

# Strangers in Gilead

## Epilogue

Sundown had brought a sudden cold wind. Dean zipped his jacket and Sam pulled the hood up on his sweatshirt. They surveyed the ruined church one last time. Sam scuffed the marks on the floor, making sure the symbols were completely gone. Dean looked out the broken window and moaned. He vaulted lightly through, out of the shell of the building.

Sam gave a last look and joined Dean outside. The few buildings that still remained slouched gray and quiet and empty, much as they had one hundred and thirty years ago, though now they were only quaint remnants of a vanished past, not forbidding bones of a town newly dead.

Dean's head lay on the roof of the Impala, his arms stretched across side to side. He was murmuring. Sam went around to the opposite side. Dean flipped one hand face up, and Sam unlocked the passenger door before tossing the keys.

They sat, taking in the squeaking of the car doors, the creaking crackle of the upholstery, and smell of oil and French fries and a stupid thing hanging from the rear-view mirror. The cold wind insisted on entering; they both closed their doors.

Dean gave a long, hard look at the thing hanging from the mirror. It was shaped like a pineapple.

"What the hell is that?"

"The dust storms were pretty bad. I went through the car wash, and they—"

"*Car wash?*"

"I watched the whole time. Hand buffed. I swear."

Dean, barely mollified, snatched the offending object and opened his door enough to toss it out. He took a moment to appreciate Sam's affronted expression at littering, and then flicked it into the wind. He wiped his hand and picked up the maps and papers on the car seat between them,

showing the delights of Historic Divinity Falls State Park and Ghost Town. A cowboy invited them to see "The West As It Was." There were wagon wheels and a saddle, and photographs of the buildings framed in picturesque barbed wire. All went back into the folder with the other photographs and missing persons reports.

"We got seven out of ten back," Sam said. "Snuffed a demon. Took down a warlock. Rode horses. Drank saloon whiskey and had gunfights."

"Ten we know of. Yeah, just a day at Knott's Berry Farm."

"Saved the town."

"Yeah. Wish we could have found the Sterners."

"Yeah."

"Thanks for fetching me back, Sam."

The car's engine growled to rumbling life. While Dean listened with eyes closed, luxuriating in the vibration, Sam could just let his eyes look at him.

"And for a hell of a night. A hell of a night. Whew." Dean exhaled loudly. "I should have tried to bring home a souvenir. That tomahawk was put in my hand by T'ašunka Witko himself."

"*Jesus*. You met Crazy Horse?"

Dean nodded. "But it belongs back there."

Sam gave a low whistle. Dean slid his hands around the steering wheel, rubbed himself up and down the upholstery. "No warlock battle could make me forget you, baby," he murmured.

A park ranger drove past, flashing her headlights to remind them that state parks close at dusk. The Winchesters waved.

Dean then got a furtive, concerned look and rubbed his mouth in the way that meant nervous. Sam looked at him expectantly.

"Hey, uh, speaking of souvenirs..." Dean said.

"What?"

"We should make sure we didn't bring home any accidentally..."

"Huh?"

"Now that we're back with modern science. Um. Penicillin."

"Oh, jeez, Dean."

"It's not like I had condoms! Never entered my head, though I guess that was the—the whatever it was."

"You had a cut on your lip from the bar fight."

Dean pulled at his lip, craned to look in the rear-view mirror. Sam put his fingers to Dean's chin, turning his face toward him.

"Nothing now. I think everything got left behind."

"Like the clothes and stuff."

"Yeah."

"You think we'll forget?"

"Don't know." He leaned back, stretched, and looked out the window, and away, and far back. "I hope not."

"God no, I hope not, too," he murmured happily for a moment, but was watching Sam out of the corner of his eye. Sam was chewing his lip, looking into the dusty wind and back a century ago. Dean punched him in the shoulder, and Sam jumped, banging his head on the side window.

"Ow!"

"You didn't either, did you?"

"...What?"

"Use protection."

Sam flinched.

Dean crowed. "No fucking way! You totally did her!"

"Shut up."

"*Busted!* You *dog!* Liz said you *talked* to her all night, and I said you were a sad sap! Oh, man!"

Sam gave Dean a level look. "We talked."

Dean leaned forward, raised eyebrows demanding, insisting, hoping.

Sam turned to look stonily forward. "A gentleman doesn't—"

"And then you *did her!* Yee haw!"

He grinned, but the grin was tempered. He held a moment, watching Sam carefully, looking for something.

"Is it okay if I whoop? Please can I whoop?"

Sam was silent.

"It's not about just sex, Sam, if it means..." Dean trailed off.

"It's not better, Dean. It doesn't get better."

"I get that. I guess. But it's good, right? A little whoop?"

"Just drive. We want to get to the Roadhouse before all the rooms are gone." He sounded reproofing, but he gave up trying not to smile, and returned his arm to its accustomed place across the seat back, after a century long absence, his thumb one-half inch from Dean's jacket collar. Dean took in that almost-smile, and thought his thanks to a woman long gone, and that was good enough.

"I never forget protection. What kind of crazy magic shit makes me forget to protect my dick and you remember you have one?" Dean shook his head. "So nothing left behind, huh? So no little Winchesters—Ow!" Dean's turn to rub his shoulder. He threw the car into gear and whooped a happy whoop anyway, turning onto the road, adding a plume of dust and gravel to the cold evening wind. The highway stretched flat and straight west into the orange light of the setting sun. There was a bedspread of high, quilted clouds glowing rose and orange stretched over the great sea of tallgrass and bottlebrush, and the prairie was the prairie still, whether dotted with buffalo herds or lines of power poles marching across the caramel grass under the yellow-gold sky.

"Well, we're doing it, Deputy Sam," Dean announced, reaching for the radio. The stations were mostly playing static.

"What?" Sam expected Dean to reach for the cassettes, but instead he flicked the radio off.

"We're riding into the sunset!" Dean laughed a loud laugh and started a lusty singing.

*We chased lady luck till we finally struck – Bonanza!  
With a gun and a rope and a hatful of hope, we  
planted our family tree!*

Sam grimaced and turned his face away before smiling.  
"You are such a dork."

