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GAGE

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Falling for
GAGE

MIA SHERIDAN

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*To those who feel an unceasing pull
Follow it. Wonderful things await.*

CHAPTER ONE

Gage

“Gage? Earth to Gage.”

I snapped out of the semi-trance I'd been in as I stared mostly unseeing at the baristas behind the counter, who were expediently whipping up frothy drinks for the waiting customers. I turned to see Haven Hale peering curiously at me, a smudge of dirt on her cheek and a leaf dangling from the braid trailing over her shoulder.

“Haven,” I said, giving my head a small shake. “Sorry. I didn't see you there.”

She smiled, cocking her head to the side. “You must have something important on your mind.”

“Uh.” The truth was, I hadn't been thinking about anything. I'd been completely checked out. “Work,” I finally said before clearing my throat. “Busy day at work.” I inclined my head toward her, noting her baggy jeans with grass stains on the knees and the bright yellow crewneck she was

wearing with the *Haven's Gate* logo over the pocket. "You must have started early today."

Her grin widened the way it always did right before she was about to talk about annuals or perennials or tubers or seedlings or whatever. I didn't know much about gardening, but it always struck me that Haven was doing just the thing she was obviously meant to be doing. *One's true purpose*. The phrase that popped into my mind caused an odd pinch in the center of my chest that I had no explanation for because Haven was a little quirky, but she was a nice girl who deserved every bit of happiness that had come her way since she'd moved to Pelion. I didn't know all the details of her background, but I knew life hadn't been easy for her or her brother, Easton, before they'd moved here. "We're installing a water feature at the Fillmore Estate. They have this big hill behind the house that's always been a challenge landscape design-wise. I suggested a water feature that starts at the top and winds down to the base with large rocks and plantings along the way and they went for it! It'll be the first one we design and install and so it has to be right. It has to be perfect. And then, who knows, maybe we'll hire a bigger crew and expand the business." She pulled in a breath, winded from the long string of words that had emerged in an excited rush. "So I was up early measuring and planning and well—" She waved her hand around and let out a small laugh as though she'd just realized she'd gotten a little carried away.

"It's going to be spectacular. I have no doubt," I said with a smile.

"Thanks, Gage. That's really kind of you." She moved aside as the woman next to her stepped forward to grab her drink.

"How's Travis doing?" I asked. "I haven't seen him in a while."

Her face went sort of soft and slack the way I imagined might happen right before a person was about to faint. But she remained upright and conscious as she said, "He's good." And for whatever reason, the word *good* sounded sort of salacious and made me want to glance around to make sure no one saw us dirty-talking. "He's off today but he's out hunting a cat." She

rolled her eyes, but even that managed to come off as adoring.

“I’m sorry. Hunting a *cat*?”

“Mm.” Someone else stepped around her and picked up two cupholders, turning carefully as he balanced eight coffees all topped with whipped cream and caramel drizzles. But then the customer turned back to the counter. “Excuse me, two of these are supposed to have chocolate sprinkles.” Good grief. No wonder there was a wait. When I looked back at Haven, her lips thinned as she watched the man hand his drinks over for an additional dose of morning sugar, certainly some sort of cardinal sin to a woman as health-conscious as Haven. “Clawdia just had kittens,” she said as her gaze moved back to me. “We assumed she was spayed but she obviously wasn’t. Well. You can imagine Travis’s outrage when it became clear his beloved cat was pregnant.”

I could absolutely not imagine any such outrage.

“Anyway,” she went on, “the kittens were born yesterday and they’re all orange. Each one!”

I stared. I had no idea what she was talking about or how I was supposed to respond.

She stared back. “Clawdia’s *gray*,” she finally explained.

“Ah. I see. So, the guilty party clearly passed on his telltale orange genes. Travis is out hunting a lustful tomcat because he outrageously knocked up his cat without first being granted permission.”

She bobbed her head as I worked not to laugh.

Oh, Travis Hale. Once Pelion’s Most Eligible Bachelor and all-around player.

My how the mighty had fallen.

The last time I’d seen Travis, he’d been helping dig holes for new trees Haven’s business was planting at the revitalized park entrance.

I’d only been passing by but by the radiant expression on his sweat-streaked face, it appeared he believed himself to be doing the Lord’s work.

The laughter that had threatened now disappeared completely, leaving an uncomfortable void.

If Travis had fallen, why did I feel like he'd surpassed me?

I cleared my throat, forcing my thoughts back to the mating habits of cats. "What's he going to do when he finds the bastard?" I asked.

Haven's brows sort of went in two different directions as though she hadn't quite considered that part. "Well, he just wants to speak to him."

"He wants to speak to the cat?"

Haven laughed. "His owner."

"If he has one."

"Right, if he has one." Someone bumped into her, and she took a small step toward me and I caught her clean scent: lavender, lilies, and grass. It was pleasant and so very *her*.

I'd gone out on one date with Haven a couple of years back before I'd found out she had it bad for Travis Hale and vice versa. I'd happily—and easily, truth be told—stepped aside and I was glad they'd ended up together. Nothing permanent would have come from dating Haven, not to mention, Haven and Travis were clearly madly in love, had formed a little family, and seemed to have found everything they didn't even know they wanted out of life.

Good for them.

Meanwhile, even though I'd determined years ago that it was time to settle down, I still hadn't met the right woman.

Maybe she didn't exist.

Except I didn't want to consider that. Not only for myself, but because my parents expected me to pass on the Buchanan name. If I didn't, our family legacy would be no more. That responsibility fell to me and me alone.

"Hey," Haven said, drawing me back to the present, "do you want a kitten in about eight weeks?"

"My condo doesn't allow pets."

Her shoulders dropped. “Oh. Well, spread the word for us. Otherwise, we’ll have several more barn cats, I guess.”

“Also, I’m moving to London in a couple months.”

Her eyes widened. “London! For work?”

I nodded. “We’re opening a hotel in Westminster.”

She frowned. “Oh. I see. Well, I know you already travel a fair bit, but Calliope won’t be the same without you. However…” She reached out and patted my shoulder. “I get needing a change of scenery.” She tilted her head, studying me, her expression slightly troubled as though she knew something about me I didn’t. But then she smiled. “I wish you all the luck in finding just what you’re looking for.” She paused, chewing at the side of her lip for a brief moment. “Sometimes, it’s closer than you think.”

“Gabe,” the barista called, a young blond kid who was obviously a seasonal employee.

“Gage,” the owner, Peggy, corrected over her shoulder with a wink and a smile in my direction. That was the thing that made my hometown of Calliope different than Pelion, which was right across Pelion Lake. Whereas they were almost exclusively small-town, we were a mix between small-town and tourist mecca—at least during spring break and throughout the summer season. And there were undeniably more upscale areas of Calliope, including the gated community where my parents lived, in which I’d grown up. I found Pelion charming and appreciated that they’d made the choice to preserve the quaint nature of their town, but I’d always preferred the variety of traditional and modern offered in Calliope and the fact that there was a little bit of everything.

I picked up the drink as the kid muttered, “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I turned back to Haven. “It was great to see you. Tell Trav I said hi and good luck with the hunt. If he’s looking to form a posse, I might be able to make myself available on Monday after I get back from the weekend golf trip I’m going on with some college buddies.”

Haven laughed. “That’s very kind of you, Gage. Have a fun weekend.”

I lifted my cup in a toast and moved past her toward the door, exiting the crowded coffee shop and heading to my car.

I turned the ignition, cranked up the AC and sat there drinking my coffee for a minute, staring out the windshield again and bouncing my knee. I caught myself and stilled my leg, giving my head a small shake as I attempted to move my mind toward the work I had on my agenda that day. God, why did I feel so damn restless? I’d thought taking the next step on my career path and moving to London would help dispel the feeling of general agitation I’d been experiencing for the last year or so, but it’d really only increased the sensation. I had to figure that was due to a mild case of nerves at such a momentous impending change, but it was still distracting as hell and the only thing that helped was making a conscious effort to ignore it. Surely it’d get better once I was settled in my new home.

In my rearview mirror I saw Haven exit the coffee shop with her drink in hand and turn in the other direction toward the old-fashioned, turquoise blue pickup she drove with the *Haven’s Gate* logo emblazoned on the side. You couldn’t miss that thing, that was for sure. I pressed slightly on the gas just to hear the purr of my Audi, but rather than bringing me the satisfaction it always had, emptiness loomed inside.

I’d built my life around luxury cars, tailored suits, exclusive memberships, and the like. Those things spoke of who I was and the life I wanted. I was about to leave this small, lakeside town behind for the sophistication of London. In recent years, I’d only grown more established in my career, and I was about to make a move that would increase my success, and my wealth. I stood on the precipice of everything I’d ever worked for and all my father had dreamed for me and all I felt was...stuck. It made no sense.

Haven’s truck bumped past me and she grinned and waved out the window. I tipped my chin, watching as the bed, filled with cheery flats of flowers, moved away. I brought my fingers to my lower lip, realizing that

instead of smiling back at Haven, my mouth had tipped into a frown.

I sighed and, once again, emptied my mind as best as possible, pulling away from the curb and heading to the office where I had back-to-back meetings.

I was glad I had a packed schedule today and tomorrow, but a short break from the rigmarole would help me get my head back in the game. The upcoming guys' weekend would be good. No—the guys' weekend would be great.

CHAPTER TWO

Rory

The bevy of starstruck women let out a collective squeal as my uncle tossed the ice from the glass in his right hand and caught it in the empty one he was holding in his left, that slow, one-sided smile causing his dimple to appear. The squeals melted into delighted sighs. I pressed my lips together, working to keep my expression neutral. I had plenty of practice resisting the eye roll that still naturally threatened such blatant reverence. *Such a simple bartender move and still they swoon like lovesick puppies.*

I wiped down the table that had just been vacated and picked up the tray of empty glasses as another chorus of “oohs” came from the bar. I gave my head a small shake. Easy tricks aside though, I could see why my uncle received so much female attention and adoration. He did bear a striking resemblance to Elvis Presley in his heyday.

“That man is truly God’s gift to Mud Gulch,” Karla, one of three servers, including me, working the floor, said, her eyes glued to my uncle as she

waited for a check to print.

“Not a difficult feat considering the competition,” I said breezily as I passed by. The man didn’t need anyone else, especially his niece, fawning over him. And his name was Romeo to boot. My grandmother must have had some foresight where he was concerned because that would have been a difficult name to manage had he been anyone other than himself. But Granny had had an affinity for Shakespeare and, apparently, believed her second-born son would bear the name of a famous fictional lothario well.

Another burst of squeals went up, confirming that thought.

I wove through the crowded tables with the full tray balanced in one hand, shouldered the door to the kitchen open and deposited the dirty glasses near the dishwasher. “Order up, Rory,” our cook called from where he stood at the grill.

“Thanks, Eli,” I said as I picked up the two plates of food sitting under the warmer. Eli nodded but didn’t look at me, a spatula held in his hand and his gaze focused on the TV mounted to the wall in the corner of the kitchen. “You have one job! Hit the damn ball, you dipshit!” he yelled as I pushed the swinging doors open.

The smack of a bat hitting a ball met my ears as I walked back into the bar. Apparently, the dipshit had indeed managed to do his job.

“A burger, medium, no onion, no tomato, with a side of onion rings, Larry,” I said as I set the food in front of one of our regulars.

“Thanks, Rory.”

I gave him a nod. “And for Kip, fish and chips with extra slaw,” I said, reaching across and handing the other man the loaded plate.

I stopped by my other tables quickly and then made my way to the computer to print up the bills. “You have got to be shittin’ me,” Sherry, the third server, said, her gaze trained somewhere behind me. I turned, my mouth falling open. “No, don’t look,” Sherry said, grabbing my arm and forcibly turning me back to the computer. But it was too late. I’d already seen.

My ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend were sitting at table six. The ex-boyfriend who'd broken up with me to start dating the new chick he was currently sitting with. At my family's bar. Where I worked.

"What a *dick*," Sherry hissed as she started picking up the beer bottles at the end of the bar and setting them on her tray. "How dare he come here?" She turned her head and looked at me. "Do you want me to have him removed?"

The way she said *removed* made me think she meant from the planet, not just from this establishment. I almost answered in the affirmative, but decided I wasn't quite angry enough to risk Sherry's freedom.

"I'll do it," she threatened as she turned to go deliver the drinks on her tray.

I managed a tight laugh. "That's sweet, Sher," I said to her retreating back. "But he's not worth it. And an orange state-issued jumpsuit will clash with your hair."

She made a sound in the back of her throat that either meant she concurred or that she didn't actually need my permission to *remove* said ex-boyfriend and risk a lifetime of being orange from head to toe.

The ex—Thaddeus Willoughby III—leaned around Karla who was taking their order and met my eyes. I glanced quickly away but not before I saw that he at least had the grace to look uncomfortable.

What the hell was he doing here anyway? He lived in Claremont Landing, the town over, an upscale locale that featured a well-known golf and country club and had a wealth per capita on the opposite end of the spectrum to Mud Gulch. I'd met him when he'd made a trip to the docks with his buddies for a bachelor party and turned the charm in my direction. I inwardly cringed as I remembered the past. God, he probably hadn't even extended much effort before I'd practically fallen at his feet. Dating rich pricks with starched collars had only ever ended in disaster for me, and I renewed my vow never to fall victim to a megawatt smile paid for by expensive dental work again.

I delivered the checks, making a concerted effort not to look in the direction of table six again. As I grabbed a couple drinks from the bar, Romeo mouthed, “You okay?” Clearly he’d also seen Thaddeus and the stunning woman he was sitting with.

I nodded, flashing him a smile as if I couldn’t have cared any less that the man I’d been dating less than three weeks before had the absolute gall to bring a date to my workplace. Romeo’s eyes narrowed slightly but he tipped his chin, focusing back on his fan club.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Thaddeus was no longer sitting at the table and when I turned my head a little more, noted that his date had her face resting on her hand and was gazing dreamily at Romeo across the room. I felt a brief buzz of satisfaction that was immediately swallowed by alarm when someone pulled my arm from around the corner that led to the restrooms and yanked me into the dim hall.

“Rory.”

“*Thaddeus.*” I pulled my arm loose and took a step back. “What the hell?”

“I’m sorry. I know being here is a low blow. She wanted to come to the docks. I tried to suggest places other than your bar, but she was insistent. She practically dragged me in here. She said she’d always wanted to...”

“Slum it?”

“That’s not how she put it.”

“I’m sure she didn’t.” But that was the gist. And by the color that had started creeping up his neck, I could see he knew it. Country club girl wanted to get up close and personal with the rough-and-tumble crowd down on the docks. And then she’d hightail it right back to greener pastures, all the more worldly for it.

“This is her summer of *experiences*,” he went on.

I resisted the flinch that threatened to reveal itself. “We aren’t experiences, Thaddeus. We’re people.” I put my hands on my hips. “I suppose that’s what I was to you as well?” I asked. *An experience.* I held a

hand up. *Remember your vow, Rory.* “No, don’t answer that. I don’t care.”

“Aw, Rory, don’t be like that.” He leaned back slightly, turning his head and risking a quick glance into the bar. When he turned back, he reached out, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. I leaned away, giving his suspended hand a death glare. “Listen...Rory. There’s no reason we can’t continue to see each other.”

“Under the cover of darkness? Should I wear a disguise?”

“Geez, Rory. Don’t be dramatic. A disguise isn’t necessary. We could just stay inside.”

“Behind locked doors and closed blinds?”

“Of course—”

“Not interested. And if I were you, I’d quickly come down with a stomach bug because Sherry is *itching* to cause you bodily harm and I’m certainly not going to stop her.”

His eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to say something, but I turned and dashed back around the corner and out onto the bar floor.

A moment later, I saw Thaddeus and his date headed for the door, Thaddeus clutching his stomach dramatically, his face twisted in mock-agony as she trotted next to him, wide-eyed and appropriately worried. But I didn’t miss the glance she threw Romeo over her shoulder, obviously wanting one last look at the raven-haired, blue-eyed Dionysus serving libations from behind the bar. And I didn’t miss the fact that Romeo threw her a wink and his famous half-grin, causing her to trip and fall against Thaddeus, both of them lurching over the threshold.

The door fell shut behind them just as Romeo flipped a bottle behind his back, caught it with his other hand and was rewarded with a robust round of applause that would have fed the ego of the most jaded Hollywood star.

I quickly checked on my tables and then walked toward the front door. “I’m going to get some air,” I called over to Romeo. He tipped his chin at me as he filled a line of shot glasses in front of him. Once outside, I took a

moment to look up and down the docks but when I saw no sign of Thaddeus and the woman, I let out a sigh of relief and walked across the street where there was a railing that looked out to the sea.

I leaned my elbows on the sun-bleached wood, clasping my hands and staring out at the moonlit water, feeling that same pull I always did when I stood here just like this. What was that hollow longing that rose up whenever I stared over the horizon to places beyond? Generations of my people had felt drawn to the water itself, their sea legs strong and sturdy. The sea had provided them peace and purpose, and also a way to feed their family. For a long time, I wondered if that was the same pull I felt, and I kept waiting for the desire to be out on the water more often than on land. Unlike Romeo, my uncle Cassius had felt the call of the ocean and now captained a boat. I liked being on the water, but I was always eager to put my feet back on good ol' terra firma. I much preferred to look out over the sea than to brave its choppy waters on any regular basis.

So no, that wasn't it. And yet the nameless pull remained. It made me confused and frustrated and I had no way to respond, nothing to act on, because I didn't know what it was specifically asking of me.

A nudge at my thigh scattered my thoughts and I looked down to see soulful eyes staring back up at me. "Loki," I greeted the black and brown mutt, squatting down so I was at his level. "What are you doing here this early in the evening?" He stepped toward me and I took his head in my hands, leaning in and bumping my nose with his before leaning back to look him in the eye so I could gauge his mood and make sure nothing was wrong. "It's not dinnertime yet. Come to the back door later and I'll have your usual." He let out a soft moan and nuzzled his wet nose against mine. I smiled. "Oh, I see, it's just some affection you're after. Well. We all need some now and again, even a tough guy like you." He stared at me, his gaze so tender that I wondered if it was me who needed affection, and this gentle soul had known it.