

CRIMINAL



Episode 71: A Bump in the Night **Air date: July 21, 2017**

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Phoebe Judge: Well, let's just start with you introducing yourself.

Amber Dawn: My name is Amber Dawn, and I live with my family in Berwyn, Illinois. I work as an animal trainer at the Shedd Aquarium. And that's about it.

Phoebe Judge: What kind of animals do you train?

Amber Dawn: Mostly penguins and otters, but I also work with all of our animals in the Marine Mammal Department.

Phoebe Judge: What do you train a penguin to do?

Amber Dawn: Mostly husbandry care, so we practice going to the vet with them. We ask them to be calm in our lap and calm with other people. We can teach them to spin, and to follow us, train them to come to their names. You can teach a penguin almost anything.

Phoebe Judge: So do you have penguin friends, ones that you like more than others?

Amber Dawn: Well, I love all of our penguins, but I do have my favorites. I helped hand-raise 11 of them. So yeah, I mean, a penguin chooses you, they choose you to be their person, and then every time you come out into the exhibit, they can come out of the water and run up to you and do their little flirty behavior. I knew I wanted to work with animals ever since I was a small child, so I started working with them eight years ago.

Phoebe Judge: Well, we're here to talk about something that happened longer ago than that. How long ago were you living in that apartment in Washington?

Amber Dawn: 21 years ago.

[Music.]

Phoebe Judge: Long before she worked with penguins, Amber Dawn moved to one of the rainiest places in America — the small town of Enumclaw, Washington — to be closer to her brother and sister-in-law.

Amber Dawn: It was gorgeous. I could see Mount Rainier out of my bedroom window of this apartment. Like, right there. It was gorgeous.

Phoebe Judge: She moved into a small apartment building. Her apartment was on the top floor, a one-bedroom with a little dining room, a living room and kitchen, and a little balcony on the front. She was 20.

Amber Dawn: The first night I moved in, I had been playing music while I was unpacking. And I went to bed that night and I turned off the music, and I was laying in my bed and I heard footsteps in the attic. And there were very clear footsteps. And I wasn't quite sure why I would be hearing that, but whenever you move into a new apartment, you start to notice all the little different sounds that that particular space makes. And so I wasn't quite sure what it was, but it sounded like footsteps.

Phoebe Judge: Had you been told that there was an attic in the apartment? Or did you have an entrance to the attic in your apartment?

Amber Dawn: There was a crawl space, it was just a little push-up... I don't even know what you would call it. Like a-

Phoebe Judge: It's like a trapdoor in the ceiling kind of?

Amber Dawn: Sort of, yeah. It would push up into the ceiling, so it was like a square, maybe two and a half by two and a half feet, that pushed up into the ceiling, and that came into my bedroom. Or it was in my bedroom ceiling, so I could see it from my bed. And I thought, okay, that's probably not what it is. I know I have an active imagination, so I just fell asleep anyway. But the next day I went to the landlord," and I told them, I think I heard footsteps up there last night. Is there any way that anybody could be up there?" And she told me, "No." She said it was probably squirrels or a raccoon or something. And I was like, "Well, that squirrel is wearing a pretty big set of boots, then."

Phoebe Judge: We've all had that feeling, that something isn't quite right. And we're very good at talking ourselves down, going on with our lives, telling ourselves that it's all in our imagination. And most of the time, it is.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[Music.]

Amber Dawn: I was very meticulous. Everything was very organized. I knew what was in my cupboards, and I would buy a six-pack of soda, I would drink one, maybe take one to work with me, and I would come back and there would be three left. And it's like, "Well, did I drink two? That's odd." Or cans of soup would be missing.

Phoebe Judge: What did you think was happening?

Amber Dawn: Well, I had moved the Enumclaw to be close to my brother, and he lived about three blocks away. He had a key to the apartment. I assumed that he was coming into my apartment and eating my food, because that is something he would do, just come over and grab a can of soda or whatever. So I thought it was him.

Phoebe Judge: Did you confront him?

Amber Dawn: Yeah, I called him. I told him, "I can't afford to feed you. Don't come over here and eat my food." And it wasn't happening all the time, I just would notice it every now and again.

Phoebe Judge: Amber wasn't home much. She was working several jobs: processing papers for an accountant, working at the local drug store, and waitressing at night. So when she noticed that little things in her apartment had been moved, she'd second-guess herself, chalk it up to exhaustion. She was starting to feel at home in Enumclaw — she had her two cats and then she got a puppy.

Amber Dawn: She was a beautiful German Shepherd mix. She was maybe 9 or 10 weeks old, so-

Phoebe Judge: Really little.

Amber Dawn: Yeah, she was just a baby, so she was learning to be potty trained. So I would come home in between my jobs and walk her. And I was kenneling her in the bathroom while she was learning her manners and learning to be potty trained. So I kept her in the bathroom with newspaper on the floor and water and toys and stuff.

Phoebe Judge: One night she was waitressing, when she got a call from her landlord saying that her bathroom was flooding.

Amber Dawn: And my downstairs neighbor was getting rained on in her bathroom. So I came home, and we came in my apartment, and I opened the bathroom door, and my puppy was in the bathroom sink. I asked her, I was like, "Did you put her in the sink?" She's like, "No, we

wouldn't open the door because we didn't know how big the dog was, we didn't know if it was people-friendly. So this is why you had to come here." But there's no way she could have gotten into that sink, she was a little puppy. And the toilet was far enough away from the sink that she wouldn't have been able to climb.

Phoebe Judge: Was there water all over the ground?

Amber Dawn: Uh-huh. It was a big mess.

Phoebe Judge: But the puppy was dry, safe in the sink?

Amber Dawn: Yeah, she was sitting in the sink.

Phoebe Judge: But, like, someone must have put her in the sink? There's no way she could have...

Amber Dawn: Yes, someone must've put her in that sink.

Phoebe Judge: Enumclaw is a tiny, safe farming community. Nothing ever went on there. So anytime Amber got worried, she just reminded herself that her brother and sister-in-law were three blocks away, and she kept herself busy. She'd been living in her apartment for about six months when she got sick and called into her jobs. And so, on this day, for the very first time, she didn't leave her apartment at all.

Amber Dawn: It was around seven o'clock at night, I was on the couch, and I was watching my stories, watching my TV, and I heard a loud thump in the bedroom. And I just dismissed it, because I have animals and they make noise. And I just dismissed and kept on watching television. Later on that evening, around 11 or so, I turned off all the lights, I drew a bath, I got undressed and I got into the bathtub. And so I'm in the bathtub, I got a candle lit, and I look up, and that crawl space door was open, and everything just slowed way down.

Phoebe Judge: And you're in the bathtub?

Amber Dawn: I'm in the bathroom.

Phoebe Judge: Naked in the bathtub?

Amber Dawn: Naked in the bathtub, in the dark. And I must have sat in that bathtub for 10 to 15 seconds after seeing that crawl space door open, but it felt like five minutes. And I put it all together, I was like, "Okay, the footsteps the first night, the doors being closed when I had left them open, the missing food, Thea, my dog, in the sink... There was someone living in my house with me."

So I very calmly got out of the tub, and got my robe, and I put it on. There was only one place he could have been hiding, and that was in the bedroom closet. And I had to walk by the closet in order to get out. And the closet were those mirror doors, and that was really scary to see myself in the dark, knowing that he was on the other side of that door.

Phoebe Judge: Did you say anything?

Amber Dawn: No. No. If he would have opened that door, if I would have seen him, I would have lost it. He's been living in my apartment for six months, if he wanted to hurt me... That's not what he wants, he just needs a place to stay. He's probably not a bad guy, like, he put Thea in the sink. I don't want to freak him out, I don't want to scare him by screaming and yelling, because then he might hurt me so that he doesn't get caught.

So I very quietly walked past the closet, and I didn't go out the door, I went to the phone. And under my phone I had a junk drawer, and in the junk drawer, there was a hammer. So I had the hammer in my hand, claw out, so if anybody came at me, they were going to get a face full of hammer claw. And I called my sister.

Phoebe Judge: This was before most of us had cell phones, so Amber had to stay in the apartment and use the landline. She told her sister-in-law that someone was in her house and her sister-in-law told her to get out of there as fast as she could.

Amber Dawn: So I grabbed my puppy and I walked out the door. I walked out the door in my robe, with a hammer on one hand, and a puppy in the other. And I got to the bottom of the stairs and I was looking at the apartment door, and I was like, "Please don't come out. Please don't come out. Please don't come out." Because like I said, if I would have seen him, I think I would have lost it. She was there within minutes with her two giant German Shepherds in the back of her car. And we went to her house and we called the police.

Phoebe Judge: And what did they find out?

Amber Dawn: Well, the police came to the apartment, but he was gone.

Phoebe Judge: In the attic, the police found a little bit of food, a book, and a sleeping bag.

[Music.]

Amber Dawn: I don't know how he was getting into the apartment. I mean, I left a window open for my cats, so he could've gone in and out that way. I had a spare key; he could've taken my spare keys and made a copy, too. I mean, I don't know. He could have lived there before me, and maybe the managers didn't change the locks. I don't know.

Phoebe Judge: She filed a police report, and while Amber believes it was a man, there's no way to know. Whoever was living up there was never found. We spoke to Amber's brother, Eric Olson, and he remembers just how nervous and scared she was through the whole thing, and how relieved she was to get out of there. We also asked if he remembered Amber accusing him of stealing food from her apartment. He said, "That sounds about right." It's been more than 20 years, and Amber says she still wishes she could find this person and ask them what was going on.

Did you stay in the apartment?

Amber Dawn: No, no. My grandparents came over the next day and we moved out. We moved all my stuff out.

Phoebe Judge: You'd think that if there was a stranger in the house, like, the puppy would have been barking?

Amber Dawn: Yeah. Well, I got her while I lived there. So as far as she knew, that's normal. Mom goes to work and then-

Phoebe Judge: Dad comes-

Amber Dawn: Exactly. My friend comes down from the attic and hangs out and plays with me. [Phoebe laughs.] So when he came in that night, she didn't bark, she was just like, "Oh, hey."

Phoebe Judge: In her next apartment, she made the landlord padlock the attic door.

It makes me so nervous, now, because I lose things and think I've done that, wait a second, did I drink that? Did I eat... And I'm like, "Phoebe, no, you're fine." But now, you've given us all reason to be really worried, "No, maybe there is someone in here."

Amber Dawn: Not that I want to make everybody paranoid, but I think you just have to listen to your instincts. I think that's what I've learned from this. Deep down I knew what was going on, but I didn't trust myself. I thought I was just imagining it. But I think since then I have learned to listen to my instincts. And if my instincts are telling me that something is not right, then something's not right.

Phoebe Judge: So, now, do you ever do things like checking the garbage can to count how many soup cans there are or...

Amber Dawn: No, I live with a family, nothing is ever where it was placed. I have no idea how many cans of soup I have in the cupboard. [Laughs.]

[Music.]

Phoebe Judge: Criminal is produced by Lauren Spohrer, Nadia Wilson, and me. Audio mix by Rob Byers. Our intern is Mathilde Urfalino. Special thanks to Dick Gordon and Carol Jackson. Julianne Alexander makes original illustrations for each episode of Criminal. You can see them at thisiscriminal.com. And if you have a story like Amber Dawn's, write to us at hello@thisiscriminal.com.

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Shows like Love and Radio. Love and Radio is a show about morally complicated and completely fascinating situations and people. They let people speak, and they don't judge them. Here's a preview of their brand new season.

[Love and Radio trailer begins.]

Speaker 1: Are you worried you're going to have all sorts of crazy side effects? Like later in life you'll grow a third arm or something?

Speaker 2: People would look at you like, "Oh, that's disgusting."

Speaker 3: I was always inspired by that American Psycho routine.

Speaker 4: If I'm a guest in your house, I will pee in your safe.

Speaker 5: Sorry.

Speaker 6: Gosh, Steven. I hope you make me a good documentary. I'm so sick of reading it. I can't even begin to tell you.

Speaker 7: I'm so upset, I could just cry.

Speaker 8: And all of a sudden the wood on my wood pile started to shake.

Speaker 9: He brought me dinner, with a flower. And then I wake up with a plastic bag over my head.

Speaker 10: Holy [bleep].

[Trailer ends.]

Phoebe Judge: Go listen. Radiotopia from PRX is supported by the Knight Foundation. And special thanks to Adzerk for providing their ad-serving platform to Radiotopia.

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