

JL Spears
authorjlspears@gmail.com
<https://www.jlspears.com>
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AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 2 – THE MOTHER WHO WOULDN'T LET GO
by
JL Spears

Catherine Jennings stared at the hospital bed where her daughter had lain only days before. There was no body to bury—Layla had chosen cremation, per the suggestion of Eternity Corporation's brochure. Catherine had signed the funeral paperwork with trembling hands, unsure if she felt relief or guilt at following her daughter's last wishes.

The bed was stripped now, the white sheet folded, the pillow stacked alongside. Nurses wheeled out monitors and IV stands, erasing the evidence of Layla's final days. Only the faint smell of antiseptic lingered. Catherine stood in the doorway, heart heavy.

"Mrs. Jennings?" a nurse said gently. "You can go home if you like. We'll handle everything here."

But Catherine couldn't move. Her feet felt rooted to the floor, locked by a suffocating mix of sorrow and confusion. *Home* meant a quiet house filled with memories—photos of Layla as a child, pictures of her father and brother who had died in that car accident so many years ago. Catherine had managed to keep going after losing her husband and son, but losing Layla? That seemed unthinkable.

She forced herself to take a breath and walked out of the hospice wing, each step echoing like a final goodbye.

That evening, Catherine sat at her dining room table, the curtains drawn. A single lamp cast a halo of light across a neat stack of bills. Hospital statements, mortgage payments, credit card balances—everything was a blur of numbers and due dates. She rubbed her eyes, exhaustion pressing at her temples.

Her phone chimed, startling her. The screen lit up with a notification from *Eternity Corporation*. For a moment, her pulse quickened in fear. She opened the message:

Reminder: Layla Jennings's subscription is active. First-year fees waived!

Then, in smaller text:

Upgrade options available at discounted rates. Visit our portal for details.

Catherine's breath caught. She had visited Layla once in Eternity Corp's VR interface—just briefly, right after the funeral. It had been surreal, seeing Layla standing in a digital meadow, healthy and smiling. Layla's hair was long again, thick and shiny, her body free of the gauntness that disease had inflicted. They'd spoken through the interface for maybe fifteen minutes before Catherine's eyes welled with tears and she had to disconnect.

She pulled out the pamphlet the saleswoman, Ava Moreno, had given her. It promised no immediate costs, but Catherine had skimmed the fine print: *premium experiences, optional expansions, enhanced communication packages*. All ways to keep “improving” your loved one's existence in the afterlife—for a price.

She set the pamphlet aside and gently placed her head in her hands, tears pricking her eyes again. “At least she’s alive...somewhere,” Catherine whispered. She needed that comfort. She had already lost so many of her loved ones—she couldn’t bear the thought of losing Layla, too, even if Layla’s presence was now virtual.

The next morning, Catherine drove to one of Eternity Corporation’s visiting centers. It was a sleek, glass-fronted building nestled in an upscale office park. The lobby smelled of lavender and boasted modern couches and digital kiosks, each advertising glimpses of “paradise”: scenic mountains, sunlit beaches, rolling fields.

She approached the reception desk, where a polite attendant guided her to a private booth. “Just slip on the headset, Mrs. Jennings,” the attendant said. “Your daughter is already waiting.”

Catherine settled into the padded chair and donned the VR visor. The sterile, softly lit booth vanished, replaced by the dazzling vista of a lakeshore. Ducks glided across the water, the sunlight dancing on gentle ripples. Standing at the water’s edge was Layla, her silhouette backlit by the warm glow.

“Mom!” Layla called, her voice echoing across the virtual air. She waved enthusiastically. She looked exactly as she had at nineteen: vibrant, strong, her skin full of life. Catherine’s throat tightened at the sight.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Catherine said, her words trembling with emotion. She tried stepping forward, but she wasn’t used to VR movement. It took her a moment to navigate toward Layla. When they finally stood together, Catherine could hardly keep from breaking down. “You look so...well.”

“I feel amazing,” Layla replied, a broad grin lighting her face. “No pain, no exhaustion. It’s like having my body back, the way it was before everything.”

Catherine tried to smile. “I’m glad, honey. I really am.” But the reality of the situation still gnawed at her. She reached out hesitantly, her virtual hand passing through Layla’s in a disorienting glitch. Both of them laughed nervously.

Layla’s expression turned serious. “Mom, how are you coping? Are you okay?”

At that, Catherine felt guilt swirl in her stomach. “I’m managing,” she lied. *I’m not okay at all. I’m alone in that house, I’m worried about money, I’m still mourning you.* But she couldn’t burden Layla. After all, wasn’t this digital afterlife supposed to be a relief from worry?

Layla nodded, her gaze flicking to the horizon. A bird soared overhead, the sky painted with pastel clouds. “Ava told me they’ll start charging real money in a year,” she said quietly. “But maybe it won’t be that bad.”

Catherine recalled the disclaimers and expansions, the ominous references to “premium coverage.” She swallowed. “Don’t you worry about that, sweetheart. I’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

“Mom—”

“It’s okay,” Catherine interrupted, forcing a more confident tone. “Let me handle it.”

They lingered a few more minutes in a gentle conversation, mostly Catherine asking about Layla’s experiences. The simulation was breathtaking: Layla reported that she could change surroundings, choose who she hung out with, and remain in perfect health. Catherine felt torn between awe at the possibilities and dread over how to sustain it all.

When the session ended, Catherine removed the visor, eyes burning with unshed tears. She had half a mind to never leave that VR booth, but life was waiting for her outside. So were the bills.

Over the following weeks, Catherine's finances unraveled. She'd saved a small nest egg for retirement, but hospital bills had already put a dent in her reserves. With no one else to rely on, she picked up extra shifts at the local library, where she worked part-time. She cut back on groceries, stopped refilling one of her prescriptions—it was for a minor condition, she reasoned, nothing urgent.

Still, she lay awake at night, calculation after calculation swirling through her head. The house or Layla's subscription? Her own health or her daughter's continued existence?

Desperate, she called Eternity Corporation's helpline one morning. "I'm worried about future costs," she said, her voice trembling with anxiety. "Is there a payment plan?"

The customer service rep cheerily explained that everything was "affordable" and "easily extended" into monthly installments once the free trial year ended. But Catherine noticed how often the rep emphasized the word *optional*. She could practically hear the subtext: *But you'd never choose to let your child be deleted, would you?*

Months passed, a blur of overdue notices and occasional VR visits with Layla. Each time Catherine logged in, Layla looked radiant—like she was truly living her best life. That, more than anything, kept Catherine forging ahead. She couldn't allow the system to cut Layla off, not

after losing her husband and son. The emptiness of her home each evening gnawed at her, but as long as Layla existed in some form, Catherine clung to hope.

One afternoon, the phone rang while Catherine was sorting through medical bills. She answered, wincing at the tension building in her shoulders. It was Ava Moreno herself, sounding as bright as ever.

“Mrs. Jennings, I wanted to check on you. We’re aware the first year is nearing its end. Have you considered our *Extended Eternity* package? It includes guaranteed account stability, plus advanced features for your daughter’s environment. We’re offering a 10% discount if you lock in today.”

Catherine’s hand shook. She barely had enough in her account for her mortgage payment next week. “How much is it?”

Ava rattled off a figure that made Catherine’s stomach drop. “But don’t worry,” Ava said. “We have financing options. You can handle it over time.”

Catherine paused, a tear sliding down her cheek. She thought of Layla’s father and brother, of how quickly they’d been taken away. She couldn’t let it happen again. “Sign me up,” she whispered. “I’ll...I’ll find a way.”

She could almost hear Ava’s smile through the phone. “Wonderful decision, Mrs. Jennings. I’ll send the documents immediately.”

After she hung up, Catherine collapsed into the nearest chair, pressing her face into her trembling hands. In the silence, she pictured Layla’s virtual face, full of health and youth,

smiling in a sunlit meadow. That image was all Catherine had left to hold onto. If keeping Layla “alive” meant losing everything else, then so be it.

Her tears fell onto the stacked bills, each slip of paper a testament to a reality she was willing to sacrifice. She would do anything—*anything*—so she wouldn't have to stand by another grave, real or metaphorical. The mother who had lost so much already refused to lose her daughter again.

And so she carried on, heart heavy yet resolute, stepping deeper into the financial and emotional binds of Eternity Corporation. Because love, she told herself, was worth every last shred of hope she could muster. Even if that love came wrapped in a corporate contract she could barely afford

End – Part 2