

POST CARD



# Stockholm Hero

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## **Stockholm Hero**

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## *Dedication*

To kind words uttered by strangers, just when you  
need them most.

# 1

A single word reverberated inside Amy's head when she stepped into the gallery. *Fake*. She straightened in the designer gown and felt the price tag scratch across her skin.

Women dripping in expensive jewelry and men wearing silk suits milled around her.

She glued her left arm to her side. *If this tag pops out, I'm sunk*.

Priceless originals hung from the walls. Although the artists remained fixed in their era, the paintings bridged generation after generation, beckoning admirers to draw closer and delve into the past.

Amy turned away from one that had caught her attention, an oil on canvas from the 1800s. *Get focused, Amy. You've got to find him*. She unsnapped her clutch and pulled out a rumpled sepia photo of a man and woman sitting together on a rock wall overlooking a canyon. She'd spent so many nights staring at this picture, imagining sitting between the two, breathing in the dry desert air. She tucked it back into her clutch.

Someone brushed past her.

"Hors d'oeuvre, miss?" The man in a vest and black tie dipped his tray her direction.

She used her right hand to pluck a pancetta-wrapped asparagus from the silver tray. A salty tang burst upon her taste buds. She finished it in one bite

and her stomach growled for more. The server had disappeared into another room of the gallery. *This sure isn't the Genghis Kahn Buffet from back home.*

Stockholm rested against the Archipelago. In a way, Seattle and Stockholm were touching the same water that circled the globe, but here it felt different, more ancient perhaps. From the jet, Amy had imagined seeing great wooden ships bobbing in the bay and wondered how different the journey would've been if she had come by sailing ship.

She turned toward the table standing against an empty wall. A large ice sculpture stood in the center, flanked by a spray of out-of-season flowers swimming in a sea of maroon napkins. Amy doubted that roses could bloom outside a hot house this late in the fall. She snagged a napkin and studied the sculpture, a unicorn with its head arched and hooves pawing the air.

She touched the surface of the clear ice, so smooth and cold.

People wandered in and out of the well-lit rooms and paused near paintings. Amy followed the flow of the crowd. Despite the murmuring voices and scuffing of dress shoes against the wood flooring, the gallery felt quiet. She stopped and pretended to concentrate on the painting in front of her as she stole glances at the people shuffling by.

A tall man wearing dark shades stood in the background. The clear pendant hanging from his neck caught the light and reflected it back toward Amy.

He followed the crowd into the next room.

"The first thing most people do when they come here is rush to the Edvard Munch. It's only on display for this viewing before it's returned to the vault. Have

you viewed it yet?"

A man stood behind her. *How long has he been there? And how does he know I speak English?* "I enjoy taking my time, I'll get there eventually." Amy focused on the painting before her, seeing it for the first time.

The large canvas depicted a man and woman strolling along a moonlit beach. The woman took little care that the hem of her cream dress dipped in the shallow water. Her gaze was fixated on the ocean. The man's canary suit matched the lace on her dress, and he clutched at her arm in a desperate way. He seemed to be attempting to tug her back to reality, or to himself, Amy couldn't tell. She could almost hear the lap of the water against the shore and taste the salty breeze that often hung in the air on summer nights at the ocean. The setting spoke of romance, but Amy couldn't ignore the distant longing in the woman's eyes.

"I like it when the artist paints himself in a scene." The man scratched his strong jaw line with his knuckles. "They had a great love. I've always thought that this painting shows the artist's realization of his wife's straying heart." He moved closer to Amy and the painting.

Amy caught the scent of his cologne, woodsy with amber notes. "I'll give you that." She studied the painting. "I think she's sad." Amy could feel the tag digging into her side again. She tucked her clutch under her left arm, worried that somehow the man could spot the rectangle through the midnight-colored silk of her gown. Another tuxedo-clad server walked her direction with a tray full of sparkling water. She reached out and grasped the long stem of the glass before the server passed by.

*I'm talking art with a stranger when I should be searching for him. I don't have much time left.* Amy gave the man a polite nod and threaded back into the crowd, resuming her covert search of faces. She moved the glass to her left hand and lifted the silken fabric of her gown from brushing against the floor as she walked. Amy couldn't take any chances with this dress. The price tag read more than she could afford in a year's wages as a barista at the Coffee Cabin.

The low hum of voices in the room turned to hushed whispers at the approach of two well-dressed men. They stepped into the room, flanked by security guards, their jackets tugged around ample muscles.

Amy shuffled through the crowd, set her glass against the baby grand piano in the corner and moved close to the dignitaries. Both men appeared to be in their late forties. One had several extra pounds hanging from his middle and a jolly face to match. His dark hair shone, and he leaned against an ironwood cane with a silver handle.

The man to his right stood stony-faced, his brow slightly furrowed. His hard, chiseled features reminded Amy of a marble statue. His age showed in the white streaks throughout his blond hair and the creases at the corners of his eyes. Without a doubt, this man matched the faded sepia picture.

*I flew all the way to Stockholm for this. I spent my life savings. It's now or never.* Amy pulled the photograph from her clutch. Her hand shook as she took a bold step forward. She opened her mouth to say the words she had practiced the whole way to Sweden, when a large hand wrapped around her arm and yanked.



## 2

“Ouch! Let go of me.”

“Please, miss, don’t make a scene.”

Amy glowered up at the same man who had been discussing paintings with her moments ago. His iron grip tightened around her arm as he ushered her away from the crowd of people.

“Slow down. Wait.” Amy dug her heels into the wooden flooring. “Listen buddy, if I scream now the cops will be all over you.” Amy jerked her arm and pushed at his chest with her free hand. No one from the crowd turned, their eyes remained fixed on the two men.

“This is not America, miss, and *you* are the security risk. Please come with me quietly. I’ll get you a taxicab to wherever you are staying.”

Amy stared up at the man. This guy stood a head taller than most of the crowd. His hand wrapped all the way around her upper arm and obvious concern creased his brow.

“I am not a security threat,” Amy’s voice rose. “And I am not leaving this spot!” A few people at the fringe of the crowd turned.

One man shushed her and then turned back.

“I’m very sorry about this, miss.”

“Sorry about wha—” Amy went weightless as he slung her over his shoulder.

"Let me down, you ape!" She pounded her fist against the behemoth's back, aware that her chance for closure stood in the room they were exiting. "Mr. Lundahl!" Amy waved her arms in the air.

More of the crowd frowned back at her.

"Wait, I need to talk to Mr. Lundahl. Put me down." She decided to change tactics. "Excuse me, Mr. Viking-man. Please put me down." Amy tapped against his back with her clutch. The flimsy latch failed and emptied the contents onto the floor below.

Without responding to her question, he turned back, reached down, and scooped up her belongings with his free hand.

"Please, you don't understand," Amy said in a whisper of defeat. "I have to meet him."

The man let out a large sigh and walked on. "Many people want to meet Mr. Lundahl, miss. You are not the first." He carried her to the front of the building and set her near the entrance doors. "It would be best if you left on your own accord." He held out her things and raised his blond eyebrows, waiting for a response.

Amy snatched her belongings from his outstretched hand and stuffed them back into her clutch. She tried to snap it shut on the jumbled mess. The clutch refused to close. She pointed her finger into his chest, flung her head back, and tried to call up the guilt-inducing glare her mother often used. "I'll have you know, I'm not just anyone."

"I see." His eyes slid to the armpit of her gown.

Amy flushed, realizing the tag had emerged. She tucked it back into place and crossed her arms, then remembered the photo. "Here, I have evidence." She rummaged through the jumbled mess in her clutch for

the yellowed picture. "It's a photo. I had it right here." Amy scanned the floor around her. "It must have dropped..." her voice died. *It's in the room with him. I must have dropped it.* She took a step back toward the gala.

The man wrapped his hand around her bare shoulder gently turning her back toward the door. "Nice try. Now you need to leave. This is your last chance."

"No, please." She pleaded with the man blocking her way.

He cut an imposing figure. Aside from his obvious size and strength, he didn't possess the usual mannerisms of a security guard. If only she could have avoided him like the other three who wore sunglasses and ear pieces. She gave one last fleeting glance toward the room and exhaled. The picture held her only clue.

"If I promise to leave now, will you go find my picture? It's very important." Amy pressed her knuckle against her lips and waited for his response.

"Miss, you are in no position for bargaining. You tried to crash a gala, or whatever you American teens call it. Our security team identified you immediately. When you became threatening, I chose to remove you without notifying the police."

"Teen! I'll be twenty-four in two weeks."

His eyes widened slightly, but he still blocked her way.

"I'll leave now. If you find a small photograph, would you please send it to me at the hotel down the road? It's the one on the left, a little off the main road. It's not far from here."

The man crossed his arms against his chest.

She toyed with the thought of turning back and

running as fast as she could but changed her mind. His long legs would give him an unfair advantage and she would probably end up ripping the borrowed gown. Amy couldn't afford to buy it, and Miranda could get fired for allowing shop property to be damaged. Amy turned to the door, lifted the hem of her dress, and strode outside.

A taxicab idled near the front of the gallery. The night sky, cold and clear, did nothing to ease her disappointment. Stars cut through the darkness as she ducked into the cab.

Back at the hotel, Amy slipped the gown over her head, careful not to touch the silk fabric against her face, folded the tissue over the dress, sealed it in the packing box Miranda had sent, and placed it next to the door. She tugged on an oversized robe, rolled up the sleeves, and pulled out her cell phone. Miranda would know what to do.

"Hey, Mere."

"Amy! You made it. How did it go?"

"I got so close, but this meaty security guard picked me up and hauled me away."

"What? Are you in jail?"

"No, I'm back at the hotel." Amy flopped against the bed. "I got so close, Mere. This was my only chance and I blew it. I feel like everything that could have gone wrong, did. To top it off, I lost the picture. I'm back where I started, except I'm in Sweden."

"The dress...did it...um..."

"The dress is fine. It's in the package ready to ship."

"Wait. You said he picked you up?"

"He tossed me over his shoulder as if I weighed nothing." Amy let out a short laugh. "The thing is, I

didn't peg him as security. The other three stood out, but this guy looked like a muscular art lover." Amy dumped the contents of her clutch onto the bed to do another search for the photo. She tossed the broken clutch in the trashcan along with the maroon napkin and started picking through the items.

"Muscular art lover. Do you hear yourself, Amy?"

"So I'm crazy. What's new?" She crooked her neck and pressed her ear against the phone, so she could use both hands to shuffle through the pile. She picked up an unfamiliar plastic card and flipped it over. "That's weird."

"What's weird?"

"Nothing." She studied the picture under the barcode. "It now occurs to me that I flew to Sweden on my life savings without a backup plan. I felt sure this would all work out. My mom doesn't even know!"

"Seriously?" She heard Miranda groan. "Why don't you get your departure changed and fly out tonight? Then you'll only be out the money."

"My tickets are nontransferable and nonrefundable. I'm stuck here until my flight out." She fanned her face with the plastic badge. "I've got a feeling I have a new line on all this. Let's say I picked it up on my ride out." Silence rushed from the other end of the phone. "Mere?"

"I'm here."

Miranda was probably pinching the bridge of her nose, which she did whenever Amy confessed to doing stupid things.

"I thought you would, I don't know, grow out of this impulsive streak," Miranda said.

"This is the way I am, Mere. I'll be home soon. Thanks for listening."

"That's what a best friend is for. Keep me in the loop, OK?"

"Yeah. Bye, Mere."

"Bye."

"All right Mr..." she glanced at his badge, "Archer Stock. Let's see what the internet has to say about you." Amy typed his name into the search engine of her tablet. Thousands of results popped up onto the screen. She expanded her search, this time including the company name from the security card. The results filtered down enough that the first three articles included a picture of Archer. She chose the first one and then found a button in the upper left-hand corner that said *English*. She clicked it.

"American-born Archer Stock has moved to Switzerland, where he has accepted a job at Archipelago Industries...*yada, yada, yada.*" Amy swiped her finger and the screen scrolled. She stopped on a picture of Archer and the man from her missing photograph. The man wore the same stern expression on his face with only a hint of a smile, his hand frozen in an eternal handshake with Archer. She enlarged the picture. The caption underneath said that Archer recently accepted head of security for the entire company. Archer appeared younger. She saved the photograph to her tablet then scrolled back to the top of the page to check the date. *Two years ago, eh? I may get one more chance to meet Mr. Lundahl after all.*

Amy tossed the robe at the foot of her bed, crawled underneath the duvet, and burrowed her head into the pillow. "You're my ticket in, Archer." She yawned and then let sleep win over.

The shrill ring startled Amy from her bed. She didn't remember turning on an alarm, and from the

light in her room, the sun wasn't up either. She slammed her hand down onto the clock next to her bed and rolled over, shoving the pillow against the noise.

"I want to sleep!" Amy shouted into the fluff. The ringing continued. She clicked on the bedside lamp. A telephone sat on a table in the corner.

*Who would be calling me? No one knows I'm here except Mere, and she'd use my cell phone.* Amy stomped over to the phone and picked up the receiver. "Hello? I'm sorry, I only speak English."

"We are sorry to inform you, but the credit card you used to acquire this room has been frozen and will no longer work as payment. Please come down to the lobby with alternative payment at your earliest convenience."

Amy's spirits sank even further. She only had one credit card, and she couldn't call her mother. Mom wouldn't understand, and Amy would have to endure the usual, "you're too impulsive and don't think things through" speech she had been hearing all her life.

Amy squinted at the glowing red numbers on her clock. *Five in the morning is not my earliest convenience.* "I will be down when I've had a chance to wake up." She plopped the receiver into its cradle and crawled back into bed. No matter how much she tossed and turned, she couldn't fall back to sleep. *This is that Archer guy's fault. If he hadn't stopped me, I could've introduced myself and...what if she had succeeded last night?*

Would he have recognized her?

Would the photograph have been enough proof?

### 3

Amy leaned across the counter and pointed to the monitor. "I think if you re-type the card number it'll go through."

"The card won't work, miss. It's flagged. Perhaps there is someone in the states you can contact for an alternative payment method." The woman's frown deepened.

"You have to understand. I can't call my mom to unfreeze the card because she doesn't know I'm here." Amy crossed her arms.

"Miss, if you have run away—"

"I'm twenty-four. I'm not running away," Amy said through gritted teeth. She flattened her palms against the marble counter and narrowed her eyes. "I reserved this room for a week. I paid for it in advance."

The woman adjusted her glasses. "Actually, miss, you gave us a credit card, and your assets are apparently frozen. That means we received *no* money and you have *no* room. If you would like to remove your belongings on your own, I would suggest you do it now before we do it for you."

It was too late for tears. Amy whirled around, stalked back to the elevator and attempted to make her five-foot, one-inch frame appear imposing. She pressed the button on the elevator and rode it back to her level.

"Frozen account, ha!" Amy threw her purple



pajama pants into her bag. "If Archer the behemoth hadn't screwed everything up last night, I wouldn't be in this fix." She scooped the rest of her clothes off the floor and shoved them into her bag along with her toothbrush and the complimentary shampoo. Amy wrestled with the zipper, only getting it half way before the yarn of her sweater snagged in the pull. She tugged, but it only made the snag bigger.

"Dear God, why..." Amy stopped herself. She didn't believe in Him anymore. She paced around the room, fiddling with her phone and thinking of Miranda. The security card fluttered to the floor. Amy picked it up and scrutinized the writing. The company name, Archipelago Industries, was familiar in some way. The cursive letters were scrawled across a tall glass building less than a mile down the road. Amy slung her half-zipped bag over one shoulder and headed for the front doors.

The fall chill blew against her thin sweatshirt and nipped the tips of her ears. She sucked in a deep breath of air, bracing and sweet. *I could get used to living here. Almost everyone speaks English and the city is so clean.*

The weather in Stockholm seemed to match Seattle, and in many ways the city had similar features. The biggest difference between the two had to be the clean lines of architecture against the skyline and the lack of dilapidated buildings crumbling into the pavement. What little research she had done before leaving Seattle had concentrated on familiarizing herself with a map of Stockholm, but several different articles had bragged about the cleanliness and low crime rate. At least the rain held off. In Seattle, when fall came, the rain blew sideways. Even her expensive raingear couldn't keep out the precipitation.

A great, glass box towered against the skyline. The broad scrawl of Archipelago Industries adorned the door.

Amy followed the flow of people past the frosted doors twice before gathering the nerve to step inside. A sweeping glass desk encompassed the entryway, restricting admittance to all but employees. It matched so much of the city, smooth lines with bright white walls.

Amy approached the counter and addressed the woman there. "Excuse me. I need to find a man who works here. His name is Archer Stock. I came across something that needs to be returned to him."

"Mr. Stock is not in right now. You can leave whatever it is at the desk, and we can place it in his box." A kind smile crossed her face.

*If she sees that Archer doesn't have his security badge, he could get fired. I don't want to get him into a fix. "I'll take it by his apartment. Thank you."* Amy turned back toward the entry doors, paused, and then turned back. "Could you tell me his address?"

The woman scrutinized Amy's attire once more. "Sure, let me write down his new address for you, as he moved about a month ago." The woman jotted down directions. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No thanks, this is what I needed." Amy glanced at the directions. She stuffed the paper into her pocket, gave the woman a smile, and headed out the glass doors.

According to the paper, Archer lived a few blocks away.

She hoisted her bag higher and ignored the twinge of pain pulling across her shoulder blade. The chilly air

snatched at what heat she had gained inside.

Light struck the buildings, creating division of dark in the alleys. She recalled an artist's trick her mother taught her. "Imagine the world in shadow and light; the shadow runs from the light, Amy."

"Why?"

"Because the light destroys the darkness. Do you ever notice how the light pushes the darkness back, like light spilling out from under a closed door? I think God gave us light to show us how much we need Him, to realize the shadows in ourselves."

Amy squirmed. Her mother loved God and trusted Him, but Amy couldn't ever comprehend why God let bad things happen to people like her mother...and like her.

Archer Stock's name appeared fifth on the list of tenants. Amy held her breath and pressed the buzzer. No one answered. She exhaled a cloudy breath and pressed the button again.

The man next to her uttered something in Swedish.

"I only speak English," Amy said, giving the man an apologetic shrug and half smile.

He stood tall and had a head of thick brown hair peeking from under his stocking cap.

Amy let her gaze linger on him a little longer.

"I said I saw Archer get into a cab early this morning. He hasn't been back since."

"Great," She muttered. A thought crossed her mind. "Could you let me into the building? He left something with me the other night, and I need to get it back to him as soon as possible."

"He's my neighbor. If you left it with me, I could give it to him when he comes back, or you could put it

in his box." The man took a step closer.

"It's a bit more sensitive than that." Amy scuffed her feet on the ground and leaned toward the man, ignoring the chill sinking into her bones. "It's his security badge. I wouldn't feel OK unless I put it in his hands."

An odd smile tugged at his lips.

Amy glanced away before he noticed her staring at his mouth.

"Oh. That does sound serious," he said in a smooth voice.

Amy frowned. "It is serious. I need to return it to him, personally."

He crossed his arms. "I think it's fine to let you in, since you know Archer. I have a key to his apartment. Sometimes I take care of his cat."

"Oh, you take care of his cat?" At her mother's house, nine cats left no piece of furniture unscathed. She glanced at her attire, grateful she hadn't chosen anything white. "Thanks so much. I'm sure Archer will appreciate it too." She followed him into the elevator.

"So you and Archer are pretty close?" He reached over and pressed the button to his floor.

"Um..." Amy didn't want to lie. "I haven't known him very long. This is the first time I've come to his apartment. Spending time with Archer is uplifting." Amy smirked at her wordplay.

"Well, that makes sense. I would have noticed someone as pretty as you coming around."

"Oh, um, thanks. So you take care of his cat when he's away? That's really nice." She followed him to a cream-colored door.

He shoved the key into place. It didn't seem to fit right, but the man wiggled it and the door unlocked

and swung open.

Amy expected a few balls of fur to roll out the door when it opened, but the apartment gleamed. She turned back to the man and stuck out her hand. "Thanks...um, what's your name?"

"Niklas." He gave her hand a firm shake, holding it longer than necessary. He gave her a broad smile that exposed the intricate design etched into his front tooth.

"My name's Amy Bath."

"Well, Amy, if you ever have a few minutes, maybe we can go get *fika* or something." He released her hand.

"Huh? *Fika*?" She forced her gaze toward the tidy apartment. It reminded her of a display from the Swedish furniture store by the airport in Seattle.

"It's our version of teatime, but with coffee."

"Perhaps. Thanks again for your help, Niklas." She pulled the door shut, shook her shoes off, and dropped her bag against a cabinet. Heat radiated from the blond wood flooring. Amy ventured further into the room. Afternoon light streamed through the windows with a view of the bay. The picturesque scene shouted beauty, the splash of color and light bouncing against the rocking water made Amy's heart ache. *This view would cost a fortune in Seattle.*

A big, black book sat in the middle of a coffee table perfectly centered on the impeccably clean glass. Warmth crept back into her fingers and toes as she shed her sweatshirt onto the velvet couch. The gritty smell of cold coffee clung to the air. Amy ventured toward the kitchen and flipped on the light. White cupboards and cream-colored flooring complimented the eggshell paint on the wall. The messiest thing in the