

The Protectorate



Patriarch

A vampire sworn to protect the secret existence of his people risks everything to save a human child – and love a mortal woman.

Tracking him to a Paducah bar, Protector Aiden Marschant must stop the rogue vampire's mayhem before he betrays the secret of the Shanrak people. When the rogue strikes again, Aiden finds the victim's infant daughter in her car. Unable to expose his identity to surrender the child to human authorities, and unwilling to let her fend for herself, he makes the ultimate mistake of taking the baby home with him.

Questioning witnesses at the bar, rookie county sheriff's deputy Shanna Preston learns of two men, possible suspects in the young woman's murder. When the FBI takes over the case, Shanna's determined to help bring down this vicious killer.

Aiden must find someone to care for the human child before she awakens in him a fatherly instinct that could bring on the forbidden *bloodlust* mating urge. He sets his sights on lovely redheaded Deputy Shanna Preston. But Shanna suspects he's guilty of kidnapping and fears he may be involved in murder. Can Aiden keep his cool around Deputy Preston long enough to stop the dangerous killer? Can Shanna survive the affections of Protector Aiden Marschant and live to tell about it?

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ISBN/EAN-13: 978-1-935563-01-3

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Previously published electronically Sept. 2006 by New Concepts Publishing

ISBN 1586089536



~Author Preface/ Acknowledgement~

This vampire romance is the first installment in a planned series. I've taken license with the usual vampire lore (no reflection in mirrors, incineration in sunlight, etc.) to fit the needs of this storyline. Due to sexual and violent content, this book is intended for adult readers.

I must express gratitude to friends, family, and fellow authors too numerous to name, for their time and effort in helping with the development and promotion of this story. You know who you are – thank you!

In particular I'd like to thank C. Fern Cook for her continued camaraderie, and my husband, whose support and understanding help make my writing possible. Any errors are strictly my own.

Happy reading...

Dana Warryck

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Patriarch

Paranormal Vampire Romance

by

Dana Warryck



CHAPTER 1

Aiden Marschant sat motionless in a darkened corner booth at Smokey Joe's Roadhouse, trying to ignore the stench of stale beer and burnt barbeque. The dirty wood plank floor beneath his boots vibrated with karaoke country music. He glowered at the stage twenty feet away as the crowd howled and booed at a fat drunk in slouching jeans slobbering on the mike while wailing off-tune like a bobcat caught in a bear trap. Aiden tuned out the noise and focused his attention on a young woman seated at the bar.

Pretty, with cascading brown curls and a ready smile, she wore a low-cut stretchy pink shirt and skin-tight jeans. She flirted skillfully, but Aiden knew she was out of her element, seated next to Cameron Ryben doing his best imitation of a smooth one-night stand. She had no idea what Cam Ryben *really* wanted.

Aiden scowled at the handsome blond man of medium build. Ryben fancied himself a slick predator above the laws of their people. A gifted amateur, he had received some training within the Protectorate until he'd dropped out of the program. Later he had gone rogue. Now he was nothing more than a rutting animal letting his bloodlust run rampant as he mauled his way through humanity, leaving a trail of dead bodies like a crazed grizzly. Aiden had tracked him across four states, catching up to him in this grungy backwoods roadhouse outside Paducah, Kentucky.

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Ryben glanced around, as if sensing he was being watched. Aiden eased out of sight until Ryben relaxed and turned back to his mark to whisper something in her ear. She squirmed on her barstool and giggled, then stood unsteadily. Ryben took her by the arm and guided her to the door.

Aiden followed at a discreet distance until a huge mound of a woman with stringy brown hair stumbled up from her chair and blocked his path. Poured into jeans and a tee shirt big enough to make a circus tent, she yelled obscenities at a beefy, red-bearded man seated at her table. Aiden dodged the woman as she staggered against a nearby table, raising protests from patrons whose drinks threatened to tip over. Her equally inebriated companion lunged at Aiden and roared, "Watch it, asshole!" Aiden shoved past the couple and barged outside.

Leaping off the wooden front porch into the cool spring night, he let the heavy plank door slammed shut behind him, muffling the music still reverberating inside. Frogs chirped in the foggy distance as he darted along haphazard rows of beat-up cars and pickups parked out front. He couldn't see Ryben or the girl anywhere. Stopping, he stilled his anxiousness and opened his mind to get a fix on Ryben. Immediately a sickening wave of hunger and lust washed over him like a blast of hot water. The scent of warm blood saturated the air, and the amphibian concert stopped. *He'd screwed up. He was too late!*

Running to the parking lot at the back of the building, he spotted a car with the dome light on. He found the girl sprawled on the gravel like a discarded rag doll, her head twisted aside, and a jagged hole torn in her throat. Her pink top glistened dark red as blood gushed and

pooled around her. Aiden snorted at the cloying smell of death, careful not to inhale deeply.

The keys still dangled from the driver's door of the car. Aiden assumed the car belonged to the murdered girl. With the front and rear doors hanging open, the car's dome light glowed like a macabre nightlight on the bloodshed. Ryben, in his usual fashion, had ripped open his victim's throat. But he must have sensed he was being tracked – he'd fled without fulfilling his sexual urges and feasting on the spoils. Aiden knew he'd kill again before the night was done. Cursing, he opened his mind and scanned the area, but sensed Ryben was gone.

Hearing voices, Aiden glanced back at the roadhouse and saw two men approaching in the neon-illuminated fog. He couldn't afford to be seen near this body. Wrapping himself in calm, he assumed the mental cloak of near invisibility that allowed him to move unnoticed among humans. The men didn't look his way.

He turned to leave, but stopped when a faint sound like a kitten's mew came from the rear seat of the car. He glanced at the two men coming closer, then ducked down to peer inside, avoiding the bloody handprints smeared across the top edge of the door opening.

He froze and sucked in a swift breath. *Sweet Mother Earth!* The bundle strapped in a car seat, a silken-haired cherub wearing a pink sleeper, yawned with her plump arms askew.

Straightening in shock, Aiden glanced at the two men opening the doors of a pickup five cars down. They didn't seem to notice anything amiss but, with his concentration shaken, he couldn't be sure they hadn't spotted him.

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He wanted to turn and walk away, but the baby inside the car whined. How could he leave? If he'd been more attentive, he might have prevented her mother's murder. Still, he couldn't stick around and get involved unless Ryben was lurking in the area with his urges dampened, waiting for the opportunity to strike again. Could the child be in danger from him? The bloody handprints smudging the roof and doorframe suggested Ryben had noticed her. Perhaps he would have drained her blood too, if he'd had the time.

Aiden grimaced and dared another look inside the car. The baby sat alone, defenseless, strapped in her car seat, with no one to protect her.

I am a Protector.

He shook his head and straightened. Humans had their own government agencies to handle these situations and would place the child with relatives or other proper guardians. He had no business taking responsibility for this tiny human. He wasn't equipped for such things. His life had no room for a baby.

He turned to the sound of an engine starting. The men in the truck drove out of the parking lot. The roadhouse's neon sign blinked like a beacon in the mist. He glanced down at the body lying in the pool of blood spreading near his feet. He couldn't afford to be caught standing over a dead woman, or stick around to answer questions from the police and destroy the anonymity required for his work.

He looked at the building again, figuring someone would find the victim and report her murder. But how long before they did? In the meantime, what would become of the baby? He couldn't very well leave her sitting in the car,

unattended for hours.

Yes, you can. It's not your responsibility or your duty.

He shook his head again. *But I'm a Protector!*

The frogs resumed their rhythmic song. A coyote yipped in the distance, and a chorus joined in, seeming to surround him. Aiden swiped a hand across his mouth. The child cried out, and the sound tugged at something inside him he hadn't realized was there – something he'd worked all his life to ensure would never be there. Obviously his efforts had gone unrewarded. He felt that twinge of compassion twisting in his chest. He knew what he must do.

Oh, hell.

He took a handkerchief from his leather jacket and, careful to avoid brushing against the bloodied doorframe, leaned inside the back of the car. Wrestling with the seat belt strung through the baby's carrier, he tried not to leave fingerprints as a clue that might link him with this murder-kidnapping.

Murder? Kidnapping?

He hadn't murdered the woman, and this wasn't kidnapping. He was just taking the baby for safekeeping. As soon as he could, he'd make sure she was placed with the proper human authorities.

The baby fidgeted and looked up at him, running her chubby fingers across his hair dangling in front of her. He glanced at her wide blue eyes full of curious, trusting innocence, then reached for the car seat. His hands froze mid-motion. If this wasn't kidnapping, what was it? Who was he trying to fool?

When he withdrew, the child screwed up her rosy face and whimpered. Was she hungry? Wet? He touched her cheek and found her hot, almost feverish. Was she sick?

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Good grief, he didn't know anything about taking care of a baby! And Noel and Marta wouldn't appreciate having the responsibility dumped on them. That would be like asking two Rottweilers to baby-sit. What was he thinking?

As he reached to refasten the seat belt and leave the child just as he found her, she grabbed his index finger. His insides melted, and he let himself smile. "You're in a lot of trouble, little one, but you have no idea, do you?" His smile turned to a frown when he wondered what would happen to this baby inside Kentucky's state child welfare system, assuming she survived long enough to be shunted into it. He didn't want to think about that.

The waif cried louder. He looked over his shoulder, hoping the music filtering outside the roadhouse would drown out her caterwauling. If only he could go back to the bar and report the murder without getting himself involved ... but he couldn't. *Damn it!*

You're a Protector. You do what must be done.

In a blinding flash, he grabbed the car seat, the diaper bag, and a stuffed pink rabbit no bigger than his fist. With the baby in her seat tucked securely under his arm, and her bag straps draped over his wrist, he backed out of the car. Catching sight of the bloody wallet lying near the woman's body, he ducked down and used his handkerchief to retrieve it. Maybe later he could find some information inside to help him locate the baby's nearest relatives.

Hugging his newfound charge close to his chest, he paced toward the line of trees glistening in the misty darkness beyond the parking lot. At the edge of the trees his dark blue rental sedan waited. He unlocked the doors, stowed the baby in the back seat and secured her, then dived for the driver's seat. Starting the car, he resisted the

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urge to peel out of the parking lot in a fast getaway.

The baby wailed, and he met her anguished gaze in the rearview mirror. "Hush, little one. You'll be all right." She calmed at the sound of his voice — an effect he could induce at will. He smiled, shook his head, then frowned. "You'll be all right, but will I? Right now, I'm having serious doubts."

* * * * *

At 2:17 a.m., County Sheriff's Deputy Shanna Preston eyed Darryl Goggins, the bartender on duty at Smokey Joe's Roadhouse when the murder had occurred. Skinny and scruffy, he wore a sleeveless black tee shirt with a Goth band emblem emblazoned across the chest — a skull and scythe. She wondered about his drug of choice. Meth? Judging by the way his eyes had sunk into their sockets and his teeth had turned askew, she figured that was it. A damned semi-rural epidemic.

Despite his suspected drugged-out state, he'd given a solid description of the man who'd left with nineteen-year-old Melody Jean Hanks just before she'd been killed. Medium build, height about six feet tall. Wavy, shoulder-length, honey-blond hair. Dark eyes, maybe brown. No visible scars. Good looking, "if you're into guys," which the bartender assured her he was not.

She snapped her report pad shut. "Okay, Mr. Goggins. If you remember anything else, be sure to give me a call." She handed him a business card, a precious commodity she'd fought hard to get ... like the respect of her peers. She stifled a sneer.

Back at the station the men treated her as a joke —

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too new to know anything about *real* police work, and too young and pretty to be a deputy for the McCracken County Sheriff's Department. They judged her by her petite package, but they didn't know her at all. She wagered she could outshoot any of them, and she knew some special moves that would help her kick their strutting, good-ol'-boy asses in a fair fight. She would change her situation one step at a time, and doing her job well was part of that plan.

But sometimes doing a good job was more difficult than she expected, especially when she felt like gagging. It wasn't that she'd never seen a dead body before. Having to identify her parents after their car accident was the worst nightmare she could possibly imagine. But when she and Deputy Jake Fenshaw took a look at Miss Hanks' body, she was lucky not to toss her cookies. She suspected a coyote had wandered over to the body and eaten away part of the throat before the two customers leaving the bar had discovered it. But Jake had insisted with a gleam in his eyes that this was the work of the infamous serial killer dubbed by the media as the *Bloodsucker*, wanted in four states for the gruesome murders of over forty women in the past two months.

She couldn't deny Melody Hanks' murder bore garish similarities to the MO of the *Bloodsucker*. The possibility that the murderer had relocated his operation to Paducah made Shanna a teensy bit leery of stepping outside alone in the dark.

"Well, there was somethin' else," Goggins volunteered after a moment, bringing Shanna back from her musing. "I mean, somebody else who kinda caught my attention."

Shanna flipped open her report pad and prepared to

jot down additional notes. No telling what tiny detail might become important later. "Go on, Mr. Goggins," she urged in a friendly tone, chastising herself for letting Jake pull her chain about some insane serial killer. Why would he come to Paducah? She winced inwardly when the answer echoed in her mind ... why wouldn't he? There were plenty of potential victims available here, just like any other small city embedded in a rural area. Maybe he thought the police force wouldn't be prepared to handle his antics. And he maybe he was right.

"Well, it was probably nothin'," Goggins mumbled. "But there was this other guy..."

Shanna zeroed her eyes on him. "At the bar?"

Goggins shook his head of drab, scraggly dishwater-blond hair. "Nope. He just sort of appeared all of a sudden, out on the floor, in the middle of the tables. I didn't remember seein' him until that blond dude was walkin' out the door with the girl that got killed."

"Why did this second man catch your attention?"

"He looked like he was in a hurry. You know, like he was followin' the guy and the girl." Goggins shrugged his bony shoulders. "At least that's what it seemed like. He bumped into some folks at a table, and they raised a ruckus. Then he rushed out."

Shanna warmed with excitement. Another possible lead. "Could you describe this man?"

Goggins shrugged again. "It was kinda dark, and I didn't get a good look at him. But he was tall. Like over six feet. He had really long, dark hair, and a black leather jacket."

"Motorcycle jacket?"

"Longer. More like an overcoat. About knee-

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length.”

Shanna smiled. A better description than she’d expected. “Anything else?”

Goggins shook his head.

“Okay. Thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Goggins. We may want to contact you again later.”

He grinned. “Sure thing – if it’s you doin’ the contactin’.”

Smiling evenly, Shanna ignored the heavy hint and closed her pad. She turned to Deputy Fenshaw interviewing a couple sitting at a nearby table. He towered over them, big and imposing with his shaved head and holstered sidearm. Everybody in the bar seemed very cooperative – probably hoping they wouldn’t get tagged with a DUI on the way home.

Jake closed his pad and strolled toward her. “All done here, Preston?”

Shanna nodded. “The bartender gave me the names of two regulars who left just after the victim and her escort. He also mentioned another possible suspect and gave me a description.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “We’ll question the regulars later. I think the meat truck just left, so I guess the coroner’s finished. Let’s go back outside and see how they’re wrapping things up.”

When Shanna followed Jake out the door, he said, “Whoa, looks like we got company.” She looked around him, annoyed to see a dark-colored, late-model government-issue sedan parked askew in the lot near the victim’s car. When she spied the suits swarming around like locusts, she figured the Department of Criminal Investigations was on the job. Her enthusiasm for the case

faded.

She knew the drill. DCI, created by Attorney General Jack Conway through executive order to replace the Kentucky Bureau of Investigation, the commonwealth's counterpart of the FBI, would take over from here. DCI officers were supposed to provide investigative support for local authorities, but they wouldn't appreciate the help of lowly sheriff's deputies. They'd take the information she and Jake had gathered and then dismiss them as bumbling amateurs.

Damn! This was their case, their turf, and she had as much right as anyone else to help catch the bastard who did this. But she knew she'd never get the chance. Single and permanently relegated to the night shift, all she'd ever handle were domestic-disturbance interventions, Saturday night DUI roadblocks, and emergency traffic calls. She knew she was capable of more – so much more.

"I'll go see what's going on," Jake announced. "You might as well go on home, Preston. Your shift was over an hours ago. We'll touch base tomorrow."

Jake had several years of seniority on her, and she knew arguing with him to stay put wouldn't accomplish anything. "Yeah, whatever. 'Night." She sighed, shaking her head as she walked to her patrol car.

She felt for the victim's family, knowing what it meant to lose loved ones to violent death. She wanted to be more than just a shadow doing cleanup work in the background. But what else could she do? No one could change what had happened here tonight. The only way she'd be of service to herself, the victim's family, and the community was to help take down this vicious animal and make sure he didn't kill again. Somehow she had to stay on

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this case, whether DCI liked it or not.

As far as she knew the Sheriff's Department was entitled to provide a representative to interface with DCI on this case. She just hoped she could convince Sheriff Grainger she was worthy of the job. And maybe, for once, he'd give her a break and let her choose her own assignment – one that could actually mean something for a change.

Yeah, right. Fat chance. She'd have a better luck getting hit by lightning in a snowstorm. Still, she had to try.

She unlocked her patrol car, then stopped to look around at the trees towering in the damp mist. Shaking off the edginess tightening her shoulders, she slid in behind the wheel and shut the door. She'd talk to Grainger tomorrow, as soon as the morning shift started.