

Chapter 8

Heat. I had heard that word before—in Ace's kitchen when he was talking to Madoc. Ace said I had experienced "mini-heats."

Even though I knew the event took place only a few nights ago, I still struggled to bring forth the memory. It was just proof of the "lock" Ace claimed was on my mind.

"I've heard you talk about that," I murmured. "One of the hunters said I was close to my first heat."

Anger carved Ace's jaw into a sharp line at the mention of my kidnappers. "Fucking hunters," he growled. "They had no right to talk to you about your heat."

"And you do?" I challenged.

"It should be up to you, but I have more of a right than anybody as your mate. It's a sensitive topic that you should have total control over."

Ace's dark gaze slid over my face, taking in every detail as if he were memorizing my features. The air around us seemed to shift—heavier. Denser.

I was suddenly aware of his scent. It was stronger now, smelling like smoke and something sweeter that I couldn't quite place.

My body betrayed me as it started to warm and a familiar aching sensation started in my core.

Ace's nostrils flared. *Can he smell me the same way I can smell him?*

"What did they tell you about an omega's heat?" Ace asked in a distinctly raspy tone.

"Nothing. They just said I was close." I licked my dry lips. "Is it something I should be worried about?"

"No." Ace's reply was immediate. "I'll be with you the entire time. I'll make sure you're taken care of, so you won't have to worry about a thing. Your heat is not something to be afraid of."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Okay... Are you going to tell me what heat is?"

Ace hesitated, and I knew he would have been raking his hand through his hair the way he always did when he got nervous if I didn't still have a death grip on his arm.

"Estrus or 'heat' is a period during the omega reproductive cycle when they become especially sexually receptive and ready to mate.

"It's kind of like ovulation, only it doesn't happen nearly as often and is a lot more intense.

"To put it bluntly, when an omega goes through heat, they become desperate for sex—especially sex with their mate. It's nature's way of ensuring omegas reproduce and have strong children."

To say I was shocked would be an understatement.

First, Ace knew way more about the female reproductive system than I thought he did.

Most men didn't even know women didn't pee out of the same hole they put a tampon in, and here Ace was using words like "ovulation."

But did he seriously just insinuate that I went through mating cycles as if I were some sort of zoo animal that needed to be bred?

I'd heard of animals going through heat before, but I never thought that was what everyone meant when they said I would go through heat.

I wanted to be offended—outraged. Maybe even a little disturbed. But surprisingly, I felt none of those things. Deep down, I knew Ace was telling the truth.

The idea of going into heat didn't seem completely unnatural. In fact, an embarrassing achy feeling was starting to pick up between my legs as I imagined having to spend days in bed with Ace.

Maybe it was biology convincing me everything Ace was telling me was...normal. Natural.

But that didn't make it any less terrifying.

"Desperate for sex?" I choked out. "Just how desperate are we talking?"

"It...it will be the only thing you'll be able to think about. You'll be seeking a release, and if you don't get it, it can cause extreme cramping, fever, nausea, and just general pain and discomfort.

"I don't mean to scare you, but going through heat on your own is not a pleasant experience. Some even end up in the hospital—especially during their first heat."

There was a loud buzzing sound in my ears and tightening in my chest, like my heart was being squeezed in a fist. This was a lot. Too much.

Ace's face softened, and he shifted so he was partially on his side, facing me, then cupped my cheek. Those familiar sparks that came from his touch traveled down my body, instantly calming my nerves.

"You don't have to worry. That would only happen if you went through heat alone. I'll never let that happen. I will be by your side the entire time, giving you everything you need and then some.

"With my help, you'll become the kind of omega who looks forward to her heat, counting down the days until she gets to experience nonstop pleasure at the hands of her mate."

My lower stomach felt funny. Hot and tingly. I couldn't control it. It was wrong to feel aroused right now, but I now knew that it was the omega in me that was making me feel this way.

"You won't be the only one affected by your heat, you know."

The unexpected gravel in Ace's deep voice made me squeeze my thighs together.

"You're going to be giving off a scent that will be irresistible to me and any other male within a ten-mile radius.

"But I'll be the only lucky bastard who's going to fucking touch you. I'll be just as desperate for you as you are for me.

"I'm going to take you somewhere we can be completely alone, far, far away from everyone else. And then..."

"You'll go into rut?" I breathed out.

Ace stiffened. "Where did you hear that word?"

I wasn't sure. I couldn't pinpoint the first time I had heard it. Another lost memory?

He didn't wait for me to answer. "Yeah, I'll go into rut. Do you know what that means?"

He reached down and ran his thumb over my neck, along the bump that sat there. The same one that Robert had dug his knife into days before. I gasped and arched my back.

"You'll want to...to f-fuck me?" I stammered.

Ace's chest vibrated with approval when my head shifted to the side. He leaned forward and left a soft kiss there. "I'll need to fuck you," he spoke against my skin.

Well, this has suddenly been tipped on its head.

I wanted to give in. So badly. To tilt my head to the side and press my lips to his.

I wanted to forget this whole nightmare and everything that had happened to me—everything that Ace had done to me—and just let him take care of me like he always did.

Because I was a coward.

Ace still had his lips on my neck when I pushed him away from me.

"Stop it," I ordered.

His hands immediately fell from me, leaning back so far that I almost thought he was going to fall off the bed.

"What? What's wrong?" he asked, searching my body for signs of pain.

"You're doing this on purpose," I accused. "You're trying to make me go soft so that I forget I'm mad at you. Forget what you did. It's not going to work."

"I'm not trying to do anything. Well, I am—but not on purpose. I can't help my reaction to you just as much as you can't help your reaction to me."

"Based on your scent, you're days away from going into your first heat. You were showing signs before, but now...I think our time apart, combined with the stress, has accelerated everything."

Shit. Only days away? That explained why it was so easy to give in to him even after everything that had happened. My body was starting to crave him.

I shook my head frantically. "I can't go into heat. I won't." I shoved him away. "Get off me. Please. I can't think when you touch me."

To my relief, Ace allowed me to push him off the bed, giving me the space I needed but didn't necessarily want. He begrudgingly sat back down in his armchair.

"You lied to me," I said, tears blurring my vision. "For years—"

"I didn't want to—" Ace said.

"Whether or not you wanted to doesn't mean it wasn't still a lie," I seethed. "And now you expect me to have sex with you for two weeks straight as if nothing ever happened?"

"It is not my intention to force you into anything. You know I would never do that to you." Ace seemed appalled to be even saying those words.

"If you don't think it's the right time, there are ways to delay your heat for as long as you need. Drugs. They're called suppressants. They'll put off your heat until you stop taking them.

"And they'll make things easier if"—he hesitated—"we need to spend time apart. Although I'm really hoping that it doesn't come to that.

"I have some here that you can take, but I have to warn you, they can have some pretty awful side effects the first time you use them. You'll feel like you have the flu until you stop taking them."

"I can handle the flu," I replied, lifting my chin so Ace knew I was serious.

I could see this conversation was difficult for him—in the way his fists clenched and unclenched in his lap, in the way his nostrils flared and his eyes constantly switched colors.

Maybe my incoming heat was impacting him just as much as it was impacting me.

But I had already concluded that I was done letting him determine my future. I would be making my own decisions from now on, no matter what Ace had to say about it.

The corners of Ace's lips tilted up the tiniest bit. "I know you can. But I would rather you didn't have to. Especially after everything you've been through during the last few days.

"I would rather just take care of you when the time is right. I would make it my personal mission to make you feel so good, baby, I promise."

Every single pull of air felt like a new line of heat deep within my lungs. The pulse in my lower stomach was becoming impossible to ignore.

Crap. Not good.

"Can I take them now?" I asked, feeling breathless.

The smile slipped from his face. "Yes, but I think we should wait until tomorrow. The doctors want to keep you overnight, but I can take you home tomorrow morning where you'll be more comfortable."

"I want to take them now." My tone was unwavering, as was my decision.

"Why? We still have a few more days before your heat starts. I want to give you the chance to recover from your injuries before we force poison into your body."

"I want to take them now," I said again. "I know how this works. I can already feel how my body is betraying me. The more upset I become, the more I crave you.

"I don't care what made you put the lock on my mind or what would have happened if you told me the truth, you all still lied to me. I need time to come to terms with that.

"I can't just... I won't..." I squeezed my eyes shut. "I can't go into heat right now. My whole life has been a lie. Everyone I thought I knew—my family, my boyfriend—I don't know any of you."

Ace groaned in misery. "Please don't say that. You know me. You know me better than anybody else in the entire world. I didn't want to lie. I had to do it to keep you safe—"

"But you didn't. You keep saying that, but we both know it's not true. You could have let me live with my father. I could have convinced Mitchell to let me see you. I could have handled it."

"But, instead, you put the lock back on me. You took away my memories and messed with my mind. You had no right to do that. Absolutely no right."

"You *couldn't* have—" He shut his eyes and lowered his voice. "I know I didn't handle the situation well, but I was young and stupid and still learning how to control my wolf."

"All I knew was that you need me. I need you. Being apart for too long could kill us."

I barely held myself back from screaming. "Let's put that theory to the test, shall we?"

I was so sick of him telling me what I needed, as if he somehow knew my body better than I did. "I want to take the suppressants and then I want you to leave. Go home."

"No," Ace instantly snapped. "Like hell, I'm leaving you—"

"No, Ace!" I yelled. "You hurt me. Don't you get that? You erased my memories, and you say it's because you love me, but we both know it's because you want to keep me under your control.

"Then you gaslit me when I asked questions and made me feel crazy. And now you're getting territorial and mad when I ask you for space? Don't you see how messed up that is?"

"Being near me will help you heal. Keep you calm and—"

"I don't care! I don't want you here! I don't want you anywhere near me." I sucked in a shuddering breath, my chest feeling like it was about to burst.

And then I said the words that hurt the most.

"I want to break up. I don't want to see you ever again."