

Mortal Touch

The Vampires of New England Series

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Inanna Arthen



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Chapter One

On April 16, 2004, only four people in the small town of Sheridan, Massachusetts were aware of the strange events that had been occurring in its vicinity for the past several months. This was about to change.

It was Friday of the Patriots Day holiday weekend, midway through one of the rainiest Apriils on record. The last of the snow from an interminable winter was finally washing away, leaving only a few dirt-encrusted icy mounds where the highest plow piles had stood. Rivulets of glittering water ran along the gutters of every street, and spring peepers sang from small ponds and boggy areas, which at the moment described every low-lying piece of ground in town. This included a waterlogged third of the unpaved parking area of the store, Regan Calloway noticed as she arrived for work. But it was the first holiday weekend of spring, and Regan was glad it wasn't raining for a change—or worse, snowing.

In several respects, Borrowed and Blue and its manager were alike. Both had been around for a little more than thirty years, both had a tidy but unexciting exterior, and both had far more interesting stories to tell than first impressions conveyed. The store occupied one of those sturdy one story buildings that line the older stretches of mixed-zoned neighborhoods in every New England town. The original wood frame and cinderblock construction had been spruced up twenty years ago with white vinyl siding, with the store's name on a tasteful painted signboard over the front window. Before Regan unlocked the front door, she paused a moment, as she did nearly every morning, to peer south down the long straight stretch of Swansea Road. Small strip malls and commercial buildings bumped elbows with stretches of houses, both growing older and more closely packed until they blended with the town center about two miles away. Looming over the downtown on the southern horizon were the blocky brick shapes of the community's economic mainstay and biggest employer, the Standish Mills. If you stood on the roof of the tallest mill building and threw a Frisbee southwest, it might, with a good tail wind, clear the river and land in Rhode Island.

As Regan gripped the front door handle, she paused, frowning. Someone, she felt, had grasped the handle and shaken it, not too long ago. She closed her eyes, her fingers curled around the cool metal, trying to identify who the door rattler had been. As often happened, no clarification came and Regan was left mystified. It wasn't an attempted break-in, and many people knew that she was sometimes at the store early. Regan gave her hand a shake, to get rid of the impressions, checked the empty mailbox by the door for notes or messages, and went inside.

She reached down and opened the window shade that covered the glass door, so morning sunshine lit up the central aisle of the store. The long rays gleamed on the immaculate shoulder-high shelves, which were filled with a colorful and

eclectic mixture of second hand ephemera, popular gift shop items and unusual hand-crafted wares. Regan had taken over a moribund antique store and over the past seven years, had built up a loyal customer base and a reputation that attracted vacationers and day-trippers all summer long. But it had been a slow winter, with the war and the post-9/11 economy. Every year, Regan hoped to increase profits enough to hire a part-time assistant, but every year, the books balanced out just barely in the black.

She turned on the credit card machine and electronic cash register at the cashier's counter by the door, then unlocked the tiny office at the back of the store. The cordless phone base was blinking its message light, and she picked up the phone and dialed in the access number and code with her thumb, setting her vintage lunch pail on the scarred wooden desk as she listened to the phone's trills and beeps. "You have two new messages..." began the automated voice, and Regan punched 1 and reached for a square of scrap paper. She paused when she recognized the voice of Dr. Hiram Clauson, a psychology professor at Bridgewater State.

"Regan," he said, his words clipped and urgent, "Can you get free tonight? We can see another one, and this could be a breakthrough. Just happened last night. Give me a call, I'll be in my office after two."

Tonight, tonight, what's happening tonight, Regan thought vaguely—for some reason, she felt that there was something she was supposed to be doing. But she couldn't recall anything specific, and there was nothing penciled in on the desk calendar. Her stomach had tightened into a sudden knot at the words, "happened last night." *Weren't these things ever going to stop?* But her thoughts were cut off by the next message.

"Hi, Regan! I stopped by in case you were early but I guess I missed you. I'll come in later today, I know you hate me bugging you when you're working. Hope you're not doing anything tonight, because I really need you! Tell you later, bye."

That explained the door rattler—and the feeling that she was committed somewhere. "Oh, Veronica," Regan sighed aloud as she punched 3 to erase the message. Veronica Standish was her best friend. After her own parents, Regan had known Veronica longer, and on a deep level, trusted her more, than anyone else in the world. But she was fairly certain she knew what Veronica needed her for so badly, and it was a toss-up which made her more apprehensive, that or Hiram Clauson's proposition. Watching Veronica careen through life was like watching video of a toddler on the edge of a swimming pool. You knew there was a disaster ahead, but there wasn't a thing you could do about it.

Regan gave herself the usual quick check in the little mirror by the office door to make sure she was completely presentable. There was little to fuss over: Regan regarded herself as thoroughly average and made no efforts to gild a dandelion, as she saw it. Medium height, medium weight, plain brown hair just below her shoulders, gray-green eyes, a face that was neither homely nor pretty

and looked exactly its age. Her hair had a natural wave when she let it out of its ubiquitous loose ponytail, but that happened seldom. Regan had a few qualities that were anything but average, but they weren't tangible assets.

Abruptly, she realized that it was 9:59 a.m. Satisfied that she was ready to greet her customers, she hurried to the front of the store to turn over the CLOSED sign, taking the cordless phone with her to keep at the counter. It was going to be a long, and she hoped, a very busy day. She was expecting a substantial UPS delivery from a crafter in North Adams, it was the beginning of the first big holiday weekend since Presidents' Day, and schools were letting out for spring break. She'd zeroed out the winter advertising budget putting block ads into Sheridan's weekly newspaper and had even gotten one into the Fall River *Herald*. As she rearranged a few items in the larger window display, she wished that she still had one of those red, white and blue OPEN flags to put out front. The store used to have a vintage one, but last fall somebody had made her a premium offer for it, and any legitimate offer involving money was an offer Regan couldn't refuse.

The front door had a set of little copper bells on a spring steel coil that jingled cheerfully when the door was opened. These freed Regan to work around the store or in the office between customers. She went up and down the aisles checking merchandize tags and flicking a sixty-year-old feather duster (for sale, if anyone wanted it) unnecessarily here and there. When the bells jingled for the first time at 10:23, Regan hastened to the counter. "Hi, Ellen," she said somewhat breathlessly. Ellen Hayes, about fifty-five with tightly curled gray and brown hair, was one of her regular customers. She stood staring around the store with a lost expression, as though she was trying to figure out where she was and how she'd gotten here. But Ellen always looked like that. When Regan spoke, her face suddenly became alert.

"Good morning Regan, I need something for a wedding, one of Roy's nieces, I was wondering if you had anything like those leaf plates you had at Christmas?"

Regan put the duster on the counter. "Today's your lucky day. That artist just brought me a whole batch of new stuff last week. Come on back here and have a look." That artist was a rather capricious soul, but her wares sold like Toscanini's ice cream in August. As Ellen exclaimed over hand-painted poppy bowls, the bells jingled, and Regan glanced quickly at the door. This customer, short and stocky with close-cropped dark hair, was a new one, and the brief eye contact she made before pointing her gaze intently at one of the shelves telegraphed a browser who didn't want to be asked if she needed help. Regan knew to wait until she seemed to be wandering at a loss and heaved a little sigh—then she wanted to be asked.

Ellen was a deliberate shopper, so Regan started back toward the counter. An elaborate series of jingles and some thumps of rubber wheels against glass announced the entrance of two young women and a stroller. Regan suppressed

a wince. She tried to keep the lower shelves filled with heavy items, boxes and non-breakable knick-knacks up to stroller and toddler level, but there was just so much you could do with limited space. The mother, ash blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, was talking earnestly into a cell phone while her friend, iPod buds in ears, was humming and bouncing her upper body side to side in rhythm to her MP3's. To ratchet the worry factor up even more, three heavy plastic bags swung from the handle of the stroller. But the women didn't want to be pestered, so Regan tried to keep the stroller in her peripheral vision. The cordless phone buzzed. "Borrowed and Blue...we're open until seven. You're welcome." iPod lady, buds unplugged, had come up to the counter.

"Do you have two of these?"

"No, that came from an estate sale, there was just the one. If you looking for a pair like that, let me show you these—"

"No, that's okay, I'll just look around some more." The customer set the brass candleholder on the counter and followed the stroller back down the main aisle. Regan picked up the candleholder, grimacing a little—she wished someone would buy this piece. Every time she picked it up, a pain ran from her chest down her left arm. The original owner had died suddenly of a heart attack, not while holding this knick-knack as far as she knew, but she could never analyze why some possessions held impressions and others didn't. The new customer came up to the counter, her mouth set in a tight line.

"Excuse me," she said, as though she had been waiting for hours and was now being ignored. Regan smiled pleasantly—not too brightly, that would make this customer feel offended.

"Yes, what can I help you with?"

"This is the fifth place I've tried." The customer sounded as if each establishment had turned her away out of spite. "I'm looking for something unique for my daughter's tenth anniversary."

"Well," Regan said carefully, "maybe if I knew a little bit about your daughter's personal style, we could find something she'd like. You wouldn't happen to carry a picture of her, would you?" The customer looked annoyed, but she put her large purse on the counter, dug out her thick wallet and after some searching, pulled out a snapshot, which she handed to Regan. "What a pretty woman," Regan said, although she was only pretending to look at the photograph. Her fingers were lightly tracing patterns on the back of it, and her attention was on the visions that were coming to her mind's eye. After a moment, she looked up and smiled. "I think I have just the thing." In fact, Regan had six different things to offer, which was fortunate because the customer agonized over every one of them before she decided on an expensive 1920's silver tea set. But she departed with a much more relaxed expression, and even smiled and accepted a business card. The stroller mom and iPod lady had left without buying anything, but at least the baby had fallen asleep. The only customers Regan hoped to bore into a coma were the ones under five.

The day went on to exceed Regan's most optimistic hopes. The UPS delivery failed to appear, and it was after 3:00 before the store was empty long enough for Regan to risk eating her lunch, a sandwich and thermos of coffee from home. But she had logged sixteen purchases, twenty-three browsers, and eleven phone calls by the time the door bells jingled and Regan looked up to see Veronica smiling uncertainly from the door.

"I hope it's not too early."

Regan glanced toward the back of the store, where there was one browser examining a display of pewter. "No, come on in." Veronica came inside, the door sighing shut behind her. She wore very high-heeled boots, and her legs were so long and thin that she always reminded Regan of a fawn when she walked, stepping not so much gracefully as carefully. Veronica was tall enough to be a fashion model, but her face, under its flawless Clinique makeup, had a strained tautness. Regan knew too much about what Veronica did to keep her figure to be envious. She would have given a lot for the natural hair color Veronica despised, the shade of warm honey, but there was no denying that her friend's waist-length platinum blonde waves had a dramatic effect.

"Did you get my phone message?"

"I did, but it was almost ten and you said you'd be stopping in."

"Oh, that's okay, I know you don't like to make personal calls from work." Veronica ran her tongue along her perfectly outlined lower lip. She seemed barely able to restrain her excitement about something. "So...are you free tonight?"

Regan hesitated. She hadn't called Hiram Clauson back, for several different reasons. "I'm...just not sure."

"You're not *sure*? Why not?" The browsing customer came up to the counter at that point, glancing from Veronica to Regan with a disapproving frown.

"Excuse me," Regan said to Veronica, trying to sound as if Veronica was just another customer. She rang up the small sale, half a dozen Yankee Candle votives and a small carved teak box from India, circa 1972. When the shopper was gone, Regan and Veronica were left in privacy, at least for the moment. "I can't make any promises about tonight, Ver. I might have to go do something. What's up, anyway?"

Veronica bridled like a game show host working up to the jackpot announcement. "Well. You remember Theo, Karen's stepbrother? You know that band he started up last year?"

"Yeah, I do. They're good."

"They've gotten a huge break. They're playing a big job at this private club up in Taunton. Karen's trying to get everyone who knows Theo to come. It's semi-private, but she's gotten some passes."

"That's great! For Theo, I mean, but god, I'd feel like a crasher."

"No, it's okay! There'll be hundreds of people there, it's some big corporate bash, for their IPO—Akins Biotech or something, it's on the passes. Karen's heard that they're getting big funding from the Krafts. A couple of the Patriots might

be there. Not Brady or anyone like that, but a couple of the second string.”

“Holy shit.” Regan blinked. “And we can get into *that*? Are you serious?”

Veronica plopped her Gucci handbag on the counter and pulled out an envelope with a flourish. “Here’s the passes.”

“My god. A corporate party, huh? I could—”

“Yeah, you could work the room, pass out some business cards—see, business and pleasure! Come *on*, Regan...”

For one dazzling second a mini-daydream flashed through Regan’s mind, involving a sign in the front window announcing the Official Thrift Store of the New England Patriots, and she almost giggled. But reality abruptly took over, and Regan’s shoulders sagged. “I just don’t know, Ver—I’m going to be open every day this weekend. It’s a big holiday.”

“I know...but you wouldn’t have to stay late. You deserve a night out.”

“Well...”

“It’ll be fun. And it’s really important to me that you come.”

“It is? Why is it that important to you?”

“Well...” Veronica hesitated, glancing around as though she thought someone might still be in the store listening to their conversation. She leaned toward Regan, lowering her voice. “Because I’ve managed to persuade Jonathan to come along, and I want you to meet him.”

For a moment, Regan had to search her memory for this reference. “Jonathan...oh. Right. This guy you met a couple of weeks ago. Jonathan Vaughn. The writer.”

“Don’t say ‘writer’ in that tone of voice. You make it sound like he was some kind of slacker. It’s not like that at all.”

Regan realized she was right, and felt chastened. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that...well, you’re not the only person who’s mentioned him lately. Everyone seems to know that he’s a writer, but no one can name anything he’s published, and he doesn’t seem to want to talk about what he’s writing now. It does sound just a little dubious.”

“He told me he doesn’t like to talk about his work, he’s writing about a sensitive subject.” Veronica sounded defensive. “Something political, I think. He’s paid his rent for the next six months in advance. Doesn’t that sound responsible?”

“Yeah, I’ll bet his landlord thinks he’s very responsible.” Regan frowned thoughtfully, considering this detail. Paying that much rent in advance didn’t sound like something a fly-by-night would do. That was considerably more committed than Regan’s own housing arrangement. “So, is this the kind of thing you two talk about when you get together, his rent?”

“No, of course not.” Veronica’s cheeks reddened underneath the pale pink blusher. “I...well, it was Derek who mentioned the rent.”

“Um-hm. How indiscreet of Derek to gossip about his clients. You must be spending a lot of time with this Jonathan Vaughn.”

The last statement was disingenuous, and Regan wasn’t surprised when

Veronica hesitated, looking a bit shifty.

“Um...no, not really. I mean, not more than anyone would...”

“Just going out for coffee and doughnuts every now and then?”

Veronica looked a little desperate. “He’s very busy, you know—writers have to be disciplined.” As Regan leaned back against the rear of the counter, giving her friend a skeptical smile, Veronica blurted out, “Well *you’re* the one who’s always telling me not to rush into anything! Besides, I’m not going to chase a guy, that would look pathetic.”

“Not even coffee and doughnuts, then.”

Veronica glowered down at the countertop for a moment. “Not even coffee. I just don’t *get* it!” She slapped the counter with her hand so hard that the soft leather handbag fell over, and her voice was rising steadily, like the whistle of an approaching train. “I’ve been as respectful of his space as hell, wouldn’t you think that any normal guy would love the attention? All this *Cosmo* bullshit about men not wanting to be rejected and hoping women make the first move, and then when you do, all they do is stand there and stare at you. If he’s not interested, fine, he should *say* so, but he never acts like he’s unhappy to see me! Oh, hello Veronica, how are you, but ask him if he wants to go *do* something and he’s got every excuse ever written. And Jesus, Regan, you’re supposed to be my friend and you’re asking me all these questions and looking at me like that, don’t you think—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ver,” Regan said, making a time-out sign with her hands. “Stop that. Take...a deep...breath.” Veronica complied, her eyes squeezed shut and her mouth curled like she was eight and swallowing a spoon of cough syrup. “Again,” Regan said, and this time the breath turned into a deep sigh.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Veronica muttered as she opened her eyes. “But I don’t do that with him, Regan, really.”

“I know, Ver. Love’s a bitch.” *And you hold it all in until you can come vent all over me, where it’s safe.* But she understood why, and Veronica had listened to more than a few rants herself. “So, does this Jonathan call you?”

“Well, he returns my calls.”

“He gave you his number?”

“Yes! That’s why I thought—god, it’s so confusing, Regan.”

Regan was beginning to see why. “And he agreed to go to this big club date with you.”

“Probably because there will be so many other people there,” Veronica said cynically. “That’s what seemed to interest him about it, a chance to meet people. He said he needed to get out. You know what he said? He said he’d *escort* me. Escort me, like it was the prom! I feel like I should hire a chaperone.” Veronica started laughing, and then abruptly stopped.

“Now I see where I come in,” Regan said, smiling.

“No, no, no, no! I’d have asked you anyway, I swear! Karen was going to ask you, and I told her I’d take care of it.”

“Should I bring a date, then?” Regan said lightly.

“Oh, you mean there’s someone you’d—” Veronica broke off at the look Regan gave her, and this time the flush extended to her forehead. “I only meant... I didn’t think you were seeing anybody.”

“It’s okay,” Regan said, turning away and picking up a pewter ashtray the last customer had decided not to buy and stuffing it savagely into a box of items to reshelve. “We all know I don’t have a life, no breaking news there.”

“I didn’t *mean* that, Regan—everyone we know is already going, that’s all. Derek’s going, stag, I’m sure of it.”

At the thought of being paired up with Derek, Regan couldn’t help smiling. “I’ll just bet.” She straightened up with a sigh. “Look, Veronica—I think I’m pretty clear about why you want me to meet Jonathan Vaughn tonight.” She leaned against the counter and folded her arms, looking at her friend narrowly. “You want me to read him. Right?”

Veronica look flustered for a moment, then spluttered, “Well, that’s what you do, isn’t it?”

“Veronica...”

“Please, Regan. I need you for this.”

“I *bate* doing this kind of reading. It goes against all my principles—it’s like going through someone’s wallet. I don’t even shake hands with people because of that, you know that.”

“You told me after Terence that I should check out anyone new I meet. And that was damn good advice. I said so then.”

“Yeah, but not like this! Ver, I’ve told you over and over, I’m not that reliable—especially when I have a personal connection. You’re my friend, I’d be liable to think I was picking up all kinds of crap that’s not true, because I want to protect you. Especially after I met Terence and totally missed little details like the fact that he was kiting checks from your checkbook.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“But it gives you an idea of how fallible I am. I don’t want to be responsible for your life like that. Run him up on PublicData.com, or hire a private detective. God knows your father can afford it—he probably has one on retainer.”

Veronica looked sullenly down at the floor. “I don’t want Jonathan to find out that I’m trying to check up on him. If he’s not hiding anything, he’ll be offended, and he’ll probably never speak to me again.”

“These days, people understand. Anyway, what do you call this? ‘Hi, meet my friend Regan, she’s psychic.’”

“It’s not the same thing. People are fascinated by psychics.”

The phone buzzed and Regan picked it up. “Borrowed and Blue...yes, we are. Sunday and Monday. You’re welcome. Veronica,” she put down the phone, “People are fascinated by psychics when they’re on TV. It’s a whole other story in real life. Don’t do this to me, Ver, please.”

“Oh, Regan...” Veronica leaned her elbows on the counter, resting her forehead

on her hands for a moment, as if she was suddenly exhausted. "I wouldn't ask this if I wasn't completely baffled by this guy," she said, looking up dejectedly. "Does he like me, does he not, does he want to see me, does he not, is he gay, is he straight, did he fall out of a UFO! He won't tell me to get lost, he returns my calls, but he won't let me close—I can't figure it out."

"So drop it, Ver. Don't put up with someone who's just going to mess with your head."

"But I *like* him, Regan. He's the nicest guy I've ever met—ever. I hate to just throw that away because he's, I don't know, maybe he's just shy, or went through a horrible divorce—"

"You'd know about that."

"No shit!"

"What if there's kids?"

Veronica straightened up. "You see? That's exactly the kind of thing I need to find out."

"You should find out from him."

Veronica flung her hands heavenward, where they probably heard her. "I can't! That's the problem!"

"Breathe..." Regan said.

Veronica dropped her hands to her sides. "You're going to get customers, I better go." She picked up her handbag and extracted a pass from the envelope with her long fingernails as though she was picking up evidence with a pair of tweezers. "Here's your pass," she said, placing it on the counter. "They're comps, so Karen says it's no biggie if you can't make it." She turned to go, and Regan held up one hand.

"Wait. Just wait a minute." Veronica turned to look at her glumly. "I do want to meet him. God knows you've piqued my curiosity. I just can't promise it will be tonight. If I don't see you, bring him into the store sometime."

"You'll do it?"

"I'll *try*. There's a lot of problems, Ver. I have to touch him, you know. It's pretty hard to do that without making people suspicious. And I might not get anything from him, anyway. Some people can't be read, and almost everyone can block if they want to."

"I know, you've told me that." Veronica looked incredulous that Regan was agreeing.

"And you have to promise me—*promise* me—that you'll treat anything I get with skepticism. No one's died and made me god."

Veronica's lips curved in a knowing smile. "I will. But you're *good*, Regan. No matter what you say." Her smile broadened. "And I trust you. Deal with it."

Regan looked down at the counter for a moment, her face sober. "Right," she said quietly. To stop this line of discussion, she picked up the pass and read the name of the venue. "Hey, I know this place, it's right off 138. Theo's playing *here*? Holy crap! They're going to be recording an album next."

Veronica shrugged her Versace jacket closed. “There’s been talk.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I’m curious, what’s going on tonight that you might have to miss this?”

Regan glanced uneasily back at the office door, where the phone message still waited on the answering machine. “Well...Hiram Clauson left a message this morning. He wants us to interview someone tonight.”

Veronica’s expression changed instantly. “You mean—there’s been another one of those weird...things?”

“Apparently. He didn’t say much in the message and...” Regan swallowed. “I just haven’t wanted to call him back.”

“So don’t.”

“I can’t just drop it now, Ver.”

“Yes, you can. It’s not like he’s paying you or anything.”

“I want to know the explanation as much as Hiram does. It’s just that it’s getting so—” she stopped as reflected sunlight suddenly flickered across the walls and ceiling. Both women turned sharply to watch a minivan pull into the parking area next to Veronica’s little silver Mazda. Regan realized that her knees were suddenly shaking. *Yes, she thought, this has gone far enough when just thinking about it has both me and Veronica going to code red at a stray flash of light.*

“I better go.” Veronica hunched her shoulders and almost shuddered. “I hope I’ll see you tonight, Regan. Good luck with Dr. Clauson.” She hurried out the door, almost bumping into the customer coming in.

By 7:00, when Regan locked the front door and cashed out the register, all she really wanted to do was go home and take a hot bath. She had been on her feet more or less continuously since 10:00 that morning. But 7:00 was closing time, not quitting time. She put together the daily deposit to drop off at the bank, before locking the register cash drawer into the small office safe. Today’s total was rather refreshing, and she started to think that the club party didn’t sound too bad. All she’d need to do was stop by her apartment and change. *Theo’s band, a couple of margaritas and the mysterious Mr. Vaughn.* She tapped the computer out of screensaver mode, her first chance since lunch, to check the status of the missing UPS delivery. She was about to get the small vacuum cleaner from the corner and quickly vacuum the carpet runners in the main aisles, when the cordless phone buzzed. She hesitated before picking it up, thinking, *we’re closed, damn it!* “Borrowed and Blue.”

“Regan?”

Regan caught her breath. “Yes, Hiram, I got your message,” she said after a moment. “I’m sorry I didn’t call back, it’s been really busy today. Made lots of money, though.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I was waiting until after business hours to try you again. Are you free tonight?”

Regan grimaced. “Well, I...I sort of promised that I’d be somewhere...can you fill me in a bit?”

Hiram’s voice sharpened. “This could be very important, Regan. We’ve never been able to interview a subject so soon after reporting. There’s far less danger of contamination, there might be more memory intact—”

“With what I do, Hiram, those things don’t tend to make a lot of difference. I’m not depending on the subject’s memory, in fact, that can be a distraction.”

“She might change her mind if she has time to think about it, too. Please, Regan—there’s got to be a break sometime.”

“Where are we going?”

“Fairhaven. It will take about thirty minutes to get there from Sheridan.”

Regan was silent for a moment, torn between her ambivalence and the urgency she could hear in Hiram’s voice. “Could we go tomorrow night? I mean, would it make such a difference?”

“I had to do some very delicate negotiating to get the family to agree—it would be unforgivable to call her up now and postpone, and bad for our credibility to cancel. We won’t take all night, I promise you. Can you push your other plans up a bit?”

“I don’t want a late night. The store is open tomorrow, and it’s going to be a very busy weekend—at least I hope so.”

“Then we can do our follow-up work later this week, it doesn’t have to be tonight. I can be there by eight to pick you up.”

Regan could feel her heart pounding. *Damn, damn, damn...* “Can we just swing by the bank’s deposit drop on the way?”

“Of course.”

Regan sagged back in the creaking desk chair, looking over at the vacuum cleaner with a wistfulness it rarely evoked from her. “All right...I’ll be ready.” In every sense but the superficial one, that was a lie.