

The rain continued overnight, so I was still driving the bistro's pickup truck the next morning. There were now entire blocks where the water was over the first steps of the houses and I had to slow down for these residential no-wake zones. If someone really wants to make a fortune, they should come up with a GPS program that routes you around urban street flooding.

My sister is the best civil attorney I know and I was going to need to her opinion on the contents of CSA Holdings' packet to determine what I needed to do next. Tulip's office is on the lake side of a long block of commercial buildings ending at Jackson Avenue. This stretch of Magazine Street has appeared in nearly as many movies as the late John Wayne. It remains little changed, architecturally, from its heyday in the 1930s. Sidewalk-wide overhangs with low iron railings serve as expansive balconies for the second-floor apartments above the row of small shops and cafes on the river side of the street. I stopped by a quick service joint across the street from my sister's office called Juan's Flying Burrito. I ordered a pair of overstuffed burritos and then waded across the street, which was curb-deep in filthy water.

"Just the man I didn't want to see. I guess it's still raining?" Tulip laughed as I squished my way into her inner office. I took off my waterlogged Merrell work boots and rain saturated socks before I sat down in a chair facing her desk. She pounced on the Veggie Punk burrito I handed her. My own burrito was stuffed with jerk-seasoned chicken. I let her take a couple of bites of food before I passed the envelope from the Batistes across her glass-topped desk. She eyed it warily.

"Take a look at this. Someone is trying to buy up the houses Brad Pitt built over in the Ninth Ward." I said by way of explaining my visit.

"You do realize there are more people involved in doing that than just Brad Pitt." She set her burrito aside and reached for the packet.

"Yeah, but I don't know any of their names."

Tulip ignored me as she flipped through the pages of legalese. She came to an abrupt stop and looked up. Her expression was a mixture of disdain and anger that I found uncomfortable to look at. I was just glad I was only the messenger.

"Did you see that the offer is only good until Christmas Eve? Could you have given me any less time to look into this?"

"I wasn't brought in on it until yesterday morning. It doesn't really matter anyway because I doubt any homeowner is taking the offer."

"Does anyone even know why the holding company wants to buy these houses?"

"According to their little packet there they want to build a better world or something. What caught your eye?"

"Well for one thing they are offering a lot of money to the people living in them, but they'd be paying considerably less than what it cost to build any of those houses."

"What?" I looked up from my lunch. I couldn't quite wrap my head around the idea that the house I had seen cost more than two hundred grand to build. It had three bedrooms and two bathrooms and the place covered less than two thousand square feet, even if you added in the front deck.

"They have famous architects designing the houses. Frank Gehry designed one, and his normal fee is higher than the price of the house they built. They are using the latest green building materials and techniques. Companies are donating their stuff just to be able to say they are part of what the Foundation is doing. What are they like inside?"

"Very modern. You would probably like one."

“What do you mean by that?” I hadn’t meant to rattle the chip she wears on her shoulder.

“I was struck by the irony that people who had never known any place but New Orleans until the storm were evacuated to places that bore no resemblance to where they were from, were kept from returning to New Orleans for over a year, and then given a home that couldn’t look any less like what they used to live in if you tried. I don’t see a bit of New Orleans anywhere on that street. They look like houses on one of the canals over in Pass Christian. I’d move if I were them, just to get into someplace that feels more like home.”

“It would cost you or me almost twice the price they are offering to build one of these places.” Tulip was giving me information, not arguing with me.

“I assume the holding company is aware of that fact.”

“Anyone with a magazine subscription is aware of all this. Those houses have been in just about every article about the city since the storm. The fact private money is doing what government money has refused to do is big news to some people.”

“I’ve been busy,” I grumbled. My nightstand is usually stacked with back issues of *The Economist* and *Foreign Affairs Magazine*. I’m used to dealing in theory rather than actual events. “So, what you’re saying is that the guys at CSA are trying to get a bargain by offering what only seems like too much money.”

“Well, they are offering more than any of those houses will ever sell for. Just because the Foundation spent so much money doesn’t make the house worth a bundle. They are still only worth what they appraise for and what people in that neighborhood can afford.”

“Now I am lost. Are they stealing the houses or what?”

“Not really,” Tulip decided. “But, they will displace the people living in them and that will just about clear out the neighborhood all over again.”

“Then this is a bad thing.” I was rapidly losing track.

“It is in my opinion, and probably yours. This is not illegal, though.”

“A wise woman has pointed out to me that something being legal doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be criminal.”

My sister broke into a huge grin and began to laugh.

“That’s Esther Batiste’s battle cry. She has been using it for years. I don’t know how many times she’s been heaved out of the City Council for making a big scene or held in contempt of court. She even had a show on community access cable for a while before the storm. Stay on her good side.”

“That’s her envelope you’re holding.”

“I hate you, big brother,” Tulip began sliding everything back in the envelope, but she didn’t shove it across her desk. “Do you know the only difference between a case and a cause?”

“The letter U?”

“No. It’s *you* personally.” Tulip said wagged her finger. Why can’t someone offer to buy a house in a crappy neighborhood and not have you assume there must be some huge conspiracy behind it? I’ll look into who owns CSA Holdings, but don’t expect knowing that will tell you much more than you know now.” “Do I get to tag along on your date tonight?”

“Why would I want you to do that?”

“This is the Wednesday we get together to plan Mother’s dinner.” My sister and I alternate the monthly chore of having dinner with our mother while she gives a brutally opinionated critique of our lifestyles and career choices.

“I’ll call Katie and cancel our dinner plans.”

“You’ll do no such thing. I’ll join you two for supper and cut out before dessert. I’ll even call Katie to let her know what’s happening.”

I shrugged and began pulling on my still soggy socks and shoes.

“I’d really like to think you have my best interests at heart,” I sighed as I stood up to leave. “But, I think it’s safe to assume you’re up to something.”

“What a dreadful accusation.” Her indignation was lost behind the sly grin she couldn’t entirely suppress.

I had only been dating State’s Attorney Katie Reilly for a few weeks and had yet to feel I had any control over the courtship. Katie’s father joined NOPD in the same academy class as our father. Their career paths could not have been much different, but their friendship was always strong. The pair used to make an annual hunting trip to my father’s hometown in the boot heel of Missouri. Katie’s father retired there just after Hurricane Katrina. Katie also used to babysit my sister, despite the slim years between them in age. My father packed me off to military school before my hormones kicked in, so I had never given Katie any romantic consideration until I brought her a dog fighting case a couple of months earlier. The years we were apart favored her body more than they had mine. Mine had, in fact, been rebuilt on multiple occasions. My sister even selected my current face from a magazine when it needed rebuilt after my skull was caved in by the butt of an AK-47. Tulip also made sure Katie was waiting in the wings when my last romance collapsed, and the two of them had been driving this train ever since. I didn’t mind in the least since the destination seemed to be worth the price of the ticket.