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## **Episode 55: The Rescue**

### **Air Date: November 9, 2022**

**George Linnane:** One minute I was walking out of the cave and the next minute the world just kind of went mad. And I had some inkling that some rocks had moved and it was all going horribly wrong.

[tense, pensive music]

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** In November of 2021, George Linnane was exploring a cave in Wales with his friends Melissa Bell and Mark Burkey.

**Mark Burkey:** We went into the cave about half past 10. We took some photos because it's all quite pretty, continued on, and explored all of the passages in that area of the cave. And we had one final area left to have a look at.

**Phoebe Judge:** They were inside what's known as the Cave of the Black Spring. It's the deepest cave in the UK. All three of them are experienced cavers. And Mark Burkey had been inside this cave many times before.

**Mark Burkey:** So I'd gone first. Went down the bottom of a boulder slope, and I was continuing along the passage, and I heard this immense rumble of rockfall. And I heard Mel shout out and I thought it was Mel that had hurt herself. So I spun around, and started heading back towards Mel and George. And there was now a hole in the floor that hadn't been there previously, and Mel was shouting to me saying, "It's not me, it's George!"

**George Linnane:** I remember my legs kind of whirling around in midair. And I remember trying to climb up whatever was in front of me with my arms. And then it all went very dark. And, yeah, a couple of minutes went past. I couldn't have told you if it was a couple of minutes or a couple of hours, but apparently it was a couple of minutes and I kind of groggily came around. [curious, minimal electronic music] And I could hear Mark shouting my name.

**Mark Burkey:** We were both shouting for George and there was no response at all. We couldn't see his headlight; we couldn't see George himself. And it was kind of the longest couple of minutes ever, just peering down this dark void and not knowing whether he was alive or dead at the time. After a couple of minutes, George groaned, so we knew that he was at least alive at that point.

[to George]

**Phoebe Judge:** Were you able to kind of look up and get a sense of how far you had fallen or how hard it was gonna be to get someone to you?

**George Linnane:** No, I had absolutely no idea. I was lying on my front. And my world ended about two inches in front of my face. I could see the floor and that was about it. I was struggling to move anything. I was able to move my arms, so I could put my arms out to my left and out to my right. And I kind of gathered that I was in, well, in the bottom of a rift. Because I could feel a wall on my left and feel a wall on my right, just about. But I couldn't see back to where I'd come from.

**Phoebe Judge:** Did you know that you were hurt badly?

**George Linnane:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. It was fairly obvious as soon as I tried to move.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** When the floor collapsed beneath him, George had fallen more than two stories. His leg was broken, his jaw too. He was missing teeth and had pain in his chest. Mark knew that George was in shock and that he needed to go for help.

**George Linnane:** And I think I had told him to hurry up. [laughs] And he left Mel where she was. She was essentially trapped above me not daring to move a muscle in case she caused more rocks to fall on me.

[to George]

**Phoebe Judge:** Were you two talking to each other?

**George Linnane:** Yes. [laughs] She wouldn't stop talking, which was important in a way. Well, not in a way, it was important. She was basically trying to keep me conscious and to get me to keep sort of moving things, to keep whatever blood flow going. So yeah, she talked to me pretty much nonstop for about three hours. She kept going and going and going, basically talked about everything, I think, you know, life partners, dogs, jobs, whatever, just in an attempt to sort of keep me conscious and with it. [minimal piano music] I kind of flip flopped between two mental states. Sometimes I tried to stay positive, and I was like, right, I'm gonna talk to Mel. I'm gonna stay conscious. But that was really, really hard to do at that point. I'd kind of do it for a little while and then think, oh, do you know what? This is too hard. Don't know if I'm if I'm gonna make it. I think I'm just gonna close my eyes and drift off for a bit and whatever will be will be. [laughs] So yeah, it was a pretty dark few hours, I'm not gonna lie.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** As George lay in the cave talking to Melissa up above him, Mark was making his way back to the surface. It took him about an hour. But when someone gets injured inside a cave, it isn't like any emergency responder can come and help rescue them. It's only other people who explore caves who can get them out.

I'm Phoebe Judge. And This is Love.

Steve Thomas lives about 20 miles from the Cave of the Black Spring and was one of the first people to come and help after George's accident. He's been a member of his local cave rescue team for the past 30 years.

[to Steve]

How often are you called to rescue someone in a cave?

**Steve Thomas:** It's probably important to understand what a rescue can involve because sometimes it's simply somebody's lost because caves can be quite complicated, and if you missed a certain feature, you've missed that turning or that little

climb or wherever it was. So people can get lost, especially if they're not familiar with the cave. Sometimes, very occasionally people are just exhausted, especially if they weren't quite prepared for it. They weren't aware of what a cave trip would involve. And they're just tired. So we've just gotta go in, you know, get their enthusiasm up and make sure they can get out. [quiet, playful music] In terms of accidents, it's quite a rare thing. It's not a regular occurrence. It's usually, if there is an accident, it's somebody's twisted an ankle or something like that, or they've slipped and banged themselves into a rock and they've just stopped the wind out of themselves. But it's not that common compared to how many trips are made each year.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** It's estimated that there are about 4,000 regular cavers in the UK today. Caving, which is also called spelunking in the United States, became popular in the UK after the end of World War II.

**Steve Thomas:** The places don't change, so you are looking at passages that haven't changed in thousands and thousands of years. And there's a real spirit of adventure you feel as well. You might not be the first person in that particular cave, but if you've never been in there before, you're exploring it for yourself.

**Phoebe Judge:** In 1959, a 20-year-old British college student got stuck in a narrow unexplored passageway of a cave. He died from carbon dioxide poisoning before he was able to be rescued. Cavers recognized that as their sport grew, they needed to create their own safety networks. There are now at least 16 cave rescue groups made up entirely volunteers across the UK. But when Steve heard about George's accident, he knew it wouldn't be a simple rescue because of his injuries — George couldn't walk. He'd need to be carried out on a stretcher. The Cave of the Black Spring has three entrances and one that a stretcher would fit through was miles away.

**Steve Thomas:** So we knew straight away it was gonna be a major rescue.

**Phoebe Judge:** It was Saturday afternoon when Dr. Rebecca Specht got a text message that there'd been an accident at the Cave of the Black Spring.

**Rebecca Specht:** When I initially saw the text, it was easy to respond and say my availability. But then when I was called and asked to go underground, my initial thought was I don't think I can do this.

**Phoebe Judge:** Rebecca hadn't been caving for a while. She'd been recovering from long Covid for about a year and had given birth to a baby three months earlier. [quiet, tense music] She says she hadn't been away from her baby for more than an hour.

**Rebecca Specht:** But I thought about it, and I realized that the whole point of me being in cave rescue is to be able to help in these kind of situations.

**Phoebe Judge:** Rebecca and her husband, also a member of the cave rescue team, quickly loaded up their two children. She was the first doctor to arrive that day. She and two other cave rescuers entered the cave through the same entrance that George had, the one that would be too difficult to bring him out of.

**Rebecca Specht:** It's quite a narrow entrance and it starts off by descending into a vertical pipe. So, they've put some manmade pipe into the cave there in order to kind of hold the earth back and for you to be able to get into that section of the cave. And what they've used is some sewage pipe, essentially. And that pretty much sets the tone for what's to come. Because following that, it's a lot of narrow passageways, a lot of crawling, and by crawling, some of it's crawling on your hands and knees, but a lot of it is commando crawling, and some of it narrow enough that you can't lift your face up from the floor to see where you're going. So you're commando crawling blind essentially through mud and through wet passages.

**Phoebe Judge:** Rebecca got to George around 7:30 at night. When she arrived, he was having trouble breathing and she suspected that he was bleeding internally.

**Rebecca Specht:** There's actually very little we could do to stop that underground, and so that could have potentially been life threatening for him. And during that initial few hours I wasn't sure if he was going to survive his injuries. I felt the weight of responsibility being the only professional medical person there. I was acutely aware of the fact that there was a significant chance that he might deteriorate, and if he did, everybody would be looking to me to do something about it. And actually, there's a limit to what we're able to do underground because of the logistics and the equipment and the things that we have available to us. So yeah, I was very aware of needing to be focused and go through things in a systematic way and not allowing myself to feel scared or overwhelmed by the situation. [low, drone-like tense music]

**Phoebe Judge:** More local cavers began arriving at the cave. They started taking supplies through the steep passageways down to George — oxygen, medicines, a stretcher, ropes. It was Saturday evening...hours since George fell. Rebecca and rescuers like Steve Thomas were getting George ready to be carried out.

**Rebecca Specht:** That was logistically really challenging because we needed eight of us to lift him safely. We couldn't rule out that he'd had a spinal injury, so we needed to be really careful about the way that we lifted. And there really wasn't enough space to fit anywhere near that number of people in there. So we had rescuers kind of clambering over one another, sitting in each other's laps, all kind of straddled over each other just to try and get the hands in that we needed to try and lift him as safely as we could, and

also to try and minimize the amount of pain that it caused George. And that was one of the points where I think he really was struggling. He was screaming and crying out in pain, and that was quite hard to hear.

**Steve Thomas:** And then he was maneuvered through passages, all quite small, and up pitches through a little chamber and then down another pitch, to get to where he needed to be, where we'd built this tent for him. But just doing that operation took I think 11 hours. It was a major undertaking just to get into that point.

[to Steve]

**Phoebe Judge:** Was he talking — what was he saying? What was it like? Did you talk to him?

**Steve Thomas:** Yeah, when we'd be bringing him down, I was quite close to him. In fact, I had the honor of being thrown up on by him. So yeah, I spoke to him a bit, but he wasn't really with it. He was a little bit delirious but could see his strength of character despite everything he was going through. Even if you'd try to crack a joke or something to just keep him with you and he didn't find anything particularly funny I don't think, but he was kind enough to raise off for smile. So he was still showing himself to be a strong character.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** It wasn't safe for the volunteers to be down in the cave for more than a few hours. It was cold and wet. They were worried about hypothermia and exhaustion. They needed more help, so they put out a call across the entire country.

**Martin Grass:** This doesn't happen often, but it happens every few years. If you have a really big rescue, they need the extra manpower.

**Phoebe Judge:** Martin Grass who lived several hours away got one of the calls. He brought more than 30 cavers in a caravan to come help George. Once they arrived at the Cave of the Black Spring, they began working in shifts alongside volunteers from other parts of the country, setting up rigging to haul George's stretcher up through the cave. Martin was getting updates from down below.

**Martin Grass:** We were getting these messages saying, 'Well, they've had to stop for another 30 minutes.' And then the 30 minutes became 40 and then all this stopped to it's actually an hour because they're trying to give him this and they're trying to give that intravenously. Yeah, it was a concern that, he might not pull through. But everybody just kept fighting for it. And though it's at the back of your mind, most people aren't thinking about that. They're just thinking we've gotta get him out.

**Phoebe Judge:** George's rescue continued on through Sunday. 24 hours had passed since his fall, and volunteers were very slowly getting him closer to the surface.

**Rebecca Specht:** There's parts of the cave where there are vertical pitches, so like, places where people would need to climb vertically. And for those, the structure was attached to ropes and hauled up. There were sections of the cave that were, depending on the shape of the cave, at that point the stretcher had to be maneuvered into different positions. So points where the stretcher had to be tipped up on its side to fit him around things or where he had to be tilted, either with his head up or head down in order to get him underneath rocks, over rocks, around corners, through passages. And there's an underground river inside the cave as well. So there was a section where an inflatable addition to the stretcher was attached so that he could be partially floated along the river as people carried and passed the stretcher through.

**Steve Thomas:** You have to go upstream against the water flow, which is okay as long as it's not too high. But the floor is peppered with potholes, very deep potholes. So you take one step and you just disappear out of depth underwater. So it all has to be managed very carefully.

**Rebecca Specht:** People actually laid down in the stream or stood in gaps in the rocks so that the stretcher could be slid over their backs in order to support him.

**Steve Thomas:** And it was remarkable 'cause the cave was just lined with people. Every section of the cave was ready to receive him well before he got there. So yeah, areas were being rigged where perhaps a rope was needed to haul up a bit or just to put a safety line on him. Everything was being prepared for him way before he got there.

**Phoebe Judge:** George says there are parts of his rescue that he doesn't remember. But by Sunday evening he says he started to become more aware of what was happening around him. And who was around him. [soft, percussive music]

**George Linnane:** When I came around, I noticed the person whose face I could immediately see above the stretcher was a relatively new friend of mine, Jan from Gloucester. And time went on and as we got down to the streamway, there was another change of personnel. And these people were from the Mendip Hills, which is Somerset, which is another area again. And then Yorkshire, and then the Peak District. And just as the rescue went on, it became increasingly obvious to me that people were coming from all over the country to help rescue me.

**Phoebe Judge:** Volunteers also came to help at the surface. A group of cavers got to work cooking. They're called the soup dragons after a soup making dragon from a 1970s British kids TV show.

**Steve Thomas:** And they just went into action and I dunno how they did it, but whenever you came out of the cave, somebody thrust a plate of hot food and hot drink into your hand. And all you could see was cars everywhere. It was incredible.

[to Steve]

**Phoebe Judge:** They just kept coming?

**Steve Thomas:** They did. You know, the call went out and people responded. We all look after each other, so if somebody's in trouble, we all know that we are the only ones who can get them out. So we'll inevitably respond. It doesn't matter how far people are to come. They came. I felt quite small fry because I'd only had to travel about 20 miles to get there. There was people who had driven through the night to get there. It seems incredible.

[to Mark]

**Phoebe Judge:** Who are people that are cavers? I mean, who does this? This is a very in some ways tight knit group, even though you're from all over.

**Mark Burkey:** It is tight knit. I always say it's a real mix of people from cavers I know I don't really know what they do for a job. They never seem to have very much money. They've got a beat-up old car, right up to caving with doctors, lawyers, people with money. So you get a real mix. But caving brings everybody down to their own level. But yeah. It's a very close-knit community.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** George's rescue was still going on after 48 hours. And it's estimated that between 250 and 300 people had shown up to help him. Here's George.

**George Linnane:** Towards the end of the rescue, when we were on what I would call the home straight, there were a lot of people around, and as we got to the exit, I was aware of there being a lot of people around. And it was also the same thing that I noticed at the end of every caving trip I've ever done. You can smell the outside when you get close to the exit. You can smell...I dunno how to describe it. It's quite often, I mean, the UK's quite wet, right? We're famous for having not the greatest climate in the world. So quite often you can smell a bit of rain. You can smell leaves and the fresh air from outdoors just smells that a little bit different. [bright, lively music]

[to Steve]

**Phoebe Judge:** What was the moment like when he actually emerged from the cave?



**Steve Thomas:** Well, when he came out of the cave, it was a brilliant moment. It was absolutely amazing.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** Steve Thomas.

**Steve Thomas:** The entrance itself is in the side of a mountain, and I'm eternally grateful for this, but I was just through chance happened to be the person who was on the head of the stretcher as he came through the entrance. And the entrance is only a two-foot by two-foot—not even that, probably—a square hole with a gate on it, which we've put on to keep children or sheep or anything out of the cave. It's for, you know, safety. And as he came through that hole, I just happened to be the one who was on the stretcher right next to his head. And as his head came through, I just leaned down to him and said, "You're out the cave, George." And so we just erupted. We never cheer or applaud or anything after a rescue. We've never done it, but we did this time. The hillside was just full of lights from the cavers and we were just all cheering. It was amazing. Absolutely amazing.

[to Steve]

**Phoebe Judge:** How long did it actually take to get him out?

**Steve Thomas:** I'm told it was 54 hours, but none of us were timing it. But it feels about right, 54 hours, yeah. I'm told it's the longest UK cave rescue in history. And I can believe that. It certainly felt like it.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** George spent 16 days in the hospital where his partner Julie was by his side. His injuries included a broken leg and broken jaw, broken ribs, a dislocated collarbone, and a lacerated spleen, which had been the cause of his internal bleeding.

**George Linnane:** And my lungs weren't too impressed either. Apparently there was some air and some blood where it shouldn't have been.

[to George]

**Phoebe Judge:** When you realized, when you were still down there and you realized that you were seeing people from all over the country there, how did that feel?

**George Linnane:** Initially, an amount of guilt, to be honest. I thought, [chuckles] I've caused a major problem here and people are having to come from all over the UK to basically dig me out of it. But that was a fleeting feeling, and it was followed by an overwhelming feeling of gratitude. It was a pretty amazing thing that happened that

weekend. I just felt incredibly grateful to them for saving me. I felt incredibly lucky to be alive. I felt incredibly, incredibly lucky to still be able to walk, and to still have two legs. Yeah.

**Phoebe Judge:** It's interesting 'cause we've talked to other people who were with you in the cave. Everyone seems to say, well, that's just what you do as a caver. You help other cavers,

**George Linnane:** Mm-hmm.

**Phoebe Judge:** No one seems to be saying, well, yeah, I thought I'd do something nice. It just seems to be a given in this community.

**George Linnane:** Well, yeah, ultimately, the only people that can rescue cavers are other cavers. They're the only people who have the skills to safely go into a cave and even look after themselves, let alone rescue somebody else. The police can't do it. The fire service can't do it when it comes to being inside a cave. [minimal orchestral music] It's cave rescue or nothing. So we say cavers, rescue cavers because it's only cavers that can rescue cavers.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** George says his injuries have mostly healed. He started caving again, and he's become a provisional member of his local cave rescue team. He'll train alongside some of the same people who rescued him, like Steve Thomas and Rebecca Specht, whose older son still talks about George's rescue.

**Rebecca Specht:** For a few months afterwards, actually, when we talked to him about what bedtime story would you like tonight, he would often say, I want the story of poorly George and the cave and the cave rescue team. And so we'd tell the story to him about all the people who came to help George.

**Steve Thomas:** We all understand what caving is about and we all know that things happen. It's just one of those things that happens. And George was the unlucky one that day. It could have been any one of us if we'd been going along that passage on a different day. It could have been any one of us. So nobody holds George responsible. We'll never stop ribbing him about it, ever. He will never hear the end of it, you know, especially if we've had a beer or two. But nobody will ever hold him responsible or resent the fact that we had to go and rescue him. Never.

**Phoebe Judge:** This Is Love is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Katie Bishop is our supervising producer. Our producers are Susannah Roberson, Jackie Sojico, Libby Foster and Samantha Brown. Our technical director is Rob Byers. Engineering by Russ Henry.

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I'm Phoebe Judge. This Is Love. [music fades out]

**END OF EPISODE.**