

Taste of the Tea

Latrice-Part One

By: D. Barnes

Latrice believed in order. Not the rigid, brittle kind that snapped under pressure, but the soft order of routines that held life together the way stitches held skin. Morning walks with her coffee balanced in a travel mug. The low hum of the exam room refrigerator. The gentle cadence she used when speaking to animals that didn't understand words but understood tone.

At thirty-six, she had built a veterinary practice that felt like an extension of her nervous system—clean, controlled, compassionate. People trusted her. Animals relaxed around her. Even chaos seemed to slow when she entered a room.

Which is why no one would have guessed how little order existed in her private life.

Marcus liked to say Latrice was “steady.” He meant it as the highest compliment. After three years together, he could predict her movements: the way she set her keys in the same ceramic bowl by the door, the way she squeezed toothpaste from the bottom of the tube, the way she hummed under her breath when she was thinking.

He was an engineer—logic-minded, future-facing. They talked about buying a house. About a dog of their own, once her schedule eased up. About children in that abstract, someday sense that made everything feel possible without being imminent.

Latrice smiled during those conversations. She nodded. She meant it—mostly.

The problem wasn't Marcus.

The problem was David Evans.

Everyone called him C-Dog, a nickname earned sometime in high school and never shaken. He was the kind of man who carried history with him like a scent—faint but persistent. He and Latrice had dated in their twenties, back when everything felt louder and sharper. Their relationship burned hot and fast, fueled by ambition, late nights, and the belief that love could outrun responsibility.

It didn't.

They ended badly. Not explosively, but with a slow erosion of trust and timing. Different paths. Different needs. The usual autopsy.

And yet.

David still brought his pit mix, Blue, into Latrice's clinic every few months. Skin allergies. A limp that flared in cold weather. Routine checkups that always seemed to take a little longer than necessary.

At first, Latrice told herself it was professional. She was good at boundaries. She had learned them the hard way—through school, through loss, through choosing herself over chaos.

But David had a way of looking at her that suggested memory was not done with them yet.

"You good?" he asked one afternoon, leaning against the counter as she typed notes into Blue's file.

"I'm good," she replied automatically.

He smiled. "You always say that."

She glanced up, met his eyes, then looked back at the screen. "Because it's usually true."

"Usually," he echoed.

That day, lunch happened almost by accident.

David insisted on paying for Blue's visit, despite Latrice's half-hearted protests. When she finally relented, he tilted his head and said, "At least let me buy you lunch. Consider it a thank-you. Or repayment."

"For what?"

"For not judging me every time I forget his meds."

She laughed. That was the first crack.

They went to a small café two blocks from the clinic, the kind with mismatched chairs and handwritten specials. Latrice ordered her usual. David ordered for nostalgia—something he claimed he used to eat back when they were together.

Conversation flowed too easily.

They talked about work. About mutual acquaintances. About how the city had changed and somehow stayed exactly the same. He told her about a project he was consulting on, something that sounded lucrative but legally gray around the edges. She didn't ask too many questions.

She told herself it was just lunch.

The second lunch felt less accidental.

By the third, there was an unspoken understanding that this was their thing.

It was during the fourth lunch that David reached across the table and brushed her wrist, casually, as if testing a temperature.

Latrice felt it everywhere.

She didn't pull away.

The rendezvous happened on a Thursday.

Marcus was working late. Latrice told him she had back-to-back surgeries and would be exhausted. That part was true. What she didn't say was that exhaustion had lowered her defenses to a dangerous hum.

David's place smelled like sandalwood and citrus. Familiar and unfamiliar all at once. They stood too close. Talked too much. Laughed like people trying to convince themselves they were still in control.

When they kissed, it felt less like a decision and more like gravity.

After, Latrice lay awake staring at the ceiling, the weight of what she'd done settling slowly, deliberately. David slept beside her, breathing easy, as if nothing had shifted.

In the morning, she left early.

Guilt arrived late, but when it came, it was thorough.

She scrubbed her hands longer than usual at work. Double-checked charts. Over-explained diagnoses to clients who hadn't asked for them. She went home to Marcus and kissed him hello, lingering just enough to feel convincing.

Marcus noticed small things.

The way she flinched when her phone buzzed. The way she stayed up later, claiming paperwork. The way her laugh sometimes arrived half a beat too slow.

He couldn't name the feeling, only that something felt... off. Like standing in a room where the air pressure had changed.

"Everything okay?" he asked one night as they washed dishes side by side.

"Yeah," Latrice said, steady as ever. "Just tired."

He nodded, but the hairs on the back of his neck rose anyway.

Latrice and David met again.

Once became twice. Twice became a rhythm.

They told themselves lies that sounded like logic. That Marcus was good but predictable. That Latrice deserved to feel wanted. That this didn't have to mean anything.

David spoke about his life in fragments—legal disputes, political favors, money moving in ways that required discretion. Latrice listened without probing, convincing herself that ignorance was neutrality.

Sometimes, after, she would watch him tie his shoes and wonder when exactly she had crossed from participant to accomplice.

At home, she maintained appearances with precision.

Meals cooked. Calendars synced. Future plans discussed.

She was careful not to overcompensate. Careful not to pull away. Careful not to let guilt show its teeth.

But guilt has a taste.

It's bitter at first. Then sharp. Then, if indulged long enough, strangely familiar.

The tea Latrice found herself sipping was brewed from silence, omission, and desire. Each choice small. Each justification neat and plausible.

Until the day Marcus stopped mid-sentence and looked at her like he was trying to remember something important he'd misplaced.

"Do you ever feel like there are two versions of us?" he asked quietly.

Her heart stuttered.

"What do you mean?"

“The one we live,” he said, “and the one we don’t talk about.”

She held his gaze, her expression calm, her pulse roaring in her ears.

“I think everyone has that,” she said.

Marcus nodded slowly, unconvinced.

That night, Latrice lay awake between two lives, aware that balance was an illusion and gravity always collected its due.

Somewhere, a reckoning waited—romantic, legal, or otherwise.

For now, she took another careful sip.

And told herself she could stop anytime.