MURDER!

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MISS HOLLY WOOD

In 1991, 21-year-old Jill
Ann Weatherwax was
crowned Miss Hollywood.
Seven years later, cops
found her scantily clad
body in an abandoned,
crack-vial-infested lot
in Fresno, California.
Tom O'Neill traces her
last days on the boulevard
of broken dreams.



n the morning of March 25, 1998, the skies finally cleared over Fresno, California, after nearly eighteen hours of rain and Larry Hicks, a forty-fouryear-old retired cement mixer, decided to take his truck down to

Motel Drive, the seediest prostitution area in a city that knows from seed, and find himself a little action. Hicks, an overweight man with rotting teeth and a nasty stammer, told police he found a girl,

Royal flush: Eighteen-year-old Jill Weatherwax at the Miss Summerfestival coronation in Michigan. negotiated a price, and drove her to a secluded spot—an abandoned lot behind the small animal shelter on the edge of town. Reached by driving a hundred or so yards off the main highway over a long, bumpy dirt path, the lot is strewn with forgotten underwear, spent syringes, and moldering condoms. But that day there was something else he

noticed as he eased his truck past the hulking piece of rusting farm equipment that blocks the clearing from view—the body of a girl lying faceup in the dirt.



Al Murrietta, a ten-year veteran of homicide, had just returned to headquarters from the scene of the town's other overnight slaying ("Just a little gang-banging stuff") when he got the call about a body behind the shelter. Noting the location, he decided to go solo, assuming it was just another hooker hit by an angry john. But as he approached the body—which was clad in cut-off jeans, a leather jacket, an ill-fitting sweatshirt, and flaming yellow patent-leather platform shoes—he knew something was different.

"Her teeth," says the cop, standing on the same spot eight months later. "They were beautiful. Straight. White. Clean. Didn't look like a down-and-outer; not a used-up piece of addicted garbage like the rest of them out here. And that's probably what got her killed."

What did get her killed—besides multiple blows to the face and twenty-nine stab wounds that ran from the base of her skull down to her buttocks—remains as much a mystery today as it was on that fresh spring day a year ago. But one thing is certain: The death of twenty-seven-year-old Jill Ann Weatherwax, a model and aspiring singer from small-town Michigan whom the newspapers dubbed "the murdered Miss Hollywood," provides a dark and unsettling look into the troubled soul of

Smiles like teen spirit: Jill in 1988, her senior year.

Hollywood and the people drawn to it.

"It's the most left-field case I've had since I began in '79," the fifty-year-old cop says as he surveys the muddy field. "The poor girl just got thrown out here in Fresno and ends up dying in the ugliest place in the world."

nly eight years before, Weatherwax was a bundle of raw energy and optimism, bounding into New Faces, Victor Kruglov's Sunset Boulevard talent agency.

"I think she saw the head shots in the window," recalls the fifty-year-old Russian, who acknowledges he's never handled any stars in his twenty-one years in the business. "She asked if I thought she had potential as an actress."

Kruglov advised her to sign up for an acting class and get her head shots taken. "But she wasn't, how you say, organized," he continues in heavily accented English. "What she really wanted to be," he recalls, "was a singer."

And thus began the time-honored Hollywood tradition: passing around the new girl in town. First stop: Joe De Carlo, longtime manager of Cher.

"I got a call from Victor," shouts the now-retired De Carlo over the phone from his home in Las Vegas, "and he says he has this girl who's new to town and has no place to stay. And I say, 'No, no, no!' And he says, 'She looks like Kim Basinger!' So I say, 'Okay, bring her over.'"

Jill stayed at De Carlo's Beverly Hills penthouse for six months. "She drove me nuts!" bellows De Carlo, who says the nineteen-year-old spent her time sitting around his apartment, writing song lyrics but never working on her career. Jill finally saw the writing on the wall, recalls De Carlo, when "I told her that I wasn't going to send her to someone and tell them she wants to be a singer when she doesn't sing that good. And then," he adds, "Ciro took over."

iro Orsini, a fiftyish Italian, arrived in Beverly Hills from London in 1987, determined to make a name for himself as big as Wolfgang Puck's. The owner of a string of club/restaurants in Europe called Ciro's Pizza Pomodoro, he opened his first American restaurant and club that fall on Beverly Boulevard, a stone's throw from the Beverly Center. A middling celebrity in his

adopted hometown of London, where his flagship restaurant in trendy Knights-bridge was frequented by Princess Diana, Orsini was unable to pull in an equally swank crowd in Beverly Hills. Instead, a dribble of rock 'n' roll outcasts who frequented the clubs on Sunset Boulevard started to drift down for late-night snacks and occasional jam sessions. In their wake came the usual Hollywood bottom-feeders—never-be moguls, soft-core players, and assorted hangers-on—to whom Orsini readily attached himself.

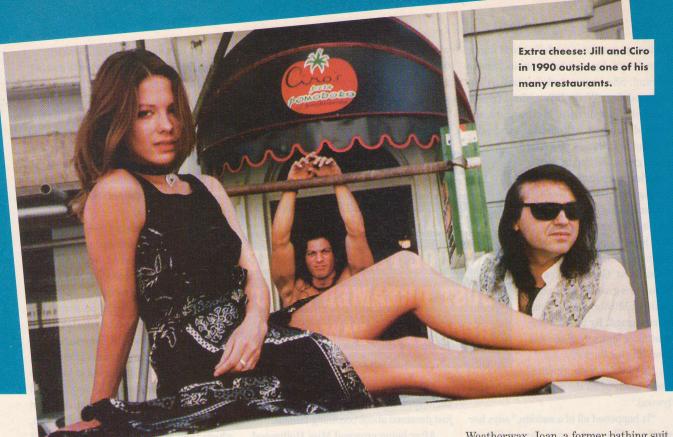
This was the world Jill entered the night De Carlo took her to Pizza Pomodoro for dinner in the summer of 1990. As usual, Orsini was holding court that night. And when De Carlo introduced Weatherwax to him, Orsini proceeded to dazzle her, flashing cash and dropping names.

"I took one look at her and said, 'I want to marry that girl,'" Orsini recalls in the first of many late-night transatlantic phone calls. Soon after, the smitten restaurateur, who had adopted a hard-rock pose of leather, chains, and shoulder-length hair, had whisked the young girl away from De Carlo; she moved into his two-bedroom bachelor pad on Palm Avenue off Sunset.

"Jill called and said, 'Guess what?'" recalls her mother, Joan. "'I met the most fantastic man. He's Mr. Hollywood!"

Almost overnight, Jill's life was transformed as Orsini made real the fantasy she'd carried with her from Michigan. He lavished gifts upon her—clothes, jewelry, cosmetic surgery (\$15,000 on her teeth, reports her sister)—and he gave her the stage she wanted, letting her perform at his club almost nightly.

And since Orsini loved to make the scene, he also provided her the introductions she craved. At a Planet Hollywood opening, Jill danced with Patrick Swayze, who whispered to her that they had known each other in a previous life. When Van Morrison came into Orsini's club one night, she sang with him. Later, she partied with heavyweight boxer Lennox Lewis, who remembers, "She was beautiful. She could speak to me with her eyes." She and Orsini spent New Year's weekend at actor Armand Assante's house. And when Orsini opened a restaurant in Jordan, she dined in the palace of King Hussein. She also posed nude for Orsini's friend Hank Londoner, a Penthouse photographer, who then pub-



lished the photos in the men's magazines Platinum and Club.

But despite the apparent glam, Orsini couldn't secure the one thing Jill wanted most: a recording contract. Recalls Carl Summers, a friend and record producer,

"One of my friends said, 'She's been traveling with Ciro for a couple of years, and if she's with Ciro she's met the biggest and the best. If none of them have signed her, I don't think you want to."

Perhaps that's why, when Orsini's Beverly Hills restaurant went under in '91 and he decided to retreat to London, the next project he came up with was to stage an elaborate pageant in which Jill would compete. In the summer of

1991, Jill was crowned "Miss Hollywood"despite the fact that the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce had discontinued the event years before. Some have raised questions about the contest's validity. To this day, Orsini insists Jill won fair and square—even though he provided the prize (a recording contract with his own newly formed label) and bought the dress that

None of that mattered to Jill. After her victory, she phoned her hometown paper, which ran a front-page story and quoted her as saying, "I have been writing [music]

she competed in. His girlfriend's dead-atthe-gate career was kickstarted, and he didn't bring Jill Weatherwax home to London, he brought "Miss Hollywood."

"THE POOR GIRL JUST **GOT THROWN OUT HERE** IN FRESNO AND ENDS UP

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> for a long time, but I just fell in the right place, and the right people heard my voice. ... I feel you can do whatever you try to do if you push hard enough."

ill Weatherwax was born on October 26, 1970, sixty miles northwest of Detroit in Fenton, Michigan, the child of Joan and Jim Weatherwax. Joan, a former bathing suit model, had three children by a previous marriage, but two of them moved out in high school, and the third, Scott, developed such a serious drug problem that he was thrown out, say his parents, when he was twenty.

"Scott was always angry, and we never knew why," says Joan, who because of

> medication for a nervous condition tends to slur her words. Sitting in the family's living room, surrounded by framed photographs of Jill, she adds, "I think he was angry about the divorce. He was the only one who wouldn't call Jim 'Dad.'"

> Five years younger than his wife, Jim Weatherwax, fifty-six, looks down at his hands, and in a soft voice says, "I wasn't that close to him."

A "beautiful, vivacious child," according to her parents, Jill delighted her father when she demonstrated musical talent at the age of two. "Just after

she learned to talk, she would want to sing with me," says Jim, who fronted a folk group in the '60s but had long ago traded his musical aspirations for more practical ones at the nearby GM plant in Flint.

At ten, Jill spotted an ad in the



Fenton paper for a modeling and dance school run by a local woman, Susan Arrand. She began studying tap, ballet, and modeling. While Jill's earliest friends remember her as naive and insecure, she soon developed self-confidence under

Arrand's tutelage. By the ninth grade, Jill had made the cheerleading squad and began dating Jim Bass, a football player. During her senior year, she started entering many of the local beauty pageants, winning nearly all of them, from Miss Great Lakes to Miss Spring in the highly competitive Michigan Four Seasons pageant. By the time she was out of high school she was modeling for Revlon.

No one, however, remembers exactly when she decided to go to Hollywood.

"It happened all of a sudden," says her mother. "She met a man named Steven Maguire at a fashion show in Chicago." With what begins to emerge as an apparent pattern of ignorance about Jill's adult life, Joan admits that, except for his name, she and Jim never learned much about the man

she could go, as long as Maguire bought her a return ticket—in case, Joan says, "things didn't work out."

who they say had offered Jill a one-way ticket to Hollywood and "introductions." After talking it over, her parents told her

"JILL NEVER REALLY HAD A PLAN," SAYS A HIGH SCHOOL FRIEND. "SHE **JUST DREAMED ABOUT BECOMING FAMOUS."**

> "Jill never really had a plan," says Tara Dickens, a friend from high school. "She just dreamed about becoming famous."

> After being crowned Miss Hollywood, Jill moved to Europe with Orsini. At first, her life was beyond wonderful. She performed regularly at his clubs in London, Paris, and Istanbul, and even recorded the promised CD (titled Shake Me Sexy, it featured her nude on the cover and was avail

able only on a limited basis in Europe).

But little by little she started to lose her way, beginning with alcohol.

"She'd have a few drinks, and she'd become another person," says Kenny Coplan, a longtime Orsini friend who

> scouts models for Hustler. "She liked picking up girls, and sometimes while drinking she'd just get wild and do it at the bar."

> In early 1996, Orsini sent Jill home to her parents after she suffered what a friend described as a nervous breakdown-resulting from an abortion Orsini pressured her to have, because, he told her, a child would interfere with their career plans. Back home, Jill was diagnosed as bipolar, a

treatable disorder marked by severe mood swings. She was given medication. Soon after, Orsini flew her back to London, where they attempted a reconciliation. It did not last.

In the fall of that year, he bought her a ticket back to Hollywood so she could work on her career, with the promise, his friends say, that he would marry her if she straightened out.

Orsini, however, maintains it was never



conditional. "I always would have married her," he insists, explaining that he needed to attend to his rapidly expanding business in the Middle East and that Jill's career would be better served if she were in L.A.

n the north side of Sunset Boulevard, where the town's soft-core porn players have staked a claim to sidewalk tables at Mel's Drive-In, Dennis Morgan, a strip-club owner and longtime friend of Orsini's, banishes three women with clinging tops and Saranwrapped bottoms to a table indoors. Nodding his enormous shaved dome toward the last of them, the forty-six-year-old confides, "I'm taking the blond for a boob job later. Over the past ten years I've gotten 'em for twenty girls. I get 'em for free because I'm so well connected."

When Jill returned to Hollywood, Morgan, as a "favor" to his old buddy Orsini, hired her to dance at Fantasy Island, his strip club on the west side of town. "He wanted someone to watch over her," says Morgan, "to make sure she stayed on the straight and narrow."

Orsini also took care of Jill's living arrangements, prevailing on another friend to let her share his apartment. Apparently she had other plans; she soon moved into a one-room apartment behind the Fatburger in West Hollywood, at the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Vista Street—a block notorious for its twenty-four-hour drug and prostitution trade.

"This is a treacherous area," Michael Powell says on a balmy day eight months after Jill's death. Powell, a soft-spoken mechanic who works nearby, befriended Jill. "She was susceptible to situations that weren't good for her. I often asked her why she came down here in the first place."

It's a question that lingers in the minds of many of the denizens of the little community of working stiffs, sex workers, druggies, and felons who welcomed Jill into their cloistered world. Later in the day, as the sun sets on Santa Monica Boulevard, a number of them emerge from the shadows cast by the Fatburger and climb into a battered stretch limo owned by one of Jill's local friends. In back are the mechanic, Powell; Lisa Freeman, a former speed freak; Evan Thomas, a seventy-year-old hairdresser and former coke dealer; and

Ezell Gipson, a large man who works in the L.A. County morgue by day, cutting open scalps, and at the Fatburger by night, flipping patties.

"She would cry out of the blue, and I would just comfort her," drawls Freeman, who came to Hollywood nine years ago "to get away from Texas."

During this period, Jill, looking to return to London, would make numerous collect phone calls to Orsini. He told her she could not return until he was finished with business in the Middle East. In the meantime, he did what he could, keeping Jill on his bankroll and asking his friends to keep an eye on her.

It never hit Freeman just how far Jill had fallen until the day she heard singing coming from the window of Jill's apartment. It was the CD that Jill often talked about; until then Freeman had not believed it existed.

"I caught her on the balcony later," says Freeman, her eyes welling with tears, "and I said, 'What the hell are you doing here? Why don't you get out!"

n the spring of 1997 Jill did get out. She went to see Scott Millard, her thirty-eight-year-old half-brother, who had been thrown out of the house for drugs twenty years before. He was now living in Oxnard, fifty miles up the coast, south of Santa Barbara. Scott, however, didn't exactly greet his baby sister with open arms.

At the time, he was sharing a place with his buddy and sometime employer Harold Earl Kurczeski, a carpenter who went by the name Butch. Both men, ex-convicts and heroin users, were better known for their sketchy ways than for their occasional carpentry work. As one local said, "Scott was the kind of guy who, if he came to see you at your garage, you'd keep him close—or he'd end up with your saw."

Curiously, the two buddies shared more than an apartment, rap sheets, and a craving for drugs: They both had troubled younger sisters who were singers. But Butch's sister, Belinda, changed her last name to Carlisle, found fame fronting the Go-Go's, and kicked her habit.

Despite his apprehension, Scott took his sister in, but after she started sleeping with Butch he moved out. While Jill steered clear of heroin, she got hooked on



crank. The drug and her mental state proved a dangerous combination. Soon, Jill was roaming the streets of Oxnard, talking to herself and hallucinating. She was banned from the Beachcomber, a local bar, because after a few drinks she'd flash her breasts and beg men to fondle her.

"It was like she had to do it," recalls bartender Judi Ellwood, who adds that Jill would pit the men against one another in a battle for her affections and then, while they were fighting, sneak out the back. The thirty-six-year-old mother of four says that occasionally Jill would cry for no apparent reason. "That's when I could see the reality come through," she continues. "It was like her soul was reaching out for help."

During this time, Orsini still sent Jill money and, though he claims Jill was his fiancée, encouraged her to stay with Butch.

"She'd say, 'You promised I could come home,' but I'd say, 'Look, stay with this guy; he's giving you shelter, and you're with your brother,'" Orsini says. "I never stopped loving and cherishing her."

Whether she needed money or attention at this point, Jill got work at Snooky's, the only bikini bar in town, but even that didn't last long; often she'd report to work too disoriented to dance; and there were times, recalls the club's owner, Jim Reiser, when she would walk off- (Continued on page 204)



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By the fall of 1997, Butch had kicked her out, and with Scott refusing to take her in, she became a transient. "She crashed with whatever guy provided for her habit," says Reiser. "But none of my regulars dated her. They were all afraid of her."

In January 1998, Orsini came to L.A. for business—and to check on Jill. Rather than meet her in Oxnard, he had her take a cab (for which he paid the hundred-dollar fare) and meet him at his pal Kenny Coplan's house, where they would stay. While Orsini remembers their time together as "lovely," Coplan says Jill spent most of the time in bed or bugging Orsini for money. "You could tell she'd been through the wringer," Coplan says.

As was his habit when he was in town, Orsini gathered a circle of friends at the Rainbow Bar and Grill on Sunset, and treated them to dinner. The evening's crowd, which grew to twenty, included Morgan, Coplan, and Scott Baio.

By 10 P.M., however, Jill had become so inexplicably disoriented (though no one saw her drink or do drugs the entire night) that Orsini called Suzi Gunn, former manager of porn star Amber Lynn, and asked her to take Jill back to Oxnard. She ended up staying with the only people who would take her in—some local fishermen. It was the last time Orsini would see Jill alive.

n February 4, 1998, Jill was arrested for public intoxication and thrown into the Oxnard jail. An exotic-dancer friend, Mia, arrested a few days later on a domestic-violence charge, met her behind bars.

"She looked scared," recalls Mia. "She said somebody was after her, that somebody wanted to kill her, but she wouldn't say who."

Until that point, Jill's life had centered on Oxnard, with occasional forays into Los Angeles. But six weeks after telling Mia she feared for her life, Jill mysteriously left town. She turned up two hundred miles away, in Fresno, on March 20. Over the next five days, before she was murdered on March 25, she floated among the town's prostitutes, junkies, and cops. Nearly everyone who reported having contact with her describes a woman whose sole possession was a small purse, who would laugh one minute and cry the next, and who was

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She spent her final days and nights loitering in the red-light district, but no one reports seeing her solicit sex—except a prostitute and her pimp. Those two witnesses say that on March 24, what would be the last night of her life, Jill lured three Latino men to a room at the Villa Motel, but appeared to back out of a deal at the last minute.

Earlier that night, Jill called her mom from a pay phone. As she'd been doing for the last seven years, she put on a good act.

"She was fine," says Joan in a flat Midwestern twang that reveals a bare minimum of emotion. "She wasn't up or down, just fine. We talked a bit, and I said, 'Where are you?' She said, 'Fresno.' I said, 'Is that in California?' She laughed and said, 'Well, yes!'"

iro Orsini received word of Jill's death in Abu Dhabi when a nephew in Hollywood, who had been contacted by Jill's parents, called him. Orsini, who was in the Mideast opening another restaurant and club, booked a flight to Michigan and asked Hal Stone, an old Hollywood friend who promotes women's boxing and wrestling matches, to meet him there. While Stone lodged at the Best Western in Fenton, Orsini asked the Weatherwaxes if he could stay in Jill's bedroom-because, he said, she would've wanted him there. Her brother Scott, home for the first time in decades, slept on the living-room couch.

But it was Orsini's behavior during the funeral that left people talking.

"At the lunch afterward, he and Stone moved around the room like it was a party for them to mingle at," recalls Jodi Szymanski, one of Jill's high school friends. Orsini proceeded to tell anyone who would listen that Jill had spoken to him that morning from the spirit world and assured him she was at peace and that her killers would soon be found. Stone, on the other hand, thought he had already figured it out.

"He sat down next to us," recalls Szymanski, "and said, 'Don't say anything to the parents, but the cops [think] it was a necrophiliac.' I didn't even know what the word meant," she says, her lip curling in disgust. "I had to ask him."

Orsini also photographed the entire funeral. As they sit in their living room almost a year later, Jill's parents take out a huge, professionally assembled photo album—Orsini's gift. (He also produced a feature-length documentary of her life, *The Girl of a Thousand Smiles.*) The purple cover is engraved: "To My Princess, Jill Ann Weatherwax, your soul mate, Ciro Orsini."

Jim Weatherwax turns the heavy pages, passing over numerous shots of Orsini posing with mourners (eerily evoking the photos of him mugging with celebrities that plaster his restaurants' walls), until he comes to a final shot. Posed in front of Jill's casket at the funeral home, Orsini cradles in



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his arms a small framed portrait of Jill and looks down at it with tears in his eyes.

"He asked me to take that," says Jim, in his usual voice.

The Weatherwax house is now a shrine to Jill. Photos and mementos of her are everywhere—from her stuffed animals stacked next to the fireplace to her favorite rosary beads draped over a ceramic set of praying hands. These items have been joined by the gifts that Orsini sends frequently: matching his-and-hers Ciro's Pizza Pomodoro baseball caps, Burberry trench coats for the whole family, a bottle of water from the River Jordan, and a crucifix from the Holy Sepulcher Church in Jerusalem. The most recent arrival is a star-shaped pillow with a plastic seethrough cover stitched over a handwritten note from Orsini proclaiming, "To My Jill, Love You, Ciro."

t's four days after Halloween 1998, but orange-and-black-striped fingernail polish remains on Kim Walker's nails.

"I wore it for a party, and I can't get it off," giggles the twenty-two-year-old Fresno State criminology major. She's standing a few doors down from the Villa Motel, the last place Jill was seen alive, waiting for her cue to become Jill Ann Weatherwax. Walker, who interns at the police department, has been recruited—"Without pay!" she notes—to play Jill in a Crime Stoppers video produced by the cops and KSEE, a local TV station. Jill Weatherwax has finally made it into pictures.

"I should have studied her file more," says Walker, a pretty, long-legged blond, who admits she doesn't know much about the woman she is playing except that she was "a beauty queen from Wisconsin [sic] who got into drugs and prostituting."

Walker sheds her black raincoat ("I feel like a flasher"), revealing an outfit similar to the one Jill wore on the last day of her life. With the camera rolling, she walks down the boulevard. A car containing three Latino men pulls up beside Walker and one of the men propositions her, reenacting one of the final known moments of Jill's life. Later, at the empty lot behind the animal shelter, Detective Murrietta points out the spot where Jill's body was found. Walker shudders. "I'm not laying down there," she murmurs to no one in particular.

ook at this shit, will ya?" Murrietta says. He pulls a plastic bag out of a metal drawer in his Fresno office and dumps its contents—a dozen audiotapes of Orsini's sessions with his London psychic—on his desk.

"It's all mumbo-jumbo psychic shit that Ciro keeps sending me."

Since Jill's death, Orsini has posted a \$20,000 reward for information, spent money on psychics, and bombarded the Fresno police with theories about her killing.

"Ciro is the common denominator in Jill's demise," Murrietta says. "She went to London and came back nuts. He promised to make her a star, and when she got there, she found out she was just an ornament on his arm." He adds that he thinks Orsini is a "fucking weirdo" who used Jill and probably now feels guilty about what happened to her and is trying to make up for it.

But Murrietta does not consider Orsini a suspect.

"I thought about Ciro at first," Murrietta admits, "but there's nothing locally that points to him, and whoever did it had to be familiar with the area."

As of now, Murrietta admits the cops are stuck. The only lead—Jill with the three Latino men—has gone cold. In addition, the police can't locate Butch—who, according to Murrietta, became a police informant shortly before Jill's death. In fact, he says, Butch fled California after Jill was killed because "he thought Jill's murder was a message to him from the Mexican drug gangs he was ratting on."

Meanwhile, Scott, according to his parents, refuses to answer any of his family's questions about Butch's whereabouts.

"Scott protects these people, and I don't know why," says his older sister, Julie.

Murrietta admits he hasn't looked too hard for Butch. But it's not for lack of concern. "There are a lot of murders in this town and not a lot of cops to solve them. And I don't have the time or money to be going around the whole state looking for suspects and clues."

"But this case will never close," Murrietta says as he stares at photos of Jill's body at the crime scene. "It'll stay with me till the day I leave the department."

rust me, I will prove one day she was not a fucking hooker—she was a beautiful angel!" Ciro Orsini is nearly shouting through

the phone. "So that's why I'd appreciate it if you write about her that the word 'hooker' would disappear from her life." The calls come late, about 3 A.M. his time, after he has closed his London restaurant and returned to his posh apartment next door to Harrods. Jill's music can usually be heard playing in the background.

"Jill's murder has totally rocked his life," says Armand Assante of his friend's loss. Carl Summers claims that Orsini has been a "different man" since Jill's murder. "We keep waiting for him to snap out of it," he says, adding that "he used to party every night, but not anymore."

Nicky Sha, another acquaintance, describes Orsini's state of mind as "pitiful." And Hal Stone says Orsini's very close friend, Sly Stallone's celebrity-astrologer mom, Jackie, recently advised Ciro to snap out of it and move on.

"Ciro lives with this thing every day," says Stone. "He cries and listens to Jill's music every night, and he's not going to rest until he finds the cocksucker who did it."

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