

Taste of the Tea – Candi

Candi knew better.

That truth sat heavy in her chest the morning after, heavier than the silence between her and Malik as he pulled on his shirt, heavier than the way her phone buzzed with a text from Terri—*You free later?*

She didn't respond.

Candi had never imagined this version of herself. Terri was her friend—not just a social friend, but the kind who knew her patterns, her tells, her quiet seasons. Terri and Malik were solid, or at least that's what Candi had believed. The kind of couple you don't question. The kind you don't touch.

And yet here she was, standing barefoot on cool hardwood floors, watching Malik avoid her eyes like they were mirrors he didn't want to look into.

What happened between them wasn't planned. It had grown in sideways glances, in late conversations that lingered too long, in moments where boundaries softened without either of them admitting it. Malik had a way of listening—really listening—that made Candi feel seen in ways she hadn't felt in a while. That was the dangerous part. Not the intimacy itself, but how natural it felt.

After he left, Candi sat alone, replaying everything she wished she could undo.

And still... she didn't block his number.

Terri, unaware, moved through Candi's life like always. Coffee dates. Inside jokes. Casual check-ins that felt increasingly sharp, like paper cuts Candi didn't deserve but couldn't stop reopening. Every laugh felt borrowed. Every hug lingered a second too long.

Terri talked about Malik with comfort, not suspicion. That almost broke Candi more than anger would have.

Then there was Davis.

On paper, Davis was perfect timing. Kind. Attentive. Consistent. He showed up when he said he would. He asked questions and waited for answers. But something in Candi stayed just out of reach with him, like she was watching herself go through the motions instead of actually being present.

She liked Davis. She really did.

She just couldn't stop thinking about Malik.

The meetings with Malik became... quiet secrets. Unplanned but not accidental. Conversations in parked cars. Lingering looks across rooms they shouldn't have shared. Each encounter fed something in Candi she didn't fully understand—an attraction not just to Malik, but to the risk, the tension, the unspoken rules being bent.

It wasn't love.

But it wasn't nothing.

Candi told herself she would end it. After the next conversation. After the next moment. After the next time Malik said her name like it meant something more than it should.

One evening, while Terri was sitting across from her, laughing and stirring honey into her tea, Candi's phone lit up on the table.

Malik: *We need to talk. Tonight.*

Terri glanced down, then back up, smiling.
“Everything okay?”

Candi swallowed, her heart pounding loud enough to drown out reason. She flipped her phone face down, forcing a smile she didn't feel.

“Yeah,” she said. “Everything's fine.”

But as Terri reached for her cup, Candi noticed something she hadn't before—Terri's ring was missing.

And across the room, reflected in the café window, Candi caught a glimpse of Malik standing outside, watching them both.