

Steeped

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Steeped

by [OrionLady](#)

Summary

Steve's mother might not have taught him a lot about how to open up and care for other people—but she did believe in the healing power of a hot beverage. Sometimes, faced with his partner's pain, it's all he has.

Five times Steve makes Danny a cup of tea and one time Danny beats him to it.

Notes

I woke up with yet another whole mcfreaking fic idea in my head over Christmas break and basically wrote one vignette a day over six days. Plus, I have Feelings™ about not only the inherent comfort of tea, but Steve trying to take care of people when he hasn't really been taught how aside from shooting threats and getting justice.

This fic is set roughly between seasons 2-7, not based around any particular episodes. All tea definitions are amalgamations taken from information found on Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Pique Tea.

Bon appetit!

Earl Grey

Earl Grey – (*n.*) a black-tea blend flavored with bergamot oil. This tea is known to help with autophagy and can have a calming effect.

Steve knows it's bad when he pulls into the driveway after a trying case and Danny's car is already parked there.

Just the fact that he somehow beat Steve to his own home sets off alarm bells—they left the Palace *at the same time*; Danny can never complain about reckless driving again—let alone why he'd come here instead of his apartment.

Steve indulges in a moment of just sitting there, staring at the Camaro. Brows knit.

Well...that's fine, he thinks. It's not like this is a rare thing. Danny comes by for beers after a long day at least once a month, sometimes as much as a few times a week. Steve can play host for the night.

Then he gets out and sets his hand on the Camaro hood—stone cold.

Danny beat him here by a *lot*.

Steve doesn't even bother fishing for his keys, simply pushing at the door knob. It opens easily, and he can only hope this will be true of Danny as well.

He's been off for a few days. Sometimes he's quiet for long spells and other times Steve will catch him staring off into space, eyes glazed, taking in nothing whatsoever.

"Hey..."

That's about all Steve manages.

A whistle of air zips past him, which upon closer inspection turns out to be Danny. He paces in a tight little circuit from one end of the living room to the other. His hair's frazzled on one side, the right, mauled by Danny's dominant hand being run through it on repeat.

His white button up has long since come untucked, rolled up to the elbows, striped socks nearly colliding with the corner of the coffee table when Danny spins to start the loop all over again.

He's honest to God *panting*.

"Hey," Steve says again, louder this time, with a little authority injected into his tone. A feeble and useless attempt to get Danny to stop moving. "What's going on, man? You okay?"

Danny ignores him, of course.

His eyes dart either to the floor or the wall, and in this too Steve senses he's not really seeing anything. With a sigh, Steve bypasses him for the kitchen. He dumps his gun and badge in the junk drawer. This habit is a new one, ever since he met Danny. In fact, Danny's presence changed a lot of things, areas of growth that Steve is still discovering and learning to enjoy.

Normally he'd just leave his gun on the table, but ever since little eyes and hands started to inhabit his home more often...

Steve's hands pause in shutting the drawer. Eyes wide, he hurries back out in the living room.

"Danno? Everything good with Gracie?"

It's the magic word, a bit of a trump card really.

Sure enough, her name captures Danny's attention at once. Or at least part of it. "Yes. She's perfectly fine..." He checks his phone. "Just finishing cheerleading practice at the moment."

Steve is about to push and demand more of an explanation, but Danny opens his mouth first.

"Is this Mary?"

It's not exactly the coda to their non-conversation Steve expected. He's fallen into the trap of assuming Danny's anger is volatile and out of control, like everyone else does who only know him at a surface level.

However, with Danny there usually are no explosive yells or tears or throwing of breakable objects.

There's just Danny, fixated on...

Following his eyes, Steve sees a faded picture on the bookshelf. It depicts a tiny girl in a fuchsia bucket hat, grinning for the camera despite an ice cream cone melting down her hands in gloopy streams.

"Yeah, it is." Steve steps up beside his partner. Glancing askance, he spies a slight tremble in Danny's fists. "She's three here and I remember it was her first time having ice cream at the beach. Heavenly Hash is her favourite flavour to this day."

Danny's mouth does a funny twist. At least this photo has somehow done the impossible and stopped his agitated motions. He cants his head.

"She's really small," he notes, with emphasis.

Steve blinks. "I suppose. Mary was always under the growth chart for her age, just like I was off it."

"So small." Danny's voice is quieter when he repeats this, still studying Mary's photo. He sounds so devastated that Steve feels like he's been roundhouse slapped.

His first instinct is to reach out and touch Danny, because that's what they do when the other person looks as if they might do something stupid. Danny's tactility gives *Steve* access to new ways of living, a permission slip to brush a hand over Danny whenever he wants.

That first year of working with him, Steve almost felt drunk on it.

The Navy psychologist made a note about 'touch starvation' on his file all those years ago during a mandated review, and Steve bristled at it. He lived his life in the sardine tin-quarter presence of other men. Constantly. Squished up against him in the barracks and huddled over his back to use binoculars and jostling his arm to wake him for last watch.

How could he *possibly* be touch starved?

Now...now Steve gets it. Comradery touch is not the same thing as tender friendship touch.

There's a language to it, one Steve speaks more fluently every day. Touch can be harsh, like a swear word. Stroking someone's hair says an earnest, 'I love you.' A bracing back pat can bolster, encourage someone to find their nerve.

All of this means that Steve is dying to rest a hand on Danny's shoulder. Get his partner to look him in the eye and spill the beans.

But Danny's simmering anger throws up a caution flare to anyone in a mile radius. It's there in bright red ribbons across his face and wound around his neck, climbing up to his ears and into bloodless lips around grit teeth.

"You're a good parent, Danno." The words slip from Steve's mouth like a note passed in class—murmured, barely noticed, a messy scrawl of humanity.

Danny straightens in a snap. "Apparently not."

Steve's frown deepens. He watches the fury, the self loathing, self *doubt*, slather together along his friend's face in an ugly masque.

"Charlie?" Steve asks, even though he doesn't need to.

"She promised." Danny huffs out between his teeth. "Shame on me for believing that, huh?"

"Who, Rachel?"

Danny paces in a teeny tiny circle barely larger than a hula hoop.

Steve's mind scrambles. It's not Charlie's birthday. Not a holiday coming up. He's done his hospital appointments, poor kid. The news of Charlie's paternity came out eight months ago and it's been hard for everyone to adjust, to reconcile how Rachel could lie about such a thing.

In a slow, agonizing motion that raises hairs on Steve's arms—Danny loosens one fist and then cinches it, tighter than before. His eyes dilate with repressed rage.

If Steve floundered before, he's downright drowning now. Rarely has he seen Danny so full of one-dimensional ire. He steps closer, casting a shadow over Danny's body, but doesn't touch. "What'd she do, Danno?"

His near-whisper does the trick. It's same the tone Steve uses with traumatized victims on a case, not that Danny notices. Thank God. Steve has a strong hunch Danny will punch anything that gets within his personal space bubble right now, including him.

Riling Danny further is not an option.

"Rachel and I had an agreement this month: she and Stan teach him how to ride his first bike and I..." Danny runs his hand through the left side of his hair this time. His eyes are big and wide and a little wet, though Steve can't tell if this is from his heightened blood pressure or he's about to cry. Either way, Steve feels his heart shatter. "She promised I could take him to swim with the dolphins tomorrow."

It hits Steve a beat later, the colossal significance of this. "Because that was your first big outing with Grace when you moved here."

"Yeah, thanks to you. I should have known Rachel wouldn't keep her promise. That she still doesn't trust me."

"She won't let you take Charlie?" Steve can't help it, the way his volume rises in affront at the idea of Rachel being petty and rescinding her promise on something Charlie would love so much. That's two victims in her wake.

"No, Steve." A vein flutters in Danny's neck. His voice is soft in that dangerous, alligator-still way he uses sometimes to interrogate a criminal. "She took him to swim with the dolphins already. Today, while I was at work. Pulled him out of school at lunch, made a day of it and everything."

A white page of absolute nothing replaces Steve's thoughts. The words shoot him point blank, ears ringing.

There's no way such a thing actually happened. That Rachel would, *could*, do something so low just to deliberately spite Danny.

No, not just to spite him—to *steal* from him. It's theft, plain and simple. She took the joy of something unique to Danny and his kids and bankrupted him of it.

Red usurps the white in a violent lurch.

Steve's hands *hurt* with the need to drive over and snatch Charlie out of Rachel's arms. It's such a strong urge that he staggers away a few steps.

Danny is quite frankly the best parent Steve has ever met. End of story. A little overprotective and fretting maybe, but he always puts those kids first, in everything. If Rachel can't see that, then she's negligent in a way Steve barely has coherent words for. It's blasphemous to even

consider robbing Danny of spending time with Charlie, let alone in a way that's sacred to he and Grace already.

Danny breathes out again through his nose, faster this time. Picking up speed. "Why, Steve? Is my job really so dangerous that she'd rather I not be in his life?"

"Don't you dare think that way. *None of this* is your fault."

Steve's growl is louder and harder than even he expects; it's no surprise when Danny jumps. He reddens more, somehow, and there's a flash of teeth when his lips draw back.

"Maybe she's right."

"Charlie is lucky to have you."

"How can you say that?" Danny barks back. "I have no hope of competing with his mother and he's only just starting to understand that I'm his real father! All he's ever known is Stan."

"That's her fault, not yours."

Danny paces away again, like he doesn't even hear this. "How could I not know? How could I not see that he's *my son*?"

Void of the ability to comfort him using touch, with his words not getting through, Steve's own heart races. He has zero idea of how to help his partner beyond these methods, how to support him through such a distressing loss. This isn't something his upbringing prepared him for. Professional training doesn't cover distraught best friends when they can't get to know a son they never knew they had.

"Sit down, alright? Just..." Steve points at the couch until Danny drifts near it. He doesn't stop pacing, but the proximity is a start. "Just wait here."

Steve all but runs into the kitchen to...to what? What on earth is he supposed to do? He's practicing motions he's seen other people go through before. Emotionally fraught situations require running into the kitchen to grab things that will comfort, let the person know they're not alone.

Danny came here, Steve realizes. *At least he knew to go somewhere he feels safe when he's upset.*

It's a start.

Steve begins rummaging through the cupboards and fridge. Completely clueless.

A beer. Steve nods to himself, eyeing the dwindling pack of Longboards. *No man ever felt worse for wear with a beer in his hand.*

This feels flat, however. A band aid pasted over a stab wound.

Not to mention that it is *also* just a mimic of what he's seen other men do. Maybe its comfort is not as real as everyone thinks.

Steve senses that handing Danny alcohol when he's like this will result in broken lamps or broken words. Not that Danny's a mean drunk or someone likely to lose control of himself, far from it. But he's been pushed past an already stretched line of long-suffering today, one Rachel can't get back, and alcohol will only magnify those feelings.

A telltale trembling is just starting in Steve's hands when he opens up a little used spice cupboard over the stove.

And halts.

Behind the salt, a small box with navy lettering stares back at him.

Where did this even come from? Steve has no memory of buying the generic tea brand and by the thin coating of dust on top, it's been months since anyone helped themselves. Maybe Mary left it here on her last visit or Aunt Deb sent them a box among the yearly Christmas parcels.

Earl Grey.

Huh.

Steve's teetering on just this side of desperate and thus grabs the box without thinking.

Worst case scenario, Danny throws it back in his face and Steve gets a wet shirt for his troubles. A friendship faux pas they can laugh about later.

The electric kettle takes a minute to boil. While it does, Steve digs out an old, fat mug, the one Freddie bought him in Morocco with a camel on the front. The enamel is chipped in places, thanks to years spent in Steve's rucksack, but somehow the thought of how Freddie would sympathize with this situation, not getting to spend time with a child, makes its use tonight apropos.

Freddie and Danny would probably have gotten along like a house on fire. The thought warms Steve more than he expects, with none of that nettle pain in his chest he normally gets thinking about his friend.

The kettle pops and tears Steve from his musings. He holds the little paper tab and string while pouring hot water over the tea bag, to keep it from falling in. A lemony citrus smell wafts into the air along with the bergamot.

Here goes nothing.

Steve steps back out into the living room and score—Danny's actually sitting on the couch. Hunched over his knees, mind you, head in his hands. But at least he's off his feet.

The red in his neck has also dissipated, bloodshot eyes now at half mast.

“I don’t uh...” Steve walks over the hardwood with careful steps, making sure not to spill. “I don’t know if you like sugar or milk in yours.”

Danny’s mouth drops open and Steve literally holds his breath. He doesn’t inhale again until the mug is presented on the coffee table in front of Danny’s shaky hands.

“You have tea in this bachelor pad?”

Steve squints, trying to read that strange note in Danny’s voice. “I’m as surprised as you are, trust me.”

It’s the second most shocking event in Steve’s day—

Danny lights up in a small smile, one of those pure, genuine ones Steve doesn’t get to see very often. It makes him look ten years younger in seconds, his eyes happy for a brief moment while he picks up the tea and blows over the water.

He’s stunning and vulnerable and brimming with goodness when he smiles like this.

“I like my tea black with nothing added. Thanks, Steve.” Danny looks away from looping the string around the mug handle. “What?”

Steve catches himself gawking in straight up *wonder* at this singular moment. At Danny. “I, uh, didn’t know you like tea so much.”

Danny rolls his eyes. “I was married to a British person for ten years, Steve, not to mention my mother who thinks tea is an art form. Though I do have to ask...a camel?”

“Freddie loved that thing.” And it tastes oddly like relief for Steve to say his name out loud, before Danny’s curious face in the cozy air of familiarity that is the McGarrett living room. He’s not sure why, but he doesn’t look this gift horse in the mouth. “We weren’t supposed to sneak off base while stationed somewhere. One night, though, Freddie dragged me out to the market and bought this mug for my birthday...sorry, Danno. You probably don’t want to hear about this right now.”

“No, no.” Danny waves an ever-expressive hand. “Are you kidding me? More dirt on baby SEAL Steve in his younger, even more reckless years? I’ll take it.”

Steve grins along, but he makes sure he has Danny’s eyes when the moment of humour passes. “We’ll figure it out, Danny. Find something special for you and Charlie to do together. Rachel can’t have all of his heart, no matter how hard she tries.”

Danny stares at him in surprise. “I know that, Steve.”

“I’m just saying...” Steve frowns at himself, then reclaims Danny’s gaze. “A child deserves to know his father.”

Danny sinks deeper into the couch, face soft. “I agree, and he will, babe.”

They talk late into the night, laugh, get angry some more. Danny definitely throws one of those couch pillows. But the escalated feel of crisis washes away after that, while Danny sips at his tea and lets Steve tell him stories about Freddie as a distraction. He's calm, all things considered.

Steve doesn't stop being in awe of this the whole night.

When the last cold drop is gone, Danny sets his mug down with a rueful snort. "My grandmother used to say tea is the modern day 'flower language.' Nutty, right?"

"Yeah," Steve says, absent. "Nutty."

His mind, however, doesn't stop racing for a long time.

Blueberry

Chapter Summary

Steve's concern grows, along with realization. His hand tenses. "Danny...how long were you sopping wet last night?"

"Dunno. Few hours."

Blueberry – (n.) *A fruit (genus Vaccinium) that can be dried and made into a loose tea. High in vitamin C and anthocyanins, this tea helps strengthen the body's immune system.*

He's not crazy, okay? He's not.

This is Steve's mantra the whole drive to the mall and the whole walk in. For thirty minutes, that's the only thing running through his head.

Sure he invests every spare minute in researching and *sure*, okay, he bookmarks web pages on his phone to read later. But these are normal person activities and just because he has an interest in something, doesn't mean he's gone insane. Hobby doesn't feel like quite the right word, even though it fulfills the expected number of hours for that—yet it's exactly what he'll tell anyone if they ask.

The guys in Steve's old unit would probably think him crazy, but then they didn't call him 'babe' and save his life and teach him how to love kids and drive Steve up the wall every single day.

It's become a *mission*. Yes, that's the right word for it.

And Steve is nothing if not successful at completing mission objectives. Supposing he treats this the same as any other operational goal or parameter, then there's nothing to worry about. Nothing whatsoever.

(In theory. It doesn't make him feel any better about standing outside a boutique shop in cargo pants.)

He's thrown himself into understanding it mind, body, and soul, staying up late reading articles and jotting notes on his phone when he sees it listed on restaurant menus.

If the mission states that he has to do recon at an artisanal tea shop at ten on a Saturday morning, then so be it.

And maybe in another lifetime Steve would feel stupid. Using his precious free time to figure out what's so magical about tea that its very presence would make Danny feel better, but being a good investigator means understanding all angles of a situation, and so here he is.

Alone. In a tea shop.

Upon more in-depth research, tea is not limited to *black* or *earl grey* (apparently those are kind of the same thing) as the nice lady at the tea shop explains. An incomprehensible range of flavours, acidities, and plant bases make up the world's favourite drink. For instance, there's an entire wall dedicated just to herbal teas.

Steve feels, to put it mildly, lost.

But he's taken on this mission and now he has to complete it.

"I'll take one of each."

The manager flaps a startled hand. "One of..."

"A sample of each," Steve insists. "There are different categories, right? Like white, herbal, green."

"Yes, but—"

"Then I want to try them all."

The woman looks frazzled, like Steve feels on the inside. Then she grabs the reins of her composure to begin sliding jars off the shelves. "Are there any flavours you'd prefer? Any allergies?"

Steve sorts through them and realizes he might not know Danny as well as he claimed. What would he prefer?

"Whatever flavours are simple, classic."

"Classic." She bobs her head in a way that reminds Steve of his old drill sergeant. "I can work with that."

Twenty minutes later, Steve is out the mall doors holding a bag stuffed with tinier bags. 'Loose tea,' they call these palmfuls of aromatic leaves. Their pleasant smell cloaks him all the way back to the truck.

Once buckled and ready to go, quest complete, Steve doesn't turn the ignition right away. Instead, he stares at the bag on his passenger's seat, looking small and at home like Danny does when he sits there.

"I'm losing it," Steve decides.

And for a month, he forgets about the tea altogether.

Danny manages to threaten Rachel with lawyering up enough that she relents and allows Danny extended time with his son. He and Charlie visit the zoo in lieu of their missed dolphin trip and it's a smashing success. Charlie doesn't stop chattering about Saharan tortoises for a week straight.

It's to the point that he and Steve have developed a game where the little boy will get 'stuck' on his back like a turtle and Uncle Steve has to come to the rescue by flipping him back over on his stomach, all to a chorus of giggling.

Danny's taken more photos of this adorable process than is strictly healthy.

The team stops a jewellery heist crime spree. Chin barbecues for them on the weekends. The world is, if not perfect, at least normal again.

Then one morning Danny comes in looking like a corpse.

None of them notice at first, wound up as they are trying to find proof their scuzzy CEO suspect embezzled money from the company's charity orphanage fund. The situation has required dash-and-run updates, long hours all week, and being on their toes without a break.

Not to mention it's rainy season and mud gets *everywhere*. Even Kono's started wearing sleeves and Chin gives up his motorbike for the foreseeable future.

So Steve doesn't catch Danny spiralling.

Not until he barges into Danny's office to see him nodding off into a file folder.

Steve's hand is still on the door and he freezes there in surprise.

Out of everyone on the team, Danny has been the most adamant about catching this crook, especially since the lost funds means the orphans' group home might have to close. It's why he agreed to comb through the CEO's financials. With his background, Steve would have asked him to do it anyway. Danny's always the best when it comes to forensic accounting.

"Danny?"

Despite Steve's attempt at keeping his voice quiet, Danny startles.

"Hm'wah!" His head shoots up from the desk. A crease mars his forehead where it was pressed to the back of his hands and a watch strap. He blinks around the room, arms sliding paper across the desk in a knee-jerk motion.

"Just me, Danny." Steve makes it inside and closes the door, thankful the blinds in Danny's office are already halfway drawn. With the sleepy, confused way Danny looks right now, Steve feels a strange flutter of protectiveness for him. "You not get any sleep last night or what?"

"M'sorry." And Danny genuinely looks it, scowling at himself and the CEO's work financials in the folder. "Closed my eyes to think and must have dozed off."

Steve opens his mouth to reassure him that it's okay, they're all being pushed to their limits on this one...when he catches a slight sheen on Danny's brow. And his nose is red.

Steve's around the desk in an instant.

"What are you doing?" Danny leans away from Steve's palm where it beelines for his forehead.

"You've got a fever."

"No, I do not, you unmannered animal. Get away."

Steve takes the liberty of ignoring this last part. He rests his hand on Danny's skin while his partner grumbles. There's something sacrosanct about the top of Danny's brow under his thumb, the inherent treasure of being trusted to touch him like this.

He's warmer than he should be. Not enough for a hospital visit, but enough to tell Steve that Danny shouldn't be at work.

"It's just a cold, Steve."

"Next you'll tell me you're 'fine.'"

"That's because I am."

Steve slides his hand around and down to the back of Danny's neck, which feels more like a twisted towline. He kneads at taut muscles.

Running back through the start of the day, Steve can see now that Danny's more bundled up than normal, with dark circles under each eye, and his voice is just congested enough to be noticeable.

Danny goes boneless at Steve's ministrations, an unexpected development Steve notes with a raised brow. Interesting. Normally Danny would have pulled away by now, barriers raised. Now, he's putty under Steve's hand.

"Something happen between yesterday and now?" he asks carefully. "You seemed fine at supper."

Danny shrugs. "It rained."

"Okay." Steve thinks back and yes, it did indeed downpour last night, the windy kind that bites skin in sharp bullets. It was the whole reason they had take out at the Palace instead of going for shrimp at Kamekona's. "And?"

"And I had to change one of the Camaro tires off the highway on the way back from Rachel's. Got a flat."

Steve's concern grows, along with realization. His hand tenses. "Danny...how long were you sopping wet last night?"

“Dunno. Few hours.”

“Didn’t you go home and shower?”

Danny shakes his head. “Had to pick up Grace from practice and drop her at Rachel’s first, because her meeting ran late. Just kinda...fell asleep in front of the TV when I made it home. Ended up showering this morning.”

Danny’s lids droop before they snap back up and his muscles go rigid in an effort to stay alert. A winch takes up residence in Steve’s stomach. The mental image of an already exhausted Danny having to stop in a cold, torrential downpour to change a tire on his hands and knees, shivering his way to sleep, and then coming in *early* the next day makes Steve feel a bit ill himself.

His hand finds a roost on the back of Danny’s neck again, more for his own comfort than Danny’s. A thready heartbeat whispers against Steve’s palm.

“You should go home, Danny. Get some actual sleep. We’ve got this covered here.”

“I can’t and you know it.” Danny rubs at his eyes, breathing through his mouth with his nose out of commission. “If this guy gets away with it, if he walks...”

“We’ll catch him, Danno. Maybe not today, but eventually.”

Danny’s eyes flash. “Eventually won’t save those kids from becoming homeless.”

Steve sighs. There’s no arguing with Danny when it comes to kids. Steve has yet to win any discussion about it, be it personal or case related. And the amazing thing is—Danny’s usually right.

It is then, suddenly, that Steve remembers the bag.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Danny calls after him.

Steve knocks on the office window while jogging by it. “Give me five minutes!”

After a quick trip to his truck, then the break room, Steve emerges victorious with one of Kono’s surfing merch mugs. She’s off chasing a lead, but Steve doesn’t think she’ll mind him borrowing it.

Five minutes is plenty of time for Danny to have dozed off again. Right there with his head in the crook of his elbow.

Steve stands in the doorway and listens to his laboured breathing. It rattles in wet, *skr-hiss* stereo. He sounds like a wreck. Danny might not be dying, but he’s got to be miserable and achy.

The last time Steve sounded anything close to this, it *felt* like dying.

He lied—this looks more akin to the flu or pneumonia than a cold.

Steve waffles on whether to make that go-home-right-now-you-sound-like-death suggestion an order, but pulling rank never works with Danny, or any of the team for that matter. He'd like to think he's earned their respect rather than forced it. No sense breaking that streak now.

Steve kneels next to the desk. He keeps his voice low, soothing, just in case there's a headache to go with that congestion. "Danno. Brought you something."

Danny wakes slower this time, one eye peeking out from his elbow first, followed a minute later by the other. Steve sets the broad heft of his hand on Danny's bicep and this wakes him further.

He looks *terrible*.

Steve hides a wince. "I can't force you to go home, but I can make sure you drink your fluids."

Delayed on the uptake, only then does Danny notice Kono's mug Steve placed by his lamp. Bleary eyes watch steam curl into the sunlight.

Steve vows with himself that today is a paperwork day—no car chases or gun fights for either of them. It scares him to imagine what could go wrong when they're compromised, the slow reaction time, Danny by his own body and Steve by the incessant need to make sure his partner gets home to his kids in one piece.

"You made me tea?" Danny croaks.

"White blueberry," Steve confirms. Factually, like this is any other sit rep. "It's supposed to have lots of antioxidants to help when you're sick. Plus caffeine. Can't go wrong with caffeine."

Danny lifts the mug in pale fingers and does a double take at the chain snaking out instead of string and a tag. "This is loose tea. In a *tea infuser*."

"Yeah, so?"

Steve prays he doesn't sound as nervous as he feels.

"So I'm just surprised, is all." Danny takes a tentative sip. Then he smiles that idiotic smile that makes Steve think the world might not be such a hideous place after all. "Thanks, Steve. Tastes good."

"It'll help your throat, if nothing else."

"Mmm."

Steve strokes Danny's bicep and then quickly stops when it threatens to put him out again. Danny almost drops the tea before Steve catches it in his other hand. He has to stabilize the bottom of the mug, Danny's grip unstable.

“Will you at least go lay down on my office couch?” It’s a sneaky ploy to both get him to rest and so Steve can keep a better eye on him. “Just a cat nap. I’ll even wake you after thirty minutes.”

“I have a perfectly good couch right here.”

“This old thing? This, Danny, is a love seat. Not conducive to sleeping at all. Mine’s bigger—and comfier. Even Lou agrees with me and he’s a mountain.”

Danny sees through this in an instant, casting Steve a wry look, but doesn’t call him on it. “Fine. But I’m setting an alarm.”

“Fair enough.” Steve steps back to let Danny stand, though he hovers until he’s sure Danny is steady. His breathing sounds worse at this angle, somehow. At least he’s awake enough now to hold the mug without spilling.

Steve lets Danny get himself settled in his office while drawing the blinds to keep noonday sun out. He’s grateful for the couch being right across from his desk. It grants him just the right view to watch Danny out of the corner of his eye while typing up a report for the governor on his laptop.

Danny drags Aunt Deb’s handmade linen throw off the back of the couch and wriggles around until he looks like a very snug burrito. Only one arm pokes out, to keep sipping his tea. He’s on his side, as usual, a precarious balancing act for swallowing.

Something about the cozy sight softens Steve’s face before he can censor it. How young Danny looks in this moment.

Danny’s tone matches his groggy face, half slurred. “Think I figured out how he’s laundering money anyway.”

“For real?” Steve perks up and stops typing. “You’re barely coherent.”

“Rude.”

“How? What tipped you off?”

Danny shrugs again, oddly modest to the end. “We’ve been looking at big, obvious expenses. I think he has fake names on the payroll, a janitorial staff that’s way bigger than it should be for the office he works out of. He...” Danny yawns with a small shiver. “He’s using it to embezzle funds.”

Floored all the way down to his toes, Steve shakes his head and fires off a quick text to Chin. “You’re something else, pal. Well done.”

Danny doesn’t reply, though he finishes his tea and sets it down on the floor. Steve knows there’s no sense being surprised, since this is his partner’s specialty, but he is. Danny’s eye for detail never ceases to amaze.

Steve searches through the CEO's financials for a few minutes and sure enough—he personally handles the employee cheques, made out to people whose names, one by one, begin to come back fake or deceased.

“Hey, Steve?”

Steve jolts a bit, not expecting the sudden words when Danny looks asleep already. Eyes half lidded. Cheeks flushed, burrowed in the blanket. His voice is rough but gentle, as if he's hesitating. It heralds a return of the tutelary flutter in Steve's gut.

He closes the laptop to give Danny full attention. “Yeah?”

“Where'd you learn that about blueberry tea? The antioxidant thing?”

Steve swallows. “Oh, here and there. I'm a very cultured guy, you know.”

“Is that what the kids are calling *Top Gun* and beer these days?”

“Be careful,” Steve warns, fighting a smile. “Just for that, one of these days I might poison your coffee.”

Danny doesn't miss a beat, even sick and heavy eyed. “Ha! You love me too much for that.”

Yes, Steve thinks, he does. And, well...maybe that's also why failing this mission isn't an option.

Rooibos

Chapter Summary

Steve's voice drops to a whisper. "We've got all the time in the world, Danno. I'm not going anywhere."

These words evoke from Danny the biggest tears yet, clear pearls that get lost down his neck and into Steve's couch.

Rooibos – (n.) *a small bush (Aspalathus linearis) of the legume family native to western South Africa that typically grows in nutrient-poor, sandy soils. This tea is often used to combat stress.*

At least this time Steve makes it home first.

He's just parked himself in front of a football rerun, last season's semi finals game, with a plate of nachos on the table and the last of his beer. Despite the fact it's a Wednesday, Steve feels the pull of exhaustion normally reserved for Fridays and weekend emergency calls. He doesn't know how he'll make it through the rest of the week.

Outside, a car door shuts.

Longboard bottle halfway to his lips, Steve pauses. He didn't invite anyone tonight and most of the team is off with their families. Especially in celebration of a successful, closed case.

And *thank God* for the closed case. It was a tough one, involving a child kidnapped by mercenaries who knew what they were doing and very good at it. Even Steve had trouble keeping up—case in point being the butterfly bandage on his eyebrow where a merc nearly blinded him using a piece of broken glass.

Not to mention hasty, thrown together rescue plans with a statistical likelihood of dying. Danny was beat red in frustration and terror disguised as anger when they whisper-argued while creeping onto the boat.

It's a miracle none of them got seriously injured. The governor himself said as much at the debriefing.

Not slams, *shuts*.

Steve corrects himself once the sound registers: a car door is closed carefully, quietly, just like the way the front door latch is pushed open and quiet feet take off their loafers.

Steve glances up, not bothering with a greeting other than a half smile. They've done this often enough, out of a need to be around other people and away from their thoughts for a while. Sometimes talking takes too much effort after a day like today.

Sometimes...sometimes just listening to each other eat or putter around is enough.

Quiet hands drop quiet keys. Quiet breathing lets out a quiet sigh.

Danny plops down next to Steve, eyes on the football game. Steve offers the plate of nachos but Danny shakes his head. For a while they actually watch the screen, until it's pitch black outside and the street is dead quiet too.

The game goes into overtime, though Steve for the life of him can't remember who kicks the winning field goal.

It should be eerie, sitting in total, wordless quiet with a man who—by account of his own smokescreen behaviour—doesn't know the meaning of the word. Silence isn't in Danny's vocabulary, at least to most people.

But then most people don't know him like Steve, both a privilege and a weight perched on his chest, and this isn't the first time two of them have sat in comfortable quiet, not saying a word.

Granted, they don't happen often and never for this long. When they do, usually one or both of them are injured or dozing.

Danny's not so loud as everyone thinks, mostly due to the fact that words are a tool for Danny. Just like the gun on his hip or the phone in his pocket. If he feels truly at ease, guard dropped, Steve has seen him give little more than monosyllabic responses for hours.

But Danny isn't just still or relaxed...he's quiet.

Quiet quiet quiet. It's all Danny can manage tonight apparently. He hasn't even eaten or drunk anything, made even more obvious by his refusal of takeout at a late team lunch this afternoon.

Steve steals another look at Danny, worried that he missed something or his friend dozed off, and stiffens—

Tears leak from Danny's eyes one by one. Chasing each other down ashen cheeks.

He doesn't lift a finger to stop them waterfalling onto his shirt, and they too are terribly silent. Judging by the dried tracks and sticky skin, he's been crying for a while.

Danny's eyes are still on the screen. Red. Calm.

The calm surprises Steve most of all.

"Hey," Steve says anyway, because he can count on one hand the number of times he's seen Danny break down and it never fails to spook him. "The little girl is fine, Danno. We saved

her and the kidnappers are in custody. We're all good."

Danny wags his head. Doesn't say anything.

Not the case, then.

This isn't 'ugly' crying, full of snot and sobbing and puffy lids. These are tired tears, hurting in a way that costs a fortune to explain. Danny's fingers are tight around the edge of the throw pillow to his right, shoulders hunched slightly.

An abrupt reality slams into Steve, something so in character for Danny he's appalled with himself for not thinking of it sooner—

"Danno, I need you to be honest with me." Steve's hands are already searching Danny's ribs. His touch is firm at first, manhandling Danny, before he gets his startle response under control and gentles it. "Did you get hurt today? On the boat?"

It would be painfully like Danny to hide an injury to save a child in danger and then not mention it so everyone could go home in peace.

Danny frowns, breaths even but hitching a little.

Steve doesn't buy it for a second. "I'm gonna check, okay? You in pain? Is that what this is?"

Another head shake, but Danny doesn't fight Steve as he does a quick pat down of his limbs and ribs. The ragdoll compliance frightens Steve to his core. Danny's never this yielding unless he's truly at the end of his tether.

"You want to help me out here?" Apparently not, since Danny doesn't even look at him. "Let me know where it hurts, Danny. Please."

Nothing seems broken, though he's a smidgen chilled and peakier than Steve would prefer, especially since he's still in his disheveled collared shirt, dotted with a mercenary's blood. No wincing from Danny at any sore spots. No sprained swelling.

Other than bruises along his knuckles where he punched said mercenary's lights out and one nasty goose egg on his elbow from being shoved against a wall in the fight, he's fine.

Steve mutes the game, almost over anyway. He turns his body into the cushion so that it's better angled towards Danny. Danny won't meet his eyes, and that's as much of a giveaway as anything he can yell.

"What's up, huh?" Steve toes at his partner's sock. "Talk to me."

This prompts a fresh wave of tears in Danny's eyes and they fall silently too. His breathing isn't even that much faster than normal. If it weren't for the weeping and twisted lips, Steve wouldn't know something is wrong at all.

"Look at me," Steve murmurs. He fights to keep his tone soft, from becoming an order. "Hey. I'm right here, Danny. A'right? Right here. Look at me."

For whatever reason, Danny refuses comply with this. Refuses to look at Steve. It's not anger—Danny is fighting with himself too. A pierce in Steve's heart becomes a gaping hole, bleeding out sympathy and desperation to fix this.

Not for the first time, Steve wishes his life experience helping people didn't consist only of this need to fix things. People look at him and see Commander, SEAL, *cop*. He protects, fixes what's wrong, provides closure and restitution.

But in a paradox, none of these roles have taught him how to support people.

Neither this job nor his family showed him how to help *after* the battle is over and people are left to pick up the crushed fragments.

"That's okay." Steve gets up and pats Danny's knee on the way by. Then his hand clamped around the pillow, also cold. "Take your time, buddy. I'm here."

As part of this tea debacle, Steve placed bits of his stash in every conceivable location he might be able to make some—the office breakroom, the governor's coffee bar, his house, *Danny's* house (he hasn't found the lemon lavender canister behind Grace's power bars yet), Kamekona's truck...

Steve's collection has grown enough that it doesn't fit up by the salt anymore. Now, it's hidden at the back of the breadbox. His toast has never smelled better.

If Danny notices the random cups of tea presented to him at seemingly random times, he hasn't said anything.

Steve removes a bag of rooibos from behind the bread, uncomplicated and reedy and comforting, and drops it into a bowl-like cat mug (Mary's) after giving it a wipe with his shirt hem. The faint after scent of vanilla fills his nostrils.

Pop—kettle.

Slurp-pour—boiling water.

Helpless sigh—Steve.

He also piles some cheese crackers onto a napkin. Hopefully they're light enough to sit well after almost twelve hours without food, if Steve's internal clock on Danny's eating habits is to be trusted. They're both running on fumes.

When Steve comes back into the living room, Danny's settled on an old black and white movie. Also muted. Something to do with a PI and his secretary-turned-accomplice. The PI reminds him of Harry a little bit, with the burly frame and thick mustache.

Other than being slumped and swallowed further by the couch cushions, Danny looks the same. Still curled up in his little bubble of sorrow. Still watching the screen without seeing it.

Steve hands him the mug and Danny accepts on autopilot, more clutching it to his chest than actually drinking. The crackers are less successful, where Steve leaves them on the table and

hedges them insistently towards Danny.

His eyes are dull, lacking interest.

“You gotta eat, man.”

No reply. Danny doesn’t make a sound.

Retaking his spot, Steve feels like a fool. How is this supposed to help? Is tea the best he can do? That’s it?

Danny cries into his rooibos, Mr. Quiet consummate. The TV plays on mute. Life goes on. Steve can’t remember the last time he hated anything so much.

The steel wool of frustration scrapes inside his chest, braided around the skein of insufficiency and irritation with himself. He is failing this mission, failing *Danny*.

Danny has flown thousands of miles to rescue Steve from terrorists and drug lords and totalitarian countries and *this* is how he reciprocates? He can’t find any other way to help? It’s an affront, is what it is.

Steve has no idea what’s going on and even if he did, it’s probably not something he can fix with a bullet or a few good punches anyway.

“Come ‘ere.” Steve shuts off his whirling brain and follows what his gut wants, which is to reach down for Danny’s legs and pull them across his lap. “I’ve got you. Huh? I’ve got you...”

Danny adjusts to the new position without comment. He tilts sideways into the back of the couch, which looks more comfortable to be honest, and tents his knees. Steve hugs them with both arms. Props his cheek on Danny’s left kneecap, the one closest to Steve’s chest, and watches him for a beat.

He’s like a lopsided sand castle, dissolved by the waves.

Danny keeps his eyes on the mug, staring at a top-hatted calico cat decal on the side. Steam wafts in front of his wet eyelashes.

Steve’s voice drops to a whisper. “We’ve got all the time in the world, Danno. I’m not going anywhere.”

These words evoke from Danny the biggest tears yet, clear pearls that get lost down his neck and into Steve’s couch. He shifts one way, then the other, as if he can’t decide between two voices in his mind.

A tear plinks into the tea.

Danny opens his mouth, closes it. Tries again. “Yesterday would have been Matty’s thirty eighth birthday.”

Well.

Steve blinks. That's not the catalyst for this meek breakdown he expected, not by a long shot.

A few years have passed since Matty died and though Danny sometimes takes the day off or comes in to work a little downcast, he isn't usually defeated with pain like this. Hanging on by a shoestring. Maybe the case lowered his defenses a bit, riled up his already struggling emotions. A double hit close to home.

Steve rubs both thumbs over Danny's leg. In response, his heels curl into Steve's thigh. Their smallness always catches Steve off guard, so he rubs these too.

Danny's voice is barely there. "I forgot this year."

Steve's grip tightens. He gazes at a few more tears where they crease in Danny's cheek and itches to wipe them away.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," Steve whispers back. "It means you're healing."

Disagreement by silence is a new one, but Danny does it masterfully, in a way that Steve also hates. Knowing Danny, he probably thinks this makes him a terrible sibling, selfish, or something equally asinine.

"You hearing me, Danny?"

Danny's lips turn down, tremble some more.

He's not close enough for Steve to guide his head to his chest, but he reaches out and smooths the top of Danny's head. His hair is velvety, textured by the salt spray of their stint on a boat today to rescue the victim.

Towhead ripples flare at the ends and Steve thumbs through them with a tenderness that surprises even himself.

Touching Danny's hair—or the express prohibition of doing so—is an office joke at this point. Even other HPD cops know about it. People tease Danny for being so defensive of it, but after years spent observing him, Steve knows vanity isn't really to blame.

Realization smacked him the first time Danny's mom came to visit, how during an emotional moment she brushed an errant strand of gold behind his ear...and he relaxed at once. It instantly defused their argument. If Grace is upset, Danny will pick her up and guide her to his shoulder, her itty bitty fingers bunching up in those wispy hairs at the base of his neck.

For Danny, touching his hair means touching his head. It represents getting close, a vulnerable part of his space. He doesn't like touch there he can't see coming.

As such, for Steve it's become a sacred ablution. He doesn't do it often, but every time it seems to comfort Danny.

Steve is desperate, lost in how to help. If this will add even a smidgen of reassurance to Danny's account, Steve will do it until the sun comes up. It's also a peculiarly effective way of gauging Danny's mental state.

Right now he feels malleable, *broken*.

Danny wipes his nose on the back of his hand. "Thought maybe I was replacing Matty."

Steve's heart stutters over exactly two beats, in a mix of relief and proud satisfaction and sudden understanding.

"Nah," he says, once a stunned minute has passed. "Nobody can replace a little brother."

Finally, *finally*, Danny looks up and locks eyes with him.

The emotion in them nearly bowls Steve clean off the couch. Danny's eyes swim with guilt, with gratitude. "I'm glad you're here, Steve."

"Me too." Steve can't help himself and flicks a tear off Danny's cheek with his knuckle. "I'm glad that you came to me instead of sitting alone at home feeling like this."

Danny rests his ear on the back of the couch, not quite on Steve's shoulder but just next to it, close enough that Steve doesn't have to stretch to reach him anymore. The heat of Danny's forehead hovering near his arm radiates even through a T-shirt.

And then, right as there's cause for concern over things like low blood sugar and shock, Danny gulps down a mouthful of tea. *And* eats two of the crackers.

Steve almost cries right along with him.

It worked. He's dizzy at the reality of this all over again.

But it's not the tea, something Danny knocking his knees into Steve's chest only confirms. It's *him*, and this is such a novelty Steve hardly knows what to do with himself.

Danny sniffs. Steve leans his head back too, giving Danny's legs a squeeze. With his right arm propped along the back of the couch, he keeps up a lazy stroke pattern on Danny's scalp. Danny hums at the touch, a two-tone sound, and Steve smiles. They watch the PI track a cat burglar for a few minutes, gun drawn, cigar hanging out of his mouth. Something in the quiet of this night tastes like home.

"My family was never big on crying," says Steve, out of the blue, like someone else inhabits his body for a split second to confess things he's never told anyone. "We did that stuff in private."

This makes Danny scowl for some reason. "Their loss."

Steve startles. That's a new one too, something he's never learned.

Danny wipes his nose again, still weeping without embarrassment for God and country to see. “I’m sorry you missed out on that. It’s healthy. My family does emotion big and loud, just like everything else.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Musta broken the tradition.” And now Danny seems sad in a completely different way, not rising to the playful barb.

Steve’s stomach twists. “Well you can cry into my couch anytime you need. Matty would be proud of you, you know.”

It’s Danny’s turn to startle, although his version of that is to stare at Steve with wide blue eyes and drop one of the crackers.

“I know that because, uh...” Steve’s hand stops its strokes, just resting on top of Danny’s head. “Because I am.”

Danny’s shirt collar is already wet from all the moisture of his tears, but at this it darkens another shade. He covers his eyes with his hand for a moment. He looks...he looks almost *relieved*.

At the sight, a gong rings through Steve’s spirit—

I pity my family.

The thought strikes him like a poleax in crystal clear definition before he takes another breath. He pities John and Doris for getting it so wrong, that they never got to see how beautiful green things like hope and peace sprout from the ashes of messy emotion, if you only let it out.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Danny says again, at the exact moment his hand tangles around Steve’s. It sloshes lukewarm tea everywhere but they hardly notice.

This time Steve hears what it means.

He leans sideways, so that Danny’s head is forced to *plunk* against his chest. It too is a mess, warm, wet with tears, and full of home. “Always, Danno. Always.”

Peppermint

Chapter Summary

WHA-BANG!

A bullet pings off the tree scant inches from Danny's cheek and this sends Steve into overdrive.

Chapter Notes

This was my attempt at a humourous chapter and then my brain was like oh?? Free angst real estate? So I can't say I didn't try!

Also, seven year old me is POSITIVE the Olsen twins had a dog on their show but I couldn't find concrete proof of this. Let's just pretend, shall we? If someone does know for sure, I'd be much obliged!

Peppermint – (n.) *a pungent and aromatic plant (Mentha piperita) with dark green lanceolate leaves and whorls of small pink flowers. When made into a tea, it can provide a significant boost to energy and metabolism.*

“What happened to getting home in one piece? Are you trying to offer us up on a platter?”

Steve pretends to be scandalized while wrapping rope around his palm. “Where’s the good faith right now?”

“Good faith? You want good faith? How about the fact that our first plan failed?”

“Cut me some slack. Our first plan would have worked if it weren’t for the knife-happy drug runners back there.”

“Don’t remind me.” Danny waves a hand up and down his filthy torso. “I’m never getting your blood out of my shirt, not to mention where I had to tear strips off the bottom. And Grace bought me this shirt for Christmas.”

“I’ll personally explain to her that it got ruined for a good cause.”

“The Olsen twins—now they had it right.”

This is, understandably, a bizarre statement to hear in the wilds of uncharted Hawaiian jungle.

Especially while you're bleeding from an arm wound and your partner is starting to sway on his feet. Steve waffles his head in a fast motion of blanked thoughts.

Then his wide eyes dart to Danny, holding up his phone yet again. No bars. Steve's own phone died hours ago.

"The Olsen twins?" he finally asks.

"Of course." Danny says it like Steve's the one who can't keep up and this is somehow textbook. "They had a show, in which their philosophy was 'solve any crime by dinnertime.' That's every detective's dream, man."

"Which one of them is the sniping Jersey cop?"

"Neither, although they did have a dog for a while. That's you in this scenario, by the way."

Steve might appreciate the pointed sentiment but he's still stuck on the fact Danny knows the Olsen twins' filmography in such detail.

Danny catches the look. "Their whodunit reruns were Grace's favourite to watch before school when she was in second grade."

"Ah." Steve turns back to the last of their rope. He's wound it around his hands for protection and grip—and so that it hopefully keeps him from falling when he climbs to the top of this twenty-foot koa tree. "Think of it this way, Danny: we've had a relaxing time out in the beautiful scenery of this great state and we caught our murderous drug dealer long before lunch, let alone dinner."

"Uh-huh." Danny's tone is dry enough to kill a fish. "You forgot the part where I *shot* said drug dealer when he tried to brain me and then we walked for seven hours."

"It hasn't possibly been..." Steve checks his watch. Feels that niggles of fear again. "Okay, you got me there."

Danny slumps against the tree by Steve's side, the bruises ringing his temple lurid on flushed skin. He rubs his forehead with pale, skeleton-like fingers. The sight makes Steve's gut lurch, that same feeling right before he misses a step.

They got a tip about their drug leader squatting in the national park and parachuted in this morning.

Now, at four in the afternoon—apparently—and hunted by the drug leader's *friends*, they're running out of options.

And energy.

Both he and Danny are flagging. They haven't said anything about it to each other, but if Steve's long legs are tired of thick foliage hiking, he can't imagine how Danny feels...

possibly concussed from several blows to the head, no breakfast thanks to the racing around *plus* no lunch when Steve lost his own pack to Ruiz's knife, healing from a recent stab wound, and carrying their supplies for hours. They're safe at the moment, having gained distance away from the well armed pack of criminals, but it won't last long.

Climbing this tree is their only shot.

"Hey." Steve nudges Danny when his eyes slip closed. "No slacking on the job."

"Oh yeah?" Danny plays along as only Danny can do, squeezing Steve's wrist in silent apology. "You going to write me up?"

Steve tests the rope against the koa's trunk and friction between the two grips better than he expected. "For sure. I'll even throw in a little extra about how you took off my shirt, completely non-HR approved behaviour in the workplace."

"That was to bandage the slash on your bicep, you putz. Which still needs stitches, I might add."

"Bet the Olsen twins didn't slack on the job."

"They also had a curfew and couldn't legally drink." But Danny's smiling and his eyes are open again, so Steve breathes easier.

It's the smile that hurtles an idea into his mouth faster than he can think about it—

"Want some tea?"

Danny pivots on his heel and flails a bewildered hand into empty air, as if someone will be standing there who can explain this madness.

"Right now?"

"Yep."

"What, you want to offer some to our pursuers? Have a tea party water break?"

But Steve's following a different mission right now than simply getting them out of this jungle alive.

In some ways it's a mission he cares more about, a long term op that has zero room for error. If forced to choose, Steve wouldn't even think twice.

He steps behind Danny to access the backpack on his shoulders and a tall thermos at the bottom. A living testament to Jerry's resourcefulness in thinking ahead. They all teased him when he insisted on packing the boiled water, but Steve makes a note to thank him if...when they get out of here.

Astoundingly, it's not cold.

“What the fresh hell are you doing?” Danny’s voice crackles with a weird hybrid of laughing and a scoff. “Steve? Steven.”

Steve untwists the thermos cap that doubles as a cup, tiny handle and all, just big enough to hold about half a liter. He takes a bag out of his left cargo pant pocket and tears it open. The homely green leaves begin to expand when he adds water. It’s not hot enough to steam, but warmth rushes against Steve’s fingers around the plastic.

He shoves the cup at Danny. “Drink that. All of it.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No.” Steve pats his other pocket, making sure the flare gun hasn’t fallen out. Then his thigh, where a hunting knife is strapped in its sheath. “Tell you what, if you finish that by the time I climb back down, I’ll carry your bag for the rest of the day. Until we’re rescued. Deal?”

Danny doesn’t look at the tea. He’s looking at Steve, unblinking, serious. His grin isn’t quite gone, but it’s overshadowed by the gravity in his eyes. Eyes that are dilated, pupils uneven.

Definitely a concussion.

“Until we’re rescued?”

Steve lowers his head but keep his gaze up and locked on Danny. “Absolutely. Chin and the team have to be out looking for us by now. It’s been hours since we were supposed to call in for a safety check. They’ll see the flare.”

“And if Ruiz’s men see it too?”

“We’ll improvise.”

“We have no ammo left, Steve.”

“I know.” Steve’s hand hovers over Danny, the bruises on his face. Another hot burst of anger scorches through him at Ruiz, for hurting Danny when he was unarmed and catching them both by surprise. “Okay? I know what we’re up against. But if I don’t do this, then we might as well surrender because Five-O will never find us.”

“Deal,” says Danny, quiet.

“What?”

“Deal, you oaf. Just don’t fall or I’ll dump this tea over your head.”

Steve barks a laugh. “Deal.”

Climbing down takes much longer than climbing up, somehow. Steve shimmies to the top branches in no time, under three minutes, and shoots the flare straight into the sky. It achieves impressive air time, suspended in mid air dozens of feet at the top of the arc before circling back to the ground.

Steve doesn't wait for it to hit the tree canopy; he's on his way down before it even arches.

Footholds mix with foot snares, requiring extraction or sturdier placement before he can move and this slows his progress. Sweat beads along his back in gauche splotches.

When his feet jump the rest of the way to the ground, he finds Danny sitting on an overturned log. Still wiped but more alert than before. In that time, he's finished the tea, stowed the thermos cup safely away, and done something fancy with a compass from the backpack.

It's Grace's Aloha Girls compass, bright pink with yellow flowers. There's something far too endearing about Danny holding it up and twisting the dial, comparing it to the sun's position.

"Peppermint in the jungle," is the first thing he says, without looking away from the compass needle. "Has a nice ring to it."

"They can put it on our tombstones."

"Very funny," Danny warns, in a tone that's not funny at all. He glances up to run assessing eyes over Steve. "Here, it's all yours."

Steve shoulders the backpack without complaint—deal's a deal—yanking the rope off his palms in the process. He appreciates their absence so he can reach down for Danny's hand and do his own assessment. It's red from the tea but not as shaky as before.

"You ready, Danno?"

Danny's eyes wander to either side. His own tic of fear. "No."

Pulling Danny to his feet, Steve checks the perimeter.

Both men go still. Strained ears listen for any sound they might have been compromised. It's perfectly silent, somehow worse than if they had a militia breathing down their necks.

There aren't even any bird sounds and they suck in a sharp breath.

Steve's nerves bristle. "We've gotta move."

Danny pokes at the knife slash on Steve's tricep, fussing, while they walk. Steve slows to accommodate Danny, but to his surprise Danny's shorter legs manage to keep pace.

"This is going to be infected by the time Ruiz's cartel picks us off."

"I'm fine, Danno. Leave it be. The bandage you made is holding and my arm isn't bleeding anymore."

Danny seems more fretful than he should. "It's getting dirty, though. I'll clean it in a bit."

"Sure," says Steve, mainly to placate his friend.

They haven't quite let go of each other's arms and it helps when he half lifts Danny over a bramble thicket or Danny shields his wound from a stray branch. The dance of it is done with nary a word and Steve's stomach glows at how fluidly they work around each other.

"Thanks, Steve."

"For what?"

Danny shrugs. "For not dying. For the tea. For being here with me in this cruddy tropical wasteland, even if it's the last thing I see. Take your pick."

"We're not going to die here, Danny."

It's the last thing Steve says for a long time...he can only hope he's right. The worry that he's not, that Grace will come home from her school field trip to a world empty of her father, eats at Steve more than his fatigue.

They don't speak again for over an hour, all effort spent on breathing and listening and trying not to fall.

It's strange, in a roundabout way, that they've been almost blown up and shot at and locked inside primitive cells. But *this* is how they might go. They might actually die out here in the jungle, all because they didn't plan on Ruiz's network being so big or well prepared.

Or so desperate for revenge.

And they know this area much better than even Steve.

Steve is constantly doing mental math, just like Danny, only he usually puts their odds much higher than his pessimistic partner.

Today...today he can't.

Even if they find their way back to the road by nightfall—already so far fetched it's practically a fantasy; a jaunt like that could take days if they don't chart a direct course—they won't be in a fit shape to hike for help, let alone fend off attackers.

Right as Steve thinks this, Danny's foot catches on a hidden pock under the brush and he trips. Steve catches him around the chest in an instant, body reacting before his mind. His arm shoots out in time for Danny to fall against it.

On instinct, one of Danny's hands latches onto Steve's arm, the other braced against a tree trunk. His hand is clammy around Steve's skin.

"Sorry," Danny breathes. He looks more shaken by the scare when they're already so on edge rather than hurt.

Steve's heart pangs. He pats Danny's chest before letting go. "S'okay. I'm beat too."

Silently, he points to the ankle and Danny shakes his head, giving a thumb's up. They continue walking and what do you know—Danny has to catch Steve a few times too. They stumble into each other with a lacking grace more visible by the minute.

Not just physically.

About thirty minutes later, the pink compass is presented before Steve's face, startling against the monochrome underbrush with dusk approaching.

Steve blinks dumbly at it, lost in his own thoughts. Even his hiking boots feel heavier than they should, his legs not lifting as high over vines and brambles. He looks from the compass to Danny with raised brows.

His partner raises his brows right back, incredulous. He points to the dial, then the setting sun.

Steve's brain kicks in and he pales. 'West,' he mouths. The nearest road is west.

They established this fact with Chin at the tech table this morning while running over survival scenarios, multiple times, in case they got lost. The memory of it feels like it happened days ago instead of hours.

Danny nods to confirm, reassuring Steve with a hand on his good arm.

The needle says North-West, an instant douse of relief. They haven't wandered too far, and that means they might make it out of this alive and in one piece.

Which is, of course, the exact moment a twig snaps behind them.

Steve's eyes widen.

"Run!" He yells it, with little need for secrecy now. "Go! *Go*, Danny!"

Danny does, and boy is Steve ever glad for the tea break. Sweat clings to their faces in thick shortening globs, greased by their own stress response, but it doesn't slow Danny or Steve down this time. He doesn't want a repeat of what happened this morning, the crazed fight before Danny shot Ruiz.

Steve makes sure Danny stays up ahead, between him and the footfalls crashing at their backs. The sounds are forty feet out, hardly far enough if—

WHA-BANG!

A bullet pings off the tree scant inches from Danny's cheek and this sends Steve into overdrive.

He lunges ahead, yanking on Danny's arm. "Come on!"

They give little care for the uneven terrain now, with a fervour that feels wild. Untamed. Without caution. Branches slash at their faces, their bare arms. Better than a bullet, Steve

thinks.

Their legs churn the ground, eating up two miles in what feels to Steve only seconds.

Voices holler behind them, angry voices. If Steve held out any hope they'd give up the chase, it dies at the profanities bitten off in Spanish when those gunshots miss their targets.

Danny glances back to make sure Steve is still close. The whites of his eyes are haunting in the gloom, especially as he pants. "Your arm..."

Steve checks and sure enough, blood seeps through the makeshift bandage again. "I'm fine. Keep moving."

They reach a small, fallen tree and Steve doesn't even stop. He leaps it in one bound, tugging at the chest of Danny's shirt until he's over it too.

Danny looks past him and gives a strange, harsh cry.

Steve's first reaction is to check for an injury. Obviously Danny hurt himself getting over the tree or his ankle, plus possibly his bad knee, are worse than he let on.

Then Steve too turns around and freezes.

A group of no less than six men stand before them in a human barricade, armed to the teeth, all branded with a scorpion tattoo that winds around the left side of their neck and down their chests.

Ruiz's crew.

Steve still has one hand on Danny's elbow and he uses it to push them back a step. He's grateful for the horizontal tree trunk at their backs. A pathetic advantage but one he utilizes nonetheless.

"There's nowhere to run, Commander."

"Maybe not." Steve eyes the men closing ranks around them. They're outnumbered four to one. "But my people are coming. They'll kill you like the swine that you are. Better to walk away while you still can."

The lead man smiles in a way that doesn't reach his eyes. "Or you can surrender and die a painless death. Of course, I can't promise the same to your friend. Not after what he did to Ruiz."

The other men shuffle, murmuring. It's a movement that signals danger, not relaxed posture, the dominant shifting of men prepared to fight. Danny feels like marble under Steve's hand.

The cartel successor bares his teeth. "We're going to have fun making him scream."

Steve spits at his feet.

The man's AR-15 rifle, aimed at the ground for the duration of this taunting conversation, whips up to aim at Steve's forehead. His finger curls around the trigger.

Years later, Steve will try to slow down the memory of what happens next.

It never works, for all he retains of this suspended moment is a brilliant flash of silver, then gold, then spurting red. Three colours save his life before he can blink.

He puts it together two precious seconds later when the man hits the ground, Steve's hunting knife jutting out at a macabre angle from his chest. Blood fountains around his torso, then dies down once the artery is depleted.

Complete silence blankets the clearing.

Danny's arm is still extended, his own teeth bared and a furious burning in his eyes.

Steve gawks at him.

The knife...he...he grabbed the knife off my leg.

Danny looks a little dazed himself, once he comes down off the bloodlust high. Steve doesn't have time to react, not when Ruiz's men break from shocked stares at their leader's body.

Even before one lets out a screeching war cry, Steve knows the jig is up. Absolutely stunning and heroic as Danny's act was, it only bought them a fraction of time. They're going to die and Steve knows no amount of fisticuffs will change that. Not against eight trained drug runners.

Guns ring them in a half moon crescent and Steve is just grateful that he gets to die beside a friend.

BANG!

Suddenly one of the men falls. A red dot blossoms between his unseeing eyes.

BANG!

Then another one.

WHA-BANG!

And *another one*.

Steve's jaw drops as, one by one, five are taken out in just a few seconds. Bodies pile up around them. It's strategically done, the targets chosen based on whose fingers are on the triggers and ready to shoot Steve or Danny. The remaining three men are smart and drop their weapons.

"Hey, boss!" Kono's head pops out from behind a tree fork. Chipper as ever. "You boys order a ride back to HQ?"

Danny strangles out a groan, folding in half with his hands on his knees.

Steve goes right down with him, hand on Danny's back. They remember how to breathe while Chin and police flood the scene. His signature rifle smokes in the twilight, along with a shark toothed grin.

"Had a hell of a time finding you, even with the thermal imaging satellite and ATVs." He claps Steve's shoulder. "But it looks like we showed up just in time for the party."

"You have no idea. Thank you."

Danny blows out a terse breath. "I have never been happier to see you in my entire life."

"Likewise." Chin winks. Then he does a double take at the dead cartel successor. "What happened to him?"

Steve glances at the empty knife sheath and shakes his head. Wonder shines in his eyes. "I can't believe you did that, Danny. That was a flawless throw. My training officer couldn't have executed it better."

"Yeah well." Danny straightens up, fingers hooked in Steve's backpack for balance. "Maybe I took some notes during your presentation at Grace's camping trip."

They watch HPD book the drug runners and pull a CSU blanket over the second man Danny killed today. Tension and adrenaline seep out of Steve's body in stops and starts, enough for him to release his squared stance, once his body stops preparing for a beat down.

"Nice work, Danno."

Danny lets out one of those exhausted, slightly hysterical giggles. "You know, if the knife missed, my next thought was to throw the Aloha Girls compass at his face."

Steve wants to pass out in relief, knees weak and heart swollen with the promise of another day. They're both alive and they're going to stay that way.

He smirks instead, throwing an arm around Danny's shoulders—"Let's see the Olsen twins beat that."

Ginger

Chapter Summary

Then Danny starts to *cough*.

Steve takes it all back—this sound is ten times worse and in the top three most gutting things he’s ever been within earshot of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ginger – (*n.*) *a thickened pungent aromatic rhizome used as a spice and sometimes medicinally. This tea often soothes nausea and vomiting.*

It might be time to rethink this whole ‘I’m not crazy’ thing.

Because there’s no way good old fashioned gut instinct has been traded in for...whatever this is. The feeling inside his torso is almost absurd.

Steve has seen some unexplainable things on the job and especially on this island, sure. He’s man enough to admit that *something* funky is happening. He believes to some extent in a higher power, a force at work in the world that causes supernatural phenomena.

But this...this is *nuts*.

After much effort and a pep talk with himself on the long drive to interview suspects, Steve actually manages to ignore said feeling for most of the day. It’s harder than he expects if for no other reason than the fact he’s alone in his truck. No Danny by his side.

The lack of talking, this silence, grates at him—not that he’ll ever tell Danny.

They’re out on the North Shore, trying to track down stolen car parts being used for a larger money laundering operation.

Unsuccessful so far.

Chin approaches from interviewing an autobody shop manager. Steve and Kono have taken a moment to just stand by the cars and look out over a windy afternoon on the ocean. It crests close enough to spray their faces with tiny droplets, a brief reprieve from the stress of the day’s dead ends.

And there it is again—a jolt in Steve’s chest. A *strong* jolt, like being kicked by a pony. He reaches up to massage his liver incision.

Kono notices instantly. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Steve shakes his head. “Just some heartburn.”

Chin and Kono glance at each other and then back to Steve. It’s been two weeks since he and Danny were cleared for work, let alone back out in the field and carrying a gun. Everyone’s a little twitchy and overprotective.

Steve reminds himself, for the nth time, that this team watched him nearly die less than three months ago, not to mention the liver transplant. Mental scars don’t go away overnight. He’d probably act the same way in their shoes.

“I’m fine,” he insists, as patient as he can. He’s said these words so many times they’ve lost all nuance. “What was our suspect’s statement, Chin?”

Chin pretends he doesn’t hear this, stepping closer. “You sure you’re feeling alright? Maybe you should have stayed home today, like Danny. Sit this one out.”

“Would you relax?” Steve forces his hand to drop away from his chest. It punishes him with another lurch, an electrical blip of distress that ups his pulse. He keeps the alarm of this sensation off his face. “Food just goes down funny on these new meds, you know that. Docs upped our immunosuppressant dosage.”

Chin’s lips purse into a hard line. “But you’re in pain.”

“No, I’m...”

Steve cuts off, tongue drying out like the beach before a tsunami. Moisture recedes in his mouth but there’s a strange detachment to it. As if a plastic coating sits between him and the feeling.

Suddenly, the liver scar *burns*. Steve yips a startled sound before he can censor it.

“Steve!” Kono’s at his side in seconds, water bottle ready. She tries to press it into his hand but he’s too hunched in on himself. “Hey, Steve. What’s going on?”

Forget a pony—an elephant foot crashes into his chest.

“Here.” Chin eases Steve onto a large rock with a hand under his elbow. He crouches down and pries taut fingers away from Steve’s sternum. “Does it hurt to breathe? Do you need an ambulance?”

Shaking his head again, Steve’s cinched eyes gradually release. “Not me. Doesn’t hurt me.”

“Sure looks like it does.”

“Pain’s not here.”

It takes quite a lot to tug the rug out from Chin's zen feet, but this does the trick. He leans back on his heels. Eyebrows almost disappeared into his hairline. "What do you mean the pain's not—"

"I've got to go."

"Go? Have you lost your mind?" Kono pushes Steve back down when he tries to stand. "You're not driving like this."

"Fine." And Steve likes the word much better this way, bitten off in an acidic syllable. "Then someone drive me to my house. Right now."

Chin helps Steve stand, gets him in the passenger's seat of his truck. Kono shoves the water at Steve and then runs to Chin's car in preparation of following along behind.

"You're sure?" Chin asks. His hand hesitates on the gear shift.

Steve nods, mouthing a 'please.' "I'm feeling better now. It was just a spell, Chin. But I think you're right and I need to tap out for a bit. We're almost done for the day anyway."

Chin starts the car and pulls out into traffic, well above the speed limit. A rush of love hits Steve for their team all over again. They care in the little things just as much as the big gestures.

And then, because Chin's one of the smartest people Steve has and ever will meet, he turns to Steve at a red light, eyes narrowed—

"Danny?"

Another, smaller jolt hits Steve and he swallows. "I don't know."

"Steve."

"Probably," Steve concedes. "But come on, man. I'm off my rocker to think..."

Chin quirks a brow. "I've seen weirder."

"Really?"

"Of course. I'd take this seriously if I were you. Better safe than sorry, right?"

The shock of not being laughed at stumps Steve for most of the drive home. A gorgeous sunset lights up the coast in reds, pink, and oranges. The lurches in his chest distract him too much to enjoy it, though he finds himself relaxing the longer he sits in quiet.

Chin pulls up and taps Steve's hand. "Call if you need anything. Please."

"I will. Thanks, Chin." Steve kneads at his scar. "Take the rest of the day off, okay? We'll start fresh on our case in the morning. You and Kono both need a break, especially with Lou away."

“We all do.” Chin corrects him with a warm smile.

Chin hasn’t asked about why they’re here instead of Danny’s place, despite the fact that Steve didn’t tell them about this morning. Probably just another way that Chin can seemingly read their minds, sometimes simultaneously. Steve waves him off and uses his key for the front door, locked for once.

This out of character precaution is his doing, not Danny’s.

When Danny called in sick this morning, with a vague description of feeling ‘under the weather,’ Steve didn’t hesitate to drive over and pick him up. He still doesn’t trust Danny’s place, no matter how much of an upgrade it is from the last one. That, and both went under the knife far too little time ago for them to be laughing about symptoms and medication side effects.

Not now and maybe not ever.

Steve peers around the living room, but no sign of Danny. In fact, the house is immaculate.

“Danno.” Steve berates him under his breath. “If you spent the whole day cleaning, I’m docking your pay.”

He won’t, for he can never deny Danny anything he needs, but he’s mad enough at the prospect of Danny pushing himself when he looked like death warmed over that the petty thought makes him feel better.

Steve dumped Danny on the couch under a pile of blankets this morning and made him a sandwich for lunch.

Last time he saw his partner, he was drooling into a pillow.

Steve checks the fridge. “At least he ate the BLT.” And Cheerios, judging by a bowl in the sink.

Probably sleeping, then.

The house is quiet, warm from sun spilling through the lanai windows. Steve takes his time preparing a tall mug of tea, soothed by the routine. He even finds it in himself for a smile, his breathing much easier now that he’s in a peaceful, familiar environment.

He’ll leave the tea for when Danny wakes up. Yeah, that sounds the most logical. Steve feels sheepish now more than anything, that he made such a big deal out of some acid reflux or bad shrimp.

“Organ donor ESP.” Steve rolls his eyes at himself. “I’ve spent too much time around Jerry.”

Danny will have a field day when he hears about this overreaction.

“Danny?”

Steve checks upstairs, his own bedroom, then the guest room. Both are empty—but the guest bed’s sheets are pulled back and rumpled; a strange, cloying smell permeates the room in a way that Steve’s subconscious registers ahead of his thoughts.

His body locks up before he overrides it and steps inside. He sets the mug on the side table.

“Danny? Danny—”

A retching sound answers, one of the most horrid cocktails of a wheeze and vomiting Steve’s ever had the misfortune of hearing.

A bucket of ice water crashes over his head. “Danny!”

He slides to his knees in the adjacent guest bathroom, hands already all over his partner. Danny clutches the edges of the toilet for dear life, the only thing holding him upright, and quivers like a leaf in a windstorm.

This isn’t a drunken hangover or flu-to-end-all-flus kind of sick.

Danny genuinely sounds like he can’t catch his breath.

Steve’s never seen his face this shade of red, veins protruded in mauve spider webs, knuckles a stormy grey, his nose bleeding from the force of each bout.

Nothing comes up anymore, just clear spit and even that seems more from Danny’s harsh wheezes than the vomiting. Blood drips into the toilet water and somehow, even stacked up against slimy criminals they’ve caught lately, it’s the most unsettling thing Steve’s seen in a long time.

“Breathe with me, hey. *Hey.*” Terror leaks into his tone before he stuffs it back. “Danny, you’ve got to slow it down. You’re hyperventilating.”

Danny either doesn’t hear this, can’t follow the order, or hasn’t registered his partner’s presence whatsoever. His breaths are loud, almost violent.

“Let’s get you off this floor, huh? It’s cold.” Steve tries to stay upbeat but his voice wavers.

He tugs gently at Danny’s arm before finally cluing in to why Danny’s skin feels so chilled—he *can’t* get up. Danny’s been slumped here on his knees for God knows how long because he’s too physically worn to stand.

“That’s alright. I’ve got you.” Steve keeps up a mindless, reassuring litany. More for himself than Danny at this point. He’s frightened down to his bones that Danny seems unresponsive. “Let me do the work, okay? Don’t fight me, there you go.”

In the end, Steve decides his instincts have been the wisest today and runs with their lead. He places both hands around Danny from behind—stacked one on top of the other, his right thumb landing in the hollow of Danny’s throat, his left arm just over Danny’s stomach and the incision scar that feels too swollen, too hot, breaths piston-pumping it at a dizzying speed—and *pulls*.

Danny yelps in pain. He clutches blindly at Steve's arm and its upward force, grip too quaking to cause Steve pain. Still, his nails bite Steve's skin.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, easy. It's alright, Danny. I know it hurts, I'm sorry. You're safe."

Steve murmurs in his ear while lifting him off his knees. After a second, since Danny's scrunched up in a compact little ball, his feet go airborne.

He's not light by any means, his muscular frame dead weight on a normal day. But a three-month stint as a hospital outpatient, on heavy duty medication that would tranquilize a horse, has taken its toll. Danny's skinny enough to worry doctors, the exact reason he took so long to be cleared for field work in the first place.

Hefting his weight is far easier than it should be and this nearly sends Steve into a tizzy.

"Here we go. Come on, Danny, stay with me."

Then Danny starts to *cough*.

Steve takes it all back—this sound is ten times worse and in the top three most gutting things he's ever been within earshot of.

'Cough' is such an understatement it's laughable.

This is a strangled, ragged sound, like someone dying in real time. A forest fire crack, the wheezes reverberate deep in Danny's torso, vibrating under Steve's hands. Danny's entire body trembles with each one. Wrung from the inside out. Inhaling takes superhuman effort, three jammed pistol tries before Danny gets a full lungful of air.

Steve abandons his initial plan at once. He drops to the floor right then and there, back against the side of the guest bed.

He's only carried Danny five feet out the bathroom door, but they're not going to make it another inch until Danny *breathes*. An ambulance is a moot point if Danny suffocates by the time it gets here.

They're both shaking now, Steve's heartrate a rival for Danny's. He guides Danny back against his chest. Curls around his partner, legs and all, and begins to rock. Quick, side to side. It's stupid and useless and one of those unfathomable instincts, but Steve only knew to come home because of them and it's all he's got.

He rubs circles over Danny's heart. Their knees knock into each other until finally Danny stops struggling. His muscles go lax.

Neither of them has ever full body held each other like this, limbs tangled, Danny juddering hard enough to clatter Steve's teeth. But they share an organ. Steve figures this nulls any embarrassment now and forever.

Blood *thwip...thwip...thwips* onto their hands from Danny's nose.

“Come on, Danno. Come on...”

“S’eve?” It’s Danny’s first actual word but Steve almost wishes he hadn’t spoken. His airway is reduced to a whistle now.

“I’m right here. You’ve got to keep breathing, slow it down.”

Steve fumbles to lift Danny’s T-shirt. Now that Danny recognizes the voice buzzing against his shoulder blades, he doesn’t fight the invasive touch. Steve leans over to see better and Danny, boneless, goes with him.

Steve’s stomach drops into his shoes:

The scar is an ugly mauve too, lit up like a Christmas tree.

Steve dares to touch it, the warmth of his palm eclipsing that awful red line. Danny mewls a ghastly half whimper, half sob that makes Steve want to throw up too.

And suddenly the pieces fit.

“Danny.” Steve speaks low, lips right next to his cheek. “Danny, listen to me. This is important—how long have you been nauseous?”

Danny stutters over another cough. “Af...after...l...”

“After lunch?”

“Y-yeah.”

He’s been ill for over six hours. The thought of him collapsed here, suffering alone for *hours*, is a gunshot. Steve closes his eyes, prickly with tears.

“Was...wasn’t this...b-bad...a’ first.”

Danny pushes back into Steve’s chest and his arms cinch in response. Though he lets the shirt fall back into place, he keeps his hand tucked up underneath it, hoping skin-to-skin contact will deescalate the pulmonary fit.

He cocoons as much of himself as he can around Danny. His knees, his arms, his pointy elbows, the yoke of his chest and shoulders—all of it circles up into a similar compact ball, a protective cage to keep Danny from going into shock.

“Okay, easy. You’re doing great, buddy.” Steve eyes two orange prescription bottles on the side table. Then an untouched glass of water. Lastly...Danny’s wrinkled fingertips. “Were you in the bathroom for most of that time? Did you manage to keep anything down?”

Danny struggles to inhale and his left hand wads up in the fabric of Steve’s sleeve at the stress of simply breathing. “C-couldn’t...couldn’t—”

“It’s not your fault. Hey. You’re not to blame.” Steve can read his self-flagellation even in the midst of a respiratory attack. “You couldn’t get up?”

Danny’s attempt at a nod takes far more effort than Steve expects. Likewise, it requires incredible willpower to keep the panicked urgency out of his touch and begin assessment. His fingers stay light only by the sheer need to emit calm for Danny’s sake.

“Can you open your mouth? Just for a second, I promise.”

Danny tries, bless him, but he’s panting too hard to stay still. Steve tips his head back and cups the opposite side of his jaw. He only needs a split-second look to confirm his theory.

Danny’s tongue is thick and swollen too, blanched with red lines.

“S...Steve? W’ass it?”

“The new medication made you queasy, sent you into a vomiting fit after you ate lunch.” Although Steve is grateful to hear Danny’s breaths slow down, now that his lungs are at a supported angle against Steve’s chest, they have bigger problems. He smooths back Danny’s wild hair. “And you couldn’t get up to replace the lost fluids.”

Danny’s listless eyes roam, clouded with pain. He’s not sweating, another red flag.

“You’re dehydrated, Danno. It’s agitating the soft tissue around your scar. You might even have an infection or internal bleeding.”

Normally Steve would leave this part out, but the frightened look on Danny’s face, coupled with his utter lack of control in this situation, moves Steve to honest compassion instead of platitudes. Any strength Danny has left is used up in the quest to breathe normally.

His hand drops from Steve’s arm and Steve lunges for it, hissing under his breath.

“Stay with me, Danno. Just a little bit longer and then you can go to sleep, alright?” His heart misses a beat at that awful silence. “*Alright?*”

“K...m’kay.” Danny licks his cracked lips—no moisture comes out. “S’ eve?”

“Yeah, Danno. Still here.”

“Hur’s.”

“I know it does, buddy. I know. I should never have left you alone today.”

Danny breathes out another cry of pain. His feet writhe and Steve, worried about more tissue damage, clamps his legs over top to keep them still.

Steve wrangles his phone out of his pocket, thankful when dispatch picks up in record time. “This is Commander Steve McGarrett. My partner’s dehydrated with possible internal bleeding...”

After rattling off the address and Danny's symptoms, he throws his phone on the bed behind him. There's nothing to do now but wait. Moving Danny isn't really an option, not when it might send him into shock; he could be septic for all Steve knows.

It is then, tears beginning their traitorous rappel down Steve's cheeks, that he glances at the tea.

Maybe not nothing.

Careful and slow, Steve unlatches one arm from around Danny and reaches up for the mug. It's long since cooled but this is better than the possibility of Danny's mouth burning. Getting liquid into him takes precedent over any surgery he might need.

"Here, Danny." Steve holds it to his lips. "Got something for you. Small sips, there we go."

If anyone ever questions their implicit trust in each other, Steve will forever reference this one shining moment: Danny's eyes aren't even open, movements sluggish. Held upright by Steve's possessive hold.

And yet he still, he *still* drinks whatever Steve puts in front of him. Without question.

His head starts back a bit when the ginger's afterbite hits his puffy tongue. Steve rumbles a comforting noise and Danny settles.

"I'm sorry." Steve's tears hit Danny's shoulder first, then his bare arms. "I'm sorry I can't do more, that I'm clueless about how to..."

Steve shakes his head. He's sorry for a lot of things, more shortcomings than he can ever hope to remedy.

You're a fool, McGarrett.

Danny's tired, *so* tired, but he must dig down to some lost reservoir of strength. Fingers a blur, he tries to find the mug. Steve guides them to the tea.

"Yeah?" He laughs, a wretched sound, and cries some more. Watching Danny down the entire mug feels more gratifying for Steve than is probably normal. "It's helping? You like my tea choices after all?"

Too spent for a verbal reply, Danny lets go of the mug and shifts his hand behind his head.

Right onto Steve's face. He smiles into Danny's palm.

"Not quite."

Pruned fingers pat around until they find Steve's cheek. They're too weak to stay there, so Steve holds Danny's hand in place. He waits to see if Danny will vomit the tea too, but it stays down with only minimal swallowing on Danny's part. In fact, it eases some of the queasy green tinge from his face.

The sound of a siren roars ever closer.

“You’re going to be okay, Danno.” Steve bites the inside of his cheek. Decides to go for broke. “*We’re* going to be okay.”

Danny’s wheezes have slowed down, enough that he doesn’t fight for air. He taps the liver incision.

“I know you’re in pain.” Steve is quick to soothe him. “The docs will you give the good meds and it’ll take the swelling down...”

He trails off at Danny’s head shake. His partner taps the scar again, then undulates his fingers against Steve’s stubble.

Wonder fizzles up Steve’s back. “You...did you feel it today too?”

Danny fishes under his shirt for Steve’s hand and shoves it away. Then he sets his palm over the scar.

The resounding sensation is so faint Steve half thinks he’s hallucinating it. But there’s no denying a tiny tickle of warmth in his own incision site, pulsing with someone else’s heartbeat.

Steve buries his face in Danny’s shoulder. He doesn’t have any words to say, and maybe that’s not going to be such a problem anymore.

Logic can’t explain what just happened but Steve doesn’t care. It saved Danny’s life. That’s all he needs to understand.

“I’ve got you, Danno,” Steve whispers.

Danny coughs and tenses in pain, but he’s awake, and that’s enough for Steve. “...Lo’e you too.”

He fades a few minutes later, right when a paramedic bursts through the door, dragging a gurney up the stairs.

The next two hours are a chaotic whirlwind, full of tests and calls to the team, one very harrowing ambulance ride during which Danny fights EMTs the entire time, and a behemoth of a saline bag hung from Danny’s IV pole. (Steve will swear later to this tidbit. It’s almost as big as his head.)

They decide to keep Danny overnight at King’s for observation, though he doesn’t need surgery after all. Steve’s hunch turns out to be correct—dehydration and the strain on his immune system were the real danger. Lack of fluids compromised his liver, which fueled the nausea in a deadly feedback loop.

“Detective Williams might have slipped into a coma, if you hadn’t come home when you did,” the doctor tells Steve, like this isn’t worse than a bomb dropping over his head. The

words force him to sit down, skin white. “That tea probably saved his life. EMTs tell me some of his organs were close to shutting down when they got there.”

“Any internal bleeding?”

“A little.” The doctor checks a clipboard. “But his liver flushed it on its own once we got him on a regular round of fluids and antiemetics. He’s going to be fine.”

Fine. It’s officially Steve’s least favourite word.

He doesn’t bother sleeping that night, parked on a cot in Danny’s room. The reality that something so small can kill, just seven hours without food or water damaging a recently operated-on organ, petrifies Steve in ways he knows he’ll have nightmares about for weeks.

Blissfully unconscious, Danny responds well to the anti-inflammatories and cool packs they place around his body. After several hours of tepid saline and electrolytes, his cheeks regain colour, fingertips a normal texture. Nurses check his tongue every thirty minutes on the dot and Steve studies his oxygen levels while they rise above those flashing red numbers.

The soupy world of a light doze thaws away sometime around three in the morning, ICU quiet. Steve opens his eyes just as slender fingers slide off the bed. They wander in a drunken search.

“Danno, hey.” Shooting to his feet, Steve squints to examine Danny’s pupils in the dim lighting. “You with me?”

Danny’s eyes at last are lucid and Steve almost loses his footing. Lucid might be a relative term right now, but at least he’s looking Steve in the eye. No foggy gaze or lines of pain.

“A’ways.”

“Hmm?” Steve moves Danny’s hand back onto the bed only to end up holding it instead. His fingers are back to a healthy pink. “Didn’t catch that, Danny.”

“Always.”

Steve’s forehead crinkles. “Okay.”

Frustrated that his point is not being made, Danny pushes their joined hands to Steve’s torso and bumps at it a few times. “Stuck...us.”

It takes Steve a beat or two. It really does. He’s still trapped in the so-relieved-I-feel-sick phase of this latest scare and the slurred words don’t compute at first.

When they do, he blinks. Notes the dead serious look on Danny’s face and the surprising, desperate way Danny holds his hand.

Tries not to cry.

“Oh yeah?” A gooey expression melts Steve’s face. It’s as if someone snips the puppet strings holding him up; he sags on his elbows. Even if Danny’s drugged to his eyeballs and won’t remember this in the morning, Steve doesn’t care. He knows. He sees. “This proves we’re stuck with each other now because of the transplant, is that the idea?”

Danny nods.

And with that nod, something releases inside of Steve.

Tunneled *deep* inside, buried there for so long that he doesn’t have a name for it right away. That something is a snow leopard, rare and unseen mostly because he had no frame of reference for what to call it, let alone if he was allowed to claim it.

He remembers late night bunk chats during BUD/S and Hell Week, trying to articulate to his fellow SEALs what it meant to belong somewhere. Not in those words, yet hoping that the Navy would be where he found it.

He did, to an extent...but never permanently, not the least of which because the people changed so often. It was never *his*.

Steve has spent his whole life trying to come home, only to give up on that dream when his father died and he flew back to Hawaii with its house full of ghosts.

Until he met Danny. Until he met Danny...

Steve stands there and watches Danny drift back to sleep, a firecracker show popping in his chest. It’s the best thing he’s felt all day. The sensation also shows no signs of leaving, just like Danny himself.

“Wouldn’t want it any other way, Danno. Wouldn’t want it any other way...”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: this is partly based on a true story. A family member was waiting for surgery on her kidney and so obviously couldn't eat or drink. She kept throwing up medication and the saline wasn't digesting well. It only took about five hours of that for her body to get dangerously dehydrated.

She's fine now and made it through the process okay but lesson learned! Drink your fluids, kids!

(Also a huge thank you to heartofwords! Now I can rest in peace finally knowing the name of the Olsen twins' basset hound. :P)

Chamomile

Chapter Summary

Danny's voice sounds like the waves, foamy and tender and crisp. "Steve...Steve do you understand that you're the most important person in my life aside from my children?"

Just like that. Stated without sarcasm or any kind of strings attached.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for coming along on this little snapshot tea journey. :)

Peace and love to you all.

Chamomile – (n.) The dried flower heads of the chamomile herb (Chamaemelum nobile) yield an essential oil possessing medicinal properties. This tea also cultivates healthy sleep.

The hammock is all Mary's idea.

This turns out to be ironic, in the most obvious way possible, as Mary doesn't even live in this *state*, let alone the house anymore.

But before her latest visit ends, she strings up a hammock between two palm trees along the private beach. Steve comes out and watches her struggle with the lines. She ignores his offer of a neat, Navy approved double fisherman's knot. By the time she gets it up, with much sweat and swearing, somehow they're both snickering.

Nostalgia as the driving factor for this impulse buy means that she's chosen the spot strategically—it's the *exact* same spot where their old family hammock used to hang before it died a fiery death when Steve was eleven.

A fiasco he'll blame on Mary until he's old and gray.

He stands there, hands on his hips, and stares at it with a growing smile. "It's flame-resistant material. At least this one stands a chance if you get a sudden hankering to steal matches out of the kitchen again."

Mary punches his shoulder around a laugh.

“I still can’t believe you never told Mom and Dad the truth,” he says.

That warm little sister weight leans into Steve’s ribs, the one that feels the same no matter what age they are or how different in height now. “They bought my story that a spark from Dad’s bonfire jumped onto the nylon.”

Steve cuddles her closer. “I tried to tell them but did they believe me?”

“Of course they didn’t,” Mary snarks back. “Everyone loves the angelic little sister.”

Their humour lasts a moment, like it always does.

Familiar silence drapes over them, comfortable but full of weary thoughts about lost parents. Lost aunts. Lost dreams. Steve and Mary represent the last remnant of the broken McGarrett family, a double monument to the dusty honour of parents who put their country above their children.

They’ll never go back in time and fix or even relive those moments, but appreciating the good times is easier than Steve could have hoped. He’s astounded to realize that he has more good memories in the present than he does in the past now, a constant stream of happy things to enjoy and people to love.

“My gift to you, oh wise older brother.” Mary christens the hammock with a vaudevillian flourish of her hands. “May you always have a place to kick up your feet.”

He kisses the top of her head. “Thanks, Mary. It’s nice.”

Two days after Mary flies home, Steve finally has a night alone to enjoy it.

Or rather...he has yet another night where the inside of the house mimics his thoughts, makes him feel trapped. He wanders out to the hammock around midnight in a last-ditch attempt to find some peace.

Ocean waves crest in a rhythmic, lulling counterpoint to storm clouds receding overhead. It reveals a carpet of stars flickering in a moonless sky. He flops into the hammock, too tired even to care about the way rope loops dig into his back or go fetch a pillow for cushioning.

It doesn’t smell the same, and there’s no stain on it like the old one, from Mary insisting upon drinking her Kool Aid while snuggling with her big brother when she was five. No nearby bonfires and their father’s terrible singing.

But its appeal is identical, being near the ocean far away from people sounds...swaying in the wind...

A gentle breeze pushes the hammock into a slight rock and Steve, already worn thin, swallows a few times at this nice stimulus. He’s soft, emotional, about a lot of things lately. Things he would have scoffed at a decade ago.

Things like race car beds and guitars and chef hats. Things like creating a home that’s not solely a mausoleum to the past.

“Hey, babe.”

Steve grins without looking away from the sky. Feet whisper through the sand, past the beach chairs toward him. First the smell of aftershave and tomato sauce hits, then a familiar hummed tune. A strange ceramic clatter follows.

“I’m firing Eddie,” Steve decides. “He’s the worst watchdog on the planet, to let just anybody waltz in.”

A laugh. “Eddie is currently asleep on the couch after enjoying the gourmet dog food I made just for him, so. Cut a guy some slack.”

“At least one of us is sleeping.”

Danny bends into sight and Steve drinks in his friend’s portrait—white T-shirt, jogging shorts, eyes that somehow sparkle a bright blue even in the dark, bare feet...

And two mugs, one in each hand. A fluffy blanket is clamped under his arm.

Steve lifts his head from where it’s cushioned on his arm. Danny doesn’t flinch at the surprised stare and in this staid loyalty he shines to rival the sun. It’s humbling for Steve to realize how much he’s started to orbit this man, gravity’s pull stronger every day.

“Those aren’t my mugs,” is his profound response to these sentiments.

Danny hands him the shorter one. A drawing adorns the side, of a cartoon seal balancing a colourful ball on his nose. Danny himself holds a tall giraffe mug, the handle its spotted tail. Steam wafts from both and Steve holds it safely away from the hammock or their skin while Danny wriggles onto it.

Once settled, he curls up into a cozy little ball, like he always does. Steve would tease him for it but he adores watching Danny do it too much to bother.

He’s half convinced at this point that Danny has some untapped wizardry skills to balance cups this well without spilling. That or he really is part cat.

“I bought them at a flea market last weekend with Charlie.” Thus comfy, Danny’s shoulder presses up against Steve, his toes tickling Steve’s calf where he’s bent his knees. “They were even sitting on a shelf together. It seemed too providential to pass up, you know?”

Steve sips at the loose tea brew—chamomile and honey. The sweet, meadowy taste hits his tongue.

His heart thumps a little harder and he’s glad for the darkness so Danny can not see his inane blush. “You found my stash, huh?”

“Steve.” Danny snorts. “Please. I’ve known about your little tisane quest for years now.”

“...Oh.”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find all those canisters in the bread box? Or the ones in my own *house*?”

This question feels like a trap, though Steve’s not quite sure why. He is both pleased and disappointed by Danny’s blunt acknowledgement of this wordless tea tango. As if he’s failed. “No, I just...”

Faithful and full of surprises to the end, Danny doesn’t jump on this right away.

“Not to mention I met Marissa at the tea shop,” he says instead. “You’re her favourite customer.”

Steve smiles. “She had some good advice about teas for different scenarios.”

“So *you’re* the reason her eyes lit up when I told her my name. She gave me ten free samples, Steven. You’d have thought I was a long-lost cousin coming home for Thanksgiving, the way she patted my hand.”

“I may have told her about who all that tea was for. How I was trying to...I don’t know...”

“Make me feel better?”

Steve thinks about the swirl of love inside his belly. How it makes him grit his teeth at the force of it, how it liquefies him and hardens his resolve at the same time. Hoping Danny would simply ‘feel better’ doesn’t even cut it. “Something like that.”

Danny hums, clearly trying not to laugh.

Then he goes quiet, one foot hanging out of the hammock to push at the sand. It keeps up the gentle swaying. That, coupled with the solid heat of Danny flush against him, fends off a brewing headache and lands Steve back inside his own skin. Bone deep exhaustion sinks through his chest.

Danny’s voice sounds like the waves, foamy and tender and crisp. “Steve...Steve do you understand that you’re the most important person in my life aside from my children?”

Just like that. Stated without sarcasm or any kind of strings attached.

Steve has to swallow some more. “We’re doing this now?”

“Yeah, we’re doing this now. What, you got someplace to be? You’re my person, Steve.”

Nobody else says it like that, not Joe, not his mother, not even Mary most days. He has become the bedrock of their ohana, someone who is always needed and respected for what he provides. And he takes huge pride in that, he really does. It’s a badge of honour.

Not Danny. Danny just loves him because he’s *Steve*. That’s it.

Steve has leapt buildings for Danny but he’s only started to understand that maybe he doesn’t have to. There’s no quid-pro-quo like Catherine used to joke about.

Danny seems to want Steve in any capacity he's willing to offer. He'd watch paint dry with Steve in silence for hours or march through deserts, big or small, if that's what it took to be near him.

"I'm so proud of you," Danny murmurs, fervent. "No one showed you how to love other people but you learned anyway, extended that marshmallow heart without reservation. Do you grasp how big that is?"

He doesn't, but he's starting to.

"You taught me," Steve whispers, and this feels less like a failure, like maybe he is as worthy of adoration as stars, waves, and golden-haired friends. "I want to give that back to you."

"Give back—" Danny deflates. "Steve, you've given back to me more than you'll ever know. You're not as helpless at this as you think."

His hand finds Steve's sternum, not moving. Weighted and just sitting there. Kind of like Danny himself, especially in the still way he suspends his breathing to feel Steve's better. A heartbeat thuds against Steve's in a slow counterpoint.

One particularly bright star pulses a warm orange colour in time with this wordless symphony. Steve keeps his eyes on it while drinking the tea. It too pulses on the way down, along with his draining unease. Nightmares always threaten, but Steve can't remember the last time he felt so peaceful in his off hours.

Rather than pushing his point, Danny strokes Steve, right over his heart this time. They watch the stars together in a simple two step of lazy, padded silence.

And Steve thinks he's never been this at home in his own house or property, not since his mother faked her death and not even when Catherine stayed here. He's not sure what to do with that, too weary to study the dawning sensation.

"I know you've been having trouble sleeping for a few months, since the..." Danny sniffs. A thick note enters his voice. "Since the radiation poisoning diagnosis."

"I shouldn't have told you that."

"Oh yes you should have."

"I don't like to worry you."

Danny rolls his eyes, though they're bright. "I'd worry about you if you got a paper cut. Thought the chamomile might help, since it's got apigenins in it that induce sleep."

Steve glances sideways at him.

"What?" Danny flicks his nose. "You're not the only one who's done your homework. Marissa was very helpful."

If Steve keeps Danny *just so* in his peripheral vision, his blue eyes blend in with the flickering of stars, as if they belong up there too. They're the muted sapphire of the ocean on an overcast day, like bluebells his mother used to grow in her garden. The sight makes Steve's chest ache; pleasant, sad, and heavy with hope.

"Sometimes I feel...I'll slough off my hide like a snake if I relax too much." Steve admits it and reddens, even though there's no need to and Danny doesn't poke fun. He just grimaces. "And then I won't be...won't be myself anymore."

"Like you're going to wind down and never start back up."

"Yeah, exactly."

Something tight flits across Danny's features before he softens. "What you're really saying is—if that happens, you won't be able to prop everyone *else* up."

Steve blinks. "...Maybe."

"Mmm." Danny sips his own chamomile. "I remember those days. It gets easier, Steve. But only if you understand that we care, that you can lean on us too. I care whether you're having a terrible day or a great day or you can't take another step. I want 'em all."

There's no more to say on it, mostly because Danny's actions prove his words better than anything else can. They sit. They rock. They breathe together. And isn't that really the crux of it all? Whether draped in the petticoat of dodging bullets together or sipping tea together—doing life with Danny is the breath in Steve's lungs. Take it away, and he's not sure he'd survive.

Steve closes his eyes almost without meaning to, with none of the usual panic he gets relaxing lately.

He does so to the mellow soundtrack of salty air, enveloped in warmth from within and without, and Danny's head sneaking onto his shoulder.

It fits perfectly there, hitting the spot just like the tea. Like maybe they were designed for it. To find each other, impossibly, and sit in a hammock in the dark, Steve's shoulder knit with infinite care and precision so that Danny can rest there. The greatest quest he'll ever go on.

It's their coda, and no matter what Steve does Danny will never stop loving him.

The bedrock of that instantly grounds him.

"You can stay if you like." Steve mumbles it right when he drifts off. "Long as you want."

"Okay," Danny says, as if there was really any other option and as if Steve really wanted anything else. Danny continues rocking the hammock, long after Steve's body uncoils. He takes the mug from Steve's hands before it can fall and tugs the blanket over them.

Steve sleeps through the whole night without waking once, the first time he's done so in weeks. He dreams of absolutely nothing. The relief of that is a greater comfort than he can

put into words.

Curled up on his side and snoring a duet with the sunrise waves, ribcage slats pressing into the negative space of Steve's, rolled up in the blanket—Danny's still there in the morning.

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