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THE AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 19 – DAMAGE CONTROL
by
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Ava Moreno stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows of her office, her gaze fixed on the sprawling city below. The streets outside Eternity Inc.’s headquarters were packed with protesters, their signs raised high, their voices merging into an indistinct roar even twenty stories up. The massive screens outside displayed one testimony after another—digital residents pleading for justice, recounting their stories of exploitation and betrayal. It was chaos. And it was all landing squarely on Ava’s shoulders.

She rubbed her temples, trying to quell the headache pounding behind her eyes. The backlash from Father Matthias’ statements had been fierce and unrelenting, amplified by the church’s conspicuous silence. The media was gleefully broadcasting the perception that the church had abandoned Eternity Inc., and public sentiment was turning sour by the hour.

Her phone buzzed on the desk behind her, and Ava picked it up without checking the caller ID. “Moreno.”

“Ava, it’s Brennan.” His voice was tense, crackling with irritation. “What the hell is going on down there? Our stock is tanking, the protesters are growing by the minute, and the board is breathing down my neck. What are you doing to fix this?”

Ava clenched her jaw, keeping her voice steady. “Damage control. I’ve been coordinating with PR to counter the negative press and highlight our success stories. I’ve also got the bishop drafting a statement to clarify the church’s stance. We’ll emphasize that Father Matthias was speaking out of personal conviction, not on behalf of the institution.”

Brennan huffed. “This is a disaster. You need to get on top of it—now.”

“I am,” Ava shot back, sharper than intended. “And we need to talk about your public appearances. Every time you’re on camera, you’re making things worse.”

Brennan scoffed. “Excuse me?”

She didn’t back down. “You’re coming across as defensive and dismissive. You’re blaming protesters instead of addressing their concerns. That’s only adding fuel to the fire. We need a more conciliatory tone—show that we’re listening and willing to make changes.”

“We’re not making changes,” Brennan snapped. “We’re doubling down. Show strength, Ava. That’s how we push through.”

Ava forced herself to take a deep breath. “Strength without strategy is just bluster. We need to secure political support and reframe this crisis before it spirals out of control. I’ve already scheduled meetings with key senators and representatives to ensure they’re still on our side.”

Silence on the other end. Ava pushed forward, determined. “Let me handle this. You focus on maintaining internal stability. I’ll handle the optics and political damage. We can’t afford any more missteps.”

Brennan grumbled something unintelligible and hung up without another word. Ava resisted the urge to throw her phone across the room. Instead, she composed herself and tapped the intercom.

“Jordan, is the conference room set up for the meeting with Senator Whitmore?”

“Yes, ma’am,” came Jordan’s efficient reply. “The senator’s office confirmed they’ll be arriving shortly.”

“Good. Make sure there’s fresh coffee and refreshments. I’ll be down in five.”

The conference room was immaculate when Ava arrived, with a soft floral arrangement at the center of the table and glasses of chilled water at each seat. Ava straightened her jacket, smoothing her blouse as she mentally rehearsed her pitch.

Senator Helen Whitmore entered a few moments later, flanked by two aides. She was a tall, imposing woman with a no-nonsense demeanor and a reputation for grilling corporate executives during hearings. Ava greeted her warmly, offering a firm handshake.

“Senator Whitmore, thank you for coming. I know your schedule is demanding.”

Whitmore gave a curt nod. “It’s been a circus lately, Ms. Moreno. This protest has taken on a life of its own. You’ve got a PR nightmare on your hands.”

“I’m well aware,” Ava replied, gesturing to the seats. “That’s why I wanted to speak with you directly. We value your insight and your continued support.”

They sat, and Ava wasted no time getting to the point. “We’re facing a critical juncture. The public perception of the Forever Program has taken a major hit, largely because of misinformation and misrepresentation. But we’re committed to addressing legitimate concerns. I’m here to outline our plan to implement stronger internal oversight and stricter regulations to ensure resident welfare.”

Whitmore arched an eyebrow. “Regulations? That’s a significant shift from your company’s usual stance.”

Ava offered a wry smile. “It’s necessary. We’ve seen that the public needs reassurance that our practices are ethical and transparent. We’ll be instituting a third-party review board to oversee resident contracts and ensure that no one is exploited or mistreated. This will demonstrate that Eternity Inc. is willing to evolve responsibly.”

Whitmore leaned back, considering. “And Brennan is on board with this?”

Ava hesitated. “He will be. Leadership needs to adapt to the changing climate. I intend to steer the company toward a more accountable future.”

The senator’s lips quirked upward. “Ambitious. And what about Father Matthias? His testimony struck a chord with a lot of people. How do you plan to counter his message without alienating the religious demographic?”

Ava chose her words carefully. “We’re emphasizing that his statements were personal opinions, not reflective of the church’s stance. The bishop is drafting a statement reaffirming the

partnership between Eternity Inc. and the church. We're also highlighting successful resident stories—people whose lives were saved by the Forever Program.”

Whitmore gave a skeptical nod. “That’s a start. But you’ll need more than anecdotes to regain public trust.”

Ava leaned forward, her tone more personal. “Senator, you and I both know how much power perception holds. Brennan’s approach lacks nuance. He’s trying to strong-arm the situation, and it’s only making things worse. My strategy is to acknowledge the concerns, address them directly, and prove that Eternity Inc. is capable of reform.”

Whitmore glanced at her aide before giving a thoughtful nod. “If you’re serious about change, you might just salvage this. But be prepared—public sentiment can turn on a dime.”

Ava smiled, exuding confidence. “I understand. Thank you for your guidance, Senator.”

After Whitmore left, Ava returned to her office, her mind racing. The meeting had gone well, but she needed more than just one ally. She needed to reposition herself as the leader Eternity Inc. needed—a leader who could weather the storm without resorting to Brennan’s outdated tactics.

Jordan entered the office with a tablet in hand. “Ms. Moreno, I have updates from the communications team. The bishop’s statement just went public. It’s framing Matthias’ comments as personal reflections rather than official doctrine. Public response is mixed, but it’s helping to stabilize our reputation.”

Ava took the tablet, scanning the statement. It was carefully worded—noncommittal but supportive enough to suggest the church wasn't abandoning Eternity Inc. entirely. It was the best they could hope for under the circumstances.

“Good,” Ava said. “Start preparing a briefing for the board. We’re pivoting toward a reform narrative. I want them to know that our leadership is willing to adapt.”

Jordan hesitated. “Are you planning to present this with Brennan?”

“No,” Ava replied firmly. “This is my initiative. Brennan’s approach is damaging us—he’s too combative, too resistant to change. The board needs to see that we’re capable of evolving. If I have to be the face of that change, so be it.”

Jordan gave a slow nod, recognizing the shift in power dynamics. “Understood, ma’am.”

As he left, Ava allowed herself a moment of reflection. The company was teetering on the edge of collapse, and if she didn't act decisively, they would lose control of the narrative entirely. Brennan's bluster had driven them into a corner, and it would take careful, strategic leadership to pull them back.

Taking a deep breath, Ava opened her laptop and began drafting the proposal for the new oversight regulations. If she was going to take control of Eternity Inc., it had to be now—while Brennan was too busy fuming to see the coup coming.

She smiled faintly, confidence sharpening her resolve. The company would survive this crisis—but it would do so under her leadership.