***red and her wolf***

Pari was seventeen, but she lined her eyes and powdered her face and hoped she looked older. She probably did, in her own estimation. She hoped the powder would not rub off on his clothes, but that was the least of her worries.

She waited.

Then she noticed him lingering off the curb, looking a little lost—was it her sympathetic imagination or did he look anxious?—brown lace-up boots, polo shirt, purple like her sweater, stone-dark eyes. Holding what looked like two finance books. *Finance*. Inwardly, Pari cringed.

She walked up to him, raised her eyes shyly—she was still too scared to look at him straight—and led him almost wordlessly to a table outside. She flipped her physics prep book open. It landed on a roller-coaster graph, which he recognized immediately.

“A potential energy diagram,” he said, as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

“Yes,” Pari managed shakily. “...Potential energy. We’re...doing it in class.”

He flipped through the book with exaggerated feigned interest. “Spring constant. Period of a pendulum…”

“Ew,” said Pari, reflexively.

“Fascinating,” he corrected. “You are a brilliant physics tutor, and I am your pupil.”

She gave him what she hoped was an exasperated sigh or at least a disbelieving one—*If I was a physics teacher my students would all fail*—but the words died on her candied red lips.

Later she learned two things: (a) He didn’t like makeup and (b) he was, in fact, very good at physics.

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He had written her a story. She skimmed it quickly in front of him and noted his disappointment, which he was quick to mask—he had clearly worked on it for a long time and was pained by her thirty-second perusal. His fleeting dismay felt bizarrely sincere.

“I’m going to read it fully later,” she explained gently. “Send it to me.”

She’d gathered that the story was a relatively well-written but terribly unsubtle metaphor about a poetic, melancholic princess who hoarded shiny things and escaped her tower prison to visit a wolf.

A *wolf*.

“It’s not a subtle metaphor at all,” she told him.

“It wasn’t supposed to be.”

Pari shrugged lightly. “I’m not faulting the writing. The writing was good...I mean, obviously not as good as mine, but better than most people’s…”

“Ego,” he said reproachfully.

“Watch *your* ego,” she snapped. “You know I’m right.”

“You are brilliant. I can admit that.” His voice had that lazy top-down intonation again, the self-assured drawl. Then he changed tack, attempting a halfway falsetto, mimicking the bright cadence of her voice. “Oh, he’s so *annoying*. Utterly *exasperating*. All the *bad behavior*, with his *friends*—”

“I don’t want to hear about your *friends*,” she said firmly.

“Right, Bambi princess. My bad. Although we don’t even do it that often—”

Pari could tell the conversation was taking a worrying turn, so she redirected it to physics and stories. In truth she was impressed by his story, and though the metaphor wavered halfway between inviting and predatory she appreciated its delivery. She was, after all, basically Rapunzel. And he was—well, not a thief exactly, but something close. She would get rid of that ego of his soon enough. If Rapunzel could do it, so could she.

Or at least she told herself she could.

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Two hours later, the sky was darkening to a languorous blue and Pari felt strangely safe. She had, after all, managed to not get kidnapped, despite the fifteen-second “I’m just kidding” threat and his amusement at her genuine terror.

It was the same type of *I’m just messing with you* as that time with the switchblade, but Pari did not make this connection as she tried to sit up, somewhat unsteadily. She realized apprehensively that her beige face powder had rubbed off on his sleeve. Hoping he wouldn’t notice, she ran her hand across the fabric discreetly. (It did nothing.) Under the sleeves his biceps were brick—a byproduct of supplements, deadlifts, and three months in the movie industry.

Earlier in the evening, he’d snatched her phone with his characteristic *I’ll give it back if you kiss me*. She’d reached for it, “fought” for it, all in futility, until she shot him an *Are you kidding me?* expression and he dropped it in her lap almost sheepishly. She could tell him what to do like a disapproving mother, or sometimes like a petulant child, and he’d listen in the same breath as he told her he knew better. Nothing made sense.

After a while he didn’t need to take the phone. She was less reluctant now. Her breath came in light gasps as he pulled her in gently, three kisses, and then released her. It was almost a pretty secret. Certainly not a lethal one. He smelled like the sandalwood stores in Karnataka, distinctively masculine but without the artificial sting of cologne. Pari liked it. She liked their banter too, two different types of brilliance casually set against each other. All with an undercurrent of danger.

It just ran together now. She could not tell her feelings apart.

He’d once locked her laptop in his office and declared it Schrodinger’s Laptop—she wouldn’t know if it had been stolen or not until she returned to check.

It was there when she checked. He had no interest in stealing laptops, even expensive ones, but Pari’s anxiety at the thought of lost machinery clearly entertained him. He’d then expressed genuine fascination when she understood the Schrodinger reference and explained it back to him. He simply couldn’t decide whether to read library books with her or terrorize her or take care of her, and this, too, astounded Pari.

She watched him in the dark. It was getting late.

“Time to go,” she whispered hesitantly.

She left. She spent five minutes crying over the tables in the library—whether from confusion or pure panic, she couldn’t tell—and then she thought of the material she’d have. It consoled her. Material. She dried her tears.

For stories, of course.