

I would be a good manipulator, but I learned it very quickly. Then I met someone I could manipulate and get thousands of dollars from. He would catch me and still I would do it again and again and again. I like the manipulation. I like the hustle.

I'm not out there sucking dick for twenties. I'm out there for hundreds of dollars. I buy lots of cocaine, hotel rooms, and every addict comes to party with me. I get high off of getting everybody high. It becomes a ritual. One time I was clean 60 days. I felt great. I did not feel like getting high. But when I get too comfortable something brings me back to drugs because I'm an addict, never ending. I'm like a magnet. I don't have to look, the drugs come to me.

A lot of shit has happened to me. I'm amazed I made it this far. I'm always alone. I don't hang out with many other people, partially because I feel unsafe. Many hate me, especially the girls. I don't have much dignity left. If I did, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. I don't feel shame for anything I do, and I don't even think my story is so bad. Not even the crimes I committed to others.

I'm not ashamed.



Judith at age 27 and her overdose death certificate



Renee at age 41, six months before her murder

14 - RENEE

A Connecticut Lawyer in Judge Arthur's Court

Don't romanticize my life. It's just suck dick, smoke crack, suck dick, smoke crack.

Renee lived boldly so could not die quietly. When she was strangled, she must have cursed out her assailant even under her stifled final breath. The aftershocks from her death rang out far louder. The murder of a lone streetwalker in itself was only marginally newsworthy. But the law degree on this victim's résumé propelled her obituary onto the front pages of newspapers and onto network TV news. Nearly as troubling as her murder, her killer remained at large for 13 years.

Schoolgirl Call Girl

Renee Alexis Pellegrino (1955–1997), Inmate Number 196576, was born with a bright mind and hoped to earn a living as a well-paid lawyer. But she was also born with an addictive mind that doomed her to dying as a pauper. As a child, she shined as a pitch-perfect flutist and pianist. But as an adult, her outlook darkened, and her music turned silent.

Overeducated as a sex worker, she began her higher education at a Rhode Island college named Rhode Island College from which she transferred to a Connecticut college named Connecticut College. Some locals mock the out-of-towners, calling them “special snowflakes.” Special for a sophomore as she was already an overripe 21 when she transferred, this snowflake melted into the crowds of the New London bar scene and became well acquainted with its ethnically diverse clientele. She also became intimately acquainted with two college professors whom she took devilish pleasure in naming, especially the married one.

Despite her extracurricular activities, Renee excelled academically and achieved A’s in all her studies except her major, Political Science. Some of her courses with A grades stand out as predictors of Renee’s discontent. In Psychology, one course about women and another about marriage. In Philosophy, “Problems in the Search for Self.” In Economics, “Critiques of American Capitalism.” And in Sociology, “Class, Status and Power” and “Deviant Behavior and Social Control.”

At age 25, Renee graduated with honors as a Phi Beta Kappa scholar, Class of ’81. She was three years older than most of her classmates due to her gap year before college during which she moonlighted as a call girl in Las Vegas. Prostitution is legal in parts of Nevada, but not Vegas. Renee was busted and fined twice there for it. Later, she took a leave of absence of nearly two years from Conn College to return to Vegas for further vocational training. And again she was busted and fined for what society condemned as her deviant sexual behavior. When she returned for the fall 1979 semester, she enrolled in that defining course about deviant and criminal behavior. From the 1979-80 course catalog:

Sociology 227

Deviant Behavior and Social Control

An analysis of the problem of social order, deviance, and crime as a product of social conflict; theories of deviance and crime; crime and agents of control in the United States. *F. Boudreau*

Professor Frances Boudreau recalls that Renee proposed writing a term paper drawing upon her experiences as a sex worker. Renee never did write that term paper. Merely proposing it was controversial enough and Renee relished stirring controversy. Since then, the college has offered several entire courses devoted to prostitution as a theme in literature and as a thread in history. Renee would have been eminently qualified to have taught them.

After graduation, Renee knew she wanted to make some serious money but was undecided about what manner of lucrative career to pursue. Maybe business, maybe administration, maybe law but certainly neither music nor teaching. While still wavering, she sought to extend her refuge within the womb of academia by entering the University of Connecticut School of Law in Hartford. Law school was a breeze, but it was Hartford that would present a new challenge.

Raising the Bar

At age 32, Renee graduated with the class of ’87, though she clearly was already in a class all her own. The postgrad envisioned a law career but was unsure where to hang her shingle. She planned to take the bar exams for Connecticut and, to broaden her horizon, for neighboring New York and Rhode Island. The legal eagles at the Rhode Island judicial board conducted a routine background check that uncovered her criminal past of 14 arrests, including for prostitution in Nevada and for shoplifting in Rhode Island and Connecticut. So vigilant little Rhody never allowed her near its exam. Omitting Rhode Island from her padded résumé, Renee gleefully boasted to everyone that she had passed the exams for both Connecticut and New York. Her proud mom encouraged her to then seek a position with a law firm. “But mom,” Renee protested, “I have 48 more states to go.” Really she had 50 to go.

Renee’s boasts were bogus. Searches of the online databases of Connecticut’s and New York’s judicial court systems deflate her balloons of hot air. The two databases list all jurists who have passed the bar since the 1920s, whether they are still actively practicing, inactive, retired, deceased, or even disbarred. Many “Pellegrino” surnames appear on both rosters but none within a decade of her age with a woman’s forename. There is no evidence whatsoever that she ever took New York’s exam. Renee did pass Connecticut’s but, before certification, she was called

to stand before its judicial review board. Upon reviewing her several misdemeanor convictions and many arrests, the judicial board withheld granting her a jurist license unless she sought psychiatric counseling and until she met other stringent conditions, among which assumedly was drug testing. At her hearing, Renee rationalized her shoplifting. "It's a thing you do in order to be in control," she said. "When I'm in school I overstudy. I escape into studying. I think I was 20th in my class of 400. I think it all stems from feeling like you're no good and inferior and you need to be better in order to just be good enough."

Not feeling good enough, Renee deceived everyone about being licensed to practice law in Connecticut and having passed the bar exam for New York. After Renee's death, her mother innocently perpetuated that myth to the news media, which the news media unwittingly spread to the world. Early on, Renee was honing her skills at lying and manipulating, skills she would sharpen as a drug addict, skills which all addicts of illegal drugs must hone. Even addicts of legal alcohol do the same. Renee was able to convince everyone because she so thoroughly had convinced herself. She could have taken a polygraph test and fooled it. Renee's great deception was rooted in her own grand delusion.

As an undergrad, Renee suffered from an array of mental problems. She strung her illnesses all together into a single phrase which she recited as "paranoid-schizophrenic obsessive-compulsive manic-depressive disorder." One mental illness she neglected to list was substance abuse, manifested by her incurable cocaine addiction. Another was kleptomania, manifested by her compulsive shoplifting. Her first arrests for boosting were as a juvenile so were expunged from her record. As an adult, she tallied still more shoplifting arrests. She was busted for boosting even while attending law school in the capital city.

Also while in the big city, the small-town girl began dabbling in big-time drugs. She learned that cocaine aided her late night "overstudying" more effectively than did caffeine, the other students' drug of choice. She also found that her own self-prescribed medication alleviated her bipolar depression more effectively than did all the other antidepressants prescribed by her schools' staffs of shrinks. Her family and friends blamed her mounting mental and emotional troubles upon coke and crack, but her ruination stemmed more from her many mental illnesses, all shaded by the umbrella diagnosis of depression, her

constant companion. Coke and crack merely treated her psychoses the way that Prozac, lithium, or Valium treat other patients' neuroses. Yet no one blames Prozac for prostitution. Renee loved coke though coke never returned the love. Cocaine haunted her for the rest of her days and crack cocaine for the rest of her nights.

If procrastination is a choice, then Renee chose to procrastinate rather than to litigate. She never sought counseling nor to meet any of the Connecticut judicial board's conditions, least of all the drug testing. She threw all jurisprudence to the wind and chose coke over the bar. A year after graduation from law school, she began living outside the law. At age 33, she entered the unlawful profession of coke dealing and reveled in the black market for her beloved white powdery snow. At age 34, the snowflake's fairy tale ended. Snow White was busted for dealing to the Seventy Dwarfs. An undercover eighth dwarf may have been Snitch. Renee served two years at York C.I.. That would not be her last stint in the women's prison.

Lowering the Bar

Whenever in jail and off drugs, Renee fantasized that, upon her release, she would expunge that felony conviction from her criminal record and begin her career in law. She spoke matter-of-factly as though felonies can be magically erased with the wave of a wand. Until she could remove that black mark, she was blacklisted from practicing as an attorney. None of the postmortem newspaper articles about Renee recounted her life-changing drug bust, which dashed her hopes of ever practicing law. Her family described Renee at this point in her life as being lost. But Renee was not so much lost as screwed. Even if some law firm were to hire a 36-year-old ex-con for an entry-level position, her dreams of an upper-crust career in law were downgraded to working as a paralegal or law clerk. She dismissed either prospect because such clerical labor would have relegated her to the working-class roots she had shunned. Even worse, she likely would have toiled under the yoke of males.

Though unlicensed, Renee often practiced law in her own defense. She became a career criminal who accrued a long rap sheet of convictions for shoplifting, selling sex, doing drugs, and criminal trespassing, the last offense a cop's last resort for thwarting a drug deal. And almost every one of her offenses was compounded by one or two predictable

failures to appear in court, called “Failure to Appear” or FTA. Renee’s underlying crime, however, was really her “Failure to Disappear.”

If Renee was her own lawyer then she had a good one. In their same league, though not on their same team, she could plead to the judges for leniency. She plea bargained most of her convictions down to suspended sentences and probations. But suspensions and probations go only so far. Eventually, when a repeat offender already on probation gets arrested for a second crime, she must serve her jail sentence that had been suspended for the first crime. So Renee went to jail once in Rhode Island and four times in Connecticut. And while in prison, she at least was off drugs, off the streets, and temporarily disappeared.

From Courthouse to Crack House

A body falling from a high place eventually reaches a terminal velocity, after which it falls no faster and so hits rock bottom no harder. Renee’s fatal crash was well documented, while her steady decline remains clouded in legend, rumors, and recriminations. The underpinnings to her perplexing psyche probably can be discovered in her gap years from college. But her temp jobs as a sex worker in sizzling Las Vegas were so far away and so long ago that her trail there has long gone cold. Any clues and any meanings from those clues must be sought closer to home.

Renee’s younger sister, Laurie, was killed in a car crash when both were in their twenties, a tragedy that left a hole in Renee’s heart and a void in her life. But death touches everyone, the coffin lurks inside every baby carriage, the skeleton dwells inside every youthful body. While attending law school Renee lived with a boyfriend, Vincent, who provided her with financial assistance for tuition. And after law school, she lived with Jeff. But Vincent and Jeff have fallen silent about Renee. Her one daughter, Lindsay, born when Renee was 39 years old, was born a so-called “crack baby” who tested positive for cocaine, so the infant was whisked away by the state into foster care. Hence the infant Lindsay remembers nothing about her mother. Laurie, Vincent, Jeff, and Lindsay are now shadows of Renee’s past. Better to look to others.

Renee’s mother and older sister, Diane, soon after Renee’s death bravely faced the news media’s fusillades. Rather than seek protection behind a wall of “No comment,” they spoke candidly about the daughter and sister they once knew. Yet they knew the crack addict and the

streetwalker only from the safety of the sidelines. Neither recoiled from Renee. Rather, Renee withdrew from them, retreating into her nefarious underworlds of prostitution and addiction.

“She totally changed as soon as she had a hit,” said her street sister and drug dealer, Troell. “She would curl up in a corner of the bed like a little baby. I used to say, ‘Come on Renee, nobody’s going to hurt you.’ I really think she was insecure, that she felt she was unloved.” Renee may have felt unloved but that does not mean she actually was. Both her loving mom and sister tried reaching out to her. Her mom financed Renee’s several failed attempts at drug rehab but with resignation sighed that she could just as well have “flushed all the money down the toilet.”

In hopes that ready transportation would jumpstart her law career, her mom even bought Renee the used Subaru that she had pined for. Renee instead used it as her mobile crack house, stinking up both the car and her clothes with the acrid stench of crack smoke. After she loaned it to a crack dealer for \$200 worth of crack, she never saw her car or the dealer again. Such barter is common between well-heeled bingers and pedestrian dealers because, lacking driver’s licenses and credit cards, dealers cannot rent cars from rental agencies. Agreed-to loans of two hours will often lengthen into two days, or two-day loans into outright car thefts. What is the lender going to do, call the cops?

Despite her gallant though futile efforts, her mom could not save Renee from the oblivion she sought in street drugs and street sex. Her mom wrote, “I’ve been through her ‘saga’ many times before. At first, with great faith. Then, with much hope. And finally, in defeat.”

Her Friends in High Places

A biographer attempting to retrace Renee’s saga of descent would do well to examine the testimonies of her street sisters who met her at their friendly neighborhood crack houses or at the unfriendly state jail or at male-friendly Le Club. As its sole brothel, Le Club reigned as New London’s house of ill repute for close to three decades. *Devon, Lynne, Heather*, and *Jade* (*Chapter 15*) had all worked there, conveniently located less than a mile from Connecticut College. The bordello’s last madam, who hired them all and who fired them all, was Sue.

SUE speaks:

I first met Renee when she came to Le Club applying for a job. She looked all straight like a schoolteacher. She had a long skirt on. She told me she was in a relationship. I was reluctant to hire her because I didn't think she was going to attract any customers.

But I hired her, so she came to work, and she was doing okay. She was making money. It became obvious to me that she had worked as a prostitute before. She started dressing like the other girls and hanging out with them, and it was obvious she was getting high. I knew she was using crack.

Renee had problems with the other girls because her number of repeat clientele was going up, which is usually because the girl is charging less than the other girls or is not using condoms. She would freely admit that she was not using condoms. And she created too much disturbance. So the other girls were asking me to fire her. She worked for six or seven months, and then she started getting unreliable, not coming to work. So I fired her.

And JADE speaks:

I met Renee at a crack house. I told her about Le Club and where I worked. So she came to work there. Basically, I trained her. Even if we made a thousand dollars that night at Le Club, when the money ran out and the drugs ran out, we would hit the streets. On the streets, we looked out for each other.

And HEATHER speaks:

I had come to the massage parlor Le Club overweight, and I left a bag of bones. I met Renee at Le Club. She was very sassy, very opinionated, a lot of qualities I had myself. We both got fired at the same time for coming in late or not coming in at all. We turned into partners. We worked the streets together. We looked out for one another, but you really can't trust anyone on the street, we couldn't even trust ourselves. Everybody stole from everybody. I'm no better. I stole from her too.

Renee was a mother figure to me on the street. One time I was smoking so much crack that I freaked out. I felt like I was being raped, or someone was chasing me. I had to get away and I almost jumped out of a three-story window. It was Renee who was talking to me, calming me down.

And JULIE speaks:

I was running hard. I was strung out, didn't matter day or night. I was out there [streetwalking]. I had my territory, and the girls all understood that. One day I was on Washington Street, and I saw a strange girl with a baseball cap standing in the middle of the street looking up into the sky. I found that behavior bizarre. I knew she was as high as a kite. She looked so young for so much gray in her hair. I thought she was a fuckup like all of us. As strung out too.

And TROELL speaks:

We was friends when we was in jail together. She didn't tell me she had a law degree. It was a guard that told me. We used to ride the court bus back and forth from the jail to the court. She used to say how she is going to represent herself to get herself off.

Later we hung together when I was dealing her drugs. She would bring me things that she boosted from stores. She got me a big leather Gucci coat. That was also when she brought me 43 pairs of silk hoses. She took the whole rack. I thought it was so funny.

And JESSICA speaks:

Right in front of the dealer she'd say, "Don't buy that stuff. It's garbage." She was gutsy. Everyone thought Renee was crazy, but she was smart as hell. Renee had a lot of fun out there. Renee loved to beat the law.

Renee the Renegade

Renee had been a typically rebellious teenager who quickly outgrew adolescence but never shed her rebellious nature. During her final years, her life revolved around illegal drugs, so everything she did was illegal. Her cigarettes were bootleg. Her clothes were all boosted. She often rented rooms in crack houses or squatted in shuttered buildings. Having lost her eyeglasses, she always squinted as though gone blind. If she were blind, she would have been illegally blind. When she would streetwalk, she rarely trod the sidewalk. She truly walked the street. And when she walked in the street, she inevitably jaywalked. Sometimes she did not even walk but just stood idly in the street, squinting and looking lost, looking for some john to find her. Those streets were just two miles from Connecticut College and just five miles from her mom's home. Some of her former professors who drove by may have recognized her,

but at least her mother knew where to drive to find her. Renee did not hide her face in shame because she had none.

Renee defied society's conventions and especially its sexual mores. Her prostitution provided her both with a livelihood and with an outlet to thumb her nose at society. If she wrapped her arms around a john, her embrace was her form of armed rebellion. Renee may have found the infamy of being a crack ho even more irresistible than the crack itself.

During the last year of her decline, in a final act of reckless abandon she had begun shooting heroin. Addiction endangered her life and impaired her health, but drugs alone were not her fatal flaw. Her living dangerously proved not enough. She wanted to die dangerously. Hence the heroin. She did not merely court death, she wed it. Her mom said Renee was obsessed with death. Her mom and two of her professors and her street sisters all agreed that Renee was bent on self-destruction and wanted to die. Yet, too fearful to just outright kill herself, she had to pursue something or provoke someone to do it for her. If not some killer, then some killer drug. "You want to die when you're out there," said *Jessica*, about Renee's death. "You want to die from a hit of bad crack, from an overdose. Every girl out there wants to die. I wanted to die."

There were two Renees. One enjoyed partying and flouting the law. Another wearied of weeping and of living. One was a kindhearted, loving "street mom" who lavished her generosity upon younger female insiders. The other was a coldhearted, contentious "bitch" who brandished her animosity toward male outsiders. If you were a younger male and you said "white," she would yell back "black." If you were an older male and you said "black," she would bellow back at you "gray." She taunted males and tested their levels of tolerance, but her scoring was rigged with failing grades for all. She treated men as though they were all thugs, pimps, robbers, rapists, or murderers, as some indeed turned out to be. She spoke derisively of her alcoholic brother, her abusive father, and her reclusive stepfather. She slandered all the authority figures in her life who were, not coincidentally, almost all father figures. Almost all the cops and the judges and the corrections officers. Almost all her bail bondsmen, her parole officers, her drug counselors, her doctors, her shrinks, her dealers, and her johns.

Especially all her johns.

Streetwalking Targets

While most janes detest most johns, most janes hide that disdain for their customers. Renee hated all johns and she hated the married ones the most. She expressed her loathing not just to other janes but to the johns themselves. If her murderer was a john that would suggest that she may have insulted or provoked him. Even without provocation, sexual predators, serial rapists, and serial killers have long targeted janes. For those who live on the fringes of society, those fringes are dark and shadowy. A deranged john could pick no easier walking target than a drugged streetwalker alone on a desolate street, past midnight, while the rest of the city sleeps. Even worse, she willingly trades the desolate street, which she knows, for a ride with someone she does not know. If the stranger beats or rapes her and if she survives, she never reports it to the police out of fear of being ridiculed or arrested for prostitution. So, even worse, the attacker can continue to assault and to rape for another day. And to commit femicide for another year.

Society should heap boundless condemnation upon the Green River Killer of Seattle for murdering 48 street janes from 1983 to 1986 and who, in exchange for a life sentence instead of execution, confessed to twice that number and revealed where he had buried the bodies. And should scorn Robert Pickton of Vancouver for killing six street janes from 1983 to 2002 and who confessed to killing 43 more. And should revile the Grim Sleeper of Los Angeles for killing ten from 1985 to 2007 and who detectives believe killed 15 more. And revile the South Side Slayer of L.A. for killing more than 17 from 1986 to 1987. And revile the Main South Woodsman of Worcester, MA, for killing five from 1996 to 2007. And revile Walter Ellis of Milwaukee for killing nine from 1986 to 2007.

And society should mourn the ten street janes all killed on the job in Chicago in 1994. And lament the 12 killed in Riverside, CA. And lament the six killed in Miami. And lament the serial killings of more in Pittsburgh and of more in San Diego and of more in Fresno, CA, and of more in Portland, OR.

And here we shall mourn the strangling deaths of 41-year-old Renee Pellegrino in New London and of 30-year-old Michelle Comeau in Norwich.

Renee made many friends, all female, within the tribal world of the

streets of New London. And she made many enemies, almost all male, because her tribal world was patriarchal. Openly admitting that she was a snitch, she may have made some friends in the courthouse but surely made some enemies in the crack house. Renee had been incarcerated at York C.I. to await her court date on a prostitution charge when her self-proclaimed boyfriend bailed her out. Renee was murdered later that same night, and her body was found the next morning. Was the killer awaiting her release in order to exact revenge upon her?

JADE speaks:

I was cellmates with Renee in May, just before she was murdered. When she came back from the medical ward, she was embarrassed to tell me, but she had to tell somebody. She started crying and she told me she was HIV-positive. She also found out she was pregnant. She was devastated. I felt bad for her, but I also felt bad for her clients because she wouldn't use condoms. She then went to the med line all the time, twice a day, so I believe she was on the antiviral drugs.

Renee had connections with the police. She was an informant. I've seen her talking to certain cops. She dated some of the policemen too. After her death, the detectives came there [York C.I.] and talked to me. I knew she was extorting the fireman and told him she was pregnant. She believed that the father was the fire guy. After she found out [that she was pregnant and poz], she could not wait to get out of jail. She knew she was going to get high again right away.

The Road Last Travelled

Caffeine is the only recreational drug permitted in York C.I. So after torturous months or years living nicotine-free, when she stepped outside York the newly released inmate would immediately lunge for a cigarette. Often the friend who arrived to drive her home provided that first whiff. But if her friend arrived with no smokes, the ex-con bummed a cig from the first person in the parking lot that she noticed smoking. Renee probably did the same. The next thing a newly released inmate did was head straight home to get high. After waiting months or even years, who could wait another minute? Certainly not Renee.

Penniless upon her return to the streets, within minutes Renee applied her urban survival skills to make some money to buy some crack. "Don't romanticize my life," said Renee. "It's just suck dick,

smoke crack, suck dick, smoke crack." She tricked and smoked all day, and then she tricked and smoked all night. The last time her street friends saw her alive was on the graveyard shift between late night and early morning when she stepped into that last car. Which car was the last car depended upon which friend saw her at what hour. Six eyewitness accounts described five different cars. So which car was the last? One jane claimed it was a gold Nissan Maxima whose Hispanic driver was known to have assaulted janes several times before. A second jane remembered a turquoise Toyota with New York plates. A third witness thought it was a small, light-colored sports car driven by a bearded white man. A fourth witness volunteered information to police that he saw Renee enter a blue station wagon. A fifth witness, a firefighter who recognized Renee because all the central firehouse firefighters knew Renee, confirmed seeing her that night in that blue station wagon driven by an older white man.

Sherry Straub (1958–2005) was the sixth witness. Close in age to Renee, eight years later she died of lung cancer at 47 years old. Her death certificate omits any mention of her addiction to smoking crack. Instead, it attributes her cancer only to "nicotine addiction." Renee's bosom buddy, Sherry that night was trolling for johns by Renee's side.

SHERRY speaks:

Renee Pellegrino, my pal. Her name alone puts a smile on my face. She got my heart. When I first met her, I said, "Who the hell do you think you are?" And she said, "Anyone I want to be."

She was off the hook always getting high, but she still knew right from wrong. She was pregnant when she died. I think she was blackmailing the fireman about it, but he didn't kill her.

Some guy picked me up the night before. He was 40 max. He was white. He had dark brown hair down to his shoulders, dirty, greasy. Not clean-shaven, a couple days growth. Fucking really weird eyes, could have been green. His car was filthy, loaded with garbage. The car stunk. He stunk. He was a pig. He wouldn't talk. I says, "So what do you want?" He just kept looking at me, really fucking sick-like. Like this guy's a serial killer. Serial killers don't have to have motives.

The next morning about 3:00 a.m. the asshole pulled up again. Renee says, "You want him?" I says, "It's up to you, Renee, but the asshole picked me up last night. He gave me the creeps. I jumped out of his car."

She got in his car. I was the last one to see her. You want to hear something really sick? About two weeks after that happened, I saw the fucking prick in his car, and I stopped a New London cop, and I told him, “I saw the guy that Renee got in the car with.” And he says, “I don’t have time for this.”

Extortion for Abortion

Many other policemen and detectives did “have time for this.” They earnestly pursued almost every lead. Eager to help solve Renee’s murder, her street sisters conjured leads about every john, pedophile, dealer, hustler, lecher, honky, thug, and conman they feared might be the killer. Few of the males in their world escaped their gossip and slander. One girl fingered a cop. Tammy Sue, Inmate Number 253023, told Mr Friendly Man that she thought the killer was Brian (*Chapter 16*). Tammy Sue told others that she thought the killer was Mr Friendly Man (*Chapter 12*).

One New London street jane the police had much time for was Lisa, a svelte black of Caribbean descent. Soon after Renee’s arrival at York C.I., she told Lisa and other inmates that she was pregnant, that the father was a firefighter, and that she was demanding that the firefighter pay for her abortion. Lisa discharged from York shortly before Renee’s own release. Before Lisa’s discharge, Renee added a twist to her story. She told Lisa that she was demanding money from the firefighter. Otherwise, she would give birth to their child. Renee’s pregnancy was no pipe dream or flimflam she had conjured to torment or fleece the presumptive father. According to the autopsy report, Renee was 17 weeks pregnant and the fetus was male. Most fathers would not want a 41-year-old HIV-poz crack-addicted streetwalker to give birth to their HIV-poz, crack-baby–syndrome child. But if he capitulated just once to her demand for money, what could prevent her from demanding more? Blackmail could only provoke the firefighter to fight fire with fire.

During the week after Renee’s death, Lisa sat on this information while lazily streetwalking and busily smoking crack. Then on the Fourth of July, when the long shadows of sunset blended with the short discharges of firecrackers, she got a ride to the Connecticut State Police barracks near Mohegan Sun Casino. The trooper on duty invited Lisa into a tiny windowless room, which may have doubled as a holding cell. After interviewing Lisa he took her allegations seriously enough to

phone the Eastern District Major Crime Squad. The unlucky detective on call probably had to excuse himself from his family’s Fourth of July barbecue and trudge to the Troop-E barracks, into which he carried a suitcase-sized audiotape recorder. He interviewed Lisa for 90 minutes. Lisa and the detective emerged from their session all giggles, as if they had shared a few beers and had become beer buddies. Lisa seemed exhausted because she was thirsting not for beer but for crack. The detective seemed excited because better than a beer he had gotten a lead. Later, he seized as evidence Mr Friendly Man’s photo of Renee flashing an impish smile while wearing her cherished New London Fire cap.

New London’s main firehouse is located on Bank Street, across the street from a 24/7 convenience store that the police brand a drug store. The police stop there for coffee and donuts. Those they police stop for crack and heroin. Renee frequented both the store and the firehouse. Its firemen, a friendly crew with time to kill, bantered with her while they stood vigil outside. Renee enjoyed playing with fire and at least one fireman enjoyed playing with Renee. Eventually the crew anointed her as their unofficial mascot and bestowed upon her their uniform cap emblazoned with the words “New London Fire.” Renee proudly wore that blue cap with its long visor and ambiguous gold lettering. She was recognizable to the downtown business community as the streetwalker with the long graying hair who always wore a blue baseball cap.

Another street jane the police had much time for was *Jessica*. She provided detectives as well as two newspaper journalists with an especially incriminating intelligence report. She said that Renee arranged a ménage à trois for the two of them and the fireman in the cab of one of the firetrucks. Despite that tryst, Renee’s pregnancy does not mean that the firefighter was the father. Nor would his fatherhood be proof that Renee was blackmailing him. Nor, if Renee was blackmailing him, would it be any proof that he had silenced her.

Donna (*Chapter 12*) also was in jail with Renee, and she later got the inside scoop from her cousin who was a cop. Donna knows it all.

DONNA speaks:

Renee was pregnant by the fireman. She was going to blackmail him. Think of what that would look like in the headlines. “Married Fireman Gets Local Known Prostitute Pregnant.” Renee said to me, “I’m pregnant, and it belongs to the fireman.” She said it could be useful to her. Police

know he's the one. They don't think he did it. But he had it done. It's too clean. The fireman, he was interviewed by the police. He refused to give a DNA sample. He retired right afterwards.

In jail, when we were interviewed that night, the police told us she was dead. I believe they said she was strangled. They found her bare-bodied, on the side of the road. They have not found that girl's clothes. Whoever did it, took the clothes. I learned a lot from Renee. You don't go down a backroad anywhere with anybody and get totally naked. It was with someone she knew, because she would not go on that backroad that far away with a stranger.

The Body of Evidence

When Renee's body was found sprawled across the roadway, she was not wearing her beloved New London Fire cap. In fact, she was not wearing any clothes at all. Because she was found naked, one might think that the john may have killed her, perhaps accidentally, while enraptured in a sexual frenzy. Yet as Donna explained, no street jane would ever fully disrobe in a car. Not voluntarily anyway. The appetizer most frequently ordered from the drive-thru sex menu is served orally, for which neither the server nor the customer needs to disrobe. To provide entry to an entrée, the jane might pull down her pants but never take them off. Janes are just as distrustful of johns as of cops and are mindful to remain clothed to be able to flee from either. So the john most likely stripped nude Renee's dead body because, through dusting for fingerprints or combing for fibers, the victim's clothes can incriminate a suspect.

The suspect was not immediately fingered. The firefighter may have rejoiced in Renee's death, but his strong alibi cleared him with the police. If a murder is not solved in the first week, it is often never solved. Thus Governor Rowland (*Chapter 11*) authorized a \$50,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Renee's killer. Reward posters with a gruesome mugshot of Renee looking already half-dead were displayed on store windows around New London's drug zone. Still, over the next decade, the pinup's case went cold.

Throughout the lengthy 11-year investigation, one prime suspect had been questioned on many occasions and kept changing his stories each time he was caught in another lie. First he denied even knowing Renee. Then, when confronted with witness accounts that he knew her,

he denied being with her the night of her murder. Then, when confronted with witness accounts that he had been with her that fateful night, he denied having sex with her. Then, when he was jailed for an unrelated felony, he was required to provide his DNA sample for the FBI's criminal database. Confronted with DNA evidence that showed it was his semen found lodged in Renee's vagina, he insisted he had used a condom, so the semen could not be his. He further claimed that, after they had sex, Renee left with another man. He claimed that the "other man" was his mailroom coworker named Darrell. Questioned by the police, neither his workplace personnel manager nor any of his own coworkers could remember anyone named Darrell having been employed there at that time. The suspect remembered Darrell's name but not his description. Nor did he recall that Renee was notorious for engaging in unprotected sex. Already pregnant and already HIV-poz, she had less cause than ever to use protection that night. Nor, it seems, did she bother to protect her clients from the deadly weapon she knew she carried within.

The Streetwalker Strangler

Thirteen years after Renee's murder, the undying efforts of the Southeastern Connecticut Cold Case Unit led to an arrest. The "streetwalker strangler" was a part-time crack dealer and full-time sexual predator named Dickie Edgar Anderson, Jr., Inmate Number 153844. He also was the very man on the street who had volunteered information to the police that he saw Renee enter a blue station wagon on the night of her murder. At the time of his arrest, the 40-year-old was on parole for a felony conviction for unlawful restraint of his girlfriend and for assaulting her by strangulation. Upon learning news of Anderson's arrest for Renee's strangling death, another of his former girlfriends went to the police and told them that eight years earlier he had strangled her into unconsciousness and had choked her so hard with his bare hands that he left red finger marks on her neck. She showed the police a photo of those red marks on her neck. The same as Anderson, she was black, so those red marks must have been very red.

Toni (*Chapter 19*), too, had been strangled by a black man. Punctuating many of her sentences with a cough, she describes the assault that she survived two years after Renee's murder.

TONI speaks:

I was sitting across from the Mohican Hotel. This black guy stopped. [coughs] The embarrassing part is, I wanted to get high so bad that I agreed to give this man a blowjob for ten dollars. [coughs] He hands me the money. I'm performing sex on him. The next thing I know he's got his hands around my neck, and I'm going in and out of consciousness.

One part of me is praying, "Oh my God, I'm going to Heaven!" And a part of me is thinking, "Oh God, don't let this son of a bitch end my life today." [coughs] I'm seeing my mother, and my mother's dead. I'm seeing my father, and my father's dead. [coughs twice] I'm going in and out of consciousness, then my dying scream came out. I'm hearing his voice, "Do you hear me? Do you hear me?" I answer him, "I hear you." [coughs] He's telling me how his mother made him do these sexual things, and he stops strangling me.

Before me, two other girls had been attacked by him. I blame those girls for what happened to me because they never reported it.

Toni's attacker may have been Anderson, who had a long criminal history dating back to his teens. Anderson's other convictions, in addition to strangulation and unlawful restraint, included several assaults, threatening, and violations of protective orders. The cowardly male's violent crimes were all against women. One arrest stands out. Anderson had picked up a jane in New London. Before engaging in any sex, they smoked crack in his car. He became aggressive, then turned violent. The jane bolted out the car door. The macho male pursued her, slammed her to the ground, and kicked and punched her. Witnesses called the police, and the he-man manqué was arrested at the scene.

Physiognomy is a shaky science, if it is a science at all. Viewed frontally, Anderson did not stand out as a criminal. But viewed in profile, his oddly misshapen skull might provide some clue to his criminality. His misshapen skull may have warped the contours of his brain, and that warped brain may have given form to a twisted mind.

Jen, Inmate Number 272214, as a battered wife, suffered several blows to the head though none reshaped either her skull or her mind. Her facial wounds gave testimony to other bruises all over her body, inflicted when her husband pushed her down a long flight of stairs. That landed the wife beater in jail as a violation of a protective order already in place for his previous assaults upon her. Being incarcerated, he lost

his job. Jen then lost his financial support for their two kids. Her coping mechanism for dealing with all the stress was smoking crack. She worked the streets to provide for her children and for her crack habit. From the crack if not from the stress, she had lost 30 pounds in three months. During that low point in her life, she had bartered sex for crack with Anderson. Anderson admitted to police that he often had traded crack for sex with prostitutes.

JEN speaks:

I was shocked to see someone on TV I used to party with being arrested for murder. I was even more floored seeing the articles with his face and that shit-eating grin. I always had found something odd about him. I had the opportunity of being in his presence only two times, thank God. I never really got into conversation with him. It was more just getting high [and having sex]. When he didn't get what he wanted, he made me feel nervous. Thinking back now, it puts shivers down my spine. Scary!

Her Murder Solved but Her Life Unresolved

Anderson pled innocence but after an arduous two-week trial he was found guilty. Taking into account Anderson's history of violence against women, Judge Arthur C. Hadden handed down the maximum for murder, 60 years in prison without parole, effectively a life sentence. He told Anderson, now 42, that his unbroken string of crimes against women could not be overlooked and that as a judge, "My job today is to see to it that you are separated from society as long as possible." The lengthy jail term indeed will ensure he will never again harm another woman.

But no judgement can ever ensure that another woman will not harm herself. Renee never really fell upon hard times but did fall into a black hole, one whose darkness she seemed to have preferred to the light of day. So rather than crawl out of it, she dug herself deeper into it. After years, the air in that bleak hole turned stagnant and she gasped for breath until, with Anderson's fingers clenched around her neck, she ceased breathing. Deliverance is what she sought, death is what she got. Most street janes perish quietly and unnoticed, like dying sparrows hidden in tree hollows, barely mourned. But Renee's murder brought her more notoriety in death than she already had garnered in life. And her life was only one single puzzling piece of a large complex puzzle.

Maps are exaggerations of features rendered larger than life. Even the very thinnest line representing a major highway can never be narrow enough to be true to scale. In her own immeasurable way on history's ledgers, after her death Renee became larger than life. She passed from life into legend, and then from legend into ghostlike myth. A year after her murder, those who had only met her would claim that she was their best friend. The waves of janes and addicts ebb rapidly on the streets, where generations are measured in months, not decades. Yet years later, janes who never met Renee had still heard of her legacy. To some she was "the streetwalker lawyer," to others "the strangled streetwalker." To those who truly remember her, she was simply "Renee." The downtown streets past midnight still seem to echo with her name.

A Life Ends but Life Does Not End

The obituary section of Connecticut College's alumni magazine wrongly noted her class year and then stated, "Renee Pellegrino '80, of New London, Conn., died on June 25, a victim of homicide. Miss Pellegrino was a Phi Beta Kappa scholar and a graduate of the University of Connecticut's law school." Prim and proper, short and sweet.

One of several detectives who worked the case said of Renee, "We didn't care if she was a prostitute. We didn't care if she was a nun. She was somebody's daughter." His were eloquent words, but hardly the final word. The person who deserves to speak the last words about Renee is the woman who taught Renee to speak her first words.

RENEE's mother speaks:

As a mother, I will say that the tragic thing that happened to Renee could happen to anybody anywhere, whether they are rich or poor. Most did not have her opportunities and her story shows that not only the disadvantaged suffer this addiction and live this lifestyle.

Renee was depressed all her life, a clinical thing. We had her to psychiatrists. Didn't seem to help much. She got to law school, and one day she called me and remarked how extraordinary cocaine was and says, "It's wonderful! You should try it! It makes me feel so good. It makes me happy, and I'm never happy." She got out of law school, and seemed to be drifting, and I know it had to do with drugs. She came home one day and without interacting with me she went right to bed. Now I realize she was crashing. She just drifted and got very skinny. She said, "This is great! Not only does cocaine make you feel great, it makes you lose weight, too."

She did not come home a lot, and when she did she mostly crashed. The years passed, she just got lost. I know that she was arrested a number of times for shoplifting and drugs. On some occasions, she would want me to bail her out. After college, instead of trying to get into a law firm, she joined Le Club. It's not a club! It's nothing but a whorehouse. I went up there once and the girls were lined up where a guy could choose one. One time she was visited by one of her professors. She was making a ton of money, five hundred, a thousand dollars a night. Spent it all, bought drugs for everybody.

And I'm trying to control that? This is nothing you can control. I thought to beat cocaine all you need to do is give her lots of kale, brown rice, fresh juices, walk her in the park every day. But you don't fix cocaine that easily or quickly. I gave up. Defeat! So I went on with my world. She went on with whatever world was hers. The streets.

Then, finally, she was murdered. It was in all the newspapers. TV people interviewed me. I remember saying in conclusion what I am repeating here, that this could happen to any mother.

And then years later there was the trial. I went to every session. I listened carefully to the evidence. They wanted me to leave the room to show the jury the pictures of Renee's body. Very graphic, very disturbing. But I had to see it because it's my child. DNA convicted him. Did I feel better by the conviction? No. It changes nothing.

I must tell you this. I have become an atheist because I can't believe in a knowing Creator creating *this* and allowing all *this*! What does Thomas Hobbes say? He says, "Life is short, nasty, and brutish."

I echo his words.



Jen at age 29; Jade at age 24; Troell at age 35, showing off a watch she pickpocketed from a john

Posthumous Postscript

Michelle Comeau (1968–1998) of Norwich is remembered more for how she died than for how she lived. Like Renee, she suffered from an array of mental illnesses including bipolar disorder. Like Renee, she was a crack addict. Like Renee, she supported her habit by streetwalking. Like Renee, she rotated in and out of jail for selling sex and doing drugs. Like Renee, she had been released from jail shortly before she was killed. Like Renee, she and Dickie Anderson were street friends, which Anderson at first denied but later admitted. Like Renee, she and Anderson had traded sex for crack, which Anderson also at first denied but later admitted. Like Renee, she had suffered a blow to the back of her head and had been strangled both by bare hands and with a rope or a wire. Like Renee, according to details released by the police only during the trial, her nude body had been found sprawled supine across the roadway, posed symmetrically in a simulated crucifix, her arms outstretched, her legs spread slightly apart, her knees bent, her feet together. Like Renee, her nude body had been photographed by the police before they removed it. Like Renee, her portrait had been photographed by Mr Friendly Man six months before her murder.

Unlike Renee, Michelle had no law degree nor even a high school diploma. Unlike Renee, she was raised by an alcoholic single mom from whose broken home she was removed at age 14 and placed into foster care. Unlike Renee, at 16 she was left an orphan when both of her foster parents died in a fire. Unlike Renee, she suffered from Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder. Unlike Renee, she was convicted of assault three times as a consequence of Tourette's, which made her prone to outbursts of violence. Unlike Renee and except during rare bouts of Tourette's, she had a peaceful demeanor and was soft spoken and self-effacing. Michelle's death, like her life, would have passed largely unnoticed had it not been linked to Renee's.

DEVON speaks:

Michelle was a good person. I knew her from Boswell Avenue, which was a very big place for drugs in Norwich. One guy picked me up near there one night and he tried to strangle me. I thought it must be the same guy who killed Michelle. It scares me because it could have been me. I don't know about *Hope* Becker. I know only about my friend Michelle. All she wanted to do is get high. And somebody fucking killed her for it. [*cries*]

Anderson was tried for both murders, but one juror held out against conviction for Michelle's. With a hung jury, the judge declared a mistrial. Knowing that Renee's killer would be imprisoned for the rest of his life, the state's prosecutor did not move for a retrial. Officially, Michelle's murder remains unsolved and unavenged. In a final act of humiliation, just as society had failed Michelle in life, it had failed her in death.

A hint of a happy ending just might provide closure to this chronicle of murder and mayhem. Like Renee, Michelle Comeau had a daughter who as an infant was ushered into foster care. Her name is Monica. When Michelle was murdered, Monica's foster father read about it and informed Monica about her biological mom's identity, her life, and her death, but he withheld the newspaper articles from his innocent 9-year-old foster daughter because of their rife references to sexual acts. When Anderson was arrested, the newspapers were again abuzz. By this time Monica was 21 years old, so she read those articles herself. Those in the *Norwich Bulletin* included the photo of Michelle taken by Mr Friendly Man. That was the first time Monica had ever seen a picture of her biological mother. She contacted Mr Man and, in response, he sent her several large-format glossy photoprints of her phantom mom.

MONICA writes:

I spent my life wondering what Michelle Comeau, my biological mother, would look like. I felt my whole life that my questions would eternally remain open and I'd never know anything about her until I was old and crusty and my reading glasses were falling off my wrinkly nose.

For some reason, I had always pictured a beautiful blonde. Then I saw in the newspaper the picture of her for the first time in my life. I realized she was not the Cinderella I had imagined.

I know Michelle must've been very frustrated and confused with why and how her life came to be. I never thought I would care about her because I never thought of her as a real person, but now I realize she was. I realize that the streets I walked, she had walked. That the body I have, she once touched.

Monica added that, though flawed, Michelle "was a human and a mother." The clock has struck midnight on this Cinderella scary tale, but just before midnight Monica had been granted her one wish. She had found a long-missing portrait of the human who had been her mother.



Michelle Comeau at age 29, six months before her murder



Trish at age 27

15 - TRISH

Off to See the Wizard of Poz

*I'm just sick of this. Sick of waking up with no cigarettes.
Sick of waking up wanting to get high. Waking up hungry.
Waking up lonely. I'm just fed up with it all.
My future? Death within a year, probably.*

Meet Grant, a broadcast journalist casting for broads. He and his video cameraman aim to cruise the streets of Norwich and New London to get the scoop about the “streetwalker strangler” to whom are attributed the murders of Michelle Comeau (*Chapter 14*) and Renee Pellegriano.