

*The Longer  
the Fall*

# *Praise for* ***Mortal Touch***

## Book 1 of the The Vampires of New England Series

“...a wonderful fictional treatment of the authentic vampire tradition in this region... has the honesty and local color that brings the characters and their towns to life and makes the plot palpably real.”

Michael Bell, author of *Food for the Dead: On the Trail of New England's Vampires*

“I think you'll be genuinely surprised by some of the twists. Regan is a sympathetic heroine, and Arthen's variation on traditional vampire lore is fresh and well thought-out. The story riveted my attention throughout.”

Margaret M. Carter, author of *Dark Changeling*, *Child of Twilight*, *Sealed in Blood*, and *Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien*

“*Mortal Touch* is an intriguing vampire adventure. Regan has worked hard to get her life back on track, but somehow trouble has found her once again. In this tension filled paranormal tale, Ms. Arthen develops a nicely detailed world with captivating characters and fascinating twists on vampirism. With a touch of mystery, suspense and passion, this is a wonderful escape from the ordinary.”

Kimberly Swan, Darque Reviews

“The story comes alive, riddled with just enough creepiness to enjoy but not so much as to keep the reader awake at night...Inanna Arthen explores vampires in the modern world, attempting to account for both the mundane details and the supernatural, and she does so with relish. She makes vampires seem real, even approachable. That's what is so creepy about this book. You finish it and think—Oh, man! That is too real! I did not want to put *Mortal Touch* down until I had finished it.”

Tonia R. Montgomery, Curled Up With a Good Book

“Having read so many vampire novels as I have, it is seldom that I find one that surprises me or that strays enough from the vampire conventions to appear original, and this is why I was pleasantly surprised to read *Mortal Touch*...this is a work that is well written and that at times gets quite suspenseful and horrific...*Mortal Touch* is definitely a novel vampire fiction aficionados will want to add to their collection.”

Mayra Calvani, Dark Phantom Reviews

“*Mortal Touch* builds slowly to a swift and exciting end. The visceral violence of the story makes it feel quite personal and in some ways shocking. You can't help but feel the betrayal and powerlessness the characters experience. It's very well written. I also enjoyed that the New England area is like another character in the story.”

Vicky London, Vampire Genre

*The Vampires of New England Series*

*The Longer  
the Fall*

Inanna Arthen



*By Light Unseen Media  
Pepperell, Massachusetts*

The Longer the Fall  
The Vampires of New England Series  
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Diana got on the road before sunrise that morning, taking US Route 1 up the coast from Boston. Although it was a weekday and school was still in session, the roads were already beginning to fill with vacationers. North of Brunswick the highway veered inland from the shoreline, passing through long expanses of deep fir forest interspersed with a bit of cleared farmland now and then. Occasionally the road crossed long wooden pile bridges that spanned tidal rivers on their way to the sea. The country seemed wild, empty and lonely.

She had been driving for six hours by the time Route 1 passed through Rockland and began working its way along the west side of Penobscot Bay. Caught up in the momentum of her adventure, Diana had stopped for fuel only once, and had snacked on an apple midmorning rather than take the time to sit down in a restaurant. Gas was running at a disgraceful \$0.32 north of Portland, three cents more than the city. But at least it was plentiful. In the post-war economic boom, filling stations were appearing everywhere.

On the outskirts of Camden she spotted one of them on the south side of the road, two pumps in front of a small building with a single open bay and a faded Texaco sign over the peeling office door. A piece of plywood leaning against one of the pumps bore a cryptic “25.9” in runny red letters that looked like they’d been written with a blood-soaked finger. She pulled into the station next to the pumps, limestone gravel crunching loudly under the car’s wheels. No one was in sight, and after a moment she tapped the horn and turned off the engine. The sudden quiet felt eerie—her ears were humming from the constant noise of the motor.

A young man in grimy blue coveralls emerged from the bay and hastened to her car, smoothing down his close-cropped red hair with one hand. He leaned his arms on the sill of the open driver’s side window and peered in at her. “Fill it up, miss?”

Diana drew back an inch or two—his breath had a whiff of Wrigley’s Spearmint that was almost obliterated by the intense fume of motor oil and sweat surrounding him like a cloud. “Yes, please. Just regular.”

The young man brought the hose around to the side of the car and began pumping. The sharp smell of gas filled the air. "So, you on vacation?"

Diana glanced back at the young man and was amused to see him striking a pose, one hand on the pump, one tucked into a back pocket of his coveralls. "In a manner of speaking."

"You all by yourself?"

"No, my husband's in the trunk." Now there was a satisfying fantasy. The young man laughed, a little too loudly.

"Where you headed?"

"Pepperell."

"Oh, I know Pepp'rell. I got an aunt lives there. That's just the other side to Camden Hills State Park."

"I know."

He finished pumping and went briskly around to raise the engine hood, hissing at the cloud of hot air that stung his face. "You should be careful," he said, giving up on his attempts to open the oil cover. "Your radiator'll boil over. Lady stranded alone on the road, that's something to worry about." He shut the hood forcefully and produced a squirt bottle and long-handled squeegee from next to the pumps.

"In Maine?"

"Well..." he squirted copiously from the bottle. "You might have a long walk, getting help."

"This is a pretty reliable car. I've never had the radiator boil over."

"Ayeh, it's a Chevy. A forty-eight, isn't it? Good car. So, you staying in Pepp'rell?" The young man grunted as he stretched to squeegee the far side of the windshield.

"Yes, for a while, anyway. Anything I should be sure and take in while I'm here?"

"Well...not too many tourist attractions in Pepp'rell. They got summer people, but most of the doin's are in Camden. Nice place, Camden. We got a park down on the harbor, an outdoor theatre—Shakespeare, they do there, and concerts. And an opera house, all kinds of shopping, I know how you girls like to shop..."

"It sounds lovely. But I'll be staying in Pepperell."

"Lots of peace and quiet in Pepp'rell, if that's what you're after." He straightened up, absently wiping beaded sweat off his forehead. "But come to think of it, there is the Hermit of Pepp'rell Hills. Might be worth writing a postcard about, if you saw him."

Diana's mind and eyes had wandered off toward the woods across the road, but at Brent's words, both instantly snapped back to attention. "The Hermit of Pepperell Hills? Who, or what, is that?"

"No one knows, for sure. He owns this big piece of land back of the town, five hundred acres if it's a foot, with some old houses on it, and he lives in one of them. Comes into town sometimes, but mostly you never see him. Grows all

his own food. Not an old guy, either. My aunt says he's real good looking, but he must be a vegetarian or something, 'cause he's dead pale and thin as a hoe handle. My aunt thinks he must be one of those...fairies, you know."

"He grows his own food?"

"He must, 'cause he never buys anything from Thornton's—that's the grocery in Pepp'rell. Mr. Thornton would deliver too, anything he wanted, so beats me where this guy gets his food if he doesn't grow it."

"Maybe he shops in Rockland or someplace."

"Sure, except he doesn't have a car. Can you figure that? But I guess he's got a big garden, herbs and everything. And he's got money, too. It's crazy. You want me to check your tires?"

"What?" She blinked, and shook herself. "No, I'm sure they're fine. They're brand new. Tell me, does this hermit have a name?"

"Yeah. Yeah, let me think." He peered off down the road, frowning. "Morris? Morton? Something like that..."

"You don't mean Morgan? Thomas Morgan?"

"Yeah! That's it." He looked down at her and his face suddenly fell. "Oh, gee...gee, I'm sorry, miss. He's not a friend of yours, is he? 'Cause I only know what my aunt says, and she can really get going, you know—"

"It's okay. I've just heard of him. What do I owe you?"

"Uhhh...that'll be two thirty two."

She rummaged in her handbag and gave him exact change, which he accepted with a look of regret.

"Thanks, miss. Stop by again, any time. I'm always here. You have any trouble with the car, you bring it here, nothing I can't fix. Brent Crothers, I'm in the book. Oh, and I do bodywork, too." He turned and gestured toward a car parked on the side of the station, its dark blue finish glistening in the sun. "Matt Taylor got himself rear-ended but good in April, I had to replace the trunk lid, both rear fenders, rocker panels, six coats of paint..."

"It looks brand new." Diana was sincerely impressed. "Well, Brent, if I have the bad luck to get rear-ended, I'll give you a call."

Brent's cheeks turned pink. "Wouldn't want that to happen, no," he said, stammering.

"Of course you wouldn't. Thanks, Brent. My name's Diana, I'll probably stop by again." Chuckling, she pulled back onto the road, her fatigue driven away by her growing elation.

Pepperell was one of those tiny New England towns you could easily miss if you sneezed at the wrong time on US 1. Like its sister town in Massachusetts, it had been named after Sir William Pepperell, the Kittery merchant who had won his baronetcy and his fortune by commanding the siege of Louisbourg in 1740. But no statue of Sir William posed on the town green—indeed, the community had no town green at all. The intersection of Main Street and School Street, which literally ran into Penobscot Bay with a pair of boat ramps, marked the

center of town. Small businesses and commercial buildings lined Main Street for about a half mile, ending with the Schooner restaurant, which attracted diners from as far as Bangor year-round. From there, Route 1 hurried on to Lincolnville, which had an even more famous restaurant and a prettier beach, and on to Lincolnville was exactly where most vacationers went.

The Holliston House Inn, built in 1888 and boasting a full three stories of spacious suites, occupied the entire upper echelon of Pepperell's accommodations. Its dining room looked out over a rocky waterfront lined with commercial wharves, but along the horizon stretched the misty silhouette of Isleboro Island, like a bank of heather green fog.

The Inn's stateliness prompted Diana to take extra care in fixing her face and wind-snarled black hair before she peeled herself off the seat of her car and went inside. She tucked her black leather portfolio under her arm, unwilling to leave it in the car even for a few minutes. The front hallway was cool and dim, with carpeted oak floors and a wide curving staircase leading to the second story. Behind the desk stood a gray-haired man, suit coat on and buttoned despite the warm temperatures. "Excuse me...Mr. Wilkinson?" Diana said as he glanced up. "I'm Diana Chilton, I telephoned you yesterday."

"Oh, yes. I have a room all ready for you. Did you just arrive?"

"Just, from Boston. I hope you're still serving lunch, because I'm ravenous."

"Lunch is served until three. After that you'll have to settle for dinner," he said, smiling. "Why don't you register and I'll steer you straight for the dining room." He set the open guest book before her. "Are you traveling alone?"

"Yes," she said, thinking irritably, *why does everyone ask that? Do they think I'm hiding someone in my suitcase?* As she took the proffered pen, she added casually, "By the way, I'm supposed to be meeting someone here in town, and I'm not sure exactly where he lives. He wrote to me, but his return address is only a rural delivery number. I was hoping someone could give me directions."

"I'm sure that I can. Who are you looking for?"

"His name is Thomas Morgan."

Mr. Wilkinson pulled his head back, his eyes guarded. "Ah." He put a myriad meanings into that one syllable. "You mean our Hermit."

Diana paused for a moment as she considered the abrupt chill in Mr. Wilkinson's affable expression. "Yes, someone mentioned that you called him that."

"Um-hm. He's a little strange, that one. I'm not sure a young lady should be going out there all by herself."

"Why? Is he dangerous?"

"Who knows? But he's peculiar, no doubt about it. Lives back there all alone, never sees anyone except three or four times a year when he comes into town for something...keeps his hair long, too. He's got a tail right down in back, like he was one of the Founding Fathers. Very peculiar. And he's not too friendly to folks who go poking around up there."

"You mean he shoots at them?"



“Lord, no! We couldn’t have that! But once or twice someone has needed to go up there and talk to him about town business, and he all but slammed the door in their face.”

Diana signed her name in the guest book and handed back the pen. “I appreciate the information, but I really would like to see Mr. Morgan. Could you tell me how to find him? He is expecting me.”

Mr. Wilkinson set the guest book back on its shelf and put both his hands on the desk, facing her squarely. “If he’s expecting you, I’m surprised that he didn’t give you the directions himself.” His voice had a suspicious note.

Diana hesitated, caught, and Mr. Wilkinson raised his eyebrows in an infuriatingly smug way. “Look. I planned this trip at the last minute, and Mr. Morgan doesn’t have a telephone. I didn’t think it would be so hard to find his house, that I needed to have him draw me a map. He owns five hundred acres, doesn’t he?” She rummaged in the leather portfolio and pulled out a small vellum envelope, hand-addressed in neat, angular script. “You see? Here’s his letter to me. Note the postmark? And the return address?”

Mr. Wilkinson took the envelope and studied it long enough for Diana to become acutely aware of the soft tick of the antique clock hanging on the wall behind the desk. He had the look of someone who is reluctantly conceding a point, and Diana guessed that he recognized the handwriting. He returned the envelope to her with a shrug. “Take School Street straight back out of town for five miles. You’ll come to a crossroads with a big chunk of gray granite by the side of the road and a wood fence to the other side. There’s no sign, but everything on your right there is private property. Turn right and follow that road until the first turnoff on the left. There’s a big stone house at the end of it. That’s where he lives.”

She smiled, to take the edge off her minor victory. “Thanks. I really appreciate it. I’m not just trying to annoy him, I promise.”

Mr. Wilkinson only shook his head. “People do have a right to be left alone, if that’s what they want. Every now and again some antiquarian comes in here wanting to take a look at that house, because it’s the oldest one left in the county, built in 1715. I don’t think many of them have gotten much of a look at it.” He handed her room key to her, frowning.

Diana sighed. “We’re both grown-ups, Mr. Wilkinson. If Mr. Morgan doesn’t want to meet with me, I’m sure he’ll tell me that. Now didn’t you say something about lunch?”

Mr. Wilkinson’s directions proved accurate. The lush green, thickly wooded countryside mixed second-growth forest with older patches of tall fir and pine. The air smelled richly of new foliage and there were more birds than Diana had ever seen. The bumpy, curving asphalt road dipped and swooped over the hilly terrain, growing steeper and higher as it wound up into a region unofficially known as Pepperell Hills.

At the granite boulder, Diana pulled up the car and hesitated, peering

down the narrow graveled way on the right uncertainly. Finally she made the turn, the crunching stones under her tires sounding painfully loud. She almost missed the driveway Mr. Wilkinson had mentioned, little more than two ruts curving around through the tall grass. She guessed that the property had been cleared and farmed up to a more recent date than most of the surrounding area.

The drive came to an end in a broad open space directly before the house. Diana stopped the car, turned off the engine, and got out, being careful not to let the door slam. Shading her eyes, she gazed up at the building for several minutes. Lichen gave the tightly fitted granite walls a dusky marbling, but the masonry was in good repair. A broad central chimney rose above the hipped slate roof. The front door faced north, and the upper windows must have allowed a long view in all directions at one time. Long meadow grass nodded in the light breezes, mixed with rustling saplings of oak and maple, and the occasional squat little spruce.

She saw no external signs that the house was occupied—no car, no landscaping, no outbuilding, no artifacts or belongings anywhere in the vicinity, and not a scrap of rubbish or debris. The second floor windows appeared to be covered with heavy draperies. Under the mid-afternoon sun, the insects of early summer droned, and in the distance, she could faintly hear the trill of small amphibians in some unseen pond or brook. Behind the soft natural chorus yawned a profound silence, undisturbed by any human sound.

Yet the stillness was not empty. She could *feel* someone inside the house, with her inner senses tuned by years of training—there was a presence there. But as hard as she concentrated, she couldn't determine whether the person she felt was asleep or awake. The ambiguity of what she sensed puzzled her.

Finally she pocketed her car key and walked up to the front door of the house, where a flat wide stone set into the earth marked the threshold. A wrought iron knocker in the shape of a crescent moon was attached to the door. With a deep breath, she took hold of its hinged hammer and knocked smartly three times.

A whip-poor-will rose from the garden behind the house, keening its three-note cry. She detected no sound or movement within the house, and no change in the consciousness that she felt. She knocked harder, then impulsively grasped the door handle and depressed the old-fashioned thumb latch. There was no lock plate or keyhole, but the solid oak door didn't budge when she pushed, and seemed to be bolted or barred from the inside.

After a minute of indecision, Diana stepped back from the door and began to walk around the house. She paused to look furtively into one of the front windows. It belonged to a sort of parlor, with several pieces of nondescript furniture. A large braided rug hid the floor and a corner fireplace connected to the central chimney. She saw no lamps, papers or bric-a-brac, but no cobwebs or dust, either. A tabletop shone like glass where a long sunbeam touched it.

She continued on around the house. At the back of the house she paused, looking around in amazement. Almost two full acres remained entirely clear of

saplings, and while meadow grass and tall weeds stood knee-deep, it was obvious that this area had only recently been neglected. Brent had mentioned a garden, but no food grew here. As her eye ranged over the clumps and lines of wild growth, she detected some sort of pattern, and fascinated, she walked forward. She felt one of her flats step on something loose and gritty, and looked down.

As far as she could tell, someone had used some sort of tool, like a garden hoe, to make precise ditches in the soil about four inches wide and deep, then filled the ditches in with gravel to create an outline. She followed this one, packed with locally quarried pink granite, and found that it made a great circle, encompassing an area almost three hundred feet in diameter. She paced it all the way around, more and more intrigued. Inside the large circle a series of progressively smaller concentric ones had been mapped out with a draftsman's precision and filled with different sorts of stone—black granite, gray granite, and white limestone. Mystical sigils, meticulously outlined in the same way, filled the spaces between the circles. Diana didn't recognize a few of them. The smallest circle, about one hundred feet across, contained a geometric design too complex for her to analyze. It seemed to be a seven-pointed star with an elaborate and irregular pattern laid over it. The entire garden was a vast mandala, traced out in chipped stone and solidly planted with herbs, what survived of them.

She got her bearings and slowly walked to the center point of the design. Here only a few wisps of grass struggled through a deep layer of pale green stone that she couldn't place at first. She knelt down and rubbed some between her hands, and gasped. He had filled the entire center space, some seven feet across, with crushed jade, a small fortune's worth. Jade symbolized longevity in some traditions, she knew. At the very midpoint of this *medeolenum*, this sacred center, an unpruned wild rose bush erupted in a tangle of brambles, surrounded by yarrow, ginseng, and life-everlasting.

She knew instinctively that the geometric design had a deep meaning that she was failing to interpret. What was he trying to accomplish, and why had he given up? As she gazed around the open expanse, another puzzle arose. Where did Thomas Morgan get his food? She could see no sign or smell of livestock, no vegetables, not even a fruit tree. Most of the surrounding land appeared heavily overgrown with woods. *He has to eat—doesn't he?* Of course, he could have foodstuffs shipped from almost anywhere, if he wanted—but that begged the question of why he would bother.

A beaten track led to the back door of the house, and Diana intuited that Thomas Morgan used this entrance more than the front. It also was bolted, and her cautious knocking failed to evoke a response from inside. She squinted through one of the windows and saw a deep soapstone sink attached to one wall and a long table. For all the clues the room offered, the house might have been vacant and abandoned.

She returned to her car and stood by it for a few minutes, studying the curtained upstairs windows for a sign of movement. But nothing stirred, and

the presence she felt remained as serene as a still pool. With a sense of disappointment, she got into the car and left. She decided not to return to Holliston House just yet, and drove instead to nearby Camden Hills State Park. She walked along the trails aimlessly, thinking—the black flies made it necessary to keep moving, but nevertheless the peace of the woods helped to clear her mind. The sun sank behind the steep hills, and in the twilight she saw several deer come to the shore of Lake Megunticook to drink. Finally exhaustion from her long day and a growling stomach prompted her to head back to Pepperell.

The Inn's windows glowed with warm yellow light, and a rich scent came from the dining room. Diana walked slowly around the wide veranda that completely encompassed the first floor, and stopped to lean against the railing and stare out at the Bay. Closely moored fishing boats now lined the docks. The Bay glistened softly in the moonlight, but a chilling breeze blew off of the water, and she turned to go inside. Then she realized that several men sat at the other end of the veranda, in heavy wooden Adirondack chairs set in pools of light from the first floor windows. She walked down to the men and their low conversation ceased, replaced by a chorus of "evenin', miss." Then she heard Mr. Wilkinson ask, "So, did you find your Hermit?"

All the men turned to look up at her with avidly curious expressions. "No," Diana said, feeling a bit self-conscious. "No one was home this afternoon."

One of the men, who wore a thick knitted vest over shirtsleeves, chuckled. "Fred, did you send this poor little girl all the way out there in the middle of the day?"

All the men except Mr. Wilkinson now laughed, and Diana glanced among them, perplexed and irritated. "Why?" she said, a bit too sharply. "Is there something I should know?"

"Well, now, missy, everyone knows that you can't raise the Hermit of Pepp'rell Hills in the daytime."

"You can't? Why not?"

"No one knows why not, but you can beat on the door and yell yourself hoarse and never get a stir. Don't know where he goes, but he won't answer the door." The speaker looked over at Fred Wilkinson, grinning. "Fred, don't you recollect when Alma Patton needed him to sign that paperwork for the lien he paid off when he bought the Schuller place? She must've traipsed up there six times altogether. Lord, I never seen Alma so mad. Then she went up 'bout suppertime one night, and there he was, cool as mackerel. Got a piece of her mind, he did, but he never apologized or even blinked, she said. Alma's got no use for him, you can bet on that."

"I remember that," said a man with receding sandy hair. "Then when the census man come in two years back, everyone told him, go up there after supper, but would he listen? He musta been from Boston, that feller, 'cause he made four trips before he figured it out. College boy, I betcha."

All the men were chuckling now, even Fred Wilkinson who looked at her

with a shrug. "I'm sorry, Miss Chilton. I truly forgot. I've never had a reason to go see Mr. Morgan, and the daytime business just slipped my mind."

She couldn't stay angry before his sincerity, but she grumbled, "It would have been nice to know this before. Are you sure he's still there?"

"Oh, he's still there, no doubt about it. Someone's keeping the place up, and we see him around now and then."

"But what can he possibly do during the day?"

The man with the vest grunted. "Sleep, I s'pose."

"Sleep? When people like Alma are hammering his door down?"

The sandy-haired man leaned toward her. "Sister, let me tell you something. I know a man name of Tim Evereaux, likes to hunt nights up back of the hills there. He told me once that he used to cut down through your hermit fella's property, oh, two, three in the mornin' if he'd had a good night. He said no matter how late it was, he'd see lights on in that house. Just dim lights, mind, 'cause Morgan's never run the electricity in there, and he's still burnin' kerosene. But the lights are on all night, and when you burn kerosene, you don't go to bed and leave the lamps on, not in a house like that one, you don't."

The other men all assented, with nods, and Diana looked from one to another of them. "Okay, so he sleeps. He must be a deep sleeper."

"Or a deep drinker, maybe," said the man with the vest. "At least, that's one idea that's struck folks here."

"Now, I wouldn't be so quick to repeat that kind of thing, Walt. No one's got any reason to believe that," Fred Wilkinson said. But Diana considered this possibility. Much as she disliked the idea, it was a plausible explanation for the odd impression she'd picked up out at the house. "Thank you for the information, gentlemen. I think I'll go in now before it's too late to get dinner."

"Oh, you've got plenty of time," said Fred Wilkinson. "The special's roast lamb tonight."

"Yes, it smells wonderful. Good night."

As she walked on around the veranda to the front door, she decided she was far too tired to go back up to the stone house that night. *I'll go tomorrow night, right at dusk*, she thought. *I'll find out if this man has a drinking problem or not, whatever happens.*