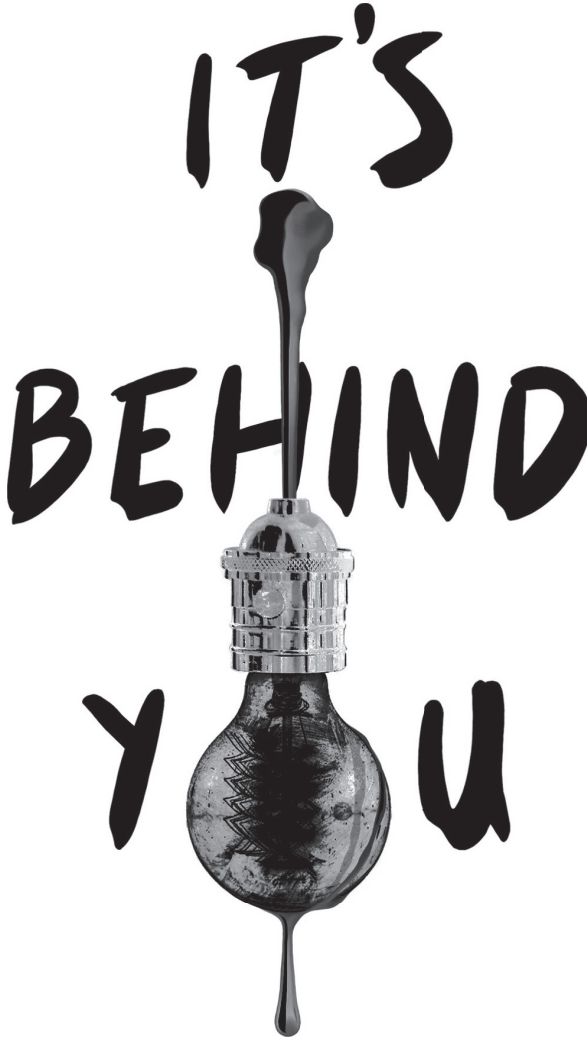


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ONE

Extract from the transcript of the T-minus-one-day final interview with Lex Hazelton [LH], contestant 1/5 *It's Behind You: Season 3, Episode 10 (Umber Gorge Caves)*. Interviewed by Jackie Stone [JS], producer of *It's Behind You*.

JS: Tell us why you've volunteered to spend the night in a haunted cave, Lex.

LH: I don't believe in the supernatural, so it's a night in a cave and ten grand at the end.

JS: But you must be aware Umber Gorge has quite some history – strange disappearances, ghost sightings, the legend of the Puckered Maiden?

LH: The heart-eating ghost? Yeah, that's a good one.

JS: It doesn't scare you?

LH: Look, can I level with you, Jackie? We both know you've got a team of special effects nerds working behind the scenes.

JS: Actually, Lex, *It's Behind You* doesn't use tricks like other reality TV shows. Other than the challenges, everything you'll encounter in the caves will be real.

LH: My arse it will.

JS: [Sighing] I don't think you understand the purpose of this video. You want the viewers at home to root for you—

LH: No, I don't.

JS: Lex. The show has a format we have to adhere to. So if you want to take part, you need to play along.

LH: Fine. Yeah. I'm puckering up in anticipation.

JS: Maybe try to be less . . . never mind. Let's try again. We need a few sound bites we can splice in with the other contestants' videos. It's how we'll introduce you to the audience. You could tell the viewer why you're here, perhaps?

LH: All right, all right. My name's Lex and, um, do I look at the camera or at you when I talk?

JS: Stare straight into the lens and pretend you're

speaking to the people at home. Try to connect with them. Get their attention.

LH: Got it. [Sound of chair dragging as LH moves closer to the camera] I'm here because I'm . . . can I swear?

JS: No.

LH: But I can get my heart eaten on TV? You're OK with cannibalism?

JS: In this instance, yes.

LH: Good to know. I'm here because I'm pucking bored. That's it.

JS: [Growling noise] You're bored?

LH: I thought the show sounded like it might be an adventure. But this interview isn't filling me with much hope.

JS: Lex, this isn't working. Let's try a different angle. [Sound of papers shuffling] All right. What does your mum think about you being here?

LH: Er, what does my mum have to do with anything?

JS: I'm just surprised she's OK with it. All things considered.

LH: All things . . . ahh, I see what you're trying to do. You're trying to manipulate me into breaking down or losing my temper. But it's not going to happen.

JS: We'll see how you feel when you're locked in the caves. I've filmed a lot of contestants who are

confident they'll hold it together. They never do, and it makes for some brilliant television. Why do you think I picked you?

LH: Because no one watches your show any more and you're desperate for contestants?

JS: It's a slight dip in ratings, that's all. And I am not desperate.

LH: You look desperate.

JS: Change of subject. What's your greatest fear?

LH: Bad hair days. Is the ten grand prize fund cash or cheque?

JS: Bank transfer. So you're not – I don't know – terrified of losing a loved one? You're not here because you want to know if there's more to this life than what we can see?

LH: Nope. Just the money.

JS: [Sighing] Fine. Last question. Do you think you can win?

LH: [Laughing] What kind of stupid question is that?



TWO

The evening smells like candyfloss and blood.

There's a procession making its way up the high street, towards Umber caves. The townsfolk are lit by glowing lanterns; their heads are bowed. The moon watches on from a clear sky as the rocky gorge reverently spills over with greenery. It's a beautiful scene, if you can get past the platters of pigs' hearts carried by a troupe of solemn schoolchildren.

"I think I love this town," I say.

"It's a cesspit." Veronica jiggles from foot to foot. "Seriously, Lex, we should go. If we get caught, I'll lose this gig. And you'll be disqualified. I'm meant to be keeping you out of trouble."

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I have some books on the geology of the caves back at the B & B. They’re much more interesting than this nonsense.”

I ignore my cowardly chaperone. All five of us contestants have someone like Veronica specifically tasked with keeping us in our respective hotels for the entirety of the annual Umber Heart Festival, so we don’t meet each other or get in trouble. But the way I see it, some rules are made for breaking, and some are an all-out invitation to make mischief. This? Definitely the latter.

I peek out from the shadows of a shopfront as the locals crowd around the children. They each take a heart and toss it on to the pavement with quiet plopping sounds. Someone throws theirs a little too hard and it slaps against the cliff face, then slides slowly down into the dirt. Everyone has blood on their hands.

I laugh in horrified wonder. “Run this past me again. The hearts are . . .”

Veronica sighs dramatically, rolling her eyes so hard her little skeleton earrings dance a jig. Veronica is all skeletons, from her jewellery to the pattern on her clunky boots. It’s a look that clashes with her red cheeks and golden hair. She looks like a cherub disguised as a Satan worshipper.

“The hearts are offerings to the Puckered Maiden. So she won’t come out of the caves and kill any of us this year.” She shifts anxiously. “Lex, please. Someone will see us.”

“Why hearts?”

“Because that’s what the Puckered Maiden eats. She hates people with hearts.”

I’ll be OK then.

“Two hundred years ago,” Veronica continues, “a local woman was jilted by her fiancé and took her revenge by cutting out his heart. Before she could be brought to justice, she escaped into the caves and was never seen again. The end.”

“You missed out the exciting bit where she drowns in a lake and comes back as a vengeful ghost. Love that part.”

She smiles wryly. “Of course you do.”

The locals abandon the cliff face and follow a path lit by lanterns and fairy lights over to the market square, where a number of long tables are set up with pot luck dishes. Everyone tucks into pies and fruit crumble as red as the splashes of blood on concrete. Someone produces a crate of unlabelled bottles. The gathering soon resembles a big family reunion, with all its bitter gossip and drunken elderly relatives.

The hearts lie forgotten in the road. “Do you locals seriously believe this nonsense?”

Veronica takes her time to answer. Her jaw is grinding as she stares across the road at the festival. When she finally speaks, her voice is oddly quiet and serious. “Lots of people have been killed in those caves.”

“Were they all eaten by the Puckered Maiden?”

She pushes herself off the wall and trundles up the hill. “It’s not a joke. I’ll show you.”

I go after her. We pick our way through the abandoned hearts and sneak around the perimeter of the party, avoiding the lights. The cave entrance stands set back from the road across the market square. Once a gaping maw in an expanse of towering rock, it's now boarded up and closed off with a metal gate for good measure. Dozens of TV vans are parked up, ready for tomorrow. I get the impression the caves are holding their stale breath in anticipation.

Next to the gate, there's a large brass plaque set into the cliff face. I use my phone as a torch to read the words. It's a memorial list of names and dates, with plenty of empty space for more to be added. The dates range all the way from the nineteenth century to just two years ago, when someone called Laurie Cox died.

“What happened to them all?”

“Cave-ins, mostly. Some got lost and never found their way out.” She takes off a pair of huge glasses and cleans them on her dungaree dress. “Those caves can't be trusted, you know? They're full of secret passageways and freezing lakes.”

I tap my finger on the plaque. “All of the deaths stopped in the nineties. Except for this Laurie Cox.”

“The caves were closed off about thirty years ago, but teenagers still used to sneak in at night. Until a rockfall trapped three people. Two of them found their way out. Laurie Cox wasn't so lucky. She was buried under tonnes of rubble.”

“Huh. Did you know her?”

“Everyone knows everyone in this town.” Veronica crosses her arms. “Why are you asking me all these questions?”

“Trying to get an idea of what I’m dealing with.”

She jabs a finger towards the party. “That’s what you’re dealing with.”

I follow her line of sight. Producer Jackie, lit up by a thousand fairy lights and looking expensive in a tight purple dress. She’s blonde, beautiful and squeaky clean, like a movie star. I’m not sure she understands not all of us want to be like her. We met in person for the first time this morning, when we recorded my “Who is Lex?” sound bites. To say we hit it off would be a lie of the highest order. I didn’t even have to try to piss her off.

Jackie is accompanied by a cameraman and a large microphone like a fluffy rat on a stick. Filming local reactions for the show, I presume, and footage of all those scattered hearts. They’ll use it to set the scene when they edit the show together.

Veronica and I duck behind one of the TV vehicles, even though we’re mostly hidden in the shadows of the cliffs. I lean against the side of the van. “Way I see it, Jackie expected me to sneak out tonight,” I say. “She *wants* me to see all of this and be freaked out. Except, I’m not.”

Veronica grimaces. “You’re not?”

“Nope. Lex Hazelton is scared of nothing.”

Nearby, something hisses loudly and I jump. But it’s only the brakes on a bus. Its windows reflect the lights

of the party as its doors swing open and someone climbs out. A boy, slouching as he walks, like he's not used to the length of his own limbs. A black hoodie obscures his face. His tight black jeans have rips at the knee. His black boots are only half-laced.

The party stalls. Everyone stares at this boy dressed in black. People point and whisper, then fall silent. Someone who was in the middle of spooning out a bowl of crumble loses concentration and lets the mushy fruit plop on to the road. I glance at Veronica and see that she's frozen to the spot. Like her soul's flown straight out of her nose and left an empty body standing in the street.

The boy nervously glances around at his rapt audience, then shoulders his bag. But before he can move, two of the TV production company's security team hustle him into a blacked-out four-by-four. Jackie jumps in the other side and the car immediately accelerates away. It takes ten slow breaths for the party to stutter back into life. Drinks are raised once again; locals pour cream over stewed rhubarb.

"He changed his mind," Veronica whispers.

"Who was that?" I say.

"What?" She jerks, like she's waking up. "No one. Look, I've remembered I have to meet someone. You can find your own way back, right?"

She hurries away without waiting for my reply. I watch as she weaves through the street party and approaches a boy with movie-style muscles. He's wearing a tight T-shirt that

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digs into his biceps and he keeps smoothing the fabric over his belly, like he's checking his eight-pack is still there.

The pair of them step away from the party, heads close together. Veronica keeps gesturing in the direction of the four-by-four. Interesting. One thing about me: I'm impossibly nosy. It's a strength and curse all rolled into one. But life would be unbearable if I didn't fill it to the brim with conflict and adventure.

So it goes without saying that I'm going to follow Veronica and get in on those local secrets.

"Lex," my mum's voice warns in my head. I try to ignore her, but she's incorrigible. "Remember what happened last time?"

She's referring to my dad's affair. But come on, the way he took to obsessively trimming his eyebrow hairs was too big a red flag to ignore. I simply followed the stench of lies and musk and – bam! – there's my dad, kissing another woman in his car. That was something I didn't want to see.

Of course, when he realized I knew, he came clean to Mum and they patched things up. I lost a lot of respect for both of them after that. Some would expect me to have learned a valuable lesson from the whole experience. Except I'm immune to learning lessons. So I shush my mum's voice and go after Veronica and Mr Muscles.

Only, as I cross the road, I'm nearly run over by Jackie's four-by-four. I duck behind the van again as they park up and Jackie emerges, minus the boy in black. Clicky heels

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approach my hiding place and I make the remarkably adult decision to cut my losses and get out of here.

Besides, there's no time for drama. I need to get my head in the game. It's less than twenty-four hours until they shut us inside the caves and switch on the cameras.

I can't wait.