

Murder, Local Style—Leslie Karst

From beginning of chapter one:

Paradise isn't always what it's cracked up to be.

Sure, Valerie Corbin knew she and her wife Kristen were supremely fortunate to now reside in the quaint, still-stuck-in-the-1970s town of Hilo on the magnificent Big Island of Hawai'i—home to lush jungles, fiery volcanoes, black sand beaches, and coral reefs teeming with eye-popping tropical fish.

But at this moment, all she could focus on was the bull terrier-spaniel mix next door barking so loudly that it almost—though not quite—drowned out the whine of the pneumatic tools its owner was using on a jacked-up truck, the parts of which were currently scattered all across his driveway.

Letting loose a few choice words regarding both dog and man, Valerie slammed shut the window above the kitchen sink, then returned to the stove to poke at her potatoes simmering in a pot of water. At the sound of the back door opening, she looked up to see Kristen and her nephew, Sean, come inside from the lānai, Valerie and Kristen's little white dog, Pua, trotting after them.

“We couldn't take the racket anymore,” said Kristen, tossing her *Outside* magazine onto the counter. “Does he ever stop?”

“Who—Akoni or Larry?”

Kristen laughed. “Both, I guess. And yeah, I know the answer: rarely. Especially Akoni, with his constant yowling. Though I gotta say, it seems like Larry's been working on his vehicles a hell of a lot more of late. And I don't believe I've ever even seen that particular truck before. You think he's started repairing other people's vehicles, too?”

“Oh, God, I hope not. Though that would explain the increased frequency of the noise.” Valerie switched off the heat under her potatoes, then turned to Kristen. “I wonder if it's legal to have a car repair business in this neighborhood. Maybe I should ask at tonight's meeting if anyone knows.”

“Or maybe you could just talk to your neighbor about it,” put in Sean, who'd taken a seat at the kitchen table and was busy typing something into his phone.

Valerie and Kristen exchanged glances, after which Valerie replied, “Maybe later. But first we should figure out where we stand on the issue.”

Sean set down his phone with a shrug. “So what's this thing you're going to tonight, anyway?”

“It's the monthly meeting for the neighborhood orchid society,” said Valerie, carrying the pot to the sink and dumping the steaming potatoes into a colander. “Shirley invited me—you know, the woman who lives at that house down the street with all those beautiful orchids in her tree ferns? I was admiring them the other day, and after we got talking, she invited me to come along tonight to see if I might be interested in joining. You wanna join me?”

Sean let loose his man bun, held in place by a wooden hair stick, and shook out his dirty-blond locks. “No can do; I’m working tonight at the hospital. It’s my first time in the ER, which should be interesting.”

Sean had come from Arkansas to do a three-month stint as a visiting nurse at the Hilo hospital and was now on his second week at the job—and at Valerie and Kristen’s house, where he’d be staying for the duration of his time on-island. “I didn’t know you were into orchids,” he said in a lazy drawl, pulling his hair back from his face and retying the bun.

“I wasn’t, not till we first got to Hilo. But they’re so amazing and, I dunno . . . other-worldly.”

“Star Trek flowers, I call them,” said Kristen, and Valerie nodded.

“And they’re so easy to grow here, so I’m thinking it might be fun to try it myself. Plus, it’d be a great way to get to know some of the folks in the neighborhood a little better.”

“Like Larry?” asked Sean with a grin.

“Ha. I’m not so sure he’s really the orchid type . . .”