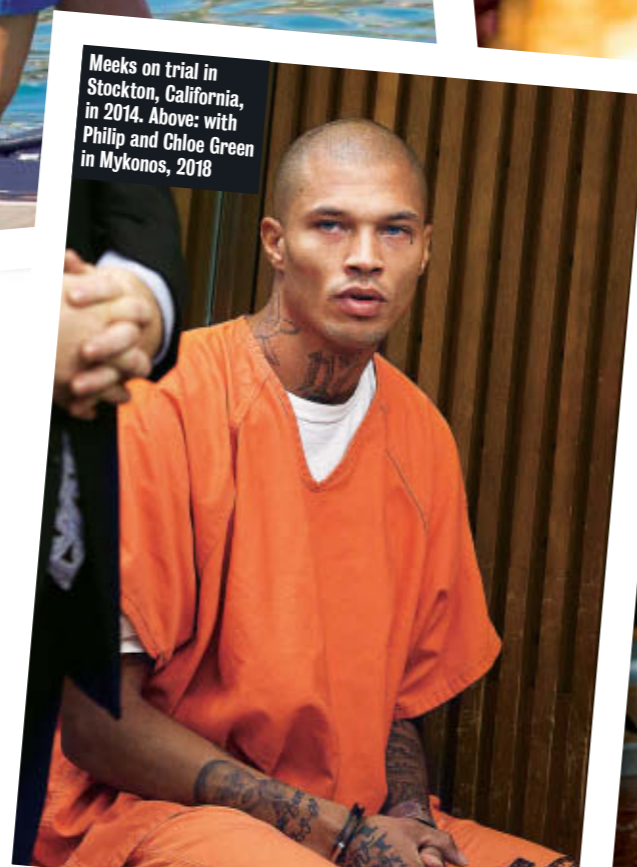


# ALL ABOARD PHILIP GREEN'S SUPERYACHT

## Confessions of the hot felon



Meeks on trial in Stockton, California, in 2014. Above: with Philip and Chloe Green in Mykonos, 2018

When Jeremy Meeks was arrested in 2014, police released his mugshot – and he became a global sensation. Signed up by a modelling agency in jail, on his release he started dating the daughter of the disgraced Topshop boss. He talks to Helena de Bertodano about a life you couldn't make up



Jeremy Meeks, 35, photographed by Barry J Holmes at Riviera 31, Sofitel Los Angeles

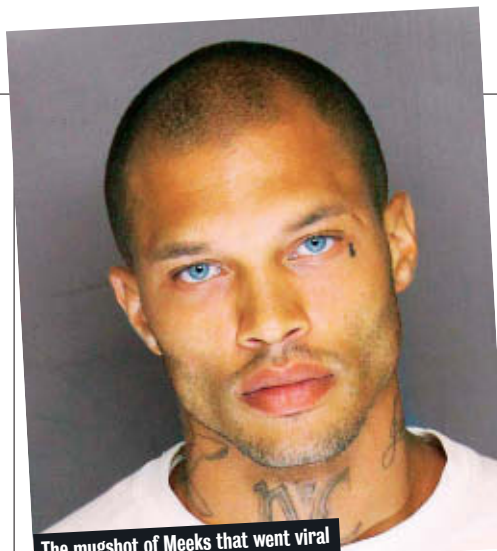


**J**eremy Meeks – better known across the internet as Hot Felon – was already notorious as a convict, internet meme and catwalk model. When his blue-eyed, pouting police mugshot – replete with tattooed teardrop, scar and 5 o’clock shadow – went viral and he was signed up by an agent while still in prison, he seemed to epitomise a new level of madness in our celebrity culture: not just famous for doing nothing à la Kardashian, but famous for looking really good while doing something really bad.

As it turned out, there was another chapter to come. Three years after being arrested on weapons charges, he met Chloe Green, the daughter of the disgraced Topshop tycoon Philip Green, in (where else?) Cannes. It wasn’t long before Chloe, a former star of *Made in Chelsea*, was pregnant. Here was the story that just kept on giving. For months the tabloids followed the ultimate dysfunctional super-rich family around the Mediterranean – the fashion billionaire now beleaguered by stories of sexual harassment, his bikini-clad pregnant daughter, and Meeks, the ex-con and son of a convicted murderer who had spectacularly landed on his feet. Superyachts! Tattoos! Babies! Billions! It was Tom Wolfe meets EL James, and then some.

Despite his savviness on the tough streets of Stockton, California, Meeks was now moving in a shiny world where nothing quite made sense. While he was fast becoming everyone’s favourite reformed criminal, the reputation of his father-in-law-to-be was unravelling. And while he was declaring his undying devotion to Chloe, she seemed to be drifting away – recent pictures show her entangled with polo player Rommy Gianni. Many had initially assumed that Meeks was an opportunist enjoying a fairytale change of fortune, but maybe we had got him wrong: maybe he was more than a handsome bit of rough caught up in a tabloid story. Perhaps he was genuinely in love with Chloe, and strangely a bit naive after a lifetime spent in jail and poverty. Maybe she was the opportunist who had bagged “the Blue-Eyed Bandit”, adding some edge to her bland rich-kid image.

We meet on the rooftop of a Los Angeles private club, the Wing, a venue chosen by his manager. Meeks could not stand out more: for one thing it is a women’s club and he is the only man here. Lots of conservatively dressed young women are working intensely on laptops or holding quiet meetings. Meeks, meanwhile, is covered in tattoos and wearing tangles of bling. By his side is a Louis Vuitton suitcase and a baseball cap bearing the slogan 99 Problems, a nod to the Jay-Z rap song of that name, which bears the catchy chorus:



The mugshot of Meeks that went viral



With Tina and Chloe Green at Paris Fashion Week, 2018

“I got 99 problems but a bitch ain’t one.”

Meeks stands up politely as I approach the table. He seems quite nervous. Or maybe he’s just cold. He is shaking a bit and wraps himself in a large woolly blanket as he takes a seat on the sofa. On the table is an avocado toast, barely touched, and a bowl of yoghurt and berries, untouched. He drinks a green juice through a straw.

Typed notes from his manager – that he does not attempt to hide – instruct him to create a mood that is “Relaxed, confident, welcoming, excited. Very down to earth. Warm. Cool. Remember name: Helena.” No wonder he is nervous; that’s a lot to remember. Everyone around him seems to want to mould him into something.

And, yes, he has lovely eyes but, no, he’s not quite as hot in person as on camera. He looks very thin in his skinny black sweater and white jeans with Nike trainers. The necklaces and bracelets are all shiny gold and studded with diamonds. “All real,” he says. He taps the \$60,000 diamond-encrusted gold Rolex on his left wrist: “This was a birthday present from Chloe.”

Scrolling through the photos on his phone, he wants to show me his favourite picture of

With Chloe Green in Barbados, 2017



Jayden, the toddler son he shares with Chloe. On the screen is an angelic-looking mop-haired boy running across a room in a Halloween costume. Most striking are his pale grey-blue eyes: the same eyes that stared out of that infamous “hot felon” mugshot. “Chloe’s also got very beautiful blue eyes,” says Meeks loyally. “But with a darker rim.”

The tale of Jeremy Meeks hinges on his eyes, which have taken him from an existence of crime and poverty to a carousel of billionaire yachts, endless holidays and a home in Monaco. Meeks was initially blindsided by his sudden fame. “It was very overwhelming. I had never had Facebook, Instagram, nothing. I was like, ‘What does viral mean?’ They were like, ‘You’re famous.’ It didn’t make sense.”

In the mugshot he looks tough and defiant but with a hint of emotion. “I was just thinking about what my five-year-old son’s reaction was going to be when he finds out that I’m locked up. [He has an elder son, Jeremy Jr, now nine, with his ex-wife.] I was thinking I’m not going to be able to pick him up from school.”

Born in Washington State in 1985, Meeks describes himself as “a heroin baby”: his parents were drug addicts and nine months

In Mykonos with Philip Green, 2018



## 'I NEVER ONCE GOT ANY BAD VIBES FROM CHLOE'S PARENTS. THEY EMBRACED ME'

after his birth his father, Raymond Meeks, stabbed and strangled his mother's best friend. He was given a 45-year sentence but released in September 2017 after serving 33 years. "Everyone in my family's been to jail. Except my oldest sister." Meeks has only met his father once. "I visited him in prison when I was 30." He has no plans to see him ever again. "I have zero desire ... I learnt things about my father that I'm just not OK with. But I wish him the best and I hope he stays out of prison."

When Meeks turned ten, his older sister – who had joined the air force – adopted him, moving with him from Washington to Travis air force base in California. "It was hard times. She was very young and she pretty much gave up her whole adult life to raise me." The move backfired when Meeks was introduced to California gang culture. There seemed to be only two choices: the Crips – one of the largest and most dangerous US street gangs, involved in murders, robberies and drug dealing – or their rivals, the Bloods. Not joining either was not an option. So Meeks joined the Crips. Which was fine at first because he liked fighting. "But it went too far at school and they stuck me in juvenile

hall – which was very aggressive and violent."

On his release, aged 15, he was shot five times – in his legs, hips and feet. Random or targeted? "Targeted. I still have two bullets in me." He still feels them sometimes – "Especially when it's cold or it rains."

Even back then, people would sometimes comment on his looks. "They'd say, 'You're handsome. You should be a model.' But it didn't make sense to me. Like, 'Look around. We are in the gutter. How could I be a model?' That door was bolted shut for me. We couldn't pay our rent; we couldn't keep the lights on; we had to steal food just to eat."

He lurched from one spell in jail to another, spending a total of ten and a half years behind bars for a string of offences including grand theft and corporal injury of a child (after a fight with a 16-year-old). Whenever he was not incarcerated, he operated in what he calls "grey areas". But by the age of 30, it looked like he was finally getting his life on track. He had married Melissa, a nurse, becoming stepfather to her two children and father to their nine-year-old son. For the first time, he had a job, driving a truck and held it down for nearly a year. "I miss that job. I still talk to my boss there."

It was on June 18, 2014, that Meeks had the bad luck – or maybe, in retrospect, the good luck – to pull up outside the house of a man police had identified as a "documented gang member" at exactly the same time as the police arrived to raid the place. Searching his car, they found a loaded Springfield Armory .45 calibre semi-automatic handgun in the boot. Meeks tried to pretend he'd found the gun, then confessed that it was his. They booked him and released his mugshot. In fact they went further: they posted pictures of everyone they had caught that day on Facebook, along with the weapons with which they were found. But if the idea was to shame him, it spectacularly backfired. Within a day Meek's image had 78,000 likes and 22,000 comments, most of them along the lines of "I'd go 50 Shades on that one. Oh, God, yes," or "Lord have mercy omg he is fine he can kidnap me anyday lol damnnnnnnnnnn ...". Two days later, BuzzFeed declared his mugshot "officially a meme" and fans were photoshopping his face into ads for Calvin Klein and Givenchy. Then real modelling contracts started arriving at the jail – Meeks could not make head or tail of them: "I'd never seen a contract in my life" – along with hundreds of letters from admirers, many of them sending him serious money. Crime, it seemed, really did pay.

Does he ever worry that other people will think that getting a police mugshot is a passport to a similar future? "No," says Meeks, "because 99 per cent of people know that is never going to happen. What I want people to know is how to recognise a blessing and take full advantage of it."

And take full advantage of it Meeks did. But first he had to spend more than two years in jail. "It gave me time to mentally prepare myself for the fame and the money. I probably would have blown it otherwise." Apart from acquiring a manager, who sorted through the dozens of contracts, he kept his head down, working out and reading lots of books. When he emerged, his manager was waiting for him. It was time to spin that mugshot. In February 2017, he made his catwalk debut during New York Fashion Week, and by June 2017 was on the catwalk again for German fashion designer Philipp Plein, later modelling for Tommy Hilfger. But his first trip ever out of the States, for a party held in his honour in London, was a disaster. "Steven Klein [a *Vogue* photographer] and Madonna – everyone was waiting for me." But so were customs police, who – citing rules that forbid entry until ten years have elapsed since a felony conviction – put him on a plane back to the US. "It was so frustrating. I'm finally doing something good and all they want to do is talk about the past."

Other countries were more lenient. At a ➤



party in Cannes in May 2017 he met Chloe Green, then 26, and by July 2017 paparazzi photos of them entwined on her father's yacht started to emerge. Meeks posted a picture of himself sitting on the prow, captioned: "All things are possible."

Melissa, his wife, was as surprised as anyone – the two finalised their divorce the following year. She has since described him as a "kind and loving" husband who was never violent, drank little and was "a good dad".

On Instagram Meeks describes Chloe as the "love of my life". They spent much of their time together on "incredible" holidays: "Turkey is one of my favourite places; I love Thailand; I love the Maldives [where they spent a month in a villa that cost \$30,000 a night]; I love skiing in Courchevel. This world is beautiful."

He describes a typical day on the Green yacht: "Wake up, eat breakfast, talk with everyone about how the night was, what the plan for the day is. We might go swimming. Might go and do some fun activities on the water or go into town. [After lunch] we all hang out, have a good time, play with the kids – we always have a lot of kids over. [The evenings] varied. We might go into the town and have dinner or we might invite some people from the island onto the boat. It's always different."

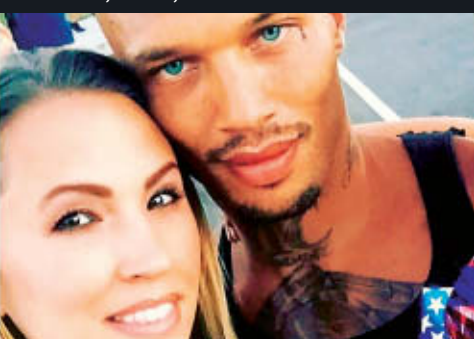
Meeks says he never felt out of place. "I pride myself on being able to have an articulate conversation with anyone about anything anywhere. I've been around some of the most powerful people in the world and I learn so much just by listening."

As for Philip Green, Meeks describes him as "the sweetest person I've ever met". Maybe he just knows which side his bread is buttered – but he sounds sincere: "I hate what they're doing to him in the press ... I never once got any bad vibes, any ill feelings [from Chloe's parents]. They embraced me and helped me in so many ways. And they helped my son." Meeks' older son, Jeremy Jr, came over to live with Jeremy and Chloe in Monaco and spent a year at the international school there. "He learnt how to speak French," says Meeks in wondering tones. Has Meeks learnt some French too? "Zero. I can barely speak English."

It is true that his vocabulary can be idiosyncratic. At one point he tells me "my pet peeve is punctuation". We talk at cross-purposes until it becomes clear he means punctuation, not punctuation. "I hate being late and I hate when people are late," he clarifies.

He may not be the sharpest tool in the toolbox on vocabulary – but he is nice, self-deprecating and anxious to please. Meeks insists that he and Chloe have not parted. "We are definitely together," he claims today. "We don't pay any attention to [reports to the

With his wife, Melissa, in 2016



## 'MY SON HAS LEARNT TO SPEAK FRENCH. I CAN BARELY SPEAK ENGLISH'



Meeks and his son, Jeremy Jr, in Monaco

contrary.] But now Meeks spends more time in America than in Europe. "Right now we're in between Monaco and LA. I have to travel a lot in order to see Chloe and my son. [We don't know] where we're going to forever settle."

However, Green has apparently removed her engagement ring and while Meeks assiduously "likes" everything she posts on Instagram, her "likes" of his posts are rare these days – possibly the ultimate test of the solidity of a modern relationship.

In the meantime, his career is burgeoning: he is working as an actor, shooting two movies, *True to the Game 2* and *Dutch*. Next he's launching his own fashion line with a German-based company, Fashion Concept, a \$15 million deal. The brand will include T-shirts with his image and slogans like "I believed in me when no one else did". He says that since his release from jail many companies have sought a collaboration with him. "I didn't want to jump at an opportunity too fast," he explains – but this one felt right. "I sat down with the designer and we went over fabrics, designs, patterns."

Did he know what looked good or was he

completely out of his depth? "I was completely out of my depth," he replies disarmingly. He had little opportunity growing up to exercise any sense of style. "I had a gang member's fashion sense: Dickies, a Pendleton and Chuck Taylors All Stars. Very stereotypical of a banger. Now I dress less street, more chic, more grown man. I have different styles for different places: a France closet, an LA closet."

His work ethic is, he says, "ridiculous". "I'm trying every door that was closed. If it slightly cracks, I'm kicking the door down. I don't want to sit on the beach all day and drink rosé."

I ask him about that tear tattoo – which usually denotes the wearer's involvement in killing someone, or, less often, the death of a friend. "As a kid, they used to call me a cry-baby," he explains. Right, I say doubtfully. He gives me a look: he knows I know it means far more than that. "I went way too far with the tattoos," he admits. "I got all of them in prison." Many are RIP tributes to "homies who died in my arms"; others mark his gang affiliation. He is thinking of getting them removed. "My son is at an age where he can understand and I don't ever want him to think this is a cool thing: 'Since my dad's a Crip, I'm a Crip.' No, that is not OK. It was one of the worst decisions I ever made."

Meeks is keen to have more children. With Chloe? "Of course. One thousand per cent ... I want to have a little girl. I want to spoil her. I want to have as many kids as I can afford. You don't know real love until you have a child."

The birth of Jayden, says Meeks, was very different from the birth of his first son. "When Jeremy Jr was born, I was in a dark place with the streets. I didn't cry when he was born ... The second Jayden came out, Chloe put him on her chest. He looked at me. I just broke down. I cried so hard."

It annoys him that people assume his character changed when his luck changed. "A lot of people think I got nice when I got this career. But I'm still the same person. Even when I was in the thick of gangbanging I had the biggest heart. I never victimised civilians."

So there's nothing you feel bad about? "Of course there is," he says. "There's all kinds of stuff."

He still finds it hard to comprehend the extraordinary turn his life has taken. "It blows my mind that I'm 35. I never thought I would still be here. How I can go from not knowing if I'm going to survive tomorrow to the position I'm in?"

And with that he finishes his green juice, picks up his Louis Vuitton suitcase and leaves for his next photoshoot – despite knowing that no studio-styled photoshoot will ever produce an image that has quite the impact of that single iconic shot in a rundown police station. ■

*fashion-concept.com*