[Snap Judgment]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** I'm in the middle of a pandemic. Too much sitting around, I ordered a new pair of pants online. But instead of the pants I ordered, they sent me a shirt. So, I called the company, asked them to please send me the pants. Man says, "Well, for first, you need to fill out a form and take the shirt to the approved drop-off location, and this, this and that before we can send you out the merchandise." I'm like, "Hey, hey, hey, come get your stuff if you want to, but I'm not doing chores. Either send me what I ordered or give me a refund." "Well, it's against company policy." "It's against my policy to keep having this conversation. Let me speak to the manager." Now, there's some other dude, maybe the same dude using a different voice, talking about the pants policy of the company. Back and forth, back and forth with these people in this loop and we've all been there. When a situation is broken, when there's an obvious solution, those involved either can't or won't take responsibility for achieving it. But what if someone does want to step up, does want to make things a tiny bit better, and not just take the blame but the responsibility for a situation that's far more pressing than a pair of pants.

[upbeat music]

Now today on Snap, we're taking a trip to Afghanistan. Snap Judgment proudly presents The Handoff. My name is Glynn Washington. Please send everyone out of the room or keep everyone in the room quiet. But make sure they will not bother you for the next hour because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, we begin with Deven Ravel, 25 years old, fresh out of college. He becomes a marine platoon commander, and they sent off was first assignment, the southern green zone, the sunken district of Afghanistan. And, yes, because of the nature of the conflict, our story does contain some graphic imagery. Producer Shaina Shealy takes it from here. Snap Judgment.

[somber music]

**Shaina:** It was 2012, a decade into the war with Afghanistan, when Deven landed in a lush agricultural area along the Helmand River.

**Deven:** The nighttime was like this cool still night air. It was really peaceful to some degree. It had that fresh rural smell to it. But it really was of the hotbed of Taliban activity.

**Shaina:** In his first few days there, Deven shadowed a platoon commander that he would eventually replace. The commander invited Deven on his last mission.

**Deven:** It wasn't like just an invite, it was like, "Hey, you're coming because you're going to be the one in charge of this stuff within the next 48 hours."

**Shaina:** The mission was to take place that evening.

**Deven:** "What? We do night missions?" I thought that we didn't do night missions because it was too dangerous, but he was like, "No, we're going to partner, we're going to go to the Afghan patrol base at PB Hanjar."

**Shaina:** The marines had Afghan counterparts who knew the territory.

**Deven:** There's a phrase in in Dari local language, that's " Shohna ba Shohna," which means shoulder to shoulder and that was sort of the theme of that deployment. It's always going to be shoulder to shoulder with our Afghan partners. They're going to lead this mission and we're just going to provide support.

**Shaina:** Shohna ba Shohna. Deven and his guys geared up for the night and left base with a team of Afghan soldiers. The Afghan commander directed the mission.

**Deven:** I think he must have been in his mid-20s, I guess, clean shaven, about 5'8", pretty skinny. He kept his sleeves rolled up. He had his map out and he was doing a phenomenal job of saying like, "Here's the compound that we're going to, here's who's going to go first." He definitely moved quickly. He definitely moved with a sense of purpose. And that was the most impressive part. He was pretty calm, and he'd ask people to do things quietly. What surprised me is, people sprang into action. He didn't have to like bark orders, people just they move fast for him. The other Marines that we were replacing, they basically told us, they're like, "Hey, this is your guy."

**Shaina:** The Marine introduced Mirza, the Afghan soldier, as a lifeline.

**Deven:** Like you have no idea how good he is at his job, but also how much he cares about this mission and how much he cares about working with us.

**Shaina:** Mirza is a nickname by the way. Deven reached his hand out to him.

**Deven:** You put your hand on that person's heart and they'll put their hand on your heart, that's like the traditional greeting. I sense that like, "All right, at least I didn't get the feeling that these were going to be the ones that were going to kill us in our sleep." Although sidenote, I still slept with my sidearm, my pistol with me every single night, just in case.

**Shaina:** The year Deven served in Afghanistan, around 50 American soldiers had been killed by Afghan security forces.

**Deven:** That year was notorious for Afghan forces flipping on Americans and having all these violent incidents. A lot of Marines, they'd be like, "Screw those Afghan soldiers."

**Shaina:** But some Americans said the US hadn't done enough to build trust with Afghans or properly equip and train the Afghan army. More Afghan soldiers have been killed than US and NATO troops. 17 times more. There were lots of mornings during Deven's deployment when Deven would go down to patrol base Hanjar for a check in with Mirza. And Mirza would get out his electric tea kettle and make green tea for both of them to share.

**Deven:** And barely speaking English, he would say things like, "Are you good, sir?" "Double good, double good." And when it came time to sitting around a large map and planning things out, he would ask questions, he would reiterate things in his language in Dari, "We're going here and then this team is going to move up." He was giving us his opinions on things, and it was just very relaxed, really easy to work with.

**Shaina:** About halfway through his deployment in June, Deven's platoon was patrolling in a village in the middle of the night, where they'd heard there was Taliban activity. Deven had split his platoon into squads. He went with one and sent another to a hilltop overlooking this tiny town. Once everyone was in position, Deven went back to the command center. He ate a prepackaged dinner and changed into a t-shirt and shorts.

**Deven:** Like tiny little gym shorts, basically in flip flops, and I was checking some of my work emails. So, I hear third squad's getting ready to come back and they had just departed from their observation post.

**Shaina:** Sitting there in the command center with his men on their way back, he felt a blast.

[explosion sounds]

**Deven:** The wall shook a few minutes after that. You can clearly tell there was an explosion. I was like, "Oh, my God, that was them. What the hell had just happened?"

**Shaina:** Still in his flip flops, Deven ran to the combat operations center.

**Deven:** The COC is basically a room with a bunch of TV screens, monitors, computers, and people wearing the headsets with the radios.

**Shaina:** Up on the screen was footage from a night vision camera attached to a high-altitude blimp.

**Deven:** On the screen, it's the gray infrared camera, but I could see the outlines of the marines, heat signature, and the marines that were in there, they're like, "Yep, third squad got hit."

**Shaina:** A marine, Brad, had stepped on an IED, and it blew his legs off.

**Deven:** There were no other units immediately close to them to give them support. So, it was just 12 guys that were out there, and we're all watching this unfold. Everyone's like on the radio, trying to make sure other units are aware. But our hands are tied. It's not like we can run out there and do anything. These guys have to get their way back to base. And as Doc Crowley was putting tourniquets on Brad, one of the other marines, Corporal TJ Bounty, he was kneeling to basically provide security because we're expecting an ambush to come from the village.

**Shaina:** Deven stood there watching the screen as Doc Crowley tended to Brad while another one of his marines, TJ, provided coverage. And then, [explosion sounds] another blast.

**Deven:** Like literally before my eyes.

**Shaina:** Deven saw the screen filled with billows of smoke.

**Deven:** And when the dust settled, you could just see people and body parts everywhere. It was horrifying. An IED did go off and now a second one went off. Brad, he had taken shrapnel. Corporal TJ Bounty, he took fragmentation to the skull and wasn't moving. Our interpreter, Khasimi, he had massive amounts of shrapnel all over his body. It was evident that TJ was dead. It was just the worst situation a platoon commander could imagine.

**Shaina:** Deven went to the site of the explosion the next morning as the sun rose.

**Deven:** We recovered, I think, it was TJ's helmet. I think we recovered, I don't know if it was Chris or Brad's boots. It was not just boots.

**Shaina:** The rest of the day was kind of a blur.

**Deven:** It was nauseous feeling that wouldn't go away for, I don't know, a long, long time.

**Shaina:** Deven couldn't eat. He couldn't sleep. He had to announce to the rest of the platoon that their friend had died.

**Deven:** I remember Mirza just watching me. His eyebrow was furrowed, and he apologized that this happened in-- he considered it his area of operation. Yes, it was shared between us, but basically, he felt like he was responsible for everything that happened in that area. He spoke about it in a way like he had lost one of his own soldiers.

**Shaina:** Later that evening, when Deven and Mirza were both in the control room, Mirza took Deven's hand and pulled him in for a hug.

**Deven:** I call it like the dude hug where you shake somebody's hand, and you throw your other hand, pat him on the back kind of thing. I guess it's as vulnerable as men can get about their huggability and emotions. I wasn't expecting that from him.

**Shaina:** He apologized again.

**Deven:** His voice was quivering. You could sense that he was trying to prevent himself from getting choked up about it. And that was surprising to me, because in my mind, this guy has seen so many of his own soldiers get killed, he's seen so many marines get killed, he's still not callous to it. Then, he just motioned, like how you'd motion eating food out of a plate. And he said, "You come," and he pointed to his guys, and then sort of put his hands together interlocking and I brought my interpreter over and he's like, "Yeah, Mirza's saying that we should all eat together tonight because you guys went through something terrible."

**Shaina:** Deven was hesitant to say yes to the dinner invitation. His marines almost never visited the Afghan living quarters. The two groups didn't hang out or eat together. It wasn't protocol.

**Deven:** You don't know if you're going to get food poisoning or what if an Afghan soldier poisons the chicken or something like that. There's risk involved with it.

**Shaina:** But he also wanted to show Mirza that that his marines were warming up to Mirza's soldiers and that they were grateful.

**Deven:** Aside from just being a wonderful gesture, it was also just like, "Wow, we get something different to eat tonight."

**Shaina:** The Afghan base was like a different world for the marines.

**Deven:** So, the kitchen area was just another one of those mud huts. There was no electricity in there, and the light came from the cooking fire. It was a big cooking fire that they were cooking for, however, many two dozen guys that Mirza had. You could smell like the fresh rice. The bread was amazing. The flatbread in that part of Afghanistan, they call it [unintelligible [00:13:51] it had some kind of lamb or goat soup, so tomatoes, onions, very savory kind of aromas just wafting around. Everything about it was warm.

We went to one of the rooms. They have rugs and these larger pillows on the ground, and everyone just sits around on the floor in a circle and passes the food around. You take the [unintelligible [00:14:20] bread, and you grab a piece of that bread, wrap it around the chunk of the lamb or the goat, especially that fatty part. And then, you dip it in the soup. It's like this brothy kind of tomato vegetable soup. And you just pop that in your mouth and it's just phenomenal.

**Shaina:** The Afghan soldiers and the marines exchanged swear words in each other's languages. They told inappropriate jokes and tried talking about soccer.

**Deven:** Inevitably, at some point, either party would run out of words that the other one knew so then you would get like an awkward silence and then somebody else would try to start another conversation. A bunch of the Afghan soldiers and Mirza said things like, "Don't worry. We're going to get them back. We'll help you in however way we can." From here on out, we're in this together. We both sides treat this as a closer working relationship.

**Shaina:** The next day started as usual. The men returned to their routines, but as they went out, things felt different. The soldiers and marines were making plans together.

**Deven:** This was a turning point for me. I would sit down with Mirza, and we would plan these missions together and we would have more in-depth dialogue about who would take the lead, which soldiers they were bringing, which squad that I would be taking out. It just felt way more cohesive.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** We're going to stop for some soup and warm bread, but our story continues in just a moment. Stay tuned

[somber music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Handoff episode. And again, because of the nature of our story, this piece does use graphic imagery. We left off with Deven and his marines sharing warm Afghani soup with Afghani soldiers. Snap Judgment.

**Deven:** The marines started playing soccer with their soldiers. At one point we're like, "Oh, we're sick of MREs." So, I went and talked to one of Mirza's guys and I brought the interpreter with us. And we're like, "Hey, is there a way that we can just give you guys some American dollars, and we get food?" And they're like, "Yeah, we'll talk to local farmers." We bought a bunch of chickens and vegetables, and people were like, "Hey, how come you guys aren't need to resupply? According to the calculations, you should be needing more food." I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I mean, we have our own way of doing things." You could start to see nonverbal friendships start to form.

**Shaina:** Deven's deployment was just seven months. Summer turned to fall, and he and his marines started to pack their bags. It was time to go home to California.

**Deven:** The sister unit of ours replaced us.

**Shaina:** When the new commander showed up, Deven gave them the lay of the land. And then, he brought them down to Patrol Base Hanjar.

**Deven:** I said, "This is a really important strategic part of the area. It's like the last stop before Taliban land. And this Afghan army unit is actually really good to work with. You can trust them. They're good. And this is Mirza. He runs the show here." Standing next to him and my arm was around his shoulder. Like, "He's your guy. This is your man. [chuckles] Lean on him. Take care of him and he'll take care of you." We definitely did a dude hug after that.

**Shaina:** Then, Mirza shook the new commander's hand the exact same way he had shaken Deven's hand, and Deven had a sort of grim realization.

**Deven:** They don’t fly back and go to football games when this is all over. This is their life. No human can possibly keep doing this for years on end. This has got to come to a breaking point. I don't do a lot of military-related stuff anymore. Most of the people I hang out with are not military. So, I would say a lot has changed.

**Shaina:** Deven's last day of active duty was about a year after he returned from his deployment, on January 1st, 2014. He tried putting the war behind him, not really talking about it much. But then last summer, while Deven was working from home, he heard a ding on his phone. [phone dings] A message on WhatsApp.

**Deven:** Gosh, actually, let me pull up my WhatsApp on my phone. Yeah, June 18th, oh, my gosh, I get a message. "Hi, my dear friend," and it's like, "Hello, who is this?" And he sends a photograph of him in uniform with a bunch of other soldiers. I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, this is Mirza."

**Shaina:** Before leaving Afghanistan, Deven had scribbled something down on a piece of paper and given it to Mirza.

**Mirza:** [foreign language translated] Deven give me his number in a small paper, like in capacity of a phone number. That small paper, kept that one in my wallet, money wallet.

**Shaina:** Hello?

[phone ringing]

**Shaina:** Mirza is in Kabul. The internet cuts out a lot.

**Mirza's Friend:** Hi, Shaina.

**Shaina:** Hi.

**Mirza's Friend:** So, I just had replaced the net, so it's good now so we can--

**Shaina:** A friend is translating for him.

**Mirza:** I translated for Mirza. Honestly, I lost it. His wallet and his--

**Shaina:** Mirza lost his wallet and then eight years later, he was rearranging his room.

**Mirza:** Fall back off my desk, so then we found it. [foreign language] He said that only Deven give me his number. So, when he give me his number, so I put it in my wallet. So, then I called on WhatsApp for Deven. Then, the first call he knows me that I'm Mirza.

**Deven:** There was a part of me that's like, "Why is he hitting me up almost nine and a half years later?"

**Mirza:** [foreign language] The only purpose was just asking how he is, how is his life now, is he still in army or he left. It's only for as a friendly purpose to greet him.

**Deven:** And he's asking me questions, how's the family? I told him I just got married, sent him a picture. And he sends me a picture of-- he's got a young son and sends me the emoji of a family.

**Shaina:** Deven and Mirza had more back and forth. Mirza had moved to Kabul, Devon to Charlotte. Mirza was working as a shopkeeper, Devon as a manager at a tech company.

**Deven:** It was like sort of warm-hearted reconnecting. July comes around.

**Shaina:** Deven turned on the TV and watched the White House statement about pulling American troops out of Afghanistan.

**Person:** Istotally Taliban takeover of Afghanistan now inevitable?

**Biden:** No, it is not.

**Person:** Why?

**President Biden:** Because you have the Afghan troops have 300,000--

**Deven:** In my head, I'm like, "If the Taliban's getting momentum, the way they are like, this country is about to implode."

**Mirza:** My wife was constantly asking me about like, if they found you, what they will do with you, because of my background of [voice breaks] and then also, if they found that you are, 100% sure that they will kill me.

**Shaina:** The Taliban was hunting down anyone who had worked with the US government. So, in July, Mirza took his family into hiding.

**Deven:** I'm actually looking at it right now at my phone and going back to like early July. And he's like, "Hey," gently asking, "What's the visa process? Is it possible for former Afghan army to apply?" And I said, "Ah, I don't think so. Why do you ask?" He's like, "Things aren't getting good."

**Shaina:** And that's when Mirza asked Deven for help.

**Mirza:** [foreign language] When I called Deven for help, the first thing is I asked him for a paper.

**Shaina:** Paperwork for asylum status, paperwork to get him a job as a guard at the US Embassy. Anything that could help Mirza and his family get out of Afghanistan.

**Deven:** Fast forward to August, then it starts to get frantic. He's asking, "Hey, can we get on a list? We heard that there's a list to get people out." I said, "Let me look into this."

**Shaina:** August, the Afghan President flees, the government collapses, and the Taliban takes over. Citizens stormed the airport in Kabul doing whatever they can to get out.

**Mirza:** I'm sure that if they find me, they will kill me.

**Shaina:** Mirza was desperate to get on a flight out of the country.

**Deven:** That's when I basically was like, I have a choice to either shut myself off from this, or I can get involved. I'm like, "Crap. I'm going to help Mirza and just provide as many updates as possible."

**Shaina:** Hundreds of other marines, soldiers, aid workers were getting calls from old friends in Afghanistan. Deven had heard from another vet about an online group where some of these people gathered to help coordinate escape plans for Afghans. The group was called Digital Dunkirk, named after World War II Operation Dunkirk, to evacuate allied forces from a doomed French port.

**Deven:** It was literally like task force of hundreds of people.

**Shaina:** They used Slack, WhatsApp, Signal.

**Deven:** You had to be invited in these groups. Nobody used real names.

**Shaina:** They came up with codenames to protect themselves from getting in trouble with the US government for breaking operational security protocol.

**Deven:** People created Slack channels and subchannels like evac routes, or high priority lists of getting people out.

**Shaina:** They posted resources, how to fill out the right paperwork for the right kind of pieces for Afghans.

**Deven:** I was supposed to get this contact out of the country, and I'm on the phone with them right now.

**Shaina:** All of this back and forth is unfolding in real time.

**Deven:** They're in a bus and that bus is stopped by the Taliban, and they're pulling people off the bus and putting bags over their head. Oh, my God, my guy just told me he had to hang up, never to be heard from again.

**Deven:** Vets in the US beaming information to Afghans trying to get out of Afghanistan alive.

**Shaina:** Word got out that the Taliban is running around Kabul, knocking on people's doors, asking them to scan their fingerprints and very clearly popping up like, "Oh, you were a high-ranking government official, or you were a high-ranking commander in the army. Guess what? We're going to execute you on the street to make a point."

[riveting music]

**Glynn:** Will Deven get Mirza out of Taliban territory? Stay tuned.

[riveting music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Handoff episode. My name is Glynn Washington. When last we left, Deven had joined an online taskforce of hundreds of people gathered to help coordinate escape plans for Afghans. He sent Mirza safety information directly. Snap Judgment.

**Shaina:** Back in Kabul, Mirza was with his family in hiding, glued to his phone, waiting for Deven to ping him with these updates.

**Mirza:** [foreign language] 4 o'clock in the morning when I woke up, I was looking for the phone that I was waiting what Deven send me. And every time constantly, I was checking with my phone.

**Shaina:** At the same time, thousands of miles away, Deven was sitting at his desk in North Carolina with dozens of tabs open. Maps, Slack, WhatsApp.

**Deven:** Gosh, at one point, I probably had like 20 or 30 tabs open on my browser. I just couldn't do my work meetings.

**Shaina:** He took a week off to rearrange his work from home desk into a sort of Afghan operation center. He was fielding updates about safe paths to the airport, where Taliban sympathizers were setting up checkpoints and how they were outing former soldiers and interpreters.

**Deven:** I feel like I have a commitment to Mirza and his family.

**Shaina:** Deven relayed safety information to Mirza.

**Deven:** Saying like, "Don't go to these checkpoints. If you see clusters of people, avoid it, because if they capture you or they catch you on the street, they're going to do your IRIS scan or your fingerprint, you're going to show up with your name, and you're screwed." He would kind of like say, "Hey, it's getting increasingly unsafe."

**Mirza:** Because of the Taliban, personally, I was very afraid.

**Deven:** I was in hourly contact with Mirza. I would ask him like, "Where's the rest of your family? Is there a road called this name and this name at this intersection?" He's like, "Yeah, that's six blocks away and it's on the way to the market." I'm like, "Okay, I got information that Taliban have a secret checkpoint there. If you go there, they might ask you to do like the fingerprint scan. So, don't go there." "Okay, good to know."

**Mirza:** [foreign language] The only thing I was doing on that time, checking the phone and just going from kitchen to room and from room to kitchen, and just looking for the phone. Every time in WhatsApp, I was waiting that what Deven exactly telling me, like where I should go and just check the phones. I can't sleep. Just say that everything was my phone. I was just waiting what are they giving me from the Deven.

**Deven:** There was another update, he's like, "Yeah, I just temporarily moved a couple houses down and we're hiding in a neighbor's house because we heard the Taliban were going door to door to see who's living where." I was like okay, "Delete the text history. Delete my number. Hide any documentation that shows that you had affiliation with Americans. If they come to your door, take any of your certificates or your ID cards from your military time. I know this is super uncomfortable, but you need to have your wife hide it in her undergarments." I had him change my name to a fake Afghan name in his phone. I was doing almost secret check-ins, like, "Just give me one word yes or no, are you okay."

**Shaina:** As his phone constantly dinged with updates, Deven was also helping Mirza get a visa application together. He rallied support letters from former commanders all over the US who had worked with Mirza.

**Deven:** He's so instrumental to the success of marines that were in Sangin. He's got recommendation letters from people who are lieutenant colonels and maybe even higher-ranking military officials. That's got to have some weight to it.

**Shaina:** Deven was hopeful. But then, he realized that since Mirza hadn't ever officially been contracted by the US, like many interpreters had been, he wasn't eligible for a special immigration visa. Deven broke this news to Mirza on August 19th.

**Deven:** I'll read you verbatim. I said, "Thank you for this information. Right now, I have very little information for you. I know that the government's making a list of people that helped the US and there's three priorities. One, US citizens, there still a lot of US citizens stuck. Second priority is approved SIV, so Special Immigration Visa, so interpreters. And then three, others who need help that had affiliation."

**Mirza:** [foreign language] I was very upset when I heard that Deven said the process is not fast, it's getting slow. And he said I hope that I should go and [unintelligible [00:31:57] with my friends from Afghanistan, but say it's not happened.

**Deven:** He's like, "Thank you," but also, you can see the next day, "Any updates? Any updates?" "Dude, you've got to be patient."

**Mirza:** [foreign language] I was very upset, and nothing I can do. Only still, I'm waiting to hear good news.

**Shaina:** Deven's only hope was to get Mirza on a list for a P-2 visa, a special category the US made for Afghans whose work was adjacent to the US military and their families. Many hundreds of thousands of Afghans fit into this category. Deven went back to his contacts.

**Deven:** I tracked down my old commander, got him to write a recommendation letter, found other marines that had worked with Mirza before me. Got photocopies of awards that had been given to Mirza.

**Shaina:** Deven wasn't just trying to help Mirza. He was trying to get Mirza's entire family out of Afghanistan.

**Deven:** "Mirza, need this information ASAP. Need your wife's name and her Tazkira number, your son's name, Tazkira number and what city are you in." And then he sends me this information back. "My wife and kids don't have Tazkira or passports because they originally lived in a smaller village, and they didn't have the facilities, even have ID cards."

**Shaina:** Soon, other people got word that Deven was helping.

**Deven:** I think I got like 20 or 30 different WhatsApp messages from random people saying like, "I heard you can help us." I'm like, "No, I can't. Are you an interpreter? Where's your paperwork at today?" And they're like, "It's at this stage." I'm like, "Then, you're fine. There's nothing more that I can do." Or, there were certain people, I'm like, "All right, I will help you put your package in. I'll get you on the list."

**Shaina:** Deven was working on five or six packages at a time, all the while keeping tabs on Mirza.

**Deven:** There was like a week where I didn't sleep. I was catching up on group chat at like 2:00 AM, 3:00 AM, sleep for a few hours, get back to the computer. And there were periods of time where I realized I hadn't eaten. My wife, she's like, "Are you okay? You don't look so good."

**Shaina:** Mirza finally got ID cards made for his family. Deven submitted the paperwork.

**Deven:** Drafted up, I think, a pretty awesome package to the State Department to get his process started for essentially like an asylum visa. And I told him, I was like, "Dude, I don't know what's going to happen. We just have to sit tight."

**Shaina:** September turned to October, turned to November.

**Mirza:** That's a long time. We didn't receive any update. We didn't receive any call or text from embassy.

**Shaina:** Deven still couldn't get his mind off Mirza and his family.

**Deven:** He sent me a Merry Christmas message. I'm like, "Yeah, I still don't have anything for you."

**Shaina:** On Slack, Deven kept seeing success stories posted of Afghans who are pulled out of Taliban territory.

**Deven:** Thousands of Afghans were saved, and there's victory associated with that. There were people that were in the group chat and they're like, "Oh, my gosh. I'm so relieved. I got my guy over," or, "I got this family over," and then you'd see them leave the chat. And it's like, "That's awesome. I'm genuinely happy for you. But I'm stuck here." I worry about stuff like, "Oh, is he not responding to his WhatsApp?"

**Shaina:** Mirza is back in his own home now. He doesn't go outside much. Not even to go get food or to go to a park with his kids. Life under the Taliban is still uncertain. Mirza still fears for his life. And just still waiting for the next WhatsApp message from Deven.

When Deven was in Afghanistan, his life was basically in your hands, like you were the one who was helping him and telling him what to do. And then eight years passed and now all of a sudden, your life is in Deven's hands.

**Mirza:** [foreign language] Yes, definitely, because, see, on that time when Devon was in Afghanistan and the mission with us, I did my best with him. Now, yes, I don't know anyone, another Americans because I'm not in contact with them. Now, my last chance is Deven. I hope that he can take me out from Afghanistan.

**Shaina:** After weeks of unanswered emails, Deven started asking friends who work in immigration law about the P-2 visa process.

**Deven:** Somebody contacted me and they're like, "Dude, the whole P-2 visa, the one that Mirza would qualify for? It was such lip service from the State Department. That process is completely stalled." This is so impossible. I don't know what to do. It did cross my mind, can I send him a WhatsApp message, meaning, like, "Hey, we suck, and I can't help you."

**Shaina:** Have you lost hope in the American system?

**Mirza:** [foreign language] Yes because the process is very slow now.

**Shaina:** Have you lost hope in Deven?

**Mirza:** [foreign language] I say no, because still I hope from Deven because he's my friend. Best friend, military friends. Military friends are different from other friends because when you're friends in the military, out from, say, from the your checkpoints going for a patrol something, it's 100% dangerous. You will feel 100% there is dangers of ambush. Sometimes, it's happened when you are wounded or someone's dead. That's the place, this is your friend, military friend will help you to save your life.

[foreign language]

[thoughtful music]

**Glynn:** Since the US left Afghanistan last summer, only a tiny percentage of Afghans who worked alongside the American government, risking their life for Americans had been relocated. Less than 3%. The State Department estimates that between 70,000 and 160,000 of these Afghans are stranded in Taliban territory, struggling in their increasingly desperate circumstances. Many thanks to Deven Ravel and Mirza for sharing their stories. Mirza is a nickname, by the way. Special thanks to Mary Mathis and Sarah Delia. Original score for this piece was by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by Shaina Shealy.

[upbeat music]

Now, you know in today's bifurcated world, the one thing we can all share is story. And your friend, the one who doesn't even know what a podcast is, that friend needs you right now more than ever. You can help them by taking their phone with their ears and introducing them to the world of Snap Judgment storytelling, hours of amazing journeys on the Snap Judgment podcast available right now for free. Each one help one before the Dark Lord rises again. Snap Judgment.

Snap was brought to you by the team that will always eat Afghani soup as it is meant to be eaten with warm bread. Except for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich, always asking, "Anybody got any crackers?" 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. Now way is this the news. In fact, you could ask the guy to give you the thing. You mean this thing? What about the other thing? I haven't got the other thing. Well, you better go get the other thing. And even as you're arguing, 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]*