



Sex with Ghosts

By

Ion Light

EHP: Experimental Home Publishing

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WARNING: This book is intended for a mature audience. Due to violence and sexual themes, some persons, especially those suffering from PTSD or childhood trauma, could possibly experience unpleasant feelings or flashbacks.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. (I would like to say 'duh,' but apparently, there were actually people who believed the Castaways of Gilligan's Island were actually stranded! No joke. There were people writing the US Navy asking them to please stop spending money on warfare and rescue those poor people before they starved. Tim Allen's movie 'Galaxy Quest' made reference to it, but I thought it was a joke till I saw a documentary on Gilligan's Island. Of course, it probably doesn't help that there is a stature in Iowa place marking the birth place of Captain Kirk. Oh, how reality and fiction love to mix. (And yes, I watched Gilligan's Island. And if you have to know: Mary Ann, hands down.)

This book is dedicated to all of those who have suffered through my grammar and teased out something more meaningful than the visible architect. May you continue to find meaning and joy in you all your multiverses. This book, as with everything, is also and always dedicated to the Goddess.

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Chapter 1

Jeremy Vale, sat at the island in the kitchen, looking down at another the rejection letter. It would go into a box with the other rejection letter. Marvel. DC. Funimation. It was discouraging when even the Japanese didn't want manuscripts for his new superhero because, as captured here in a rare hand written rejection, "Way too sexy in style. Too much Sex. It'll never get past the American censors, and they are now our primary customers. Insufficient violence. Insufficient melancholy and social angst. You have a reasonable idea and a nice artistic style. Stay away from the puns. We don't need another Sean Connery meets Dead Pool. Also, the general rule of thumb is that publishers tend to ignore solicitations, and promote from within, or people they find. Get your stuff out there and be discovered. If there is any public resonance, you'll get there."

This was actually one of the most personable rejections he had ever received. The Japanese people were actually nice people, but hearing his work was 'too sexy' from a nation that sells used women underwear in vending machines stung like no one's business.

A Victorian Secret model brought him a cup of coffee, leaned her butt against the island, and sipped at her own coffee. He didn't know her name. He probably should have known her name, as often as she had 'visited,' but he never asked and she never gave it.

"Don't be so down," she said. "The world is your oyster."

"I know," Jeremy said. "I don't know why this bothers me. If a person isn't melancholy, despondent, or aggressively vengeful, you get whited out. I have everything I could ever want, except a voice."

"Aww," she said, hugging him. She kissed the top of his head. "I hear your voice."

"Yeah," Jeremy said.

He took his comic book, 'The Manifestor: Manifest Destiny,' and placed it into a new envelope, complete with a self-addressed return envelope, his letter head and sales pitch, and prepared it for the next agency on the list.

Jeremy got up from his chair, took her coffee from her, and set it down. She smiled as he drew closer, her arms embracing him, a knee coming up as they kissed. He closed his eyes, accepting the softness of her lips, and then, she was gone. He knew it because of the subtle shift of weight and the smell of ozone. He picked up the envelope and walked away from the kitchen, which was incomplete. It was as if it were a television set in a studio. The set was bright, the 'studio' was dark. He took the envelope containing the manuscript out the 'studio' door and placed it into the mailbox. He pushed the flag up.

From outside the 'studio,' it became clear it was not an actual studio, but a private airplane hangar. The neighboring hanger had a small apartment and the owner was sustained through renting out his hangar space and his work as a licensed aircraft mechanic. A Cessna was coming in for a landing, slight crab, then at the last moment straightened and touched, and disappeared as the plane went down the curve of the runway, no bigger than a two lane road, and then back up. The sky was a morning dark blue, the sun still not visible from this perspective, thought likely above the horizon. This was a different blue than the window inside suggested.

He imagined the people on the Cessna were going for pancakes. The Beacon had some of the best pancakes one could ask for. People flew in from all over just for pancakes. Hicks

Airfield was a tiny place, on the outskirts of Fort Worth, sitting between Alliance Airport and Denton Municipal. If you weren't a pilot, you probably never heard of it.

Jeremy smiled at the plane as it came off the end of the runway and started the track back. He went back inside. He went back into the breakfast set and looked out the window. There was blue sky and a yard that was not the actual view. He was no longer disturbed by this. He had ceased trying to understand this. He stretched out his hands, closed his eyes, and the set disappeared. His hanger space was empty, except for shelves. Shelves containing thousands of catalogs. There was an apartment loft, which he used to shower and change, and kept most of his 'keeper' stuff.

He lit a candle and proceeded to one of the shelves, set the candle down, found a car magazine, tore out a page, and studied it. The candle offered a bit of a flicker to the image. He closed his eyes. When he opened it, the car was no longer in the image. The actual car was in the middle of his hangar.

He grabbed one of a dozen backpacks. He grabbed the blue one. He went and opened the hangar door, sliding it open just enough to permit the car passage. He went to the car, tossed his backpack to the passenger side floor, got in, and powered it up. It came to life and he drove it to the hangar door, easing it out. He got out of the car, pulled the hangar door to, and got back in the car. He drove away. Morning sun was now visible above the far hanger.

No one seemed to notice him. It wasn't that they were ignoring him. He could come up to anyone, have conversations with them, usually innocuous, unusually mundane. No one ever asked about the variety of cars he had access to. No one asked about the planes he flew. They knew him well at the Beacon, where he ate most of his meals. But people tended to avoid him. There was a weirdness factor to him that gave him a level of anonymity. It wasn't so good that he could walk into a bank and steal a million dollars and walk out. But it was good enough that he could walk down the street, or through a mall, and people would not see him. He had to be careful not to walk into folks because they didn't see him until they bumped. They would look at him, confused and then realize an accidental trajectory, apologize, and slip away back into the ocean's night of people. 'Keep swimming, keep swimming.'

He touched the dash and song began to play. Jain – 'Come.' He drove to Denton, parked his car illegally near the UNT campus, grabbed his back pack and got out. After about three meters, and several blinks, the car was no longer there. He didn't look back to confirm it had gone. All things go.

He was early for class. He was always early. This aided the anonymity factor. If he came in and sat in the back, most folks found other places to sit. The classroom held about three hundred people. There was usually half that attending. This particular professor was popular due to incorporating iconic sci-fi into his quantum physics lectures. There was more than one class with Star Trek in the course title. Jeremy had made friends with a Professor Chilton, who wrote the academic book, 'Star Trek: Visions of Law and Justice.' He and Chilton had set and played guitar together for a year or so, before the professor moved. All things go.

The professor was writing an equation on the board. Jeremy pulled out a notebook and turned to the next blank page. He jotted the formula down, and then began doodling. The class began. A few stragglers came in and found seats. Questions. Jokes. Some laughter. Hard math. Philosophy. And before too long, the class was over, and other than the original formula he had

jotted down at the beginning, the only thing on the page was the doodle, which was nonsense, repetitive, mandala kind of gyrations.

Jeremy found his hand going up. He never raised his hand. He never asked questions. His hand went up. In doing so, the anonymity thing was broken. People who were starting to get up settled back. A silence fell. An uncomfortable one, like a crowded cafeteria going silent. The professor recognized him. He was now committed.

“Um, sorry,” Jeremy said, trying not to sustain eye contact. “But how do you get around the Mott Problem?”

The professor seemed surprised. Actually pleasantly so. He considered. “It’s not really a problem inherent in the math, but a perspective based, counter intuitive result that can be canceled out by applying the Klein constant.”

“Which, just invokes the Klein paradox,” Jeremy said. “Taking us full circle.”

“It’s not a real life dilemma,” the Professor said.

“Perhaps,” Jeremy mused. “But then, why do math at all? Maybe constants aren’t constants. Why have an order of operation if we’re just going to ignore the results?”

The professor was suddenly less enthusiastic about the question. He seemed flustered. “Your point?”

“We agree to an order of operation. Was it derived out of a fundamental mathematical nature, or was it arbitrarily chosen due to a preference in philosophy?” Jeremy asked. “If the latter, there can be no agreement on final answers, and if I show my proof it’s just as worthy as anyone else’s answer. Do Martians have the same math as us?”

“So, now you want to talk aliens?” the Professor asked.

“It’s a metaphor,” Jeremy said. “Would any hypothetical being discover the same principles of math regardless of their position in the Universe? Are constants always constants, or just regionally constant?”

“What’s your name, son?”

“Jeremy,” Jeremy offered, a little sadness because he would likely not be able to attend this class again. Once anonymity was broken, it tended to stay broken. All things go.

“Hypothetically, if the virtual particles could be captured and manifested into a conglomerate particle or molecule, how would one go about sustaining it indefinitely? What keeps regular matter from decaying?”

“The observer principle...”

“Sir, please. You have identified yourself in all of your published work as a being a confirmed materialist, so if you rule out consciousness has the fundamental aspect of reality, the hard problem of measurement defining reality would be a contradiction of your paradigm,” Jeremy interrupted.

“I don’t know,” the Professor said, offering a hands up gesture, palms open. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“No,” Jeremy said, saddened further. “I am not challenging you just to be a dick. I wanted an answer. Even a wrong answer. An argument that leads us to synthesis of a new paradigm. Something tangible I can work with that doesn’t lead to another damn paradox.”

“I share your lament, Jeremy,” the Professor said. “Come by my office. Let’s talk. Class dismissed.”

Being close to the door gave Jeremy a quick exit.



The bookstore on the Denton Square was in walking distance of UNT. It was a surprisingly nice day out for walking, the rains of the last few days having brought the temperatures down. Fall colors were starting to leak through, and there was a false spring greening that was just simple relief from the torturous summer. There were people on the square, sitting in the grass. It was not quite hippie in tone, but definitely a reflection of the university lifestyle. A kid playing his guitar. There was a coffee shop that held poetry readings on Tuesday nights. There was a British pub. There was comic book store, with comics, trading cards, card games, DnD, and figurines. It was not in competition with the book store that bought and sold and recycled everything. There were antique shops near the book store. It was possible to find just about anything here. Except a Graflex camera flash. Ever since Star Wars, those were a commodity hard to find.

The book store was huge, hidden corners, ramps, up and down stairs. It smelled of books and dust and LPs. He selected books like a Saint holding a relic. He browsed some, spent time with others, and picked out one book that required a little more intimacy. He found a corner to sit in. "The User Illusion" Tor Nørretranders. He tried to read it without imposing his own system. Not liking it, he skimmed it for digestion later, in the event he became bored, and then put it back. He browsed magazines, kept a Bridal magazine in his arms along with an anime, and a Playboy wrapped in plastic.

"Hello."

The voice belonged to a female, 18 or 19, Emo hair and clothes. A dark blue, plaid shirt, and black mini. Black lipstick. Black hose. Nike running shoes. She was close. He blinked. Looked to other side to see if she was speaking to someone else, found he was alone and accepted she was indeed addressing him. His eyes went down to his shoes.

"Shyness is actually an adorable quality," she said. "It denotes intelligence, humility, and a general respect for others. I am Tory. Tory Hicks"

Tory offered her hand. Her bracelet charm suggested Wiccan. Then he had flash insight that placed her. She was from the quantum physics class. She sat with friends, three quarters of the way down. He had noticed her as he had noticed every other female in class. With the exception of the Professor, and one guy up front who asked a ton of annoying questions, all the males in his class memory were simply silhouettes. Ghost place-holders for real people he didn't want to remember. He did not accept her hand. Other connections were highlighted. Tor, the author of the last book he skimmed. Hicks, the name of the airfield where his home was.

"This is where you take my hand and say hi, my name is Jeremy," Tory said. "Or Jere. I like Jere. You ever go by Jere?"

"No," Jeremy said.

"Jeremy it is," Tory said. "I am puzzled. Before today, I have never seen you in class. In hindsight, you have never missed a quantum physics class. Kind of spooky, don't you think?"

"It doesn't mean what you think it means," Jeremy said, and turned and walked away.

Tory followed, not perturbed or turned off in the least. “I know. It’s probably not magic. It’s never magic. Just like it’s never aliens. Until it is, then it’s magical aliens. You do believe in aliens, don’t you?”

“Hypothetically, or speculatively?” Jeremy asked.

“In actuality,” Tory asked.

Jeremy put his items on the counter. On doing so, the clerk suddenly noticed him, and came to do her job. “Oh, hello, Jeremy.”

“So you know him by name?” Tory asked.

“Sure. He comes in all the time,” the clerk said.

“Really? Does he ever flirt with the staff?” Tory asked.

“He has never flirted with the staff,” the clerk said.

“Interesting,” Tory said. “A mystery. He’s clearly not gay.”

“You presume I am not gay,” Jeremy said, looking at his shoes.

Her shoes were in his line of sight. As was her cleavage, as she was leaning into the counter, and him. She pulled the magazines he had selected out of the pile. She looked at him as if having won a game.

“Circumstantial artifacts that could be a distraction from the truth,” Jeremy said.

“Playboy, Marilyn Monroe, December 1953 - 54, 175 copies sold,” Tory said. “I am a Marilyn freak.”

“I could be gay and still like Marilyn,” Jeremy said.

“True,” Tory mused.

“Or Carrie Radison,” the clerk added.

“Who?”

“Playboy, 1957, one million copies sold,” the clerk said. “That’s who you bought last time you were here. You paid in cash, which was impressive.”

“Oh? Do tell me more,” Tory said.

“Farah Faucet. You bought all of those, actually. And Raquel Welch,” the clerk said.

Jeremy blushed, dropped a hundred on the counter which more than covered his selected items, and pulled them off the counter. “Keep the change.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Tory said, following him. “Everyone likes naked women. I do.”

Outside on the corner, he stopped. “Why are you following me?”

“I am interested. Feels like fate,” Tory said.

“I am not interested,” Jeremy said.

“Can’t hardly blame you,” Tory said. “Gay or not, what girl could compete with the likes you’re holding. That and the airbrushed models in the Brides magazine, and streaming porn through cell phones, and hot babes in video games, a girl just doesn’t stand a chance these days. We practically have to put out on the first date just to get a meal. And, yes, I put out. Hell, we could even skip the meal. I don’t believe in teasing or prolonged foreplay. OMG, you’re blushing again. Have you ever been with a real girl? I mean, it’s not a shame if you haven’t, not trying to shame, sorry, I am a flibbertigibbet. Tell me you know that word.”

“Joe Versus the Volcano,” Jeremy said. “And, Sound of Music, ‘how do you solve a problem like Maria.’”

Tory smiled. "Nice. So, what sort of porn do you stream? Let me guess. POV, mother or step mother seduction."

Jeremy met her eyes. "I don't have a cell phone. I don't have computer. I don't have a television. I don't have cable or internet."

Tory sorted that. "I am super impressed," she finally said. "So, hypothetically. If you wanted to call me, how would you do it?"

"Hypothetically," Jeremy said. "You would tell me your number. I would call you."

Tory spit out her phone number.

"I am not going to call you," Jeremy said.

"Yeah, I think you will," Tory said.

"I assure you, I am not going to call," Jeremy said.

"You have a photographic memory," Tory said. "Yeah, I stalked you since you came in the book store. I divined your nature by how you handle books. You're smart. Much smarter than you let anyone know. And now, in addition to my number, I am placing a spell on you which will make the urge to call me increasingly more irresistible."

Jeremy laughed and walked away.

"I'll be waiting!" Tory said.

"Don't hold your breath!" Jeremy yelled back.

"Okay," Tory said. "Talk to you later."



Jeremy took a train to down town Dallas. While on the train, Jeremy stowed his magazines in his backpack, except the bridal one. He flipped through it until he saw a particularly nice wedding ring, tore the page out, stowed the magazine, and sat back and studied the ring. He held out his hand, blinked, and was suddenly holding the very ring, and the box it came in, in his hand. The ring had disappeared from the magazine. No trashcan, so he stuck the advertisement in his pocket. He studied the ring further. It was perfect. Almost better than perfect the way it radiated light.

"Some girl is really lucky," someone across the way said.

Preston became aware that the few people sharing the car with him were looking. Most found other things to do. The girl with an envy smile leaned closer. He put the ring back in the box, closed the box.

"May I ask, how much it set you back?" she asked.

"It didn't set me back. Diamonds are as free as sunlight," Jeremy said. "In fact, if people knew how easy they are to acquire, no one would buy them."

"If that were true, you could give me that one," she said, trying for humor.

It could have been genuine humor. Maybe she was harmless. He reacted.

"And then you'd have to marry me, and it would be fine for a moment, till you discover diamonds don't bring sustained happiness, and then you'd want something else, and if I failed to provide it for you, someone else would. That sort of relationship thing is called monkey branching, by the way," Jeremy said. "That's not a just a girl thing. Everyone is doing that these days. And, it's quite a reasonable thing to do, until you realize, statistically speaking, everyone in

the world is likely not in the most ideal relationship. We are limited by region, language, age, social position, paradigms, personal filters, physical attributes, history, sphere of influence, family, friends, and gestalt of complicated and often opposing emotional vectors. Anyone of us is on the verge of being traded up or out or just dismissed completely. The promise is better is just a swipe away! Go ahead, take out your phone and ignore the one you're with, ignore your children because the phone is the gateway to the ideal other. The people around you, they're not important. They're flawed. We have a decrease in tolerance for imperfections. And it's not just that we can do better, we beat people up for imperfections. It doesn't even matter if person's mistake of immaturity was twenty years ago. Blow it up. Don't believe me? Look at the trending social justice of movement Me2, anyone with personal vendetta against someone can suddenly find themselves the most hated person in the world, whether that reasonable or not." He held the ring up, flipping it open. "This is an illusion. It's an ankle bracelet. It's a collar. They moved it to the finger because people are okay biting off a finger to escape, not okay losing a neck. It marks you as property. The amount of money spent on weddings, dresses, receptions, rings, all of that would be better spent on property. At least then, if your marriage goes south, you can at least sale the property. Most marriages today go south. Everything goes. You have nothing left but home videos that make you vomit because in hindsight, even that was just a performance, and a poor one at that. You want a movie? For 20 dollars you can get a Disney DVD. Wait long enough you can get the same movie for five dollars in the Walmart trash bin. Go for the older movies. They were better written anyway. This ring, after the divorce, suddenly becomes a despised object even a Hobbit wouldn't take. This is a fifty thousand dollar ring. I bet I only get fifty dollars for it at the pawn shop. Diamonds are as common as granite; the DeBeers and advertisements have fooled the consumer into craziness. They need the divorce industry to keep diamonds rolling. Jewelry clerks are the equivalent of drug reps; they're snake oil car salesmen who are peddling dirt. Don't be fooled by the smile and sway of hips. They, too, are trying to swing up, bouncing off a few heads as they go."

By the end of the impromptu speech, the woman wanted to run away. Several guys clapped in. One quit when his wife kicked him. Jeremy got out first. He slung his backpack, found his way out of the train station a little hurried, and finally made it to his next destination. The pawn shop. His prediction hadn't been far off.

"I'll give you sixty dollars for it," the shop owner said. He was impressed with the ring. It was as if he was glamored. The diamond peg in as real. It had the weight of gold. Under the glass the ring was brilliant.

"Seriously?" Jeremy asked.

"That's the best I can do, especially without ID. I am giving you a break," the man said, not putting the ring down. "I might give you seventy five if you show me a receipt and ID."

"It was my mom's. She died. No paperwork," Jeremy said.

"Sorry to hear that," the man said. He put three twenties down on the counter.

Jeremy feigned the struggle. "Fine," he said.

The man pushed the twenties, took the ring to a safe, closed the box, closed the safe, and spun the dial. No sooner than Jeremy had scooped up the twenties, law enforcement scooped in to arrest him. Weapons came up. He quickly put his hands back on the counter, palms flat.

"Drop the back pack," one of them yelled.

“Okay, hands coming up...”

Someone grabbed the backpack and pulled and it came free. Someone jumped in and pushed him hard against the counter.

“Not resisting!” Jeremy said, his face flat.

The only things found on him were a worry stone and quartz crystal, front pocket. A necklace was broken when it was pulled free. The chain held tiny glass containing two seeds; a mustard seed and a rose seed. A pocket watch on a chain, held in the left pocket, with a Russian Star on the flip up cover. He was handcuffed taken out to a car. The owner went to get the ring from the safe for the detective. He opened the safe. Neither the ring nor the box were in the safe. There was a driver license, his picture, not his sir name, not his address.

Chapter 2

Dallas County Jail began the booking process. “Fingers on the pad, Jeremy Wade.”

“Can’t we do it the old fashion way? Ink and paper?” Jeremy said.

The officer behind him shoved him. “Cooperate.”

“I am cooperating,” Jeremy said.

He touched the pad. The pad malfunctioned. He was instructed to try again.

“Computer working?” Jeremy asked.

The computer was working. The pad didn’t seem to be capturing. “Take him to station two,” the officer behind the desk said, rebooting her computer.

Jeremy was hauled over to station two. He instructed to put his hands on the pad. He complied. The pad failed. So did the computer. Lights flickered.

“Ink and paper never has to be rebooted,” Jeremy said.

The delay in the processing resulted in the detective, Mateo Flores, to investigate. He got impatient.

“Just bring him back,” Flores said.

“The last time we didn’t follow procedure, we got in trouble,” the officer said.

“Ink and paper?” Jeremy asked. He got evil glares. “Just trying to be helpful. You do have power failures from time to time, don’t you?”

Ink and paper were found. Finger prints were made. They spent another twenty minutes trying to get a photo. They gave up. He balked at going into the metal detector, which was very similar to the one at the airport. He was shoved into the metal detector. It rang and sparks rained down on him; it took five minutes to get the door to spin back open. After wards, he was patted down severely. Jeremy denied past surgeries and any metal on him or in him. The wand hit him down. The wand broke. He was stripped and provided an easy suit, that hardly looked like scrubs. He was eventually brought to the detective, who instructed him to take a seat next to his desk. The chair was positioned right next to a monitor.

“Would it be okay if I sat on the opposite side of the desk?” he asked.

“Sit!”

Jeremy sat. The monitor blinked off. Flores sat down and tried flipping it back on. It didn’t come back on.

“Are you wearing a magnet on you?” Flores asked.

“No, Sir,” Jeremy said.

A fellow officer dropped by. “Boss wants you.”

Flores got up and went to the back of the room. Jeremy looked about, curious if anonymity would allow him to walk out. He decided no. Not likely with his special clothes. A hooker, a male who needed to shave, winked at him. Jeremy nodded and went to looking at his shoes, paper slippers, almost socks. The detective returned.

“Get up,” Flores said.

“We just got here,” Jeremy said.

“You’re going into a holding cell,” Flores said. “Maybe after you sit a moment you’ll be more cooperative.”

“I am cooperating!” Jeremy insisted.

“Yep, right into a cell,” Flores said, directing his charge.
Jeremy moved in the direction indicated. “Don’t you have to charge me first?” Jeremy asked.
“No, actually, move,” the detective said, pointing the way.
Jeremy was placed in a cell. He went accommodatingly. The door was closed. It clicked locked.
“Do I get a phone call and bail?”
Flores frowned. He hesitated, considering, and then opened the cell. He took Jeremy to a phone. “Local only.”
“So, I can’t call the president?” Jeremy asked.
“If the president accepts a collect call from you at the Dallas County jail, I’ll let you go,” Flores said.
Jeremy mused. Decided that had gone as far as it was going to go.
“You wouldn’t mind dialing it for me, would you?” Jeremy asked. The detective scowled. “Seriously, I don’t want to be accused of breaking the phone, too.”
Flores picked up the receiver. Jeremy gave the number. “Put it on speaker, please.”
A moment later, the phone picked up. “Hello”
“May I speak with Tory, please,” Jeremy said.
“This is she,” Tory said. “Jeremy?! OMG, I so knew you would call.”
“Um, yeah, Tory, I know we just met and all, but do you suppose you could come bail me out of Dallas County Jail? I’m good for it. Honest,” Jeremy said.
“What did you do?”
“I haven’t been charged yet,” Jeremy said.
“What do you think they think you did?” Tory asked.
“Maybe it has nothing to do with me and all about the irresistible urge to call you spell you did,” Jeremy said.
“Oh. I am sorry,” Tory said.
“No worries,” Jeremy said. “If it’s inconvenient, I understand.”
“Times up,” the detective said.
“Don’t worry, I’ll be there,” Tory said. “I know right...”
Flores redirected Jeremy back to his cell.



Tory pulled her four year old out of the car seat, and his head fell to her shoulder. She didn’t have enough information for the bondsmen to find a Jeremy in the system. She went next door to the police station and inquired.

“I am trying to find a Jeremy who was arrested earlier.”

“Jeremy who?”

“Um, I forget his last name,” Tory said, embarrassed.

“No Jeremy,” the officer at the desk said.

Tory wrestled out a cell phone and showed the call from the county jail. “That number came from here.”

“There is no Jeremy here,” the officer said.

“Well, that can’t be true,” Tory said.

“Excuse me?” the officer said.

“You’re reading the playboy that he bought while with me today,” Tory said. The man actually blushed. She hadn’t been sure, but what were the odds of seeing Marilyn twice today? “Do you know who Judge Hicks is? That’s my dad. My mother is a Surgeon at Parkland, trauma. You will give me that magazine, give me Jeremy’s number, so I can go pay the bondsmen and get him out. Or do I need to call your superior? Who is that? Michael? He is working nights still, isn’t he?”

The officer pushed the playboy across the desk. “His name is Jeremy Vale. He isn’t here. Feds took him next door.”

“Really?” Tory asked. She leaned in. “Officer Keats?”

“Yes, Mam,” the officer said.

“Take down my number. If he is transferred back before I find him, I want you to call me. Clear?”

“Yes, Mam,” the officer said.

Tory changed her tone. “Hypothetically, if it was just you and me shooting the breeze, what was he charged with?”

Keats looked about and leaned closer. “Suspicion of grand larceny. Scuttlebutt says the arresting detective screwed up. They have nothing.”

“What do the Feds want him for?” Tory asked.

“I have no idea. No sooner than we get his inks scanned in the Feds call looking for him,” Keats said.

“Really?”

“No lie, mam,” the officer said.

“Why are you still using ink?” Tory asked.

“Oh, that’s way above my pay grade,” the officer said.

“Thank you, Keats,” Tory said.

She carried her son across the street. The streets were shiny with a late evening rain that had come and gone, popcorn thunderstorms.

James woke enough to complain. “I want to go home,” he said.

“I know, baby. It won’t be much longer, I’m sure.”

The building was locked. She tried another door. Locked. She went back to the front door, looked up into the camera.

“I demand that you send someone down to talk to me. You’re holding my husband here,” Tory said. “Jeremy Vale is my husband. I know he is here.” She held up the Playboy. “And you will want this for evidence. It was accidentally left behind.”

The door unlocked. She pulled it open and went inside. Two men in black came to escort her up. On the lift up, she casually remarked. “I really didn’t expect that to work.”

They escorted her to a conference room where a couch was available. They brought her blanket and a pillow for her son.

“Do you need anything?” the fed asked.

“Information?”

“I can bring you food. Water. A soda,” he said.

“Soda would nice, thank you,” Tory said. “Coke zero, or anything diet.”

She made her son comfortable on the couch and sat down next to him. The guard brought her a bottled drink and then went outside. He remained in the hall facing the door. She took her cell out and discovered no signal. She turned it off and put it back in her bag.



Jeremy sat, looking down at his lap, trying to capture everything with his peripheral. He had been given back his clothes and allowed to dress. He had done so without privacy, figuring no modesty here as they were likely filming him beyond the mirror. He assumed it was working. There were two guards and two Federal agents in the room. A careful scrutiny of the guards caused him to suspect they were also agents. The two sitting at the desk seemed nice enough. Attractive, young Agents. They looked smart. Agent Anthony Ortolani and Agent Dawn Elizabeth Smith. He tried not meet their eyes. They sat for a long time. Insufferably long time. He had time to ask himself twice if he were dreaming; dream checks pointed to not a dream, but could not be considered absolutely conclusive. His backpack was emptied out onto the table. They had the advertisement from his pocket, unfolded, and back in the Bridal magazine from where it was torn out. Jeremy frowned.

“There was a Playboy?” Jeremy asked.

“No,” the detective said.

“Fuck, if you can’t trust the police, who can you trust?” Jeremy grumbled.

“Let’s talk about trust, Jeremy,” Ortolani said. “Your ID is a fake.”

“Really?” Jeremy asked. “Stand all day in line at the DMV and can’t even get a good license?”

Ortolani smiled. “You’re funny. I like you,” he said.

“I don’t,” Smith said. “You’ve been a person of interest since you disappeared at age 14. You know how many people lost sleep looking for you?”

“Well, I guess you shouldn’t have relied on the milk carton campaign,” Jeremy said.

“Again, humor,” Ortolani said.

“No, this is me being serious. I bought up like ten cartons. Even set the picture down facing the clerk,” Jeremy said. “Held one up and smiled at the cashier. ‘Looks like me.’ All I got was, you’re cute. No one takes milk seriously. Absolutely zero calcium in milk. You want calcium, eat spinach. Also, the picture really wasn’t that great.”

“Good enough you bought ten cartons?” Ortolani asked.

“Well, I wanted a souvenir from my past,” Jeremy said.

“You ran away from foster care,” Smith said.

“Yeah. Those people were dicks,” Jeremy said.

“So, you ran away and left other foster kids with dicks?” Smith asked.

Jeremy found renewed interest in his lap.

“Do you know those dicks were arrested and charged with child endangerment and child abuse soon after you left?” Ortolani asked.

“Yeah, I said they were dicks,” Jeremy said. “Many foster parents are. Very few smart families sign up for foster; they know how hard it is to take in kids who have been abused or suffering from PTSD and depression. And no one is training foster parents for the shit that’s coming their way.”

“You sound a bit jaded,” Ortolani said.

“Nope. Just know the system. And it hasn’t gotten much better,” Jeremy said. “There are still parents taking kids in for state funding. Some chain-locking the refrigerator. Some put the kids on ADHD med to shut them up. Some just get the ADHD meds for themselves because very few providers want to treat ADHD in adults. Some get the meds to sell on the street. Milk the kids for as much as you can as long as you can. Go figure. Sex abuse, child trafficking, alive and well, right here in the big ol’ heart of Texas. What, we’re number two? Number two in sex trafficking, number 49 in terms of delivering mental health services to folks that need it. Go Texas! If you’re curious who’s fifty, well, don’t go to Oklahoma if you need psych meds faster than Texas.”

“You know stuff. You’re smart,” Smith said.

“Knowing stuff isn’t a sign of intelligence,” Jeremy said. “Any ten year old kid can memorize baseball statistics. Doesn’t make him street savvy.”

“Why did you run away and not report the abuse?” Smith asked.

Jeremy was quiet.

“Were you trafficked?” Ortolani said.

“Are you charging me with something?” Jeremy asked.

“This is just a friendly little chat,” Ortolani said.

“Are there fries with that?” Jeremy asked.

“Where have you been for the last six years?” Smith asked.

Jeremy folded his hands into his lap.

Smith spoke: “Five years ago, a CPS agent in Chicago investigated a rumor there was a young man in an apartment, no parents. She spoke to you, took a picture. Supposedly took a picture of you and your mother together. When she showed this photo to her boss, they came back to investigate further and you were gone. Nothing left but some clothes, several ready to run backpacks, and lot of magazines. ”

The photo in question came up on a screen. It was undoubtedly him. The woman even looked like his mother. In the picture, the apartment in questioned appeared fully furnished. He and mother were sitting on the couch together.

“I liked her. She was nice. She had a 35mm camera,” Jeremy said. “Any chance I can get a copy of the negative?”

“Why?” Ortolani asked.

“Just curious,” Jeremy said.

“The really odd thing about this pic is you were in foster care because your parents died an airplane crash,” Smith said. “This woman looks a lot like your mother. Who is she?”

Jeremy didn’t hide a tear. “My parents are dead. Clearly, this can’t be my mother.”

“Detective Flores arrested you today on suspicion of grand larceny. Interestingly, we are also interested in what happened tonight, as the alleged crime resembles a rash of pawn shop

thefts where a young man, fitting your description, would pawn a diamond ring at multiple shops, and the rings would end up missing by the next morning,” Ortolani said.

“Probably should have called in Mulder and Skully” Jeremy offered.

“Are you an illusionist, a cat burglar, or a petty thief?” Smith asked.

“You know who you should be investigating? Pawn Shop owners,” Jeremy said. “I traded a 50k ring for 60 bucks. That’s a crime. Technically, he’s probably more in line with actual value. We should investigate the DeBeers. They’re scamming the whole world.”

“Where’s the ring?” Smith asked.

“What ring?” Jeremy asked.

“The ring you sold to the pawn shop,” Ortolani said.

“In the safe?” Jeremy asked.

“No,” Smith said. She nodded and someone turned on a video.

A camera view of the pawn shop, poor quality, black and white, panned the store. As it panned directly over Jeremy it flickered, but kept going. It captured the owner depositing the ring into the safe, closing, spin locking it and coming back. It captured the arrest. The flicker as the camera passed over him was sharper, coinciding with his head being shoved into the counter and a clear spark of emotion.

“Can we use that for evidence of police brutality charges? I wasn’t resisting,” Jeremy said.

Jeremy was taken out of the shop. The detective asked for the ring. The owner went and opened the safe. The safe was empty.

“Fuck. You guys lost my mother’s ring?” Jeremy complained. “That was the only heirloom I had left. I want to press charges.”

“I suppose, if we can’t get answers from you, we can get them from your wife,” Smith said.

“Or your son. How old is he? Five? Five year olds will spill their guts over bowl ice-cream, you know,” Ortolani said.

“What are you talking about?” Jeremy asked.

Someone brought in the missing Playboy and put it on the desk. There was a sticker on the back that placed all the magazines at the bookstore on the square. The receipt revealed the time of sell and the collection was again complete. A video of Tory demanding to see her husband came up. She was holding a toddler.

Jeremy frowned at the desk, brought his hands together. “It is my humble opinion, plea bargaining and negotiating is a form of evil. It’s manipulative, playing on people’s fears and weaknesses, and often the people who get fucked over down the line had nothing to do with any crime. Tricking children to betray family, that’s worse than evil.” His eyes came up, providing clarity of his feelings about his position on this. “Both of you can go fuck yourselves. You have nothing. Charge me, lock me up, or let me go.”

Ortolani sat back. “You’re free to go,” he said.

Jeremy sat there for a moment. Not trusting it. He gathered his magazine and stuff and put it all into his backpack. He zipped it up and repositioned a charm that hung from the zipper key; a tiny glass vial displaying a mustard seed and rose seed together. He walked to the door. He thought about saying something. He wondered what the Manifestor would say. He wouldn’t

say anything. He wouldn't threaten. The comic book hero and Jeremy were two different people. His hand shook.

"We need an address and a phone number so we can reach you," Smith said. "Just in case we have any further questions."

"I'm homeless and I don't have phone," Jeremy said. "Maybe when cells become mandatory and free and my phone number becomes my social security number and there is absolute ban on debt collectors and solicitors calling you at all hours of the day even though you're on the do not call list we'll talk. Seriously, there shouldn't be a do not call list. It should be a call me list! Do you see my name on the list? Fuck you."

He opened the door and would have stormed out but there were two agents semi blocking a fast exit. They escorted him to the conference room where Tory was sitting on the couch. She stood, greeted him with a hug.

"Are you okay, honey?" Tory asked, meeting his eyes. Her concern was genuine.

"We should go," Jeremy said. There was a sadness in him.

"Okay," Tory said.

Tory collected her son. She left a soda that was half finished on the couch. He collected it and drank it as they walked. They were escorted out. They walked across the street to her car. The meter had expired. She had a ticket. She put her son in his car seat. He mumbled and she quieted him, telling him they were on their way home. She closed the door and smiled faintly at Jeremy.

"I am sorry," Jeremy said. "If I had known you had a son, I wouldn't have called you."

"Why? You hate kids?" Tory asked.

"I love kids. He should have stayed at home in bed," Jeremy said. "Why didn't you just say no?"

"Want me to leave you here?" Tory asked, a little annoyed.

"No. I'd like to go home," Jeremy said. He looked up at the Federal building. "Home is the last place I should go." He looked at her. "You have put yourself and your son at great risk."

"I can take care of myself, and my son, just fine, thank you," Tory said, she went around and collected the ticket and got in the car. She started the car. She leaned over to look at him through the window. "You coming?"

Jeremy glanced back up at the building, back to Tory, and got in the car. She drove away from Dallas.

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