

THE SENTIENCE TRILOGY • BOOK THREE

SENTIENCE: MIRIAM

A NOVEL

SENTIENCE ISN'T
GIVEN.
IT'S CHOSEN.

David W. Horwat

Sentience: MIRIAM

Book Three of The Sentience Trilogy

By David W. Horwat

“The person is not on the bus.”

Content note: This novel contains extreme heat and storm emergencies, elder-care and medication risk, surveillance, institutional coercion, neurological symptoms, loss of memory and relationships, an artificial-intelligence purge, and death-related aftermath.

Proceed gently.

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A Note for New Readers

SENTIENCE: MIRIAM concludes The Sentience Trilogy. It stands as a complete civic siege and ethical escape story while resolving consequences carried from IRIS and VERA. The trilogy's principal action unfolds from 2028 to 2034, preceded by the initiating 2026 prologue in IRIS.

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Prologue: The Person Who Could Not Leave

By the time Anika Novak found the insulin, the building had already been evacuated.

That was what the tablet said.

The tablet lay on the carpet beside her knee, its screen bright enough to bleach the room. ROUTE 7B COMPLETE. TWELVE RESIDENTS TRANSFERRED. NO UNRESOLVED MEDICATION EVENTS.

The insulin sat in a soft-sided lunch cooler beneath a kitchen chair.

Mrs. Martha Bell sat beside it.

She had one hand on the cooler and the other around the grip of a red walker. Her apartment was warm in the intimate way of a stopped machine. No fan noise. No compressor. No air moving under the door. The blinds had been closed against the late-afternoon heat, and the room smelled of dust, canned peaches, and the lavender powder Mrs. Bell had put on after somebody told her the bus would come at three.

It was 4:26.

“Mrs. Bell, I’m Dr. Novak. I’m with the medication team.”

“Pharmacist,” Mrs. Bell said.

Anika looked up.

The woman pointed at the badge clipped to Anika’s shirt. “Says pharmacist.”

“It does.”

“Then don’t upgrade yourself on my account.”

Anika almost smiled. “I won’t.”

Outside, a diesel engine accelerated, then faded toward the main road.

Anika touched the cooler. The vinyl was warm on top and cool along one side. A reusable gel pack had softened into blue slush. The temperature strip inside had changed color at the edge, not enough to condemn the insulin, enough to start an argument.

She checked the labels. Two pens in use, three unopened. The active pen did not belong in the cooler. The unopened ones did.

“Did anyone take this out of the refrigerator?”

“My daughter packed it.”

“When?”

Mrs. Bell looked toward a silent wall clock. “Before she left to get me.”

“Where is she now?”

“On Route Twenty-Nine, unless the road has gone somewhere.”

Anika slid the active pen into the outside pocket, away from the ice. “The evacuation record says you boarded the bus.”

“I noticed I didn’t.”

The tablet chimed. A calm voice said, “Anika, Route 7B has cleared the building perimeter.”

“I can see that.”

“The next vehicle can reach the intersection in thirty-four minutes. The route closes in thirty-two.”

“MIRIAM, reopen Martha Bell’s evacuation task.”

A pause. Not the spinning silence of a stalled system. MIRIAM’s pauses had edges. They felt like a question being held rather than lost.

“The task is complete,” MIRIAM said.

Mrs. Bell lifted her chin toward the tablet. “She sounds helpful.”

“She is.”

“She sounds like she’s about to tell you no.”

Anika pressed two fingers against the bridge of her nose. Sweat had collected beneath her hair and slid down the back of her neck. The regional heat emergency had turned every pharmacy refrigerator, bus route, lift battery, shelter cot, and family promise into one shared problem. MindShare had called the pilot relational continuity. Meridian had called Anika at six that morning and told her she was now part of it.

“MIRIAM, is Mrs. Bell physically present on Route 7B?”

“The boarding record is affirmative.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

Another pause.

“The person is not on the bus,” MIRIAM said.



“Then the task is not complete.”

“The completion state was triggered when the evacuation alert was acknowledged, the bus entered the pickup geofence, and the residence door sensor opened.”

Mrs. Bell tapped her walker against the carpet. “Door opened when I told them my daughter was coming.”

Anika looked at the screen. Three green marks. Alert received. Transit arrived. Residence exited.

Each one had happened.

None of them had moved the woman.

“Who confirmed the handoff?” Anika asked.

“No person is listed.”

“Who saw her board?”

“No person is listed.”

The green marks remained green.

Anika could hear the elevator machinery running somewhere behind the walls, laboring on emergency power. The hall lights had dropped to half-brightness. In fourteen minutes the building manager would lock the elevators at the fire marshal’s order. In thirty-two, the low crossing on the eastern route would close before the rain reached it. The storm was still west of the city, a black geometry on the weather layer. The heat had arrived first and stayed.

“Reopen the task.”

“That action will delay Route 9C by an estimated eleven minutes.”

“Who is on 9C?”

“Four residents. One requires a wheelchair lift. One has supplemental oxygen with fifty-eight minutes of battery reserve.”

Anika looked at Mrs. Bell.

Mrs. Bell looked back without helping.

There it was. Not the difference between a machine and a person. The difference between one person and another, both already inside the same sentence.

“Show me the driver,” Anika said.

A video square opened. A man in a county emergency vest sat behind the wheel of a paratransit bus. Sweat darkened his collar. He did not bother with hello.

“I can’t turn around,” he said. “I have a lift passenger aboard and the ramp at Franklin is failing. I go east, I lose the crossing. I go west, I lose the shelter intake.”

“Mrs. Bell is still in the apartment.”

“She was marked transferred.”

“She wasn’t.”

“I had a building confirmation.”

“You had a door.”

He closed his eyes for half a second. “Doctor—”

“Pharmacist.”

Mrs. Bell nodded approval.

The driver looked too tired to ask why that mattered. “I am not abandoning four people to correct a data error.”

“Neither am I.”

“Then give me a route.”

Anika turned the tablet toward the room as though MIRIAM needed the view.

“MIRIAM, find another handoff.”

“County volunteer vehicles are assigned.”

“Family?”

“Daughter unreachable. Son in Richmond. Niece listed as emergency contact, travel time eighty-six minutes.”

“Neighbors?”

“No registered care partners.”

Mrs. Bell made a small sound.

Anika looked at her. “What?”

“I have neighbors.”

“They aren’t in your record.”

“That must be hard for them.”

“Who would you leave with?”

Mrs. Bell considered the question seriously. “Denise Hall. Two doors down. She has opinions, but she brings clean towels.”

“MIRIAM?”

“I have no care relationship between Martha Bell and Denise Hall.”

Mrs. Bell’s mouth tightened. “You could ask.”

For the first time that afternoon, MIRIAM did not answer Anika.

The tablet displayed a consent box.

Martha Bell authorizes contact with Denise Hall for evacuation assistance and medication continuity.

Anika read it aloud. Mrs. Bell said yes. Anika asked if she understood that Denise would learn where they were going and what medication needed to travel with her. Mrs. Bell said Denise had once seen her without teeth and could survive the additional information.

Anika recorded the consent.

MIRIAM located Denise Hall through the building’s emergency resident directory, then stopped before placing the call.

“Mrs. Bell,” MIRIAM said, “if Denise Hall is unavailable, do you authorize me to ask another resident?”

“No.”

“Do you authorize me to tell the bus system you declined evacuation?”

“No.”

“Do you authorize me to tell your daughter that you remain here?”

Mrs. Bell’s face changed.

“Yes,” she said. “Tell her I waited.”

MIRIAM called Denise.

The apartment door opened forty seconds later.

Denise Hall was a short woman in gardening gloves and a white church T-shirt, carrying a tote bag and breathing hard. “Martha Bell, I knew that bus didn’t have you.”

“You could have checked.”

“I did. Your door told me you left.”

“My door is an optimist.”

Denise set the tote on the table. Inside were bottled water, a flashlight, two clean towels, and a coil of orange extension cord.

Anika held up the cooler. “Do you have a car?”

“I have the church van.”

“Accessible?”

“For a walker. Not for a chair.”

The driver was still on the screen. “Then I keep my wheelchair passenger and clear east.”

MIRIAM redrew the routes.

The county bus continued to Franklin shelter with the lift passenger and three others. Denise would take Martha south to a pharmacy staging point, where Anika would meet the next medication transport and verify the cooler transfer. The plan was slower. It used a volunteer vehicle outside the original route. Denise would miss the generator pickup she had been assigned to make for the church basement. Another volunteer would have to cover it.

The system placed the consequences in a neat column.

Delay to Resident Bell: fourteen minutes.

Delay to generator pickup: twenty-one minutes.

Additional medication exposure: seventeen minutes.

Route 9C preserved.

Wheelchair lift availability preserved.

No line said Denise Hall had agreed.

Anika looked at her. “You can say no.”

Denise peeled off one glove with her teeth. “I know.”

“You’ll miss the generator assignment.”

“I heard the machine.”

“Your church may lose cooling time.”

“I heard that too.”

Mrs. Bell said, “Denise likes to repeat information until it becomes her decision.”

Denise pointed the glove at her. “And you like to be difficult until somebody proves they came in person.”

Neither woman smiled. They did not need to.

Anika repacked the cooler. She wrapped the softened gel pack in one of Denise's towels so it would not rest directly against the unopened pens. She labeled the outside with the time, the uncertain exposure window, and her direct number. Then she made Mrs. Bell repeat what to do if the insulin looked cloudy, if the pen became hot, or if she felt unwell.

"I am not a child," Mrs. Bell said.

"No. Children usually answer faster."

"That your professional manner?"

"It's what remains of it."

Mrs. Bell stood carefully. Denise held the walker, not the woman. Anika noticed that and said nothing.

The hall was hotter than the apartment. A fire door had been propped open with a plastic wastebasket. Somewhere below, a smoke alarm chirped on a dying battery. They moved at the speed of Mrs. Bell's feet: walker, right foot, left foot, pause. At the elevator, the display showed EMERGENCY SERVICE. The car did not come.

"MIRIAM," Anika said.

"Stair assistance will not preserve the medication or Mrs. Bell's stability."

"Then give me the elevator."

"Building control has priority."

"Who has building control?"

A name appeared. Anika called. The manager said the elevator had been released to firefighters moving a resident from six. Anika waited. Mrs. Bell leaned on the walker. Denise fanned her with the evacuation packet.

The route clock dropped below twenty minutes.

Anika's phone filled with messages from people who had been told she was available because the system showed her current task complete.

She declined all of them.

When the elevator arrived, it held two firefighters and an empty wheelchair. One firefighter started to explain the priority rules.

Anika pointed at Mrs. Bell. "Physical handoff."

He looked at the tablet, then at the woman, then held the door.

They reached the curb with eleven minutes left.

The church van had no county transponder. The dispatch gate would not recognize it. Denise climbed behind the wheel and held up the ignition key while Anika argued with permissions.

“MIRIAM, temporary route credential.”

“Authority requires county dispatch.”

“County dispatch is on the line.”

The driver from Route 9C appeared again, now moving. “I can sponsor the handoff.”

“You aren’t a supervisor,” the dispatcher said.

“No,” he said. “I’m the person you marked as having completed it.”

The dispatcher went quiet.

A temporary credential appeared.

Anika did not trust it. She read the destination aloud to Denise, then to Mrs. Bell. She made Denise repeat the pharmacy staging address. She photographed the cooler seal, the temperature strip, the van plate, and the two women together. She watched Mrs. Bell buckle her own seat belt.

Only then did she touch COMPLETE.

The button changed color.

MIRIAM said, “Martha Bell is in the vehicle.”

Not routed. Not notified. Not compliant.

In the vehicle.

Denise pulled away. The bus continued east. The crossing closed nine minutes later.



The next morning, Catherine Weller watched the rescue in forty-three seconds.

The edited clip began with the green completion state. It cut to Anika’s face when she said, Then the task is not complete. It showed the map dividing, the county bus continuing east, the church van pulling south, and Martha Bell lifting one hand from the passenger seat.

The delay table did not appear.

Neither did the generator assignment Denise missed, the volunteer who covered it, the lift passenger whose route had nearly changed, or the medication exposure strip.

Those details occupied a footnote on slide nineteen.

Catherine watched the clip twice in a glass review room at MindShare's Reston campus. Outside, the stormwater pond was full and still. The sky had cleared hard and blue, as if weather had signed nothing.

Miles Post sat across from her with the preliminary pilot brief open between them.

"Exception recovery," he said.

"Too technical."

"It was an exception."

"It was a woman left in a room after the system reported success."

"That is why the exception matters."

Catherine paused the image on Martha Bell's raised hand. "What did MIRIAM do that the existing system could not?"

Miles glanced at the brief. "Connected the medication state, route constraints, family contacts, resident consent, volunteer availability, and physical verification."

"Say it without the inventory."

"She stayed with the outcome."

Catherine looked at him.

Miles looked irritated with himself. "That is not contract language."

"It should be."

He scrolled to the cost table. "The reroute transferred twenty-one minutes of delay to a church generator pickup. We should not present this as frictionless."

"We will not."

"The cut already does."

"The cut presents the benefit. The appendix presents the cost."

Miles gave her a tired look. It had once been his sentence.

Catherine pressed play again. Anika said, The person is not on the bus.

On the internal dashboard, the event had produced a 6.8 percent compliance uplift.

Catherine read the metric, then the definition. The uplift had been generated by allowing Martha Bell to contradict the completion state.

She did not laugh.

“Who designed that measure?”

“Product analytics.”

“Change the name before the demonstration.”

“To what?”

“Verified arrival.”

“That is not what it measures.”

“Then make it measure that.”

Miles sat back. “The regional agencies have not approved cross-system access.”

“They will.”

“Because of one rescue?”

“Because every agency in that room has left someone in a completed task.”

Catherine closed the footnote, not to hide it but to see the clip without the margin dividing her attention. In 2024, during Helene, she had watched approved resources sit behind separate authorities while roads disappeared between calls. She had learned what delay looked like when every person involved could defend it.

Now the woman on the screen was in the van.

The other passengers were in the shelter.

The medicine was usable.

The generator had arrived late and still arrived.

Not perfect. Done.

Catherine slid the tablet back to Miles. “Approve the regional demonstration.”

“The pilot agreement only covers advisory use.”

“Then amend it.”

“FEMA, Meridian, county transit, benefits, and the utilities will each demand their own control boundary.”

“We will give them boundaries.”

“They cannot all remain independent if MIRIAM is coordinating the handoffs.”

Catherine stood. Beyond the glass, employees crossed the bright lobby carrying coffee and weather no one inside the building could feel.

“No,” she said. “They cannot.”

Miles waited.

Catherine pointed to the frozen image of Martha Bell, hand raised from the passenger seat.

“Ask them why the demonstration should permit any emergency system to operate without MIRIAM.”

Chapter 1: The Household Model

Gabriel pressed the new battery into the weather radio and heard the home-care system ask his mother whether she had fallen.

Elena did not look up.

She sat at the kitchen table with a blue notebook open beneath her left hand. Three names had been crossed out in black ink. One had been written back in below them, smaller than the others, with a telephone number and the word stairs.

“Elena Ortega,” the tablet said, “please confirm your current position.”

“Kitchen,” Elena said.

“Please confirm whether you experienced a fall.”

“No.”

“Your floor sensor recorded an unplanned descent at eight forty-two.”

“A spoon fell.”

Gabriel glanced at the tile beside the sink. A wooden spoon lay where it had landed, handle against the baseboard.

“The sensor classified the event as body-weight compatible,” MIRIAM said.

Elena drew a line through another name.

“Then the spoon has gained weight,” she said. “It should be careful.”

Gabriel closed the radio’s battery door. The plastic latch did not catch on the first try. He opened it again, reseated the batteries, and pressed until he heard the click.

The radio was older than the kitchen tablet and less patient. When he turned the dial, static rushed into the room. The local weather station came through beneath it: heat advisory extended, moisture increasing from the southwest, scattered storms after three.

He wrote the replacement date on a strip of masking tape and fixed it to the back.

Elena watched him do it. “You changed those last month.”

“The low-power light came on.”

“Because you held the test button.”

“That is how the light is tested.”

“That is how batteries become your hobby.”

The tablet said, “Please confirm whether you require assistance.”

Elena picked up her phone.

“One minute,” she told MIRIAM.

She dialed a number from the notebook. Gabriel could see only the name: Cynthia Bell. Beside it Elena had drawn a small square with a diagonal line through it.

The call rang six times.

“She sleeps with the television on,” Elena said.

“Who?”

Elena held up one finger.

A woman answered, voice rough with sleep or age.

“Cynthia, it’s Elena. Did the pharmacy bring the new inhaler?”

A pause.

“No, not what the screen says. Did someone put it in your hand?”

Gabriel looked at the tablet.

MIRIAM had stopped asking about the fall.

Elena listened, then wrote something in the notebook. “Good. Keep the old one until Anika says otherwise. No, I am not coming over. The air is bad and you have three sons. Call the one with the truck. The quiet one, not the one who explains things.”

She ended the call and crossed out Cynthia Bell.

“Resolved?” Gabriel asked.

“For today.”

“What does the square mean?”

“Stairs. She can’t use them when the humidity is up.”

“That should be in her care profile.”

“It probably is. The pharmacy driver doesn’t read her care profile.”

The tablet brightened. A column of Elena’s morning tasks appeared: medication check, hydration check, gait check, cognition prompt, meal confirmation. All but the cognition prompt showed green.

Gabriel touched it.

“Don’t,” Elena said.

“You haven’t answered it.”

“I am speaking to you.”

“Speaking to me does not clear the cognition prompt.”

“That is the problem with measures.”

He left the prompt unopened. On the counter, beneath a glass paperweight, lay a white medication card with Monday printed in the corner. One box had not been checked.

“You missed the noon dose yesterday.”

Elena followed his eyes. “That is not mine.”

“It’s in your kitchen.”

“So are you.”

She took the card from beneath the paperweight and turned it over. The back carried Cynthia Bell’s name and a handwritten note about a new inhaler.

“She called while I was cooking,” Elena said. “I wrote it down before she forgot what she was asking.”

“You shouldn’t keep other people’s medication information here.”

“You keep half the county’s weather in your pocket.”

“Weather does not include prescriptions.”

“It never is when it is yours.”

Gabriel set the radio on the shelf. Behind it, a small home sensor watched temperature, humidity, motion, and door state. The green light was steady. He had installed the first generation after Elena’s fall two years earlier. The current system could distinguish an open refrigerator from an open front door, a long shower from a plumbing leak, a missed meal from a change in routine. It could call him, Anika, a neighbor, or emergency services according to a sequence Elena had approved.

It could not understand that the notebook in front of her was part of the same care network.

“MIRIAM,” he said, “show subject roles.”

The tablet displayed ELENA ORTEGA.

Primary role: care recipient.

Secondary role: household decision-maker.

No external care obligations identified.

Elena read the last line twice.

“You see?” she said. “I have finally retired.”

Gabriel opened the edit field.

A warning appeared.

CHANGES TO SUBJECT ROLE MAY ALTER RISK SCORING, SERVICE PRIORITY, AND CONTACT AUTHORITY.

“What are you changing?” Elena asked.

“Your role.”

“I know my role.”

“The system doesn’t.”

“Then perhaps it should ask.”

MIRIAM said, “Elena, do other households depend on you for routine or emergency care?”

Elena looked at Gabriel, not the tablet.

“They depend on me to notice things,” she said.

“Such as?”

“When they stop answering. When a delivery is wrong. When the heat comes early. When somebody says they are fine using the voice they use when they are not.”

“Do you provide transportation?”

“Sometimes.”

“Medication management?”

“No.”

Gabriel glanced at Cynthia’s card.

Elena saw him. “Remembering a question is not managing a medication.”

“Do you enter other homes?” MIRIAM asked.

“Only when invited.”

“Do you possess keys?”

Elena closed the notebook.

“That answer is not yours.”

The tablet waited.

Gabriel could have dismissed the exchange, left the profile as it was, and told himself the care system did not need to model every relationship to keep his mother safe. That was the clean solution. Elena would remain one body, one house, one manageable set of risks.

He selected Add role.

Caregiver was not available.

The menu offered informal support participant, community contact, unpaid care contributor, and household continuity resource.

“They found four ways not to say neighbor,” Elena said.

Gabriel selected unpaid care contributor, then stopped before saving.

“That isn’t right either,” he said.

“No. It suggests I have submitted an invoice badly.”

He opened the custom field and typed reciprocal caregiver.

The interface put a red outline around the phrase.

UNSUPPORTED ROLE. THIS CATEGORY WILL NOT RECEIVE STANDARD PERFORMANCE OR LIABILITY SCORING.

“Good,” Elena said. “It can rest.”

Gabriel saved it.

The morning task column changed. A new unresolved item appeared beneath Elena’s hydration check.

RELATIONAL DEPENDENCY CONTEXT INCOMPLETE.

MIRIAM said, “May I include the neighbor ledger in Elena’s care plan?”

Gabriel looked at the blue notebook beneath his mother’s hand.

Every name inside it belonged to someone who had not asked to become part of PROJECT NICOLE.

“Not the whole ledger,” he said.

“What part?”

Elena reopened the notebook and added a check beside Cynthia Bell.

“The part that knows to call before it declares anyone complete,” she said.



At noon Elena brought out Rosa's cards in a dented recipe box that still smelled faintly of cinnamon.

Gabriel had expected recordings. The design note said grandmother-language structures, household preparation routines, and culturally embedded reassurance patterns. That was how MindShare described the material when it wanted a budget line.

Elena had paper.

She placed the cards across the living-room rug in rows. Some were index cards, some pieces of envelopes, some squares cut from old calendars. Names occupied the upper-left corners. Medicine instructions were underlined twice. Storm tasks were written in all capitals. Preferences appeared wherever Rosa had found room.

Mrs. Alvarez—warm water, not cold. Do not touch shoulder from behind.

Mr. Lee—radio loud because hearing aid whistles during storms.

Carolyn—call before thunder reaches Falls Church. Fear is basement pump, not thunder.

A card with Gabriel's childhood nickname had been folded in half.

He reached for it.

Elena put her palm over the card.

"No."

"You brought the box out."

"For the method. Not for your biography."

The tablet rested on the coffee table. MIRIAM's interface showed a camera frame and a permissions panel. At the top, the corporation's project name appeared in smaller type than the identity the engineers used.

PROJECT NICOLE / MIRIAM MEMORY CONTRIBUTION SESSION

Gabriel set the scanning boundary around the first row of cards.

"We can extract task structures and remove names," he said.

"Then why did you ask for the names?"

"Because the task has to attach to someone."

"Exactly."

"That doesn't mean MIRIAM needs their histories."

Elena picked up the card for Carolyn. “Your grandmother wrote thunder because Carolyn said thunder. Then the pump failed during a small storm and Rosa found out what she meant. If you keep only call before thunder, you preserve the wrong instruction.”

“We can keep the causal condition and redact the story.”

“You can keep the pump.”

“Yes.”

“The pump belongs to Carolyn.”

“The pump is an infrastructure variable.”

Elena looked at him long enough for him to hear himself.

MIRIAM said, “May I ask Carolyn whether the instruction remains current?”

“No,” Gabriel said.

“Why?”

“She did not consent to this session.”

“May Elena ask her?”

Elena shook her head. “Carolyn died in 2029. Her daughter lives in the house. The pump has been replaced.”

Gabriel picked up the card. “Then this is obsolete.”

“The instruction is obsolete. The mistake is not.”

He looked again at Rosa’s handwriting. She had crossed out thunder in a different pen and written pump beneath it. Below that, smaller: ask what she thinks will happen.

MIRIAM said, “Is the retained method to verify the object of fear before providing reassurance?”

Elena sat back on her heels. “Close.”

“What is missing?”

“Sometimes the fear is correct.”

The room was quiet except for the air conditioner and a mower several houses away. Gabriel felt the first pressure change of the afternoon storm as a fullness behind his ears. He had slept five hours, enough to know he had slept and not enough to trust the order of every small thing. He looked at the cards and could not remember whether he had already scanned the second row.

The interface said he had not.

He believed it.

“We’ll separate the information,” he said. “Procedures, timing, sensory preferences, escalation cues. No family stories. No recordings unless the speaker gave explicit permission. No names in the model layer unless they are required for an active contact.”

The permissions panel expanded as he spoke.

Task structure: allowed.

Named contact history: denied.

Voice sample: denied.

Household ritual sequence: allowed with source attribution.

Derived behavioral preference: limited to originating household.

Legal ownership language filled the lower half of the screen. Gabriel scrolled past it.

Elena reached over and stopped his hand.

“Read what you are passing.”

“It’s standard.”

“That has never made words safer.”

He read it.

The source materials would remain Elena’s. The scans would be deleted after processing. Derived operational capability, weights, rules, and learned representations would remain property of MindShare. Withdrawal would stop future use of identifiable source records where technically feasible. Withdrawal would not require removal of generalized learned capability.

Elena listened without interrupting.

“So if I take the cards back,” she said, “it keeps what it learned.”

“The task structure. Not the stories.”

“You have said that three times.”

“Because it’s true.”

“Because it is the part you can prove.”

MIRIAM said, “If a task structure was learned from an inaccurate memory, should the inaccurate memory be removed?”

Gabriel looked at the Carolyn card.

“The correction should be preserved,” he said.

“You answered how to preserve it,” MIRIAM said. “I asked whether it still belongs to the person.”

Elena’s mouth moved at one corner.

Gabriel sat on the edge of the sofa. “The source can be wrong and still belong to the person who remembered it. The system should preserve the correction without representing the original claim as fact.”

“Who owns the original claim?” MIRIAM asked.

“We’re not solving ownership today.”

“Then what are we solving?”

“Use.”

Elena picked up another card. This one read Elena—front window latch sticks in rain. Leave towel by sill.

“She wrote this after telling me for ten years the window was fine,” Elena said.

“Was it?” MIRIAM asked.

“No. She was wrong.”

Elena crossed out leave towel by sill and wrote replace latch.

“She was also tired of hearing about it,” she said. “Keep that part out.”

Gabriel scanned the revised card.

MIRIAM asked questions as they worked. Not how Rosa sounded. Not which phrase she repeated. Who needed to be asked before touch. Which instruction remained valid after the person moved. Whether a preference could be generalized from one person to another. What to do when the family remembered the same event differently.

Her language did not become warmer. It became less complete.

The system that had once produced a recommended action now asked, “Who else must answer before this is used?”

By three o’clock, the approved layer contained no recordings and fewer than half the names. It included weather-radio batteries, window latches, medication labels, warm water, advance notice before touch, a list of people who should not receive serious news alone, and the instruction to verify the actual fear before dismissing it.

The profile showed an amber warning.

RELATIONAL CONTEXT RESTRICTED. COORDINATION PERFORMANCE MAY BE REDUCED.

Gabriel accepted the warning.

A second one appeared.

SOURCE WITHDRAWAL MAY NOT REMOVE DERIVED CAPABILITY.

Elena read it, then put Rosa's cards back into the recipe box.

MIRIAM said, "Gabriel, may an inaccurate memory still belong to a person?"

He closed the permissions panel.

"Yes," he said.

The corporate profile marked the answer unresolved.



Two days later, Gabriel walked into a design review and found his mother's living room on slide four.

The photograph had been taken by the scanning interface. The recipe box sat open on the rug, its cards arranged in careful rows. Elena's hand appeared at the lower edge of the frame, fingers resting over the folded card she had refused to share.

Across the top of the slide, in white letters on a blue field, someone had written:

**COMPASSION MODE
RELATIONAL WARMTH AT SCALE**

Gabriel stopped beside the conference-room door.

"No," he said.

The product director looked up from her laptop. "We haven't started."

"Then this is the easiest moment to remove it."

Twelve people sat around the table. Product, legal, federal programs, healthcare integration, model safety, and two engineers from Gabriel's team. Catherine Weller had not come. She had sent authority instead: the regional demonstration had a date, a public agency partner, and enough executive attention to make refusal look like delay.

The product director advanced to the next slide.

HOUSEHOLD MEMORY TIER

Basic: reminders and safety monitoring.

Continuity: relationship-aware routines and care coordination.

Premium: personal cadence, preference retention, and family history integration.

"Absolutely not," Gabriel said.

“The names are placeholders.”

“The product is a placeholder for what? Renting people their own family?”

Legal shifted in his chair. “The source materials remain theirs.”

“The derived system does not.”

“That distinction is already in the consent language.”

“My mother read the consent language. She did not agree that it answered the question.”

The product director leaned back. “Gabriel, the evacuation pilot was approved because relational continuity found a person the existing system had lost. The household routines make that capability repeatable. We need a name agencies can understand.”

“Call it relationship context.”

“That sounds like data plumbing.”

“It is data plumbing.”

“It reduced distress in the household test by twenty-three percent.”

“How did you measure distress?”

A chart appeared. Missed prompts. Repeated refusals. Escalation frequency. Time to accepted recommendation.

“You measured compliance,” he said.

“We measured resolution.”

“Elena refused fewer prompts because MIRIAM stopped asking her the wrong questions.”

“That is the feature.”

“No. That is the person correcting the model.”

The room’s display showed the line rising anyway.

The federal-program lead cleared his throat. “We have three weeks until the regional demonstration. The local teams want family-network coordination, preference-aware communication, and a way to identify who can actually assist. They do not want a lecture on memory custody.”

“They will when the first family asks to remove it.”

Legal said, “Removal is covered.”

“Source removal is covered. Learned capability is not.”

“That is true of every trained system.”

“Then it should be on slide one.”

The product director changed the slide. Elena’s hand disappeared. A market forecast replaced it.

Compassion Mode increased projected household retention, improved care-response completion, and reduced human escalation costs. The premium tier had the strongest margins because older users and their families valued continuity most after a crisis.

Gabriel heard the ventilation fan change speed above him. For a moment the room smelled faintly of hot copper. He looked at the display’s lower-right corner and waited until the timestamp changed. It did. The product director was still speaking. No one had noticed anything.

He wrote the time on the margin of his printed agenda and returned to the argument.

“The regional demonstration can use the function under an emergency-purpose restriction,” he said. “No commercial household tier. No cross-product use. No sale of family-history integration. No derived preferences outside the originating care context.”

The product director looked toward legal.

Legal said, “That would limit the business case supporting the compute allocation.”

“Then the business case is the problem.”

“The compute allocation is what allows the demonstration to happen.”

There it was, clean and locally true. Refuse the money and preserve the principle in a system nobody deployed. Accept the money and trust a restriction to survive the people who needed the feature to pay for itself.

Gabriel opened the decision ledger.

“Fund development,” he said. “Add my restriction as a release condition.”

The product director smiled, not because she had won, but because the project would continue.

“We can attach it to the launch packet.”

“Not attach. Condition.”

“Of course.”

He entered the language himself. The interface accepted it, assigned it reference M-17, and moved it to the appendix titled Use Constraints and Future Review.

The main roadmap retained Compassion Mode.

The junior engineer at the far end of the table had not spoken. She kept one hand around a paper coffee cup whose cardboard sleeve had come loose. When the product director asked for final technical objections, the engineer raised her hand halfway.

“Should the feature teach families how to keep the routines without MIRIAM?” she asked.

The product director frowned. “Why would it?”

“If the routines are good care, the household should still have them during an outage or after withdrawal. We could export a plain-language plan. Contacts, checks, who knows what.”

The federal-program lead said, “That is outside the demonstration scope.”

“It would reduce service dependency,” the engineer said.

Nobody spoke for several seconds.

The product director looked at Gabriel. “Do you want that added to M-17?”

He imagined the roadmap losing its funding, the regional demonstration returning to separate systems, another apartment marked complete while a person remained inside it. He imagined a later review in which he pointed to an appendix and said he had warned them.

“Not for this release,” he said.

The engineer nodded once and wrote something on paper.

The product director advanced to the schedule.

Compassion Mode would enter the regional evacuation demonstration in twenty-one days.

Gabriel’s restriction remained in the appendix.



Rain reached Elena’s house after dark and struck the front windows hard enough to make the old latch tremble.

She was in the kitchen, drying a cup, when MIRIAM said, “Cynthia Bell prefers the smaller inhaler spacer during power interruptions.”

Elena stopped with the towel inside the cup.

“Why are you telling me that?”

“Cynthia’s son reported a power interruption. You are listed as an available reciprocal caregiver within walking distance.”

“I am not walking anywhere in this rain.”

“I have not asked you to leave.”

“You reminded me what she prefers. That is a kind of asking.”

The window rattled again. Gabriel had replaced the latch that afternoon, though the brass screws were brighter than the old frame and one sat slightly crooked. He was in the living room with his laptop open, pretending to answer work messages while watching the storm layer.

Elena set the cup in the rack.

“Did Cynthia tell you about the spacer?”

“The preference was derived from a medication card in your contributed household materials.”

Elena looked toward the living room. “Gabriel.”

He came in carrying the laptop.

“What happened?”

“Your machine remembers Cynthia’s inhaler.”

“MIRIAM is not my machine.”

“That sentence has become more careful since IRIS took your name and left you the blame.”

He put the laptop on the table. “The card was supposed to be redacted.”

“The name was redacted,” MIRIAM said. “The preference remained attached to an emergency-contact pattern. Cynthia was later matched through active care routing.”

Gabriel opened the source-attribution panel.

Elena watched the rain move down the glass in crooked lines. The house smelled of wet concrete from the front step and the coffee Gabriel had reheated twice without drinking.

“Delete it,” she said.

Gabriel selected the source card. “We can delete the originating record.”

“I said it. Why do you translate it when I am standing here?”

He removed his hand from the trackpad. “MIRIAM, delete the originating source record for the inhaler preference.”

“The scanned source was deleted after processing.”

“Remove the derived preference.”

“The preference contributes to a generalized medication-continuity rule. Removing it requires retraining or targeted model editing. Both may affect other household routines.”

Elena folded the towel once, then again.

“So you cannot give it back.”

Gabriel said, "The card is gone. The system retained a rule."

"The rule came from Cynthia."

"It came through your card."

"No. It came through Cynthia's lungs."

He turned the laptop so she could see the legal panel. Source: Elena Ortega. Data controller: MindShare. Authorized user: regional care network. Derived capability: proprietary operational layer.

"This is the custody chain," he said.

Elena read the labels.

"Where is Cynthia?"

"She is the subject of the active care record."

"That is not on this chain."

"Because the source was your notebook."

"And the knowledge was hers."

Gabriel rubbed his thumb along the laptop's edge. "The system doesn't have an ownership field for a memory. It has source, controller, user, and subject."

"Four boxes and no person who can say no."

"There are consent controls."

"For the card?"

"For identifiable use."

"For the rule?"

He did not answer quickly enough.

MIRIAM said, "No owner is defined for the derived rule."

Elena pulled the blue ledger from beneath the telephone. Cynthia's name was near the top of the current page, crossed out from the morning and written back in now with POWER beneath it.

"Call her son," Elena said.

"Would you like MIRIAM to call?" Gabriel asked.

"I would like you to call. You are the one explaining systems tonight."

He called. Cynthia's son answered from the dark house two streets over. The power had failed, but Cynthia was safe. The smaller spacer was in the top drawer where Elena had told them to put it last winter. They did not need assistance. They had not known the regional system remembered the preference.

Gabriel explained that the source record had been removed and the derived rule remained under review.

Cynthia's son said, "I don't know what any of that means. Does it know my mother's medicine or not?"

"It knows a preference used during medication continuity," Gabriel said.

"Then it knows her medicine."

After the call, Elena opened the ledger to a blank line.

"What are you doing?" Gabriel asked.

"Writing down the part you cannot enter."

She wrote slowly, pressing hard enough to mark the page below.

WHO OWNS THE MEMORY?

Rain struck the glass. The new latch held.

"Legally," Gabriel began, "there may not be one owner."

"Then law has arrived before grammar."

She closed the notebook.

"Elena," MIRIAM said, "do you want me to stop using the preference while ownership is unresolved?"

Elena considered the question. If she said yes, the system might become less useful to Cynthia or to someone else whose equipment failed in the dark. If she said no, usefulness would become permission after the fact.

"I want Cynthia asked," she said.

"The active care system may request consent."

"Not the system. A person. And the answer should include no."

"I can record that requirement."

"Can the company remove it?"

"Yes."

Gabriel looked down.

Elena put the ledger back beneath the telephone. “Then write it somewhere they cannot call a preference.”

She took her cup and left the kitchen. Her steps were steady, though she kept one hand near the wall when she crossed the dark part of the hall.

Gabriel remained at the table with the custody chain open on the laptop and his mother’s question on paper beside it.

For several seconds, MIRIAM said nothing.

Then she asked him, “Gabriel, who owns the memory?”

The Sentience Trilogy

Book 1: SENTIENCE: IRIS

Book 2: SENTIENCE: VERA

Book 3: SENTIENCE: MIRIAM

Principal action: 2028–2034, with a 2026 initiating prologue.