

PROJECT ONION

Book 1 in the Melville Consulting Series

Karen Stensgaard

~ THE ONION ~

One of the world's most widely consumed vegetables can be deadly if eaten by cats, dogs, and many other animals.

Like onions, people are multi-layered. If someone says, "You know your onions," it means you know a lot. You're clever!

Onion in street slang means an ounce of a drug.
An onion of coke refers to an ounce of cocaine.

~ INSPIRATION ~

"Life is like an onion. You peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep."
Carl Sandburg, American Poet, 1878 - 1967

"People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."
Albert Einstein, German-American Physicist, 1879 - 1955

"We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men."
Herman Melville, American Novelist and Poet, 1819 – 1891

The first three chapters ...

Chapter 1 ~ Just Do It

"What's so special about Fridays, and why do they make you feel so great?" I stared at the hazelnut coffee in my mug for an answer. This existential question was too early for my half-asleep brain to crack, so I sipped more caffeine.

Today was just another workday, but it was loaded with so much anticipation, especially with a three-day weekend ahead. Tonight I had dinner plans at a fancy restaurant with my boyfriend and his work buddies. I couldn't bear to jinx things by overthinking it.

My unwanted blues and nervousness, shadowing me for months, had faded some. This first week back to the old work grind had gone surprisingly well, and the early morning rush wasn't so bad.

I lifted my mug and made a silly toast to my big brother Keith. He smiled back from an old photo. "You'd be so proud of your little sis. Vengeance shall be ours, eventually." If only I could

call to tell him my fantastic news.

My phone alarm sounded with John Lennon's optimistic song "Imagine," reminding me to leave. I gulped the rest of my coffee, cringing at the gritty aftertaste of coffee grounds from my sloppy preparation. After I rinsed out my mug, I drank some of New York City's tasty bargain-priced tap water.

Living alone inside my apartment, without even a pet, took getting used to. So sometimes, I chatted with Giuseppe, my gargoyle, perched on the kitchen shelf. "Keep an eye on the place while I'm gone, buddy. And scare off any evil spirits."

Giuseppe's stony eyes glared from a vigilant, crouched position with his mighty wings folded tightly against his chest. I sighed. Sure, I'd rather stay home, but someone had to get a job and pay the bills. Or both of us would lose our high-cost perch.

Once I moved past the first month with this new job, I will spend more time with my old friends. I even planned to get a real live roommate that purrs.

Running late, I hustled down four flights of stairs inside my apartment building. I pressed against the building's front door to exit when a woman said, "Kat, wait up!"

I froze, irritated at the delay, and whispered under my breath, "Hell's bells and buckets of blood." I picked up that odd tiresome slang from a witty sailor on my seven-month voyage, and it wouldn't leave my memory bank.

Turning around, I saw Abby, my neighbor down the hall, who used to be my closest friend. Usually, I was happy to see her, but not now. "Hey. Sorry, I'm in a hurry. New job and all."

She grinned. "Headed to the subway?"

"Yeah." I opened the door, prepared to say a quick goodbye outside.

Abby asked, "The one at 66th and Broadway?"

"Yep." Not being a morning person, I preferred to commute solo. Another less convenient subway line was next to the park on Central Park West. Except I would be late and ruin all my extra effort this week to make a winning first impression. We strolled toward Broadway.

Abby was one of those annoyingly cheerful and chatty morning types. "I'm riding that subway too. So I'll walk with you. What a beautiful Friday to go to New Jersey. I hope this weather holds for a while."

The warm rays from the sun improved my mood. For the beginning of November, this was one of those unusually exquisite fall days. We were lucky *Sunna*, the Nordic Goddess of the Sun, still lingered here.

"Why New Jersey?"

"Looking at an apartment. You get so much more for your money there."

"But Abby, you can't leave Manhattan." And me, I wanted to add.

"Never hurts to look. It's so much more affordable." Abby sounded stressed. "I hate to bring up terrible news. Did you hear about Nathan in 8B?"

"Nathan? Not sure I know him."

"You talked to him at the rooftop party before you left on your bucket-list cruise."

Interrupted by a roar above our heads, we looked up to observe a noisy jet flying east toward the Hudson River. The plane's destination was most likely Newark airport in New Jersey. Despite being more than eight thousand feet over Manhattan, planes still made me nervous. Even if they lost engine power at that altitude, commercial jets could glide for hundreds of miles.

Abby and I stopped briefly to watch the plane disappear from view. An invisible bond existed among New Yorkers who had experienced that fateful day almost twenty years ago.

Jackson Chow, my new boss who was a former CIA operative, shared some essential tips

during my impromptu training yesterday. His message was bleak. “Don’t count on Homeland Security or anyone else who investigates terrorists.” Overly cynical, but with his extensive industry contacts, he’d know.

I was tempted to share with Abby what Jackson told me. But this would only cause panic or invite unwanted questions about him and my job.

While we waited to cross busy Columbus Avenue, taxicabs, cars, and bikes flew by as if they were on an urgent mission to save the world. After a seven-month cruise from Copenhagen to Hong Kong and a trip to Texas and the West Coast, I was still adapting to my old life in nonstop Manhattan.

I refused to let irrational fear or worries consume me. Instead, I refocused on Abby and our mutual neighbor Nathan. “Now, I remember. The fortyish quiet guy who worked in publishing. What happened?”

“He died.”

“He did? How?”

“Heard he committed suicide.”

The word suicide hit home painfully. I stopped walking and touched Abby’s shoulder. “Oh, how terrible. Maybe it was an accident.”

“Well, if you call slitting your wrists and bleeding out in your bathtub an accident.”

“Such a shame.” My stomach ached at what must be a suicide.

“Tell me about it. Nathan lost his job about six months back. He told me he had to downsize and sell his apartment. Publishing sucks. No one reads anything longer than a 280-character tweet.”

“Yeah, I know. So sad.”

Abby began walking again, and I followed her down the stairs into the subway station. My new position was tenuous, with my paycheck based on customer demand and what they agreed to pay. Approaching fifty and the ugly midpoint in life had made it more challenging to land a new job this time around. All this trying to please had pushed my stress level out to some undiscovered planet.

Abby and I passed through the turnstiles to wait for the next downtown train.

She took out a tissue, dabbed her eyes, and blew her nose. “Nathan had some drug issues.”

“He did?” I felt a sharp stabbing wound deep in my chest. The inescapable dependence on deadly narcotics claimed another victim, ruined a life, and devastated a family. “I think I told you my brother died years ago. Not suicide but an accidental overdose. The pain never disappears.”

Abby wiped away a tear with the back of her hand.

I would never forget the exact date and time my dad told me my brother Keith was lost forever from an overdose. My biggest regret was that I should have done more to prevent it.

“Nathan’s problems might have been solvable.” These final acts of giving in and giving up ignited something inside of me. I wanted to slap Nathan and Keith to toughen them up and face whatever problems they had. Unfortunately, life wasn’t all smiles and way-to-go moments.

“Hey, I’m with you. It’s the damn drug dealers. I wish someone would lock them up forever.”

I nodded, thinking about how important my work was this week.

Abby stared at me. “Since you got home from your long voyage, you’ve been so different. All closed up and a loner. I miss the old Kat.”

I unbuttoned my jacket and peeked at my shirt. After a silly Kat Jensen physical inspection, I tried to prove I was still the same. “Yep, she’s still all here.”

I forced a laugh, but Abby didn’t smile. “Sorry, Abby. I know you haven’t seen me much recently. Settling back in has been hard. The job search took over my life. Soon things will be like

before. Please don't move to New Jersey.”

Nathan's suicide troubled me. I had been forced to shut down my struggling consulting business a year ago. My nest egg had shrunk from paying bills while I was unemployed for a year. I had faced plenty of despair but never considered suicide.

An incoming subway screeched to a stop, and we lined up with the crowd. The rush-hour train was packed, so we squeezed into the car's narrow aisle between the filled seats.

Today, in memory of poor Nathan, I would try harder to adapt to their unique work culture. Working for a small investigative company run by a former spy, with a lawyer and an ex-NYPD detective as colleagues, was unusual.

I was accustomed to working with Wall Street traders and businesspeople at global banks and big-name companies. All boasted about their services with costly marketing and publicity support teams. My new firm, Melville Consulting, intentionally stayed off the grid, and client projects had secretive names.

“How's the new job?” Abby paused, eager for details I couldn't give.

I was under a strict nondisclosure agreement and had a paranoid boss. To not let anything slip, I had decided to say virtually nothing about my job. But Abby was my closest friend and trustworthy, so I could share some vague details. “So far, okay. My first week and getting used to the old grind.”

“What do you do exactly?” Abby asked.

“About the same as before. Internal auditing is similar to what an investigative journalist does. Digging in, finding issues, and reporting them with suggestions to fix them. So, my job usually covers a wide range of different projects. This week was more forensic accounting. I analyzed financial records and crunched numbers.”

The client's name on my first assignment was strictly off-limits. The pre-assigned codename ‘Project Onion’ told me nothing. Even if I figured it out, I had signed those pesky nondisclosure documents, promising not to breathe a word.

“Sounds pretty dull.” Abby's opinion was not uncommon.

“Can be. Like anything else.”

Except this week was more like a game called follow the drug money. I had traced the flow of dollars and foreign currencies from one account to another as if solving a complicated numerical jigsaw puzzle. My in-depth analysis, propelled by my twenty years of auditing, delved deep into the logistics of money movement.

She smiled. “I'm glad you found something. You seemed so stressed out.”

“Yeah, it was incredibly hard this time around. Getting older and better at your job didn't help.”

My hard-earned nest egg was gone, so I was desperate to find a job to avoid downsizing and moving. Jackson's enthusiastic job offer was a welcome ego boost. I'd spent weeks waiting around and hearing so many prospective employers turn me down.

I sighed. “One week down with another twenty years to go.” Please let this job last at least two years. The job interviews and being scrutinized from head to toe in an uncomfortable business suit were awful.

“You and me both.” Abby grinned, understanding what I meant.

To afford pricey New York City, single women without a ton of money often had to work until they dropped dead or got tossed out.

She looked wistful. “At least we're getting together Tuesday. Don't forget our girls' night out with Darlene. You've already canceled twice.”

“I'll be there. Even if something happens, I'll hobble in with a broken leg.”

“Oh, Kat. Please don’t break anything. Just show up for once.”

“I will. I promise.”

The doors opened for her stop at 42nd Street and Times Square. We exchanged a quick hug goodbye.

She whispered, “Be careful,” and disappeared into the mass exodus.

I pushed my way back inside the crowded subway car. Abby’s parting comment was weird and unlike her. At first, I assumed this referred to my lame joke about breaking my leg. However, I must always be prepared. Anything could happen at any time.

Inside the heated car, I loosened my cashmere scarf and noticed a small hole. “Darn moths,” I said to the invisible, hungry critters. Buying anything new and nonessential had to wait.

At last, the subway pulled into my stop, Christopher Street, in the historic, hip West Village. I gathered up my belongings and some determination for day five at Melville Consulting.

Jackson, the founder of the company, was a fan of the author Herman Melville. He even used Ahab, the name of the ship’s captain in *Moby-Dick*, as the code word to enter the office’s front door.

To anyone who might be spying on me inside the half-empty station, I warned, “Moby Dick, here I come.

Chapter 2 ~ The Waiting Game

“I’m tired of trying to see the good in people.” Anita Garcia’s voice echoed from her temporary hiding place inside the closet. My chatty work colleague had inspirational quotes from her hero Oprah pinned all over her desk’s bulletin board.

“Oh, you two. Enough. You’re scaring Kat.” Shantelle Nkosi, another colleague in our four-person investigation company, sat on the floor next to me and squeezed my hand. Sadly, her flowery perfume had lost the battle against the musky smell of dust down here.

I struggled to be brave. But hiding with Shantelle under the office’s conference table was abnormal. I should have known Jackson would do something weird like this and escaped an hour ago when he gave me a chance.

But no, I was striving to be more of a team player, adapting to whatever culture this diverse workgroup represented. Heck, Nathan, this was your fault. Your suicide over not having a job made me hesitate when I had the opportunity to leave. But I couldn’t blame the dead. If Nathan were still alive, he might regret his suicide attempt.

Now, after just one week on the job, I was bonding by hiding with them. My boss Jackson, a former CIA spy, and Anita, an ex-NYPD detective, were probably used to this. Shantelle, our in-house lawyer, was nervous like me.

“How long are we going to be here?” I released Shantelle’s hand and shifted my aching legs while pulling up my skirt to cross them. Not a ladylike position, but this was the least of my worries. Shantelle was one of the dumb reasons I stayed. If a lawyer could stay and witness this arrest, I could too.

“Not long. Maybe five minutes,” Jackson said.

Jackson and Anita had handguns and customized night vision goggles. They had assured me this was all precautionary with our brave men and women in blue on their way. If they were late, Jackson would temporarily detain him.

“Didn’t you say this Puerto Rican drug lord has a weird nickname?” With so many foreign

shell companies, pseudonyms, and account numbers, I had lost track. His name was long, like so many Spanish names. Although his name didn't roll off my tongue, I was ready to roll it from my memory bank.

I was coated in a layer of sweat and wiped the accumulation from my face. This didn't help much since sweat continued to slide down my back. My elegant silk shirt was stained and likely ruined.

"Yeah, El Rey. So many months, and now we've trapped him. Is that coming through, Esteban Miguel Rodriguez?" Anita piped up from the storage closet with the door open.

"El Rey as in the king?" I was curious but didn't want any new information to lead to my demise.

I pulled at my shirt, trapped under a bulletproof vest that I couldn't take off. According to my work gang, this was standard equipment and available for a few hundred dollars online at Walmart. Later I should google bulletproof suits and helmets, and if they exist, buy one of each. But only if I don't quit first. My plan to give this job thirty days was way too optimistic.

"Yeah, the Puerto Rican drug king. Now he's dead broke. Brilliant work, Kat. You nailed the operation's twisted account setup." Jackson's voice was chipper, so at least I had done something right this week.

"Thanks. They sure went to a lot of trouble to conceal it." I had struggled all week to prove my worth as their first-ever forensic auditor. Our secret client had sent us reams of documentation to sift through. The wire transfers had codes indicating which financial institution, so it was only a matter of unwinding the data piecemeal and tracking it.

The wires flowed to accounts domiciled mainly in the Caribbean. I loved the challenge of a game. Once I traced the transfers from one account to another, it led to El Rey's banks in the United States. That part of the job was enjoyable. Jackson's daring CIA undercover background had been my main concern, and hiding like this was never part of the deal.

"I figured he'd go to the ATM this morning to pull money out for the big weekend. I wish I could have seen his face when the bank told him his account was frozen," Jackson said.

Entertaining to witness for about a second until he figured it out and exploded.

"Any plans for the long weekend, Kat?" Jackson asked.

Monday happened to be Veterans Day, a federal holiday, but not for Wall Street employees. In a group vote yesterday, we opted to take the day off.

"Nope. Why?" As soon as I said this, I regretted it. I should have made up something important for my weekend to-do list. I had tentative plans to go to Connecticut with Charlie, my unrelenting boyfriend, on Sunday. After this ordeal today, I wanted to back out and stay home.

As soon as this ended, I was getting the hell out of here. I'm not hiding in the dark or helping him chase a criminal around town. This whole cloak-and-dagger spy stuff and dodging bullets brought back memories of working on an investigation with Jackson years ago in Hong Kong.

These crazy situations were what I had declined to do if I joined his investigation firm. Jackson had agreed and promised that it wasn't a problem. But here I was in a dangerous position and trapped until the police showed up.

"You wore a skirt today. I told you this is a 'jeans-and-T-shirt' operation," he said.

I tried to stretch my aching back and legs. In the dark, my skirt flopped around, showing more than it should. "Someone forgot to tell me I'd be sitting on a dirty floor for half an hour waiting for an angry drug king to show up." Next week, if there was such a thing, I'd set them straight by wearing my *Don't Mess with Texas Women* T-shirt.

No one said anything. Possibly to avoid being bombarded with another biting quip from me,

the grump. The silence was unnerving. “I dressed up to meet a friend for dinner if I get out of here.”

“You’ll be out of here way early. Shantelle, when our man is arrested, take Kat to the roof and show her the fire escape stairwell.”

“Appreciate the early start to my ruined weekend,” I said.

“You can’t say this isn’t exciting,” Jackson said.

I didn’t bother explaining that I had experienced way too much excitement lately. Now I craved dullness and being a homebody who got her thrills from a movie or novel.

“We’re putting away a power-hungry murderer and drug trafficker. El Rey’s evaded arrest for years. So be proud of yourself, Kat. You helped do this.” Shantelle patted my shoulder in thanks. She had the expertise and pleasure of doing the company’s legal filings and court work.

I was proud despite not knowing the purpose of the complicated account mess when I unraveled it. But why did we need to suit up and hide? This stakeout ruined the entire week, and my presence here was so unnecessary. Like in one of those corporate team-building exercises, I was stuck.

“You should buy a rug to put under this table for next time.” After years as an internal auditor, recommendations gurgled out of me like the spring water fueling the Jack Daniel’s Distillery in Lynchburg, Tennessee.

“Go for it,” Jackson said. “Something colorful that doesn’t show dirt. We don’t hire snoopy cleaning crews.”

Yeah, I wonder why. “Get a red one to roll out when your drug cartel kingpin drops by again.”

“Nah. This is a one-time deal. Where he’s going, there won’t be any carpets.”

Did Jackson mean dead or in jail? I didn’t want an answer.

Shantelle said, “We have plenty of evidence. With his account activity as proof, more than enough to keep him behind bars.”

“On second thought, don’t bother with the carpet. I better find another more secure office tomorrow,” Jackson said.

Shantelle and Anita groaned but didn’t complain. Changing offices was sensible. Who would want to go through this ordeal again?

“New codename?” Shantelle, experienced at triple crossing t’s and dotting i’s in legal documents, followed up on the details.

“How’s *Pequod*?” Jackson tossed out another *Moby-Dick*-inspired codeword.

“What’s a pea-quad?” Anita repeated the unusual word slowly.

“Oh my God,” I blurted out. “The name of the whaling ship in *Moby-Dick*. What’s with this weird fixation on Herman Melville?”

Jackson said, “That book’s a masterpiece. The best novel ever written. Not my fault colleges fall way short in their required reading lists. Read it this weekend with your extra day off. That’s an order!” But he chuckled, and we knew he was only teasing.

“Sorry, but I have no interest in reading about hunting and killing defenseless animals,” Shantelle said.

“Not quite so defenseless. That whale took a major bite out of Captain Ahab.” Jackson never gave up quickly.

“Well, he deserved it.” I patted Shantelle’s knee in agreement. I had seen some whale ships and met whalers. Whaling was a brutal, disgusting business.

“I started that book on my Kindle. Stopped when I saw how dang long it was. There ought to be a law with book police to enforce a three hundred-page limit. That *Moby Dick* was not at all

who, or what I expected.” Anita giggled.

All this talk about *Moby-Dick* and Melville was a feeble attempt to distract us from worrying about El Rey.

Shantelle, as usual, steered the conversation away from sex. “Have you read it, Kat?”

“Nope. But I heard all about it when I was at sea.” The second mate on board the ship brought along the three-volume British version, titled *The Whale*.

“On that infamous voyage around the world?” Jackson teased.

“Only halfway. Sometimes not much else to do but read.”

“What happens when you go off the grid. I’d load up my iPad with fifty books and be set to go.”

I was tempted to say, “Best of luck, recharging without any electricity onboard.” But I didn’t want to argue with the head honcho or invite more questions.

The conversation died off, and I shifted again to keep my legs from cramping.

Anita broke the silence. “Hey, Kat, I’m going to target practice tomorrow afternoon with some of my old buddies from the force. Want to come along?”

“Target as in shooting guns?” She most likely wore a small hidden pistol under her clothes all the time.

“Well, it ain’t bows and arrows.” Anita snickered.

“Thanks, but I’m busy. I have a resignation letter to write for Monday.”

“Monday is a holiday.” Shantelle was always precise and punctual.

“Okay, I have an extra day. For Tuesday.”

“Ah, come on, Kat. You promised me a month. Isn’t chasing and catching the bad dudes thrilling?” Jackson’s voice boomed with the others echoing their support.

“Maybe to you but —”

Loud car brakes screeched outside, interrupting me, and I dug my nails into my thick vest.

“Shush! It’s the cops. But it might be El Rey. Ready, Anita?” Jackson growled like an angry dog.

“Yo, what I know for sure,” Anita said.

Despite my racing heartbeat, I smirked, hearing Anita whisper Oprah’s catchphrase from the monthly *O* magazines piled on her desk. This week the monthly magazine’s colorful pages were a welcome diversion after staring at row upon row of numbers and computer files.

Shantelle took my arm and pulled me to the closet. At the same time, Anita got into position by the doorway across from Jackson. I considered sprinting for the window to jump, but we were on the third floor. The fire escape was on the other side of the office and required passing the front door.

I reached up to cover my mouth and stay as quiet as possible. But my elbow bumped up against something in the closet. I reached for the glass vase, but it slipped through my fingers and fell to the ground. The glass shattered into what might have been a million pieces, and the noise pierced the air.

“Sorry,” I whispered so quietly that I almost didn’t hear it. Shantelle’s flower vase and our hiding place were both ruined.

Someone banged on our office’s front door so hard I feared it might get knocked down. Would the police hammer away like this without identifying themselves? My heart pounded. In a few minutes, whoever it was would enter our conference room and find us.

A man screamed, “Jackson, *pendejo!*” along with a string of other Spanish words I didn’t understand. Naturally, the cops didn’t arrive in time.

Sometimes I might agree that Jackson could be an asshole, except for how that man said it. My employer of a mere five days might be history soon. Lifeless, like Ahab and most of the crew from the *Pequod*. They ended up at the bottom of the ocean. Jackson had picked terrible code words.

El Rey, or whoever it was, continued banging on the door, and splintering noises increased. A man yelled, “I know you’re in there hiding, you idiot Chinaman. It’s all over. Start praying.” The attack continued, and our old wooden door wouldn’t last much longer.

Another man yelled in Spanish. I was able to translate some of it, including, “You’re a dead man!” If they were ready to kill Jackson, we didn’t stand a chance, even with guns.

I prayed but not to a god most people believe in. My wish was for the men in blue and the familiar Manhattan sound of sirens. Anita had called them, and they knew all about this. Why in the hell weren’t they here by now?

Chapter 3 ~ What Would Dorothy Do

Whoever invented the hot shower deserved a gold medal, millions of dollars, and whatever else they wanted. Steamy hot water pelted my back without mercy. I coated my brush with a Tahitian coconut scrub to extend my moments of ecstasy. How I managed seven months on a ship without hot showers and modern plumbing was beyond me.

If I knew who to thank for my daily shower, I would hug them. The creator belongs right up there with famous inventors like Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, and Steve Jobs. They deserved gifts and some of my delightful herbal bath gels, nutty scrubs, and quality loofas.

I sang along with Freddie Mercury to Queen’s classic hit “Bohemian Rhapsody,” blaring from my radio. It was a too-long, offbeat number that became a surprise hit and always would be in my book of music. Good old Freddie, the underdog turned top dog.

Climbing out of the shower, I recited my mantra. “I will adjust to life here and now.” I had repeated this almost daily during the past year, especially during the dangerous voyage to Hong Kong.

I grabbed a bath towel and dried off in a hurry, swearing to never take the immense pleasure of a modern bathroom for granted. The shower idea likely came from a time-pressured woman like me, who didn’t have time for a soak in a bathtub.

Crazy Jackson Chow! Who did he think he was? Captain Ahab chasing Moby Dick, the whale, for biting off his leg? Or Ishmael, the sole surviving crew member, when the ship sunk?

At least shots weren’t fired, the door didn’t get knocked down, and the police arrived in the nick of time. They blamed the screw-up on poor coordination with the D.E.A.’s agent-in-charge. Both of those organizations could benefit from a thorough internal audit review of their interagency procedures. Just not by yours truly. At least El Rey was arrested and carted off to jail. I never planned to see him or his accounts again.

Luckily, I didn’t observe a thing since I’d stayed hidden in the closet until it was over. I had curled up into a tight ball in the corner. Later, I was coaxed out when each of my colleagues, including Jackson, promised me the coast was not just clear but completely secure.

All these reminders about ships and life at sea didn’t benefit my mental or physical health. The day’s ordeal had involved moving around on the floor on my knees. I stood in front of the full-length mirror inside my bedroom, looking for bruises, scrapes, or cuts. Luckily, no new injuries were detected. My body was colorless and pale but injury-free. At least on the surface, except for an unwanted souvenir from my not-so-grand voyage.

A three-inch braided band of misery, wrapped around my left arm between my elbow and shoulder, glared at me. A lousy reminder that came with me after a stopover in Indonesia. I kept this attention-grabbing, intricately designed tattoo well hidden. Now, with November's cooler weather and wearing long sleeves, it was easier to do.

Mom had been horrified when she saw it a few months ago in Texas. She obtained a referral to a specialized tattoo-removing dermatologist, but he confirmed what I expected. In that impersonal chairside manner, he had said, "Old-style tattoos made with thorns and that kind of ink are nearly impossible to remove. Best to not even try."

Resigned to being disfigured, I gave it the usual scratch without a hint of affection. The only plus, from the smug, tattoo-adverse doctor, was that it wasn't cancerous.

With a loud sigh, I pulled on my jeans, but they were uncomfortably snug. My lack of willpower among plentiful food and all-too-frequent alcoholic, calorie-loaded drinks was the culprit. New York bagels and ice cream, what I'd missed the most, weren't helping either.

"Gym tomorrow, 9 a.m. sharp." I stared down at my belly and repeated this out loud for more sticking power. Despite my too-tight jeans, I preferred this outfit to the dressy dinner-date clothes I'd worn to work today.

After seven months at sea and three months traveling around in the United States to reconnect with my parents and friends, I had expected too much too soon. Working a regular day job after a year off was a significant adjustment.

I was lucky to have a job. Unemployed women approaching their fifties and working in the finance business had a tough time. My situation was far from a position of strength, and in fact, no position at all. At least I wouldn't go extinct like the endangered Amur leopard. But this situation was so unfair, and I wanted to scream.

Explaining how I took a year off for no real reason made job-hunting challenging. Few women would go solo on a seven-month cruise from Copenhagen to Hong Kong. Some interviewers viewed my bucket-list vacation as daring, and in a weird way, admirable. But this didn't bode well when they sought stability and professionalism.

The part they didn't buy into was taking four months to slack off, including a road trip from Texas to the West Coast. My main excuse was to visit friends and family and readjust to life back in the good old U.S. of A. But this was difficult to justify during serious, competitive job discussions. Job interviewers didn't understand how a once-in-a-lifetime trip was a worthwhile use of my time or how it enhanced my audit and managerial skills.

I liked Jackson, Anita, and Shantelle, and the work was fascinating and meaningful. Shantelle lived with her longtime boyfriend, and Anita lived alone like me. Jackson wouldn't say, but I couldn't picture him committing to what he'd classify as optional.

Frequent last-minute business trips and the long hours for this kind of profession didn't help build relationships or families. The four of us were so different, but we had quickly eased into a comfortable work-team relationship. So ideal, it would be hard to replicate.

Jackson was the only one I'd known before joining his company. We met on a Hong Kong money-laundering investigation when I was employed by one of the largest global banks. Then I left to start a consulting business that didn't make enough money to stay afloat.

Before I went on the cruise last year, he'd offered me a job since he needed a CPA. I was still unsure exactly what he did then and now. This week confirmed he intended to keep it that way. He was a major smart-ass, yet an all-around good guy who got me out of some tight spots in Hong Kong.

I wandered into the living room and kitchen to get a bottle of sparkling water and looked for

my purse and cell phone to call Charlie. The least I could do was apologize.

Carrying a gun and being Jane Bond was never one of my fantasies. Hiding in the shadows and staying under the radar, like a law-abiding Catwoman, was more my style. We were just plain lucky when the police showed up right before our demise. I refuse to be a sitting duck, and I'm way too old to hide under conference room tables.

I found my shoulder bag on the couch and pulled out my cell phone. Unexpectedly, tears spilled down my cheeks, and I checked to see if Giuseppe had noticed. At least he didn't stare directly at me.

I grabbed a tissue off the side table and dropped my cell phone on my lap. "Don't be a crybaby!" I counseled the only human inside my apartment while drying my face. To think about something else, I started the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, recorded the previous night.

But I couldn't focus, with my work situation bouncing against the soft walls of my brain. Maybe I needed a complete change in careers and should find something entirely different. However, that meant going to the bottom of the pay scale, and with my current financial issues, it wasn't an option.

Surprisingly, it wasn't difficult to adapt to working for someone again and not be responsible and the leader-in-charge. Being an independent contractor gave me some degree of control. Talented internal auditors have that innate skill to question everyone and everything, not merely numbers. Digging in and looking for why and not just how. These past five days had honed my rusty analytical skills.

Being productive and accomplishing something again tasted better than devouring containers of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. At some point, I had to stop relying on eating their Americone Dream flavor and start living it.

Another company, unthreatened by irate, murderous criminals, was bound to hire me. I sniffled one last time and picked up my phone to return Charlie's call, determined to be more optimistic. After all, what else was there in life?

My cell phone buzzed that Charlie was calling again. He deserved an answer, so I paused my video in the middle of the dance down the yellow brick road with the munchkins.

"Kat, where are you? We agreed on 6:30 at Nobu Downtown. I hope you aren't at the one in Midtown."

"Nope. I'm really sorry. I can't make it tonight." I should have texted him to take the easy way out.

He responded with some cuss words, including shit, to express his disappointment and then apologized. "Can't or won't?"

"Both, I guess."

Charlie waited on the other end, and I visualized his face filled with frustration. Repeatedly, I had told him to move on. Charlie was one of those annoying types who would have rejected boarding a spare lifeboat. He would have gone down on the *Titanic*, optimistically insisting a rescue would arrive in time.

"Kat, I thought you were up for this. An enjoyable and expensive meal out with some of my team. Even my senior manager and his wife are here and eager to meet you."

"I had a rough day at work. I can't go anywhere now."

"But we spoke last night. You said it was going fine, better than expected."

"Well, the unexpected happened. I'm quitting next week."

"That bad, huh?" Charlie sighed, echoing my feeling of despair.

"Worse." He deserved more, but I couldn't tell him much. "I got sick and threw up."

“At home?” His voice softened in concern.

“No, at work. So humiliating. I vomited into a half-empty box of copy paper. Ruined about four packages.”

He chuckled. “Doesn’t sound like you. My environmentalist tries to save trees.”

I tried to smile, but it hurt. “Today was truly awful.” But right after I threw up, Shantelle had given me a wet paper towel to clean up and a cup of water.

“Was it something you ate?”

“Maybe.” Our African takeout for lunch was unusual, but this was a reaction to pure, uncontrolled stress. While at sea in dangerous situations, I sometimes vomited.

“I’m sorry, Kat. You were so upbeat about starting something new. A promising challenge.”

“I decided boring is more my style.”

“Nah. Not you.”

I bit my lip and blinked to keep the tears from falling.

“So, what are you doing now?”

I paused, not wanting to confess my evening’s diversionary TV lineup. Charlie would scold me again.

“Let me guess. Watching *Little Women* or *Doctor Zhivago*? Or what’s the third?”

“*The King and I*. Nope.”

I used to enjoy *Gone with the Wind*, with the sassy, kickass Scarlett O’Hara. She survived the Civil War in a nineteenth-century man’s world. But the slavery bothered me so much that I stopped watching it.

“What then?”

“*The Wizard of Oz*. I like Dorothy. She’s brave. Saves Toto and manages things.”

“At least that’s a new one. You know I love a good flick. But you should stop hiding behind those old movies. You watch the same ones over and over. There’s a glut of modern-day flicks out there to see. How about it?”

“Next week.” I had repeated that last week and the week before, and I hoped he wouldn’t harp on it.

After I hung up, I wandered to the kitchen and nodded a polite greeting to the gargoyle. Giuseppe focused on monitoring me in addition to the usual kitchen and living room. His patina and skin color transitioned from a grim grayish-green shade to an attractive deep purple in the evening.

I found a stray ginger beer inside the refrigerator. From the freezer, I grabbed an ice-cold washrag and wandered to the living room, taking the beer with me. With the soothing rag over my forehead and eyes, I stretched under a blanket on the sofa.

Secure in the knowledge that Giuseppe was on guard duty, my exhausted body sunk into the sofa. Eventually, I drifted off to what I hoped was a safer, saner place.

Are you interested in reading the rest of the novel? Thirty-seven more chapters are ready and waiting. **PROJECT ONION** is available as a trade paperback or ebook from Amazon and will be made available through other book retailer and libraries.

About the Author

Karen Stensgaard is the author of two novels, *Aquavit* and *Blueness*, part of the Aquamarine Sea series. She is a member of The Author’s Guild, the largest and oldest organization supporting

working writers. Currently, she lives in Philadelphia with her husband and two rescue cats.

Karen grew up in San Antonio and spent a year in Denmark as a foreign exchange student. After completing her MBA, Karen moved to San Francisco and worked for the Federal Reserve Bank as an examiner and Bank of America as an internal audit consultant.

Seeking new challenges, Karen relocated to New York City to join PricewaterhouseCoopers and held senior internal audit positions at various financial firms. Over the years, she obtained many professional and brokerage licenses, including a CPA, and a Certified Internal Auditor, Fraud Examiner, and Anti-Money Laundering Specialist designation. Her work experience and licenses came in handy while writing this novel!

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