

AQUAVIT ~ Book 1 in The Aquamarine Sea Series ~

Karen Stensgaard

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. Ironical, 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 bar stool 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 1860's. 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 bar stool.

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!”

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