[Snap Judgment intro]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Okay. So, way before Snap, I worked in Malaysia. I'm a junior diplomat. My job is to make with a happy talk to the government officials, the politicians, the media. And I like them. I like everybody. It's fun. I ask them, the most American question there is, "What do you do for a living?" I pretend to be interested in their answers. I nod my head up and down, then we switch while they pretend to act interested in my nonsense. Usually, there's going to be cocktails. I like cocktails. Sometimes though, wires, they get crossed, or maybe it's someone's idea of humor, whatever. Occasionally, I receive an actual paper invitation to a Spooked show.

[intriguing music]

They don't call it that, but that's what it is. See, the spies, they don't just go to parties. Sometimes they have their own because Malaysia has got the oil well. It's got the ports. It's got national banks. It's not too close to China, but it's close. It's got the defense, and arms agreements, and international Islamic organizations, both above board and clandestine find it a great place to do business. This means there's lots of spies buzzing about trying to uncover covert information, trying to recruit people to sell information, to make money, to sell weapons. These people, these spies, they come from everywhere. They have every skin tone, every religious background. But once you squint your eyes, everyone looks the same because if you do look right, you only see that mask upon mask upon mask. At this party, the masks are uptight.

Snappas, as a public service, I'm going to tell you the height of comedy, if yourself happen to wander into your own Spooked show, I stroll up to this rough circle of steely eyed men. They are all men, each of them studying the insides of their cocktail glass and say, "Hey, what is it you, fellas, do for a living?" And they freeze. They look at each other, they look back at me, and then they all laugh crazy, like, I'm Chris Rock and Jerry Seinfeld combined. I laugh back. For a brief moment, everyone puts their mask down.

Today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present The Lamb, The Lion, and The Fox. You might want to put your mask back on because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** We begin with a brave and intrepid young woman named Amaryllis Fox. When she was young, her best friend was killed in a terror attack. So, Amaryllis set out to be a reporter to cover the news to report on conflict. And listeners, please note, some names, locations, some operational details have been changed to safeguard intelligence sources and methods. Snap Judgment.

**Amaryllis:** So, I walk into the bar, and I see Jim sitting there, one of my very best friends in the world, this person that I have shared so much of my truth and my soul with. I sit down and he says, "What happened?" And I tell him, "I didn't get it." He takes a sip of his beer and says, "Yeah, I bet they just told you to say that." And I start crying. He's never seen me cry before, so he believes me.

[ominous music]

**Nikka:** But Amaryllis was lying. The CIA ordered her to, which is hard to imagine if you know Amaryllis Fox. She was a reporter who risked her life for the exact opposite, for transparency.

**Amaryllis:** I'd taken this year off in order to go and find a way to smuggle myself into Burma and interview Aung San Suu Kyi while she was under house arrest, all because I believed in the power of her words and the power of truth to challenge this terrifying authoritarian government.

**Nikka:** After their interview, Amaryllis was arrested and interrogated by the state police. But she managed to smuggle the footage out anyway by wrapping it up in plastic and actually hiding it in herself like a tampon. So, needless to say, she was committed to her cause, and she became a serious journalist, focusing on Southeast Asia, following in the footsteps of other journalism giants covering international conflict.

**Amaryllis:** It's winter in Oxford, and I make my way over to our little subterranean college bar with windows that are always covered in condensation. I ask the barman to make me a hot toddy. I'm waiting for my medicine. And I see on the television set that Danny's been beheaded.

**Nikka:** So, that's Daniel Pearl. He was the South Asia bureau chief of The Wall Street Journal. While covering a story in Karachi, Pakistan, he was kidnapped and later executed. He was a hero to Amaryllis, and on several occasions, had mentored her journalism career.

**Amaryllis:** Over the next few weeks, the news can't get enough of this story. They play all of the horrible things that Danny was made to say by his captors before he's killed. In the midst of all of this media frenzy, I asked what I could do to make this stop. The idea that daylight really is the best disinfectant was something that I could feel slipping through my fingers. Maybe there was something more complicated happening now. Maybe, in fact, it's governments that need to be protected from humans in this new war.

**Nikka:** So, she passes all of her tests, and she's officially selected to be a member of the CIA. In that moment, she knows she's leaving behind her commitment to transparency.

[tense music]

**Amaryllis:** This path is in the shadows and necessarily involves lying in order to serve some greater truth. But it doesn't make it any easier.

**Nikka:** So, her first order was to go and lie to Jim, the one guy she had worked with to apply to all these various intelligence jobs and convince him that she had failed. But those tears, those were actually real.

**Amaryllis:** What got to me in that moment looking at this friend who I had shared this entire journey with was that from this moment forward, this friend would never really know me again.

**Nikka:** Right after that, she had to go lie to her family and anyone else who knew anything about her application.

**Amaryllis:** This kind of work is probably the loneliest in the world.

[electro music]

**Nikka:** Amaryllis's first target is a Hungarian man named Jakab. The idea is actually simple. Start a fake relationship with someone who has intel or access that you want. And as you're getting that information, work towards building trust so that one day you can flip them and turn them into an informant.

**Amaryllis:** We know that Jakab is an illegal arms dealer. And not just any illegal arms dealer, an arms dealer with access to some of the most sensitive black market nuclear precursors that used to be stored in former Soviet arsenals.

[tense music]

**Amaryllis:** In order to get near him, I'm posing as a buyer, a buyer of these weapons so that I can build a relationship with him with a view to maybe getting some of them off the street, maybe even someday recruiting him as a source directly who can work with us to take down the entire network. But it's the first time I've done this, and I don't know what to expect. So, I'm walking down these back streets in Léon, which is this beautiful bacchanalian town in France, really known for its love of food and wine and nightlife. It's already evening. It's dark outside, and all around me at the street cafes, people are enjoying one another, and I'm trailing this broker of mass scale death.

[pensive music]

**Amaryllis:** I can only see the back of his head, and he's singing, and he has this beautiful, ancient voice. The song he's singing is a kind of a Hungarian folk song, the kind that fills you with nostalgia, even if you have no idea what the words are. I'm really surprised, because maybe he's not as hardened an arms dealer as he makes himself out to be.

[tense music]

**Amaryllis:** So, I take out a cigarette, I ask him in French for a light, because I found it's a pretty good way to get people's hands where you can see them before they know what's happening. When he's flicking his Zippo, I can smell the butane between us and I can see his face for the first time. This face was as brutish as any you could imagine, someone who's lived a hard life and grown hard in response. So, we're standing in the street, smoking our cigarettes, and he's about to turn and walk away. He thinks I'm just a passerby who needed a light. That's when I say, "Jakab?" I introduce myself. He's surprised but realizes pretty quickly what's going on.

One of the things that's most important in that circumstance is to not stay in public very long. So, I've parked a car across the street, and I ask him whether he'd be up for a drive. Without waiting for answer, I turn around and go get in the driver's side [car door opens] and resist the overwhelming temptation to look back. [car door closes] Once I pull the door closed, I can see that he's still standing on the other side of the street looking curious and bemused. But he crosses the street and climbs in the passenger side door. We sit there for a second. We crack the windows to ash our cigarettes. And I say, "Do you mind if we drive?" And he says, "What the hell are you doing in this game?" And I say, "I'm just a businesswoman."

[engine starts]

**Amaryllis:** I start driving because he hasn't told me not to. Then I say, "I do have an opportunity that could be good for both of us." As soon as I say it, I know I pushed too hard. I know I should have let him turn the talk to business, but there we are, and the only way out is through. So, I don't backtrack. I just let it sit. He says that he has some wares available for sale, and I ask him what they are, and he gives me the most mundane list of arms that you could ever come up with. These are M4s, maybe going out on a limb, a few components that you might need for surface to air missiles, but not the missiles themselves. I know that he's giving me his cover story, and I know that I've screwed up.

He gets out of the car, and as he gets out, I say, "I guess, our mutual friend misunderstood your access." He pauses, and then he closes the door and walks away. My heart falls, because it's the first time that I come face to face with the terror of failing. I walk back to my hotel, and I pour myself a whiskey. I'm sitting there nursing this drink and telling myself that I was right. I was right at the beginning when I doubted my ability to do this, given that I'm not Jason Bourne, and tonight, it wasn't good enough. I know I've got to go home and tell them it was all for not.

**Nikka:** The next day, she flew back to America.

**Amaryllis:** So, I get home, and I drive to the office in Virginia, and I walk in knowing that the first thing I have to do is tell my boss what happened. I lay it all out. I say, "I was an idiot. I pushed too hard. I screwed this up and now I don't know what's going to happen." He lets me go on like this for 10 whole minutes, indicting myself. Then he smiles this half smile and he says, "Go check the drafts folder. Jakab wrote today." I'm flooded with relief, because this means he reached back out. It means that contact isn't lost. It means that maybe I can still get one of these machines off the street. As I walk away, my boss yells after me, "But you're still an idiot." [chuckles]

[intriguing music]

**Nikka:** Before Amaryllis could write back, she needed to figure out how they would work with Jakab. There are really only a few options.

**Amaryllis:** There's go in pretending to be a buyer, buy all of the inventory, and stockpile it somewhere safe, so no one else can access it. Well, that only works until the dealer realizes that you're not selling any of it on, and suddenly they disappear. So, another option that gets thrown around the room is, "Well, why don't we sabotage the technology, then allow it to be sold on? But it won't work." Problem is, in the news just then, there's a lot about Operation Merlin, which turns out to have been a misguided intelligence community operation that sabotaged the designs for nuclear components and then provided them to Iran.

Well, it turns out the Iranians are pretty good at math, pretty good at engineering, and they figured out where the flaws in the design were, fixed it, and then suddenly had access to information they never otherwise would have had. That really only leaves the third approach, which is to recruit the dealer to our side.

**Nikka:** So, they decide to two track their approach. They're going to buy weapons from Jakab and get them off the street, but at the same time work towards turning him into an informant and hope he doesn't realize the plan because of the nature of her work though, Amaryllis gets relocated to China, along with her husband, who is actually also a spy. As they settle into their new life in a red brick lean house in the maze of streets in the center of Shanghai, it turns out she's also actually pregnant. Month after month, while her baby grows in her belly, she also works to strengthen her relationship with Jakab.

**Amaryllis:** So, we embarked on a series of meetings in different places, different cities, all over the world. And in each, I got to know him better. I got to understand what drove him. I remember one in particular where I asked him about this huge ring that he wore that was in the shape of a lamb and the size of a Super Bowl ring. "And what is that?" He says, "It reminds me of my grandfather, and not to go soft." And I ask him, "Your grandfather was a tough guy?" And he says, "No, my grandfather was a lamb, and he got torn apart by Rakosi's lions." I realized that he's talking about this Hungarian dictator who interrogated and persecuted and tortured his enemies. In this moment, Jakab is anything but a hero.

This is a guy who is paying the bills by selling weapons that not only kill but kill indiscriminately. But maybe I can reawaken that in him. But I would have liked to have a few more meetings to let them simmer and come of age on their own. Unfortunately, the group with dangerous ties to Jamaat-e-Islami and Al-Qaeda had planned a meeting. The only reason you plan a meeting with an arms dealer is if you're in the market for arms. And Jakab's arms were potentially catastrophic. So, ready or not, it was time for the recruitment pitch.

[plane flying]

**Nikka:** So, before Jakab can meet with the buyers, Amaryllis gets on a plane for Thailand to intercept him. She sets up a meeting in a hotel room, hoping that there she'll be able to convince him to become a spy for the US.

**Amaryllis:** Nobody can ever tell how someone's going to respond when you finally reveal that you work for CIA. There's always a chance that everything goes to hell. There's a sense of danger in the room. When I hear his singing in the hallway, I take a breath, and I walk to the door, and I unlock it, and he walks in, and I put the do not disturb sign on, and I close the door behind him, and we're in it. He throws himself down, and laments the state of the economy at home, and the incompetence of his government, the same diatribe that he goes through every time. As we sat in that room and talked about what would happen if one of these devices went off, he said, "Well, if only there was something I could do about it."

He looked at me asking, inviting me to tell him what it was. I told him, "Here we were two people sitting in a room. Only one of us was a nuclear arms dealer talking with Al-Qaeda, and one of us was a CIA officer trying to save lives. And together, we could do something that no other two people on the planet in that moment could do." He looks at me and he asks, "Will I be safe?" And I say, "Yes." I tell him, "We're friends." I tell him that for these past years, he might not realize it, but I've had his back.

[ominous music]

That our communications were safe. Everything has been to prepare for this moment, in case in this moment, he decided to become the person I knew he wanted to be. He sits really still for a minute. I've never seen him do that before. And then he finally looks me in the eye and he says, "Don't get me killed." And I say, "Deal." I raise my drink and I say, "To your grandfather. May he be watching." And he raises his drink and he says, "To our grandkids. May they survive."

**Nikka:** Then they sign their names to a piece of paper, committing their lives to one another. Amaryllis to protect his identity and for him to protect hers. In a strange way, it's actually one of the most honest relationships she has.

**Amaryllis:** In some ways, this moment, the result of so many fictions over so many months in so many cities, this moment is the first time that someone outside of my work has really seen me, has really known me in a very long time.

**Nikka:** Then she heads back to Shanghai, and in between buying and stockpiling weapons with Jakab, she gives birth to her baby, Zoe.

**Amaryllis:** I lean over and reach into this plastic rectangle and pull out my daughter. I feel bursts of technicolor. And the stakes that I thought I'd understood before are suddenly larger than life, because I have something to protect.

**Nikka:** While that moment was filled with great joy and relief, it also had another quality, something that didn't make sense.

**Amaryllis:** I take Zoe home, and like any new mother, I read all of the books, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and so on. They tell me that the first thing that I'm going to experience as a young mom is this profound eye contact with my baby. But I don't. My daughter won't lock eyes with me, and I begin to panic. Even though I'm working on counterterrorism and counterproliferation, this little being fills me with fear in a way I've never experienced before.

So, we take to spending a lot of time outdoors, Zoe and I. I walk her around Shanghai, even though the air is really thick with pollution and smog. She and I, both cough while we walk around. Still, it feels less claustrophobic than being back in the house. We take to visiting this Buddhist temple near our home in Pushi. In the middle of this temple, there's a koi pond. Zoe loves the colors of these fish as their fins flash up over the water. And then one day, one of the koi jumps to the surface and then hangs out there for a moment as though he's just gazing up at us. I'm in the middle of this sentence to Zoe and I just stop. My mind's wandering as I'm looking at this fish and I say to her out loud, "We must look really weird to them, huh, Zoe?" It makes me laugh. And in that moment, Zoe laughs and her eyes lock with mine.

I realize that Zoe sees me when I'm truly myself, when I forget about the situation we're in in this hostile country, and just let down my defenses and give her a clear view of her mom. So, from then on, when I would strap her to my chest and we would go out into the world, I felt like she was kind of my Yoda, where every time that I let down my guard, dropped my defenses and allowed myself to really be me, I would feel her respond and we could explore each other, and in my case, myself.

**Nikka:** A few weeks later, Jakab delivers on his first big piece of intel about a possible attack at a busy intersection in Karachi, Pakistan.

**Amaryllis:** We get the intersection and we get the groups that might be involved. We know that there is an intermediary that the agency has worked with before that might be open to conversation.

[tense music]

**Nikka:** Amaryllis is given a choice. As a new mom, she can stay at home with her daughter, or she could press forward with the mission.

**Amaryllis:** I look at Zoe and I know that if I choose to stay home with her, it's someone else's daughter that's going to pay the price. And ultimately, I make the choice to get on a plane and try to stop the attack. So, I set off to talk with them as a representative of the government and see whether there's any opening to being able to prevent this attack.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** In just a moment, Amaryllis locks her armor down tight for her mission. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. When last we left, Amaryllis was faced with a very big decision.

**Amaryllis:** I look at Zoe, and I know that if I choose to stay home with her, it's someone else's daughter that's going to pay the price. And ultimately, I make the choice to get on a plane and try to stop the attack. So, I set off to talk with them as a representative of the government and see whether there's any opening to being able to prevent this attack. And I land in Karachi and get into a taxi.

**Nikka:** In the taxi, she gets an order, hold all field operations. The next day, she learns that a fellow CIA agent had been killed in a nearby attack. After headquarters checks for additional threats, she's cleared to prep for her meeting. But now she's down 24 hours on security checks, so she'll just have to ballpark things. She heads to the intersection where the bombing is been planned.

**Amaryllis:** I have the danger and the loss of my agency brethren foremost on my mind. And I remember too that this is the town where Danny was taken. All of the loss and all of the training and all of the fear pools in my shoulders, and I lock my armor down tight.

**Nikka:** The idea is that she'll go in as a representative of the US government to meet with this local terrorist leader who isn't totally for this bombing and might be willing to negotiate.

**Amaryllis:** As I walk into the intersection, I see a man across the street who I've noticed earlier in the day, and I realize that he's been trailing me. And then I realize that he's pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and he's getting ready to dial.

[suspenseful music]

**Amaryllis:** In the world of terrorism, cell phones are bad news. They're used to trigger explosive devices. And all of a sudden, I wonder whether Jakab had the wrong day, whether this is a trap, whether the device that I'm there to prevent changing hands has already been placed and is about to explode.

[suspenseful music]

**Amaryllis:** All I can do is look for cover. There are concrete vehicle barriers to my left and I get ready to dive behind them.

[cell phone rings]

**Amaryllis:** Then my cell phone rings, and I answer it. And I can see the man across the intersection say into his phone, "Welcome to Karachi. Is it possible that you have time to move our meeting forward to today?"

**Nikka:** This is a crucial move. Amaryllis is not supposed to meet with the terrorist group until tomorrow. Yet after doing a quick calculation, she figures it might build trust for her negotiations. So, she goes in blind.

**Amaryllis:** The first thing that I notice when I walk into the room is that the walls are lined with books. And the second thing I notice is that in front of the books along the window are rifles, M4s leaning lazily against the shelf beside two fighters who are standing. And the third thing I notice is that their boss, the older man sitting on the sofa in the middle, is holding a baby. None of the briefing materials that I have read on this man, on this feared, hardened terrorist, have said anything about a baby. This baby is heaving with mucus in her throat. I can hear it. There's dust hanging in the air and it's hard to breathe. And then we get down to business.

I unfold the map and I show them the intersection. I tell them what we know about the planned attack. I explain that the targets all around the intersection are civilians, Muslims. I say I know that they don't believe in killing their fellow faithful, that they can't possibly endorse this target. In the midst of all this conversation, I'm not getting anywhere. The man brings up our drones, asks me whether I'll prevent future attacks on him if he prevents this attack.

Throughout all of our back and forth, this baby is breathing, these raspy, sticky breaths. I decide to take a risk to go off script. I ask the man, "Yours?" And he nods. I tell him that I have a child too, and I ask whether his baby has asthma. He doesn't respond. And then I tell him that we live in China. He gives me a pitying look as though he shares my frustration at governments that can't keep their air clean. All of a sudden, in this moment, we're two parents lamenting the health of our little ones.

This is wildly off script now, because revealing anything about our families, revealing any personal information is definitely not standard operating procedure when talking with the adversary. I reach into my bag and I pull out a little vial of clove oil. I travel with it because it's useful in making changes to documents. But at home, I've learned to add a little bit to hot water and let my daughter breathe in the steam when her breathing is difficult. And so, I hold it up, "Have you ever tried clove oil?" And he stares at me with such skepticism that it makes me realize the extent of the leap that I am asking him to make to let his baby inhale some unidentified substance from some dark vial that a CIA officer is giving him on the off chance that I'm genuine. So, I take the top off, and I inhale myself to show him that it's safe.

**Nikka:** After a second, the man signals to someone behind Amaryllis.

**Amaryllis:** Generally, it's not a great sign when the terrorist that you're talking to makes a hand signal to someone to bring something out from the back. And then a woman emerges, and she puts a little branch of white blossoms on the table. "Alyssum," he says. And I say, "For asthma?" And he nods, and he says, "It tastes like broccoli." In this moment, we exchange our home remedies. He sniffs and I nibble, and then he says, "I will see about shifting the target, but won't we all just pick new targets tomorrow?" And I say, "Yes, you will, and we will." But the Quran says, "To save one human life is to save all humankind. So, can we just save all of humankind today, even if it's going to destroy itself again tomorrow?" There's this long beat.

[tense music]

So, out of the corner of my eye, I can see the other two guys hands go to their guns. The fear surges through me, but I know that I can't show it. So, I hold his eye, and I put my hand in my chest and he puts his hand to his, and then he smiles and tells me that the flowers he just gave me aren't just good for asthma. They also work for stress. And we both smile.

**Nikka:** Amaryllis exits the meeting, thanking the man and taking the white blossoms home to Shanghai. Then she gets an email from headquarters.

**Amaryllis:** It says simply that, "There was no attack today, that it's either been deferred or a new target has been acquired. Kudos."

**Nikka:** So, Amaryllis returns to the States, and her boss lays out the details of her next assignment. She'll be deployed to a new country with a new identity.

**Amaryllis:** I sat down, wrote my letter of resignation, and turned it in.

**Nikka:** So, Amaryllis left. But Jakab, the man she recruited and turned into an informant, he stayed on.

**Amaryllis:** And now, years after leaving the agency, I still think of Jakab. I send him a deep bow through the ether, because it's not easy to do that work knowing that it may put you in a place of danger. And in the end, it might not even work.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Thanks so much to Amaryllis Fox. Amaryllis now works as analyst on current events and gives talks on peacemaking. She just finished her memoir, *Life Undercover: Coming of Age in the CIA*. To find out more, go to our website, *snapjudgment.org*. Original score for that story was by Leon Morimoto. It was produced by Nikka Singh.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Snapnation, it is about that time. And if you missed even a moment with Snap storytelling magic, you know what to do. Get the Snap Judgment podcast, wherever you get your podcast. Snap Judgment is brought to you by the team that always carries a spare key. Make some noise, if you would for the uber producer Mr. Mark Ristich. Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Liz Mak, Eliza Smith, Leon Morimoto, Lauryn Newsome, Marisa Dodge, Flo Wiley, Nancy López, John Fecile, Nikka Singh, Teo Ducot.

Even though you may have heard that this is not the news, no way is this the news, in fact, you could lock up the suspect in your secret room in the back of the safe house, only to realize that when you go to leave it, the door doesn't work. The suspect seems to have disappeared, and most challenging of all, the candy has vanished from the bowl. All of this and more, and you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

[music]

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