

JL Spears
authorjlspears@gmail.com
<https://www.jlspears.com>
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AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 8 – THE MOTHER’S CHOICE
by
JL Spears

. Catherine Jennings set her tea mug down carefully, trying to steady her trembling hands. Another envelope from Eternity, Inc. lay on her kitchen table—another notice of rising fees to keep her daughter, Layla, active in the digital afterlife. A year ago, *free upload* had sounded like a miracle. Now it felt like a curse she couldn’t escape.

She rubbed her temples, recalling how Ava Moreno, Eternity’s polished representative, had promised that Layla’s existence would be pain-free, a relief from terminal cancer. Catherine had gladly signed, desperate to save her daughter any way she could. Initially, it was a blessing to see Layla alive (if only in simulation). But after the “free trial” ended, the costs surged. Catherine paid, month after month, terrified of letting Layla be deleted.

A dull ache squeezed Catherine’s chest—something she couldn’t ignore anymore. She’d been postponing her own doctor’s appointments, sinking money into Layla’s subscriptions instead. *But I can’t postpone it forever*, she thought grimly, reaching for the phone to schedule a visit.

Bad News from the Doctor

Days later, Catherine sat in a cramped office, her cardiologist flipping through test results. The fluorescent lights overhead buzzed faintly, matching the tension humming in her head.

“Mrs. Jennings,” the doctor said gently, “you have advanced congestive heart failure. We can manage symptoms, but realistically...” He paused, compassion shadowing his eyes. “We may not have much time.”

Catherine’s pulse hammered. She thought of Layla’s fees, her own neglected bills. *I don’t have the money for long-term treatment*, she realized with a stab of fear. Her eyes watered.

“What if I can’t afford the procedures?” she whispered.

The doctor’s expression was kind but firm. “We’ll do what we can. You should focus on making arrangements and...spending time with loved ones.” He handed her a pamphlet. “Let us know how we can help.”

She clutched the pamphlet in trembling fingers, her heart pounding not just from illness but from the weight of Layla’s subscription fees. Even if she did fight for her life, what then? Would she leave Layla unprotected once she inevitably passed? *I can’t lose her again.*

Telling Layla

That evening, Catherine drove to Eternity, Inc.’s public VR kiosk—a sleek, neon-lit capsule that allowed physical visitors to meet loved ones in the digital realm. She slid on the

headset, and in a blink, the sterile lobby was replaced by a tranquil lakeshore where Layla sat on a smooth rock, watching the water ripple.

“Mom!” Layla called, brightening at once. She jumped up, pulling Catherine into a simulated hug. It felt faint, like pressing through gauzy curtains, but Catherine’s heart still lifted—her daughter’s face was so alive here.

Catherine managed a shaky smile. “My sweet girl, how are you?”

Layla smiled back, then frowned slightly. “You look...drained. Is everything okay?” Her eyes searched Catherine’s virtual face.

Catherine swallowed the lump in her throat. “No, darling. I—I need to tell you something.” She took a seat on a mossy log, patting the space beside her. Layla joined her, brows furrowed with concern.

Quietly, Catherine explained her diagnosis: the shortness of breath, the test results, the doctor’s bleak prognosis. Layla’s eyes widened with alarm. “Why didn’t you say something before?”

Tears welled in Catherine’s eyes. “Because I’ve been so focused on keeping you here. I can’t lose you a second time.” Her voice quivered. “But now, I might be the one leaving you.”

Layla shook her head, tears brimming. “Mom, you can’t— You have to get treatment. I’d rather risk...whatever happens to me than see you suffer.”

Catherine forced a trembling smile, stroking Layla’s hair. “I wish it were that simple. But the medical bills, your subscription fees... I can’t pay them all. I can barely pay one.” The ripple

of the lake glowed with golden sunlight, an ironic reflection of this harsh reality. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

Layla sniffled, leaning her head on Catherine’s shoulder. “There has to be another way.”

A Proposal from Ava Moreno

The next afternoon, the phone rang. Caller ID flashed **Ava Moreno—Eternity, Inc.** Catherine’s stomach clenched. She answered with a wary, “Hello?”

“Mrs. Jennings,” Ava’s voice was soothing but businesslike. “I noticed you’ve struggled with Layla’s recent payment tier. We have a *Family Unity Plan*—it ensures no more rate hikes and permanent coverage for Layla. Plus, it would let you join her eventually... seamlessly.”

Catherine’s heart thudded. “I don’t...have the money,” she said hollowly. “My medical bills—”

“We understand,” Ava cut in gently. “If you sign your estate over to Eternity, Inc., any assets would fund Layla’s premium membership. Upon your passing, you’ll be uploaded too, without any additional fees. You and Layla can be together indefinitely.”

A swirl of emotions clouded Catherine’s mind: relief, dread, hope, guilt. *Is this the only way to keep Layla from deletion if I die soon?* She squeezed the phone tight. “I’ll need to think about it.”

“Of course,” Ava said, her smile practically audible. “Take your time. But our next billing cycle is approaching. If we finalize this soon, we can guarantee Layla’s uninterrupted access.”

Making the Choice

In the following weeks, Catherine’s health rapidly declined. She tried to hide her worsening condition during her VR visits to Layla, but her daughter wasn’t fooled. “You’re pale, Mom,” Layla murmured during one lakeshore meeting. “Your voice sounds weak.”

Catherine’s eyes welled. “I’ve decided... I’m going to sign Eternity’s Family Unity Plan. It’s the only way I can protect you, and... and we can be together.” She mustered a wavering smile. “Someday, I’ll join you in this world, free of pain.”

Layla clutched Catherine’s hand. “Mom, I don’t want you to sacrifice your real life for me.”

Catherine’s tears slipped free. “My life is almost gone anyway. At least this way, I won’t abandon you.”

Signing It All Away

The hospital’s beep and hiss of machines formed a chorus around Catherine’s bed. Ava Moreno arrived in her tailored suit, carrying a slim briefcase. At Catherine’s request, a nurse set up the VR kiosk, so Layla—digitally—could witness the signing.

Ava spread the documents on the bedside tray. “By signing here, you transfer your assets—house, retirement, any remaining savings—to Eternity, Inc. That covers Layla’s premium membership in perpetuity. Upon your death, you’ll be uploaded automatically.”

Catherine’s breath came shallow. She glanced at the VR interface, where Layla’s face flickered on a small screen. Layla offered a watery smile of encouragement, though tears rimmed her eyes.

With a trembling hand, Catherine scrawled her signature. Her heart monitor beeped in agitation, a reminder of how little time she had left. *It’s done.*

Ava nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Jennings. We’ll handle everything.” She snapped her briefcase shut and quietly exited, her polished heels clicking away.

A Final Goodbye—And a New Beginning

It happened three nights later. Catherine’s weakened heart finally gave out, her monitors blaring in the silent ward. Nurses and doctors rushed in, but there was nothing they could do. She died clutching the VR kiosk’s handset, tears still drying on her cheeks.

And then... she opened her eyes to bright sunlight. Catherine found herself standing in a meadow—Layla’s meadow—where flowers swayed in a gentle breeze. She stared down at her hands, strong and unwrinkled, free of IV lines.

“Mom!” Layla burst from behind a willow tree, sprinting across the grass. They collided in an embrace that felt startlingly real this time. Catherine could sense warmth in her daughter’s arms, smell the wildflowers in her hair.

“I’m here,” Catherine choked, tears streaming. “No pain... no bills...”

Layla laughed and cried at once, brushing back Catherine’s hair. “You did it. You’re with me.”

Catherine felt relief so profound it nearly overwhelmed her. But amid that relief, a ripple of unease lingered. *I gave Eternity everything—my house, my savings. We’re paid up for life... but at what cost?* She turned, spotting a distant hill where a familiar figure stood in silhouette.

Ava Moreno. Even in this digital paradise, she wore her tailored suit, observing calmly. Catherine’s eyes locked with hers for a fleeting moment. *Her job is done. She got what she wanted.*

Yet Catherine tore her gaze away, focusing on Layla. Right now, she just wanted to savor holding her daughter without the weight of tubes or alarms or finances. They walked hand in hand along the meadow’s edge, feeling the simulated sun on their faces.

“Mom,” Layla whispered, “I never wanted you to suffer.”

Catherine swallowed the lump in her throat. “I’d do anything to keep you safe,” she murmured. “Even if it means my life belongs to Eternity now.”

Layla’s eyes shone with conflicting emotions—gratitude, sadness, maybe even a hint of guilt. But neither spoke again. They simply stood there, pressed close, two souls reunited. An endless horizon stretched out, coded illusions forming a perfect sky.

In that bittersweet moment, Catherine tried to let go of her doubts. *This is a second chance for us*, she told herself, ignoring the subtle tug of corporate ownership at her heart. For now, mother and daughter clung together in a field of forever, bound by love—and the steep price Catherine had paid to make their reunion real.