Lovereading.co.uk

Served Cold

Zoë Sharp

Published by Robinson Publishing

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

SERVED COLD

Zoë Sharp

Layla's curse, as she saw it, was that she had an utterly fabulous body attached to an instantly forgettable face. It wasn't that she was ugly. Ugliness in itself stuck in the mind. It was simply that, from the neck upwards, she was plain. A bland plainness that encouraged male and female eyes alike to slide on past without pausing. Most failed to recall her easily at a second meeting.

From the neck down, though, that was a different story, and had been right from when she'd begun to blossom in eighth grade. Things had started burgeoning over the winter, when nobody noticed the unexpected explosion of curves. But when summer came, with its bathing suits and skinny tops and tight skirts, Layla suddenly became the most whispered-about girl in her class.

A pack of the kind of boys her mother was usually too drunk to warn her about took to following her when she walked home from school. At first, Layla was flattered. But one simmering afternoon, under the banyan and the Spanish moss, she learned a brutal lesson about the kind of attention her new body attracted.

And when her mother's latest boyfriend started looking at her with those same hot lustful eyes, Layla cut and run. One way or another, she'd been running ever since.

At least the work came easy. Depending on how much she covered up, she could get anything from selling lingerie or perfume in a high-class department store, to exotic dancing. She soon learned to slip on different personae the same way she slipped on a low-cut top or a demure blouse.

Tonight she was wearing a tailored white dress shirt with frills down the front and a dinky little clip-on bow tie. Classy joint. The last time she'd worn a bow-tie to wait tables, she'd worn no top at all.

The fat guy in charge of the wait staff was called Steve and had hands to match his roving eye. That he'd seen beyond Layla's homely face was mainly because he rarely looked at his female employees above the neck. Layla had noted the way his eyes glazed and his mouth went slack and the sweat beaded at his receding hairline, and she wondered if this was another gig she was going to have to try out for on her back.

She didn't, in the end, but only, she realized, because Steve thought of himself as sophisticated. The proposition would no doubt come after. Still, Steve only let his pants rule his head so far. Enough to let Layla – and the rest of the girls – know that he'd be taking half their tips tonight. Anyone who tried to hold anything back would be out on her ass.

Layla didn't care about the tips. That wasn't why she was here, anyhow.

Now, she stood meekly with the others while Steve walked the line, checking everybody over.

"Got to look sharp out there tonight, girls," he said. "Mr Dyer, he's a big man around here. Can't afford to let him down."

He seemed to have a thing for the name badges each girl wore pinned above her left breast. Hated it if they were crooked, and liked to straighten them out personally and take his time getting it just so. The girl next to Layla, whose name was Tammy, rolled her eyes while Steve pawed at her. Layla rolled her eyes right back.

Steve paused in front of her, frowning. "Where's your badge, honey? This one here says your name is Cindy and I *know* that ain't right." And he made sure to nudge the offending item with clammy fingers.

Layla shrugged, surprised he picked up on the deliberate swap. Her face might not stick in the mind, but she couldn't take the chance that her name might ring a bell.

"Oh, I guess it musta gotten lost," she said, all breathless and innocent. "I figured seeing as Cindy called in sick and ain't here

– and none of the fancy folk out there is gonna remember my name anyhow – it don't matter."

Steve continued to frown and finger the badge for a moment, then met Layla's brazen stare and realized he'd lingered too long, even for him. With a shifty little sideways glance, he let go and stepped back. "No, it don't matter," he muttered, moving on. Alongside her, Tammy rolled her eyes again.

Layla had the contents of her canapé tray hurriedly explained to her by one of the harassed chefs and then ducked out of the service door, along the short drab corridor, and into the main ballroom.

The glitter and the glamour set her heart racing, as it always did. For a few years, she'd dreamed of moving in these circles without a white cloth over her arm and an open bottle in her hand. And, for a time, she'd almost believed that it might be so.

Not any more.

Not since Bobby.

She reached the first cluster of dinner jackets and long dresses that probably cost more than she made in a year – just for the fabric, never mind the stitching – and waited to catch their attention. It took a while.

"Sir? Ma'am? Would you care for a canapé? Those darlin' little round ones are smoked salmon and caviar, and the square ones are Kobe beef and ginger."

She smiled, but their eyes were on the food, or they didn't think it was worth it to smile back. Just stuffed their mouths and continued braying to each other like the stuck-up donkeys they were.

Layla had done this kind of gig many times before. She knew the right pace and frequency to circulate, how often to approach the same guests before attentive turned to irritating, how to slip through the crowd without getting jostled. How to keep her mouth shut and her ears open. Steve might hint that she had to put out to get signed on again, but Layla knew she was good and he was lucky to have her.

Well, after tonight, Stevie-boy, you might just change your mind about that.

She smiled and offered the caviar and the beef, reciting the same words over and over like someone kept pulling a string at

the back of her neck. She didn't need to think about it, so she thought about Bobby instead.

Bobby had been the bouncer in a roadhouse near Tallahassee. A huge guy with a lot of old scar tissue across his knuckles and around his eyes. Tale was he'd been a boxer, had a shot until he'd taken one punch too many in the ring. Then everything had gone into slow motion for Bobby and never speeded up again.

He wore a permanent scowl like he'd rip your head off and spit down your neck, as soon as look at you, but Layla quickly realized that was merely puzzlement. Bobby was slightly overmatched by the pace of life and couldn't quite work out why. Still plenty fast enough to throw out drunks in a cheap joint, though. And once Bobby had laid his fists on you, you didn't rush to get up again.

One night in the parking lot, Layla was jumped by a couple of guys who'd fallen foul of the "no touching" rule earlier in the evening and caught the rough side of Bobby's iron-hard hands. They waited, tanking up on cheap whisky, until closing time. Waited for the lights to go out and the girls to straggle, yawning, from the back door. They grabbed Layla before she had a chance to scream, and were touching all they wanted when Bobby waded in out of nowhere. Layla had never been happier to hear the crack of skulls.

She'd been angry more than shocked and frightened – angry enough to stamp them a few times with those lethal heels once they were on the ground. Angry enough to take their overflowing billfolds, too. But it didn't last. When Bobby got her back to her rented double-wide, she shook and cried as she clung to him and begged him to help her forget. That night she discovered that Bobby was big and slow in other ways, too. And sometimes that was a real good thing.

For a while, at least.

"Ma'am? Would you care for a canapé? Smoked salmon and caviar on that side, and this right here's Kobe beef. No, thank *you*, ma'am."

Layla worked the room in a pattern she'd laid out inside her head, weaving through the crowd with the nearest thing a person could get to invisibility. It was a big fancy do, that

was for sure. Some charity she'd never heard of and would never benefit from. The crowd was circulating like hot dense air through a fan, edging their way up towards the host and hostess at the far end.

The Dyers were old money and gracious with it, but firmly distant towards the staff. They knew their place and made sure the little people, like Layla, were aware of theirs. Layla didn't mind. She was used to being a nobody.

Mr Dyer was indeed a big man, as Steve had said. A mover and shaker. He didn't need to mingle, he could just stand there, like royalty, with a glass in one hand and the other around the waist of his tall, elegant wife, looking relaxed and casual.

Well, maybe not so relaxed. Every now and again Layla noticed Dyer throw a little sideways look at their guest of honour and frown, as though he still wasn't quite sure what the guy was doing there.

Guy called Venable. Another big guy. Another mover and shaker. The difference was that Venable had clawed his way up out of the gutter and had never forgotten it. He stood close to the Dyers in his perfectly tailored tux with a kind of secret smile on his face, like he knew they didn't want him there but also knew they couldn't afford to get rid of him. But, just in case anyone thought about trying, he'd surrounded himself with four bodyguards.

Layla eyed them surreptitiously, with some concern. They were huge – bigger than Bobby, even when he'd been still standing – each wearing a bulky suit and one of those little curly wires leading up from their collar to their ear, like they was guarding the president himself. But Venable was no statesman, Layla knew for a fact.

She hadn't expected him to be invited to the Dyers' annual charity ball, and had worked hard to get herself on the staff list when she'd found out he was. A lot of planning had gone into this, one way or another.

By contrast, the Dyers had no protection. Well, unless you counted that bossy secretary of Mrs Dyer's. Mrs Dyer was society through and through. The type who wouldn't remember to get out of bed in the morning without a social secretary to remind her. The type whose only job is looking good and saying

the right thing and being seen in the right places. There must be some kind of a college for women like that.

Mrs Dyer had made a big show of inspecting the arrangements, though. She'd walked through the kitchen earlier that day, nodding serenely, just so her husband could toast her publicly tonight for her part in overseeing the organization of the event, and she could look all modest about it and it not quite be a lie.

She'd had the secretary with her then, a slim woman with cool eyes who'd frozen Steve off the first time he'd tried laying a proprietary hand on her shoulder. Layla and the rest of the girls hid their smiles behind bland faces when she'd done that. Even so, Steve took it out on Tammy – had her on her back in the storeroom almost before they were out the door.

The secretary was here tonight, Layla saw. Fussing around her employer, but it was Mr Dyer whose shoulder she stayed close to. Too close, Layla decided, for their relationship to be merely professional. An affair perhaps? She wouldn't put it past any man to lose his sense and his pants when it came to an attractive woman. Still, she didn't think the secretary looked the type. Maybe he liked 'em cool. Maybe she was hoping he'd leave his wife.

At the moment, the secretary's eyes were on their guest. Venable had been free with his hosts' champagne all evening and his appetites were not concerned only with the food. Layla watched the way his body language grew predatory when he was introduced to the gauche teenage daughter of one of the guests, and she stepped in with her tray, ignoring the ominous looming of the bodyguards.

"Sir, can I interest you in a canapé? Smoked salmon and caviar or Kobe beef and ginger?"

Venable's greed got the better of him and he let go of the girl's hand, which he'd been grasping far too long. She snatched it back, red-faced, and fled. The secretary gave Layla a knowing, grateful smile.

Layla moved away quickly afterwards, a frown on her face, cursing inwardly and knowing he was watching her. She was here for a purpose. One that was too important to allow stupid mistakes like that to risk bringing her unwanted attention. And after she'd tried so hard to blend in.

To calm herself, to negate those shivers of doubt, she thought of Bobby again. They'd moved in together, found a little apartment. Not much, but the first place Layla had lived in years that didn't need the wheels taken off before you could call it home.

He'd been always gentle with Layla, but then one night he'd hit a guy who was hassling the girls too hard, hurt him real bad, and the management had to let Bobby go. Word got out and he couldn't get another job. Layla had walked out, too, but she went through a dry spell as far as work was concerned, and now there were two of them to feed and care for.

Eventually, she was forced to go lower than she'd had to go before, taking her clothes off to bad music in a cheap dive that didn't even bother to have a guy like Bobby to protect the girls. As long as the customers put their money down before they left, the management didn't care.

Layla soon discovered that some of the girls took to supplementing their income by inviting the occasional guy out into the alley at the back of the club. When the landlord came by twice in the same week threatening to evict her and Bobby, she'd swallowed her pride. By the end of that first night, that wasn't all she'd had to swallow.

Even Bobby, slow though he might be, soon realized what she was doing. How could he not question where the extra money was coming from when he'd been in the business long enough to know how much the girls made in tips – and what they had to do to earn them? At first, when she'd explained it to him, Layla thought he was cool with it. Until the next night when she was out in the alley between sets, her back hard up against the rough stucco wall with some guy from out of town huffing sweat and beer into her unremarkable face.

One minute she was standing with her eyes tight shut, wondering how much longer the guy was going to last, and the next he was yanked away and she heard that dreadful crack of skulls.

Bobby hadn't meant to kill him, she was sure of that. He just didn't know his own strength, was all. Then it was his turn to panic and tremble, but Layla stayed ice cool. They wrapped the body in plastic and put it into the trunk of a borrowed car before

driving it down to the Everglades. Bobby carried it out to a pool where the 'gators gathered, and left it there for them to hide. Layla even went back a week later, just to check, but there was nothing left to find.

They stripped the guy before they dumped him, and struck lucky. He had a decent watch and a bulging wallet. It was a month before Layla had to put out against the stucco in the alley again.

How were they supposed to know he was connected to Venable? That the watch Bobby had pawned would lead Venable's bone-breakers straight to them?

A month after the killing, Venable's boys picked Bobby and Layla up from the bar and drove them out to some place by the docks. Bobby swore that Layla wasn't in on it, that they should leave her alone, let her go. Swore blind that it was so. And eventually, they blinded him, just to make sure.

Layla thought she'd never get the sound of Bobby's screaming out of her head as they'd tortured him into a confession of sorts. But even when they'd snapped his spine, left him broken and bleeding on that filthy concrete floor, Bobby had not said a word against Layla. And she, to her eternal shame, had been too terrified to confess her part in it all, as though that would make mockery of everything he'd gone through.

So, they'd left her. She was a waitress, a dancer, a hooker. A no-account nobody. Not worth the effort of a beating. Not worth the cost of a bullet.

Helpless as a baby, damaged beyond repair, Bobby went into some institution just north of Tampa and Layla took the bus up to see him every week for the first couple of months. But, gradually, getting on that bus got harder to do. It broke her heart to see him like that, to force the cheerful note into her voice.

Eventually, the bus left the terminal one morning and Layla wasn't on it.

She'd cried for days. When she'd gotten word that Bobby had snuck a knife out of the dining hall, waited until it was quiet then slit his wrists under the blankets and quietly bled out into his mattress during the night, there had been no more tears left to fall.

Layla's heart hardened to a shell. She'd let Bobby down while he was alive, but she could seek justice for him after he was dead. She heard things. That was one of the beauties of being invisible. People talked while she served them drinks, like she wasn't there. Once Layla had longed to be noticeable, to be accepted. Now she made it her business simply to listen.

Of course, she knew she couldn't go after Venable alone, so Layla had found another bruiser with no qualms about burying the bodies. And, once he'd had a taste of that spectacular body, he was hers.

Thad was younger than Bobby, sharper, neater, and when it came to killing he had the strike and the morals of a rattlesnake. Layla knew he'd do anything for her, right up until the time she tried to move on, and then he was likely to do anything *to* her instead.

Well, after tonight, she wouldn't care.

She slipped out of the ballroom but instead of turning into the kitchen, this time she took the extra few strides to the French windows at the end of the corridor, furtively opened them a crack, then closed them again carefully so they didn't latch.

By the time Layla returned to the ballroom, the canapés were not all she was holding. She'd detoured via the little cloakroom the girls had been given to change and store their bags. What she'd collected from hers she was holding flat in her right hand, hidden by the tray. A Beretta nine millimeter, hot most likely. As long as it worked, Layla didn't care.

A few moments later someone stopped by her elbow and leaned close to examine the contents of the tray.

"Well hello, *Cindy*." A man's voice, a smile curving the sound of it. "And just what you got there, little lady?"

Thad, looking pretty nifty in the tux she'd made him rent. He bent over her tray while she explained the contents, making a big play over choosing between the caviar or the beef. And underneath, his other hand touched hers, and she slipped the Beretta into it.

"Well, thank you, sugar," he said, taking a canapé with a flourish and slipping the gun inside his jacket with his other hand, like a magician. When the hand came out again, it was

holding a snowy handkerchief, which he used to wipe his fingers and dab his mouth.

Layla had made him practise the move until it seemed so natural. Shame this was a one-time show. He would have made such a partner, someone she might just have been able to live her dreams with. If only he hadn't had that cruel streak. If only he'd touched her heart the way Bobby had.

Poor crippled, blinded Bobby. Poor *dead* Bobby . . .

Ah well. Too late for regrets. Too late for much of anything, now.

Layla caught Thad's eye as she made another round and he nodded, almost imperceptibly. She nodded back, the slightest inclination of her head, and turned away. As she did so she bumped deliberately into the arm of a man who'd been recounting some fishing tale and spread his hands broadly to lie about the size of his catch. He caught Layla's tray and sent it flipping upwards. Layla caught it with the fast reflexes that came from years of waiting crowded tables amid careless diners. She managed to stop the contents crashing to the floor, but most of it ended up down the front of her blouse instead.

"Oh, I am *so* sorry, sir," she said immediately, clutching the tray to her chest to prevent further spillage.

"No problem," the man said, annoyed at having his story interrupted and oblivious to the fact it had been entirely his fault. He checked his own clothing. "No harm done."

Layla managed to raise a smile and hurried out. Steve caught her halfway.

"What happened, honey?" he demanded. "Not like you to be so clumsy."

Layla shrugged as best she could, still trying not to shed debris.

"Sorry, boss," she said. "I've got a spare blouse in my bag. I'll go change."

"Okay, sweetheart, but make it snappy." He let her move away a few strides, then called after her, "And if that's caviar you're wearing, it'll come out of your pay, y'hear?"

Layla threw him a chastised glance over her shoulder that didn't go deep enough to change her eyes, and hurried back to the little cloakroom.

She scraped the gunge off the front of her chest into the nearest trash, took off the blouse and threw that away, too, then rummaged through her bag for a clean one. This one was calculatedly lower cut and more revealing, but she didn't think Steve would object too hard, even if he caught her wearing it.

She pulled out another skirt, too, even though there was nothing wrong with her old one. This was shorter than the last, showing several inches of long smooth thigh below the hem and, without undue vanity, she knew it would drag male eyes downwards, even as her newly exposed cleavage would drag them up again. With any luck, they'd go cross-eyed trying to look both places at once.

She swapped her false name badge over and took the cheap Makarov nine millimeter and a roll of duct tape out of her bag. She lifted one remarkable leg up onto the wooden bench and ran the duct tape around the top of her thigh, twice, to hold the nine in position, just out of sight. The pistol grip pointed downwards and she knew from hours in front of the mirror that she could yank the gun loose in a second.

She'd bought both pistols from a crooked military surplus dealer down near Miramar. Thad insisted on coming with her for the Beretta, had made a big thing about checking the gun over like he knew what he was doing, sighting along the barrel with one eye closed.

Layla had gone back later for the Makarov. She didn't have enough money for the two, but she'd been dressed to thrill and she and the dealer had come to an arrangement that hadn't cost Layla anything at all. Only pride, and she'd been way overdrawn on that account for years.

Now, Layla checked in the cracked mirror that the gun didn't show beneath her skirt. Her face was even more bland in its pallor and, just for once, she wished she'd been born pretty. Not beautiful, just pretty enough to have been cherished.

The way she'd cherished Bobby. The way he'd cherished her.

She left the locker room and collected a fresh tray from the kitchen. The chefs were under pressure, the activity frantic, but when she walked in on those long dancer's legs there was a moment of silence that was almost reverent.

"You changed your clothes," one of the chefs said, mesmerized.

She smiled at him, saw the fog lift a little as the disappointment of her face cut through the haze of lust created by her body.

"I spilled," she said, collecting a fresh tray. She felt every eye on her as she walked out, smiled when she heard the collective sigh as the door swung closed behind her.

It was a short-lived smile.

Back in the ballroom, it was all she could do not to go marching straight up to Venable, but she knew she had to play it cool. The four bodyguards were too experienced not to spot her sudden surge of guilt and anger. They'd pick her out of the crowd the way a shark cuts out a weakling seal pup. And she couldn't afford that. Not yet.

Instead, she forced herself to think bland thoughts as she circled the room towards him. Saw out of the corner of her eye Thad casually moving up on the other side. The relief flooded her, sending her limbs almost lax with it. For a second, she'd been afraid he wouldn't go through with it. That he'd realize what her real plan was, and back out at the last minute.

For the moment, though, Thad must think it was all going according to plan. She stepped up to the Dyers, offered them something from her tray. The secretary still hadn't left his side, she saw. The girl must be desperate.

Layla took another step, sideways towards Venable, ducking around the cordon of bodyguards. Offered him something from her tray. And this time, as he leaned forwards, so did she, pressing her arms together to accentuate what nature had so generously given her.

She watched Venable's eyes go glassy, saw the way the eyes of the nearest two bodyguards bulged the same way. There was another just behind her, she knew, and she bent a little further from the waist, knowing she was giving him a prime view of her ass and the back of her newly-exposed thighs. She could almost feel that hot little gaze slavering up the backs of her knees.

Come on, Thad . . .

He came pushing through the crowd nearest to Venable, moving too fast. If he'd been slower, he might have made it. As

it was, he was the only guy for twenty feet in any direction who didn't have his eyes full of Layla's divine body. Venable's eyes snapped round at the last moment, jerky, panicking as he realized the rapidly approaching threat. He flailed, sending Layla's tray crashing to the ground, showering canapés.

The bodyguards were slower off the mark. Thad already had the gun out before two of them grabbed him. Not so much grabbed as piled in on top of him, driving him off his legs and down, using fists and feet to keep him there.

Thad was no easy meat, though. He kept in shape and had come up from the streets, where unfair fights were part of the game. Even on the floor, he lashed out, aiming for knees and shins, hitting more than he was missing. A third bodyguard joined in to keep him down, a leather sap appearing like magic in his hand.

There was that familiar crack of skulls. *Just like Bobby* . . .

Layla winced, but she couldn't let that distract her now. Her mind strangely cool and calm, Layla stepped in, ignored. The fourth bodyguard had stayed at his post, but Layla was shielded from his view by his own principal, and everyone's attention was on the fight. Carefully, she reached under her skirt and yanked the Makarov free, unaware of the brief burn as the tape ripped from her thigh.

The safety was already off, the hammer back. The Army surplus guy down in Miramar had thrown in a little instruction as well. Gave him more of a chance to stand up real close behind her as he demonstrated how to hold the unfamiliar gun, how to aim and fire.

She brought the nine up the way he'd shown her, both hands clasped round the pistol grip, starting to take up the pressure on the trigger, she bent her knees and crouched a little, so the recoil wouldn't send the barrel rising, just in case she had to take a second shot. But, this close, she knew she wouldn't need one, even if she got the chance.

One thing Layla hadn't been ready for was the noise. The report was monstrously loud in the high-ceilinged ballroom. And though she thought she'd been prepared, she staggered back and to the side. And the pain. The pain was a gigantic fist around her heart, squeezing until she couldn't breathe.

She looked up, vision starting to shimmer, and saw Venable was still standing, shocked but apparently unharmed. How had she missed? The bodyguard had come out of his lethargy to throw himself on top of his employer, but there was still an open window. There was still time . . .

Layla tried to lift the gun but her arms were leaden. Something hit her, hard, in the centre of her voluptuous chest, but she didn't see what it was, or who threw it. She frowned, took a step back and her legs folded, and suddenly she was staring up at the chandeliers on the ceiling and she had to hold on to the polished wooden dance floor beneath her hands to stay there. Her vision was starting to blacken at the edges, like burning paper, the sound blurring down.

The last thing she saw was the slim woman she'd taken for a secretary, leaning over her with a wisp of smoke rising from the muzzle of the nine millimeter she was holding.

Then the bright lights, and the glitter, all faded to black.

The woman Layla had mistaken for a secretary placed two fingers against the pulse point in the waitress's throat and felt nothing. She knew better than to touch the body more than she had to now, even to close the dead woman's eyes.

Cindy, the name tag read, even under the trickle of the blood. She doubted that would match the woman's driver's licence.

She rose, sliding the SIG semi-automatic back into the concealed-carry rig on her belt. Two of Venable's meaty goons wrestled the woman's accomplice, bellowing, out of the room. She turned to her employer.

"I don't think you were the target, Mr Dyer, but I couldn't take the chance," she said calmly. She jerked her head towards the bodyguards. "If this lot had been halfway capable, I wouldn't have had to get involved. As it was . . ."

Dyer nodded. He still had his arms wrapped round his wife, who was sobbing, and his eyes were sad and tired.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

The woman shrugged. "It's my job," she said.

"Who the hell are you?" It was Venable himself who spoke, elbowing his way out from the protective shield that his remaining bodyguards had belatedly thrown around him.

"This is Charlie Fox," Dyer answered for her, the faintest smile in his voice. "She's *my* personal protection. A little more subtle than your own choice. She's good, isn't she?"

Venable stared at him blankly, then at the dead woman, lying crumpled on the polished planks. At the unfired gun that had fallen from her hand.

"You saved my life," he murmured, his face pale.

Charlie stared back at him. "Yes," she said, sounding almost regretful. "Whether it was worth saving is quite another point. What had you done to her that she was prepared to kill you for it?"

Venable seemed not to hear. He couldn't take his eyes off Layla's body. Something about her was familiar, but he just couldn't remember her face.

"I don't know – nothing," he said, cleared his throat of its hoarseness and tried again. "She's a nobody. Just a waitress." He took another look, just to be sure. "Just a woman."

"Oh, I don't know," Dyer said, and his eyes were on Charlie Fox. "From where I'm standing, she's a hell of a woman, wouldn't you say?"

Lovereading.co.uk

Mother's Milk

Chris Simms

Published by Robinson Publishing

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

MOTHER'S MILK

Chris Simms

Just a glimpse across the graveyard at a hundred yards and he knew that milking her dry would pose no problem at all.

To an ordinary person she was a sad-looking woman in her forties, fat thighs bulging as she bent forward to replace the dying flowers before the gravestone with a fresh bouquet.

But to Daniel Norris she stank of need. The need for company. The need for human warmth. The need for someone to lavish kindness upon. So acute was his ability to sniff out and exploit vulnerability, she may as well have held a loudhailer to her lips and announced to the cemetery, ''In sickness and in health, please, God, give me someone to care for.''

He slid into the shadow of a moss-furred crypt and waited for her to pass. As he stood there out of the weak October sun, a breeze whispered between the graves and a shiver ran through him. The ugly clacking of two crows squabbling in a nearby yew tree masked the sound of her approaching steps, but he soon heard the crunch of gravel as her stout legs took her back towards the gates, hair dull and brown, head held up in an attempt to bravely face the grey afternoon.

As soon as she was out of sight he hurried over to the grave she had just left. The headstone was new. He sneered at her tacky taste. Shiny black marble topped by two maudlin cherubs trumpeting a silent lament to an unhearing God. His eyes scanned quickly over the inscription, letters chiselled out then painted with a layer of fake gold. Something about her babies now being with the angels. His eyebrows raised in slight surprise: he had assumed it was a husband and not young ones she'd lost. Not that it mattered to him. He knew she was alone in the world.

He studied the large and expensive bouquet. If this was the weekly ritual he suspected, she had plenty of cash to spare. He rubbed his hands together in the chill autumnal air. Wealthy widows were particularly easy to fleece.

Several days dragged by as he eked out an existence between dimly lit boozers and dingy bookies, their floors littered with torn paper slips. A win on the dogs on Friday provided some much-needed cash for the weekend. He combed his grey-flecked hair and put his blazer on over his only decent shirt. Then he treated himself to twenty Bensons, leaving the dented tin of rolling tobacco in his hostel room before heading to the Tap and Spile.

During a visit earlier in the week he'd read the small sign above the door and noted the licensee was a single woman. Jan Griffiths. He'd watched her from a shadowy corner, noticing the lack of wedding ring as she pulled the pints while keeping up an easy flow of conversation with her regulars. He'd liked her dyed blond hair, throaty laugh, and sparkling blue eyes.

Now he walked into the pub with an easy roll in his step, one hand in his pocket. Confident and at ease with his place in the world. He slid his thin frame onto a barstool, nodded at her with a wolfish half-smile, then watched as she registered the expression. He knew it never failed to pique the interest of her type.

"You look like the cat who's got the cream," she stated, a wary curiosity in her voice.

"Do I?" he said, taking the twenties from his pocket. "Just got some good news on a business deal I'm in town for. A bottle of your best champagne, please." Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

She smiled, pleased to be filling the till so early in the evening. "I'll need to get it from upstairs. How many glasses would you like?" she replied, eyes moving to the empty seats behind him.

"Well, I'm hoping you won't make me drink it alone. So, two, please."

She smiled again, turning on her heel and looking back at him over her shoulder. "Never can say no to a bit of bubbly," she said archly, hips swinging slightly as she headed for the stairs.

Peeling the cellophane from his cigarettes, he looked around the cosy pub at the scattering of drinkers quietly sipping their pints. A warm glow spread across his chest. "Nice place," he said to himself, thinking he could get used to it.

She reappeared a minute later, bottle of Moet standing upright in the ice bucket in her hands. "One bottle of bubbly."

He watched as she took the foil off and then expertly prised the cork loose with a soft pop. A small gush of foam emerged and his eyes wandered to her generous cleavage.

"So what's the business deal?"

He glanced up, realizing she'd seen where his eyes had strayed. She didn't seem bothered. "Oh, a new retail development in the town centre," he replied. During his first recce round town he'd spotted a large commercial property for sale. "The one next to that big Barclays.

"On Prince's Street?" She sounded impressed. "That's massive. Have you bought it?"

"I wish," he said with a smile. "I'm just the middleman between the vendor and the buyers. Venture capitalists from the Middle East. Still, I get my commission as a result."

She placed two glasses on the bar and he nodded at them. "Will you be mum?"

She poured them both a drink and handed a glass to him. "Well, here's to your deal."

"Thanks."

They clinked glasses and he took a large sip, briefly savouring the sensation of bubbles popping against the roof of his mouth before swallowing it down. "Delicious," he sighed, offering her a cigarette out of the new pack.

"So where are you from?" she asked, taking one and leaning against the bar.

He reached for the cheap disposable lighter in his pocket, but changed his mind. "Have you any matches?"

She flicked him a book and he lit their cigarettes. "Wherever business takes me," he replied. "I'll be in town for a while yet, tying up loose ends of this deal, sorting out planning permission for the shops."

"It's going to be a shopping centre, then?"

"That's the intention. My clients want retail units put in, then they'll offer out the space to the usual suspects. Boots, Topshop, WH Smith, and the like."

He took another sip, aware of her eyes assessing him, and he realized she'd have heard countless tales of bullshit across the bar.

"So how long have you been in the pub game?" he asked casually.

"Donkey's years." She laughed. "It's all I know."

"You run a nice place here," he said, glancing round.

She gave a small smile. "It's not bad. Business-wise, I mean. The big pubs they've opened in the centre have taken away a few customers, but mainly the younger ones. I prefer a quieter crowd."

He refilled their glasses. "Absolutely. Not enough places like this left."

She moved away to serve another customer and he almost drained his glass, wondering how quickly she'd come back to him. To his satisfaction, it was almost straightaway.

The allure of strangers. Deciding not to push things too early, he finished his drink and patted the tops of his thighs. "Well, I'd better be off. My clients are taking me to dinner at seven o'clock."

Her eyes went to the unfinished bottle. "What about your champagne?"

"If it would keep, I'd say put it behind the bar for tomorrow," he replied, hinting at his return. "You have it. My treat."

"Well . . . thanks," she answered uncertainly, wrong-footed by his sudden departure.

"See you again," he smiled, heading for the door.

He returned to the cemetery exactly a week after he first saw her. Earlier in the morning he'd picked up a drab suit in a charity shop, pairing it with his oldest shirt and tie. Finally he'd put on a pair of battered leather shoes, pleased with the look of someone down on his luck but determined to keep up appearances nonetheless.

She appeared at eleven o'clock, making her way straight to the grave, another large bouquet in her arms. He made a rip in

the paper that wrapped his bunch of cheap chrysanthemums, watching as she plucked a couple of weeds from the bed of marble chippings in front of the headstone before exchanging fresh flowers for the wilted. After standing in sad contemplation for a good five minutes, she started to turn around.

He stood up, walking over a couple of graves to make the path that would intersect their routes. Two lost souls, drifting alone in the world. As he walked with head bowed, he tried to drag up any memories that might bring tears to his eyes. God knew he'd been witness to enough pain. But the anguished weeping of so many women had all been his doing, and the images of their distraught faces did nothing to stir his heart.

Now she was less than twenty feet from his side. He caught his foot in a nonexistent crack and stumbled forward, flowers cascading to the ground as the wrapping tore completely. Regaining his balance, he stooped forward as if to start picking them up. But then he placed his hands on his knees and let out an anguished sob. He heard her footsteps stop beside him and, knowing that it would clinch his act, the tears he'd been failing to summon suddenly appeared.

A hand was placed on his shoulder and he looked up at her face as it wavered and shifted through the liquid filling his eyes.

"There, there," she murmured, pressing his head to her bosom.

Within four days he had packed his few possessions, moved out of the hostel, and was sleeping in her spare room. She'd lapped up his story of a childhood spent in care homes, adult years wasted in a directionless drift, not anchored by family to any area. Then his long search for his real mother – a search that had finally ended in the town's cemetery, at a grave that had only been dug the year before.

She brought her blubbering under control by clucking and fussing around him. Bustling around in the kitchen, carrying through dinner on a tray as he sat dejected on her sofa, his eyes furtively searching the room while she'd cooked his food.

Every night she'd conclude her nursing routine by bringing him a mug of Ovaltine. Creamy, smooth, and comforting, it was a taste he quickly came to look forward to. "That's because I

make it with milk, the proper way,'' she'd say and smile, her look of pleasure increasing with his every sip.

But the need to get to a pub and enjoy a cigarette in a comfortable seat rather than standing out on her bloody patio was steadily growing. So he began to recover from his feigned despondency, apparently revived by the succession of meals she so lovingly prepared. One day he announced that it was time he sorted himself out. Found a job and place of his own.

Her eyes had widened in alarm at his mention of moving out. ''Stay as long as you like. The house is too big for just me. I like you being here. Please.'' The desperation in her voice surprised him. It was going to be so easy cleaning her out of everything.

He pondered her words, thinking of the three bedrooms upstairs. The spare room he slept in, her pink nightmare, and the locked door with the nursery placard on it. He'd peeped through the keyhole at the first opportunity and was just able to make out babyish wallpaper and some cuddly toys on a chest of drawers. Three bedrooms and a decent garden. Worth what? Two hundred grand at least.

''What happened to your family, Marjorie? What happened to your babies?'' he whispered, curious that, apart from her creepy shrine, all traces of them had been removed from the house.

The question obviously distressed her and she waved it away with an agitated flutter of her hands. ''I really can't speak about it. Not yet. I'm sorry, it's still all too . . . raw,'' she said, fingers grasping at the crucifix around her neck.

He nodded. ''I understand, Marjorie, I understand. But I must repay your kindness somehow. Let me pay you some rent at least.''

She shook her head. ''Really, I don't need it.''

He paused, always amazed at his ability to bring out the maternal instincts of women. ''Think of it for me. For my self-respect if nothing else. There's a job I spotted when I first arrived here. A salesman for those industrial vacuums they use in pubs and restaurants. It's something I've done before. They'd take me on, I just need to brush up a bit . . .'' His words died away and his eyes dropped to his scuffed old shoes.

She sprang to her feet. ''You need proper work clothes.'' She

crossed to the dresser in the corner, took out a file from the top drawer, and extracted several twenty-pound notes from inside. "Here, take this. Buy yourself a nice new suit."

"No, Marjorie, I couldn't," he protested, holding up his hands while making a mental note of the file's whereabouts.

"Then take it as a loan," she insisted.

"Okay," he agreed reluctantly. "And I'm paying you back every penny, understand?" he added, knowing she'd never ask for it back.

He scoured the shops for a sale. After finding one and then mercilessly bargaining down the young assistant, he picked up a suit, three shirts, and a pair of shoes for a steal. The deal left him with over eighty pounds in change. He headed straight for the nearest pub with a copy of the *Racing Post*, where he picked his runners over a couple of pints and several cigarettes.

When he set off back to Marjorie's at five o'clock that afternoon he was fifty quid and several more pints up. As he ambled happily along he wondered how to explain the state he was in. She opened the door to find him swaying on her doorstep, shopping bag hanging from one arm.

"I rang them. I've got an interview tomorrow," he sighed.

"Well, that's good news, isn't it?" she said, confused by the look of sadness on his face.

"But then I went back to my mother's grave. Oh, Marjorie, if I hadn't dithered for so long before tracing her, I might have spoken to her before she died. I'm afraid I've had a few drinks."

"Come here," she said, arms outstretched.

He slipped inside and endured a crushing hug.

"You mustn't punish yourself. Now take that jacket off and sit down." She led him to the sofa in the immaculate front room. "I'm making tea. Is beef casserole all right?"

"Great, thanks," he replied with a weak smile.

She sniffed at his jacket. "This reeks of cigarettes. You really shouldn't smoke."

"I know. It's only when I'm stressed."

She nodded. "Well, I'll give it a good airing on the washing line."

"Thank you," he said, reaching for the TV's remote control as soon as she was out of the room.

He woke with a sore throat and cursed himself for smoking so heavily the day before. She'd washed and ironed his shirts the previous evening and he walked down the stairs straightening his tie.

"Oh, Daniel. You look the perfect gentleman." She moved across the kitchen, encroaching on his personal space. "Stand still, you've got a stray strand of hair."

He fought the urge to slap her hand away, instead gratefully smiling as she smoothed it into place.

"Perfect," she said, standing back. "I've ordered you a cab. We don't want you going by bus and getting there late."

He sat down and waited for her to cook him breakfast.

"Just here's fine, mate." He leaned over from the rear of the cab.

"The betting office?" the driver replied, confused after hearing the pudgy woman wish the passenger good luck in his job interview.

"Yeah, here will do."

"That's four eighty then, please."

He counted out the exact money, then climbed out, the cabbie not bothering to thank him as he drove off. A bout of coughing caught him by surprise as he walked towards the bookie's and he lit a cigarette to quell the itch in his throat.

The morning was spent working out his bets. He rang Marjorie at midday. "I've got the job. Can you believe it?!"

"Daniel, that's brilliant. I'll cook something special for tea."

"They want me to start straightaway. I've got a sales patch right in the centre of town. Mainly pubs, so I'll probably end up smelling of cigarettes each day."

"Never mind. Did they say what they'll pay you?"

"It's commission only, but the vacuum is a great product. I'm sure I'll sell loads. I've got to demo it to prospective customers. They're dropping me off and have given me a special trolley to wheel it around on."

"They're making you carry one around town?"

"Yes. And I have to drop it back off at the factory at the end of each day."

"That's ridiculous. You need a car."

He smiled to himself. "I'll manage somehow. Now I've got to go. See you later."

He hung up and then walked over to the Tap and Spile. "Hello there," he said, taking the same stool at the bar, straightening a pristine shirt cuff.

She looked up, a tea towel in her hand, eyes passing briefly over his suit. "Hello again. Thanks for the champagne the other night."

"My pleasure," he replied.

"How's business going?"

"Okay," he said. "There's a few question marks over the rates the council wants to charge. I'm arguing it's a multi-let property, so not subject to the standard commercial tariffs they'd levy if . . ." He paused. "Sorry, that's probably more of an answer than you were expecting. How about you?"

She looked round the deserted pub. "Lunches tend to be quiet. But I'm not giving up the bar meals. Every decent pub should offer them."

He picked up a menu. "What do you recommend, then?"

"I don't know," she said, polishing another glass. "The chicken pie is good."

"Homemade, too, I see."

"Of course."

"Is it breast or leg?" he asked provocatively.

"You'll have to see," she replied, one eyebrow arching upwards.

"Fine with me. I love both," he said, placing an elbow on the bar.

He walked back to the bookie's a couple of hours later, stopping at a newsagent's to buy some Rennie for the burning ache at the back of his throat. Things were looking good. Marjorie was proving as easy as he knew she would be and it was going better than he dared hope with Jan. So good, in fact, he'd asked her out to dinner on Sunday night. He pictured her face, her cleavage, and realized she was really growing on him.

If his plans for Marjorie worked out, he and Jan could look forward to some fun times together.

The next morning he woke with a headache and a metallic taste in his mouth. He struggled out of bed, a bout of coughs wracking his chest. God, he felt awful. He counted back the number of drinks he'd got through in the pub. Not enough to warrant a hangover like this. He'd have to have a word with Jan about how often she cleaned the pipes in her pub.

In the bathroom he stared in the mirror. His skin looked grey and a latticework of tiny veins marred the whites of his eyes.

"'Morning," he said dully, shuffling into the kitchen in a bathrobe and slippers.

"Daniel, are you all right?" Marjorie said, lines of concern across her forehead.

"Not so good, actually. I'm glad it's Saturday. I don't think I could have faced working today. Have you got any aspirin?"

"Yes," she said, immediately opening a cupboard and reaching up to the top shelf. He watched the flesh wobbling under her thick upper arms with disgust.

"Here we are. Now you go and sit on the sofa. Can you manage some tea and toast? I'll bring everything through."

She bustled in with a blanket shortly after, tucking it around him before carrying through a tray piled with toast, a pot of tea, a glass of milk, and two aspirin in a little pot.

"Thanks, could you pass me the remote?"

She appeared again a couple of hours later, hovering by the sofa and aggravating him with her presence. "I'm going to the cemetery today. I always take flowers for my babies on a Saturday. Do you feel up to coming? We could take some for your mother, too."

Her and those bloody babies, he thought, dragging his eyes from the TV screen. Normally a lie would appear instantly on his lips, but his mind seemed to be working sluggishly. "Erm, no. No, thanks."

"No to coming with me?"

"Yes, I still feel terrible."

"How about I take some flowers for your mother? You'll need to tell me exactly where her grave is."

He raised his fingers to his temples and shut his eyes. "No, don't worry. I'd feel guilty if you took flowers for me. It's something I'd prefer to do myself."

"Okay, then. Would you like more tea? Or an Ovaltine, perhaps?"

He looked at the huge pot, still half full. "Yes, an Ovaltine sounds good. And a couple more aspirin, please."

Once she'd gone he sat sipping his drink, swallowing down the aspirin with the last gulp. Then he kicked off the blanket, walked over to the front window, lifted the net curtain, and peered down the street. No sign of her. His temples were thudding and he realized his heart was racing uncomfortably fast as he turned to the top drawer of the dresser and took the file out.

Everything was there. Details of several savings accounts, bank cards, cheque books, even the deeds to the house. He flicked through to the back of the file, grunting incredulously when he found the sheet of paper with all the passwords for her savings accounts neatly written out. Stupid, stupid bitch. He thought forward to his meal with Jan the following evening. If everything went smoothly, he'd start draining Marjorie's accounts dry the next day. Then he could invite Jan on a luxury cruise and be out of this horrible house within a week.

He turned to the envelope at the front and counted the cash inside. Almost four hundred quid. Taking the phone and a copy of the Yellow Pages back to the sofa, he found the number for the bookie's he'd become a regular in. "Hi, George, it's Dan Norris here. Can I place a few phone bets?"

The keys clicked in the front door after lunch and she walked into the front room, a rosy flush on her chubby cheeks. "How are you feeling?"

"Rotten," he said, shifting on the sofa. "This headache seems to be getting worse."

"Poor baby," she said, shrugging off her coat and pressing her fingertips to his brow. "Perhaps I should take your temperature. You could be coming down with the flu. It's that time of year."

"You might be right. My joints are starting to ache, too."

She brought the thermometer through from the kitchen, perched on the edge of the sofa, and popped it in his mouth. As they waited he was aware of her large buttocks pressing against his legs. After three minutes she took it out and tilted it towards the window. "It's a bit up."

"Maybe I just need some fresh air," he said, wanting to get away from her cloying company. But when he tried to stand, the blood surged in his head and red clouds filled the room.

When he came to he was stretched back out on the sofa, the blanket now tucked up to his chin. She was sitting on the arm, looking down at him, her fat face filling his vision.

"You fainted, you poor dear. It's lucky you hadn't got to your feet."

Feeling weak as a child, he shut his eyes again. "My head's pounding. I need more aspirin."

She instantly stood. "Of course. I think you're dehydrated, I'll get you a drink, too."

When she returned a minute later he saw she was carrying a steaming mug and a small bottle. "I've made you some more Ovaltine. I'm afraid you've had all the aspirin. But I've got some Calpol."

"Calpol? Isn't that for kids?"

"Yes. It was for . . ." Tears brimmed in her eyes. "We'll give you an extra big dose."

Too exhausted to protest, he watched as she poured out a tablespoon of the red liquid. Once he'd swallowed it, she placed the mug of Ovaltine in his hands. "Now drink up. We can't have you like this, can we?"

He spent the rest of the evening lying on the sofa, listlessly watching the telly as his pulse rose and fell again and again. At eleven o'clock she came over and stood in front of the sofa. "I think it's beddy-bed time. Shall I help you up?"

Irritated by her patronizing choice of words, he waved her away. "I'm fine here. I'll head up later."

"Head still bad?"

He nodded once. "If there's no improvement by tomorrow I think we'd better call for a doctor."

* * *

She found him there the next morning. He was lying on his back, a shallow pant coming from his mouth.

"Oh dear, still feeling poorly?"

His eyelids fluttered open and he looked at her from the corner of his eye. "I'm more than poorly. I need a doctor," he croaked, gesturing weakly to the phone which lay just out of his reach. "Can you pass it to me? I can hardly move. And bring me the copy of the Yellow Pages, too," he added, thinking he needed to call Jan to cancel their dinner date.

"Let me get you a drink, your throat sounds awfully dry."

"Okay. Yes, a drink would be good."

She returned a minute later with a mug in her hands. Kneeling in front of the sofa, she reached an arm round his neck and lifted his head off the cushions.

"What's this? More bloody Ovaltine? I just want water."

"Now, now," she clucked. "I've made it with milk, just how you like it. Take a sip, it's not too hot."

With a reluctant sigh, he did as he was told. Once it was finished she laid his head back down.

"Now can you please call me a doctor? I'm seriously ill here."

She picked up the phone and placed it further out of his reach. "We don't need a doctor. I'm here to take care of you."

A surge of self-pitying anger made the dull thump in his head more pronounced. "Listen, I need more than cups of bloody Ovaltine. I need medical help. Now call me a bloody doctor."

She held a finger up. "Any more language like that and I'll wash your mouth out with soap. Now let's get you upstairs, you need to be in bed."

He tried to shrug off her arm as it slid back round his neck. "Give me the phone," he gasped, thinking of Jan, the only person in the world he could turn to for help. Not caring if it meant revealing the truth about himself to her.

Ignoring his demand, she pulled him into a sitting position, then draped one of his arms round her shoulders.

"Get your hands off me," he protested feebly.

"Okay," she said brusquely. "One, two, three, up!" She hoisted him to his feet and his vision swirled and faded.

"What are you doing?" he mumbled helplessly, unsure if

they were actually moving until he felt the edges of the stairs banging against his shins. "I need the toilet."

"There, there. Everything will be okay," she grunted, getting him onto the landing.

His vision cleared a little and he realized they'd stopped outside the door marked Nursery. She took a key from her pocket. His head lolled forward as she unlocked the door. The room had the letters of the alphabet running below the picture rail. The jungle-animal blind was drawn and a mobile of toy animals hung over an enormous cot in the corner.

"What . . . what is this?" he said, trying to focus.

"Don't you worry, I'm here to take care of you," she replied, lowering the bars of the cot and laying him down.

"I need the toilet. I have to go to the toilet." He started to cry.

"That's fine," she said, stripping off his pajamas and taking a pair of incontinence pants from a drawer.

He felt her slipping them on and he looked at the photos lined up on the shelf to his side. Framed photos of gaunt-faced men, all lying in the cot he now found himself in.

"Who are they?" he whispered.

"My babies, of course," she answered brightly, picking up each picture in turn. "All dead now. All dead." She looked down at him, a smile on her face. "All my babies die. It's what God wants."

He stared up at her, remembering the inscription in the cemetery about her babies being with angels, realizing there were no actual names listed on the gravestone.

"Now, it's time for your feed. Mummy will get it." She raised the bars back up and he heard her go downstairs. While she was gone he tried desperately to summon the strength to move. Sobbing with exertion, he was only able to lift a hand just clear of the blanket.

She returned with a large baby bottle, dripping a bit from the teat onto her upturned wrist. "Just right."

He tried to shy away from her as she bent over him. But she cupped his cheek and turned his face towards her.

"What's in that? What is it?" he said through gritted teeth as the teat was forced between his lips.

"Mother's milk, my sweet one. Mother's milk."