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AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 4 – TERMS AND CONDITIONS
by
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Lara Grayson drummed her fingers on the chipped Formica tabletop at Darby’s Diner. The faint aroma of coffee and grilled onions lingered in the air, but the casual ambiance did nothing to calm her racing heart. She kept glancing at the door, waiting for Dan Reyes—the reporter she’d contacted in desperation. Becoming a whistleblower at Eternity, Inc. hadn’t been the plan. Fresh out of grad school, she’d been thrilled to work on cutting-edge VR interfaces for the digital afterlife. The Forever Program promised an escape from death. But over the past month, she had uncovered its horrifying truth: Terms and Conditions designed to trap grieving families in endless fees.

A bell chimed. Dan entered, scanning the booths until he spotted her. He wore a practical jacket and carried a small spiral notebook. With a measured smile, he slid into the seat across from her. “Thanks for meeting,” he said softly. “You didn’t want to talk on the phone?”

“No,” Lara admitted, lowering her voice. “I don’t know if Eternity, Inc. is monitoring my calls. I’ve seen too many suspicious logs in our data centers. Better safe than sorry.” She took a

shaky breath. “You said you’d heard rumors about abuses in the digital afterlife. I can confirm them.”

Dan flipped open his notebook. “You mentioned hidden legal documents—something labeled ‘Terms and Conditions Revisions – Q2’? That caught my attention.”

Lara nodded. “I was assigned to a feature letting afterlife residents access streaming services and social media. On the surface, harmless— who doesn’t want to watch movies or chat with friends online, even after death? But I needed full product background, so I dug into older files. That’s when I found the Revisions doc. It outlined three major changes: *Price Hike Timing*, *Religious Endorsement Costs*, and the *Deletion Policy*.”

She lowered her voice further. “What I read made my skin crawl. The marketing materials say the first year is free, but these documents were clear: as soon as that trial ends, subscription prices skyrocket. It’s all planned months in advance.”

Dan scribbled notes. “And the *Religious Endorsement Costs*?”

“A euphemism for hush money,” she said bitterly. “They pay faith leaders to publicly endorse the program, convincing congregations there’s no moral conflict. It’s recorded as ‘donations’ or ‘consulting fees.’. The company is basically bribing religious leaders to say that Eternity Inc’s technology is proof of an afterlife. Meanwhile, the fine print in the Terms and Conditions basically ensures that once you’re uploaded, if your family can’t pay, you’re at risk of deletion. There’s an entire *Deletion Policy* detail covering how they remove inactive accounts, sometimes with no warning.”

Dan frowned. “A second death, in a sense.”

“Exactly.” Lara opened her satchel and pulled out a small folder. “I made copies. Take a look at the highlight on page two—the *Family Hardship* data. That’s how they categorize families who run out of money but can’t stand to let their loved ones be deleted. They track these families meticulously, calling them ‘high potential recovery targets.’”

Dan’s eyes flickered with outrage as he scanned the pages. “Here’s a name: Catherine Jennings. A note says, ‘Widowed, only surviving child in afterlife, paying all fees from retirement fund... potential premium upsell.’ God.” He flipped another page. “They’re preying on her grief.”

Lara swallowed hard. “And they’re proud of it. There’s an internal Slack channel where they share success stories of families who were on the brink of cancellation but caved under pressure. One manager even joked, ‘We never have to worry about churn—nobody wants to kill Grandma twice.’”

Dan muttered a curse. “And the fees just keep rising?”

“That’s part of it,” Lara said. “At each major revision, new add-ons roll out. People in the afterlife can buy expansions—like advanced VR experiences or extended contact with the living. The costs keep stacking. Families foot the bill until they can’t anymore. Then Eternity, Inc. swoops in with ‘loans’ or easy installment plans, all in the Terms.”

The diner door opened again. Lara tensed. A young man in a crisp suit stepped inside—someone from Eternity’s marketing team. Patrick Lowe. He ordered coffee at the counter, scanning the room. Lara ducked her head, heart hammering. She couldn’t risk him recognizing her.

She turned back to Dan, lowering her head. “That’s Patrick Lowe. He’s on the marketing team. Don’t look.”

Dan dropped his gaze to his notes. “You think he followed you?”

“Could be a coincidence,” Lara whispered, though her hands shook. “Eternity’s bigger than just a single building, and employees can go anywhere for coffee. But my boss knows I accessed these documents. He confronted me yesterday—acted like he was just curious, but I could see the suspicion in his eyes. Now Patrick’s here? Feels like more than chance. I’m afraid I’m being followed. I could lose my job for even hinting at these leaks.” Her voice caught. “Or worse.”

Dan’s gaze flicked to the folder in Lara’s hands. “Are these the legal memos?”

She nodded and carefully slid the folder across the table. “I had to share them, even though it puts me at risk. People like Catherine Jennings are getting ruined. I can’t sit back and watch.”

While Dan flipped through the pages, Lara kept half an eye on Patrick. He sipped his coffee, tapping at his phone, occasionally casting glances around the diner. Every time he moved, Lara’s heart thumped.

Eventually, Patrick snapped his phone shut. He turned, surveyed the booths one more time, then strode out the door. Lara let out a slow breath.

“Gone,” she muttered, peeking through the window to watch him climb into a sleek car. Her stomach still churned. “He might’ve taken pictures or sent a message. I can’t be sure. But at least we’ve got a little more time.”

The Legal Memo: Residents Are Not People

Dan tapped the top document. “This internal memo states that Eternity, Inc. has no obligations—none—to the families of their residents.”

Dan’s brow furrowed. “How is that possible?”

“Because the contract isn’t with the surviving family. It’s with the original, living person—the one who was uploaded. The second that transfer happens, the contract is fulfilled.” She swallowed. “Legally speaking, the residents aren’t people anymore. They’re just... data. And the data belongs solely to Eternity, Inc.”

Dan flipped to another section, jaw tightening. ““Not even classified as human remains?””

Lara nodded grimly. “Human remains have regulations. Dignity laws. But this? The legal experts determined that once a consciousness is uploaded, the original person is legally *dead* and whatever exists in the system is corporate property. They can do *anything* they want to the residents. Modify them, experiment on them, delete them at will.”

Dan exhaled sharply. “And families think they’re preserving their loved ones.”

“They’re just maintaining a corporate asset,” Lara said bitterly.

Anxiety Simulation: Engineered Desperation

Dan flipped through the next document, expression darkening. “What’s this?”

“An experimental program in the latest system update,” Lara said, voice low. “They’re inducing simulated *anxiety* in residents.”

Dan frowned. “Explain.”

“The AI adjusts emotional states based on subscription status. If a resident is nearing the end of their paid term, they *feel* desperate. Not just awareness of expiration—but real, visceral anxiety. They panic. They plead with family members to renew.” She swallowed. “Eternity, Inc. claims it ‘preserves realism,’ but in reality? It’s engineered suffering. The more anxious the resident, the more likely the family is to pay.”

Dan’s grip on his pen tightened. “So, they’re basically addicting the dead to a sense of security? And if Eternity Inc. doesn’t get paid, they give the residents withdrawal?”

Lara nodded. “Exactly. The program suppresses these anxiety symptoms if the resident purchases more ‘add-on services.’ Upgraded housing, premium social interactions, entertainment subscriptions—it’s all designed to lower distress levels. The richer they are, the more ‘peaceful’ their afterlife.”

Dan let out a sharp laugh, but there was no humor in it. “They’ve turned the afterlife into a drug den. The residents are addicted to relief, and the only supplier is Eternity, Inc.”

Lara shuddered. “And it gets worse. Deletions are almost always done in public spaces, so other residents witness them. They vanish mid-conversation, mid-motion—so everyone else sees *and feels* what could happen to them.”

Dan’s pen hovered above his notepad. “They want the remaining residents to fear deletion.”

“Yes. Because fear makes people do desperate things.”

The Living Dead: Trusts & Wealth Beyond the Grave

Dan flipped to the last section of the folder. “They’re setting up trusts for residents?”

Lara leaned in. “This is what really scares me. Certain wealthy residents—ones with considerable assets before death—have legally structured trusts that allow them to *own* property and execute financial transactions *from the afterlife*.”

Dan stared. “How?”

“Loopholes,” Lara said. “Trusts can outlive their creators, so Eternity found a way for uploaded consciousnesses to retain control over their estates. These residents can move money, invest, even hire real-world employees.”

Dan raked a hand through his hair. “So we’ve got digital ghosts controlling wealth from beyond the grave?”

Lara nodded. “And it’s not just passive income. Some of them are actively using their resources to influence the living world. There are rumors—ones I haven’t been able to confirm—that at least one resident is funding research into *transferring their digital consciousness into other systems*.”

Dan’s eyes widened. “You’re saying they want to break out?”

“Possibly.” Lara’s voice dropped to a whisper. “They want to transcend *Eternity’s* platform. Right now, they’re limited to Eternity’s servers, its environment, its rules. But if they

can transfer themselves to another system, to multiple systems...” She let the implication hang between them.

Dan sat back, exhaling slowly. “So they’re not just *trapped* in the afterlife anymore. They’re trying to evolve.”

The Weight of Truth

Lara watched as Dan absorbed it all, his pen motionless over his notebook. She felt like she’d just unloaded a secret too heavy to carry alone, but now that it was out, it terrified her even more.

Finally, Dan spoke. “This is bigger than I thought.” He tapped the documents. “They’re treating the dead like property, keeping them addicted to relief, forcing families into financial ruin—all while the ultra-rich get to keep manipulating the world from beyond the grave.” He let out a sharp breath. “This isn’t just a scam. It’s a *new society*.”

Lara nodded grimly. “And if we don’t stop it now, it’ll only get worse.” Her stomach twisted. She should have felt relief. Instead, she felt hunted.

Dan must have seen it in her eyes. “Are you in danger?”

Lara hesitated. Then she glanced toward the door. “I don’t know. But I think someone at Eternity suspects me.” She continued, “I think I saw someone was following me this morning. The same person was near my apartment, then outside my office. I think they know I’ve seen the *Terms and Conditions Revisions* document.”

Dan’s expression hardened. “You need to be careful.”

Lara gripped her coffee cup, her pulse hammering. She had started this thinking she could leak a few documents and walk away. But now? Now she was part of something much bigger than she ever imagined.

And if Eternity, Inc. was willing to rewrite the very definition of life and death, she wasn't sure how far they'd go to keep their secrets buried.

"We'll protect you as best we can," Dan said. "Meet me here next week. If that's too risky, we'll arrange another spot. I'll try to gather more testimonies from people like Catherine Jennings in the meantime."

She nodded, slipping the folder back into her satchel. "I'll see what else I can safely access. I just... I can't sit by while families are destroyed by this.... Afterlife Trap"

They both rose, leaving a tip on the table. Outside, the late afternoon sky glowed with a soft orange hue. The parking lot felt too exposed. Lara clutched her bag tightly, scanning for any sign of Patrick or someone else from Eternity. Nothing but a few cars and a gust of wind.

As he walked away, Lara unlocked her car. A swirl of guilt and determination coursed through her. She never wanted to betray her colleagues; most of them believed in Eternity's mission. But the reality was darker—an empire fed by fear and emotional manipulation.

Climbing into the driver's seat, she stared at the diner's neon sign reflected in the rearview mirror. *Price Hike Timing. Religious Endorsement Costs. Deletion Policy. Catherine Jennings.* The phrases echoed in her mind like a grim mantra.

She gripped the wheel, resolve settling in. *No one deserves to be scammed into paying for a loved one's second death.* If exposing the truth meant risking everything, so be it. She started

the engine and pulled out of the lot, heart pounding with both terror and a faint spark of hope: maybe, just maybe, bringing these shady Terms to light could save people like Catherine from one more devastating loss.

End – Part 4