

In The Hay - Excerpt

by

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Chapter One

This wasn't the first time the redhead had caught Drew staring at her. He doubted it would be the last. It couldn't be helped. Her god-awful dancing had first drawn his eye, but it was the realization she wasn't drunk, or even drinking, that held his gaze. Moves like those should really only come after shots.

Eight or nine of them.

He wasn't certain what she was attempting. Looked like a combination of the robot, chicken dance, and hokey-pokey. Bad enough, but made so much worse by the others rhythmically dancing on the floor beside her.

Drew could give her props. What she lacked in talent, she was more than making up for with enthusiasm and seemed to be having the best time. It was refreshing since he was having the worst.

A cop leaned on the bar next to him and gestured at the girl with his fingertips. "She with you?"

Drew glanced at the red headed beauty. "Ah, no."

The officer shrugged. "You're both new around here. I didn't know if you were together."

"Nope. Riley Hamilton is my cousin. I'm in town helping put up his new fence."

"Good man." The cop held out his hand and they shook. "Mike Gable."

"Drew Hamilton."

"All right." Mike nodded, his brows pulled into a V as he searched the small bar. "Let me see if I can find who she belongs with. Want to make sure she doesn't drive out of here drunk."

“She’s not drinking.” Drew searched the crowd, his chest tightened when he couldn’t find her short, but very nice legs or her just barely long enough yellow skirt. He looked higher and caught a bit of red hair swinging around as she looked to be head-banging to the classic country tune.

Mike winced. “She looks pretty wasted to me.”

“Haven’t seen a drink in her hand all night, but I’ll keep an eye on her for you.” Because he was going to be watching her anyway, and continue looking to see if she was with anyone here.

Only a few had attempted to dance with her. One guy thought to get behind her and grind on her, but in all cases, she laughed, scouted away and carried on with flinging her body about. She’d only stopped her attempts long enough to sip from a bottle of water before returning to the middle of the dance floor.

The cop flicked his fingers up. “Didn’t want to trouble you, but was just checking.”

Drew smiled at Mike. “Really no trouble at all.”

The door to the packed out bar opened and two tall blondes walked in. They were pretty, but they didn’t draw his eye near like the redhead. She was just...bless her heart, she just didn’t have a dancing bone in her body no matter how hard she tried or attempted to mirror the girls next to her.

Mike straightened and cursed under his breath. “Thanks. I’ve got my hands full now.”

“No, problem.”

This was not only Drew’s worst night ever, but the start of the worst couple of weeks and he didn’t want to lose sight of the little bit of entertainment he had for the evening. Or maybe had. Either way, come morning, it was time to straighten up his act, and help Riley install a new fence for his cows. Drew’s dad had the mistaken belief that once he proved he knew hard work, then he was ready to take over the company.

Drew wasn’t sure how in the hell being able to drive hundreds of fence posts in the ground and string barbwire meant he could manage their construction company. He’d do it though, to prove he was ready. Just one more step up his dad’s ladder.

Drew turned back to the bulk of the crowd, looking for the nutty dancer. Their gazes caught again. This time she stilled and stared back. He glanced down her body. Her heaving chest. Flat stomach. Shaped legs and little slipper-Tinker Bell-looking shoes.

She took a step. He lifted his gaze back up her body, past her fisted hands, straightened shoulders and raised head as she crossed the small bar. Her stare never wavered from his face. As she drew closer, he could see the sweat that had formed on her brow and soaked into the center of her barely covering white tube shirt thing. Her cheeks were flushed. Breath rushed out of her. She stopped before him, dark red hair clung to the sweat on her neck.

She stared up at him. Her little chin upturned, pouty lips parted as she gasped for air. Freckles dusted over a nose framed by wide brown eyes with long, thick lashes. Hmm. Not just simple brown eyes, so much more than that. Golden and bright and flecked with bits of green. “You’ve been watching me.”

He shrugged a shoulder. “I have.”

She pressed her lips together and glanced away for a brief second before looking back at him. “What’s your name?”

“Drew. Yours?”

“Nicolette.”

She didn’t look like a Nicolette. Nicolette was too formal, too proper. This girl looked like honey fresh from a hive. “Having fun dancing?”

Her lips split to a wide grin, hands came up and clasped before her chest. “I’ve never danced the night away before.”

“Ah. That makes sense.” Not really, but she smiled, liking the response, so that was good enough.

She glanced around and bit her lower lip, kicked at the old concrete floor with her toe, and twiddled with her fingers. He started to ask if she wanted to get out of there, but he wasn’t given the chance.

Her gaze returned to his as she grabbed the front of his shirt, tugged him forward, and planted her lips to his. No sooner did their lips touch and the tangy sweetness of what he thought was peach bubble-gum filled his mouth, she pulled away, red-faced.

“I’ve never done that before.” Air gushed from her in a rush. “So sorry.” She spun on her heels and started away. Her heat and fire was slipping through his fingers along with her red curls.

“Not so fast.” He wrapped his arm around her slim waist and spun her back against him. “For your first time, it ought to be done right.”

Her lips parted, her eyes widened. A soft gasp escaped as he tugged her hot and sweat dampened body flush to him. Fully and right as he'd been wanting her all night. She was taller than he'd thought. Her hips were against his. Chest on chest. He waited no longer to take what'd he'd been wanting and pressed his lips over hers. She stiffened for only a moment before she melted against his body and sighed into his mouth.

He stroked his tongue along hers and finally got his hands in her thick hair. It curled over his arms, the thick strands wrapped around his fingers as he tipped her head back and deepened the kiss, giving her a full taste of what he could deliver. By the purr vibrating in her throat, he'd say she was onto the idea.

Besides, he was only doing his civic duty here. He *had* promised that officer he'd see her out safely. What better way to keep his promise than if they left together?

Hoots and hollers shouted out in deafening volumes, breaking the all too quick moment. Her hands landed flat on his chest and she started to push, but he linked his hands together at her lower back to keep her close, to hold the sweet, peach scent close.

He leaned over and whispered in her ear. "We could get out of here together."

She blinked. Her fingers curled against his chest. Breath filled her twice. He waited for another push from her, ready to release her if that's what she wanted. There was no shove. She wouldn't meet his eyes, but stared toward the base of his throat. "What about my dancing the night away?"

"Haven't you heard of the horizontal tango?"

She burst out laughing and her forehead dropped on his chest. Those slim fingertips curled into fists and tugged at his shirt until her knuckles were whitened. She was silent for a long moment. The grip on his shirt loosened.

He pulled his hands from her and cursed himself for moving too fast. "Go back to your dancing."

She didn't release him. Or push away. Or tell him off. "I'm not sure I want to."

When he wanted to put his hands on her again, he lifted them instead and curled the ends of her hair around his finger. The golden-red strands were soft and thick. He wanted to see them bounce and sway against her shoulders as she straddled him. Feel them across his chest. He'd never seen or felt hair like this. It seemed to have a life of its own, curling perfectly around her. "What do you want?"

“I think I want to get out of here. With you.”

He stilled and stared down at her, wondering if he'd heard right. After the past few seconds, he wasn't expecting a yes.

“Oh, God.” Her jaw dropped. “You were only kidding.” She spun away, head down and walking a straight bee-line toward the door.

“Nicolette!” He left his nearly full, now warm beer abandoned on the bar and chased after. She never looked back, but kept going. That wild, long hair of hers flicked up and danced nearly to her lower back. She hit the front door with her hands flat on the glass and shoved it opened, disappearing into the night.

Deputy Mike stopped him at the door. “Is there a problem?”

Drew shook his head. “Nothing I can't straighten out. I'll take care of her.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the two blondes chalking up sticks and taunting a couple of gang-looking members. “I think you have your hands full here.”

Mike followed his gaze and cursed under his breath. Drew breathed a sigh of relief and headed out into the night for the redhead.

“Nicolette!”

Rocks kicked over the ground to his right and he went off in that direction and found her just around the corner. She leaned against the brick wall, head tilted back, and stared toward the bright moon. She breathed hard and her lips parted. Dim light reflected off the sheen on her chest and she looked just perfect.

He crossed his arms over his chest. Mostly to keep them to himself. After wanting her all night, those all too short seconds were a sampling tease. “You took me by surprise. That's all.”

“Why?” Her head cocked to the side. The moonlight caught on her cheek and eyes. “Why ask if you didn't really mean it?”

He chuckled, “I meant it, sweetheart. I just didn't expect you to go for it.” She only stared after him. “That is, I didn't think you'd leave with a man you didn't know.”

She tugged on her shirt and brushed something off her naked shoulders. “I'm not.”

“That's what I thought.”

“Doesn't mean I'm not game for it though.” In the pale light, a brow arched in clear challenge.

But Drew wasn't quite ready to go there yet. She might talk a good game, but he had doubts she'd ever played one. He had to admit, he liked this girl. There was something about her. An edge lurking just under her pop princess, peach-flavored façade. So he'd take his time and see what happened. Peel her back by layers. He had all week at the least. "What do you want to do then?"

Her eyes widened to saucers. "I thought..."

"You thought..."

Yeah, he'd make her say it. Not because he wanted to be an ass about it, but if she said it, he'd know she'd meant it and that might change everything he had in mind.

Her lips twitched and her gaze dropped from his face. "I'm not sure."

Ah, shy. Definitely not the kind of girl who'd ever picked a man up at a bar before. But yet, here she was, alone with him, thinking about doing that very thing. Interesting. "You said you'd never danced the night away. Do you want to go back inside and finish that?"

"No. I can check that off my list."

"Your list?" He didn't have to see her cheeks to know they were glowing pink.

"I want to try a few things I've never done before."

That explained a little. Or at least explained why she was blushing and fidgeting in this dark alley with him, but clearly still tempted enough that she hadn't run back inside. Yet. "What did you have in mind?"

She walked a few steps away. Not leaving him, but pacing. He leaned against the course brick wall and let her have at it. And then she went and tucked her hair behind her ears. He didn't like it. It confined her hair. Shoved it back when he preferred it waving around her face. He nearly reached forward and loosened it before he caught himself.

What the fuck.

He rolled his shoulders back, shoving off his nagging curiosity with her.

She stopped suddenly and faced him. "Well, such as, I've never been skinny dipping before."

He choked and coughed it off. She stood under the light a few feet away and he could see the grin she tossed him. *Tease*. He cleared his throat. "All you gotta do is go. Can't imagine that anyone would stop you."

"I don't have a swimming pool."

Easy enough. He stuck his hands back in his front pockets before loosening her hair. “I know where there’s a pond.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Are there things in it?”

“Things?” He blinked. He’d have their naked bodies in there, if that counted as things.

“Fish. Turtles. Snakes?”

He laughed. “I would imagine.”

She shook her head. “Can’t do it then.”

“That’s not very adventurous of you.”

“When I was nine my parents took me to the beach. Hundreds of people there. I got in the water for ten minutes before a jellyfish got me a couple of times on the same leg. Parents threw me in the car. Mom screamed and freaked out the whole way to the hospital. Dad was hollering at her to calm down. Most of what I remember was the pain. Lasted for days. Doctors said I was likely allergic now since I got stung several times. I never got back in. If it’s not crystal blue and smelling like chlorine, I’m out.”

“Understandable. What else?”

“Um... I’ve never walked a railroad.”

“A railroad?”

“Yeah.” Light was coming back in her eyes like when she’d been on the dance floor. A breathlessness was taking over her chest. “I’ve never walked down the tracks. Like you see people do on TV.” She walked past him and stared toward the small tracks crossing Main Street. “We have some near our house, but Momma used to tell me my foot would get stuck and a train will run me over and cut off my leg. Or kill me. She told me that stuff to keep me off of them as a kid but it stuck, ya know?”

“I think you’d probably be safe over there.” It was hard as hell, but he forced his mouth not to smile, not wanting her to think he was laughing at her, because he wasn’t. But because his parents pulled that same line with him. And probably every other kid out there too. “It’s on pavement. No wood slats to catch your feet on.” And with that, she ran. “Hey!”

Only her laughter touched him and he found himself grinning over it. He gave chase and caught up to her as she was standing on the metal tracks, walking them with one foot in front of the other. He got on the rail next to her and walked. Even though the rails were pretty well level with the pavement, he still put his arms out for balance to match her stance.

“Who are you, Drew? Tell me something.”

“I’m from Little Rock. I’m visiting my cousin and helping him install a fence on his property.” He’d leave the part out about needing to prove himself to his father and all that. “You?”

“Visiting, too. I’m from Fayetteville. I saw you talking to the cop in the bar.”

“He wanted to know if we were together. He thought you were drunk and wanted to make sure you weren’t driving.”

She stopped. “I haven’t had a drink all night! I don’t drink!”

“I know.” He shook his head. “I mean, I knew you hadn’t been drinking, not that you don’t.”

“Why are you’re out here with me, Drew...?”

“Hamilton. And I’m here because you grabbed me by the shirt in the bar and kissed me without hardly a word.” He winked at her gaping mouth. “I’ve never had that done to me.” That much was true. Any other women had carried on at least a five minute conversation first.

“Hamilton? Any relation to Riley?”

He nodded. “That’s my cousin.”

“I’m house sitting for my cousin. She said to call a Shellie Chambers who lived with Riley Hamilton if I needed anything. Small world.”

“Small town. Sign said there was all of about nine hundred living in Apple Trail.”

She looked toward the ground and continued walking the tracks. “How long are you here for?”

“A week. What else do you have planned?”

“I’m not sure. I want to climb a water tower.”

He stumbled. “That’s kind of high.”

“I know, but I’ve never done it before.”

“You’re not afraid of heights?”

“Nope.” She wobbled and caught her balance. “Always thought it was fascinating. Never actually tried it.”

“Are you going to paint your name on the side?”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “I’m pretty sure that’s illegal.”

“I think climbing a water tower in general is illegal.”

“Is it?” She stopped, her arms fell to her sides. “I’m not going to do anything but go up and have a look around. That’s all I want. Just to see what the fuss is about.” She started walking again. “Maybe eat something while I’m there.”

God. She was going to tote a picnic basket up a water tower? She could barely walk the train tracks straight. No, not barely. She’d tipped and shook every other step on level ground. She’d break her neck going up a tower. But he kept his mouth shut. For all he knew, she’d thrive on that sort of thing. He cleared his throat. “I would imagine if there’s a locked gate blocking the ladder, then it’s illegal. Trespassing.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll just have to hope there’s not one. I mean, I’m don’t want to get arrested or anything. Just taking chances while I have them.”

And he’d damn well make sure there was a lock there. He halted on the tracks, wondering why he cared. When she glanced at him, he returned to walking. He cared because it was the humane thing to do. If she fell off the tower, he’d feel like shit for knowing about it and not stopping her. Or trying to stop her. “Anything else?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought it all out yet. It’s supposed to rain in a couple days. There’s a good sized hill in the back yard, maybe I’ll do a slip-n-slide. I always thought it would hurt with the plastic scraping against your skin, so I’ve never done it.”

“Squirt Dawn on your plastic.” He glanced over. “You won’t stick and you’ll go faster.” She blinked. “Good idea.”

“Any reason why you’re doing this list?”

A shoulder shrugged to her ear and dropped just as fast. “Never had the chance to pick things out on my own. When I was a kid mom wanted me to take dance, so I did. Little older, Dad decided I’d like the piano. Jr. High friends said I’d love softball.” Her arms wrapped around her shoulders and she stroked down her biceps. “Don’t get me wrong, those things were alright. I was decent enough at them, but I never got to pick. Even in college, my aunt was pointing me to her sorority or a new friend was pushing me toward one club or another.”

They were at the edge of town. Since Apple Trail wasn’t overly large, he could still see the bar’s red neon sign, End Of The Trail, glowing in the distance. “How far do you want to go?”

“Just a little bit more.”

He walked in silence next to her and found himself smiling while doing this ridiculous thing. He hadn’t walked train tracks since he was a kid, but here he was, doing that very thing.

Hell, he hadn't had time the last eight or nine years to just hang around and do this kind of stupid shit.

There was always something to be done at home. Something he needed to accomplish for his dad. Granted, whatever he finished usually went unnoticed, but Drew knew things were completed. Eventually his dad would too.

And then, Drew could get his hands on part of the company. There was so much room for expansion, so many things he could do. Things he couldn't even begin to tackle until he had run of the business and his dad trusted him to do a good job.

She stopped suddenly, her arms dropped to her sides. The pavement ended. The tracks continued into the countryside. Continued with wooden slats and rocks surrounding them. "Want to keep going?"

She stared after them.

He shook his head and moved to stand behind her. "Go on. I swear I'll catch you if you fall. No worries."

She glanced over her shoulder. "I'm putting my life in your hands and I don't even know you."

"I don't hear a train. Help at the bar is a sprint away, so you'll be okay even if I blow it. Plenty of time to get help and get you freed."

"You think?"

He reached forward and wrapped his hands around her slim waist. Her body easily came against his. "Better?"

Her breath hitched. "Maybe just a couple steps. You're not going to walk on the tracks too, are you?"

He pulled her a little tighter to him, taking complete advantage and wasn't going to be ashamed of it. By the wiggle of her ass, she was taking a few advantages herself. "I'll keep both feet on the ground."

"Well, all right then." She took a breath and put one foot in front of the other and walked.

Her body shifted and moved under his hands as he kept pace behind her. The rails stunk of hot metal from the blistering afternoon, but when the wind blew, he could pick up her peach scent. It was faint and hard to detect over the smoke from inside the bar, but it was there. He

could nearly drink the stuff. It wasn't too strong or too feminine, just a hint of sexy on this woman and not at all too young.

"Don't start with me, Mike!" A female shouted through the night.

Lette startled and Drew immediately firmed his grip around her waist. She wrapped her arms around his holding her. "Who is that?"

He swallowed, trying not to think of how soft she was, how her fingernails were biting into him with a needy grasp. "A blonde who came in the bar shortly before we left would be my guess."

"Tiffany!" Mike's voice boomed across the empty streets.

"No. You may be in charge of this town, but not me. You had no right!" With that, a car door slammed and an engine turned over. The whine of a motor rumbled and faded out as it drove down the street.

Lette's head leaned back and rested on his shoulder, her cheek against his neck. Her grasp eased to her fingers gliding along his arm. "Well. Eavesdropping on a lovers' fight. Check."

He laughed, liking the feel of her tucked against him. She was just so soft everywhere, softer than any other woman he could recall. And soft on the inside too. Open and easily amused, easily fascinated. "I'm not sure they're lovers."

"How do you know?"

"They don't sound like lovers fighting."

She turned in his arms. "And how would you know what fighting lovers sound like?"

"Well, I..." He cleared his throat. Was he really going to stare at her and admit he'd had several lovers over the years?

"A lover. That's something else I've never done." Her voice was low and distant, even though she was plastered to his chest. She lifted her leg, her knee pressed against his thigh. Fingers relaxed on his shoulders and nails just barely scraped over his neck.

Shit. She might have teased and hesitated a few minutes ago, but she was being perfectly clear now. He cupped her cheek and turned her up to face him.

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