[Snap Judgment intro]

[somber music]

**Glynn:** It was a hard birth. Very hard birth. Honestly, I don't know how my wife did it. I do not. Push. Push. No relief. The doctors calm at first, “Everything's going to be all right. Everything's fine. Push.” Then I see the worry increase their faces, ours. My wife looks too small, too fragile for this. I want to tell her just a little bit more, “Almost there, darling.” But I don't know. So I hold her hand, “Push.” I've never seen a more amazing display of physicality. Then she gives me a miracle, a girl.

I cut the cord, take her to be clean, bring her back to her mother. Pain forgotten. Laughing, crying. Then this baby girl gets all quiet, looks up at me, eyes blazing. I'm in her face and she's staring up at her father, examining me as I examine her. And in that space, I don't even realize it at the time, but I make a promise. It's holy. It's solemn. It's serious. “I will do whatever I can do for you until the end of time.” She looks at me like, “I'm going to hold you to that.” Then she puts up a holler.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present “The Promise,” amazing stories about the oaths that bind. My name is Glynn Washington. We grabbed the brand one, and ran as fast as we could from the hospital, because this is Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Now then, we're going to kick off the program with a story from an intrepid reporter, one who would follow any lead, climb any mountain. But sometimes, the story of a lifetime just falls in your lap. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Bryan:** A contact of mine at the courthouse called to say that something was coming in that, you know, I'd certainly want to see.

**Nancy:** That's Bryan Denson. And back in 2009, he was reporting for The Oregonian newspaper in Portland.

**Bryan:** I grabbed a seat in the front row of a courtroom. I was trying to get as close as I could to a 24-year-old defendant named Nathaniel Nicholson. He went by Nathan. Nathan looked really stoic as government prosecutors played a wiretap.

[phone ringing]

**Star:** Nathan, are you okay?

**Nathan:** Yeah, I'm okay. Are you okay?

**Star:** I'm good. What's up with the FBI?

**Nathan:** Well--

**Star:** Are you okay? Are you in jail?

**Nathan:** No, I wouldn't be calling from my cell phone if I was in jail.

**Star:** I've been very worried.

**Nathan:** I know. I know. So is everyone else. [laughs]

**Star:** So, what happened?

**Nathan:** Holy cow. Yeah. Well, it's a really long story.

**Nancy:** This is tape of the wiretap. It's Nathan speaking to a sister, Star, after the FBI came to his apartment on December 2008.

**Nathan:** What was going on is, I was transporting some information.

**Star:** O-kay.

**Nathan:** That's what the whole deal was about.

**Star:** Who information was it for?

**Nathan:** Ah, well, it was for the Russians.

**Star:** Dude.

**Nathan:** But it was nothing illegal or anything like that.

**Star:** It was nothing illegal?

**Nathan:** If it was, I'd be in prison.

**Bryan:** This was for me way more than just an espionage case. I really needed to know what Nathan's role was in the spy plot.

**Nancy:** So the first chance he got, Bryan slipped a note to Nathan's attorney and landed an exclusive interview with Nathan.

**Bryan:** Okay. So I did talk about that then.

Yeah. And I'm going to go back to that tape to describe that a little bit.

**Bryan:** Okay. We talked for slightly more than eight hours, all on videotape.

**Nancy:** The story starts when Nathan was 12. He was living in a townhouse with his dad and his sister, Star, in Burke, Virginia.

**Bryan:** It was, for the most part, an idyllic childhood. And at that point, of course, he didn't know his dad also happened to work for the CIA.

**Nathan:** He was my hero. I saw him as someone who would make sacrifices for his family, and I wanted to aspire to that.

**Nancy:** But then everything changed one day. In November 1996, Nathan, his sister, and their uncle had just dropped Nathan's dad off at the airport.

**Bryan:** To fly off on what Nathan thought was a business job. A few hours later, two FBI agents knocked on the door.

**Nathan:** Yeah, I remember answering the door.

**Bryan:** What did they say?

**Nathan:** They asked if Uncle Rob was there.

**Bryan:** And in fact, they have to search the house. They're going to tear the house upside down. So the kids literally had to pack up their things and go to a motel that was rented for them by the FBI.

**Nathan:** I just remember them looking very serious and said, “All right.” I turn on the TV, and they flipped it to a certain channel, and then they started saying, “Harold James Nicholson was arrested for espionage, and he could be looking at life or he could be looking at the death penalty.”

**Bryan:** Harold James Nicholson, he went by Jim, was Nathan's dad. This is a guy who had betrayed his country on so many different levels.

**Nancy:** Jim Nicholson passed information from secret CIA cables to Russian spies all over the world. He gave up the names of approximately 300 CIA officers in training. He exposed their identities, putting their operations and lives at risk.

**Bryan:** Jim's betrayals didn't end there. He gave up the names of access agents. He gave up the names of the CIA station chief in Moscow, for heaven's sakes. He gave up a whole lot of top secret and other classified information to the Russians for $300,000 in pay.

**Nancy:** Nathan couldn't believe any of it. The person the FBI was talking about did not square away with the man he knew as his father.

**Nathan:** I was just so shocked. I couldn't even feel any emotion other than just like, “What is this?” Surely, there must be like a huge mistake going on here. Star started shouting out things like, she doesn't believe in God anymore. I was worried for my father's life. I was worried-- that was the last time I was ever going to see him.

**Nancy:** Nathan did see his dad again, but not until a year later.

**Bryan:** Jim was convicted in 1997, the highest-ranking CIA officer ever convicted of espionage.

**Nancy:** And he was now serving a 23-and-a-half-year sentence in a medium security prison in Oregon.

**Bryan:** That prison became Nathan's second home. He spent so many hours sitting knee to knee with his dad.

**Nathan:** He expressed a lot of guilt, “What I did was selfish. I should have never done that, because you kids are now suffering because of it.” He felt incredibly embarrassed. He’s just very, very remorseful and always very humbled whenever we would come to visit him.

**Bryan:** Nathan was 22 years old. He was going to visit his father.

**Nancy:** And he was going to go in and buy his father a jalapeños cheeseburger and a Coke. They were going to talk about their favorite show, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*.

**Bryan:** No, I don't think he was expecting anything unusual that day. When his father said--

**Nathan:** I know you kids are having some tough times with finances, and there's a way for me to help out with that, and that I would be the go-to guy to make all this happen. He was saying, “I want you to find out where some Russian consulates are.”

**Bryan:** Nathan didn't really give it a whole lot of thought.

**Nancy:** So he went home, did a little internet research, and found a Russian consulate in San Francisco.

**Nathan:** I relayed that to him, of course, and says, “All right.”

**Bryan:** Just verbally though?

**Nathan:** Oh, right.

**Bryan:** Jim nodded along and he said, “I'd like for you to drive down to San Francisco, and I would like for you to carry some messages that I'm going to prepare for you, and I want you to ask for the Director of Security.”

**Nathan:** And he said, “What I'm hoping for is that they will give you some money.”

**Bryan:** Now, Jim would have known that the Russians were holding what might be called a pension for him in Moscow. It's been estimated at about a million dollars, and that Nathan could maybe make some early withdrawals from this account.

**Nathan:** But it's dangerous.

**Bryan:** What did you say?

**Nathan:** Well, I let dad know that whatever he needed done, I would do it.

**Bryan:** And he never asked his dad, “What do you mean it's dangerous?” [chuckles] Then when his father was talking about cover stories and pretending to be an architect just in case the FBI or someone should stop you, this should have been sending warning flags.

**Nathan:** I was really appealed to the adventure of what it sounded like. He explained to me that while I could tell Jeremy and Star, it might best not to, just because the less explaining, the easier things would go.

**Bryan:** I'll have to say this, Nathan was extremely vulnerable. He'd been through a terrible parachuting accident that had called him from the army. He was depressed. He had been suicidal. He was a Pizza Hut delivery man at night. It was not the exciting life that he had imagined for himself.

**Nathan:** I started the drive around midnight or so, got to a rest stop, threw on my suit. Dad told me to present myself in a nice fashion.

**Nancy:** Early the next morning, Nathan walked into the Russian consulate. He was carrying a couple messages and a photo of him with his dad.

**Bryan:** In fact, he felt pretty confident that the Russians would treat him very well.

**Nancy:** At the receptionist's desk, he asked to speak to the Director of Security.

**Bryan:** A man did come out and drew Nathan back into the bowels of this consulate into a surveillance proof room.

**Nathan:** He was very suspicious of me. He starts questioning me.

**Bryan:** What did he ask you?

**Nathan:** He says, “Well, tell me about yourself. Where were you born?” He tried to trip me up by saying, “Tell me about your brothers.” And I say, “Well, no, I only have one brother and one sister.” “I want to let you know that we don't trust you right now. [chuckles] We have no idea who you are.”

**Nancy:** Ultimately, the Director of Security turned Nathan away.

**Nathan:** I remember driving back very discouraged. “Well, why'd I waste this trip?” Informed dad on the next visit as to all that happened. Well, he's very concerned about my safety. “Did they hurt you?” I say, “No, [chuckles] they didn't even touch a hand on me, other than shaking my hand.” You can almost hear the gears turning in his head as to what he's thinking up there.

**Bryan:** At this point, Jim undoubtedly knew the Russians were vetting Nathan and that they were poring over his notes to the Russians.

**Nathan:** He wasn't too happy, and he says, “All right. Ah, I want you to go back in two weeks.”

**Nancy:** So, with his marching orders, Nathan drove back down to the Russian consulate in San Francisco. He was a little nervous, unsure what to expect.

**Bryan:** He asked for the Director of Security again.

**Nathan:** He was very apologetic for being so harsh the first time. “We're very sorry for the way we treated you, for not believing you. We fully trust you now.” Just about gave me a bear hug [chuckles] almost, it seemed like.

**Bryan:** And then to Nathan's great surprise, he spilled out $5,000 out of a bag in $100 bills.

**Nancy:** But there was a catch, and one that Nathan didn't fully grasp at the time. The Russians wanted something in exchange for this money.

**Nathan:** He gave me specific instructions as to where I was going to meet for the next meeting.

**Bryan:** Told him that it was now unsafe to be visiting the Russian consulate in San Francisco, and was told to go to Mexico City and given a date.

**Nancy:** The Russians had a list of questions for Jim, and now they had Nathan to carry those answers back and forth. The Russians wanted to know--

**Nathan:** Was dad suspicious of being tailed in Malaysia? If he was suspicious, what were his reasonings behind that? They were curious as to who gave him the lie detector test, if he noticed anything odd or-- Basically, it seemed like, “Why did you screw up,” type of questions.

**Bryan:** There is a little bit of truth to that, the Russians were trying to find out where they went wrong, but what they were trying to do is find out what Russian spy among them fingered Jim. [laughs] Nathan is driving home from that visit feeling like he's on cloud nine, and he is very excited to tell his father. Just about that time, the phone rings.

[cell phone ringing]

**Nathan:** Hello?

**Automated:** This call is from—

**Jim:** This is [unintelligible [00:13:42].

**Automated:** An inmate at a federal--

**Nathan:** Hey, Bob.

**Jim:** Hey, Nathan. I thought I'd call you and see what kind of hours you're keeping these.

**Nathan:** Pretty much the same, I guess.

**Jim:** Yeah? [laughs]

**Nathan:** Yeah. I'm on the road heading back now.

**Jim:** Oh. Okay. Did everything go okay?

**Nathan:** Yeah, everything went real well. I got a sale for about 5K.

**Jim:** Okay. Uh-huh.

**Nathan:** Even thinking of making a trip over to Mexico come December.

**Jim:** Is that right?

**Nathan:** Yeah.

**Jim:** Oh. So business is picking up, huh?

**Nathan:** Yeah. Yeah, sure is.

**Jim:** Well, I'm just tickled to talk to you about it. I'll be calling you again then, tomorrow maybe after church or something like that?

**Nathan:** Sounds great.

**Jim:** Okay. You have a safe journey, and get some sleep this afternoon, I guess you'll be sleeping.

[chuckles]

**Nathan:** Okay, Bob.

**Jim:** All right, buddy. You take care, and I love you. Have you got fog down there?

[intriguing music]

**Nancy:** For the next year and a half, Nathan crisscrossed the globe on the Russians orders. The first two times, he went to Mexico City. The next to Lima, Peru. Each time he met with a Russian handler named George. Nathan would hand over his dad's answers written on prison napkins. George would give him $10,000 stuffed in a paper bag. At the end of each meeting, he'd get a list of more questions for his dad and the location of his next assignment.

**Nathan:** I'm feeling great. It's like, “Wow, this is finally successful.” My faith in my father was panning out, and dad told me he was proud of me. He said he wished some of the people in the CIA that he had trained were as cooperative or is successful. [chuckles] And so that encouraged me. It made me feel like a sense of pride.

**Bryan:** So at this point, they have now gotten $5,000 in San Francisco, $20,000 in Mexico City, another $10,000 in Peru. So we have $35,000 already, and the promise of much more.

**Nancy:** Nathan moved to a nicer apartment, got a better car, but he wasn't pocketing all the money. He funneled some of it to his brother and his sister too. Of course, they didn't know it was from the Russians.

**Nathan:** I felt like a, I don't know, undercover Santa Claus, because I was able to see my brother and sister be able to afford their expenses now. Star was able to move up to Portland and get a job up here.

**Bryan:** It was after the trip to Lima, Peru, when Nathan was stopped in the airport in Houston that he really began to feel that what he was doing couldn't possibly be on the up and up any longer.

**Nathan:** I started becoming very suspicious of anyone around me. I was getting very nervous before I would go on these trips.

**Nancy:** And then George signaled Nathan to meet him in Cyprus in December 2008. Nathan was feeling especially anxious about this trip.

**Bryan:** And he brought up the subject on a couple of occasions with his dad, “Maybe this should be the end of this.”

**Nathan:** Dad would say, “You're this brave guy that goes off and does these things.” And I'm like, “Yeah. All right, that fires me up. Let's do this.” Something in the back of my head said, “Trust that dad knows what he's doing.” Maybe I was selfish. I don't know, and wanted all the glory for myself.

**Bryan:** It felt glorious.

**Nathan:** No, it did. I don't know if that's what kept me going or subconsciously going. I don't know.

**Bryan:** Ultimately, Jim's motivations were very clear. He was securing his future in Russia, where he planned to move after serving his prison term. He was looking at maybe another eight years.

So throughout this time, you'll see from the tapes that Jim is giving him fatherly love in triplicate and grooming him like any garden variety asset he would have worked overseas. But this was his own son, and I don't think Jim felt any shame about it.

[phone ringing]

**Nathan:** Hello.

**Jim:** Did you read that psalm that I mentioned?

**Nathan:** I sure did. You're really good at reciting passages there.

**Jim:** Oh, no. I was just amazed at how that just lined up with what you had just done. I was just amazed. I said, “Wow. Thanks, Lord. I know He's got his hand on you because He knows I worry about you all the time, [Nathan chuckles] and He just wants to reassure me all the time that He's got you.”

**Nathan:** Oh yeah.

**Jim:** [laughs]

**Nathan:** Yeah. [laughs] That’s for sure.

**Jim:** That was good. That was real good. All right, real super. Well, listen, you just have a good week this week, okay? I just want you to know I love you.

**Nathan:** I love you too, Bob.

**Jim:** I got you my prayers, of course, all the time. We're going to have a good time here, so just keep plugging along. You make me really proud, son. You're doing a great job.

**Bryan:** Nathan could not resist going to Cyprus.

**Nancy:** But on his way back to the States, he was stopped by a customs officer and questioned for a very long time. Nathan managed to stay calm, talked his way out of it, and made it home.

**Nathan:** I was feeling pretty good that I had actually made it past security at that time and thought I could relax a little bit. I woke up to a loud pounding on the door.

**Bryan:** Oh, is that right?

**Nathan:** Oh, yeah. I thought they were going to break it down there. [chuckles] Peeked out the eye hole, saw that there was two gentlemen. I knew who they were at that point in time. I started flashing back to what I remembered when I was 12 years. They looked exactly like what I remembered. So I opened up the door, let them in, and they introduced themselves that they're FBI agents. My world came unglued at that time. I asked them, “Am I going to be arrested right now?” They say, “Well, not right now, you're not.”

**Nancy:** After being grilled for eight hours, the first person Nathan called was his sister, Star. She'd also been visited by the FBI.

**Star:** They sent two mean ladies here.

**Nathan:** Two mean ladies? Oh, no.

**Star:** Uh-huh.

**Nathan:** Oh, sis, I'm sorry. Yeah.

**Star:** So you're good? You're fine, and everything's going to be okay?

**Nathan:** No, I'm doing all right. Doing all right. Just a little concerned about Christmas now because I was planning on using that money for some presents.

**Star:** They took your Christmas money?

**Nathan:** Well, yeah, because the information I gave the Russians was worth $10,000.

**Star:** Oh, dude.

**Nathan:** Yeah. I was planning on giving you and Jeremy some of that money.

**Star:** Oh, dude. No.

**Nathan:** Like the past years.

**Star:** That was you?

**Nathan:** Yup.

**Star:** Dude, you're not supposed to do that. Thank you. Don't think I don't appreciate it. [Nathan laughs] But seriously, it just sounds like what daddy did.

**Nancy:** The same day that Nathan was interrogated, two other FBI agents took Jim out of his cell and sat him down.

**Bryan:** Jim had multiple chances to fall on his sword and save his kid. He could have taken full responsibility and cut a deal with the government to go easy on Nathan. But he indignantly said, “I don't want to talk anymore,” and invoked his right to counsel.

**Nancy:** 43 days later, Nathan was indicted for conspiracy to act as an agent of a foreign government and for money laundering.

**Nathan:** So when they came to arrest me, I knew exactly what they were there for. I had a mixed emotions. I didn't know if I felt relief or if my life was falling apart. [chuckles]

**Nancy:** But now Nathan had three choices. He could plead guilty and go to prison for a long period. He could cut a plea deal and get less time.

**Bryan:** Or, there was a door number three, and that was to become a cooperating witness against his own father.

**Nathan:** It was a very lonely road that I was on, because it felt like, here's my hero, he was trying to help me out to the best of my knowledge, at least. I had to essentially crucify him.

**Nancy:** Nathan decided to cooperate with the government, essentially turning on his dad.

**Bryan:** But the judge had to ask him, “Do you realize that by pleading guilty here, you'll likely be asked to confront your father? Are you indeed ready to do that?” And his answer was yes. But it was a very pained yes.

**Nathan:** It did take a lot of soul searching, as you put it, but it was ultimately the right thing to do. I wanted to take full responsibilities for my actions and try to make amends for it.

**Nancy:** In a way, Nathan's decision forced his father's hand. After holding out for months, Jim finally cut a plea deal with the government.

**Bryan:** Jim did something extraordinary at sentencing. He didn't apologize to the US government. In fact, he apologized for the trouble that his assistance brought the Russian government. This did not sit well with the district judge, Anna Brown, who sentenced him. She said, “Your time going forward is not going to be easy time.” Jim was sentenced to the supermax in Florence, Colorado, where the worst of the worst go in the US federal system.

**Nancy:** Since his conviction, Jim has not been able to speak to Nathan or communicate with him in any way.

**Nathan:** In a sense, that's been like a death.

**Bryan:** Looking back at the letters you got from your dad with the hindsight you've obviously gained in all this time, what do you make of lines like, you've been brave enough to step into this new world, you're like me?

**Nathan:** To be honest, there's still part of me that appreciates those words even now. But what troubles me is the very real possibility that it was used for some sort of manipulation. But I don't know, I still have all these memories about when I was a kid. I still wrestle with the idea that he may or may not have manipulated me, but I do still very much love him, and I still appreciate those words. I guess I sit differently a little bit now.

**Glynn:** Snappas, we've got a strange addendum to this story. See, I know Jim Nicholson, who is the subject of this story. He was a CIA Station Chief in Malaysia, when I was there as a junior, junior, junior Foreign Service Officer, we pretended that he was my boss. And at the time to say that I looked up to him would be the understatement of the decade. He was so cool, so confident. When he actually turned his full attention to you, it was like you felt better about yourself. When he initially left Malaysia, I lived in his house, discovered through the grapevine that were dating some of the same women. I heard that he had a tough reentry back to the United States. I had no idea how tough.

To learn more about the father-son spy plot, grab a copy of Bryan Denson's book, *The Spy’s Son*. We'll have a link to that at *snapjudgment.org*. The original sound design for that piece was by Renzo Gorrio, and it was produced by Nancy López.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Now, when Snap Judgment returns, we've got a new take on a free meal, and someone forgets what you should never, ever forget when Snap Judgment, The Promise episode continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Promise episode. Today, we're exploring stories of commitment and consequence. Listeners, please note, this is a real story that touches on the topic of suicide. Please take care in listening.

We are transporting you now to Snap Judgment Live. Put your hands together for Pia Glenn.

[applause and cheers]

**Pia:** I get home from school, walk in the door, and immediately see the letter addressed to me from NYU. [cheer from an audience member] I drop my backpack-- damn straight.

[laughter]

I drop my backpack, tear it open and read out loud that I've been accepted. Early decision, scholarship, done deal. My mother stands next to me as I read it, and she high fives me, just a little too hard. But we're excited and I'm so happy. See, I had put all my college application eggs in that one basket and I was in. I float through that evening on a college bound cloud and eventually go to sleep.

I wake up in the middle of the night and I see my mother standing over my bed, but I don't see the knife in her hand until she's bringing it down onto my neck. I feel the pressure from the blade on my skin, but I don't say anything and I don't scream. I have to gauge her lucidity. See, my mother's often violent toward me during her manic or psychotic episodes brought on by bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. I scan her face for a trace of awareness, and I'm about to ask if she knows where she is when she lifts the knife and backs out of the room. The high five from earlier flashes across my mind. It was just a little too hard. She's gone off her medication again. It's my job to monitor her meds and to pay attention to when mommy laughs too loud or cries too long or high fives me just a little too hard and I messed up.

I get out of bed to check on my brother, and disarm my mother, and get the phone to call 911. And suddenly, two policemen burst into my room. “Have you taken any pills?” The cops sandwich me in, physically stopping me from leaving the room, and they're shouting, “Tell us what you've taken. Tell us what you've taken.” The cops are here for me. My mother called the police on me. They tell me that, “Yes, she had called them and told them I was threatening to kill myself.” “What? No, I absolutely am not pleased. She's not well. I have to go downstairs. I have to check on my brother.”

The cops give me a quick pat down and the three of us hustle down the stairs. And there, I see my 11-year-old brother's little face. Seeing him upright and breathing brings some relief. So I turn back to the cops, trying to convince them that, “She's the dangerous one, not me.” My mother's yelling over me. Our voice is louder and louder, like a terrible duet. And the cops are just staring. Suddenly, my mother produces a pile of tattered papers that look vaguely familiar. She shoves them in the cops faces and time stops, as I recognize my own anguished handwriting.

I watch the cops reading little snatches of my words being used as evidence of my alleged suicide threat. “No, no, no, no, you don't understand. When my mother's depressed, she tells me not to talk to her. She tells me to write down anything that I have to say to her. That's why I wrote those letters. I might have been sad because my mother wouldn't talk to me, but please, she's the one who needs help, not me.” They're dragging me along, “But I will not leave my brother with her.” And just when I'm about to stretch myself out across the doorway like a cartoon cat, my mother picks up the guitar she never played and smashes it into the glass top of the coffee table, shattering it. She stands over her mess, huffing and puffing, and the cops finally think maybe they should take her in too.

I call the understanding neighbor who sometimes looks after my brother at times like this. The cops debate calling a second ambulance, but then it's decided that we'll just all ride together. For the whole ride, I stare at my mother staring into space, and I wonder, “How I can fix this? It's my job to fix this.”

When we get to the ER, I'm still considered the threat, and she's a question mark in their minds. But legally, having just turned 17, I'm a minor and she's my mother, and she puts on enough of a show of sanity to sign the paperwork to have me committed. We sit side by side on plastic molded seats in the psychiatric ER in the middle of the night. “Mom, do you know where you are?” She stares straight ahead. “Mom, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that this is all happening.” She turns to me and says, without even a hint of recognition in her face, “What do you mean? What's happening?”

I turn my face, so she won't see me cry. My mother gets up and starts pacing in the waiting area. Pacing is bad. I try to alert the staff, but she lunges at a passing nurse, getting off one clean punch to her head before being tackled to the ground, injected with straight Haldol, and dragged off to be admitted. Well, now they believe me about my mother. I'm begging for someone to believe that I don't need to be hospitalized. And I'm aware that as the hours pass and my begging gets more and more emphatic, I only look more and more unhinged, and I'm still in my pajamas because the police wouldn't let me change.

A full day comes and goes, till finally I'm granted an audience with the head doctor. I plead my case to him in a tiny exam room, and I'm crying here and there as I talk. But when he smiles warmly and says he believes me, I start to sob with relief and the full force of two sleepless nights exhaustion. The doctor continues. “One thing though. If you're okay, then why are you crying?” He's so smug, but I try to answer him anyway, “I'm crying because I just watched my mother attack a nurse and get sedated on the floor, and she tried to kill me. I think last night or the night before.” He just gets up and walks out of the room.

A little Medi-van transports me to the facility. They confiscate my shoelaces and the drawstring from my funky pajama bottoms and offer me donated clothes that are way too small. I shower with an orderly watching, and eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the little cafeteria by myself, and I just wish I could call my brother and check on him.

A fellow patient with a full cast on his arm tries to say hi, and I try to hide my fear. He has that same manic look in his eyes as my mom. There's a skeletal girl with a feeding tube in her nose because she won't eat. I cling to my little corner in therapy room looking out the closet at the window.

On day three, a therapist begins a group session by asking four volunteers to share. And the scruffy boy with the wild eyes in the cast raises his hand, he says, “I'll start,” and he points sharply at me and he says, “Why is she here?” Another girl says, “Yeah, she shouldn't be here. Send her home.” There are about 12 of us in the room and everyone chimes in and the boy with the cast is banging it on the table and they're saying, “Send her home. Send her home.” And then he starts hitting himself in the head with the cast, hard, and he's like, “Yeah, I'm crazy. This is crazy. She's not crazy. Send her home.” I am watching these kids, these wonderful and warm and compassionate and in this moment logical kids-

[laughter]

-sticking up for me saying what I had been begging adult medical professionals to say for days. The next day I'm released. My father picks me up. At this point in my life, I hadn't seen much of him. I can tell he doesn't really believe me when I tell him what happened. I go from staying at my dad's to staying at a friend's. When my mom is released from the hospital, she gets my brother from where he'd been staying.

When I finally get back home, my mother greets me with a smile on her face, and a big mylar balloon bouquet as if I'd been on a pleasure cruise. I know she doesn't remember her episodes, but there's always evidence of them in what's missing or broken. So I look around to use my usual cleanup. A time she broke all the glasses in the kitchen, I just went to the store and bought plastic cups, or I just throw away whatever she lit on fire and it's never spoken of again. But this time was different, because she got home before me.

My brother and the helpful neighbor had swept up the glass, and thrown out the guitar, and my mother's mess was cleaned up without me. So what was broken this time was my belief that my mother could ever really love me. What was missing this time was my ability to go back to business as usual. That fall when I pack my things to go live in the dorms at NYU, I'm full of conflict. I hope that my mother won't be as violent to my little brother as she was to me. She hadn't so far, but anything could happen with her.

The day I leave for school, I stand in front of the house with my brother and I say, “I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm leaving you, but I have to go.” He's not nearly as emotional as I am. I'm a mess. It was a passing of the torch of caring for our mom. And in the years to come, he stepped up and did just that.

My mother died six weeks ago, and at the funeral, I almost fell over at the side of her body in the casket. It was my little brother, now a married father of two, who held me up when I couldn't take another step forward. At our mother's funeral, my brother took care of me, the way I had taken care of him, the way we both took care of her.

[applause]

**Glynn:** The amazing, Broadway actress, singer, dancer, storyteller extraordinaire, Pia Glenn. The original score for that piece composed by Alex Mandel, performed live by Alex and the Snap Judgment players, Tim Frick and David Brandt.

When Snap Judgment returns, we're going where no one has ever been before. And The Promised episode continues, stay tuned.

[applause]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington. Our next story comes to us from our friends over at The Truth, a podcast of amazing fictional tales. It's about one of those days when you have one of those days that changes everything forever.

[infant crying]

**Ann:** Just tell me what you want, okay? Just tell me-- Are you hungry? Are you what?

[infant crying]

**Ann:** Ow. Argh. Oh, God.

[telephone ringing]

**Ann:** Okay.

**Louis:** Hi, beautiful. I'm with Kim and Eric and Libby at the rover. Come by.

**Ann:** Oh, no, I can't. I'm babysitting my sister's kid.

**Louis:** A bummer. Well, we'll be here pretty late, I think. What time is she coming home?

**Ann:** Monday. So it's a whole weekend of fun.

**Louis:** Ah, how's it going?

**Ann:** Not great.

**Louis:** You want some grown up company? Be over there in half an hour.

**Ann:** No, no, I'm not feeling that great.

**Louis:** I'll bring pizza, some wine, a couple of bottles.

**Ann:** Yeah. No, I need to stick here with the thing.

**Louis:** Thing is, I've always had this babysitter fantasy.

**Ann:** Oh, very tempting.

**Louis:** It's done. I'm on my way.

**Ann:** Oh. Ow.

**Louis:** I'll see you in half an hour.

**Ann:** No, really, seriously, I'm not up for it.

**Louis:** You've become a very not fun person recently. Do you know that?

**Ann:** I don't feel good. I got to go. I'm going to hang up.

**Louis:** Call me if you change your mind.

[infant crying]

**Ann:** Okay. Oh, God, what's wrong? What's wrong? Are you sleepy? Do you want to go to bed, huh? Hey. Okay. Hey, hey, hey. [baby still crying] *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy*. [screams] Please stop crying. Ah, what is this? What is happening? What is happening?

**Ann’s conscience:** You're having a stroke.

**Ann:** That's not possible. I'm 34.

[whispers]

**Ann’s conscience:** You are having a stroke. Be logical. You're having a stroke, you're having a stroke, you're having a stroke. What do you do?

**Ann:** I need to call someone.

**Ann’s conscience:** Adam.

**Ann:** Adam. I need to I need to call Adam back.

**Ann’s conscience:** Good. The phone's on the table.

**Ann:** Yeah. The phone. Oh, it’s the purple case.

**Ann’s conscience:** Yes.

**Ann:** So beautiful. Why is it so beautiful?

**Ann’s conscience:** Don't get distracted. Focus.

**Ann:** Who are you?

**Ann’s conscience:** I'm Ann.

**Ann:** I'm Ann.

**Ann’s conscience:** I know.

**Ann:** Where are you? I can't see you.

**Ann’s conscience:** I'm everywhere. I'm everything. Stay focused, Ann.

**Ann:** [exhales] All right. Focused. Okay. Call Adam.

**Ann’s conscience:** Adam. The phone's on the table.

**Ann:** Right, on the table.

**Ann’s conscience:** But you can't walk there.

**Ann:** Right there.

**Ann’s conscience:** Are you okay?

**Ann:** Yeah.

**Ann’s conscience:** You fell.

**Ann:** I fell.

**Ann’s conscience:** You can't move your leg.

**Ann:** Oh.

**Ann’s conscience:** You're feeling disoriented.

**Ann:** Mm-hmm. Yeah.

**Ann’s conscience:** Just try to stay calm.

**Ann:** [pants] Are-are you there? Are you still there?

**Ann’s conscience:** I'm still here.

**Ann:** I'm scared.

**Ann’s conscience:** I know.

**Ann:** I don't know what's happening.

**Ann’s conscience:** Part of your brain is dying.

**Ann:** Oh, God.

**Ann’s conscience:** But don't be scared.

**Ann:** Oh, God. Oh.

**Ann’s conscience:** Listen to me.

**Ann:** I'm scared. [breathes heavily]

**Ann’s conscience:** Ann, listen to me. Listen. Don't panic. You need to remember what I'm telling you. Listen to the baby.

**Ann:** The baby.

**Ann’s conscience:** Listen.

**Ann:** Baby. The baby.

[baby’s crying]

**Ann’s conscience:** Don't forget.

**Ann:** The baby.

**Ann’s conscience:** You have to get your phone and call for help-

**Ann:** I need to call.

**Ann’s conscience:** -while there's still time.

**Ann:** Yeah. The phone.

**Ann’s conscience:** It's on the table.

**Ann:** Yeah.

**Ann’s conscience:** But be careful.

**Ann:** It's right there. I can get it. I can get it. It's-- [grunts]

**Ann’s conscience:** Ann?

**Ann:** I got it. I've got it.

**Ann’s conscience:** Listen to me. I'm leaving.

**Ann:** No, please don't leave me.

**Ann’s conscience:** I'm sorry. I have to go.

**Ann:** Please.

**Ann’s conscience:** I'm sorry.

**Ann:** Don’t go.

**Ann’s conscience:** Remember the baby.

**Ann:** The baby. Please don't go.

[baby’s crying]

**Ann’s conscience:** Remember the baby.

[baby’s crying]

**Ann:** *You are my sunshine. My only sunshine.*

[cell phone ringing]

**Ann:** *You make me happy.*

**Louis:** Well, this is a pleasant surprise. Changed your mind, beautiful?

**Ann:** Uh, [mumbles].

**Louis:** I'm sorry, beautiful. I can't hear you. What did you say? [Ann struggles speaking] I still can't hear you. Hold on, I'm moving away from the jukebox. Okay, that's better. What's going on? It's a babysitter thing, right?

**Ann:** Just-just-just-- argh.

**Louis:** Ann? Are you okay, Ann?

**Ann:** Guh-- [exhales]

**Louis:** [voice fading]

**Ann:** [panting] Hello? Please. Where are you? Please, baby, where are you? Baby, where are you?

[baby crying]

**Ann:** Don’t stop crying. Don’t stop. Please. Don’t stop.

[baby continues crying]

**Louis:** Ann? [door opens] Ann?

**Doctor:** Ann, can you say it?

**Ann:** Argh. Ah.

**Doctor:** Yeah, that's good. That's enough for now, huh? She needs a break.

**Louis:** Does she know I'm here?

**Doctor:** She knows. She's taking everything in.

**Louis:** Hi, beautiful. Everyone's sending their love. Uh, we set up a GoFundMe to help you with your medical bills. Almost $4,000 raised already, so. Is she okay? She looks tired.

**Doctor:** You have to speak slowly or she loses some of the words.

**Louis:** Okay. Listen, Ann, I just wanted to say that no matter what, um--

**Ann:** Buh--

**Louis:** What’s that?

**Ann:** Buh--

**Louis:** What do you need, beautiful?

**Doctor:** She wants to hold the baby. Oh, boy. Here you go. Up, up, up.

**Ann:** [onomatopoeia] [soothing baby]

**Doctor:** She really loves that baby.

[cheerful music]

**Glynn:** Thank you, Jonathan Mitchell, for lending us your radio play. Snappas, that story was written by Louis Kornfeld and produced by Jonathan Mitchell. The part of Ann was played by Ann Carr, Adam was played by Louis Kornfeld, and Amy Warren was the sister. This piece was commissioned by The Sarah Awards from Sarah Lawrence College. And for more radio fiction magic, you can visit *thesarahawards.com* and *thetruthpodcast.com*.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** It's about that time, and I understand where you're coming from. “Glynn, we need more snap storytelling.” Yes, I know this, and I've got the solution right here. Hours of Snap to get you through what you do. It's all there on the Snap Judgment podcast. Subscribe right now at *snapjudgment.org*. See what your favorite Snappas look like. Hit Snap Judgment on Facebook, like us on Twitter.

Snap was produced by the team that if you ask them no questions, they will tell you no lies. Show some love for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. Pat, not a slave to fashion, Mesiti-Miller, Anna, can do, Sussman, Nancy, won't do, López, Davey, already did, Kim Joe, the maestro, Rosenberg, Resident linguist Renzo Gorrio, our get fresh crew, Eliza Smith, Ana Adlerstein, Matt Ducat, Leon Morimoto, Jazmin, turn the radio down, Aguilera.

[applause]

**Glynn:** And this, this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, if you whisper a promise in someone's ear and have them whisper a promise in the next person's ear and so on and so on around the circle, and when the last person promises, they will forever be a toad on an auxiliary hose, 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*](http://www.speechdocs.com/)*]*