

SPECIAL FORCES

by Joshua Birk

"That went well," Dre said to the rolled up window as she began to slink into the passenger seat.

Across the parking lot, Dean was checking for blood as Sam and Joy helped him to his feet. Dre started to slide downward as the gang shifted their bewilderment towards the car, causing the vinyl horizon of the window to slowly rise and remove the view. The driver's door slammed shut. She jumped a bit as her husband collapsed into his seat.

James turned the keys with one hand while waving his other hand in the air as if to cool it off.

"Whatsamattah tiger, hit with a closed fist?" Dre asked.

The Mustang's engine cranked, rumbled and James simply glared in response. Dre turned her head back to the fallen scene at the park as tires shot gravel away. The car bolted from the parking lot and onto the nearby street. Safe from being seen, she sat upright and began staring at his hand, which he was now opening and closing, opening and closing, clutching and releasing the air. James was keeping his eyes intent on the road as they left the wooded curving ways of the park and onto the straight city streets. She turned away, trying to block him from thought and sight.

Dre rolled down the window and hung her head lazily towards the outside. She breathed in the cool air and tried to relax. She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the night winds brush against her eyelids and then opened them again. Cars began to snake out from either side, whooshing past as if they were being pulled along from a single string. Trees narrowly and nimbly dodged by, joined by the occasional street light. Houses crawled over small hills.

Dre picked out Sammy's old house from the distance and imagined the old tree swing hanging in the backyard. The same swing she and Dean had passed out on ... six, seven years ago. Maybe more like a decade ago. Like a life ago. This was all the way on the other end of town and from the flipside of her life. They had snuck away from the party early, hours before Sam's dad broke it up. Tales from that night were legendary - kids jumping out of windows (one, actually, and it was more like falling), Sam's old man firing off a shotgun (in reality - he only loudly reminded people he owned one), the keg that was never found (still in the basement). All the while, the two of them lay swaying slowly in the breeze, sleeping until sunlight woke them up without anyone the wiser.

"So what the hell were you doing out there?" James snapped. Sam's house fled off to the distance.

"Smoking crack and killing babies, what the hell do you think?" She shot back.

"I'm not being funny here."

"No, no shit. Usually punching someone is such a laugh riot. Not your best material, but solid humor."

"How long has he been back?"

"Dean? You mean Dean? He's been back for years, haven't you noticed?"

James just stared at Dre, flickering his eyes occasionally to watch impending road.

"Well," Dre snapped, "maybe if you spent a little more time, you know, in town, you could be up to date on the comings and goings of your ex old best friend."

James blinked and fixed his gaze to the road. His lower jaw clenched. It was a big gun to pull out and Dre knew it.

She didn't relent, "What? It's fucking Dean, jackass. You know - the ghost of Harrison? Mr. Gone? Remember that guy that nobody could find for like, I dunno, half a decade? He's been back for like, twelve hours. How long do you think someone like Dean can stay under the radar? I'm amazed Sam's dad doesn't have some kind of APB on him."

"Then how come nobody told me he was here?"

"What? Isn't that why you showed up?"

"No. I showed up because I called Sissy and she said you were at Ferris Park. So I went to Ferris Park. And who do I see? My wife's ex-boyfriend who was supposed to be like eaten by wolves years ago."

Dre paused a bit to take it in, "So Sissy didn't tell you that she brought Dean back?"

"No. Fuck no."

"That evil little minx."

Dre felt her skin cool off into the evening air. Sissy. God damn Sissy. How fucking bored can one person be that they have to milk one surprise for all it's worth. Sure, getting Dean back home was a worthy stunt - but not worthy of screwing with James.

The car stopped at the bottom of the hill by the old school. Dean used to walk Dre back down this hill when they'd go back to his place after class. Sometimes they'd meet up with Sam by the lakeside on the way to see whatever bag of tricks he'd gathered. James had been there sometimes, surely. Surely he had, but Dre didn't seem to be able to remember him there. She could remember Dean talking to him sometimes, but it was like he hadn't been there at all.

"Earth calling Dre?"

"Yeah," Dre responded in a bit of a monotone, "Sorry. I just thought Sissy told you. Didn't realize what a shock you had." She folded her arms, "Still ... you didn't have to punch him,"

James gripped the wheel with his bad hand, causing a quick wave of pain to shudder down his arm. It had been a while since he had punched anyone, close fisted or otherwise, and he wasn't sure if it was supposed to hurt this much. Even while his wife was keeping on, he was worried about whether or not he'd have to head to the hospital in the morning. He couldn't remember the last time he had talked to Dean. He did remember Dre calling, Dre sobbing, Dre going on about the night Dean had left her on a porch. By that time, he had been done thinking about Dean Forrester. Been done for a good solid year. So maybe he didn't have to punch Dean ... but it felt awful good for the wrong thing to do.

"He had it comin'. You know he did. Hell, I'm surprised you hadn't laid him out by the time I got there." James mumbled and then added more clearly, "I'm not the one who left you standing. I mean Jesus, what was it last - even money that Dean had joined a cult against him plummeting to his death while training for the Special Forces?"

Dre focused on her husband; his head was still sporting the simple short haircut he had since she'd

met him. Almost a crew, but not quite. The simple white tee underneath his year old button-down was from those days as well - she recognized the stain he got from Prom. He took Angie Betterden. She'd never seen wine explode like that. She smiled and stifled a laugh, which only resulted in a snort.

"Right," She pushed through her smile, "Special Forces."

The next light was already red as they rolled up to it. James tapped at the gear shift. He rubbed his chin and took a breath before saying, "Is he staying long?"

"Looking to say sorry? Feeling guilty?"

"Not really. Just wondering."

Dre kept her smile and shook her head, "It's Dean. I kinda doubt it. He's been upstate doing God knows what, apparently he just lives on this golf course. I think he's a pro caddie or something. It's like a bad teen comedy. He's Bill Murray before he went crazy after some gopher."

Dre breathed deeply in through her nose and wiped away something non-existent.

"Any ideas why he left?" James asked, "Anything at all?"

Dre looked at her empty hand. She thought about it. Me. You. The trees. "No," she answered, "no good ones."

James drove on, hanging a left. At this time of night there was almost no traffic. Past the streetlights and signs was mostly pitch darkness, with splotches of late night windows in the distance moving slowly around the objects on the side of the road. Parked car. Parked car. Parked car. Tree. Parked car. Lamp post.

"Well," he said, "maybe that's all for the best. You can't just stay away like that and then pick it all up again. What am I supposed to say to someone who does that?"

Dre shrugged, "Sorry I married your old girlfriend as soon as you weren't looking?"

"Jesus."

"Well, you kinda did."

"OK. Fuck off. That's not what happened."

"Relax. I'm just fucking with you."

"It's not damn funny."

"Chill out, sweetness. It's nice of you to get all male and stuff over me, really. If you want to beat Dean up and piss all over him - I guess that's really OK with me. Seriously. The nicest thing Dean could have done is possibly gone and died upstate."

"Dre," James sighed.

"What?" Dre raised her hands slightly, "At least then we could have had a nice funeral. Everyone could have dressed up real nice and said a lot of nice things about him. Then we could have a great party and gone to bed. The Great Mystery of Dean would have this simple ending."

"That's still horrible."

"No, you were right before. What's horrible is leaving all your friends behind and expecting anything more than a couple words and maybe the occasional fist. I don't know what the fuck Sissy was thinking. This was truly a stupid idea."

As they neared home, James was driving slower. The frantic stream of car, car, tree, car turning into a trickle and then just a drip. He was being intentionally silent now. He had avoided a major fight with Dre and every question that popped up he silenced.

Then one got the better of him, "So why go see him at all?"

Dre looked at James and then slowly turned back to the open window. This wasn't the neighborhood of their youth. They had moved here after James got his promotion. All of the houses were smaller than what their parents owned. The whole block felt shorter. Maybe it wasn't planned from the same part of the city or maybe it was added on at a much different time. The streets were smaller. Smaller bushes around smaller buildings with smaller numbers to tell them apart between their smaller lawns. She blinked twice as James slowed into their driveway. She thought of something Dean had said not long ago at the park's mini golf course.

This is just like my life. Only smaller. And more plastic.

James braked and pushed the gear shift into park. He twisted the keys out of the ignition.

"I guess," Dre started.

They both sat there, hung inside a pause trapped within either door ... waiting for an opening until someone spoke or left the car. Dre took a small breath from the nose. She put her hand on the door's handle.

"I guess I just wanted to see what years of special forces does to a person."