

GONE TOO FAR'S PARTNERS—AND LOVERS—
SAM STARRETT AND ALYSSA LOCKE
ARE BACK IN ACTION IN
AN EXCLUSIVE SHORT STORY!

Sam was hovering.

He'd already made up a multitude of excuses to come into the bathroom while Alyssa was in the shower, and now, while she brushed her teeth, he lurked just outside the door.

She'd scared him tonight.

They took turns when out on assignment. Tonight Sam had been on lookout, hiding on the hillside, watching for headlights that would announce an approaching car, as Alyssa jimmied the cheap lock on the door to Steve Hathaway's ramshackle cabin.

The place had been deserted. In fact, this entire part of the county was deserted—they were at least forty miles west of the booming metropolis of New Hope, in northern New Hampshire, population 473 at the height of ski season.

Getting inside that cabin undetected had been laughably easy.

Alyssa now dried her face on the plush resort towel as Sam checked up on her for the twenty-seventh time since they'd returned to their suite here in the ski lodge.

"I'm really okay," she told him.

"I know," he said.

Sam bent over backward to make sure he never said anything that might make her think he doubted her ability to take care of herself.

Earlier tonight, when she'd pushed open that cabin door, switched on her penlight and gone inside, Sam had spoken into his radio from his perch on the hill.

"Lys, I can't see you." He'd worked hard to keep his voice sounding calm, relaxed. Filled with Texas. Because he knew that *she* knew he dropped his honeyed drawl when he was stressed. "Talk to me."

She'd flashed her little light across the walls and floors, giving him a running commentary. "I'm in a room with a bed, no other furniture. Just piles of trash—classic love shack. It smells like old socks and mildew, with a dash of overflowing septic tank."

"Yum."

"Yeah." She'd sifted through one of the garbage piles with her foot. It was mostly paper—newspapers, empty food boxes, stacks of junk mail. "Honestly, Sam, I can't imagine Amanda Timberman being caught dead here. Even for some of Stevie Hathaway's golden-tan pretty-boy ski-hero booty."

"What's in the other room?" Sam had asked.

"Looks like a combination living area and kitchen," she'd reported, opening up the kitchen cabinets, looking for . . . what? She wasn't even sure. "Sink, stove, refrigerator . . ."

Alyssa pulled herself back to the pristine warmth of the bathroom. “I wish they made some kind of nostril brush—you know, like a toothbrush only smaller,” she told Sam now. “I can’t get that awful smell out of my nose.”

He leapt into action. “Whiskey’ll take care of that.”

She followed him into the other room. She didn’t particularly want a drink, but he seemed so glad to have found a way to help, she didn’t want to stop him.

As Sam opened the minibar, she wandered toward the balcony window, where the pink of dawn was lighting the sky to the east. Glasses clinked, ice tinkled.

“Here.” He handed her a glass. “It’ll make you stop smelling it.” He corrected himself. “Her.” He tried again. “Death.”

Just a few hours ago, during dinner, this had felt more like a vacation than a paid job. It was, at the very least, a silver bullet assignment. She and Sam had been forced to stay in this four-star ski lodge with room service, balcony views of gorgeous autumn sunsets, and chocolates on the pillows.

They’d been assigned to find twenty-five-year-old Amanda Timberman, who’d vacationed at the New Hope Ski Lodge a few short weeks before her disappearance.

Lucas Timberman, the young woman’s father, was a total pit bull when it came to placing the blame on Randy Shahar—Amanda’s ex-fiancé. He claimed Shahar, born in Saudi Arabia, had killed his daughter after she’d discovered he was part of an al-Qaeda terrorist cell.

Shahar—who had moved to the U.S. when he was four months old—had come to Troubleshooters Incorporated, hoping they could locate Amanda. A former lieutenant in the U.S. Navy Special Boat Squadrons, he now ran a fleet of whale-watching vessels out of Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Timberman’s accusations were bad for business.

As if it weren’t hard enough to be an Arab American business owner after 9/11.

Finding a missing person wasn’t the sort of job that Troubleshooters Inc. usually took on. The company specialized in security—personal and corporate—with a leaning toward counterterrorism. But Tom Paoletti, the former commanding officer of SEAL Team Sixteen who owned and ran TS, Inc., was friends with Shahar. Tom had not only taken the assignment, but he’d given it to Alyssa Locke, his second in command.

Formerly an FBI agent, and before that an officer in the Navy herself, when Alyssa had taken this job with Tom Paoletti, she’d permanently partnered up with Navy SEAL Sam Starrett.

In more ways than one.

A few months ago, she’d married the man—a fact that still seemed surreal.

That she was married at all was odd enough. But that she’d married a textbook alpha male . . .

Sam—her husband—was standing in front of her now, looking hopefully at her empty glass. A man of action, he liked having something to do. “You want another?”

“No,” she said. “Thanks, but . . .”

“Didn’t help, huh?”

She shook her head.

He pushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. It always amazed her that someone with such big hands—and an ability to put his fist through a wall when provoked—could have such a light touch. “Another might help you sleep.”

Again, she shook her head. “Tom said he’d call after he spoke to Randy. I want to be coherent.”

“I could talk to him,” Sam volunteered.

“I know,” Alyssa said. “Thanks. But . . .” Sam hadn’t looked inside that refrigerator.

Her cell phone rang, and she opened it. “Locke.”

“What time is it there?”

That wasn’t Tom Paoletti’s voice. It was . . . “Jules?”

“It’s nearly three a.m. here, which means it’s not quite six there. Aren’t you allowed to answer your phone with ‘Alyssa’ at least from, say, two to six a.m.?”

“It’s Jules,” Alyssa told Sam. She and Jules Cassidy had been playing phone tag for weeks now. It was exactly her former FBI partner and best friend’s MO to call in the middle of the night after being frustrated by voice mail.

“Are you—honest to God—in a town called No Hope?” Jules asked. “Because I got this weird message from Sponge Bob and it sure as hell sounded like he said you were in No Hope, New Hampshire, and all I could think was, *shit*. No Hope High School . . .”

“You called Jules?” Alyssa asked Sam.

“No Hope Hospital,” Jules continued.

Sam lifted a shoulder. “It’s been a rough night. I thought you might want to talk to him.”

“I’m really okay,” she said again.

“I know.”

“No Hope Hair Salon . . .”

“It’s *New Hope*,” she told Jules as she sank down onto the leather sofa, one leg tucked up beneath her.

“New Hope Hair Salon—that’s almost as good.” His voice changed. “You okay, sweetie?”

Sam sat down on the other end of the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He was trying hard not to look worried.

“We’ve been looking for this woman, Amanda, and we found her today. In the refrigerator of an abandoned cabin. She’d been there for six months and . . . Whoever killed her had . . .” Alyssa had to stop, take a deep breath.

Sam reached over and put his hand on her foot.

“He mutilated her,” she said. “It was . . . gruesome and surprising, and . . .” Sam’s gaze was as warm and solid as his hand. She was, in truth, talking to him. “I think I’m embarrassed. My reaction to seeing

her was . . .”

She’d actually screamed. Only her years of training had kept her from running from the cabin after opening that refrigerator door. Or maybe it had been the light-headedness and suddenly blurred vision that kept her glued to the spot.

“I almost lost it,” she said. “I actually had to put my head between my knees.” All the while unable to say anything more than, “Oh, shit, oh, shit . . .”

Which had sent Sam running down the mountain, racing to her unnecessary rescue.

Or maybe it had been necessary. She’d been beyond glad to see him, to feel his arms around her. She’d done everything but burst into girlish tears.

“I mean, come on,” Alyssa told Jules. “What’s that about? I’ve seen murder victims before. This is nothing new.”

But Sam shook his head. “You were caught off guard. We both were. We were sure she was still alive.”

They’d spent dinner trying to guess where Hathaway and Amanda had gone.

Such optimism was new for Alyssa. In the past, she’d always been a worst-case scenario thinker. Anyone who’d been missing for six whole months *had* to be dead. But this time, she was positive that they’d find Amanda by finding Hathaway. Instead . . .

The FBI agents heloed in from the Boston office were convinced that Amanda was the latest victim of a serial killer they’d been tracking for years. The Bureau was excited because, even though Steve Hathaway was an alias, for the first time, thanks to Randy Shahr, they had a photo of the man they were after.

“I liked her—Amanda,” Alyssa told both Sam and Jules. Although she’d never met the woman, she’d read her diaries and talked with her friends. “I thought she’d found true love. I thought she was hiding from her father because she knew he’d be mad that she’d married the ski bum instead of the businessman. I actually pictured her with Hathaway in some little house with a white picket fence, living happily ever after.” Instead, he’d probably made a necklace with her teeth. “God.”

She looked up at Sam and told Jules, “Two months of marriage to Pollyanna here, and I’ve already moved in to Sunnybrook Farm.”

Jules didn’t laugh. Instead, he sounded wistful. “That must be nice.”

“Yeah, it is,” Alyssa said. Sam was shaking his head over his new nickname. “It’s scary, though. The potential for disappointment can be pretty high.” As opposed to always expecting to be disappointed . . . “Look, Jules, I have to go. Thanks for calling.”

“Anytime, sweets. Give Pollyanna a big, wet, sloppy kiss for me.”

“I will.” She hung up the phone.

“You know he’s going to call me that, from now on,” Sam said. “For the rest of my life. And, by the way, it’s Rebecca who lives at Sunnybrook Farm. As opposed to Laura Wilder, who lives in that little house on the prairie. Pollyanna lives . . . Shit, I have no idea where Pollyanna lives.”

“Come here,” Alyssa said, moving toward him, meeting him halfway, in the middle of the couch. He put

his arms around her, so that she was leaning back against him, her head beneath his chin.

Outside the window, dawn was putting on quite a show.

“Are you going to be able to sleep?” he asked. “Ever?”

She laughed, except it came out sounding like a sob, and his arms tightened around her. “I keep thinking, if only . . .”

“Don’t,” he said. He kissed the top of her head. “Just don’t.”

“I can’t help it,” she said. “I hate it when the bad guy wins.”

“I know. But they’re going to catch this one now,” Sam said.

“I hope so.”

“They will.” He kissed her again. The way he put it, it was a *when*, not an *if*. He had no doubts whatsoever. For Sam, the future was filled with possibilities, not possible disappointments.

“Nice, huh?” he said as, outside the window, the brilliant colors of dawn—a new day—streaked the sky.

“Yeah,” Alyssa said, loving the feeling of his arms around her. It was very nice, indeed.