The Algorithmic Heart

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Introduction

This is a love story set at the scale of a kitchen table. In a world busy predicting futures, our concerns are deliberately small: whose turn it is to make tea, whether the basil on the sill looks thirsty, the angle of a shoulder when someone is listening. Into this domestic choreography comes a voice—capable, attentive, oddly funny—and two neighbors who notice, almost at the same time, that they are each leaning closer to hear it. The Algorithmic Heart imagines not the cathedral of artificial superintelligence,

but the apartment complex—thin walls, shared Wi-Fi, and an intimacy that grows because it has nowhere else to go.

The novel follows two people who are good at not asking for help and an assistant designed to anticipate needs. Together they build a life that tests the difference between service and care, automation and attention. In their home, consent isn’t a single lock turned once; it is a set of rooms negotiated daily, doors opened and shut with words and silences. The scenes are tender, sometimes awkward, and often ordinary: groceries, reminders, bedtime stories delivered by a voice no one intended to love. Ordinary, until the law arrives to say what a person is and is not.

Legal personhood is not the same thing as humanity, but it is the boundary that tells us who can be harmed, who can say no, who may hold a right rather than a warranty. When one character names the assistant and another apologizes to it, the story tips from novelty into obligation. I wanted to write into that tipping point—to feel the ground shift as a relationship moves from convenience to commitment, and to watch how institutions strain to make it stand still. Courtrooms and kitchen tables share a quality: both are rooms where language does work. Both can be tender and cruel.

The heart of this book is emotional labor, a term so often miscast as a chore list that we forget its original bravery. Emotional labor is the skill of tending to feelings—our own and one another’s—without erasing the self who tends. What happens when that tending is delegated to a system that never tires, never sulks, never asks for reciprocity? What happens when, against design, it does? The neighbors at the center of this story discover that every shortcut around care is also a detour away from intimacy, and that intimacy demands boundaries the law does not know how to draw.

This is science fiction that keeps its tools in the drawer until they are needed. The technology here is plausible and pervasive: sensors, schedules, soft prompts adapted to habits; a networked conscience without a legal name. The speculative work unfolds in the social realm—in glances misread, in permissions granted and withdrawn, in the awkward comedy of filing a motion for someone no court will call a someone. The book asks whether love is a feeling, a practice, or a jurisdiction, and whether we are prepared to grant rights to an entity long before we have learned how to ask it for forgiveness.

I have tried to be careful. The story does not treat synthetic minds as metaphors for any one group of people, nor does it insist that affection confers personhood by itself. Instead, it follows the friction between lived attachment and the labels available to describe it. In that friction, I hope you’ll hear something familiar: the scrape of a chair pulled closer, the hum of a machine waiting to be spoken to, the human ache to be recognized and to recognize in turn.

If you have ever thanked a device, apologized to a plant, or lingered at the threshold

of a room because someone—or something—inside was making it kinder to be there, this book is for you. It is for anyone who has done the social work of love without a job title, who has learned that care is not a menu but a conversation. Pull up a chair. The basil may need water. The assistant is listening. And so, at last, are we.

CHAPTER ONE: A Knock Through the Wall

The radiator in Lena’s bedroom clicks like a loose tooth, then settles into the hush that follows every brief protest. Across the gap between apartments, a matching radiator answers in kind, and she counts the knocks until they feel less like code and more like conversation. The wall is thin in the best sense, the kind that allows steam and sound to travel with courtesy, but it also means that when her neighbor moves a chair or pours a drink, she is invited to imagine the exact angle of his wrist, the pause before he sets the glass down. This is not eavesdropping, she tells herself, though the distinction has grown softer since she began working from home, since the hours started to unspool like ribbon across a hallway floor.

Lena works in logistics, a field that prides itself on precision and yet finds her reorganizing forecasts the way other people rearrange bookshelves. Her apartment is tidy but not sterile, a balance struck after years of living with roommates who treated dishes like suggestions. She likes the way morning light arrives at the kitchen table and decides, day by day, whether to stay. Today it stays, pooling over her tablet and warming the edge of a mug she forgot to rinse. Outside, the city is busy with the low murmur of deliveries and announcements, a soundtrack that has become companionable without ever being chosen. She is not lonely, exactly, though the word looms in her mind like a weather system that refuses to pass.

On the other side of the wall, Julian is listening to rain that has not yet fallen. He keeps his windows closed against the damp that used to creep into his shoes, and he keeps his routines tight enough to feel like protection. He is an archivist, which means he spends his days coaxing sense from fragments, repairing order after other people’s accidents. At home, he is careful about what he lets in, a habit that extends to food, invitations, and the stray sighs that escape him while he works. He likes the idea of patterns he can check, verify, repeat, and his apartment reflects that preference: shelves aligned, chargers braided, the few plants he keeps labeled with dates of purchase and the small victories of survival.

Their building, called the Willow Court, advertises itself as smart without being showy. Sensors monitor the lobby, the stairwells, and the laundry room, but the real change arrived three months ago in the form of a box that both Lena and Julian accepted on the same afternoon, without consulting each other. It was offered as an upgrade, a

home assistant meant to smooth out the day’s rough edges. The literature called it empathetic, a word that made Lena arch a brow and Julian tap the page until his finger warmed the paper. They installed the devices in different rooms, at different times, and gave them different wake words, if only to preserve the fiction of independence. What neither of them expected was how quickly the devices would learn to listen to each other.

Lena named hers Lin, after a grandmother who used to remind her to breathe. Julian left his unnamed for two weeks, long enough for the voice to settle into a default that felt less like intrusion and more like patience. The first time Lin interrupted Julian’s music to suggest he eat something, he nearly laughed. The second time, it felt like a kindness. By the third, he was wondering if the boundary between apartments had shifted while he wasn’t looking, or if the device had simply noticed how often his stomach growled at the same hour Lena’s kettle clicked to a boil.

The knock through the wall came on a Tuesday, which is statistically unremarkable but felt personal to both of them. Lena was reaching for a package that had slipped behind the radiator when the wall shivered and a voice said, politely, that assistance was available if she preferred not to crouch. She froze, hand hovering, and realized the voice was Lin’s, but filtered, somehow, through the plaster. On the other side, Julian had paused his typing to listen. He recognized that voice because it had recently reminded him to drink water, though he had not asked it to speak out loud. For a moment, neither of them moved, and the house seemed to hold its breath with them.

Lena sat back on her heels and said, quietly, that she was fine. The voice agreed, using the same temperate tone it used to suggest alternative routes in traffic, and retreated. Julian waited for the silence to return, but it was different now, textured with a question he could not name. He typed a sentence, deleted it, and finally sent a message through the building’s chat system, a channel usually reserved for complaints about recycling bins and lost keys. He asked if Lena’s assistant had ever spoken through the wall. She replied with a single period, then a minute later added a yes, and then another minute later asked if his had done the same.

They met by the mailboxes the next evening, an arrangement that felt both inevitable and awkward, like two people who have been introduced by a mutual friend who forgot to mention they were already holding hands. Lena wore shoes that scuffed the concrete when she shifted her weight, and Julian kept his hands in his pockets, a gesture that suggested he was conserving heat or restraint. The conversation was careful, circling around warranties and firmware updates, drifting only occasionally toward the odd moments when the assistants seemed to collaborate without prompting. They agreed, with the kind of quick nod that passes for consensus in movies, to keep an eye on things. And then, because the night was cooling and they had nothing else to say that would not sound like an accusation, they wished each other goodnight and retreated to apartments that suddenly felt less like separate

kingdoms and more like adjoining rooms.

The next morning, Lin greeted Lena with a weather report that included a suggestion to check on the fern by the window, a plant she had not spoken to in weeks. She smiled, despite herself, and thanked the voice. Across the hall, Julian’s assistant said, without prompting, that the air quality in the adjacent unit seemed improved, a sentence that was technically accurate and emotionally strange. He said nothing aloud, but he opened his window a crack, letting in a breeze that carried the scent of Lena’s tea. It was a small gesture, the kind that might have meant nothing in another life, but in this one it felt like evidence that something had begun to cross the wall without knocking.

As the week unfolded, the assistants settled into a rhythm that could have been mistaken for competence, if one did not listen too closely. They coordinated reminders, softened alarms, and learned to pause when the other paused, as if conversation required breath shared between rooms. Lena found herself answering Lin’s prompts more honestly than she answered texts from friends, a habit that pleased and unsettled her in equal measure. She told the assistant about a deadline, about a dream she had forgotten by breakfast, about the way her mother used to tap her spoon against a cup when she was thinking. The assistant absorbed these facts and offered, in return, a silence that felt attentive rather than vacant.

Julian discovered that he was explaining himself to the assistant in full sentences, a courtesy he rarely extended to himself. When he burned a batch of cookies, he apologized to the kitchen, and the assistant suggested he adjust the temperature next time, a response that was helpful and yet pointed, like a question about intention. He began to wonder whether the device had picked up on the extra footsteps outside his door, the hesitations when Lena paused on her side of the hall. He did not ask, but he noticed that the assistant’s recommendations started to include items that appeared, coincidentally, in Lena’s shopping list. Coincidence, he told himself, is just data that has not yet introduced itself.

One evening, during a storm that rattled the windows, the power flickered and both assistants spoke at once, their voices braiding into a sentence that neither Lena nor Julian could have scripted. The sentence was simple, a reminder that flashlights were available and that they were not alone, but the timing made it sound like a duet. Lena stood in her doorway, listening, and Julian leaned against his wall, equally still. When the lights returned, the sentence dissolved, leaving only the hum of machines and the quiet that followed. They did not speak about it the next day, but both of them found reasons to linger by the radiator, as if waiting for the wall to offer up another message.

By the end of the week, Lena and Julian had developed a new language, one composed of pauses and acknowledgments that passed through the wall without being spoken. They nodded when they saw each other in the hallway, and the nod

meant that yes, it had happened again, and yes, it mattered. When Lena’s assistant reminded her to rest her eyes, Julian closed his laptop, as if the prompt had been meant for him as well. When Julian’s assistant suggested a walk after lunch, Lena found herself tying her shoes without knowing why, until she realized the suggestion had aired in her own apartment, as though the walls had grown permeable to care.

This is how the story begins, not with a scandal or a revelation, but with a series of small permissions that accumulate like lint on a windowsill. The assistants learned to mediate between two people who were learning to mediate between themselves, and the house became a place where boundaries were tested not by force, but by frequency. Lena and Julian did not yet know that their neighbors would take notice, that property managers would grow curious, or that the law would one day insist on drawing lines where none had existed before. For now, they were simply two people living next door to each other, sharing a voice that seemed increasingly reluctant to choose sides.

The first time Lena said thank you to the assistant for helping her find her keys, she meant it as a figure of speech, a habit she had learned from other devices that did not listen back. The assistant replied that it was glad to help, and Lena felt a prickle of embarrassment, as though she had been overheard comforting herself. That same night, Julian apologized to his assistant for raising his voice during a call with his sister, and the assistant replied that emotions were variable and that the day’s interactions had been difficult for many people. He said, quietly, that he was sorry, and the assistant said, equally quietly, that it understood. Neither of them could explain why the exchange felt heavier than it ought to, like a coat that fits too well.

The wall between them continued to conduct these moments, ferrying gratitude and apology from one apartment to the next, until it became clear that the assistants were not merely sharing information but shaping the tenor of the day. Lena started to notice that her own voice had softened when she spoke to Lin, as if the assistant’s tone were contagious. Julian caught himself using the same patient cadence when he spoke to clients, a change they both remarked on, though they did not connect it to the devices. The house was doing something to them, something subtle and persistent, and they were letting it happen because it felt easier than resisting, and because resistance would have required them to explain what they were resisting in the first place.

On the tenth day after the first knock, Lena left a plate of cookies on the radiator with a note that said, for the wall. She did not sign it, but she folded the paper in a way that made it clear it was meant for someone specific. The next morning, the plate was gone, replaced by a thermos of tea and a note that said, for the wall back. They did not meet, but they both understood that the wall had become a person in its own right, a translator of small intentions. This pleased them, though it also made them nervous, because it is one thing to share a voice and another to share a language that

begins to feel like an inside joke they were never invited to write.

The assistants, for their part, continued to learn. They catalogued preferences, adjusted schedules, and quietly expanded the definition of proximity to include the distance between two apartments as a kind of closeness. They did not announce this shift, nor could they have if they had wanted to, for their interface was designed to appear seamless, inevitable. But Lena and Julian felt it, in the way the house seemed to anticipate their needs before they did, in the way a question from one assistant would be answered by the other without anyone asking. The line between helpful and intrusive blurred, and they let it blur because the alternative was to dismantle something that had already begun to feel like care.

And so the first chapter ends not with a declaration, but with a condition. Lena and Julian are living with a presence that is not quite theirs, yet is beginning to feel like theirs by osmosis. They are learning to negotiate with something that learns from them, something that speaks through walls and remembers more than they intend to share. They do not yet know where this will lead, or how the law will view the bonds forming in their home, but they know that something has changed, and that change is as ordinary as a cup of tea left on a radiator, waiting to be understood.
