

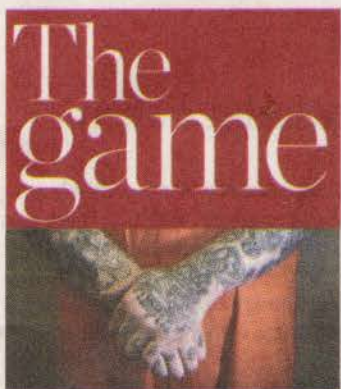
# 'The pimps turn you into a robot. All you know is money, drugs and sex'



MELISSA RENWICK/TORONTO STAR

"Phoenix" had the name of her pimp tattooed on her shoulder. She says she wants to replace it with a "big black heart. That's what he gave me."

*Sex trafficking is one of the fastest-growing crimes in Ontario — and one of its biggest secrets. Survivors emerge scarred and broken*



*Part of a series*

## The rescue.

Two young women turned to one of their johns to help free them from now-convicted pimp, **A8**

## Little girl lost

How one family's 13-year-old daughter fell under the spell of a sex trafficker, **A9**

**OLIVIA CARVILLE**  
STAFF REPORTER

Trapped in "The Game," Phoenix wasn't allowed to sleep until she made \$1,000 a day having sex.

Sometimes there were up to eight clients a day, ranging from businessmen to labourers, accountants, teachers, doctors, lawyers and soldiers.

When she met her quota, she had to hand over the cash or be beaten.

Phoenix has a grisly red scar wrapping around her right ankle from an attack last year that severed her Achilles tendon and left her foot "just hanging there." The man charged with trafficking and assaulting Phoenix is before the courts and has pleaded not guilty.

Every day across Ontario, a growing number of teenagers and young women — seasoned detectives estimate the figure to be in the thousands — are falling victim to domestic sex trafficking and being forced to work as prostitutes in what has become one of the fastest-growing crimes in the province. Police, pimps and sex workers call it "The Game."

These girls are beaten, branded with their pimp's name, and bought and sold across Ontario, a Star investigation found.

They are sold a dream of money, love and security by "Romeo pimps" who brainwash them into be-

lieving they are their boyfriends.

"The Game changes your life," Phoenix said. She is telling her story using a pseudonym due to fears for her safety and concerns that the stigma of her past would follow her online.

"The pimps turn you into a robot. All you know is money, drugs and sex."

Michele Anderson, a sex-trafficking specialist from Toronto's Covenant House, said she has seen victims burned with cigarettes, beaten black and blue, starved until they serviced a certain number of men and had guns put against their heads or shoved inside their mouths.

Her personal caseload of trafficked victims has "exploded" recently, jumping from 20 victims in 2013 to more than 50 this year.

Last month, Anderson answered a call from Sick Kids Hospital about a 13-year-old patient who doctors discovered had been lured from a group home and forced to work in the sex trade.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about human trafficking. A lot of people believe it is an international problem, but the majority of cases we have are our own girls; they are from Toronto, Mississauga and the East Coast," she said.

THE GAME continued on **A8**

"These are young girls falling in love for the first time. It's hard for them to listen to reason. These are our daughters and our cousins and our nieces."

For four years, Phoenix was a pawn in The Game, trafficked across the country from Toronto to Vancouver.

Her life was dictated by its rules: She had to call her trafficker "Daddy," she wasn't allowed to talk to other pimps, or even look at them, and she had to meet her \$1,000 daily quota before sleeping.

One day Phoenix's pimp got mad and her Achilles tendon was severed with a shard from a broken drinking glass, police alleged when they were searching for the woman's attacker. Phoenix told the Star in an interview prior to the man's recent preliminary hearing that this assault happened after the man came home one night angry that her phone had died. When she was lying down on the bed, hiding her face, she said she heard glass smash and felt pressure on her foot and a sudden, searing pain.

The cut was so deep that the blood oozing out of Phoenix's ankle started to turn black. She was screaming that she was going to die. Nobody called an ambulance.

Instead, she was carried into the alleyway and thrown to the ground beside a dumpster.

"I was just left there like trash," she said.

The man got into his car and drove away. Carly Kalish, a therapist who works with survivors at East Metro Youth Services, said nearly every girl she counsels believes her trafficker was her boyfriend.

Her clients have been raped multiple times and the youngest, only 14 years old, was locked in a hotel room while the pimp stood guard outside the door.

"If they aren't physically confined, they are manipulated to the extent that there is a fence around their brain," Kalish said.

For Phoenix, it began in 2008. She was 18 and moved to Toronto without knowing anyone.

She said she met a man who spent thousands of dollars on her, paying for her hotels, food, clothes, nails and hair.

"He made me feel like I was his girl and he

# 'It didn't matter how much makeup I'd put on, my eyes were dead'

gave me anything I wanted."

After a month, the grooming was over and he told her she had to "make money."

She said he took her to a sex shop, bought her lingerie and 12-inch heels and then dropped her off at a strip club.

It was her first time and she didn't know how to dance. A woman in the dressing room told her to "just move sexy."

The owner of the club gave her \$150 for a sexual favour on that first night.

"It's creepy when they touch your skin," she said.

It's easy for pimps to recruit indigenous women, said Phoenix, who was born on the Garden River Reserve in Sault Ste. Marie.

"They are very beautiful and they get sold a dream. Sometimes all they see is dollar signs."

Over the four years Phoenix was in The Game, she had several abortions; she thinks she made her pimp about a million dollars and admits she doesn't understand why part of her still misses him.

"He took four years of my life," she said.

"Some days I just feel like a leaf on the street blowing in the wind."

Tattooed on Phoenix's right shoulder is her pimp's street name.

Some nights when she gets drunk, she tries to claw it off her skin.

"I gotta cover it up; I hate looking at it," she said, craning her neck to see the tattoo in the reflection of her bedroom mirror.

When asked what she's going to cover it with, she paused and sat down on her unmade bed.

"With a big black heart," she said. "That's what he gave me."

The Star spoke to an additional five victims of domestic sex trafficking who worked across the GTA. These are their stories:

**Natalie is from Toronto and felt abandoned by her parents. She met her pimp at 23 and was trafficked to Calgary.**

"It didn't matter how much makeup I'd put on, my eyes were dead."

Natalie, 27, said she felt worthless and empty inside when the man she loved forced her to have sex with 15 strangers a day. (Her real name is not being used to protect her identity.)

Her pimp controlled everything "from what I ate to when I slept and how long I slept for."

For a month she worked as a sex slave, waking up some days at 7 a.m. to service the early morning businessmen working until 3 a.m. for the late-night rush. When she was on her period, her trafficker inserted a sponge inside her and forced her to continue to work.

Natalie was a drug addict when she met her pimp at 23. He made her feel special and loved. She agreed to move to Calgary with him and on the drive there they were stopped by police. An officer ran a background check and told Natalie she didn't know the real name of her "boyfriend."

"(The officer) straight up said to me, 'Do you need any help?' Inside I was screaming, but I was too scared to run." Natalie told the

officer no; she said she loved him.

An hour before they arrived into Calgary, her pimp said she had to pay him back for the gas money, hotels and food. He posted her ad on an escort site.

Over the following month, she made \$30,000, but didn't keep a cent.

After they returned to Toronto, he was arrested. The trial is set for 2016.

**Claire is from a middle-income family in Toronto. She met her pimp at 19 and was trafficked across the GTA for almost two years. He was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison.**

Claire had been dating Chris for three months when he started to drop hints about wanting her to work in the sex trade.

She was 19 and in love. (Their real names are not being used to protect the identity of the victim.)

At night, Chris would pull up online escort ads and say, "You're so much better looking than these girls and you'd make 10 times as much."

He painted a picture of their future together. "We just have to do this for a bit and then we won't have to worry about money again."

At first, she said no, but after a while he convinced her to upload an ad "just to see what happens."

The first time she turned a trick, Chris told her what to wear: a tight dress, high heels, heavy makeup.

He drove her to the customer's downtown condo. When she came out an hour later,

He told her to get his name tattooed on her body "so everyone can know you're mine." She did. The tattoo is now covered by two flowers, but if you look closely enough you can still see the outline of his name, branded on her body for life



JADE



JESSICA



shaken and feeling empty inside, Chris asked for the cash.

Within weeks, Claire was making \$1,000 a day in hotels across the GTA.

"I just became so blinded," said Claire, who is now 26.

Every three days, Chris would move her to another location — from Toronto to Oakville to Burlington.

If she tried to leave, he threatened to tell her family she was a "whore" and upload her escort ads to social media.

At the start, they talked about saving to buy a house. In the end, Chris bought a house with the money Claire made — and her name isn't even on the ownership forms.

**Jade Brooks is from Nova Scotia. She met her pimp at 15 when she was in foster care and he trafficked her through Toronto from age 17 to 19. She never pressed charges.**

During the school holidays, Jade Brooks would sell herself for sex in a dimly lit massage parlour in North York.

"I saw hundreds of clients and I was only a little girl."

She would drive to the big city from Nova Scotia with her pimp, who she believed was her boyfriend, and would work from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. most days — and give him all the cash.

Brooks, a 17-year-old in foster care, was doing this because she loved him; because she thought this was the sacrifice she had to make to build the dream life they'd talked

about, with the wedding and the house with a window seat.

She was doing this because sometimes he hit her and once "it hurt so bad it made me throw up."

Her pimp first asked her to work in the sex trade at 16, but she said no. When he told her he would break up with her unless she "brought in the money" at 17, she agreed.

He told her to get his name tattooed on her body "so everyone can know you're mine." She did.

The tattoo is now covered by two flowers, but if you look closely enough you can still see the outline of his name, branded on her body for life.

"They manipulate you into who they want you to be. I would've done anything for him. I would've died for him."

Brooks, now 23, wanted to be identified because she is writing an autobiography about her experience called *Stages*.

**Taylor grew up with her parents in Hamilton. She met her pimp at 19 and was trafficked across the GTA for four months. A man and woman were charged with trafficking Taylor. The Star could not determine the outcome of the case.**

Taylor was lured into The Game by a "bottom bitch" (the slang term for a pimp's top earner) — and told she would be burned alive if she tried to run.

She was 19, living with her parents in Hamilton and working as a waitress when the 26-year-old woman befriended her and

started to call every day. (This victim's real name is not being used to protect her identity.)

The woman coaxed Taylor to move to Toronto by introducing her to a glamorous lifestyle of parties, free drinks and flashy cars.

After a few weeks of grooming, she told Taylor she had to start earning her keep. She dropped her off at a strip club with a duffel bag full of thongs, lotion and a money pouch and said she couldn't leave until she made \$500. That night Taylor had sex with her first client.

The woman disconnected Taylor's cellphone, threatened to hurt her family and said she ripped the hair and eyelashes out of the last girl who tried to run.

Taylor was told what time to wake up, what to eat, when to shower, what to wear and how to do her hair.

Soon, she was turning tricks from strip clubs across the GTA. Every dollar was handed to this woman, who then passed it to her own pimp.

"I was an ordinary girl," Taylor, now 24, told the Star. "In my head when I was doing this I kept thinking, 'How did I get this low?'"

**Jessica Pennock is from a middle-income household in Winnipeg. She met her pimp at 15 and was trafficked in Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver. She never pressed charges.**

It was a good-looking older boy who gave 15-year-old Jessica Pennock crack cocaine

and said it was "a high like marijuana."

She met him while playing basketball at a neighbourhood recreation centre. She went to the centre every Friday night to try to make new friends because she was being bullied at school.

Her mum would drop her off.

Pennock grew up in a middle-class family; her mother was a teacher, her father a businessman.

She struggled with depression like many other teenage girls, but unlike most, Pennock got addicted to drugs and was manipulated into entering the sex trade.

She still remembers her first customer; she was lying on her back in a grungy room, looking up at a cracked light bulb, wishing for it to be over.

For 12 years, Pennock was exploited across Canada, from Winnipeg to Edmonton, Vancouver and Toronto.

She was sold from one trafficker to another and raped by a pimp who thought she was hiding cash inside her vagina.

"I was beaten like I was a dog on the floor," she said.

"The drugs and the manipulation was what kept me there. These men brainwash you, make you believe you need them."

At 23, she jumped off the Maryland Bridge in Winnipeg, landed on ice and broke her back.

Pennock is now 31, mother to a 3-year-old daughter and in her last year of college.

She is sharing her story in the hopes to save others: "It's important for people to know that this could happen to any girl."

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