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Master Sergeant Dustin James nudged a clod of dirt back into place with the toe of his boot. The rich black soil of the Portland Oregon Rose Garden simply dissolved and left a blackish patch of mud on the worn leather. Today was the Winter Solstice. It was raining and about three degrees above freezing. Pretty typical. He stared down at the *Rosa canina*.

This rose had been propagated from a cutting of the oldest documented rose bush on the planet. The rose now huddled,

dormant and pruned back for the winter. In bloom, it was the least assuming rose in the garden, a single layer of five pink petals around a yellow center. Four days before Christmas, it was a cluster of frosty twigs decorated by bright red rose hips.

Most people passed it by, but not his father, the head gardener of the nearby Japanese Garden. He had visited the rose every day after work on his walk home. Dusty and his mother had often walked up to meet him at the old Briar Rose.

“I met your mother by this rose. We married right here.” Being a man of few words, his father never embellished the story. It wasn’t the most scenic spot in the garden, but with ten thousand rose bushes in a couple hundred neatly tended beds, not bad either. The fact that they’d married here on the Winter Solstice when nothing bloomed had been a little odd perhaps, but then his parents had been rather eccentric.

Dusty had come home for this Christmas, even though his parents had

been gone for three years. Their small condo now lay empty most of the year due to a crashed tourist helicopter. An old Bell 206 called in an engine failure and then auto-rotated right into an Icelandic volcano, no survivors.

That Dusty was a crew chief and mechanic on a Sikorsky Black Hawk for the U.S. Army's 160th SOAR had made the loss beyond ironic. His job was to fly, fight, and keep the Special Operations Aviation Regiment choppers running perfectly despite war conditions. His parents had died, probably from a broken fan belt.

So, any time that he was home, but especially on the Winter Solstice, he made a point of coming to visit their rose as his parents had done so often for their three decades together.

"I'm glad you went together, at least you got that much," he told the sleeping rose. With no ashes to scatter, he'd gathered some ash from the volcano and scattered it onto the rose's soil. His parents belonged

together here. His father, a quiet man who loved visiting the garden's roses, such a contrast to his artistic Japanese garden, and his wild mother, a true child of the sixties, who had never understood Dusty's choice to serve. They appeared such an oddly-matched couple, the slight Eurasian and the tall, busty blonde. "She brings me to life like the spring warmth." "He keeps me steady with his deep roots."

When would Dusty find that? His own dreams had just been pruned back hard. He'd found out, on no notice, that he had a week's leave. He'd rushed back to Portland only to discover that Nancy had meant to Dear Dusty him, but forgotten, as usual, to follow through. Another woman who hadn't understood his need to serve his country, his need to protect that which was so precious. She was living with some software geek named Ralph.

Dusty's few friends still in the area were busy with pre-holiday family stuff. Some invited him over for a meal, but being a third

wheel in some other couple's holiday wasn't his first choice, nor his second or third.

On call, Dusty really didn't have time to go anywhere els—

The cry of pain echoing across the garden snapped him out of his damp reverie. His Special Forces training had him sprinting down the garden path before he even fully registered what was happening. One hand slapped for his sidearm, and came away empty. The other slapped for the med kit on his SARVSO survival vest, but he wore only a rain slick over his heavy sweater.

The cry sounded again, a woman in agonizing pain. Halfway across the garden from his parents' rose, he spotted the source. Not that it was hard. On a rainy, winter Friday morning there was only one other person in the garden.

She knelt in the mud at the edge of a garden bed.

Dusty rushed up beside her. "Where are you hurt?" Seeing no obvious wounds he started unzipping her parka.

Her punch came out of nowhere.

She hit him square in the solar plexus so fast he had no time to block it. He tumbled backward among the pruned roses, the thorns carving painful scratches across his cheek and bare hands.

“What the hell are you doing?” the woman shouted down at him. Her hands were poised to strike another blow. He recognized a Taekwondo black belt when he met one and held his hands palm out.

Dusty rolled slowly from the rose bushes onto the wet grass and inspected his hands. “Ow! Shit, that hurts,” he flexed a hand and felt every little scratch.

“Answer the damned question!”

He eyed her more carefully. It wasn't your average woman who issued commands to men half-again their size. He blinked the rain from his eyes. She had well-defined cheek bones, arched eyebrows that indicated brunette hair would be hiding under her hood, and eyes the brown of autumn leaves. He shook his head to clear it.

“You sounded like you’d been shot.”

“Soldier?” She watched him closely.

“Yes.”

She settled back on her heels in perfect balance, clearly poised so that she could attack easily if she decided it was needed.

“Okay. Maybe.” She puffed out a breath.
“I’m fine.”

“You look fine, but you didn’t sound it.” She did look fine. Not the white of porcelain, but refinement shone in her features. He considered mentioning how much he’d love to draw those features with the artist pencils his mother had given to him as a young child. He didn’t know if he’d ever seen so much personality in a woman’s features before. It was a face made to laugh and smile, but was now drawn grim and closed.

“I...” In the single word he heard all of the wounded distress return to her voice. She glanced back at the bed of roses she knelt in.

“They cut down the tree,” she whispered as softly as the rain.

Dusty looked around, trying to picture this part of the garden in his memory. A tree had been here, a big one.

“It was their willow tree.”

That was it.

She pressed the heel of her palm against the center of chest.

“It makes my heart hurt.”