

# Murder at the Luau

Chapter Eight: Mountain Air



The air at this altitude was as different from the beach breezes as it was possible to get. It seemed unthinkable that this was the same island.

Just a short drive, less than an hour from the beaches of Maui, and Kitty found herself at 2000 feet elevation, high above the ocean and far from the tropical paradise of the Maui postcards. This was Upcountry Maui, the green and lush fertile landscape on the backside of the volcanic mountain the locals named Haleakala: The House of the Sun.

On the eastern, windward side of the dormant volcano, the terrain was rugged and resembled the surface of Mars. Small rocks crumbled at the slightest touch, and the constant tugging wind carried silt across the frozen--yes, frozen--ground during the night. Haleakala was designated both a National Park and a Cultural Heritage Site, and had been worshipped by the indigenous Hawaiians for generations.

On the leeward side, away from the constancy of the wind, the rain fell heavy on the slopes of the volcano. The warm air that was trapped there made

for perfect growing conditions, not just for coffee but for lavender, and abundant vegetable crops that were now sent to the high-dollar restaurants on the north end of the island, where tourists gathered in Old Lahaina to enjoy the ambiance of the downtown with its 19th-century charm and \$120 entree dinners.

The chefs on that side of the island were world-renowned, and Kitty's long years of work tracing the history and origins of various food crops had led some of them to seek her out. Arnie Gonzalez, the executive chef at the (very expensive and very highly rated) Lahaina Grill had contacted Kitty years ago with questions about locally indigenous plants on the island, and how he could better incorporate them into his menus. Kitty had been intrigued by the idea of turning her knowledge toward researching modern restaurant menus and the two had struck up a correspondence that continued right up until Kitty had arrived for the conference last week.

Only a week? It seemed like so much longer.

Her side ached. The attacker had gotten some good licks in, no doubt about that. Kitty hoped she'd given as good as she got, but couldn't be sure. It had all happened so fast.

After leaving the beach, Kitty had staggered to her car. Other bathers had offered help, but her lizard brain was fully engaged, and Kitty could tell

she was in fight-or-flight mode. Every instinct in her told her that she was wildly unsafe and needed to get far, far away. And so: the mountain.

She'd gone home and tried to sleep first. The sun was setting, and the adrenaline was wearing off. But then the worry and shock of the attack had set in, and she'd gotten only a very fitful night's sleep.

By dawn, she was back in the car and back in her lizard brain.

She didn't follow a map to get to the mountain. She didn't need to: there really was only one road around Maui from Wailea to Kula, the main residential area Upcountry. Kitty left the parking lot amidst a crowd of concerned faces, because Maui residents were a helpful lot, not because she was in such bad shape.

Physically, she was really very little the worse for wear: some bruising that would certainly get worse over the coming days, a small cut on her upper arm, and a very sore leg from the hardest of her attacker's kicks. She knew she'd gotten a good grab of the other surfer's arm, but there was so much neoprene and coverage, she doubted there was any skin under her nails, no evidence to take to be tested. Nothing to trace.

Just the hope that she'd left a mark so her attacker would think twice before coming back to finish the job.

As she drove, Kitty could feel herself chewing

worriedly on the identity of whomever had tried to pull her under the water and off her board, but knew it was useless. The wetsuit had been more appropriate to a cold-water climate, and covered all but the eyes--and Kitty had been in no condition to admire her attacker's irises.

Hoping to block out the incipient obsessiveness of her thoughts, she'd pulled quickly into the parking lot of the first food establishment she saw, and was pleasantly surprised: perched on the side of the mountain was a tiny French bakery, entirely outside in the fresh air. Coffee, croissant and mango-lemon ice cream in hand, Kitty settled into a tiny bistro table complete with sprigs of fresh Birds of Paradise in a vase. She focused on her food: the bitterness of the coffee, the buttery feel of the croissant under her fingers, the tang of the citrus in the ice cream. She wanted to slow down her brain, and allow her subconscious to sort out the events of the last few hours.

Chewing the last bit of croissant and feeling buoyed by the coffee, Kitty noticed a sign indicating the Kula Botanical Gardens were walking distance from the cafe. A short trail led off the back of the open-air bakery, with a hand-painted sign leading her toward an installment of local plants.

Kitty sighed happily. Few things could settle her brain than walking through carefully organized nurseries or botanical gardens, and this was a

serendipitous discovery.

She checked that her car was locked and stepped on the path. It was well-maintained, the edges lined with hop bush, monstera leaves and various grasses. As Kitty walked further down the half-mile stretch between the botanical garden and the coffee shop, she could see an increasing level of maintenance and deliberateness in the plantings, as if the gardens were slowly leaking down the path over time.

Kitty entered the small gift shop, purchased her admission and picked up a map. The Kula Botanical Gardens were actually quite extensive, and Kitty was surprised to learn they were privately owned, land that had once belonged to a local couple with a passion for native plants who had created a public space to share their gardens with others.

She walked past a waterfall and pond filled with koi, and under an arbor dripping with flowers.

Wandering along the property, Kitty entered the Zen state she could only consistently achieve when she was in a garden. Even when The Itch struck, that inconvenient urge to pick a lock and gain access to something hidden, the urge that had cost her a university position and more than one friendship, a garden was the one place where she felt she could overcome her impulse and turn her attention to something more...wholesome.

Growth-oriented, her therapist had called it.

Literally.

The gardens were organized into smaller sections, each one dedicated to a particular part of the Hawaiian islands or a kind of plant. There was an entire rock wall devoted to orchids, and Kitty was astonished at the variety in size, shape and color. Given how difficult orchids were to grow, she was equally impressed with the skill of the maintenance staff who kept them all alive and flourishing.

She exited the back of the orchid maze and found herself at the Taboo Garden, reading the signs to see that it was filled with toxic plants native to Maui. Under cover of a lush mango tree--itself toxic, not the fruit but the sap causing welts and rash on contact--Kitty found a lovely small plot of land overflowing with gorgeous flowers. A wooden sign indicated that all of them were in one way or another poisonous to humans.

She saw the usual suspects, like oleander and Angel's Trumpet, both of which contained neurotoxins that could stop a heart or paralyze anyone foolish enough to ingest them, but also some unexpected toxins, like plumeria, which was a hugely popular flower for leis on Maui, but according to the sign was also caused vomiting and diarrhea when consumed. She saw castor bean, and a kukui nut tree, both of which could cause seizures, but also unexpectedly crown flower, another plant commonly used in leis but that apparently could decrease the

heart rate and respiration to dangerous levels if eaten.

So many beautiful things, and just one touch of their sap could burn or scald human skin. Kitty wondered to herself why so much of the world both attracted and repelled at the same time.

At the edge of the taboo garden stood three wood pillars, deeply carved and painted with leering faces. Kitty stopped to admire them, looking at their bases to see if there was another helpful sign indicating who had made these and what they represented.

“Dr. Campbell?” said a voice from behind her.

Kitty glanced up in surprise. She was so lost in the exploration of what she considered a sacred and safe place that she hadn’t paid any attention to the other people around her. The botanical gardens were a popular destination, and she’d rarely been alone on the paths, but Kitty’s eyes had only been for the flowers and learning their names. Unlocking their secrets.

Which might have accounted for the awkward pause when her name had been called.

“I’m...I don’t know if you remember me? I’m Lacy Martindale?”

Kitty shook herself slightly and forced a smile. She had followed her most basic instincts to run, run, run away and find a safe place, and running into someone who knew her felt vaguely like a violation.

But that wasn’t the girl’s fault, she thought.

And she knew how this girl recognized her.

“Lacy, of course,” she said, hoping her face had taken on the appearance of polite recognition.

“We met the other night. At the luau.”

Lacy nodded, her eyes traveling around the garden path but not making contact with Kitty’s.

Kitty waited for Lacy to continue. The girl had approached her, after all, but instead of picking up the conversation, she simply stood near Kitty. She was wearing tan shorts with leather sandals, and picked nervously at the buttoned cuffs of the long-sleeved shirt she was wearing. Kitty noticed it was covered in tiny pineapples, each with a small smile on it.

“It’s...nice to see you again,” Kitty prompted, quietly thinking that it wasn’t really all that nice, given the circumstances under which the luau had ended, and that both of them would be relieved when this encounter was over.

Lacy shook her head apologetically. “I’m so sorry, I’m sure I’m interrupting. I just...saw you and thought....”

Her voice trailed off again, and Kitty hoped that they could end this interaction on that note.

“I guess you like the tiki?”

“What’s that?” Kitty asked.

Lacy gestured toward the carved pillars.

“The tiki? Carvings of the ancient Hawaiian gods

and goddesses. You know, physical manifestations of their story.”

She looked at Kitty and said lamely, “Anthropologically, I mean.”

Kitty nodded. “Right. And which ones are these?”

She was really asking out of politeness, but that wasn’t really like her. Maybe she felt sorry for this girl. All of them had been rocked by the grisly discovery at the luau.

Lacy gestured toward the tiki, but looked mostly at the surrounding plants. “These are my favorites. But it’s a sad story.”

Kitty waited and resisted the urge to sigh impatiently.

Lacy continued, “This is Pele, goddess of volcanoes and lightning. She’s fiery and powerful.”

“Sure,” Kitty nodded. “I’ve heard of her.”

“And this is Namakaokahai, her sister,” Lacy told her, gesturing to the pillar at the opposite end of the grouping of three. “They...loved each other, but they were opposites. Namakaokahai is the goddess of the sea, and where Pele’s heat gave her power, Namakaokahai was filled with the magic of the ocean.”

Kitty was warming up to Lacy. The kid could tell a story.

“Namakaokahai married Aukelenuiaiku, and loved him because he was a great sorcerer. She showed him all her magical powers, and taught him

the magic of the ocean.

“But then he met Pele, her younger sister. And she seduced him, and he abandoned Namakaokahai. He ran off with Pele, and married her, leaving Namakaokahai alone.”

Lacy was looking fully at the tiki now, and Kitty’s eyes were locked to the girl’s face as the story unfolded.

“So Namakaokahai sought revenge. She unleashed the power of the ocean on Pele, sending high tides and massive waves to destroy her, to show her sister how much her heart was broken by their betrayal and abandonment.

“Pele fled, and climbed and climbed, but everywhere she went, every crack in the earth she would open with her volcanic fire, there would be smoke that told Namakaokahai where to find her, so Namakaokahai chased her across the islands and Pele could not find rest.”

Kitty’s eyebrows were so high they approached her hairline at this point.

Lacy stopped speaking. Kitty waited, but it felt like the girl was done.

“And...did Pele escape?”

Lacy nodded. “Eventually. She landed at Mauna Loa? You know, on the Big Island? And it was high enough that Namakaokahai’s waves couldn’t reach her. But their fight will never end.

When Mauna Loa erupts, when the fire pours out and reaches the sea, the waves crash above it and that's them, still warring over Namakaokahai's broken heart."

Kitty let out a whoosh of air.

"Man, Lacy," she said. "That is some story."

Lacy gave a nervous laugh. She shook her head self-consciously.

"Yeah, sorry. I mean, I love the folklore of Hawaii, it's how I first got into the archaeology of the islands, learning the stories that had been passed down so long. And there seem to be a lot of love stories mixed in?"

Kitty nodded. "The most universal of emotions."

Lacy sighed. "Anyway. I'm sorry to interrupt you, I just saw you here and the other night...I mean, it was so awful, and I haven't talked to anyone since then...about it..."

"Yeah, I know," Kitty agreed. "I don't know what any of us can really say. You knew her?"

Lacy nodded again. "I worked with her, sometimes. She would come down to the lab with Marc...Dr. Kelekolio and have lunch with him? And sometimes I would help her on volunteer projects here on the island. She was always volunteering, things like that."

"I never met her in person, but she seems like an incredible person. Everyone seemed to love her

very much."

Lacy's eyes filled with tears. "Yes. They did."

Then she turned on her heel and walked away.

Kitty looked after her and thought some more about what she had learned since arriving on the island. A woman who had given her heart passionately to those who had the least was dead, there was literally a single clue to guide her to find the killer, and someone had leaked that information in a way that had gotten Kitty attacked.

What was she doing at a botanical garden?

Kitty was wasting time. She needed to head back down the mountain.