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Approx 1500 words

THE AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 23 – REDWOOD HEIGHTS
by
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The van crept through the darkened parking lot, its engine humming softly as Adrian navigated around the concrete barriers. Alina sat tense in the passenger seat, her eyes darting between the building and the security cameras mounted on the corners. A cold, metallic taste lingered on her tongue, born from a combination of fear and determination.

"Second gate's up ahead," Adrian muttered, his hands steady on the wheel despite the tension in his voice. "You remember the plan?"

Alina nodded. "Get to the server room, copy the files, then hit the broadcast to get it out before they can shut it down. We have to expose the whole operation."

He gave her a quick glance, his jaw set. "And if something goes wrong—"

"I get out on my own. I know." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "But we're not splitting up unless we have to."

Adrian didn't argue. Instead, he eased the van forward and swiped his ID card through the reader. The light flashed green, and the gate groaned open. He let out a slow breath, pulling

the van into a service lot behind the main building. They parked in the shadows, far from the few lit windows on the upper floors.

As they stepped out, Adrian motioned for Alina to follow him to a side entrance. He scanned his card again, and the door unlocked with a mechanical click. Inside, the air was sterile and cold, the faint hum of ventilation the only sound.

"Sublevel B," Adrian whispered. "Stairwell's on the right."

They moved quickly and silently, slipping through the narrow corridor until they reached a steel door marked "Staff Only." Adrian pushed it open, and they hurried down the cement stairs, their footsteps muffled by years of dust and grime. The air grew colder, tinged with a chemical scent that made Alina's stomach twist.

"Is this where they do it?" she asked under her breath.

Adrian hesitated. "Yeah. The labs are on the other side of the sublevel. We're heading for the data center first. If we can copy the server logs and video files, it'll be enough to blow this wide open."

As they reached the bottom of the stairwell, they crouched by the door, listening. No footsteps. No voices. Adrian slowly cracked the door open and peeked out. Seeing the coast was clear, he motioned for Alina to follow.

The hallway stretched in both directions, sterile and industrial, with doors lining either side. Adrian led her to the left, navigating the maze with practiced precision. At the end of the corridor, they found a security checkpoint—empty, the monitor screens flickering with static.

"Something's wrong," Adrian murmured. "This should be manned."

Alina felt a chill run down her spine. "Maybe they're in the labs?"

He nodded. "Let's not waste time. Server room's just ahead."

They passed the checkpoint and slipped into a reinforced door labeled "Data Operations." Adrian swiped his card again, and the door buzzed open. Inside, the room was filled with rows of server racks, red and green lights blinking in rhythmic pulses.

Adrian moved to the nearest terminal and plugged in a portable drive. As the download began, he opened a command prompt and navigated through the directories. Alina hovered beside him, keeping watch.

"How long will it take?" she asked.

"Five minutes, maybe more," Adrian replied. "These files are huge. Surveillance footage, transfer logs, medical records. Once this gets out, it's going to sink Redwood Heights for good."

Alina couldn't help but feel a surge of hope. "We're really doing it."

Before Adrian could respond, the sound of muffled voices echoed from the hallway. He stiffened, his fingers flying across the keyboard to speed up the download. Alina peeked through the narrow window on the door and saw two guards passing by, their footsteps receding.

"That was close," she whispered.

Adrian glanced at the screen. "Eighty percent. Almost there."

A loud clattering noise from the hallway made them both freeze. Adrian cursed under his breath. "They're getting closer. If they check in here—"

Alina looked around, spotting a utility closet at the far end of the room. "Hide," she hissed, dragging him behind her. They squeezed inside, leaving the server to finish the download on its own.

Through the narrow gap in the door, Alina watched as two guards entered the room. One of them approached the terminal, frowning.

"Did you leave this running?" the first guard asked.

"No," the other replied. "Must've been one of the techs. Looks like a system diagnostic."

The first guard grunted. "We've been having glitches all week. Just make sure it's secure."

Adrian glanced at Alina, his breathing shallow. They couldn't afford to let the guards discover the data transfer. Alina pulled a small, metal ball from her pocket—a smoke grenade Adrian had given her as a last resort. She gave him a questioning look, and he hesitated before nodding.

She pulled the pin and tossed it through the gap, the grenade rolling to a stop near the guards' feet. A thick plume of smoke erupted, and the guards cursed, fumbling for their radios.

"Fire! Something's burning!" one shouted, and they scrambled to trigger the fire alarm.

Adrian pulled Alina out of the closet, grabbing the drive from the terminal as alarms blared throughout the sublevel.

"That'll bring everyone running," Adrian whispered. "We have to get to the labs. If we can sabotage the machinery, it'll cripple their operations."

Alina nodded, adrenaline pounding in her ears. They moved through the hallway as the fire suppression system activated, white foam misting from the ceiling.

As they hurried down the hallway, Alina spotted a familiar face through a narrow window—Kelsie, lying motionless on a gurney, her face pale and eyes barely open.

"Kelsie!" Alina gasped, rushing to the door.

She pulled it open and knelt beside her friend, brushing her hair back. "Kelsie, can you hear me?"

Kelsie's lips moved, but no sound came out. Her eyes fluttered weakly.

"They drugged her," Adrian said grimly. "She's prepped for transfer."

Panic clawed at Alina's mind. She wanted to rip the wires from Kelsie's skin, to drag her out of there, but Adrian grabbed her shoulder.

"Alina, listen," he urged. "If we don't finish this, she'll just be taken to another facility. We have to expose the whole operation. It's the only way to keep her safe."

Tears stung her eyes, but she forced herself to breathe. "I'm coming back for you," she whispered to Kelsie. "I promise."

She rose to her feet, wiping her eyes. "Let's go."

Adrian gave her a grim nod. "This way."

Adrian led her to a door marked "Biological Transfer Unit" and hesitated before entering.

Inside, the lab was eerie—empty medical chairs arranged in rows, each one wired to a central console. Alina's stomach churned at the sight of syringes and neural interfaces scattered across metal trays.

"This is where they do it," Adrian muttered. "Where they strip out the mind and leave the body a blank slate."

Alina shuddered. "Can we destroy it?"

Adrian moved to the console, yanking out cords and smashing the display with his elbow. "We can fry the core components. But once the fire alarm clears, security will be on us."

He pulled out a bundle of wires and handed them to Alina. "Short these out. It'll send a power surge through the machinery. Should be enough to fry the mainframe."

As she worked, Adrian moved to a secondary terminal, typing rapidly. "I'm uploading the data directly to public servers," he called out. "Even if they shut down the local net, it'll keep spreading."

Alina felt a surge of triumph, but it was cut short by heavy footsteps approaching. "Adrian—"

"Go!" he shouted. "I'll hold them off. Get out through the maintenance tunnel!"

Alina hesitated, but he gave her a fierce look. "Don't make this sacrifice for nothing. Run!"

"Go!" he barked. "I'll cover you."

She hesitated, looking back at Kelsie's prone form one last time. "I'll be back," she whispered. Then she turned and sprinted down the passage, Adrian's gunfire echoing behind her.

With tears stinging her eyes, Alina bolted down the hallway, ducking into the maintenance tunnel. The alarms blared, and she heard gunfire behind her—short, brutal bursts. She didn't dare look back.

She emerged from the tunnel into the cold night air, coughing and wiping foam from her face. The sound of approaching sirens made her look up. Red and blue lights flashed in the distance, and she knew the authorities were on their way.

A notification popped up on her phone, and she checked it, heart pounding. The files had gone live—news outlets were already picking them up, and comments were flooding in. Redwood Heights was finished.

As the police vehicles swarmed the entrance, Alina watched from the shadows, her chest tight with a mixture of triumph and grief. She looked back at the facility, her heart aching. She had saved the world from Redwood Heights, but she hadn't saved Kelsie—not yet.

"I'm coming back for you," she vowed, watching as the police surrounded the building. "Just hold on a little longer."