

AQUAVIT

Book 1 in the Aquamarine Sea Series

Karen Stensgaard

~ AQUAVIT ~

A Scandinavian liquor dating from the 15th century, and in Latin *aqua vitae* means the water of life.

Aquamarine, a pale bluish gemstone, is believed to protect travelers at sea, ward off laziness, and bestow energy.

~ INSPIRATION ~

“I always have a comfortable feeling that nothing is impossible if one applies a certain amount of energy in the right direction. When I want things done, which is always at the last moment, and I am met with such an answer: ‘It’s too late. I hardly think it can be done;’ I simply say: ‘Nonsense! If you want to do it, you can do it. The question is, do you want to do it?’”

From Elizabeth Jane Cochrane’s memoir, *Nellie Bly’s Book: Around the World in Seventy-Two Days*, published in 1890. Ms. Cochrane was one of the first American women investigative journalists. Despite some competition, she unexpectedly won and beat Phileas Fogg’s fictitious 80-day journey in the novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and met the novelist, Jules Verne.

The first three chapters ...

Chapter 1 ~ Willfully Blind

Friday nights weren't normally like this, but in a few hours, it should all be over, and I could finally plan my escape from New York City. I took another big sip of my pink pomegranate margarita to let the coldness give me a slight brain freeze matching what I felt all over. Charles, a ruggedly handsome guy, sat across from me behind a glass of whiskey. My first real date in what seemed like forever, and he wouldn't notice.

He droned on about what an expert he was in investment banking with his predatory Wall Street company. Not only was Charles lucky and smart, he apparently ran a close second to Gotham's own Batman. But I only wanted an ordinary guy, not a superhero.

Charles said, "My division grew exponentially this year. The fees we've negotiated are unheard of in the industry." He was proud and puffed up like a balloon for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

I couldn't resist a quick jab to bring him back to earth. "Yeah, well, someone must pay those exorbitant fees, and it trickles down from the company to the shareholders and anyone who buys the stock - even one share."

"It's the capitalist way, Kathryn." His greenish eyes narrowed while he pushed his rebellious brown hair back with his hand intent on convincing me.

I stared back wondering why his personality took such a drastic turn for the worse. He was charming, even alluring, during the first twenty minutes. Somehow that guy disappeared, and now I faced the typical, condescending executive I often audited.

"I fully support the capitalist system, but I don't like ripping people off Charlie."

I intentionally didn't use the overly formal 'Charles' and reminded him again. "It's Kat, not Kathryn."

I knew Wall Street, and the games he and his buddies liked to play. Always chasing revenue to feed their egos and massive bonus pools, and it was never enough.

In what felt like eons ago, I'd suggested meeting here at my favorite neighborhood place, Rosalee's Mexicana. The upscale restaurant was festive and warm and reminded me of my hometown, San Antonio, Texas. If I hadn't promised to meet him, and my dating prospects nonexistent, I would have left by now. But I was fascinated and eager to see what would happen next, and that stubborn part of me that didn't sensibly quit when the going got tough made me stay. Besides, I couldn't bear another lonely takeout dinner and boring TV.

Our mutual girlfriend Susan had raved about Charlie, so maybe we got started wrong. Susan had insisted, "Kat, he is the only guy out there who meets all your criteria - unattached, employed, mid-forties to fifties, lives in Manhattan, and no kids."

Tomorrow I must adjust my criteria and add two new ones, kind and modest, or put out a permanently unavailable sign and avoid the whole issue. I found the perfect guy once and married him. I knew the odds. This wouldn't happen twice.

Months ago, we'd set this up but rescheduled twice. I canceled last month when I lost Xena, my best friend and four-legged furry soulmate. I was her human more than she was my cat, and the ache would never leave.

Behind Charlie, a woman leaned against the bar and watched me. She was cozied up between two young hunks, but I didn't recognize her. I dabbed my mouth and chin with my napkin in case

I'd dribbled red pomegranate juice. But she still looked at me and gestured in our direction.

Charlie was busy boasting about his famous neighbors in his building on Central Park West, adding details about a famous musician, and name-dropping other wealthy one-percenters. Ironic, after he bragged about how rich he was, we were still here in the downstairs bar instead of getting a table in the restaurant upstairs. But I was glad we hadn't since that would drag things out, and I preferred the casual bar.

"Are those friends of yours?" I asked, pointing behind him to our trio of gawkers. I pushed my hair back and wished I brought along a hair clip to keep it off my shoulders.

"Yeah, they're part of my old due diligence team. Checking up on me, I guess. I don't do blind dates." He waved for them to come over.

"Neither do I." And, I swore under my breath, "My first and last."

Due diligence teams did in-depth research for senior bankers like Charlie. I shifted in my seat uncomfortably. Did they investigate me for the hell of it to impress their boss? I took another sip of my drink but told myself not to worry since I had nothing to hide.

I glanced down at my newly manicured nails and admired my handiwork, even though I was out of practice. My blonde hair, transitioning towards brown, was trimmed and highlighted last Saturday. I even dressed up my usual jeans with a new silk top. But the extra effort to spiff up wasn't necessary with the way things were going.

To get through this date, I needed something stronger than a fruity margarita. I ignored the overhyped mezcal tequila with the requisite dead worm, a fate I wanted to avoid. But I couldn't pass up a tequila at Rosalee's with the most extensive list I'd seen this far north of Mexico.

The waiter came by, and Charlie ordered some appetizers without asking me what I wanted. I hoped he was being courteous, not egocentric, and didn't object since I liked everything on the menu.

Before the waiter left, I ordered a tequila and practiced my nearly nonexistent Spanish. "*Uno Patrón reposado por favor.*" This brand from the patron saint brand of tequilas was my favorite, and reposado tequilas were aged with a smoky taste.

"Make that two tequilas, please," Charlie added glaring at me.

Charlie swiveled around to greet his three young friends and introduced me. They lingered to chat and hovered around as if he smelled irresistible. It must be the nasty smell of money. Based on where Charlie lived and his job, he probably earned more than many third-world countries ever would.

While they discussed clients and what might be confidential deals that I shouldn't hear about, I scanned the immediate area. The jam-packed bar was noisy with pulsating music muffled by the spirited and lively crowd before the theater rush. I envied that sense of anticipation for a weekend. I hadn't looked forward to anything for nearly two years. Back before my husband received his death sentence.

The waiter returned with our tequilas and a cart to custom-blend our guacamole, so his friends drifted off. The waiter asked for our spice preference and how hot he should make it.

I couldn't help responding first. "Bring it on. Extra jalapeños, por favor."

After our waiter had made the guacamole and left, I apologized to Charlie. "I grew up on Mexican food. I hope you're okay with spice."

Charlie nodded. We sipped our tequilas, and I savored the sweet hint of smoky citrus and vanilla. Just what I needed, and the cold, soft burn tickled my throat.

We started in on the chips and spicy guacamole, fiery even for me. Charlie probably didn't like it since he stopped eating after a brief taste.

“So, Kathryn, I mean Kat, do you have any questions?”

I laughed being reminded of a job interview when managers go on and on, and at the end, remember they should have let the applicant speak. Dates were so much like job interviews. Everyone tried to present their best side.

“Have you ever been to Richmond?” I wanted to steer the conversation to a neutral topic and away from work and New York City real estate.

But I was distracted and busy with an important job to do. Since Charlie stopped eating, I was responsible for finishing off the guacamole waiting in a large stone molcajete bowl. Not even a teaspoon would be left behind.

“Richmond, Virginia?” After a pause, he said, “No, why?”

“Isn’t your last name Richmond?” He must be curious about a city not far away that shared his last name. Didn’t he have a sense of adventure?

“No, I’ve never been to Richmond. No reason to so why would I? I spend my time off at my beach house in the Hamptons. And I’m in London at least once a month for business. Thinking about buying a flat there, but their prices make New York look cheap.”

Boring but at least Charlie wasn’t talking about work.

Our waiter checked in, and I ordered a second margarita while Charlie demanded another Jack Daniel’s whiskey. Didn’t he know this was a Mexican joint? I shrugged but was beyond caring. He could eat or drink whatever he wanted.

Our mahi-mahi fish tacos and carnitas pork quesadillas arrived with more drinks. When we finished eating, I would say a polite goodbye and leave. I savored the gourmet dishes and picked out hints of cilantro and tried to do the impossible: distinguish the flavors of habaneros peppers from poblanos.

I didn’t have any more questions for him since I was busy eating, but he broke the silence. “It’s a shame your consulting biz is closing down.”

I was so surprised I nearly choked and swigged down tap water to regain my focus.

He needed no urging and continued. “All that fame with the FBI, being in the New York Times, meeting the mayor, and then -”

“How did you know that?” I cut him off and put my water glass down shakily. We only told our existing clients and close friends last week that my business was closing.

“Well, it was broadly known. In the paper and all that.”

“No, I mean about closing.” My consulting business was the realization of a dream come true. I’d earned it and paid the price fighting dangerous money launderers and clients of my former employer. My fifteen minutes of unwanted fame.

“I’m in the business to know who I associate with.”

“But this is not business-related, so that’s not an acceptable answer.” I wanted to reach over and pull the information out of him. But he was a professional negotiator and used to getting his way.

“Now Kat, I never reveal my sources. Besides, firms don’t want someone like you poking around and looking at their business and clients. They pay you and all the other auditors to look the other way.”

“It’s not my fault everyone has something to hide, and no one wants to do the right thing. That’s the whole problem.”

Waves of frustration reverberated across my tequila-soaked brain. Internal auditors fought a losing battle trying to do what’s right and not only find but fix the problems. We were never liked, respected, or well paid.

I shifted uncomfortably on my barstool and leaned on our small table to find an escape route.

Being trained to evaluate business disaster plans, I should have already done this. But the bathrooms were upstairs with no exit, and Charlie faced the front door. I reminded myself not to worry since I can leave at any time. But I'd stay to the bitter end and set him straight.

"Perhaps. But I'm sure your last employer, the global bank, was thrilled when you gave your notice."

At that bank, with help from a few brave colleagues, we identified an active drug-dealing account. Untold millions flowed through it unhampered since the founding of the bank in the 1860s. The resulting scandal reverberated throughout the industry and temporarily brought the bank to its knees. Charlie was right. The bank was probably thrilled, but I didn't need reminding.

Charlie focused on drinking more of his whiskey. When he looked at me again, his eyes changed color to a darker green. His gaze was so direct as if he was trying to bore a hole into me. "Internal auditors don't create or provide anything of value. The only reason your kind exists is to keep the regulators off our back."

"That's your uneducated opinion." He knew nothing about what an internal auditor did or why they were important, and how every company could benefit from an in-house evaluation. But I wasn't going to bother educating him.

He looked at me as if still trying to read my thoughts, but his eyes were less focused. All those whiskeys must be taking a toll. I glanced at our half-eaten dishes to avoid his scrutiny and felt the warmth from the tequila coursing through my veins.

"Filing Chapter 7 bankruptcy must not be much fun. But you'll get through it. Haven't been there myself, but my clients do it all the time." He patted my hand sympathetically.

I pulled my hand back as if bitten. "What? My firm isn't bankrupt. I'm shutting down because I've had enough. I'm planning to do something else."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, really. Your sources are wrong. Dead wrong." I motioned to his colleagues, the three stooges and likely the guilty party, still hanging out at the bar. "All expenses were and will be paid in full. We aren't walking away from anything."

Every expense, that is, but my salary. Despite some success, I wasn't good at promoting, selling or pricing our work high enough. If I didn't shut down the business my nest egg and retirement savings, which kept the firm afloat, would disappear.

"Yeah, and whoever your sources are, they need to do better homework because that offends me."

Charlie resumed eating as if nothing happened. These mistakes probably occur all the time. He gets his facts wrong and brushes it off. The more I considered his spiteful, condescending, and inaccurate comments, the angrier I got. The scrumptious Mexican treats served on colorful plates now resembled pulpy, brown masses.

"If you, or any of your sources, spread this lie around, I will consult with an attorney."

"Now, Kat, no need to get all bent out of shape. My apologies. I will talk to my team."

I sighed with relief. Charlie took a big bite of a fish taco, and the juice and salsa slid out and stuck to the corner of his mouth. I wanted to shift the conversation to anything else, even back to hearing about his incredible success and wealth. He stared at me and might have sensed I was suffering because I'd stopped eating.

"Well, think of it this way. Now you can do something more productive and valuable. Adopt orphans from Africa. Do some charity work. Scale a mountain. Cure a disease."

I was shocked, but before I could reply, he added, "Of course, that takes money and lots of it. My ex went through it faster than I could make it. My advice to you: find a rich guy."

He slurred his words this time, and when he mentioned his ex-wife, heat radiated from his hatred. I couldn't endure this date anymore. I was a career woman, and to him, my entire life's work was a waste of time. Maybe I hadn't stopped world hunger, but I'd tried to make a difference. And the idea of needing a sugar daddy sickened me.

Now that I was soon unemployed, and nothing was holding me back, I was going to do something unique. A once in a lifetime bucket list worthy trip that would get me back on track. An adventure to be proud of and astonish and surprise my friends. I'd already imagined returning full of optimism, recharged, and happy again. I just hadn't figured out exactly what I'd do or where to go, but I would this weekend.

Charlie sat back and sipped his drink grumbling incoherently about women. I picked up my water glass, now just half full, and tossed the contents at Charlie. The water might eliminate his evil smirk, wake him up to the 21st century, and how he should treat women.

The water hit his chin and neck and then dribbled down. Charlie stood stumbling back in surprise, but when he realized it was only water, he sat down again.

I was still seething, but a smile crossed my face, pleased for once I fought back. I fumbled around in my purse for my wallet and tossed some twenties on the table. "Here's my portion," while I slid off my barstool.

He dabbed the water off his face with a napkin and grinned. I did him a favor since the water removed the taco sauce, but his eyes looked bloodshot. He must be drunk to act like such a moron.

"I'm sorry, Kathryn. I was rude and deserved that. Please stay."

"Nope. This isn't working out." I gave Charlie plenty of chances to redeem himself, and I didn't see the point of staying for more verbal abuse.

Before I could stand, Charlie clamped his hand down on my wrist and held it firm against the tabletop. His soft, cold hand made me recoil. I tried pulling my hand away, but he pressed down harder. For a split-second, I visualized the terrible image of a trapped fox chewing his leg off to escape.

I couldn't believe this was happening, but I didn't want to scream or cause an embarrassing scene. "Let me go! Now," I demanded in the most forceful but calm voice I could muster.

Charlie shook his head and mumbled something about calming down. I stood, but it was awkward. I leaned towards him with my right-hand stuck under his on the table. My left hand covered the gap in my low-cut blouse. I wasn't about to let him see any more of my skin than necessary. But that was a minor problem. How could I get away?

I noticed the silverware next to my plate, grabbed my dinner knife, and waved it above Charlie's hand to threaten him. At the flash of silver, he jerked his hand away.

"Crazy bitch!"

Chapter 2 ~ Crossing the Line

I grabbed my belongings and dodged people pushing my way out the front door. Adrenaline-fueled, I wanted to run but forced myself to walk not stopping to pull on my blazer. The calm, crisp October night air cooled me down from the fight. I hurried north on Columbus Avenue passing slow-moving pedestrians and the well-lit Lincoln Center Plaza with its centerpiece fountain.

"Relax," I chanted. You're safe and free again. My mood swiftly changed from fear to being exhilarated and on top of the world. As if I'd escaped some near disaster and emerged magically alive. The feeling I experienced on my last day at a miserable job. My last one, at the bank Charlie

so kindly reminded me of, only lasted six months. After two short years with my own consulting business and a taste of real freedom when I could call the shots, it was all coming to an end on Monday.

Maybe I should do something more meaningful like Charlie said. Whatever it was it would be my decision, and a challenge while I was young and healthy enough to do it. My own personal Mount Everest that doesn't involve hiking.

"But what?" I tried again to imagine something.

At the busy intersection of 65th Street, the traffic forced me to wait before jaywalking ahead. I was several blocks away from the restaurant but looked back, worried Charlie might be following me.

I reassured myself that was nonsense. I'll probably never see him again, and if I did, we could ignore each other. I mumbled, "I showed him."

I would never have stabbed him or anyone for that matter. The knife was only a threat. No one will take advantage of me, but then again, no one will want to go on a date with me either. I'll just have to get used to being alone while I bit my lower lip not savoring the idea.

The sound of squealing brakes and an angry car's blaring horn came from out of nowhere. I froze and saw the blur of a yellow taxicab. The cabbie yelled out the window, "Damn fool. Watch out," and shook his fist at me.

I stepped back on the curb and bumped into some people standing behind me. "Sorry. Excuse me."

Focused on what to do in the future, I'd blindly followed other pedestrians across a vast stretch of Broadway against the light without checking for traffic. I didn't look at the others standing around me, not knowing what to say or how to explain that I'm not normally this careless or suicidal.

While I waited on the curb, people around me made a few gasps and murmurings. "That was a close call. Holy crap. Geez." And worst of all, "Glad I didn't see that."

I let the crowd pass by when the walk sign flashed and waited for the next one. What a perfect end to an awful week. But when you're dead nothing matters, and I wasn't ready. A month ago, I'd say sure but not now. I had forward momentum and a trip to plan. I'll find my mojo out there somewhere and drag it back for a much happier life.

I trudged the last few blocks to my apartment. I missed my husband, Axel, but I had lots of friends. Except for tonight's failed attempt, I hadn't dated. Not even a one-night stand. But I didn't want another husband. A fun-loving guy to date once a week would be perfect. After my trip, maybe I'll try again.

I unlocked the door to my empty apartment wishing Xena, my little tabby cat, was there to greet me. She was a real New Yorker, abandoned and rescued from the Bronx. More of a seven-pound dog wearing a cat suit. Somehow, Xena always knew when I was coming home and waited at the door for me.

Losing her this past month after ten years of spending every night nestled together added more unbearable heartbreak. My chest tightened up again as if I wouldn't be able to breathe, and I tried to think about something else.

As I glanced around my apartment, I realized nothing but memories of what I'd lost kept me here. I didn't want to forget but needed some distance to heal. Inside the hall closet, I pulled out one of Axel's favorite hoodies and wrapped myself in it inhaling his faint smell.

"You're safe now," I said to my empty apartment while I wrapped my arms around myself in a straight-jacket hug. I wasn't crazy, but I missed Axel, and not just tonight, all the time.

I picked up Axel's coffee can with its label hidden by photos and reminders from our trips around the world. His final wish was to have his ashes recycled and stored temporarily in an old coffee can.

We bought gourmet coffee in bags, so I'd argued, "At least make it a better class of coffee."

I ordered a fancy can of Café Du Monde chicory coffee from New Orleans. But at that point, he was too sick to drink it.

I flicked on the radio to drown out the sound of emptiness. The song *Beyond the Sea* surrounded me, and I reminisced about some of our trips, the easier ones, where we threw our stuff in a cabin, free to explore the ship and ports of call. One photo was from a cruise through the Norwegian fjords, and in late May, we had a snowball fight in the mountains.

"We had some good times, didn't we Axel? I miss our trips. Soon we'll go traveling, and I'll take you home to Denmark."

I needed to get out, take a chance, and make new memories instead of replaying the old ones. A hoodie, scarf and a few other things were all I had left. My assistant Mel insisted on a serious house cleaning six-months ago, so almost all his personal belongings were donated to Goodwill.

And now after a year, I should scatter his ashes. I'll start in Denmark, Axel's birthplace, and have a ceremony with his brother. And then scatter him in some other places. I couldn't go anywhere before when I was running my business or leave Xena when she got sick.

"Axel, I'm afraid I need another drink. It was a rough week. Any suggestions?" I didn't want to mention the details about my first and last blind date.

I didn't hear him or feel any communications coming through and didn't believe in it. Axel was an atheist and believed in caring for animals and the environment. After all that I'd been through, I wasn't sure if a God existed. Now I was unofficially agnostic and hedging my bets since no one made me chose.

The Beatles' *Eleanor Rigby* song started playing on the radio. "Axel, I don't want to end up like her. Why did you have to go and die?"

But whining was a waste of time, and I forced myself to do something productive. I confirmed in about a second that the fridge was still nearly empty. Our eclectic liquor collection was long gone. Turned into all sorts of strange concoctions when friends came by before and after he died.

We used to have Scandinavian aquavit, known as the 'water of life' in Latin, in the freezer. With the high alcohol content, it never froze. Digging past bags of frozen veggies, I found two bottles, one Danish and another Norwegian, wedged in the back. After I had placed them on the kitchen counter, a thrill went down my spine. I rubbed my hands together to warm them, while not losing eye contact with my friendly elixirs, eager for the tasting to begin.

The bottles were frosty, but like most Scandinavians, they were used to the cold. I plunked my favorite shot glass from Sweden on the counter and poured my first shot, a small one, unsure how it would mix with tequila.

I started with the Danish aquavit in honor of Axel. While I poured, I recalled the Danish warning that one drink, or shot, went to one leg. To avoid being off balance, you must have a second drink for your other leg. But I was already tipsy, so one tiny shot from each would have to suffice.

The liquor's smooth herbal flavor wafted up, and I inhaled deeply. The label said it was seasoned with coriander, cilantro, and dill.

I confirmed to whoever might be listening. "Not bad. The dill is light and not noticeable. After all, we aren't making dill pickles." I giggled at the idea.

I stared at the Norwegian bottle with an unusual story behind it. Barrels of this aquavit crossed the equator in ships known in sailor speak as 'crossing the line' not once, but twice, before bottling.

I knew all this, but I picked up the semi-defrosted bottle to read more. The tradition started by accident. Barrels of the aquavit were shipped to Asia but didn't sell. After returning to Norway, the liquor had acquired a unique flavor from being jostled on the ship while crossing two equators.

I admired the beautiful drawing of a sailing ship on the label and wished I was on board. The label said you could track your bottle's sea journey with the date on the back. The song playing on the radio was appropriate, the Beach Boys' *Sail on Sailor*. I didn't know all the words but sang the chorus out loud while I googled the company's website on my phone. Find your Bottle popped up with instructions, so I plugged in the date my newfound friend began his journey.

"All right buddy, let's see where in the world you went. Perhaps, somewhere I haven't been." I stopped to sing the song's refrain wishing he could sing along too.

While waiting for the details, I threw back a small, second shot to stay balanced. The Norwegian aquavit tasted smoother than the Danish version. Must be the hell it went through to get here.

When the journey flashed up on my screen, I clicked from port to port as the ship's route went around the globe: Oslo, Brooklyn, Sydney, Hong Kong, Yokohama, Cartagena and back to Oslo. I was impressed with my little friend, a world traveler. Was it twice or three times it crossed the line? Trying to follow the ship on the company's website made me dizzy.

"Your adventure sounds like fun," I said to the well-travelled bottle. "I've been to all those places, but I've never crossed the equator on a ship, only on planes. Might be worth doing on a beautiful sailing ship like yours."

I rubbed the label trying to feel the ship's billowing sails and the force of the wind. The bottle stared at me as if it was waiting for more conversation. Were all those people who talked to bartenders talking to bottles instead?

I'd swear someone said, "You go girl." Or something to that effect, but I wasn't sure since the bottle probably spoke Norwegian.

When I was having a conversation with a bottle, even if he was a gentleman, I'd better call it a night. I was a one, or maybe two, drink social drinker, and tonight I'd passed my max. I kicked off my boots and stumbled into bed not bothering to change. My bedroom rocked as if I was at sea while I drifted off.

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The phone rang, and I fumbled around on my nightstand and grabbed the phone, but it slipped, missed the area rug, and banged against the wooden floor. Not giving up, I retrieved it from the floor and croaked out a hello.

"Kat, are you okay?" I recognized Melanie's familiar voice. She was my soon to be former assistant since our last work day together was on Monday.

"What's up, Mel?" My voice slurred while I wondered where I was in the darkness. The room swayed as if I was in the cargo hold with the aquavit. Wishful thinking, when I recognized it was my bedroom.

"Sorry to call so late, but I've been texting and emailing you for hours. You haven't responded."

I swallowed hard and scanned my brain for what to say. "I'm fine but worn out. Can't this wait?"

"I guess so."

That was all the assurance I needed. As I hung up, Mel said, "But I should warn you -"

I was too tired to listen. Mel was a night owl and meant well, but it was probably some gossip that could wait. I tried to put the phone back in its cradle, but it fell to the floor. This time, I left it there.

My throat ached dehydrated from my alcohol binge. I dragged myself to the bathroom for a drink of water, and on the way, I discarded my clothes from last night. The liquid was refreshing and a

real aquavit. New York City's tap water was one of the world's best.

Refreshed, I flicked on the bathroom light and groaned at what was reflected in the mirror. My face was smeared from carefully designed, heavier than usual, glam eye makeup for my date last night with Mr. Rich & Attractive. Unfortunately, he was Mr. Rude & Arrogant. I looked awful, like a zombie with dark, sunken eyes.

My blondish, shoulder-length hair always had a life of its own during the night and flared out from my scalp in all directions. My stomach was queasy, but I didn't feel that rush of water like I'd throw up. Maybe I'll be lucky for once. I hadn't over indulged for so long, not since Axel's death. Splashing my face with water, I washed off the worst of it, threw on a nightgown, and crawled back under the covers eager to re-board my dream ship and delay the start of another weekend.

Chapter 3 ~ Going Viral

"I'm coming," I yelled to the incessant knocking and doorbell ringing while swinging my feet around to the cold floor.

"Who in the hell could be here this early on a Saturday?" I grumbled and glanced over at my clock radio. Shocked, it was already after 11 a.m., so I should get going.

I pulled on my robe while I stumbled across the living room to the front door. Peering through the peephole, Melanie, my faithful assistant, and partner-in-crime waited. Everyone called her Mel, and even though she was technically my employee, we worked as a team, and I respected her judgment completely.

Our friends teased us about running 'the Kat and Mel show' since we complemented each other so well. The past two years in consulting and beforehand at the bank were entertaining. Sometimes too much so. Now she could tell me whatever it was she called me about last night. I was surprised to see her since she lived in Brooklyn, and we shared a passion for sleeping late.

Her eyes were intense, and she wasn't smiling. My heart pounded so loud I was sure she could hear it.

"Mel, what's wrong?" Something awful must have happened for her to be here.

"I was in the area and wanted to see how you're doing. You weren't answering your cell or home phone."

"Nothing's wrong?" Relief flooded over me. But then why was she here? "I'm fine just didn't hear the phone. It fell on the floor after you called, and my cell is turned off. Just sleeping late. Come on in."

I stepped back to let her in. She was my height, but there the similarities ended. Her skin was pale, and she had red hair and carried about an extra hundred pounds. But if her weight bothered her, she never mentioned it, and I didn't either.

She carried a grocery bag from Whole Foods, and I followed her into the kitchen.

I decided to confess about last night even though she would say I told you so. "I survived my first and last blind date last night. The guy was a complete jerk and drank so much he was wasted. I should have trusted my instincts and listened to you. I can't believe Susan insisted we'd be perfect together."

"Yeah, well, I can see you didn't exactly hit it off."

"Who told you that?" Did Charlie or his friends already tell someone she knew?

But Mel didn't answer. She picked up the strange aquavit bottles still on the kitchen counter one by one to read the labels. "Party last night?"

“Yeah, but just me. The date was so devastating. Axel must have sent me a subliminal sympathy message since I didn’t remember these bottles were in the freezer.”

Sitting on a barstool at the kitchen counter, I tried to smooth down my wild hair. At least, I’d washed off most of the heavy makeup. Too bad I couldn’t save that scary look for Monday night’s Halloween party and my annual witch transformation.

“Mighty fine of him.” She grimaced at the coffee can covered with his photos. She was tired of hearing about him, especially when I said how great he was or talked about him as if he was still alive. She’d never liked him much.

Mel looked at the bottles. “Aqua vitae. That’s Latin for water of life. Does it work? Bring you back to life so to speak?”

“Yeah, well it did for me.” I picked up the Norwegian bottle of aquavit with the ship logo holding it up to show her. “And isn’t this the most spectacular, beautiful ship you’ve ever seen? The bed rocked, so I dreamed I was on board a ship like this last night.”

She glanced at the bottle again while she shook her head tired of my vivid imagination. With that reaction, I changed my mind about offering her a drink. No need to waste any of my valuable life-water on her. Besides, it was too early, and the bottles weren’t frozen anymore.

“You may wish you were,” she said in her serious, business-like voice. “Here, you have to see this.” She handed me her smartphone with a video playing.

Mel wasn’t the type to share stupid animal videos. Could it be a friend of ours in trouble? The video showed a blonde woman in a turquoise shirt trying to stand up, and then a glint of silver in her hand.

“But that’s me from last night. What in the hell happened? How did it end up online?” I hadn’t said anything when this happened and let the knife do all the talking.

She reached out to take her phone back, but I shook my head holding it out of reach. “Wait. I must see this again. I still can’t believe it.”

The clip started right after Charlie sat down after I splashed him with water. My actions must have captured his friends’ attention, and they videotaped what happened next. I was trying to leave and stand and looked crazed, waving a knife around. The video didn’t show how Charlie held my hand down on the table against my will.

Being well acquainted with my kitchen, Mel took out coffee and a filter and started a pot, while I watched the video over and over mesmerized. You could only see Charlie’s back, not his face, and the video zoomed in on me.

“It’s on Facebook, and you were tagged by a mutual friend of Krista O’Neil’s with the comment ‘Blind Date Gone Bad.’ Saw it last night. That’s why I called.”

I slumped down on my barstool. Mel sat on the other stool and patted my shoulder.

“And this morning, it went viral on Twitter, YouTube, and some blogs. A slew of discussions too,” Mel added calmly, which I found odd under the circumstances since I wanted to yell and fight back or punch something.

Mel grabbed her phone back and brought up one of the other websites to show me. Some comments were positive, how I was protecting myself, but others said I looked like a deranged, serial killer, and should be locked up for psych treatment.

She poured me a cup of coffee and added a splash of skim milk. After years of working so closely together, she knew me better than anyone. I inhaled the comforting pumpkin spice wafting up from my cup and took a sip.

Mel sighed in frustration. “Totally sucks how with all the shit going on that women treat other women, part of their tribe, like this. Especially in this fricking testosterone fueled city.”

“But why would she do this to me?” This wasn’t funny and to be reminded and have the whole world see it. “How could anyone be so spiteful?”

“Yeah, Kat, I googled her. This Krista bitch works at that vile investment bank Levittman. Do you know her? It’s a quirky, twisted video, so people are naturally eating it up. It’s striking a nerve with both men and women. She probably didn’t realize how many views it would get.”

“Krista must be the woman I met at the bar last night along with a couple of others. They work for Charlie. Part of his due diligence team, but they acted like a groupie entourage.”

I explained to Mel what happened and why I was forced to pick up the knife as a threat. She nodded as if it was all normal and reasonable.

Mel looked in the nearly empty fridge. “I don’t see how you live like this Kat.”

“I don’t like cooking and just buy what I need.”

She emptied her grocery bag - a carton of eggs, veggie sausages, and a bagel and started to make breakfast.

I zoned out still in a daze that this happened while I was sleeping or drinking. The two stoic liquid culprits, whom I mistook for friends last night, were guilty. But I quickly forgave them and picked up the bottle of Norwegian aquavit and displayed it to Mel to stop thinking about the damn video.

“Did you know the contents of this bottle were in a cask on a ship from Oslo, went practically all over the world, past two equators, before being bottled and sold to end up here?”

She shook her head and grabbed the bottle from me as if I was going to have another drink.

“Oh, Mel, don’t worry. I had enough last night.” I laughed. “But at least something good came from last night. I’ve finally decided. I’m going to do what the aquavit did. Go on a cruise on an old sailing ship. Take a few months off and find a job next year. Starting my search now is a total waste of time.”

“Great. I keep telling you to take some time off and go somewhere. You need a break from all this bullshit. But first, we need to respond to this. Human Resource staff and headhunters look at digital media and web stuff before hiring anyone, particularly someone senior like you.”

I knew that all too well. People lose not only jobs but entire careers over bad internet publicity, and I was at the managing director level in financial services, a publicity-shy line of work.

“Was Charles or Charlie Richmond tagged too?”

“Nope, I googled him too. He doesn’t have a Facebook or other online accounts. Not any I could find.”

“Smart. Charlie’s firm probably tells him not to. Should I shut mine down?”

“You could, and I’ll un-tag you on Facebook, but the video will still be out there for the world to see. I think it’s better to fight back. Tell the world what happened after brunch.”

Mel made herself at home and fried the sausages and seasoned and blended up the eggs in a bowl. The smell of a real breakfast cooking made my stomach growl, and I patted it to calm down. My overindulgence last night wasn’t making me feel sick, and I was eager for this special meal.

When the eggs were cooked to perfection, she filled our plates with the sausages, scrambled eggs, and a toasted dark pumpernickel bagel.

“Yum. You are such a good cook. Will you marry me?” I teased and after a few mouthfuls started to feel better.

Mel knew how to make scrumptious eggs – moist and sloppy. I didn’t like to bother with cooking especially not for one. And eggs weren’t easy to master. I savored my last delicious mouthful hating to finish so soon. The last time I’d had eggs this delicious was at the buffet on a Royal Caribbean ship. Another reason to plan a cruise.

We debated an appropriate on-line response. Mel insisted I identify him by name.

“He insulted our profession. And he has that ridiculous old-fashioned, macho Wall Street attitude about how women must fill their days with kids, nannies, and society parties.”

“Mel, I can’t write that. If I do, it will hurt my future career worse than the video. Besides, I don’t think he meant it all. He was pretty drunk.”

“But, Kat, you can’t let that bastard get away with this.”

I considered how best to explain to her all the inappropriate advances, rude comments, and jokes teetering on the obscene, that I’d experienced first-hand or heard from my friends. Leaning in might work in the cyber-space Silicon Valley bubble, but on Wall Street, it often ended by getting your head chopped off. Particularly the employees who occasionally wore skirts.

“Sometimes I’ve encouraged women to report these distasteful, but not illegal situations. They backfired and hurt the women more than the original incident. Things got worse, and I regretted getting involved.”

“But, Kat –”

“I know Mel. It sucks but trust me on this. If I do something publicly, the old geezers filling the boards of directors and audit committees may hear about it, or see it, if I put it out on the internet. They’ll never hire me.”

“One of these days, we should let them choke on their damn cigars and martinis.”

“Yeah, but not by me, or with Charlie and this video. That idiot woman Krista is responsible.”

We agreed on a polite but watered-down comment per Mel, and I posted it as my official response. I scrolled through the slew of Facebook likes on the video, which didn’t seem appropriate. Should you like a video of someone getting robbed? I copied the message on Facebook too, so at least my friends wouldn’t think I was dead or rotting in jail.

I had a slew of emails and texts, more than normal, and several from Charlie. I showed Mel one of his messages, pretty much all the same thing, briefly begging me to call him.

Mel glanced at it but got right to the point. “I trust you are going to delete his ass.”

“Sure am. Gone.” I hit the delete key. But secretly, I was glad he’d contacted me. Maybe he knew he was wrong and should apologize. There was even a tiny chance Charlie might behave better on his next date. Poor girl.

We scrolled through our devices laughing at some ridiculous posts related to the video. My Facebook page was more active with my West Coast pals viewing it. I added another post limited to my friends, “Still alive and fighting,” with a happy face icon.

Mel started cleaning up my kitchen.

“Leave it. You’ve done enough. Jen must be missing you.” I pulled her by the arm to the front door, so she’d go home and spend time with her girlfriend. “I’ll see you on Monday in less than 48 hours.”

We stood in the small entry way, but she refused to leave.

“Why don’t you come over tonight? I know you don’t like the trek to Brooklyn. Jen and I will make you a nice dinner. Get your mind off things.”

Things like men she meant. But I wasn’t wired like her, and I still hoped to find a decent guy to date. If I hung around her, I’d worry about Monday and get more depressed. I didn’t want her to feel guilty about the company closing. I was the one responsible for bringing in business.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m off to the Metropolitan Art Museum to unwind. A special exhibit on Turner and his seascapes ends tomorrow. Besides, I’ve made it through much worse. At least no one shot at me.”

She looked dubious but frowned remembering. “Yeah, at least you weren’t dodging bullets.”

After Mel had left, I climbed into my shower and let the steamy hot water pelt down jabbing my skin. I wished I could burn away the images from the video and date last night. The radio serenaded me with the upbeat Beatles' song *Here Comes the Sun*.

I poured some bath gel on my wooden brush and scrubbed my back hard to scrape off my stubborn grimy worries. A fusion of coconuts and sea salt filled the air. Letting me imagine a day at the beach without all the hassle of traveling. The next best thing to being there.

Are you interested in reading the rest of the novel? Thirty-nine more chapters are ready and waiting. AQUAVIT is available as a trade paperback or ebook from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other book retailers.

About the Author

Karen Stensgaard grew up in San Antonio, Texas and was a foreign exchange student for a year in Denmark when she tried aquavit for the first time. After completing her MBA in Texas, she moved to San Francisco and through a series of unexpected twists became an internal auditor focused on financial firms. Karen lived in New York City for many years. She now resides in Philadelphia with her husband and a cat. Aquavit is her debut novel with more stories about Kat's adventures underway.

To find out more about this book and others in the pipeline, visit karenstensgaard.com to sign up for updates or join her Facebook Novelist page. On Pinterest, she has created several boards related to the novel's characters and scenes.

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Published in the United States by Sandefur Metz Publishing Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
E-book ISBN: 978-0-9992197-1-3

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