

Walkersville

By Joanne Reid

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Episode 1

The Walker mansion dominated the town as it had for 150 years. Large, white, with an actual turret at the southern corner, the mansion was surrounded by rolling green lawns and copious flowerbeds. As she drove slowly past the elaborate wrought iron gates, Liza Diamond allowed herself a small smile. Even from the main highway it was obvious that the lawns could use a trim and that pleased her.

The satisfaction Liza took from the ragged grass lasted as she eased her Lexus over the next hill and down past the golf course towards Armstrong's Point. She was halfway through the complex network of curving streets and bays that comprised Armstrong's elite section of town before she realized that the little smile had frozen on her face, nearly a grimace.

"Oh God, I hate these people," she said as she took the next corner too sharply, steering towards the nearest exit from the enclave of doctors and politicians and lawyers and old money.

The long honking of a car horn startled her and annoyed her at the same time. She glared at the driver coming out of a side street. It was a teenager, a girl with long pale brown hair falling straight back from a white hairband. Some local snob in training, just letting Liza know that driving faster than a delicate and classy twenty-five miles an hour was not acceptable. Liza curled her lip in the general direction of the girl and stepped on the gas a little more firmly. Let her call the police. Report that someone in a silver Lexus had looked at her funny.

Liza drove through the stone gates that marked the exit from Armstrong's Point, her heart racing. At the first red light before entering the business district, she caught a glimpse of her tense face in the rearview mirror. "If just driving through the Point makes you feel like this, how in hell do you think you're going to be able to settle down and live here? Tell me that, Miss Diamond," she said to her reflection, emphasizing the "Diamond".

She knew she should go back to the Holiday Inn, gather up her stuff and return to Boston. Never mind that every action, every

stroke of work, every dream for the past ten years had the single goal of her successful return to Walkersville. Now that she was here, she knew that some things were just too hard to fight.

“There she goes again,” Paul Walker nudged his drinking companion at the Hitching Post, just off the Holiday Inn’s lobby. “I tell you, that’s Betty Brown’s brat.”

His companion, Grayson DeWitt, blew at the foam on his beer and watched the leggy redhead stride towards the elevator. “Right. Uh huh. Yeah. Those Browns out on the Line Road are noted for their beauty. And their dress style. Seems to me I saw old Betty herself come into town just last week wearing an outfit exactly like that.” He indicated the coffee-colored linen slacks and jacket the redhead was wearing with a nod of his bald head. “Must have been one of those mother-daughter matching outfits they carry down at Rose’s Clothing.” He laughed, a deep belly laugh. “Hate to disappoint you, you gossiping old woman, but Elizabeth Brown died years ago. If you don’t believe me, ask Betty.”

- Episode 2 -

Betty Brown Haniman shoved her feet into her husband's old slippers. Her feet didn't so much ache as throb. "I got to lose me some of this weight," she said to no one in particular. Her husband, Jim, was in the living room area of their trailer, watching Jeopardy. He never bothered trying to ask the questions but he did enjoy it when the contestants were wrong.

Betty was in the kitchen corner, on the other side of their chrome set, slicing potatoes for a big fry-up of potatoes and eggs. Her sister-in-law, Mabel, sat at the table rolling her own cigarettes with a little black plastic gizmo. A pile of tobacco and a stack of preformed white, filter-tipped tubes were stacked in front of her.

"Jehospat! Jim. Can't you turn the darned thing off and talk to a person for a change?"

"What for? She's got you to talk to. Besides I know better than to say anything when she gets talking diet. What's a man supposed to say?"

"I'm not talking about that," Mabel slammed more tobacco into her cigarette roller.

Jim turned himself slightly sideways and looked hard at his sister. "I been sitting here all day long with you two. What else is there to talk about? We decided we couldn't stand the new preacher so we wouldn't bother starting to go to church again. We picked out the shows to watch tonight and, I might add, you got your first choice. We did our critique of Oprah. And you informed us that you couldn't quite afford to move out yet. So what do you expect me to talk about now."

"Our critique of Oprah?" Mabel snorted. To Betty she said, "I think he watches too much of that public television stuff."

Betty didn't reply. She dumped the sliced potatoes into a sizzling skillet, nibbling on one of the raw slices. She let out a long, shuddering breath.

“Aw, Mabel. You and your damned big mouth. Now look what you’ve done.” Jim pushed himself out of the chair and moved into the kitchen next to his wife, “Don’t cry, babe. You know I hate to see you upset.”

“I’m not crying.” She poked at the potatoes with a spatula. “It’s just too much to think about.” She turned suddenly to face her husband, the spatula held up as if it were a weapon. “What if it is her?”

“Babe, it ain’t. You know it ain’t. I mean, I loved her just like she was my own kid and all and I miss her but all the missing in the world won’t bring Elizabeth back to us.”

Mabel sprang up from the table, knocking over her careful stack of cigarette tubes. “Jim, it could be.”

“Shut up, why don’t you? Can’t you see all your gossip did was hurt Betty? Why couldn’t you have kept your big mouth shut?”

Mabel marched up to her brother and leaned her face into his, “Don’t try to bully me, Jimbo, me boy. It was not gossip. I saw Ruth at the Pay and Save when I was getting my tobacco and she said Grayson saw Elizabeth check into the Holiday Inn.”

“Grayson’s a drunk and you know it. Him and that Paul Walker wouldn’t recognize their own wives if they saw them walk into the Holiday Inn. So, little sister, don’t start stirring up trouble where none’s wanted.”

- Episode 3 -

“Don’t look now but we’re about to be ambushed,” Giselle Lamont breathed her words as she jogged happily beside her husband. She loved the evening in Walkersville, with the soft summer breeze carrying the scent of lilac bushes and rose beds, the sound of children laughing, her handsome husband at her side.

Jeremiah Lamont looked ahead and saw the ambush. It took the form of two impeccably dressed women pretending to have a chat on the sidewalk in front of Ruth DeWitt’s house. “It’s too late to change direction now,” Jeremiah said. “Let’s just play through.”

“We have to be polite.”

“We can pretend we’re too winded to talk.”

“What could we tell them anyway, even if we weren’t bound by lawyer-client privilege.” Gisele dropped her voice. They were two driveways away from the women.

“Good evening,” Jeremiah said, clearly intending not to stop.

Gisele slowed down. “Good evening, Mrs. DeWitt.”

“Oh, Mrs. Lamont,” Ruth said, “I think it’s wonderful that you and your husband are so health conscious. There’s nothing quite like one’s health.”

“Yes, indeed. And I better keep on going before my pulse rate begins to slow down....” but Ruth DeWitt was too fast for her.

“Certainly. I just wanted to ask if it’s true that the Brown girl bought the old Dibblee place over on the next street.”

“I couldn’t say.”

“Well, it’s just that my sister saw her coming out of your office. And I noticed the for sale sign was gone. Oh, you’ve met my sister, haven’t you? Angela Densmore.”

“Of course, Mrs. Densmore. We have met.”

“Yes, at the mayor’s reception, I believe.”

“Gisele, I hate to rush you but we have to go,” Paul was running on the spot just behind the two women.

“Sorry, but I must go.” And Gisele jogged off.

Angela grimaced at her sister. “Well Ruth, you could have been a little more obvious. Now all you’ve done is make it more difficult to find out if it was her who bought the Dibblee place.”

“No, that was just happenstance. I thought we’d find out the easy way. Now I have to go back to my original plan and invite Gladys Cameron over for tea tomorrow. Her daughter is the real estate agent who handled the sale. She’d know.”

Angela shook her head, “Let’s go inside before I shake you right out here in public. Do you think I didn’t already talk to Gladdie. According to her it’s some Diamond woman who bought the place and paid the price they asked. No mortgage, either.”

“Diamond, Shiamond. Do you think she’d really come back here using her own name.” Ruth began walking back towards her house and her sister followed.

Angela continued, “And why did you say I saw the Brown woman come out of the lawyer’s office. That was a lie.”

“What was I supposed to say, that your hairdresser saw her and told you and you told me. They’d think we had nothing better to do than gossip.”

Inside the house, they both kicked off their too-tight high-heeled shoes and padded into the living room. Ruth said, “I don’t believe it’s her. Why on earth would Elizabeth Brown want to come back to this place after the way it treated her?”

- Episode 4 -

Giselle liked Liza Diamond. She liked her style, her easy smile and the underlying shyness she was sure she recognized in her. But then, Giselle was a self-assured woman and expensive clothes did not intimidate her.

When Giselle's secretary ushered Liza into the office, Giselle rose and held out a hand. They shook, a brief firm handshake. "Here's the paperwork. That's about all there is to it and the house is yours as of the fifteenth."

"Great," Liza said, bending head over the papers and reading quickly through each page before signing the final page. "Can you recommend anyone local who can paint the place and do a little minor carpentry before I move in?"

"I'm afraid we haven't been in town all that long so I don't know who is considered good. However, I can ask around for you."

"I'd appreciate that." Liza opened her handbag and took out a cream-colored business card. "I have to take a small trip out of town but you can leave a message for me at that number in Boston."

"Perhaps the real estate agent could be able to help you."

"I'd rather do all that kind of business through you," Liza said.

"Oh certainly." Giselle smiled her most charming smile, "We love to get the business."

Liza laughed, a knowing laugh. "Hard to convince the locals that outsiders can be trusted."

"Sounds like you know the place." Giselle was careful to sound casual.

Liza was silent a moment and then she said, "Small towns are all the same."

“I grew up in New Orleans, so I don’t know much about small towns.”

“They’re beautiful but they can be cruel.”

“Well, since you’re my only client this morning, what do you say to a cup of coffee or a tour of the town?” Giselle was amazed to see the transformation on Liza’s face. Her blue eyes widened and her face lit up and softened. She looked closer to twenty than to thirty. For a moment, Giselle thought she saw tears in Liza Diamond’s eyes.

“Hey, I’m not going to bill you for the time spent touring either.”

“Then, you’ve got yourself a deal. But only if you let me buy you lunch.”

They went to the Old Rose Inn for lunch. It was a quaint Victorian kind of place with ornate mantelpieces, flowered wallpaper and upholstery and cozy tables. Giselle and Liza sat in a secluded corner, protected more or less from the other diners by an oversized hanging ivy. Nevertheless, Ruth and Angela could see them quite clearly from their corner booth, especially if they sat near the outer edge of the dark red cushioned seats.

“What a coincidence, seeing them pass by the house,” Ruth said. “Imagine. They were the last two people I’d expect to see driving around the neighborhood on a Thursday morning.”

Angela moved her menu in front of her face, “Oh, Ruthie, don’t look now but you’ll never guess who just walked in.”

Ruth turned and looked towards the front entrance.

Angela hit her lightly with the menu. “I said, don’t look now. People will think we’re nosy.”

“Oh, Angela. It’s Thomas McAllister.” Ruth could not resist craning her neck around to see if the so-called Miss Diamond could see the handsome, dark-haired man who was now strolling across the room as if he owned it.

- Episode 5 -

Thomas McAllister felt cramped by the overpowering fustiness of the Old Rose Inn. He swore he was being choked by the scent of lavender verbena. His jaw ached from the effort of keeping his temper under control. No, it wasn't just temper, it was beyond mere temper. It was anger. It was frustration. It was the raw aching emptiness of life.

He'd settle this thing with Amanda, and then, first thing next week he'd start divesting himself of everything else to do with this town.

"Tom?" Her voice was soft and he knew that the look he shot her was cold. She smiled up at him gently. "I wasn't sure you saw me."

He sat down across from her at the table. She was perfectly beautiful and beautifully perfect, her shiny dark blonde hair falling from a white hairband, setting off her golden skin and dark brown eyes, complementing her white sleeveless blouse and white silk slacks. He tried to smile, feeling slightly ill at what he had to do. She was such a sweet girl. Twenty-one going on eighteen. Then the anger coursed through him. How did she think she could ever enchant him, keep him, arouse him with her virginal, simple sweetness?

She wasn't a woman for a man like himself. His passion frightened her and she had barely seen the surface of it. He tried to hate her, her who only crime was a face that vaguely reminded him of a once much-loved face. If he could hate her, it would be easy to hurt her, to tell her the wedding was never going to take place.

"Tom. What happened? You look like you just lost your best friend," Amanda Walker laid a cool manicured hand on his arm. "Tell me, darling."

At that moment, a waitress came over and began to explain the specials of the day. "Do you want me to order for you, Tom?" Amanda asked.

“Yes. If you would.” Thomas glanced over at the two old biddies perched at the end of the benches in the nearest booth. Mrs. Dimwit and her evil twin. He bared his teeth at them in a quasi-smile. They nodded back at him.

“Oh and bring me a scotch,” Thomas said to the departing waitress. To Amanda, he said, “I’m assuming you didn’t order me a drink.”

“You know I didn’t. It’s not....,” but he wasn’t listening. He was looking beyond her, past her smooth hair, past the hanging ivy.

“Tom. What is it? Are you all right?”

“No. Amanda. No, I’m not all right.” He shoved back his chair and crossed the room in several long steps. The two women beyond the ivy were laughing at something, delicate female laughter, when he approached their table. The one with the short dark hair and pointed chin glared at him, “Yes. What is it that you want?”

He ignored her. His icy green eyes were totally focused on Liza Diamond. “It is you.” His voice was a harsh rasp.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” she said the words clearly enough but her voice was too tight, too high.

Giselle said, “Sir, you’re interrupting a private meeting between me and my client. I must insist that you leave us alone.”

He snapped at her, “I must insist that you mind your own business.”

“Tom,” Amanda appeared at his side, “What is it?”

Liza Diamond got up from the table and head high and cheeks flaming, walked out of the Old Rose Inn.

- Episode 6 -

Liza pushed her way through the startled crowd coming in for a leisurely lunch at the Old Rose Inn. Her heart thudded, the pounding sound of her own blood drowned out all other noise. She was vaguely aware that a couple of people were taking steps in her direction and she darted around the corner of the restaurant. Originally a Victorian mansion, it had plummeted to the depths of being a badly run boarding house before it regained a lease on life as the Old Rose Inn. The parking lot was around the back and along the other side of the building.

The path that Liza was on was narrow and it led to the parking lot. She took several long deep breaths as she slowed her pace. A couple was walking towards her and she wanted them to not notice her at all.

Now what the hell was she going to do? She'd abandoned Giselle at the table. Thomas. Oh merciful heaven. Thomas McAllister. She'd girded herself for their first encounter, practicing and practicing until she could manage a graceful and distant, "Yes, Thomas, it is nice to see you."

She was in the parking lot now. Without her purse. What could she do? She couldn't very well go back in now and say, "Oh, Giselle, ignore my sudden rudeness. It's a tic that I have. I simply have to leap up and make a scene every now and then."

But then she couldn't just run off on Giselle like that. A car pulled into the crowded parking lot and Liza began moving again. She walked across the parking lot and around the building to the side entrance that led into the kitchen. She'd have to throw herself on the mercy of the kitchen help. At least she felt at ease with them.

She had her hand on the doorknob and was about to turn it when she heard her name being called.

Giselle was coming towards her from the upper end of the parking lot, nearest the front entrance. "Liza? Are you okay?" She speeded up, nearly running toward Liza.

It was the story of her life, Liza thought. Caught between the back door entrance to life and the elegant life of people such as Giselle and Thomas. Giselle laid a gentle hand on her arm and said, "Whatever it is, it can't be that bad."

It was the touch that did it. The simple human kindness that the touch represented. Liza moved her hand away from the doorknob and gave Giselle a wry smile. "I am so sorry."

"Don't worry, we can have lunch some other time. Hey, we can even go someplace else right now if you like. We can even go back in there if you want."

"I never make a scene like that. I'm so humiliated," Liza said.

"That wasn't a scene and in any case, it wasn't you who was out of line. It was that man. He barged into our lunch, interrupted our conversation."

"But -- I reacted..."

"For all I or anyone else knows, you simply came out to get something out of the car. Now that you have it, let's go back in and have lunch, if you like."

- Episode 7 -

When the two women returned to the restaurant, Thomas and Amanda were gone. Ruth DeWitt and Angela Densmore were in their glory.

The waitress stopped at their booth ready to give them their bill.

“Oh no dear. We have all the time in the world,” Ruth said. “Wouldn’t you like another cup of tea, Angela?”

“Yes. And perhaps a nice dessert. What do you have?”

The waitress reeled off the list of desserts and eventually went off to fetch them a piece of cherry cheesecake and a slice of black forest cake.

Ruth leaned forward. “Did you see that McAllister boy? Oh he’s such a handsome lad and what did he say to make her run out like that? Did you hear?”

“She didn’t go very far.”

“Only because that lawyer woman went after her.” Ruth’s eyes opened wide and her mouth stopped mid-word.

“What is it?”

“You don’t suppose she’s suing him do you?”

“Suing him? Whatever for? We don’t know for sure that’s the Brown girl and even if it was, what could she sue him for? They were both in on it, it isn’t like he did something to her.”

“That’s the Brown girl. You’re as bad as Grayson. He swears she’s dead. Died in Boston. He claims to have it on excellent authority that she died there the summer after she left here. But I’m here to tell you that’s her. I don’t think she died. I mean, I know she didn’t die. But I’ll bet you money that she’s come back to settle some old scores.”

“Here you go, ladies,” the waitress said as she placed their desserts on the table. She put the cheesecake in front of Ruth.

“That’s all right dear. Just put them both down anywhere. We’re going to share them.”

They nibbled on the desserts, declared they could do better at home, and then dug into them hungrily. They had given up on hearing any conversation between the two women behind the ivy. But they could at least see how long the women stayed and if they arranged it right, they might even be able to keep an eye on where they went after they finished lunch.

“I appreciate this,” Liza said, as the waitress cleared away their dirty dishes. “Not many people would be, well, so willing to let me not talk about it.”

“Hey, we lawyers are good at keeping our mouths shut. But, you know, I think we can be friends and if you ever need to talk, I’m not far away. And, if you have any more trouble with Mr. McAllister, let me know. He is not allowed to harass you. Not in this day and age.”

The waitress came back with the bill and Liza gave her a gold credit card.

“I’ll leave the tip,” Giselle said as she reached for her purse.

“Not this time.” Liza smiled and it felt really good. “I have a feeling that we’ll be having more lunches and you can get it next time.”

- Episode 8 -

Amanda Walker was furious. How could Thomas do that to her? In front of the entire town. She was in the kitchen, looking through her mother's fridge for something decent to eat. She found a perfect red tomato and sliced it thinly, arranging the slices on a plate. Then she sprinkled fresh basil over the tomato slices. She poured herself a glass of sparkling water and added a single ice cube.

She took her late lunch into the sunroom that overlooked the river. The slowly moving blue river banked on the far side by the dark green of the trees, the sleek green lawn that spread out before her, with its blossoming bushes and neat beds of flowers had always comforted her. She'd taken to sitting in this room since she returned home after two desultory years at Vassar. It was her special haven. Mother preferred the sanctuary of her own bedroom when she was home.

This had always been Amanda's dreaming room. She planned her life in this room ever since she was able to get into it by herself. In here, she could see her life stretching out before her. Since the spring, she'd been planning to marry Thomas. They'd live in a house like this and everything would be perfect. Maybe they could even live here. Mother and Daddy needed someplace smaller. She would talk to them about it.

She picked at her lunch and sipped her water as she watched the river flow by. Something was niggling at the edge of her mind.

Some stray thought. The anger that had filled her head was receding. She knew how to punish Thomas and she surely would.

Right now, she concentrated on the stray thought. She worked through what she called brainstorming, trying to repeat the series of thoughts she'd been having. Thomas and that woman.

Lunch. Food. Waitress.

“Yes,” she startled herself by speaking out loud. “That was Bonnie Griffith. She’ll know.” Amanda finished eating the tomatoes as she worked out her plan. Thomas had refused to tell her who the woman he’d driven out of the restaurant was. He’d been quite ill-mannered about it too.

“Oh Amanda. You’re a genius,” Amanda congratulated herself. Bonnie was a waitress at the Old Rose Inn. She’d be able to tell Amanda who those two women were. Amanda would feign interest in the dark haired one and then as an afterthought, she’d ask Bonnie who the other one was.

She carried the dirty dishes out to the kitchen and found the telephone book in the drawer near her mother’s small kitchen desk. She looked up the number and dialed.

“Could I please speak to Bonnie?”

“Just a sec.” Amanda heard the telephone clunk as the person dropped it on a table or desk or some hard surface. In the background picked up by the phone, she heard voices and then steps and finally, Bonnie’s voice, “Hello.”

“Hi Bonnie. This is Amanda Walker.”

“Hi Amanda.”

“I have a favor to ask of you,” Amanda said and continued quickly before Bonnie could get a word in. “It’s about that thing at lunch. Thomas and I are so embarrassed. And I thought that perhaps I could send a note to the women, extending our apologies. The problem is, I don’t know their names or how to contact them.”

“Oh. That’s all? Sure. The dark haired one is a lawyer, you know, her and her husband have an office downtown. Giselle Lamont she is. They’re from away. And the other one...oh wait...” Amanda could hear voices in the background. She distinctly heard Bonnie say, “I’m not telling her that.” Then Bonnie was back on the phone. “The other one is Liza Diamond. And all I know about her is that she’s new in town.”

“Isn’t there something else you might know?” Amanda asked in her most convincing voice.

Bonnie hesitated and then said, “Well, she just bought the Dibblee place.”

- Episode 9 -

Betty Brown Haniman was alone in her own kitchen. It was blissful. She'd just had a huge, long and loud cry. She felt like a spring rain had just washed through her entire body.

Jim could be sweet and when he offered to drive Mabel over to visit their mother in the nursing home and let Betty be alone, Betty remembered why she had married him. He had a very kind heart. And he knew how she felt about things, even when life got to be too much and there wasn't much time for dwelling on the past.

She heard the sound of tires moving down the road but Jim and Mabel would be gone a long while. She knew Mabel would want to stop along the way for a bite to eat. The vehicle stopped and Betty nearly began crying again. It had been months since she had two minutes to herself and now some damned salesman was going to try to butt in and ruin it for her.

She dabbed at her face with the kitchen towel and went to the door before he had a chance to knock.

"Thomas McAllister!" She spoke more loudly than she intended but she was in a state of shock.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Haniman."

"Good Lord, boy. Call me Betty. But do it from where you are. Tell me what you want from me now."

"Come on. It's not like that. It's just that I wondered if Elizabeth was here."

He was not prepared for what happened next. Betty Brown Haniman came down the steps of her trailer home, stooping to pick up a rock as she moved towards him. "First I'm going to use this rock on that car of yours and then I'm going to use it on you. You miserable lying big-feeling snake. You killed my baby and now you come slinking on out here like this to ask if she's here. How rotten can you be."

She had reached the front of his car and lifted the rock, ready to swing down on the fender with it.

“Wait. Please. Betty.” He stepped closer to her, thinking to get between her and his car. He didn’t think she’d really hit him with the rock. “I saw her in town. I swear I did.”

Betty lowered her hand with the rock and fixed him with a flinty eye. “When.”

“Not more than an hour ago. I was at the Inn.”

“And she talked to you?”

“No.”

“How do you know it was her?”

“I know. “ He licked his lips nervously, “I’d always know Elizabeth. You never forget your first love.”

Betty picked up the rock and threw it at the windshield which shattered into little greenish chunks of glass all over the hood of the car. “Now get the hell out of here. And don’t you ever mention Elizabeth or love or anything to me.” She looked around and Thomas got into his car, brushing away the broken pieces of windshield and began to back out of the yard before Betty found what she was looking for.

Another rock.

- Episode 10 -

After what turned out to be a rather pleasant lunch with Giselle, Liza packed her things into her car and headed back to Boston. The deal for the house was in motion and Liza now realized what a mistake the whole thing had been.

How could she ever have imagined she could return to Walkersville. Face Thomas. Cope with those people on a daily basis. She could cancel the house deal although it would not be very nice for the people selling it.

Her head started to ache.

“Face it, doll, you’ve got to do something with the rest of your life,” she told her reflection in the rear view mirror. But what? Had she peaked at the age of 28?

The employment agency she had established because she couldn’t find a decent job without references at the age of 19 had grown and grown, until she became a headhunter for the oddest and most elite array of clientele. She had an absolute genius for bringing the right people together. In the beginning, it was a matter of helping her friends work on their resumes and interview skills.

Then, she began to go back to places that had not hired her, wearing clothes she borrowed from the friends she stayed with, her hair and nails done by friends who worked in beauty parlors in return for her help in getting them the job. She even used breathing and projection skills taught to her by an aspiring actress who needed someone to help her prepare for auditions.

She strode into offices, asking for a brief meeting with the manager, and she explained that she was a personnel broker. “Tell me exactly the kind of person you’re looking for and I’ll find that person for you.”

Her business card simply stated her name, her title, Personnel Broker, and her phone number. The number was an answering service and she had the calls forwarded to wherever she was

currently staying. If anyone asked where her office was located, she simply smiled and said, Beacon Hill. But you don't come to me. I come to you.

It was gutsy. But she was young and after what happened in Walkersville, nothing could scare her.

Now she discovered the hard way that maybe nothing in Boston could scare her but Walkersville still could.

She no longer placed secretaries and receptionists. Her specialty was placing people with unique skills with people who had very specific needs. Because much her clientele was in the arts and entertainment business, they were a mobile lot. As a consequence, her reputation had spread across the continent in a strong thin thread of satisfied clients. The agoraphobic writer who needed an assistant to handle his life so that his agoraphobia was not noticed. The high powered high profile lawyer who needed a personal shopper who could be trusted not to sell his secrets to the tabloids.

Liza could live anywhere in the country. Why did she feel compelled to live in Walkersville? She blinked back tears. She could make deals with the biggest names in the country. And yet, here she was.

Afraid of people she despised.

- Episode 11 -

Paul Walker was at the DeWitt house before Grayson had finished his morning ritual of a pot of tea and a quick read-through of USA Today.

When the doorbell rang, Ruth flicked back the curtain and looked out at her front step. No one came to visit this early. Her lips tightened when she saw Paul lounging against the wrought iron railing of their front door step. "Gray," she called, her voice still creaky. She had not yet used it this morning.

The doorbell rang again.

"Grayson!" Ruth's voice was in action now and her tone was not one of Grayson's favorites. "Answer the door." She went upstairs. She'd be damned if she let Paul Big Mouth Walker see her in her quilted housecoat and without makeup at nine a.m.

Grayson sighed and moved towards the front door, carrying his newspaper. Toast crumbs were snagged in the gray bristles of his unshaven face. He opened the door to find Paul squinting around at their front yard. His face lit up.

"What happened to get you up so early, you old dog. Did you wet your bed?"

Paul grinned and pushed in past Grayson. "Nah. It's part of my new health regime. I just get up earlier in the morning and go for a walk." He looked around the living room. "Where's Ruth?"

"Upstairs, I think."

"Not still in bed?"

Grayson snorted. The suggestion that Ruth DeWitt would be lying abed after seven a.m. was ludicrous. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"No. Already had a pot of it down at the diner."

They were standing in the front room, each of them waiting for the other to speak. Grayson recognized Paul's look of excitement. It was like a red flag advertising some new and fascinating, at least to Paul, bit of gossip.

"Well?" Grayson said.

"Well what?"

"What's your big news today? You didn't just drop by. The last time you set foot in this house was for our Christmas party. So I want to know what it is that couldn't wait until I got to the Hitching Post this afternoon."

Paul grinned, a crooked half-smile sort of grin. He wagged a bony finger at Grayson, "I told you that was Betty's kid."

"And I told you she was dead."

"Come on, Grayson. Just because an obituary is in the Sentinel does not mean that the person is actually dead. No way."

"So what do you know that's so all-fired important?"

"The McAllister boy had a visit with Betty Brown and she took a baseball bat to him."

"What?" Grayson sat down on the sofa and Paul took the seat opposite him. He leaned forward, dangling his hands between his knees.

"Yessirree, Gray. I saw the car myself down at the garage. Front windshield is completely gone. She just put the run to him."

"That's no proof that the girl is alive."

"Well, it's pretty strong evidence when you also happen to know that there was a scene at the Old Rose Inn...."

“Good morning, Paul.” Ruth’s voice was as crisp as the white blouse and navy blue slacks she had selected for her day’s wardrobe. Grayson jumped at the sound of her voice.

“Ruth. You’re looking lovely as usual.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Forget it Paul. You were a blarney-skite as a boy and you’re no better now.”

Unexpectedly friendly, she sat down next to Grayson and said, “So what’s this story about Betty and the baseball bat?”

- Episode 12 -

“Hi ya, Tommy. So how’s it going?” Thomas McAllister listened to the voice on the other end of the phone. He was still in bed, pretty much still asleep. The phone’s ringing had dragged him from a scotch-induced sleep and the front of his brain ached.

He cleared his throat and tried to spit out the cobwebs he was sure clung to his tongue.

His caller chuckled. “Bad morning, Tommy. Or did Old Lady Brown really lay a licking on ya?”

Thomas cursed and hung up the phone. Before he was in the bathroom, the phone rang again. He let the machine pick it up.

“Geez, Tommy. Perhaps I should send an ambulance over there. Sounds like you just fainted and dropped the phone. Don’t worry, buddy. Dan Jordan to the rescue. Just hang on guy, I’m dialing 911 from the other phone.”

Dan Jordan. Thomas adjusted the shower to as hot as he could bear. Mr. Dan Jordan, with the emphasis on the last syllable of his last name. DAN Jor DAN. Ace reporter. Ace pain. How the hell did he hear about the run-in with Betty. Some mouth down at the garage. No. They’d have no way of knowing how the car got damaged.

He switched the water to icy cold and let it beat the poison out of his body. He was just drying himself off when he heard the sirens. Damn it. He toweled his hair and gave it a quick brush. Then he yanked a pair of jeans and a Red Sox jersey on over his nakedness. He went down the back stairs to the kitchen where he poured himself a glass of orange juice and sauntered out to the front door just as the paramedics arrived.

Thomas pulled open the front door, grinning as he saw Dan Jordan pull up behind the ambulance. There he was, Ace Weasel, camera at the ready.

“So this is how you spent all that money I pay in taxes, eh?” Thomas quirked his mouth in a half smile.

One of the two paramedics said, "But we got a call...."

Thomas gestured with the hand holding the glass of orange juice, "It was our fine friend over there. Just trying to save my life."

"Swear to God," Dan puffed up behind the paramedics. "I didn't do it."

"You were a loser in high school, Dan Jordan," Thomas said the name with the emphasis on the first syllable of the last name. "And you're a loser now. Your voice is on my answering machine upstairs, describing how you were calling the ambulance."

"Well, yeah, I called them. I meant I didn't do it deliberately. Well, I mean not maliciously. I just thought you had fainted. Or something."

The paramedics took their leave after assessing the situation and realizing that the least said, the best. McAllister was on the hospital's board of directors.

Dan remained in the driveway.

"Get off my property, you fat oaf." Thomas took a sip of orange juice.

"No need for name calling."

"Get going or I'll have you arrested."

"Oh? If you're so arrest happy, why don't you have mean old Betty Brown arrested for beating you up."

"Don't talk so loose, you idiot. Do I look like anyone laid a hand on me?"

"Yeah. Okay. So I don't actually think Betty did a lot of damage except to the car. What I really want to know is why her daughter came back to town? Did you have anything to do with it? Did you stop paying her to stay away."

- Episode 13 -

Amanda Walker's heart skipped a beat when the ambulance that screamed past her stopped at Thomas' house. Her hands shook so violently that she could not control the steering wheel. She pulled over to the curb for a moment and licked her dry lips.

He wouldn't have harmed himself, would he? She wondered as her mind raced through the possibilities. Drugs? An overdose. No. She was positive that Thomas was well away from that kind of stuff. That woman, that Liza Diamond. Whoever she was to him. That bitch had something to do with this. Amanda jerked the car back to the street, flushed with fury at the thought that perhaps Liza Diamond had spent the night with Thomas.

Be sensible, she warned herself. If Liza was there, who needed the ambulance? Then she saw Thomas on the step, talking to the ambulance men and pointing at a disheveled pudgy little guy who was walking across the lawn.

Amanda parked around the corner. She knew who that little guy was. He used to be a reporter for the Sentinel and now he was branching out to write for other papers. If he was onto Thomas, there must be something going on. And if Miss Liza Diamond thought she was going to move into town, into the Dibblee place, right around the corner from Thomas, she had another think coming. No one was going to get in Amanda's way.

She checked her makeup in the rearview mirror, at the same time watching for the reporter to come up the street. The ambulance went past and a few minutes later, she saw the little guy at the wheel of a wreck of a car. She pulled out and followed him to the next stop light, where she pulled into the turning lane and tapped her horn.

He looked over at her and she waved her hand at Bud's Donuts on the other side of the street. She smiled, turned left and then

made an illegal turn into the traffic going back in the direction she had just come from.

Dan Jordan chuckled out loud to himself. He let the chuckle grow into a large laugh. Amanda Walker. As dumb as she was beautiful. She must be some pissed off at Tommy Boy if she wants to talk to me, Dan gloated. As he got out of his car which he parked beside her sleek vehicle, he hitched up his trousers and tried to tuck his shirt in neatly. It wasn't working because the button that held the shirt closed across his round belly had disappeared a few days before.

He locked the car, checking that his camera was carefully hidden under his winter coat in the backseat and strolled into Bud's.

"Hiya, doll," he said to Amanda who was primly looking at the list of donuts posted above the shelves.

She nodded, tight-lipped, at him.

"Look," he sidled up to her and dropped his voice. "Do you just want to grab a coffee and go sit outside and drink it?"

She lifted an eyebrow a bare fraction of an inch. He leaned in more closely, "Do you really want these people to hear what you have to say?"

She shook her head and Dan ordered two coffees. He handed hers to her and indicated the little table where she could add cream and sugar. "Never mind," she said and started out the door. He stopped and added a large dollop of cream and two sugars.

"Let's sit in your car," he said and she unlocked her door and pressed the button to open the passenger door. He settled in and sipped his coffee. Her door was still open and she dumped her coffee out on the parking lot pavement. Then she turned to him and said, "So, you tell me what you know and I'll tell you what I know."

- Episode 14 -

Mabel Haniman's cigarette burned down to her fingers and she yelped as the heat touched her. The cigarette, still lit, went flying and landed behind the counter.

"Geez, Mabel, no need to get rowdy." Patsy Peters bent down and picked up the still burning butt. She mashed it out in the ashtray and grinned at her old friend. "So?" she asked. They were the only people in Bud's Donuts.

Mabel was staring bug-eyed out the donut shop window. She turned to Patsy and said, "Did you see that?"

"Well, yes. Pretty hard to miss the beauty and the beast."

"That's Amanda Walker."

"I knew she was one of the Walkers. They have those funny light-colored eyes. And I've seen the blob around before."

"That's what's-his-name. Used to work at the Sentinel until he got fired for asking too many questions about the wrong kind of people."

Mabel lit another cigarette and watched as Amanda dumped her coffee on the ground. "Well, well, well. Isn't that something?"

"It's something all right. But what?"

Mabel turned back to face Patsy. "Remember I told you about Betty chasing Thomas away the other day? Well, that's Thomas's little girlfriend."

Patsy's fingers were tingling to call her sister over at the hairdressers with this tidbit. She'd have to wait until Mabel left. Without asking, she poured Mabel another cup of coffee on the house. She felt guilty about wishing Mabel were gone but she knew that Mabel only told her really good gossip if she pretended she weren't interested. Mabel had always been like that. Kind of secretive. Reeling out gossip in little bits.

“Well, Mabel. The fact is, he followed her in here so he’s likely just chasing down a story and thinks she’s got some information for him.” Patsy wiped down the counter.

“Believe me, it isn’t like Miss Professional Virgin to give the time of day to anyone. So something’s up.” Mabel continued to stare out the window.

Patsy poured herself a cup and put on another pot of coffee. She moved around the counter and sat down next to Mabel.

Together they watched the two people in the car talking. The man ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head slowly. Amanda leaned forward, her head moving in an aggressive manner.

“Oh what I’d give to know what they’re saying,” Mabel moaned.

In the car, Dan was shaking his head slowly back and forth. Amanda leaned toward him and said between clenched teeth, “Oh? What’s your problem? All I want you to do is track down some information on this Diamond woman.”

“There isn’t much to go on.”

“No damned wonder my uncle fired you from the Sentinel. You’re no kind of newspaperman.”

“He didn’t fire me because of anything to do with my work. It was because I was looking into that incident that Thomas was involved with back in high school.”

“Whatever. That’s old stuff. Who cares? A bunch of drunken kids get into an accident. What kind of story is that? Besides, I don’t want you to research her here. I want you to find where she is from and go there. I’ll pay you.”

“Five hundred a day.”

“All right. But for that, you’d better do a good job. And while you’re at it, get some decent clothes.”

“Plus expenses.”

“Okay. But try to dig a little deeper than looking at high school pranks. I want to know everything about her.”

Dan smiled. What a snap this would be. He was half-way home because he already knew who Miss Diamond was. Elizabeth Brown. A second victim of that old high school prank. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was Elizabeth. A man doesn't forget the face of the first woman he loved.

- Episode 15 -

Liza wandered through her empty condominium. She was a little surprised that she didn't feel any sense of loss as she looked out at the cityscape beyond her living room window. Neither did she feel any trepidation. Once she crossed the state line back into Massachusetts, the cloying fear seemed to disappear. She would recharge her emotional batteries in Boston for another day or so and then return to Walkersville to get things set up before flying to the coast for a meeting with her favorite client, William Anderson Smythe.

Just the thought of the irreverent old writer cheered her. When he hired her to find the perfect secretary, she'd been warned how difficult he was to work for. She recognized him immediately as a fellow mask-wearer. Up close and in person, she was not intimidated by his outrageous yellow suit with his even more yellow shirt and his thick thatch of white hair with its tinge of yellow. She watched as he whisked around mixing them the perfect martini and decided that his campiness was more an act than the real thing. Several of her clients and best friends lived alternate lifestyles but they were nothing like this stage presentation of an aging queen.

As he passed her the chilled glass with the two perfect olives, she met his eyes and held the gaze for a couple of beats too long for politeness. Then she sipped her martini and asked, without looking at him, "Before we begin, may I ask you what your real name is?"

He chuckled but didn't answer. She looked at him, sitting neatly in a pale lemon leather loveseat across from her. There was silence.

"Very well. For now, I will put down William A. Smythe." She wrote a few words in her notebook. "Next question. What are the three most essential qualities you want in a secretary?"

He pursed his lips, looked thoughtfully at his martini and then said, "Discretion. Discretion. Discretion."

“So skills, personal appearance, gender, age and personality are not an issue. Excellent. Very forward thinking and politically correct.” She hid her smile as she wrote in her notebook. Smythe’s primary claim to fame was the political incorrectness of his novels which rivaled the novels of Jackie Collins for their gossipy nature about the inner working of Hollywood and the entertainment business.

And so the interview continued. She gleaned so little information about what he really wanted that she suspected this might be her first failure in finding the perfect employee for a client.

On the way back to her hotel, she suddenly realized what she could do. She called Tyrone Kelly, a young actor she had found work for as he waited for his big break. He was still waiting. Tyrone was destined for a tough time in the movie world. He was hard to cast, being six and a half feet tall with fiery red hair and the pale freckled skin that went with it. He worked out and was powerfully built but even his broad shoulder could not dispel the angelic babyface aspect of his looks. It was too bad because Tyrone was a genius at assuming personalities. Liza had spent many long hours convincing Tyrone not to give up because once he found his perfect vehicle the world would be his oyster.

She called him from her hotel room and got his voice mail.

“If you can type, call me,” she said, giving her hotel number.

- Episode 16 -

Giselle and Jeremiah had lunch in their office. Following Liza's instructions, Giselle had hired the Haniman women to clean the Dibblee place and she had painters ready to go once she consulted a little more with Liza.

"I'm surprised she doesn't want a team of professional interior decorators out here." Jeremiah opened a bottle of Perrier and poured it into two champagne glasses. "To our newest client." He took a sip. "It's a relief to do something besides write wills and work out separation agreements."

"Jerry?"

"Yes my love," he smiled at her and she regretted the thin walls between them and the secretary's office. He'd be a delicious dessert.

"Do you think it would be appropriate to invite her to stay with us?" she asked.

"I don't know. I mean, it'll be weeks before the house is painted and ready to live in."

"No. No. She's not going to be here all the time. She has a number of business trips to make. She'd only be here a few days at a time. It's just that there's something going on between her and the people here...."

"And you want to know what it is." He laughed fondly. "I suppose you imagine the pair of you swapping secrets over a late night glass of wine."

"No. Well, maybe. But, I like her. And you should have seen that episode at the Old Rose Inn. I felt so sorry for her."

"If you're asking my permission...."

"Arrghh. Jerry! I am not asking permission. I'm just asking if you think it's okay to have a client as a houseguest?"

“Sure. We just won’t bill her for our time on after dinner chats.”

The intercom buzzed and Liza picked up its receiver and listened. “Sure. I’ll be right out.”

She opened her drawer and took out a checkbook. “It’s the Haniman woman to pick up her check for the cleaning.”

“Did they do a good job?” Giselle had stopped by the Dibblee place on her way to work and was impressed with the cleaning. The place virtually sparkled.

The intercom buzzed again. “I can’t. Well, I’ve already made out two checks.” Giselle said and cut the connection.

To her husband she said, “It’s Mabel Haniman out there. She wants me to write a check payable to her for all the work, both hers and Betty’s.” She wrote the checks as she talked.

The intercom buzzed again. Jeremiah pressed the speaker and said, “Yes.”

A strange voice, rich with years of smoking and whiskey, spoke, “Look, it’s Mabel Haniman out here. It’s just that my sister-in-law Betty was took bad and there’s no way she can get to a bank.”

“Tell you what, I’ll give you her check and you can have her to sign it over to you and you can take it to the bank for her.”

Mabel sighed deeply. “All right. But most people in this town trust me.”

“I’m sure you’re absolutely trustworthy. It’s just that the checks are already written and it becomes an accounting problem to rewrite them. I’ll be right out.” He shut off the intercom reached for the checks. “Let me meet this paragon of integrity.”

Giselle handed him the checks. “She did have good references.”

“I’m sure she did. But I like to keep this as simple as possible.”

- Episode 17 -

Tyrone answered the phone on the second ring. “William Anderson Smythe’s residence.” His voice was smooth. Today he was doing David Niven, Liza guessed. He’d been with Smythe for nearly a year. Ever since the night he returned her call at the hotel.

On that evening, he had returned her call just after 8 p.m., less than an hour after she had left the message. That night, his voice boomed in her ear when she picked up the phone. He said, by way of greeting, “You know I can type. What’s the gig?”

She explained her plan and put him on hold while she called Smythe on her cellular phone. “I can have someone there whenever you’re ready for them to start,” she told him.

“Well, I have some urgent matters to attend to. Would it be possible for this person to start tonight?”

“It will cost you more to have someone start on such short notice. But yes.” He’ll be there in an hour.

“He?” The writer said, querulously. “He? What makes you think I want a male secretary?”

“You didn’t specify gender. We discussed it and you left it to my discretion. So I simply chose the person with the best office skills who, in this case, happens to be a he.”

“It’s a live-in position.”

“Fine. Although it would have been helpful if you’d had told me this earlier.”

“So what does your young stud think of that?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t mind.”

Smythe harrumphed good-bye and hung up.

Tyrone was delighted at the plan. All he had to do was role play. And since he'd been staying with his sister and her husband and their two children, he was ecstatic that it was a live-in job.

"Just one thing, Liza. Are you sure it's really William Anderson Smythe? Are you sure that I'm not dreaming?"

"No dream. And it may not be as easy as you think. He...."

"There's nothing about him that frightens me, Liza. Absolutely nothing. Oh my God! In an hour. Look, I got to go and get into character."

A week later, Smythe called Liza and got her voice mail. The only message he left was, "To answer your recent question, I was born William Andrew Smith. And your check's in the mail...with a bonus."

Now, in her car, steering her way back to her roots, cellular phone tucked between her shoulder and her ear, she greeted her protege and they discussed her impending visit.

"I should warn you, I've changed my looks," Tyrone said.

She smiled. "I heard. They flashed a photo of you on Entertainment Tonight." Tyrone had been chosen as the co-star in the new Mel Gibson movie. With his hair dyed jet-black and his white skin, he was perfect for the hero of the futuristic Gibson movie.

"Liza. I owe you everything. If you ever need me...."

"Thank you. And who knows? I may call upon you on of these days." She had no intention of ever calling upon him, but who knew what the future would bring.

"Do you want to speak to the boss?"

"If he's around."

He was and they chatted about her upcoming visit and she talked him out of throwing a party while she was there.

“Low profile, Bill. Remember always, I prefer low profile.”

“Oh my dear, so do I. So do I.”

- Episode 18 -

Jim Haniman was worried. He'd never seen Betty like this. Not even when they got the letter from the lawyer saying that Elizabeth was dead. Betty got kind of grim and silent but she was never like this before. He rubbed his nose and pulled on his upper lip, as he tried to think of some way to get Betty to talk to him. Her being grim bothered him because it wasn't the way she should have reacted to news of the death of her only child.

Nor was this. This was not something he'd ever seen discussed on the Sally show. He could hear her in the bedroom, banging things around and cursing. He stood up and started to go toward the hall that led to the bedroom but he stopped in the kitchen. He had seen enough on Sally and Oprah and Jenny Jones to know that sometimes women just needed to be left alone to work out some things. But was this one of those times?

He felt a little sick to his stomach. What if Betty left him? The thought came tumbling into his head out of nowhere and the suddenness of it frightened him. He leaned over the sink, thinking he might actually be sick. A whole story unfolded behind the terrifying thought that Betty might leave him. There was something going on that Betty wasn't telling him. That much was a fact. Any fool could see that. But what was it she wasn't telling him? The answers to that question tumbled into his mind with such ferocity that his head began to ache.

Betty had never told him who Elizabeth's father was. That had happened before he met her and then it was enough that she liked him and that the little girl liked him too. Betty was beautiful then, but starting to look a little worn out from being on her own with a three-year-old. It hurt him to see her with such a hard life ahead of her.

A tear rolled down his cheek and splashed into the spotless sink. He sobbed. The life he'd offered Betty and her child hadn't turned out much better after the first few years when he still had a job. When he asked her to marry him, she explained

that she had never been married to Elizabeth's father and that she never wanted to talk about it beyond that. At one point, he suggested that he adopt Elizabeth as his own and Betty refused. He suspected then and he still suspected

that the reason for that is that adoption proceeding might force her to tell him who Elizabeth's father was.

Now the thoughts that had pained him began with, "What if he's come back? The man young Betty Brown had gone with, had certainly loved, the man who fathered the only child Betty would ever have."

"Cripes, Jim. What are you doing?"

Jim swung around at the sound of his sister's voice. She was grinning at him from the doorway. He recognized it as her nervous grin, the little smile that she hoped would convince people that things would be all right, that the world didn't stink. That he was not losing the only woman he ever loved. Well, it wouldn't work. The world did stink. Betty was losing her mind or she was leaving him or both and there was nothing he could do about it.

Mabel dropped her purse and came toward him quickly, the grin gone. "Jim. Oh, Jim what is it?" He turned to her and like a lost child threw his arms around her and began to cry.

- Episode 19 -

Thomas McAllister added cream to his coffee and stirred it with a small silver spoon. He heard the small noise Amanda made as she restrained herself from commenting on the cream. He took a sip of the coffee. Then a second sip.

“You know what, Amanda? I think this coffee needs more cream. What do you think?” Even as he spoke he knew it was childish of him. There really was no point in tantalizing the girl. After all, she was an innocent. He looked at her, contrite. “I’m sorry, Amanda. I’m not in a good mood and I’m afraid I’m taking it out on you.”

“Oh, Thomas, you’re so tense all the time. That’s why I want you to watch your cholesterol...”

He stood up abruptly. Why did he even try? She might be beautiful, every line of her fine young body showing her breeding. But there was nothing in her head except crap she picked up from afternoon television and commercials. And even then, she only absorbed parts of the message. Only the parts that applied to other people. Thomas drank his coffee, the strong taste of his private blend burning like acid all the way down.

“See what I mean.” Amanda was chattering away behind him.

He turned to her, suddenly disliking her. It wasn’t hate. He’d never loved her enough to have that love turn to hate. She had been his haven, his rescue from an empty world. His attempt at being normal, having a normal life.

They would have had beautiful children. Something tore at his chest and for a terrifying moment, he thought he would break down.

Amanda leapt up and was at his side, her hands on his arm. “What is it? Tom? Are you all right?”

He gave her a half smile and shook his head. "We need to talk," he said and moved to sit down again, but not before he saw a flash of fury on Amanda's smooth face.

She sat down next to him on the love seat but she remained quiet.

"Amanda. Darling Amanda. There is no easy way to do this." He half hoped she'd speak up, say something, draw her own conclusions and make it easy for him. She said nothing.

"I don't think this is going to work out, you and me."

Her face was impassive as she said, "Are you telling me that you no longer love me?"

How was he supposed to answer that, he wondered. The truth is that he had never loved her because he was not capable of love. There was no room for any emotion after all the love he once had turned to pure hate and then just fizzled into nothingness.

"It's not you, Amanda. It's me. I'm not the right person for you...."

"You incredible idiot," she said, her voice still calm. "You can't even be honest with me."

"I'm trying...," he said.

"Well, try harder. Tell me the truth about this -- do you really think I'm so stupid that I don't know this has something to do with that Diamond woman?"

"It doesn't matter, Amanda, what the reasons are. We're over." His voice was sharp. All he wanted to do was get her out of his house. She bored him, suddenly bored him beyond bearing. "Just leave me now. Please."

She turned her head away from him and left without another word. He heard her car start up and by the time it was on the street, he realized that she had said 'the Diamond woman'. That bothered him. It had taken him more than a day to

uncover the name Elizabeth was using in town. And yet Amanda knew it. How had she found out? Perhaps she wasn't as dumb as he thought.

- Episode 20 -

Amanda stormed into her house and went straight to the telephone. She dialed the hotel in Boston where Dan Jordan was staying, at her expense. There was no answer in his room and she left a message with the desk clerk. "Just tell him to call me immediately."

Meanwhile Dan was parked across from a condominium on Beacon

Hill. On television and in the movies it looked so easy. All you had to do was slip a twenty dollar bill to the superintendent of the building and you were in.

No such luck here. To begin with, the superintendent was a hard-nosed woman who looked at him as if he were a child molester and refused to tell him anything.

He wasn't even sure this was where Liza lived. The phone book had a discreet listing for L. Diamond at this address. It wasn't the only L. Diamond listed in the book but it was the only one in a high rent district. So here he sat, watching the front entrance for a tall redhead and trying to think of what his next step should be. It wasn't the kind of

neighbourhood that had friendly little shops, or even unfriendly little shops. So he couldn't drop into the drycleaners pretending to pick up Liza's drycleaning for her. What to do? What to do?

He sat for three hours watching a few people enter and exit the building. He was getting hungry and frustrated. Just before five, he saw a pleasant-looking woman leave the building and walk towards the corner. She looked like she might be a maid to someone from the building. He got out of his rented car, courtesy of Amanda, and followed the woman to the corner. There was a bus stop and she stopped there.

Trying to look as much like a lost soul as he could, Dan went to her and said, "Please. I need your help."

She frowned at him and hugged her purse more closely to her side.

Dan impressed himself by managing to squeeze out a tear. Then he went one better and turned his head away as if he were ashamed of his weakness in crying. The woman turned her back on him.

“It’s my girlfriend. Well. My ex-girlfriend.” He continued to talk even though she was ignoring him. “Liza. I saw you come out of her building and I -- well, perhaps you know her. And the thing is, I think she moved and...,” he hiccuped. It was nerves and frustration and little bit of hunger that made the hiccup happen. But it seemed like he was about to launch into serious heart-broken crying.

The woman swung around and glared at him. “Why don’t you call the real estate office? They know who moves in and who moves out. People in there own their apartments, you know. They have to sell them. It’s not as easy as just moving out.” Then she stepped forward to get in line for the bus which was just arriving.

Dan looked at his watch. It was just five. Any real estate office would be closed by the time he got to a phone. He called to the woman, “What’s the name of the real estate company?”

She looked at him and he knew that he looked pathetic. He could see her mind churning over the possibilities of danger that might lie in answering his question. She stepped onto the bus and called back to him, “Beacon Lights.”

- Episode 21 -

Liza called Giselle from her cellular phone as she drove through the outskirts of Walkersville. She speeded up a little as she passed the turn-off to the Line Road and Betty Brown's trailer. Being on the coast, among friends, had helped her regain a little perspective and she had felt a lot more confident about her decision to move to Walkersville.

Until this moment. The reality of the town was quite different from her fantasies about it. In her fantasies, she returned under a cloak of invisibility. In her fantasies, no one recognized the boyish-looking teenager she had been under her sleek, pampered and well-dressed city woman disguise.

Giselle answered.

"I got your message," Liza told her. Giselle had called the Boston number and invited Liza to stay with her and Jeremiah the next time she was in town.

"So then, you'll stay with us?"

"If you're sure it's not an inconvenience."

"I am positive. Jeremiah is cooking his famous spaghetti sauce tonight. And I was thinking that perhaps we could take a walk over to your new place after dinner and think about what needs to be done to it. If you like."

They chatted a little more about the house and Giselle said, "I got the Haniman women to come in and clean it. They did a great job."

Liza knew that Giselle was going to do this. But she didn't know it would be Mabel and Betty. Of course, why wouldn't it be them? That's the kind of work they did. She said a perfunctory "thank you" to Giselle and tried to pay attention as Giselle explained how to get to her house. It was just after four p.m. and they arranged to meet at Giselle's house in half an hour.

“Don’t leave your office early on account of me,” Liza said.

Giselle laughed, “It’s not like we have a line up of clients waiting to see us.”

Ruth DeWitt was in her living room when she saw the Lexus pass and caught a glimpse of red hair. Well now, well now. She got up and peered through the front window but all she could see was the tail end of the car turning the corner. She lived on Riverside Street, which ran from the entrance at one side of Armstrong Point around the outer edge of the Point along the river to the other side. The DeWitt house was near the entrance closest to the downtown area. The further into the Point you drove, the more expensive the houses were. The

Dibblee place was on Riverside at the deepest part of the Point, the most expensive section.

The Lexus had turned into Gray Street which ran from the east leg of Riverside to the west leg. The Lamonts lived on Gray.

Ruth had her sister’s number dialed before she was even aware of having the phone in her hand. She got Angela’s answering machine.

“Call me, Ange. Guess who’s back in town.” Then she put on

her walking sneakers and took a brisk tour down Riverside and along Gray Street to Walker Street which ran from the tip of the point bisecting the cross streets, then up Walker to Langdon and back over to Riverside. Her heart was racing just a little when she arrived back home. She could hardly wait until Angela called. The Brown girl’s Lexus was parked in front of the lawyers’ house. She wondered if Elizabeth Brown was planning to sue someone. Ruth wouldn’t blame her if she did.

- Episode 22 -

Thomas McAllister was feeling pretty edgy. For one thing, he wanted a woman in his bed right now. It was the normally peaceful late afternoon, the summer scents and sounds brushing past, a languid time of the day. He'd been celibate for months, for the duration of his liaison with Amanda, the perpetual virgin. Well, nearly that long. There had been that trip to Bangor in February when he'd gotten together with an old girlfriend, now married.

Everything had been under control until he saw Elizabeth in the restaurant. He enjoyed the quiet evenings with Amanda when he wasn't too busy with the family business to see her. She wasn't much of a talker and she didn't make his loins ache. What more could he have wanted in a fiancée? Never again would he be a captive of desire. Amanda had been the perfect mate for him, a self-contained unit that did not touch his heart or his passion.

Now, pacing in his living room, his entire body tingling with unspecified desire he fought the awareness that he had been hiding in the emptiness of his relationship with Amanda. Already he was forgetting her smooth young face.

He needed to get drunk as quickly as possible before the memory of seventeen-year-old Elizabeth Brown flooded back into his mind. This had been the pattern of his days lately. Tension, old memories and the bottle of Glenlivet to kill the pain. His hands remembered the lean length of Elizabeth's young body. He recalled how her hair always smelled of apples and the sound of her laughter.

He opened the liquor cabinet and hunted for the Glenlivet. There wasn't enough left to do anything about his pain this evening. He debated taking a run to the liquor store. Then he wondered if he should change his pattern of behavior.

The phone rang and jolted him back to reality. He turned up his answering machine, not willing to talk to anyone but ready in case it was a problem at the office.

“Hey, Tom, are you still alive? How about a game in the morning?” David Webster, his accountant and golf buddy. He let the answering machine keep the message and picked up his car keys. Perhaps he’d go out to see Betty again. As hard as this was on him, it must be hell on her. Her own daughter had let her think she was dead.

That was what puzzled him. Elizabeth had never been cruel, not deliberately, especially not to her mother. And she had always been courageous. What would possess her to let her mother think she had died in a car accident on the way to Boston ten years ago? It was one thing to let him think she was dead. But she had always loved her mother.

Amanda sat in her car parked at the end of the street and watched as Thomas pulled away from his house. She thought about following him but opted for a quick search of his house. If he came back before she was through, she’d just tell him she’d dropped by to return his house key. She practiced looking sad and abandoned. She’d left off her makeup so she looked a little pale anyway. When he turned on to Riverside Drive, she pulled up in front of his house.

- Episode 23 -

“Make yourself comfortable, Liza.” Giselle showed Liza the spare room, which was decorated in New England Victoriana which was purer than the real New England Victoriana had ever been. Rose-covered wall paper, dark rose ceiling, four-poster maple bed with large fluffy pillows and a wedding ring quilt. The dresser and chest of drawers and night tables were mismatched but cohesive antique.

The effect was pretty if somewhat overwhelming to Liza who liked things spare and simple. Giselle grinned, “Don’t worry. We stopped at this room. It’s our one indulgence in capturing time past.”

“It’s lovely,” Liza said. She sat on the edge of the bed, relieved to find that the mattress was current, not some hard horsehair monstrosity or feathered thing that threatened to smother the sleeper.

Giselle opened the heavy drapes and let the evening sunlight in. “There’s a den across the hall if you want to use the phone.”

“I really appreciate this, Giselle.”

“It’s our pleasure. And Jeremiah is delighted to have someone else to cook for. Speaking of which, I’d better check on him before he gets too carried away.”

“I’m going to make a couple of calls,” Liza said, digging her wallet from her purse and finding her calling card.

Giselle went downstairs and Liza found the phone in the den across the hall. She called her answering service in Boston and made a list of the calls she had to return. One of them caused her some puzzlement. Please call Delores. And there were two phone numbers. The only Delores she knew was the woman who cleaned her condominium once a week. Delores also cleaned for other people in the building. But why would she be calling Liza?

She called the number and a child answered. She asked for Delores and the child dropped the phone down hard on the desk or table or whatever counter it was resting on and called, "Mommy, it's for you."

When the woman answered, Liza recognized her voice. It was the cleaning woman. After a little chit chat about the move and the weather, Delores said, "It was kind of spur of the moment that I called you. I was cleaning for her downstairs from your old place and told her about that guy saying he was your ex-boyfriend and I told him to contact Beacon Lights for information and we got to talking about it, her downstairs I mean, not him and I, and she suggested I call you. I still had your answering service number in my book so I thought why not. I mean, he didn't look like your type."

Liza smiled at that. Not her type. No horns? No forked tail? Men!

"What did he look like?" she asked and Delores described him.

- Episode 24 -

Dan Jordan left the Beacon Lights office no further ahead than before he went in to inquire about condominiums for sale, in particular Liza Diamond's. It was a futile effort not to mention an embarrassing effort.

"We have several condominiums for sale in that area," the snippy agent had told him. "However, before we show them to anyone, we need an indication of serious intent."

"In other words, show you the money," he snapped. It would take more than the suit of clothes that Amanda paid for to make him look like an up and comer. He knew that but it still hurt him that he had loser so clearly stamped on his face.

The agent smiled coldly and said, "Yes. That pretty well sums it up."

Although he knew he could probably get Amanda to provide whatever was needed in this area, he was tired of the whole spy game. For one thing, he was so bad at it. Even worse at it than he was at investigative reporting.

His mood had been foul since he received Amanda's message last night to call immediately. When he called, he got the Walker answering machine. He didn't leave a message. As slow as he was at catching on to things, he was quite sure that Amanda wouldn't want her father to know that she had any dealings with the likes of Dan.

Donald Walker had been part of the conspiracy to have Dan fired from the Sentinel. Resentment and anger washed over Dan as he walked back out onto Commonwealth Avenue. He walked along the street until he found a corner bar that was open for business. "Scotch. Double. No ice," he said as he adjusted himself on a bar stool.

Three doubles later, he had a solution to his immediate problem. "Hey, buddy," he called to the bartender. "Can I use your phone?"

“Local calls only,” the bartender said as he slid the telephone toward Dan.

“I’m putting it on my card,” Dan said, waving the calling card Amanda gave him at the bartender. Think what you like about the dumb bitch, she’s thorough. The thought clutched at his gut as he punched in the numbers. It was just past ten a.m. He’d leave a message. Donald would be out and even if Amanda were still in bed, she’d get the message before her father heard it. When the answering machine clicked on, Dan said, “Amanda, it’s me. I’m coming home to follow up the lead I got here. I’ll call you when I get back. Don’t call me. I think my line is tapped.”

It was a temporary measure, buying him about forty-eight hours of peace. Meanwhile, all he had to do was clear his head.

“Another double, please,” he said as he pushed the phone back to the bartender.

- Episode 25 -

Thomas did not interrupt her examination of his house. Amanda went through every drawer in his desk and found nothing but boring reports on the construction industry. There was nothing in his card file that surprised her.

In his bedroom, she searched the closet and found only what she could have expected to find. She looked through his dresser drawers and other than a package of condoms, found nothing disturbing. She counted the condoms left in the pack. It was a twelve-pack box and there were nine left. Her heart pounded a little faster as she wondered who had participated in the use of the three that were missing. She threw the box across the floor in fury and then retrieved it and replaced it among his shorts and socks. It may be an old package, she consoled herself.

There was nothing in the house that she could use against him. Nothing at all. And that infuriated her. Dan was useless. She'd gotten his message that morning and he sounded drunk. She should have known better than to hire an idiot.

It wasn't until she left his house, his key still in her purse, that her mind really began to work on the problem. Her mother's youngest sister was just a couple of years older than Thomas. Maybe Aunt Lily knew something about his past. Something about this Diamond creature.

When Amanda returned home, she was in the foulest possible mood. She stopped in the kitchen, her mind sifting through the list of things she could eat. Food as solace.

"Oh Lord in heaven," she said to herself in the bright kitchen and it was not a prayer. "Is this what you've come to? Looking for comfort food. Why not just move into one of those dinky little houses and watch daytime television in your housecoat which chomping on a king sized bag of chips?"

"Amanda?" Her mother's querulous voice startled her. She shot a look at the older woman standing in the doorway, her hair

perfectly coifed, her extremely slim figure in a comfortably stylish linen pantsuit.

“Mom, you scared me. I thought you were in your room.”

“I am allowed out, you know,” Andrea Walker said, her voice cold. “I just had my hair done.” She moved toward her daughter. “Do you often talk to yourself?”

“Sometimes when the house is deadly quiet I do.”

“It’s not normal,” Andrea said as she opened the fridge and took out a large bottle of water. She poured herself a tall glass of the sparkling liquid. She didn’t drink from it yet. “You should see a doctor.” She looked at the glass of water and Amanda knew that it must be time for the next pill. This conversation wouldn’t last long. Mummy would have to run back to her room and unlock her not-so-secret stash of uppers and downers.

“I’m fine.”

“Did Jessie leave anything for dinner?”

Amanda opened the fridge door that her mother had just closed and looked for the dinner preparations that the daily woman always left if Dad was going to be home for dinner. There was a lobster casserole with heating instruction taped to its plastic wrapper.

“Yes.”

“I can’t eat with you two tonight. Can you make dinner for yourself and your father.” Without waiting for a reply, Andrea drifted back to her room.

- Episode 26 -

Angela's hand shook as she poured herself another cup of coffee. "I don't believe it, Ruth. I just don't."

"I got it straight from the horse's mouth."

"Horse's ass is more like it."

"No. It wasn't Paul this time." Ruth reached for another slice of banana bread.

"Oh Ruth, I can't stand it. Nothing good will come of this."

"What are you so upset over?"

"It's my nerves in general. And this kind of nonsense bothers me. Ever since Liza Diamond showed up, there's been nothing but chaos around us."

"You've always been too hysterical. Ever since you were a kid, you always made mountains out of mole hills. That whole schmozzle had nothing to do with us."

"It's just a feeling I have." Angela looked at the banana bread, "No. Don't let me have another slice."

"Well, don't you want to hear what I heard...."

"From the horse's mouth?"

Ruth nodded. "It was amazing. I was down at the drug store and who came in but Nellie, you know, who does for the Donald Walkers in the morning."

Angela cut herself a thin slice of the bread. Before Ruth could say anything, she said, "I'm all quivery. It'll settle my blood sugar."

Ruth rolled her eyes, "Listen to me. Nellie said that Dan Jordan called Amanda this morning and left a message. Apparently he's doing some undercover work for Amanda on this Diamond

woman. You know after that scene in the Old Rose Inn, Thomas just dropped Amanda like a hot potato.”

“And he just left a message on Donald Walker’s answering machine for anyone to hear.”

“Well, he didn’t leave his name but Nellie said she played the message over three or four times to make sure it was his voice. She knows his mother really well and she is positive it was his voice. He said for Amanda not to do anything but he was hot on the trail. Things were getting stirred up because he was getting closer to finding out the truth and he might be in danger, his phone was already tapped. So Amanda shouldn’t contact him.”

Down at the Hitching Post, Grayson DeWitt sipped his beer and sighed. “Paul, old buddy, I have to admit you and Ruth may be right after all.”

“See. I told you.” Paul grinned into his beer. “What were we right about now?”

“The Brown girl. Apparently Donald’s girl hired that reporter fellow to check up on her in Boston and she’s been up to no good at all. Seems likely she just faked her death so as not to humiliate her family any more than she already had.”

“Must be bad.”

“Must be bad indeed if she was worried about humiliating old Betty who was never any better than she should have been to begin with.”

“Speaking of Betty, I hear she’s had a complete nervous breakdown.”

The bartender poured another couple of beer for the men as they hunkered down to relive old memories.

- Episode 27 -

Dan picked up his mail. A bunch of bills and a rejection letter from the National Enquirer. He still had some of the advance money from Amanda. That would take the worst of the bill collectors off his case.

His answering machine light was flashing. He picked up the receiver, checking to see if his phone still worked. It did.

There were the usual messages. Credit card nags reminding him that he promised to pay and he hadn't. His mother. And then, a voice from the past.

"Dan. When you get this message call this number immediately."

He played it over several times. Definitely Elizabeth Brown. He called the number with trembling fingers and when he heard her voice, he could barely speak.

"Hello," she repeated.

"This is Dan Jordan returning your call."

"Dan." She said his name softly and the whole awfulness of his life washed over him. He looked around his single room, dust bunnies everywhere, dirty dishes still stacked in the sink from before his visit to Boston and he knew if he spoke, his voice would break.

There was a silence on the phone and then she said, "Dan. Can you meet me out at the cemetery?"

"Yes," he managed to say.

"I'm going out there now," she said. "I'll be near the trees."

"Give me fifteen minutes and I'll be there," he said and she cut the connection.

There is a birch grove in the center of Walkersville Protestant Cemetery. The trees are old and thick and the grave stones that surround them are the earliest ones in the cemetery. Dead Walkers from two centuries ago. Dan got there first and he was seated on the cool grass under the birches when her car pulled up.

He sat there, transfixed, as she walked towards him. She was more beautiful than ever, her hair vibrantly red. It pierced him like a knife, the sight of her, the memory of their childhood. Her defection to the other side of the tracks, the rich side, when they were in high school. He wanted to die before she reached him, so that his last sight on earth would be the absolute perfection of Elizabeth Brown walking toward him with the sun at her back. His heart hurt so much, he thought perhaps he would die.

He didn't. She walked up to where he was sitting and he stood up. They stared at each other.

"I thought you were dead," he said, immediately regretting the words. If there was a way he could ruin the most perfect moments of life, he would find it.

"Clearly, I am not. However, Elizabeth Brown is. That girl no longer exists. Can you understand that?" She was brisk, businesslike, cold.

He nodded. He could see that the firebrand hothead Elizabeth Brown was indeed dead, replaced by this cool cucumber.

She stepped closer to him and they stood, locked, eye to eye. "I hear you were in Boston, looking for Liza Diamond. Well, here I am. What was it that you wanted?" She did not blink, "And remember, I can tell when you're lying."

He had a sudden flash of an old memory. They were kids and she leapt on him, pushing him to the ground, screaming, "Liar. Liar." But he hadn't been lying to her then. And that was the tragedy.

- Episode 28 -

“Amanda, darling, what a nice surprise.” Lily Campbell looked up from her desk as her niece knocked on the open door to her office in the State University English department. She rose from her chair and embraced Amanda. “How long are you planning to be in the big city?”

“Just overnight. There were a few things I needed to buy that I can’t find in Walkersville.” Amanda smiled at her aunt. Fashion was not a big deal to Lily. Today she was wearing neatly pressed jeans and an intricately patterned overblouse that was predominantly bright blue and pink “I’m surprised to find you here. I thought university teachers had the summer off.”

“We do. I just came in to work on a new course I’m giving in the fall.”

“Can you take a break for lunch?”

“I would be delighted to get out of the office.” Lily began tidying her desk. “Is it too early?” She grinned. “Not that I’m not eager to slave away here at my desk on a beautiful summer day.” She shut off her computer.

“I should have called first but it was a whim. I mean, I got up this morning and couldn’t find a thing to wear that wasn’t just too old or too boring and thought that it was time for a shopping trip. So here I am.” She twirled as if she were on display.

Lily nodded, taking in the impeccable outfit her niece was wearing. It was a three hour drive from Walkersville which meant that Amanda would have had to leave at eight thirty. “Did you stop by the house first?”

“Yes. And when you weren’t there, I knew you’d be here.”

They moved into the corridor and Lily shut the door. That added another half hour to the trip. So Amanda left by eight a.m. More and more interesting. Lily wondered what the girl was really up to. There were very few things she could think of

that would entice Amanda Walker to get up before eight. She draped an arm over Amanda's shoulders and asked, "How's your mother?"

Meanwhile, Dan Jordan was fighting his own demons. Seeing Elizabeth again had opened a whole floodgate of memories and pain. He sat in his room and reviewed their meeting in the cemetery for the hundredth time.

After he'd admitted that he had been investigating Liza in Boston and that he'd been hired by Amanda to do so, Liza and he sat side by side under a thick old birch tree and he poured out his tale of woe.

"So after the elite clique put me on their shit list, that was the end of my career in this town," he ended his story.

"You always were a whiner, Dan. Listen to yourself, telling me of all people, how the Walker-McAllister-Campbell clan can destroy your life just because you're not one of them."

"Or even if you are one of them," he said, knowing he was risking the same fate he suffered at Elizabeth's hands when they were fourteen and he told her who her father was. This time however, she did not leap on him and pound his head into the ground. She merely bent her head and buried her face in her hands.

- Episode 29 -

Liza drove over to her new house. Jeremiah told her he had arranged for a local building company to send over a crew. When she drove up to her new house, she saw a motley assortment of trucks parked along the street. A stocky middle-aged man came out of the house to meet her.

“Walter Duguid,” he said and extended his hand. “Mr. Lamont gave us the key so I got the boys in there now looking her over. One thing I can tell you, it’s going to need a full job of interior painting and I’d say that the carpet in the living room area is covering a lovely old hardwood floor.” As they walked into the house, he continued to tell her in detail about how his men were checking the wiring, the plumbing, the walls and the basement. “I think the roof is all right. We did that a couple of years ago. And the exterior paint.”

“Have you been in business long?”

“Myself? Since I was a boy.”

“I meant your company.”

He shook his head, “Not my company. I mean, I get to hire my own guys and pick my own subcontractors. But you’re dealing with WM.”

Liza’s face remained calm. “WM.”

“Walker and McAllister Construction and well, there really isn’t anyone else in town is there?”

“Are they good? Being the only game in town doesn’t make you good.”

“Well, Mrs. Diamond, they got to be the only game in town by being good. But you’d know that.” They were in the living room, a lovely well-lighted room. The wallpaper and matching long shag deep Wedgewood green carpet did nothing to enhance its natural attractiveness. Liza was trying to visualize the room the way she wanted it to be and digesting the truth of what the

man was telling her. WM was the only game in town. What had she expected? She nearly missed his last remark. Suddenly she swung around to look at him, trying to let herself appear calm.

“Why would I know that?”

“No offense meant, Mrs. Diamond, but I thought you was a local person.”

“No. I’m from Boston.”

“I meant, before that.” He frowned at her, “It’s not an insult. We here in Walkersville think it’s a fine thing to be from here.”

“Do I have an accent?”

“No. It’s not that you look or sound like you’re a local. Just someone said you was. Matter of fact, since I met you out front there, I been trying to place what your maiden name might have been.”

At that moment, Liza’s cellular phone rang and she flinched. With her best smile at Walter, she said, “Oops. I forget I had it in my purse.” She dug out the phone and as she answered it, wondering who would be calling her, she walked towards the dining room pretending to look at the windows there. Very few people had this number.

She said a noncommittal “Hello.”

“Liza, darling, the great man wants to talk to you.”

“Tyrone! What are you two doing up at this hour. It has to be before dawn where you are.” Her answering service had a list of people whose calls could be forwarded on to her. William Anderson Smythe, the great man, was on that list.

“It’s just after six a.m. And we’ve got a surprise for you.”

Then William’s voice was on the line. “I’m doing a little story on a writer who lives up that way and we thought we’d stop by and visit.”

“When?” She asked weakly.

“Today. We’re on our way to the airport now.”

On the other line, Tyrone spoke, “We’ve made arrangements at the Holiday Inn. Don’t worry. We’re not going to land on your doorstep on such short notice.”

- Episode 30 -

“Thank you for a lovely dinner. I don’t often go out and when I do, it’s usually to the Greek restaurant around the corner.” Lily flicked on the halogen lamp in her living room. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“I really shouldn’t.” Amanda arranged herself on the wicker loveseat and looked around the room. It was cozy but quite basic. All the furniture seemed to be variations on the wicker theme. She watched as Lily took a bottle of Chardonnay from the wine rack in the darkest corner of the room and turned on the CD player, letting the crooning voice of Leonard Cohen filter into the room. Lily was an attractive woman but she did absolutely nothing to enhance her looks. Her hair was a mousy brown and tied back in some sort of casual knot at the base of her neck.

“I wish you’d have one with me. I’ll feel uncomfortable drinking it alone.” Lily said as she bent over the bottle, working at the cork with a corkscrew. She wanted to conceal her face from her niece. Really it was too easy to manipulate her. All one had to do was play on Amanda’s sense of what she deemed proper behavior and the girl was completely pliable.

“Very well. But just one small glass.”

Lily poured and set the bottle down on the coffee table between them. “So Amanda. Has that handsome lad proposed yet?” It was obvious during their afternoon of shopping and through lunch and dinner that there was something seriously bothering the girl. Since her life was free from career and financial concerns, the only thing left was personal, which would translate directly into some sort of man-woman thing.

Amanda took a long second sip of her wine and dropped her eyes. “It’s over, Auntie.”

“Oh dear, I am sorry to hear that.” Lily paused for two beats and then added, “What happened?”

Lily had her own reason for being interested in the gossip of Walkersville. She needed to be reminded why she lived in Augusta, which, while a lovely city, was not home with the pretty river running through it and the familiar main street and all the best physical attributes of the perfect cozy little town.

She heard the long breath Amanda took and she waited quietly. She smiled affectionately. The fact that Amanda's thought processes were so visible on her face, and obviously a difficult experience for the girl in no way diminished the love she felt for her niece. The silence continued and then Amanda said, "It's got something to do with Liza Diamond."

"Who's Liza Diamond?"

"Oh, Aunt Lily. That's really why I'm here. I was hoping you'd know. I hired this guy to go to Boston to check on her and he brought back information that wasn't very helpful. I mean I know a little about what she did in Boston but I don't know anything about her. Who is she? How does Thomas know her?"

"Tell me about her," Lily said as she added a little more wine to Amanda's glass.

"She dresses beautifully and seems to have money. It doesn't look like new money either." Amanda looked around her at her aunt's modest surroundings but she knew that this was not a reflection of Lily's true financial worth. "You know how some people just know how to live with money and some don't."

"Yes, oddly enough, I do."

"Well, she seems comfortable with it. But then I haven't seen a great deal of her."

"What does she look like?" Lily finally asked.

"Tall. Slender. And she has this great red hair. I think it's real. It seems to suit her skin, you know how it is, not everyone can do red hair so that it looks right."

"And Thomas is having an affair with her?"

“That’s what I don’t know. They had this scene in the restaurant and he’s been odd ever since.”

“Except for the money aspect, it sounds like Elizabeth Brown.”

“Who’s Elizabeth Brown?”

“Let me tell you about Thomas McAllister and Elizabeth Brown.”

- Episode 31 -

Liza's day was one of the worst she'd had. She left the assorted contractors doing what they had to do. When she woke that morning, her biggest task was choosing the right color of paint for each of the rooms. She was working on that task in the Lamonts' kitchen but she was barely able to concentrate on the paint chips spread out around her.

She was half mad with worry about Tyrone and William coming to Walkersville. She kept consoling herself by saying that they would certainly distract the locals from paying attention to her. Her cellular phone rang and she picked it up, wondering if the devil in Boston really had been that bad after all. Would there be no peace at all for her, ever?

It was Dan on the phone. "Well, Dan, how did it go?"

"Not so hot. Amanda's out of town apparently. But not for long. I just wanted to call and let you know I'm working on the project." His fear of being scolded was palpable in his voice.

Remembering the curly-haired little boy she used to wander the riverbank with gave Liza such a pang, she nearly sobbed out loud. Poor Dan, he didn't stand a chance in this village. She couldn't speak.

"Liza." His voice was worried.

"I'm here. It's okay, Dan. I didn't mean it had to be done the second I got out of your sight. Whenever you find her is okay. And meanwhile, I'm working on the other project."

"I...well, thank you isn't enough..."

"Wait until it works out and then see if you want to thank me," Liza teased. Or tried to, making her voice lighter.

"Eliza..." he began but she cut him off.. "Please, Dan. Let's just start from now."

After she hung up from talking to Dan, Liza decided the best thing to do would be to check into the Holiday Inn herself. It would be the easiest way to control William. She called Giselle at the office and explained her situation.

“Liza, we’d love to have them stay with us,” Giselle said, and Liza knew the offer was genuine.

“I appreciate that but I couldn’t do that. It’s bad enough that I’m here.”

“At least invite them to have dinner with us tonight.”

“You know, Liza, that would work. It’s just thinking about the scene that William will no doubt make that worries me.” She felt immense relief at being able to talk to someone about her situation, someone who didn’t ask a lot of questions of her.

Giselle shook her head in amazement. It was like royalty coming to visit. She buzzed Jeremiah in his office and said, “Guess who’s coming to dinner.”

- Episode 32 -

Paul Walker saw them first. “Well, now, look what the cat dragged in,” he said. “A pair of pretty boys.”

Grayson was about to criticize his old buddy for being homophobic, not because he really cared, but because he was bored and wanted to have an argument. It was just about time to go home for supper and Grayson preferred to get his arguing done before supper with Ruth. Instead he froze with his mouth half open as he saw the alleged “pretty boys”.

He and Paul were in the Hitching Post, the bar at the Holiday Inn. The tallest and palest young man they’d ever seen was at the counter. He was wearing jeans and a buttoned-down shirt with a pale blue stripe against a white background. Just off to the side was an older man, leaning on a cane. His yellowing hair was thick and brushed straight back from his high forehead. His suit was black. So was his shirt, tie and the floor length cape he wore over it all.

“See,” Paul said, “You didn’t believe me, did you?”

Grayson shut his mouth and turned back to look at Paul, “Those aren’t pretty boys, you idiot. Don’t you ever watch television? That’s William Anderson Smythe. He was on Entertainment Tonight last week.” Grayson looked back at the two men as they waited for the elevator. The younger man had stacked their luggage on a trolley. “He’s supposed to be going up to Maine to write a book about that horror writer fellow.”

“What’s he doing here? This isn’t a stop over on the way to Bangor.”

“I got to tell Ruth,” Grayson was out of his seat and on his way to the bar before Paul could swallow another mouthful of beer. Grayson grabbed the phone at the end of the bar and called his wife. When he told her who he’d seen, she said, “Why don’t I go and have dinner there with you.” This pleased Grayson.

Ruth hung up and called her sister Angela, who called her best friend, next to Ruth, and so it went. Within forty-five minutes

the Holiday Inn restaurant was packed with people who suddenly decided to have dinner out.

Upstairs, in William's room which was linked by a door to Tyrone's room, Tyrone was trying to convince William that the cape was not appropriate. "For one thing, it's too damned hot. It's bad enough that you're wearing black."

"It's my disguise, I tell you. I am here inognito. Yellow being my trademarked color, people never expect me to wear any other color. And certainly they'd never expect to see me in black."

"I hate to tell you this, William, but you've already been spotted."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"There were people in the bar positively gawking at you."

"They were not," William said but his eyes twinkled and Tyrone recognized the old man's pleasure in being spotted, even through his "disguise".

"Wear whatever you like. Liza will be here any minute to pick us up and I promised her we'd be out front to meet her."

"All right. I will leave the cape behind." William undid the clasp at his throat and tossed the offending cape to the bed. He ran his hands through his mane and tossed his head.

"You look fabulous," Tyrone assured him as he opened the door.

Liza parked in the pick up zone right in front of the hotel and waited in her car. The parking lot was crowded and she could see people lined up at the entrance to the restaurant. She sighed. It was obviously too late for a discreet visit from her old friend. In her rearview mirror she saw a television van arriving.

At the same time, Tyrone was ushering William past the people in the lobby. She reached over and opened the passenger door. "Hurry," she called just as the television van pulled up beside

her. Tyrone practically shoved William into the front seat and just as quickly got himself into the backseat. The doors were barely closed when Liza pulled out past the van.

“I’m surprised, William, but your disguise didn’t work.” Liza saw the van move to follow her.

William sighed and removed his sequin-trimmed cat’s eye sunglasses. “It’s a curse,” he said.

- Episode 33 -

“Get up, you sniveling bastard,” David Webster said as he yanked the bedcovers off Thomas McAllister.

Thomas grabbed at the covers and tugged them back around his naked body.

“My God, man, look at yourself.” David pulled the covers completely off the bed and threw them across the room. “You’ll end up down at the Hitching Post with the rest of the mighty fallen if you don’t get your act together.”

If insults didn’t work, David wasn’t sure what would.

He sat down in the wingback chair and watched as Thomas struggled to his feet. David watched him as he stretched and arched his back, the powerful muscles rippling and he was grateful that Thomas was a relatively gentle man because he could inflict a lot of damage if he ever became violent.

“You’re a miserable prick, Dave. Have I mentioned that?” Thomas disappeared into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

“I’ll put on the coffee,” David called.

When Thomas came downstairs, he looked a little sharper but his eyes were still red-rimmed and his hand shook as he took the mug of coffee David offered him.

Thomas drank the coffee hot and black and glared at David. “Just don’t give me one of your damned lectures. This isn’t a lifestyle change I’ve made. Just a temporary remedy.”

“Recovering from Amanda, eh?” David hid his face behind the morning paper. Then he saw the front page, above the fold, photo. Liza Diamond and William Anderson Smythe getting out of a car on one of Armstrong Point’s tree-lined streets. She was a good looking woman, that was for sure. Smythe was posing for the camera, pretending to scowl. In the background there

was a very tall young man. He didn't hear Thomas' epithet about Amanda.

"What the hell are you looking at?" Thomas asked him.

"Nothing."

"Must be a damned interesting nothing. You didn't hear me speak," Thomas grabbed the paper from David and cursed when he saw the photo. "What is that old queen doing here?"

"Maybe he's in town to do a biography of the McAllisters," David joked. Everyone knew that Smythe only wrote about the superfamous, not merely the locally famous. Or infamous.

"Don't even think it," Thomas read the caption. There was no accompanying story. He wasn't surprised that the photo was not credited to Dan Jordan. Dan always had a soft spot for Elizabeth and there was no way he'd chase her down and photograph her like that, looking like a deer caught in the headlights. All the cutline said was that William Anderson Smythe was in town visiting friends. It identified Liza Diamond and the man in the background as Tyrone Kelly, who would be appearing in the next Schwarzenegger movie.

Thomas' gut clenched with an emotion he hadn't felt in a decade. Jealousy. Pure vicious jealousy.

- Episode 34 -

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive back to Walkersville,” Lily asked her niece. The girl looked like she hadn’t slept a wink all night.

“I’ll be fine. A cup of tea will help.”

“I’m sorry...,” Lily began to say but Amanda interrupted her.

“Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t your fault.” Color flared in her cheeks as she clenched her jaw. She had felt fury before but never anything like this. It wasn’t just Thomas. Actually it was Thomas least of all. He couldn’t have been expected to tell her about the women in his past. It would have been in bad taste. But what about her family? Her friends? Her face flamed anew at the thought of all those people in the restaurant, laughing behind her back as Thomas went racing after that red-headed slut while she just sat there looking like a dunce.

Lily raised an imploring hand, reaching out to comfort her. “I’m all right, Aunt Lily. Really I am. I’m just having a hard time...,” her voice broke and she took a deep breath. “I loved him.”

And she had. She felt dizzy with pent up desire now. She certainly hadn’t thought he’d been a virgin but somehow she assumed that his sexual conquests had been limited to the girls he’d bedded when he was away at university. Girls who meant nothing to him.

Her hands tingled as she remembered the hard muscles of his arms and the breadth of his powerful shoulders. What she had once viewed as his loving respect for her, his caring enough for her to wait until they were married, she now saw as his lack of desire for her and the thought of him in passionate embrace with that creature, that slut, made her heart race.

“Mandy.”

“I’m going to be okay. Please!” Amanda’s voice was harsh.

There was a sound at the front door and Lily, more to break the tension, went to get the paper that had just been delivered, late as usual.

When Lily returned to the kitchen with the paper in hand, Amanda was drinking a glass of water.

“You can stay longer if you want, you know.”

“Thank you. But I think I’d better get on with getting my life back in order.” She knew that the Valium she’d taken would cut the sharpness of her pain. She forced a smile at her aunt. “I’m sorry you had to see me this way.”

Lily tossed the paper down on the table and hugged her niece. “Darling girl. Emotions are fine things to have. It’s all right to let yourself be human.”

Amanda hugged her aunt in return. Then, pulling away, she said, “Shall I make the tea?”

“Please. I’m going to grab a quick shower.”

Lily let the water pour over her, washing away her discomfiture at telling

Amanda about Thomas and Elizabeth and the scandal they created. It was the right thing to do. She didn’t hear the crash in the kitchen or the sound of Amanda’s car tearing out of the yard. She didn’t know that her niece was gone until she went back downstairs and found the teapot in pieces on the floor and the newspaper shredded.

She laid the larger pieces of the paper together on the table. She found a piece with Elizabeth Brown’s face and she hunted for the other pieces that went with it. There was another and another. The pieces were torn and bits were missing but there was enough for her to see Elizabeth and the notorious William Anderson Smythe getting out of a car. Whoever Elizabeth had become, she was traveling in fast company now.

And Amanda was gone. In a rage. Lily felt an old guilt creep over her. There would be hell to pay for this.

- Episode 35 -

“I am sorry about this,” Liza said as Giselle poured her coffee. They’d been late getting to bed and given the growing crowd at the Holiday Inn, Jeremiah had to arrange to deliver Tyrone and William back to the hotel through the back entrance.

“They could have stayed here,” Giselle was saying as Jeremiah entered the kitchen.

He chuckled, “They could have but I think it would have broken William’s heart not to be able to hide in the back seat.”

Liza raised an eyebrow. “Was that necessary?”

“Not at all. I got the night security guy to meet us at the back door of the restaurant and let them go up the back stairs.”

“You weren’t followed?”

“Sure. But the security guard stopped them by the garbage dumpster while William slunk out of the back seat and tiptoed into the restaurant with Tyrone right behind him. Mind you, they’ll have a hard time getting out of there today.”

Jeremiah topped up the women’s coffee and joined them at the table with his. “You have some interesting friends. Liza.”

The phone rang and Liza splashed a little coffee on her hand. “I’m too jittery this morning. I guess it’s the strain of having my two worlds collide.”

“It’s for you,” Jeremiah said to Liza, setting the phone down on the counter.

“Me?” Liza took her coffee cup with her.

“Uh huh,” Jeremiah nodded. “You.” To his wife, he shrugged in an “I haven’t a clue” motion.

Liza picked up the phone with a little trepidation. She had not given out the number to anyone.

The voice at the other end of the phone surprised her and she felt her mouth go dry and her palms begin to perspire. "Liza?"

"Yes." She tried to sound cool and disinterested.

"I know it's early to call but I need to talk to you."

She said nothing,

"Can we meet somewhere?"

"I suppose so." The words were wooden. She wanted to hang up, to say no, to run and hide.

"You name the place."

"Is anyone living at the old Walker place now?"

"My aunt and uncle use it for a summer place but it's empty right now."

"Can we meet there?"

He hesitated. "Why there?"

"Why not there?"

"When?"

"In half an hour." It was a statement, not a question. She hung up.

She made her excuses to the Lamonts and went to dress for her appointment.

"Who was that?" Giselle asked her husband.

"I'm not sure but I believe it was Thomas McAllister."

- Episode 36 -

Lily Campbell didn't know what to do. There was no point calling her sister, Amanda's mother, to talk about what she had told the girl. Andrea Walker had never been good at getting to the point, at at getting the point, either. Besides, Lily was a little concerned about dragging up that old gossip again for that's what it was. Gossip. No one knew for sure what had happened that June. Well, those who did know for sure weren't talking. She should never have told Amanda any of it.

Perhaps she should talk to Donald, her brother-in-law.

She fretted all morning, terrified that she was going to hear that Amanda had driven herself into an accident on the interstate. Or that Amanda would go straight to Thomas and confront him with what Lily had told her. Or that she would find Liza Diamond and confront her. She'd felt a vague unease at indulging in gossip with her niece and now that she realized how unstable the girl was, it was even more worrisome.

She had to talk to someone. But who?

Dan Jordan was beside himself. Ever since his talk with Elizabeth...he stopped himself, he had to think of her as Liza. Ever since his talk with Liza, he'd been alternately on cloud nine and in the dumps. Just because she looked like a million bucks, and probably had a million bucks, didn't mean she had any power. If he'd learned nothing else from living in this tank town, he'd learned that.

Now he saw her photo in the paper, getting out of the car with none other than William Anderson Smythe, and he knew that she was able to do what she said she could do. Get him out of this trap, away from this town, into the big time. If you hung around with the likes of Smythe, you had contacts, all right.

But first, he had to get through to Amanda and return her money. Thanks to Liza's advance, he was able to take care of most of his more pressing needs. The teller at the bank had curled her lip at the check but she had no choice. It was one of the Lamont law firms checks, drawn on the same branch as

Dan used. They couldn't put their damned week-long hold on it and make him beg for a few bucks from his puny account. They had to tap a few keys and transfer ten thousand dollars straight into his account.

He'd gotten got a bank draft made out to Amanda and took another thousand which he gave to his mother.

Now all he had to do was get this bank draft to Amanda. He wanted to do it face to face but she was no where to be found.

Life was good, now that he didn't have to start every day with agonizing worry about where his next meal was coming from. He turned on his 286 computer and opened his word processor. While he was waiting for Liza to get back to him about his next step, he had to do something. What better time was there to start writing the book he had always wanted to write?

- Episode 37 -

Liza drove slowly but had to fight the urge to step on the gas. It was an old captivity, this feeling she had on her way to the Walker mansion. Part excitement, part fear. She wished she had the courage to drive on by.

As she turned up the lane to the big old house, she didn't see Thomas' car. Something nasty clutched at her throat. There was no reason to think that he genuinely wanted to see her. There was no reason to think that this wasn't a trap. Why did the sound of his voice on the phone whip her back to the good old times? Back before Thomas McAllister would gladly have seen her consigned to hell.

By the time she parked the car, leaving the engine running, she realized that she was not thinking straight. It was crazy, sitting here in front of the house that had overshadowed her youth, waiting for the man who had destroyed it.

She swung her car around and began a hasty retreat. She was back at the end of the lane when she saw another vehicle approach. A Land Rover. She had a momentary vision of herself racing down the road with the Land Rover in full pursuit. The big blue vehicle stopped next to her but she couldn't bear to look at the driver, not yet, not like this. Captured in flight. She jerked the car into reverse and backed up the lane.

Try to remember, she whispered to herself, try to remember the good times. Don't let him see you as a frightened rabbit.

She got out of the car and brushed imaginary lint from her jeans. Then she leaned defensively against her car, arms folded, mouth a straight, probably grim, line. "Think of him as a difficult client," she told herself.

He was out of the Land Rover and striding towards her and she had to blink. With the sun behind him silhouetting his familiar stride, the length and breadth of him, it was like they were eighteen again. She wasn't sure she could speak. "Remember,

silence is a wonderful negotiating tool,” her inner voice told her. “So shut up.”

“Elizabeth.” He stood before her, his hands held out ever so slightly, as if preparing to reach for her and hold her.

She allowed a tight smile and said, “Thomas.”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“I may have made a mistake picking this as the meeting place,” she admitted.

“I wondered. But you always had to test yourself, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. Did I?” She could hear the edge in her own voice. Well, why not go with it. “In any case, you’re the one who called this meeting. What’s up?” She was brisk, matter-of-fact, in control. Or at least appearing to be in control.

He looked at her, expressionless. “What’s up?” Liza was mollified by the slight streaks of redness that appeared under his eyes, just across the top of his cheek bones. He’d been smacked in the face with a hockey stick when he was thirteen. The stick struck his face on either side of his nose which was saved by the crook of the stick. He’d been bruised for weeks and the lingering legacy was that in moment of high emotion, red lines appeared where the old injury had been. Now he was saying, “What’s up? Perhaps you can tell me.”

- Episode 38 -

Grayson was still in bed when Ruth returned from her early morning walk through the streets of Armstrong Point. This was a new habit of hers, to get up, set up the coffee and power walk in her grey jogging suit around a certain route that usually took her past the Lamont house and the Dibblee house. Aside from any human interest involved in her walk, it was also very healthy for a woman her age to get out and get moving. She could feel her blood pressure dropping already and it had not been a week since she started getting out and about.

By the time she returned she expected Grayson to be out of bed and to have the coffee on. All he had to do was flick a switch. She tugged off her running shoes and went upstairs to the bedroom. Sure enough, he was still dead to the world.

She yanked open the drapes and pulled back the sheets.

“Get up, you lazy bum,” she said, not without rancor. Today of all days, she needed him up and at it.

He mumbled something into his pillow and tried to burrow more deeply into the bed.

“Oh no you don’t. You’re going to get up and get out of here.”

Grayson opened a bleary eye and looked at his wife. “Okay, where is she?”

“Who?”

“The real Ruth. That’s who.”

“I don’t believe it. The one damned day when I want you to get up and go out for breakfast with me, you lie in bed like you’re some kind of royalty.” She picked up a pillow and began beating him with it. “If I was that old woman, Paul Walker, you’d be out of here like a shot.”

His head, still aching from all the beer he drank last night at the Hitching Post, threatened to explode. He wriggled to the

edge of the bed, away from the pounding pillow and shuffled his way to his feet and into the en suite bathroom.

“You be downstairs in five minutes and ready to go in twenty.” Ruth listened to the shower running before going to turn on the coffee maker and have a quick shower of her own in the main bathroom.

She was in the kitchen drinking a coffee when Angela let herself in through the back door. Angela was dressed to kill, with her navy blue linen shirtwaist, with the white piping, and her matching navy blue and white wingtip shoes. She poured herself a coffee and looked around the kitchen before saying “Good morning.”

“I cannot believe what I have to endure. First, Gray won’t get out of bed and now you’re late. Is it really too much to ask that we be ready to go out for a nice leisurely breakfast at the Holiday Inn? Has it come to this? That I have to beg my family to consider one simple little request.” She stared, her eyes bulging blue with reddened rims, at her sister. “And what on earth have you gotten yourself all gussied up for?”

“Calm down, Ruth. It doesn’t matter.”

“What? Oh no, don’t tell me he’s gone.”

“No. But the restaurant is totally filled, has been since it opened at six.”

Grayson came into the kitchen and waved weakly at his sister-in-law.

Ruth glared at him and then turned her attention back to Ruth, “What? How can you be so calm about it?”

Angela grinned. “They’ll all be sitting there waiting for Mr. Smythe and his companion to come downstairs and where do you think we’ll be?”

Ruth felt as if her skin would burst. She hated it when Angela played these games.

“For heaven’s sake, Ange, tell her. Tell me. I can’t cope with much more of this,” Grayson said.

“Having room service breakfast in the room next door.” She smiled that smug, superior smile that Ruth hated. “Yes. I called one of the girls I know. Her daughter is a maid there and she told her mother who told me which room he’s in and she got her daughter to secretly book the room for us. Now all we have to do is just go down there, sashay right on by everyone and go up to the room. No stopping at the desk. She’s leaving the door open for us. But we got to get a move on. They’re so busy in the kitchen, I ordered the breakfast special to be delivered at eight thirty and it’s almost that now.”

“I’m calling Paul. He can’t miss out on this,” Grayson said. Ruth opened her mouth to say something to him but Angela laid a hand on her arm and said, “Just tell him to go straight on up to Room 209. And tell no one.”

- Episode 39 -

Tyrone heard the rustling in the hall. At first he thought the crowd was moving en masse toward their rooms but almost as soon as he had the thought, he realized that they would be much noisier. He tapped on the door leading to William Anderson Smythe's room and entered when William called, "Come in."

William was resplendent in a flowing pale yellow nightshirt that brushed the ground. The dyed black hair made the old man look a little garish and Tyrone frowned at it now. He had advised against any attempt at disguise. But what could he say? There was no point trying to dissuade Smythe once he got a notion.

"What! What? Is something rude showing?" William was feigning crankiness but Tyrone knew all too well how much he was enjoying this. There he sat, perched on the love seat near the window, sipping his morning orange juice mixed with club soda, a pot of tea before him, and peering out the window at the parking lot that was packed with cars.

"Yes. Your massive ego."

"Oh come, Ty. Wait until you get working on that film with what's his name, the big guy. You'll understand then that you have a duty to your public."

There were more sounds in the hallway and William tilted his head like a nosy old parrot.

"Did they send my coffee up yet?" Tyrone looked at the tray on the table. Toast and muffins and marmalade. Milk and sugar. But no pot of coffee.

"Yes. But the smell was overwhelming so I removed it." William was up and moving towards the front door of the room. For a brief moment, Tyrone thought William was actually getting the coffee pot from where ever he'd hid it. To his astonishment, William drifted like an oversized pixie in his

gossamer yellow gown to the door into the corridor and before Tyrone could say a word, William had the door opened.

Paul Walker was coming down the hotel hallway when he saw the shock of black hair appear from the open door of Room 211. His eyes were a little bleary this morning and his head felt full of cobwebs. He lifted a hand in a weak wave and barely mumbled "Good morning," as he turned his attention to the door to 209 which was propped open by a large doorstop. Paul frowned at the large glass blob with colored streaks that rested against the base of the door.

William was intrigued at this man's lack of interest in him and slipped out into the hallway and moved toward the open door. He looked in and saw three people, sitting around the table, eating breakfast. They turned their attention to the newcomer, whose name apparently was Paul.

"Excuse me," he said and all four looked at him. He smiled, gratified at the look of shocked amazement on the faces of the two women.

"Oh, Mr. Smythe, please come in," one of the women said.

"Thank you." And he entered the room. The other woman quickly moved to the door and shut it as the rest introduced themselves. Ruth, Grayson, Paul and the woman returned from securing the door announced that she was Angela Densmore.

By the time Tyrone got to the hallway, it was empty. Nothing but a long row of closed doors. He did the only thing he could think of -- he poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot which he found in the bathroom.

- Episode 40 -

Liza stared at Thomas, telling herself the wave of emotion she felt was anger. Fury. Hatred.

“I shouldn’t have even come out here to talk to you. I must have been mad.” And indeed she must have. Until this moment, she thought she could face him. That their brief contact in the restaurant was the worst of it all. She wanted to be able to look at him, eye to eye, and say, “I know what you are. What you did. And I curse you for it.”

Instead, she was barely able to say, “Anything you have to say to me, you can say to my lawyer. Obviously you know who she is.” Her voice was shrill. She closed her eyes and tried to conjure some relaxation magic. No peaceful images of sparkling streams running through a dappled wood came to mind. All she could see was red. All she could hear was the voice of Thomas McAllister, Senior, telling her that not only was she a bastard, which she knew, but she was his bastard.

The morning after the senior prom, in this yard, he confronted her. It had been a perfect morning. None of them had slept the night before. The party had rolled from house to house to the cemetery and to the park downtown. Just before dawn, the die hards had come here. To the old Walker place where Thomas McAllister, Senior, had ruled supreme since the death of his wife years before.

He’d been old then. Not just old to an eighteen-year-old but genuinely old. He’d married, late, the daughter of his partner. Emily Walker had been nearly forty at the time. A year later they had Thomas and before he was ten, Emily was dead of some wasting disease.

That night had been so perfect. The select few, her among them, had quietly continued their celebrations in the garden house behind the big house. At dawn, she’d gone out to the apple orchard, walking barefoot, wearing her long ivory gown. She heard the footsteps behind her and anticipated Thomas.

She gasped now, remembering the sudden hurt, the unbearable pain of what happened next.

Suddenly, Thomas touched her, here and now. It seared her flesh and her heart.

“What is it?”

“You bastard,” she screamed, the tears rising, “You know what it is. You and your rotten father....”

She pulled away from him and raced for her car.

She locked the doors and leaned her head against the steering wheel. She was in too much agony to drive.

“Elizabeth. Please,” he was at her door. She turned the key and began to steer, blinking her eyes free from the blur of tears.

She drove away from the place, unable to stop her shaking. She turned onto the Line Road and pulled into a lane leading to nowhere except a rutted path into the woods. She eased the car along as far as she could without risking damage and got out.

Leaning against a maple tree, she retched until she could retch no more. The horror of that day was back, afresh, brighter than ever. She kept reeling back the memory in her mind, trying to stop it before she got to the memory of that night.

She moved away from the maple and sank to the earth.

Why, oh why, hadn't she died? What was the point of living if it all came back to that night of horror in June no matter what she did?

- Episode 41 -

Tyrone drank the whole pot of coffee before he began to worry about William. He was quite sure that the old devil was downstairs wowing his fans. He'd regret not dressing. His flowing caftan-like nightwear did not flatter his shape or his coloring.

Tyrone called the front desk and asked, "Is Mr. Smythe through his performance yet?"

"Pardon me, sir?" was the desk clerk's response.

"Sorry. This is Tyrone Kelly in room 213. I'm checking to see what Mr. Smythe is doing down there."

"He's not down here."

"You mean, he's on his way back up."

"No, sir. He hasn't been down here all morning. Believe me, I'd know if he was."

Tyrone sighed, "Then where could he have gone?"

"Perhaps he's in his room and just not answering the door."

"I'm in his room and he's not here. Never mind. I'm sure he'll be right back."

Tyrone stepped out into the hallway again. He heard the noise from the room next door and moved more closely towards it. Chatter and laughter and then William's big booming "ha ha ha".

The unbelievable old fraud, Tyrone thought with a certain amount of fondness. Let him have his glory. In a larger venue, he stirred some interest from time to time in certain areas but it was unusual to have such an outpouring of attention. It would also improve the old fellow's mood which often became dour before a large project.

Tyrone went back into his room and called Liza. She'd enjoy this. At least he hoped she would.

The phone rang and rang before it switched to her voice mail. He left a message detailing the situation as he saw it.

Liza didn't hear the phone ringing above her screaming pain. She had finally wept herself into weariness and dozed off, her face on a mossy mound. She wasn't quite asleep and she wasn't quite awake. She hovered in that in-between area.

Then it struck her, what she should do. What she should have done in the first place.

She got up, brushed the leaves from her clothes. She stumbled her way back to the car and inspected her face. She looked like death warmed over. There were twigs in her hair.

She dug out her brush and swept the worst bits from her hair. Then she composed herself, gathering her thoughts around her and backed out onto the Line Road again.

There was only one thing left to do. She had to talk to her mother.

She moved slowly along the road, trying to keep up her courage. These things had to be dealt with sooner or later, she knew that. She told all her clients to deal with their personal demons as well as they could before the demons returned.

Thinking of demons, she pulled off to the side of the road and picked up her cell phone. She would have to ask Dan Jordan if and when the miserable old devil McAllister died. There was a message waiting for her and that's when she learned that William Anderson Smythe was partying with heaven only knew who.

She turned the car around and drove back into town. Business first. Revenge later.

- Episode 42 -

Dan was fascinated by Walkersville's reaction to the appearance of William Anderson Smythe and his sidekick in town. He was torn between his desire to return triumphant someday and his certainty that had Smythe returned to whatever tank town had spawned him, the greeting would be quite different.

In any case, he enjoyed not participating in the shenanigans downtown, where suddenly everyone had to go out for breakfast or visit the drug store across the street from the Holiday Inn. He was mildly astonished that he was relieved not to have to push to the head of that line, to be scrabbling for crumbs from the table of the waiter who took Smythe his breakfast in bed or the maid who cleaned his room or any of that stuff.

He was starting to worry about this thing with Amanda. He had to see her, explain that he had failed at his assigned task and return her money to her. For once, he wanted to do everything right. And Liza had called him. She had a job for him that afternoon. He had to meet her at three at the cemetery again.

At the Donald Walker house, there was only the answering machine. He'd called this morning and again this afternoon.

In a last ditch attempt to put paid to his relationship with Amanda, he called her father's office.

"Mr. Walker is on another call right now," the officious secretary said, boredom clear in her voice, "Shall I take a message?"

"May I hold?" he asked, thinking that his use of the work 'may' might do the trick.

"Very well, then." And he was on hold.

A moment later, Donald Walker was on the phone, his voice clipped and just a little too weak to carry the power he wanted.

“This is Dan Jordan. I’m....”

“I know who you are, you guttersnipe.”

“It’s about Amanda.”

“Leave her alone. She wants nothing to do with you or your kind.”

“I’m not working press these days. It’s just that,” what could he say? He paused....

“What?”

“This is kind of odd,” Dan was improvising, “ but I found her wallet in the parking lot thing morning and I wanted to return it to her. But I --.”

“She’s out of town for a couple of days. Just drop it off with my secretary here. She’ll give you a receipt for it.”

“Okay,” Dan said and hung up.

Donald thought about it for a couple of moments and then looked up his sister-in-law’s phone number. If Amanda lost her wallet, she’d need money. In the back of his mind, something niggled at him. Something about the impossibility of Amanda going without her wallet for twenty-four hours. There was something fishy here.

If she went crawling back to that damned McAllister, something would have to be done.

Lily answered on the second ring.

“Hi Lil. It’s Donald Walker here.”

“Yes, Donald. How are you?”

“Very well thank you. I do hope you’ll get a chance to visit over the summer. I know Andrea would like to see you.”

“And I’d like to see her.”

“Is Amanda there?” he asked.

“Not at the moment,” Lily said. “She’s out shopping,” Lily added to forestall any questions of when she might return his call. “I’m not sure when she’ll be back.”

“Shopping. Oh, then, as usual that idiot Jordan has it wrong.”

“Has what wrong?” Lily’s mouth went dry.

“He called here claiming that he found Amanda’s wallet in some parking lot.”

She hesitated and then said, “Oh. Donald. I think we better talk.”

- Episode 43 -

William was enjoying himself. These people were just like the people he grew up with. Cozy, down-home sorts. A rush of goodwill raced through his blood. Not an ounce of phoniness here. He would prove that to himself by asking, straight out, why they were at the Holiday Inn. They'd tell him the truth.

"More coffee, Mr. Smythe." It was the better looking of the two women. Neat crisp hair, shapely legs and a navy blue dress that reminded him of church when he was a child. He smiled at her as his eyes met hers and then the damndest thing happened. He meant to say, yes, more coffee would be fine but their eyes locked. He could see her soul and it was beautiful. They held each other's gaze for several moments longer than was polite and she blushed.

A pang of something not quite wistful and not quite excitement but a bit of both sprang in his heart. It was as if she were seeing him, plain old Bill Smith, the son of Maisie and Bill, Sr. He reached out and touched her hand, the one that held the coffee decanter.

Then, aware of the other people in the room, he said, "Yes, please." Slightly embarrassed at being caught off his emotion guard and suddenly aware of how he must look in his ridiculous nightgown and horrid dyed hair, he turned to the other and said, "I can't tell you how long it's been since I just sat down and talked with folks like this."

To the men he said, "You're lucky men."

Paul snorted.

"Yes, indeed you are, to have such fine wives. I was never so blessed."

Ruth giggled and Angela protested, "Oh my, no. He's not my husband." Quickly she added, "I mean, he's just an old friend."

Grayson laughed, finally feeling comfortable. This guy was a regular guy even if he did look like the world's biggest fairy. He

congratulated himself privately on his little joke, because this guy did look like he could be the world's biggest fairy of either kind, the Tinkerbell kind or the other kind. He made a note to mention this to Paul later.

“Well, Angela, you’re making it sound like you and old Paul here are, what’s that phrase, long time companions. Like you’re living in sin or something and looking for the right words to describe it.” He’d never seen Angela quite this girlish. She’d been married once, briefly, sometime in the dim dark past and that fellow had high-tailed it out of the county after six months with Miss Priss.

- Episode 44 -

Thomas shook with fury and frustration. He stood and watched as Liza tore away from him in her car. Let her go, man, he told himself. Let her go.

He looked at the old house. It should have been his home now. But after that night, when his father told him what Elizabeth had done, he couldn't bear the place.

His father.

What had she said. "You bastard," she had screamed at him, "You know what it is. You and your rotten father...."

What did she think his father would do, not tell him what Liza had done? How she had drifted away from the party in the garden house, drifted towards the main house. How she had gone into the old man's room. It still pained Thomas to remember it. She'd never let him touch her, certainly not that way.

That day, Thomas found his father in the breakfast room when he went to look for Elizabeth and that's when the old man told him.

He shut his eyes and heard the old man's voice, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, son. But you ought to know what she is. Playing virgin with you. Believe me, that was no virgin that climbed into my bed this morning." Still, today, the sound of someone buttering toast set his teeth on edge. There he was, his life spreading out before him like a golden prairie. He had dreams of the life he and Elizabeth would have.

And the old man just sat there buttering toast. "I'm sorry I didn't throw her out. But that's not the point, is it? The point is that your sweet little virgin did things to me that no decent woman should even know about. I told you, son, trash is trash."

Thomas got into the Land Rover. His father's poison spread through him all over again, following the sweet feelings of a

past love that the very sight of her had stirred up. Feelings he'd thought long dead.

He started the engine. His first impulse was to go after her but that was an old captivity. His second impulse was to get drunk. But that was just another version of the old captivity.

Thomas was nothing if not logical. He could see that she was well off. Her clothes, her car, the old Dibblee place...these all cost money and lots of it.

Whore? Kept woman? Trash?

He hated himself for thinking it but what else could it be. She'd never gotten to the university. Women with no education didn't usually make big bucks.

The only puzzle was, why was she blaming his father for telling him the truth? And it was the truth. It had to be. He had gone to see her right after his father talked to him and she refused to see him. Jim Haniman was the one who ran him off the property then. No explanation. Just, "Get out of here. The girl don't want to see you."

And then she was gone. Just like now. She just disappeared over night.

- Episode 45 -

Donald Walker hung up the phone. He was concerned. He'd been concerned about Amanda for years. All her mother's beauty, which had been about the only thing she'd had going for herself. Well, that and her money. But none of her mother's brains, and that meant not much at all. He looked at the photo of Andrea on his desk. Taken years ago, it showed an elegant, well-bred woman. Had she ever been clever? Witty? Entertaining?

He seemed to remember that she sparkled when he first met her but now, she barely moved, never mind sparkle. In some people, alcohol was an uplifting potion, making a false perkiness to hide the dull interior. Not so Andrea. She just grew quieter and quieter until she made no sound at all.

He was no Einstein either but he was diligent. But clearly not diligent enough to foresee this kind of aggravation. That damned McAllister. Why couldn't he have just married Amanda and taken this burden from Donald? But no. He had to start up chasing after the Brown slut again.

He buzzed his secretary. "Get me that reporter creep on the phone."

Dan Jordan wasn't home to take Donald's call. He was already on his way to leave the bank draft for Amanda with her father's secretary. He'd scrawled out a quick note, asking her to call him and saying that what she had asked him to do couldn't be done. It was vague and that bothered him. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps he had lost his ability to write.

When he arrived at Donald Walker's office, the secretary took the envelope, looked at it as if it was a letter bomb and slipped it into her desk. Then she wrote out a receipt and handed it to him but she held onto her end of the piece of paper. "Mr. Walker wants to talk to you."

"Damn!" Dan was a little shocked that the word came out. He was losing his cool. It was the pressure of waiting, of wondering what Liza could do for him. A crisis of conscience.

He was being bought. There had been a time when he would have done this for Liza for free. But that was then. This was now and unless he wanted to just end his life, he had to change it. That thought stuck in his head brushing aside a cobweb, offering a view to what perhaps Elizabeth Brown had faced the day she abandoned Walkersville. Hopelessness mingled with fear.

Before Dan could pursue the thought, follow the tickling feeling that he was about to grab hold of the end of a string that might take him to some essential truth, Donald Walker opened the broad mahogany door to his office.

“In here,” he barked. Personality minus.

Not knowing, and surprising to him, not much caring, what Amanda’s father wanted, Dan followed him into the office.

- Episode 46 -

Ruth spoke up, "Stop it Grayson. Not in front of company."

William turned to Angela. More to save her from further embarrassment, for she was clearly embarrassed, he said, "You don't mean to tell me that you're free from encumbrances?"

She smiled prettily. "Well, the only encumbrance I have is my old house. And of course, my brother-in-law," she nodded in Grayson's direction. "But that's more a curse than an encumbrance." It was clear that she was teasing.

"Have you ever done secretarial work?"

"Of course. For years and years. But, well, you know how it is, women over forty are a drug on the market."

Grayson was giddy with the excitement of it all and he said, "So you can imagine how it is for women over fifty."

Ruth hissed at him, "Shut your mouth."

Paul laughed.

None of them could believe the sight before them. It would be the topic of many conversations for years to come. The man in the cream-colored nightie was openly flirting with the woman in the too-tight girdle.

"The reason I ask," William said, shifting his voice into his formal speaking voice, that is to say, deep and projecting. "It's that young fellow I have with me has decided he's the next Tom Cruise and is going off after this junket to make some movie with that character that's married to John F. Kennedy's niece. You know, whatshisname."

"Arnold..." Grayson began.

"Shut up," Ruth hissed. If she didn't see this with her own eyes, she wouldn't be believing it.

“And I’m going to need a new secretary. Can we talk about whether you could be that person in my life?”

Angela opened her mouth to speak and he held up a pleading hand, “Please don’t answer now. Think about it first. Allow me a few hours of joy thinking you might come and work with me.”

Angela nodded.

There was a knock at the door.

- Episode 47 -

Liza was on her way back into town to deal with William and Tyrone when her cellular phone rang.

“Yes.”

“Liza, I hope this is not a bad time.”

“They’re all bad times, Dan.” Her voice was clipped. She could feel her stress level going up and up and up. She’d explode before she got to the Holiday Inn.

“Can we meet?”

“Yes. But first I have to find out what kind of mess is going on down at the hotel. Call me in an hour.”

She parked in a no parking zone and strode into the lobby of the hotel. She punched the elevator button and refused to look around her. Mercifully the elevator came within seconds. She tapped on Tyrone’s door. He looked like a vampire, with his red-head’s complexion and his jet black hair.

Needing to snarl at someone, as soon as he opened the door, Liza snapped, “And another thing, you two need to get another hairdresser. You look like escapees from the road show of The Night of the Living Dead. At least on William, it’s amusing. You, it just makes you look sick.”

“Well, good morning to you too.”

At that moment, the door down the hallway opened and William emerged. “So this is how you talk about me behind my back. Very nice, I must say.”

Tyrone said, “The reason she’s here is we thought you’d been kidnapped.”

Liza stared in amazement as people began to appear in the hallway behind William. The DeWitt duo and the old crab, Angela Densmore. And that dreadful Paul Walker.

“What are you doing?” She nearly screamed at them. Her words were directed at all of them. It was not a sight she was used to seeing, William being down-home folks.

“Just having a quiet cup of coffee with some people. Is that not allowed? And being pilloried by you behind my back.”

“William, be sensible. It would take more than that ridiculous hair to camouflage you. It looks terrible and you know it. Think how you’d like a photo of yourself as you look right now slapped on the front of the tabloids. Just think about it.”

Angela stepped forward. “If I may suggest something...,” she said.

“Yes, my dear,” William smiled at her.

“A very good friend of mine is a hairdresser. She could fix your hair if it’s important.” She leveled a gentle eye at Tyrone and Liza.

“Oh, William, it’s not your hair. I was just angry at you because I was worried about you,” Liza said. And because my life is just flying to hell right in front of my eyes.

Paul Walker and Grayson DeWitt stepped forward. Grayson said, “I know what we could do. We’ll flank him and march him out of here, past those busybodies downstairs, right on over to the salon. What d’ya say, Paul?”

“Marvelous,” William said. “Shall I change into something more suitable for street wear?”

“Why not?” Liza knew when she was defeated. When the old boy got up to something, he was unstoppable. “Tyrone, get him something to wear to the hairdressers.” She had too much to cope with already. She didn’t need a scene with William.

- Episode 48 -

Donald Walker looked at the young man sitting across from his desk. Greasy slob. Even the semi-decent suit didn't improve him. He was just one of those pieces of crap that you sometimes stepped in and had trouble getting off your shoe. The little punk didn't even wait for an invitation to sit down. He just plopped himself down in the best client chair.

Donald let the silence sit between them. It was his favorite negotiator's trick. People could not bear the silence so they often spoke just to fill it and of course, they had to say something. They usually said something that Donald could use to wrangle a higher commission or otherwise benefit his business.

The fat sleaze sat there and said nothing. He didn't blink, look around the room or fidget. He just sat there patiently as if waiting for a bus. His expression was mild. Nevertheless it irritated Donald.

Tick. Tick. Tick. The minutes grew longer. Donald would be damned if he'd speak first. He punched his intercom, "Stacy, bring Mr. Jordan's envelope in here please."

The door opened and Stacy's perky head popped in. "What envelope?" she asked.

Donald fought the urge to lay his head down on the desk and moan. Instead, he barked, "The envelope that this fellow here just gave you."

"Oh. Okay." And she was gone. A few seconds later, she returned with Dan's envelope.

Donald knew his face revealed his emotions, his frustration mixed with cruelty, but he didn't care. "This doesn't feel like a wallet to me." He ripped open the envelope.

Dan did not show any reaction. He just sat there, looking peaceful.

“What the hell is this?” Donald asked, pulling out the banker’s draft and the note.

“Ask Amanda.”

The veins in his forehead bulged as Donald rose, leaning forward menacingly, “She’s missing, you idiot. And I think you had something to do with it. Indeed, I’m sure you did.” He punched the intercom again, “Stacy, call the cops. Ask for Chief Davidson.”

To Dan, he said, “You have thirty seconds to explain this to me or I’ll have you arrested for complicity in Amanda’s disappearance.”

Dan said nothing.

“And don’t think I can’t. First you say you found her wallet and she wasn’t even in town at the time she would have had to be to lose it where you found it....,” Donald tried to stop talking before he was babbling completely. He wanted to go around the desk and beat that smug face right off Jordan’s head.

“And you, sir, have thirty seconds to go to hell,” Dan said as he got up and walked out of the office.

In the doorway, he encountered Stacy, who looked at him nervously and then said to Donald, “Chief Davidson is out of the office. But they’re sending someone else over.”

Dan snickered but did not look back to see how Donald was taking that news.

- Episode 49 -

Liza Diamond was in a daze. She watched the incredible shenanigans as Tyrone, looking like something from outer space at nearly six and a half feet tall, with his red hair dyed an improbably black, helped the four aging gossips surround William.

She was helpless to stop them. William seemed to be taking on some new persona, way beyond his visiting celebrity persona. She wondered if he was going senile. He was a bit young for it but who knew the real truth about his age?

Her stomach felt full of iron filings, a hungry empty feeling. She bit back a sob. Her head would explode if something didn't go right for her soon. It was this town. This cursed town. In nearly ten years of headhunting on behalf of the most exacting and often eccentric employees, she had never encountered anything like this mess. She had gone toe to toe with the most arrogant of lawyers, even a Hollywood producer or two.

And now, it had come to this. Standing in the hallway of the Holiday Inn in a town that heaven forgot watching a pair of overweight overaged men and a pair of old biddies prepare to march the wild and woolly William Anderson Smythe, darling of the jet set, down to the Hair Do, Hair Do to have his hair redyed to its not-so-natural yellow.

She actually pinched herself. Maybe it was a dream. She'd even settle for it being a nightmare. Just so long as she could wake up and wake up soon.

"Liza, are you all right?" It was Tyrone, his eyes mirthful. His concern was sincere. He was a decent lad.

She shut her eyes and nodded, pasting on a small grin.

"Don't worry. He does this kind of stuff all the time. It's just that you get to see it this time," Tyrone said. "He needs attention like you and I need air."

Liza held up her hands in surrender. "Call me when it's over."

As they left, Liza went back into Tyrone's room and threw herself down on the bed and sobbed until she had no tears left.

Thomas McAllister drove without really noticing where he was going. His mind was on automatic pilot. He came to the wide gate of the Revere Inn and passed through it, somewhat surprised to find himself there.

The Revere Inn was no longer an Inn. In the seventies, a group of doctors invested their money wisely in the historic place and restored it to mansion quality. They also installed an excellent set of medical professionals and gerontologists.

For the past eight years, Thomas McAllister, Senior had been a guest at the Revere Inn. It was hard to say when the Alzheimer's had set in. After the fiasco the day Liza left town, Thomas hadn't spoken to his father for months. And then it was a chilly conversation.

Sometime during his time away at university, Thomas realized the old man was losing his mind and his memory. Then his only regret was that he would never be able to make the old bastard know how much he hated him.

Thomas parked his car in front of the beautiful old house.

- Episode 50 -

Dan was out on the street before his heart stopped its furious pounding. A funny and unfamiliar elation crept through his body, as if flowing through his blood. He'd always known, without being able to prove exactly who or how, that it was Donald Walker and old McAllister and that gang of thieves who had ended his career at the local paper and prevented him from being hired at any paper within a five hundred mile radius. It wouldn't take much. A wink, a nod, a word from any of them and Dan Jordan could rot in hell for all anyone cared.

There was a certain freedom in knowing that something had happened to Amanda and having his only concern be for her, the woman herself, not for the story, the front page photo, the potential scandal he could rake up. And he was concerned, a little. Chances were that Amanda just got sick of the whole town as well. He knew how it felt to be rejected. It hurt, even though he was used to it. Poor Amanda. She wasn't used to it.

Dan took a deep breath. It felt good to care. What he was going to do next, well, that was another matter. For all her talk about finding him just the right niche for his talents, Liza wasn't going to be able to do for him what he wanted done. This time he didn't bother fighting back the knowledge that her generous advance on his future earnings was really just a way of buying him off. Of getting him to look away from his investigation into her life in Boston.

Another bonus was that it no longer mattered. He would pay Liza back in time. And he wouldn't look into her past in Boston, but not because she paid him but because he had to move beyond this gang of monsters that ran Walkersville. No, he would leave Liza alone because long ago, as a child, he had loved her. And he had caused her damage. Someday he'd have to find a way to make that right.

Dan got lost in his own thoughts and was nearly in front of the Holiday Inn, having walked right past where he parked his car when he saw the damnedest sight. Old lady Densmore and her sister, Ruth DeWitt, along with some tall skinny character and

Ruth's husband and his old crony, Paul, were moving along Main Street like some great giant crab formation, with William Anderson Smythe in the middle.

Dan began to laugh. It could have been a flashback, a hangover from his acid days, but no, even his flashbacks weren't this weird. Because this human juggernaut stopped in front of the Hair Do, Hair Do salon and turned, as one body, and marched into it.

Dan moved closer to the salon just in time to see someone in a pink smock flip the open sign on the front door around to read, "Closed."

The woman looked at him and frowned. Then she moved away from the door. He turned to look at the street and saw an inordinate number of people milling about.

Wondering if the whole town had gone mad or whether he was just seeing it differently, Dan went back to his car.

- Episode 51 -

Mabel banged the frying pan into the sink and clattered the plates into the cupboard.

“Keep it down, Mabel, she’s trying to sleep.”

“She’s trying to sleep! She’s trying to sleep. Jim. She’s been sleeping for days. She’s in one of those states I saw on television. I forget which show, but it’s serious. It’s a mental illness.”

“Shut up,” Jim nearly raised his voice. “After all she’s done for you and you go around saying she’s crazy. You’ve always been selfish but this is just too much.”

“What has she done for me?” Mabel took off her apron and stomped into the living room area of the trailer. She stopped in front of Jim, between him and the television, blocking his view. “You just name one thing she did for me.”

“She lets you live here rent free.”

“This is your place. You let me live here.”

Mabel sat down on the sofa next to her brother. She poked around the debris on the coffee table, digging for her cigarettes. She found a package but it was empty. There was a half smoked butt in the ashtray and she filched that out and lit it.

“That shut you up, didn’t it?” she said as the first satisfying, if somewhat stale, swallow of smoke entered her lungs.

Jim looked at her and it made her more than a little nervous. He was sucking the inside of his left cheek which meant that he was thinking over something.

“What is it? Just spit it out.”

“This is not my place.”

“Yes it is. You bought it when you married her and took her in with that little bastard of hers.”

Jim’s eyes flashed and he stopped chewing on his cheek. “How can you be such a bitch?”

“Well she is a little bastard. In fact and in deed. Letting her mother think she was dead and all this time she’s been rolling in dough and look at the way we live.”

“We live just fine.”

“And admit it. This place is yours and always has been.”

He shook his head. “After I lost my job, it was Betty who paid off the mortgage.”

“With what? Money from scrubbing floors.”

“She got some insurance money after...the accident.”

Mabel screeched, “She’s had money all along? She’s got money now? I don’t believe it.

“I told you to shut your damned mouth and you will shut it now. And if I hear a word of this around town, you’re out on your bony old rump.”

“I can’t believe she could be so selfish.”

“It was because it was the insurance money. She didn’t want to spend any of it because she didn’t believe Elizabeth was dead. She did it for me. Because she’s a good and decent person. And now it turns out she was right about Elizabeth not being dead.”

“Oh, God in heaven. Now she’ll have to pay it back. The insurance money. What will happen to us?”

“I think you’re the one who’s mentally ill, little sister. I think you got terminal meanness settling right into your bones. To hell with what happens to us. What’s happening to Betty?”

Jim's lip began to quiver, "My beautiful Betty. What will become of her?"

- Episode 52 -

“Thomas.” The nurse bubbled towards him and Thomas was surprised that she remembered him until he remembered her. He had come out on an obligatory visit last Christmas. It snowed and he stayed overnight. She had provided aid and comfort to him.

He smiled and was almost surprised his face didn't crack. His cheek muscles felt like cement, his lips like wood. He reached for her hand and dipped his head to kiss it, letting his eyes absorb the name attached to her uniform just over her rounded breast.

N. Sherwood.

A lot of help that was.

In keeping with his mock-courtliness, he whispered in a flirtatious manner, “My dear Miss Sherwood, it is lovely to see you again.”

“Stop that,” she hissed. But a flush spread over her freckled cheeks.

He stood up, letting his face assume the demeanor he truly felt. Grim, bleak fury. He forced himself to modify it slightly. “I don't blame you for being angry. It's bad enough I neglect my father. But how could I have neglected you?”

They were in the great front hall. The reception area was discreetly tucked away off to the left in a large room that had once been a cloak room. Several nurses and office types were milling around. Miss Sherwood glanced in their direction and then called out, not too loudly, “I'll be right back. I'm going to take Mr. McAllister to his father's room.”

Then to him she said, so that the others could hear her, “We've moved your Dad to a room on the second floor. It's much brighter. He likes the southern view.”

“Okay, Nancy,” someone called.

Thomas smiled. "Thanks, Nance," he said. As they began walking up the stairs, he whispered, "Any chance for a late lunch or early dinner?"

"Either or both." She looked up at him provocatively.

Then they were at the oak doorway leading into a room with high narrow windows. The sun streamed in, giving the room a cheerful glow.

"Mr. McAllister," Nancy chirped, "Look who's come to visit you."

The wizened old man sitting in the Wedgwood Blue armchair, his feet up on a matching footstool, looked up at Thomas with hooded eyes.

"Matthew." The hooded eyes sparkled. The old man leaned forward, his clawed hands reaching out. "Matthew. Oh it's so good to see you. I thought you'd never come."

"It's Thomas," Nancy said. "Your son Thomas has come to see you."

"Yes. My son. Matthew."