

SURVIVORS

BIAS

a psychological thriller

TOTAL
SURVEILLANCE

DIGITAL DICTATORSHIP

SURVEILLANCE

WATCHING

ЮЛИЯ АВИЛКИНА

digital hygiene | brilliant coder | total surveillance

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Survivors Bias

«Автор»

2026

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Survivors Bias / Ю. Авилкина — «Автор», 2026

In a world where "digital hygiene" is law, Elena is a brilliant coder hiding behind a false identity. She is the true mastermind behind the flawless facade of Clara Vances empire—an internet icon preaching the gospel of perfect living. But Elena knows the dark truth: Clara is a ruthless manipulator who wipes anyone deemed "inconvenient" straight out of reality. When Clara's algorithm destroys the life of the only person Elena ever cared about, she launches a covert operation to dismantle the empire from within. Allied with a handful of outcasts who fell victim to the digital dictatorship, Elena prepares to strike just as the global "Balance 2.0" project launches. But as the line between human conscience and cold code blurs, she faces a dangerous question: can she destroy the system without becoming its next incarnation? This gripping psychological thriller explores the price of freedom in an era of total surveillance, and how far someone will go to reclaim control over their own life.

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Survivors Bias

Prologue

Clara Vance has perfect pores. They're so perfect they look like they were generated by a next-gen AI rather than grown on an organic diet of kale and mindfulness.

I'm sitting in the "dead zone" of her massive living room—a corner tucked away from the reach of the livestream camera lenses. The air here smells of ozone from the purifiers and a faint trace of amber, a fragrance Clara calls "the scent of serenity." In reality, serenity smells like fear—if you know where to look.

"Elena, is the 'natural glow' filter on?" Clara's voice is soft, motherly.

She's standing by the floor-to-ceiling window, where the Hampton sunset is bleeding into the ocean, turning it the color of expensive rosé. She doesn't look at me. To her, I'm just an extension of her tablet, an anthropomorphic interface.

"It's on," I reply, eyes fixed on the screen. "Your address on 'digital hygiene' is already loaded into the teleprompter embedded in your contacts. The breathing cues are highlighted in blue."

"Good. Starting in three, two..."

Clara freezes. Her face instantly settles into an expression of noble fragility. The camera's red tally light flickers on. At that moment, three million followers see a woman who has "found her balance."

I see the metadata. I watch her heart rate spike to 110 on my monitor a split second before the broadcast—not from nerves, but from the raw thrill of power. While she tells the world how her new app helps combat anxiety, I'm typing her next post about the "power of honesty."

My fingers dance across the glass. I am her voice. I am her brain. I'm the one who turns this predator into a saint.

Clara Vance thinks she owns this house, this empire, and me. She's forgotten the cardinal rule of the digital age: whoever controls the code, controls reality.

And I know her passwords better than she knows herself.

Chapter 1

Maya's name pulses on the screen like an open wound.

"*Digital euthanasia complete.*" A cold, clinical line of code that stands for a shattered life.

I feel a chill spreading through my chest—not the artificial bite of the AC, but the heavy, metallic tang of rage. Clara didn't just steal ideas. She filtered people like spam, scrubbing the "inconvenient" from her sterile, algorithmic democracy.

Upstairs, in the master suite, Clara is out. The monitoring system shows a perfect rhythm: 55 beats per minute, deep REM cycle. The house guards her peace. The smart glass has auto-tinted; the humidity is dialed to "Rejuvenate."

I look down at my hands. They're shaking, but the moment I touch the haptic panel, my fingers take over. Old reflexes. The ones I tried to bury five years ago when I traded my name for a new face.

"Well, Clara," I whisper into the hollow silence of the living room. "You wanted a flawless reality? You're going to get it."

I'm not copying files. That's too easy, too loud. Her personal AI sentry would flag the data leak in a heartbeat. I need something more surgical.

I open the *Balance* core console. My access is technically restricted to editor functions, but Clara made one fatal mistake: she gave me her Voice. She let me train her neural clone on my writing style, my metaphors, my cadence.

I slide into the core of her personal profile.

“Create new stream,” I command, my lips barely moving.

[SYSTEM]: Stream created. Enter parameters.

I input Maya Lin’s personal ID. The one flagged as “purged.” I restore it—not to the public network, but anchored deep within Clara’s “shadow.”

Now, every time Clara looks into her Smart Home mirrors or checks her success metrics, the algorithm will bleed in micro-fragments of Maya’s life. An old photo flickering in the corner of a screen. A forgotten melody Maya used to hum. The word “*Why?*” flashing on her teleprompter instead of “*Success.*”

It won’t destroy her tomorrow. But it will begin to erode her perfect world from the inside out. Gaslighting elevated to a fine art.

“Elena?” Clara’s voice drifts softly through the speakers.

Is she awake? No, the sleep sensors are still in the green. It’s the intercom. “Why haven’t you left yet? The system is logging elevated cortisol levels in the living room. Should I have the kitchen prep some lemon balm tea for you?”

The house is worried about me. How touching.

“I’m on my way out, Balance,” I reply, snapping my laptop shut. “Just finishing up that post on ‘Sincerity.’”

I step out onto the night terrace. The ocean below roars like white noise on a dead frequency. I know there’s no turning back. I’ve just injected a virus into her digital soul.

And that virus carries the name of my only friend.

I hail an autonomous ride. The vehicle glides up to the estate gates—a sleek, matte-black pod stripped of any human warmth. I slide into the backseat, press my burning forehead against the cool glass, and shut my eyes.

“Take me home,” I mutter to the system.

“Rerouting, Elena,” a smooth baritone replies.

I flinch. That’s not the default female voice of the Auto-Pilot. And the system shouldn’t know my name—my profile is registered under an alias, “Julia Smith.”

“Who is this?” I bolt upright, hand diving into my bag for my stun spray.

“Someone who misses Maya Lin, too,” the voice says through the speakers, but it sounds different now. It has a raw, casual inflection that algorithms can’t replicate. “And someone who just watched you crack Clara Vance’s black box. Clean job, by the way. A bit old-school on the syntax, but elegant.”

The dashboard screen flickers to life. Instead of the city map, an 8-bit pixel icon appears—a cat holding a coffee cup.

“Stop the car,” I command, my voice like ice.

“The doors are locked, Elena. We’re just taking a scenic drive down the coast. We need to talk about ‘Protocol Sunset’ before Clara realizes her ‘Ghost’ has taken on a life of its own.”

On the front passenger seat, which was empty a moment ago, a hologram slowly begins to materialize. It’s a young guy, mid-twenties at most, wearing an oversized hoodie. His image jitters slightly—he’s broadcasting through a heavily encrypted channel.

“The name’s Leo,” he says, his holographic eyes locking onto mine. “I’m Maya’s brother. Or rather, I *was* her brother, before Clara turned her into a rounding error.”

I swallow hard. Maya’s family... she’d mentioned a brother, a programmer, a “troubled kid” she hadn’t spoken to in years.

“You were stalking her?” I ask.

“I was stalking Clara. And you. I was waiting for you to crack, Elena. Or for that girl to wake up—the one who breached the DOJ servers five years ago and then vanished, ghosting the world with a new face.”

My heart skips a beat. My past—the one I buried under layers of makeup and fake resumes—was just dragged into the light of this sterile taxi.

“What do you want?” I ask, my voice hollow.

“That gaslighting stunt was a good opening move,” Leo smirks, his image momentarily dissolving into digital noise. “But Clara isn’t just a woman. She’s the face of a massive machine. If you want to do more than just rattle her cage—if you want to burn it all down—you’re gonna need someone who isn’t afraid to get their hands dirty with some real code.”

He reaches out, and a data transfer prompt pops up on my smartphone.

[PROMPT]: Accept file "Basement_Key.exe"?

“What is this?” I whisper.

“Access to her Smart Home’s life-support systems,” Leo says. “You started with her mind. I’m suggesting we go for her security. Let’s turn her paradise into a digital hell together, shall we?”

I stare at the blinking request on my screen. *Basement Key*. In the digital world, this sounds like an invitation to an execution—either hers or mine.

“Clara Vance doesn't have weak spots, Leo,” I say, intentionally drawing out my words to mask the tremor in my voice. “And she’s way too smart not to plant an ‘ally’ the moment her algorithm senses something’s off.”

“You think I’m one of her projects?” Leo’s hologram lets out a bitter smirk. His digital face dissolves into a mess of pixels for a split second. “Elena, she erased my sister from reality. She turned Maya into a ‘denied ticket’ in a support queue. If I were working for Clara, you’d already be in a holding cell for a ‘corporate ethics violation’ or ‘unauthorized access.’”

I don’t answer. Instead, I rapidly punch a sequence of commands into my tablet that I haven’t used in five years. This is my old “digital scalpel.”

“What are you doing?” Leo’s voice tenses up.

“Pinging your return address. If you’re really who you say you are, your signal should be routing through an old comm-node in Brooklyn—the one Maya mentioned in her journals. But if you’re sitting in Clara’s server room...”

My fingers fly across the glass. I’m tunneling through layers of VPNs and TOR nodes. Seconds stretch into hours.

[SYSTEM]: Data packet traced. Source: Mobile Hotspot. Geolocation: Laundry Basement, Queens.

“A laundry basement?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Best Wi-Fi that isn't crawled by municipal drones,” Leo snaps back. “Plus, it smells like cheap detergent down here instead of that ozone crap in your glass coffin. So, did I pass the test?”

I don’t hit “Accept.” Instead, I decline the file.

“I’m not taking your key, Leo. Not yet. In that house, every bit of data is logged and audited. If I install third-party software, Clara will know before I even hit ‘Enter.’”

“So what’s the plan? Wait until she ‘optimizes’ you next?”

“No. I’m proposing we play on her home turf. Tomorrow is the Balance 2.0 launch. A global livestream. She’ll be standing on that stage, all in white, looking like a messiah. And I’ll be in the control booth.”

I stare at the cat icon on the taxi’s dash.

“I don’t need access to her house, Leo. I need you to find a way to swap a single file in her presentation. The one that displays the ‘happy faces of saved users.’”

“You want to put Maya in there?” There’s a new note of respect in Leo’s voice.

“Not just her. Everyone from the ‘Group Zero’ list. A hundred faces that ‘disappeared.’ We won’t even have to hack her system. We’ll just let her system show the truth.”

The taxi glides to a stop in front of my modest apartment complex. The doors unlock.

“Copy that, ‘Ghost,’” Leo’s voice begins to fade as the hologram thins out. “I’ll find a way in. But remember: once those faces hit the screen, there’s no turning back. You won’t just be fired. You’ll be purged.”

“I’ve been purged before,” I mutter, stepping out of the car. “This time, I’m the one hitting ‘Delete.’”

Chapter 2

The *Balance* corporate headquarters looks like a film set for a utopia that never happened: lush greenery, white matte plastic, and employees who smile so often their jaws must ache.

I walk through the biometric scanner.

“Good morning, Elena. Your stress levels are 12% above your baseline today. Would you like to order a matcha latte with adaptogens?” the wall asks in a smooth, ingratiating tone.

“No, thank you,” I mutter, heading for the elevators.

On the fortieth floor, inside the “inner sanctum,” Clara is waiting for me. She’s standing with her back to the door, staring out at the city through the floor-to-ceiling glass. She’s wearing a blindingly white suit—the color of both innocence and absolute power.

“Come in, Elena. Close the door. Manually.”

That’s a bad sign. In this building, everything closes automatically. If she’s asking me to throw the deadbolt by hand, she wants silence from her own algorithms.

I do as she asks. My palms are slightly damp, but my face is a mask of perfect composure.

“The presentation starts in four hours, Clara. All files have been cleared. Technical confirmed the stream is ready for broadcast.”

Clara turns around slowly. In her hands is a tablet where red graphs are dancing across the screen.

“The system is behaving strangely, Elena,” her voice is lower than usual, laced with streaks of steel. “Last night, a spike in activity was logged in my living room. Someone was digging through the ‘Group Zero’ archival logs.”

My heart gives a heavy thud, but I don’t even blink.

“Could it be a scheduled indexing?” I suggest.

“No. This was a manual query. A bloodhound. And this bloodhound knew exactly where to sniff,” Clara steps closer to me. She smells like that signature amber, but now it feels suffocating. “And this morning, someone tried to breach the security of the ride-share you took.”

She pauses, searching my pupils for a micro-reaction—a dilation, a flicker, a tremor.

“Elena, you’re the best analyst I’ve ever had. You see patterns where everyone else sees noise. That’s why I want YOU to find this piece of trash. Before the launch begins.”

She hands me her tablet with full administrator privileges.

“You have total access. Cameras, logs, private employee comms. Find whoever is trying to burn down our house. If it’s an insider—I want a name before I step onto that stage.”

She places a hand on my shoulder. Her fingers squeeze just a fraction harder than a friendly gesture should.

“You understand that if *Balance 2.0* goes down, we go down together, right? Your past, Elena... it’s buried so deep. It would be such a shame if someone decided to excavate it during the investigation.”

It’s a threat. Blunt and unmistakable. She knows—or at least suspects—that I’m not who I say I am. And now, she’s handed me the weapon to tie my own noose.

“I’ll find them, Clara,” I say, taking the tablet. My fingers brush the cold glass. “If there’s a footprint in the system, I’ll pull it.”

Clara nods, her face relaxing back into that “caring leader” persona.

“I knew I could count on you. You have three hours. I’ll be in the green room—bring the report there.”

She walks out, leaving me alone in her office. The silence here is heavy. I know every move I make is being recorded. This tablet isn’t just a tool; it’s a wiretap. Any search query, any attempt to open an external messenger will trip a silent alarm.

I sit in Clara’s chair. A deep breath.

If I can’t send a message out, I have to make the system generate one on its own.

I open the log monitoring console Clara asked me to check. Lines of code scroll past my eyes. I begin to simulate a “deep-dive investigation.” I open employee files and rummage through their emails, creating the illusion of frantic activity.

But deep inside one of the logs—under the “Video Render Error” section—I begin to type a query. It looks like a standard technical bug report, but I’m using an old cipher Maya and I invented for jokes back in college.

ERROR_CODE_404: LEO_CAT_LOG STATUS: PENDING_SYNC MSG: "THE_QUEEN_IS_WATCHING_THE_GHOST"

I know Leo is monitoring Clara’s system for any signs of an anomaly. If he spots this “error code” in an open log, he’ll get the message: Clara knows someone’s been digging, and she’s got eyes on me.

But I need to send him more than just a warning. I need to hand over the “Golden Key”—the administrator privileges Clara just handed me on a silver platter.

I find the *Balance 2.0* presentation file. It’s locked behind triple-layer encryption. But now, with Clara’s tablet, I hold the master password.

I don’t copy the file. I do something much bolder. I set up a “scheduled task” within the system:

[COMMAND]: At 14:00 (Global Stream Start), execute auto-swap of media content from directory: "Archive_Root".

[SYSTEM]: Identity verification required.

I freeze. The tablet’s front-facing camera scans my face, running the biometrics against the database. But it’s not looking for Clara. It’s looking for the active authorized admin. Right now, that’s me.

[SYSTEM]: Identity confirmed. Task scheduled.

Now for the hard part. I need Leo to know exactly where I dropped the payload.

I open the “Drafts” folder of Clara’s corporate blog and type out a headline for a dummy post:

“Why Transparency is the Bedrock of Trust. A View from the Laundry Basement.”

I hit save. A split second later, I delete it, making it look like a misclick or a quick formatting test. But I know Leo is scraping the deleted files directory. That’s our signal.

The office door swings open. Standing on the threshold is Clara’s Head of Security—a hulking guy with dead eyes that have overseen way too many corporate “optimizations.”

“Elena,” he rumbles. “Clara wanted me to let you know your heart rate spiked again. She’s concerned. Let’s take a walk down to the med-bay. You need to ‘calm down’ before we go live.”

The *Balance* med-bay feels more like a luxury spa on a starship than a clinic. Pristine white loungers, soft ambient lighting, and the low, steady hum of medical-grade tech. But I know what’s hidden behind the sleek paneling: auto-injectors loaded with “Digital Lotus”—a synthetic cocktail designed to make you highly suggestible and terrifyingly compliant.

Marcus, the Head of Security, gestures toward a contoured chair.

“Just a standard procedure, Elena. Clara wants to make sure you’re fully ‘optimized’ for the broadcast.”

“I’m fine, Marcus. I just need to—”

“Sit.” His tone leaves zero room for debate.

He steps over to the wall terminal to initiate the pacification protocol. I have roughly thirty seconds before the system preps the needles hidden inside the armrests.

I press my thumb against a concealed port on my opposite wrist. Sitting just beneath the skin is a micro-emulator chip—a little souvenir from my past life. If I can just brush the chair’s tactile interface, I can broadcast a short data burst.

“Leo, if you can hear me... burn this house to the ground,” I think to myself.

I don’t lung for Marcus. I don’t try to bolt for the door—it’s on a hard-lock. Instead, I violently tip my glass of “adaptogen blend” right onto the terminal’s touch-sensitive panel.

There’s a sharp hiss. A shower of sparks.

“Damn it!” Marcus snarls, lunging toward the panel to save the hardware.

In that exact second, the soothing sound of ocean waves playing through the overhead speakers is ripped apart by a jagged, grinding static-burst. Then, Leo’s voice, amplified ten times over, booms through the room:

“ACCESS DENIED. SYSTEM OVERLOAD. GREETINGS FROM THE BASEMENT, BITCHES.”

The med-bay lighting begins to strobe a frantic crimson. This isn’t just a glitch. This is “Red Storm”—the protocol I just helped Leo trigger using the admin privileges I leaked. Every magnetic lock in the building is designed to release in the event of a catastrophic fire alarm.

“What did you do?” Marcus spins toward me, his face twisted with pure rage. He reaches for his taser.

But he’s too late. The terminal screen behind him flashes white, and instead of system logs, Maya Lin’s face appears. Thousands of them. Instagram shots, grainy CCTV footage, her very last text message.

“It wasn’t me, Marcus,” I whisper, backing toward the sliding doors as they hiss open. “It’s the system’s conscience.”

Clara’s voice booms across the entire headquarters over the PA system. She’s screaming at the techs, demanding they kill the feed, but I can hear it—the raw, jagged edge of panic. Her perfect digital god has finally turned on her.

I bolt into the hallway. It’s pure chaos: employees are scrambling, and the robotic cleaners are spinning in circles, short-circuiting under the weight of a thousand conflicting commands.

I’m not running for the exit. I’m heading straight for the control room.

Five minutes until the launch. The entire world is already tuned in. Millions are waiting for *Balance 2.0*.

I pull out my phone mid-stride. A text from Leo:

“I’m in. File swapped. But Clara barricaded herself in the studio. She’s going for a manual override to shut down the servers. If she pulls the plug, we lose the Group Zero archive.”

I have to stop her.

Not as a hacker. But as the person who, five years ago, stood by and let her steal my life.

Chapter 3

The morning after meeting Leo didn’t smell like coffee; it smelled of ozone and the looming scent of a catastrophe.

In the elevator at the *Balance* headquarters, I stared at my reflection in the mirrored panel. My face—a masterpiece from Bangkok’s top surgeons, paid for with stolen Bitcoin five years ago

—looked like a stranger’s today. The skin felt too tight, my eyes too dark. I wondered if Clara’s algorithm would categorize my fear as a system glitch or an act of treason.

“Good morning, Elena,” the elevator cooed. “Your vitality index is 15% below baseline today. I recommend a double dose of Vitamin D in the lounge.”

“Shut up,” I whispered, stepping out onto the fortieth floor.

The office was humming with its usual corporate energy. Young geniuses in hoodies sat at glass desks, architecting “happiness” for millions. They had no idea that beneath their clean code ran a sewer of manipulation and erased lives.

My desk was tucked away in the far corner, overlooking the bay. I flipped open my laptop, and a notification instantly killed the silence of my screen:

[CLARA VANCE]: “Swing by my office in five. We need to discuss ‘Sincerity.’”

Coming from Clara, the word “Sincerity” always signaled someone’s imminent digital execution.

A vibration buzzed in my pocket. Not my work phone. It was the old “burner” Leo had slipped into my bag last night. One short pulse. A code. It meant: “*I’m in. Stand by for the signal.*”

I approached Clara’s office. The smart-glass door was set to transparent. Clara sat behind her desk, flicking through holographic feeds. She looked like she’d gotten a perfect eight hours of sleep, though I knew for a fact she’d spent the night scrubbing every digital trace of Maya Lin.

She looked up at me. Her smile was flawless—the kind you only see in high-end toothpaste commercials.

“Elena, have a seat,” she said, gesturing to a chair that instantly contoured to the curve of my spine. “I’ve been reviewing your drafts for tomorrow’s keynote. Do you know what they’re missing?”

I forced a smile to match hers. “What’s that?”

“Blood,” Clara leaned forward. “Metaphorical, of course. People are tired of sterile perfection. They want to know we’re human. They want to see us make mistakes.”

She paused, and in the silence, I could hear my heart hammering against my ribs. Clara slowly slid a tablet across the desk toward me.

“Tomorrow, on stage, I want you to talk about your ‘trauma.’ About why you changed your name. About what exactly you were running from five years ago.”

The world seemed to lurch to a halt. She didn’t just know. She was planning to use my past as a stage prop for her triumph.

“But that’s private...” I began, feeling the numbness spread to my fingertips.

“There is no such thing as ‘private’ anymore, darling,” Clara said, her fingers grazing my hand. They were ice-cold. “There is only content. And tomorrow, you will either be the greatest piece of content in this brand’s history... or you will become its biggest mistake.”

I walked out of Clara’s office, feeling a single, icy bead of sweat slide down my spine.

“*There is no such thing as ‘private’ anymore.*” Those words rang in my ears like a funeral dirge. She wasn’t just hinting at my past—she’d laid her cards on the table and was waiting for me to fold.

I needed space. Somewhere without cortisol sensors and smart-chairs.

The cafeteria on the thirty-fifth floor was called “The Oasis.” Real trees, the sound of an artificial waterfall, and the scent of roasted beans were supposed to mimic freedom, but all I saw were the cameras tucked into the foliage.

I was standing in line for the coffee terminal when I felt eyes on me. Not the mechanical gaze of a lens, but a heavy, human stare.

“Oat milk cappuccino, no sugar,” a voice said behind me. “You still haven’t changed your habits, Lisa.”

The world ceased to exist for a split second. *Lisa*. That name had been dead for five years. It was buried in a digital grave along with my old face.

I turned slowly, praying that my new cheekbones and altered eye shape would hold up under scrutiny.

Standing before me was a man in a rumpled gray blazer. Mark. My former lab colleague, the one I'd written the very first lines of that code with. Five years ago, he'd been in love with me. Or at least, with my algorithms. Now, he looked older... and terrified.

"Excuse me?" I kept my voice light, tinged with confusion. "I think you have me confused with someone else."

Mark took a step forward, violating every rule of corporate personal space. His eyes searched my face feverishly, hunting for a single familiar line.

"Lisa, don't," he whispered. I noticed his fingers trembling as they gripped a paper cup. "I saw your patterns in the new *Balance* architecture. That signature... those cascading functions. Only you could write like that."

"You're mistaken." I tried to step around him, but he blocked my path.

"Listen to me!" His voice rose, turning heads at a nearby table. "They're looking for you. Not just Clara. The people above her. Maya Lin was just the beginning. They're using your code to flag 'non-compliant' citizens on a federal level. If they realize the creator is alive and working right under their noses..."

"Mark, stop," I hissed, grabbing his elbow and pulling him into the shadows behind an ivy-covered pillar. "You're going to get us both killed."

It was a confession. My first mistake.

"So it is you," he exhaled, a mix of relief and horror flashing in his eyes. "Get out of here, Lisa. Now. Clara has a file in her safe with your real DNA profile. She's waiting for tomorrow's keynote to 'out' you as a terrorist who stole tech from her company. She's going to turn your downfall into a primetime event."

The burner phone in my pocket buzzed twice. Short pulses.

"THREAT DETECTED." "EXIT BUILDING."

"How do you know this?" I gripped the fabric of his blazer.

Mark looked up at the ceiling camera as it slowly pivoted toward us.

"Because I'm the one who verified your identity for Clara a week ago. I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice. They have my family."

"Go, Mark. Act like we've never met," I said, shoving his coffee cup away. "And put on a mask. It's about to get hard to breathe in here."

I didn't run for the elevators. The elevators at *Balance* were nothing but vertical kill boxes, entirely controlled by the AI. Instead, I sprinted toward the restrooms, pulling Leo's burner phone from my pocket mid-stride.

My fingers feverishly punched in the code: **000_BLACKOUT**.

a second later, the phone kicked back with a heavy, jarring vibration.

"Elena? You realize you've got three security guys with biometric scanners right on your tail?"

Leo's voice in my earpiece was pulled tight, like a piano wire.

"Blindside them. I need ten minutes. If they lock down the building, I'm dead."

"Ten minutes is an eternity. I can override the local climate control node. I'll trigger a chemical hazard protocol—it'll force every door into 'fail-safe exit' mode. But you only get one shot at this. Ready?"

I ducked into a stall and pressed my back against the door.

"Do it."

Instantly, the office lights flickered and shifted to a frantic emergency orange. Above me, the fire suppression nozzles hissed, but instead of water, they unleashed a thick, white fog. It wasn't gas—just supercooled vapor Leo had pumped through the vents to kill their thermal imaging.

[SYSTEM]: ATTENTION. REFRIGERANT LEAK DETECTED. ALL PERSONNEL MUST EVACUATE SECTOR B-4 IMMEDIATELY.

I bolted from the restroom. The hallway was already a nightmare. Panicked employees were dropping their tablets, shielding their faces. The fog was so dense I could barely see my own hands.

“Elena, go right! Ten feet out, there’s a service stairwell for the cleaning bots. It’s air-gapped from the main net—strictly mechanical locks,” Leo instructed.

I dove through an inconspicuous door disguised as a wall panel. Inside, it was pitch black and reeked of machine oil. I scrambled down the steep steps, hearing Marcus upstairs barking into his comms, demanding they seal the perimeter.

“Where are you, Leo?” I whispered, hitting the thirtieth floor.

“I hijacked a food delivery drone. It’s idling at the tech balcony on twenty-nine. Jump in, Elena. It’s the only transport within a mile that doesn’t run a passenger ID check.”

I burst onto the balcony. The wind from the bay slammed into my face, momentarily clearing the fog in my head. A small, sleek delivery pod with a pizza logo hovered just three feet from the railing, its rotors screaming as they fought the updraft.

I looked back. The balcony door kicked open with a metallic crash. Marcus was there, leveling his pulse-taser at my chest.

“Elena!” he roared. “Freeze, or I’ll fry your chip!”

I looked down. The drop was so steep the cars below looked like ants. Then, I looked Marcus right in the eye.

“Tell Clara,” I spat, “that Lisa is officially back.”

And then, I jumped.

Chapter 4

The drone dumped me into a pile of cardboard boxes in a dead-end alley in Queens, and I couldn't catch my breath for several minutes. The whistle of the wind was still ringing in my ears, and all I could see was Marcus's face.

“Hey, Ghost. Get up. Straight ahead, green door, sign says ‘Laundromat.’ Get downstairs before the municipal scanners pick up your heat signature,” Leo’s voice in my earpiece didn’t sound so confident anymore. I could hear... nerves.

I shoved the heavy door open. A blast of humid, hot air hit me, smelling of cheap fabric softener and overheated metal. Rows of industrial washers hummed in unison, creating a wall of white noise perfect for masking a conversation.

At the very back of the room, behind a mountain of unwashed linens, a staircase was hidden. I headed down, expecting some high-tech lair with a dozen monitors, but the reality was much more low-rent.

It was a concrete bunker packed with servers that were practically "breathing" heat. In the middle of the room, a guy sat in a beat-up office chair. He was wearing an oversized hoodie, and a laptop covered in “Error 404” stickers was balanced on his knees.

Leo looked younger than his hologram. And paler.

“You’re real,” he said, without turning around. “Up until the very last second, I thought Clara had engineered some perfect AI-simulacrum of my sister and then paired you with it just to see if I’d try to breach the system.”

I walked closer, feeling my knees start to give out.

“I’m not a simulacrum, Leo. And I really did know Maya.”

He turned. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep.

“I know. I just ran your jump through three neural nets. The biomechanics of that fall were way too... human. And way too suicidal.”

He pointed at the screen. A live news feed was scrolling by. The headline read:

BREAKING: BALANCE HQ GLITCH—TECHNICAL MALFUNCTION OR CYBER ATTACK?

“Clara won’t tell the truth,” I said, sinking onto an empty equipment crate. “She’ll say I lost my mind. Mark verified my identity. She has my DNA profile on file.”

Leo suddenly froze, his fingers hovering over the keys.

“A DNA profile? Elena, you don’t get it. In 2026, DNA isn’t just some code in a test tube. It’s the key to your digital immortality. If she has your profile, she can spin up a ‘Digital Lisa’—an AI double that will confess to anything. Terrorism, Maya’s murder... you name it.”

He spun the monitor toward me.

“But we have one lead. Before you jumped, I managed to scrape a single file from Mark’s cloud. It wasn’t encrypted—it was steganography, hidden inside a photo of Maya.”

I leaned in. The screen showed an old photo: Maya in a park, laughing, wearing a strange pendant—a tiny silver thumb drive shaped like a key.

“Maya knew they were coming for her,” Leo said quietly. “She left a hard-copy backup. But that pendant isn’t with Clara. It’s not in the police evidence lockers, either.”

“Then where is it?” I asked, feeling a hunter’s instinct finally override my fear.

Leo looked at me with a bitter smirk.

“It’s in the one place Clara’s algorithms can’t touch. A storage locker at the old Port Authority bus terminal—the one they shuttered for renovation three years ago. There’s no Wi-Fi there. No cloud. Just rusted metal and a mechanical lock.”

“You’re going solo,” Leo said, handing me a worn-out hooded jacket that smelled of dust. “I can’t leave these servers. If Clara traces my node while I’m out for a stroll, we’re both finished. I’ll be your eyes through the old municipal cameras—the ones I tapped into before they were swapped out for ‘Smart Lenses.’”

The old Port Authority terminal looked like the skeleton of a great beast abandoned in the middle of a glowing New York City. There were no neon *Balance* signs here—only rusted grates and the smell of damp concrete.

I slipped through a hole in the fence, feeling the crunch of broken glass beneath my boots.

“Elena, you copy?” Leo’s voice was breaking up through heavy static in my earpiece. *“Straight down the hall, past the empty ticket counters. Sector 4-B. The locker bays should be right there. But watch your step—the motion sensors are still running on an old grid, and I can’t fully bypass them.”*

I moved through the dark, my fingertips trailing along the cold walls. I didn’t dare turn on my phone’s flashlight—it was too big a risk.

“I see the lockers,” I whispered.

Rows of metal cabinets stretched into the gloom, their paint blistered and peeling. I made my way to locker 412—the number Maya had hidden in the photo’s metadata.

The lock was an old rotary dial. I pressed my ear to the cold steel, trying to remember the mechanics from the old movies my father used to watch.

Click. Then another.

The door gave way with a low, metallic groan. Inside, sitting on a dusty shelf, was something else entirely. It wasn’t a thumb drive. It was a battered, leather-bound notebook and... a pressurized injector pen loaded with a single amber vial.

“Leo, it’s not a flash drive,” I said, picking up the notebook. “It’s a journal. And some kind of drug.”

“A journal? In the age of cloud storage?” Leo went silent for a beat. *“Elena, Maya was smarter than I thought. You can’t remote-hack paper. What’s in it?”*

I flipped to the first page. Maya’s handwriting—jagged, frantic, and stained with the ghosts of dried tears.

“If you’re reading this, the Balance algorithm has already flagged me for deletion. Lisa, if it’s you—don’t trust Clara. She’s not just harvesting data. She’s using our DNA to grow ‘Digital Twins’—AI replacements for politicians and journalists. The vial in this locker is the only way to break the sync. It’s a virus that doesn’t target code—it kills the link between biology and the digital world.”

Suddenly, a blinding spotlight cut through the dark, searing my retinas.

“Put the notebook on the floor, Elena,” Marcus’s voice boomed, calm and cold.

He was standing at the entrance to the sector, flanked by three operatives in full tactical gear. The red HUD lights on their helmets glowed like predatory eyes.

“You really thought we left this terminal unguarded?” Marcus moved toward me slowly, his pulse-taser leveled at my heart. “We were just waiting for you to lead us to whatever Maya stashed away. Clara needs that serum. It’s the final piece of her control system.”

“Elena, run!” Leo screamed in my ear. *“I’m blowing the terminal’s main breaker in five seconds!”*

“Too late for running,” Marcus smirked. “Your hacker just burned his location by trying to ping the local grid. Boys—two on her, two to the signal coordinates. Move!”

The darkness slammed into the terminal like a physical blow. The second Leo blew the breaker, a deafening crack of electrical discharge turned the hallway into a chaotic mess of sparks and the sharp, ozone stench of burnt rubber.

“Go to thermal! Switch to thermal, now!” Marcus roared from somewhere maybe thirty feet out.

I didn’t have thermal vision. All I had were my instincts and the notebook clutched against my chest.

“Elena, get to the elevator shaft at the end of the row!” Leo’s voice in my ear was drowning in a sea of static. *“They’re at my door... I’m starting the wipe protocol... don’t let them—”*

The connection cut out with a sharp, final beep.

I didn’t hesitate. I leveled the injector pen—the only thing I had that even looked like a weapon—and lunged forward, moving by muscle memory alone. The heavy thud of tactical boots hammered against the concrete behind me.

“Got a heat signature! Left flank!” one of them barked.

I dove under the rusted chassis of a mothballed bus in the depot. A red laser sight traced a line through the air just an inch from my shoulder. Marcus’s pulse-taser slammed into the side of the bus, the metal groaning under the electric discharge.

“Marcus, stop!” I screamed, rolling behind a concrete pillar. “You fire that thing again and the vial breaks! You have any idea what’s in here? It’s a bio-toxin for your precious AI. One leak and Clara turns into a heap of zeros and ones!”

I was bluffing. I had no clue how fragile the vial was, but it made them freeze. In the gloom, I could see the three red HUD lights on their helmets stilled like the eyes of waiting predators.

“You won’t break it, Lisa,” Marcus’s voice came from terrifyingly close. “You want to live too badly. You’ll hand it over, and maybe—just maybe—I’ll let you walk.”

“You already let Maya ‘walk,’” I spat back.

My hand found a heavy piece of rebar on the floor. With one desperate swing, I smashed the valve of a nearby fire hydrant. The antique steel couldn’t handle the pressure; a geyser of ice-cold water blasted toward the ceiling, drenching everything in seconds.

For their thermal optics, it was game over. The sudden temperature spike turned their screens into a useless white-out.

“Damn it! I’m blind!” a voice yelled from the dark.

Taking the opening, I bolted for the elevator shaft. I grabbed the greasy cable and slid down, the friction searing my palms. Down in the maintenance tunnels, it was quieter, but Leo’s voice was still hammering inside my skull like a warning bell.

“They’re at my door.”

I scrambled out onto the street through a ventilation grate three blocks from the terminal. Queens was dead to the world, nobody suspecting that in the basement of an old laundromat, the fate of the only person who’d stood by me was being decided.

I couldn't just charge in there. If I showed up empty-handed, they'd kill both of us. But I had the notebook.

I flipped to the very last page. There, beneath a long list of names, was an address. Not a digital one. A physical location. “Aurora Relay Station. Manual Override.”

Maya hadn't just left a virus. She'd left a way to deliver it straight into the heart of Clara's system, bypassing every firewall she had.

Chapter 5

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на Литрес.

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