

Timberly Lake

by Lee Holden

Apparently, she had missed charm school class the day they had covered “Excuse me, please and thank-you.”

The guys, being guys, at first resisted the incursion into their territory as she shoved her way through to the bar. But then it was hard to tell whether they were making room for her or just stepping back to get a better look. With a succession of double takes, the crowd parted like the Red Sea, surging and engulfing her in a sea of admirers.

Each tried his line and was summarily dismissed. She soon tired of the game and relocated to a newly vacated table in the corner. I gulped the last of my drink, took a deep breath and began jostling my way toward her ignoring the chuckles and snide remarks of the recently vanquished nipping at my ears.

“Of all the gin joints in all of the airports in the world, you had to steamroll into this one,” I mouthed in my best Bogey voice.

Blue eyes flashed beneath a wisp of raven hair. “You been waiting long to use that line, Mike?” Her tone was sarcastic, but a small smile played at the corners of her mouth.

“I see the assertiveness training is working, Timberly. How’s L.A.?”

The stares from the bar burned a hole in my back as I sat down.

“L.A. is exactly like an airport bar,” she enunciated like the TV reporter she was. “I’m right at home here,” and—with a sly smile, “Speaking of which, shouldn’t you be—at home that is?”

“I’m working again.”

“Not more T-man stuff?”

“No. Couldn’t pass the physical when they released me from the hospital—maybe not the mental either,” I shrugged feigning an air of casualness.

“What then?” She arched an eyebrow, her natural curiosity peaked.

“Turns out there are people who need my skills—skills the authorities tend to frown on. I’m my own boss now, and it leaves enough time to look for the guys who ambushed us.”

“What’s-her-face can’t be thrilled with that.” A mischievous glint flitted across her eye. “She couldn’t understand what you did, much less why you did it. Is it the danger she hates or just being exposed to the wrong elements—like me?”

“Anne is dead.”

“How?”

“She survived the attack but never recovered emotionally.” I took a deep breath and continued. “At first, recuperating together actually brought us closer than we had been in a long time. But, the hospital walls gave her security and me cabin fever. When they let us go home, she just sat watching soaps with the curtains drawn. One day I came home and found her on the floor with an empty bottle of pain killers.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” A tinge of anger colored the plaintive question.

“You left,”—He paused through the din of the bar. “Remember? Besides, leaving turned out well for you. This wasn’t a big enough market.”

“You made it clear you weren’t going to leave her for me.” The glint in her eye turned steely.

“Remember how it all started?” I pushed on after an awkward pause. “I was knee deep in the Altos trial and you were out to make your mark by prying an exclusive out of me.”

“It was my job, you were a jerk—it was too much of a challenge to pass up,” she replied with a tart toss of her hair.

“We were like oil and water,” I let a wry smile escape. “No pushy broad was going to get to me. Ha! I still can’t believe that I…” I left the words dangling in the air.

“I couldn’t stand your smug chauvinistic attitude and I was damn sure not going to let you run rough shod over me.” Her eyes seemed to cloud as she mused absently as if evoking scenes from the past. Then with a sigh, “How the hell did it happen?”

“Long hours, danger and alcohol make a potent cocktail. One minute we were screaming at each other and the next…” I seemed to be having a hard time finishing thoughts.

“I consigned you to my big-dumb-cops list the first time we met and you never failed to irritate the hell out of me.” Her voice softened. “Pissed me off no end to find out you weren’t dumb. I started to get anxious—too anxious for the next time we’d meet. Then, that night we were at each other—sparing and snipping like normal. One minute you were your smug, egotistical self baiting me with logic and sarcasm, and the next minute I just had to touch your face.” Her voice was almost a whisper now, hard to hear in the bar, but I caught every syllable.

“Electric,” I remembered with a shiver.

“You would never have left her for me would you?” She asked ruefully shaking her head. “You were too stubborn, too old fashioned, too—loyal. Then—afterwards, I suppose you blamed yourself for getting her caught in the crossfire. But I thought you would have come after me when she died.” She absently ran her finger around the rim of her glass.

“I did.”

“What do you mean?” The eyebrow arched again as she moved back slightly in the chair. “This is the first time we have seen each other for a year.”

“I didn’t come here by accident tonight.”

“Oh?” Her eyes narrowed creating small furrows in her forehead.

“It was a small thing really, just a line toward the end of a tabloid article I was browsing a tabloid in the doctor’s office. Couldn’t help but read about ‘The *Real* Timberly Lake’.” The pause was pregnant with tension. “I never knew you had a stage name. The line buried near the end of the story casually mentioned that your real name is Timosina Laguna—like everyone else in the world knew but me. The light went on: Timosina Laguna, daughter of Timmy Laguna, drug lord. Timosina Laguna, niece of Tony Altos, wise guy.”

“So what?” She glared a challenge.

“Like everyone else, I thought the attack had been meant for me. “ Nearly there now, I leveled my gaze. “You must have been pretty upset when Anne survived. You always got what you wanted, but another attack would have raised suspicions. On the other hand, nobody would question a suicide by an already fragile woman, would they?”

“You’d never make it stand up in court.” Her eyes were as cold as her voice, all hint of impishness gone.

“That’s the advantage of freelancing. I don’t have to use the courts.” I rose, intentionally towering over her. “Take care.”

A flash of fear across her eyes told me she didn’t miss my meaning.