

[Snap Judgement intro]

**Glynn:** Hey, Snappers. We know you enjoy your storytelling in the bright light of day, but you also like your storytelling crafted in the dark of night, this is for you. Because right now we're hiring two freelance stories scouts for our incredible sister show, Spooked. In our efforts to bring you more supernatural stories from around the globe, Spooked is searching for someone who has lived in or has deep cultural knowledge of the Caribbean or the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the American South, Southeast Asia, or West Africa. This amazing story scout will find and pitch original first-person stories, will work closely with the Spooked team and work closely with me. Is this person you? Do you know someone who might be interested? For more information, go to [snapjudgment.org/careers](http://snapjudgment.org/careers).

[music]

**Glynn:** Every year, right around the start of the holidays, we have a ritual. I tell my kids, "Alright, kids, we're off to Target to pick one of those prefab Christmas trees they've gotten the box there. And you don't have to worry, it comes already decorated and everything. But they start screaming, bloody murder. "No! no! You can't get a fake tree!" "What do you mean fake? I just spray a bottle some of that pine smell stuff aroma, it's just like the real thing. No needles all over the floor." "You can't! It's not right. We'll be right back. There's no such thing as a pre-decorated tree."

[music]

**Glynn:** We holler, argue, all the way to the Christmas tree lot, where they run about, they pick up the perfect "real tree, daddy." And they insist I pay some burly fellow an enormous sum of money in cash, cards not accepted. What's that about? And we haul this treasure back to the house. We drape it in lights and ornaments and ribbons while drinking eggnog. And they play *Last Christmas* on the radio again and again and again, attempting to drive me out of my mind. And then magically, in the midst of our household cacophony, a Christmas miracle. Where once stood just a piece of wood, now a glorious bejeweled tree emerges more magnificent than ever.

Someone's baking cookies. A glass of wine has spirited itself into my hand, I'm giggling. They're digging around for a board game, and that scent, not from aerosol can, but from a tree. Pine-scented wonder, permeating the room in good cheer, such heartwarming memories with the people I love, and sitting under the brightly lit branches. Watching my children as they each in turn land on Park Place and boardwalk with my hotels on it, I truly wouldn't have it any other way.

Rudolph has worked his spell once more, but I've recently learned that is not exactly magic. And it certainly isn't reindeer that make all of this possible.

You see, at the North Pole, as in life, somebody's got to do the dirty work. So today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present *The Christmas Tree Mafia*. Wise guy, St. Nick, and an offer you cannot refuse. My name is Glynn Washington. Sure, deck the halls, but look over your shoulder, because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[music]

**Glynn:** It's a chilly New York City afternoon. A few weeks before Christmas, the producer, Ilana Strauss, sits inside a trailer in the middle of a Christmas tree lot. Snappers, this is not just any Christmas tree lot. It's the Rolls Royce, Eartha Kitt *Santa Baby* blinged out Christmas tree lot. Full of elves running about with good cheer. And the manager, the hardboiled New Yorker with a grayed beard and a fedora, put between Ilana's interview and customers coming up to the window to buy trees. St. Tommy is making a cup of coffee and his phone keeps ringing. And, yes, for this story, there may be a bit of explicit language. But ho! Ho! Ho! This is a family show, not to worry. Snap Judgement.

**Big Scott:** Yeah, hello, this is Scott, SoHo Trees here. Okay, why don't you like the tree? That's a horrible thing to say, ripped off? Why do you mean ripped? You've got a gorgeous tree. \$130 is not much for a nice tree in Manhattan, I'll tell you. That's average.

**Ilana:** In Manhattan, there's this lot just packed with Christmas trees. There's an RV in the middle of it, where there's this guy on the phone.

**Big Scott:** It's okay. Don't worry, nobody wants your money. You can have it back.

**Ilana:** That's Scott Lechner.

**Little Scott:** Yeah, she's a fucking asshole. What was her problem?

Big

**Scott:** That's nothing. You have to deal with it. It's part of the game.

**Ilana:** And in this game, Scott's a legend.

**Big Scott:** We're talking trees.

[Christmas music plays]

**Big Scott:** It's Christmas. We're talking trees. Look at my baby.

My name is Scott Lechner, and I'm the manager at SoHo Trees flagship location at Varick and Sixth Avenue, Manhattan.

[chainsaw runs]

[music]

**Ilana:** Scott's the short guy. He's got a grizzled mustache. He's almost always wearing a fedora. And he runs the most exclusive Christmas tree stand in Manhattan.

**Male Reporter:** A vendor in SoHo is selling what is likely the city's most expensive trees, brace yourself. \$6,500 a pop.

**Female Reporter:** And celebrity shop all the time.

**Big Scott:** Carmen Electra, the whole staff of *Million Dollar Listings*, De Niro family, all of them.

**Ilana:** And Scott will do pretty much anything to keep customers happy.

**Big Scott:** Oh, we did have a gentleman two years ago, here before last, who wanted 40 different Christmas trees in assorted sizes, all hung upside down and decorated from the ceiling of his loft.

[music]

**Ilana:** This tiny piece of Christmas magic is actually part of a long and dangerous tango between Scott and the New York Mafia. The stand, and quite possibly Scott's life, all came down to this one decision. One choice between light and dark. And to understand that choice, we got to go back to Brooklyn in the 1980s.

[disco music]

**Ilana:** How do you get started selling Christmas trees?

**Big Scott:** Me and some of my friends were absolutely thug bound. You know what I mean? We were going to be thugs and crooks.

**Ilana:** For a while, Scott rolled around in a Cadillac, selling watches. And then, he stumbled into this thing, that would completely change his life.

**Big Scott:** Some friends of ours had purchased a bowling alley, and they said, "Why don't you put some Christmas trees in front of a bowling alley and sell it to our customers?" But we didn't, we instead opened at a different location.

**Ilana:** He opened up a stand on the street and he started selling Christmas trees. Scott did what other street businesses did. He paid the mafia tax. Scott said in his neighborhood, lots of businesses either paid off the mob or were being run by them. The mob's Christmas tree environment was so well known, that the capo a rumor to control the Christmas tree industry, he was nicknamed Piney.

**Big Scott:** We didn't know what we were getting into. We didn't know if it was a lucrative business, if it was a good business, if it wasn't-- [crosstalk]

**Ilana:** Scott didn't know how things were going to turn out. But he knew he had to hire people he trusted. So, one of Scott's first employees was this guy called Little Scott.

**Little Scott:** Because I started when I was a kid, he was known as Big Scott and I was known as Little Scott.

**Ilana:** They grew up in Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn.

**Little Scott:** Well, the funny thing is, is that I'm 6 feet and he was, I think, on his best day 5'6", 5'7".

**Ilana:** So, Little Scott was the muscle and Big Scott was the brains and they had this really short amount of time to actually make it during Christmas tree season.

**Little Scott:** You're one snowstorm away, and one bad rain event for the week away from working all month to break even.

**Ilana:** How much they made during these few weeks determined how they live the rest of the year. So, they could not leave trees unguarded at night, because if they did, other stands would just rob them.

**Little Scott:** It's just the business. It's a cutthroat business. You've got to make all of your money in a very small window.

**Big Scott:** And I did many a nightshift where I was on duty by myself. It was only me and a hatchet. Some really disgusting riffraff out there

**Little Scott:** One year, our night guy fell asleep, and he woke up and we were light 40 trees.

**Ilana:** Not only that, people used to like, let each other's trees on fire, right?

**Little Scott:** Oh, yeah. And piss, that was a big one too. They got like a spray thing, and they walked by and sprayed someone's whole thing of trees with urine. Pungent urine.

**Ilana:** Yeah. No one's going to buy a Christmas tree that smells like that. Normally with sabotage, people try to be discreet. But one day, it just gets straight up insulting. Big Scott's at the stand with his pal, Joe, and his employee, Besam.

**Little Scott:** These guys just kind of walk over and take a tree and just start putting it onto their van or whatever they were doing.

**Ilana:** Scott's guys run out and they start yelling, and then the other guys start yelling. And then, it gets physical.

**Little Scott:** And Joe just goes into full taekwondo mode and [mimics punches] there were like two or three of them, just takes them out in two seconds, and Besam grabs a saw and put it right to one guy's neck on the floor and says, "You move, I'm going to cut your head off." And then, a few of the other guys subdued them.

**Ilana:** After this, the guys wanted more. It wasn't just about surviving anymore, they wanted to be big.

**Little Scott:** We weren't looking to hurt anybody, but we were expanding. We were expanding exponentially and threatening everyone around us.

**Ilana:** Every Christmas, Scott's Christmas Tree Stands were growing all over Brooklyn. Everybody in the neighborhood was buying trees from Scott, including the mafia.

**Little Scott:** We used to love when the connected guys came because they would spend tons of money. They give you a \$20 tip for just giving them rope. You saw a pinkie ring, "Hey, this is good."

**Ilana:** With each new lot, Scott got bolder and he started to think he could get away with pretty much anything. So, he set up shop right down the street from this other Christmas tree stand. And this stand was run by an out-of-town sheriff from Missouri.

**Little Scott:** And yes, we were trying to hurt our competitor.

**Ilana:** They were trying to drive them out of business. The Missouri Sheriff didn't like that, obviously. So right away, the sheriff's people started robbing Scott. One night they stole thousands of dollars worth of trees.

**Little Scott:** It was almost like being in a war, like, "What are they going to do to us now?" "What are we going to do to them?"

**Ilana:** One day, Scott sitting in a trailer, probably smoking a cigarette wearing his fedora, and the Missouri Sheriff shows up outside and starts yelling.

**Big Scott:** "I'm going to get you. I'm going to rip you into pieces with my bare fucking hands. I ain't going [unintelligible [00:12:44]]."

**Ilana:** Scott refuses to cop out. So, the sheriff storms off. And then, Scott hears him come right up to the trailer door. The Missouri Sheriff pulls out his axe and he hacks it through the front door of Scott's trailer.

**Big Scott:** He says, "The next one's going through your fucking head when I get to you." I was like, "Oh, my God!" Me and six of my friends couldn't have taken this guy. We needed artillery to put him down, that's how scary he was. It was all his attitude and he's a sheriff. He was a bona fide sheriff.

**Little Scott:** So, the guy lost it and he jumped in his white pickup truck.

**Ilana:** And he drives screaming to 30 of Scott's trees. It crashes through a bunch of wooden horses and he keeps driving around Scott's lot. Little Scott is standing close by.

**Little Scott:** I saw that. I witnessed it. I could see him behind the wheel of his truck. And one of the guys had to dive out of the way of the truck.

**Ilana:** Then, the sheriff heads straight for the Christmas tree booth, and he just demolishes it.

**Little Scott:** And ran them over and popped his tire and drove away like a maniac.

**Big Scott:** Yeah, they could have killed somebody and they didn't mind that they had. At that point is when action had to be taken.

**Ilana:** All right, so things are getting way out of control, and Scott needed to do something. Every year, he'd been paying the mafia tax and now he needed to call in the favor.

What did you do?

**Big Scott:** I instructed some people to let them know that they had to leave town tonight, that tomorrow wouldn't be accepted. And if they were in town by tomorrow night, nobody would find them.

**Little Scott:** Oh, shit. We've got our trees coming. [double knock]

**Big Scott:** Oh, what a scare.

[indistinct chatter]

**Big Scott:** Hi. Hey, how are you?

[crosstalk]

**Big Scott:** Good. [crosstalk] -show you some nobles? Did you see them open and how magnificent they are? Please do enjoy it. And have the most wonderful Christmas-- [crosstalk] Thanks.

The biggest problems we had were turf wars. Street fighting over areas that I felt we deserved, that we had properly annexed, and the others didn't. So there, they helped me.

**Ilana:** The help wasn't free, of course. Scott called in a favor, and favors have debts. The Christmas Tree Mafia wanted to know what Scott could do for them.

**Big Scott:** I'm half Hebrew by birth, so they really liked that because in their lexicon, that means I'm going [unintelligible 00:15:21].

**Ilana:** To the boys.

**Big Scott:** I was Jewboy. "You're a Jewboy--." Of course, I [unintelligible 00:15:33] say, I wasn't a wise guy. "Are you good with numbers, Jewboy?" I'd be like, "Uh-huh." "Are you very good with numbers, Jewboy?" "Uh-huh."

**Ilana:** In the offseason, when he wasn't selling Christmas trees, Scott started working for them as a pit boss at their casino. Between that and the trees, his relationship with the mob deepened. They started paying him visits, asking questions.

**Big Scott:** I got severely interviewed by a few of them to see if I was going to be loyal and good and what they wanted, and I passed those tests.

**Ilana:** Scott wasn't sure why they were questioning him. He didn't know they were making big plans for him. But what are you going to do? Say no to the mafia?

All right. So, it was the early 90s and New York started booming. Giuliani was mayor and more and more rich people started moving into the city. People who could afford to pay big bucks for Christmas trees. So, for the first time, Scott realizes he's got this opportunity to be this big shot that he's always wanted to be. He ventured outside of Brooklyn and started scouting Manhattan. Big Scott called Little Scott from SoHo.

**Little Scott:** I remember him calling me up and telling me that he goes, "I found a great location." I said, "Where is it?" He said, "Sixth Avenue and Spring Street." I said, "That's a shithole."

**Ilana:** But Scott bet on the right neighborhood. SoHo exploded. Business was going well, Scott started to open up more locations. He had to hire more workers.

**Russ:** When I met Scott, literally all I had was a backpack. That's it. I didn't own anything else. There was nothing else for me. I spent a long time just being a vagabond, traveling around doing nothing.

**Ilana:** That's Russ.

**Russ:** I was in a really bad place when I started working there. A really, really bad place. And a lot of stuff was going on. I was actually homeless at the time.

**Ilana:** Russ saw this posting on Craigslist about this Christmas tree gig. And he went to meet Scott in Scott's apartment on the Lower East Side.

**Russ:** He's a very short person. He was maybe 5'7", and absolutely perfect white teeth. The smile, he had this very open smile, where you could see his white teeth and he would tilt his head a certain way. He always wore a wide-brimmed hat, and this hat was absolutely iconic.

**Ilana:** There were a bunch of other people in the apartment, all around Scott. They all wanted jobs.

**Big Scott:** Mountain climbers, hikers, world travelers mixed in with actors and actresses that are in between gigs. They've got to make money and they're not baristas because everyone else is a barista.

**Little Scott:** And then also a lot of people who couldn't hold regular employment. I mean, we had some off the wall people that work for us. And, of course, the crazier they were, they come back to work the following year. The crazy ones always wanted to come back. And we didn't care your background as long as you are a hard worker, except vegans. I hated hiring vegans.

**Ilana:** Scott really like to sell the crowd on this Christmas tree job. He gave them this bigger-than-life speech.

**Russ:** We're New York City treemen, we're going to have the tradition. We're going to stand there in the cold and not give a fuck because we're New York City treemen, and New York City treemen don't get cold. And we have this tradition to hold up. Not just for us, but for the city. From the second he started speaking, I had to do it. I had to try to do it and I was like, "So, I have the job?" And he's like, "Yes." [chuckles] And that was it.

**Ilana:** Russ and the other workers, they show up to work their first day. It's this brisk fall morning and 30 workers find the street.

**Russ:** You showed up at 6:00 AM, and you worked until you were done. Then, we're just told that we have two days to build seven Christmas tree stands, and we better get start hammering.

**Ilana:** They create these elaborate Winter Wonderland stands at seven different locations. There are red ribbons, wreaths, candy canes, ornaments, lights everywhere. The whole shebang. You're not in New York anymore. You're in the North Pole.

**Russ:** During the day, it's madness. There's 30 people screaming, and I'm screaming at the guys.

**Ilana:** They built these cozy cottage tents lined with Christmas lights and trinkets. Everything's lit with this warm light.

**Russ:** And then, you hear the chainsaws going and the people moving. It's almost like there's so much noise, there's no time to think. And then, there will just be quietness because we're just surrounded by trees.

**Ilana:** And then, there's the smell.

**Russ:** You just smell of different types of pine trees. [chuckles] Yes, some pine trees smell like lemons. [laughs]

**Ilana:** There's this quiet bliss in the trees and the smell of piney lemons wafting by, all smack in the middle of Manhattan. That means no one's trying to steal Scott's trees or throw hatchets at his head. And no one's running around spraying urine. It means that what Scott's doing, it's working.

Ah, the sights of Christmas in New York, a 10-foot tree carted through the busy streets of SoHo.

The business grows to 15 locations in four of the five boroughs, and Scott makes bank. This Christmas tree industry in New York, it's a half a billion-dollar industry all in only a couple months a year. He's not just selling to mobsters. Now, he's also selling to the legitimately wealthy, like the Queen of Christmas herself.

[Mariah Carey's *All I Want for Christmas is You*]

**Big Scott:** Mariah Carey, I was calling her Mary.

**Russ:** Obviously, everybody knows Mariah Carey's our customer.

**Big Scott:** And she said, "What? My name's Mariah." I said, "Mary, come over here." I gave her a couple of shots. and she was like, "Eh, you can call me anything."

**Ilana:** His new customers like Mariah Carey and Bradley Cooper and Kelly Ripa, they can afford to pay premium prices for premium product.

**Russ:** Scott was literally the first person probably in the world to get more than \$100 for Christmas tree.

**Scott:** What we have here is some beautiful Canadian balsams. These are from Antigonish Nova Scotia, one of God's natural balsam treasure areas that grow the most gorgeous balsam in existence as you can see.

**Russ:** It's like how Tiffany sell a bracelet. You know it's the best silver in the world. You know it's the best designers in the world.

**Little Scott:** We used to call him the Pontiff of SoHo.

**Big Scott:** I am the Pontiff of SoHo.

**Ilana:** The Pontiff along with his cast of Merry Men.

**Big Scott:** Let's just shake it out, make sure it's good.

**Little Scott:** Everyone else that does what we do, mimics what we started. He set the rules in Manhattan.

**Ilana:** But as the Pontiff of SoHo, Scott's success soon attracts unwanted attention from the boys.

**Little Scott:** Scott calls me up and he goes, "Hey, listen, we may have a little bit of a problem."

**Glynn:** When Snap Judgement returns, Scott gets an offer that he cannot refuse. Stay tuned.

[music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to the Christmas Tree Mafia episode. And you just heard Scott, Scott's on the top of the Christmas tree market with Mariah Carey by his side, pouring shots. But you can only stay so high for so long before the troubles start to drag you down. And Scott just got a message from the boys. Now, this story does contain explicit language, sensitive listeners are advised.

**Little Scott:** Scott calls me up and he goes, "Hey, listen, we may have a little bit of a problem."

**Ilana:** What happens is there's this guy working on the Christmas lot. We're not going to use his real name. We'll say John Smith. John tells Scott this guy, Carmine, came to their standard in SoHo, with a little bit of trouble and a whole lot of muscle. And he's got a message for Scott.

**Little Scott:** He said that this is his territory and if we want to sell here, we got to give him \$2,000. If we don't give him \$2,000, we're going to get shut down or our stuffs going to get destroyed. I said, "All right. You tell Carmine to meet me here tonight at 10 o'clock and I'll have his two grand."

**Ilana:** So that night, Little Scott meets this guy, Carmine, in a nearby bar.

**Little Scott:** And this guy's like right out of Central Casting. He's got the three-quarter leather coat, he's got this, he's got that. He goes, "I'm Carmine. This is my neighborhood." Meanwhile, the guy is just like 35 years old. If Carmine is going to run a neighborhood, you expect a 55-year-old guy to walk in. My life growing up on the streets is I know how to smell bullshit in 30 seconds, because I grew up in an extremely tough neighborhood with extremely tough people. So, I knew that there's something wasn't right here. I said, "Well, I got a problem. I'm not going to pay you. I'm not going to give you any money and nothing's going to happen, and you're not going to do anything." And he goes, "You know, my gang--" I said, "Well," and I pulled out my shield, and I said, "Well, I'm in a gang too."

**Ilana:** Oh, yeah, by the way, Little Scott's job, not during Christmas season, he's a New York City cop. He shows Carmine his badge.

**Little Scott:** “There's about 50,000 of us. We all wear blue. And you're going to go meet all of them right now, because I'm going to arrest you.” And the guy starts breaking down hysterical crying. “Oh, no. He made me do it. It's him. I'm an actor. What do you--” John Smith and him were acting buddies. They concocted this whole plan to shake us down for two grand, thinking that we would fall for it. So instead, Carmine and John Smith might have gotten a little backhand therapy and never worked for us again.

**Ilana:** These guys weren't the real deal. Well, Scott knew that the actual mafia was much scarier.

Remember all those tests, all that questioning when Scott was in Brooklyn? Well, one day the mafia approached him with an offer. One of those offers that could change everything for Scott and his Christmas tree stands.

**Big Scott:** They wanted to capture the entire five-borough New York City Christmas tree distribution business, and they wanted me to lead it. They told me, “Nobody will ever stand in your way.”

**Ilana:** Up to that point, Scott had paid the Christmas tree mafia tax, and they provided him with protection. And that was true for lots of Christmas tree stands in the city. But now, the mafia was telling him, he could take all of these stands, in Staten Island, Queens, Bronx, trees on all the corners, trees in the parking lots. They could all be his. They say--

**Big Scott:** “We assure you, Scott, you'll run them all, you'll make about 10 times what you earn now,” which is a young, low-, middle-class guy striving, was very appealing to me. The power that I would have had behind me was very appealing to my Napoleonic ego.

**Little Scott:** And he wanted to be the biggest Christmas tree seller in the city.

**Ilana:** If he took them up on the offer, Scott would have more power than he could ever imagine. So, he imagined it.

**Big Scott:** My ego on one shoulder, you see the cartoons, there's a good angel and the bad devil on each shoulder?

**Ilana:** Yeah.

Scott had already tasted a bit of the good life while working at the mafia's underground casinos.

**Big Scott:** So, the bad devil was really winning out, because I loved having 10 thugs at my fucking beck and call. I loved it. “Yeah, go get me a coffee,” and the guy, 325 pounds, no fat, would come back and be like, “You got it wrong. I said I don't want no sugar.” They'll be like, “Uh, uh, boss.” That guy could lift me and throw me like a harpoon. I like that.

**Ilana:** He was seriously considering the opportunity, and he told his dad about the offer.

**Big Scott:** My dad, who was an ex-thug himself told me, “One day, you'll end up dead from them because there's no morality to them. Might does not make right,” my father always felt. Right makes might, not might.

**Ilana:** Scott's dad knew that if Scott was helping the mafia control the Christmas tree business, he'd actually be helping with a lot less wholesome and jolly work. He understood that the Christmas tree empire doesn't stop at trees. There'll be money laundering.

**Big Scott:** And also, it's a really neat place to hide drugs at a tree stand, the distribution.

**Little Scott:** So, what are we going to do? We're going to get into bed with people and they're selling drugs out of our Christmas tree stands? At what point does it become stupid? “Oh, I could do this. I could do that.” You'll also wind up dead. You got that over you. [chuckles]

**Ilana:** Scott thought about all the different ways it could go down. The FBI or Justice Department agent could do a crackdown and grill Scott. But the boys wouldn't want him to talk.

**Big Scott:** They might put a bullet in my head so I don't get them indicted even though I was at their house the other night for pasta. And their wife knows just how I like the extra sauce on there with the extra grated cheese, but now they're going to put a bullet in my head and say sorry.

**Ilana:** It's creepy.

**Big Scott:** Well, they killed one of my friends.

**Ilana:** Seriously?

**Scott:** Yeah, not about Christmas trees, it was about other things.

**Ilana:** This was a guy that ratted on the mafia.

**Big Scott:** And he was in my group of friends. He wasn't my best friend or anything. Thank God. I still shed tears for him. They killed him, they slit his throat, and they throw it in the trunk and locked the trunk. And they found some days and days later, because he was a rat.

**Little Scott:** Look, you don't go into partnerships with those people, you work for them. It's different. You think you're partners, you're not. You're not partners with these people, because you're not in their world, you're just working for them. It's a devil's deal. And eventually, the devil gets paid.

**Ilana:** Scott thought about the offer and the world he'd enter. He decided that his business shouldn't be involved with the mafia anymore, like at all. So, the next time they ask him for his regular dues, Scott said, “No.” It seemed like it was Scott's way of saying no to their offer too.

**Big Scott:** Because I felt that kept us in some sort of association to get mentioned with them. And who the hell wants to pay with illegal grift?

**Ilana:** A little while later, mafia invited him to a meeting.

I'm trying to imagine, you're invited to like that meeting.

**Big Scott:** I wasn't invited to the meeting, I was mandated. I was told to show up.

**Ilana:** Scott's friends were way too scared to go. So, Scott went alone.

**Big Scott:** It was actually at a shopping center. A major shopping center, they had a big conference room in there.

**Ilana:** Scott came to the conference room, and there were people sitting around a table, deep in discussion. He looked around, saw some local mafiosos and some familiar faces.

**Big Scott:** And I was like, "You're a sworn-in elected politician."

**Ilana:** The conversation took a turn when Scott walked in the room. They asked him, "What's the deal? Where's the money?"

**Big Scott:** I threw my best poker bluff. And I said, "I can't be paying you no more." And they said, "Well, I think you better rethink about that." And I said, "Well, I did. I've been in this business for quite some years, but I'm willing to not be in the business anymore, if that's what it takes." As easily as they were enamored by my Jewboyism, and my sharp mathematical skills and my sharp tongue, they could have easily turned to me and said, "You're a little motherfucker. Someone's going to hit you with a baseball bat fucking one night at 2 o'clock in the morning. Who's going to know who, why, or what?" I said, "I can't afford to be paying you guys anymore. I'm so sorry. I really think that we're just a small little tree company, just a couple of guys selling some trees with our friends. We can't really afford any of this involvement." They looked at me with some gumption. And they went passively, like, "Alright, one more year." They looked at me like, "Oh, so now you're playing schmuck. Guy play schmuck, get out of here. But Vinnie and his family get a tree. We all get trees." Yeah, y'all going to get trees." I had a personal moral epiphany about it.

**Ilana:** Scott could have had it all. It came down to one thing. Would he rather be loved or feared?

**Big Scott:** It's a much stronger man that derives his power from love. The guy who is feared, his life is miserable. His death would be an inconvenience financially to some and a blessing to others. A man is loved, takes all that with him. Just because you're powerful, it doesn't validate really anything in your life. What does it validate?

**Little Scott:** Do you know it's a line from a movie, right?

**Ilana:** I knew I heard it somewhere, but I didn't know where.

**Little Scott:** It's a line from the movie called *The Bronx Tale*. I used to tell him, "You're wrong, you'd rather be feared."

**Ilana:** Little Scott and Big Scott, they'd sit in a trailer and debate the meaning of life. To be loved or feared. They kept up the debate for over a decade. But this kind of pontification just feels different when you get a diagnosis.

**Little Scott:** He got sick. When he got sick, he got sick really bad really fast.

**Ilana:** At first, Scott reassured everyone that things would be okay, but he was diagnosed with cancer. The people at the stand are pretty shocked. Little Scott remembers the last time they talked on the phone.

**Little Scott:** I said, "I love you, pal." I knew he was dying, and I knew it was probably going to be the last time I spoke to him. And that was very hard, because he was a good person.

See, what Scott doesn't want to admit is that Scott's life is a legacy of Christmas trees.

**Ilana:** What does that mean? [crosstalk]

**Scott:** It's beautiful.

**Little Scott:** It's interesting.

**Big Scott:** Well, meeting you was part of [unintelligible [00:34:55]]. Get the fuck out of the door--[crosstalk]

**Ilana:** In December 2020, Scott passed away. He was 64 years old.

**Little Scott:** Scott was-- Have you heard the expression 'a mensch'? Okay, he was a mensch. That's who he was. Scott loved Christmas. I mean it was his favorite time of the year. He hated when it was over. The rest of us were like, "We're tired. We want to go home. I'm so done with Christmas." And he was like, "No, I would do this whole year if they let me." And he really, really just loved everything about it.

**Big Scott:** It's aromatherapy. Christmas trees is absolutely a natural one. Put people around a Christmas tree in their home, they feel better. Case closed. They're just happier, nicer, and--

**Russ:** We're probably going to have one night where we go to Velázquez, we eat matzo ball soup with pierogies and latkes, like we did every year with Scott. We're all going to be holding back tears.

**Big Scott:** Case closed. They're just happier nicer and they feel better. They don't know why. They think it's just the holiday revel, but it's also the olfactory system making them feel, "Ah," remind them, reminiscent of their childhood, their youth growing up, and the people they feel Christmas--

**Little Scott:** [laughs] Yeah, it's funny. Damn, I'm going to fuckin' miss him. I fuckin' miss him. [sobbing] Deep breaths. [laughs]

**Ilana:** Russ came back to SoHo Trees every year, and now he's the foreman. He gives the same speech to new employees the Scott gave him.

**Russ:** And I tell my guys this every year when we start. The first thing I say when we're getting ready to unload the wood. "We are about to uphold a New York City tradition. You are a New York City treeman from this point forward, and that is who you are. You do not get cold. You do not get tired. And you're going to do everything with a smile because we're selling Christmas trees."

[music]

**Glynn:** This story is dedicated to the memory of Scott Lechner, the Pontiff of SoHo and the Emperor of New York City treemen. Big thanks as well to Russ and Little Scott for holding down Christmas. The original score for this piece was by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by Ilana Strauss, John Fecile and Annie Nguyen.

[music]

**Glynn:** Snappers, it is not over. When we return, a covert operation goes horribly wrong. When Snap Judgment, the Christmas Tree Mafia Special returns. Stay tuned.

[music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment with Christmas Tree Mafia episode. My name's Glynn Washington. Our next story comes from a man with real secrets, from a covert operative named Mike Ramsdell. Our story starts when Mike was assigned to go into Soviet Russia to extract a high-level target. Snap Judgement.

**Mike:** I really do think I had a death wish. I was just going through some very, very difficult times. So, when States contacted me and asked me to consider this mission, I just thought, "Bring it on. I'm your man. Bring it on. No matter what happens, I can live with that. If I make it back, that's fine. If I don't, who's going to care?" It truly was escapism. I wanted just to get out.

It was very important for us to find some informants and we did find three individuals, what we call in the spy world "assets." And these three Russian individuals worked for the target, the man that we were after. But when it was all said and done, just as the mission was to conclude, and we were going to

extract the target out of the country, one of the informants betrayed us and told the target who we were and what we were about to do. That's when the mission went bad.

My orders were to sanitize the mission, and what that means in spook lingo is, to get rid of anything and everything so if the KGB or the Soviet secret police came into our apartments, they would not be able to find anything. I was instructed, "You will not have your weapon. You will not have your communication device."

I threw away my weapon and my radio into the river in the middle of the night. I was definitely on my own. I would have to use all my training and resources to survive. My orders were clean those apartments, do my work and then get out of town as quick as possible.

The last apartment that I was to sterilize was on the sixth floor. There was something that told me to look outside, and I walked across the hallway to the kitchen, pulled back the drapes, I looked down. And there I saw two mafia goons waiting for me.

People think that 007, he never shows his true emotions but that's not true at all. I knew I was in big trouble because I had already disposed of my weapon and my communication device. I couldn't confront it. I had nothing, and suddenly I heard the crowbar break the front door of the apartment.

The fear and the panic was just-- even retelling the story right now my heart's beating. I heard the crowbar start to break the front door. And all I could do was, I had no other choice, I had to confront them. I pulled on my gloves, I zipped up my jacket. I walked towards the front door and said a prayer, and then the splinters and the door came apart.

There, the mafia goon was standing there. I had a maneuver worked out with a certain blow to his temple. I had nothing, and he had a pair of brass knuckles. Within a short time, I looked like a big, red wedge of Swiss cheese. Somehow, we ended up in this stairwell. In one hand, he has these bloody brass knuckles. In the other and he pulled out a stiletto knife and was jousting where the first cuts were going to go.

Just as he was ready to carve me up, by the grace of God, there was the building drunk on the stairwell underneath us and he reached up through the stairwell and grabbed the mafia goons pant leg and pulled on it. And in that saving moment, when that mafia goon looked down, I flew around him and over him. Down those stairs, I bounded. I told myself, "Mike, get to the train station." I'd lost so much blood from the beating.

I stopped by a vacant building and turned around to see how close they were behind me. The only movement on the street that night was the falling snow. The very first snow of the oncoming Russian winter. Why did I choose to do this? I didn't have to accept this assignment.

[train horn blows and Russian PA announcement]

Headquarters had directed me that I would catch the local train, and I would be on that train for several days until I got to the village of Potevka, where indeed we did have a safe house. I am so thankful to be on the train and to be alive. At the same time, I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, thinking that the mafia or the KGB are on the train with me. I'm in terrible, terrible condition. The only sustenance I had in those five days was the awful Russian black tea that was available to everyone on the train. I cannot tell you how hungry and starved I was, but I knew if I could hang on long enough, that is policy that every safe house is equipped with seven days' MREs, meals Ready to Eat.

It was late at night, it was dark, blizzard, snowy. I got to this dilapidated train station. I made my way trudging through the heavy snow about a mile to the cabin. I walked to the cupboard, opened the doors. There are no boxes of MREs. I went to the back of the cabin to the closet, looked in the floorboards, up in the rafters of the cabin. Again, no MREs. I was so spent, I pulled probably a dozen blankets over me and crawled in a straw bed fully dressed.

In the morning, trudging into the village to the marketplace and I convinced myself there, "You lucky because you will be able to get some cabbage. Whoopy. Some potatoes." And strange as it sounds, as I walked, I saw no one. I saw no tracks in the snow. When I finally approached the marketplace and pushed open the big oak doors, and that's when I realized the village had basically been abandoned. I was hoping to see a light on or a candle burning and to find someone. And I did, I was able to talk to two old couples. I took out a fistful of rubles in exchange for a potato, and they would not do it. The conditions in Russia were awful. I had more rubles than those old couples would ever have seen in their life. And yet, keeping food for themselves to survive was more important. That's when the first thoughts came to my mind that, "Mike, you might not make it. How am I going to survive? Where's the food going to come from?"

Get back to the cabin, I was almost obsessed with the idea of dying. And I thought, there I am isolated in this little village in the middle of Russia, and that's how I was going to die. Why can't it be a gun battle on the streets of Moscow so that the people can read about this hero?

I had been in the cabin possibly three days. It was mid-morning. Sorry, but I get a little emotional in this part. I'm at a table writing letters with a goodbye, because I'm not going to make it. When any one of us writes a letter, the first thing we do is put a date on it. I had totally lost touch with reality and especially date and time. But when I pulled out my calendar, that is the moment when I first realized that it is Thanksgiving in America.

I heard this loud thump or bang. I thought it could be an explosive. And that's when I heard the sound of a vehicle. I hustled to the window, but there was so much snow, I could not identify the vehicle, but it sounded like the engine of a jeep. Knowing about one or two of our agents losing their hands or their face, I panicked, waiting for the explosion to happen. I ran to the back of the cabin, probably waited 15, 20 minutes and nothing happened. I pulled the cabin door open 6, 8, 10 inches, and there on the stone steps of the cabin was a package, about the size of a normal shoebox.

There's no turning back now. I grabbed the package. My heart is pounding, and I pull the string off the package. There, the first thing, a box of macaroni and cheese, a little small box of Frosted Flakes, a jar of artichoke hearts. And there I see the Thanksgiving card. And I recognize the handwriting of my sister, Karen. And then, I prepared my Thanksgiving meal. There was a little package, I remember when I fixed the meal around the outside of the plate, I put all these little colorful gummy bears. They had made their way from Torrance, California, to the American Embassy in Helsinki, Finland. And somehow from Helsinki, Finland, to the safehouse in Potevka, Russia.

Over the years, I made a concentrated effort to find out how the package could have gotten to Potevka and who brought it there and why. But in our line of work and intelligence, there is a cliché that is called the “need to know.” I am not privileged to ask any questions about it because, “Mike, do you have a need to know?” When you work in the covert world, there are so many unanswered questions you have. I still do not have a definitive answer as to how the package got to me.

[music]

**Glynn:** Mike wrote a book about this experience. We'll have a link on our website, [snapjudgment.org](http://snapjudgment.org). That piece was produced by Anna Sussman with sound design by Renzo Gorrio

It's happened again, dear listeners, but the gift of storytelling knows no season. It's time to subscribe to Snap Judgment Podcast and magically become the most interesting person ever.

Snap was brought to you by the producer, Mark Ristich, Anna Sussman, Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Bo Walsh, and Annie Nguyen. And as you know, this is not the news. No wait, is this the news? In fact, you can find a little something extra under your tree, and you would still, still not be thorough with the news as this is, but this is PRX.