

Teacher's Pet, Ch. 13

"Here, I'll pour it. Tell me when to stop."

"It's okay, Helena. I don't mind cutting it for you."

"Come on, Helena, don't be such a baby. We both know you're still weak, so what's with all the fussing?"

Helena felt dizzy. She'd hoped that going downstairs would signal some kind of... shift in power. That hadn't happened. She'd hoped that Diane would stop feeling so untouchable, that Diane's words and motions would stop making Helena feel like she was trapped in slow-motion.

But she *did* still feel so weak. Downstairs didn't feel any less liminal. The kitchen was even similarly dimly-lit as Diane worked on breakfast. Had Diane's downstairs windows always had blackout curtains?

"Right, I just..." She fidgeted with the fridge door. "Yes, Diane. Thank you."

She sounded so pathetic. She didn't want to sound this way around her teacher. She just needed Diane to slow down a little. Why was she still letting Diane get away with so much?

"Of course, Helena." Diane gave her a sly smile, and Helena's fluttering heart came in answer. "There's nothing wrong with me pampering one of my favorite students, is there?"

Helena's lips parted. She forced several answers down and just nodded.

One of.

Diane giggled. "God, Helena." The white noise of the microwave hummed in the background. "It's like nobody's made you breakfast before."

Helena's heart raced. "I—I mean, I always—"

"Oh, right. You always make breakfast for your girlfriend, didn't you?"

Helena's heart rate slowed. The room suddenly felt a little colder, and the lamplight seemed to recede. "Ex-girlfriend."

"Oh?" Diane slow-blinked. "But I thought... is that recent, sweetie?"

The microwave droned on.

“Ten months ago.” Helena shifted, feeling a heaviness in her throat, a weakness behind her eyes.

“Huh. Your essays talk about her a lot.” Diane’s head tilted slightly. “Even the ones that don’t mention her.”

“They... they do?” Helena’s fingers squeezed the fridge door. “I didn’t...”

“Her name is Amber, right?” Diane’s voice was soft as she took a step closer. “Amber Baker.”

“I—” The hum of the microwave and its glimmering light became anchors for Helena. She struggled to steady her voice, but her heart was starting to thud slowly in her chest. “I didn’t... say her name in my, um... essays.”

On a different day, she’d try to accuse Diane of spying, of researching her dating life, of stalking her, but in this kitchen, at this time, she knew better. Diane always had a reason.

“You say her name in your sleep, Helena. A lot.”

Helena whimpered softly. She focused on the hum of the microwave, trying to ease her breathing to match it.

Diane gave her a pitying smile. “It’s okay, Helena.” She reached forward to take Helena’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I didn’t know you two broke up. That’s... a shame.”

Helena nodded weakly.

“And you haven’t dated since?” A slow blink. Fluttering lashes.

Helena’s heart fluttered. Focus on the microwave. Focus on its slow glimmering light. She shook her head.

Diane’s face was filled with empathy. She gave Helena’s hand another squeeze. “And I know you’re estranged from your family. So... you live alone.”

Helena shook her head. She didn’t want to say anything. She knew she’d say something to break the spell, to piss Diane off, to make Diane stop holding her hand. And she’d spent so long alone these last few days.

“My roommate,” she whispered weakly, almost apologetically. “Tamara.”

Diane didn't seem upset. If anything, she seemed satisfied, reaching up to pat Helena's shoulder. "Right! Tamara Mills, your roommate. You texted her to let her know not to worry the other night."

"Right." Helena nodded hesitantly. Actually, Diane had texted her, but... Helena had given her permission to, so it wasn't an important correction.

Especially when Diane was touching her.

Focus on the microwave. Focus on the microwave. The microwave, the microwave...

"No one else to look for you."

Helena gave a start. "W-What?"

"I said, no one else looking out for you." Diane frowned. She seemed to lean in a little closer. Or maybe Helena was the one leaning. Helena felt dizzy for a different reason right now. "It really is just me, huh? Everybody else is..."

Helena shivered. Cut off. Her own fault. She'd even canceled this week's therapist appointment so she could focus on confronting Professor Wood. Stupid.

"Are you cold?" Diane whispered.

"D-Diane," Helena whispered. "You're... kind of close..." But she didn't lean away. She wasn't even sure her objection was loud enough to be heard.

Diane's nails traced along her shoulder, creeping closer and closer to Helena's neck. "Oh, Helena..."

The piercing beeping of the microwave rang through the intimate quiet. Helena and Diane both jumped back as the alarm blared.

"Sorry," Diane said, almost like a reflex.

Then she blinked, her head flicked, and she smiled.

"Well, let's get you fed, Helena," she chirped, turning to open the microwave. "Why don't we eat on the couch?"

Helena swayed slightly. "H—Profesor Wood, that—"

Diane turned to look at her.

Helena's stomach shifted.

"That sounds nice, Diane," she said, her voice quiet.

She wasn't tamed, she reminded herself, even as she averted her gaze. She wasn't giving in, and she wasn't letting Diane take control. She was still her own person, and *now*, at too-long last, she was going to make herself heard.

* * *

"So..."

Helena was starving. She hadn't realized this until she'd started eating. She was using every ounce of will left to her to not scarf the whole thing down as fast as possible, right in front of her professor. After that prolonged sickness, pancakes with cheap syrup and TV dinner bacon-and-eggs were a banquet. She'd so missed good, plain processed food.

Diane was smiling at her quizzically, her own food barely touched. "Someone's hungry."

"Mm." Helena gave a tiny nod, making herself swallow. She tried not to look directly at Diane just yet. The dizziness was easing up a bit, now that she was sitting down, but her heart was still a tiny fluttering thing. "Little bit."

Having a full stomach helped. Not being swaddled in thick blankets helped. The fever had passed, and things finally almost felt a little... normal. At least physically.

She tried to chew quickly. Her mind cast back, searching through everything that had happened. It was hard to think about. Unpleasant, humiliating, and also... difficult. She'd been in such a dreamlike state for days.

Her cheeks reddened a little as she remembered a few special dreams in particular.

"How, um..." She wiped her mouth self-consciously with a napkin. "How long..."

She knew the answer to that. Two days. Time just felt a little weird because she'd gotten sick. She was sort of hoping Diane would finish the thought and answer anyways, but Diane was just waiting patiently now, giving her time to put her words together.

She wasn't going to lead with accusations. It wasn't worth it. It felt like no matter what she ever brought up, Diane would just talk around it, outmaneuver her, find a way to justify every little thing.

She wanted to be angry.

But at the same time...

She lowered her plate, wiping her face self-consciously with a napkin. Blaming Diane was the easy way out. It would be such a relief. Diane had been condescending, had been controlling, had at times been a little cold or unprofessional.

But there was another, much simpler way to read all this: For the past two days, Diane had been dealing with an insecure, paranoid fever patient dreaming up new wild accusations every half-hour, and she'd let a few frustrations slip as a result, and this was all Helena's fault.

"I... I want to ask you about that first evening, Diane. Professor Wood." She stared at her plate, already mostly cleared. "Is that okay?"

So she was going to stay calm. She was going to stay polite. She was going to ask questions and listen. Gather information.

She felt Diane's gaze on her. She sneaked a glance—Diane's face was expressionless. Maybe a little chilly? Her heart gave an anxious twinge.

No. Keep going. She nodded, looking back down at the plate. "Is that a yes?"

Diane was quiet for another moment. "Of course. Go ahead. If you're ready to talk about it."

Her tone had changed from before. Helena couldn't read it any better than she could read that pretty face.

"That night, I... made a lot of accusations." Helena's toes curled. "I told you I was going to the Dean. I was going to get you fired."

"Right."

Helena tried not to grip the plate too hard. She was worried she was going to break it. "I'm still going to do that, D—Professor Wood. I think it's. Important. That you know that."

Professor Wood was quiet.

"But I'm... I'm sorry for how I acted. I'm really, really sorry." Helena drew herself inward, desperate to be small, unthreatening, even pitiable. "I know we both crossed a lot of lines that first night." Her heart started to pound as she felt Diane shifting, seemingly pulling away from her. Terror struck her that Diane's temper was kicking in again. She already regretted this. It was too soon. She needed more

time. More time with Diane before she made Diane angry again. “I—mostly me! We were both drinking, we were both—I mean, I was—”

“Breathe, Helena.” The tone in Diane’s voice made it clear this wasn’t a request. Helena took a deep breath in. “Are you finished yet?”

Helena flinched. “F-Fuck, Diane, I don’t—” Her voice broke. “I’m sorry. I know it’s—please, these days—everything has been so much—” Her throat was constricting. She was fighting back tears. “I don’t want you to... *h-hate* me, I-I just can’t—you—I—”

Diane’s hand reached forward. Helena’s heart leaped a little before she reached she was just taking the plate, which had started to rattle.

“Sit up straight, Helena.”

Helena complied automatically. Her chest shuddered. She could feel the wetness in her eyes and could only pray tears didn’t start flowing.

“Look at me, Helena.”

Helena’s head snapped up to meet Diane in the eye.

And relief rushed through her. Because Diane was smiling down at her. It was a slight smile, a sympathetic smile. Maybe a little pitying. She didn’t care. She ducked her head, finding herself smiling slightly herself. It was still so hard to hold Diane’s gaze, but knowing Diane wasn’t angry...

“What’s got you so scared?” Diane asked softly, and she reached down to gently tip Helena’s chin back up, forcing her back into range of those pretty ice-blue eyes. “Do you think I’m going to hurt you, Helena?”

Helena swallowed. “Of course not. I just...” She longed to dodge Diane’s gaze again, but Diane’s hand was still there, holding her in place. “I just don’t want you to be mad at me,” she whispered. “I... you...”

“I’m important to you.” Diane was still giving her that gentle smile. Helena could bathe in the light of that smile. “I know. I know how hard this was, Helena.”

“Y-You...” That hadn’t been what Helena was going to say.

She’d been trying to say *you scare me a little*.

Or more than a little. Or a lot. When Diane got angry, when her mood would suddenly shift and her expression would chill and her grip would tighten around Helena's wrist...

... but wasn't what Diane had said true, too? Diane was her mentor, her favorite professor, the closest thing she'd had to a... role model. Or something like a role model.

And Diane had taken care of her. Diane had saved her life. Diane knew her better than almost anyone, it felt like.

And right now, all Helena wanted was for Diane to keep touching her. And she knew that the way to make that happen was to agree.

"You're..." Helena swallowed. "Yes. You're important to me, Diane. I don't w-want to report you. I just..."

Her words felt so hard to find. And Diane seemed happy to fill them in for her again.

"... you just feel like you're *supposed* to tell the Dean. That she has a right to know." Diane's eyes sparkled. "It's what I taught you, isn't it? That authorities deserve honesty and respect?"

Helena nodded, even though that didn't feel like exactly what she'd been planning to say, either.

Diane released her chin. Helena lowered her head back down, almost just to test and see if Diane's hand came out again. Diane didn't stop her this time. "And you feel like if it was anyone else, it's what I would tell you to do."

Helena nodded. It was... basically true. Under the guise of leaning past Diane to retrieve her juice on the table, she scooted a little bit closer.

Diane's hand touched her shoulder. "Let me get that for you." Diane gently guided her back and handed her the glass of orange juice. "So, you're scared that now I'm going to be disappointed in you for doing exactly what I told you to."

Helena sipped her juice meekly, cheeks reddening.

"Oh, Helena..."

Helena heard Diane give a little giggle.

Helena squirmed. "That's... and, uh, that's why I wanted to ask, if it's okay, for the... phone code." She tried to keep her voice as small and unassuming as possible, but tried very hard, too, to look up and

hold Diane's gaze. "I need to... go home for a little and... figure things out. And I need to call them and tell them what I know. Like you said I should have done two days ago."

For a moment, Diane was totally silent. But her smile didn't fade. She just stared at Helena, eyes glinting, as if Helena were a child who had said she was going to grow up to be a T-rex.

"Helena, sweetie." She turned away, shaking her head ruefully. "Are you being serious?"

Helena's heart started to hit her chest hard. "I-I have to, Diane, I'm not—I—you—" She'd tried so hard to be diplomatic, she'd tried, she—she needed to be firm, but fear was gripping her and shaking her like a rabbit in a wolf's—

"Helena." She heard Diane chuckle. "I already resigned yesterday. Did you already forget?"

Helena's breath caught, nearly causing her to choke on the juice. "W-What?"

Diane quickly took the glass from her and set it back on her endtable. "What?"

"You—but you—"

"Where did you think I went yesterday?" Diane leaned in, tilting her head quizzically. "I did tell you this, Helena. You just forgot again."

"I... I don't..." Helena's cheeks burned. She wrung her hands in her lap, staring at them intently.

"Honestly, your brave little..." Diane waved a hand dismissively. "... *confrontation* was a wake-up call. I'd been thinking about quitting for a while now, but I'd kind of... I guess I'd convinced myself my little white lie wasn't really doing any harm."

Helena sputtered. She had no idea what to say. Professor Wood calling her blatant academic fraud a *white lie* barely even rated her attention above this reveal.

"But then you came here, and..." Diane chuckled softly, clasping her hands between her knees. "... and I realized that there were girls like you in my class."

"Girls like..." Helena's mouth was dry. She wished she had the orange juice back, but she didn't dare interrupt to reach for it.

"Girls who... I don't know. Idolized me. Put me on a pedestal." Diane turned to her, and her smile was deeply pitying now, with no attempt to conceal it. "I mean, the way you spoke, how comfortable you were getting *so* drunk around me..."

Helena shook her head slightly, still not daring to face her professor. That hadn't been how it had gone. Diane had assured her the drink was mild. Hadn't she? Even that night, it had felt so confused...

And it was hard to fact-check when her heart was burning straight through her chest. Girls like her. Girls who idolized Diane. She couldn't protest it, even if she'd felt safe to do so. She couldn't say a word against it. She just had to sit here and take it, because it was so clearly fucking true. Otherwise none of this would have ever happened. None of this.

"That kind of... worship." Helena flinched slightly as she felt Diane's fingers running through her hair. "Infatuation. Unrequited crushes..."

Helena's whole body seized up in a silent agony of shame and rejection.

"Not specifically you, of course." Diane added this as if to forestall any arguments—like Helena was in any state to argue. "But the way you acted, it was... well, definitely how you came across. And with all these secrets, I just didn't feel *comfortable* with it, Helena."

Helena swallowed. "You, um..." She forced herself to look Diane in the eye again. It felt nearly impossible. It felt like staring straight into windswept snow. "You didn't seem to mind with your *other* TAs."

She'd meant the line to seem a little biting. It was reckless, but she couldn't take any more of this, and Diane *needed* to remember that she'd done more than just fraud. Her tone was still more hesitant, more apologetic than she liked.

Diane just looked bemused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... Mark." Helena gripped her own hands tightly, steeling her nerve. "And Susan." She was sure she'd brought this up the first evening. Hadn't she? "I know *Body Language 411* is just... you know."

"I know...?" Diane looked quizzical. At least she was still smiling, but there was a metallicness to her eyes that cautioned Helena. *Watch your step*, those eyes seemed to say. *You were doing so well.*

"It... certainly feels like you don't ever have anything ready for the classes, doesn't it? And you only ever let in a small number of attractive students."

Diane raised an eyebrow. "Like you?"

Helena's cheeks heated up. She brought her legs together, shrinking back slightly. "A-And... and the extra-credit projects, with the 'private work sessions'..."

“Those are standard for higher-level courses, Helena.” Diane’s voice was patient. Her smile was not.

“D-Despite never...” Helena hesitated, struggling to rally herself. “I mean, you never seemed to grade us on anything?” She felt intense *deja vu*. She’d definitely talked about this the other night, hadn’t she? “So it feels a little... um. Weird? Don’t you think?”

Diane blinked.

She let out a soft sigh. “I *really* think you should...”

Helena wanted to interrupt. She wanted to ask if Diane thought she was an idiot, if Diane thought nobody could connect the dots. She wanted to point out that Susan and Mark were the *only* students she’d seen doing ‘extra credit’ meetings, even though she and two other students had taken the course, even though she *knew* her grades were higher than Susan’s. She wanted to be forceful. To stop Diane from making yet another of Helena’s accusations melt into tree sap right beneath her feet.

Helena fidgeted in her lap and waited for Diane to explain.

“... be careful, Helena,” Diane continued slowly, “assuming these things about your peers. And about me. I may have fudged a reference on my resume, but that is a *far* cry from these kinds of accusations. I seriously hope you haven’t shared any of these fantasies with them.”

“But—but I—”

“Mark is only twenty. That would be a pretty serious age gap, Helena.”

Helena’s cheeks heated up. She was only a year older than Mark. “That’s—that’s what I—”

“I offer extra credit assignments to students who I think will make the most of them.”

“B-But—no, but why only—”

“Sometimes we have to meet to hash out details. But I would hope my students are capable of remaining professional with me.”

“But it’s always—”

“And Mark and Susan,” Diane went on, “are always excellent—”

“Why not me?” Helena burst out.

Diane stared at her, appearing genuinely startled.

Helena's whole body tightened as she realized what she'd just said. For a moment, she felt frozen, searching for the part of herself that knew how to speak. It had suddenly made itself very scarce. She dug her nails into her legs. "I-I mean... you... *I* would have done extra credit, I was..."

She trailed off awkwardly. Her gaze felt locked on her knees. She needed to look up, but she was completely paralyzed. Why had she said it like that? Was it as... as revealing as it had felt?

"... Helena." Diane's voice was very slow, very measured. "Are you... *sure* that this is actually about misconduct?"

Helena's cheeks heated up. "I'm not... you're..."

"Take a deep breath."

Helena breathed in deeply, and was ashamed of how hard it was, how her whole body shuddered with the effort.

"Helena. I need you to be honest with me. Can you do that?"

Helena managed to lift her gaze. She felt meek. Cowed. Diane looked down at her with a kind of gentle calm Helena wished she could sink deep into and drown inside.

"Are you sure," Diane said, reaching to touch Helena's shoulder, "*beyond a shadow of the doubt*, that these accusations are completely untouched by... jealousy?"

Helena squeaked. "I-I—"

"Deep breaths." At Diane's words, Helena chest rose and fell. "Say yes or no."

Helena swallowed. She nodded. "Yes, Diane."

"Yes, they are...?" Diane's hand trailed down Helena's arm.

Helena's gaze slipped free of Diane's to follow that hand. "U-Untouched," she whispered.

Diane's lips seemed to twitch.

That sight shifted something inside Helena. Wires tugged. Helena snapped back to reality, and she flinched away from Diane's hand. "I-I'm—Professor Wood, you aren't exactly disproving the allegations of inappropriate conduct right now."

At this, Diane drew back. Her expression again became controlled and neutral, but Helena had *seen* that little almost-smirk, she was sure she had. “Helena.” Diane let out a sigh, turning away and scooting away slightly. Helena hated the immediate pangs of remorse. “I’ve already resigned. You’ve gotten what you want. Do you want something more from me?” Diane shot her a look, eyes narrowed slightly. “Or are you ready to go?”

Helena flinched. She felt that sudden paralyzing terror again, Diane’s contempt bearing down on her like hammerstrokes, and she had to fight to whimper out, “G-Go?”

“Back to bed.” Diane looked equal parts confused and annoyed. “Or did you not still plan to take the day in?”

Helena felt whiplash. She’d been so desperate to get out of here, but at the prospect of Diane forcing her out, she’d felt so... cold inside.

But *back to bed*?

“Wait.” She bit her lip, trying to refocus, to recover some momentum. “I still... I’m sorry.” She didn’t know what she was apologize for. “I’m not trying to... to pester you, Diane, I’m really not. But you’re going too fast.”

Diane’s expression held, just for a moment. Then it softened slightly. “Oh, Helena... you’re the one who wanted to have this conversation in the middle of breakfast.”

“I know.” Helena nodded quickly. “I still... I mean, I thought you...”

Diane reached back and retrieved the glass. She handed it to Helena. “Here. Drink your juice, sweetie.” She gave Helena the smallest of smiles. “I’ll be right back.”

Sweetie. Helena gulped the juice down.

Diane was a few steps away when her professor paused and glanced back at her. “You know, Helena. I’m sorry if it seemed like I was favoring Mark and Susan over you. I know that must have stung.”

Helena set the glass down in her lap to grip it tightly between her knees. She didn’t know how to respond.

“But if it’s any consolation.” Diane smiled faintly. “You’re the only one of my students who I’ve ever ‘taken to bed’.”

Helena felt like she’d been shoved facefirst into fire. Her heart started to pound. “W-Wh—”

Diane's giggles stayed behind to haunt her as her professor disappeared into the kitchen.

Only then did Helena register that she still hadn't gotten the phone code.

* * *

Diane was taking a while to get back.

Helena squirmed in the confines of an all-too-familiar silence. She'd never liked being alone. She wondered if Diane knew that.

It had happened again. This maybe had been the worst yet, because she was fully lucid this time. Wasn't she? She *felt* drunk around Diane even when she hadn't had a drop. Diane knew her so well, knew just what to say to fluster her, to leave Helena feeling so unsure, so desperate. The fact that Diane posed zero physical threat didn't make Helena any less *scared* of her anger.

It hadn't even been two days, and she was already so...

She clenched her fists. She had to ask for the phone code. Call someone. She had to get out of this fucking house already. Had to get out and... get some perspective.

She was missing her Thursday classes right now. People would be worrying about her.

Wouldn't they?

Somebody would. She hoped.

It didn't matter. She had to go. Even if the thought of returning and being asked where she'd been made her physically sick.

Even if a tiny part of Helena whispered dark treacherous ideas. Diane had never been so close to her before. Helena had never felt so...

... and, well, Diane *had* resigned, so hadn't Helena gotten what she wanted?

If Helena left now, Diane might never forgive for all this. The fact that Diane hadn't made her leave yet... that had to mean something, didn't it? That something might be...

"This is wrong," she whispered to herself. "Sh-She's *fucking* with you."

She wasn't sure if she hated the doubt in her voice more than the fact that she'd said it at all.

The sound of her own voice, though, and the strangeness of it, put her in mind of something. She leaned forward and peered underneath the little endtable.

She hesitated, glancing towards the kitchen archway. Diane was still nowhere to be seen.

She scooted to the leftmost side of the couch, set down her glass, and reached for something resting beneath the table.

She'd completely forgotten about it. In all the... excitement, most of her preparations for the visit had completely slipped her mind.

She grasped the strap of her backpack, hesitated, then reached down to unzip the smallest pocket.

She'd completely forgotten that she'd been feeling *really fucking paranoid* that night.

Helena pulled out her old digital recorder. It was switched off, obviously. The battery was definitely dead.

She ran a finger over the buttons. Her heart thudded dully in her chest. This, cradled in her hands, was all the perspective she needed.

That entire humiliating night. She barely trusted her memories of it anymore.

She needed to find a charging cable.

Footsteps came from the kitchen.

Helena's whole body lurched.

She released the backpack and shoved herself back into place. With no idea where to put the recorder, she tucked it under her shirt and folded her arms tightly to conceal the shape and tried to look innocent as Diane re-entered the room.

Diane appeared through the open archway carrying a steaming mug in one arm and a large bowl. "I thought you might like some tea," she said, smiling. She was smiling at Helena again. Helena felt little butterflies battling in her gut.

Helena glanced at her empty glass of orange juice. "Um, thanks, but I'm not really..."

She would have sooner asked for a soda, but it was a little late now.

“Thirsty?” Diane giggled. “Yeah, I didn’t think you would be, but...” She held up the bowl, and Helena noticed the distinct buttery smell of popcorn. “If you’re not gonna hydrate, I don’t have to share any of this.”

Helena blinked. “W...”

“We’re watching a movie, remember?” Diane blinked back, looking puzzled. “Did you forget?”

“N-No, I remember!” Helena flushed. She couldn’t, but she’d said all kinds of things during the fever. Had she really agreed to watch something today? “It’s just, I really need to be heading...”

“Oh! Your backpack.” Diane walked over and picked it up. She looked down at the open pocket, then at Helena. “Did you need something from this?”

Helena’s breath caught. It was a strange question, but Diane couldn’t have any idea how dangerous it felt to Helena. She shook her head. “Just... just looking for my, um. Makeup kit.”

“Oh!” Diane stared blankly. Her lips quirked. “Did you find it?”

Helena shook her head mutely. *‘Makeup kit’? What? You couldn’t think of anything else?*

Lying at all felt stupid and petty, but to reveal she’d recorded the conversation—and that she was planning on listening back, that she *needed* to because her own memories were so blurry—was definitely something that would upset Diane, or make Diane think Helena was being paranoid and hysterical again, and Helena couldn’t bear either.

Helena knew Diane couldn’t actually ‘send her back to bed’ like she was an eight-year-old. But she didn’t want to tempt Diane to try.

“Well.” Diane chuckled softly, setting the bowl in Helena’s lap—Helena was just grateful for the extra cover for the device—and the mug on the endtable. She put it on the table next to Helena this time, at least, so Helena wouldn’t need to reach over to get a drink.

Which she probably wouldn’t, anyways. Helena hated tea. She didn’t like bitter things, and caffeine made her jittery.

The popcorn did smell good, though, like the perfect mix of real butter and the cheap fake stuff. She still felt pretty hungry, even after the breakfast.

Inwardly, she knew she needed to turn this down. It was time to go.

But... one movie couldn't hurt, could it? Diane *had* already quit. Helena had already missed her morning classes, and nobody would necessarily expect her back just yet.

It could be nice to rest a little first. To let some of the tension between her and Diane fade away.

Besides, her ride would take a while to arrive, considering how remote Diane's place was. She could text them during the movie.

Which she needed to ask about. The phone. The new phone code. She turned to Diane—

Diane sat down next to her. Right next to her this time, the skin of her bare legs nearly brushing Helena's. Her heat radiated against Helena. Helena could smell her cinnamony perfume.

Helena wondered why she hadn't noticed before how... casually Diane was dressed this morning. That pale plaid blue button-up blouse was almost translucent, and her above-knee shorts looked... very comfortable, and very inappropriate for a school setting.

Helena swallowed. "Did you, um..." She felt crazy for asking. "... change clothes?"

"Hm?" Diane blinked back at her as she stretched forward to pick up the remote. Her back arched, and Helena tried very hard not to notice how the motion made the buttons strain against her ample chest motion. "Oh, yeah, I spilled some butter on myself earlier. That's why I took so long to get back here."

"Oh."

"Yeah. So you better be grateful, Helena." Diane's eyebrows arched. "I risked near-fatal injuries getting you this popcorn."

Helena's heart fluttered, less at the words and more at how casual Diane was being with her all of a sudden. She giggled, ducking her head.

It didn't seem worth asking why Diane had had a spare change of clothes handy. There'd probably been clean clothes in the laundry room, although she... wasn't actually sure where Diane's laundry room was relative to the kitchen. She just knew Diane would have an explanation.

It didn't matter. Diane was flipping through menus now.

Helena tried to settle down. She munched on some popcorn and leaned back in her seat, trying to, just for a minute, let all the anxieties about noir sleuthing and secret audio recorders slip away.

It was surprisingly easy. Everything about this felt so... normal. Gentle.

Like a date.

As long as she didn't overthink things.

As long as she didn't mess it up.

"Oh, I know a great miniseries," Diane was saying. She reached into the bowl to retrieve some popcorn, and Helena tried not to think about where Diane's hand was in relation to Helena's body. "I'll bet you'll love it. You like horror, right?"

Helena hated horror. She'd barely made it through *Young Frankenstein* while clinging to Amber's arm. Amber had made fun of her for it for days after, bringing it up to shared friends at any opportunity, stealing teasing kisses whenever Helena started being too sensitive over the teasing so Helena wouldn't make a scene.

Helena smiled and nodded.