

Unconscious 1111

Chapter 1111

With Adele cradled in her arms, Ariana fell silent. After a brief pause, she looked down at Adele and suddenly blurted out, "Where is Mr. Fredrick? Is he here in the mall as well?"

"Yes," Shawn replied.

Ariana's heart quickened, her thoughts descending into chaos. If Holden was present, could it be him in the photograph Sarah had captured?

Shawn added, "By the way, Miss Edwards, your partnership proposal has been approved. When will you have time to meet with Mr. Fredrick?"

Hearing this, Ariana looked up at Shawn with a hint of anxiety in her eyes. "Could we arrange a meeting today? | can talk to him right now."

Ariana couldn't help but feel the impatience welling up within her, her yearning to catch a glimpse of Holden had soared to its Zenith.

She longed to bring an end to this internal turmoil, to unravel the mystery of Holden's true face. ninjanovel.com Shawn hesitated briefly before gently shaking his head.

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Miss Edwards. Mr. Fredrick is currently engrossed in helping Miss Pierre choose her wedding dress."

Those words instantly jolted Ariana back to her senses. Indeed, Holden was already betrothed, on the cusp of exchanging vows. Even if she were to discover his current appearance, what purpose would it serve?

A heavy silence enveloped Ariana. Even if Holden's voice resonated like Theodore's and he bore a resemblance, he was not her Theodore.

He had Sadie and Adele.

So, even if he sounded like Theodore and looked like Theodore, he could never be her Theodore. The man she had loved had departed five years ago.

If her Theodore still breathed, he would have sought her out without delay, never having taken another as his bride, let alone siring a child with Sadie.

If he were capable of such betrayal, she would rather believe him dead.

With a sigh etched deep within her heart, Ariana lowered her gaze.

Her obsession with finding Theodore had held her captive for far too long; it was time to release it. Summoning a forced smile, Ariana turned to Shawn.

“Well, let's put this aside for now. Perhaps another time.”

Ever perceptive, Shawn noticed the discord in Ariana's emotions and inwardly sighed.

He held a deep admiration for Ariana; she possessed capability and a commendable character, but fate had conspired against her, arriving too late on the scene.

Chapter 1112

Meanwhile, on the top floor, Sadie stood draped in a wedding dress, tirelessly adjusting her posture and striking poses before the mirror.

The wedding dress designer stood at the ready, attempting to meet her exacting demands.

Sadie carried an air of entitlement about her, a demeanor demanding perfection, incessantly pointing out the slightest imperfections in each dress. It seemed that none were glamorous enough for her elevated status, nor did they quite accentuate her figure to her satisfaction. She cycled through several outfits, and the designer struggled to maintain a forced smile while grappling with mounting frustration.

It wasn't until Sadie grew tired of changing outfits that she finally stopped.

She cast a fleeting glance toward Holden, who had maintained his quiet composure throughout, immersed in his own thoughts, never uttering a word or casting a glance her way. With calculated intent, Sadie approached Holden, performed a graceful twirl, and posed the question, "How does this one fare, in your opinion?"

Holden remained unfazed, his eyelids unmoved as he nonchalantly replied, "Looks good."

Sadie pouted and playfully chided, "You didn't even take a look."

Holden, still engrossed in his own thoughts, paid her no heed.

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Nonetheless, Sadie didn't mind; his presence was solely to accompany her in the quest for the perfect wedding dress.

With a continued smile, she pressed on, "I've sought advice from someone, and I believe we should schedule the wedding for Adele's birthday next month. It holds significance, and the weather will be more agreeable, not too scorching.

Sadie was in the midst of expressing her thoughts when Holden's phone abruptly rang. It was the manager of the Fredrick Group's real estate division, calling regarding a crucial land bidding in the West City area. Without hesitation, Holden accepted the call.

On the other end of the line, the manager reported that the bidding for the West City land had proceeded smoothly, but an essential document required Holden's signature.

"Alright, I'll come over," Holden responded succinctly before hanging up the phone. He made his way toward the exit without sparing a glance for Sadie. It was only upon reaching the doorway that he remembered to add, "You have free rein over all wedding decisions."

With that parting statement, he departed without a backward glance.

Sadie watched as Holden strolled away without a single glance her way.

She shouted after him, but he kept on walking.

Feeling a rush of helplessness, Sadie stomped the floor in annoyance.

Even with all his gestures, like getting her a wedding dress or lavishing her with gifts, Sadie knew the truth. Holden's affection wasn't for her but for Adele.

She wasn't just after his gifts or his endorsements. She yearned for Holden to be truly present at their wedding, to genuinely want it.

Right then, Shawn appeared with Adele in his arms. He looked around, noticed Holden's absence, and said, "Miss Pierre, have you seen Mr. Fredrick?"

Clearly not in the mood for questions, Sadie shot back, "Do you even keep track of your boss? Go find him!" She then took Adele from him, her face all storms and thunder. Shawn, a little thrown by her outburst, could only scratch his head.

He didn't ask more and went in search of Holden.

Chapter 1113

Watching Shawn's retreating figure, Sadie felt her anger boiling over. She snapped at the folks in the dressing room, "Why are you all still here? Shoo! I need peace and quiet." Everyone exchanged a "what just happened" look and swiftly exited. It was just Sadie and Adele left in the room.

Sadie sat there, a volcano about to erupt, while Adele hung back, sensing the danger. All that rage inside Sadie? It used to be taken out on Adele, and today was no different.

With a frosty stare, she instructed Adele, "Go. Lean against that wall and do a handstand."

Adele hesitated, which seemed to be the wrong move because Sadie's eyes flashed in anger. Rising from her seat, she approached the young girl, who, sensing the imminent threat, shuffled to the wall and tried the handstand.

Sinking back into her chair, Sadie remarked, "Don't stop until I say so."

But kids could only hold out for so long. After what felt like forever but was probably only minutes, Adele's face was a bright shade of red. Out of breath, she whispered a desperate plea, saying, "Mom, please."

Sadie barely glanced Adele's way, instead choosing to admire her nails. Grinning with a hint of cruelty, she teased, "What was that?"

You'll need to raise your voice."

With every ounce of strength, Adele tried to steady herself, her voice breaking. "Mom, please!"

That seemed to appease Sadie, who waved a dismissive hand.

"Fine, get up."

Angela's Library

She had her ways to make Adele miserable, and this method, being discreet, gave her a wicked sense of pleasure. It sure lifted her spirits.

But catching sight of Adele's exhausted face, Sadie was reminded of the day Adele had clung to Ariana. Her rage returned in a flash. She lightly tapped Adele's cheek, her tone dripping with malice.

"Always be good, alright? Parents only love good little girls. Otherwise, who knows, we might just leave you behind."

Adele stood there, a quivering mess, and couldn't muster a word.

Seeming satisfied with her little tirade, Sadie headed out, Adele in tow.

Soon after, a crew entered to spruce up the dressing room. Among them, a newbie stared wide-eyed at the luxurious dresses on the floor and the sparkling jewelry. She whispered, a touch of envy in her voice, "One of these necklaces could set me up for years."

Another cleaner, a seasoned one, warned her, "Eyes straight ahead. This room's watched by cameras. One cleaner thought they could slack off and got caught. Lost their job." Taking the hint, the new cleaner dove into her work, the earlier longing replaced by caution.

Holden made his way to West City with a document needing his signature. After he had scribbled his name on it, a nagging feeling made him pause. The thought of returning to Sadie wasn't appealing at the moment.

Chapter 1114

Digging in his pocket, he looked around. His eyes caught a glowing sign on the other side of the river: "Evergreen Apartments. That name rang a bell. He racked his brain and remembered that the middle-aged owner of the tailor shop had mentioned it. Eyeing the building, he told his driver, "You head back. I'll keep the car."

Once his driver was gone, Holden made his way across the river to the building.

He still had the exact address the man from the tailor shop had provided.

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He stood in front of the apartment door, gathering his thoughts.

Finally, he knocked.

Silence.

He tried again. Still nothing.

A feeling of disappointment settled in Holden's gut. He was about to leave when his gaze landed on the fingerprint lock. On a whim, he pressed his hand against it.

The lock beeped and, to his astonishment, the door swung open.

He blinked in surprise, then stepped inside.

He stood by the door, carefully scanning the room for anything out of the ordinary.

The apartment was spacious, seemingly a blend of two combined units.

Dust had claimed its territory, but furniture draped in white sheets hinted that whoever had stayed here took care of the place. A sense of déjà vu hit Holden as he wandered the room, taking in every detail.

The room was scattered with various trinkets, though all had succumbed to the relentless march of dust over the years. By the looks of it, the place had been untouched for quite some time.

Amidst the exploration, Holden's eyes landed on a collection of figurines perched on a shelf. There were pairs of male and female dolls that looked like someone's handiwork.

Yet these were drawn in a whimsical, cartoonish style, leaving their real-life inspirations a mystery.

He brushed his fingers over them, the nostalgia evident, before venturing deeper into the room.

One peculiar detail stood out: numerous little ramps positioned near stairs and entrances. The purpose? It escaped him.

Pulling open a wardrobe, it was brimming with men's attire. Plucking a random piece, he noticed the custom cuts. And when held up for comparison, the clothing eerily matched his own size.

His intrigue deepened. Holden opened the next wardrobe door to be greeted by an array of women's clothing.

His mind raced to Sadie, wondering if she ever owned any of these things.

Chapter 1115

But upon examining a long skirt and checking a shoe cabinet, he found the sizes were all wrong. Everything was off. Confusion took hold.

His fingerprints were enrolled to the lock, but he couldn't recall ever owning this place. The men's wardrobe screamed his name, yet the women's closet sang a different tune. It wasn't Sadie's.

His mind raced back to the tailor, who'd mentioned the wedding dress designed for someone Holden held dear. Could she have lived here?

Yet, according to Sadie, they were the star-crossed lovers from five years back. How could he have a connection with another woman?

Holden put everything back to its original place, and then he fell into deep thought for a long time. He suddenly began searching the entire apartment, hoping to find even a simple trace of the woman's existence. He wanted to know who this woman was, even if he could only find one photo.

However, the room had been meticulously cleaned and Holden was unable to find any photos or objects that could give clues to the identity of this woman.

Only the shoes in the shoe cabinet and the women's clothing in the wardrobe indicated that a woman had once lived here. Standing in the room, Holden looked around, his mind in a mess.

He couldn't understand why there were so many things related to him here. Who was that woman? More importantly, what did she do five years ago?

Since his accident, he had never had such an ardent desire to remember his past. ANGELA'S LIBRARY

What happened before he lost his memory? Had Sadie been deceiving him all this time?

Holden stayed in the apartment for a while. After he had finally calmed down, he left the apartment. Just as he entered the elevator, the doors of another elevator opened and Ariana stepped out. Ariana's mind was still busy with what had happened during the day.

On top of that, she missed Theodore so much. She unconsciously turned in the direction of the apartment where Holden had just come out of.

Standing at the door, Ariana took a deep breath to calm her heart, which was overwhelmed with emotions. It had already been five years since she had been back here. In fact, she had been afraid to come back here as it could bring back old memories and she might not be able to control her emotions. But ever since she saw that photo, she had been restless. Her heart was no longer consumed by fear but by desire. And now she found herself standing right here.

It was the first time she had come back here in five years. When Ariana opened the door and walked in, a wave of bitterness and sadness washed over her heart at the sight of the familiar surroundings.

Everything was still the same as it was five years ago. Nothing had changed at all. She had not even changed the fingerprints lock or the passwords.

She had been in a situation where she found herself both avoiding this place and wanting to preserve it in its original state. She wanted to keep things intact, as if Theodore was still with her.

She knew every nook and cranny of this apartment as if the last time she was here was yesterday. But at the same time, all of this was like a fleeting dream to her.

Ariana went straight to the room that used to be Theodore's at the time. As soon as she entered it, the sadness in her heart grew so much that her heart was about to burst.

She opened the wardrobe and took out the clothes Theodore used to wear. She couldn't resist the desire to squeeze them tightly against her. With her hands trembling slightly, she held the clothes close to her chest.

Chapter 1116

Tears welled up in Ariana's eyes and her whole body was trembling slightly. She buried her face deep in the clothes, trying to inhale

Theodore's familiar scent. However, after five years, the clothes only carried the smell of the fabric itself mixed with the scent of sawdust from the wardrobe.

The harsh reality was ruthlessly breaking her illusions. "Theodore, why? Why did you leave me here all by myself?" Ariana murmured in a trembling voice.

She made an effort to calm down. With her eyes still red, she put the clothes back in the wardrobe. When she turned around, her gaze fell on the dusty decorations on the shelf. The thick layer of dust almost hid the original appearance of the figurines.

At this time, Ariana regretted not coming back here due to fear and allowing the memories she shared with Theodore to be covered in dust.

She made up her mind this time to come back here regularly. With this in mind, Ariana tidied up the room a bit before leaving.

As she was about to leave, she suddenly noticed that, unlike the other dusty figures, the top of one of the figurines on the shelf was clean. It felt like someone had just touched it.

Ariana's eyes widened in astonishment as she picked up the doll.

It was a shocker, to say the least. Had an uninvited guest made their way in? Yet, the room had no signs of a break-in, and nothing of value appeared to be missing.

Quickly, Ariana assessed her door lock and found no trace of forcible entry. ninjanovel.com

Did someone come in through the front door just like that? But the only people authorized were herself and Theodore, their fingerprints the only keys. Who else, if anyone, could've entered?

In a fleeting moment, Ariana's thoughts flickered to Sarah's snapshot at the shopping mall. Could it be possible, against all odds, that Theodore was not truly deceased? Was he back?

With that notion seizing her, Ariana raced down the stairs, reaching the residential area's security office. Breathlessly, she addressed the guard, "I'm the tenant upstairs. I urgently need access to the surveillance footage!"

Simultaneously, Holden was back at the Fredrick family home. Meanwhile, Sadie sat down for dinner with Adele in the dining room.

At first, Sadie had little inclination to engage with Adele, but upon catching wind of Holden's return outside, she swiftly put on a facade of warmth and tenderness. Spoon in hand, she fed Adele affectionately, murmuring, "Adele, care for a bit more?"

She pretended to be oblivious to Holden's return, only registering surprise when the butler announced Mr. Fredrick. "Holden, you're back!"

Feeling tired? Have you had anything to eat?"

As Sadie was about to remove Holden's coat, he disregarded her completely, handing the coat to the butler.

Her smile waned into an awkward one, and she withdrew her hand.

Eagerly, she pressed, "Let's sit down for a meal. I've been eagerly awaiting your return."

Holden nodded and settled at the dining table, where the servant promptly arranged the tableware.

After a few quick bites, Holden unexpectedly broached the subject of their impending wedding.

"Since you've planned the wedding for next month, it'll be pretty soon." His words caught Sadie off guard. His follow-up remark extinguished her enthusiasm before she could revel in the excitement.

"I'd like our love story to have a commemorative touch, a testament to our journey. Do you happen to possess any photographs from five years ago or other keepsakes that hold sentimental value?"

Sadie's expression froze in an instant, panic coursing through her. Her eyes darted around involuntarily as she hastily sipped her soup.

"No need for that," Sadie stammered, her voice trembling. She glanced up at Holden, her anxiety palpable, and added hurriedly, "Moreover, it might be embarrassing for our guests to see such old photos. Plus, I've switched phones recently, and unfortunately, I lost all the saved pictures."

"No backups?" Holden inquired, skepticism tainting his tone.

"No.. At the time, I was alone, and my phone was stolen suddenly. I couldn't retrieve it," Sadie hurriedly explained, pretending to focus on her meal, avoiding Holden's penetrating gaze.

Holden continued to regard her with a narrowed, suspicious gaze. He knew Sadie well, and her lack of photographic evidence from their past together seemed oddly inconsistent with their relationship.

Delving further, he probed, "Not a single photograph? You didn't post any on your social media?"

Chapter 1117

Sadie was in a sudden whirlwind of panic, her heart racing like a horse escaping the starting gate. She couldn't fathom why Holden had brought up this long-buried past out of the blue. She stammered with her mind in a fog, "Back then, I felt like a ship adrift in a storm, thinking you'd cast me off. It tore me apart, and I purged every trace of our shared history in my anguish."

Holden, his utensils set aside, wore a sly grin.

"Well, reckon you could scour your digital catacombs for those lost remnants. Sometimes, treasures could lurk in the shadowy recesses of some software."

"I'll give it a shot when time allows," Sadie replied. Her palms grew sweaty, and a sense of restlessness gnawed at her like a persistent itch. She added, "But after all these years, the sands of time could have swallowed our digital footprints whole."

Holden, nodding in reluctant agreement, couldn't deny the passage of time. He watched as Sadie's face betrayed her anxiety. When she thought the storm had passed, Holden's words came forth.

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"By the way, can you recall the gifts I gave you half a decade ago? We could adorn our marital home with some of those cherished relics."

"I'll see what I can muster," Sadie answered nonchalantly, though her mind resembled a jigsaw puzzle in disarray, the pieces eluding her grasp like needles on shifting sands.

Aglimmer of relief could be seen on Sadie's face when a servant came in. "Miss Pierre, your car awaits. We should embark right away."

Sadie rose hastily.

"I need to be at the set later. Excuse me."

She walked off, leaving Holden nodding, his face as cold as ice.

Once, Holden had seldom delved into such matters, letting the past be. His focus had eternally been on Adele, his biological daughter.

Yet, Sadie's guilty face had planted seeds of suspicion in him.

Holden's thoughts circled back to what he had discovered at the apartment earlier. Each passing moment deepened his skepticism.

At the same time, Adele, having emptied her plate, wanted to leave, but Holden's swift hold halted her. He then tenderly wiped her mouth.

Wiping his mouth as well, he said, "Adele, Daddy bought you a gift!"

His hand went into his pocket, only to discover the box with the crystal hairpin missing.

After a moment's pondering, he surmised he had left it in the lounge, so he had someone look for it.

Meanwhile, Ariana, locked in a dispute with the property manager, employed every resource.

"I have fulfilled your prerequisites, with my credentials validated. Why, then, can't I access the surveillance footage?" "I've already stated that we cannot access the surveillance footage.

Please leave if you do not have any pressing issues," the property manager replied steadfastly. Their resolve mirrored a stone wall impervious to Ariana's entreaties.

Chapter 1118

As the situation unfolded, a growing crowd of curious onlookers, comprised mainly of community residents, began to gather. Ariana's anxiety swelled, and she didn't mince words. She confronted the property manager directly, her voice laced with urgency.

"What's the meaning of pressing issues? Valuables have vanished from my house! If you continue obstructing access to the surveillance footage, I'll be left with no recourse but to summon the authorities and let them take it from here."

Then, she feigned dialing the police.

Quickly, the property manager interceded, "Wait, hold on. It's not that we're barring you from the surveillance footage. The stark truth is that our community's surveillance system has been on the fritz for years, rendering it inaccessible."

This revelation drew a chorus of criticism from the onlookers. “What? ninjanovel.com

Have you let the surveillance system languish for years? What have you been doing with the hefty property fees we’ve been forking over?”

“That’s a valid point. What about our safety? It’s Miss Edwards today, but who knows who’ll be next? Can you shoulder that responsibility?”

The property manager hurriedly tried to appease the angry crowd, asserting, “Ladies and gentlemen, I assure you, we’ll take immediate steps to rectify the camera system. We give you our solemn word.”

As the commotion continued, Ariana’s hopes dwindled.

However, she noticed the nearby security guard and clung to a sliver of hope. She inquired tentatively, “Pardon me, but before my unfortunate incident, did you happen to spot a tall gentleman entering that building?”

“No.” The security showed certainty on his expression and said firmly, “I’ve been here all along keeping an eye out for anything. During this whole time, you were the only one who came in and out.”

Upon hearing the security guard’s response, the spark of hope that Ariana had been holding in her heart was completely extinguished. She lowered her head and managed to utter a feeble thank you. A self-deprecating smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. She realized that she had let her longing and imagination get the best of her, making her believe that it might have been Theodore who had come back.

She turned around and walked out of the building in disappointment. Watching her leave, a sense of guilt crept over the security guard.

In reality, he took a short break from his work earlier in the morning, so he hadn’t seen anything. But when Ariana asked him about it, the manager had been standing right next to him, so he couldn’t tell her the truth and lied.

Later that night, Holden was spending time with Adele in the room.

The girl sat on the bed, engrossed in looking at picture books. As he observed his daughter, Holden couldn't help but think of Melon, and then his thoughts wandered to the images of Ariana.

The thought of her made him restless, and he felt the urge to call her. Hearing her voice could calm his mind.

He picked up his phone, ready to dial Ariana's number, but he stopped midway, thinking that he might disturb her. In the end, he decided to send her a message first. But to his surprise, as soon as the message was sent, the notification of being blocked by the other end popped up on his screen.

Holden was momentarily stunned. He told himself that there might be an issue with the messaging app. He exited the app and sent another message to Ariana, but he received the same result-the notification indicating that he had been blocked.

Holden's emotions became more complex. He was left feeling bewildered because he had no idea why he was blocked. This was the first time he had been blocked, and he felt somewhat lost, unable to comprehend the situation.

Growing increasingly anxious, Holden decided to call Ariana. After a brief wait, the call was finally answered, and he heard rustling noises on the other end of the line.

Chapter 1119

"Hello?" came a faint voice. Ariana's voice sounded slurred, and it seemed like she had been drinking for quite a while.

"_Are you drinking again?" Holden furrowed his brows and shot a question. It was already late at night, and Ariana was drinking, which made him worried.

"N-no. I'm not drinking," Ariana replied. Although she denied it, her voice clearly showed that she had consumed more than just a little bit of alcohol. Her words were slightly slurred, and she sounded somewhat inebriated. She continued, "Who are you?"

Holden scoffed.

“You don’t even recognize my voice anymore, and you’re saying you haven’t been drinking?” “So, who are you then?” Ariana persistently inquired in her inebriated state.

“Well... Holden began to speak but then stopped himself.

He realized that for Ariana, he didn’t have a_ straightforward identity to claim. Holden was uncertain about how to present himself.

After a moment of silence, he finally said, “I’m your online follower and Melon’s fake dad.” “I don’t know who that is,” replied Ariana. Her words were still slurring from the effects of alcohol. Holden sighed and asked, “Where are you?”

On the other end of the phone, Ariana mumbled something about a riverbank and then mentioned a nearby building before abruptly hanging up.

Holden didn’t even have the time to confirm the location she had mentioned. Feeling helpless, he let out a long sigh again. In the end, he decided to rely on himself and used the location hints she had given. He finally found a bar, grabbed his car keys, and drove there immediately.

When he arrived at the bar, he looked around to find Ariana. His eyes then landed on a small figure slouching over a table that had more than five empty bottles.

Seeing Ariana unprotected in the middle of the bar, Holden couldn’t help but feel a hint of anger. It was strange for him because he didn’t understand why he felt that way. He looked at Ariana, who was too intoxicated to recognize anyone, and he couldn’t help but feel a little annoyed. Did this woman have absolutely no sense of danger?

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She dared to drink so heavily when she was out alone, and this wasn’t the first time.

As he approached Ariana, Holden's anger dissipated. He gently tapped her forehead and said, "Stop drinking. Let's go home." The bartender approached and asked, "You must be Theodore, this lady's husband, right?"

Holden found himself frozen, a whirlwind of intricate emotions swirling within as the server fixed a quizzical gaze upon him. After a moment of hesitation, he gave a subtle nod.

With a sigh of relief, the server exclaimed, "Thank the stars you've arrived. This poor lady has been sipping her sorrows away solo for quite a spell now. Be gentle in your disagreements — life's no walk in the park for the fairer sex. It's risky letting your spouse stew in solitude too, nursing her wounds with drinks like this."

Holden gave an awkward nod and turned to assist Ariana, feeling a tad embarrassed by the server's assumptions. As he looked at her slouched across the table, her cheeks flushed and her hair awry, he couldn't help but let out a sigh.

In her inebriated state, Ariana said, "Theodore, you scoundrel. Why haven't you looked for me?"

Hearing her long for her late husband kindled a stifling sensation in Holden's chest. Though he knew he had no claim on her, an irrational pang of jealousy flickered through him.

With care, Holden slipped his arms beneath Ariana's limp body, taking care to avoid the knife wound on her arm. But as he hoisted her up, she weakly resisted.

Chapter 1120

"Don't touch.. my husband's on his way," she protested, her words slurring together incoherently.

A surge of frustration and protectiveness coursed through Holden, causing him to hold her more firmly against him. He said sternly, "Stay still, or I might drop you!"

At his authoritative tone, Ariana quieted, her body becoming pliant in his arms.

Holden carried her outside, the refreshing night air enveloping them as they left the stifling bar. However, no sooner had they stepped out than he heard soft sobs coming from the woman nestled in his embrace.

Reaching his car and placing her in the passenger seat, Holden glanced down in surprise, gently brushing aside her disheveled hair to reveal tear tracks staining Ariana's delicate cheeks.

Despite his intentions, his heart ached at the sight. He wiped away a stray tear with his thumb and inquired tenderly, "What's troubling you? Why are you crying?"

Pouting, Ariana whimpered, "You. you raised your voice at me. Taken aback, Holden took a moment to reflect on his harshness. As her sniffles persisted, he conceded with an apologetic tone, "You're right, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

At his sincere apology, Ariana's tears momentarily ceased, and she looked up at Holden with watery eyes. But a moment later, fresh tears welled up, and she cried out joyfully, wrapping her arms around his neck.

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"Theodore! You've finally returned for me!"

Before Holden could react, Ariana buried her face against his chest, her warm tears soaking his shirt. "I missed you so much," she sobbed.

"Why did you leave me all alone?"

Listening to her drunken lament over this Theodore ignited a flame of jealousy in Holden, though he knew he had no right. Still, he couldn't suppress the bitter envy bubbling up within him.

This surge of irrational jealousy only served to infuriate Holden further. Gently forcing Ariana to meet his gaze, he asserted firmly, "I am not Theodore. Look closely."

Blinking blearily up at him, Ariana persisted, "But you are Theodore!

You look just the same as you did five years ago!"

Realizing she was too drunk to recognize him, Holden reiterated firmly, "No, you're confused. I am not Theodore." Staring intently into his face, Ariana furrowed her brow in puzzlement.

"If you're not Theodore, then who are you?" she asked confusedly.

Holden paused, then replied with measured words, "I am Holden Fredrick."

"Holden?" Ariana repeated the name.

She tilted her head, furrowing her brow as if decoding his words.