

Murder at the Luau

Chapter Thirteen: Tidepool

Kitty stood in the center of the morgue. She was not confident.

This wasn't the first time Kitty had worked to solve a murder. But it was the first time she felt wildly unsure of the accusation she was about to make. Maybe more than that, she suddenly felt the weight of the words she intended to speak, and how they would affect the innocent she'd invited today. There was real heart-ache here, borne by people who had a deep investment in Angela Kelekolio. Kitty couldn't pretend that this would be a situation from which anyone would walk away feeling better.

Getting justice would mean hurting people. Omelettes, eggs. Broken hearts.

So rather than stand on the beach, wind-swept and tropical in its majesty, Kitty had invited everyone here, to the basement morgue, in all the stereotypical gloom. It was still shining and brightly tidy, but it wasn't the ocean beating the sands. It wasn't the sun glowing down on brown skin. It wasn't romantic or magical.

It was a place where the dead went to find peace. It was a place to end suffering.

What business did Kitty Campbell have in a place like this? she thought to herself. She should be out of doors, or at least over a lab table, where the flowers and seeds of plants could remind her of growth and connection and the fecundity of decay, not death and malefaction and criminal behavior.

Get it over with, she sternly reminded the reticent part of her. Just say it, and be finished. Time to get off this island.

Kitty had invited all the major players from the past few days to join her, but made sure she arrived before them to have time alone with Noelani. She needed the pathologist to answer some last questions for her, based on what she'd learned by talking--and by paying attention. The police had been surprisingly quiet through this entire event, asking routine questions and largely staying out of sight. Kitty thought it was out of respect for Angela and Marcus, for their status on the island, but she also knew they were at a loss. The exceedingly low rate of violent crime on Maui meant that the local police had vast experience with petty theft but less than zero with outright murder.

Kitty wished she could say the same about herself.

As she suspected, Noelani had insight that confirmed Kitty's gut. What they had all seen that

night in the luau pit had gone under their eyes unnoticed, but the clues had been there all along. Kitty had simply needed proof. And now she had it.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Kitty looked at the faces around her. Mostly expectant. All curious, though not all willing to admit it.

Noelani stood near her desk. She was quiet, her hands resting at her sides as she stood off to Kitty's right. There was no nervous twitching. She simply seemed to have settled in as Kitty's right hand, dependably unflappable. Even her scrubs were tidy.

Next to her stood Jonathan, tall and strong but bent, as if he were a wilted stem. His face was slack, his eyes red and turned toward the floor. He stood a little closer to Noelani than he needed to, as if the steady woman's warmth gave him a safety net.

Across from Kitty was Marcus, the grieving husband. He, unlike Jonathan, was a straight arrow and stood as if tethered floor-to-ceiling by an invisible thread. He wore suit pants and a tie, wildly out of place in Hawaii, much more suited to the weather in Wisconsin than the surf culture of a tropical island.

Unsurprisingly, Lacy was next to Marcus. There was space between them, some air that Kitty hadn't noticed before. Was it less or more than she'd seen at the luau? Was Lacy closer to Marcus? Or further away?

Kitty had also invited Ailani Kahale, the Anthropology Department chair. It had seemed wise

at the time. There were facts to reveal, and Kitty wasn't sure the police were the correct authorities to hear them. Kahale seemed like the next best thing, someone who was involved but one step removed, someone who knew everyone on the island but wasn't carrying a weapon. Or handcuffs.

It was a small group of individuals on a small island, meeting in a small room about a big loss.

"I...thank you all for being here," she began lamely.

Kitty shook her head and laughed quietly at herself, looking down at her shoes and tucking her hands into her back pockets as she often did in the field.

"When I'm supervising an excavation," she said, changing tack, "there are a lot of moments where I need to back up and get the big picture, where I've spent so much time focusing on the tiny, tiny details of what we're pulling out of the ground that I lose my perspective."

There was silence around her. She wondered if they followed her metaphor.

"When we discovered Angela..."

Kitty allowed her voice to trail off and looked around her, taking in each face one by one. She wasn't searching for words. She lacked confidence in how she was going about all this, knowing she wasn't qualified but also that she felt compelled

to do it, to seek justice, to solve the puzzle, to pick the lock. What she did not lack was confidence in her conclusions. She had examined the data and evaluated it. She knew the answer.

Which one of them knew it, too?

“When we discovered Angela, I think we all hoped it was an accident,” she said, meaning every word. The faces around her clicked in now, all of them looking at her intently.

Marcus nodded, stoic but with tears in his eyes.

“But no one gets buried in a barbecue pit by accident,” Jonathan said softly.

Kitty looked over at him and nodded.

“Agreed,” she said.

She looked at each face in turn. “Which led us to the conclusion that this had to be murder, and that’s...awful.”

She stopped for a moment and let that sink in.

“It’s just awful to consider that Angela, someone everyone seemed to adore, could have been killed, on purpose.”

Lacy sniffled and wiped her nose on the back of her hand.

“But she had a head wound, and even if she hadn’t been buried under the pork, she didn’t give herself that wound.”

Kitty looked at Noelani and gestured toward

her. “I asked you to examine the body again?”

Noelani nodded.

“Because we found...will you tell them what we found?”

It seemed faster to have the information come from the source.

Noelani said, “We looked at the head wound. It was sharp force trauma, where Mrs. Kelekolio had been struck on the skull. That’s what killed her.”

“Could that have been an accident?” Kitty asked. “What I mean is, if we’re ruling out possibilities, how would we know that she didn’t die by accident and someone covered it up by burying her?”

“I really wanted that to be true,” Noelani told them all, her voice revealing emotion that her calm exterior masked. “I wanted to examine her body and learn that she’d had some kind of accident and that there was an explanation for her body ending up at that luau, that it was...kindness, I guess.”

“And what did you find out?”

“She was hit by a coconut,” Noelani said.

Marcus’ head snapped around to look directly at Noelani rather than at the wall across from him where he’d been staring. “She was what? Why am I only hearing about this now?”

Kitty placed her hands between herself and Marcus, palm down, in a placatory gesture meant to

calm him. It only seemed to enrage him further, and he took a step toward Kitty and Noelani both. Lacy reached out and grabbed him by the elbow to pull him back, but Marcus shook her off, his large body leaning forward toward Kitty until his necktie swayed back and forth. Lacy's sniffles turned to sobs.

"She was hit by a coconut," Noelani repeated, her face revealing no emotion beyond the communication of bare facts.

Marcus looked wildly at Kitty, seeking answers she didn't have for him.

"You said...you said she was murdered!"

"That's the point I'm making, Marcus," Kitty replied, even though the size and sheer rage in him made her tremble inside. This was the part where she'd lacked confidence, in their reactions, in her own wisdom for calling them all here. To tell them this.

"She was murdered," Kitty said. She stopped talking then. She wasn't great at that; she pretty much always thought more words were better. But in this case, she wanted to work on leaving space, opening holes in the conversation to let all the details sink in. The truth was going to be hard enough. Complicated.

Marcus blinked at her. He lowered himself off his toes and looked confused. His anger was fading, but Kitty knew it was still there behind his eyes, waiting to erupt again, like magic.

"She was? Are you saying she was murdered by a coconut?" Marcus laughed as he said it, somewhat hysterically.

"Yes," Kitty told him.

"What does that mean?" Jonathan asked.

Kitty looked over at him. "Noelani and I discovered coconut fibers in Angela's hair that seemed to indicate she'd been struck by a coconut."

"Those coconuts have been known to kill people," Jonathan murmured. Kitty sensed an attempt to break the tension.

"They can fall at over 100 miles an hour," Lacy interjected, sounding more serious than Jonathan.

Kitty nodded at them both. "And what I really, sincerely hoped was that, you know, hey, we found coconut fibers and that means she died by accident and there's another explanation for her death, for how she ended up in that pit."

Jonathan was shaking his head before Kitty was even finished. "But you said sharp force trauma, that can't be caused by a coconut?"

"I think you must have a guess, or you wouldn't ask, Jonathan," Kitty said, slipping into Socratic method and turning the questions on the questioner.

"A coconut can't cause sharp force trauma. Sharp force is indicated by a wound with defined

edges, like a knife wound or a deep incision from the edge of a corner.” His answer was textbook.

Kitty nodded. “And a coconut isn’t a knife blade. It doesn’t have corners.”

“So...what then?” Marcus asked confusedly.

Lacy wiped her nose again behind him.

“You think someone hit her? Over the head?”

Lacy asked.

“Yes, I do,” Kitty replied. “But only as a cover-up.”

There was a general uproar at these words.

Kitty waited for them to quiet down.

“Noelani, will you explain what we found?

It’s why I asked you to meet me here before everyone else arrived,” Kitty said.

“We found an angular depression in Mrs. Kelekolio’s skull, indicating she’d been struck with a sharp blow. We also found coconut fibers embedded in the depression, which had been left there along with an overlapping blunt force trauma.”

“Wait, that means...she was hit twice, right?”

Jonathan asked.

Noelani nodded. “Once with a sharp object, then with a rounded one, almost certainly a coconut.”

“But why?” Marcus asked, his face perplexed.

“That’s what I wondered,” Kitty told him.

“It’s so odd that I wanted to triple check the facts with Noelani before I moved forward with my suspicion.”

“Which was what?” Lacy asked, her nose red

from sniffing.

“There was an attempt on my life this week,” Kitty said. She knew it sounded like a non sequitur but she needed them to see how all the dots connected.

“I was nearly drowned, and I am quite certain that it was because of the seed we found when examining Angela’s remains.”

Kitty saw Marcus stiffen.

“I’m sorry, Marcus,” she said softly. But she didn’t take it back.

“A seed?” Now it was Lacy’s turn to stare at her.

Kitty nodded. “When we were doing the initial examination, we discovered a seed. Only three of us were here when it was removed from Angela’s body: me, Noelani, and Jonathan. But someone soon after that attacked me and tried to kill me.”

Kitty’s hand shook a little as she said this, her body remembering what her brain didn’t want to, the terror of being on her surfboard underwater, unable to catch a breath.

She slipped her hand into her back pocket to stop the shaking, then went on.

“For them to attack me, they must not only have known about the seed, but they must also have thought it was important enough to prevent me from looking into it more deeply. Someone wanted to

stop me from completing my analysis.”

“What were they worried you’d find?” Jonathan asked.

“I spent a lot of time thinking about that,” Kitty told him. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “I think it was the species they were worried I’d discover.”

“Why does that matter?” Jonathan asked.

“Because it was an orchid seed,” Kitty told her, “and that gave me a lot of information.”

“Like what?” Lacy asked. Her eyes were round and wide.

“Like, orchids are one of the most common flowers used in leis on Hawaii,” Kitty said, looking at her.

“So?” Lacy responded.

“So, Angela was making leis the day she died. And it would make sense that some of the flower seeds would end up on her body.”

“What difference does that make?” Marcus challenged her. “Who cares if she was making leis? Angela made them often, she loved doing kind things for people, she...”

He broke into sobs.

“It wasn’t the fact that the seed was on her body, Marcus. It was the fact that someone wanted me to stop looking into it.”

“Because then you would know who was with her when she died,” Noelani offered.

Kitty nodded.

“Angela was making leis the day she died,” Kitty said. “And she was struck and killed with a sharp object. The killer must have acted in the heat of the moment, an act of passion and fear, or anger. It wasn’t planned.

“And then they realized what they’d done, they’d killed one of the most beloved women on a very small island. They needed to cover it up.”

“The coconut,” Jonathan breathed.

Kitty nodded again. “The coconut.”

“She was hit...twice?” Marcus said.

“Yes. One hit killed her, but it was a crime of the moment. The next hit was the cover-up.”

“To make it look like she’d been struck by a falling coconut,” Noelani said.

“Exactly,” Kitty agreed. “The killer must have thought, if it looks like an accident, then there won’t be any questions.”

“So then, why the luau?” Marcus asked.

“Because of the seed,” Lacy said.

Kitty looked at her. “Because of the seed.”

“Because anyone who saw that seed would realize,” Lacy continued, as if in a trance, “that she was making leis right before she died. And that...”

“That you were with her?” Kitty finished.

Lacy looked not at Kitty, but at Marcus. “I

am SO SORRY, it was an accident, I swear!”

Marcus stepped backward, bumping against the gleaming exam table in his effort to get away from Lacy. His eyes were so wide they showed whites all around, and there was a shiny drop of spittle in the corner of his mouth as it stood agape.

“She was telling me...that she could never leave Maui, that no matter what the offer was for you, for the think tank, she would never ever leave the island,” Lacy told him, pleadingly.

Marcus shook his head side to side, disbelieving.

“I didn’t mean it to happen, but she was saying she’d never leave and she couldn’t tell you why, and it was your dream!! I didn’t want you to lose your dream, for what?? For her?? For him??

“It’s HIS fault!” Lacy was hysterical now, crying and her voice rising like a banshee.

Jonathan reacted physically to Lacy’s words, jerking toward her but bumping into Noelani, who despite her small frame managed to block his momentum.

“My fault? Mine? She was my mother!”

Now Marcus turned and stared at Jonathan, then back and forth between the two.

“Yes! Yes! She said she’d never leave you, that no matter what happened, she could never be away from you again! So I fixed it, don’t you see,

Marcus? I fixed it! I always fix things for you, I always make it better for you, don’t I? Don’t you love me, Marcus, the way I love you?”

Everyone in the room stared at Lacy as she stood vibrating, her entire body begging Marcus to respond.

“She was just talking and talking, about how now she’d found her son, and her whole life made sense! What is that, what?? Like, it didn’t make sense before?? She had YOU, and that wasn’t enough??

“And I got so mad, so mad, Marcus. I love you, and she didn’t care about anything but HIM. And I was holding these giant shears, these massive scissors for cutting the flowers and I...just...”

“You hit her,” Kitty said.

Lacy nodded, emphatically. “And then I saw what I’d done...”

Her face crumpled.

“And you tried to cover it up,” Kitty filled in.

“People DIE from coconuts, all the time!” she exclaimed. “Why not her? Why not?? That would solve all my problems, all OUR problems, Marcus!”

The girl looked crazed.

“So you hit her with a coconut?” Jonathan asked, incredulous. Unconsciously, the boy had

moved closer to Marcus, as if to protect him.

“Then it would look like an accident!” Lacy nearly screamed.

“Except for the seeds,” Kitty said.

“Oh, those seeds!” Now Lacy laughed, and it was an insane laugh. “They were every where, everywhere. I tried brushing them off, I couldn’t get them gone, and I thought, well, great, someone sees these, they’ll know she wasn’t under a coconut tree, they’ll know she was working with flowers, they’ll see the leis and the orchids, they’ll put two and two together.

“Just like you taught me, Marcus! Follow the data!”

Lacy was weeping freely now. Her body was shaking like a leaf.

“How did you get her to the luau?” Marcus asked her.

“There was a wheelbarrow. I wanted to return her to the fire. I...loved her, too, I didn’t mean for her to die. I thought she should return, to where she came from.”

“Return?” Jonathan asked, confused.

“She’s Pele,” Lacy told him, looking surprised.

Kitty nodded. “That was the clue, Lacy, that tipped me off to you.”

Lacy looked at Kitty, not seeing.

“The myth of Pele and her sister,” Kitty explained. “Both in love with the same man, Pele the goddess of fire and her sister goddess of the ocean, chasing her and her husband because of her broken heart.”

“She was Pele,” Lacy repeated, “and she stole my love. I just...wanted him to be free.”

They all stood, very still, very sad, and very silent.

As the tableau remained frozen, Kitty was transfixed, but a movement from the corner of her eye drew her back to consciousness: Department chair Ailani Kahale, who had remained a silent witness to the entire proceeding, was very quietly calling the police.

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Kitty stood at the entrance to the cafe, looking across to the two men seated by the low sea wall that separated the eating area from the beach. They were laughing together quietly, a kind of familiarity between them that she would never have expected days before.

She walked slowly over to them.

“Dr. Campbell,” Marcus said, rising to greet her.

Kitty waved him off, then waved to Jona-

than, who stood and offered her a hug.

“I wanted to say goodbye before my flight,” she said. “And maybe get a cup of coffee.”

The men both smiled and Marcus called the server over to take Kitty’s order.

He turned back and said, simply, “Thank you.”

Kitty nodded, a little sadly. “You are more than welcome.”

She glanced between them and added, “I see you’re getting to know one another?”

Jonathan smiled shyly and told her, “Dr. Kelekolio says the job at the think tank is still open and, you know, would I like to go along.”

Kitty looked at Marcus and raised her eyebrows.

“Angela and I didn’t have children together,” Marcus said, talking to Kitty but looking at Jonathan, “but it turns out we did have a child. And I won’t waste the chance to know him.”

Jonathan blushed and fiddled with his own coffee cup.

“And Lacy?” Kitty asked, wanting to be delicate.

Marcus blushed, as well, and told her, “Lacy believed I loved her, simply because I was kind. I will never forgive myself for not seeing more clearly, not stopping it before it was...too late.”

“Will there be a trial?”

Marcus nodded. “I’ve asked to delay my start on the mainland until after it’s over. I owe the girl that much.

“And then we can have a new life. Me and my son.”

Jonathan’s eyes glistened with tears.

Kitty hugged them both, and the server arrived with her coffee. Suddenly realizing she was a third wheel, she waved at the men and walked out toward the curb, where she could call a cab to Maui’s small airport.

Kitty had scratched her itch, solved the puzzle. It was gratifying to know that at the end of it, she’d helped Jonathan and Marcus, both of them, find a home.

She only wished she could do the same for herself.