

CHAPTER ONE

The soft light of the lamp, its gooseneck bent down over the piano, shined on the keys as Daniel Quinton's little fingers stumbled over the last few notes of his piece. Sarah Cole stood behind him, tapping her finger against her leg, concentrating on his efforts, and attempting to ignore the sounds intruding from outside. The house next door, her aunt's old place, had stood vacant for two years. She had gotten used to the peaceful solitude.

Solitude was nice, but paying the bills was nicer. When Aunt Verna died and left her the house, she had thought about fixing it up and keeping it as a rental. Having that steady flow of income to supplement her teaching salary, one that was on shaky ground, had been tempting. But Sarah had very little patience with people who tried to jerk her around, and getting that kind of tenant was not a risk she was willing to take. People skills were not her strong suit. No need to lie to herself about it. Being a landlord for the rest of her life was probably not a good plan. In the end, she had renovated the place, doing a lot of the work herself with the help of her dad and brother-in-law. She had stuck a For Sale sign in the yard, contacted a realtor, and hoped for the best.

Now, with all the noise from next door while the guy moved in, she had to remind herself that she had money in the bank to pay off her own house, plus a little left over to tuck back for the inevitable rainy-day brewing in her future.

“Can you tell I've been practicing?”

Sarah looked down at the sandy headed boy on the piano bench. “Yes, I can. You are doing so much better.” She smiled down while glancing at the clock sitting on top of the old high-back piano. “Your mom will be here in a few minutes. Go put a gold star on your progress poster and get a sugar cookie off the plate. I made them this morning with you in mind.”

Sarah watched the little seven year old disappear into the kitchen, then stepped across the living room, and peaked through her closed mini blinds. A man, probably her new neighbor, walked out of the U-Haul with a wooden queen-sized bed frame over his head, onto his front porch, and disappeared out of sight through his front door. Someone had already stacked cardboard boxes all over the front porch and in the yard. She looked toward the road, then scanned the yard. There were no other vehicles around, and she didn't see anyone helping him unload. Was he a family man with a wife and kids? She should have asked more questions from the realtor. The last thing she wanted was a neighbor who would keep her up all hours of the night with his comings and goings.

“Did you see how big that guy is?” Daniel stepped up beside her and lifted a slat in the blinds. “Momma said he’s a lot taller than Daddy.”

Sarah dropped the blind like the child had caught her doing something illegal. “Is he? I haven’t met him yet. I guess your mother saw him when she dropped you off.”

“We both saw him.” Daniel ran his tongue over his upper lip, capturing a buttery cookie crumb, as he continued to stare out the window. “He was in the ditch fixing a lady’s flat tire. I think it was that lady that lives across the street. You know the one who is big pregnant? She was standing on the edge of the road by the car.”

Daniel Quinton loved to gossip as much as his mother. Sarah placed her hands on his shoulders and guided him away from the window and over to the nearby sofa, leaving a trail of cookie crumbs behind them. “That was nice of him.” Candy and Randy Thompson lived in the little house across the street, directly opposite her new neighbor. Candy was due with their first baby any day now. Randy was out-of-town doing his routine stent at with the National Guard. She should probably check on the woman later.

Sarah collected her student's lesson books from the piano while he shoved the last bit of cookie in his mouth. She would vacuum all the spilled crumbs this evening before she went to bed, after she got back from mowing. Daniel was the last of six students that took weekly lessons every Saturday. They all had grown to expect homemade cookies as a reward for their hard work every week, and she didn't mind indulging them. The piano lesson money, along with the drop in the bucket of cash from her tiny lawn care business, all went into her special account she kept as a back-up plan for life shattering events. Things changed, and Sarah did not like being caught without a plan.

"Are you going over to meet him?"

"Hmm?" Sarah set the books on the coffee table in front of Daniel and looked back toward the window. A small crash from outside rang in her ears. She pushed back the urge to go spy on the neighbor again. "No." she answered, turning her eyes back to the child. "There's no reason to."

"That man sure is tall. Momma says maybe you and him will hit it off. She says you need to find a husband or you're going to turn into an old cat lady."

"Oh, really?" Sarah raised an eyebrow and looked down at the little boy. She had been the music teacher for the elementary and junior high school, and directing the junior high band for the past eight years, floating from one class to another every day, giving the different grades an hour of music as part of their curriculum. Hearing the children regurgitate in public what their parents said in private was a common occurrence. "I thought you and your mom liked Harvey."

"I do." The little boy leaned over and stroked the long-haired, smoky gray cat that lounged on the sofa beside him. "Momma is more of a dog person. I told her you said you didn't want anymore cats. That you only loved Harvey."

“That’s right.” Sarah stepped over and scratched her feline behind his ears as he nuzzled up next to Daniel. “I’m a one cat woman, but I appreciate your mother’s concern.”

“But don’t you get lonely sometimes?” Daniel continued to stroke the cat’s back as he looked up at Sarah. “Your house is always so quiet. Don’t you like talking to people?”

“I like talking to you and the kids at school and my other piano students. When I come home, I talk to Harvey.” She stood back up straight and looked over at the front door. A car horn tooted in her driveway. *Finally*. “He’s an excellent listener, and I kind of enjoy the peace and quiet.”

Sarah followed Daniel onto her front porch and waved to his mother, who waited for him in their enormous SUV. Several of the parents of her students had played matchmaker over the years, telling her who was single and why she needed to go out with them. Some had even given her the men’s phone numbers or offered to set her up. They didn’t understand that a woman could be content alone—with their cat.

Clutch rolled down the door on the back of the U-Haul and ran his forearm across his brow, mopping the droplets of sweat soaking his hair and face. Honor, his best friend and business partner, had offered to help him unload everything, but Callie, Honor’s wife, had started having back pain yesterday, and her doctor admitted her to the hospital last night.

Clutch looked up at the summer sun, beating down in the cloudless August sky. According to Honor’s last call, Callie should deliver their first baby sometime soon. Clutch already had the U-Haul loaded and ready to pull out of his old place in Houston yesterday when Honor called. He

could have postponed moving and came over to be with his friend, but Honor assured him it wasn't necessary. Callie's sister, brother, her in-laws, and friends were all swarming the hospital halls by the time the nurse had put them in a room last night. Clutch's presence wouldn't have been a bit of help. He had decided to go ahead and make the trip, moving his belongings to his new home as planned. Uncle Buck and Aunt Rita were driving his truck down tomorrow. They already had everything set up. No need to mess everything up when he could unload a few pieces of furniture and boxes easily by himself.

He looked over the chain-link fence to where an SUV was backing out of his neighbor's yard. A woman, her hair scraped back in a slick ponytail, wearing a gray t-shirt and faded jeans, stood on the front porch, looking his way. "Hello, neighbor," he called, waving to the woman. She appeared to be about his age, but he wasn't sure. His horn-rimmed glasses were on a box in the living room. They kept sliding down his sweaty nose, so he finally took them off. His vision wasn't wonderful without his glasses, but it was good enough to unload a truck. The woman lifted her hand and gave a small wave with her fingertips before disappearing through her front door.

Maybe he would go over tomorrow after church and introduce himself. He knew a lot of people already in Carson's Bayou, and this woman looked vaguely familiar. He couldn't be sure that he knew her until he had met her and was wearing his glasses. Five years ago, when he had first come to Carson's Bayou with Honor to set up the satellite office of their business, Honor Systems Technology, he had lived in a rented trailer for six months helping his best friend get the branch up and running. After that, he went back home to Houston, but made several trips to the little town over the years to help as needed. Now, as their company grew, the Carson's Bayou branch that served the Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida areas needed more staff than Honor, his wife Callie, and the old man that worked in the office.

Honor had urged, begged really, Clutch to move to Carson's Bayou and fill this position. "You know you love it there, and it's a great place to raise a family and send your kids to school. These school systems are tons better than the ones where you live."

"Who said anything about raising kids?" Clutch had asked, putting off giving Honor an answer. "I have to find a girl and get married first, and I'm in no hurry. Kids are probably a decade away, if ever."

"That's all the more reason to move." Honor could be like a pit bull with a bone when something got in his head. "You need to find you a nice Louisiana girl from around here. If you meet a girl from Houston, then you will never move down here with me."

This had gone on for about three months before Clutch finally agreed to pack up and come to Carson's Bayou. His mother had thought it was a wonderful idea. She had married the year before, and the two didn't see each other often since she had moved to San Antonio with her new husband. Uncle Buck and Aunt Rita had their own son and daughter living close to their homestead. There was no need for him to stick around.

Clutch's phone buzzed, and he fished it from his sweats pocket. "Do you have a baby yet?"

"We do. Nine pounds, thirteen ounces." Honor's voice beamed with pride. "She's the most beautiful girl on the face of the earth."

"Congratulations." Clutch walked to the front of the U-Haul and climbed up in the cab. "Let me grab a shower, and I'll come see her and her mother. How's Callie?"

"She's fine. Came through like a trooper. I was a wreck."

Clutch congratulated Honor again, then hung up his phone. He pulled the big truck from his driveway where the nose was sticking out into the edge of the narrow street. It probably would be okay to leave it like that since the road was pretty quiet. If someone came flying down the street

and rammed into it; however, he would feel terrible. He backed the truck up and pulled onto the shoulder of the road in front of his and his next-door neighbor's houses. He was blocking both their driveways, but the truck would only be there a few minutes while he grabbed a shower. He climbed out of the vehicle and looked at the woman's house. The place was as quiet as a tomb with all the blinds down. He wouldn't bother her just to tell her he would move his U-Haul in thirty minutes. Clutch started back across the grassy area between her driveway and his. He whistled as he entered his house and shut the door. *I'm going to be a godfather. This new life is starting off right.*

CHAPTER TWO

Sarah hurried from her bedroom, pulling on her lace-up steel-toed work boots as she hopped to the kitchen. Going over her monthly budget had taken longer than she planned, but it was worth it. Putting on the extra piano student and picking up two extra yards to mow had increased the amount she could add to her catastrophic preparation account by two hundred fifty dollars a month. Not too shabby. She was racing against the clock. The school board had been pretty clear at the last meeting. The music teacher would be the next head on the chopping block. She might get to stay on at the junior high, working part-time with the band, but her sweet little elementary kids would soon be a thing of the past.

She plopped onto the kitchen chair and laced up her boots, then bounced back up. Forty-three. She needed to get to the Barlow's, mow their lawn, then hustle down to the Swensen's. It didn't get dark until after seven, so she had time to do both, since neither yard was large. She had been at the Colten's this morning at six. Their place was enormous, over in the garden district, and took twice as long with all the extra weed eating and pruning, but it paid double, so there was that. She swiped the truck keys from the bar and headed out the back door to the shed, a metal roof with open sides, where she parked the truck, trailer, and her lawn equipment.

When Sarah was twelve, her next door neighbor, Drake, had started mowing grass for the people on their block to make spending money. She had asked her dad if she could do the same thing. Since Drake only mowed one yard a week, there was plenty of business to go around.

"Girls don't mow grass." Her dad had laughed as she squatted beside the edge of their house, holding the flashlight while he tightened a fitting on a pipe to stop a leak. "That's a boy's way of earning a little cash."

“That’s ridiculous, Dad. I mow our grass. I should be able to mow other people’s yards just as well as ours.”

“I tell you what.” Dad scooted out from under the edge of their house where he had been lying flat on his back fixing the leaky kitchen pipe. “If you come up with enough money to get a mower, then you can start mowing lawns.”

“Why can’t I use ours? Drake uses his dad’s.”

“You know our mower is hanging on by a thread.” Dad wiped his damp, muddy hands on the sides of his old jeans and leaned his back against their house. “You helped me put the new pull string in it last month. I’m hoping and praying we don’t have to buy a new one before the summer’s out. There’s no way it will last if you cut other people’s yards.” He reached over and tugged on one of the long brown braids hanging along his daughter’s skinny face. “That’s the deal, Pickle. Use that big brain of yours. If you want to go into the mowing business, get yourself a mower. Personally, I would stick with baby-sitting.”

“Evie gets all the good babysitting jobs.” Sarah’s face twisted into a frown. Her sister, only older by eleven months, had cornered the babysitting market on their block. She was so much better at talking to people. Sarah could be polite and answer a question with only mild anxiety, but Evie was able to sell ice to an Eskimo. At least she had left Flip Wallace, the most spoiled three-year-old on the planet, for Sarah. Even so, the family only needed her to watch the little monster about once a month.

“I’m going to do this, Dad.” Sarah picked up the monkey wrench and pipe glue from the grass and stood with her father. “You don’t think I can, but I am. I will make flyers to pass out to our neighbors about my business. When I get that mower and start working, I’m charging you full price to cut our grass.”

“That will be just fine.” Dad took the monkey wrench from his daughter’s hand and they headed to the garage to put up the tools. “But I think I’m going to start charging you for your bathwater, and the electricity you use as well.”

Sarah grinned, revealing a beautiful set of silver braces with lime green rubber bands. “I guess I can give you the Cole family discount.”

It had taken a solid year of scrimping, saving snack money and her allowance, her babysitting money, birthday money, Christmas money, money for making straight As, every drop of money she was able to scrape up. She had even helped Aunt Verna clean her house, including cleaning the ancient cat’s litter box for a few months—nasty, but she had done it. By the next May, Sarah had enough to buy the simplest push mower, no self-propel or easy pull chord, just a very basic mower. Dad loaded it in their truck the same day he bought the new riding mower for himself.

Sarah checked to make sure the zero-turn mower, leaf blower and weed eater were secure on the trailer, then lifted the gas can into the back of her old beat-up truck. She slid onto the worn truck seat, dodging the spring that poked through the cloth on the side near the door, and gawked as she looked out the windshield. *Oh no he didn’t.* The U-Haul, her new neighbor’s U-Haul, sat pulled in perfectly across her drive, completely blocking her in.

Alright, mister muscles. Just because you look all hunky and manly, do not, for one instant, think you are going to push this woman around. Sarah slid back off the truck seat and slammed the door. Harvey, who was watching from his perch above in the kitchen window, stretched his eyes wide, mocking the peasant that he allowed to live in his presence. Sarah’s eyes narrowed as she looked through the chain-link fence to her new neighbor’s yard, a wave of anger overriding the normal urge to keep her distance. She stomped through her grass, around the front of the fence

separating the narrow stretch of land between their houses and into his yard, each step she took making her fume even more.

“Hello!” Sarah banged the side of her fist against the front door, the lovely oak door she had bought for a steal at an estate auction last year that she should have kept for herself, but put on her aunt’s house to up the property value. “Hello,” she yelled again, dragging the word out in a sing-song voice. “I need you to move your truck. Now.”

Crickets. Sarah stepped over and peeked in the window. The lights were off, but she could easily see boxes stacked everywhere on living room furniture scattered willy-nilly from one end to the other. She stomped back over to the door and banged again. She had to get going, or she would be weed eating in the dark. She couldn’t afford to accidentally zap off her client’s daylilies while she whacked off the grass around the flower beds. She reached down and turned the doorknob. It wasn’t locked. He had to be in there.

Sarah eased the door open. “Hello. I’m in a big hurry and need you to move your U-Haul.” The sound of a man’s voice... singing, came from the back of the house. Running water accompanied the masculine baritone solo, ‘because you’re mine, I walk the line,’ from the shower, somewhere unseen through the dim light flowing through the many naked windows in the living room. Sarah’s eyes quickly adjusted as she searched the her surroundings. *Ah-ha*. A couple of truck keys attached to a keychain with the U-Haul logo lay on a barstool to her left.

Sarah snatched up the keys and hurried out the front door. She would back the moving van out of her way and return the keys before Mr. Muscles got to the second verse of his performance. She ran out of the front door, slamming it behind her, jogged up to the U-Haul, and climbed in. She started the engine and pulled the gear stick into reverse, giving the engine a little gas, and

easing the U-Haul backwards. Moving it enough to pull her truck and trailer out of her driveway around the nose of the van. Easy-peasy.

Sarah jumped down from the van and slammed the door. *Uh-oh*. The neighbor, a thick white towel wrapped around his middle, hands on hips, feet apart, stood on the front porch, water running off his skin and puddling on the wood plank floor below. *Busted*.

Somebody was having a good time. Clutch scrubbed the Old Spice body wash into his scalp as he listened to the noise coming from somewhere outside. When he bought this house, the realtor had assured him it was a quiet, family friendly neighborhood. Not that he planned on having a family anytime soon, but he did plan on inviting different groups from church over for backyard barbecues and other get-togethers.

He started back singing "Walk The Line" as he plunged his head under the steamy stream of water from the detachable shower head. He would have to get that fixed. A problem with being six-four was fitting comfortably under most showers. When he bought the house, he had made sure the shower in the master bathroom had a sprayer he could hold over his head. He would get a plumber in soon to raise up the fixture attached to the wall, but in the meantime, he was able to spray himself with ease from many years of practice.

That sounded close. Clutch listened again to a voice—a nearby voice yelling something. *Is someone in my house?* He jerked back the shower curtain and dropped the sprayer at his feet, water shooting up in all directions. Yep, that was definitely his front door slamming. He shut off the water and jumped out of the shower, grabbing the only unpacked towel in the house from the back

of the toilet. Maybe someone was hurt. That lady across the street that needed a flat fixed earlier might have gone into labor. Had someone come inside trying to get him to come over and help her? Or was someone in his house up to no good?

Clutch wrapped his towel around his mid-section and shoved his sappy wet hair back from his forehead as he hurried from the bathroom. He stopped in the living room doorway and looked around. Everything looked like he left it, no woman panting in labor lying on his floor. He tilted his head to the side. An engine started in his yard. *That realtor promised me this was a crime-free neighborhood.* Honor grabbed the corner of his towel, holding it in place as he rushed out of the house onto the front porch. Yep. Someone was behind the wheel of his moving van. Going backwards? What in the world?

He re-tucked his towel and wiped a river of water out of his eyes as the woman, his neighbor, jumped from the cab of the van. She looked up, and their eyes met. Clutch watched, his jaw set in a firm line, as she made her way across the yard to his front porch.

“You blocked my drive.” The woman marched up his steps and stopped directly in front of Clutch. No, “I’m sorry for breaking into your house and taking your keys.” No, “Please excuse me for stealing your property.”

Clutch stared down at the woman, probably five foot six, with a determined glint in her eye. She looked like she was going to a construction site dressed in her faded black t-shirt, tan cargo pants hanging on her narrow hips, work boots on her feet, and a baseball cap pulled snug on her head. “I would have moved it in a second, lady.”

“No need.” The woman glared at him, her brow pulled low over her eyes. “I moved it myself.”

“You broke into my house.” Clutch glared at his neighbor. She didn’t seem the least bit sorry for what she had done or the least bit intimidated by his anger.

“Like I said, you blocked my drive.” She raised her chin and pushed the ball cap back. “I have to be somewhere. I didn’t have time to wait for you to get through with your little concert.”

“Huh?” Clutch’s forehead wrinkled. *The singing.* His eyes stretched wide, a look of shock taking over his face. His eyes shot down to his nearly naked body, water rolling down in streams. He quickly looked up and down the street, his head jerking one way and then the other like a spectator at a Wimbledon match. He grabbed the corner of the towel, making sure it did not decide to roll down. “Look, lady, give me my keys, and you can be on your way to put out a fire, or whatever other emergency you have to get to.”

“Here,” she said, a tiny spark of triumph flashing from her eyes. “You need to put gas in the tank before you turn it back in or they will charge you extra.”

She turned on her heels and marched back down his steps without another word. “Hey,” he called to her back. “What’s your name?”

“Sarah Cole,” she called back, not turning around. “You have a nice voice.”

“Thank you,” Clutch said, the corner of his mouth pushing up into a lopsided grin. “I’m Clutch. Clutch Franklin.”