

FEVER

Excerpt

Chapter Three & Four

Clutching to her luggage as if the bag was her teddy bear, Mae's eyes swung around the crumbling edifice outside the building. It reminded her of the old biblical movies her Nana adored. This one could have easily stood in for a temple Samson knocked over, or perhaps where David dropped Goliath's head. History caught in her lungs, centuries upon centuries seeping up through the rocks. Then she turned her head and spotted a Bluetooth speaker shaped like a soda can sitting on a crumbled pillar. That shattered the illusion, the thumping bass of a Top 40 song trailing her up to the great door.

Already open, Mae peered inside. She expected to find broken mosaics, bleached statues missing limbs, and sandblasted tapestries. All she saw was bureaucratic chaos. Tibbs guided her into the first room, a desk strewn in cheaply printed pamphlets. The ink clearly began to run in the last round, but no one seemed to care enough to reprint them. She couldn't read the writing on the front, but recognized the stock photo of an army nurse injecting a shot into the arm of a smiling brown man.

"Pst," Tibbs whistled through her teeth at yet another head bent behind a desk. Mae sighed, growing used to such a fate. His head was about to swing up when a voice called from the side.

"Tibbs, where did you bugger off to?"

Mae turned to the man and tried to not gasp. Even in this drab, olive world of papers, bureaucracy, and bullets he looked like a ray of sunshine. Copper gold hair pushed up high off his forehead, eyes of a mischievous brown that put her mind of an old golden retriever a neighbor had, and a smile... His smile was so deep it excavated two dimples on both sides of his pale cheeks. In her flippant heart, Mae wanted that beam of light to focus on her, but his eyes were fully upon the sergeant.

"Had to do a pick up," Tibbs said, jabbing her thumb to the woman standing in the shadows.

When his eyes swept over her, Mae was ready. She dug her fingers tighter into her rucksack to not do something foolish like thinking she could take his hand. Or babble about how handsome he was. "Well," the mystery man somehow smiled wider, "welcome to the family."

He stepped even closer, meeting Mae almost eye for eye. His hand slipped off the butt of his gun for her's and she squeaked out the first words in her brain, "You're English! I mean, your accent, it sounds...uh..." *Oh, dear god. What are you doing?*

The man chuckled, "Scottish, if you want to get technical. But lived a bit everywhere, absorbed a bit of everything. Bit of an accent bastard, I suppose." His smile didn't dim, but the proffered hand began to lightly shake as if he wanted to pull it back.

"I just..." Mae scratched at her head, then hissed at herself for being foolish, "I thought, this being the army that..."

"No Brits allowed?" he shrugged his sunny shoulder and wrinkled the tip of his long nose.

Sweet lord, he should not look so adorable. He's a marine, or soldier, or whatever. Man's holding a gun right now!

"He ain't in the army," Tibbs spoke up, turning away from whatever paperwork she was filling out. "Wardens. The clowns running this circus."

"If that were true why aren't you all in your requisite red noses and floppy shoes?" he called to the sergeant before focusing on Mae. "Name's Alistair."

"Mae," she let her fingers slip into his warm ones. *Grip tight, give it a hearty shake. Don't let the soldiers boss you around. You have every right to be here.* But he's smiling so pretty and his palm feels like a warm hug. Her turncoat eyes drifted to his wrist, dooming her.

A clip of boots rescued her from drooling on his toned forearm, both of the soldiers snapping to attention and their hands tapping to their foreheads. "Sir!" both Alistair and Tibbs shouted.

“Sergeant,” the newest man nodded to Tibbs before turning to Alistair. He was lean, like the type of sort who can’t sit still long enough to put fat on. A hearty mustache wound across his upper lip, the black hair seeming to tickle his mouth when he talked. The face reminded her of an old librarian or professor, not at all a strict soldier commanding the troops.

“Captain Young,” he nodded to the ray of sunshine who was gulping and patting the butt of his gun. Calculating grey eyes sized up Mae and a smile graced the man’s mustache, “I am guessing you are...”

“Mae Jones,” she said instantly. “Doctor Mae Jones.”

“Colonel Stewart, doctor.”

“Wait, wait,” Alistair inserted himself into the greeting. “No chance in...Tibbs had to have screwed up. You cannot be the new doc. You’re too cute,” he said with a laugh in his voice.

Her hackles transformed into spikes, Mae’s lips pursing into a tight line and she turned on the man. “I assure you,” Mae’s tone could flash freeze the desert they drove through, “despite my age, gender, or other aspects you question I am more than qualified to serve as doctor for this expedition.”

“Ah, tour,” Alistair said, gulping deep. He had enough sense to know he said something wrong, but clearly no brains to understand what.

“You know what I meant,” Mae hissed at him.

“Right, sure, just...Hey, look, it’s the colonel!”

Colonel Stewart drew a hand across his brow as if to wipe himself from the entire situation. “Doctor Jones, I thank you for arriving quickly. I’m afraid your training will have to be brief as we’re needed a hundred clicks away before the rainy season strikes.”

She’d barely had a chance to catch her breath since the first phone call. There’d been promises that once in Ivostan the medics there would talk her through how the army did things. All of her previous experience was with one hospital back in Ohio. But...

The hairs on her neck rose as she felt Captain Young staring at her. Questioning her, same as the desk sergeant. Same as everyone else. What was one more need to prove herself capable when her damn name should be enough?

“Not a problem, uh...do I call you Colonel? Sir?”

“Stewart is fine,” he smiled at her, easing her burden a bit. She’d feared the man in charge would be some kind of bark-chewing general that’d shout her deaf if she stepped out of line. This man was such a shocking breath of fresh air, she was tempted to invite him to a cookout back home.

“Thank you,” Mae gasped.

“Captain Young,” he turned to the looming lunkhead behind. “Meet your newest charge.”

“Sir?” the man’s lips dangled low, his smile finally perforated.

“You go with her, everywhere. Keep her safe. Protected.”

Mae whipped her head to the colonel, “That’s not...that’s not necessary.” A guard at all times on her? For what purpose? Did they already think she was guilty of something a few steps into the door?

“It’s for your safety, Ma’am. You’re not trained for potential combat situations. He’ll get you out of any hot zones should the worst arise.”

“But...” Mae cast a slow eye at him before she tried to lower her voice, “does it have to be him?”

For his part, Alistair blinked slowly a moment. No doubt he overheard her words. Still, it seemed to take awhile to reach his brain when he winced and popped his lips. Mae’d feel bad for causing him to feel bad, but she didn’t want someone who already questioned her validity to be hovering over her shoulder every day until this was over.

Colonel Stewart glanced at his man, then leaned closer to Mae, “Don’t worry, Young will keep you safe. He may not look it, but he’s highly trained.” That wasn’t her concern. “Tibbs, can you find her a room, show her the infirmary? There are a few on-loan scrubs who’ll get you all caught up. It’s pretty standard out in the field.”

“Sure,” Mae nodded her head. She had no idea what counted as standard here. Normal vaccinating for her involved a table covered in paper, a well-stocked med fridge, and an iPad with all the patient’s medical history. Would she have to travel by goat here?

“Dismissed,” Colonel Stewart ordered to his people before he was the one to saunter out the door.

Alistair’s wary eye trailed him before he turned to Mae. The sunshine was gone, but he didn’t turn cold to her either. It seemed a more wary voice as he said, “Guess we’re stuck together.”

“Delightful,” she wrapped her hands tighter around her luggage, causing the bag to shift.

“Do you...need any help with—?”

“It’s fine, I have it. I have a lot of things in hand.” Her head was pounding, trying to dig up how long this tour was in theory supposed to last. Until the country was vaccinated or the money ran out was the official answer, but they’d given some length of time. Was it in weeks or months? God, why couldn’t she remember?

“All good,” Tibbs interrupted Mae’s thinking. “Here’s your military ID, probably best to keep it clipped to your coat or on a lanyard.”

Mae twisted the scrap of paper around, the crocodile clip catching on her canvas strap. She thought she’d be given dog tags. Maybe doctors didn’t need ‘em.

“I’ll take you to your room. You’re lucky, being a doctor and all, you don’t have to share.” Tibbs babbled on over the rising uncomfortableness as she led Mae out through yet another door.

Before the two of them slipped out, Alistair called, “Guess I’ll see you at dinner, doc.”

He was mocking her. *Well, you knew this was liable to happen.* Not like she didn’t find her fair share of it in the states. Why’d she expect anything different halfway across the world?

With a dead eye and cold tone, Mae said, “I can’t wait,” before leaving behind her future ball and chain.



Oh, this was going to be fun.

After half a day of trailing behind doctor Jones, who didn't once laugh at a single 'this belongs in a museum' joke, Alistair was dead certain in his first assumption. She hated him. She was polite about it. Didn't say, stomp on his toes, or hurl hot...tepid military coffee in his face. But whenever her eyes would wander over to where he stood, or he'd say something witty, she'd cringe.

Fed, trained, and on her way to her room was how Alistair left her for this first go. Only...god knew how many more days of this left.

He clawed at his face while cracking open the door to the officer barracks. Normally, it wouldn't bug him. Plenty of people in his life would groan, wag their foot, and try to kick Alistair away. The problem was in the smaller head he kept in his trousers. Boy was she pretty. Punch you in the jaw, leave you gawping on the barroom floor with stars in your eyes pretty.

There were a few times while she was talking about titers, and blood, and needle stuff with the other medics when his traitorous eyes kept drifting to her lips. Like two plush pillows crafted by the gods to cradle a man, he couldn't stop wondering what they tasted like. Felt like. Which was when the doc's onyx sharp eyes would cut through him like butter.

Moaning, as if his life was pointless, Alistair stumbled into the shared room. Four beds for four men filled the generous closet, but only one other person was inside. Lieutenant Barry sat perched upon the desk, the phone home laptop beaming a warm glow over the man's set jaw. He was always gritting like that, bringing out that square jaw. Alistair warned him if he didn't stop he was liable to chew all his teeth down to nubs.

"I bumped into your gran at the store today," a man's voice spoke from the screen. He had that southern rowdy boy accent but pitched higher than one expected. Alistair twisted his head enough to see it was Darion, the man's normally sienna-colored skin a sallow hue from the bad connection. Or maybe it was due to the single desk lamp beside him across the sea. What time was it over there?

“What’d she want?” Barry asked, inching closer to the screen. He didn’t seem to notice Alistair was sneaking into his own bedroom.

Darion sighed, “At first, for me to find her the greens. But, uh...” he rubbed a hand over the back of his head and sighed, “then she asked me how you were gettin’ on. As if I’d know. As if she knew I talked to you...a lot.”

“I didn’t tell her, I swear. I haven’t told anyone,” Barry insisted, his jaw doing that twitching thing it did when he was super serious. Though, he could be super serious about oatmeal.

The man across the globe tipped his head, revealing a healing scar on his scalp. “Okay. It’s...probably my imagination.” He forced on a smile, but Barry cupped a hand to his lips.

“Dare, promise me that...” the soldier sighed, “just keep your wits about you.”

“Right,” Darion bobbed his head, “like you ain’t the one in the line of bullets and bombs.” The rising tears in his voice caused Alistair to squirm, maybe enough to catch on the video stream. “Is that your Brit back there?”

“Aye, that’d be me. Tea, crumpets, off with her head, well I never!” Alistair cried in the fakest English accent he could conjure. He did do a pretty good Queen Victoria if he could find a big enough dress.

“You’ll keep an eye on my boy, right? Keep him from doing something stupid like being a big hero,” the voice chided from across the ocean.

“Darion!” Barry gasped, but Alistair smiled.

“I swear it,” he dropped a hand around the Lieutenant’s shoulders and squeezed. With barely any challenge, Alistair switched to an American accent to say, “I’ll bring him home for ya.”

The other men cringed, leaving Alistair to wander off to his bed. As he lay back, his hands curled up behind his head to raise it, he watched Barry and Darion whisper a few more words.

“It’ll be lights out soon here,” Barry said, his eyes darting to the clock.

“Which means I need to be getting to work,” Darion added. “Tomorrow?”

“Uh, we’ll be in the field, but probably 19 hundred here.”

“That’s...” The civilian groaned doing the math, but without complaint picked up his phone to set the alarm. Once that was finished, he placed a thumb to his lips, then pressed the kiss to the screen. “I love you, watch your back.”

Barry was much quicker to return the affection, his eyes darting to the side, but his voice was complete sincerity as he replied, “I love you too, and I’ll see you later.”

As the screen went blank, Barry took his time to wipe as much of his data off of the shared laptop as possible. Most of the others didn’t care, often yanking up the lid to find someone else’s kid screaming about how a sister tossed their favorite toy into the toilet. Barry was different.

Once his ritual was complete, he tipped his head down and took a deep breath. Alistair could take no more, “What’s got you bent out of shape? Don’t tell me, the pretzels in the mess are bent out of shape!”

The roommate who’d suffered him for nearly three months now turned around and snorted, “I worry about him.”

“Why? We’re the ones that nearly got shot. Oh, and Tibbs wants us all to get tattoos to commemorate our nearly getting shot. She’s cornered me twice, and each time I just shriek at the thought of needles and fake passing out. It’s either run from her or get a tweety bird on my inner thigh.”

Barry snorted at the random nonsense, shaking his weary head. He spun in the chair, eyeing up Alistair stretched over his bed while still in uniform. Should probably take the boots off at least, before he got sand all over his sheets.

“How are you getting on?” the lieutenant asked instead of dredging up all the same fears he had for his boyfriend clear across the globe.

Alistair blew a raspberry, his thin lips flapping in the breeze.

“That well with the new doctor...”

“I don’t get it!” Alistair cried, his head slamming back into the bed. He rubbed his palms vigorously over his face as if a good scrubbing might bring sense to him.

“Which part? Her being a doctor? You having to watch her?”

He froze in his washing of the sins, both hands thudding to the sides. Staring up at the cracked ceiling, Alistair moaned, "Why my damn libido's doing a cheeky salsa over a girl who clearly can't stand to be within fifty miles of me."

His traitorous roommate snorted, cruel laughs breaking from the man's nose as he slapped his knee.

"It ain't funny."

Barry gave him the patented "Bro, please," look which sent Alistair whimpering back under his hands. "This always happens to me. Girls I get tongue-tied, knock-kneed, sweaty-palmed over look at me like I should be scraped off their shoe....But not in like a kinky fetish way. More an 'Ew, Barbara, I can't believe you stepped in that' way. You know what I mean."

"Not particularly," Barry said, sliding the laptop off the desk and into his hands.

Alistair sighed at the pedantic in the room, "Replace girl with boy then..."

"Sorry, no."

"What? You're saying you never had to suffer the curse of unrequited love, puppy eyes, diary scribblings, tears in the rain, the whole biscuit tin from some guy who'd rather eat raw sewage than be near you?"

Barry shook his head, "Nope."

Stroking his chin, Alistair mused, "Maybe I need to change my sexuality. Think sticking my hand in a microwave would do it?"

The groan rose up from the depths of Barry's gut, and he stood. "I highly doubt that, but for the sake and curiosity of the medical community why not give it a go?"

Alistair leapt to his feet, a hearty smile replacing his woe. He slapped his friend on the back, "There's the spirit. Always willing to let me mutate into some horrific blob monster for kicks. Where ya going?"

"Put the phone home back. Not sure who's next on the list," Barry glanced down at it before his eyes cut into his friends. "Unless you wanted it."

"Uh," Sure. Lots of people in Alistair's life who'd want to see and talk to him. Like... Or... There was always...

Okay, maybe the curry place from when he was in school. They probably miss him, or his business at least. Mrs. Finchner said they put in new chairs on Alistair's vindaloo habit alone.

"Here," Barry passed it over, "seems you're always passing over your slot for others."

Generous. That was the ol' Brit. Happy to let everyone else cut in front of him, just so he wouldn't have to face reality. "You know the sob stories. I haven't seen my kids in insert time here. My wife's birthday's today. My wife's half birthday's today. My kid's football coach's wife's birthday is today. I'd be a monster to turn 'em down."

He smiled wide at that, Barry swallowing the bullshit easily. That man seemed to have enough family to fill a House of Parliament. The concept of someone else having nothing but dust bunnies in his family tree seemed beyond him. With a smile, the Lieutenant yanked down the covers on his bed. Alistair watched a moment before saying, "Ah, I'll...use it elsewhere. Since you're trying to get your beauty rest."

"Thanks, Cap," Barry said, tugging off his shirt to prepare for sleep.

Alistair stumbled out into the hall. Great going there. *You were gonna go to sleep. You'd been up since 4 AM doing prep work for a doc that hates you. Now you're stuck with this stupid laptop that you don't know what to do with and...*

As an idea took hold in his weary brain, he shrugged. Maybe she hated him because she already had a boyfriend. Got to keep all the competition at bay by glaring the rest of the men on the earth to death. Soldierly men at that. And what better way to fish that fact out than by old phoney here.

He nodded to a few of the night patrollers, including the final two roomies who were late as usual, on the way to the doc's fancy room. It was near the Colonel's. Not as big, but there was an actual closet and a chest of drawers. Alistair tried to not lust too much over the idea of having a place to separate his socks from his underwear. The times he'd find one wadded up inside the other while dressing made him start to wonder if his clothing wasn't having its own little orgy inside his footlocker.

Be his luck, even his clothing was getting laid more.

Raising his fist, he knocked five times, waited a few breaths, then added the last two downbeats. When the door blew open, he partially expected to find her with green goo smeared over her face and fuzzy pink pajamas on.

No, doctor Jones' complexion was perfect. Dewy like a morning rose, her makeup-less skin began to crinkle into a frown as she eyed up who was knocking at her door. Her hands crossed over her chest, causing a silk robe to undulate.

Alistair couldn't help it, his eyes drawn to the movement. It was instinct, pure and simple. The lizard brain told him to stare down at her palm sized breasts perked up without any bra to assist in the lifting.

"What do you want?" Jones said in her polite but 'I could burn a hole through your forehead with my glare' voice.

That knocked some sense into him, not much mind, but he snapped his eyes up into hers and said, "Here." The fool thrust the phone home laptop at her. She wouldn't uncross her arms, so it bounded against her forearms a bit as Alistair kept trying to pass it over.

"What am I supposed to do with that?"

Boy was she a tough nut. "It's the phoney," he smiled like a jack ass, wanting to swoop his hair high out of twitchy habit, but his hands still clung to the laptop. Be a great ice breaker if he beaned himself in the head with it by mistake.

Jones' hazelnut with a dab of cream eyes narrowed, her cheekbones somehow becoming even more sculpted as she glared. "You want to give me a fake laptop?"

"No, no, sorry, it's..." Swallowing, he began again. "This is the only laptop we have that ain't geolocked. And I've lost you. Okay, due to the fact we're technically in a war zone by some countries metrics, most of the telecommunication apps don't work here. Guess they don't want to become the face of the rebels who just tore down a spine for shooting practice."

He worried his fingers back and forth over the various ports on the sides of the old but trusty laptop. "Phoney here, phone home we call it, is the only one on base that can let you get in contact back with wherever you're from. The states, I'd guess."

“Oh,” her locked-in stance opened a moment, curious fingernails painted a pale pink reaching for it. “That’s...only one?”

“Yeah, there’s a list...somewhere. Probably. We’re supposed to check it out from the canteen, but usually it just gets passed around like a...” the very rude smile died in his brain as he gulped at her. He couldn’t stop fidgeting, which would have gotten his knuckles wrapped ’til they turned bloody as a kid.

“Thought you might want it, being your first night and all.”

Dr. Jones finally accepted his gift, twisting the hard metal case around in her hands. Feeling better about himself, Alistair said, “In case you had someone you just had to talk to. Someone special.”

He thought he was being sly, but her eyes flared open wide. “Why? You think me to be some sniveling child sent away to camp for the first time? That I’m already homesick and wishing for my mother to collect me?”

“Uh...no,” the boy who’d never been to any camp scratched at the back of his neck. “I thought I was being nice. Which, apparently in your view is the same as kicking a basket of kittens down some stairs.”

Dr. Jones sneered, lobbing the laptop at Alistair’s chest. “I don’t need your charity, nor your pity.”

“It ain’t either of those. Cheeses you are fickle.” His blood began to boil, surely strangling that stupid libido to death.

Her chest rose, the doc preparing a deep breath to yell at him some more, but the dumb fool was drawn right into her cleavage. The libido left for dead leapt to its feet and went running for the border. Damn it. “I have every right and reason to be here, same as the rest of you,” she said, confusing Alistair even more.

“That’s nice,” he threw out, sliding on the mess he stepped into. This was stupid, everything was stupid. Getting up in the morning, putting his boots on, completely idiotic. He should have stayed in bed that day and pretended to be sick. Some terrible fever going around that only pops up when having to deal with hysterical women about to hurl laptops at his skull.

“If you are quite finished, I am tired from a long trip and need my sleep,” Dr. Jones snarled.

“Fine, fine,” Alistair held a hand up while clutching phoney tighter to his chest. He walked back from her door, wondering if he shouldn’t put a few chalk marks up to warn others away. *Beware. This one’ll bite your head clean off.* “Forget I was ever here.”

“I am trying my best,” she snapped, spun on her feet, and stomped inside.

He waited for the door to slam shut, maybe lock as loudly as possible to make her point. While staring down at his feet, Alistair whispered, “There’s nothing wrong with feeling homesick. Means you’ve got a home to go back to.” With his final stupid words mumbled to himself, he turned to go when he heard the door softly close.

Had she been listening to him after all?