

PART I

Witnesses

WITNESS:

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Cross-Examination Excerpt

September 16, 1997

Q. When you got to Cell Five, what did you see?

A. The defendant was holding a knife to Bryan Douglas's throat and screaming for John.

Q. Just to clarify, he was screaming for John Forrester, the owner of the Quigley House?

A. Yep.

Q. Was John there that night?

A. Nope.

Q. Did you recognize the man with the knife?

A. Recognized his voice. Dude was on our blacklist.

Q. Can you clarify, please, your blacklist?

A. It's a list of people who've threatened us.

Q. Is this list reserved for people who live in Lincoln, Nebraska?

A. Not at all. It's got people from all over the world, but mostly from Nebraska, I guess, since the biggest pains are usually local.

Q. Is the list long?

A. Yep. Hundreds.

Q. But let me get this straight, you recognized his *voice*? You'd never actually met my client in person.

A. Yeah. I knew his voice well. He left messages almost every day all crazed.

Q. Okay, so you saw the defendant with a knife to Bryan's throat, then what?

A. Everyone rushed down to Cell Five—the crew, the cast, people in the control room, everyone. Nuts. I didn't want 'em to crowd like that, but sometimes people aren't too bright.

Q. So the entire cast and crew witnessed the defendant holding a knife to Bryan's throat?

A. Yeah. And the other contestants, they witnessed it too. They'd been competing in that cell.

Q. And who were the other contestants?

A. Victor Dunlap, Jane Roth, and Jaidee Charoensuk.

Q. And Kendra Brown, the one who'd initially CB'd you, was she there?

A. No, not in the cell. She was in the control room.

Q. Why was she there?

A. She'd been in the parking lot, 'cause that's where . . . She'd run to the house for help. She thought I'd be in the control room, but I wasn't. I was in Cell Five, like I said. So, she saw it.

Q. Saw what?

A. Well, she saw what happened.

Q. And what exactly did she see?

Kendra

After her father's funeral, in a bright, green-carpeted reception hall, Kendra Brown, age fifteen, sat in a corner by herself, flipping quickly through the pages of *Pet Sematary*. She was at the part where Louis Creed, protagonist and ideal father, witnesses his child's death-by-truck, noticing, sickeningly, that his son's baseball cap is filled with blood. *Filled with blood*. That's what it said. *Filled with blood*. Kendra shook her head, thought: How would a baseball cap, presumably cloth, *fill* with blood? Wouldn't the blood just soak in? Wouldn't the cap deflate? Wouldn't there have to be a *ton* of blood for the cap to *fill*? If so: gross! She looked up.

In the center of the room, her extended family—most from the D.C. metro, but a few from elsewhere—mingled. They carried baked goods held upright by red and yellow napkins. Some nibbled; others devoured. Her cousin Iris, whom she hadn't seen in five years, stuffed half a chocolate-chip cookie in her mouth, chewed vigorously. Her jaw dislocated left, then right, then left,

then right. She slouched, her free arm reaching for the floor, her stomach flowing over her pants, her breasts free and pendulous against her rib cage. Kendra swallowed. Look at her, crying like that, she thought. Like she was close to him.

Kendra opened her book again. The words ran into one another. *Filled with blood*. She blinked. She closed the book, sighed.

“Kendra, baby, come over here,” her mother, Lynette, called from behind the food table.

Kendra set her book down, went to her. Her mother had been furiously rearranging the dishes, making sure the baked goods, the fried goods, the desserts were all in their proper places. She set down a plate of brownies, strode around to the front of the table, met her daughter.

“Mom,” Kendra said.

“What a mess,” Lynette said, unwrapping a mint, popping it into her mouth. “I told them to keep it orderly.” The harsh light enlarged her weariness. Her cheeks were drawn, her forehead deeply grooved. Kendra had always found her mother striking—long-limbed, large-eyed, smooth-faced, a direct contrast to her own short-limbed, small-eyed, freckled self—but there, in front of all that food, she looked rabid and ancient, a woman in need of a month of hot meals and warm showers. She wore a pair of rumpled black pants, creased and bunched in odd places, and a flowy red button-down that opened slightly at the top, exposing a dark, rigid clavicle. Kendra reached out, grabbed the collar, pulled it closer to her mother’s neck. “All of this,” Lynette said, shaking her head. “A mess.”

“Mom,” Kendra said.

“I know,” Lynette said. “I know. But why are you over there by yourself? Don’t do that. Don’t you do that to me today.”

“What do you want?”

“Kendra,” Lynette said. “We talked about this.”

“We did?” Kendra said.

“For one damn day,” Lynette said.

“Fine, fine, fine,” Kendra said, feeling prickly, turning slowly toward the clump of family in the middle of the room. “Fine, fine, fine,” she said. She walked.

It wasn't that she actively disliked her family. For the most part, they amused her. Her cousins, her aunts, her uncles, they'd all, at some point, helped her mother out, and individually they were great conversationalists: for instance, Kendra could sit and listen for hours to her uncle Howard talk about how, when he was young, he'd nearly died on a yacht in the Bahamas. Something about a rotten mango. Something about a high-speed car chase. Something about a white man mistaking him for a seaside restaurant employee. Anyway. As a collective, and especially at major functions, her family all talked over one another so that together they became this buzzing, barking mass, and Kendra found this extremely irritating. Packed together in one room, they overwhelmed her with their intense animation, and so she withdrew.

But this was a different kind of day. And she'd told her mother that she would engage. So she walked to the center of the mass and allowed them to descend, their funereal breath mixing, fluttering. They said: *Kendra, how are you? Kendra, I'm sorry. Kendra, I've been prayin' for you. Kendra, what you need, hon? Kendra, come here, let me look at you. Kendra, you need food? Kendra Kendra Kendra Kendra Kendra Kendra*

“Kendra.” Her uncle Nestor—all 325 pounds of him—stood in front of her, put his hand on her shoulder, tilted his head, said, “You okay?”

Kendra looked away. Around her, condolences weighted the

air, constricted her throat. She wasn't quite ready to receive them. She wasn't quite ready to understand that her dad had become permanently erased. She looked up. The ceiling seemed impossibly far, all glaring white fluorescence. She looked to her left, to the wall, to a painting of Jesus praying in Gethsemane, his head haloed gold, his eyes beseeching and sad.

"Hey," Nestor said. "I was just thinking. You remember how your dad used to lift you over his head and run around the house? You were like, 'I can fly, I can fly, I can fly!'" He chuckled. "You'd giggle so much you'd *cry!* Whole buckets of tears and you, all cute, goin' on about flying. He'd put you down and you'd say, 'More, more, more!'"

"Hmm," Kendra said, blinking hard, still looking at Jesus.

"Whenever you two were in a room together you were smiling broad as ever," Nestor said.

She looked at him, focused on the mole in the center of his forehead. "When did you see me—"

"He cherished you completely, K. *Completely.*"

Kendra stuffed her hands into her pockets, looked longingly at the chair in the corner. How full was that baseball cap? she thought. A tablespoon? A cup? A pint? She imagined Louis Creed picking it up, letting the blood spill out all over the road.

"Greg's at peace now," Nestor said, nodding. "He's smilin' down on you."

Kendra smiled, turned, shoved her way to the outskirts of the group, nodded, embraced, nodded, embraced. *Kendra, I'm sorry. Kendra, you come visit anytime. Kendra, you try the brownies? Kendra Kendra Kendra.*

She thought: *And what exactly am I supposed to do with all these fucking sorrys?*

She found her cousin Bryan, the only family member with-

out food, standing at the perimeter of the group with his hands clasped in front of him, solemnly observing. She reached up and hugged him, felt warmth.

“You look weird in a suit,” Kendra said.

“I wanted to come over and say hi before,” he said, pulling back, “but you seemed busy with your book.” He smiled. His teeth gleamed.

“I guess,” she said.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said.

Standing next to her cousin made her feel tiny. He was six-foot-two; she was barely five feet. He was athletic, lithe, confident, the type of guy who endlessly frustrated women. She was inward, clumsy, sullen, a girl who roamed invisible down school hallways. For some reason, though, they got along best: it was him she’d called directly after the accident, saying: *I think this is shock?* Though he lived in Nebraska with her mother’s sister Rae, she saw him the most out of all her cousins. Rae and Lynette were exceptionally close.

“Don’t know why you’d wanna read books when you’re not in school,” Bryan said. “And that? Here? Now? Stephen King, man. He’s fucked up.”

“What do you know,” Kendra said, her vision clouding.

“I know enough.”

“I can’t deal with all this,” she said, staring once again at Iris, who was still chewing.

He sniffed. “I dunno. You’re what they call . . . what is it? Someone who doesn’t fit into normal life?”

“Fuck off, Bryan.”

“No, I don’t mean it negative. All the brilliant people are like that.”

“A misanthrope?”

“Maybe.”

They stood in silence for a while. Gray light from the window fell over her cousin, shadowing his eyes. Outside, traffic rumbled and screeched down Rhode Island Avenue. Kendra winced. Since her father’s accident, she couldn’t stop envisioning loud, clamorous impacts. Every honk, engine rev, or shriek of rubber on asphalt signaled a grave, untimely death, and though nobody had been in the car with her dad, whenever she closed her eyes she envisioned everything: the white truck edging closer and closer to her father’s lane, her father’s horn blaring, her father shouting, *Get in your lane!*, the car ahead not accelerating, the car behind not decelerating, the middle-aged truck driver growing sleepier and sleepier, his head bobbing up and down, the truck careening over the line, her father grabbing the steering wheel so tight his hands shook, the spray of dirt, the small hill, the sudden shouts of the truck driver, who still, impossibly, raced beside him, the fumbling brakes, the choking seat belt, and finally, the wide, wide trunk of the scarlet oak tree.

“You okay?” Bryan said.

Kendra breathed in through her nose, out through her mouth. “Uncle Nestor told me how my dad used to lift me over his head and pretend I was flying,” she said.

“So?” Bryan said.

“My dad never did that.”

“When you were little—”

“He never did that.”

“I think I remember something . . .”

“No, Bryan.”

He shifted his weight from his left to his right leg, stuffed his

hands in his pockets. “Hey, when you gonna get out of this all-black phase?” he said, looking her up and down. “Haven’t you heard? Goth shit is a white loser thing. Black people got *enough* problems—we don’t wear them for show, you know?”

“Whatever,” Kendra said. “It’s a fucking funeral.”

Bryan said, “Well, I guess.”

Kendra thought of the last time she’d seen Bryan. He’d been at her house talking to her dad, who, as per usual, sat poring over paperwork in his starched white shirt and solid blue tie. Bryan had been discussing his new girlfriend, gesticulating wildly, trying, Kendra supposed, to make up for her father’s cool rigidity. Bryan told Greg, her father, how this girl, Simone, was different from all the others, how she challenged him, made him think. “I’ve never felt this way before,” Bryan said. “I’m serious.”

Kendra had walked in on them, looking first at her dad, then at her cousin. She’d thought: *Bryan, no. Haven’t you learned anything?* but said nothing, letting her cousin continue speaking to the stone structure that was Greg Brown, and when Bryan was finished, after he’d briefed her father on all the particulars of Simone’s wondrousness, Greg removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes, sighed, and said, “I’m sorry, Bryan. I’m just not interested in this right now.”

In the reception hall, Bryan wrung his hands by his sides. There was a nervousness to him that Kendra had never witnessed before. She didn’t understand it. It wasn’t like he and Greg had been close. “Are *you* okay?” Kendra said.

“Your mom’s gonna need your help,” Bryan said. “She’s not good.”

“Nobody’s *good*,” Kendra said.

"I'm just saying," Bryan said.

"You know he was a fucking jerk," she said. "You understand that, right?"

"Kendra," Bryan said.

"What."

She closed her mouth. Part of her stoicism was an act, she knew. Part of her wanted to cry, or race around like her mom, or spill memories like everyone else in the reception hall. Part of her felt like falling into the grief, letting it consume her, displaying the displays that everyone expected, but another part, a stronger part, remembered too much, remembered the nights her mother had called Greg at eleven P.M., midnight, one A.M., pleading for him to come home. *Your clients will be there in the morning*, she'd said. *But we're here now*. Kendra remembered how he'd missed her last three birthdays without so much as a card, how he ate fancy dinners with clients while Lynette slathered jelly on toast, how, when he *was* home, he walked around without speaking, grunting hellos, then retreating to his study. Could she properly grieve a man who'd tried so badly to be missing? She didn't know.

"I'm just saying," Bryan said, "Lynette, she's gonna need you more now. So stop sulking in your room, reading those books. You're gonna have to seriously work together, figure shit out."

"What do you know," Kendra said.

"I know enough," Bryan said.

"Okay," Kendra said. "Whatever." She touched her cousin's arm, squeezed, then went back to her chair.