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Opening Extract from...

THE RABBIT HUNTER

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Published by **HarperCollins**

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It’s early morning, and the still water of the inlet is shimmering like brushed steel. The luxurious villas are asleep, but outdoor lights glint behind tall fences and hedges.

A drunk man is walking along the road by the shore, a bottle of wine in his hand. He stops in front of a white house whose elongated façade faces the water. Very carefully, he puts the bottle down in the middle of the road, steps across the ditch, and climbs the black metal railing.

The man weaves his way across the lawn, then stops and sways as he stares at the big windows, the reflections of the patio lights, the indistinct outline of the furniture inside.

He heads towards the house, waving at a large, porcelain garden gnome, and then stumbles out onto the wooden deck. He manages to hit one knee, but keeps his balance.

The water of the pool shines like a blue sheet of glass.

The man stands unsteadily on the edge, unzips his trousers and starts to urinate into the pool, then weaves his way over to the navy-blue garden furniture and proceeds to soak the cushions, chairs and round table.

Steam rises from his urine in the chill air.

He zips up his trousers and watches a white rabbit as it hops across the lawn and disappears under a bush.

Smiling, he walks back towards the house, leaning against the fence. He makes his way down to the lawn, then stops and turns around.

His befuddled brain tries to make sense of what he just saw.

A black-clad figure with a strange face was staring at him.

Either the person was standing inside the dark house, or was outside, watching him in the reflection.

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Summer

Drizzle is falling from the dark sky. The city lights glow high above the rooftops. There's no wind, and the illuminated drops form a misty dome that covers Djursholm.

Beside the still waters of Germaniaviken lies a sprawling villa.

Inside a young woman walks across the polished floor and Persian carpet as warily as an animal.

Her name is Sofia Stefansson.

Her anxiety makes her register tiny details about the room.

There's a black remote control on the arm of the sofa, its battery cover taped in place. There are water rings on the table. An old plaster is stuck to the long fringe of the carpet.

The floor creaks, as if someone is creeping through the rooms behind Sofia.

There are splashes of mud from the wet stone path on her high heels and toned calves. Her legs are still muscular even though she stopped playing football two years ago.

Sofia keeps the pepper spray in her hand hidden from the man waiting for her. She keeps telling herself that she has chosen this situation. She's in control and she wants to be here.

The man is standing by an armchair, watching her move with unabashed frankness.

Sofia's features are symmetrical, but she has a youthful plumpness in her cheeks. She is wearing a blue dress that shows off her bare shoulders. A row of small, fabric-covered buttons stretches from her neck down between her breasts. The little gold heart on her necklace bobs up and down at the base of her throat in time with her increased heart-rate.

She could say she's not feeling well, that she needs to go home. It would probably annoy him, but he'd accept it.

The man is looking at her with a hunger that makes her stomach flutter with fear.

She is seized by the feeling that she has met him before – could he have been a senior manager somewhere she worked, the father of a classmate a long time ago?

Sofia stops a short distance away from him, smiles, and feels the rapid beat of her heart. She's planning to keep her distance until she's figured out his tone and gestures.

His hands don't look like they belong to a violent man: his nails are neatly trimmed and his plain wedding ring is scratched from years of marriage.

'Nice house,' she says, tucking a stray lock of hair away from her face.

'Thanks,' he replies.

He can't be much more than fifty, but he still moves ponderously, like an old man in his old home.

'You took a taxi here?' he asks, and swallows hard.

'Yes,' she replies.

They fall silent again. The clock in the next room strikes twice with a brittle clang.

Some saffron-coloured pollen falls silently from a lily in a vase.

Sofia realised at an early age that she found sexually charged situations exciting. She enjoyed being appreciated, the sense of being chosen.

'Have we met before?' she asks.

'I wouldn't have forgotten something like that,' he replies.

The man's grey-blond hair is thin, combed back over his head. His slack face is shiny, and his brow is deeply furrowed.

'Do you collect art?' she asks, nodding towards the wall.

‘I’m interested in art,’ he says.

His pale eyes look at her through horn-rimmed glasses. She turns away and slides the pepper spray into her bag, then walks over to a large painting in a gilded frame.

He follows her and stands slightly too close, breathing through his nose. Sofia startles when he raises his right hand to point.

‘Nineteenth century . . . Carl Gustaf Hellqvist,’ he lectures. ‘He died young. He had a troubled life, full of pain. He got electric shock therapy, but he was a wonderful artist.’

‘Fascinating,’ she replies quietly.

‘I think so,’ the man says, then walks towards the dining room.

Sofia follows him even though she feels like she is being lured into a trap. It’s as if the way out is closing behind her with sluggish slowness, cutting off her escape route little by little.

The huge room is furnished with upholstered chairs and highly polished cupboards. There are rows of leaded windows looking out across the water.

She sees two glasses of red wine on the edge of the oval dining table.

‘Can I offer you a glass of wine?’ he asks, turning back towards her.

‘I’d prefer white, if you have any,’ she replies, worried that he might try to drug her.

‘Champagne?’ he says, without taking his eyes off her.

‘That would be lovely,’ she replies.

‘Then we shall have champagne,’ he declares.

When you visit the home of a complete stranger every room could be a trap, every object a weapon.

Sofia prefers hotels, because at least there’s a chance that someone would hear her if she had to call for help.

She’s following him towards the kitchen when she hears a peculiar, high-pitched sound. She can’t figure out where it’s coming from. The man doesn’t seem to have noticed it, but she stops, and turns to look at the dark windows. She’s about to say something when there’s a very distinct sound, like an ice-cube cracking in a glass.

‘Are you sure there’s no one else here?’ she asks.

She could slip her shoes off and run towards the front door

if anything happened. She's more agile than him, and if she were to run, leaving her coat hanging where it is, she'd be able to get out.

She stands in the kitchen door as he takes a bottle of Bollinger from a wine fridge. He opens it and fills two slender glasses, waits for the bubbles to settle and then tops them up before walking over to her.