

## First 2 Chapters of 'A Marriage of Convenience', by Stevie Turner.

### PART ONE – MARCH 1997

#### CHAPTER 1

"I hear on the grapevine that you're seeking a quick way to pay off your debts."

I glance up as a stocky young guy with clean-looking brown hair falling to his waist puts his lunch tray down opposite me and takes a seat. I don't know him but have seen him around the campus carrying a guitar in a case on his back. I don't think he stays in Halls, so I come to the conclusion he must be one or two years older than me.

"I might be; as long as it's legal and I get to keep my clothes on."

I nibble on my sandwich as nonchalantly as I can, enjoying his throaty chuckle at my remark.

"Well, it'll definitely be legal, but it's up to you about the clothes."

Intrigued, I study his face for more clues. There are two laughing blue eyes trying to hide behind copious amounts of dark facial fuzz, which I swiftly decide he'd look better without.

"Out with it then; I've a lecture starting in twenty minutes."

"Sure." He nods. "It's like this. I'm here on a student visa which runs out at the end of June next year, but it'd be better for my musical career if I can stay in the UK." He takes a bite of his burger and scans my face intently. "So ... you agree to marry me, and I put thirty thousand smackeros in your bank account."

"Bloody hell!" I nearly choke on my food. "You move right along, don't you?"

"Don't give me an answer now. Think about it." He waggles his finger at me. "I'm not saying all this just to get into your pants, I really need to stay here. Things are happening for me and my band."

"Jeez." I look at him aghast. "Married? I don't even know your name!"

"Ha! It's Gerrie Hermann. So you're interested then? What's *your* name, by the way?"

His accent is appealing, but I can't quite place it. I have a terrible mental image of taking him up North to meet Mum and Dad, the straightest, poorest, but proudest parents in all the land.

"Sophie Woods, but I can't see it working." I shake my head.

"Sure it will. You don't have to love me or anything, 'cos I'm basically an arsehole." His eyes twinkle. "We get married, then I go my way and you go yours. Only now you're thirty thousand pounds richer, and I don't have to go back to Gaborone and face dear Papa."

I try not to laugh as I finish up my cola and look at his frayed denim waistcoat and dirty-white tee shirt.

"And where are *you*, arsehole extraordinaire, going to get thirty thousand quid from?"

"I've already got it and more from my parents and from playing gigs. Come with me to the hole in the wall and I'll print you out a balance."

"I've got a lecture in a minute, but I'll think about it."

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I must look gullible or desperate for money, but then again I suppose I'm both. Gerrie finds me again the next day in the cafeteria. I notice with distaste the same off –white tee shirt, but this time without the waistcoat.

"See you at the cash machine at half past four." He winks as he walks past me. "Don't be late."

The effrontery of the guy is amazing. However, intrigued, I find myself walking a circuitous route to the accommodation unit after my lectures end, just to see if he's there. He is; waiting there looking like Winnie the Pooh on steroids, with a smile on his face the size of the Blackwall Tunnel.

"I knew you'd come!" He's almost jumping up and down with glee. "You're not seeing my pin number, but you can have the print-out."

I look away as he pops his card in the reader and enters the pin. I still cannot believe somebody who looks the way he does could possess thousands of pounds in his bank account. He requests a balance and gives me another grin.

"Mum and Dad are minted. Why do you think I've been able to get a student visa?"

I take the balance print-out from him, and am surprised to discover there is over fifty thousand pounds in his account.

“Because you murdered them and stole all their money?” I look again at the piece of paper just to make sure.

“Tempting, but wrong. I told you, they’re wealthy. What do you say? Come down to the bank with me tomorrow lunchtime, and I’ll transfer all that lovely money over to your account.”

It was all moving too fast. I envisage a summer of not having to work at menial jobs in order to pay Mum and Dad back, who had re-mortgaged their home in order to be able to send me to University. I can repay my debt to them in dribs and drabs so as not to cause suspicion, and be done with it. They’ll never find out I am already married, and I can always say to a future partner that I don’t need a marriage certificate to prove my commitment. I decide for once in my nineteen years to throw caution to the wind and live dangerously.

“Okay, but wait until exams are over. I’ll do the preparations and book it for some time in July, but you’ll have to shave though. I hate beards.”

Gerrie shakes his head.

“No way. Love me, love my beard.”

“I don’t love you, and I’m not marrying a guy whose face is full of fuzz.”

“Bugger.” Laughs Gerrie. “You drive a hard bargain, don’t you?”

“Take it or leave it.” I reply.

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We’re now drawn together as though there’s an invisible thread running through the pair of us. I begin spending all my breaks and lunchtimes with Gerrie, where we sit and eat cross-legged on the grass outside Halls and he plays me tunes on his guitar. Quite often we’re joined by other students. Gerrie can play any tune they name, and we sit there and sing like scouts around a camp fire. I’d rather be with Gerrie all day than attend lectures, but with exams looming we have to do our share of studying too.

As yet I haven’t invited him back to my room, and he hasn’t asked. Sex doesn’t seem to be part of the deal, and anyway, I couldn’t envisage kissing him with all that facial hair in the way. Sometimes I catch him looking at me. He has a twinkle in his eye, and I know that if I mention sex then he probably wouldn’t decline my offer. However, I’m not that sort of girl who could just come out and say ‘*how about it then?*’ I blame my modesty on my prim and proper parents.

I sometimes find myself wondering whether I'm doing the right thing or have totally flipped my lid. It seems incredible that boring Sophie Woods who has never done anything in life on the spur of the moment is now going to be marrying a virtual stranger without ever giving it much thought at all other than the large amount of money involved. I do not have many close friends at Uni to talk over the situation with. Gerrie seems one of those totally laid-back types who doesn't really worry about anything at all and lives in the present. I suppose it's the right way to be, but I tend to weigh up both sides before taking the plunge and making a decision. It must have been his innate charm that has sealed my fate from the beginning.

Typical of Gerrie's laissez-faire style, he's left it to me to organise the wedding. It's not too difficult to sort out seeing as we want to keep it a secret with only the two of us and a couple of witnesses attending. I buy a cheap sundress and matching sandals for the big day, try and make my grey eyes look alluring with some eyeshadow and mascara, and ask a hairdresser to put some blonde highlights in my shoulder length mousey brown hair. Gerrie has to wait for that all-important marriage certificate before he can apply for his ILR (indefinite leave to remain) status which will eventually lead to British citizenship. He's already lived in the UK for two years while he's been at Uni, so it all looks good for him (and for me come to that).

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It's a lovely day for a wedding. Thirty thousand pounds richer, I stand on the steps of Walthamstow Registry Office in the summer sunshine with my new husband of just ten minutes. We thank our two witnesses, and ask them to take some photos of us with my Polaroid camera. The witnesses comply, and then disappear into the throng of passers-by from whence they came. Gerrie looks at me and gives a whoop of joy.

"Yes! Cheers for this Sophie, you don't know what it means to me. The music scene's here in London, and now I can apply for the ILR and follow my dream. I don't know how long it'll take, but at least now I'll have the chance."

"You're welcome, and thanks so much for the money." I laugh with that exhilarated debt-free feeling. "Let's go and celebrate!"

As we walk along The Blackhorse Road to a nearby pub I take a swift glance at the newly-shaven Gerrie, now sporting a Kirk Douglas-like dimple on his chin, who actually looks devastatingly handsome in a three-piece suit and cravat, with his hair

slicked back into a ponytail. He catches my eye and puts a casual arm around my shoulder.

“So you like the new me, eh?”

“Sure.” I blush furiously. “You’ve scrubbed up pretty well.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” His gaze travels up and down my body in an instant. “Fancy coming along to my gig tonight at The Standard? We can go for a curry afterwards if you like?”

I’m suddenly happy that we’re not going our separate ways straight off, and enjoy feel of Gerrie’s arm about me and the obvious agreeable effect that I’m having on him. I turn my head to look in his direction and ask the question that’s been buzzing around my head for ages.

“So why didn’t you just apply for British citizenship like everybody else?”

“Ha!” He throws back his head in a roar of laughter. “I did a few months back, but apparently I’m not of good moral character.”

“Really?” I shake my head. “Why’s that?”

Gerrie shrugs.

“Oh, probably because I’ve got long hair, play in a band, and study Music instead of Engineering. Here we are.” He opens the pub door and waves me through first. “What’ll you have?”

I detect a pleasant aroma of aftershave as I brush past him.

“Just cola please.”

“What my wife wants, she shall have.” Gerrie walks up to the bar and signals to the landlord. “Grab a table. I’ll be back in a minute.”

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I still cannot believe I’m married; it seems like it’s all happening to somebody else. I watch Gerrie chatting to the barman before looking down at the plain gold band now adorning the third finger of my left hand. Of course I know it’s only a marriage of convenience, but there’s a buzz from knowing that thirty thousand pounds is now sitting in my bank account just waiting to be spent.

Gerrie struts towards me, head held high and carrying a frothy pint of beer with my cola. He slaps both glasses on the table, sits down, and gives me a wink.”

“So... wife of mine. Tell me a little bit more about yourself.”

*This is madness!* A mental picture of Mum and Dad meeting Gerrie flashes through my mind.

“I’m in the first year of studying Psychology, as you probably know by now. I’ve always wanted to be a social worker.” I take a sip of cola and try not to drown in those baby blue eyes. “I still live in Halls. My parents live a few miles from Manchester. I’m an only child. How about you?”

“Not much to tell really.” He gives another shrug. “I’m twenty. Mum and Dad pay the rent on a small flat for me near the station - they live in Gaborone. I’m the youngest of three. I’m gonna be a rock star.”

I have no idea where Gaborone is, and so decide to hide my ignorance and look it up later on Google. Gerrie states his last few words with the utmost sincerity, and I believe him. As far as I’m concerned, there’s no doubt he already looks like a cross between younger versions of James LaBrie from *Dream Theater*, coupled with a touch of the top-hatted ‘Slash’ from Guns ‘n’ Roses.

“Why did you pick *me*?”

I make a pleasant study of his features while he thinks up an answer.

“Well... I’ve asked most of the girls on campus, but you’re the only one who has said yes.”

I cannot help but laugh.

“So you weren’t attracted to my stunning good looks and exuberant personality then?”

He has the grace to appear embarrassed.

“Er...”

“Don’t worry.” I wave away the awkwardness. “It’s just a business arrangement. I’ll be off just as soon as I’ve watched you play your gig.”

I feel a slight twinge of disappointment at the thought.

## CHAPTER 2

I suppose some of my contemporaries would call me *strait-laced*. Certainly the people I'm sitting with in The Standard music venue might do just that as soon as my back is turned. They eye me suspiciously as I sip a cola. A wild-looking redheaded girl, pale and with pre-Raphaelite curls, looks me up and down as Gerrie sound-checks with his band and plays power chords on the stage in front of us.

"Are you Gerrie's girlfriend?"

I shake my head and answer truthfully.

"No."

I see her gaze stray to my left hand, and I can tell she's desperate for a more detailed explanation. I could kick myself for forgetting to take the bloody ring off.

"You're at the university?" She shouts as the band warm up.

"Yeah." I nod. "Psychology, first year."

"I'm Maxine. I don't study at the university, but I work there in the clearing office." The girl then gestures to a guy next to her that I've seen around the campus. "He's Olly."

"Hey." Olly nods in my direction. "Where did Gerrie find *you*?"

The *you* comes over as slightly condescending. I dislike him immediately and reply in the same off-hand manner.

"By the campus cash dispenser. I was looking for thirty thousand pounds."

Olly yawns and turns away from me towards the stage.

"Aren't we all, darling?"

I decline to inform him that I found just what I was looking for, and that I am not his darling. Instead, I concentrate on my new husband, twiddling the knobs on his amplifier and now decked out in black leather trousers, scuffed cowboy boots, and a rather fetching black tee shirt boasting the logo '*If you don't want oral sex, keep your mouth shut*'. His brown hair is long and free, and in the spotlight it falls in shining waves down his back. Stubble is already growing back on his chin. I find myself wanting to eat him alive.

The band plays loud heavy metal, to the delight of the assembled crowd. I recognise a few covers, but mostly I think they're playing their own material. The singer, suitably hirsute but thinner than Gerrie and not as tall, growls in a kind of creature-of-the-deep way. He's wearing about fifteen tee-shirts emblazoned with the

band's name *Thrash*, and as he sings he removes them and throws them out into the audience. Gerrie struts about the stage with his guitar. I don't really like the music, and all I can think of when I see the band's name is the affliction *thrush*, which luckily so far my dubious alter ego of *Miss Frigidaire* and I have managed to avoid.

Halfway through the band's set there's a break. Olly's already got the drinks in. Gerrie bounds over to our table, sits down next to me, and takes a deep swig of beer, indicating with a forefinger towards the singer who has manoeuvred himself next to Maxine.

"This is Ace, a good friend of mine."

"Hi Ace." I flash my best smile. "Great first set."

"Cheers." Ace lifts his pint of beer. "Over there next to Olly are Dave and Stu."

I look over to where two identical twins are standing together and lifting pints in unison.

"Hi guys." I'm mesmerised by their similarity. "Two peas in a pod."

"Yeah, that's us." Dave laughs. "Except that Stu can't play the drums and I can't play bass guitar."

Maxine and Ace kiss, and I look away embarrassed. Gerrie puts his arm around me and hisses hot breath in my ear.

"How about a curry later on and then back to my flat after we've helped Stu load up the van? It's our wedding night, after all!"

It's Sunday tomorrow; exams are over and there's no more coursework. I think it's time to finally address a very important issue before I call Dad to come and pick me up for the summer holidays. I've been on the pill for long enough; it's just that now I'm stuck with the *Miss Frigidaire* label I've found out pretty quickly there are very few guys remotely interested in helping me lose my cumbersome virginity, and the ones that try their luck I wouldn't touch with somebody else's barge pole, let alone mine.

"Okay." I shiver with anticipation. "Fine with me."

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The curry is steamingly hot, making my eyes water and my mouth tingle. I feel as though I don't fit in with this group, who are all older than I am and as far as I can tell have seen it all and done it all. I've done zilch with my life thus far, and it shows.



We each pay our share of the bill, and feeling as though I couldn't eat even another poppadum I enjoy the walk back along the Blackhorse Road to Gerrie's flat. He carries his guitar case in one hand but has his other arm around my shoulders. The traffic is still heavy even though it's nearly midnight, and car horns honk for their owners' right to rule the road. London is alive, Gerrie's body heat is pulsing through my body, and I'm young and eager to sample what so far I've been missing.

The flat is the upstairs part of what looks like a Victorian terraced house. Lights are on in the downstairs windows.

"Ash and Charlie are still up." Gerrie unlocks the front door and we enter the communal lobby. "They're great guys – I'll introduce you to them tomorrow."

He then opens his own front door and I follow him up a flight of carpeted stairs to what I soon determine is a small 4-room somewhat untidy flat.

"I'm going to take a shower." Gerrie places his guitar case down carefully on the landing. "You can come in with me if you want."

I try to hide how aghast and turned on I am all at the same time after receiving this invitation. My heart begins to race.

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

"Yeah, I do." He gives me a mysterious smile. "So what d'you say?"

The picture of a ripe cherry waiting to be picked comes to mind. It's time for me to sample the fruit.

"Okay." My voice sounds breathy. "Now?"

He's already divesting himself of his clothes as he makes his way to the bathroom.

"No time like the present."

I follow the curve of his buttocks with hungry eyes. He turns to face me as I undress shyly. I have never seen an erect penis before. I touch it briefly as we step into the shower, and there is an answering twitch.

"It doesn't bite." Gerrie turns on the tap and water cascades over us. "Not unless you want it to."

I'm reassured but mesmerised by his manhood. He dabs shower gel onto his hands and soaps my breasts. The sensation causes me to move closer to him, and we kiss. I wrap my arms around his neck.

"Are all men just life support machines for their penises?"

"I reckon." Gerrie exhales softly, sinking his head into my shoulder.

I feel his own throbbing desire against my abdomen, and somehow know for certain that beneath his rather macho exterior my husband is a gentleman, and that nothing will happen to me that I do not wish.