. "Well, more pudgy than puffy," he thought. He hopped on his scale and noted a five-pound weight gain. "Five pounds? That's unbelievable. All that from a few extra chocolates?"

"Well, better lay off the sweets to drop the extra poundage. I'll just drop these in the trash..." Paul said aloud while holding the box of chocolates. As he went to lower the box into the trash, he found he couldn't follow through. "No, moderation is better than cold turkey. I'm sure I can keep it under control. I just need to use some willpower. I'll be all right in a few days, and there's no need to waste such a fabulous gift."

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"Hi, Mom!"

"Holy cow! Paul?"

"Oh, uhh, yeah. It's me."

"What? What happened to you?"

"Is it that noticeable?"

"Honey, you are huge! What? How?"

"I don't really know, Mom. I just can't seem to keep from eating these fantastic chocolates..."

"A few chocolates can't do this, honey. You haven't just gained weight. You're looking awfully... feminine. Something is up..."

"Oh... dang."

## **Chapter 08 - Who's that now?**

Meanwhile, across town, in an office building that looked like any other office building that's eighty stories tall, a group of a dozen executives paused their arguing to welcome their CEO back from her latest research excursion.

In unison, three women who appeared to be triplets stood and bowed their heads. The other executives were not far behind as The Call of Beauty Corporation's chief executive glided into the room. Her gait was flawlessly feminine as she placed one heel before the other, hips swaying side to side. Two assistants walked on either side of her, clearing a path for her to take her place at the head of the conference room table.

"Ms. Awl! Welcome back! We hope your trip was a success!" the triplets spoke in an eerily synchronized manner.

"But, of course, dears." The chief executive replied with a flair that only the head of a beauty company could produce. The executives all cheered the woman at the head of the table as they took in the energy created by her simple presence in the room. Laurie Awl, Chief Executive Officer, stood five foot eight inches in flats and looked about fifty years of age, but her actual age was only known to a select few of the executives. They all knew she had to be significantly older than she appeared due to her tenure with the company. She founded the company from her 1-bedroom apartment and grew it into the global retailing giant it had become. With over five billion confirmed unique customers, it was more likely than not that any given individual had made a purchase from the C.O.B. Corp. Men and women purchased goods ranging from skincare, haircare, and makeup to brushes, tweezers, or files. Chances were that a shopper was looking at a C.O.B. corp product or one of its subsidiaries whenever a person visited a store's beauty department.

The triplets smiled with their whole faces, their eyes taking on a particular brightness accentuated by their respective eye makeup applications, which served as the only differentiator an observer could use to distinguish between the women. One had an exaggerated but expressive application of eyeliner. The next had a beautifully blended gradient of pink to purple eyeshadow. Finally, the last triplet had the most magnificently pronounced eyelashes accented by a skillful application of mascara that seemed to defy the laws of gravity.

"Sit down, you three. Laurie, what can you tell us about the latest artifact?" a woman with absolutely flawless skin near the head of the conference table said. She returned to her seat as well, and the other executives followed her lead. The triplets glared at the woman sitting next to their chief executive with contempt but maintained their composure in front of their leader.

"No need for squabbling all of you. Ms. Foundation, please be kind to the triplets. I return with exciting news. Experiment 'Magical Femininity' is on track, and we are ready to proceed to the requirements-gathering phase of the project. If the roadmap holds firm, this will be the thirteenth 'Trans-Lab.'" Laurie Awl announced,

holding her hands in the air as she celebrated the triumph of her efforts. Again, the executive clapped along, rejoicing about their leader's accomplishments.

"It's hard to believe how far out this roadmap is chartered already. We're only now starting the second Trans-lab. What did it take? Two weeks to collect the data from the first experiment?" The woman sitting on the opposite side of the table across from Ms. Foundation asked. Her skin looked similarly flawless as Ms. Foundation's, with a distinct evenness in color that seemed impossible to maintain to the casual observer.

"A little more, Ms. Concealer. Our subject underperformed to our expectations, but we have updated our forecasts accordingly. We're chartered out through May next year based on the statistical regressions and the likelihood of performance changes by the subject," Yet another woman at the table announced. She had minimal makeup, but it was neatly applied with a smoothness that drew outsized attention given the small amount of actual product used.

"Ms. Primer is right as always. Thank you, dear," the chief executive affirmed her approval of the information being shared. Looking at her dozen executives, a sense of pride welled within her, and she almost felt a tear come to her eye. An assistant saw the change in her expression and quickly applied a tissue to the edge of her eye to prevent any makeup from smearing. As the first assistant pulled her hand away, the second reached in with an eyeliner pen to fill in any makeup that had been drawn away.

"How is the second experiment going? Is 'Chocolate Gains' producing the results we hoped?" Ms. Concealer asked the table.

"Oh, absolutely. Based on our observations, the subject has finished the box of chocolates or, at worst, has one left." The triplets answered, reading from tablets they held before themselves.

"And the additive? How long until we can evaluate its effectiveness?" Ms. Foundation asked.

"We should have initial results back within 24 hours," a younger woman answered. Despite her age, she had a classic appearance and held a compact in her hand, which she occasionally fidgeted with. Ms. Foundation looked at her with admiration and a hint of pride.

"Thank you, Ms. Powder. Will Business Intelligence be emailing the report? Or should we expect a meeting to review?" Ms. Foundation beamed, her pride in the young executive's performance coming through clearly.

"From my early read, this will be a meeting. Paul's—"

"The subject. We don't use that name," Ms. Awl interrupted."

"Of course, Ms. Awl. My protege knows the rules," Ms. Foundation immediately responded while looking disapprovingly at the young woman. The look conveyed all the information she needed to know her following action.

"I apologize, Ms. Awl. It won't happen again."

"I know, dear... Ms. Concealer, what business are we in?"

The executive paused momentarily. She was struck by the question's seeming simplicity and its use as a rhetorical question in this forum with these executives. "We are in the business of beautifying the world, of course!"

"Incorrect. Would anyone else like to try?" Ms. Awl responded directly without judgment.

A sheepish woman sitting near Ms. Powder raised her hand. Although she appeared to have no makeup on, her beauty shone through nonetheless.

"Ah, Ms. Natural, would you like to venture a guess?"

"We're in the business of longevity, Ms. Awl," Ms. Natural answered back.

"Close! But that is not it either. Let me be clear: We are in the business of all things feminine. No, femininity itself! If this world is to survive, we must distill the essence of femininity and spread it across the world! Grace, beauty, strength, endurance, community! Women's leadership embodies all the qualities the world needs to handle the crises that are yet to come. So, do you see why we refer to Mr. Mansson in the manner we do?" Ms. Awl concluded, redirecting her glance at Ms. Concealer, her second in command.

"Umm... Yes, of course! It's because—" Ms. Concealer started to respond.

"Before you embarrass yourself, let me tell you. Mr. Mansson is the subject because we are better than him. We're better than the men of the world. Because of that, we maintain a scientific objectivity in combating biases. Biases that men allow into the workplace because they are weak and can't control their lesser impulses and lizard brains. The glass ceiling of yesteryears, sisters, is a direct result of men's ignorance of their own mental shortcomings and their base instincts to suppress superior practices and behaviors that come from women in

the workplace. So, we hold a higher standard because it is our very business model to do so. Anyone who can't adhere will be summarily dismissed. I'm sure you can all understand. You're all women, after all."

"Does that same policy not extend to the subject? He's being turned into a woman, so he must have some recognition of the significant mental differences—" Ms. Routine, a well-put-together middle-aged woman, asked before being interrupted by Ms. Awl.

"Again, no. The subject is an elastic man. Our treatments don't result in permanent change for him. He will always choose to use his power to return to his maleness. Despite his ignorance of the gifts we offer him, he reveals to us the development of femininity with the ability to do so experimentally! We repeat the same test repeatedly with small changes to the process, allowing us to control for variables that we otherwise could not. The subject is our one chance to deepen our understanding of what defines feminine essence! I will not entertain any sympathy for the subject; 'he' is our means to our goal. Nothing more."

A bit of chattering developed at the table as the women turned to one another to criticize or agree with the sentiments expressed by their leader. The discussion started to heat up, with criticism turning into disagreement, which could quickly turn into arguments. Ms. Awl knew she needed to step in.

"Ladies, please let's maintain our decorum. This company is meant to exemplify the strengths of collective behavior. We all succeed or none of us succeed. We must be united in our goal to bring femininity to the world. The subject, Paul Mansson, is a tool for us. By running these experiments on him, turning him into a woman, we can uncover universal truths of femininity. What does it take to be a woman? What does it take to impart womanly qualities? How does the physical change the mental? How long do these effects last? Are they permanent or merely resilient? Durable or fragile? Eventually, we will find a way to overcome the most stubbornly masculine man in existence's ability to be male. Once we've done this, we can replicate the process and finally start to bring the world around to a kinder, more compassionate, more sustainable path where all people can live in harmony. This is our purpose at Call of Beauty. It's not just to improve the lives of our customers but to bring beauty to the fundamental elements of society. Now, let me hear from you all. Are we committed to rising to that call?"

The room's inhabitants responded as though they were a single resolute voice, "Yes!"

## **Chapter 09 - There's No Stopping Family Dinner**

Exciting as that was meeting Paul's antagonist, there was no stopping Paul's

mother's questioning over his current state. From questions about where the chocolates came from to why Paul kept eating them, the questions continued unabated by Paul's strong desire for his family to let it go. His sister had only piled on even more when she arrived.

"Can we just eat our meal in peace? I'll be back to myself in a couple of weeks, tops. So, we can drop this whole thing preferably and talk about other things that are going on, please?"

"Paul, I understand why you'd be hesitant to discuss this. You look a bit like I did when I was pregnant with your sister. Oh God! You're not pregnant, are you?" Paul's mother asked, greatly alarmed at the possibility.

"What? No! How could I be? This has only been happening for a few days."

"Well, stranger things have happened, right Annie?"

"Oh, one hundred percent. You can just be working, and then some random person injects something into you, and who knows what happens from there? Strange times we live in for sure," Annie deadpanned while staring at Paul.

"Ha... Ha... Very funny, Annie. Please, any other topics? I am not pregnant. I'm not even going to look like this in a few days. I already used my power to change back once before."

"Your power?" Paul's mother asked quizzically.

"You didn't tell her?" Paul asked, looking at Annie, who replied with a shrug.

"Sorry, Mom. I thought Annie told you... Something similar happened a few weeks ago. I got turned into a girl and then—"

"Woman, you got turned into a woman. Unless you're saying, you got younger too?" Paul's mother interrupted him.

"Ahem... Woman, and then I used my power to change back into my usual self."

"Honey, that's incredible news! Your power isn't as useless as you thought!"

"Heh, yeah. I guess not. It worked out for me in this one instance. And, well, I guess I've already got my second shot at it."

"That's so wild that you'd spontaneously turn into a woman. I don't think I've ever heard of anything like that. Have you, Annie?" Paul's mother asked. Annie's eyes



opened large, and she spooned a mouthful of food into her mouth and then averted her eyes. Paul sighed heavily in response to Annie's reaction before recounting the last several weeks to his mother. Fifteen minutes later, the story had been retold.

"So, how do we stop this gender-bender villain from doing this to you again?" Paul's mother asked.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, she's obviously the one that's behind this second attack on you, too. Getting turned into a woman once would be a terrible case of collateral damage by a maniacal villain. Having it happen a second time so soon makes it pretty clear to me that she has an agenda, and you are a central part of it. So, I think it's best if we start to make a plan for how we deal with this! I'm not about to let some crazy woman torture my sweet baby boy."

"Moom, you are embarrassing me."

"Nonsense, parents are allowed to say these things about our children. Now, Annie, what can you tell me about the situation? Surely, you researched the suspects."

Annie turned her head to the side so she couldn't catch anyone's eye. "No, I didn't think I needed to..."

Their mother sighed and pulled out a notebook from her oversized purse. "It looks like I'll just have to do it myself. Paul, tell me every detail. Mom is on the case!"

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Thus began Paul's dual mission to kick his chocolate habit and help his mother discover the identity of his mysterious adversary.

Paul woke up the morning after his family dinner, relieved to have the day off to relax. This relief was short-lived. A knock followed by another at his front door jostled him out of bed. Walking to the front door, he opened it and saw his mother standing there with several bags in her hands.

"Paul! You're indecent, Sweetie. Get back inside quickly."

Paul stumbled back into his apartment as his mother pushed through the door. "Huh?" was all he managed to respond.

"Paul...ah, you can't open your front door with your robe open. It's indecent. Go get changed, young lady."

"Ma-oom, don't call me that. I'm not a girl."

"Woman."

"Whatever," Paul said, stomping off. Five minutes later, he returned wearing his only female clothes. Upon seeing Paul, his mother was confused about why he chose to wear his work uniform.

"I thought you said you had the day off?"

"I do."

"Then why are you wearing your uniform?"

"This is the only outfit I have that fits this body."

"Mhmm, that's what I figured. Here," Paul's mother said, stretching her arms towards him. Both hands were holding a separate bag. Paul took the two bags and looked at them briefly, realizing what was happening.

"How many?"

"Just one or two. Three tops."

Paul turned back around to go to his room to change. His mother had a history of requiring her children to model the clothes she had bought. The idea of modeling his outfits sent his brain straight back to his school years, buying clothes each summer for the upcoming year. The only thing missing was the public venue in which to be completely mortified. However, Paul ventured to guess that his mother would have some fresh new form of torture for him to suffer.

"I didn't know your sizes, so I had to guess. Try the bras on first. Start with the bigger sizes and work down. Not the other way, or you'll pinch those boobies."

"Mom! Please don't talk about boobies with me."

"Would you prefer I say breasts?"

"No!"

"Well, sorry to say it, honey, but you have a rather sizable pair. How should I refer to them?"

Paul responded, "Maybe we don't talk about them at all?" and walked out wearing the underwear his mother had purchased. "Oh, well, it looks like the largest size wins. I'm glad I bought that one. I almost didn't," Paul's mother clinically responded as she saw her son's full figure. She was astonished by the sight. She could see several resemblances to her own body in Paul, but also elements that remained of Paul's father. There was no mistaking that this woman was actually her son, despite how confusing that was.

"Am I all right to go now? Two more outfits, right?" Paul asked impatiently. He stood there anxiously for several minutes while his mother stared in disbelief.

"Oh, uhh, yes. Try the dress on first. It will be easiest to get on."

"A dress? Do I have to?" Paul whined.

"Yes, I think you'll find it more comfortable than trousers and a shirt."

"Ugh, fine..." Paul said, stomping off. He knew better than to debate the finer points with his mother. He would always lose that debate. Returning several minutes later, Paul's mother stood up to see him and put her hand over her mouth in shock.

"It's that bad?" Paul asked, worried that he looked like a freak.

"No, Paula. It's... it just reminded me of something from a long time ago, is all. I think you look very pretty."

"I don't want to look pretty, though," Paul responded, choosing that offense as the hill he would defend over the other offense of using a feminine name to refer to him.

"Well, I can't help it. You are pretty. It's just good genes. Now, go try on the capris and tank top. Hopefully, it's not too small. I may have underestimated your size—"

As Paul's mother was speaking, another knock came on the door. Paul was closest, so he answered it out of instinct.

"Delivery, Ma'am. Sign here, please."

Upon hearing the salutation, Paul grumbled but signed for the package silently and

returned to his mother.

"Who was it?" she asked, knowing very well that it had been a delivery.

"Looks like someone sent me more chocolates. It was another delivery man."

"Another? Not the same one who has delivered you chocolates these last few days?"

"Well, I didn't see the first box get delivered. But I don't recall any similarities between people who recently delivered things to me. Do you think the Global Delivery Service is 'in' on the old lady's scheme? Maybe they don't ship enough, and turning me and the rest of the world into women will increase online shopping, making GDS the top logistics company in the world and raising shareholders' portfolios to all-time highs!"

"Joke all you want, Paula, but this is serious business. It's very concerning that someone is targeting you like this. There are people out there with powers you can barely even comprehend. Most people are using their powers for good, but villains are also out there. So, excuse me if I worry about my child," Paul's mother said, wiping a freshly forming tear from her eye.

"Sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to upset you. I know it's weird to be targeted like this. I will try to take it more seriously."

"Thank you. Now let's look at these chocolates," Paul's mother said, reaching out to take the box from Paul. Paul had a little hesitancy in giving the box over; his 'addiction' to the confectionery was already strong. Paul's mother's face became very focused as she inspected the package, turning it over and examining each side. She frowned as she finished her visual inspection. "This seems like a completely ordinary off-the-shelf box of big-brand chocolates."

"Yeah, and?"

"I thought they would be custom or fancy in some way. It looks like they haven't been tampered with at all."

"Here, let me see them," Paul said, taking the package. Yeah, they are sealed like they would be from the factory. Let's open it to see if that reveals anything," Paul continued, opening the package. "It looks pretty normal to me," he said, placing the open box on the coffee table between him and his mother.

"Yeah, I'd say you're right. Dang, I was hoping we'd have our first clue."

"Mom, I really think we should just hand this off to S.U.C.K.S. They know all the background. They even assigned this beefcake bozo superhero to my case. I think his name was... Rome? Something like that, at least."

"The Roman? He's a very high-level hero for something like this? Don't you think?"

"How should I know? I avoid superhero antics as much as possible," Paul said, turning away out of an evident sadness he held inside.

"Honey, I know you were disappointed by your power evaluation. I know you wanted to fight crime and be like your hero, Captain Kimper. But we don't always get what we want in life. That doesn't mean we should hide from the realities of the world. Being informed about superheroes is an important part of staying safe."

"Yes, Mom. I've heard the speech before. We don't need to go through it again."

"Fine, at least let me take these in for—" Paul's mother stopped in her tracks as she saw Paul swiftly grab a chocolate and down it in one bite.

"Paula! No!"

"What? You came to the same conclusion I did. They are ordinary chocolates."

"No, I did not come to that same conclusion! I said they look ordinary, but look what they've done to you!" as Paul's mother said this, her eyes grew wide, catching Paul's attention.

"What? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"No, but I did just see your boobs grow. Look."

Paul looked down and saw that his chest was now overflowing out of the top of his dress and bra, "Well, I guess seeing is believing, right?"

"I always believed you, Paula, but seeing it is more alarming. Even if this was supposed to all be from weight gain from too many sugary treats, the effect wouldn't be this fast. I'm worried that this might be magic."

"Magic? Only a few confirmed cases of magic have ever been documented. It's extremely rare, and I doubt these are enchanted chocolates."

"No! It's more common than you think! Have you heard of Ramnaghast? He's supposed to be able to grant wishes with his magic. He's an evil djinn searching

for people to corrupt by granting crooked versions of their greatest desires. It's super scary."

"Mom, that's all tabloid stories. You know those are fake. Please tell me you know they are fake," Paul said, looking at his mother with concern.

"Only the celebrity ones! The Daily Telegram is the real deal!"

Paul sighed heavily but relented. This wasn't a fight he was interested in having right now. "Okay, Mom. So maybe magic is more common than I know. What do we do about it?"

"S.U.C.K.S. can look at the chocolates. They will be able to help."

"I know they have magic-detecting abilities there, but would that work on an enchanted food item? Usually, they scan people, not possessions."

"We will just have to see. Won't we?" Paul's mother asked, emphasizing her last word.

"You don't mean..."

"Get your shoes on! We're going to meet with some superheroes!"

