



## Not Quite a Husband

By Sherry Thomas

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Sherry Thomas is one of the hottest new voices in historical romance, garnering the highest praise from today's bestselling writers ("Entrancing." —Mary Balogh; "Ravishingly sinful, intelligent and addictive." —Eloisa James). Now Sherry delivers this powerful story of a remarkable woman and the love she thought she'd never find—with the man she thought she'd lost forever....

Their marriage lasted only slightly longer than the honeymoon—to no one's surprise, not even Bryony Asquith's. A man as talented, handsome, and sought after by society as Leo Marsden couldn't possibly want to spend his entire life with a woman who rebelled against propriety by becoming a doctor. Why, then, three years after their annulment and half a world away, does he track her down at her clinic in the remotest corner of India?

Leo has no reason to think Bryony could ever forgive him for the way he treated her, but he won't rest until he's delivered an urgent message from her sister—and fulfilled his duty by escorting her safely back to England. But as they risk their lives for each other on the journey home, will the biggest danger be the treacherous war around them—or their rekindling passion?

*From the Paperback edition.*

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

#### **Winner of Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA award as Best Historical Romance of 2010.**

"Thomas' latest exquisitely crafted historical, set in late 19th century India on the eve of rebellion, is another beguiling mix of complex characters and realistically complicated romance." -- *Chicago Tribune*

"A beautifully written, deeply moving story of romantic renewal and moral repair set against the backdrop of a heartstopping journey across northwest India." -- Read React Review

"Thomas, who has made a name for herself with her exquisite use of language, deftly switches between past and present in this lyrically written, emotionally captivating story graced by beautifully developed, realistically flawed characters, clear motivation, and descriptions that make late Victorian India spring to life." -- *Library Journal*

"Sherry Thomas is the most powerfully original historical romance author writing today." --Lisa Kleypas

#### About the Author

Sherry Thomas burst onto the romance scene with **Private Arrangements**, one of the most anticipated debut historical romances in recent history and a *Publishers Weekly* Best of the Year book. Lisa Kleypas calls her "the most powerfully original historical romance author working today." Her books have received stellar reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Romantic Times*, along with enthusiastic praises from many of the most highly trafficked romance review websites and blogs.

Her story is all the more interesting given that English is Sherry's second language—she has come a long way from the days when she made her laborious way through Rosemary Roger's *Sweet Savage Love* with an English-Chinese dictionary. She enjoys creating stories. And when she is not writing, she thinks about the zen and zaniness of her profession, plays computer games with her sons, and reads as many fabulous books as she can find.

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#### *Chapter One*

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Rumbur Valley  
Chitral Agency  
North-West Frontier of India  
Summer 1897

In the bright afternoon sun, the white streak was a gash of barrenness against the deep rich black of her hair. It started at the edge of her forehead, just to the right of center, swept straight down the back of her head, and twisted through her chignon in a striking—and eerie—arabesque.

It invoked an odd reaction in him. Not pity; he would no more pity her than he would pity the lone

Himalayan wolf. And not affection; she'd put an end to that with her frigidity, in heart and body. An echo of some sort then, memories of old hopes from more innocent days.

In a white shirtwaist and a dark blue skirt, she sat between two fishing rods set ten feet apart, a bucket by her side, a twig in her hand, tracing random patterns in the swift-flowing, aquamarine water.

Across the stream, fields glinted a thick, bright gold in the narrow alluvial plain—winter wheat ready for harvest. Small, rectangular houses of wood and stacked stone piled one on top of another along the rising slope, like a collection of weathered playing blocks. Beyond the village, the ground elevated more rapidly, a brief stratum of walnut and apricot trees before the bones of the hills revealed themselves, austere crags that supported only dots of shrubs and an intrepid deodar or two.

"Bryony," he said. His head hurt, but he must speak to her.

She went still. The twig washed downstream, caught in a rock, then spun and floated free again. Still facing the stream, she wrapped her arms about her knees. "Mr. Marsden, how unexpected. What brings you to this part of the world?"

"Your father is ill. Your sister sent several cables to Leh, and when she received no response from you, she asked me to find you."

"What's the matter with my father?"

"I don't know the specifics. Callista only said that the doctors are not hopeful and that he wishes to see you."

She rose and turned around at last.

At first glance, her face gave the impression of great tranquillity and sweetness. Then one noticed the bleakness behind her green eyes, as if she were a nun on the verge of losing her faith. When she spoke, however, all illusions of meek melancholy fled, for she had the most leave-me-be voice he'd ever heard, not strident but stridently self-sufficient, and little concerned with anything that did not involve diseased flesh.

But she was silent this moment and reminded him of a churchyard stone angel that watched over the departed with a gentle, steady compassion.

"You believe Callista?" she asked, destroying the semblance.

"I shouldn't?"

"Unless you were dying in the autumn of ninety-five."

"I beg your pardon?"

"She claimed you were. She said you were somewhere in the wastes of America, dying, and desperately wanted to see me one last time."

"I see," he said. "Does she make a habit of it?"

"Are you engaged to be married?"

"No." Though he should be. He knew a number of beautiful, affectionate young women, any one of whom would make him a suitable spouse.

"According to her you are. And would gladly jilt the poor girl if I but give the command." She did not look at him as she said this last, her eyes on the ground. "I'm sorry that she dragged you into her schemes. And I'm much obliged to you for coming out this far—"

"But you'd rather I turned around and went back right away?"

Silence. "No, of course not. You'll need to rest and reprovision."

"And if I didn't need to rest or reprovision?"

She did not answer, but turned away from him. Then she bent down, retrieved a fishing rod, and reeled in something that was struggling to escape.

Weeks upon weeks of trekking across some of the most inhospitable terrains on Earth, sleeping on cold, hard ground, eating what he could shoot and the occasional handful of wild berries so he wouldn't be weighed down by a train of coolies carrying the usual necessities deemed indispensable for a sahib's travels—and this was her response.

One should never expect anything else from her.

"Even the boy who cried wolf was right about the wolf once," he said. "Your father is sixty-three years old. Is it so unlikely for a man of his age to ail?"

With a deft turn of her wrist, she unhooked the fish and dropped it into the bucket. "It is a six-week journey to England, on the off chance that Callista might be telling the truth."

"And if she is, you will regret not having gone."

"I'm not so certain about that."

Her ambivalence toward most of Creation had once fascinated him. He'd thought her complicated and extraordinary. But no, she was merely cold and unfeeling.

"The journey need not take six weeks," he said. "It can be done in four."

She looked back at him, her expression unyielding. "No, thank you."

It was 370 miles from Gilgit, where he'd been peacefully minding his own business, to Leh, that much again back to Gilgit, then 220 miles from Gilgit to Chitral. For most of the way he'd done three marches a day, sometimes four. He'd lost a full stone in weight. And he hadn't been this tired since Greenland.

Fuck you.

"Very well then." He bowed slightly. "I bid you a good day, madam."

\*

"Wait," she said—and hesitated.

He turned around halfway.

When she'd fallen in love with him, he'd been that magical man-child, with the beauty of a dark-haired Adonis and the playfulness of a young Dionysus. She couldn't think of anyone else who'd have gotten away with that song about a cold-blooded duchess and her very hot teapot, which had a three-inch spout that could nevertheless "fill all the right cups, be they shallow or deep, and then to patiently, lovingly steep."

Toward the end of their marriage, he'd already lost some of that deceptively cherubic sweetness to his looks. Now his profile had become angular and precipitous, like the bleak heights that concealed the Kalash Valleys.

"Are you leaving now?" she asked. She was conflicted about it, but it would be churlish to not at least offer him tea.

"No. I have promised to take tea with your friends, Mr. and Mrs. Braeburn."

"You met them already?"

"They were the ones who directed me to you," he answered, his tone matter-of-fact, but with an edge of impatience.

Suddenly she was alarmed. "And what did you tell them about us?"

Surely he would not have given the Braeburns an account of their short, infelicitous history.

"I didn't tell them anything. I showed them a photograph of you and asked if I might be able to find you here."

She blinked. He had a photograph of her? "What photograph?"

He reached inside his jacket, pulled out a squarish envelope, and held it out toward her. Beyond weariness, his expression gave away nothing. After a moment of wavering she wiped her hands with a handkerchief, walked to him, and took the envelope from his hand.

She opened the unsealed flap of the envelope and pulled out the photograph. Her retinas immediately burned. It was her wedding photograph. Their wedding photograph.

"Where did you get this?"

He'd moved out of their house in Belgravia the day after she'd asked for an annulment, leaving behind his copy of their wedding photograph on his nightstand, which she'd fed to the grate along with her copy.

"Charlie gave it to me when I passed through Delhi." Charles Marsden was Leo's second eldest brother, formerly political officer at Gilgit, another forward station on the Indian frontier, currently personal aide to Lord Elgin, Viceroy and Governor-General of India. "I suppose he didn't get the hint when I didn't take it with me, because he sent it again by post."

"What did the Braeburns say after you showed them the photograph?"

"That I'd find you fishing upstream by the water mill."

"Did they—did they recognize you?"

"I believe they did," he said coolly.

Surely, none of this was real. The man who had once been her husband was not standing before her, smelling of horse and road dust and speaking with a voice scratchy with fatigue. He did not mean for her to travel with him. And he had not exposed her as a sham to the kind and decent Braeburns.

"And what will you tell them now, when you sit down to tea?"

He smiled, not a very nice smile. "That will depend entirely on you. Were we to start our journey immediately after tea, I would compose a lovely tale of forced separation, heart-wrenching mutual longing, and a joyful reunion here in this most inaccessible of locales. Otherwise, I'll tell them we are divorced."

"We are not divorced."

"Let's not split hairs. It was a divorce in everything but name."

"They will not believe you."

"And they will believe you who, until a quarter hour ago, was a widow?"

She took a deep breath and turned her head. "It cannot be helped. To me, you no longer exist."

From time to time she would be at the most incidental activity—lacing her boots or reading an article on the adhesion of the intestine to the stump after an ovariotomy—and a physical memory would barrel out of nowhere and mow her down like a runaway carriage.

The boutonniere he'd worn the evening he first kissed her, a single stephanotis blossom, pure white, as tiny and lovely as a snowflake.

The sensation of raindrops on warm wool as she placed her hand on his sleeve—he'd come per...

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