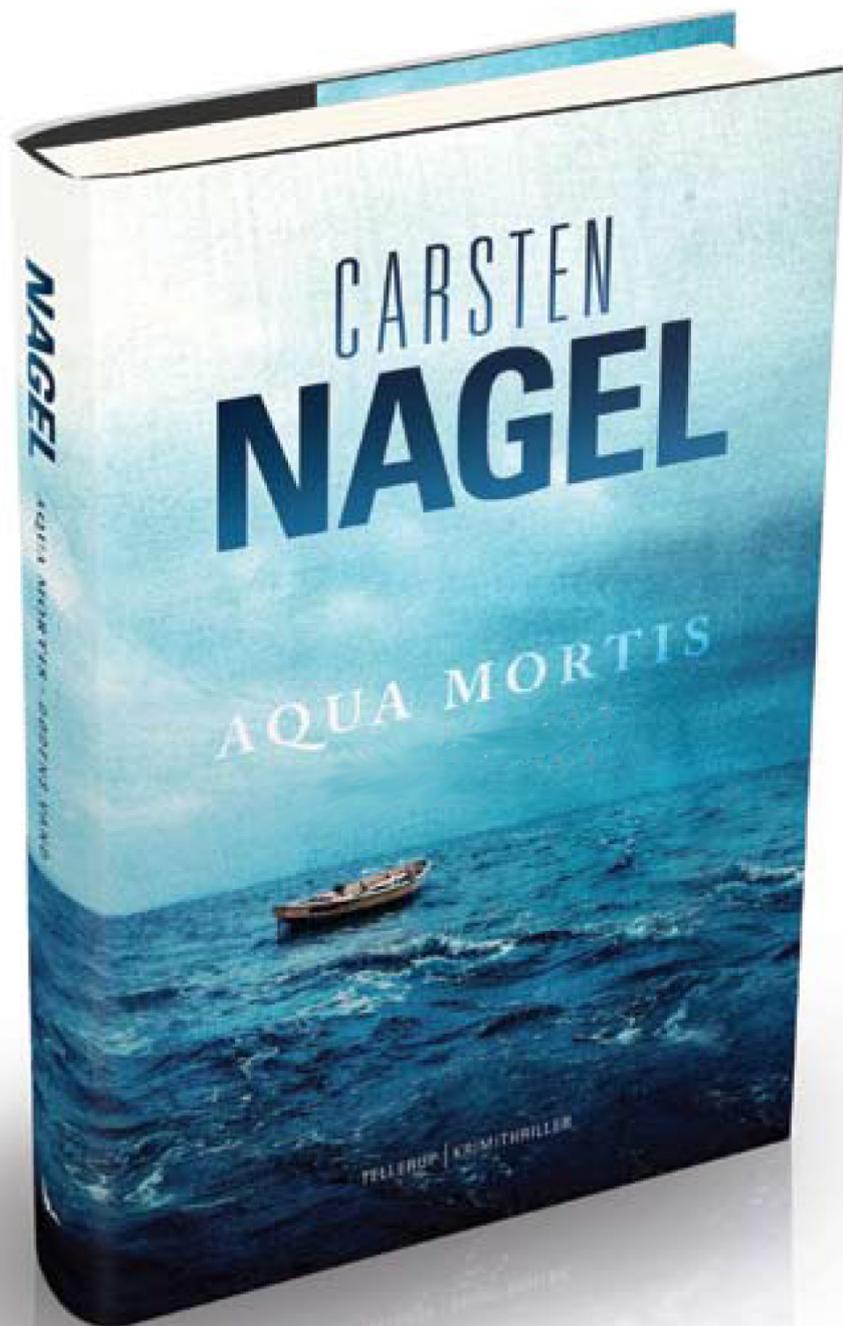


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Prologue

The seagull's cry sounded above the woman as she awoke. The ether soaked rag was gone. The sharp smell hung in her nostrils. She was terribly thirsty. Other than the bird's cry, the stink of the anesthetic was the first sign of life she registered as she slowly came to.

The duct tape across her mouth made it difficult to breath; the blow had restricted the passage of air through her nose, as did the cold she had contracted during her confinement.

Should she take a chance and open her eyes? She knew, if she looked up, the ether cloth would come back. Just the thought of it kept her from doing it. She couldn't count the number of times she had been drugged since her abduction.

Where was she?

Was he close by?

What was his next move going to be?

Her hands and feet were tied, arms behind her back. Some sort of loose rope lay along her legs and body. The surface she lay on was hard and uneven. Her limbs had fallen asleep and were partly numb.

She listened. More birds...the sound of water lapping...the man's breathing.

She held her breath and hoped that he didn't come closer. He sounded

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more out of breath than he usually did. He was fiddling with something. His lungs wheezed, like when he chopped wood by the shed she had been imprisoned in since he had attacked and abducted her.

Her crotch stung. Had he been inside her while she was drugged? Had he used some sort of instrument?

Now that helped. Something cool washed over her.

Water. She lay on the bottom of a boat with water in it. With each small movement the water ran back and forth over parts of her body. Was the rope along her legs a fishing net?

The water's movements were the kidnapper's movements. It couldn't be a big boat. Maybe a dinghy that had collected water from one of the summer's many showers.

The man moved around a couple of meters away from her. It sounded like he got something to slot in place. His satisfied grunt reached her at the same time as the nasty smell that at once put her in a panic. The ether soaked cloth for the very last time. But then... it wasn't ether, it was petrol.

Was he going to pour petrol on her, push the dinghy into the water and light up his darkened soul with her as a living torch? Would he finally feel satisfaction wash through his veins as he watched her ultimate destruction?

A metallic clank was followed by the gurgle of liquid being poured from one container to another. While he, presumably, poured petrol into the outboard motor he had maneuvered in place, she tried to wrench her arms free behind her back, but this only resulted in a splinter boring into her hand.

A splinter. It's a wooden dinghy then, probably an old one. So far so good. Knowledge was everything now. Her only weapon.

A plastic baler rocked against her hip. The sound of a match striking. Then the familiar smell of pipe smoke with vanilla.

She hated vanilla.

The boat lurched as the motor started. The dinghy moved. It slid through the water. They sailed calmly over the smooth surface. It had to be some sort of harbor. The baler tapped lightly against her knee.

Voices? Her abductor was speaking to another man! She peeked out at the man by the outboard motor, tried to get up, twist her body so her head,

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or even just a foot came above the railing. She hadn't been so close to the possibility of being freed before. But there, on the bottom of the boat, she couldn't move any more than she had been able to in the eel trap he had forced her into each night she had been kept captive.

"Cod, plaice, maybe even turbot...and fishing stakes." Her captor spoke without removing the pipe from his mouth. The motor roared, and the voices fell away.

Soon she would be no more. If nothing else she wanted to see clearly for the last time. Carefully she opened her eyes. The sky, tones of blue and grey, was more beautiful than she had ever remembered seeing it. In the boat around her she saw fishing nets, buoys with white flags, and just as she thought, a net over her legs. Seagulls flew above them in the hope of an easy meal.

Would he offer her to the sea, tethered to a fishing stake, transformed into fish food?

Her body protested and she felt weak as she rolled back and forth, her movements rocking the little boat from side to side while the motor continued to rumble.

"Ah, so your awake, it won't be long now. We just have to get a bit further out and then you'll be free. Rocking the boat won't help. Think about something beautiful, think about The Little Mermaid!"

She still couldn't see over the railing, only him and the sky. He turned his head and looked out over the water so that his neck's large oblique muscle popped out like an all too vigorous and unbeatable opponent. A vein pulsed gently but rhythmically at his temple. The mermaid sounded like something he knew well, but still, it came to him from somewhere. Something had made it pop into his mind. Suddenly she knew they were on their way out of Copenhagen's harbor. Abruptly he let go of the rudder, let the motor do as it would, stood up, and as if by heart, recited as he moved toward her:

"... The Little Mermaid...die kleine Nixe...La Petite Sirène..."

She hurried to close her eyes, but knew that she would have to pay for her sight. It was that time again, in a little while she would disappear into

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the fumes of the ether. He bent down over her...but no. In one quick move he ripped the tape off her mouth.

“You deserve it on your last day!” he said, already making his way back to the outboard motor.

The boat turned and cut into the waves. The motor’s monotone throb changed to a stubborn but insistent complaining. The dinghy shot forward, further and further from land.

Each time she had awoken from the ether, surprised to still be alive, she had feared suffocation because of her stuffy nose and the far too tight duct tape covering her mouth.

For the first time it hit her, suffocation may have been merciful compared to what awaited her.

Was she giving up? Pacified on the bottom of the old dinghy, she had no idea how to fight.

A wave sprayed over the bow, the motor moaned, and the boat rose on the wave and slammed back down, hurting her neck.

With the pain ringing through her head and reaching down into her shoulders, she remembered the little she knew about drowning.

It was all too terrible. But behind the fear she felt defiance grow. She could not die now, especially not with him, and not as the last act in his insane drama! She had to fight, not just for herself, but for her little girl, for all small girls. She had to use everything she had, not let herself be broken, no matter what awaited her.

If possible she would kill the man at the boat’s controls.

But what could she do, tied and bound as she was? No weapons and with a body that was on the verge of being useless.

Only words were left. And even these were in danger. Threatened by a simple piece of duct tape!

She looked up again. With growing defiance she contemplated the pipe-smoking man who had caused so much pain.

“I want to talk to you” she said. “There’s something you should know.”