

# Murder at the Luau

Chapter One: Welcome to Hawaii



Kitty surreptitiously drummed her thighs with her fists under the low table. She glanced wistfully over her shoulder at the diners in chairs on the patio behind her. The best seats were near the front, obviously, but they were also in the traditional style: low tables on the grass, sitting cross-legged on a cushion in front of the plate. Which might be fine for kindergarten class, but was hard on the circulation for a grown adult.

Not that Kitty wasn't accustomed to a certain level of discomfort. She spent days in the field all over the country, sleeping in a tent in the high desert or slogging through wet soil in the panhandle. Excavating a unit meant squaring off a spot on the ground and then laboriously taking the soil out, layer by layer, sifting it through a screen, bagging any artifacts. Kitty Campbell was, in short, dirty and sore about 90% of the time.

Somehow having pins and needles shooting up her thighs while sitting steps from the beach just FELT different, though.

Kitty Campbell had traveled the world, working in harsh conditions, dirt under her nails and hot sun on her back. As an archaeobotanist--a specialist who studies prehistoric interactions between humans and plants--her work wasn't necessarily tied to any specific geographic region. Recently she'd worked on projects on the barrier islands of Georgia, at the historic site of Jamestown Colony, and at the top of a mountain in the Appalachians. And despite the discomfort in her legs, Kitty wasn't fool enough to ignore that the gig she was currently on was probably the sweetest yet: visiting an ancient site on the Hawaiian island of Maui while speaking at a conference on someone else's dime. She was basically living the dream.

Just two hundred yards from where she now sat, legs crossed and auburn hair gently teased behind her by the breeze off Lahaina Harbor, waves from the inaccurately-named Pacific Ocean beat violently against volcanic rock while the ring of torches along the beach competed with the sunset glow. Palm trees swayed, a living Jimmy Buffet song but with the lilting strains of ukelele played by buff men in grass skirts as the melody. It was actual paradise.

Two hours earlier, Kitty had pulled her rental car into the crumbling parking lot off the main road through Lahaina, the classic little town situated on the west end of the island of Maui. Shaped like a figure eight, Maui was rocky mountain in the East,

with volcano and valleys and Martian landscapes that no one would ever have believed, and lowland beaches surrounding lush forest land in the West, complete with palm trees and ocean breezes. Lahaina, built at the turn of the last century and retaining much of its colonial charm, sat between the two, and was a treasured tourist destination, with a charming main street lined with shops and boutique hotels for visitors wanting to capture some of the 1950s charm of Hawaii when it first became a state.

But there was still traffic. Like a lot of Hawaii, Maui suffered from terrible traffic congestion and poor maintenance of roads, making travel around Maui the one blight on her otherwise magical visit so far. After spending more than an hour on a two-lane highway traveling from the apartment she'd rented in the (more affordable and less touristy) town of Kihei, at the narrow neck of the island, she had been more than ready to park and head inside. Bumper-to-bumper had no place in paradise, as far as Kitty was concerned, and she was looking forward to tonight almost as much as any other part of her visit to the island.

The building she'd entered had been built to resemble an elaborate grass hut, with bamboo exterior walls and thatched roof. It was low, and had more corners than any house or restaurant Kitty had ever seen on the mainland. At unexpected points along the shell-strewn path leading from the parking lot,

there would appear a bamboo screen, jutting out in front of her--and the other hordes of people who all seemed to have arrived at the exact same moment as Kitty. She was surprised to see so many others, in fact, because she was pathologically early to nearly everything, and liked to do a lap before crowds arrived at public events. Instead, she found herself carried along on a wave of tourists, men dressed in loud shirts printed with hibiscus flowers and women wearing gauzy dresses with tags from hotel gift shops, their swollen feet encased in cheap plastic slide sandals from the ABC gift stores that dotted every island in the Hawaiian chain.

As she was pushed past one of these bamboo screens, she bumped into a tiny slip of a girl who had clearly been stationed there to direct traffic. The girl took a necklace of flowers from around one arm and presented it to Kitty with a softly-spoken "Aloha!"

Kitty nodded and allowed the lei to be placed around her neck, breathing in the heady scent of orchids.

"Welcome to Hawaii!" the girl told her, nodding and smiling, then gesturing to her left with a slender hand.

As Kitty's eyes followed the gesture, she realized that each of the bamboo screens was, in fact, functional: they masked entrances along the path leading inside the hut, which wasn't really a hut at

all, but rather an elaborate ring that formed a wall around...

The most glorious garden Kitty had ever laid eyes upon. She gasped quietly as she walked through the entryway, noticing that the “wall” was twelve or fourteen feet thick, with small rooms between outer walls, and really constituted a skinny fort circling lush grass and fecund gardens. Circles of volcanic stones grounded groupings of plants dotted across the acres of lawn, looking like living crowns. Orange and yellow spikes of Birds of Paradise soared three feet above the ferns and plumeria that encircled their roots, giving off an intoxicating scent that combined with the salt air to leave Kitty feeling like she’d downed three glasses of wine on an empty stomach. For anyone with eyeballs, this place would be a feast; for a woman who had spent her life dedicated to immersing herself in the centuries-old love affair between humans and plants, it was intoxicating.

Color was everywhere. Oranges, turquoise, bright greens, plus pinks and reds and yellows. The sky was a rich marine blue with golden waves from the setting sun. The flames in the torches burned brightly over the thatched roof, with its variegated tans and browns and blacks. Everywhere Kitty looked, she was greeted with glorious color. Coupled with the warm air and the soft carpet of fresh grass beneath her feet, she could have sworn she

had just crossed through the pearly gates and found herself in heaven.

“Ticket? Ma’am? Your ticket?”

The illusion was crushed as was shoved rudely forward by the crush of people moving in behind her, landing her awkwardly in front of a gangly young man with a name tag reading “Juan.” His hand was reaching toward her, and the smile on his lips didn’t fully counteract how bored his voice sounded.

Kitty, flustered, looked around and stepped to her right, moving out of the flow of people and under the eaves of the bamboo structure. She fussed around in her shoulder tote for the printed tickets she’d tossed in on her way out the door. While she was pathologically early and ALWAYS prepared, Kitty was not known for being tidy. She knew the tickets were in her bag and not left behind, but she’d have to dig down beneath the empty gum packages and grocery receipts and wallet and bag of knitting and three sets of keys (to doors on another continent) and leather gloves (for another climate) and notebooks and actual books and pencil pouch and wallet and sunglasses case in order to find them.

She gave the teen ticket taker an apologetic glance, then felt her hand brush between the raw leather of the interior of her rustic tote and a folded piece of printer paper--her ticket. She handed it over, and with an attempt at avoiding an eye roll, the

young man unfolded it and looked over the details.

After just a second or two, his entire demeanor changed, and suddenly he was all smiles and welcome.

“Please allow me to escort you to your table, ma’am,” he told her, grinning broadly at her startled expression. “You’re one of our VIPs tonight.”

Kitty followed him across the grass, her feet sinking an inch or two with every step. He led her between table after table, all elegantly appointed with candles set amidst more tropical floral arrangements, some with banana leaves folded to resemble birds, all with enormous monstera leaves placed beneath the sparkling plates as chargers. The scent of blossoms wafted around her.

Kitty was impressed by the scale of the place. Old Lahaina Luau was one of the oldest and most traditional on Maui, and had a reputation for not only entertaining guests with Hawaiian and Polynesian dance and music, but also educating them about Polynesian culture, the foods and flora of the islands, and the music of the indigenous peoples. It made sense that this was the event to which Kitty had been invited.

Each year, the Society for Pacific Islands Archaeology hosted a conference by invitation only, at a tropical location. There were sessions on topics ranging from experimentally recreating ancient fishing techniques to the problems of preserving prehistoric

finds in a moist, warm climate, plus presentations on the latest innovations and discoveries in the region.

Kitty had been asked this year as a guest speaker--not the keynote, as she wasn’t specifically an expert in Polynesian archaeobotany, but as a specialist in her particular area. It was an honor.

As a reflection of that honor, the department chair of Maui College had arranged for Kitty and the other speakers--including the actual keynote speaker, Marcus Kelekolio--to attend Old Lahaina Luau the evening before the conference opened.

Kitty had never attended a luau in person before. She’d seen them on Magnum, P.I. and The Brady Bunch, obviously, just like any other red-blooded American, but this was her first time watching the action up close. She felt touched that Ailani had worked to secure a table for all of them directly adjacent to the platform that would serve as the performance space this evening.

From where she was sitting drumming her pins-and-needles thighs at the moment, however, Kitty was having second thoughts about whether she might have preferred the cheap seats, where they had chairs and the chairs had backs to rest against. She looked at Ailani now. Ailani Kahale would an unusual choice to be head of any department at another college, particularly the Department of Anthropology. Despite advancements

over the years, it was still painfully rare for a woman, and an indigenous woman at that, to chair a department of social science. Ailani was born-and-bred on the island of Maui, and that might have disqualified her on its own from chairing the department in most circumstances: in most universities, there was an active attempt to make faculty more diverse, which meant locals hardly ever got placed in positions of authority in the region where they were raised.

Ailani was unique, though, and so was Maui. The Hawaiian Islands as a whole are the single most isolated body of land anywhere on the planet, lying nearly 2500 miles from the nearest continent and surrounded entirely by the Pacific Ocean. As volcanic islands, the majority of their landmass was below the waves, but they were constantly growing and changing over time. They were also hard to get to know as an outsider, or *haole* as they were called by locals. The phrase “we grew here, you flew here” was a common one to hear tossed at rude visitors who didn’t understand or respect island customs.

Under those circumstances, the selection of a local and a woman was nearly essential for the study of the history and customs of Maui. A local because Ailani understood the past and the connections of the peoples around her, and a woman because Polynesian culture was the rare people group with a matrilineal structure, one that handed authority and titles through the female line of ancestors rather than the

male.

Kitty was considering the impact of this as she gazed at her friend. Ailani was physically very typical of Polynesian women: strong-boned and with a rounded body that reminded one of a painting from the Italian Renaissance, but with the honey-and-caramel skin of island peoples, and blessed with cascading jet black curls that bounced in the breeze. Her dark eyes sparkled in the firelight from the torches, and Kitty admired how straight and white her teeth were, without the orthodonture that had tortured Kitty throughout middle school.

Across from Ailani sat Marcus Kelekolio, the keynote speaker. Marcus was a large, loud man with an easy smile and a welcoming air. Everyone loved him. His booming laugh preceded him almost everywhere he went, and as an expert in lithics and prehistoric Polynesian tool-making, his expertise was in demand around the Pacific Rim. For her part, Kitty was enchanted by him, and looked forward to spending the evening in his company.

“Dr. Campbell,” Marcus said, turning his attention to her, perhaps in response to feeling her gaze upon him. Like Kitty, he was wearing an orchid lei, the traditional flower lei of respect and welcome in Hawaii.

Kitty smiled at him, and recognized that the remainder of the guests at the table had followed the

big man's lead and were also all looking at her now, including Ailani.

"What do you think of Old Lahaina so far?"

Kelekolio asked her.

Kitty's smile grew even broader. "I expected more dancing. And fire eating."

Marcus laughed in return. "Of course you did!"

His belly shook as he continued, explaining in the tone of a patient teacher not just to Kitty, but to the other guests at the table who were not local, as Ailani looked on mildly: "When they show luau on television or in the movies, they always have the fire eating and the fire breathing, it makes for good entertainment. But it isn't really Hawaiian."

"Was it ever?" asked a young woman to Marcus' left, across the table from Kitty, whom she recognized to be a visiting graduate student named Lacy.

Marcu shook his head in reply, and said in a kind tone, "No, not at all. It IS Polynesian, but not specifically from Hawaii, and so at Old Lahaina they exclude it from the performance. You'll see, the narrators do an excellent job here sharing the history but also the thought behind the program of the show, why it matters to keep it authentic."

Almost on cue, the floodlights that illuminated the surrounding patio dimmed and the beat of drums began behind Kitty. Her legs were finally awake again, and so was the rest of her--something about the beat

brought electricity to the air and made the entire crowd hushed but engaged.

For the next hour, Kitty was entranced. The performance was intellectually engaging, just as Marcus had said it would be, but it was also emotional in ways that Kitty didn't expect. There were love stories told of the old gods through dance, and Kitty learned that hula isn't just a plastic bobble-headed doll but a moving, lyrical form of storytelling that brought tears to her eyes and made her back ache not from discomfort, but from longing and heartache.

Was there crying at the luau? Kitty didn't know if crying was allowed, and her life as an academic had led her to believe it was tantamount to professional suicide to cry in front of professional colleagues, so she choked back her tears as the dancers in their banana leaf skirts moved sinuously to the beat of the ipu drums and their hands told of love lost across the waves long ago, when the islands were new.

Kitty could understand why hula was regarded as a spiritual practice for indigenous Hawaiians, as a means of connecting back to the land and the volcano that feeds it. There was also a small part of her that understood why, in the mid-19th century, the missionaries who arrived first to these islands worked so hard to suppress the dances: their sensuous movements were graceful but also inviting and physical in a way that a man of the cloth could easily consider unacceptable in a new-found flock.

Kitty felt warm.

Between the breeze and the music and the drum beat and the firelight, she felt dreamy and drowsy. Her legs might very well be falling asleep again, so perhaps she wasn't actually being transported by the luau to another plane, but it sure felt like it--and she was not fighting it.

"Dr. Campbell?"

Kitty realized she was hearing her name called, and that she wasn't moving. She was immersed in the sway of the dancers and felt the thrum of ukelele in her gut. Her eyes were half-closed, and now she was stuck: she should answer whomever it was calling her name, but then she'd have to admit that she'd been carried away by the luau, right here in front of her colleagues.

"Dr. Campbell?" The voice was a little more concerned.

The jig was up. No more swaying for Kitty Campbell.

"Yes, what's that?" she said, trying for a casual air of indifference.

Lacy looked back at her, relieved.

"The kalua roast is ready, Dr. Campbell. Dr. Kahale thought we should all walk over together to see them open the imu?"

Kitty looked back at her for two full heartbeats before nodding sharply and saying, "I mean, totally!"

She unfolded her legs awkwardly from beneath the low table and banged one knee on the underside painfully. Finally, she slid backward over the cushion and rolled over on one side before standing unsteadily and shaking out her legs. She followed a smiling Lacy, tall and willowy blonde, as she waved Kitty along the grass toward the edge of the compound.

Kitty could see that the rest of the guests were headed the same way, mostly in twos and threes. They were following the curve of the bamboo walls, crossing the grass, and congregating at one side of the open area. The ocean was to the right, past the burning torches, and there was a stretch of sand in front of two men wearing sarongs and standing with their backs to a wall of smoke.

"The imu," one of the men was saying, "is the traditional underground pit where we cook the kalua pork, yeah?" His face was wide and kind, his tone affable. He sounded comfortable, as though he'd given this speech a thousand times before, which Kitty realized he probably had. But rather than seeming bored by it, the man was friendly and welcoming, gesturing for the guests to lean forward and peek into the pit he was describing.

Kitty could see that it was approximately twelve feet long and eight feet across. The two men were standing in front of one edge, and a third was down inside the pit itself, which was fairly shallow in

relation to the other dimensions. He held a long stick, and was poking into a large smoking mass under charred leaves.

Much of Kitty's work revolved around charred plants, actually. Most plant remains preserved fairly poorly--botanical parts, after all, were exceedingly well designed to do their job of growth followed by decomposition, so they could return to the soil and feed new growth in a never-ending cycle. Finding preserved prehistoric botanical remains, like leaves and seeds, relied on specific changes in climate or circumstance that couldn't be planned: a very dry cave, or a fire that burned the seeds into carbonized chunks which could later be analyzed and identified under the microscope. So in addition to realizing that she was quite hungry after the emotion and excitement of the hula, Kitty looked very closely into the pit out of professional curiosity and appreciation.

"We dug this pit out yesterday, when some of you were on the mainland still, yeah?" the man continued teasingly. "It's lined with hardwood and banana leaves, then the whole pig is put in on top, so it gets good and hot inside but nice and crispy outside. Then we cover it with more leaves and hot stones to make sure it's juicy and tender before we take it out." There were nods around from the crowd as they watched.

"And that's the good part!" the man was say-

ing. "Taking it out is ceremonial but also a lot of fun. You all want to see what that's like?"

There was a small cheer from the crowd, which he encouraged by placing a hand to his ear and smiling broadly. The guests cheered more loudly, laughing with good nature. They were relaxed and dreamy after the hula, just like Kitty had been.

Kitty watched as the speaker and the other man at the lip of the pit joined the third down inside it. They took up positions on either side of the pit. Then they used their long sticks to peel back the large leaves on top with a flourish, releasing a massive cloud of smoke and steam that got an excited "Ooooh!" from the crowd, who applauded while the men bowed and waved, laughing.

Under the leaves was the shiny, crispy body of a very large whole roast pig. It smelled incredible, though there was a slight tang of charcoal accompanying the scent.

Overcooked it a bit, gentlemen, thought Kitty to herself.

They then levered their sticks beneath the very large mass under the leaves and heaved mightily. With their bare torsos and sarongs, it was as much a performance and display of strength and health as it was a process of preparing food.

Lifting the pig on the three sticks like a level tripod, the men climbed up the sloping sides of the

pit and began to carry it away. The one at the back slipped a bit down the slope, dislodging some soil which rolled back toward the remaining banana leaves that had lined the imu.

Lacy gasped and tapped Kitty on the arm.

Kitty glanced at the girl, then looked at where she was pointing. Lacy's eyes were rounded, but her lips were squeezed tightly together, as if preventing herself from speaking. She pointed for Kitty, but did it surreptitiously so that the people on either side of them didn't see. Kitty noticed that Marcus Kelekolio was across the pit from them, in laughing conversation with another speaker from the conference, and Ailani Kahale had already followed the men carrying their burden of roast pork back across the grass and toward the serving area.

In the bottom of the pit, where the leaves made a softened mat of vegetative material, Kitty could see the dirt that had been knocked loose by the men as they removed the pig from the imu. It had rolled along the soft, warmed wall of the pit, gathering more soil as it went, and finally landed at the low, level center of the cooking area.

The weight of the soil had pushed the wet leaves out of the way, revealing something blackened and shiny, like the pig's skin.

"Is that another pig?" Lacy asked, her voice falsely hopeful.

Kitty shook her head. "Pigs definitely don't have fingers."