

Murder at Jamestown

Chapter Eight: Two Lips

Jamestowne Colony, 1621

Olaudah stood watching his master from across the tilled field. The brutal sun beat down on him and he was sweating profusely, though it was barely past dawn. In the time he had been on this land, in this village, Oludah had become used to discomfort, to heat, to hard labor.

When he had come here, it was to begin again. He sold his years to these white men, indentured, they called it, but it was only for a time. He had little say over his hours or his home, only the counting of the days as they went past, and the paper he kept carefully folded in the skin pouch at his neck, the one they said showed when he was free once more.

Olaudah counted himself blessed. Many of the men who had traveled over the sea to this shore had found themselves tied to mas-

ters who were cruel, who worked them far harder than the masters themselves would work, who demanded that these indentured workers carry the weight and the heat of the fields on their own brown backs. Jeremiah was not an easy master for Oludah, but he worked alongside him, and there was a kinship there. Oludah knew that the white man had come here himself to begin anew, and that there was a deep darkness inside him that came from long ago. The black man watched his master driven by that blackness, and knew it was best to drive it into the soil and let it rot in the ground, where it belonged.

And so Oludah worked hard, he sweated, he labored--for himself, but also over time for this white man filled with blackness, because indentured or not, Oludah understood that if the pain Jeremiah carried wasn't pushed down by plow and axe, it would bleed out in fists and knives. His own life was better if his master kept his hands in the soil.

As Jeremiah stood across the field, Oludah knew that the formation of this New Towne was of great meaning to the white men here. It seemed like freedom to them, and Oludah laughed sardonically to himself. Of course they saw it as freedom, moving outside the gates of the fortress. They did not see what death awaited them out here, beyond the fields.

Wild animals. Fast ones, even too fast for their guns.

Wild men. Smart ones, silent on their bare feet and native to this land.

But even that was less of a threat than the white men were to themselves. Olaudah had seen their wild eyes, fueled by greed as they surveyed this land. Away from the fort, with so much rich soil stretching across the river plateau, Olaudah knew that there would be fighting amongst the white men--not the kind as with the tribes, but the civilized kind that white men preferred, waged with words and with laws and with buildings and with roads.

No, they were not free. No more than Olaudah was free. But at least in his skin pouch, alongside the claw and stone he had carried with him from his tribal home across the water, he had papers saying he would one day have his freedom. For all that Jeremiah looked down the road, Olaudah knew the white man would find no freedom there.

Jamestown, Present Day

Archaeobotany, Kitty learned when she arrived for her very first day of graduate school, can be terminally dull. Her college courses

had cured her of the mistaken image nearly every archaeology student has of the professional archaeologist: which is to say, she knew the job wasn't Indiana Jones. It was record-keeping and plotting out digs in one-meter square increments. It was shovel shaving, that particular method by which thin layers of soil are removed using a flat shovel, centimeters at a time, gradually and systematically, and with scale drawings made at every stage. Archaeology was far more writing on small plastic zippered storage bags with permanent marker than swapping bags of heavy sand for ancient golden idols, and Kitty knew exactly zero scientists in her circle who had ever, even once, been forced to escape from a massive rolling sphere.

So the fact that archaeology wouldn't be Hollywood levels of exciting wasn't news. The concept that here particular field of specialization might be MORE monotonous was a bit of a disappointment, however.

At least, it was at first.

Botanical remains are first divided into fractions. This is the technical term for the division of any solid fragments in a soil sample, broken apart by the size of the fragments. Various sieves, each with slightly larger openings than the one beneath it, are used to sift the soil, and the fragments fall until they reach a size of sieve through which

they can't pass--like a stack of Chinese bamboo steamer baskets, if the weaving in the base of the basket got progressively smaller as you worked your way down the stack to the table. Each size of fraction was then examined individually: the larger portions, called macroremains, were evaluated using the naked eye, while the smaller fraction, microremains, would often be viewed through a microscope.

Where they would be drawn. To scale. Often the pieces could measure smaller than half a millimeter across, and individually were significantly uninspiring. But in the aggregate, taken all together, they painted a picture. They told a story. They revealed not just history, but human culture and the lives of a single person who farmed and cooked and ate, maybe thousands of years ago.

That fact alone would have been enough to hold Kitty's attention, but she learned in her first semester working in the basement lab that she didn't just not mind so much--she actually CRAVED the silence and tedious, meticulous work involved.

The department had issued her a key the second day she arrived on campus. It was a gorgeous fall day, the kind you can only really discover in New England in September, so different from the late-summer-lingering-on that Kitty had been used to down South growing up. She was left to find the door on her own, the key having been handed

to her by a faceless scholarship student in the bursar's office in another building across campus. The key was heavy and brass, stamped with the words "DO NOT DUPLICATE" in aggressive all-caps.

Down a grey corridor under institutional lighting, the door had been dead center of the hallway, exactly too far to have been reached conveniently from either of the entrances to the building when carrying heavy boxes, or when searching for an unfamiliar location. After entering through the main doors, wandering down the hall, fearing she was lost and so exiting the building to start again from the other end, Kitty had at last landed on the correct room number, inserted her shiny new key, and turned the knob to enter the lab.

It may as well have come from a novel. A novel set in the time between the wars, in Jolly Olde England. The room had nine-foot ceilings hung with industrial light fixtures, only one of which was illuminated where it hung over rows and rows of very tall, spindly open storage shelves. They extended to Kitty's left and behind the door further than she could see in the low light, and stretched across the width of the room. Every shelf was stacked with a vast array of boxes, buckets, paper-wrapped objects, bins, and make-shift storage devices; in contrast to the higgledy-piggledy nature of the objects on the shelves, the front of every opening was neatly labeled with bright white tape, tidy black

print identifying the items held in the ad hoc bays, and the items spaced far enough apart from one another to avoid any confusion. It was like the private library of a persnickety packrat. Kitty loved it immediately.

There, comforted by the pervasive odor of dust and old books, Kitty met a dismissive PhD student who gave her the most cursory of tours followed by what was certainly a sub-standard initial tutorial in how to fraction and separate a soil sample, and then promptly departed, leaving no more light or illumination behind than the warm bulb over the lab table. Kitty began that day to teach herself the finer points of archaeobotany, fearing that if she admitted to her advisor two buildings over and three floors up how little she knew that she would be dismissed or, worse, disregarded immediately.

And as she taught herself to handle the samples, to record the data, to distinguish the species of seed she saw beneath her microscope and in the palm of her gloved hands, Kitty found that she loved it. She loved the minutiae of it, the exactness, the way that analyzing a sample demanded all her focus. She loved the quiet, the hidden nature of the lab, the fact that no one ever came looking for her there in the depths of the shelving. She loved that there were stages of the work when her mind was free to roam, where she could listen to music or books on her headphones and watch as an observer while her hands went through the steps by muscle memory--and that as soon as her thoughts turned in on

themselves, as soon as her mind began to worry at old bones, by then she had moved on to a new stage in the process, one that demanded that she be mentally present with the ancient remains, and the nagging worries and itching in her brain was silenced.

In the basement lab, Kitty learned that her shiny key gave her access to peace.

That was all years ago, of course, and the lab had grown even more mythical and exalted in her memory. It was certainly, even if Kitty stripped away the golden filter of first love that she felt for that place, as opposite from the Archaearium as it was possible to get. Not least because the lab had never contained a chatty partner, and at this moment, Kitty was six inches away from a very animated Bryan Brown.

"I mean, mind blown, right?" Bryan exclaimed, again. His face was flushed red and his hands gestured wildly as he spoke. "This...I mean...this explains so much! Right?"

He looked at her, eyes wide and practically jiggering in his sockets, shocked and a little admiring.

"This, this is why you lost your job?" he asked, waiting with breath held.

He was wise to hold his breath. Kitty stopped what she was doing, frozen in place, and closed her eyes. Turning very slowly and with

a minimum of extraneous movement, she gave Bryan a level look over one shoulder and said nothing before going back to her task.

“Too soon?” Bryan said in a smaller voice. He was slightly chastened, but his excitement overcame it.

The file cabinet was tall, and Kitty was working at eye level, but the lock was small and her shoulder was at an odd angle to access the tumblers inside. She shook out her wrist and rolled her neck before grasping her tools in her hands and steadying them.

“I have so many questions, though!” he exclaimed, the words bursting out of him in a burst of released pressure after the agony of holding them in for seven seconds. “I mean, where do you even learn to DO something like that? What was your dad, like a criminal mastermind?”

Kitty took in a slow, deep breath, the kind taught in anger management classes.

At that moment, as she slowly exhaled, she felt the tumblers give way and the lock released, alongside her breath.

With her hands still on the tools, Kitty turned to Bryan and said quietly, almost dreamily, “You know how runners say they get an endorphin rush when they run long distances?”

Bryan looked back at her, his face confused.

“The research now is saying that’s part of the fight-or-flight re-

sponse. That your body signals it’s in danger, your fight-or-flight kicks in, and when you run, you’re basically telling your body that you’re escaping, that you’re headed for safety. So then after, you get this chemical reward, the rush of endorphins, and it tells you Good Job! You did it! You’re safe!”

“Okaaaayyy....”

Kitty turned back to the file cabinet, removed her tools methodically and put them away, and then placed her thumb on the button that would open the top drawer.

“This is like that, Bryan,” she said, not looking at her friend. “When I pick a lock--or even, you know, when I open a unit, or sketch a map of a site--I feel that reward, like, you’re safe! You did it! Crisis solved, problem gone.”

Bryan contemplated her for a moment, and even without looking, Kitty was reminded that this man, always such a contradiction, was an equal mix of very intelligent and very awkward.

“So, what, it’s a control thing?”

Kitty pulled back on the drawer, still not looking at Bryan. She took a deep breath.

“I call it...” She paused. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d even said this aloud.

Bryan waited.

“I call it the Itch.”

Bryan made a noise, tried to disguise it as a cough. Kitty glanced at him and saw the look of distaste on his face, and unexpectedly laughed.

“Yeah, OK, not like that, not like an infection,” she said sardonically.

She paused thoughtfully for a moment.

“OK, maybe a little like an infection,” she admitted. “It comes and goes, and mostly I try not to let it come out to play too often. It can kinda...get in the way.”

“Your lost job?”

Kitty shrugged one shoulder with affected non-chalance and began skimming through the tabs at the tops of the file folders.

“How often does this happen?” he asked, clearly both curious and repelled.

Kitty kept her eyes on the file drawer. “Let’s just say, this isn’t the first time it’s come in handy.”

She pulled out a fat fistful of folders and turned to Bryan. Giving him a long look in the eye, she said nothing as he returned her look.

He smiled and shrugged.

“I had a girlfriend once,” he began.

Kitty made an exaggerated look of mock-surprise.

“Haha,” he said, waving his hand to dismiss the teasing. “What

I was going to say was that I had a girlfriend once who liked to base jump. You know, launch yourself off something high with a parachute? Like, SO dangerous. Anyway, she did it off tall buildings in major cities, I think she was collecting the set.”

Now it was Kitty’s turn to look surprised.

“My point is,” Bryan continued, “she did it for the release. Not the thrill, like you’d think? Not because it was exciting. But because when she DIDN’T do it, she’d get a little...crazy. She needed to jump off stuff to keep herself together.”

Kitty tilted her head to the side, thoughtfully.

“I guess it’s kinda the same thing. So, I’ve seen worse?”

Kitty nodded, a grateful smile curling up the corners of her mouth. “Still friends, then?”

Bryan nodded emphatically. “Still friends. You big criminal.”

Kitty rolled her eyes, and then handed Bryan the stack of folders.

“Let’s start going through these.”

“Wait, how are we going to keep them in order??” Bryan’s voice was extremely concerned.

Kitty looked at him, confused. “For real? You’re not going to ask me what you’re looking for?”

“I know what we’re looking for, because I’ve read Agatha Christie: we’re looking for something that doesn’t belong. What I DON’T know is how to pull folders from a file cabinet that was locked and doesn’t belong to me, and then go through them looking for something that doesn’t belong, and then put them BACK in the cabinet without getting caught.”

Bryan was a little out of breath after this speech. Maybe this was his version of jumping off a tall building.

“They’re alphabetized, Bryan,” Kitty said simply.

He looked down at the tabs in his hands.

“Oh.”

The two spent the next few minutes opening files, fanning through pages, putting them back, and moving to the next. Most of the content was official documentation of grant applications, payment stubs, fundraising committee meeting minutes. Standard non-profit organizational minutiae.

Suddenly, Kitty stopped riffling papers and skimmed down the text of one with Magnolia letterhead.

“Bryan,” she said.

The tone in her voice caught his attention. “Did you find something?”

He put down the file folders in his hands and stepped across to

look over Kitty’s shoulder.

“Did you know that Marty is a forensic accountant?” she asked him.

Bryan frowned slightly. “I mean, I knew he was an accountant.”

“But a forensic accountant is special.”

“Criminal?”

“Exactly. If Marty was here as a forensic accountant, he was reviewing the books for inappropriate or illegal activity. You say he worked for this Magnolia company?”

Bryan nodded. “That was the firm. I heard him mention it a few times.”

“Any idea what he was looking for?”

“Not even the slightest. And what about Hank, you know?”

“Hank was here as a student, not with Magnolia,” Kitty reminded him.

“Exactly,” Bryan told her, his face concerned. “So why would a student be holding a piece of letterhead from an accountant whose job was to look for a crime?”

The two of them looked at one another for a long moment.

“And how would the accountant’s tooth get knocked out?” Kitty asked.

“You don’t think Hank knocked out Marty’s tooth, do you?”

Bryan looked scandalized.

Kitty shook her head. “No, he doesn’t seem the type. But you know who does.”

Without hesitation, Bryan replied, “Brandon.”

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They found Brandon in the grad carrel with the others. Kitty was worried she’d need to wake him up, and if it had been Stella she might have put off the interview until the morning, but the police would be on their way and honestly, Kitty didn’t like Brandon enough to feel badly for waking him.

She needn’t have worried. As Bryan and she tiptoed down the hall, Kitty could see the outline of Brandon’s muscular physique leaning up against the wall. Upside down.

Glancing over at Bryan, who looked equally confused, Kitty stopped ten feet from Brandon and waited for him to notice them. The younger man breathed steadily for almost a minute before his eyelids fluttered open and he gradually seemed to become aware that they were watching him. Kitty struggled to understand what he had been thinking--had he not heard them approach? did Brandon assume they were

relaxing quietly in the hall for some reason OTHER than to speak to him? Did he just not care?

Brandon looked over laconically, his hair drifting away from his forehead and toward the tiled floor. His forearms formed a triangle around the crown of his head, and he gracefully lowered his feet to the floor, rolling down his body like a fern spiraling out a new leaf. With his sneakers on the ground, he rolled up and shook himself slightly, a seal slippery from the ocean and coming ashore.

Kitty looked at him. He reeked of self-assurance.

Brandon looked back and forth between Kitty and Bryan, settling on Kitty and raising his eyebrows. Kitty opened her mouth to speak, glanced once at the darkened door of the grad carrel, and gestured back down the hall the way she had come. Brandon nodded crisply, once, and led the way as if it had been his idea all along.

Bryan turned to follow, then looked back to see Kitty standing still in the center of the corridor. She squinted after Brandon, her lips pursed, then tipped her head to one side and followed behind at her own pace.

As they arrived at the end of the hallway and entered back into the ring of illumination cast by the overhead lights, Brandon finally stopped and turned to face the older two. Kitty, rather than stopping to face him, continued past wordlessly, leading the trio to the lab, where

she opened the glass door and held it for both of them, following them through and quietly locking it behind her.

Brandon walked forward, standing between two lab tables, and crossed his arms when turning to face Kitty again. His chin was tilted upward and his eyes slightly closed. A twitch along his jawline indicated his annoyance, but outwardly he appeared calm and unconcerned.

“Why are you here, Brandon?” Kitty asked without preamble.

Brandon allowed his eyes to widen slightly--which is to say, he looked at Kitty with his full attention rather than the too cool demeanor he'd been affecting a moment previously--and told her, “I want to be.”

Bryan, who in his habitually unexpected manner, seemed to have cottoned on to the subtext of the conversation much more quickly than Kitty might have predicted, given his emotional ups and downs that evening. “You want to be here in this room, or you want to be here at this field school, Brandon?”

Brandon swiveled his eyes toward Bryan without moving his head. He didn't respond, but let his gaze rest on the smaller man briefly before turning back to Kitty.

He answered, looking at her, “I'm here because I chose to be here, alright?”

Kitty saw the attitude that Bryan had described to her, the one she herself had witnessed when she arrived but which had been notably

absent the past 24 hours.

She wanted to tread lightly. Brandon was far more self-aware than most young men his age, and he was also highly intelligent. Kitty felt strongly that Brandon would have information that might help her ensure that the right person was blamed for Hank's death, and she didn't want to blow her one shot at getting that information.

“Why are you an archaeologist, Brandon?” she asked him.

She watched the twitch in his jaw trigger once more, and then was gratified to see his face relaxing.

He told her, “Because it's cool.”

Kitty tilted her head and with raised eyebrows prodded, “And?”

Brandon gave a half shrug, with overtones of his usual petulance but also of resignation. “My parents traveled a lot. When I was little, they'd take me with them, Greece, Italy, Egypt. But I got older and with school, I couldn't always go. They'd still go, I just couldn't go with them.”

Kitty nodded. Bryan frowned.

Brandon continued, reluctant at first, but warming slowly to his topic. “So when they were gone, I'd stay with my grandfather. My mom's dad. He'd take me in his library, and he'd show me stuff he brought back from all over the world. He had, like, these tiny drawers, and they were filled with things he bought in the bazaar or a silk scarf

he won in a poker match on a camel drive or a grain of rice he had engraved with a portrait of my grandmother. A vial of saffron from India. It was amazing. You could smell the wood from the drawers, and he would let me lean in really close...”

Brandon’s face had a dreamy quality, but he didn’t hide it or seem ashamed. He looked Kitty square in the face.

“It made up for getting left behind. It wasn’t the stuff I liked, it was the stories. It was knowing he thought I could keep a secret and be trusted to share them.

“Anyway. Archaeology is as close to that as I can get.”

“Why not just travel yourself?” Bryan interjected, still frowning. “Doesn’t your family have the money for that?”

Kitty stiffened, suddenly concerned that Bryan would blow it for them both. Why was that man so inconsistent?

Brandon responded as if he had anticipated the question. “I could. I did, right after high school. Spent a year traveling all over.”

“Sleeping in hostels, backpacking Europe?” Bryan asked, and Kitty was surprised to hear a nasty edge to his voice.

Brandon shook his head. “Not hostels, no. And not just Europe. But that’s the basic idea.”

More gently, and with genuine curiosity, Kitty asked, “So why

not just keep doing that? I mean, if you can?”

Brandon looked at her, evaluating.

“I’m only saying, pretty much anyone would, if they could,” she clarified, gently.

Another half shrug from the tall young man, the muscles in his shoulders rippling under the golden skin. “I could have. You’re right, we do have the money. Enough for me to travel...forever, I guess, if I wanted. But it wasn’t hard. It was just swiping the card, you know?”

He faced Kitty, and she could see some vulnerability there.

“So you’re here because you want to be here,” she said.

Brandon nodded, and even though Kitty had merely repeated his own words back to him, there was a sense that he felt understood.

“If you want to be here so badly, why are you so mean?” Bryan burst in.

Kitty held her breath.

“Who says I’m mean?” Brandon said dismissively.

Bryan scoffed, his eyes wide in disbelief. “You’re...I mean, you have to know...”

His voice trailed off, and Brandon allowed his eyes to lazily travel over Bryan’s face as he waited for the rest of the sentence.

“I mean...” Bryan squeaked, trailing off. He finished lamely,

“Everyone hates you.”

Brandon looked back at Kitty, his face showing full disdain for Bryan. “I don’t have to worry if everyone likes me. Not that I accept your argument, by the way, because ‘everyone’ is a little strong. But it wouldn’t matter.”

He gave that peculiar half-shrug again, the one that made him look both was unconcerned and totally in control.

“Why doesn’t it matter?” Kitty asked him. She sincerely didn’t understand. Even people who said they didn’t care if people liked them did, deep down. Most of the people who said it, in fact, thought they didn’t care because they were surrounded by people who DID like them.

“Because I know I’m not staying here,” he said simply. “Why would I care what people think of me when I’m not going to be around in another six weeks?”

Kitty blinked at this bald statement.

“What? Like I’m the only one?” Brandon asked, incredulously. “Look at that Greg guy. He IS going to be around, and he doesn’t care what anyone thinks, either.”

“He’s mean, too,” Bryan said under his breath.

“What makes you say he doesn’t care?” Kitty asked. “From

what I’ve seen, he’s pretty involved in what everyone around here is doing. He didn’t want to share office supplies with us, for heaven’s sake.”

Brandon shook his head knowingly. “Whatever. That guy cares about you thinking he’s in charge, but he doesn’t care about YOU, see what I’m saying?”

At the silence from both Kitty and Bryan, Brandon continued, “Like his clothes, right? He wears really nice stuff, expensive stuff. Silk jackets, cashmere coats, \$400 shirts.”

“Wait, \$400 shirts? Where do you get a \$400 shirt?” Bryan asked. It was his turn to be incredulous.

“Anywhere, man, but the ones he wears are custom. You can tell by the stitching.”

“How do you know?” Kitty asked.

“My dad,” Brandon said simply. “He wore shirts like that, with hand-stitched cuffs embroidered with his initials. He used to make sure they were exactly ½” past the end of his coat sleeves so that you could see the stitches. He said people respect a man with a nice shirt.”

Kitty looked at Bryan. “How could Greg afford \$400 shirts? Does he really make that much money?”

Bryan appeared scandalized. “If he does, then I am way under-

paid.”

Kitty turned back to Brandon. “And Hank? You didn’t care what he thought, either? Because you’re a short timer.”

Brandon rolled his eyes with exaggerated disdain. “Hank DID care what people thought. He cared about everyone following the rules, and doing the right thing, and checking up on people.”

Almost as an aside he added, “And he wore cheap shirts.”

“So, you didn’t like him because he was bossy? And badly dressed?”

“I didn’t care what he thought of me,” Brandon clarified, pointing at Kitty to get his meaning across. “What I didn’t like about him was that he was so goody goody. He never set foot out of line, never said the wrong thing. He hated it when we took lunch breaks five minutes too long, or when the sifting screens weren’t stacked against the wall by size.”

Brandon gestured to his left, where the wooden screen frames were resting against the wall, larger ones at the back, smaller ones in front.

“And man, Greg used to drive Hank crazy,” Brandon added, almost gleefully.

At this, Kitty became very alert. “Crazy how?”

“He didn’t like that Greg used his sick days when he wasn’t

really sick, right? Like, that’s not a crime, dude. That’s basic human behavior.”

Kitty looked at Bryan, who seemed sincerely confused.

“That’s it? He just hated him lying about being sick?” Kitty asked.

Brandon twisted his face in thought. “It wasn’t that, man. It was more like, he didn’t like that Greg didn’t seem to care about this place.”

Brandon gestured vaguely around him, as if to indicate the entirety of the Archaearium, the excavation, Jamestown, all of it. “You know how Greg is. Wants everyone to know he’s the boss, that he signs the checks, that he’s the one bringing in donors and hosting events. But he didn’t seem to be all that worried about what actually happens here. He didn’t care about the evidence of cannibalism we uncovered, didn’t think the field school was that important, wasn’t interested in what we uncovered each day, he didn’t care about the tooth even!”

Kitty nodded thoughtfully, and when she glanced at Bryan to see what he was making of Brandon’s words could see that the man was deep in thought himself.

“But you’re a short-timer, Brandon,” Kitty said in a leading manner. “Why do YOU care, if a full time employee doesn’t?”

Brandon looked Kitty full in the eye. “Because this matters. This, archaeology, this place, it’s about people and their stories and how

much they hurt and loved and sweated it out here. I may not care about what people think of me, Dr. Campbell, but I never said I don't care about people."

Kitty nodded, her face shrewd.

"Thank you, Brandon," she said. "I appreciate that."

He gave his half-shrug again, and moved to leave the room.

Over his shoulder he casually asked, "Now. Which of the suspects should I send in next?"

Bryan started as if he'd been pinched, and Kitty raised her eyebrows.

"What makes you think you're a suspect?" she asked.

"Dr. Campbell," he said with quiet derision. "If we weren't, we would all be back at home, asleep, in bed, like normal people. No reason to keep us all here all night and bring me in, alone, for questions. Not unless you're playing detective."

He paused for effect, getting his point across. Kitty was reminded again that while he was irritatingly attractive, she shouldn't let his looks distract her from the fact that Brandon was also very, very smart.

"Alright, Brandon. I'd like to speak to Stella next."

Brandon left the room, and Bryan turned to Kitty. His hands trembled slightly.

"This is awful," he burst out. "The tension, the questions..."

His face was flushed, so Kitty placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

"Bryan," she told him. "You said you wanted to learn to manage people better. Looks like you're about to get the graduate-level crash course."

Bryan blanched and swallowed loudly.

The two of them settled in to wait for Brandon to bring Stella to the lab.