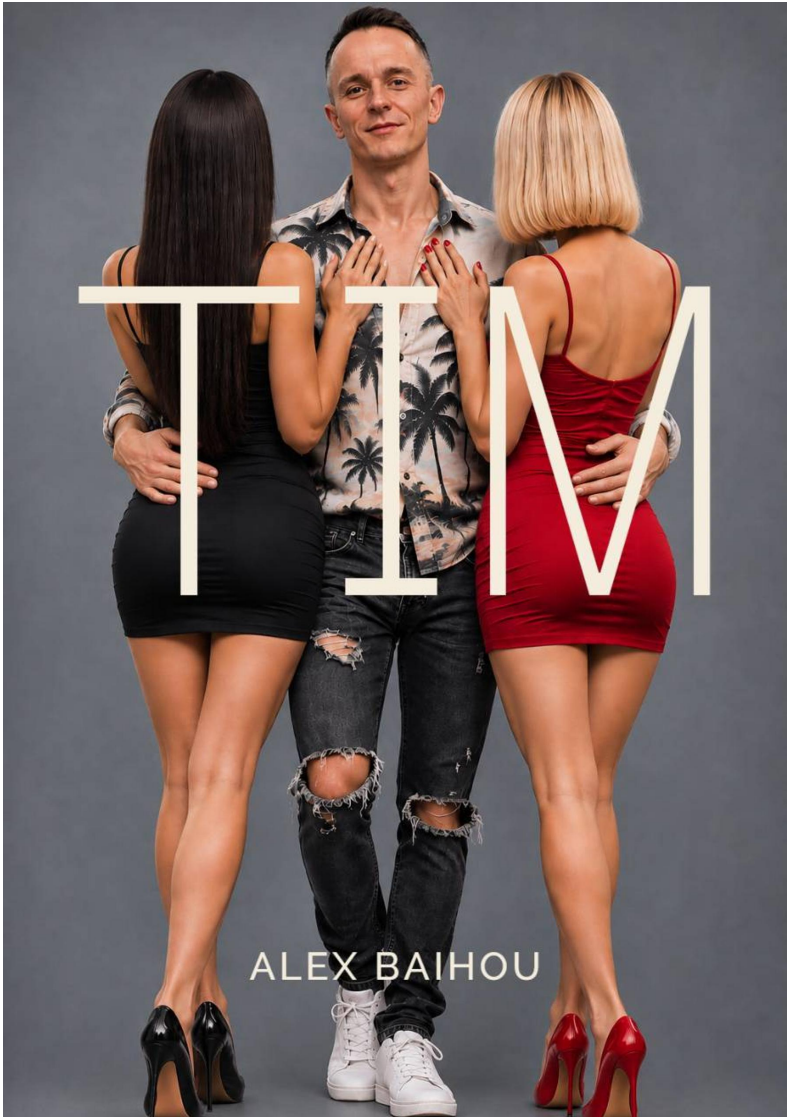

TIM
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Tim

Tim. Alex Baihou

A story of Tim's love and friendship in the bachata world

He was walking along the lake, wheeling a cruiser bicycle with a front basket. Dark blond hair escaped from beneath his white cap. His lightweight T-shirt draped casually over the contours of his arms and chest. The pineapples on his short navy-blue shorts seemed to whisper to his tanned legs to take their time. Yellow flip-flops were the final touch to this carefree summer scene.

A group sat on the grass to his left. Three couples. A picnic. Everyone was talking animatedly. Everyone except her. Her fair hair was tied back. Her sky-blue sundress matched her eyes. Her sensual lips held an unspoken thought. She turned a glass in her hand and stared into the distance.

He recognized her and smiled. The handlebars drifted to one side. He stopped, his eyes never leaving her.

She noticed him and straightened up. A delicate blush spread across her cheeks, and her smile brightened.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"Hello," he said, looking around at them all.

"Hi," only she replied, waving.

Silence hung in the air like a storm cloud.

He leaned toward her. She started to get up.

The man beside her raised his eyes to her. A broad-built man, sitting half-turned, one hand braced against the ground. A grimace crossed his face.

The others turned away and resumed their conversation louder than before, like bad actors.

She tightened her grip on the glass. She stayed seated. The smile disappeared from her face.

His smile faded too. He adjusted the handlebars and wheeled his bicycle on.

She watched him go, then lowered her head.

The sun set like a coin dropping into a piggy bank. The beach emptied. Streetlights and windows lit up. So did the dance studio.

One group had finished class; the next group of students had just arrived. Everyone mingled in the changing rooms and hallways.

“Tim, hi,” said the blonde, opening her arms.

“Hi, Eva!” Tim replied.

They hugged. Stayed that way for a couple of moments. Exhaled. Let go.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t come over to you at the lake.”

“I got flustered, too, when they didn't say hello to me. What happened?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Maybe because I was so happy to see you.”

“Strange thing to get upset about. Especially since there’s

nothing going on between us…"

"My husband and I haven't been doing so well. And then I let it show…"

"Oh. Well, that explains the hostility," Tim said, nodding.

"Anyway, forget it. Want to dance a little before class starts?"

He offered her his hand. She took it, and they walked into the studio, where bachata music played nonstop.

He stepped closer, placed his hands on her shoulder blades, and moved his chest forward, initiating a wave. Her body followed. When the music picked up, they spun through a series of turns.

Other couples joined in. After a few tracks, a voice rang out:

"All right, sweethearts, let's get started!"

The instructor was of average height, with brown eyes and dark hair. He began moving energetically. Everyone followed his lead. When the group was breathing hard, he turned the music down.

"Who can show us what we covered last class?"

Silence. Glances exchanged. A few giggles.

"I can see Tim wants to give it a try," he said, narrowing his eyes.

Everyone laughed.

"You can choose any partner you like," he added.

Tim walked over to Eva. She couldn't hold back a smile. They stood facing each other, holding hands. He looked somewhere between the ceiling and his partner's head. Then down at their

feet, as if checking how the laminate flooring had been laid. He began counting and doing the moves.

"One, two, three, four…" He froze.

"Come on, think," the instructor encouraged him. "The pretzel—or what we call the 'under the wing' move."

"Five, six, seven, eight," Tim breathed out.

The room burst into applause.

"What, Andrey? Didn't expect that?" Tim lifted his chin.

"On the contrary. I believed in you," Andrey played along.

Then he demonstrated some new moves. Class carried on as usual: new tracks, partner changes, experiments on the dance floor.

Andrey spent a long time dancing with and explaining things to a newcomer in tight black leggings and a turquoise top. He demonstrated the moves. When she lost her footing, he put an arm around her and repeated the sequence with her.

Tim and Eva crossed paths again as the circle rotated.

"I missed you," Tim said.

"I missed you too. I wouldn't even switch partners," she said, wrapping her arms around him.

They danced on. Partners changed, smiles passed around the circle, until the instructor's voice rang out again:

"We've already gone half an hour over. It's time to wrap up."

A collective groan rolled through the studio.

"All right, one last track." Andrey searched for something on his phone, and a slow bachata began to play.

The room dissolved into chaotic movement. People no longer waited for their turn; they danced with whoever they wanted. Tim and Eva found each other at once. Their dance was interrupted by Andrey's voice.

“Tim, turn off the lights.”

The studio was empty now, and the music had stopped. Everyone went to change. Then they gathered in the lobby, hugging and saying goodbye.

“Want me to walk you to your car?” Tim asked.

“That would be great,” Eva replied.

“Hey, where do you two think you're going?” Andrey stopped them. “We're all going for pizza.”

“I can't. I'm supposed to be home,” Eva said, trying to get out of it.

“Tim, walk Eva to her car. We'll wait for you!”

“Yes, sensei!” Tim said, spreading his hands.

The headlights of her car disappeared around one corner. A noisy crowd emerged from another and headed toward the café, spreading across the sidewalk like a shapeless, laughing smear.

They went inside. The room suddenly felt cramped. Someone went to wash their hands; someone else checked their phone. Andrey leaned over the table on his elbows, studying the menu. A waitress came over.

“We want pizza,” Andrey's voice rolled across the floor like a cobblestone.

The others' orders immediately came flying from every direction.

“What kind of tea do you have? Coffee? Is the Coke cold?”

Tim sprawled on the couch. One moment he drifted into his own thoughts; the next he jumped into the conversation.

“Is it true what they say—that bachata is sexually transmitted?” He patted Andrey on the shoulder. A petite brunette was already sitting on the instructor's lap.

“Sorry, I can't pass it on to you,” the instructor replied without missing a beat.

“Ouch. That hurt. And here I thought we had something special,” Tim said, trying to look offended.

Laughter spread through the pizzeria. The group sank into conversation. They fell silent for a moment when the food arrived, then the stream of stories and jokes swept over them again.

“If it weren't for bachata, we would never have met,” one of the women said.

The table hummed in agreement.

“Then here's to friendship and bachata,” Andrey said, raising his glass.

“And love!”

“And love!” the others echoed.

The moon gave way to the sun. Tim stretched on his thin mattress on the floor. He threw off the blanket. The cool morning

air from the window brushed his legs. He pulled the blanket back over himself. A message came in:

"Tim, everything's ready. What time will you get here, as usual?"

"Of course, Mom. Just as we agreed."

"We'll be waiting."

Bachata played in Tim's headphones. He stood at the bus stop, shifting from foot to foot. He got on the bus. Every now and then his shoulders moved to the beat. He looked at the other passengers, then out the window.

The familiar house. The gate was unlocked. The dog came to meet him, barking, jumping, licking him. Tim gave it a piece of meat. It ran off with it, ate, and came back to play.

"He's been waiting by the gate since early morning. It's as if he knows you're coming."

"Hi, Dad!"

"Hi, Tim! How was the ride?"

They shook hands.

"The hardest part is getting up on a day off."

"Come inside."

Borscht simmered on the stove, along with fried potatoes. Vegetables and fish were on the table.

Tim took wine and sweets out of his backpack. They sat down.

"Let me teach you how to use the internet before we start eating."

"Oh, not today," his mother snorted.

“You've had smartphones for six months, and you never have time.”

“Later.”

Tim looked at his father. He just spread his hands and glanced at her. Silence. They served the food and poured the wine. Halfway through the first glass, they talked about the weather. As they poured another, his father asked:

“Tell us about your project.”

“I'm working on it, little by little. There's a lot I still need to learn.”

“You had such a good job,” his mother interjected. “Why don't you go back? Maybe you could ask your old boss?”

“I like what I'm doing.”

“Living in the clouds?”

“If you can't support me, at least don't criticize me. I'm already feeling my way forward in the dark. I don't need this from you either.”

“I'm going out for a cigarette,” his father said.

Tim followed him outside.

“If she keeps this up,” Tim began irritably, “I'm leaving.”

“She seems to be in a bad mood today. Let it go in one ear and out the other.”

“Yeah. She always says things like that to me.”

His father stubbed out his cigarette. They went back inside.

“What a mess the world is in,” his mother said. “Have you watched the news?”

“I try not to.”

“But you should. You need to understand what's going on around you.”

“It's not as if I can influence any of it. I've got my own life to figure out. Besides, we don't know whether they're telling the truth. How can we check?”

“What do you mean, not telling the truth? Are you saying they all lie?”

Silence.

“Are you still going dancing?” his father asked.

“Yes. I really enjoy it.”

“You got divorced because of those dances. You had such a good wife. Don't you regret it? Was it worth it?” his mother cut in.

“We didn't get divorced because of dancing.”

“That's what she says.”

“Are you ever on my side?” Tim stood up and started getting ready to leave.

“Tim, where are you going?” His father stood too.

“Home.”

“Take something with you, at least. We cooked all this for you,” his mother said.

“I've had enough. Thank you.”

“I'll walk you out,” his father said.

“Don't.”

Tim rode back on the same bus, but now he wasn't listening to

music. He stared out the window. The passing landscape merged with the sky into one gray canvas.

A message from Eva pulled him out of his sluggish thoughts:

"Maybe we could go for a walk tonight before the party?"

"I'd love to!"

Tim and Eva turned off their screens and put their phones away as soon as they saw each other at the park entrance. Evening was falling. Lights along the paths flickered on one by one.

They bought sea-buckthorn and ginger tea. They walked along the path, warming their hands on the tall paper cups and occasionally brushing shoulders.

"How was lunch with your parents?"

"Not great this time. I won't be visiting them for a while."

"But they're your parents. You'll make up. They love you. Besides, you have to cherish the time you get with them."

"I know. But I can't keep putting up with being rejected."

"I understand," she said, lowering her eyes.

"Want some candy?" Eva held out a few pieces.

"Oh, now we're talking," Tim perked up.

"How are things with your husband?" He looked into her eyes.

"We pretend everything's fine. But it's just appearances. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but we don't even sleep together anymore. We're just friends raising our son."

"Wow. Sounds like you're heading for divorce."

"I still hope things will get better," she sighed. "We've already

tried to get divorced once. It didn't work out."

Eva took a sip of tea. Tim looked at her but said nothing.

"Why do you spend time with me?" she asked.

"I'll be honest. I've been feeling awful since my divorce. I fill the emptiness by spending time with you and dancing. But I'm genuinely interested in you, too. Very much."

"I enjoy talking to you too. You feel like home to me."

They reached the school. Familiar Latin American melodies were playing. Familiar faces flashed by. A stream of hugs, conversations, and dancing swept them in different directions.

Andrey stood surrounded by several girls and guys, with his arms around a brunette from the beginner group.

"Tim, want some whiskey?"

"Wouldn't hurt."

They poured it into plastic cups, clinked them together, and drifted off in pairs onto the dance floor. A few tracks later, the group gathered around the bar again.

Halfway through the party, Tim and Andrey found themselves alone.

"Salsa's on. Time for a break," Tim said with a grin.

"I don't get this dance," Andrey replied.

"So which one of them is your girlfriend?" Tim winked.

"I don't have a girlfriend," he answered calmly.

"Do you sleep with all of them?"

"Some of them."

"What a Casanova."

“I just don't lie to myself. The guys come here because of the girls, and the girls come because of the guys. First and foremost, you should see your partner as a woman you desire, not as a mannequin for practicing moves. You must like it when someone looks at you that way.”

“What about love?” Tim asked.

“Every dance is a different story. With some, it's just a bit of flirting. With others, it's rough sex.”

Tim kept scanning the room for Eva. Whenever she was free, he'd ask her to dance. Toward the end of the party, he waited through one dance, then a second, a third, a fourth. She laughed, spun around, and moved from one partner to another.

He gave up waiting. He turned away and headed home without saying goodbye to anyone. The streets were empty. Only a few streetlights illuminated the sidewalks.

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