

VICTOR METHOS

BLACK
WIDOW

EVERYONE HAS A PRICE



BLACK WIDOW

a thriller

VICTOR METHOS

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The blood was everywhere.

Connor Jones could smell it from the doorway of the hotel room. The forensics teams were already here and several police officers with black and gold Honolulu Police Department uniforms were standing around, waiting for the lead detective.

He stepped inside the room. Plush. Lots of gold trim and white, clean carpets. All except the crimson shoeprints leading out from the bedroom and walking to the front door. And the small spatters over the walls and ceiling.

“Detective,” Gary Akanu said. He stepped over a forensic tech swabbing one of the shoeprints with a Q-tip. “It’s all in the bedroom.”

“What is this shit?” he said, looking up to the blood on the ceiling.

“This is probably where they fought. But once the fight was done they dragged the guy into the bedroom and finished up in there.”

Jones followed him into the bedroom. On the bed was something that he guessed was human.

The skin had been removed almost surgically over most of his body. His penis had been severed and placed in between his teeth... and those were just the injuries that Jones could stomach before he had to look away. Though he made it seem like he was examining a pile of clothing near the closet instead of nearly gagging.

“This is just like the one at the Dale Koa last month, ain’t it?” Akanu said.

“Not *just like*, the same.”

“Shit, two in one month. You thinking we got a serial?”

“Not yet. Third one’s the charm.” Jones looked over the clothing. He motioned for one of the forensic techs from the Scientific Investigation Section to hand him some latex gloves. After snapping them on, he searched the clothing and found a leather wallet. “Hugh Robert Neal. Forty-seven. Tourist from Miami. Lives on Brickell Avenue.”

“Brickell?” Akanu whistled through his teeth. “My parents live in Florida. I know

that place. Fucker's loaded. Even a small shack up there runs ten mil."

Jones exhaled loudly as he handed the wallet to a tech, who placed it in a plastic evidence bag. "Well, it don't mean shit now. Can't buy yourself even a second more time."

"Room's rented under his name. I'll run a search of the cameras and see who he came in with. I'm sure we'll get him."

"See them dots after the shoeprints? That's high heels. It ain't a *him* we're looking for."

Akanu shook his head. "We lookin' for a cooha? Shit. I ain't never seen that before."

Jones looked back to the mass of wet meat on the bed. "Neither have I."

Jon Stanton rolled over the forest floor and came up with his weapon held in a kneeling stance. He fired twice, hitting the paper target both times in the chest. He jumped up and leapt over a fallen tree branch as another paper target came up. This one had a man holding a gun to a woman's head. He fired once and hit the man between the eyes.

Dashing between the trees, he rolled and came up into the weaver stance. Two paper targets flipped up and he hit them both.

As he started running again, he saw someone on the ground. A man in sweats, a 9mm pellet gun—as Stanton's was—lying by his side.

"You all right?" Stanton said.

"It's my ankle, bra."

Stanton checked his time. He was about to set a course record, something he'd been working toward for the better part of six months. He replaced his weapon and bent down and put the man's arm around his shoulders.

As he helped the man through the forest, he could see other patrons of the shooting park behind him. Within a few moments they sprinted past him. No one offering to help.

"You a cop?" Stanton asked.

"Yeah, Honolulu PD."

Stanton pulled him in tighter to get him over a branch that was purposely left on the trail back to the front entrance. "You behind on your firearms scores?"

"How'd you know?"

"That's what most cops are doing here."

The man tried to put some weight on his leg and grimaced. "You a cop?"

"No. Retired."

Stanton moved him through a thicket of trees. The finish was less than five hundred yards now and the entrance wasn't far behind that. Stanton helped the man all

the way to the nurse's tent that was always set up just next to the administration building.

"You good?" Stanton asked.

"I'm good." He slapped hands with Stanton. "Mahalo."

"No worries. Probably best to tell everybody at the PD you hurt it mountain biking or something."

He grinned. "I think a few people already saw me. Donkeys just ran past without helping."

"You're a rookie, right?"

"First year."

"They're just trying to teach you to be tough. They'll be there for you when you need 'em."

Stanton walked away and wiped the sweat from his brow with his hands. He'd try again next week. But he'd been in the zone. That mystical place where time and effort melt away and nothing is left but a flawless execution. He wondered why—other than a photo and a trophy up in the administrative office—it mattered to him to have the record.

The shooting park had showers and lockers, and he undressed and listened to some of the conversations around him. The clientele was almost exclusively Honolulu PD with the occasional federal agent from a local office. They were swapping war stories.

One man with a buzz cut was telling a story about the time he pulled over a car for speeding and found a stash of fully automatic weapons in the back. When he asked the driver to step out of the car, the driver nodded, and then pulled out a .357 magnum. The officer grabbed him by the elbow and slammed his fist down into the driver's hand, forcing him to release the weapon. The bust yielded a pound of heroin and over ten rifles.

"You shoulda seen the cooha he had with 'em," the officer said.

Stanton grinned. It was an inverse correlation he'd noticed long ago. The bigger the scumbag at the defendant's table, the hotter the girlfriend crying for him in the audience.

"This fucker here's done some shit, though. Ain't that right, Jon?"

"Nothing you guys haven't done," Stanton said, slipping on his pants.

"Bullshit. I seen you on the news, man. That shit in Utah."

"It was nothing," Stanton said, putting on a black V-neck shirt.

“Heard you died, man. Was in a coma and your heart stopped. You seen anythin’?”

Stanton paused. “No.” He grabbed his gym bag. “Later, guys.”

The air on the island of Oahu was tinged with a coming rainstorm but for now was warm and pleasant. Stanton walked to his car, a Jeep Wrangler he’d bought from a neighbor, and drove out onto the dirt road that led back to the H3 interstate.

He didn’t put on sunglasses and instead squinted, enjoying the heat on his face. Since the incident in Utah when he had been placed in a coma, the sunlight was something he felt he could never get enough of.

His home sat on the beach in one of the most expensive areas on the island: Hawaii Kai. He’d made a small fortune as a private investigator in San Diego after he’d left the police department. But the money had dwindled now. The cost of living in Hawaii was over 80 percent higher than the rest of the country. A gallon of milk cost him ten dollars with tax.

He hadn’t even thought about what he would do for money. He was teaching part time [[the rule is teach part time; a part-time job]] in the psychology department of the University of Hawaii. He was one of nine PhDs in the psych department, but the only one from a law enforcement background. The other eight were academics that didn’t seem to want him in the department, and treated him with distrust and an odd curiosity. It was, in many ways, the same way cops treated him. He was a ghost in both worlds.

Stanton pulled to a stop in his driveway and could hear the bass thumping from inside. He got out of the jeep and walked in. His son, Mathew, now in his senior year of high school, was sitting on the couch with a CD blaring on the stereo. He didn’t notice Stanton until he turned the music off.

“Dad, when’d you get home?”

“Three hours ago. I’ve been watching you the entire time.”

“You saw me make out with that hot neighbor chick, huh?”

Stanton moved his son’s feet off the coffee table and sat next to him. “She’s outta your league.”

“Whatever.”

“Sorry, pal. She wants a doctor or a CEO. Not a pro surfer.”

“Wait ’til I get some endorsements. She’ll be all over me.”

Stanton leaned back into the couch. “Where’s Johnny?”

Mathew relaxed into the couch as well, mimicking his father, and Stanton

wondered if he did it on purpose.

“Next door at Dave’s.”

“Get him back for dinner. I’m cooking.”

“Can’t we just get pizza?”

Stanton rose and went into the kitchen to wash his hands. “It’s spaghetti and meatballs. You love that.”

“Fine, I’ll grab Johnny.”

Mathew rose and left the home to find his brother. Stanton pulled out some pasta and ground beef with spices and tomato sauce. As he cooked, he thought about his finances. When he had initially budgeted for living in Hawaii, he had banked on the income of his fiancée at the time. As a chemist and engineer, she made quadruple what he did. Now he was on his own with two teenage boys.

Once, in college, a professor had told him that if you were ever short on money, just run through in your mind what you love. Pick one of those things, and find a way to monetize it. Other than family and his church, the only thing he could think of was being a cop. He wondered if it was because he actually enjoyed it, or because he had done it for so long he didn’t know what else to do.

As he put the meat into a pan and fried it, he thought back to Kyle Vidal’s offer. The Assistant Special Agent in Charge, at the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI, had offered him a job as an agent. But the Bureau wasn’t where Stanton wanted to go. He was a cop, and sometimes he just didn’t feel that federal agents were. Whenever they wanted more power, they seemed to get it if they claimed it was for “national security.” A term no one understood or could properly define. The federal government, Stanton felt, might itself be a threat.

As the meat fried, Stanton walked to the patio. On the patio table was a brochure for the Honolulu PD. It had a photo of Honolulu on the cover and inside were photos of smiling policemen helping smiling citizens.

A session was coming up at the Ke Kula Maka’i Police Academy in one week.

Stanton had been agonizing over the new session for two months. He was in top shape and would fly through the tests. As a former homicide detective with the San Diego Police Department, he might even receive lateral hire status and gain his detective’s badge immediately after graduation from the academy.

He sat down in a chair and watched a few waves lap the shore. There was always the option of going back to San Diego, where he had a reputation for solving the cases no one else could. But the city now held darkness for him. So much had happened that

the last time he'd been there, he'd had a panic attack that he mistook for a coronary. His psychiatrist at the time had recommended he leave police work entirely.

Behind him, he heard the noise of three teenage boys entering the house after an argument. Mathew, Stanton's younger son Johnny, and his best friend Dave ran in.

"Dad," Johnny yelled out, "can Dave stay for dinner?"

"Sure."

He looked behind him. The three of them turned on the Xbox and flopped on the couch. Watching them play video games was one of his favorite things to do. He turned back to the Honolulu PD brochure and brought it inside but left it on the counter. Underneath the spice rack, where his boys were unlikely to see it.

Detective Jones sat at his desk in the bullpen at Honolulu PD's headquarters on Beretania Street. The window nearest him looked out onto the grass of the front lawn and some trees beyond that. He found himself staring off at the trees more than he would have liked. They looked like the trees near his childhood home in a suburb of Seattle.

"That looks nasty."

Jones glanced up and saw his secretary, Bella, whom he and three other detectives shared, staring at the photos on his computer. They were of the two victims he had spent the last week thinking about to the exclusion of everything else.

"Oh wow," she said. "Is that the victims of the Black Widow?"

"I don't know who leaked that to the press but I'm gonna have someone's ass over it," Jones said louder than necessary, making sure the few uniformed patrolmen in the room heard him.

"Calm down, no one cares that we released that name."

"These two men had families. Children. I bet they care about everything they hear about this."

She shrugged. "It's news, Connor. You can't stop that."

He leaned back and put his feet on the footstool he had under his desk.

"Something you needed?"

"Captain said he wants to talk to you."

"Bout what?"

"How do I know?"

Jones watched her walk away. Once you had the level of seniority in the PD that Bella had, you didn't have any fear of being fired, and consequently no fear of giving shit right back to your bosses.

Jones rose and walked to the captain's office. The door was shut and he knocked.

"Come in."

Jones opened the door and walked in. He sat across from Captain Kai Ma'hala and waited until Kai was done reading something on his computer screen. Jones could see a headline stating, "Black Widow Claims Second Victim."

Kai was massive, easily four hundred pounds. But he moved like a man half his size. He had played football for Brigham Young University before blowing out his knee. After that, he moved back to his native Hawaii, and Jones knew he became a police officer for the benefits and the steady paychecks. But he seemed to genuinely love it now. There weren't many people Jones respected, but Kai was one of them.

When the captain finished, he leaned back in the seat and exhaled. "Black Widow. Kinda catchy."

Jones smirked. "Clichéd, if you ask me."

Kai rubbed his chin and then took a drink from a bottle that had illustrations of fruit on it. "What you got for me?"

"Nothin'. No video at the hotels. The victims walked in by themselves. Checked in under their names. No one saw anything that we didn't know before."

"So you got shit?"

Jones shifted in his seat. Kai had the ability to intimidate a lot of the detectives under him. He just had this face that let you know he was a second away from busting your ass. "I don't have a lot of experience in this sort of thing, Kai. When was the last time we had somethin' like this?"

"We had a dad once, some janitor or somethin'. He was kidnapping girls from the University and raping 'em in his car. He'd bury 'em under Farr Bridge. That was a year before you came up." He opened Pandora on his computer and a soft, male voice came on and sang in Hawaiian. "You want the feds in?"

"No," Jones said, shaking his head.

"Well, I know someone else."

"Who?"

"Cop I worked with. I'll get him to come in and talk to you."

"I'm not desperate yet, Kai."

He turned his eyes away and changed songs. "Yes, you are. Talk to him. He'll help us."

Jones nodded and rose. He got to the door before Kai said, "Connor?"

"Yeah."

"Don't fuck it up. Tourists is how we make money here."

He nodded again and left.

Stanton sat on the dark ocean at the North Shore, the board between his legs buoying him on the surface. He saw some of the younger surfers leaving, but not before smoking a bowl next to their cars. A lot of the younger guys didn't appreciate night surfing. For one, it was much more difficult because you couldn't see well. But also, there were no girls.

The newbies were called kooks, those that were inexperienced but posing as though they knew what they were doing. The cycle that most people didn't see was that at a certain age, all surfers became kooks again. Eighty-year-old men would be out on the waves and the thirty-year-olds would be wondering what they were doing, just as they would with the kooks. Life, Stanton thought, was similar. The elderly, mentally, were far closer to children than adults.

The waves were low but the water was warm. He lay down on the board and paddled into shore. When he got near the beach he stood and held his board upright as he waddled onto the sand.

Stanton lay on his towel and stared at the cloudless, shadowy sky. The wetsuit was cold against him, but he tolerated it. The empty sky had an allure, a spell that he didn't want to break just yet.

"How'd I know I was gonna find you here?"

Stanton looked up to see a figure at least six foot five and bulky like a linebacker. Kai Ma'hala plopped himself on the sand next to Stanton.

"You want a set?" Stanton said.

"I can't even get on the board, brother. And Pua would kill me if I hurt myself and was home all the time."

"The ocean takes care of you. If you respect it, it won't give you more than you can handle at one time."

Kai picked some sand up in his hands and started pouring it over his exposed legs. He was wearing shorts, and Stanton could see the long scar on his knee in the moonlight.

“So guess what I saw?” Kai said.

Stanton put his hands behind his head and turned back to the sky. “What?”

“An application that was submitted to Ke Kula Maka’i.”

“That is odd.”

“Yeah. Thing is, under previous employment, they put *San Diego Police Homicide Unit for six years.*” He dumped the sand on the ground and slapped his hands together. “What you doing, Jon? You wanna go through the police academy again? You’re almost forty.”

“I know. I need a job, Kai. Unfortunately, I don’t know how to do anything else.”

“You told me the job cost you your wife.”

“My wife, and then my fiancée last year.”

Kai nodded and took off his sandals, burying his fat toes in the sand. “I got Pua pregnant when she was fifteen. We ain’t been with nobody else since. I don’t even wanna be. I’m lucky, I guess.”

“Out of curiosity, how’d you know about the application?”

“The AC recognized your name. He emailed and asked if you was the same person. Then he said I should hire you. But not through the Academy.”

“A lateral hire?”

“You can test out of the Academy. Just pass the written and physical fitness tests... You look skinny.”

“I run every morning. You look good, too.”

“I’m too fat. I’m gonna die before fifty.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that Stanton was taken aback. “You can do something about it.”

“Nah. Food is evil to me, but evil is beautiful, too,” he said with a chuckle.

“Nothin’ ugly to God, brother.” He lifted more sand and let it run through his fingers.

“Lemme ask you somethin’, why you wanna be a cop again?”

“I have no idea, Kai. There’s a part of us that I don’t think our conscious mind can reach. It seems to be the part that dictates our life, but we can’t understand its motivations. We’re ruled by dictators we can’t even see.”

He chuckled again. “Better than ruled by a wife that throws plates at your head.” He placed his hand on Stanton’s shoulder and rose. “You wanna job, you come see me. We’ll get you tested out and get that badge back on you.”

The waiting room for Dr. Natalia Vaquer was like every other psychiatrist's office Stanton had ever been to. His own father had been head of psychiatry at a hospital in the Pacific Northwest and then San Diego. Stanton had enough exposure to the field to last him a lifetime.

The door opened, and an attractive woman in a business suit came out. She smiled and wordlessly held the door open for him. Stanton went inside the office and sat down on a couch. She sat across from him in a chair and pulled out a legal pad.

"How do you feel, Jon?"

"Good."

"You look good. How's the Prozac working?"

"I think adjusting the dosage was the right move. I felt jittery at sixty milligrams. Twenty's a much better fit."

She wrote something on the pad and said, "That's good to hear. So what's going on in your life?"

He crossed his legs and slung one arm over the back of the couch. He knew that Dr. Vaquer preferred him to lie down; she was a traditionalist in many respects, but he preferred to sit.

"I got offered a job."

"Really? You were searching for one last time. What is it?"

He hesitated. "Detective with the Honolulu PD."

She nodded but didn't say anything.

"You can say it," Stanton said.

"Say what?"

"You have the same look on your face my wife used to get when I told her I was being promoted."

She tilted her head slightly to the side and was quiet a moment. "You've been coming here for the better part of a year, Jon. What do you think I'm going to say?"

“I think you’re going to tell me it’s a bad idea. That police work tears me apart and I shouldn’t do it.”

“I wasn’t going to say any of those things. But do you think it’s interesting at all that you said them?”

“I’m self-aware, Natalia. I’m not one of those neurotics in self-denial over the most trivial things that are obvious to everyone else. I know how bad it is for me.”

She nodded. “You’ve catalogued an enormous amount of injuries to me. Last year you were put in a coma by some man you were chasing and nearly died. Do you want to die?”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t want to die.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you also held the record at the San Diego Police Department for the most officer-involved shootings. Isn’t that true?”

Stanton bit the inside of his cheek. A nervous tic he’d been trying to get rid of for years. “I don’t know if I still do, but I did. That was because I had a certain skill set and I would be assigned a certain category of cases. Psychopaths of the type I chased don’t typically go into custody easy. They usually fight.”

She wrote something else down. “Did you notice the use of the past tense in your statement, Jon? You *had* a certain skill set. The psychopaths you *chased*... What does that tell you?”

“It tells me that I, on some level, know that part of my life should be over.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

Stanton put his arms over his head and placed his hands behind his neck. His feet fell flat to the floor. “It gives me an anxious feeling.”

“Why?”

“Because the work was cathartic for me. It was a release.”

“Release of what?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Jon, you told me once about your sister. Liz. You said that she was kidnapped from a movie theater she was at with her friends, and that they never found her.”

“No, they didn’t.”

Vaquer placed the pen down over the notepad. “Jon, is that why you get anxious when you’re not doing police work? Do you think that maybe, through police work, you’re going to find Liz somehow?”

Stanton pulled his arms forward onto his lap. He was quiet a long time. “I don’t know.”

Stanton sat on the beach at six in the morning while his two sons fought the waves. He had caught a few sets himself and then decided he wanted to watch his boys.

Having sons was an odd feeling. He had a moment when they were born that he had never admitted to anybody. For each one, he didn't feel a connection to them. Not at first. He took care of them and loved them as best he could but knew that strong connection that should have been there, wasn't.

Then one day, out of the blue, the connection was there. His oldest, Mathew, was walking around at the age of two and hugged his leg and said, "I love you, Dada." That single moment bonded them together. In a fraction of a second that link was there, and it overwhelmed him to the point that he picked up his boy and wept.

The boys came into shore. Mathew pushed his brother down and then ran as Johnny chased him. They tackled each other in the sand. Mathew flipped him onto his stomach and pinned Johnny there until he gave up.

"Come here a sec, guys," Stanton said.

The boys flopped down next to him as the sun rose to its full height. A half-circle of bright orange in the sky, the ocean lighting up gold.

"I'm thinking about taking a job and I wanted to see how you two would feel about it."

"What is it?" Mathew said.

Stanton hesitated. "It's as a detective."

"Back in San Diego?"

"No, here. How would you two feel about that?"

The boys looked to each other.

"Mom said that job's not good for you," Johnny said.

"I don't know if it is or not. There's something... I never told you guys. I had a sister once. She was a teenager, fifteen, the last time I saw her. We were very close, as close as you two are now. My parents couldn't really deal with me, so she basically

raised me.” Stanton looked out over the ocean. “She was kidnapped when she was out with her friends, and I never saw her again. The police searched for her for almost a year before closing the case. I searched a lot longer than that but I didn’t know what I was doing. I was a kid at the time.”

“We had an aunt?” Mathew said.

Stanton nodded. “I want to know what you guys are thinking.”

“Mom’s just got brothers. I think it would’ve been cool to have an aunt.”

Mathew’s eyes widened a little and locked onto Stanton’s. “Is that why you were a cop?”

Stanton shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m working through that right now.” Johnny was staring at the sand. “Johnny, how do you feel about it?”

“I dunno. I feel bad.”

“Why do you feel bad?”

“I feel bad that you had to have that happen. I’m sorry, Dad.” Stanton felt emotion rise in him and he had to push it down. That his boy didn’t think of himself but only how it might have affected his father.

Johnny thought a moment. “So they never found her?”

“No.”

“So she could still be alive?”

Despite the years that had gone by, the counseling and the medication, Stanton’s heart dropped. “I…”

“Don’t be stupid, Johnny,” Mathew said. “It’s been like a zillion years.”

“I’m not that old,” Stanton said, lightly smacking the back of Mathew’s head.

“You’re ancient, old man.” Mathew jumped on him. “And I can take you now.”

Stanton wrapped his legs around Mathew’s hips and rolled him over. “I still got some fight left in me.”

Johnny jumped on him from behind shouting, “Banzai!”

Stanton pinned Mathew as he tried to deal with Johnny with one arm. The boys worked together and took him down. He rolled away, then stood and ran into the surf, the boys chasing after him.

The entrance exam to the Honolulu Police Department was the state certification exam and was almost identical to California's exam that Stanton took over a decade ago.

The test consisted of knowledge about the most used statutory codes, reading comprehension, prioritizing tasks, logic games, estimating time and distance, interpreting maps, diagramming, recognizing patterns, controlling physical surroundings, and form completion.

Stanton had six hours to complete the test. He finished in an hour and a half, then left and grabbed a *puka* dog. The bun was holed out and filled with cheese, onions, mango ketchup, and relish. The hot dog then floated in this mixture and soaked it up. Stanton couldn't get enough of them.

He sat at a table out on the patio of the strip mall and ate. Within two bites, his cell phone rang from a number he didn't recognize.

"This is Jon."

"Jon, it's Kai. Congratulations, man, you passed."

"You graded the test already?"

"Nah, I'm just guessin'. I put in a rush and they'll get your results tomorrow. You wanna come in then and get your badge and gun?"

"I have a firearm I like to use."

"We use Smith and Wesson five nine oh six. What you got?"

"Desert Eagle forty-five."

He whistled. "Big gun. Okay, just use your own. But we gotta run it through administration."

"That's fine."

Silence for a moment. "I'm glad you're doing this, ohana."

"Why do I get the feeling you already have something in mind for me?"

He chuckled. "Oh, we got something for you."

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Kai.”

“Shaka.”

Stanton hung up and finished his hot dog and Diet Coke. An odd, peaceful feeling came over him, and he people-watched for a good half-hour. He didn’t feel like moving. The weather was perfect, the food was tasty, and he was closer to his boys than he ever had been in his life.

So why, he thought, despite all this, did he feel like a man standing on a mountain watching a storm race toward him, knowing he wouldn’t be able to climb down in time to avoid it?

After Emma left him he preferred solitude, with the exception of his boys. But now, when his boys were off doing their own things, he was completely alone. Sometimes the loneliness strengthened him, but not now.

Now it was a drain and a distraction. But it was probably for the best. Though both Emma and his ex-wife, Melissa, had been close to him, they hadn’t understood him. In addition to being a father, a provider, a churchgoing Mormon... there was something else too. Something buried deep underneath. And Melissa and Emma couldn’t touch it. In some ways, he felt as alone with them as he did by himself.

He wiped his fingers with a napkin and watched a few birds dance around the table, looking for crumbs. He threw them some and then rose and drove home.