[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** Oftentimes, in today's urbanized, depersonalized, atomized society, who is it that actually knows you? Who knows you better than your mama, better than your friends, better than your cousins, your lover? Who sits next to you on the couch for your greatest joy and who knows your dirty little secret? Who else but your roommate? Because one thing we can all be agreed upon, left or right, citified or rural, old or poor, the one thing that unites all of us is the certain knowledge that the rent is too damn high. This means that living alone all by yourself in some glorious solitude is a luxury reserved to trust fund kids and drug dealers. And if you are neither of these, at some point, you may have to open your life to someone who is more than a stranger, more than intimate, a person arriving out of nowhere to pierce your inner sanctum, who can change the very course of your destiny, simply by proving to you that on the first of the month, they absolutely, positively will come through with their share the rent.

[upbeat music]

Today, Snap proudly presents Roommate Wanted. My name is Glynn Washington. We scoured the newspapers so you don't have to, because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, our story begins with struggling writer, Brian Boucher, who after breaking up with his girlfriend, scrambles to find a roommate so that he can afford the rent on his tiny New York City apartment. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Brian:** I hadn't lived with a random stranger since my freshman year of college. I'm not sure exactly what I was looking for really in terms of an ideal roommate. They just needed to be dependable and pay the rent. They didn't even have to be quiet. I advertised on Craigslist for the roommate. I said, “Looking to share one bedroom. It's a little small.” John Williams, whose full name was John, but he went by Don, came to visit the apartment. He was really, really low-key. He said that he was a ghostwriter working on a project. I was sort of impressed with him. Here we see I'm making a living as a writer, which was what I was sort of hoping for and had not accomplished. I just felt very comfortable with him.

He moved in within days. We didn't really know whether this was going to be a long-term situation or not. It was a kind of month to month. Don was willing to pay a little bit more than half the rent in return for the privacy of the bedroom. So, I crashed on the couch in the living room, and he moved into the bedroom. I would be in bed reading the New Yorker [ambient noises] and door opens [door shuts] and in walks Don, and he's going to walk through the living room and we just sort of chuckle at each other like, [awkward chuckle] “Isn't this awkward?” I just felt humiliated, honestly. I felt like, “Ugh, has it come to this?” But it had.

He didn't have that much stuff. He didn't take up any space in the kitchen or the refrigerator. I guess he just had all his meals out or he got takeout or whatever. The only thing that sort of took up space is that he would take really epic showers. The man could shower for like an hour, and you could hear the water running. This was not just him like in there plucking his eyebrows. He was really, really getting the getting the hot water into his pores.

As time went by, one thing that did seem a little strange to me was that I would be doing my thing, watching a movie, whatever, for hours and thinking maybe I was alone in the apartment, and then the bedroom door would open and he would come out to use the bathroom, and I'd realize he was in there just quiet as a mouse for hours. And then on the other hand, [door shuts] there would be times when I would realize like, “I haven't seen him in days. I don't think he's around.” So, it sort of left me feeling a little uneasy, but none of my business, I figured.

In December, I hadn't seen him in some time, might have been a couple of weeks. I come home one day and find the door to his room open, which was unheard of. Someone had ransacked the bedroom, and my things were untouched, like completely untouched. So, it was plainly targeted at him, which was just unbelievably spooky. Whoever wanted to get at his things was so motivated, that they had torn the door and the frame entirely off the wall. The door and the frame were just hanging by, I think, the bottom hinges when I walked in. They had taken his nice red Swiss Army luggage out of the closet. They just cut it open, and went through all of his things, like his clothes and stuff were kind of scattered around. He has on the inside of the bedroom door, like a postcard size piece of paper that says, “Security Check. Windows locked. Keys, phone. Go.” That was a suspicious detail. But also, the fact that the night that the break-in happened, it happened on a night that I had ended up staying away from the apartment all night. It seemed too strange that somebody should break into the apartment just the one night that I happened to be away.

I called the police, and the police came by, and they said, “Well, what was stolen?” And I said, “I don't know.” And they were like, “Well, if we don't know that anything was stolen, there's really not much of a crime here for us to investigate.” I filled out-- there was some sort of paperwork, like there was an incident report. They were like, “Well, have you been in touch with your roommate?” “No.” “Okay, so could have been him as far as we know.” I'm trying to reach him and I'm emailing him and I'm calling him, and he's not responding. He wasn't getting back to me. The rent hasn't shown up. I thought, “Okay, here's AWOL. He's gone.”

I was out of my mind with anxiety after this. My imagination just went totally wild. “Is this guy CIA? Is he with the government?” I thought I have to just change the locks, because by now, he seems like a suspect. I feel like I have to protect myself from him, and just hope that he doesn't ever come back. By the time Don disappeared, I wasn't quite as desperate financially. I had more steady work. I wasn't financially totally destitute anymore like the day I was that I placed the Craigslist ad.

What little belongings he had, I then go into the room, and I pack them up, and moved back into the bedroom, which was a bizarre feeling in itself because I'm like, “I've been in his bedroom that is the scene of this intrusion and violence and violation of his space.” I went off to visit my parents at Christmas in New Jersey. And I get a call, and it was like a voice from the grave.

When I heard his voice over the phone, at first, I felt just completely distrustful. But then he says, “Look, I'm sorry I haven't been in touch, but my sister was in a car accident, and she died. And so, I've been in Seattle dealing with that.” I felt like, “Oh, my God. Here I am, imagining that this guy is a spy or a terrorist or something. And all the while, he's been at his sister's deathbed. How could I possibly have thought this about him?” He had shown up and found the door locked, of course, and that his key didn't work anymore. And I said, “Okay, how about if you meet me at the apartment tomorrow at 3:00?” I got on a train from New Jersey the next morning so that I could be at the apartment a couple hours ahead of time.

I feel I can't possibly tell him that I handled all of his things on the suspicion that he had either skipped town or that he was some sort of shady character, and I was just too embarrassed to say that. And so, I felt like, “I have to recreate the scene of the crime and make it seem like I was never in there.” I had to make it look like the room had just been broken into. So, the clothes that had gone into plastic bins came back out of the bins. [zipper sounds] I brought the luggage back out of the closet and scattered the clothes around on the floor, trying to make it look like chaotic, the same way that it had.

He shows up. It's 3 o'clock on Christmas Day. He just looks completely downtrodden and exhausted. I greeted him saying, “Look, I'm so sorry for what you're going through.” And he comes in, he sort of gets himself settled, and then goes into the room, and is just taking it in, surveying the situation, and looks at the closet door that hanging off the hinges and says, “Well, that's one way to get into the closet.” And looks at his nice Swiss Army luggage that's been cut open and says, “Well, that's a shame.” I said the cops asked, “What was missing?, and, of course, because it's not my possessions, I didn't know what to tell them. I mean, did they steal anything from you?” And he said, “Well, not much. It looks like some old cell phones, a little cash, a small color printer, some marijuana.” And then, he said, “But they won't be able to use the phones. You have to put in a security card before you can use them. And without the right identity card, the phones won't work,” which just struck me as very 007.

There had been a video camera that the thieves didn't steal from him. He was as puzzled at some aspects of this robbery as I was. At a certain point, Don said, “What we should do is we should set up some webcams in the apartment so we'll catch him if he comes back again.” And I felt like, “No, no, actually, I don't want to extend the surveillance state into my own apartment. I'd rather never know what happened than do that.” He also put a small lock on the bedroom door, which was a joke. It had been several weeks, maybe a month after the break-in, and he was still trying to figure out what happened.

Out of nowhere, one day, he says, “So, I sent some things to my brother-in-law in DC from my room who's a Fed. So, if there are any prints on these things, he'll figure it out.” And I said, “Look, there's something I wanted to tell you. I haven't been honest with you about this, and I can't do that anymore. When the breakup happened, I freaked out. I didn't realize that you had deposited the rent in my account. And then, I didn't hear from you for weeks and I thought you weren't coming back. And then, when you called and you told me that your sister had died, I just felt like such an asshole." And I took a deep breath. And I said, “So, I felt like I couldn't tell you that I had packed up your thing, so I came in and tried to make it look like it looked just after the break-in. Sorry. There it is. Now you have it.”

And he said, “Yeah, yeah, you handled pretty much everything in there,” as if that he was asking for confirmation of something that he already knew. He said, “I found your prints too.” And I was like, “Well, wait a minute.” And he said, “Oh, well, it's pretty easy. You could just take a bottle out of the recycling bin.” Up until this point, I had no idea that he was harboring any suspicion to me. There was no normal anymore after that. It had been just awkward to be sharing such a small space. But now, we had the elephant in the room of this break-in and neither of us really trusting the other. But we just sort of limped forward in this very thickened tension. I wasn't completely dependent on him for the rent money. And looking back, I don't know why I allowed this to go on. I honestly just don't know why I didn't say, “Look, Don, I just don't feel this is working out. I think you're going to have to find another place to stay.” And he didn't seem to want to leave. So, we were just stuck together.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Things are getting really awkward in the apartment, Snappers. Can these two roommates continue to coexist? Find out when the Roommate Wanted episode continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Roommate Wanted episode. Last when we left, Brian and Don’s apartment was mysteriously broken into with no answers as to who did it. They have since grown very suspicious of each other what to do. Snap Judgment.

**Brian:** A few more months went by and rent time came due, and I didn't hear from him. I couldn't reach him via email, his phone wasn't taking calls. And this time, I was not going to prematurely go into this guy's room. So, I gave it two weeks, three weeks beyond rent day. And at this time, I was like, “Okay, now I'm well within my rights to change the locks again and to pack up his things.” So, this time, I'm doing a thorough job of packing up his things. And [pause] under the futon, I find a Manila file folder and there were papers sticking out of it. The closer I looked, he had all this information on me. He's got my social security number, he's got bank account numbers, he's got credit card account numbers. He had copied down the names and addresses and phone numbers of my immediate family. And he had identifying information on a number of other people elsewhere in his records, like a Charles Brown and an Andre Holmes, and photocopies of their paperwork. What business is this guy in that he is collecting identifying information on numerous people? So, now of course, my mind is just doing absolutely cartwheels.

Also, among these things, I find your classic composition notebook. And it's a journal, and it revealed some weird, weird information. It's like incredibly long, rambling journal entries. He had imagined movie scenarios. He seemed to want to get involved in the movie industry because he was trying to write screenplays. Smith & Smith v. The State of California. At another point, “I talked to Spike Lee. He's really interested in the story and wants me to send him the articles.” Okay. What articles? And there were also notes about seemingly continuing education classes he wanted to take, but one of them was knife fighting and another one of them was rappelling mass attacks. Among these just endless journal entries, “My babies, my babies, I miss my babies,” and how he would never be able to stand for his babies to see him locked in a cage. Just who can make sense of this? Why would he be locked in a cage? Why would his babies ever see him locked in a cage?” Or, it's all part of an elaborate screenplay, where he's writing the journal of the part of the criminal.

There was also a laptop among his things. [denied notification sound] It was password protected. I was at the time writing and editing for this website. So, I brought the laptop into the IT guy there. I explained the situation to him, and he was like, “Oh, yeah, no problem. Leave it with me overnight.” I pick it up from him the next day. [Windows startup sound] And the sign-in name on the computer, by the way, is yet another slightly generic name, “Dino Loren Smith.” This is obviously a fake name. And I googled Dino Loren Smith. [typing] Expecting nothing. The first search result was the website for a television show called *America's Most Wanted*.

[lively music builds up]

My roommate was a career criminal, who had been on the run from the law the entire time that he was rooming with me. He was a big wheel in San Francisco criminal circles. He and his brother, Devon, nicknamed Troy, basically robbed stores, robbed wealthy people's homes. Dino had a talent for rappelling down the side of buildings to get into people's homes. So, I suppose rappelling mass attacks and knife fighting not that far off. He always had a knife with him at all times. He did hold the widow of a Nicaraguan drug lord and her children hostage one time where basically he broke into her apartment and held them at knifepoint. I bounced out of my chair, screaming the F word hundred times running around in circles in my apartment, totally terrified.

So, I call the police. And they come over. And they come in and they look around and they said, “Well, if you see him, call us.”

A little further googling at this point turned up a press release that, thank God, he had been arrested by the San Francisco Police who had traveled across country to get him because he and his brother and a couple of other accomplices had overnight broken into a jewelry store in San Francisco. And when the employees showed up in the morning, they made them open the safes, and they made off with six or so million dollars of jewelry. And they left them tied up in the store.

So, I find this press release put out by the SFPD that says, “Please contact Chief Robbery Inspector Daniel Gardner if you have information.” And so, I call this number, I leave this message saying, “Look, Dino was my roommate. I have some of his stuff. Maybe you'd be interested in having it.” They very quickly got on a plane, [plane takes off] Gardner and his partner and came to my apartment with a search warrant. They present the warrant, and they say, “Do we have permission to come in and search the premises?” [chuckles] I'm like, “Come on in, guys. Yeah.”

So, they go to work. They put on rubber gloves. They unscrew the electrical switch panels. They fondle the futon. They look in the cereal boxes. It was remarkable. Alas, they did not turn up any jewels. I did overhear one of them say, “Oh, we found the blue and black parka.” They found a Manhattan mini storage container of Dino’s with power tools, and a concrete saw. And Gardner says, “Well, with any luck, this guy is not going anywhere anytime soon.” And he takes out a wanted poster and gives it to me with Dino and his brother on it side by side, mugshots from a previous prison stint.

On a sunny day, I arrived at the Hall of Justice in San Francisco and headed into testify at trial. To say that it made me anxious to participate in testifying at this trial would certainly be an understatement. I was in the hallway, and there were a dozen or so people who were the jury, of course. But then, there was somebody who was sitting a bit apart from the jury. The closer I looked at her, I realized, “Oh, my god. That's Dino's nose. That's Dino's face.” I realized that this must be Dino's mother. It made me so unbelievably sad. Here is a woman whose son has been in and out of prison for many, many years. And here he is looking at possibly going to prison again for decades, if not for the rest of his life. So, this whole other human dimension of this thing dawned on me at that moment in a way that it really hadn't before.

We all walked into the courtroom, the jury and I, and I'm sitting in the seats for the public. A doorway opened at the back of the courtroom, and in walked Dino and the room suddenly went silent. Dino goes to join the defense attorney at his table, and he's got like some papers, and he puts them down and arranges them on the table. And then, he turns over his shoulder and looks at me, and gives me the funniest look. It was this sort of half smile, greeting, as if to say like, “Hey, roomie, bet you never expected to be in this situation, huh?” I was called to the witness stand and sworn in. And there's a microphone that you speak into when you're testifying. And I swear I was so on edge, I felt like the microphone was going to pick up the sound of my heart pounding.

The defense attorney then said, “You advertised on Craigslist, and you found a roommate, and is that person in the room? Would you point at him and mention an article of clothing?” And so then, I pointed at Dino and mentioned his black polo shirt. Dino really just sort of sat there stone faced watching me and listening to me, but did not show much reaction really. The computer that I turned over ended up being key evidence. And so, the defense attorney at a certain point said, “Did you ever see him using the computer?” And I said, “I think I saw him watching a movie on his laptop one time.” "Well," he says, “I'm not asking you what you might think or speculate about. I'm asking you if you saw him using the computer.” And I felt like I'm actually not sure. And so, I just said, “Well, I don't know. I guess I can't be 100% sure.” And I thought, “Oh, no, that's it. That's it. I just ruined it. I just blew my whole testimony,” because, of course, it didn't turn out that way.

It was June 3rd, 2005. Based in part on the evidence found on the computer, the jury convicted him of 8 of 11 counts of robbery and false imprisonment and burglary and conspiracy. And then in November, he was sentenced to 23 years in prison.

[somber music]

Once Dino was gone and I had the apartment to myself, it took a little while to get used to being back in this bedroom that this notorious criminal had slept in. It was as though I was never alone in the room, like the sort of ghosts of everything that had happened were in there with me.

Ultimately, my lease on the apartment came up and I didn't feel like staying there any longer. I was working at an art magazine by that time, so not making a great deal of money. So, I looked for another apartment share. I went back to Craigslist and ended up moving in with a couple, who was a financial planner and a dance instructor and their kid, it was a great situation because they weren't at this apartment very often. I had no hesitation to go back to Craigslist, because, of course, Craigslist isn't the problem. Jewel thieves are the problem.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Huge thank you to Brian Boucher for sharing his story at the Snap. In 2006, Brian wrote an essay in New York Magazine about this experience. It was titled, *My roommate, The Diamond Thief*. And it turns out there is more to the story. Once again, here's Brian, he catches us up on what happened years later.

**Brian:** In summer of 2017, I was going to visit family in California, and they live like a half an hour drive from Folsom Prison, which is where he was at the time. I tried over years to correspond with him. I would write to him, and he never answered any of my questions, or even really acknowledged them. And so, I thought, “Well, what the heck? Let me just see if I can go and visit him.” I did ultimately go on a hot, hot, sunny day to Folsom Prison. I got walked through this fortress wall, to go inside and get to the area where people are actually visiting. And he walks into the room, and he's sort of looking from side to side and looking for me. And then, he sees me, and he actually smiled. It was so strange to me how sort of casual the conversation was at first. Almost as if he were kind of catching up with a friend or acquaintance that he hadn't talked to in a long time.

And he says, “You probably wonder why I chose you as a roommate. Well, I actually thought very carefully about it. You might recall that the day I came to visit you, it was a Saturday. *America's Most Wanted* airs on Saturdays. I had to be sure that the person I rented from wouldn't be watching *America's Most Wanted*.”

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** And you thought your roommate experience was wild. You never know who you're going to run into on Craigslist. The original score for that piece was by Dirk Schwarzhoff. It was produced by Bo Walsh.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** It's happened. It's happened. Now, storytelling is powerful. Storytelling can change lives. If you want to change someone's life right now, snatch up their phone from their clammy hands, teach them how to get the Snap Judgment podcast, press the buttons for them. Because if you don't do it, they simply won't know. Alternatively, you can hand your phone to a random 10-year-old and tell them you need more life-changing stories, and would they please help you get the Snap Judgment podcast. Each one, save one, that's community if you're looking to meet the best people, or let's just say the best person.

Look around, who's wearing a Snap Judgment t-shirt, not only will they be the sexiest person you've ever seen, and that person will have the heart of gold. I guarantee. And if you want to be as awesome as they are, your Snap gear is available right now at *snapjudgment.org.*

Snap is brought to you by the team that would never, ever never leave dirty dishes in the sink or, God forbid, leave the toilet seat up. No. This team would never contemplate such madness. Except, of course, for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Davey Kim, Bo Walsh, and Annie Nguyen.

And this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you can invite all your drunken friends, your house for a party when your roommate's out of town, even invite them to sleep off in his bed and then act like you don't know what happened when he comes back from the ski weekend. Maybe some robbers broke in and ate up all the cereal and dirtied up all the sheets and drew dirty pictures on his wall, but you didn't notice because you were watching TV. You could do that. You could do that. And you would still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.

[upbeat music]

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*