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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Love Minus Eighty**

Written by Will McIntosh

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LOVE  
MINUS  
EIGHTY

**WILL McINTOSH**

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*For my wife, Alison Scott*

# Prologue: Mira

*AD 2103*

The words were gentle strokes, drawing her awake.

“Hello. Hello there.”

She felt the light on her eyelids, and knew that if she opened her eyes, they would sting, and she would have to shade them with her palm and let the light bleed through a crack.

“Feel like talking?” A man’s soft voice.

And then her mind cleared enough to wonder: who was this man at her bedside?

“Aw, I know you’re awake by *now*. Come on, Sleeping Beauty. Talk to me.” The last was a whisper, a lover’s words, and Mira felt that she had to come awake and open her eyes. She tried to sigh, but no breath came. Her eyes flew open in alarm.

An old man was leaning over her, smiling, but Mira barely saw him, because when she opened her mouth to inhale, her jaw squealed like a seabird’s cry, and no breath came, and she wanted to press her hands to the sides of her face, but her

hands wouldn't come either. Nothing would move except her face.

"Hello, hello. And how are you?" The old man was smiling gently, as if Mira might break if he set his whole smile loose. He was not that old, she saw now. Maybe fifty. The furrows in his forehead and the ones framing his nose only seemed deep because his face was so close to hers, almost close enough for a kiss. "Are you having trouble?" He reached out and almost stroked her hair. "You have to press down with your back teeth to control the air flow. Didn't they show you?"

There *was* an air flow—a gentle breeze, whooshing up her throat and out her mouth and nose. It tickled the tiny hairs in her nostrils. She bit down, and the breeze became a hiss—an exhale strong enough that her chest should drop, but it didn't, or maybe it did and she just couldn't tell, because she couldn't lift her head to look.

"Where—" Mira said, and then she howled in terror, because her voice sounded horrible—deep and hoarse and hollow, the voice of something that had pulled itself from a swamp.

"It takes some getting used to. Am I your first? No one has revived you before? Not even for an orientation?" The notion seemed to please him, that he was her first, whatever that meant. Mira studied him, wondering if she should recognize him. He preened at her attention, as if expecting Mira to be glad to see him. He was not an attractive man—his nose was thick and bumpy, and not in an aristocratic way. His nostrils were like a bull's, his brow Neanderthal, but his mouth dainty. She didn't recognize him.

"I can't move. Why can't I move?" Mira finally managed. She looked around as best she could.

"It's okay. Try to relax. Only your face is working."

"What happened?" Mira finally managed.

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“You were in an accident,” he said, his brow now flexed with concern. “You were working on an engineering project for the military. Evidently a wall gave out.” He consulted a readout on his palm. “Fairly major damage. Ruptured aorta. Right leg gone.”

Right leg *gone*? *Her* right leg? She couldn’t see anything except the man hanging over her and a gold-colored ceiling, high, high above. “This is a hospital?” she asked.

“No, no. A dating center.”

“What?” For the first time she noticed that there were other voices in the room, speaking in low, earnest, confidential tones. She caught snippets close by:

“...neutral colors. How could anyone choose violet?”

“...last time I was at a Day-Glows concert I was seventeen...”

“I shouldn’t be the one doing this.” The man turned, looked over his shoulder, then up at a black screen she could just see, set into the wall behind her. “There’s usually an orientation.” He turned back around to face her, shrugged, looking bemused. “I guess we’re on our own.” He clasped his hands, leaned in toward Mira. “The truth is, you see, you died in the accident...”

Mira didn’t hear the next few things he said. She felt as if she were floating. It was an absurd idea, that she might be dead yet hear someone tell her she was dead. But somehow it rang true. She didn’t remember dying, but she sensed some hard, fast line—some demarcation between now and before. The idea made her want to flee, escape her body, which was a dead body. Her teeth were corpse’s teeth.

“...you’re at minus eighty degrees, thanks to your insurance, but full revival, especially when it involves extensive injury, is terribly costly. That’s where the dating service comes in—”

“I have a sister,” she interrupted. “Lynn.” Her jaw moved so stiffly.

“Yes, a twin sister. Now, that would be interesting.” The man grinned, his eyebrows raised.

“Is she still alive?”

“No,” he said in a tone that suggested she was a silly girl. “You’ve been gone for over eighty years, Sleeping Beauty.” He made a sweeping gesture, as if all of that was trivial. “But let’s focus on the present. The way this works is, we get acquainted. We have dates. If we find we’re compatible”—he raised his shoulders toward his ears, smiled his dainty smile—“then I might be enticed to pay for you to be revived, so that we can be together.”

Dates.

“So. My name is Alexander—call me Alex—and I know from your readout that your name is Mira. Nice to meet you, Mira.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mira murmured. He’d said a wall collapsed on her. She tried to remember, but nothing came. Nothing about the accident, anyway. The memories that raced up at her were of Jeannette.

“So. Mira.” Alex clapped his hands together. “Do you want to bullshit, or do you want to get intimate?” The raised eyebrows again, the same as when he made the twins comment.

“I don’t understand,” Mira said.

“Weeeell. For example, here’s a question.” He leaned in close, his breath puffing in her ear. “If I revived you, what sorts of things would you do to me?”

Mira doubted this man was here to revive anyone. “I don’t know. That’s an awfully intimate question. Why don’t we get to know each other first?” She needed time to think. Even just a few minutes of quiet, to make sense of this.



Alex frowned theatrically. “Come on. Tease me a little.”

Should she tell Alex she was gay? Surely not. He would lose interest, and maybe report it to whoever owned the facility. But why hadn’t whoever owned the facility known she was gay? Maybe that was to be part of the orientation she’d missed. Whatever the reason, did she want to risk being taken out of circulation, or unplugged and buried?

Would that be the worst thing?

“I’m just—” She wanted to say “not in the mood,” but that was not only a cliché but a vast understatement. She was dead. She couldn’t move anything but her face, and that made her feel untethered, as if she were floating, drifting. Hands and feet grounded you. Mira had never realized. “I’m just not very good at this sort of thing.”

“Well.” Alex put his hands on his thighs, made a production of standing. “This costs quite a bit, and they charge by the minute. So I’ll say good-bye now, and you can go back to being dead.”

Go back? “Wait!” Mira said. They could bring her back, and then let her die again? She imagined her body, sealed up somewhere, maybe for years, maybe forever. The idea terrified her. Alex paused, waiting. “Okay. I would...” She tried to think of something, but there were so many things running through her mind, so many trains of thought she wanted to follow, none of them involving the pervert leaning over her.

Were there other ways to get permanently “revived”? Did she have any living relatives she might contact, or maybe a savings account that had been accruing interest for the past eighty years? Had she had any savings when she died? She’d had a house—she remembered that. Jeannette would have inherited it. Or maybe Lynn.

“Fine, if you’re not going to talk, I’ll just say good-bye,”

Alex snapped. “But don’t think anyone else is coming. You’re a level eight-plus.”

Mira opened her mouth to ask what that meant, but Alex raised a finger to silence her.

“What that *means* is your injuries make you one expensive revival, and there are many, many women here, so not even your nine-point-one all-original face and thirty-six-C tits, *also* original, are going to pry that kind of treasure from any man’s balance.” He stepped back, put his fists on his hips. “Plus, men don’t want women who were frozen sixty years before the facility opened, because they have nothing in common with those women.”

“Please,” Mira said.

He reached for something over her head, out of sight.

I: IN THE MINUS EIGHTY

*AD 2133*



# 1

## *Rob*

The woman across the aisle from Rob yammered on as the micro-T rose above street level, threading through the Per-rydot Building, lit offices buzzing past in a colorful blur. He should have taken his Scamp. Public transport was simpler, but he always seemed to share a compartment with someone who didn't have the courtesy to subvocalize.

For no reason except that she was annoying the shit out of him, Rob decided to scan her to see how much work she'd had done on her face.

As his fingers danced over the skintight system on his left arm, the woman glanced his way and curled her lip—a microexpression that was there and gone in a flicker. Now he had another reason to dislike this complete stranger. No, his style wasn't elegant and seamless, and he was tired of being judged by the technological glitterati as lacking some vital core because he only cared about making his system function, not how he looked doing it.

A flashing grid superimposed itself over the jabbering woman's face. He grinned, satisfied. Nose work, lip work, eye work, chin work. There wasn't much to her that was original. It was petty of him to check, even more petty to take satisfaction in her artificiality, but she was truly bugging him.

"I wasn't the one who told him," the woman was saying to some guy's screen. "Ask Corrie if you don't believe me." She was naked except for her skintight system running upper thigh to midchest, which was a 5/5 Manatee—totally state-of-the-art, glittering like blue-green jewels on her skin.

The screen she was speaking to, which was huge and floating two feet from Rob's head, was muted. The unshaven face framed in it looked sleepy, or maybe just uninterested.

"Since when don't you like Corrie?" the woman asked in response to something the guy said. "So you don't like any of my friends, is that it?"

She had no class. If a conversation was going to be intense, you did it in person. She probably showed up for weddings and funerals via screen. He could mute her, but her gesticulating form would only be more distracting if her mouth was moving soundlessly. Rob decided to go to screen himself, and see what Lorelei was up to. Of course that meant working his system again, and another contemptuous microsneer.

Lorelei was in their bedroom. She was utterly surrounded by screens. Rob was stunned at how many people were watching her, and she was adding more by the second. Onlookers' eager screens jockeyed for the best vantage point, rolling and shifting like rectangular gnats, scooting low to corners of the room, all shrunk to palm-size to accommodate the crowd. Yes, Lorelei was a total attention hound, but she'd never scored (he called up the stats on his screen) one hundred eighty-two simultaneous viewers before.

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Lorelei actually looked nervous, kneeling on her bed in the midst of the storm, probably terrified she might blow it by saying something stale or letting the pace of whatever she was doing drag. What *was* she doing? Rob zoomed in on the stack of greeting cards in her hand, just as she activated the one on top.

“Aw, how cute: ‘Love to Robby, from Grandma on your sweet sixteen.’” She grunted, flipped the card over her shoulder, toward a scattered mess that Rob recognized as his journals, remote photo files, all the personal stuff he kept in his lockbox. As Rob’s heart began to hammer, Lorelei activated the next card. “Oh, here we go. I knew it.”

He could see it was the one from Penny, the one Rob had almost thrown out when he moved in with Lorelei. A rush of rage, threaded with tendrils of guilt, hit him as Lorelei read the card aloud:

“‘To Rob. Okay fine, if it’ll make you happy. XX(X). Penny.’”

*No!* Rob subvocalized to Lorelei as she activated the video, holding the card at an angle as the screens swooped and rose, bumping up against Lorelei’s privacy perimeter, jockeying to see.

“This should be choice,” she said, ignoring Rob. As the video started, Rob set his screen to lurk, hoping no one had noticed his brief presence. Of course they hadn’t; all eyes were on Lorelei. She was scoring more and more eyes—her stunt was going viral.

Penny’s video was etched in Rob’s memory from a hundred viewings. Penny was sitting on her bed, one leg tucked under her, dressed in a high-necked, double-button blouse and demi-jeans. Her gaze dropped shyly as she lifted her hands and began unbuttoning the blouse.

There was no sound, so Lorelei provided slutty

“buh-buh-buh-bah” stripper music for her audience as Penny exposed first one, then the other small, erect-nippled breast.

That was all; Penny stopped there and blew a kiss, a kiss only Rob was meant to see.

“I *knew* he was keeping secrets from me,” Lorelei hissed. She tried to sound outraged, but undertones of triumph and excitement leaked. “Let’s see what else we’ve got.” She picked up the next card.

Shaking with rage, Rob cut the feed and returned to the train, and the loud chick still arguing with her bored boyfriend. Stabbing sensors on his biceps, Rob submitted a destination change, hoping the microrailcar would plot a reroute that was inconvenient for the woman, who never seemed to need to take an inbreath.

Lorelei looked up when Rob burst into their room. She made no attempt to hide what she was doing.

Without taking his eyes off Lorelei, Rob gestured toward the screens with his chin. “Block them.”

“*No*. It’s *my* apartment. They’re my guests.”

Rob looked at the sea of floating faces, all of them waiting to see what would happen next. Messages were surely flying among them—reactions, predictions, snide asides.

Rob spotted his friend Mort in the crowd. When he saw Rob had noticed him, Mort looked away sheepishly, then tucked his frame out of sight behind some others.

Rob realized there was no way he was going to get Lorelei to block the eyes, because she was loving this; it was her finest hour.

“Fine. Can you and your friends go somewhere else so I can pack my things?” As he said it, the certainty of it sunk in. They were through; there was no walking this back, not after



what Lorelei had done. Despite himself, despite what Lorelei was doing, he felt a lump of pain forming in his chest.

Lorelei folded her arms and pouted dramatically. “So you still have a thing for Penny. I guess that makes sense, since she ditched you, not the other way around.”

“You’re rummaging through my stuff without my permission.” He gestured toward the wall of small faces watching them. “In front of *hundreds of people*. And you think I should feel guilty for keeping a card from my ex-girlfriend?”

She put her hands on her hips. “A card? She’s *stripping*.”

He opened his mouth to defend himself, but most of the defenses that came to mind were lies. *I forgot I had it. I never watched the video again, once I met you.* He looked down at his private things, strewn on the floor like candy wrappers, or used condoms. Yes, he shared some of the blame here, but what Lorelei had done...

“This is just sick.” Rob waved the closet open and pulled out a duffel bag. Kneeling, he scooped a double-handful of his stuff off the polished granite floor, set it gently in the bag.

“I found the porn holos as well, by the way. How lovely. When did you find time to”—she cleared her throat suggestively—“use them?” Her words, cutting as they were, still came in that beautiful rhythm, Lorelei’s signature vocal style, injected with subvocalized asides to her friends that sounded like soft susurrations and gulped exclamations that she somehow made sexy.

“At least they’re convincing when they fake their orgasms,” he said, wanting to humiliate her in front of her viewers.

Lorelei grabbed the back of his collar and yanked, nearly sending him sprawling. “I don’t have to fake them when a man actually excites me.”

His anger boiling over, Rob sprung up, meaning to... what? Shove her? Hit her?

And then, suddenly, he got it. This was Lorelei's climax, the finishing touch that would leave her viewers eager to return to witness more of her fascinating and tumultuous life. She didn't care about Penny's card; it was just a useful prop, a ratings boost.

He took a few deep breaths, willing himself to stay calm, just until he got out of there. He went back to packing. Lorelei had over eight hundred sets of eyes now; the room was teeming with screens. As he scooped another handful of his things into the duffel, he realized how pathetic he must look to all these people.

Rob stood, leaving the duffel where it was. "On second thought, I'll pick up my things later." Despite his best efforts to deny her audience the satisfaction of seeing how hurt and angry he was, his voice was shaking. "I'm out of here."

The only things he grabbed were his lute, and a stack of his publicity photos that were sitting on top of the lute case. At the bedroom door he paused to take a last look at Lorelei, so absurdly tall (yet wanting everyone to believe no genetic trickery was involved), her face a perfect balance of Asian, African, Anglo, her jet-black curls rolling down her shoulders.

As he turned away, it occurred to him that Lorelei might have been planning this from the moment they met at The Skyview. Was it possible? Would anyone build a relationship and then wreck it solely to draw eyes?

"Why don't you see if Penny will take you back."

Rob felt something ricochet off his shoulder. He didn't turn—he already knew it was Penny's card. He kept moving, through the living room and down the glass corridor to the tube.

To his relief the door to the tube opened immediately. Breathing hard, arms at his sides, he glared at the sea of frames hovering outside the tube door, wanting a good look

at the tube who'd just been disemboweled by super double-nifty Lorelei. He set a total block to keep them from squeezing into the tube with him as the door slid closed.

*One, two, three*, he counted silently to give the tube time to get moving, out of auditory range of the gawkers, then, as the familiar three-hundred-sixty-degree view of Manhattan's Low Town spread out far below him, he screamed so loudly his ears crackled. He dropped the photos and his lute case, pounded the glass wall of the lozenge-like compartment, spun and slammed his back against it, pummeled it with his elbows, pounded it with the soles of his spear boots, which Lorelei had bought him. It felt good. He went on slamming the glass until he was exhausted, then, panting, he slid to the floor.

What had just happened? For the past eight months, everything had been skintight. No drama, their relationship exclusive but not escalating, everyone happy. Or so he'd thought.

Fortunately the tube didn't stop at any of the other apartments spread out along the lift line, like beads threaded on a string, hanging from the underside of High Town. This was the last time he would take this trip, he realized. No, the second-to-last time—he still had to collect his stuff. Maybe he could get Gord or Beamon to do that for him.

If this was his last trip, he wished he could enjoy the view, drink in the rooftops below, dappled in sunlight filtering through High Town. He couldn't, though. He was too hurt, too angry, too sad. He honestly wasn't sure what he felt, whether he was glad to be rid of her or devastated to lose her. Both. Lorelei was brilliant in her own way, dynamic, utterly unpredictable. It was fun to be with her. He'd been aware of her cutting edge, had felt it graze him from time to time, but never thought she'd cut so deep.

Rob knelt, collected his photos scattered on the floor, and

grabbed his lute as the lift opened onto Rogers Street—the shopping district. He stepped into bright sunlight, looked left and right, not sure where he was going. One of the photos slipped between his damp fingers. As he stood there panting, a twenty-three-dollar fine rolled off his account balance in the corner of his vision. In High Town the incivility cameras were always rolling. Rob flung the rest of the photos at the sky and stormed off, as several hundred dollars in fines thinned his balance further. He headed west, away from the garage where his mini was stored, toward Skyview. He needed a drink. No—he needed six.

Skyview was nearly empty. Ignoring the breathtaking view of the outer burbs provided from the tables, Rob slipped onto a bar stool, smiled at Ellie as she came over.

“What *happened* to you? You look terrible.”

Rob tried to wave away the question. “Nothing. It’s stupid.”

Ellie folded her arms. “Clearly it’s not, or you wouldn’t look like someone just stomped your favorite puppy wearing four-inch spiked heels.”

Rob surprised himself by choking up. He shook his head, looked down at the bar, felt Ellie’s hand on his shoulder. “I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess you’re not having absinthe?”

A coarse guffaw escaped him. “No, no absinthe.” Absinthe was Lorelei’s drink. He’d gotten into the habit of drinking it, hanging with her. Suddenly it was way too expensive for him. This entire bar was suddenly too expensive for him without his girlfriend and her rich parents.

A vodka martini appeared directly below his hangdog face. “First one’s on me, sweetie. And don’t repeat this please, but I think you’re better off without her.”

“Yeah, I know. But even though I know that, even though

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she did something so”—he reached for a word to encapsulate the wretchedness of what Lorelei had done to him, but came up empty—“so *shitty*, it still hurts. You know?”

Ellie sighed, leaned on the bar. “I know.”

“I didn’t do anything to her. It was like she just decided to shit on me for kicks.” Rob lifted the martini and took a long swig.