

Unconscious 921

Chapter 921

The following morning, Ariana awoke and reached for her phone, a lazy gesture that had become a routine. As she unlocked the device, her eyes widened in surprise as a notification informed her that one of her previously published videos had earned a spot on the popular List of the app.

Confusion and astonishment tangled within her. She delved into the backend and discovered an unexpected twist — her video's ranking had been boosted. To her astonishment, the person behind this was none other than the affluent admirer from the previous night.

Shocked and exasperated by this turn of events, Ariana resolved to communicate with him. She sent a message, inquiring why he had broken his promise not to intervene in boosting her videos' rankings.

However, patience was tested as time stretched on without a response from the other end. With a sigh, Ariana placed her phone aside, tending to her daily obligations.

After a considerable interval, a message eventually appeared from the mysterious benefactor. Yet, instead of addressing her question, he sent a picture.

In the image, a young girl viewed from behind played joyfully with building blocks. Subsequently, a new message blinked into view: "How do I make my Little one happy?"

The sight of the adorable silhouette in the photograph triggered an unexpected reaction in Ariana. Her heart warmed and softened at the sight. It was evident that the girl was undeniably endearing; Ariana's own maternal instincts yearned to embrace and coddle her.

Reflecting on the query, Ariana responded, "Providing within reasonable boundaries should suffice."

"Reasonable boundaries?" Holden contemplated briefly, unable to conjure any notions that would tread into the realm of unreasonableness.

Intrigued, he pressed on, "What if her desires remain unspoken?" Ariana's reply was concise.

“Certain children might be more reticent and struggle to articulate their wishes, but kids are not difficult to decipher. Observe where their focus lies, and that should serve as your compass.”

Following a prolonged exchange, both participants resumed their separate routines. Soon, a message arrived from Ariana’s assistant, announcing the completion of all the paperwork for the new company.

Organizing the documents, Ariana retrieved the invitation letter presented by Sonia, a token to partake in a talent show hosted by the BRD Group.

Arriving on set, Ariana handed the invitation letter and the company’s business license to a young male staff member. His gaze swept over her, and upon noticing her newly established company, a hint of disdain flashed in his eyes. He carelessly placed her documents at the bottom of the pile, commenting, “You must have spent quite a bit on that invitation letter. Most

participants in this program are from well-established agencies. Your participation seems like just filling up the numbers and wasting an invitation letter.”

His tone dripped with contempt and mockery. Ariana frowned, but her patience held as she waited for him to complete the procedure.

To her surprise, the staff member allowed the person behind her to proceed with registration, completely ignoring her. He treated the next person with enthusiasm, displaying an entirely different attitude, even laughing with delight.

This infuriated Ariana. She had to pick up Melon from Sonia’s place later and couldn't afford to waste time here.

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“What's the meaning of this? Don’t we follow the principle of ‘first come, first served’?” she asked the staff member with a cold edge to her voice.

Rolling his eyes, he retorted, “What's your hurry? Don’t waste the big company’s time, for they have a lot on their plate. You, with your newly established company, probably don’t have much business. Wait your turn, what’s the big deal?”

“What do you mean by ‘wait your turn’? | was here before him!” Ariana’s annoyance was palpable as she stood her ground, refusing to yield her position.

Seeing her steadfastness, the staff member stood up, growing more aggressive. “Are you trying to cause trouble? If you can’t wait, you can get out! There are plenty of people who want to take your spot.”

He was on the verge of calling security to remove Ariana. Just then, a man appeared, his voice stern as he inquired, “What’s going on? What’s happening here?”

Ariana turned towards the voice, a hint of familiarity tickling her senses. After a moment of recognition, it dawned on her — it was Jayson!

Jayson’s appearance seemed to exude a vibrant energy, a stark contrast to the image Ariana had held of him five years ago. His once-short hair, now even shorter, was the only familiar trait that gave her any inkling of recognition.

In that moment, Ariana escaped Jayson’s notice, but the staff member intercepted him with a deferential grin and a bow. “Hello, Mr. Spears,” the staffer greeted him. He gestured towards Ariana, his finger pointing in her direction. “Someone overseeing a recently established contracting agency is causing a bit of a stir,” he disclosed, his tone laced with amusement.

“She’s attempting to jump the queue using a stolen invitation.”

Jayson’s face contorted into a frown, an expression that didn’t escape the notice of the staffer. Seeking to clarify, he added, “Our event’s invitation list has undergone meticulous rounds of scrutiny and inquiry. We don’t extend invitations to fledgling entities looking to lower our standards.”

Jayson’s scowl deepened, his attention shifting towards the thin woman who had clearly caught his eye with her smirk.

Momentarily taken aback, Jayson’s surprise was soon replaced by recognition as he realized it was Ariana. His astonishment was palpable, the frown melting away as he strode over to embrace her warmly.

"It's truly you! Remarkable. It's been five long years since I last heard from you," Jayson exclaimed, his voice laced with surprise. "Much has transpired over the past few years," Ariana replied, reciprocating his embrace with a heartfelt hug.

Their hug bore the traces of respect and camaraderie. Encountering each other here was a delightful twist of fate neither had anticipated. Jayson's satisfaction was evident as he reminisced, "That film achieved tremendous success in its time. Yet, my attempts to reconcile accounts with you bore no fruit. Nevertheless, I held onto the funds, awaiting your eventual return."

Ariana's emotions were a blend of conflicting sentiments as she absorbed his words.

The car accident had heralded a series of tumultuous events, casting a pall over her life. The weight of responsibilities had drained her, and she had gradually distanced herself from her closest companions. The continuity of their friendship across five years was a sentiment she had not dared to hope for.

She had a lot to say to her old friend, but this was not the place for catching up due to the presence of others.

Ariana shifted her mood and glanced around, eventually focusing her gaze on the staffer. With a playful smile, she addressed him, "Mr. Spears, it seems you're in command here. Could you perhaps help me with the current issue?"

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Only then did Jayson recall the events that had transpired. His brows knitted in a frown as he turned to the staffer, his words snapping out, "What on earth is going on?"

The man shrunk his neck like a quail, avoiding their gaze and remaining mute.

Never had he considered that this unassuming woman would recognize Jayson, who held a repertoire of significant awards in the movie industry.

Jayson, the program's overseer and his boss, held far more importance than the company representative he had regarded with respect earlier.

At this moment, the staffer felt regretful, at a loss for words.

As he remained silent, Ariana continued, "Allow me to explain. He contended that my invitation didn't come through in a respectable manner, despite my patient wait in line to submit the paperwork. Not only that, he also attended to those who arrived after me. Unfortunately, I cannot spare time to stand in line again today, given my rush."

Jayson harbored a deep-seated aversion to conceited individuals. As expected, his temper flared, and he addressed the employee directly, "You may proceed to collect your salary. Your return is not necessary."

Following that, Jayson arranged for another person to take over his responsibilities and complete the registration for Ariana.

The staff member's heart sank as desperation to salvage his job mounted. Jayson's resolute refusal left him scurrying back to the supervisor he had been buttering up moments ago. With a forced chuckle, he implored, "Sir, I was just trying to expedite things for you. Could you say a word in my favor?"

To his astonishment, the supervisor brushed off his entreaties entirely. Having ascended the ranks from a small firm himself, the supervisor regarded the staff member's pitiable display with disdain. Treating him as though he were repulsive, the supervisor delivered a lesson in utter disrespect.

Shamed and defeated, the staff member shot a venomous glare at Ariana before slinking away. In his place, a new staff member arrived and adeptly tackled Ariana's paperwork without any fuss.

Jayson then extended an invitation for them to catch up, prompting Ariana to message Sonia about picking up Melon later. Sonia's swift reply read, "Sure thing."

The two then located a café to reminisce over cups of coffee.

Seated across from each other in the snug café, Jayson beamed warmly and remarked, "You look nearly the same as you did five years ago. How's life been treating you all this time?"

"Not too shabby," Ariana reciprocated with a smile.

“Even though I’ve been residing in Melcorn, I’ve managed to stay in the Loop about developments back home. Your films have achieved notable success in recent years — congratulations.”

Jayson offered a modest laugh, shaking his head.

“Just a few minor victories. Now you’re pulling my Leg.”

“On another note, I should've expected you'd be here today,” Ariana mused.

“It seems you're always entangled with BRD.”

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“That’s right, BRD is the reason I’m here this time as well,” Jayson confirmed, sipping his coffee.

“Although in the past few years, BRD’s personnel has undergone a complete overhaul, including top-level executives, Even Adrian, who backed our film, is no longer stationed at the domestic headquarters.”

“Really?” Ariana’s eyes widened in astonishment. “Wasn't Adrian a key figure at BRD? How could he end up being transferred?”

Jayson’s expression turned somber as he shook his head. “I’m not privy to the intricacies of their upper management changes. Word has it that Adrian assumed the role of a regional executive president at one of the overseas branches under the Fredrick Group.”

Ariana sighed internally. It seemed that even venerable institutions like BRD were susceptible to drastic shifts. “Incidentally,” Jayson inquired curiously, “Do Sarah and Tyler know you're back?” “Nope. I’m planning to surprise them later,” Ariana replied with a tinge of excitement.

Ariana had meticulously reviewed their schedules and knew that Sarah was currently on a concert tour, while Tyler was off filming in another location. Both friends were deeply engrossed in their respective careers, which prompted Ariana to decide to wait before sharing her return with them.

In the midst of their conversation, an idea struck Jayson. “Oh, right. Give me your account number. I’ll transfer your portion of the profits to you.”

Taking a moment to contemplate, Ariana responded with a gracious smile, gently shaking her head. “Keep it for now and consider it my contribution to your next film project.”

Jayson chuckled in a slightly helpless manner.

“You're putting quite a lot of faith in me, aren't you? What if the next project flopped?”

Ariana's confidence shone through in her smile. “No worries, if I didn't trust you implicitly, I wouldn't have sought you out five years ago.”

At this juncture, a sensitive question surfaced within Ariana's mind. She approached it with caution, saying, “By the way.. how is your wife, doing?”

Jayson's countenance darkened, and he remained silent for a moment.

“She passed away two years ago,” he finally disclosed, his tone somber

“I'm so sorry,” Ariana responded gently, bowing her head slightly. She recollected how Julissa's condition had improved remarkably the last time she saw her. Yet, regrettably, she hadn't triumphed over her illness.

Jayson managed a bitter smile. “I really believed she had turned the corner. But she Left so unexpectedly in the end.” His gaze dropped to his coffee, consumed by bittersweet memories.

“In truth, when Julissa passed, I felt like I was collapsing again,” Jayson admitted, his sigh heavy.

“But I managed to come to terms with it. I've already borrowed quite a bit of extra time from fate. She was initially given only six months, yet she remained by my side for a full three years. I'll be forever grateful for that. I will live on and carry her desires and aspirations with me.”

Turning his gaze to Ariana, Jayson inquired softly, “And you? Have you managed to move on?”

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Ariana cradled the coffee cup delicately in her hands, a bitter smile playing on her lips as she slowly shook her head.

After encountering someone as dazzling and captivating as Theodore during her most naive and impressionable years, how could she possibly forget and move on from a love like that? Deep within her heart, she knew she might never fully overcome him in this lifetime.

Aweighted silence settled between them for a fleeting moment. Kindred spirits bound by grief, they exchanged understanding smiles, a wordless communion passing between their eyes. Through unspoken accord, they deftly shifted the conversation to lighter subjects.

They engaged in conversation about mundane things, catching up on each other's lives over the past five years. After talking for a while, Ariana stole a glance at her watch, realizing she needed to pick up Melon soon. She bid Jayson a warm goodbye and then made her way to her car, driving over to Sonia's place.

The moment Ariana unlocked the front door and stepped inside, she was greeted by a rather peculiar scene unfolding at the dining table.

Sonia was adorned in a sweeping black wizard's cloak and a pointy witch's hat, while Melon sported a long blonde wig with princess curls and a frilly pink ballgown. Even the dining table itself was draped in rich purple velvet, adorned like a medieval royal court.

Ariana stood momentarily frozen in surprise before releasing an exasperated yet amused sigh. She should have anticipated that leaving those two alone for the day would likely result in them turning the house upside down with their dramatic antics.

“Mommy, you're baci Melon exclaimed, his eyes crinkling with delight at the sight of Ariana's return.

However, Ariana was all too familiar with this little rascal's ways. His sweet demeanor likely concealed a significant request or favor he was soon to ask of her.

With enthusiasm, Melon patted the empty chair beside him, beckoning Ariana to join them at the table. Observing the sly and eager glint in her son's eyes, Ariana sighed and reluctantly took her seat.

"Alright, no need to beat around the bush. What is it that you want Mommy to do for you this time?"

With a mischievous grin, Melon playfully grabbed Ariana's arm and snuggled up close. "Mommy, I want to go to a costume ball," he declared.

"Costume ball?" Ariana looked over at Sonia questioningly.

"Where is this ball going to be held?"

Sonia's smile brightened as she cheerfully explained, "The Dvie Jewelry Auction House is hosting a masquerade gala tonight on a cruise ship. They sent me an invitation, and I think you should come with us too!"

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Without hesitation, Ariana declined the idea. "I still have work matters to finish up. I can't go." "You're such a workaholic!" Sonia chided, her words laced with affection.

"Do you really have to be so hardcore all the time? Loosen up a bit, won't you? Live a little!"

She shot a subtle wink at Melon. He, in response, embarked on his own fervent plea. Clasp ing Ariana in a tight embrace, he held her arm and cast upon her his puppy-dog eyes, brimming with moisture.

"But dear Mommy, it's an affair of costumes aboard a lavish cruise ship! Just imagine the fun that awaits!"

Sonia, drawn to the scene, sidled over and ensnared Ariana's other arm, the two of them beseeching her.

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"There shall be raffle prizes aplenty," Melon interjected with palpable eagerness.

"I'm yearning to claim that grand prize — an anime figure in life-size proportions, so uniquely exclusive, it stands as the sole specimen in existence!"

Adding to the entreaty, Sonia appended, "Furthermore, the guest List brims with titans of industry and elites of high stature. A plethora of opportunities for forging connections across diverse sectors, especially given your aspirations of professional elevation."

Under the siege of their collective cajoling and the fortress of logical persuasion, Ariana's resistance capitulated at last. With a conceding nod, she yielded, her surrender spoken softly. "Very well. I shall accompany you both."

Sonia and Melon erupted in harmonious elation, sealing their triumph with a fleeting, congratulatory high-five.

Sonia, assuming a mischievous air, produced two slips of paper, carefully folded, exuding an aura of intrigue.

"Okay, now time for costumes! Draw a slip from this collection, and whatever role lies inscribed within shall determine your guise for the evening's revelry."

Ariana drew a slip at random, unfurling it to reveal its contents. Her eyes widened in startled astonishment as the identity of the designated character swept over her in an unexpected revelation.

Ariana, dressed up as Medusa, stood on the cruise ship's deck, feeling utterly hopeless as she endured the curious glances of onlookers who came and went. The embarrassment was so intense that she wished she could just dive into the water.

Sonia had tricked her! She'd turned the event into a full-blown masquerade!

Everyone on the ship was wearing intricate masks and Lavish costumes exuding charm and elegance. And there she was, feeling completely out of place. Even Sonia's witch costume seemed normal compared to Ariana's predicament.

Running away crossed Ariana's mind, but Melon and Sonia intercepted her exit.

"You'll miss out if you bail now."

"Mommy, I want the Garage Kit," Melon pleaded, casting a pitiful Look her way.

Ariana took a deep breath and clenched her teeth. It was alright. Just a moment of awkwardness. Life was too short.

They pulled her along like she was a zombie. The deck waiter blinked in surprise at her appearance, then quickly composed himself, handing her a standard mask.

Blushing in embarrassment, Ariana donned the mask and found a quiet corner to sit alone. Sonia and Melon wandered off to explore the masquerade.

In the VIP restroom, Adele couldn't help but keep her gaze fixed on Ariana due to her costume. Following Adele's line of sight, Holden glanced at Ariana before quickly turning away with a slight frown.

Seeing her unconventional outfit, Holden assumed she was seeking attention by dressing flamboyantly at a masquerade. His initial impression of her was negative, bordering on distaste.

With a hint of a nasal tone from a cold he caught after sleeping on the couch, he held Adele in his arms and asked softly, "Are you hungry?"

Adele responded not with words, but with actions. She leaped off the couch and made a beeline for the dining table, her bodyguards following suit under Holden's stern gaze.

Sadie took a seat beside him on the couch, while Holden continued his phone work without lifting an eyelid.

Observing this, Sadie scooted closer and whispered, "You agreed to accompany me, remember? Spare your attention from work."

Holden didn't divert his gaze from the screen, his tone icy as he replied, "Adele Likes the grand prize Garage Kit." Despite his busy schedule, he had made time for the party solely for his daughter's sake.

Sadie caught the undertone of his words, her expression darkening.

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As the jewelry brand's spokesperson, Sadie was meant to be the star of the evening, drawing the attention of all the men present at the ball. Yet, among the admirers, Holden remained indifferent. Despite sitting right beside him, he didn't spare her a glance.

Struggling to control her feelings, Sadie forced a smile and ventured, "How about we share the first dance?" Holden's frown deepened as he promptly declined her proposal.

Even masked, the risk of being recognized was a concern he couldn't ignore. It was the reason he'd chosen a discreet approach to attending the party.

As the opening dance was about to begin, Sadie felt her eyes welling up with tears.

From the stage, the host announced the selection of two guests for the debut dance, but Holden remained aloof. His focus remained absorbed in his work until an unexpected beam of light illuminated him from above.

His frown intensified as he glanced upward, only to spot another beam of light piercing through the darkness.

The second beam converged on the woman in the Medusa costume. @

Chapter: 928 Ariana stood, her disbelief palpable. How could it be so coincidental that they picked her?! Utterly embarrassed, she longed to avoid the gaze of anyone in the room.

Just as she contemplated declining, the host strode forward, holding a * Applause microphone, and declared, "Welcome our two Lucky guests followed his words, led by his own claps.

The audience joined in, yet their eyes couldn't help but gravitate towards Ariana's attire, sparking murmurs of discussion.

Trapped in this predicament, Ariana realized escape was futile. With reluctance, she ascended the stage, her discomfort tangible.

Both Ariana and Holden were like reluctant ducks thrust into the spotlight, their expressions far from composed, especially Holden's. Even behind his mask, his foul mood was evident.

"Can you dance?" Holden's words cut coldly through the air, directed at the flamboyantly dressed individual before him. Ariana, overcome with embarrassment, could only manage a hasty nod in response. ©

She couldn't help but steal a glance at the man before her. Towering over her by a head, his impeccably tailored suit accentuated his impressive physique. His posture was erect, shoulders broad yet tapering to a slender waist, projecting an aura of dominance.

His golden butterfly mask, adorned with silver edges, gleamed icily under the Lights, mirroring the sharpness of his jawline. He exuded an air that seemed unapproachable.

Masked as he was, Ariana couldn't help but envision a flawless countenance beneath it.

Strangely, a feeling nagged at her, suggesting a familiarity with him. He bore a faint resemblance to Holden, even obscured by the mask, yet his presence exuded a far colder aura than Holden's. Their hairstyles differed, offering some distinguishing features.

Holden — how could someone of his demeanor be present at such a dance? Ariana briefly contemplated but chose to refrain from delving further into his identity.

The music commenced, beckoning them to dance, and they drew nearer to each other, moving in harmony with the rhythm.

As the distance between them closed, Holden caught a delicate whiff of Ariana's fragrance, triggering an inexplicable flutter within his heart.

Ariana remained oblivious to Holden's reaction, her own nerves consuming her attention. It had been an extended period since she had last danced, and the intricate steps eluded her memory.

With mounting anxiety, her missteps multiplied. In a mere heartbeat, she unintentionally trod on her partner's foot, a misfortune repeating itself four or five times.

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Flushed with embarrassment, she repeatedly murmured her apologies in a hushed tone. When her voice reached Holden's ears, a sense of familiarity dawned upon him, though its origin remained beyond his grasp.

He clasped Ariana's hand, guiding her through the dance as the music swirled around them. Yet, her attire was ill-suited for the twirling motion, causing her to stumble. Inadvertently, she ensnared her own skirt and collided with Holden's chest.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," Ariana stammered, her distress palpable. Panic surged within her, the desire to vanish from the stage nearly overwhelming. However, Holden just frowned slightly.

As her body had collided with his just moments before, an inexplicable quickening of his heartbeat ensued, an anomaly in his normally steady emotional state since the accident.

An unsettling intuition gnawed at Holden, a feeling that all was not as it should be. Urgency surged through him, compelling him to conclude the dance.

Ariana shared a similar discomfort, her unease augmented by the warmth of Holden's gloved hand at her waist. The delicate aroma of tobacco entwined with juniper enveloped him, intoxicating her senses

Ariana realized that they couldn't continue like this.

In that pivotal moment, an abrupt, disdainful snort from him jolted her back to reality, shattering her reverie.

For an instant, that cold sound bore an uncanny resemblance to Theodore's voice. ©

Chapter: 929

Ariana's head snapped up, but all she could see was the mask's cold facade. It couldn't possibly be Theodore.

That much was crystal clear to Ariana.

Aswirl of complex thoughts surged through her mind. Slowly, she averted her gaze, skimming over his alluring Adam's apple, and redirected her attention elsewhere.

As the music reached its conclusion, the applause of the crowd below snapped Ariana back to reality. She mustered a composed smile, concealing the disappointment that had taken root within her.

In that instant, a low, raspy voice reached her ears, "Your foot's on mine."

Startled, Ariana glanced down, realizing that her right foot had inadvertently landed on his leather shoe.

"It's my fault, I'm sorry." She quickly apologized, hastily retracting her foot. However, in her haste, she almost tripped over her skirt.

Thankfully, he held onto her hand and steadied her.

"Thank you." Ariana patted her chest, conveying her gratitude, before the two of them bowed in unison to the applauding audience.

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Outside the venue, Sadie's gaze was locked on the woman on stage, her grip on her glass threatening to shatter it. It felt like she was losing her mind. Ever since crossing paths with

Ariana, she had become overly paranoid. Now, even a random woman had her suspecting it was Ariana.

To make matters worse, this woman had danced the opening dance with

Holden. Jealousy was gnawing at Sadie's heart, driving her close to madness.

Sadie's glare was fixed on the figure on stage. She turned to leave, her mind consumed by fury.

Unaware of the Little boy playing behind her, Melon, she collided with him head-on, almost as if she'd kicked him.

The glass in her grasp sloped in the process, the drink staining her skirt.

Unable to feign composure any Longer, Sadie's facade crumbled. Already infuriated, she redirected her anger toward the child and scolded him vehemently, "Can't you watch where you're going? Are you blind?!"

Melon felt unjustly scolded. He was the one who had been bumped into, yet he dutifully apologized, "I'm sorry."

However, Sadie had seemingly found an outlet for her frustration and persisted, "Look at my dress now. What are you going to do to make up for it? Kids these days have no manners whatsoever."

Her disdain for children was evident in her brusque attitude. Observing

Melon's continued silence, she taunted, "Never mind, it's clear you're an ill-mannered child brought here by someone equally clueless. Your parents must be morons to allow you to run around at a formal event like this."

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Initially stung by Sadie's words, Melon's hurt transformed into anger when he heard her insult his mother. He shot back with unwavering volume, "You bumped into me first, you mean lady, ugly witch! My mom is a hundred times better than you. You bumped into someone and didn't even say sorry, yet you're arguing with a kid. Nobody's going to Like you!"

Melon wasn't content with words alone. He stepped forward and attempted to push Sadie, though his effort barely moved her an inch.

Nevertheless, his actions provoked Sadie's annoyance.

Driven to fury, Sadie poised herself to retaliate, but Melon's fear overpowered him, causing him to swiftly hide beneath the nearby table.

Wanting to pull him out, Sadie's intent was interrupted by an event organizer approaching her. The organizer said, "Miss Pierre, there's an interview waiting for you over there."

Though she sent a fierce glare toward the person hidden under the table, Sadie had no choice but to leave.

While watching Sadie's departure, Melon contemplated crawling out from under the table. However, his intention was abruptly halted as a man in suit pants drew near. Recognizing the two of them as being together,

Melon promptly retracted back under the table. Once the opening dance concluded, Holden returned to his seat directly. Just as he settled in and was preparing to address some business matters, he sensed a subtle nudge against his foot.

Bending down to investigate, Holden caught sight of a small section of a skirt disappearing beneath the table. It seemed someone was gradually pulling the fabric under the table's cover.

An intrigued brow raised, Holden leaned down to lift the tablecloth. "Ah!" Melon's startled exclamation echoed, his hands still gripping his skirt tightly. Nervously, he looked up at Holden.

Upon closer inspection, Holden discovered a "girl" with golden curls concealed under the table. "Her" large eyes held traces of fear as

"she" met his gaze. Clinging tightly to "her" dress, "her" fair hands and rosy cheeks resembled a blushing apple

Despite "her" tender age, "her" features were delicate, with eyes that were clear and lively. Despite "her" trepidation, "she" remained poised, observing him with intent focus.

Seeing this child, Holden found himself thinking of his own daughter's endearing countenance, which softened his demeanor.

He was about to inquire further when Melon, sensing his movement, swiftly apologized, "I didn't mean to do that earlier, Mister. Please don't punish me."

Holden was taken aback, his confusion evident as he asked, "Why would I do that?"

In that instant, Melon realized that the man in front of him meant no harm. A sense of connection washed over him, emboldening him to crawl out from beneath the table, no longer fearing the situation.

Patting his skirt, Melon expressed a hint of frustration, "A lady bumped into me a while ago. She spilled her drink on her skirt and kept bothering me despite my apology. She even insulted my mom. I got so mad that I pushed her and she tried to hit me, so I hid under the table."

He went on, "I saw that lady and you sitting together, so I thought you were together." He blinked and asked, "Is she your wife?" Upon hearing this, Holden's brow furrowed slightly. Shaking his head he replied, "No."

Relieved by the confirmation, Melon burst into a joyful dance and exclaimed, "That woman is so mean, nothing like my mom. My mom's beautiful, she talks so softly, makes the yummiest food, and she loves me a lot. She's the greatest mom in the whole world!"

Tickled by the child's fervent praise, Holden nodded in agreement, though he held a more nuanced view.

After all, a responsible mother wouldn't leave her child alone in such a vast ballroom. What if the child got lost?

Holden stood up, scanning the surroundings for any parents searching for a child. His attention shifted as he noticed Melon's curious gaze fixated on his mask. He bent down and asked, "What's on your mind?"

The child glanced at the mask on Holden's face, seemingly tempted to touch it. However, he held back, his expression a tad distressed.

"Everyone has one of these masks, and I want one too, but they won't give them to kids."

Holden couldn't help but smile at the child's earnest demeanor. Noting the relative emptiness around them, he removed the mask and offered it to Melon to play with.

With evident delight, Melon accepted the mask and began, "Thank you,

Mister.." But as he looked up and his gaze met Holden's unmasked face, he froze momentarily. His scrutiny intensified as he stared at him, and then he uttered, "Dad!"