



## Breaking the Seal

The November 20 auction at the mansion on Coffee Pot Bayou in St. Petersburg, Florida officially starts at 1 p.m., but well-heeled bargain hunters flock to the estate grounds hours before to inspect the finery.

Near the bayou's Venetian stone bridge, two fishermen in overalls cast their nets, eyeing the heavy foot traffic. A Great White Egret veers toward them from Bird Island. It lands on the wall next to the fishermen and waits.

One fisherman nods at the stampede from the double-parked SUVs to the brick walk between the stone lions.

"Jackson, that crowd looks as wild as the flea market by the junkyard."

Tipping his Buccaneer baseball cap, Jackson shrugs, "Junk's junk if you ask me, Davey, and you'd pay dearly for the junk in that house."

"Bet I can find a bargain."

"Your trailer need a new chandelier?"

"Maybe not a chandelier, but something no one else would see its value, and I'd just pick it up for a song."

"You a betting man, Davey? "

"Aren't you just a little curious to see how the other half lives?"

"Huh!"

"So, how about we stow the nets in my truck and see what's what?"

"I don't have my American Express card in these overalls."

"You're scared is all."

"In a snook's eye."

"Ten minutes. We take a look and get back to business."

"What're you so fired up about?" mutters Jackson as he draws up the empty net.

"There's a yard sales every other street corner."

"Pitiful, you calling this a yard sale," says Davey. "That mansion must be 10,000 square feet. Look at the veranda. Bet there were parties there in the roaring 1920s with speak easy booze and babes."

"Okay, so it's better than a yard sale, but do I need a bunch of antiques?"

"Maybe the guy who lived there fished in Coffee Pot and will not need rods where he's going."

"I would look for them."

"Why don't we check the garage, too, and the pool shed, and the green house, and that wooden sailboat, and work our way up to the house?"

"Oh, alright, Davey."

A bow-tied auction rep steps in front of them as Davey kicks the tire on a 1960s BMW convertible.

"Don't touch that!" he snaps. "You are supposed to inspect tagged items. The rest goes with the house."

Jackson straightens to his 6'3" height and crosses his arms over his barrel chest. His blue eyes narrow under bushy brows.

"And what if I want to buy the house?"

The rep starts walking into the mansion. "Then I guess you'd only look at the items *without* tags."

Jackson scowls. "I should buy the damn place and wipe that smirk off his face."

"Yeah, do it!" says Davey, darting toward the dock "Hey, check out those rods."

"Now we're talking. That's an 1880s Chubb rod. See the star trademark. Worth a fortune."

"Get outta town!"

"I read it in *Field & Stream*."

"What does it catch, goldfish? "

"Shhh. Behave yourself."

"Let's see what's in the house, Jackson."

"Bunch of yuppies is all. Bet I'm the only multi-millionaire."

"I know that, but when was the last time you sprung for lunch?"

"Supposed to *make* money, not spend it."

"You read that in *Money* magazine?"

"*Forbes*."

"Jackson, you won the freaking lotto. Buy something!"

"Always said it wouldn't change me at all."

"Look, didn't you buy things *before* the \$90 million?"

"Well, I always liked to order magazines from the Publishers Clearing House."

"Look, here's a nice bamboo magazine rack! Goes with the Chubb rod. Bid on it. You need practice."

"I suppose."

"And this lamp in the hall."

"Nah. Let's see what they got in the living room," says Jackson.

"Bigger than your whole double wide and comes with a great view of the bayou."

"Now, that's a recliner."

"Yeah, it goes nice with the leather couch."

"I'm heading upstairs, Davey."

"Wait up."

"Well, that's a big tub."

"Those jets can make a lot of bubbles, Jackson."

The irked auction rep stands in the doorway. "The spa tub is *not* part of the auction.

Nothing upstairs is. Get your number if you're going to bid on the sale items."

"Let's go, Davey."

"Are you getting a number, Jackson?"

"Why not!"

Jackson, the multi-millionaire, successfully and without competition, bids on the magazine rack. He then signals to stop the auction and buys the mansion, lock, stock, and fishing rods. And, as a reward for the cash purchase, the deliriously happy real estate agents award Jackson a deluxe trip for two to Las Vegas.

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Jackson and Davey board the jet to Vegas on December 7 and settle into their first class seats. A slightly claustrophobic and non-drinking Jackson downs bourbon on the rocks and promptly falls asleep. Ever the smart shopper, Davey spends his time studying the Sky Mall catalog. He sighs contentedly at the finery and begins marking off must-have items for Jackson. Somewhere over Texas, the wealthy man stirs.

"Hey, Jackson, I found a way to make you money."

"That would be a first."

"You know how you'll need to make your mark on your new place?"

Jackson nods.

"Well, I figured out a way you can buy a ton of stuff and make money every time you buy something."

Davey signals for a fresh drink and lays out his plan.

"Well, you get a \$50 Sky Mall gift certificate for every \$200 you spend. The catalog has 278 pages. Say you average about \$200 worth of stuff on every page. At most, you spend \$55,100 and make \$10,000."

Jackson takes a deep breath and says, "Buy like what?"

Between Texas and Nevada, Jackson nods as Davey ticks off his wish list. The bounty includes:

Page 6: 7 Rhinestone time mugs for \$210.

Page 7: Panasonic Core trainer, e-z vision video glasses with 50" screen  
\$1,499.95.

Page 10 Bed & Breakfast gift cards \$200

Page 16: World map \$149.95

Page 17: Snow flurry generating snowman \$149.95

Page 17: Remote-controlled helicopter \$79.95

Page 18: Marshmallow shooter (2) @ \$24.95

Page 19: Christmas tree 9'5" \$799.95

Page 25: Robotic vacuum \$399.95

Page 31: Pop-up hot dog cooker \$49.95

Page 39: Gravity-defying boots (2 sets) @ \$139.95

Page 42: Alive Elvis Animatronics Robot \$299.95

Davey continues through to page 278, including a page 200 holiday feast from Burgers' Smokehouse of ham, ribs, game, and sausage for \$430.

When they land in Vegas, the two commence a wild night for the Sky Mall call center representatives, who quickly get into the spirit of the blow-out and suggest they add Adirondack lawn chairs, bookcases, globes, storage units, televisions, and a pool sound system into the mix.

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The Sky Mall spree makes it easier for Jackson to get into the spirit for Vegas. He and Davey spend their days at casino slots. Given a few nights at Cirque de Soleil, an uncomfortably close encounter with two glittery escorts, and a side trip to the Grand Canyon, they arrive back at the mansion just shy of spending \$50,000.

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The Sky Mall loot begins arriving the week before Christmas, quickly filling corners in the five-car garage and most of the downstairs rooms. Jackson single-handedly sets up the revolving, music playing, fully-lighted 9'5" tree in the two-story entrance hall. As dusk approaches one evening, Jackson calls in an order for pizza, tucks his new *Architectural Digest* in the magazine rack, and goes fishing.

Jackson imagines even the local pelicans on Bird Island can see the sparkling tree through the wall of glass. Certainly, tourists leaning on the railing of the last dolphin and mansion cruise could spot it as they turn from the bayou and back to Tampa Bay. They

must wonder who lives in such a grand house. Jackson vows to set up the snow-flurry-generating snowman to dazzle street passersby.

The doorbell rings and Jackson works his way to the front door. Before him stands a pretty Asian American girl of 19. She wears a Santa hat over her long black hair, and a sweatshirt and faded jeans over her somewhat plump body. She smiles up at Jackson distractedly and thrusts the pizza box at him.

Jackson balances the box on one hand and fishes in his pocket for money. He also startles the girl by saying, "Madison Smith, of all people!"

"You know me?"

"You're the spitting image of your mother and I knew her pretty well from the trailer park. A fine woman." Jackson frowns. "Course I haven't seen the two of you since your father took over her trailer... must be two, three years ago."

"I'm just there now."

"And your father?"

"Jail."

"Your mom?"

"She's ... out of the country."

"I'm sorry," says Jackson with a shake of his head. "That shouldn't be at Christmas." Madison stares at the ground. "So, things happened to you, too," she says cheerily, nodding at the house.

"I won the lotto pretty big."

Jackson glimpses at Madison's rusty Chevy in his circular driveway, hears its radio blaring, and takes a deep breath. "So, what *you* doing for Christmas?"

"Oh, I'm not a big Christmas person."

"Hell, everybody has to have Christmas," he scoffs. "Say, why don't you come by Christmas afternoon and have a bite to eat with me and my buddy, Davey. He's from the trailer park, too."

He sees Madison frowning and slightly backing away.

"Oh, believe me, we're both harmless and I am just talking a holiday dinner."

“Yeah?”

“You bet.”

“So, you know my mother?”

“Minnie and I would just shoot the breeze after work every now and then by the pool. A very nice lady who was interested in everything. I’m that way myself. Geography. Science. Technology. No reason for you to remember me, except maybe for the *National Geographics* I passed on to your mom for you.”

“Why, sure, I always used them for school!”

“One and the same,” Jackson smiles. “And you finished school, right?”

“High school.”

“Maybe you’ll go on some day, said Jackson, adding “I got my associates in computer networks years ago and it served me well till ...” He motions to the opulence around him.

“I want to get into computers,” admits Madison.

“Smart move.”

“For now, I got a factory job and the pizza thing.”

“Well, you come to dinner around 3 o’clock Christmas day and tell me all about it, okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“Now, don’t argue. Your mom would want you to be having a good meal and, for her sake, I will see you get it, young lady.”

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Back in the living room with his pizza, a contented Jackson imagines that early Christmas morning he and Davey will put on their new gravity-defying boots and yuck it up in a battle with deluxe marshmallow shooters. There were so many rooms for a shoot-out. He’d get the Elvis robot going, too. For dinner, they’d all feast on Burgers’ Smokehouse meats, Davey’s fish boil, and supermarket salad trays. To top it off, they’d take apart the

four-foot gingerbread house on the round table by the picture window and eat all the gumdrops.

Jackson thinks about Minnie's girl. Damn shame for Madison. With no one here but that bad-ass dad to visit in jail. Merry Christmas! Jackson closes his eyes and pictures pretty Minnie Smith in her bikini, wading in the trailer park pool, her black hair swooped up in a pony tail, her almond eyes bright with interest in his description of an article he had read, a woman he could talk to.

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Christmas morning breaks early with Davey carting his fish boil into Jackson's gourmet kitchen. He sets his kettle on the six burner stove and the two head out to the dock to fish. Back inside later, it takes some getting used to wearing the gravity boots from Sky Mall. The two old friends crack open the marshmallow shooters and yuck it up with a ground floor battle that lasts an hour. They start to drink their coffee from the new rhinestone covered mugs, think better of the sparkling choice, and switch to Jackson's subscription gift mugs from Field & Stream.

Coffee turns an early lunch of cold cut slices in the living room. Next, they get the Alive Elvis Animatronics Robot going and croon with it, twice belting out "Heartbreak Hotel." That's when the doorbell rings and Davey looks quizzically at Jackson.

"I forgot to tell you Madison's coming for dinner."

"Madison?"

"Daughter of that nice Minnie Smith that lived in the trailer park - married to that trash guy in #21."

"What's she doing coming here?"

"Well, her mom is out of the country and her father's in jail, and when she delivered a pizza the other night ..." Jackson's voice trails off as he opens the door.

Madison is wearing a red sweatshirt and blue jeans and still sports her Santa hat. She thrusts a holiday bag of Dunkin Donuts at Jackson as a sullen Davey enters the center hall. The three stand around the tall, lighted, twirling Christmas tree as it plays "Jingle Bell Rock."

Jackson starts introductions, but Davey cuts him off. "I recognize her."

"Me, too," replies Madison, hugging herself as Davey gives her a blatant once over.

"Let's eat!" bellows Jackson, pushing Davey into the kitchen. A buffet is set on the marble-topped island. They load Santa-shaped plastic dishes with meats and salads and grab cans of Mountain Dew. Davey starts to fill three bowls with his fish boil, but Madison holds up her hand and points to her Santa dish, "This is plenty for me."

"Suit yourself," sighs Davey as he drops the ladle into the kettle.

The three sit at the breakfast nook and Jackson points to the bayou, where pelicans cruise in formation toward Tampa Bay.

"Nice," says Madison before turning her attention to her feast.

"Want to go fishing?" Davey asks Jackson.

Jackson shakes his head, nodding toward Madison.

Davey grunts, empties his plate, and picks his teeth, then rises to grab a beer from the fridge.

"Good potato salad, isn't it?" asks Jackson.

"Everything's real nice," agrees Madison, who eats like it is her first or last meal.

"So, tell me about going to college," says Jackson.

"I'm saving money to apply for Saint Pete College for a degree in network security cause the keep talking about viruses and hackers."

"Good choice," says Jackson, sitting back, before cautiously adding, "I bet I could give you a hand with college finances."

The startled Davey blows a mouthful of Bud across the table as Madison and Jackson stare at him.

"What the ..?"

"None of your damn business," says Jackson quietly.

"Since when do *you* give away money!" sputters Davey.

"I got \$90 million dollars and will do what I want with it."

"You can get any girl with \$90 million," says Davey.

Shot out of her chair by Davey's volley, Madison says, "'I'm not one of them!"

"Course not," says Jackson. "Davey's jealous is all."

Davey shoots out of his chair.

"For Christmas sake, everybody calm down," says Jackson.

Everybody calms down.

Jackson is silent for a moment. He takes a deep breath, then leans toward his old friend,

"So, how much money do *you* want, Davey?"

Jackson watches the storm brewing on his friend's face.

"A million wouldn't hurt."

"How much you think Madison's education would cost?"

"Maybe \$50,000. \$100,000."

"And you got a problem with me giving that to our out-of-the-country neighbor's deserving child if she gets herself into college?"

"Not when you put it that way," allows Davey.

Madison stares at the two men.

"It's settled then," says Jackson, polishing off his Mountain Dew. "Let's have at that gingerbread house!"

The holiday party gathers round the four-foot gingerbread house and commences demolition. Jackson looks at his old and young friend as they pop gumdrops in their mouths and peel lengths of licorice string from the roof.

"Now, this is the Christmas I had in mind," Jackson beams. "Oh, almost forgot, "I've got presents!"

Jackson leads Madison and Davey into his garage and switches on the lights. He hands them keys to two new vehicles festooned with red bows.

Wide-eyed Davey circles his new truck, comes back, and punches his friend's arm affectionately. "Man, you have gone a good kind of crazy."

A dazzled Madison turns from her convertible, impulsively drags a step ladder up behind Jackson, climbs it, and places her Santa hat on his head. He smiles and adjusts the hat.

"So, Merry Christmas, you all, and to all a good night!"

"Merry Christmas, Jackson!" agrees the dazed Madison, patting his shoulder.

As they return to the living room, Jackson asks, "Madison, where in the world is your mother?"

"I'm not supposed to say cause she doesn't want my dad coming after her."

Shaking his head, Jackson vows, "I'd never tell your dad a thing."

"She works on a cruise ship in the Caribbean."

"What does she do?"

"Massage," says Madison. "She does massages in a spa on the ship."

Jackson nods and settles into his recliner. "Davey, it sounds like I got a New Year's resolution brewing," he says, "I'm going to get me a cruise-ship massage."

The Alive Elvis Animatronics Robot croons, "I'll Have a Blue Christmas Without You."

"Madison, when does your mother's ship come in?"

Pipes in Davey with a sly smile, "I'd say it already has."