

AFFIDAVIT

of Richard P. Herman

I, Richard P. Herman, being duly sworn, depose and state the following under penalty of perjury. Every word herein is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and recollection. I set this down not because I expect to be believed, but because I cannot carry it alone.

1. My eyelids had gone heavy and my chin was dropping when the sound split the intersection open — one hard, flat note that bounced off the buildings and hit me like a fist. My heart lurched sideways. The light had gone green while I was somewhere behind my own eyes, briefly nowhere at all.

2. I checked the rearview. The drivers stacked behind me had opinions about the delay, and none of them were friendly. I pressed the accelerator and moved on before things got worse.

3. The whole week had wrung me dry. Twelve-hour shifts at the factory, an hour each way in the car — the math doesn't leave much room for sleep. I was running on fumes and stubbornness, and the stubbornness was losing ground.

4. I thought about my bed the way a man thinks about something he can't quite reach yet. That was all I wanted. Horizontal, in the dark, until I decided otherwise.

5. Then the rain started. If you're not from here, you don't know rain like this. It wasn't a gentle rain. It was a gully-washer, a frog-strangler — the sky coming apart all at once, buckets not drops. The wipers on high couldn't keep up. I couldn't see the road, just sheets of black water where the asphalt used to be. I made it home anyway. Call it a miracle or call it stubbornness finding its second wind.

6. Running for the front door I hit something in the dark.

Damnit — Shit — just — *Shit* —

7. I said it out loud. Said it loud enough that I hoped God and the neighbors were both occupied elsewhere.

8. I dropped my keys on the kitchen table and kicked my shoes across the floor. They hit the wall with a sound like something drowning. I shed everything on the way to the bedroom – the belt first, then the shirt, the soaked denim fighting back with every wet inch until the pants hit the hardwood with a slap. Each sock left its own small puddle. By the time I reached the bedroom door I was down to nothing but forward momentum.

9. I fell face-forward onto the bed and in the last half-second before dark, my eyes caught the picture of Nell on the nightstand.

"I wonder how Nell is doing at Summer Camp."

10. Then the pillow took me.

* * *

11. *What the hell – Jane?* I sat up. I rubbed my eyes. I shook my head and looked again.

12. Real. It was real.

13. She stood at the foot of my bed in a white robe that hung open. Two years of absence hit me like a second fist inside of ten minutes. I had made myself forget – or tried to. Standing there, she reminded me why I hadn't been able to stay angry, and why I'd had to leave anyway. Her collarbone caught the light. The robe wasn't doing much work and her curves were doing all of it. The part of my brain responsible for good decisions started shutting off lights and heading home.

14. *"Yes, Honey-stick. It's me."*

Nobody else called me that. It had started as something cruder and softened over time into something only she owned. Hearing it confirmed what my eyes were still arguing about.

15. A warmth started low and spread upward. My mouth went dry. Three feet between us, maybe less, and I felt every inch of it. I thought: *why did I leave? I left because I had to. But standing here –*

16. *"How did you find us?"* I said. *"How did you get in?"*

17. I had moved us a thousand miles for a reason. No trail. No forwarding address. No breadcrumbs. And yet here she stood.

18. She pressed down lightly on the foot of the bed and leaned toward me.

"Don't be nervous, Honey-stick. Don't be angry. I'm only here for a little while and I won't be back. I just want you to know the whole truth."

19. Her voice did what it always did. Gravity shifted directions. The room got smaller and quieter at the same time.

20. I thought about the divorce – the panic of it, the blind rage, how I'd run a thousand miles on broken feelings without stopping long enough to hear her side. The truth was I'd stopped tending the marriage long before the end. She had slipped away so slowly that I hadn't noticed the temperature drop until the water ran cold. I spent so long making a living, I forgot to do the giving.

21. The robe hit the floor. She climbed onto the bed and we found our way back into an embrace that had been buried so long I'd half-convinced myself I'd imagined it. We kissed as people do who know they are running out of time. The rhythm of what followed was outside the reach of ordinary language, and I will not cheapen it by trying. We erupted and fell still.

22. Just as the darkness was pulling me under again, Jane climbed over me, patted my chest, and said:

"Honey-stick – should we have a cup of tea? Sit and visit like the good old days?"

I had erased everything between us. I was living right at the beginning again, and I said: Sure.

* * *

23. When I walked into the living room, Jane was curled on the couch wearing nothing but the confidence of Eve before the fall – the kind of ease that belongs only to the Garden, where shame had not yet been invented. Another steaming mug waited on the end table for me. I picked it up and sat at the opposite end. She gave me a sideways smile – the kind that carries a whole verdict in it.

24. I couldn't organize my thoughts. We had done what married couples do, and we had not been married for two years. I started looking around for something to put on. There was nothing. I started looking around for fig leaves. There were none of those either.

25. I looked at her and said: *Jane, I'm sorry I didn't give you more of a chance.*

26. She looked me in the eye and said:

"Honey-stick – I'm sorry I didn't give you more of a chance to give me one."

27. We sat in silence for a while. Then she said: *Do you want to know what happened?*

28. Yes.

29. *"You know, Honey-stick, I never meant to become what I did. It happened slowly – subtly. It snuck up on me and had me completely before I realized I was playing with fire. I thought it was harmless fun at first. Warm and fuzzy. Until it burned me to the ground."*

30. She told me about the men at work. All of them. The escalation from jokes to touching to something far worse, each of them unaware of the others. My stomach turned. She was worse than I'd imagined – and I had imagined plenty.

31. Then she told me about Jo. Joseph Ernesto Carrillo – the son of Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo. She had no idea who he was when it started. He introduced it to her in trickles, the way cold water finds its way under a door: you don't notice it until you're standing in it. By the time she woke up to reality, they were sitting in jail together. Her affiliation with the Guadalajara Cartel was not a choice she'd made all at once, but a series of small ones – and that, she said, is the nature of how a person loses themselves.

32. When she was released, Nell and I were already gone. The papers had said to stay away, and I had made staying away easy by leaving nothing to find. The house – her mother's house – already had a stranger living in it. She had nowhere to go and Jo was there. The rest was headline news. The cartel safe house. The FBI raid. The gunfire.

33. I said: *I read about that. I read how your grandfather laid you to rest. So how did you fake your death? How did you find me?*

34. Before I could finish the sentence she was on top of me again, and every rational thought I had went dark.

* * *

35. Afterward she settled at her end of the couch, easy in her own skin the way only the completely unburdened can be. She seemed to carry no shame. I was starting to envy her.

36. She said:

"I didn't fake my death, Honey-stick. I really died."

37. Right, I said. You look dead.

38. *"Good. Because you are looking at the dead. I worked the back channels of the spiritual world and got permission to come. To thank you for taking care of our Nell. And to tell you I'm sorry – in hopes that somewhere, sometime, you can forgive me."*

39. I said: If you're dead, how can I feel you?

40. *"My body is in the ground, yes. In the spirit it's still me. We are both spirit – the only difference is yours is in a body and mine has been set free."*

41. I pushed her for details about the other side. She didn't answer that directly. Instead she said things I believe every living person should hear:

42. *"The biggest thing that stares you in the face when you die is Regret. The dead talk about it more than anything else – the things they wish they had done and had not done. Believe me, it consumes me. Don't wait. If you want to meet someone, help someone, change something – do it now. Death sneaks up on you. Life is over before you understand it."*

43. She pulled me to the bedroom one last time. We lay in our old spoon position, the one buried under two years of silence and a thousand miles of road. I kept pressing her about the other side. She held me tighter and eventually gave me this, and only this:

44. *"There will be three surprises when you die. Who is there. Who is not. And where you are. Be aware of what you say and do – you are purchasing your ticket to where you will go."*

45. Then she was the rodeo queen at her final championship ride — all rhythm and rein, her hips finding the cadence the way only a woman born to the saddle can, eight seconds that stretched into forever — and I was completely lost beneath her, and then I was not there at all.

* * *

46. My next recollection was a horn blating on the street outside, and sunlight needling through the drapes.

47. I sat up straight. No sign of her. I lay back and stared at the ceiling. *One hell of a dream. The most vivid dream of my life. I was bone-tired. That explains it.* In a way I felt relieved. In another way I could not name, I did not.

48. After a while I dragged myself out of bed and staggered toward the bathroom, rubbing my face.

49. I stopped dead.

50. There at the foot of my bed lay the white robe.

51. I don't know how long I stood there. Long enough. I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at it and did not touch it.

52. Eventually I made myself walk out of the bedroom. My thoughts were spaghetti. My hands were shaking.

53. I froze again.

54. On the two end tables of the couch sat our two empty teacups. On the stove, the kettle still had water in it.

55. It was boiling.

*I, Richard P. Herman, swear under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct
to the best of my knowledge, recollection, and belief. So help me God.*

AFFIANT SIGNATURE

Richard P. Herman
Richard P. Herman

DATE SIGNED

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Plain truth, good humor, and a better tomorrow.



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