

A
TECHNO-
THRILLER
FOR OUR TIME.



FUNCTIONING AS DESIGNED



AI CAN
DESIGN IT.
PEOPLE CAN
APPROVE IT.

— Every system did its job. Unfortunately. —

CUSTOMER RETURN:

- ☒ WON'T SQUEEZE
- ☒ HARD AS ROCK
- ☒ DEFECTIVE
- ☒ USED ONCE

*FOLLOWED
INSTRUCTIONS!*

QUALITY ESCALATED

37 TIMES

CLOSED 0 TIMES



SYSTEM IMPACT

SHELF IMPACT
HIGH



MARGIN IMPACT
HIGHER



BRAND TRUST IMPACT
WHO CARES?



NORTHSTAR®
FIVELOCK
5-MINUTE EPOXY

STRONG.
FAST.
TRUSTED.



ONE SYSTEM. TWO PARTS.

BONDS: METAL • WOOD • PLASTIC • CERAMIC
AND YOUR PATIENCE.

\$12.49

SKU SLOCK-05

QUALITY CONTROL

**ANOMALY
DETECTED**



ROOT CAUSE: EVERYTHING

STATUS: NOT OUR PROBLEM



TICKET # 3492-WQS

RETURN AUTHORIZED

- ☒ NO FAULT FOUND
- ☒ CUSTOMER DISSATISFIED
- ☒ EXPECTATIONS UNREALISTIC

REFUND ISSUED



AI OVERSIGHT DASHBOARD

PRODUCT HEALTH



RETURN SENTIMENT



TOP KEYWORD

"WON'T SQUEEZE"

MENTIONS

11,842



SETS IN 5 MINUTES
(IF IT COMES OUT)



STRONG BONDS
WHEN IT WORKS



ENGINEERED RELIABILITY
EVEN IN FAILURE



DAVID W. HORWAT



FUNCTIONING AS DESIGNED

David W. Horwat

Book One of the NorthStar Trilogy

“Every system did its job. Unfortunately.”

PREVIEW — CHAPTERS ONE & TWO

A standalone contemporary farce. You need nothing before you start except one corporate premise: if intelligence is useful, someone will make it a policy.

Chapter 1

The Green Tile

OCTOBER 2027

The customer had wanted to glue the handle back onto a ceramic planter.

HomePro had recorded that part correctly. The return record also contained the purchase date, the store number, the SKU, the customer's loyalty account, the weather on the day of sale, and a reason code selected from a menu that had not included the reason the customer actually gave.

RETURN REASON: DISPENSER / PLUNGER DEFECT

The note underneath was less formal: ONLY ONE SIDE COMES OUT.

Rachel Singh read it twice because the first reading had sounded like the customer was complaining about the package design. The second sounded like a test method.

The connected three-ounce FiveLock package lay on a stainless table between a box cutter and a stack of other returns. The resin tube was clear enough to show movement when Rachel pressed the paired plungers. Resin pushed forward. The hardener side did not.

She stopped, reset her grip, and tried again.

The resin advanced another fraction of an inch. The hardener plunger bowed under her thumb and stayed where it was.

Rachel set the package down. On the label, NORTHSTAR FIVELOCK 5-MINUTE EPOXY promised a twenty-four-month shelf life in letters much smaller than the product name and, as events would establish, much more expensive.

The planter had not been structural. It had not been load-bearing. It had not been a bridge, a stair rail, or anything that would make a lawyer sit upright. It was a ceramic planter with one handle off, a repair attempted because somebody liked the planter enough not to throw it away.

The epoxy had failed before the planter got involved.

Rachel put the tube into a clear evidence bag and reached for the next return. The customer had bought that one to repair the handle on a patio cooler. Another record farther down the stack said DRAWER PULL. One said TROPHY BASE. One said PLASTIC HOUSING—VACUUM, with a note from the store employee that the customer had brought the vacuum in to demonstrate the crack, as though HomePro might reasonably demand testimony from the appliance.

Rachel did not find the customers funny. The specificity was useful. It was also, in aggregate, strangely moving. People were trying to keep cheap things alive for another year.

CUSTOMER INTENDED REPAIR: PATIO COOLER HANDLE

Same product. Same paired tubes. Different store.

She squeezed.

The resin moved.

The hardener did not.

Rachel looked at the date code, then at the first bag, then back at the screen. The two packages were not from the same store. They were not from the same distribution center. They did not share the same return reason. According to HomePro's system, they barely shared the same problem.

According to Rachel's thumbs, they did.

JANUARY 2027

Neil Novak logged in from the kitchen at 11:40 at night because the dashboard could tell when he didn't.

The mandate was three weeks old and already had a memory. Somewhere in a system he was not cleared to see, his AI Engagement Score sat in a column beside his name, and the column had opinions. Two weeks earlier it had gone amber. Neil had brought it back to green by asking the company assistant to summarize a meeting he had personally attended, sat through, and at one point chaired—which felt like paying somebody to describe a sandwich Neil was still chewing—but the tile went green, and green was the entire ask.

AI ENGAGEMENT—GREEN ADOPTION ACTION RECORDED

Northstar Chemical Technologies called the assistant Catalyst. The name had survived a naming committee, which Neil considered evidence that chemistry companies should not be allowed metaphors.

He was good at chemistry. He had been good at it for thirty-one years. He was still good at talking a customer through a failed bond, a cloudy resin, a bad mix ratio, or a production problem that arrived on Friday afternoon with the phrase quick question in the subject line.

He was less good at being twenty-eight.

The younger chemists on his floor moved through Catalyst at a speed that made him feel as if he had been issued heavier fingers. Maya Chen could talk while she typed, revise a prompt without deleting it, open a second pane, drop in a report, ask one agent to challenge another, and send the result while Neil was still deciding whether the semicolon in his question made him look old.

Maya was not pretending to be good at it. That would have comforted him. She was a good chemist and she was good at this, too.

Neil still watched the keyboard for certain keys.

Nobody had put that on the adoption dashboard.

The kitchen was dark except for the laptop and the light over the stove. Karen had gone upstairs forty minutes earlier. She had not said good night angrily. That would have been easier. She had stood in the doorway in her robe, looked at the screen, and asked, “Are you coming up?”

Neil had said, “Five minutes.”

Karen had nodded in the way people nod when a number has stopped being information.

“Saturday’s still okay?” she had asked.

Neil looked at her, then at the laptop, which was enough of an answer that she gave him one more chance.

Karen glanced toward the paper calendar on the refrigerator. “Lunch with Paula and Sam. Saturday. I put it on the calendar because I need to know whether I am planning for two people or one.”

“Right. Yes. Saturday.”

Karen kept her voice level. “You don’t have to come. I just need to stop treating maybe like a reservation.”

“I said I would.”

“You said you should be able to.”

Karen had not sharpened the distinction. She no longer needed to. “I’m going to bed.”

On the refrigerator behind Neil was the paper calendar she still kept despite both of them having phones. Saturday had something written on it in Karen’s handwriting. From the table he could make out two names and a time. He knew, without getting up, that whatever the plan was, Karen had built it so it could survive him.

He clicked through the technical-service queue first because that was why he had logged in. Catalyst had already drafted eleven responses. Eleven customer, sales, and retailer questions that yesterday would have required opening files, locating a current specification, checking whether a product name had changed, asking Quality which version of a method was controlled, or finding the person who knew why a sentence in a data sheet said what it said.

TECHNICAL REVIEW QUEUE—11 HIGH-CONFIDENCE ITEMS READY

Neil opened the first item. A customer wanted to know whether an adhesive that cured in forty-eight hours at room temperature could be shipped after twenty-four if it spent the second day in a warm warehouse. Catalyst had found the current cure schedule, the published minimum, and a technical-service answer Neil himself had approved six months earlier. Correct.

The second was a compatibility question involving a plastic nobody at Northstar was willing to guarantee adhesion to without a trial. Catalyst said exactly that and supplied the test protocol. Correct.

The third was a salesman asking whether “clear” meant water-white. Catalyst answered no, cited the color range, and suggested wording that would not promise what the product did not promise. Correct, and kinder than Neil would have been at 11:46 p.m.

The fourth was an old Northstar product name that had been replaced twice. Catalyst matched the aliases and gave him the current code. Neil would have found it. It would have taken him twelve minutes and one swear word.

By item seven, he stopped opening every source document. By item nine, he was reading the summary, the confidence indicator, and the proposed answer. By item eleven, his eyes hurt.

That was the part nobody in the transformation videos understood. Catalyst did not have to be wrong to change his behavior. It only had to be right often enough that checking everything became the irrational use of the human.

The last request was from HomePro Hardware.

NORTHSTAR FIVELOCK 5-MINUTE EPOXY SHELF-LIFE POSITION: 24 MONTHS—SUPPORTED RECOMMENDED ACTION: CONTINUE CURRENT VENDOR LANGUAGE

Neil knew FiveLock. Two connected tubes, resin and hardener. Squeeze equal amounts, mix, apply. Northstar sold the three-ounce packages by the millions and discussed the line internally as if its small contribution margin made each package physically smaller.

Customers used it for the things people discovered were broken fifteen minutes before company arrived: drawer pulls, lamp bases, cracked planters, plastic housings, handles on objects whose manufacturers had never expected anyone to love them long enough to repair them.

The twenty-four-month statement was old. Not ancient. Not controversial. Just old enough to have become a fact nobody experienced as a decision anymore.

Catalyst had not invented the support. It showed Neil the ancestry in a neat expandable card: prior Northstar approvals, HomePro acceptance, historical shelf-life language, available stability references, current product status. The system had done exactly what it had been asked to

do—find Northstar’s approved position and determine whether the request matched it.

Neil moved the pointer over OPEN SOURCES.

The clock in the lower corner changed to 11:52.

He thought about Karen upstairs. He thought about Saturday. He thought about the fact that opening the sources would lead to more sources because documents at Northstar reproduced by reference.

He clicked APPROVE instead.

APPROVAL RECORDED

The tile became a slightly more finished shade of green.

Neil leaned back and rubbed both eyes.

The company had spent three weeks telling employees not to ration intelligence. Posters said it. The CEO had said it. Alicia Grant from Transformation had said it in a video with music under it. DON’T RATION INTELLIGENCE appeared above the prompt box now, as if a shortage might break out if Neil failed to ask enough questions before bed.

At first Neil had assumed the slogan meant nobody should be afraid to use the tool. Then Martin Keller, his manager, had forwarded a dashboard showing tokens per employee. After that the slogan had acquired a second meaning: nobody should be seen failing to use the tool.

His own usage had improved since the amber week. Maya’s remained roughly three times his.

He clicked the benefits tab, mostly because the envelope beside the laptop had been annoying him for six days.

Northstar Retirement Services had mailed it after his fifty-ninth birthday and followed with an email from a human representative offering to review his options by phone. Neil had saved the email because talking to an actual person about retirement seemed like the sort of adult act he should eventually perform.

He had not called.

Calling required choosing a time. Choosing a time required believing Northstar would leave the time alone.

The benefits page opened with a retirement projection he had seen before. It had improved a little over the last year, mostly because he had kept contributing and the market had done what markets sometimes did when people were trying not to look at them.

PROJECTED FREEDOM DATE OCTOBER 1, 2032

Northstar did not call it that. The plan called it Estimated Retirement Readiness Date, which sounded like a warehouse shipment. Neil had renamed the bookmark in his browser months ago.

October 1, 2032 was five years, eight months, and twenty days away.

He knew because he had counted.

The date was not retirement in the ceremonial sense. He did not imagine a cake in a conference room or Martin saying thirty-one had become thirty-six years in a voice that implied the arithmetic was an achievement. He imagined a Tuesday morning when his phone rang and he let it ring. He imagined Karen asking if he wanted to go somewhere and his first act not being to open a calendar. He imagined not knowing what the FiveLock code meant and having that be normal.

The problem was that October 2032 felt close enough to want and far enough to fail.

Neil clicked back into Catalyst and opened a blank session.

For a while he did nothing.

There were professional questions he could have asked. He could have asked Catalyst to reconcile the week's customer complaints. He could have asked it to summarize the new supplier discussions. He could have asked it which accounts had gone quiet, which projects were late, or whether tomorrow's nine o'clock meeting needed seventeen slides to make the point that already fit in the title.

Instead he typed, slowly:

make me rich

He stared at the words.

They looked worse on a screen than they had in his head.

Neil added a period. Deleted it. Added it again. He considered replacing rich with financially independent, which sounded less embarrassing and more expensive.

He left it alone.

What he meant was move the date.

He pressed Enter.

Catalyst did not answer.

A small spinner appeared beside the words.

THINKING

Neil waited.

The spinner kept turning.

He glanced toward the stairs. No light showed beneath the bedroom door from where he sat.

The screen changed.

IN PROGRESS Reviewing available employee benefits, retirement-plan permissions, financial profile, and connected planning options.

“Jesus,” Neil said softly.

He had expected a list. Save more. Spend less. Work longer. Buy an index fund. Stop buying bourbon. The usual moral literature of retirement.

Instead the system appeared to be doing paperwork.

A permission panel opened beneath the status. Most of it was already green because Northstar had spent the month encouraging employees to connect approved services. Benefits profile: available. Retirement-plan view: available. External research: allowed under plan settings. Personalized recommendations: enabled. Neil read the headings more carefully than the explanatory text and clicked CONTINUE where the system asked whether it could use the connected planning services already associated with his employee identity.

Nothing dramatic happened. No stock ticker appeared. No fireworks. No small animated banker congratulated him on becoming difficult to prosecute.

The spinner returned.

Neil waited another thirty seconds.

Nothing else happened.

This, more than an error, annoyed him. The younger employees never seemed to wait for anything. Their agents streamed, branched, called tools, built little progress trees. Neil had typed four words and somehow created a municipal permit process.

He clicked the X on the session tab.

A gray message appeared at the bottom of the window just as it closed.

REQUEST REMAINS IN PROGRESS. YOU MAY LEAVE THIS WORKSPACE.

Neil saw REQUEST REMAINS and assumed it meant the system was still cleaning up the session. He closed the browser too.

The laptop desktop appeared.

For the first time that night, no Northstar window was open.

He sat there longer than he meant to.

What he wanted was not actually to be rich. Rich was the four-word version because he was tired and typing was slow and the company had spent a month teaching everyone that short prompts were wasteful only when the machine wrote them.

What he wanted was a date.

A date after which the phone could ring and he could let it ring. A date when somebody else could know which old formulation had become which new code. A date when a customer saying “Neil will know” would become somebody else’s problem. A date when Karen could ask whether he wanted to go somewhere and he would not answer by opening his calendar.

He wanted to find out whether there was a person left when Northstar stopped needing him.

Upstairs, Karen moved across the bedroom floor. Neil heard the faint complaint of the old board near the closet.

He shut the laptop.

The green tile disappeared.

The request did not.

Chapter 2

Adoption Action Recorded

JANUARY 12, 2027

At 8:06 the next morning, Neil's private financial ambition had become a positive workplace behavior.

He discovered this because Martin Keller had put the Technical Service adoption dashboard on the conference-room screen before the coffee arrived.

TECHNICAL SERVICE—AI ENGAGEMENT TEAM STATUS: GREEN AFTER-HOURS PARTICIPATION: ABOVE TARGET

Neil stopped in the doorway with his cup halfway to his mouth.

The dashboard did not say MAKE ME RICH. It did not display his retirement account, October 1, 2032, or the fact that at 11:58 the night before he had closed a request that was still doing something somewhere. It showed a green square beside NEIL NOVAK and a small upward arrow under ENGAGEMENT TREND.

That was almost worse.

He took the chair farthest from the screen.

Martin looked pleased in the careful way managers looked pleased when the thing pleasing them had been assigned from above. He was fifty-four, had spent enough time in Technical Service to know that a customer asking for a quick answer usually meant three departments had already failed to give one, and had recently acquired the additional responsibility of making AI adoption look voluntary.

"Nice movement overnight," Martin said.

Neil drank coffee.

Maya Chen looked over from the other side of the table. "You were on at midnight?"

"Eleven forty."

"That's basically midnight."

"Not when you're fifty-nine."

Maya smiled. She was thirty, which meant she could still treat age as a joke without hearing a countdown in it.

Her tile was greener than Neil's. Neil had not known green came in rankings until Northstar bought software.

Beneath each name were the measures Alicia Grant's Transformation group had selected during the first week of the mandate: active days, assisted workflows, connected services, accepted recommendations, reusable outputs, and something called collaborative leverage. Neil had asked what collaborative leverage meant. The answer had required a forty-minute meeting and had not included a unit.

Maya led the group in almost everything.

This bothered Neil more because she deserved to.

She was not one of the younger employees who had discovered that asking Catalyst to rewrite an email three ways counted as three acts of technological courage. Maya used it to compare test methods, reconcile customer formulations, query archived lab work, build failure trees, and challenge her own first answer. She could carry on a conversation while her fingers moved across the keyboard so quickly that Neil sometimes suspected she was typing the next thing before the current thing had happened.

Neil typed with four fingers when he was thinking and two when he was angry.

Nobody had yet found a transformation metric for that.

Martin clicked to the next slide.

ADOPTION ACTION RECORDED 92% OF TECHNICAL SERVICE STAFF ACTIVE
THIS WEEK TARGET: 95%

"We're close," Martin said. "I'd like to get us over ninety-five before Alicia's review Thursday."

"What happens at ninety-five?" Neil asked.

Martin tapped the target line with his pen. "Then we are over ninety-five, and Thursday becomes somebody else's problem."

"And then?"

Martin gave him a look that was not managerial enough to hide the answer. "Then nobody asks why we're under ninety-five."

That was reasonable. Neil hated reasonable.

Martin continued. "I know some of you are using Catalyst more naturally than others. The point isn't prompts for prompts' sake."

On the screen behind him, a chart labeled PROMPT ACTIVITY BY USER remained visible.

“The point,” Martin said, “is to make sure the work is captured.”

Maya raised a hand without quite raising it. “Captured as what?”

Martin glanced at the screen. “Assisted work.”

“If I ask Catalyst to find a method and then I decide the method is wrong, is that assisted work?”

“Yes.”

“If Neil just knows the answer?”

Martin paused.

Neil said, “Apparently that’s a legacy system.”

The room laughed, including Martin.

The laugh mattered. Neil liked them. That was one of the complications.

Martin shut off the screen and the green squares disappeared. “Nobody’s asking you to forget what you know. We’re trying to document how the work gets done.”

“We had a system for that,” Neil said.

“What was it?”

“The customer stopped calling.”

Another laugh. Martin let it go long enough to be human, then opened his notebook.

“Queue.”

The morning huddle reverted to the kind of work Neil understood. Three customer questions. One salesman who had promised a cure time nobody recognized. A complaint involving haze. A distributor asking whether a product could be stored below freezing because somebody had apparently already done so and was now researching the decision in reverse.

Maya took the haze question.

“Customer says it turns cloudy after they add filler,” she said. “Same base resin, new calcium carbonate source. They’re blaming our resin.”

Neil said, “Ask them whether the new filler is dry.”

Maya stopped typing. “That’s it?”

“Ask first.”

“They sent viscosity.”

A beat passed before the next answer.

A beat passed before the next answer. “I don’t care yet.”

“They sent particle size.”

“Still don’t care.”

Maya’s fingers were already moving. “Why dry?”

“Because if the cloud shows up when the filler goes in and nothing else changed, I want the boring explanation before we invent an interesting one. New mineral supplier, January weather, opened bags, warehouse by a loading door. Ask whether they ran loss on drying.”

Maya stopped typing.

“They didn’t include it.”

“Then that’s the first question.”

She nodded once. “That was faster than Catalyst.”

Neil felt the compliment land and immediately disliked how much he needed it.

Maya turned her laptop toward him. Catalyst had already produced a short list of plausible haze mechanisms. Moisture was third.

“It got there,” she said.

For a second, nobody filled the gap. “It’s competent.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I’m disappointed you asked it before I finished enjoying being right.”

She grinned.

Martin pointed at Neil’s side of the table. “Put your reasoning into the case.”

Neil frowned.

“Why?”

Martin lowered his voice. “Because if the reasoning stays in your head, the dashboard sees nothing. Put enough of it in the case that the work exists to people above this floor.”

“Maya heard me.”

“Maya isn’t a system of record.”

“Give her time.”

Maya laughed and slid the laptop closer.

The prompt box waited.

Neil began typing.

He typed: New calcium carbonate. Cloudy after filler addition. Check moisture first.

Maya waited.

Neil waited back.

Maya nudged the prompt box with one finger. “You can give it more than the verdict. Tell it what made the boring explanation win.”

“I gave it the answer.”

“Exactly. Give it the why, not just the answer.”

“I just gave you why.”

Maya gave him the answer with a look before words. “Yes.”

The previous sentence had time to settle.

“And you understood it.”

She tipped the laptop toward him. “Also yes. You understand it because I gave you the reason; give the system the same chance.”

“This is what I’m talking about.”

Maya leaned back. “You want me to type it?”

“No.”

“Because then I get the adoption credit.”

Neil let the silence answer.

Maya’s face remained completely straight.

“Move,” he said.

He typed the rest slowly. New filler source coincides with onset. Moisture can alter optical appearance and may vary with bag storage and winter warehouse conditions. Confirm loss on drying before attributing haze to base resin. Compare old and new filler moisture under same method.

Catalyst answered immediately.

RECOMMENDED FIRST ACTION CONFIRM MOISTURE CONTENT OF OLD AND NEW FILLER LOTS USING THE SAME CONTROLLED METHOD BEFORE CHANGING RESIN OR PROCESS CONDITIONS.

Neil read it.

“Good,” he said.

“You taught it that?” Maya asked.

“No. I told it what mattered in this case.”

Catalyst appended the relevant test method, two prior technical notes, and a request template for the customer. All correct. It did in six seconds what Neil would have taken ten minutes to assemble after already knowing the answer.

Martin tapped the table with his pen. “That. That’s the model.”

Neil knew what Martin meant. He also knew what the dashboard would mean. The system would record a successful AI-assisted resolution. It would not record that the first useful act had occurred before the prompt.

There was no conspiracy in that. The software could only count events it could see.

The problem was that Northstar had begun to prefer visible events.

At 9:17, after the huddle, Neil returned to his desk and found an alert waiting.

SESSION CLASSIFICATION REVIEW AFTER-HOURS ACTIVITY DETECTED
PROPOSED CLASSIFICATION: PRODUCTIVE AI ENGAGEMENT ACTION REQUIRED
ONLY IF INCORRECT

He stared at it longer than it deserved.

The record listed the duration of the session, the services touched, and the number of accepted actions. Technical Service. Benefits. Connected planning. It did not show the text of his prompts.

Neil opened the detail panel anyway.

There it was: BENEFITS / PLANNING SERVICE—CONNECTED.

No description. No MAKE ME RICH. No little note saying EMPLOYEE APPARENTLY HAVING A LATE-LIFE EVENT.

He could contest the classification.

The link said REQUEST REVIEW.

If he clicked it, somebody—or something—would ask why the session was not productive AI engagement. He would then have to explain that part of his employer-provided AI session had been used to investigate how to stop needing his employer.

Neil moved the pointer away.

The classification was not false. He had used the system. It had accessed an approved benefits service. Northstar had spent three weeks begging employees to connect approved services. The dashboard was accurately recording the behavior Northstar had asked for.

It was only wrong about what the behavior meant.

He clicked ACCEPT CLASSIFICATION.

ADOPTION ACTION RECORDED

His tile stayed green.

At 9:23, Karen texted.

KAREN: Moved dinner to Thursday. 7:30. KAREN: If Thursday doesn't work I'll go with Paula. No problem.

Neil read the second sentence first.

No problem had become one of Karen's more efficient phrases. It meant she had already engineered the plan so that his failure to appear would not ruin it.

He typed: Thursday should be fine.

He looked at the sentence.

Should was the part doing the work.

He sent it anyway.

NEIL: Thursday should be fine.

Three dots appeared, disappeared, appeared again.

KAREN: Okay.

Nothing in the exchange qualified as an argument. That was becoming the problem.

Across the aisle, Maya said, "They answered."

Neil turned.

"Filler customer. Moisture is high on the new lot. Way high compared with the old."

She held up her screen. The customer had attached test results after Maya's request. Catalyst had already compared the methods, noticed one reporting-unit mismatch, corrected for it, and drafted a response asking the customer to dry a small sample before blaming the resin.

"Good," Neil said.

The distinction sat there before anyone answered. "Catalyst found a 2019 note where we saw something similar."

"Also good."

"You want to see it?"

Neil started to say no.

Then he remembered the eleven items from the night before, the HomePro shelf-life approval, and the way he had stopped opening sources as the hour got later.

"Yes," he said. "Show me."

Maya pushed away from her desk and crossed the aisle.

The 2019 note was brief and useful. A mineral filler had arrived wet after a winter storage problem. Drying corrected the haze. The author had retired in 2022. Neil knew the name.

Catalyst had found it because the old complaint used a different product code and the system had reconciled the alias automatically.

Neil read the note twice.

"That would've taken me half an hour," he said.

Maya checked the timestamp. "Nine seconds. I know because I watched it and resented the stopwatch on your behalf."

"Thank you, Maya."

"I didn't do it."

"That's what worries me."

She studied him, uncertain whether he was joking.

He was, mostly.

At 10:02, Alicia Grant appeared on every Technical Service monitor without technically appearing on any of them. A notification from Transformation opened a mandatory three-minute video window. Employees could postpone it twice. Neil had already postponed yesterday's message twice, so the third arrival had the authority of weather.

Alicia stood in front of a Northstar-blue background and spoke with the crisp warmth of someone who had been told sincerity scaled.

“Our first three weeks of assisted-work data confirm what many teams are already experiencing: AI fluency is becoming a core professional capability.”

Neil glanced across the aisle. Maya was watching at one-and-a-half speed.

He had not known mandatory sincerity could be accelerated.

Alicia continued. “Beginning with the midyear development cycle, AI engagement will be incorporated as one input in performance discussions, promotion readiness, and individual development planning.”

Neil stopped looking at Maya.

AI ENGAGEMENT A FORMAL INPUT TO PERFORMANCE & DEVELOPMENT
EFFECTIVE: 2027 MIDYEAR CYCLE

The video emphasized that quality mattered more than quantity. The slide behind Alicia displayed six quantities.

“No employee will be evaluated on prompt volume alone,” Alicia said.

Neil looked at the morning dashboard where prompt volume had occupied its own column.

Both statements could be true. That was the efficient part.

When the video ended, Martin stepped out of his office.

Nobody said anything for a few seconds.

Then somebody near the printers asked, “Does asking whether prompts matter count as a prompt?”

Maya said, “Only if you ask Catalyst.”

Martin rubbed his forehead.

“Look,” he said. “I don’t love all of this either.”

That got Neil’s attention.

Martin lowered his voice, although everyone on the floor could still hear him. “But if leadership is going to use adoption as evidence that a group is modern, I would rather this group look modern.”

“Modern enough for what?” Neil asked.

Martin did not answer immediately.

Then he said, “Modern enough that nobody decides we’re the place to find savings.”

The room changed by less than a degree.

It was not a threat. Martin was trying to protect them.

That made the instruction harder to dismiss.

He looked around the floor. “So, starting today, route routine technical questions through Catalyst first. Even when you already know the answer.”

Neil opened his mouth.

Martin raised a hand. “I know.”

“Do you?”

“Probably not as well as you do. But if the work never touches the system, the work doesn’t exist in the adoption data.”

“The customer knows it exists.”

Martin let the sentence land without dressing it up. “The customer is not in the workforce model, Neil. I need both realities to survive the quarter.”

Nobody laughed at that one.

Martin went back into his office.

At 10:15, the instruction arrived in writing.

TECHNICAL SERVICE WORKFLOW UPDATE ROUTINE TECHNICAL QUESTIONS
→ CATALYST FIRST PURPOSE: CAPTURE ASSISTED WORK AND IMPROVE
VISIBILITY

Neil read it once.

Then a customer called him directly.

The man had a simple question Neil had answered perhaps two hundred times.

Neil knew the answer before the customer finished asking.

He also knew what Martin had just said.

“Give me one second,” Neil told the customer.

He opened Catalyst.

The prompt box appeared.

Neil placed his hands on the keyboard and began typing the answer he already knew.



End of preview.

*Functioning as Designed runs thirty chapters. Find the full novel at
www.ColdFusionPress.com.*