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AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 1 - FIRST STEPS INTO FOREVER
by
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Layla drifted in and out of awareness beneath the soft glow of the hospice room's overhead light. Most days, her world was a haze of pain, sedatives, and the murmurs of caregivers. She had long since stopped marking time by the clock. Instead, her life was punctuated by occasional visits from her mother—eyes rimmed red—and the presence of an impeccably dressed stranger named Ava Moreno.

A Hazy Visit

Layla first noticed Ava when the woman set a glossy folder on the small bedside table. At the time, Layla was too tired to engage in more than a confused blink, her body consumed by the ache of late-stage cancer.

“Hello, Layla,” Ava had said softly. Her voice was low and confident, though tempered with a pleasant bedside manner. “I’m from Eternity Corporation. We offer a unique service that might...help.”

Layla's eyelids fluttered; she registered more the shape of Ava's words than their meaning. Yet something about *help* tugged at her thoughts.

Ava continued, opening the folder. "With our *Forever Program*, you can...transition. We'll upload your consciousness. You'll be free from pain. And you'll get to choose how you appear in this new life—any age, any style. It's like building your ideal self."

At that, Layla's cracked lips parted in a faint smile, though she wasn't sure if Ava saw it. *A healthy body*, she thought dreamily. She couldn't even remember what it felt like to walk without wincing, to breathe without her lungs burning.

"Sounds nice," Layla managed in a barely audible whisper.

Ava patted her hand. "We'll talk more when you're feeling up to it. Rest for now."

Layla closed her eyes, drifting back into the fog of medications and fatigue. Through the haze, she caught glimpses of Ava's suit jacket and the sparkle of her name badge. The words "*no cost to you*" echoed faintly as she slipped under once more.

A Difficult Pitch

Days later—Layla wasn't sure how many—she found Ava sitting quietly by her bedside. This time, Layla felt more lucid. The morning's dose of painkillers had partially worn off. A dull ache throbbed in her bones, but at least she could think clearly enough to form sentences.

Ava smiled when Layla stirred. "Good afternoon, Layla. I wanted to check in."

Layla's mother, Catherine, lingered in the corner, arms folded as if she couldn't quite decide what to say. She met Layla's gaze with a worried look before shifting her eyes to Ava.

Taking a breath, Layla gestured for Ava to continue. “You mentioned...uploading me?” Layla rasped. “But I’m worried about my mother.” She glanced at Catherine, recalling how her mother had lost both Layla’s father and brother in a single catastrophic traffic accident years ago. The tragedy had nearly destroyed Catherine’s spirit. “She’s already been through so much,” Layla said, her voice cracking. “If... when... I die...” She trailed off, swallowing around the lump in her throat.

Ava leaned forward, sympathy in her eyes. “That’s exactly why this can help. Your mother won’t have to lose you entirely—you’ll be here, in digital form. She can visit you through our VR interfaces. It might ease her grief.”

“That’s not all,” Layla added, voicing the deeper fear that had haunted her since Ava’s first pitch. “My dad and brother... If there’s a real afterlife, I want to see them. I don’t want to end up stuck somewhere else.”

Ava nodded, as though she had heard this question a hundred times. “We’ve consulted with religious leaders across denominations. Locally, your bishop has endorsed the idea that your *soul* still moves on in the traditional sense. The upload is just a copy of your consciousness data. You won’t be prevented from entering whatever afterlife you believe in. You could even leave our digital environment at any time.”

Catherine spoke for the first time, her voice trembling. “But how can we know it’s not...tampering with her soul?”

“It’s a question that so many people have prayed over. That’s why our company has spent so much time with leaders from many faiths... including yours.” Ava said gently, “They see no conflict with the scripture and many have given sermons about how our service proves that there

is an afterlife. If it offers you comfort, Layla, and helps your mother cope, it's worth considering. Remember, you'll have a chance to choose your ideal self. Think of it as...being restored to the body you were meant to have."

A faint spark of hope lit in Layla's chest. It felt selfish, yet also like a lifeline—for her mother, too. "I just don't want her to suffer again."

"I understand." Ava's voice softened. "Take your time. I'll be back to answer any more questions."

Conversation Three

By the time Ava returned, Layla had only a few days left. Her decline had been swift; the cancer was merciless. She lay propped up on pillows, breaths shallow, eyes sunken but still holding a glimmer of resolve. Catherine hovered at her daughter's side, pale and exhausted from sleepless nights.

Ava moved a chair closer to the bed, her expression serious. She placed a contract and a pen on the rolling table. "I'm sorry to see you in pain, Layla. If you sign these forms, we can proceed with the upload as soon as tomorrow. You won't feel a thing. We promise."

Layla's throat was too dry to speak at first. She sipped water through a straw Catherine offered, then mustered the strength to ask, "It's...still free?"

Ava nodded. "Yes. Eternity Corporation covers the upload procedure entirely. Your first year will be fully comped."

Layla glanced at her mother. "Mom...do you think we should do this?"

Catherine's eyes brimmed with tears. "I just want you to be free from pain, honey." She stroked Layla's hair. "If this means I can still talk to you, if you'll be happier..." Her voice broke. "I can't bear to lose you like I lost—" She halted, the memory of the accident choking her.

Layla reached for the pen with trembling fingers. She could barely keep hold of it. Ava steadied her hand gently. "You'll be able to choose your appearance once you're inside," Ava reminded her. "Think about how you'd like to look—young, healthy, strong. No more pain."

An image flashed through Layla's mind: herself as a teenager, running cross-country meets, hair shining in the summer sun, lungs full of air instead of tumors. She remembered what it felt like to breathe freely, to actually *live*. The thought was bittersweet and intoxicating.

She signed her name, each shaky letter a small rebellion against the cancer that had stolen her life.

"Thank you," Ava whispered, taking the contract and sliding it into her folder. "We'll prepare everything."

The Final Moments

The day of the procedure arrived quickly. Medical staff wheeled in strange equipment: slender towers with blinking lights, a sleek helmet bristling with electrodes, and a console that displayed rapid streams of digital code.

Catherine stood on the opposite side of the bed, clutching Layla's hand. Layla felt an odd mixture of terror and relief. Even breathing hurt, her chest on fire with every inhale. All she wanted was peace—maybe this new life, digital or not, would bring it.

The technician placed the helmet on Layla's head, apologizing for the cold metal against her scalp. Layla's vision blurred, tears mixing with the sedation drip coursing through her IV. Through the fog, she heard Ava's voice, gentle yet businesslike: "You'll drift off, and when you wake up, you'll be in the new environment. Remember, you can customize everything about yourself there."

Catherine squeezed her hand. "I love you," she choked out.

"I love you too, Mom," Layla managed.

A beep sounded, monitors flickered, and then a wave of darkness swept through Layla's consciousness. The last thing she felt was the soft pressure of her mother's hand and the faint, persistent ache of disease. *Maybe that ache would be gone soon*, she thought, before slipping into a dreamless void.

Waking into Light

Layla opened her eyes to a brilliant sunrise painting the sky in hues of pink and gold. She lay in a field where every blade of grass shimmered with morning dew. A gentle breeze ruffled her hair—thick and lustrous again, just as she remembered it before the chemo. She lifted her hands, staring at them in awe. No tremors, no IV scars, no pain.

"Welcome, Layla." Ava's voice drifted on the breeze. She appeared, smiling as though delighted by Layla's wonder. "You can shape your body as you wish. You're free."

Tears of relief blurred Layla's vision. She flexed her arms, feeling strong, whole. The memory of the hospital bed still lingered, but it felt distant now, like a half-forgotten nightmare.

“Will I be able to see my mom soon?” she asked.

Ava nodded. “She can visit whenever she’s ready. For now, enjoy your new self.”

Layla took a breath—real or simulated, it hardly mattered. For the first time in months, the rush of air felt refreshing rather than excruciating. She gazed at the radiant sky, heart swelling with cautious hope.

The horizon stretched before her in endless possibility, and though a quiet voice in the back of her mind whispered about the unknown cost of this paradise, she let herself believe, if only for a moment, that she had found a second chance at life—even if it was just a digital imitation of forever.

End – Part 1