

KNOWN TO THE VICTIM

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DOUBLEDAY CANADA

PROLOGUE

The day my mother was murdered wasn't the worst day of my life. I didn't even find out she was dead for twenty-nine hours. Sometimes, the guilt over that crushes me, as if I should have heard the sonic boom of my life exploding. Instead, I'd gone to classes and then hung out with friends that night while we tossed back shots and moaned about midterms. Some nights I'll jolt up in a cold sweat, remembering myself perched on a campus barstool, saying that if I didn't get a B in chem, my life would be over.

No, my life was not over. My mother's was. And I had no idea.

I'd texted her that morning, as I always did, and she'd popped back a quick "Good morning, sunshine!" and "Busy day. Talk tomorrow?"

I'd sent a thumbs-up, pocketed my phone and moved on with my day. As I'd learn soon enough, she hadn't sent those texts. She couldn't. She was already dead, stuffed into her killer's trunk. He'd flipped through her messages to see how she talked to me, and replied with something that would buy him time to dispose of her corpse and possibly even buy him an alibi.

Why no, she couldn't have been dead already—she was texting her daughter.

Those texts didn't raise any red flags. Nor did the ones she sent her law partner, Dinah, saying she had "some kind of bug" and would be "sleeping it off." The red flags were noticed by a trucker who spotted a car down a side road, the driver struggling with something in the trunk.

Struggling with my mother's body.

The next day, the police showed up at my dorm to tell me Mom was dead. But that wasn't the worst day of my life, either, because I was too numb to react. I spent the next few days in shock, propelled along only by Dinah, who led me through all the appropriate steps because there was no one else to do it. My parents had split before I was born, my father remarrying within the year and exiting from my life. I had half siblings on my father's side, and I'd never met them. My mother was an only child, so I had no aunts, uncles or cousins on her side. By the time I was in college, both her parents were gone, and I'd never had any contact with my father's side of the family.

It was just the two of us. Kim and Amy. "The Gibson Girls," Dinah always joked, and it wasn't until I was nearly twenty that I realized that was a reference to an old TV show. When I watched it, I understood the allusion: a mother and daughter

who adored each other, just them against the world. Of course, in our version, Mom wasn't nearly so flighty, and I wasn't nearly so sensible, but it was a cute name, nonetheless.

Dinah guided me through the funeral arrangements, but after that, I insisted on going back to school, and when I took her daily calls, I pretended everything was okay. Eventually, I answered her calls less and less often, but I always texted saying I was just busy. She took me at my word. I was back to school, immersing myself in it, and I didn't need my mom's friend hovering.

That was a lie. I needed Dinah. I needed *someone*. But I didn't know how to ask for help, and I didn't want to be a burden, so I played the role of a young woman who was grieving but okay.

I was not okay.

The worst day of my life wasn't the day I had to choose my mother's casket. It wasn't the day I buried her. It wasn't the day I cleaned out her closet for charity. It wasn't the day I returned to school and had to explain my mother's death to classmates who wondered where I'd been. With each passing marker, people swore things would get better. They lied. It got worse.

The truth was, there was no "worst day"—just an unending blur of worse. I stopped going to classes and spent my days locked up in my dorm room, watching that damn mother-and-daughter TV show as I cried.

My father didn't come to the funeral because I hadn't bothered to let him know that Mom had died. He'd never been part of our lives, so screw him. I did, however, make one inexcusable mistake: I didn't tell my brother.

Oliver was ten years older than me. His parents split when he was five, and our father got custody of him. That meant, for the three years of my parents' marriage, he'd been my mom's child.

Mom always hoped that Oliver and I would have some kind of relationship once I was old enough to stop letting my anger at my father spill onto my half brother. For the few years that she'd been part of his life, she'd loved him like a son, and she always said that losing Oliver had been the worst part of the divorce. Not being his mother by blood or adoption, she'd had no right to see him, and she never had again. I should have called and let him know she was gone.

Oliver reached out a few weeks after Mom's death. He must have read about her murder in the news, which was a shitty way to learn it. Oliver asked whether we could talk, and I dodged and weaved until he sent me an invitation to a video chat.

It took me three days to prepare. I spent the first one working up to showering, which I did on day two, and then on day three, I finally left my dorm room and washed the clothing I'd been wearing since Mom's funeral.

Right up until the moment of the call, I had to fight myself not to cancel it. I wrote the email three times. Wrote the text a dozen. But I didn't send them, and when the call came, I took it, and it was . . .

It was wonderful. And it was horrible because it was wonderful. Does that make any sense? For years, I'd had this mental image of Oliver. I knew he'd taken over our father's business—some company whose exact purpose was so dull I couldn't keep it in my mind longer than it took him to explain it—and I knew that the business was one of the leading employers in Grand Forks, where they lived. I also knew that my father was

one of those assholes who could afford to pay the bills for a thousand underprivileged kids but didn't even pay child support for his own daughter.

I can hear Mom's patient sigh at that. I'm not saying I was deprived by my father's neglect—emotional or financial. I was a loved and privileged kid with a mother who'd decided to raise me on her own significant income. My point is that's the kind of guy James Harding is—he once bought a yacht and let it rot in the marina for a tax deduction. I assumed that Oliver would be Dad 2.0. In other words, Corporate Asshole 2.0.

Except he wasn't. The guy on that video call reminded me of my mom. He was sweet and patient, and he never once said "I'm sorry for your loss," because that was obvious. Instead, he talked *about* her.

"I have so many good memories of your mom," he said. "She was so much *fun*. That's what I remember most. Hey, did she still make those cheesecake brownies?"

My eyes teared up, and all I could do was nod.

"I love those brownies," he said. "One time, she put them out to cool, and I asked if I could have a piece . . ."

"And you took a whole row and blamed the dog?"

"She remembered?" His smile is surprised, but also pleased.

Of course. She remembered everything about you. You'd been her child, once upon a time.

But I didn't say that. I could only imagine what stories our father had told him about Mom.

"Your mom was awesome," he said. Then he rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that makes me sound about twelve, but she really was. I remember, one night Dad was working late, as usual, and I had a math test the next day. I was freaking out. Your mom spent

hours working with me, and then we went for ice cream. That's who she was. Work hard, play hard, and I really . . ." He cleared his throat. "She was awesome."

Pain stabbed through me, but for the first time in weeks, it didn't feel like a fatal blow.

"She was," I said.

"And I'd say my dad made a huge mistake leaving her, but honestly, I always figured she dodged a bullet there."

I choked on a laugh.

Oliver's voice lowered. "Our dad is an asshole, Amy. I hate what he did to you and your mom."

"What he did to all of us," I said before I could stop myself.

His voice cracked then. "I used to beg to see your mom again, and he said she didn't want to see me." Before I can protest, he hurries on. "Which is a lie. A few years ago, she reached out, now that I was an adult, and my father couldn't interfere. She probably never mentioned that."

"She didn't." I wasn't surprised, though. Now that I think about it, I'd have been more surprised if she let him go and never contacted him again.

"We even had lunch a couple of years ago. You were in your senior year, and she was so proud of you, Amy." He was quiet for a moment, then he said softly, "I know you weren't ready for a relationship with me. You were understandably angry with our dad. So your mom and I decided to wait a bit. And then . . ."

My eyes filled. "I'm sorry. She was right. I was angry with him, and I shouldn't have let that spill onto you."

"I understood. Our father—" He cut himself short abruptly. "Enough about him. He doesn't deserve it. Let's talk about her. Is that okay?"

Was it okay? God, it was *so* okay. Talking about Mom and sharing good memories was exactly what I needed, and that video call was the best thing to happen to me since the “before” times.

That should have turned everything around for me, right? Back on my feet, determined to start the uphill climb and find my new normal?

No. In fact, it was the opposite.

I’d psyched myself up for the call with Oliver, and it had gone better than I could have dreamed, and somehow that sent me crashing even deeper into the pit. I became racked with guilt for not contacting Oliver when Mom died. Guilt for letting him see it in the news. Guilt for presuming he’d be an asshole. Guilt for not telling him, during that call, that Mom had loved him. That’s what depression does: people think you just need something to cheer you up, and sometimes, your brain takes that “good” thing and weaponizes it against you.

I bottomed out after that. At least before the call I’d been forcing myself to eat and finding temporary solace in that TV show. After the call, I stopped both.

And no one noticed. Dinah presumed if I ducked her calls with texts, I was just busy. My back-home friends all presumed I was drowning my grief in schoolwork, and they didn’t want to interfere. My new college friends presumed I’d gone home after I’d dropped out. No one wanted to bother me, and that only made me feel more alone.

I won’t say I was ever suicidal. That would require action. I just . . . stopped. It was as if I shut down, and even the most fundamental parts of life seemed like too much effort. I had to force myself to eat and drink, and otherwise, I lay in bed and

existed. I existed, and that took all the energy I had, with days where even that seemed like too much effort.

Mom was gone. Dead. *Murdered*. With her went the center of my universe, the only person who truly cared about me.

Then came the knock at my dorm door.

“Amy?” a man’s voice said. “It’s me. Oliver.” A pause. “Your brother.”

I didn’t move. I stayed in bed, staring at the ceiling. Even processing what I was hearing seemed like too much effort. My brain was empty.

The knock came firmer. “I know you’re in there, Amy. I know you dropped out of college, and I know you didn’t go home. You haven’t been returning my texts, so I got worried and made some calls. No one’s seen you in weeks.”

Another pause. Then he said, “Maybe I should be breaking this door down, presuming the worst, but I’m hoping I don’t need to do that. I realize you don’t know me from a stranger, and I’m sorry for that. I misunderstood the situation. I realize that now, and I want to make up for it.”

Silence.

“Come stay with me,” Oliver said. “I have a guesthouse.” A short laugh. “It’s not as fancy as it sounds—the former owners built it for their parents, and it’s tiny—but it has a bedroom and bath and kitchen. Come stay with me until you’re back on your feet.” He cleared his throat. “Or we can figure something else out. Please, Amy. Just open this door.” Another pause. “I owe your mom. Let me help you. For her.”

I lay there for two seconds. Then I whispered, “Okay,” rolled out of bed and padded to the door.

ONE

EIGHT YEARS LATER

I'm standing at the front of an auditorium, looking out on a packed room. My first sold-out show. I try not to get too excited about that. This is a library, not a thousand-seat auditorium. But it's the central library, with a two-hundred-and-fifty-person-capacity auditorium, and every seat is taken by someone here to listen to me, Amy Gibson, host of the true crime podcast *Known to the Victim*.

After Mom died and Oliver helped me back to my feet, I switched my major to sociology with a minor in psychology. Intimate partner violence became my focus. I wanted to understand what happened to my mother and how to help others, the survivors of such violence and the families the victims left behind.

That led to volunteer work in shelters and on helplines. Then, as part of my master's degree work, I started the *Known to the Victim* blog, devoted to cases where, as the title suggests, people were killed by those they knew.

Intentionally seeking out cases like my mother's isn't easy. It's a reminder of how she died, but also a reminder of the injustice and the commonplaceness of that injustice. My mother's story should be unique in its horror, and it is not. Her killer should be unique in his monstrosity, and he is not. They are just two actors playing out an age-old drama, where one partner leaves a relationship and the other kills them for it.

My coverage of one Toronto case gained me a guest spot on a Canadian true crime show, where the host convinced me to turn my blog into a podcast, which I did. I won't say the podcast is a runaway success. Podcasts can fill arenas with live shows, and I'm in a library, an hour from where I now live in Grand Forks. But in the last six months, I've been on over a dozen lists of up-and-coming podcasts, with my numbers increasing exponentially month by month. These days, I divide my time between the podcast and part-time doctorate studies, where my thesis is on how familial factors impact the reporting of domestic violence.

I've been doing live shows across Ontario for about a year now. Not many, but it's a huge and exciting step. The people that attend are here to see *me*. To listen to *me*, Amy Gibson. That's both exhilarating and daunting.

I stand behind the podium and introduce myself, thank everyone for coming and thank them for their support, hoping they can see how much I truly appreciate it. Then I start the presentation.

“This was my mother,” I say as her photo fills the large screen behind me. “Kimberly Louise Gibson. Lawyer, daughter, mother, world’s best brownie baker, world’s worst driver, world’s biggest Scrabble cheat.”

A soft round of polite laughter.

“She died on October 2, 2015, while I was in my second year of college. Strangled to death. Murdered.”

I walk beside the big screen, wireless mic in hand. “Next, I should explain how I singlehandedly tracked down her killer and how that launched my podcast, right? That’s not what happened. The police arrested my mother’s killer the next day. Should I say that the case was tossed out on a technicality, and I found the evidence they needed to convict him? Nope, that didn’t happen, either. My mother’s killer was tried and convicted and sentenced to life in prison. I did nothing to find my mother’s killer or bring him to justice. The system worked exactly as it should.”

I look out at the crowd, allowing a beat before saying, “But that doesn’t change the most important thing: that my mother is dead. That she was murdered by someone she knew.”

I pace the stage, still talking. “I did nothing to help catch her killer, so maybe I started the podcast out of guilt. I failed to see the danger signs, and *Known to the Victim* is my attempt to keep others from making that mistake. But it isn’t that simple, either.”

I turn back to the audience. “I started *Known to the Victim* for a thousand reasons, all of them about my mother and what happened to her. Were there more things Mom could have done? Warning signs she missed? Things I could have done? Signs I missed?” I shrug. “I don’t know. You can decide that. I can tell you this much—when you stand in my shoes, everyone

judges what you did, the choices you made, and no one judges them as much as you. My mother was murdered by a man she went on three dates with.”

I press the remote in my hand. Another picture fills the screen. It’s a man in his early fifties, heavysset, broad shouldered, with a lazy left eye. A murmur goes through the audience. A few women relax. See, they wouldn’t have made the mistake my mother did. They can *tell* this man is trouble.

“William Levy,” I say. “Twice divorced. At twenty, he spent a year in prison for assault. Got out, joined the army for a few years, then went into private security and finally became a long-distance trucker.”

I turn to the screen. “Bill is the reason my mother’s killer was caught. He noticed a man parked near a pond, taking something from his trunk. Bill snapped photos of the man and his license plate. Then he called the police. He showed up for court even when it could have cost him his job. I exchange Christmas cards with Bill and his wife, and whenever he comes through this way, we go for coffee. He’s a good man, and I owe him so much.”

I click to the next photo, of a man in his early forties, smiling and pleasantly handsome. “This is Grant White. College professor. Married his high school sweetheart, who died of cancer a decade later, leaving him a widower with two young children.” I look out at the audience. “This is my mother’s killer.”

I turn away from the photo as fast as I can, pretending to casually stroll across the stage. “My mother didn’t meet White in a bar. She didn’t meet him online. They were introduced. He was friends with a longtime client of hers. Afterward, that client told police the charges against White were a terrible

misunderstanding, that clearly something happened, a tragic accident, and White panicked and tried to dispose of my mom's body. When she—yes, the client was a woman—discovered that White had strangled my mother, she declared it rough sex gone wrong. When she discovered my mother had reported White for stalking her, she declared my mother had always been—I air-quote—“‘a little high-strung.’ White was upset over the breakup and only trying to get Mom back, and Mom overreacted, and yes, it obviously looked bad, in light of her death, but it had to be a misunderstanding . . . or maybe my mother did something that sent him over the edge, because Grant White was not that kind of man.”

I turn to the next slide, which shows a quartet of official complaint reports, the victims' names and all identifying information redacted. “These are four students White taught in college. They all accused him of unwanted sexual advances. He lost two jobs as a result, but as part of the negotiations, the details were not on his employment record, which means they weren't passed on to future employers. If four women filed complaints, studies suggest there would have been more who didn't. Two ex-girlfriends also testified at his trial that he had threatened them. One had even taken out a restraining order.”

I turn to the audience, and I focus on the ones whose eyes are on me, those who nod, react, give me their full attention. There will always be some who fuss or play with their phones, but I'm beginning to recognize that implies discomfort more than boredom. I let them have their quiet moment, unobserved, while I shore up my confidence with the others.

“The warning signs were there,” I continue. “My mother saw them by the third date. White called her during work hours

when she'd asked him not to. He wanted to talk about their future even after she said it made her uncomfortable. He grumbled when they couldn't go out one night because she had plans with me. After that last one, she ended things, and I made her promise to be careful, to stay away from White, and to use her home-security system."

My throat seizes with old rage and grief, but I push on. "She did all that. When he wouldn't stop calling and showed up at her work twice, she also reported him. She saved troubling messages and was consulting with a lawyer on next steps. That's when White grabbed her in the secured-entry parking garage of her law firm. At eight in the morning. In broad daylight."

I flip to the next slide. It's my mother's headstone. "My mom did all the right things. Had she known of this man's past, though—if she'd had any way to access that, if the police had found the previous restraining order—she'd have done more than just consult a lawyer."

I look out at the audience and pause. "White was a serial predator, and it was only a matter of time before he killed someone. That someone happened to be my mother. This is why I started *Known to the Victim*. Predators rarely *look* like predators. Many of them are men, like White, who will have their friends swearing—in all sincerity—that there's been a mistake, that the woman is to blame. There will be a pattern of behavior—"

"Like with your brother," a voice calls from the audience.

I go still as I squint, trying to pinpoint the speaker. A woman stands. She's a few rows from the front, and my mind immediately catalogs everything I can see about her. There are many ways my mother's murder changed my life, and this is one of

them: I am perpetually hyperaware of threats. Sometimes, I feel like my brain is one of those cybernetic eyes in science fiction movies, scanning even the most minor potential threat and spitting out the data, just in case I should ever need to make a police report.

Is this healthy? Probably not, though it has helped with my podcast. I notice everything, and I analyze and store the data. In this moment, I take in this woman. She's in her early forties, brown hair past her shoulders, glasses so unfashionable they might be coming back *into* fashion. About five foot three, a hundred and thirty pounds—though it's hard to tell in the oversized sweater she's wearing. She's in the fourth row, third seat from the middle aisle.

“Your brother is Oliver Harding, yes?” she calls.

“He's my half brother, actually,” I say. “Ten years my senior. We have different mothers.” Ever since *Known to the Victim* started seeing a modicum of success, I began clarifying that, because more than one person had made the connection and offered condolences to Oliver on the murder of his mother.

“Oliver Harding,” the woman continues, “whose first wife died under mysterious circumstances.”

There's a murmur in the audience, a shift of discomfort. My heart picks up speed, but I force myself not to jump into defense mode. Bigger names in podcasting have warned me about this. It's the reason I keep my online comment section moderated—always a good idea when you're public about a personal tragedy—but the trolls know they can have their say at a live show.

“Oliver's college *girlfriend* died by suicide,” I say calmly. “It's one reason . . .” I swallow. “I fell into a pit after my mother

died. Oliver hauled me out, and that's one of the reasons. He knew the danger signs for suicide from personal experience. He also knew what it was like to lose someone and feel as if he hadn't been there for them. I was at university when my mother was killed. He was in the US with friends when his girlfriend died."

If I expected that to shame the woman to silence, it proves I don't have nearly enough experience with trolls. She plows on as if I haven't opened my mouth.

"Then there was his second wife, who drowned under equally suspicious circumstances."

"Laura was his first and only wife," I say with all the calm I can muster. "She drowned three years ago while they were out boating."

My words send another rumble through the audience, followed by the hiss of people whispering to their neighbors. I might stiffen at that, but I get it, too. Laura's death was a classic suspicious death, but the circumstances meant that the police didn't do more than half-heartedly investigate, mostly because they didn't want to be accused of failing to do so. Witnesses saw Laura dive off the bow to swim, my brother at the stern. They heard her teasing him about not joining her. Then they saw her duck underwater . . . and not come up, while my brother was still visible on the boat.

I could say all that, but my producer has taught me not to feed the trolls.

"If you're interested," I say, keeping my voice even, "it was fully reported in the local papers."

"*Fully* reported?"

I maintain eye contact with her. "Yes."

“And what about his new girlfriend?” the woman continues. “What about her accusations against him?”

My whole body tenses, and I don’t have time to school my features. “Accusations?”

Stop feeding the trolls, Amy!

“I don’t know what you mean,” I continue, “but since you seem to have concerns, maybe you should speak to the police.”

I’m sorry, Oliver. That’s a shitty thing to say.

On the other hand, I know it’s exactly what he’d want me to say. After Laura died, before all the facts came out, there were plenty of whispers. Rich guy’s wife disappears while they were boating? Convenient . . .

At the time, I’d just started my podcast, and I had so few listeners that no one asked me about it, but Oliver said that if they did, I should refer them to the police. Don’t defend him. That only makes things worse. Steer people in the proper direction for answers.

“Oh, there’s no need to tell the cops.” The woman’s lips twist in a smirk. “They already know. That’s why your brother is sitting in the Grand Forks police station right now, answering their questions.”

I blink. She’s lying. She must be.

But what if she’s not? What if something’s happened, an argument between Oliver and Martine that turned into . . . I don’t even know what.

Something *could* have happened, and Oliver *could* be answering questions at the police station, and if I deny it—without being certain—then I am no better than every bystander I talk about in my podcasts, the people who denied that their friend, sister, brother, child, parent was a predator.

“If something has happened,” I say slowly as I bite back the urge to qualify it as a misunderstanding. *I’m sorry, Oliver. I’m so sorry.* “Then I’m sure I’ll hear about it later. Right now . . .” I look straight at her again. “Was there a question in that comment?”

The woman fixes her gaze on me, defiant. “I just thought everyone should know.”

I stand there, channeling Mom in the courtroom, the way she sometimes paused after a witness had spoken, as if waiting for them to say more, as if whatever they’d said didn’t make sense, so clearly couldn’t be *all* they’d meant to say, and she’d hate to cut them off.

I wait, my gaze on the woman, and eventually, she shifts, as if uncomfortable.

I wait to the count of five, then move my gaze from the woman.

“All right then,” I say. “Now, where were we . . . ? Right.” I click the presentation slide. “Let’s talk about gaslighting. As you may know, the term was popularized by this 1944 film.” I wave at the screen. “*Gaslight*. In it . . .”

TWO

An hour later, I'm in the parking lot, and I'm shaking. I have my windows rolled up despite the warm May night. When I notice a trio of women watching, I recognize them from the show and wave my hand in farewell. Then I start my car and back out.

I did well. That's what everyone said, from the guests who'd come up to me afterward to the librarians who'd been watching from the dressing room.

You handled that so well.

I don't know what that woman thought she was doing.

Some people . . .

After the show finished, I'd gone to the seat I'd noted earlier—fourth row, third from the center aisle—and marked

down the number. 4J. The woman herself was long gone, having left after she interrupted my show.

Why had she done it? I couldn't wrap my head around that. It was a sold-out show, meaning she'd bought her ticket well in advance with the intention of doing this.

Was she an old friend of Laura's? She seemed about the right age. Maybe she was a friend who'd been furious when the police hadn't pressed charges. But they'd investigated and found no reason to believe Oliver had done anything wrong.

The boat trip had been Laura's idea. Swimming off the side was her idea, too—she always insisted on it, and Oliver always worried that swimming in such open water wasn't safe. A group of men fishing a bit away had spotted an attractive woman in a bikini balanced on the bow of a boat, and two had picked up binoculars to watch. They saw Laura dive in while Oliver stayed at the stern, well out of reach. They'd then seen her swimming and calling back to Oliver, laughing and teasing before ducking under the water. When Laura didn't resurface in a few minutes, Oliver frantically flagged them down.

The case was so cut-and-dried that even tabloid media only lured people in with clickbait headlines before acknowledging that it'd been a tragic accident.

There will still be people convinced that Oliver got away with murder. That obviously includes the woman who accused him tonight. And she'd thrown in Oliver's college girlfriend had died, for extra ammo.

Oliver told me about Greta shortly after we connected, when he confessed how worried he'd been that I might have been suicidal myself. Oliver and Greta had been students together in Vancouver. He'd known she was struggling with the pressures

of school and parental expectations, but he hadn't realized how bad it'd gotten until it was too late. While he'd been in Seattle with friends, she'd downed her whole bottle of antidepressants. He will never forgive himself for not being there that weekend.

And Martine?

The troll hadn't even said Martine's name; she'd just thrown out a wild accusation about Oliver's girlfriend filing a complaint with the police.

Oliver has been seeing Martine for six months now. He's wild about her, and what I've seen of her, I really like. She's quiet, apparently more like Greta than Laura. She's smart and sweet and good for him, encouraging him to step off the corporate treadmill, slow down and breathe.

I can't imagine Oliver doing something to Martine. He is frustratingly even-tempered, and she is so quiet I have to lean in to hear what she's saying. No fight between them would have escalated to a screaming match that brought the police.

Still, having spent my adult life studying intimate partner abuse, I know I can never say with absolute certainty that someone is incapable of it. Just because Oliver has never been that way toward or in front of me does not mean I can absolve him of guilt or even suspicion.

What I need to do now is speak to Oliver. Warn him in case he's in danger from this woman. Another person might argue she was just some troll causing trouble, that she's hardly going to show up on his doorstep tonight with a gun. But anyone who thinks that hasn't had a loved one murdered by a stalker. And anyone who thinks that doesn't listen to my podcast. Even if it's an overreaction, I don't ever want to be looking back wishing I'd warned him sooner.

I call Oliver's number over Bluetooth, and my brain mentally adds a hatch to this week's tally: the number of times I've contacted Oliver versus the number of times he's contacted me. Yes, I keep track, and I like my tally to be always just slightly lower than his. He's my only family, and I am terrified—*terrified*—of clinging too tight. Terrified of losing him and terrified of relying on him so much that I suffocate him. I measure everything, and I know that's not healthy, but it keeps me calm and steady.

I know I am not a burden in any way—Oliver reaches out more often than I do. He invites me out more often than I invite him. Despite his offers, I don't work for his corporation. I no longer live in his guesthouse. I don't even accept the money transfers he sends when I have an unexpected expense.

The trust fund from my mother's estate covers tuition and rent while I slowly finish my doctorate. Right now, with advertising and promotion—and paying Raven, my producer, her cut—I'm not exactly reeling in millions with my podcast, but I have started clearing a very low four figures a month, which covers daily expenses and allows for some savings. Even if my growth pattern slows, I predict being able to take care of expenses and rent in a few months. So, in other words, I'm doing just fine financially.

I turn onto the highway as the phone rings three times before going to Oliver's voice mail.

"Hey," I say. "It's me. Had a weird thing happen at the show tonight, and I'd like to talk to you about it."

I sign off and then check the car clock. It's nine thirty. Not late enough for him to be in bed, but late enough that I won't have caught him working late.

Could he be out with Martine? No, I remember her mentioning a Tuesday book club, because I've been trying to work up the nerve to ask whether they take new members.

So why do my fingers itch to hit the Redial button?

I switch lanes and go to turn on a podcast, but only drum my fingers against the wheel instead, as I think about my own podcast and whether I'll need to address tonight's interruption, maybe with a note on my website. My fingers move to the screen to place another call, this one to Raven Kwan, my producer. She's on the West Coast, so it isn't too late. I should also warn her what happened.

Except if I phone her, I might miss Oliver's return call.

I'll email Raven later instead. A few minutes pass. Oliver still doesn't call back.

I mentally replay my message to him and curse myself. I made it sound as if I just needed to vent or cry on his shoulder. If I were him, I'd quietly pretend I didn't get that message until morning.

I call him.

"Hey, it's me again," I begin when I get his voicemail for a second time. "The short version is that a woman interrupted my show to ask about Laura, and she seemed a bit unhinged. I wanted you to know right away."

I sign off again and disconnect.

He doesn't call back.

After I get home, I text Oliver the woman's description, acting as if I'd just forgotten to mention it in the call. I write a note on everything I remember about the woman: her seat number, her age and appearance and exactly what she said. Then I make

myself popcorn and load up a streaming show on my laptop . . . watching exactly twenty minutes of it and remembering not a single scene because I spend more time watching the status of that text.

Unread.

Maybe Oliver has an early morning meeting and is already in bed. He sometimes does that. Martine also could have stopped by after book club, and maybe they're in bed and *not* sleeping.

It's fine. Drop it, Amy. Seriously, drop it.

But I don't drop it. I look up the number of the Grand Forks police department and script what I'd say if I called.

Hi, so, uh, I have reason to believe my brother may have been brought in for questioning, at his girlfriend's behest . . . No? He's not there? . . . Am I concerned about her safety? Why, no. Not at all. Why do you ask?

Yeah . . . I can't call.

Instead, I look up Martine's number, and again I script what I could say.

Hey, Martine. It's Amy. Weird question, but have you and Oliver had a fight lately? Possibly one that could have led to you calling the police and him being taken in for questioning?

I groan. I have to stop this. There is nothing I can do that won't make me seem as if I need more therapy, nothing I can say that won't make trouble for my brother.

Oliver is fine.

Everything is fine.

Go to bed, Amy.

I don't go to bed.