Every Time I Look in the Mirror (I See a Stranger)

by DemiCas

Summary

Dean came up behind and put his arms around Castiel's waist. He was careful, these days, not to stray into forbidden territory, forbidden not by discussion or explanation, but by flinching and recoiling: the shudder of reluctant flesh. Castiel hated pushing Dean away, especially in such a stupid, passive-aggressive way, but there was no remedy, no way to allow him to touch those places Castiel found so strange and ugly and alien.
Chapter 1

Castiel stepped out of the shower and walked to the big mirror in the bedroom, dropping the towel along the way. It had been a long time; Castiel didn't much like looking in the mirror these days, especially not the full-length one. Especially not naked.

A queasy feeling rolled through Castiel's stomach as blue eyes meet blue in the soft light of the bedroom. It was wrong, this body: weird, flabby bits; bulges and curves all misplaced; one part out of proportion with another – it was all just wrong. It was ugly and unfair, and Castiel hated it. Tears begin to well, stinging, but Castiel blinked them back, refusing to let them fall.

The pale shape in the mirror trembled. Castiel's fists clenched, relaxed. It was not like anything could be done.

A small sound, and Castiel started. There was movement in the mirror. Castiel's gaze shifted to the background of the reflection.

It was Dean, standing in the doorway, a fond smile on his face. “Hey babe – not to say that the view ain't awesome, but it's time to get dressed. We don't wanna be late.”

Castiel was suddenly self-conscious at being caught naked, felt exposed and ashamed. “I'm sorry, Dean. I lost track of time.”

Dean came up behind and put his arms around Castiel's waist. He was careful, these days, not to stray into forbidden territory, forbidden not by discussion or explanation, but by flinching and recoiling: the shudder of reluctant flesh. Castiel hated pushing Dean away, especially in such a stupid, passive-aggressive way, but there was no remedy, no way to allow him to touch those places Castiel found so strange and ugly and alien.

“'S'alright, Cas,” Dean said soothingly. “We still have a few minutes. 'Sides, there's no need to go overboard – it's totally casual.”

“That's good, at least,” Castiel sighed. The thought of dressing up that body brought the queasiness back again.

Dean kissed Castiel's shoulder. “You always look gorgeous, no matter what you wear,” he murmured into Castiel's hair.

Castiel tried to relax, to act normally, and smiled at Dean in the mirror. “Burlap?”

Dean nodded emphatically. “Oh yeah. You could totally rock burlap. Have 'em swooning in the aisles.”

Castiel actually laughed at that. It was a small sound, but genuine. “An experiment for another time, perhaps. But you said we were running late . . .?”

Dean took one hand away from Castiel's waist to look at his watch. “Shit, yeah,” he muttered “And I still have to grab Sam's present and feed the cats.” He kissed Castiel's temple. “Hurry up, babe.
I'll meet you by the car.”

Castiel stepped out of the embrace and placed a chaste kiss on Dean's mouth. “Go. I won't be long.”

Dean turned back at the door to the hall with a wink and a half-smile. “That's my girl,” he said, and was gone.

Castiel's throat tightened. “No, I'm not,” he whispered.

Castiel settled for something easy and comfortable: jeans, a tailored white button-down with blue and green pinstripes, and Doc Martens. At the last minute he also threw on a dark grey vest, just to dress things up a little. There. Mostly casual, as befitted a family outing, a touch of formality for a birthday party. No frills required.

Dean's eyes lit up as Castiel came down the path from the house, shoving himself up from where he'd been leaning on the Impala to take Castiel in his arms. “You look terrific, Cas,” he beamed. “You know how I love a girl in drag.”

Castiel tensed, then forced himself to relax. Smile. “We need to go a formal event, then,” he said, trying for playful and mostly succeeding. “I could wear a tux.”

“I'd have to beat the guys off with a stick, maybe some of the girls, too,” Dean said with a grin, pulling himself away from Castiel with obvious reluctance and heading for the driver's side door. “But not tonight, babe. We gotta go hang out at some seedy restaurant with my nerdy little brother and his way-too-good-for-him wife. At least the ankle-biters have a sitter for the night.” Dean rolled his eyes and looked put upon.

Castiel rolled his eyes in return, but his smile widened, finally reaching his eyes. “Don't be difficult, Dean,” he said as he took his place in the passenger's seat. “You love this restaurant almost as much as you love Sam and his family.”

Dean grunted noncommittally as he pulled away from the curb, but one corner of his mouth twitched.

“Two words,” Castiel deadpanned. “Cherry. Pie.”

Dean let out an explosive, almost obscene sigh. “Oh, yeah. Better 'n chocolate,” he murmured.

“Don't blaspheme, Dean.”

Dean laughed and palmed the steering wheel over. Castiel settled into his seat and angled his body so he could look at his husband's profile . . . just look. He felt the tightness in his body loosen, the hard places inside him go softer. Fifteen years and more they had been together, and Dean was still beautiful, so beautiful that Castiel had sometimes felt jealous of him, raised as he had been in a world that taught that women should be more physically attractive than men. But now, as he gazed at the slightly bent nose, the humorous curve of the full lips, the absurdly long lashes, at the perfect planes and curves of that beloved face, all he could feel was gratitude and love.

And then, guilt.

Castiel turned away abruptly and stared out the window, ambushed once again by his insecurities. All the questions he's asked himself for the last month or more started crashing their way through
his head: How could this happen? What did it mean? Why now? And perhaps most importantly, how could he do this to Dean?

He suppressed the urge to rub his temples; Dean would ask what was wrong and Castiel couldn't face that right now. He closed his eyes briefly instead and tried to convince himself that he wasn't doing anything to anyone. This...this thing just was. If he'd had a choice, he certainly wouldn't have chosen this, not now, not ever. Why would he? The very question was bizarre. Still, he couldn't help feeling that he was in the wrong somehow, that he could undo this if he only tried hard enough. And then the world would turn right side up again, and he'd never have to tell Dean, and everything would be just like it always had been. That was what he wanted...wasn't it?

“Cas?”

Castiel was startled out of his reverie by Dean's voice and a warm hand on his leg. “Wake up, babe,” Dean was saying, a small smile on his face. “We're at Grandma's house.”

Castiel shot him an amused look, complete with eyebrow. “When has either one of us ever been to 'Grandma's house'?”

Dean shrugged, smile turning into a grin. “Never. I got the line from MST3K.”

Castiel laughed and squeezed the hand on his leg. “And you call Sam a nerd.”

“Hey, I'm cool, which means the things I like are cool. I like MST, so, ipso facto, MST is cool, not nerdy. QED.”

Castiel gave him a dubious squint as he got out of the car. “Your reasoning does not bear close examination, Dean,” he said. He tipped his head to one side. “Though I have to admit that I am surprised and impressed at your proper use of both ipso facto and QED.”

Dean came around the hood of the Impala and grabbed Castiel's hand. “Ouch. You're a hard, unforgiving woman, Cas,” he complained.

“Sorry, neither.”

Dean raised his eyebrows. “Uhura?” he guessed.

Castiel kissed him, feeling better now than he had all day. This was love: a shared life and all the memories and in-jokes and experiences that went with it. Everything else was extra. “You are a nerd, Dean. Time to put on your big-boy panties and deal with it.”

Dean laughed, slipping his hand out of Castiel's to wrap it around his waist and steering him towards the restaurant's entrance. “Okay, okay. I give. You win. Truce?”

Castiel lifted his chin haughtily while trying not to grin like an idiot. “Truce.”

“Sammy! Happy birthday, nerd-boy!”

“Thanks, Dean. I think.” Sam rolled his eyes.

Dean nudged his brother's shoulder. “Ah, you know you love it, Sasquatch.” Dean turned to his sister-in-law. “Hey, Amelia. You still hanging out with this loser?”

Amelia rolled her eyes. That happened a lot around Dean. Castiel suppressed a smile. “I think he’s
stuck with me. Hi, Castielle,” she said, turning and giving Castiel a sisterly hug.

“Hello, Amelia,” Castiel said. He held out the gift bag. “For you, Sam. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks, Cas,” Sam said, a tiny note of hesitation in his voice.

Castiel inclined his head. “Don't worry – I didn't let Dean pick out the gift this year.”

“Spoilsport,” Dean said with an exaggerated pout.

“Thank God,” Sam laughed. “I'm still not sure what to do with all that itching powder.”

It was Dean's turn to roll his eyes. “No imagination, I swear. What about that judge on the garbage incinerator case? He sure could'a used an attitude adjustment . . .”

“Shall we sit?” Amelia interrupted pointedly. She grabbed Castiel's arm. “Come sit by me, Castielle,” she murmured. “You know how the boys can get.”

Castiel smiled, a little ruefully. “Oh, yes. I know.”

It was a good night. Bobby and Ellen arrived shortly after the group was settled, swelling the party's ranks. Castiel loved his brother- and sister-in-law, as well as the grumpy Bobby and unsinkable Ellen, and it always made his heart warm to see Dean and Sam interact when they were both in good moods. There was excellent food, a lot of laughter, and even some intelligent conversation. Dean didn't drink too much and Castiel did, a little bit, but it didn't matter because he was feeling good. Surrounded by the people he loved, he felt expansive and relaxed, overcoming his usual shyness to partake in all the jokes and witticisms, at ease enough that he didn't even feel embarrassed when Sam and Dean's more esoteric pop-culture references sailed right over his head. He glowed at the look of pleased surprise on Sam's face when he opened the gift bag and took out the complete set of Firefly DVDs (Serenity included). Dean leaned against him and kissed his cheek and called him the biggest nerd of all, and everyone laughed, and Castiel felt loved, and he forgot, for an evening, that everyone thought he was a girl.

“You're sure in a good mood tonight, Cas,” Dean said as they were driving home again. “It's nice.”

Castiel, who had been smiling absently out the window, started, feeling a little twinge of unease in his stomach. “Have I been in a bad mood lately?” he asked, trying to sound merely curious rather than anxious.

Dean glanced at him sideways. “No, no. Not in a bad mood,” he said quickly. “It's more that you're in an extra good mood tonight. And I know how you can sometimes get . . . tired when there's too much noise and too many people around. I'm just, y'know, happy you're happy, that's all.”

“Mmm,” Castiel agreed, though he felt a little sad that Dean had been worried about him, sad that he always had to look out for him. He reached out and ran a hand lightly over Dean's leg. “I felt fine, love,” he said. “The crowd didn't bother me at all, and you know I always love seeing Sam and Amelia and Bobby and Ellen. I had a good time.”

Dean broke into one of his incandescent smiles, the kind that made Castiel want to laugh and cry at the same time. “That's awesome, babe. I'm glad.”
Castiel scooted over and laid his head on Dean's warm shoulder. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

So, okay . . . this is pretty autobiographical. Most of Cas' concerns and fears are ones I have hashed out in my own mind at one time or another, though they've been expanded here for Drama and Conflict. The story of how Cas came to his realization is almost exactly the same as mine, and some of Cas and Charlie's conversation is lifted almost verbatim from conversations I have had with friends, family, and/or my therapist.

I've tried to keep people in character as much a possible, and I hope I've done a decent job. Cas has had to change the most, so his story would make sense, but I still think he's not too far off, considering he's in a real-world AU and he's ftm. :-)

Please leave (constructive) comments -- I long for them!
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tonight? The same tired track that had been on endless replay for the last month and more: the Situation. This bizarre, impossible, cosmically hilarious Situation, a divine joke at Castiel's expense, or perhaps a punishment for the sins of another life – who knew? It made no sense, but there it was: after nearly forty-two years of life on earth, and despite all appearances, biology, and socialization to the contrary, Castiel had discovered that he was not a woman but a man.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They stayed up a little longer once they got home, watching an episode of “Dr. Sexy, MD” from the DVR and cuddling on the couch. Castiel drank water while they watched to offset the wine from dinner and by bedtime was only slightly muzzy.

He got ready for bed slowly – changing into his sleep shirt and sweat pants with his back to Dean so he didn't have to be seen with naked breasts – and replayed the enjoyable parts of the evening in his head: the jokes he got, the jokes he didn't get but no one seemed to mind, the food and wine, Dean's little smiles and touches, Sam's enthusiasm, Ellen's earthy humor. He smiled as he remembered Sam laughing at one of Dean's cornier jokes, Dean's eyes lighting up at the sound. Amelia had looked across at Castiel and smiled, and Castiel had smiled back, the unspoken “boys” hanging in the air between them. Castiel was so lucky to have this family, he knew; it was a family almost entirely of choice, not blood and, he thought, all the stronger because of it.

Unfortunately, thinking about his adopted family caused memories of his blood family to rise up, unbidden and unwanted, demanding comparison. Castiel frowned and tried to shake the thoughts out of his head, but they were old familiar enemies, and he found he was too tired to resist them. Bobby's curmudgeonly soft-heartedness was crushed by Castiel's father's cold, precise authoritarianism, Sam's bright friendliness overshadowed by Lucien's gleeful malice and Michael's harsh disapproval. By the time he'd climbed into bed, Castiel's good mood had slipped, dimming into something sad and wistful.

“G'night, babe,” Dean said as he curled up to Castiel in under the blankets, kissing him gently.

Castiel shut his eyes against the darkness and returned the kiss briefly, dryly. “Good night, love,” he whispered. “Sleep well.” They lay quietly for a short while, face to face, Dean's hand on Castiel's hip, Castiel's on Dean's arm, until Dean yawned and rolled onto his back, and Castiel rolled onto his other side and it was time to sleep.

Not that Castiel slept.

It seemed like he never slept any more, though of course he did. It was just that it took so long to get to sleep nowadays, so much happening in his head before he could drop off, that he sometimes felt that he had been up all night even when he'd managed five or six hours.
Tonight? The same tired track that had been on endless replay for the last month and more: the Situation. This bizarre, impossible, cosmically hilarious Situation, a divine joke at Castiel's expense, or perhaps a punishment for the sins of another life – who knew? It made no sense, but there it was: after nearly forty-two years of life on earth, and despite all appearances, biology, and socialization to the contrary, Castiel had discovered that he was not a woman but a man.

Castiel scowled and turned over again, bunching the covers up around his ears and wriggling his feet out into the cool night air. He'd run this through his head a hundred times at least, but he was no closer to an answer to his central question than he was when it all began: what the hell? Seriously, how did this happen?

He'd known about transgender people, of course. He didn't know any personally, other than that friend of Charlie's, whom he'd only met once, but he'd always been interested in gender politics and identity, so he was better informed than many Americans on the subject. He just didn't think it had anything to do with him. True, he'd never been stereotypically feminine and went through “butch” phases, as Dean teasingly called them, when he cut his hair shorter and wore androgynous clothing, but it didn't mean anything. And yes, as a child he'd envied the freedom boys had that he didn't, especially in the context of his repressively religious upbringing, but he didn't want to be one. He was fine with being a girl, really. Men were kind of loud and clueless and wouldn't ask for directions, and as a group they'd kind of run the world into the ground (#notallmen notwithstanding). Why the hell would he want to join those ranks?

The answer to that, at least, was that his brain (or body or hormones or whatever the hell ran this particular show) didn't give a rat's ass what he wanted. He was apparently a man, dammit, and if it took over forty years for said man to realize it? Well, too fucking bad.

Castiel gritted his teeth and tried to still his mind, forcibly turning his thoughts from his internal spirals to listen to Dean's even breathing beside him. Dean was not snoring, just making tiny noises as he breathed in and out, the same noises he made most nights for all the thirteen years of their marriage. Focusing on those noises mercifully distracted Castiel from the Situation, and he smiled reflexively, his thoughts turning to all the reasons he loved the man sleeping beside him – his humor, his loyalty, his sense of justice, his gentleness – and as Castiel listened and thought, something in him began to uncoil, his body and mind relaxing together, and before long he found himself burrowing deeper into the bedclothes, feeling sleepy at last, feeling warm and cherished and . . .

Dean.

Goddammit to hell. How was he going to tell Dean?

And all at once he was awake again, a blade of anxiety cutting a bloody swathe through his lazy thoughts. God. Dean. Dean, who thought he married a woman, who was so straight it was sometimes painful . . . how could Castiel tell him his wife was really his – what? – his husband? How did that even work? And what would Dean do with the information? Turn gay? Write a book? Join PFLAG? Go into therapy to learn how to deal with it?

What if Dean couldn't deal with it?

What if Dean left him?

Now this, this was a loop that Castiel rarely played. Whenever he ran through the consequences of coming out to Dean, his mind shied away from the thought of rejection with all the urgency and violence of a horse shying from the scent of blood. He refused to entertain the idea, essentially, though he never imagined how it would not come to pass, either. He never saw, in his mind's eye,
exactly how Dean would come to accept Castiel's revelation or what their marriage would look like afterwards. It was if his brain just skipped everything in between: Castiel would tell Dean, Dean would ask some confused questions, then blink! Everything would be normal again, except Castiel would have a beard and no breasts and would never have to wear stupid women's clothing ever again.

He tried to look away now, tried to tell himself that Dean loved him and would never leave him and that they would work it out even if he had no idea how, but for some reason he couldn't make denial work for him this time. He tried to imagine Dean telling him everything was all right, but all he could see was Dean's expression transforming from surprise to disgust to repudiation. He saw Dean turn from him, saw Dean leave the house, saw himself leave, then nothing. No matter how many times he replayed the scene, all he saw was leaving: hard or soft, cruel or regretful. All there was was loss.

Loss turned into grief and grief turned into a fear that rose up as a physical pain in his chest. He hunched over himself in the bed, unconsciously moving away from Dean as if he were already alone. He felt his body heave with strangled sobs. He tried to fight them back, pressing his fists against his mouth, terrified of waking Dean, but he wasn't strong enough.

“Cas?” came a rough, sleepy voice. “Cassie?” Clearer, worried.

Sleep-warm hands reached for him, and Castiel shuddered, wanting the touch so badly he felt like wailing aloud, but also wanting to run and hide, so Dean would not see him crying, not see him so weak, not ask him why.

“Cassie, love,” Dean coaxed, rubbing Castiel's shoulders, pressing his lips to the back of Castiel's neck. “Wake up, babe. Why are you crying? Did you have a bad dream?”

Castiel nodded, not knowing what else to do; pretending to have a nightmare was easier than the truth. The fear and grief boiled up inside him, and he let words tumble from him, barely knowing what he said. “I, I dreamt . . . I dreamt you left me,” he gasped between the harsh, ugly sobs. “You left me, and I lost you forever, and I was alone. I was all alone!”

Dean embraced him tightly, lips in Castiel's hair. “It was just a nightmare, babe,” he murmured. “I'm never gonna leave you, okay? You know that. I'm never gonna leave you, 'cause I love you more than anything.”

“I know, I know,” Castiel hiccuped, feeling useless and helpless and raw. “I love you, too, Dean, so much. I just . . . I know it was just a dream, but it felt so real. I'm sorry. I'm sorry . . .”


Castiel felt his body relax, almost against his will, melting into Dean's warmth like a kitten against its mother's belly. “Don't go, Dean,” he whispered. “Don't leave me.”

“Not goin' anywhere, Cas. I'm stayin' right here with you.”

Chapter End Notes
So yeah, Cas is a late bloomer, but to be fair, I was even later. ^_^;

Insomnia's a bitch -- even when I wasn't specifically worrying, I couldn't turn my fucking brain off. I guess that's what happens when your world turns inside out.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

God, something had to break.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dean was careful and solicitous in the morning, touching Castiel constantly (though never in one of the forbidden places), talking gently, asking if he was okay, and Castiel was torn between wrapping himself in Dean's love and care and flogging himself for being a burden. He opted for responding to Dean as if he was doing the former while sinking into the guilt of the latter.

Dean stopped him at the door, his green eyes full of concern. “You sure you're okay, Cas?”

“It was just a dream, Dean,” Castiel said with a fair approximation of easy composure, though he couldn't quite meet those eyes. “I know I overreacted, but that was last night. I'm fine.”

Dean's brow creased. “Well, you just seemed a little off this morning, too . . .” he began.

Castiel waved Dean's worries away with a hand and a smile he didn't feel. “I'm fine, truly. It's just that my sleep was a little broken. If I don't have too much work, I'll take a nap, all right?”


“I will.”

God, something had to break.

“Charlie? It's Castiel.”

“Castielle! What's up, girlfriend?”

Cas smiled; it was hard not to smile when he talked to Charlie. “Do you have any plans for Saturday?” he asked, trying to sound casual rather than half out of his mind with nerves.

There was a brief silence as Charlie apparently went through her mental planner. “Gee, um, I have a Skype date Saturday morning – a friend in England. In the afternoon I was thinking of dropping by Uni to look for a new router, though they probably don't have anything powerful enough, you know, they never do; I'll probably have to order something online. Oh, and there's an Arkham Horror tournament over at Rolling Gnome, but I'd only go for a drop-in game, I'm not signed up or anything.” She paused, breathless. “Why? D'you have a better idea?”

“I'm not sure it's a better idea, exactly,” Castiel confessed, “but I'd like to see you, maybe have lunch? Or coffee?”
“Yeah! Oh! Oh! We could have a total girls' day!” Charlie said enthusiastically. “We could have lunch at Ladybird or Fuzzy's, maybe get pedicures, and then, I don't know – there's still Arkham Horror or Uni, if you don't mind tagging along . . .”

Castiel winced a little at “girls' day,” but he knew that if there was anyone in his small group of friends that could deal with the Situation without any awkwardness or disgust, it was Charlie, and, God, he needed to talk to someone. “Lunch would be wonderful, Charlie,” he said, cutting off his friend's excited babbling before it got out of control. Again. “Maybe we could play the rest of the afternoon by ear?”

Charlie barely seemed to notice the interruption. “No prob, Cas,” she said, and Castiel could almost see Charlie's sunny grin. “Where d'ya want to meet and when?”

The prospect of being able to talk to Charlie on the weekend shifted a bit of the weight off Castiel's mind, and the memory of his breakdown the night before softened, becoming less painful and humiliating and more quietly sad, and as he went about his day, even the sadness faded, leaving him feeling merely wistful and a little guilty about worrying Dean.

The lighter feeling stayed with him for about a day, but it wasn't long before he began to worry that he had made a mistake. Yes, Charlie would likely be accepting, maybe even understanding, but was he sure he wanted to tell her, to tell anyone? What if it was too soon? What if it was just a phase? What if he . . . turned back? It would make things easier, god knew, but was it possible? He'd tried to think his way back to womanhood, early on, and it hadn't worked. Did that mean this was all permanent or not? Should he try again?

Did he want to?

And yes, that was definitely a question he'd like an answer to. As complicating as the Situation was, as much as it made him want to scream and protest and, sometimes, cry, it also felt, when he let himself admit it, right. Right in a way he was beginning to realize he'd never felt in all his life, at least not since early childhood. Yes, it would be “easier” to go back to being a woman – and it would be nice not to feel as if his body were some kind of grotesque mistake – but part of him insisted that he had, in fact, discovered a truth that there was no turning back from, even if it were possible.

Castiel went around and around in his head like this for the rest of the week. He had some work, so that at least was distraction for a while, but it wasn't enough to fill every minute of every day. In his free time he tried to keep himself from brooding by cleaning the house or weeding the garden or watching TV, but the anxiety still snuck up on him sometimes, sending a jolt of nausea through him as he was scrubbing the toilet or rooting out bindweed.

He was unspeakably grateful that Dean didn't seem to notice any change in him. Of course, Castiel had always had his “moods,” and Dean was as familiar with them as he was with the inside of Baby's engine, but apparently he wasn't presenting any unusual symptoms, for Dean was the same Dean as always: kind, supportive, goofy, and perfect.

By the time Saturday came around at last, Castiel was a jittery mix of hot and cold; he'd finally decided, somewhere Friday afternoon, that he really did need to tell someone and that he wanted that someone to be Charlie. Sometimes he even looked forward to telling her, as if saying everything aloud would make everything more real, make him more real. Then he'd panic, and all the objections that had tormented him through the week would rear up and start gibbering at him.
again. He banged and clattered around the house in his nervousness, dropping things and forgetting things and laughing at himself, sometimes just to laugh and sometimes to keep from screaming.

Dean had teased him until Castiel started throwing cat toys at him, at which point Dean laughed and threw up his hands and left, saying he was going to go hang out with Benny, and God have mercy on Charlie's soul. Castiel threw him a parting raspberry, then collapsed on a dining room chair and tried to get his breathing under control.

Castiel was fifteen minutes early. He rarely drank at lunch, but today he ordered a beer and took a table near the back, fingers tapping on the wooden tabletop. He'd finished half his drink before he heard Charlie's cheerful “Hola, girlfriend!” drifting across the lunch-crowded room.

He looked up and couldn't help smiling with relief at the sight of his friend, though his stomach was still infested with an entire kaleidoscope of butterflies. “Hello, Charlie,” he said warmly.

Charlie huffed dramatically to a stop in front of Castiel's table. “Damn!” she said as she dropped her messenger bag onto one of the chairs in front of her. “The traffic was stupid bad on the way over. On a Saturday? In Lawrence? Double-you Tee Ef?”

“There are at least five buses that pass within two blocks of this restaurant,” Castiel said helpfully. “That's how I got here.”

Charlie made a face. “Yeah, but you're good, Castielle,” she said. “You actually care about carbon emissions and climate change and downtown parking and all that stuff.”

Castiel cocked his head to one side. “You do, too, Charlie,” he chided. “Remember when you hacked into Arch Coal and 'donated' ten thousand dollars of their money to the Nature Conservancy?”

Charlie looked wistful. “Yeah, that was a good one, wasn't it?” She shook her head and waved a dismissive hand. “Okay, okay, I care, but I'm lazy, Cas. Besides, on the bus I'm always getting hit on by scruffy nerd boys with neck beards and dog-eared copies of Atlas Shrugged clutched in their sweaty little hands.” She shuddered.

Castiel laughed, the knot in his chest easing and a few of the butterflies migrating off to wherever stomach butterflies went when they weren't tormenting poor idiots like himself. He stood, skirted the table between them, and caught Charlie up in a tight hug. “I'm so glad to see you, Charlie,” he said into her hair.

“Oof!” she squeaked, taken off guard. “Um, you, too, Cas.” Suddenly embarrassed, Castiel let go, his face hot.

Charlie shook herself. “Damn, you're strong,” she muttered. “You should totally be one of my Handmaidens next time there's a gathering.”

Castiel winced on “handmaiden,” though he knew Dean had played that role in the past, sat down hurriedly, and handed Charlie a menu to hide his discomfort. “Lunch or brunch?” he asked.

The next little while was taken up by menu-perusing, small talk, and ordering lunch. Once the
waiter had walked away, Charlie laced her fingers under her chin, leaned forward on her elbows, and fixed Castiel with a serious look and a raised eyebrow. “Okay, girl, spill,” she commanded. “What's wrong?”

Castiel opened his mouth, closed it. He felt his face heat up again and cursed his pale complexion. “Wh-what do you mean?” he asked, trying for, and utterly failing at, nonchalance.

Charlie gave him a look that was half exasperation, half pity. “C'mon, Cas!” she said. “You're practically vibrating over there, and those baby blues are big as cartwheels. I mean, seriously, you look terrified.” She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “Now, you called Aunt Charlie here for a reason, and I'm guessing it has something to do with that deer-in-the-headlights look, right? So tell me already!”

Castiel sighed and buried his face in his hands. This was not going as planned. He had wanted to be brave and forthright and calm. In control. Instead, he was practically semaphoring his nervousness to the entire room. Damn, if he couldn't even tell Charlie without breaking down . . .

He felt a warm hand on his shoulder. “Castielle,” Charlie said, her voice softer now, “it's okay. You can tell me. It can't be that bad, can it?”

Castiel sucked in a breath and chuckled humorlessly. “Yes and no.”

“Well, that clears that up,” Charlie said. She took her hand off Castiel's shoulder, sat back in her seat, and clasped her hands in front of her. “Care to be more, I don't know, specific?”

Castiel scrubbed his face with both hands. “Yes, in that my news can be that bad depending on how some people take it,” he clarified. “No, in that it's not intrinsically bad. In fact, in a way, it's good.”

“Oookay,” Charlie said encouragingly, making little do go on motions with her hands.

Castiel rubbed his face again. Man up, he thought hysterically. He sucked in a deep breath and looked straight into his friend's questioning eyes. “Charlie,” he said, and every muscle in his body seemed clenched. “I – I'm not a girl.”

Castiel bit his lip. “Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply, I mean . . .” he babbled
Charlie took pity on him and smiled kindly. “Oh, no – it's okay. This is huge, probably even more so than coming out as gay, at least nowadays, and you're nervous, I get that. I'm not offended.” She squeezed his hands, looking a little sad. “Oh, Castielle, were you afraid of me?”

Castiel looked down at the table. “No,” he said. “I mean, not you, specifically, just . . . you're the first person I've told, and it is a big deal, and I guess I just got myself all worked up about it.”

Her eyes went wide, her lips parting. “I'm the first? Oh wow, Cas . . . I – I'm honored.”

Honored. What had happened? Had Castiel slipped into a different dimension? One where transgender people were not reviled or seen as bizarre or unnatural? Where they were actually welcomed and valued? He felt a lump forming in his throat, and his vision was getting a little watery. “Charlie, I don't know what to say . . .” he began, his heart full.

They were interrupted by the waiter with their meals. Charlie withdrew her hands and put them primly in her lap as the dishes were set down. Castiel, his head swimming, ordered another beer. Charlie laughed and ordered one, too.

“You don't have to say anything,” Charlie said once the waiter had slipped away again, “not if you don't want. But if you do want, you can tell me anything.” She suddenly sat up straight, her eyebrows shooting into her hairline. “Oh! Oh! Will you be changing your name? Have you got one picked out?”

Despite himself, Castiel laughed, at her enthusiasm, at her acceptance, at her kindness. Dean had once referred to Charlie as “the little sister I never wanted.” He was joking about the “never wanted” part, of course – he loved Charlie as much as much as he loved any of his strange little family-by-choice – but Castiel sometimes wished she really had been his own sister. It would have made his childhood so much easier, god knew. “Actually, I'll be keeping my current name, just spelling it differently,” he said with shy a little smile. “Did you know it's actually a masculine name, the name of an angel? My parents had decided on it before I was born, and when they saw I was –” He hesitated. He found he couldn't say “a girl.” “When they saw I was female, they decided to add -le to the end to make it look like a girl's name. So I'll just be plain C-A-S-T-I-E-L now, not C-A-S-T-I-E-L-L-E.”

Charlie drew her hand across her brow melodramatically. “Whew! Thank Hera! I'm too old to learn new names and new pronouns.”

Castiel laughed again, and Charlie laughed with him, and Castiel suddenly thought that maybe – maybe – everything would be all right after all.

Castiel swirled a french fry absentmindedly around in a pool of malt vinegar. “I don't know exactly how it happened,” he said, his mind searching back. Only a month and change, and yet sometimes it seemed like he'd always been this way. “I think I'd been kind of, I don't know, anxious for months, but the first thing I really remember is looking in my closet and all my clothes looking like . . . drag.” Charlie smothered a giggle in her beer. “I mean, I'd never been a fluffy, pink lace kind of girl anyway,” he continued with a little quirk of a smile himself, “but even a tailored shirt with a shaped waist and bust darts seemed too girly, somehow. I started wearing only my most androgynous clothes – unshaped button-ups, unisex t-shirts, and the like. I wore whatever of Dean's wasn't too huge, got myself some Doc Marten's. And then, one day or another, I was looking at myself in the mirror, and I realized that it wasn't so much that I felt non-girly as it was that I felt anti-girly.”
“Anti-girly,” Charlie echoed around a bite of sandwich, her expression unreadable.

Castiel shook his head. “Not anti-girl, just anti-girly. For me.” He frowned. “I'm not anti-girl. I'm still a feminist and everything. Men can be feminists, too, you know,” he said a little defensively.


Castiel lips twitched. “Well, I'm a gay man, so I guess it's okay then.”

There was a beat, then, “Omigod!” Charlie said as if the idea both surprised and delighted her, because of course it did. “Oh, you are! We're siblings in queerness now! Or maybe cousins – 'cousins in queerness' sounds better doesn't it? I mean it alliterates. Alliteration is good. Oh! Holy crap, dude, I've got to take you out to the best clubs!”

“Wait! I'm still married, you know!” Castiel protested, laughing.

Charlie's expression froze, then slowly sobered. “Oh, right. Um, if I'm the first person you've told, then . . . what about Dean?”

*Shit.*

The guilt and anxiety that Charlie's effervescent presence had held at bay rushed through him again like a high-speed train, plowing through his happiness and leaving behind a cold, leaden feeling in his stomach. His shoulders slumped as he stared down at his half-finished lunch. “I haven't told him, Charlie,” he said slowly. “I don't know how.”

Charlie propped her chin on her hand and regarded Castiel gravely. “C'mon, Cas – he loves you. I mean he's, like, crazy in love with you. You know that.”

Castiel groaned. “I know. That only makes it harder. He loves me so much, and then I do this to him!”

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Charlie huffed, “you're not doing anything. You're just you, and yeah, it sucks that it took so long to figure out, but it's not like you can change that now. *Dean loves you.* And he'll love you whether you identify as male, female, neutrois, Wookie, or whatever.”

“Ngggh . . .”

“What, then? *What*?”

“But Dean's so – so straight,” Castiel all but wailed.

“Oh.” Charlie cleared her throat. “Oh, well, yeah, that might be a little hitch.” She fell silent, frowning in concentration, then her expression cleared. “But even that's not necessarily a deal-breaker. I mean, even if you do the Full Monty, you know, all the surgery and all the hormones, it won't change, y'know, all of you. If you do hormones, you'll look male, eventually, but you'll still look like you, just a guy-you. And even if you decided to, I dunno, sew your pussy shut –”

“Charlie!” Castiel hissed, scandalized.

Charlie continued as if she hadn't said the word “pussy” in a crowded cafe. In *Kansas.* “There are other orifices, you know. And toys. Toys are always good.”

Castiel covered his face with his hands. “Charlie, *please,*” he pleaded.
Charlie leaned across the table and patted Castiel's arm sympathetically. “My point is, sweetie, that Dean loves you, and you love Dean, and sex is only one part of that. And hey, even if sex was the only thing Dean cared about — and you know it isn't — there are plenty of ways you two could play that shouldn't upset his fragile manhood.” Castiel peeped between his fingers to see Charlie's encouraging smile turn sly. “Besides, I don't think Dean is as, um, rigid as you think he is. Have you seen that man watch 'Dr. Sexy'?”

Castiel rolled his eyes. “I've been married to 'that man' for thirteen years,” he said flatly. “I think I might have noticed if he had any . . . bisexual tendencies.”

Charlie shrugged and pursed her lips. “I dunno, Cas. Maybe you only saw what you thought you should see. Or what Dean thought you should see.”

Castiel wasn't convinced, but he didn't feel like arguing about it, so he just shrugged and said something non-committal and returned to his lunch.

They ate in silence for a little while, Castiel hunched forward a little, completely absorbed in his plate. After a bit, however, he began to get twitchy, and, looking up under his lashes, he saw that Charlie was regarding him with a calculating look, head tipped a little to one side.

“What?” he demanded.

“You know what you need?” Charlie said cheerfully, as if everything were normal and Castiel hadn't just told her he was trans and she hadn't just been talking about sex toys and “other orifices.”

“Enlighten me,” Castiel said dryly.

“A makeover!”

“Charlie!”

“God, no, not a girl makeover, a guy makeover. C'mon, you said that all your clothes looked like drag now, right?”

Castiel blinked. Yes. Yes, he had said that. “Uh . . .”

“So why don't we go shopping for some real clothes for you? Stuff that makes you feel all manly and shit, you know?”

Castiel pressed his lips together, trying to fight down the manic laughter that was trying to push its way past his teeth. “Manly,” he said, trying the word out. He wasn't sure how that felt. Good? Weird? Cliché?

“Yeah! My friend Josh said that it helped a LOT to finally get into gender-appropriate clothes. Ones that fit and he liked and everything, not just something to cover up his body.” Charlie drank down the last of her beer, looking thoughtful. “I wonder if we can find a binder in this town or if you'll have to go online.”

“A what?”

Charlie waved a nonchalant hand in the air. “A binder. You know, to squash your boobs down,” she said as if she were talking about wearing a hat on a rainy day. “You're lucky, you know, not being too big, um, up there.” She gestured with her hands. “Won't be as uncomfortable.”

Castiel's head felt like someone had tossed it in the washer and pressed “extra spin.” “Charlie, I
can't go around with – with squashed boobs,” he said, lowering his voice to a whisper on the last two words.


*Physical transitioning.* The term stopped Castiel cold, as if he had been hit with high-voltage current. *Physical* transitioning. Changes to bodies. Did Charlie mean surgery? Oh god . .

“Cas? Castiel?” Charlie asked, waving a hand in front of his face. “You okay? You're not going into a fugue or something, are you? Do I need to call 911?”

Castiel blinked once, slowly. “No,” he said. “No, of course not. Don't be silly. I was just . . . thinking.”

Charlie grinned and bounced in her chair. “Clothes? You wanna go? It'd be more fun than Uni. Maybe even more fun than Arkham Horror.”

A broad smile spread slowly over Castiel's face. “Yes. All right. Clothes.”

Chapter End Notes

I have never been to Kansas, though my mother's family is from there originally, but I do have Google as my slave, so as of publishing, these businesses and bus routes are accurate for Lawrence, KS. I don't know if Rolling Gnome hosts Arkham Horror tournaments, but if it doesn't, it should.

Charlie is Charlie, of course, but her reactions here are an amalgam of the reactions of many of my friends and acquaintances, as well as that of my totally awesome little brother. My realization that I was not a girl began pretty much exactly as I've written for Cas -- one day I just noticed all my clothes looked like *drag*. It was weird.

BTW, the correct collective noun for butterflies, is, in fact, "kaleidoscope." Isn't that awesome?
“Okay!” Charlie said as she dragged Castiel into a large local department store. “This is the best place to start – they have lots of stuff and it's pretty nice but not too expensive.” She turned and faced Castiel, hands on her hips. “So, the first thing you have to figure out is – what's your look?”

“My look?” Castiel asked with a confused tilt of his head. “Um, I want to look . . . male?”


Castiel laughed, if a little uncertainly. “Well, I think we can rule out 'jock' and 'redneck' right off the bat,” he said. “Probably soccer-dad, and – what was it? – 'studly stud,' too.”

“Just as well,” Charlie said with a careless wave of her hand. “Dean's got redneck and stud down already, and you don't want to compete.”

“Dean is not a redneck!” Castiel protested, laughing.

“Yeah, but he dresses like one,” Charlie insisted. “Still . . . “ She put her finger on her chin and regarded Castiel as if he were a particularly interesting species of insect. “So that leaves us with what? Nerd, smart, hip, and edgy. You could also add 'fashion wank' and 'college professor,' the last one in either 'absent-minded' or 'hide your daughters' flavor.”

Castiel shook his head. “You're awful.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I think I gravitate towards kind of an understated style. Tidy, you know, but not flashy. But not old or frumpy, either.”

“That's nice and vague,” Charlie pouted, “but I guess it'll do for a start. Now, the easy stuff will be shirts and accessories, so maybe we ought to stick to that for now.”

“No pants?”

“Well, that depends on what you want to do,” Charlie said matter-of-factly. “I mean, if you aren't planning on doing any physical stuff to transition, then we'll stick to women's pants 'cause they'll fit your hips and butt, and you can get nice stuff that will last a long time. If you do think you want to do hormones, on the other hand, you might want to just get some jeans or, I dunno, chinos to tide you over until your shape changes.”
“Hormones would change my shape?” Castiel asked, surprised. “I thought testosterone would just, I don't know, lower my voice and give me facial hair and a bad temper.”

“Way more than that, dude,” Charlie replied with a “don't you even know how to Google?” look on her face. “The testosterone makes your body fat – not that you have too much, for a girl, anyway, I mean, you always look great, oh God, now I'm babbling –” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Anyway, it makes your body fat sort of rearrange itself. You know, it comes off your hips and ass and moves to your waist, mostly. Your face will change, too. So, anyway, if you do think you might do hormones, you might not want to spend too much on pants now, 'cause you'll just have to buy more a year or so after you start.”

“I – I . . .” God, he could change his shape. Without surgery. What would it be like to not hate looking in the mirror? “Let's buy a pair of jeans. You know, for now. Keep my options open.”


They left the store two hours later, having spent, much to Castiel's alarm, at least half his little nest egg (the one he'd been saving for a new computer): not one, but two pairs of “modern cut” men's jeans and a belt to keep them from gapping at the waist, four casual short-sleeved men's shirts, one more formal long-sleeve, an Iron Man t-shirt (“Face it, Cas – you are a nerd.” “I think Robert Downey, Jr. is a very good actor.” “Keep telling yourself that.” “Besides, he is, I think the term is, 'smoking hot.’” “Castiel!”), some Chuck Taylors, and a couple of hoodies. He balked at men's underwear, though he was really, really tempted – that was something he absolutely didn't know how he would explain to Dean.

“How're you doing, Cas?” Charlie asked as they exited the store, Castiel battling a serious case of buyer's remorse mingled with mild gender-identity panic.

He swallowed. “I've never spent this much money on clothes at one time,” he said. “Ever.”

Charlie shrugged. “Well hey, you are starting from scratch, dude,” she said reasonably. “And some of it was on sale. All in all, I think you got a really good deal considering how much stuff you got.”

He looked down at the shopping bag in his right hand as if he might find a poisonous snake in it. “Yes, I suppose so,” he said slowly. “It's just . . .” He stopped himself. No. Enough of that – he was not going to feel guilty about buying gender-appropriate clothing, for god's sake. “No, you're right. It was all very reasonable, and I think – I think I needed it.” He peered into the bag. “It's just something of a shock. I suppose I really haven't thought of some of the more material consequences of this whole . . . thing.”

“Well, I have one more, um, material consequence for you before you go home,” Charlie said with a frankly alarming twinkle in her eye. “And it's on me, so you can't squirm out of it.”

Castiel shook his head. “Oh, no, Charlie. I couldn't allow that. Besides, I don't think I need anything else right now – this ought to be a good enough start.”

Charlie put her hands flat against his shoulder blades and pushed him towards her car. “Dude. You so need this last consequence. Now just trust Aunt Charlie, and everything will be all right, okay?”

“Oookay,” he said warily. “And just what might this consequence be?”
Hair.

Castiel had worn his hair long most of his life. As a child, youngest in a strictly religious household, the question of long vs. short hair hadn't been a question. “A woman's hair is her glory,” was quoted at him often enough that it had ceased to have any meaning outside of “no, you can't get a new hairstyle – just get the ends trimmed.” When he went to college he'd rebelled a tiny bit and got a layered cut that ended at his shoulder-blades, the shortest it had been since he was a toddler. Even when Castiel had gone through his “butch” phases he'd never dared to go too short, and his current bob – hitting just at the nape of his neck – was as short as he'd ever managed to cut it. Until today.

He walked out of the barbershop with a man's cut, by god. Nothing too scary, just a normal, side-part thing that was a bit longer on the top than the sides, artfully disheveled with a little styling mousse, but as he walked along the street and the afternoon breeze hit his neck, he felt practically naked. He kept running his hand nervously through it, and it felt so weird when he ran out of hair so quickly.

“I don't know, Charlie,” he said anxiously as they got back into her car. “It's so short! What's Dean going to think?”

“He's going to think you look awesome, as usual,” she returned airily. “This style is great for you – it really goes with the shape of your face.”

Castiel pulled down the passenger-side sun visor and frowned at himself in the makeup mirror. When he'd seen the style taking shape in the barbershop mirror, he'd been excited; he thought he'd actually seen his true self beginning to peek through the hated layers of femininity, but now all he could think about was how he couldn't undo it and how Dean might freak out or hate it or think he looked stupid or ugly. “Still –” he began.

Charlie gave him a sideways stink-eye. “‘Still,’ nothing,” she scoffed. “It's your hair, and it looks good on you, and Dean is going to love it.” She leaned over and patted his knee. “You'll see. It's going to be fine.”

Castiel gritted his teeth. “All right.”

Castiel got home in the late afternoon, chauffeured by Charlie, who absolutely refused to let him haul all his purchases around by bus, though Castiel suspected she just wanted to be there to see how Dean took the haircut. Dean, unfortunately – or fortunately, depending – was still out, so Charlie left Castiel alone after many reassurances of support and congratulations, which Castiel found heartwarming, welcome, and, ultimately, exhausting. It took fifteen minutes to say goodbye, by which time all he wanted to do was collapse, numb his brain with sudoku, and try not to think about the cold spot on the back of his neck where his hair used to be.

First, however, he ran upstairs, dumped his purchases on the bed, and stood staring at the colorful pile for a long, long time. Men's clothes. The shoes and hoodies and t-shirt were relatively innocuous; the hoodies were maybe a little long, but nothing about these items necessarily screamed “male-only.” The shirts, on the other hand, were boxy and buttoned up on the wrong side, and the jeans fit his hips and thighs but were so wide in the waist he needed a belt to keep
them from showing a spectacular plumber's crack when he bent over. He bit his lip. He had been so excited when they were shopping, but now that he had the clothes home, he wasn't sure what to do with them. Could he wear them in front of Dean? Would Dean wonder what was going on? Would he ask questions Castiel wasn't ready to answer yet? Dammit, what had he been thinking?

In a fit of paranoia, Castiel shoved the button-ups and jeans back in a bag and buried them in the closet, under a pile of bedding they only used in colder weather. The hoodies and sneakers he put away properly. He hesitated over the t-shirt for a moment, then pulled off the shirt he'd worn out and slipped out of his bra. Ducking back in the closet, he grabbed a fairly tight sports bra and put the t-shirt on over it. He blinked at himself in the mirror: the shirt was a bit large, and its size plus the sports bra minimized his not-overly-large breasts pretty well. He smoothed down his ruffled hair (*God, it was short!*) and essayed a small smile, watching his reflection as if seeing a new person.

He walked slowly downstairs feeling strange, like he'd taken some kind of irrevocable step without really knowing what it was. He felt kind of . . . happy, yet at the same time nervous and scattered, uncertain of what to do. He glanced around the living room, into the kitchen. He *should* be thinking of dinner, and there were dozens of other household tasks he'd been putting off the last couple days.

He threw himself on the couch and pulled up the sudoku app on his tablet.

He had more than an hour of blessed peace in which to stew and worry before he heard the Impala pull into the drive. His stomach went into advanced butterfly mode, but he didn't get up from the sofa, his eyes glued stubbornly to his tablet. He had his back to the front hall; Dean would come into the living room and see the haircut before Castiel could see him. He knew he was being a coward, but he just couldn't bear to look into Dean's eyes at the moment of revelation.

Keys jingled; the front door opened and shut. “Hey, babe!” Dean called. “You home yet?”

Damn. He'd have to talk now. “Uh, in here, Dean,” he called back. He kept his head bent over his sudoku game.


A warm hand landed on his shoulder, and Castiel looked up into confused green eyes. “Cassie?” Dean said. “What? I mean, babe – your hair . . .”

Castiel had opened his mouth to speak, though he had not the slightest idea what he was going to say, when Dean's face split into a wide grin. “Hey, it looks great. I mean, it's really cool!”


Dean worked his way around the sofa to look at Castiel full on. He tilted his head as if this would give him a better view, then straightened up again, all the while sporting a goofy, affectionate smile. “Yeah, I do. I mean, I was kinda surprised at first, but you know, now that I see it, I think it looks perfect on you. It's really, I dunno, *sharp.*” He reached down, pulled Castiel up by the hand, and planted a kiss on his half-open mouth. “Course, anything looks good on you,” he murmured in Castiel's ear.

Castiel threw his arms around Dean's neck, almost giddy with relief. “I'm so glad you like it, Dean,” he said. “I was afraid it was too short. Too sudden.”
Dean pulled back and looked him in the eye. “Nope. It's perfect. Besides, it's your hair, Cas. You can do whatever the hell you want with it.”

Castiel laughed a little nervously. “Yes. That's what Charlie said.”

“Oh, right! Charlie . . . how is my little sister? You two girls have a good time?”

Castiel was so relieved by Dean's reaction to his hair that he didn't even twitch at “girls.” He grinned. “Oh, yes. We had lunch and went shopping, and then, uh, she convinced me to get a new haircut.”

Dean released him and sat down on the couch, pulling Castiel down beside him. “Shopping? What d'ya get?”

Castiel looked down. “Uh, well, nothing exciting. Just some clothes. I got some Converse – you know I needed some new sneakers. And a couple hoodies.” He smoothed out the front of his shirt. “And this t-shirt.”

Dean grinned. “I thought that looked new.” He wrapped an arm around Castiel's shoulders and kissed his temple. “You crack me up, nerd-girl.”

Castiel sighed, just a little, and leaned into Dean's embrace. “That's me,” he said. Sort of.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“I don't know how to describe it, Charlie, but everything is different now. Not just me, and not just how I see my gender, but everything. The world seems new and interesting, and what's amazing is that I'm not afraid of it.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day out with Charlie turned out to be a kind of turning point for Castiel. Buoyed by his friend's easy acceptance and unquestioning support, he started to slowly emerge from his inner world; instead of spending all his time in his head, endlessly playing over all his fears and misgivings about the Situation, he began looking outwards, at the actual world, and when he did, he found that everything looked a little different.

It started out small, in everyday material things. When he passed by the women's sections in stores, for instance, everything suddenly looked . . . odd. As he'd told Charlie, he'd never been an overly “girly” girl, but now everything seemed not just uninteresting but foreign, as if made for another species. The men's sections were, on the other hand, were starting to look more like home. He found himself wondering if he should do pleats or plain fronts or if those smart shoes came in a size small enough for his feet. He began to look longingly at ties and jackets.

More startling, though, was the way he began to see the people around him. Being naturally shy and awkward in public, he was used to keeping his head and eyes down, but now he started looking, and as he did so, he was astonished to find that women no longer looked like his people. Women had somehow become “other,” despite how long he'd thought he was one. There was no judgment in this; he didn't suddenly see them as objects or victims or purveyors of cooties, but simply as somehow separate from himself. Surprised and a little confused, he began to pay attention to the men he passed as well. His reaction to them was less well-defined. He didn't feel like he was one of them, not yet, but there was a connection to them he couldn't remember feeling before, a longing that had nothing to do with sex or physical attraction. He wanted to belong to them, to be not just a man, but a man among other men.

As he watched the men around him, as well as the ones he saw on television or in movies, he began to imitate them, both consciously and unconsciously. He began to walk more loosely and comfortably, and he started to pull himself up to his full height instead of hunching down as he'd learned to do as a tall girl growing up, told that men would be intimidated by a woman who could look them in the eye. He found the change exhilarating, the longer gait and thrown-back shoulders giving him a sense of freedom and strength that he couldn't ever remember feeling, not even as a child.

He noticed other things, too – how being in crowds didn't seem to bother him as much as it used to, and how he wasn't as easily embarrassed when he made a mistake or failed to pick up on a joke or cultural reference. He began to go out in public more, even alone, running errands when work was slow instead of waiting for Dean to do them on the weekends, even going out to read or write in coffee shops just for the change of scenery. He talked to people – strangers! – in grocery stores and
on the bus, making eye contact instead of dropping his gaze nervously.

His discomfort with his body was still strong, but with his new haircut and clothes, he found he could look in the mirror now without wincing or feeling depressed and sick. He began seeing past the gentler curves to the man underneath; his high cheekbones, his strong chin and nose – features he’d always thought of before as keeping him from being truly pretty – were now reasons to rejoice.

He wondered, in a kind of dazed bemusement, if all these changes meant that the Situation was real, not a dream or a phase. He wondered why that thought didn't worry him more.

He still had plenty of worries, of course, most of them centering on Dean, and there was still the fear of being seen as a freak or being harassed or being rejected by his friends (of his family, of course, only Gabriel mattered, but he couldn't think that far ahead yet). He still had trouble falling asleep at night, the anxiety-loops on endless repeat keeping him awake long after Dean dropped off, but he began to notice that the loops were getting shorter and fading sooner than they had done before he'd come out to Charlie and that once asleep he actually stayed asleep. He even woke up some mornings with a smile on his face, amazed and grateful at the reprieve.

He began to feel . . . happy. Not just the transient delight that comes with a pleasant surprise or a passing experience, but general, pervasive, day-to-day contentment. Happiness.

Dean seemed noticed the change and began to bloom in Castiel's new light. He smiled and laughed and teased more, and Castiel smiled and laughed with him, though he was perplexed at first at the change, in Dean as well as in himself. Then one night, when they'd gone to a party – a party! – and Castiel had not planted himself in a corner with the cat but had talked to people and made jokes and even danced a little, and Dean had grabbed him around the waist and swung him around the room to the whoops of all their friends, and looking into Dean's grinning face, he realized what had changed. That up to this point, for years and years, perhaps for their entire marriage, Dean had been careful with him, as if Castiel were something that might break if Dean leaned too hard or spoke too loudly, and now, somehow, he realized that Castiel wasn't made of glass after all, and he could be free. The realization hit Castiel like a blow, and guilt washed over him for all the years Dean had wasted, constricted and confined by having to be careful of his fragile wife. He slept very badly that night, but the next morning, when Dean greeted him with a joke and a kiss and his famous pancakes, Castiel wondered if perhaps it might be best to just accept this new gift, to let Dean be happy and not fret over the past

“Cas!” Charlie stood up and waved from across the coffee shop. Castiel waved back and made his way towards her and was immediately enveloped in a bear hug. His coffee sloshed dangerously, but he managed to keep it all in the cup.

He grunted. “You're pretty strong too, you know,” he said with a smile.

Charlie pulled back and made a face as she flexed one slender arm. “I didn't get these guns coding, dude. There's some serious Moondor training behind these rippling pectorals.”

Castiel laughed and sat down. “How are you doing, Charlie?” he said.

She shrugged and sat across from him. “Oh, you know. Same ol', same ol'. Got a tournament to officiate next week, and the costume's still not done, ugh. And there was this totally irritating dudebro at work who thought he was all that and that I needed to partake in the glory that was him
“You didn't kill him, I hope,” Castiel said, dimly aware that he was not speaking entirely in jest.

“Nah – I just got him transferred to Minot.” She grinned. “North Dakota.”

Castiel winced.

“Oh, yeah, and I finally managed to hack into Richard Roman Enterprises – oh, and by the way, did his mom know what he was going to turn out like when she named him Dick? I mean, total douchebag, that guy. Anyway, it's scary in there and I haven't gotten very far, but I'm gonna have some fun, I can tell.” She grinned, then propped her chin on her hands and gave Castiel a bird-like head-tilt. “So, how 'bout you, Cas? How ya holding up?”

He looked down at his hands and considered, and as he considered, he began to smile, a broad, natural, real smile. “I'm good,” he said, looking up in to Charlie's eyes. “I'm – I'm very good.”

Charlie stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. “You know, I can see that. You look good. You look great, actually.” She paused, squinted. “But you know what I can't see?” she said slowly. “Your boobs.”

Castiel went red to the tips of his ears. He leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, “I'm wearing a binder.”

“Get outta town!” Charlie squealed. “You brave thing, you! Where'd you get it?”

Castiel looked down and fiddled with his napkin. “Amazon.”

Charlie burst out laughing. “Isn't that the most amazing place ever? Where else can you get binders, bibles, and vibrating butt plugs all in one place?” Castiel's face grew even hotter but he chuckled anyway. Charlie grinned at him. “So you crossed that Rubicon, huh? That means you've finally talked to Dean, right? How did he take it?”

Castiel's face and stomach fell. He began to tear the napkin into small pieces. “Um, no. I haven't told him yet,” he said in a small voice.

“Seriously, dude?” Charlie exclaimed. “Did he not notice that your tits were suddenly AWOL?”

“I don't wear the binder at home,” Castiel confessed, “only when I'm out. Alone. Where I'm not likely to run into anyone I know.” He sighed. “I know it's cowardly of me . . .”

“Pfft!” Charlie said with a dismissive gesture. “Coming out is hard. You're not a coward for having to do it in tiny little steps. Give yourself some credit!”

“I'm trying,” he said with a wry half-smile. “And honestly, other than that I still haven't told Dean, everything is going well, it really is.” He ran a hand across his jaw in unconscious imitation of Dean. “I don't know how to describe it, Charlie, but everything is different now. Not just me, and not just how I see my gender, but everything. The world seems new and interesting, and what's amazing is that I'm not afraid of it.”

Charlie's expression shifted, became puzzled, soft, and intent. “What were you afraid of, Cas? I mean, I know you don't like crowds and stuff, but I never thought of you as a frightened person.”

Castiel shrugged. “Well, I've always worked to avoid situations that made me anxious, so I'm not surprised you didn't notice,” he said. He stared down at his hands. “I'm afraid of a lot of things,
actually. Crowds, yes, but I'm also afraid of meeting new people, of forgetting things, of change – even if it's just moving the furniture or trying new food. I'm afraid of making mistakes, of trying something new, of being too far from home or being out in public alone. So many things.” He raised his head then to look at Charlie, whose eyes had gone round with sympathy, and a slow, somewhat perplexed smile spread across his face. “But I'm kind of not afraid now, and it's surprising and – and wonderful. I don't panic any more when my bus is late and I can't get home before Dean. I don't worry that people are going to laugh at me if I don't get a joke or forget someone's name. Last week, Dean and I went to a party where I knew only a few people, and I talked with strangers.”

Castiel let out a long breath, confusion mixed with wonder. “I don't know why this is happening. I don't know why realizing my true gender changed all these other things; it doesn't make sense. I mean, one the one hand, yes, everything is new and different, but on the other hand I feel like the same person, but on the third hand I feel like I'm starting over. I don't know how or why this works, but I'm happy, Charlie. Even with the body dysphoria and worrying about Dean, I'm happy.”

Charlie was staring at him, hands pressed against her mouth, eyes wide and glistening. Castiel started, concerned. He'd been so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he hadn't been paying attention to his friend's reactions. “What's the matter?” he asked worriedly. “Did I say something wrong? Are you all right?”

“Oh,” Charlie squeaked from behind her hands. “That's just so great, Cas. I'm so glad for you!”

Castiel felt his throat close up, and his eyes began to sting. He and Charlie stared at each other across the tiny table, and then they both burst into tears.

“You do have to tell Dean, though,” Charlie said at last, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. “Soon, Cas.”

Castiel blotted his nose with a new, unmutilated napkin. “I know, I know,” he groaned. “I've been trying to figure out how to do it. How to approach him, how to lead into it, but I can't decide.”

Charlie blinked a few times. “Why don't you just, you know, tell him?”

“What should I say? 'By the way, Dean, I'm not a woman'? Just like that?”

“Why not?” she replied. “I mean, he'll ask questions, and you can fill him in on the whys and wherefores, but y'know, sometimes simple is best.”

Castiel stared into his now-cold coffee. “I suppose,” he said slowly. “It's just, I want to get him at the right time, but I don't know when that would be. At dinner? Breakfast? When we're washing the car? When we've just finished a movie? And what kind of movie would set the mood? Action-adventure? Comedy? Romance?” He shuddered. “All right, maybe not romance . . .”

Charlie threw up her hands. “You're over-thinking it, dude! I mean, don't show him 'Boys Don't Cry,' for Cthulhu's sake, but you know, some quiet evening when there's no other distraction, sit him down, give him a kiss, . . . and just tell him.”

Castiel sighed. Charlie was right, and he knew it, but this was one fear that hadn't miraculously melted over the past few weeks: the fear of looking into Dean's eyes and seeing – no, not hate, not
even disgust, but turning away. Of seeing Dean try and fail to accept a change so radical in the person he'd married. Castiel didn't know if he could take that, didn't know if he could survive it. But what else could he do? It was either come out to Dean or suppress his identity and try to go back to being a woman again.

To his shock, the very thought of trying to go back made him feel physically ill, his stomach roiling and his heart tightening in his chest. He set his teeth. No, he couldn't do that, not any more, not after knowing what it meant to be his true self. Turning back now, he feared, would kill him even more surely than Dean's theoretical abandonment.

He drew a deep breath, and if felt like the first one he'd ever taken. “All right,” he said firmly, amazed and relieved that his voice didn't shake. “This weekend, then. I'll do it.”

Chapter End Notes

The most personal chapter to date. *gulp*
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

We can still be friends, he thought desperately. I know he loves me enough for that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Having a deadline seemed to snap something inside Castiel, like breaking a band around his heart that he didn't know was there until it was gone. He felt nervous and jittery, but also free, spacious, and almost giddy with excitement. He'd already started wearing his man-jeans, but now he dug out his new button-ups and started wearing those as well. He started lowering his voice experimentally (not around Dean, of course), just a little, to see how low he could comfortably go without hurting himself. He bought a messenger bag at Goodwill to replace his purse. He dug the 5-lb. weights out of the downstairs closet and started using them again. He began to research trans issues and support groups on the internet. He defragged and backed up his hard drive. He cleaned all the bathrooms and the refrigerator and still got Professor Armitage's Arabic translation done a day early.

If Dean noticed any changes in his “wife,” he didn't say anything. He commented on one of Castiel's new shirts (“Hey, I like that one, babe – brings out your eyes.”), but otherwise everything seemed to coast along as usual, so Castiel stopped tensing up around him and just relaxed into his new self as much as his nervous energy would allow.

He found himself smiling at his reflection in the mirror in the mornings (clothed, and from the waist up), and it almost felt like the real Castiel was smiling back.

He decided he would tell Dean Saturday evening, after dinner. They had no outside plans, so he thought he'd let Dean make ribs (Dean was, frankly, the better cook) and coleslaw, then they'd settle in front of a Babylon 5 marathon with beer and popcorn. Maybe he'd tell Dean before the marathon, or maybe after the first episode; he wasn't sure yet. But sometime that evening, when Dean was full and happy and there was nothing important to think about. That would be best, Castiel thought. It should be easy. And then, if it went well with Dean, they could both tell Sam, Amelia, Bobby, and Ellen at brunch on Sunday. Or not. It didn't matter. Castiel was going to tell Dean on Saturday, and if the world didn't end, everything else could take care of itself.

With ribs on the menu for Saturday, Castiel decided Friday should be lighter – Caesar salad with chicken, garlic bread on the side. He'd finished the French translation for that grad student in Florida early, the garlic bread was in the oven, and the chicken was from leftovers, so he had time to relax with half a glass of wine and some swing revival on the stereo before chopping the romaine and shaving the Parmesan. He grinned to himself as Brian Setzer started in on “Jump Jive an' Wail.” He sipped his wine and started shimmying around the living room, no one to please, no one to see, just him and the music and –
– strong hands on his hips, twirling him around. Wine splashed, but he held onto to the glass by sheer instinct, his heart beating fast as it tried to to jump into his throat. He looked up, mouth foolishly open, and there was Dean, his face lit by one of his best grins, eyes dancing.

“Hey, beautiful,” Dean said and bent in to nuzzle his neck. “I'm home.”

Castiel felt his face go red. It wasn't that he never danced in front of Dean, but he wasn't prepared this time; he'd been alone, open and heedless and emotionally naked, and he'd had no time to put up the wifely mask, to pretend to be the person he'd been for forty-two years, the person Dean thought he married. But as Dean's lips moved from his neck to his mouth, and Castiel gasped, and the wine glass slipped from his hand onto the couch, another realization hit him like a comet: he didn't want to put on the masks any more. He wasn't a “wife” or a “daughter” or any kind of female person, and he was tired of pretending to be one. To be honest, he didn't know what he was at this point, but he did know this: that he wanted to be the one who made Dean grin like a kid with all the Halloween candy, the one who danced in the middle of the living room with a wine glass in his hand, the one who was strong and happy and didn't give a shit what other people thought.

His thoughts wheeled and shook in his mind, and once again everything looked different. He was Castiel, not Castielle, and Dean was in his arms, not vice-versa. He drew himself up to his full height, put one hand on Dean's shoulder and the other around his waist, and whirled him around like he knew what he was doing, and Dean gasped and laughed and clung on as if he was afraid of falling. When they came out of the spin, panting a little, Castiel looked Dean in the eye, hard, direct, not hiding anything, and kissed his mouth like a man kisses another man, equal to equal, strength to strength, and damned if he didn't feel his (purely conceptual) cock twitch when he heard Dean make a small, surprised noise deep in his chest and felt him go a little hard against his hip.

“Whoa, babe!” Dean grinned when Castiel let him loose. “I see someone's had a good day!”

Castiel regarded Dean through half-lidded eyes, a teasing smile just touching one corner of his mouth. “Something wrong with that?” he asked in his new deep voice, not caring how he sounded.

Dean grinned again, obviously delighted, and Castiel's stomach did a little flip. “Not at all. It's great,” he enthused. “I like seeing you like this.”

“Like what?” Castiel asked, eyebrows raised challengingly.

“I dunno,” Dean said. He grabbed Castiel and tugged so that they both landed on the couch, somehow neither of them landing on the wine glass, and thank god for white wine anyway. “Silly, laughing, having fun. Y'know – just happy.”

Castiel closed his eyes briefly against all the lost time behind him. “Yes, yes . . .” He was smiling, really smiling, and he felt as if he hadn't smiled in years.

He was still smiling into Dean's eyes when Dean's expression shifted, became more serious. Castiel felt his stomach clench up a little as Dean took his hands in his, his green eyes looking deep into Castiel's as if they were diving in with no thoughts of resurfacing. “So,” he said, “what's up, Cas?”

His stomach didn't so much unclench as free fall straight into his intestines. He felt like he'd been hit up the side of the head with a brick. “What? I – I don't . . . I mean, I don't understand,” Castiel stammered. “What do you mean?”

Dean leaned back slightly, pausing as if weighing his next words carefully. “I mean, you've been different lately. Like something's changed.” He frowned. “Or like you learned something that
changed you.”

“Dean, I –” He searched his mind for all his opening lines, all his prepared speeches and explanations, but everything had gone white, and he had nothing.

Dean looked down at their hands, mercifully withdrawing his intense gaze and giving Castiel a moment to breathe and reset his brain. “Don’t get me wrong, Cassie – whatever it is, it looks like a good thing. I mean, you’ve been so happy lately, so much happier than I’ve seen you for . . . god, so long.” He hesitated, his brow furrowing. “And seeing you like this, it makes me realize how unhappy you must have been before, and I gotta wonder how I missed it, y’know?” He looked up again, face earnest, almost pleading. “Keepin’ you happy, babe – that’s my job, and shit, I must’ve really sucked at it, ’cause you’re happy now like you haven’t been in years, and I sure as hell ain’t responsible for the change.”

Castiel, who had been staring at Dean through most his speech like a startled hare, snapped out of his stunned trance and scowled at this last sentence. Oh, for god’s sake: only Dean could blame himself for someone else’s happiness. Love and exasperation crashed through him, scouring him clean of fear and leaving him feeling expansive and somehow powerful. “You ridiculous man,” he said sternly. Dean's eyebrows jumped, but Castiel didn't give him time to throw up any of his usual defenses and plowed right on. “You can't make someone happy – all you can do is be wonderful and loving and perfect and hope the other person has the strength to meet you halfway.” He leaned in and up, touching his forehead to Dean's. “It's not your fault if they can't, you know,” he murmured. “There are so many things beyond your control, love; you can't save everyone.”

Dean's breath was warm against Castiel's lips. “Not even you, Cas?” he whispered.

Castiel shook his head, but he smiled, too. “Not even me, if I'm not ready to be saved.”

Dean sighed and sagged a little, leaning into Castiel. Castiel shifted his position, straightening up and leaning back against the couch so Dean could rest his head in the curve between his neck and shoulder. “So what is it?” Dean asked quietly after a moment. “What changed?”

Castiel wrapped an arm around Dean's shoulders. He closed his eyes, seeing his whole life before him, from his anxious and fraught childhood to his somewhat-less-so-but-still-anxious-and-fraught young adulthood to now. To what?

“Dean,” he said, low and clear, “I'm not a woman.”

He felt Dean stiffen, then relax and take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Oh,” he said. “Okay.”

Castiel pulled back, trying to look Dean in the face, but his eyes were closed, his face strangely serene save for a puzzled line between his eyebrows. “Okay?” Castiel echoed. “What do you mean, 'okay’?”

Dean's eyes fluttered open, and his expression was open and artless. “I dunno,” he said. “What do you want me to say? 'Yes you are'? I mean, you'd know better than me, wouldn't you?”

Castiel gaped. “But, but, Dean . . .”

“But what?”

Frustration shot through him. He felt as if Dean was just humoring him, trying not to upset the “fragile woman” – because it couldn't possibly be this easy. Could it? “Damn it, Dean, did you even hear what I said?” he demanded. “I am not a woman. Yet I have a woman's body. I've presented myself as a woman for over forty years. You thought I was a woman when you married
me. And now I tell you I'm not the gender I look like, the gender you thought I was, and all you can say is 'okay'?

Dean shrugged against him. “Cas, you're just you, y'know? Everything else is just details.” He looked up again. “Is this, whatever it is . . . deciding you're not a girl or whatever . . . is this what's saved you? Is this what's made you happy?”

For a moment, all Castiel could do was stare, his irritation shifting into wonder. He'd been prepared for denial and demands, for a long, agonizing “discussion” that would have left Dean, well, educated, at least, but Castiel raw and exposed and exhausted. And all he got was “is this what's made you happy?” Sometimes simple is best, indeed. He swallowed. “Yes,” he answered quietly, absolutely. “Yes it is. I don't know how, and I don't know why, but realizing I am . . . what I am, instead of what I thought I was, has been incredibly freeing. I feel . . . stronger, more confident and less afraid than I used to be. And yes – I'm happy.”

Dean didn't move his head from Castiel's shoulder, but he reached his arms out and wrapped them around his body. “Then I'm happy, too, babe.”

“But you don't know what it means, Dean,” Castiel persisted, caught between gratitude, joy, and the agony of the unknown. “You don't know what I am, what I'll become.”

“Yeah, I know.” Dean paused. “Do you?”

Castiel shook his head. “Not entirely. Not yet.”

“Then I guess we'll figure it out together, huh?”

Castiel laid his cheek on top of Dean's head and breathed out slowly all the worry, all the uncertainty and fear of the past two months. Of his whole life. “Dean, if any person, if any thing in the world outside myself could make me happy,” he whispered, “it would be you. I – I love you.”

“Love you, too, Cas. That's never gonna change.”

They sat for a long moment, no questions, no answers, just holding each other, until the timer announced that the garlic bread was ready. Slowly, blinking as if coming out into the sun from a cave, Castiel untangled himself from Dean, and they both stood and headed for the kitchen. Castiel chopped the lettuce and prepared the Parmesan while Dean sliced the leftover chicken. They ate quietly, Castiel asking about Dean's day, Dean answering briefly, but otherwise they kept their words and thoughts to themselves.

After they cleaned up, Castiel brought out the open bottle of wine, and Dean grabbed a second, unopened one, and they nestled into the sofa with their glasses and talked. Or rather, Castiel talked. Dean asked a few questions here and there, but mostly he just listened, his gaze soft and accepting, a deep, quiet pool that took in everything Castiel gave him. Castiel, on the other hand, felt like a cataract: once he let go, all the thoughts and feelings and fears that had been spiraling around in his head for these last two months came tumbling out of him in a heady spate, catching Dean up and spinning him along in its wild current. He told Dean everything: how he had come to his realization (it wasn't a decision, he emphasized; who in the world would decide something like this?), how he had struggled with his body, how he had slowly come to accept himself for what he was, and how much better he felt about himself and his life once he'd done so.
They drank wine – Castiel in quick gulps, Dean in slow sips – and Castiel talked until he couldn't think of anything more to say, though he knew there was more, so much more. But he was spent now, his head light and drowsy from the wine, and he was so tired of talking and thinking and trying to explain the explainable. But there was one more thing, one question that he couldn't put off, no matter how his heart shied away from it.

He stared down at the wine glass in his hands, inexplicably empty now. He reached towards the open bottle, stopped, drew his hand back. “Dean?”

Dean had obviously heard the waver in Castiel's voice; his own in reply was soft, careful. “Yeah, babe?”

Castiel shut his eyes. He wondered; he knew. He hoped; he feared. “Do you – do you want to stay married? Now that you know?” He opened his eyes, but kept his head down, afraid to look at Dean's face.

Dean stiffened next to him. “What the hell kind of question is that?” he asked, his tone a strange mix of outrage, affection, and disbelief. He reached out and took Castiel's chin in his fingers, gently coaxing his head around, tilting it up so Castiel would have to meet his eyes. “I love you, Cas,” he said with fond exasperation. “I love you. Not your body, not your gender. You.” He dropped his hand and leaned back a little, eyebrow cocked and mouth twitching with a small smirk. “Thirteen years ago you said you'd take me, remember? Sickness, health, all that jazz? 'Fraid you're stuck with me: man, woman, Vulcan, whatever.”

Castiel wanted to believe it, God he wanted to believe it, but no matter what Charlie said about sex, he knew it wasn't that easy. Sexual orientation was a fundamental thing – how could he ask Dean to go against his? Was it even possible? “But, Dean . . . I'm a man, and you're straight. I know I look like a woman, but I'm not, and I think – no, I'm fairly certain that I want to look more like a man in the future, not just with clothes and haircuts but in my body as well.” His throat tightened. “And I can't ask you to stay with someone you'll never be attracted to, who you'd never want to have sex with. It wouldn't be fair.”

Castiel paused, trembling a little, searching Dean's face for reaction, waiting for the rejection, the turning away, the goodbye. “We can still be friends,” he thought desperately. “I know he loves me enough for that.”

Several seconds passed. Dean's expression was very . . . strange. Castiel's fear began to bleed into confusion. “Dean?” he ventured, almost unable to hope.

Dean rubbed the back of his neck, which was turning, along with this face, a little red. “Yeah, well, about that, Cas . . .”

“The thing is, uh, the thing is that reports of my heterosexuality have been kinda . . . exaggerated.”

Dean ducked his head, as if to hide the sheepish smile that was forming on his lips. “I mean, have you ever watched me watch 'Dr. Sexy’?”

“What?” Castiel sputtered. What? What? What? He felt like the ground had fallen out beneath his feet, but he didn't fall, his stomach light and giddy as he floated mid-air. “But Dean . . . all your exes. All your stories . . .” He blinked back sudden tears – of anger? joy? relief? – and suppressed a hysterical giggle. “Why didn't you tell me?”

Dean spread his hands. “I dunno. At first, it was so I wouldn't scare you, you know? When I met
you it was – it was just bam! and I wanted everything to be perfect. It's not like I wanted to lie to you or anything, but you came from this hyper-religious family, so I decided I'd play it by ear, put the whole thing on need-to-know. By the time I found out you'd gotten over the bullshit they'd tried to brainwash you with, I thought, well . . . I guess I thought it just wasn't that important. I mean, I'd never really done much with guys, just a little fooling around, no serious fluid exchange, if you know what I mean, and I knew that as long as you'd put up with me I wasn't gonna be sleeping around anyway, so why bring it up?"

Castiel gaped at Dean for a moment, torn between laughter and aggravation, then threw himself at him, wrapping his arms around his neck and holding on tight. “You are impossible,” he gasped. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Um, have and hold me?” Dean suggested, his voice slightly muffled against Castiel's cheek and neck. “Till death do us blah, blah, blah?”

Castiel sighed, sliding down Dean's body until his head rested in the hollow of his shoulder. Dean folded him in his arms, and Castiel could feel him smile against the top of his head. “Yes. I would like that, Dean. I would like that very much,” Castiel murmured.

Chapter End Notes

Things went a little differently IRL, the biggest thing being that my husband, unlike Dean here, is not bi. Not the tiniest bit. 99.999999% het, poor man. So, yeah, he had his sexual identity panic . . . and he got over it.

What he realised, basically, is that I am still me, and that was enough for him. As he wrote in an e-mail to his relatives, "[w]e've been friends for about 35 years, lovers for over 30, and married for almost 29. We have history, and it's not like I woke up one morning with a stranger in the same bed." Sure, there were a lot of things to rethink, some negotiations, but in the end we love each other, and gender changes, and even sexual identity issues, weren't scary enough to make us want to put aside our life together. (Yes, I did ask if he wanted to break up. He looked at me, seriously and honestly puzzled, and said, "It never occurred to me.")

Yeah, I know I'm the one of the luckiest SOBs out there, and that it's not always this easy, but sometimes there is a happy ending.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“What about you, Dean?” he asked quietly. “What do you need?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Castiel was done. There would be more, of course – ideas and explanations and plans and discoveries – but for now he was exhausted, emptied and relieved, and all he wanted to do was maybe watch something emotionally undemanding and go to bed. Dean seemed pretty calm, considering, though that might have been a mask to protect Castiel – wouldn’t be the first time, god knew. Still, it seemed as if it was time for both of them to put thinking aside for the moment, even if that meant there was no immediate closure.

Castiel decided he was done with drinking, so Dean put the second bottle away before they settled in for an episode of the Great British Bake Off. Castiel was too weary and tipsy to pay much attention, though Dean seemed riveted. It was only 9:15 by the time the show was over, and 9:40 after they’d finished cleaning up, but Castiel was perfectly ready to collapse, so they called it an early night.

When they went to bed, Castiel wound himself around Dean as he hadn’t for . . . months, probably. His disgust with his body had made him shy, made him shrink away from any reminder that he was inherently wrong, but now, with Dean's acceptance and the knowledge that there were ways to change his shape to match his self, he no longer felt ugly and untouchable. Dean responded by enveloping Castiel in his arms and tangling their legs together and nuzzling his neck until they both drifted off to sleep. There were no loops in Castiel's head than night, no voices of self-loathing and condemnation, and he slept without remembering dreams.

Castiel started his Saturday feeling strange and a little surreal. He'd shot a reassuring text off to Charlie as soon as he'd gotten up (he knew he didn't have the energy to handle her enthusiasm in person just then), but afterwards he felt a bit at loose ends and spent the morning after breakfast wandering the house, not sure of what to do or say, as if coming out to Dean had collapsed his future into that one last act, leaving nothing left. Dean, on the other hand, was his usual ebullient self – maybe even more so than usual. Trying a little too hard, maybe, but that was Dean, and Castiel found he was too wired to resent it. So when Dean started making faces and execrable puns to rouse him out of his funk, Castiel finally laughed and threw his hands in the air, surrendering might-have-beens and what-might-bes to right-here-right-now.

So in the end they went about their usual Saturday lives: errands, chores, games, cooking, TV. They discussed Sunday brunch with the family, Castiel deciding, after much solicitous questioning from Dean, that he was up to another coming out. Now that Dean knew, he felt that he could face anyone (with the possible exception of some of his own family, but as he had serious doubts he'd ever talk to any of them except Gabriel again, that was something of a moot point). They had ribs and coleslaw for dinner, watched an episode of Deep Space Nine instead of bingeing on Babylon 5,
and finished the day with a little Borderlands co-op, Castiel pulling further ahead in their on-going “who can score the most head-shots” competition. He went to bed with the threat of another butterfly invasion, but fell asleep before a quorum could be reached.

Sunday, as it turned out, was surprisingly easy. Castiel knew where he was now, and he had Dean solidly behind him. Besides, he had no fear of Sam or Amelia; Amelia could be a little prickly sometimes, but his brother- and sister-in-law were both warm, compassionate, open-minded people, and the absolute worst Castiel had anticipated was a cool distancing. But once Sam got over his surprise, he burst into dimples and drew Castiel into a rib-creaking hug, and both he and Amelia gave him their joyful congratulations, just as Charlie had. Little Bobby had simply nodded, hazel eyes solemn as only a six-year-old's could be and squeezed his hand. Emma, a much more mature nine, had smiled and announced that she would say “Uncle Castiel” from now on and then returned to her strawberry waffles without further fussing.

Castiel had been a little more apprehensive about the older couple, but Ellen hugged him as thoroughly as Sam had done and wished him the best and told him to let her know if there was anything she could do, especially if anyone “gave him any shit.” Bobby huffed and rolled his eyes and muttered something about “kids these days,” until Ellen cuffed the back of his head, at which he straightened up and and fixed Castiel with a curmudgeonly scowl and warm eyes and said he was real glad Castiel was happy. Beside him, Dean was beaming like a lighthouse, whether in support of Castiel or out of pride for his amazing family or both, it hardly mattered. Castiel barely ate a thing, overwhelmed as he was, but he went home happy, light in head and heart.

They spent the rest of Sunday quietly; after the rush of emotion at brunch, Castiel felt drained and lethargic – even joy has its emotional toll – and Dean seemed just as happy play the domestic house-husband. Castiel took a nap when they got home, getting up a couple hours later to plant himself on the couch with a book as Dean wandered in and out on his own business. They ate leftovers for dinner, quietly, with very little conversation, and afterwards Dean read a couple of shorter stories from Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences aloud while Castiel lay with his head in his lap.

They went to bed early again, though they didn't turn immediately to sleep, instead lying on their backs, Castiel's head pillowed in the hollow of Dean's shoulder. “So what are you going to do now, babe?” Dean asked after a several minutes of warm, comfortable silence.

Castiel blew out a long breath. He knew this question had been coming, but he still had no answer. “I don't know,” he admitted at last. “I've been so caught up in just feeling lately, in worrying and wondering and trying to make sense of everything, that I haven't really looked very far ahead. I've started to research things, but this is so... big. I was thinking that maybe I should talk to someone.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Dean shoot him an indecipherable look. “I'm someone,” he protested, trying to sound like he was joking.

Castiel resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Oh, Dean. “I meant someone professional, love, like a therapist. To help me sort things out.”

“Oh.” He felt Dean relax again. “I knew that.”
Castiel laughed. “I know you did.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Dean asked after a moment, sounding a little chastised.

“Mmm,” Castiel said, considering. “Well, pronouns are good. It’s amazing how weird ‘she’ and ‘her’ sound to me now.”

“I can do that,” Dean said.

“Oh, and I’m not changing my name, not really. Just dropping the -le at the end, so that it’s a man’s name.”

“Oh, that’s right. Castiel, Angel of Thursday.” Dean laughed shortly, then fell silent, thoughtful. “Can I still call you ‘Cas’?” he asked, almost humbly.

Castiel smiled and patted Dean’s chest reassuringly. “Yes, you may,” he said graciously, then stopped. “Um, I think I’d rather you not call me ’Cassie’ anymore, though. It’s awfully . . . girly. And it sounds like it’s short for ’Cassandra.’” He narrowed his eyes, remembering. “And it’s the name of one of your female exes.”

Dean laughed again and moved his hand to squeeze Castiel’s shoulder. “Yeah, okay – whole lotta baggage with that one. Got it.” Dean pulled away a little then, so he could look down into Castiel's eyes. “You know I'm gonna mess up, babe, right?” he continued slowly. “I'll try to be good, but I know I'll forget sometimes. I mean, I've known you for so long, and, y'know, habit and all . . .” His voice trailed off as he searched Castiel's face, eyes anxious.

Yes. It was going to be hard on everyone, and Castiel felt a small pang of guilt for all the changes and accommodations he was asking of his friends. Who was he to demand all this special attention? But then . . . was this really any different from when Ellen’s daughter Jo had asked people to stop calling her “Joanna”? Sure, there were mistakes at first, but everyone tried, and after a surprisingly short time the only person who still called her by her old name was her mother, and then only when she was angry. So pronouns might take a little longer – they’d all adjust.

“It’s all right, Dean,” Castiel said, smiling. “I know it's not going to happen overnight. And as long as you love me and try your best, it’ll be enough. Truly.”

Dean's expression relaxed, and he moved in to press a kiss to Castiel's temple. “Yeah, well, my best ain't always that great, so you remind me when I screw up, okay? I mean it. I wanna make you . . .” He stopped himself, smiled wryly and tried again. “I wanna make it easy for you, babe. So you talk to me, correct me, educate me – anything you need, you let me know.”

Castiel felt a ribbon of warmth curl around him, sweet and comforting, but he wasn’t going to let Dean off that easily. “What about you, Dean?” he asked quietly. “What do you need?”

Dean drew back again and stared at him in surprise. “Huh? Me? I don't need anything. I'm not the one who's had the world do a one-eighty on 'em.”

Castiel raised a dubious eyebrow. “Oh, no? You mean, you've not had your wife of thirteen years tell you, out of the blue, that she is now your husband? You're never going to have to deal with the potential homophobic or transphobic fallout attendant on this revelation? Your less-than-perfectly-heterosexual orientation notwithstanding, you somehow know you’re not going to have to reevaluate what it means to be in a romantic relationship where your partner a man rather than a woman?”

Dean opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again. “Huh,” was all he managed.
Castiel sighed. He felt a little sad, and very tired. “This . . . thing that's happened to me, Dean, it's – it's not because of you and, honestly, it's not about you, either, but it affects you and will continue to do so, perhaps more deeply than you can guess right now. And because I want you to be happy, too, I just want to make sure you don't neglect yourself and your own needs. Like if you need to talk to 'someone' who is not me.” He smiled a little and stroked Dean's arm. “No Winchester martyrs here, love,” he murmured.

“It's the family business,” Dean protested, though Castiel heard the smile underneath the words.

“You still haven't answered my question,” Castiel pointed out sternly, poking a finger into Dean's chest. “What do you need, Dean?”

Dean was thoughtful for a long moment. “I dunno, Cas. Maybe I . . . well, it is kind of a huge thing, I guess, and it is going kinda fast,” he admitted at last, as if embarrassed that he was showing some sort of weakness. “Maybe it'd be nice to talk to other guys – or girls or whatever – who've been there before. How they handled the changes, how they felt about it, how they've supported their, um, partners.”

Castiel smiled and allowed himself to relax a little. Getting Dean to admit even this much was something of a victory. “I think that's an excellent idea,” he said firmly. He stirred, suddenly inspired, and propped himself up on one elbow to look Dean in the eye. “How about we make that our homework for the week? Look into therapists or support groups or, I don't know, subreddits, even, to help us sort out how we feel about what's happening.” Dean sucked in a breath, and Castiel went on quickly, not giving him time to protest. “Not saying we have to have appointments lined up by Friday or that we have to go stand in front of a group of strangers and talk about our feelings, but just – let's see what's out there, okay? If we need the help, either together or separately.” He bit his lip. “Is that all right?”

Dean's expression smoothed out, the line between his brows disappearing. “Yeah, okay, babe. That sounds good.”

Castiel blew out a tense breath, turned out the light, and settled back against Dean's body. He ran his hand over Dean's chest, reveling in his warmth, the feel of his skin, the steady thud of his heart. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

“What for?”

Castiel closed his eyes. “For being amazing and wonderful and supportive. For being you.”

Dean huffed out a self-deprecatory snort. “I'm just this guy,” he said.

“Yes, but you're my guy,” Castiel pointed out, smiling in the dark.

“And you're . . . mine. My guy.” Dean's voice, which had hesitated a little on “mine,” grew strong and firm again on “guy.” He kissed the top of Castiel's head. “Love ya, Cas – no matter what happens. Don't ever forget that.”

“I won't,” Castiel whispered, breathless with gratitude. “I can't.”

He shut his eyes. “I love you, too, Dean.”

**Epilogue – a week later**
“Um, Dean?”

Dean looked up. “Yeah, babe?”

“You know how, um, transitioning has changed a lot of things for me? For the better? Like being less anxious in public, feeling more confident, things like that?”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Yeah . . .” he said.

Castiel looked away, cheeks reddening. “Well, there have been some other side-effects, as well.”

Dean frowned in confusion. Okay, this was good, probably, judging from the smile tugging at the corner of Cas' mouth, but why was she – he, Dean reminded himself sternly – blushing? “Like what?”

“Like, uh . . .” Cas broke off, closed his eyes, then spoke all in a rush, “Like-I-seem-to-have-got-my-libido-back.”

Dean's eyebrows flew up to his hairline. “Oh?” he breathed, hardly knowing what to think.

Castiel looked down at the ground, his face a mix of emotions, though the smile lingered. “Yes,” he said. “Oh, yes.”

Dean held out his hands. Castiel took them and folded himself onto the couch next to him. “Well, this is . . . good,” Dean said tentatively. He felt a little at sea here – he thought Cas' sex drive had just fallen victim to female middle age. He'd read about that. Somewhere.

Cas looked him in the eye, his expression shifting to that solemn, unblinking look he got when he needed to talk about Very Serious Things. Dean's stomach clenched up a little. “I want to explain, Dean, why I stopped wanting sex. I couldn't talk about it for a long time, but now I can.”

“You don't have to explain anything –” Dean protested hastily.

Castiel shook his head. “Yes I do, and I want to. It's been selfish of me to keep this all in when it affected you as well as me.” He took a long, long breath. “Do you remember, when we were first talking about, well, everything that's happened, that I said that for the past few years I'd been feeling kind of . . . sexless?”

Dean nodded. “I remember.”

Castiel was kneading Dean's hands, blue eyes fixed on the way his long fingers ran over Dean's palms. “You know, when we were first married, I was so excited – sex was pretty new to me, and it seemed amazing and wonderful that we could use our bodies to make each other feel so good. I loved how you laughed and made jokes and said you loved me and how you just let go of everything when you came, as if nothing existed at that moment but you and me and the ecstasy of our bodies. I loved making you happy that way.”

He ran his index finger idly down the lifeline on Dean's right hand. “So when my – my drive began to fall off a couple years later I was a bit disappointed, I guess, though I wasn't really worried. Our lives were busy and besides, I thought I was simply getting over the ‘honeymoon stage' and that I'd eventually find my level again, as it were.” He paused, frowning. “But I didn't. Things got worse instead. I began to feel uneasy in my body, as if it didn't fit anymore. I was restless and anxious; I
could never get completely comfortable. It got so that I would look in the mirror and not know who or what I was looking at. I felt alien, slow and useless and ugly. For some reason, sex intensified these feelings, so I started to avoid it, unconsciously at first, then consciously. I stopped making the first move; I made excuses; I ignored your hints and suggestions until you just stopped making them.”

He drew in a deep breath; Dean stared at him, eyes round and shocked. “I hated denying you,” Castiel continued in a lower voice. “I hated myself. I felt like a failure, both as a wife and a woman, and more than anything I hated my body for being the source of that failure.”

Dean's throat closed, and he felt his eyes begin to sting. He'd had no idea. He'd come up with any number of theories for their waning love life – blaming himself for being pushy and oversexed, blaming the differences between male and female biology – but he never imagined that the reason Cas had had been turning away was because he hated himself and his body so much. How could Dean have missed it? Why hadn't he tried to do something? “Oh, babe,” he breathed.

Castiel finally lifted his eyes to Dean's, and they were not haunted by regret or shame, but full of life and gratitude. “But I don't feel that way anymore, Dean,” he said earnestly. “I don't know why or how, but my body feels alive again, as if accepting myself woke it out of hibernation. It feels things again, things I want to share with you.” He took in a quick, sharp breath and squeezed Dean's hands. “Oh, I was so scared when I told you everything – I was afraid you wouldn't want me anymore, just as I was coming back to life. But it didn't matter, and you love me, and everything's okay. We're okay.” His blue eyes pierced Dean, full of hope and anticipation. “Right?”

Dean swallowed, overwhelmed. “Yeah, Cas, 'course we are,” he croaked.

Castiel's serious expression cracked, and he broke into a broad smile, the full, show-all-his-teeth grin that Dean so rarely saw but loved so much. He threw his arms around Dean's neck and held him tight. “It's so strange,” he murmured in Dean's ear. “I mean, I'm in the completely wrong body, but for some reason I don't think it's ugly anymore, and I certainly don't feel like it's so disgusting it shouldn't be touched.” His pulled back a little, and his bright smile softened into something almost shy. “In fact, it seems to be very on board with the idea of being touched again. And of touching in return.” He put a gentle hand on Dean's crotch, whispering his fingers over the stiff denim.

Dean took in a shaky breath, trying to wrench his mind back from distress at Cas’ pain to the promise of those fingers, but it didn't seem to matter, because his dick was way ahead of him. “I can do that,” he managed, a sloppy grin tugging at his mouth. “Now?”

“Now?”

Castiel cocked his head to one side. “Do you have other plans?” he asked.

“Hell, no!” Dean assured him.

He attempted to grab Cas around the waist, but Cas beat him to the punch, was on his feet and pulling Dean up beside him with surprising and wiry strength. He threw his arms around Dean's neck and kissed him fiercely, lips and tongue almost desperate in their enthusiasm. It was a question, a plea. When they broke apart, both breathing heavily, Dean looked into those wide blue eyes and smiled. “Yes, Cas. Yes.”
Whew! Well, there it is, the story of my Castiel's life as a newly minted transman. I have a timestamp with Cas coming out to Gabriel, but it's not finished, and I don't know if it ever will be.

I wrote this because I thought it would be a good story and because I thought it might interest cis people to see a trans person discover themselves (and besides I ADORE ftm!Cas), but if it also helps any transman or -woman in anyway, I will be doubly blessed. Not everyone is going to have friends and family this supportive, but you might be surprised: my family were a lot quicker to accept than I was expecting, and I have had only a couple of semi-negative reactions, neither of which had to do with me. Find the people you trust and trust them with yourselves. You can only be the richer for it.

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