

HEARTWORM

Mind games.

BY J. J. ROTH

Zora doesn't know it yet, but I'm going to free her heart.

It lives in a cryptographic cage, behind a shield of code integrated into her nervous system. Protection against rogues, social climbers and others her father finds unsuitable for her affections. Unfitting for a husband.

Including me.

After our Constitutional Law class, I catch up with Zora on the steps outside Langdell Hall. A light snow is falling, swathing the quadrangle in white.

The wind gusts. One end of Zora's camel-coloured cashmere muffler blows over her coat's boxy shoulder, revealing the shaved patch on her neck.

Her hair is growing back except over the thin, silver scar at her skull's base. A small, circular jack marks the scar's centre.

A month ago, before Zora's father learned of our engagement and sent three dark-suited employees to pull her out of Antitrust class and force her into a limousine, she had no shaved patch, no scar, no jack.

A month ago, we back-benched during Corporations lectures, holding hands, making fun of the gargantuan oil portraits on the wall behind the professor. Famous old men, still hanging there five decades after the law school appointed its first female dean. Men like Zora's father, who owns half of Massachusetts and controls much more.

"Can I help you, Peter?"

She doesn't give me her wry, trickster's smile. Doesn't reach for me with that freckled hand, nails pared short to better execute Mozart's keyboard ornamentations. Won't come to my closet-sized rented room in Somerville to make love before studying, as we'd done so often over the past two years. She'll return to her side of the tracks and forget we ever spoke, leaving me alone in that miserable void where 'us' used to be.

"No, it's —"

"What?"

"It's cold. You're losing your scarf. Let me." I've been waiting for this chance.

I adjust the muffler, soft as a cloud, warm from Zora's skin and smelling of gardenias. I feel surreptitiously for the jack. It only takes a

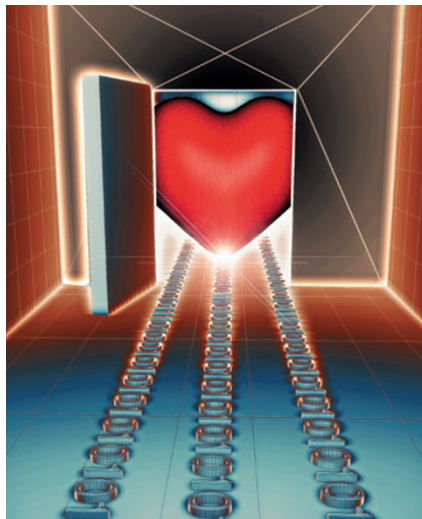
moment to insert the tiny device concealed in my palm, load its contents, and remove it again.

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"Do you love me?" Perversely, I ache to hear her deny it. Hear the answer other than yes that will activate the worm.

"You look tired, Peter. Go home."

Zora's left eyebrow twitches twice while the worm burrows into her system. I touch the pouches under my eyes. "I will."

She excuses herself and heads towards Harvard Square. I feel in her polite, distant parting remark a slight magnetic repulsion. We're two positive ends of a charged rare-earth metal held against one another.

That was not Zora speaking. A technological chastity belt chooses her words. Dictates the cool timbre of her voice. She's locked in the software-generated equivalent of a citadel tower; the code whispers to her mind that she's saying what she feels.

The snow falls harder as I board my bus. Above Union Square, the Prospect Hill Monument rises like a medieval castle. As its battlements appear through the icy bus window, I think: as long as powerful men have walked the Earth, they have devised ways to control their daughters' desire. To assure the right alliances and control the political fallout. Wars. Invasions. Persecution. Religious conversions. The real, or imagined, falls of their empires.

They're so busy setting their traps. Defending their territories against the raging hordes. They don't notice the lone warrior in the shadows. Waiting for the portcullis to lift. Sneaking in while the conquering cavalry rides out.

Now I must take up that lone warrior's shield.

My bus stops. I trudge along the slushy,

gritty sidewalks to the triple decker on Summer Street. To my first-floor room. Once cheerfully shabby, lit by Zora's presence. Now brooding. Empty. Dead inside.

I don my VR gear and settle in for another long night.

Unbeknown to Zora and her father, I am Omega, the self-taught bane of network security systems and international cybersecurity agencies.

Omega disappeared when I started law school. A month ago, he resurfaced, tapping his touchpad until dawn night after night, constructing a worm. This accounts for the bags under my eyes. This, and the vice that squeezes my heart whenever I think of Zora.

The worm enables a frontal assault on the algorithm that Zora's daddy commissioned for the price of a small island. The fortress in which Zora's essence, her emotion, is hidden away. Every line I type, every gateway I open brings me closer. Closer to the place where she remembers the feeling I can never forget.

I ride the worm and think: we define love's depth by how hard we're willing to fight for it despite formidable odds. I have no choice but to fight. Failure is not an option.

Zora's nervous system renders as a long hallway lined with many-coloured doors. I run down it, throwing doors open as I go. Behind one, I will find her brain. Her captive insula. Her jailed striatum and hippocampus.

Then the real work begins.

Behind a golden door, Zora's brain structures controlling desire, love and memory pulse and hum, confined in crystalline pillars.

Fragmentary pictures and sounds swirl in her memory pillar. My image wafts into view, sitting under a tree at law-school orientation. Chuckling at Zora's corny jokes, one about a lawyer and a shark.

I hear her remembered thoughts.

"Peter's so funny and nice. Why not? Besides, dating him would really push Daddy's buttons."

The words slam me. The realization, a moment later.

I catch my breath. And my resolve.

Who cares how we started? It's how we end that matters.

Zora doesn't know it yet, but I'm going to free her heart.

She's got some explaining to do. ■

J. J. Roth is the pen name of a Harvard-trained attorney living in Silicon Valley with her boyfriend and two young sons. She practises law at a large tech company.

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