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Hush Hush

Written by Laura Lippman

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For Sara Kiehne

Hush Hush

Transcript of interview with CAROLYN SANDERS, March 3. Filmed outside Friends School, Charles Street, Baltimore, MD. (Production notes: Interview was actually recorded on sidewalk near school, a public area, as school refused access. Permit was not obtained. Harmony Burns is off-camera. Transcript provided by our third-party transcription service, then edited by HB per her notes for clarity, transcription errors. Otherwise a full and unexpurgated transcript.)

SPEAKER 1: Harmony Burns
SPEAKER 2: Carolyn Sanders
INPUT: HB

SPEAKER 1/HARMONY BURNS: I'll ask questions for clarity, details. But it's really just supposed to be you talking. When the film is edited, my voice will not be on it. You're telling a story, as if I'm not here.

SPEAKER 2/CAROLYN SANDERS: Why would I be telling the story if no one is here?

HB: I mean tell the story as if I'm not asking questions, as if it all just came out. As if the camera is your audience, which it is.

CS: Okay. Gosh, I'm glad it's not colder. Why didn't you want to do this inside?

HB: Production issues. Besides, it just looks like any school on the inside and it's dark, which is unflattering when you don't have the time to light professionally. People actually look better in bright light. Plus, this is a more interesting backdrop.

CS: You mean the tennis courts? Can you even see them from here? And it's not like they're just for the school. There's a club of sorts. People in the neighborhood pay to use them. Friends is a private school, but it's not super-fancy.

HB: Did you go here?

CS: No, I attended Roland Park Country. They had a summer program, too, but I wanted a change of scenery. I wish I had—I'd give anything not to have been here that day.

HB: Don't get ahead of yourself, okay? Just tell the story, beginning to end. Don't worry about pausing. Take all the time you want. And if you screw something up, stop, take a breath, and start over. There's no wrong way to do this.

CS: Okay. Now?

HB: One more check on everything—we good? Okay, go. Oh, and identify yourself. Name, age, your, um, role. What you were doing that summer.

CS: My name is Carolyn Sanders and I'm twenty-eight years old. I work at Sanders & Sanders, a local communications company that does advertising and PR. It was founded by my grandfather and his brother—my great-uncle—right after World War II. It is one of the oldest communications firms in Baltimore. My father is the current president and serves on several local boards.

HB: And twelve years ago? What were you doing then?

CS: Oh, yes. Right. On August eighth, 2002, I was working at the summer day camp here at Friends when a woman came in and asked to take her children home. The woman was Melisandre Dawes, the mother of

two of our campers, Alanna and Ruby. She said she needed to get the kids and take them home. She said it was an emergency, but she wouldn't tell me the nature of the emergency. Only that she needed them, right now.

HB: Just keep going. You're telling a story.

CS: It was about ten A.M. and all the children had just left for a field trip to a local dairy farm. I was surprised that Mrs. Dawes didn't know because she had signed the slips two weeks earlier. Three kids had to stay behind because their parents forgot, and those kids had been dropped off by caregivers who couldn't give legal consent. Lots of our kids were dropped off by babysitters, nannies. The Dawes girls almost missed the trip because they were late that day, but their dad had dropped them off. Usually, it was the nanny, but she wasn't around that week. She was on vacation or something. Mr. Dawes had seemed a little absent-minded at drop-off, but he's that kind of guy, right? He didn't make all his money by focusing on details that others could take care of. That's what my dad always said. They knew each other a little, my dad and Mr. Dawes. They were on some board together. Anyway, Mrs. Dawes, whom I'd seen only once or twice that summer, came in, and asked to withdraw the girls. She said it was an emergency. Of course, I was very concerned when I heard that, but I had to ask—What is the nature of the emergency? And she just kept murmuring: "Can't you see? Can't you see? Isn't it obvious?" The only thing I could see was that she looked awful.

HB: Could you be more descriptive?

CS: Well, just awful. Her hair looked as if it hadn't been washed for days—and she had such pretty hair the other times I had seen her. Her skin looked bad, pale and waxy. She was breathing heavily, almost panting, and she wore way too much clothing for a hot day. She had on a turtleneck and this big baggy linen thing over it. It looked very Eileen Fisher and it was enormous on her. It was all very strange. Disturbing, like the homeless people you see wearing coats in hot weather. I didn't think she should be left alone. I told her to wait in the hall for me and that I would go get someone. I thought maybe she should see a nurse or a doctor, but I wanted to ask my boss. After all, I was only sixteen, I couldn't tell a grown-up to wait in one place, or make her have a glass of water. I wasn't gone more than five minutes, but when I got back with the head of camp, she—Mrs. Dawes—had left. When I heard later—I felt awful. If I had gotten her to stay, nothing would have happened. But I thought she was a risk only to herself. I mean, that's bad, but it's not as if I could see the baby.

HB: Are you sure the baby was with her?

CS: Not at the time. I mean, it was only after that I realized—there were straps, over the turtleneck, but under this poncho-like thing she was wearing, visible at the edges of the neckline. They had to be straps, right? So she had the baby in a carrier and she had put on the big poncho so we wouldn't see the baby. That's what I think.

HB: But are you sure the baby was under the poncho? Could you see the baby's shape, hear her? Was she moving?

CS: No.

HB: So the baby could have been in the car.

CS: Anything is possible, I guess. But I think the baby was with her.

HB: Go back and describe Melisandre again. In more detail if you could. Make people see her as she was that day.

CS: Her hair was almost flat with grease. I had seen her once or twice and she was a really striking woman, and her hair was what you noticed first. She had those big snaky curls, you know? And the color was amazing, gold and brown, almost like a topaz. She also had brown eyes and lovely skin. Normally. But on this day, her skin was grayish white and she was way overdressed, all these layers on a really hot day. She had on tights, too. And cowboy boots. Bright red cowboy boots. But, you know, some people overdress in the summer because they're in places that have really strong air-conditioning. I keep a cardigan in my desk drawer.

HB: And what did she say?

CS: She asked me to go get Alanna and Ruby. I said, "But they're on the field trip. They just left." She got so upset that I thought she might—do something to me. She was waving her arms, pacing, muttering, saying she had to take them right then. I went to get the head of camp, Mrs. Von. She's actually Mrs. Von Treffathen, but—well, little kids, you can imagine them trying to say that name. So she was known as Mrs. Von. I said that Melisandre Dawes was in the lobby and seemed to be in some kind of distress. I said—I said [next few words indistinct]. Mrs. Von came out with me, and Mrs. Dawes was gone. Everyone says it's not my fault. She probably ran out the second I left her, and what else could I have done? And I didn't know—I mean—if

I had known. I should have known. Where else would the baby have been? And we all knew that the family had a baby. Alanna and Ruby talked about her all the time. Isadora. But it didn't occur to me that she had brought the baby in with her, under her clothes.

HB: In court, you didn't mention the part about the baby carrier, did you?

CS: I wasn't allowed. They said it was conjecture. And they said even if I could swear to seeing the straps of the baby carrier, I couldn't know if a baby was under her dress. But she had to be. It became a big deal. That was the first time her lawyer moved for a mistrial, but it wasn't granted. People forget that sometimes, or get confused. They say, Oh, you're the girl whose testimony got Melisandre Dawes a second trial. The mistrial wasn't because of me, I didn't do anything wrong. I was only sixteen. Well, seventeen by the time it went to trial. [Indistinct words.]

HB: You know, Carolyn, Melisandre Dawes didn't go psychotic in a single morning. Think of all the other people who had a chance to intervene before that day. Her husband, her own mother, who had visited earlier that summer. Her mother-in-law, who lived right here in Baltimore and saw her grandchildren at least once a week. And you can't be sure that she had the baby with her. She might have left her in the car. After all—

CS: No, I'm sure the baby was there. I was the last one. I was the last person to see her that day. Isadora was there, inches away from me. Everyone says I can't know that, but I do.

HB: Did she say anything strange when you spoke? Melisandre. You've established that she acted oddly, but what about the conversation itself?

CS: No. I told you everything.

HB: She didn't say anything else? Something out of the ordinary? Anything about the nature of the emergency?

CS: No.

HB: Nothing?

CS: What do you mean?

HB: I don't want to lead you, Carolyn. My—our—standards for this—they're very high. I don't want to plant an idea in your head, lead you in any way. But are you sure you've recalled the conversation in its entirety?

CS: Pretty sure.

HB: She didn't say anything else? Something—I think this is okay—something to explain why she was dressed the way she was. Anything like that? About her arms, her legs, what was happening to them?

CS: No, nothing like that.

HB: Never mind. I just thought— Never mind.

CS: She thought something was wrong with her arms and legs? I don't remember reading about that.

HB: We asked you not to read, remember? Not to prepare in any way. We just want your memories, unfiltered.

CS: I read things at the time. Who wouldn't? And I was relieved that— The police came to talk to me, but my name was kept out of it until the trial and, by then, I was away at boarding school, which my parents thought best, although I came back for the trial. And to live, after college, but by then no one remembered anymore that I had a part in it. My dad always says Baltimoreans, the real ones, are like homing pigeons. Or boomerangs. We all come back. Anyway, everyone kept saying it wasn't my fault, but what else could they say?

HB: I thought you just said that people said the mistrial was your fault.

CS: Not the mistrial. The actual—thing. What happened. I could have saved her.

HB: You didn't know the baby was there, much less what Melisandre was going to do.

CS: But I knew Mrs. Dawes wasn't in her right mind. I saw her and I left her alone, to walk out and get in her car and—do what she did! I mean, even if she wasn't in her right mind, I might have been able to help.

HB: Even if? What do you mean?

CS: Nothing. I mean—my dad said not to go there. It's gossip. And the Dawes family has always been quick with a lawsuit. My dad says. When will this be on TV?

HB: No broadcast date yet. But it will be in theaters first, I hope. Theaters or on one of the premium cable networks, maybe one of the streaming outlets, which are doing original work now. We hope to finish shooting before summer, which means we'll take it to festivals the following year. So, if we're lucky—two years from now.

CS: Wow, I'll be thirty by then.

HB: Somebody has to be.

CS: What?

HB: I said that's a nice age to be. Camera off, end tape.