

Husband With Benefits

chapter 36-40

Chapter 36

Sara Anderson gazed at Nora's back, curiosity evident in her eyes. If she believed in concepts like rebirth, she might have been convinced that Nora had undergone some sort of transformation. However, not subscribing to such beliefs, she could only ponder what had caused her sister's profound change.

Nora had always been someone who followed orders. From an early age, Sara had understood that all she had to do was cry and blame Nora for not listening to her, and her older sister would do everything for her. And if she did not, then their mother would make her do it, whether she wanted to or not. At times, she had even feared that her mother might do the same to her if she had a younger sister. However, she gradually came to realize that her mother wasn't just biased against Nora; she actually harbored hatred towards her. Whenever she troubled her older sister, Sara was rewarded for it.

However, while she had been the center of the universe at home, Nora had excelled in school. Sara did well too, but mere success was insufficient for her; she desired the spotlight solely on herself. And so, one day when she was ten, she tearfully implored her sister to stop being so brilliant in school. She explained how hard it was for her to study and compete. She wanted to love her sister without resentment.

Of course, at that time, Sara didn't realize that those last words had deeply affected Nora. Nora didn't want her younger sister to resent her. If barely passing exams could make her younger sister love her, Nora was willing to compromise her academic excellence. Although Sara didn't grasp this initially, by the time they were teenagers, she started understanding. Not only did she understand, but she also exploited this vulnerability, gradually making it her norm.

This dynamic continued until Nora met Antonio. The only guy that she had a crush on asked her less remarkable sister out. That night, Sara wept profusely, mixed with fear. She believed Nora was undeserving of love, so Antonio would surely break her heart eventually. But Sara dreaded the possibility of Nora revealing unfavorable things about her to Antonio while they dated, which would ruin Sara's chances with him.

As a result, Sara distanced herself a bit, refraining from using Nora as much as before. She even requested her mother to ease up, to no avail. Nonetheless, she waited, expecting their relationship to collapse, only for it to persist. Watching Nora with Antonio brought tears to her eyes, until her mother suggested she seek Antonio's help. Her mother assured her that once Antonio got to know her, he'd move on from Nora. True to

her mother's prediction, Antonio left Nora and turned to Sara. He even publicly declared his intention to marry her. Yet, despite having Antonio by her side, Sara couldn't escape her fears.

What if Nora's tears evoked Antonio's sympathy? After all, they'd shared a strong bond for over three years. This sense of insecurity weighed heavily on her, a shroud around her thoughts. However, everything shifted drastically from there. Antonio couldn't marry her despite her surrendering herself to him. Marrying Antonio sooner, as her mother advised to secure her inheritance, proved challenging due to his mother's objections.

The only reassurance she had that Antonio wouldn't return to Nora was his perception of her as inferior, incapable of standing beside him. And now, Nora had suddenly become an expert at math. This worried Sara, as the barrier between Nora and Antonio seemed to have crumbled. Antonio's belief that Nora was unworthy of him was now under scrutiny.

Sara sighed in her heart. She wished Nora could have Antonio, yet the truth was Nora had truly let him go. The only person she could now fight to save her love was the man himself.

As for herself, she held no grudge against Nora. Nora had always been available to cater to her every need, and Sara had taken advantage of that. If Nora was exiting her life, Sara saw no reason to torment her. Hence, she refrained from sabotaging Nora when she noticed her newfound success.

However, there was one thing she couldn't understand: who had tried to report her? She had asked Antonio, and he had denied informing the professor of Nora's score.

Lost in thought, Sara suddenly realized that Nora had disappeared from her sight. Scanning the surroundings, she attempted to locate Nora but found no trace of her.

Then, she felt a tap on her shoulder and swiftly turned around, coming face-to-face with Nora. Caught off guard, Sara offered a somewhat fearful and hesitant smile, saying, "Nora, how are you? What are you doing here?"

Arching an eyebrow, Nora inquired, "I was on my way to work. Why are you following me, Sara?"

Startled, Sara stammered, "Me? I wasn't following you. I, uh, I was just passing by."

Observing Sara's unease, Nora sighed, "You want to talk to me?"

"Me? Um... No, no." Sara vehemently shook her head, even taking a step back. Nora shrugged and turned away, saying, "Alright then. I'll be on my way."

As Nora began to walk away, Sara's impulse got the better of her. "Could you spare a few minutes? I'd like to talk to you, please."

Exhaling audibly, Nora agreed. She gestured towards the café where she worked and said, "I have ten minutes. But let me warn you if you're planning any theatrics, I'll leave. Is that clear?"

Sara nodded vigorously, relief washing over her. "Absolutely, Nora. I just... need someone to talk to."

They walked to the café, settling at a table near the window. Sara fidgeted with her fingers, her thoughts racing. She finally found the courage to speak. "Nora, I want you to know... I've been unfair to you. I've used your kindness and sacrifices for my own gain, without truly considering how you felt."

Nora's expression remained impassive as she listened, her eyes fixed on Sara.

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Chapter 37: A Heart To Heart[Bonus -]

[1,035 words]

Chapter 37: A Heart To Heart[Bonus Chapter]

"I've used your kindness and sacrifices for my own gain, without truly considering how you felt."

Nora remained calm as she heard the words but said nothing. As Nora continued to maintain her silence, Sara fidgeted more and more until she could barely keep still.

"Say something, Nora."

Nora shrugged her shoulders and questioned, "Do you want me to refute your words? You want me to say that you've never done that?"

Sara raised stricken eyes to Nora as she was questioned by the latter and spoke slowly, "I hope you will not hold the past against me. I... I never meant you harm."

"Now that is a lie, Sara. You and I both know it."

Another small period of silence followed that statement with Nora making no effort to ease Sara's discomfort. She wanted to. She'd had to forcefully clench her hands to not go forward and hold Sara's hand, reassuring her that all was well. But she had to remind herself that this girl was too selfish to deserve such consideration.

"No! I know I've hurt you physically and sometimes... emotionally, but don't you know I'd stepped back so much when you started going out with Antonio? Did I not try to avoid you at all times?"

"And you did that for your own purposes, Sara. So don't come to be like a bleeding heart. Tell me why you have been following me around."

"I...I don't... I don't know!" Sara burst out.

Nora raised an eyebrow at that, and Sara explained, "I have not been following you around! Only today, I gathered the courage to come and talk to you. I want you to forgive me."

Nora looked at Sara, her expression a mixture of weariness and detachment. "Sara, do you truly feel remorse for what you've done, or is this all an act to make me surrender to you again? Because I have trouble believing that suddenly you want everything to be alright between us. I haven't forgotten how you are good at using your tears against me. So, I do not wish to be entertained by your act. Come to the point and let's talk directly. What do you want?"

Sara's eyes widened, and she stammered, "No, I swear, I'm really sorry. I didn't realize how much I was hurting you. So just forgive me and let us move on."

Nora studied her for a moment before speaking, her voice calm and measured. "You see, that's the thing, Sara. You're not apologizing. You're demanding forgiveness. And that's not how things usually work."

Sara's face fell, and she looked down at her hands, her fingers twisting nervously. "I know, but... I just thought maybe if you saw how much I regret my actions, you might consider forgiving me."

Nora shook her head slightly. "Regret is one thing, but understanding the depth of your actions and the pain they caused is another. You used my kindness, my sacrifices, for your own gain without any regard for how it affected me. Hurt me? That is too kind a word, Sara. What you and Lara Anderson have done all these years is not something that can be called hurt! The right word for it is 'abuse'."

Nora watched as Sara flinched at the word and continued, "Yes Sara, the word is abuse. You've both abused me emotionally, physically and mentally. So the next time

you want to try getting my forgiveness, I expect you to come on your knees and beg for it. And even then, I will be the one making the decision whether I want to give it to you or not."

Sara's eyes welled up with tears, and she reached out as if to touch Nora's arm, but then withdrew her hand when she saw Nora flinch. "I never meant for it to get this far..."

Sara wiped away a tear and looked up at Nora. "So... what do I do? How do I make this right? I know it is very difficult for you to accept this, but I really am trying to make amends. You have to understand something. Just like you did everything to gain mother's approval, I did everything for that too!"

Nora shook her head. Already Sara was so much like their mother. Not even willing to accept her own mistake and quickly blaming someone else. However, Nora had no intention of finding out if today was an act. She just needed Sara to stay away from her. So, she sighed and finally spoke, "If you truly are repentant, then stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours. Give me the space I need to heal and move on."

Sara nodded, sniffling. "I can do that. I'll do whatever it takes."

"Good," Nora replied, "But remember, this doesn't mean we're suddenly friends. You are and will be the person who has tormented me for the most part of my life. Whether I forgive you or not, the past cannot be changed."

Sara wiped her tears and managed a small, watery smile. "Thank you for giving me a chance, Nora. I won't disappoint you."

Nora said nothing as she watched Sara walk away. She'd never imagined such a day. Sara apologizing to her for hurting her? The little sister whose love she had yearned for. Of course, the cynic in her did not believe Sara and was pretty sure it was all an act, but the sister inside her could feel some hope unfurling.

Ruthlessly, she curbed the instinctual hope and redirected her attention to the question that Sara's denial had left behind. If Sara had been telling the truth and had not been following her then who had been leaving behind those 'notes' for her. And why?

Nora quickly went to the changing room of the cafe and checked her locker. There were three notes in all. The first one had been left on her desk when she had gone to the classroom a day after the Maths fiasco. The second one had been left at the cafe here. And then the third one today... Could the person who had sent the note be... Antonio?

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Nora looked down at the small note in front of them and marveled. When Demetri had first started teaching her, she had been surprised by his handwriting. The man was so organized in everything that it had come as a shock to see his handwriting. To say it was atrocious would be an understatement. She'd even joked that he must have been really thankful that people hardly wrote anything these days, preferring the typed word. Of course, he hadn't found it funny. A case in point was the note he seemed to have left her on the breakfast table. She had no idea what was written on it! It was like he'd written his own hieroglyphic language. As she squinted, trying to read the note, she heard the doorbell ring. Well, that was odd. No one really came to this house unless she ordered some takeaway, which was rare.

"What did you say?"

"Exactly what you heard, Nina. We are set to fly in less than an hour, and we do not have the most important thing required for the conference," Assistant Ma whispered.

Nina could feel herself breaking into a cold sweat and whispered, "Can't you ask them to send it here? Or directly there?"

"Those are confidential documents! Do you think sending them by post is going to be acceptable to the boss? And even if they were willing to cooperate and send them here, they would first have to send someone to his house, retrieve the documents, and come back here. We do not have enough time for that!" Assistant Ma sighed.

"Then what are we going to do?" Nina asked, worry evident on her face. "Maybe we can ask Mr. Ian Frost to go to the house and retrieve the documents. He hasn't reached here and might be able to..." Nina trailed off as she watched Ian walking into the airport lounge with his own assistant trailing behind him. There went their last hope.

With each passing minute, their problem was escalating. There was no choice but to confess to the boss that they were missing some crucial documents.

Before they could call each other out, they heard Ian Frost greeting them and almost jumped out of their seats. Hurriedly they greeted the man before giving each other the stink eye. They should confess to Ian and hope he could save the day, but Ian Frost had already turned to his brother.

"Demon."

Demetri nodded to Ian before turning back to his file. Ian shook his head and threw himself next to Demetri, rubbing his sleepy eyes as he did. He'd had a rough night last

night and then rushed here. Since they still had time before their flight could be cleared, maybe he should grab some shuteye in this private lounge.

Ian had barely closed his eyes when he heard Assistant Ma's voice, "Excuse me, Mr. Frost. There is a problem..."

Ian's eyes snapped open as he heard this and looked at Ma with interest. That was unexpected. Before the perfect assistant could say more, Demetri's phone rang. Now this was not surprising anymore. Okay, it was still surprising but not shocking. Somehow, somewhere, their brother seemed to have found a girlfriend. Of course, their brother could have probably used some voice technology to fend off phone calls but that would be rather extreme for Demetri.

As always he answered, "Hmm?"

Ian did not even try to overhear what the other party had to say and simply stayed still. There was no point in trying. They'd already heard the voice. Now they needed new information.

Whatever the other party said, Demetri replied, "Yes... It said I will be out of the country for the next few days... yes. Thank you." and disconnected the call. Now, even though Ian could not hear what the other party was saying, he could guess what Demetri had said. He had probably informed someone that he was leaving the country. Hmm. Another first for Demetri. All these out-of-character things for his brother were now making him doubt the existence of this mysterious girl that had appeared out of nowhere next to their brother.

He then turned to Assistant Ma and questioned sharply, "You ordered them to take the Security Portfolio to my address?"

"It was a miscommunication. I asked them to send it to you directly. I did not want one of the interns to open it mistakenly in order to bring it to me. I meant that they should address it to you directly. It was only now I realized that the portfolio was missing. And then I contacted the company. I am so sorry, sir. I'll go and get the documents and get a commercial flight later..."

"And reach Country B after 3 days? Ours is probably the last flight that will leave today with the weather conditions outside."

Assistant Ma looked at the sky outside and sighed. It was true. There was no sunlight to speak of and the clouds cast deep shadows all over. And with the history of unstable weather conditions in the country, the airport could very well cancel all outward-bound flights for safety reasons.

Assistant Ma sighed. He'd not even paid attention to the unstable conditions. The security portfolio was key to the arrangements for their hotel in country B, which was

preparing to host dignitaries worldwide next month. It contained detailed security procedures, emergency response plans, and new surveillance systems that were critical to ensuring the safety of guests and staff.

"Then..." As Ma tried to think of a solution, Demetri stood up and spoke, "Proceed towards boarding. The file will be here in twenty."

A sigh of relief passed through his lips even as Ma was punished for his carelessness, "Docking your bonus this month, Ma."

Assistant Ma nodded gratefully for that. Demetri Frost was not one to fire people recklessly, but he was known to demote them if he was truly angry. Whoever the other party was that had received the documents and agreed to bring them here, had saved him from becoming an on-field salesman probably! With a grateful voice he offered, "Sir, I can pick up the documents..."

While Demetri shook his head and made his way out of the lounge, the others started to proceed towards the private boarding bay, ready to board the flight with less than thirty minutes left.

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In a world where sibling intrigue knew no bounds, Ian was not about to let a golden opportunity slip through his fingers. This was his chance to catch a glimpse of the individual who held the keys to his brother's kingdom—a person with access to his brother's house, private phone, and all those tantalizing secrets. With a speed that rivalled a squirrel spotting a particularly enticing acorn, Ian deftly retrieved his cell phone and casually strolled away in a different direction pretending to be on call.

Under the guise of a phone conversation that could rival an Oscar-winning actor, Ian adopted an undercover mode, trailing behind his unsuspecting brother, Demetri, his phone glued to his ear as if his life depended on it—though in truth, his life might very well depend on not getting caught. Despite the palpable fear that Demetri's discovery could instigate an apocalypse, Ian's determination to unearth the secret that lay ahead was unyielding. After all, what were brothers for?

As he skulked along the edges of shadows, Ian's mind played host to an array of fantastical narratives, each more elaborate than the last, speculating on the identity of the mysterious figure who had captured his brother's heart, and seemingly, all his passwords too. After all the couriers had probably taken it to Demon's mailbox. And the other person had not needed to ask for the password to access the mailbox!

Slowly, Ian strategically stationed himself behind a modest pillar, an architectural ally in his clandestine escapade. The difference between the private lounge and the normal access was very different. There, Demetri only had to look back and Ian would have been caught, while here, the people were all bustling about.

Ian leaned forward and peeped around the corner before his eyes widened in disbelief. What was Arabelle doing here? Could it be that Arabelle was the person... No, Arabelle already went around claiming that she was Demon's fiance and if Demon was interested, he could have married her. Also, hadn't Arabelle been with grandfather when they had called Demon that evening..."

He observed as Arabelle said something to Demetri and extended a paper toward him, which he did not care to take. However, this helped him understand that Arabelle's presence was probably a coincidental occurrence.

As anticipated, Ian witnessed his brother cast a glance at the paper before retrieving his phone and initiating a call. A jolt of surprise coursed through Ian's veins as the phone pressed to his ear emitted a resounding vibration. Dam* it! He should have guessed that his brother would not hesitate in foisting off Arabelle. Making a swift attempt to compose himself, he answered the phone with a somewhat startled, "Hello."

His brother wasted no time, ordering, "Our grandfather has dispatched a guest. Fetch her."

The impulse to bash his head against the pillar surged within Ian. The dilemma was clear—if he were to retrieve Arabelle, the certainty of his ability to accomplish the most important task of his lifetime, dwindled considerably. However, there was no way he could deny his brother. He peeked around once again and saw that Demon had already turned away from Arabelle, but the woman was continuously talking.

Jogging in place so that it wouldn't look as if he had run back all the way here, Ian made his way to the two people standing there. Smiling charmingly at Arabelle, he greeted, "Ah... I was wondering what it was that grandfather had sent. It was a beauty. No wonder my brother wanted me to come here to bring you."

Smoothly, Ian took the papers in his hand and glanced over them. It appeared to be a letter granting security clearance for Arabelle to travel with them. Ian couldn't help but let out a sigh. He found himself questioning who possessed the thicker skin—his stubborn grandfather or Arabelle herself—resolutely unwilling to yield. Did they really think that they could achieve their goals by forcing proximity? So, Arabelle wanted to get close to his brother using the long flight to country B. Well, it was going to be a good show, he thought to himself.

As he extended his arm toward Arabelle, he inquired, "Are you embarking on a vacation? Although I must caution you that there aren't many tourist-friendly places to explore there this time of year."

Arabelle's expression creased into a frown as she was deftly guided away from Demetri. Her response carried a distracted tone, "I'm actually going for a relaxation trip. I don't have any plans to visit tourist spots; my aim is just to recharge. There are numerous natural hot water springs over there... By the way, Ian, why is Demetri lingering there? Is he waiting for someone? It was quite unexpected to find him standing there."

While Ian was not averse to exchanging sibling gossip with his cousins, he drew a firm line at divulging his brother's private matters to anyone outside of the family circle. Thus, without much contemplation, he offered a succinct reply, "He's waiting for some crucial documents that got left behind."

Arabelle halted mid-step, pivoting to face Ian and tugging lightly at his arm. "I thought he had assistants for that. Why did he wait here himself? Are his employees not competent enough?" Before Ian could say something to defend them, she continued, "Then why don't we wait here with him, and we can go back together—"

Suddenly, he felt Arabelle stiffen and realized she had trailed off without completing her words. Curiously he looked at her face which was paler than a ghost and followed the direction of her gaze.

And there she was, a woman ensconced in Demetri's embrace. Her arms were draped around his neck, as she was raised on tiptoes while Demetri, the ice mountain had his hair tangled in her dark long hair.

Ian itched to rush forward and take a look at the woman but now was not the time to satisfy his curiosity. He needed to take Arabelle away from here before she caused any problems. Quickly, he grabbed Arabelle's hand and almost frog marched her out of there towards the boarding bay.

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Chapter 40: Brothers

[1,046 words]

Chapter 40: Brothers

The plush interior of the private jet exuded an air of luxury, the soft leather seats cocooning the occupants in opulence. While the employees who sat further away were

engrossed in their own conversations, Ian sat there observing his brother who sat opposite him and Arabelle, who had surprisingly taken up a seat not next to Demetri but somewhat further.

Of course, he could guess what was going through her mind. Arabelle had single-mindedly been devoted to Demetri, her heart set on him since she was a young teenager. All of the brothers had of course recognized this, but they had simply assumed that the girl was going through puppy love.

However, Arabelle had not only not grown out of her puppy love but even somehow convinced their grandfather to pressure Demetri to marry her. That had been her biggest foolishness. Maybe if she had been devoted to Demetri, his brother would have taken note of her someday. However, by choosing underhanded means, Arabelle had cut off her own path.

She'd been so delusional that she had even started to believe that Demetri had stayed away from women because he was waiting for her to grow up. This presumption came from the fact that Demetri had never had any scandals with anyone in the past.

Ian had always looked at Arabelle as his little sister and it was why he was sometimes tempted to hold her by the shoulders and shake her. His brother was a man in his prime, dealing with a stressful job, not a monk! The only reason there were never any scandals was because Demetri was extremely discreet.

All his close employees who had access to his personal life were carefully and personally vetted by Demetri himself. Other than using a chauffeur for official purposes, Demetri drove around himself. This way no one would know where he went in his personal time. And there was also the fixed work leave every Saturday. All of them had long assumed that Demetri visited his mistress during that day.

The only reason he had not tried to burst Arabelle's bubble yet was that she would not believe him even if he used a megaphone. However, seeing Demetri kissing someone passionately, without a care for his image, must have shaken her. She'd escaped from there as if she was being chased by demons from hell. But Ian had stood there, watching.

This person with his brother was definitely not a regular mistress. Demetri had not been discreet about her but other than that, when he had let go of her, there had been something soft in his gaze as he looked down on her. Even Ian who stood further away could feel the difference in his brother's stance. He'd watched as Demetri had opened the door of the cab for the woman, helping her into the cab and watching the cab leave.

If somebody had told Ian that Demetri could be like this, he would have sent them to the psychiatric ward for a checkup. But as he thought more and more, Ian remembered that Demetri had not always been like this. Even though he had never been very talkative, Demetri had usually smiled a lot. He used to even play pranks on them, instigating his

younger brothers into mischief before pretending to be the innocent party. It had been so long that they'd forgotten their older brother whom they idolized as the best prankster.

And every change in Demetri circled back to that one time, ten years ago... Ian sighed and glanced at his brother. Whatever it was that had caused the rift between Demetri and their grandfather had changed their brother. And unfortunately, no one knew because they had all been in the boarding school at that time...

Ian's sharp eyes flicked over to his elder brother, once again, who was engrossed in studying a stack of documents, his brow furrowed, and his jaw clenched. Ian could practically sense the tension radiating from him.

"You look like you're ready to implode," Ian remarked, his tone half-joking, half-concerned.

Demetri looked up from the documents with a furrow, slowly easing when he sensed that Ian had something to say. "You want to talk about something?"

Ian understood Demetri was very well aware of what he wanted to talk about, but the man was going to make him say it. So be it. Ian sighed deeply and remarked calmly, "I can't believe what I just saw." Demetri passionately kissing a woman, a rare show of emotion from his usually composed older brother was not something any of them could witness and let it slide.

"What did you see?" Demetri asked nonchalantly.

"Ian sighed and spoke," Demetri, please do not play with me. I know you are aware that me and Arabelle were right there."

"So, you want to know the identity of the woman?" Demetri asked slowly.

While Ian was tempted, he knew his brother was not going to reveal things easily so he shook his head, "Not her identity. But her standing. What is she to you?"

Demetri's lips lifted in a half smile. His brother knew the right questions to ask, "Hmm. In the future, you will address her as your sister-in-law."

Even though Demetri had not given Ian the answer to his question, he had given the man something that distracted him. Suspecting that his brother had a special woman was one thing but hearing that she was going to be their sister-in-law was quite another.

Ian scrutinized his brother carefully. Demetri still looked the same as he made the announcement, but Ian, who had long been used to studying his brother's features to be able to stand by his side, could see some difference in his countenance.

Another glance at Arabelle showed him that the girl was probably coming back to herself from the shock. With a subtle glance in her direction, Ian questioned, "What about her?"

Demetri's eyes flickered to Arabelle, understanding everything. "You think she'll blow things out of proportion?"

Ian nodded. "Arabelle's been living in a world of her own making, where she's the only woman in your life. Seeing you like that... It will shatter that illusion, and you know how she can be..."

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