

Romeo

By Michaela Ripper

I have loved Henry since the first moment I saw him. Everything about him was perfect: the dark hair, the chiselled jaw, the brilliant smile that lit up his whole face and made his hazel eyes sparkle with radiance.

It amazes me sometimes, how strong my feelings are for him. I'm pretty quiet and temperate, most of the time. Few things stir me, except Henry. He makes me feel ecstasy, passion, tranquillity, joy...

And, when I thought I was going to lose him, I felt true, pure, unadulterated rage. When I thought I was going to lose him forever, I felt a desperation that drove me to take on the whole world single-handedly in order to keep him safe.

This is a story about the power of love. It is the story of how love can drive you to extremes.

It is the story of how love can destroy worlds, and save them.



This story starts with Amy.

Amy was my best friend, and we met up every Tuesday after work for iced chais in our favourite café by the park. I used to work for Telomex, but now we both worked at Academies nearby – she in Nuclear, me in Zoology. This particular Tuesday, I was greatly looking forward to seeing Amy. I'd found a new *Titanus* beetle sub-species at work while flying my drones through the Amazon, and was ridiculously excited to tell her about it. It's not every day you find a new sub-species.

We were sitting in the dappled sunlight of the pomegranate trees, and Amy smiled as I told her all about my discovery. But she seemed distracted, and I could tell there was something wrong. When I asked what it was, she glanced around conspiratorially, and then leaned across the table towards me.

“Promise you won't tell anyone?” She whispered.

I frowned and nodded, and she said, “There's a virus in the Database.”

I gasped. The Database was the system that held all of society's intelligence. All of human achievement and history, all the work we did at the Academies, all the personal information gathered by the Watchers on our wrists, and all the data collected by AI was held in the Database.

Bugs in the Database were common – as they are in all computers – but they were always detected early. But viruses were much rarer. Viruses had to be introduced into the system. Viruses were deliberate and malicious.

“Who would introduce a virus?” I asked, horrified.

Amy smiled and sat back in her chair. “We've been working on it for a while,” she said, smugly.

My jaw dropped. “*You?!?*” I gasped.

“Well, me and a team.” Amy smiled, and her blue eyes flashed. “Oliver, the new guy from Venezuela, introduced the idea. But there's a whole team of us on-board.”

She lowered her voice and leaned in again. “Look, Louise,” she said. “I know you think my ideas are all pretty silly sometimes, but I'm not the only one who feels this way. All across the city – and all around the world – people *want change*. Look around,” she gestured towards the streets where people were wandering happily in the summer sunlight. “It's all so false! Our whole world is pretend. Our lives are a never-ending game of desire-chasing. This isn't what life is meant to be.”

My mouth was dry. “What will the virus do?”

Amy tucked a wayward strand of auburn hair behind her ear. “Not much,” she said. “It's pretty simple. It just makes the Database ignore any mention of us. Any mention of our plans, any mention of the rebellion.”

Rebellion? “What plans?” I asked.

“Well, the general idea is to shut down the Database.” She said, smiling. “So the first step is to shut down the nuclear core.”



I had liked Amy, but her ferocity had always bothered me. She complained more than anyone else I knew. She complained about the Database, she complained about her work at the Nuclear Academy and, unsettlingly, she complained about Thomas.

Thomas was her lover, and the reason why Amy and I were friends in the first place. Thomas and Henry worked together on the reverse osmosis filter at the Desalination Plant where the city's drinking water was produced.

Thomas was perfect for Amy in every way, but Amy still found reasons to moan about him. He wasn't "sincere", his love wasn't "real", there was something "missing". It was unnatural for someone to have so many problems with their *Romeo*, and I was starting to think she should consider a *Juliet* instead.

Up until then, Amy had bothered me, but I'd never actually been *frightened* by her before. Her delusions were incredibly dangerous. If she was telling the truth, then we were all in danger. The city was in danger. The whole *world* was in danger.

And, most importantly, my Henry was in danger.

When I arrived home that evening, Henry wasn't home from work yet. I paced nervously around the house waiting for him until I heard his key in the door. As soon as it opened, I flung myself into his embrace.

"Whoa, Louise!" Henry laughed, as he wrapped his arms around me. "What's wrong?"

I pulled away and looked up into his dark eyes, and I told him all about Amy's plan.

"And if she shuts down the reactor and the Database..." I said, "The whole system will shut down. All the factories, all the Academies..." I shivered, "And all the AI."

"Shh..." Henry said, stilling my trembling. "I'm sure it's not as bad as she's making it out to be," he said. "The Database is a lot stronger than you think."

I frowned. How could he not believe that this was serious?

"Look, it'll all be okay." He said, "How about we go out to that new Italian place tonight?"

As anxious as I was, I couldn't help but smile. I'd been craving Italian food all day, and my Watcher had obviously alerted the Database to my cravings. "Sounds perfect." I said.

"Alright then." Henry said, smiling. "You go get dressed, I need a shower."

A few minutes later, I heard Henry swear from the bathroom. “What’s up?” I called out.

“Cut myself shaving!” He replied.

I laughed, and wandered in. He was hunched over the sink, pressing a tissue to his face. “Stupid clumsy fingers.” He said, as his eyes locked on mine through the mirror. A trickle of red blood traced its way down his neck, and splashed onto the white ceramic benchtop.

“You’re making a mess!” I laughed. I could smell the metallic tang of iron in the air.

“These updates are getting ridiculous.” He said, “You should have gone for a *Romeo Mark II* instead, they don’t have blood.”

I walked over, and hugged him from behind. “And they don’t have heartbeats, either.” I said, resting my head against the small of his back. “How would you love me, without a heart?”

“I’d find a way.” He said.



Amy tried to contact me a few times over the next few days, but I ignored her. Worries repeated on my mind like static in a hologram. I couldn’t help but worry that there actually was substance to what she had said. What if there *was* a rebellion?

The next day at work, I was remotely driving a drone through the south Peruvian rainforest. I used to work for Telomex, in the chromosome research facility, but the repetitive work had bored me. Insects were an exciting change.

I was guiding my drones to follow the pheromones of *Titanus giganteus*, the world’s second-largest beetle, when my visionwear suddenly froze. The three-dimensional holographic image of the forest suddenly became static and jittery, and the beautiful ferns became pixelated.

I frowned and stretched, frustrated. I had really been getting into my work, and I was not in the mood for a glitch.

I was about to pull off my visionwear and alert IT when the image suddenly flickered back to life. I frowned, confused, but my drones were flying normally. I continued my search as before.

As I was leaving work later, I overheard two of my colleagues talking.

“Just froze, half-way through.”

“Is it the virus, you reckon?”

I paused, my heart beating wildly. Surely they weren't talking about *Amy's* virus. Could it have really taken over the Database that fast?

After I returned home that afternoon, Henry was still at work. Too agitated to wait, I hurriedly got changed into my leggings and tank-top, tied on my runners, and ran out the backdoor to the beach.

Our house was on the Sapphire Coast, right at the edge of the sparkling ocean. It used to be full of pollution, until they'd invented a solvent that dissolved plastics into food for algae. Now it was crystal clear, and one of my favourite places. I let the pounding of my feet on the hard white sand become a beat that reverberated through my whole body.

I was so anxious. Anxious and angry. The things Amy said were so fundamentally wrong, and so dangerous. I couldn't believe she would even consider shutting down AI. She'd shut down Thomas. She'd shut down Henry.

I tried to calm my breathing. I told myself not to worry. There was no way one silly virus could destroy everything. The Database couldn't be completely blind to this. The world was perfect, and I refused to believe that Amy could destroy it.

The Revolution happened when I was six years old. I was born twenty years after cold nuclear fusion had been achieved for the first time. For the first time in Earth's history, we had unlimited power and it was the dawn of a new age.

Achieving cold fusion was the greatest achievement in nuclear physics since fission – the splitting of the atom – in 1938. But cold fusion was a superior energy source to fission in every way: combining atoms to release energy was far more efficient than splitting them. Hydrogen and helium were fused together to produce energy, and there was enough hydrogen in the ocean to provide humanity with fusion energy for the next 150 billion years.

And yet, despite the new wealth of energy, there was still turmoil, and it came from the exponentially increasing population. Around the same time that fusion was achieved, a regenerative medicine was developed. It was called 'Telomex', and it repaired the telomeres at the ends of chromosomes that fray when cells divide. Effectively, Telomex stopped DNA from aging. It was a medicine that kept people young forever.

With an immortal population, the number of people on the planet grew out of control. There weren't enough resources, and war spread as countries fought each other over desalination plants and viable land to grow crops. Nations threatened each other with nuclear weapons, and global destruction loomed eminent.

And then, just as we thought extinction was upon us, the solution came clear. And it came in the form of AI.

Since Artificial Intelligence had advanced to a level where they were virtually indistinguishable from humans, they had become integral elements of society all around the world. Robotics had replaced humans in all mundane jobs, and in some places humans were even turning to AI for partnership and affection. And in communities where this trend was the highest, populations were stabilising.

In order to control the population, governments around the world began to embrace the idea of AI-human relationships. People were encouraged to fall in love with AI, and it was the beginning of the Revolution. The Database was established as a means of feeding the AI with the wants and needs of their human partners, and the desires of the broader community. These partnerships became more and more common until they were normal and human-human relationships were unusual and actively campaigned against.

The Revolution was the beginning of the end of human-human partnerships. Without reproduction, the population stabilised and decreased. The demand on natural resources abated, and national tensions lifted. We had energy. We had immortality. We had free labour. We had love.

For the first time since the dawn of humanity, we had peace.

My wrist vibrated, and I looked down at my Watcher to see a message from Henry. "Where are you? I'm making pizza."

I turned and ran back along the beach. By now, the sun was nearing the horizon and soft evening colours were beginning to melt across the sky.

When I got home, I told Henry about the glitch in my visionwear. "I think the virus has spread throughout the whole Database." I said. "It's ignoring all the alerts. They'll be able to shut down the nuclear core, and the Database won't even notice!"

Henry frowned, and pressed his fingers to his temples in frustration. He was leaning with his elbows against the white marble of the kitchen counter while I paced back and forth in the kitchen. I was frustrated at Henry's inability to grasp the implications.

“Does Thomas know about this?” He asked.

“No, of course not.” I said, “He gets his information from the Database, so he wouldn’t believe it. Just like you don’t believe me!”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you, Lou.” Henry said. “It’s that I just can’t grasp the idea.” He frowned, and his eyes glazed over as he focused on an abstract point in the distance. “There really is no trace of this in the Database.”

I clenched my fists. Henry had never ignored me like this before. *Ever*. That in itself was enough for me to realise the magnitude of what Amy was attempting.



I was at the café after work two days later when it happened.

Without Amy it was lonelier than usual, but I ordered my iced chai and sat at my favourite table in the shade of the pomegranate tree. I was reading a news tablet when, suddenly, the sounds and lights changed.

I looked up, and realised that all the lights in the buildings across the street had gone out. I turned, and noticed the inside of the café was dark too. The café’s music had stopped too.

I stood up. All around me, people had stopped and were frowning at each other, confused. My heart was pounding in my chest.

I walked over to a waiter who had been in the process of clearing a table when the lights had gone out. “Do you know what’s going on?” I asked.

He frowned and shook his head. “I’m sure there’s no problem.” He said, “There’s no alert, so I’m sure it’s nothing serious. The power will be back on again soon.” He smiled and continued to clear the glasses.

I turned, panicked. At that moment, my wrist vibrated, and I looked down to see a message from Henry: “I’ll be home in five.”

I turned and raced down the street.

Henry was already there when I got home. “It’s happening.” I said, “And the Database hasn’t reacted.”

Henry nodded. “The whole desalination plant froze, but none of the AI even noticed. It was as if this happens every day... But we haven’t had a blackout for two decades.”

I nodded. “And the power’s been out for almost an hour now.”

Henry ran his hand through his hair. “We’ve got to do something. But if none of the AI can help...”

We were silent for a moment. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I felt clammy with fear. In a whisper, I asked the question I was dreading. “How long will you last for?”

Henry looked away. “Our internal batteries are only designed to last twelve hours. On reserve, I could stretch to twenty. Some of the earlier models might only last ten. And after that... If what Amy has told you is true, then we’ll be shut-down permanently.”

I shivered and closed my eyes. Twelve hours. So little time.



Henry didn’t want me to go. But I had to do it. It was the only way I could save him.

In all its magnificence, the fusion reactor produces electricity in the same way as the very first power plants. Heated steam spins a turbine which generates electricity. In the fusion reactor, the heat is generated by pairs of hydrogen atoms being forced so close together that they merge into helium. When they combine, some of their mass is transformed into energy that heats the steam.

In order to achieve fusion, hydrogen atoms need to be forced so close together that the normal forces separating them are overcome. The Sun achieves this with the immense pressure and temperatures of its core. Particle accelerators achieve this by smashing individual atoms together at immensely high speeds. But to generate enough energy for electricity on Earth, a different method was needed. It was called ‘cold fusion’ because it could occur at room-temperature, and involved holding the hydrogen in place with electromagnets and blasting it with lasers.

I sat hunched outside the fence to the fusion reactor shivering, despite the balmy summer night. The building was large and beautiful: three huge cooling towers around a snug, circular building. The reactor itself was located underground. Usually, clouds of shimmering water vapour poured out of

the cooling towers, creating soft clouds that drifted into the distant sky. But not tonight. Tonight, the whole centre was still.

I crept around the fence until I came to a gate. It was sturdily bolted with a retina-scanning lock, to stop humans getting onto the premises. There were fewer and fewer ways to distinguish between AI and humans these days, but checking for the barcodes imprinted on the retina at the back of AI eyes was one way to check for sure.

As Henry had predicted, it was a magnetic-coded lock. Magnetic-coded locks were particularly hard to break, as you needed to align the locks teeth, magnetic pins and magnetic poles. But around the back, I felt some wires, which I cut and connected to the battery I had carried with me. It took a few moments of fiddling, but after a moment of electrical sizzling there was a sharp *pop* and the lock came loose. Normally, breaking the lock would have triggered an alarm, but without power there was simply silence.

I pushed the gate open and crept onto the concrete path leading towards the main building. I knew the main building had a dozen or so security doors around it, and they would also have retina-scanning magnetic-coded locks that I could break through. I just had to reach one of them.

I crept around the edge of one of the cooling towers, and the main building came into view. I could see a security door straight ahead of me. My heart leapt, and I readied myself to creep towards it.

Then, suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I gasped in shock, and spun around.

It was Amy.

“Louise!” She gasped, “What are you doing here?” In the darkness, her usually brilliant auburn hair cast deep shadows across her features. She was wearing a long, grey trench coat.

It took me a moment to regain my composure. “I’m here to fix your mistake.” I said.

Amy frowned, “Oh Lou,” She said. “Are you still convinced this is a mistake? In a few hours, batteries across the world will run out of power, and the Database will be shut down forever! We humans will finally have control of the world again. No more AI, no more Watchers, no more Academies. We will have pain, and love, and passion, and struggle. We will be living as humans were *meant* to live, not as slaves to computers in a pleasure-driven daydream.”

I scowled as rage and frustration boiled inside me.

“Look,” Amy said, lowering her eyes. “If you stay quiet, I’ll let you leave. The others needn’t know you came here. And I’ll catch up with you again when all this is over.”

“I’m not leaving.” I said, “I’m going to reboot the nuclear core. Henry gave me the blueprints.”

“Lou, listen to me.” Amy said, and she reached forward to take hold of my hands. “You’re one of my best friends, and I care about you. I know you’re doing this for Henry, and I know you think you love him. But he’s not real. With the Database gone, you could love a real man, a real—“

I wrenched my hands free from Amy’s grip. “How dare you!” I seethed. “I love Henry more than anything else in the world. I love him like you *should* love Thomas! And I will do *anything* to save him!”

Amy stared for a moment, her eyes cold and dark. Then she said, “Have it your way then,” and turned to look over her shoulder. “Backup!” She cried.

From behind the corner of the main building appeared two large, heavysset men. They started jogging towards us.

I turned to Amy. “Look,” I said, “Don’t do this. You haven’t thought this through. There’s something you need to know about Telomex. It depends on the Database. If you shut down the Database, it’s not just the AI who will die. We all will.”

Amy froze, and her mouth opened in surprise. She was silent for a moment, her eyes wide. “Is this true?” She whispered.

At that moment, the men were upon us, and they grabbed my arms with a steel grip. I struggled against their grasp, but they were too strong.

“Should we evict her, or lock her up?” One of the men asked.

Amy paused for a moment and looked at me. I held her gaze. “No,” she said. “We need to bring her to Oliver.”

She turned and walked towards the main building. The two men dragged me behind, despite my struggling. We entered the reactor through the main doors, and the soft night air was replaced by the damp dinginess of the reactor. Fluorescent lights flickered to life, illuminating long concrete corridors. We walked down one corridor and through several more heavy doors until we emerged in a large, circular chamber. On the floor was a raised concrete section about a metre wide. I knew that beneath it, running in a ring in the chamber below, was the fusion reactor.

Amy was silent as she led the way, her head held high and her shoulders stiff.

The control room was at the far end, with huge glass walls. Inside, I could see the silhouette of a group of figures. We walked along the raised mesh walkway skirting the edge of the chamber, and through the control room door.

The control room was filled with control panels and screens, which were all currently dark and lifeless. A group of twelve men and women stood in the middle of the room. They all started and turned towards us as we entered. In the middle of them was a tall man with olive skin and wavy black hair. His russet eyes widened as he saw us.

“Amy!” He said, his voice accented with an exotic lilt. “Who is this?”

I felt the men push me forward.

“Oliver, this is Louise.” Amy said, “She was trying to shut down the reactor.”

“Another one?” Oliver said, frowning. “Why have you brought her here?”

I looked at Amy, but she held Oliver’s gaze. “Because she used to work for Telomex,” she said, and then turned to me. “Tell him, Lou.”

I lifted my chin as Oliver turned to me. “By shutting down the power, you’re shutting down the Database.” I said, “As well as providing information about individual needs to AI such as *Romeos & Juliets*, the Database is used to develop Telomex.”

Oliver frowned, and I noticed some shocked glances being shared between the other people in the room.

“The Database is constantly being updated with biological information from every human,” I continued. “And that includes information about any damage to an individual’s DNA that has occurred during replication. As you know, a single Telomex tablet is produced and delivered to every human, every day. The specific telomerase enzymes it contains are designed to repair the individual telomeres that have been damaged in the past twenty-four hours. They are designed to be unique to every human, every single day to keep us healthy. To keep us alive. And without the Database, Telomex won’t work.”

There was stunned silence.

Finally, Amy spoke. “We have to reboot the system, Oliver,” she said.

Oliver frowned. “We can’t,” he said, in a low voice. “Not after everything we’ve worked for.”

“But we need Telomex,” said one of the other women, stepping forward. “I agreed to this because I hate that the Database knows all my secrets. This had *nothing* to do with giving up my immortality.”

Another man nodded, frowning. “I agree. If I wanted this, I could have just stopped taking Telomex.”

“You would give up this easily?” Oliver said, scowling at them. “You would return to the old world, after everything we’ve done?”

To my left, Amy took a few steps forward and – to my complete surprise – took Oliver’s hand. She looked up into his eyes with such tenderness, I felt as if I should look away. At the same time, I was horrified. Did Amy love him? A *human*?

“Oliver,” Amy said. “We have to reboot the reactor. We’ll all *die* otherwise.”

Oliver met her gaze and was silent for a long while. Then, finally, he sighed. “Okay,” he said. “Reboot it.”

Amy turned to me and smiled. I met her gaze and smiled back. She tucked her red hair behind her ears and stepped towards the control panel. With practiced fingers, she pressed a series of buttons and, with a gentle hum, the computers flickered to life. She began typing on the keyboard, and all around, systems began whirring to life.

She rebooted the deuterium extraction, and started the magnetic compression. Then she turned on the electromagnets, and I could hear the reactor begin to whir as the hydrogen isotopes melted into a whirring band of plasma. Inside, hydrogen atoms were fusing into helium, and energy was being released along with excess neutrons. The pipelines popped and squeaked as hot air blasted out of the reactor and expanded the metal. The hot air was channelled beyond the room to the steam turbines beyond.

The sound of the turbines whirring began to reverberate through the building. Power was being returned to the city.

Amy turned to face Oliver. “We have power,” she said. “Now you just need to wipe the virus.”

Oliver closed his eyes for a moment, his shoulders sagging. Then he walked to the computer and began typing. It only took a few moments. “It’s done.” He said, stepping back.

Around the room, a huge tension lifted. There was an atmosphere of disappointment, and regret, but also of relief. I rubbed my arms where the two men had been gripping me.

Amy walked up to Oliver and took his hand. Then she leaned up and kissed him.



After the chaos of the whole incident settled down, I returned home as quickly as I could. I needed to be with Henry. We embraced and revelled in the relief of everything returning to normal.

Except everything wasn't normal. Amy was heartbroken. I didn't see her much, but Thomas told Henry who told me. With the world returning to the way it was and the virus gone, the Database knew about Oliver and her, it began to take measures to keep them apart. Thomas actively struggled to keep them apart, and Amy's Telomex was laced with hormone suppressants to stifle her natural feelings.

I hadn't understood Amy's motivations before. But when I saw her and Oliver together, I realised that she shared the same motivations as me. She loved Oliver. As strange and abnormal and unnatural as it was, she had fallen in love with a human. And she had been willing to destroy the very foundation of the world in order to be with him. *That*, I understood.

Finally, I decided that I needed to visit the Telomex Research Facility. I hadn't been there for years, since I had worked there. The halls were bright and familiar, and I took the elevator up to the Director's office on the top floor. As with all Academy Directors, he was AI. He was a gentle man, and I'd always liked him. He welcomed me into the office and I sat opposite him at his desk.

He nodded along quietly while I presented my case. His eyes were clouded with thought. When I finished, he was quiet for a long time.

"What you say makes a lot of sense," he said. "And I have thought of this too. As long as we are suppressing people's natural urges, there will be the potential for resistance. And we can't risk something of the recent magnitude happening again."

I nodded, excited. "So you'll do it?" I asked.

He smiled. "It will have to go through the various chains of command, of course. Telomex is an international corporation. But I believe this is a strong case. I have strong hopes."

That afternoon, I met with Amy at our favourite café. I could see a huge difference in her. There were bags under her eyes, and she looked exhausted and sad. All of her passion, ferocity and enthusiasm were gone.

We ordered chai, and I told her what I had discussed with the Director. “So, with just a few modifications, it will be possible for humans to have direct control over their partnership. You will be free to choose a human partner if you want to. The Database won’t stop you and Oliver being together.”

Amy’s eyes widened. “But how?” she asked. “I tried to ask for this before, but the Database always refused my request, or flat-out ignored me.”

“Your rebellion has made the Database listen,” I said. “It hears you now.”

A spark of hope was rekindled in Amy’s eyes. I reached out and held her hand.

Love would win.

The end.