

TO RESCUE THE ' DAMSEL OF DEATH ' - IN FLORIDA, AN ACCUSED SERIAL KILLER AND HER UNLIKELY NEW MOTHER

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The setting was **the** Citrus County Jail when Arlene Pralle was finally able a few weeks ago **to** hold and kiss her daughter for **the** first time. It was a rapturous moment, Pralle says, when she understood what being a mother really means

"I felt fulfilled, a sense **of** completeness and confirmation that what I was doing was correct," she says. "And I knew that others didn't know her like I do."

Pralle, slight, doe-eyed and 44, is no ordinary woman.

Neither is **the** woman she legally adopted, Aileen Carol Wuornos, a stocky, hard-drinking 35-year-old who is said **to** be that rarest **of** predators, a female serial killer.

Wuornos, called "Lee," is a bisexual prostitute who has admitted luring at least six men **to** their **deaths** along Interstate 75, **the** north-south highway that slices through **the** rolling hills **of** central Florida like a twin-bladed knife.

"I had **to** kill them," she said in a four-hour videotaped confession **to** police that was made public last month. "It's like I'm thinking, 'You bastards. You were gonna hurt me.' It was self-defense. It was, like, 'Hey, man, I gotta shoot you, 'cause I think you're gonna kill me.' "

Indicted in five **of the** murders, she is scheduled **to** be tried on **the** first **of the** charges Jan. 13.

Although **the** legendary Ma Barker met her end near here 55 years ago, this rural area between Ocala and Gainesville is known more for its horse farms and natural springs than for mayhem. But two years ago **the** bodies **of** middle-aged traveling men -- shot **to death** , often with their pants down -- began **to** turn up in **the** woods, and police announced that they were looking for a pistol-packing blonde who was quickly dubbed **the " Damsel of Death ."**

Soon after Lee Wuornos was arrested last January, curled up asleep on an old car seat outside a Daytona Beach, Fla., biker bar called **the** Last Resort, she told police she killed **to** support her lesbian lover. In a rented storage shed **to** which Wuornos had **the** key, police said they found clothing, cowboy boots, watches, tool boxes and suitcases belonging **to the** victims.

In an interview with **the** Orlando Sentinel, Wuornos tried **to** explain. "I'm not a man-hater," she said. "{I am} so used **to** being treated like dirt that I guess it's become a way **of** life. I'm a decent person."

There are few parallels between **the** lives **of** Pralle and Wuornos. Pralle, adopted and raised by well-off parents on Long Island, N.Y., breeds Tennessee walking horses on a 35-acre farm that she bought last year with her husband, Robert, a field engineer for Sony.

After twice attempting suicide, Pralle became a born-again Christian in 1981. While looking at Wuornos's picture in a local newspaper, Pralle said, she peered deep into her eyes "and God prompted me **to** do something." She sent **the** accused a letter.

"I don't care if you're guilty or innocent," she wrote, "but I want **to** be your friend."

To Wuornos, alone and accustomed **to** betrayal, Pralle appeared **to** be **the** answer **to** a prayer, someone without an ulterior motive. Born in Troy, Mich., in 1956, Wuornos was abandoned by her mother when she was 6 months old, and she and her brother were raised by her grandparents. She has said her grandfather beat her and has admitted **to** a brief sexual relationship with her brother.

Wuornos became pregnant at 13 and gave birth **to** a son, who was immediately given up for adoption. A heavy drinker and drug user beginning in her early teens, she left school in **the** 10th grade and, while hitchhiking around **the** country, supported herself as a waitress, pool hustler, maid and prostitute.

In 1976 Wuornos wound up in Daytona Beach, a town popular with Hell's Angels, hellbent college students on spring break and drifters **of** various stripes. That same year, her father committed suicide in prison, where he was serving time for kidnapping and sodomizing a child, and her brother died **of** cancer at age 21.

Desperate for security, Wuornos says, she married a 70-year-old man. **The** marriage lasted a month. She said he beat her with his cane. Two years after that, crazed over breaking up with a boyfriend, she shot herself in **the** stomach.

Says Pralle: "She's had a horrible, horrible life."

In 1981 Wuornos was arrested after robbing a convenience store **of** \$33; she served a year in a Florida prison. After her release, she wandered for years until 1986, when, in a lesbian bar in Daytona Beach, she met Tyria Moore, 28, **the** woman she has described as "**the** love **of** my life." **The** couple lived in rooms and motels, Wuornos taking care **of** Moore by working part-time jobs or by turning tricks.

Through **the** years, Wuornos claimed **to** police, she has had sex with 200,000 men, been raped nine times and been beaten up and manhandled more times than she can remember. Eventually, she decided not **to** take it anymore.

The killings began in late 1989. **The** body **of** **the** first victim, Richard Mallory, **the** 52-year-old owner **of** a television repair shop, was found on Dec. 13 that year, buried in **the** woods under a piece **of** carpet. He had been shot four times, police said.

Over **the** next year, **the** bodies **of** nine more men were found. One was a sausage delivery man. Another worked in rodeos. One was a former Alabama police chief working as a child custody investigator for **the** state **of** Florida. A part-time missionary also was killed.

All **of the** victims were men passing through, en route **to** somewhere else, and traveling alone. There was often evidence **of** sexual activity. In addition **to** some **of the** bodies being discovered in states **of** undress, empty condom wrappers were found in several **of the** dead men's cars.

Police say **the** killer met her prey at truck stops or while hitchhiking and lured them off **the** road with **the** promise **of** sex. Tips led **to** a composite drawing and soon **to** Wuornos's arrest.

Moore, picked up later in Ohio, cooperated with police **to** trick Wuornos into confessing **to the** murders. In an extraordinary court hearing last month, Moore described how police put her up in a Daytona Beach motel room for four days -- and kept her supplied with plenty **of** Budweiser and hamburgers -- as they tape-recorded 10 telephone conversations between **the** former lovers.

Moore admitted from **the** witness stand that she lied, cried and pleaded with Wuornos **to** get her **to** recount her crimes. And Wuornos did.

In one conversation, Wuornos says she pumped seven slugs into **the** former police chief, Charles R. Humphreys, 56, " **to** put him out **of** his misery."

In another, she tells Moore: "I will not let you be involved in **the** picture. You're not **the** one. I am **the** one who did everything. I did it all myself."

Tricia Jenkins, Wuornos's public defender, refuses **to** discuss defense strategy. But in **the** videotaped confession, Wuornos, asked by a police officer why she killed, says, "They crossed **the** line. They were gonna rape me, kill me, strangle me."

Jenkins has charged that prosecutors may have covered up evidence that could link Moore with **the** murders in order **to** ensure her expected role as **the** state's star witness. She has not been charged with any crime.

And Brian Jarvis, a former Marion County sheriff's deputy who was a key investigator on **the** case, also contends that Moore's involvement was ignored because fellow investigators had teamed up with her in a movie deal. **The** state attorney investigated and, while ordering **the** investigators **to** forget about **the** movies, found no wrongdoing

Caption: PHOTO orlando sentinel PHOTO ap

Arlene Pralle, who recently adopted Wuornos. Alleged serial killer Carol "Lee" Wuornos.

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