

## Taste of the Tea – Terri

Terri had always trusted her instincts.

They'd never failed her—not with people, not with timing, not with love. She was the friend who noticed the shifts before anyone else named them, the one who could feel a room tilt without a word being said. That was how she'd built her life: attention, patience, intuition.

So when things started to feel *off*, she noticed.

She just didn't know where to place it yet.

Malik had been quieter lately. Not distant exactly—still present, still affectionate—but distracted in a way Terri couldn't quite pin down. Like he was carrying something heavy he didn't want to set down in front of her. Conversations ended sooner. Touches lingered less. He listened, but sometimes she caught him staring past her, as if his thoughts were somewhere else entirely.

Terri told herself it was stress. Work. Life. People changed rhythm sometimes. Relationships breathed in cycles.

Still, the silence had weight.

What unsettled her more was Candi.

Candi had been her constant. The kind of friend you didn't have to check in on daily because the bond just *existed*. They had history—inside jokes, shared disappointments, mutual growth. Terri trusted Candi the way you trust something solid: quietly, without question.

But lately, Candi felt... distracted too.

Not withdrawn—no, that would have been easier to read—but guarded. Smiles that arrived a beat late. Laughter that didn't quite reach her eyes. When Terri spoke, Candi listened, but sometimes it felt like her attention was split between the moment and something she was holding close.

Terri noticed the way Candi flinched when Malik's name came up.

Just a flicker. Barely there.

Terri ignored it at first.

She had no reason not to.

One afternoon, sitting across from Candi at their usual café, Terri watched her friend stir honey into her tea like she always did—slow, clockwise, precise. The ritual hadn't changed, but something about it felt rehearsed, like muscle memory filling in for emotion.

"You've been busy," Terri said casually.

Candi looked up too quickly. "Yeah. Just... life."

Terri nodded, accepting the answer while filing it away. She'd learned long ago that people told the truth in fragments, and you had to be patient enough to wait for the rest.

Still, she couldn't shake the sensation that she was sitting at the edge of something she hadn't been invited into.

Later that night, Terri stood alone in her bedroom, holding the ring Malik had given her months ago. She hadn't taken it off intentionally—it had just felt tight that morning, like her hand needed air. Now she turned it between her fingers, studying the small imperfections in the metal, wondering why it suddenly felt heavier than before.

She hadn't told Malik she'd taken it off.

She hadn't told Candi either.

Terri wasn't ready to name the questions forming in her mind.

Instead, she watched.

She noticed how Malik flinched when his phone buzzed late at night. How he angled the screen away without realizing it. How he kissed her forehead instead of her mouth sometimes, like affection had become something careful.

And she noticed how Candi had started asking about Malik in ways that felt... indirect.

"So how's he been?"

"Is work still crazy for him?"

"Y'all good?"

The questions weren't inappropriate. Not on the surface. But Terri felt them land differently, like pebbles dropped into still water.

Terri trusted Candi.

She repeated that to herself like a mantra.

When Malik said he needed “space to think,” Terri didn’t argue. She agreed with a grace that surprised even her. She wasn’t afraid of space—she’d learned that love didn’t survive being clutched too tightly.

But as the days stretched, she began to feel something unfamiliar creep in.

Not jealousy.

Awareness.

One evening, Terri spotted Malik across the street while she sat in the café with Candi. He wasn’t supposed to be there. She caught his reflection in the window first, the way his posture stiffened when he saw them together. For a moment, he didn’t move—just watched.

Terri felt it then.

That quiet click inside her chest.

The sound of a puzzle piece snapping into place, even if the full picture wasn’t clear yet.

Candi’s phone buzzed on the table. Candi flipped it face down too quickly. Terri pretended not to notice, but her body registered the shift before her mind did.

“Everything okay?” Terri asked.

Candi smiled. Too smooth. “Yeah. All good.”

Terri sipped her tea, letting the warmth steady her. She’d spent years learning not to confront feelings without evidence, not to accuse without clarity. Still, she made a silent promise to herself in that moment:

*I’m going to pay attention.*

Later that night, Terri lay awake, staring at the ceiling, replaying moments she’d brushed off before. Malik’s absences. Candi’s hesitations. The strange way their names seemed to orbit each other lately, never colliding—but always close.

Terri didn’t know the truth yet.

But she knew this much:

Something was happening without her consent.

And she wasn't the kind of woman who stayed in the dark for long.

Across the room, her phone lit up with a text from Malik.

**Malik:** *We need to talk soon.*

Terri stared at the message, her heartbeat steady, her instincts fully awake now.

She typed back slowly.

**Terri:** *So do I.*

And for the first time in a long while, Terri didn't feel afraid of what she might uncover.

She felt ready.