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THE AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 11 – THE VULNERABLE
by
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Jamie sat on the crumbling steps of the old church, her knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped tightly around them. The sky was gray and heavy with the threat of rain, but she didn't mind. It had been days since she'd found a sheltered place to sleep, and the faded stone steps felt safer than the alleys where shadows moved and whispered threats. Her stomach growled, and she pressed her arms tighter, willing herself to ignore it.

A van pulled up across the street—sleek, black, and clearly out of place in this rundown part of the city. Jamie eyed it warily, her instincts screaming caution. The door slid open, and a man stepped out—tall, dressed in a crisp suit, his eyes scanning the area before landing on her. He didn't approach immediately, just stood there, watching. Jamie's fingers dug into the fabric of her tattered jacket, ready to run if he moved any closer.

Finally, he lifted his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm not here to hurt you," he called out. "I just want to talk."

Jamie stayed silent, her heart pounding.

He glanced around, as if considering the best approach. “My name is Dr. Crowe,” he said, his voice low and measured. “I’m conducting a study—research on how trauma affects the brain. We’re looking for volunteers.”

Jamie frowned. “What kind of study?”

Dr. Crowe stepped closer, still maintaining a respectful distance. “It’s a medical trial. We’re testing a new therapy that could help people struggling with PTSD and other trauma-related conditions. We’re offering compensation, and it includes food and shelter.”

Jamie hesitated. It sounded too good to be true—anything that promised shelter usually came with strings attached. “Why me?” she asked, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice.

Crowe gave a small, almost sympathetic smile. “Because you’ve been through a lot. And because we want to help people who don’t have access to regular medical care. You would be helping us learn more about how to treat trauma.”

Her stomach twisted—a mix of hunger and desperation. The offer dangled in front of her like a lifeline, but her instincts screamed that it was too convenient, too easy. “And you’d pay me?” she asked.

He nodded. “A stipend. Enough to get you back on your feet.”

Jamie bit her lip. Money and safety—two things that felt like distant dreams. “Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll do it.”

Crowe smiled, stepping back to signal to the driver. “Good. Come with me.”

The clinic was bright and sterile, a labyrinth of white corridors that made Jamie feel small and out of place. They'd given her clean clothes and a hot meal—more than she'd had in weeks. Dr. Crowe had walked her through the initial intake, his demeanor calm and reassuring, but something in his eyes unsettled her—an intensity she couldn't quite place.

“Just a few questions to start,” he said, guiding her to a small room filled with medical equipment. Jamie sat on the edge of the examination table, gripping the thin paper sheet that crinkled under her fingers.

“How long have you been on the streets?” he asked, his tone clinical but not unkind.

Jamie glanced at the floor. “Couple of years. Off and on.”

“Any family?”

She shook her head. “Not anymore.”

Crowe made a note on his tablet. “Have you ever experienced seizures or blackouts?”

She hesitated. “Sometimes... when I'm stressed. I just kind of... lose time.”

He nodded, unfazed. “We'll run some tests to check for neurological issues. Nothing invasive.”

Jamie swallowed hard. “You said this would help with... the memories?”

His gaze softened. “That's the goal. To help you move past them. You're doing a brave thing, Jamie.”

She didn't feel brave. Just tired—so tired of fighting to survive, of constantly looking over her shoulder.

Hours later, Jamie lay on a medical bed, electrodes strapped to her temples. Crowe hovered over her, his voice soothing as he explained the next step. “We’re going to help you relax—put you into a deep, restful sleep. Just breathe slowly.”

Jamie closed her eyes, her breathing uneven. Darkness crept over her, and the last thing she heard was the soft hum of machinery.

In the observation room down the hall, Dr. Crowe addressed the gathered elites via video call. Their holographic images flickered in and out as they scrutinized the data on their screens. Crowe kept his voice steady and confident.

“The procedure was a success,” he announced. “The consciousness transfer is complete. The subject has stabilized, and the new identity has taken root.”

Alexander Voss’s hologram leaned forward, eyes narrowed. “How can you be sure? We’ve been burned before with failed transfers.”

Crowe gestured to the monitor displaying Naomi’s vital signs. “Unlike previous attempts, the neural activity is coherent and consistent with a single personality. There’s no sign of fragmentation or rejection. The subject’s motor functions are intact and responsive.”

Lennox Shaw spoke up, his tone skeptical. “And the original consciousness? No trace?”

Crowe didn’t hesitate. “None. Jamie’s consciousness has been completely overwritten.”

Voss seemed satisfied, his hologram giving a curt nod. “Good. Keep us informed of any changes. This breakthrough could change everything.”

The call ended, and Crowe allowed himself a breath of relief. He adjusted his tie and walked back to the patient's room, forcing himself to project calm confidence. As he entered, Naomi was sitting up on the bed, examining her hands with a puzzled expression.

Crowe offered a professional smile. "Welcome back, Naomi. How do you feel?"

She looked up, her gaze distant and unfocused. "Strange... like... I'm not all here."

"That's normal," Crowe assured her. "It may take some time for your consciousness to fully acclimate. Your body has been through a lot."

Naomi furrowed her brow. "Where... where am I?"

"You're in a safe place," Crowe replied. "You've successfully transferred to a new body. Your digital consciousness is now fully integrated into this form."

Naomi blinked, lifting her hands to her face. "It's... it's real," she whispered. A tremor of emotion passed through her, and for a moment, she seemed overwhelmed. Crowe placed a hand on her shoulder, his touch calculated to appear supportive.

Suddenly, Naomi's expression changed—her hands dropped to her sides, and her eyes filled with fear. "Where... where am I?" she stammered, her voice cracking.

Crowe frowned. "You're safe, Naomi."

"No..." she whispered, clutching her head. "I'm Jamie. I don't... I don't understand..."

Crowe's eyes widened in alarm. He grabbed his tablet and scanned her brain activity. Neural patterns were shifting, resembling the original subject's profile. He cursed under his breath and activated the sedation protocol, watching as Naomi's—or Jamie's—body slumped back onto the bed.

He paced the room, trying to control his rising panic. Was it a failed transfer? No, that didn't make sense—the patterns had been stable. Could it be a residual imprint from the original consciousness? He ran his hands through his hair, his mind racing.

If the investors found out that the original personality was trying to reassert itself, they would demand his head. He couldn't afford to lose their confidence—not after so many failures. He took a deep breath and made a decision. He would suppress the anomaly, increase the neural stabilization frequency, and monitor the integration more closely.

After ensuring Naomi was securely sedated, he exited the room, closing the door behind him. He couldn't afford to let fear undermine his resolve. This project was too important—too revolutionary to fail now.

Walking back to his office, Crowe pulled up his notes, adjusting variables and preparing new protocols. Success was within reach—he just needed to push past this unexpected complication.

Behind the locked door of the patient room, Naomi's eyes fluttered beneath closed lids, and a faint murmur escaped her lips.

“I just... wanted to be safe...”

End – Part 3