

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 ("Enthrancing." —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?

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Editorial Review

Review

~ **WINNER of the 2010 RITA Award for Best Historical Romance**

~ **Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Nominee for Best Innovative Historical Romance**

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

"Thomas' latest exquisitely crafted historical...is another beguiling mix of complex characters and realistically complicated romance."—*Chicago Tribune*

"Thomas has quickly become a fan favorite thanks to her wonderful storytelling and her unique ability to get into her characters' minds and our hearts...Add diverse plotlines, engaging characters, depth of emotion and a sweeping romance -- what more could you desire?"—*Romantic Times*, 4 ½ stars

"Rich and evocative...In mentioning new historical authors to be excited about, [Sherry Thomas's] name should always mentioned."—Jane Litte, DearAuthor.com

"[Sherry Thomas's] books have vaulted to the top of my 'most anticipated' list...[Her] prose and storytelling are reminiscent of Laura Kinsale (in my eyes, there is hardly a higher compliment). In *Not Quite a Husband* I found echoes of the best of Mary Balogh, as well. Grade: A."—Jennie, DearAuthor.com

"Both of these bright and complex characters will captivate...Sensuous scenes and brief touches of wit are scattered throughout a suspenseful plot. Sherry Thomas's debut novel, *PRIVATE ARRANGEMENTS*, and the following *DELICIOUS* were highly praised; *NOT QUITE A HUSBAND* is guaranteed to be as well."—Romance Reviews Today

"I really enjoyed Ms. Thomas' writing. I have her previous books in the TBR pile and have every intention of cracking them open as soon as I can."—The Good, The Bad, The Unread

"Sherry Thomas writes in a beautifully evocative, luscious style that had me return to several passages to savor them once more...*Not Quite a Husband* has everything I want from a romance...Delightful but flawed characters I love and can identify with, luscious prose, an interesting setting, and a romance that touches my heart. I can't recommend it enough, and am looking forward very much to Sherry Thomas's next book. Grade: A."—All About Romance

"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*

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

**

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 ovariectomy—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 personally to the curb to see her into her carriage—and the wonderful stillness of her world as he said, smiling, through the still-open carriage door, "Well, why not? It should be no hardship to be married to you."

The almost prismatic glint of sunlight on the fob of his enameled watch—which she'd given to him as an engagement present. He held it suspended in midair, staring at its pendulum swing, while she asked for his cooperation in obtaining an annulment.

But mostly those upsurges of memory were nothing but ghost pains, nervous misfires from limbs that had been long since amputated.

To me, you no longer exist.

He moved as if in recoil. As if he flinched. When he spoke, however, his voice was wholly serene. "Divorced it is then."

Chapter Two

Mr. and Mrs. Braeburn were originally from Edinburgh. Mr. Braeburn was a Presbyterian minister and an avid scholar of the lands and peoples between the frontier of Russia and the frontier of India. Mrs. Braeburn said, laughing, that she'd married Mr. Braeburn thinking she'd be arranging flowers for the church and taking soup to sick parishioners, only to spend most of their married life tramping all over the Himalayas. For the past ten months they'd lived in Rumbur Valley, studying the cosmology of the Kalasha, the last unconverted people of the Hindu Kush—an island of paganism in a sea of Islam.

Because the stacked stone Kalasha house the Braeburns occupied was not much larger than a postbox, tea was held alfresco. The Commander, the Braeburns' small Portuguese cook, had managed to make a fresh cake in the time since Leo's arrival. With eggs, Mrs. Braeburn informed him, smuggled in two days before from the nearest Muslim village, since the Kalasha's religion frowned upon both chicken and eggs in the diet.

Leo managed a grin at this account of The Commander's ingenuity. Mrs. Braeburn returned a nervous smile. She was waiting, Leo realized, for Bryony to join them. And then The Questions would finally be asked.

When Bryony did appear, conversation stopped. She carried the fishing rods in her right hand, the bucket in her left. She'd fished often when she was fifteen, spending the whole day by herself, with a basket of sandwiches and a canteen. His eleven-year-old self used to watch her from the opposite bank of the stream, wishing he knew what to say to the silent, intense girl from the neighboring estate.

To me, you no longer exist.

To her, he'd never existed, except those few wonderful weeks before their wedding that distant spring of 1893.

He watched her wend her way past women in vibrantly embroidered black robes guiding water into the irrigation canals that supplied the fields of wheat, women in vibrantly embroidered black robes shaking ripe mulberries from trees onto blankets, women in vibrantly embroidered black robes cutting hay to make winter fodder.

Mrs. Braeburn said something about the Kalasha men being away at summer high pasture. Leo nodded, barely registering her words. Bryony handed the bucket and the fishing rods to The Commander, who was chopping carrots on the veranda of the house, with a soft "Only one, I'm afraid." And then she approached the table at last.

He rose. His joints ached with the movement—all the traveling had taken its toll on him. The fever that had ragged at him since he set out from Chitral in the morning was beginning to subside, the chills largely gone, but his headache still lingered. He wished he'd thought to take some more phenacetin in Ayun.

"Mrs. Marsden," he murmured as he pulled out her chair.

The corners of her lips tightened. She glanced at him, then at the Braeburns, as if trying to gauge how much truth had been irreversibly spilled.

"Oh good, now we are all here," said Mrs. Braeburn, her cheer rather overbright.

She poured tea for Bryony, who accepted the teacup, but set it down in the same motion. "Do you still have your special whiskey, Mr. Braeburn?"

Mr. Braeburn cleared his throat. "Why, yes."

"Would you mind serving us a few drops of it?"

So whatever she'd decided needed the help of strong liquor.

"Of course not," said Mr. Braeburn, somewhat puzzled. "I was going to serve it at dinner, but I suppose now is as good a time as any."

He gestured at The Commander. The Commander ducked into the house and promptly returned with a bottle of whiskey and four small glasses.

Mr. Braeburn poured. "What shall we drink to?"

"To fond memories," said Bryony, raising her glass. "Mr. Marsden and I are leaving as soon as my belongings can be packed. I wish to take this moment to thank you both for your excellent and admirable friendship."

"So soon?" gasped Mrs. Braeburn. "But why?"

Bryony gave Leo a hard stare. "Mr. Marsden can tell it far better than I."

Across the table she sat rigidly, as tightly wound as the mainspring of a newly cranked clock. He still remembered a time when the tension she carried within her had been unbearably erotic to him, when he'd believed that all she needed was some proper lovemaking to turn her limp, relaxed, and happy. Life had its way of beating humbleness into a man.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Mitchell Boone:

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