

# THE REPLACEMENTS

Also by David Putnam

The Bruno Johnson Novels

*The Disposables*

*The Squandered*

*The Vanquished*

# THE REPLACEMENTS

A Novel

David Putnam

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*Dedicated to the greatly missed and irreplaceable  
Kyle Benjamin Allen.*

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# THE REPLACEMENTS



## CHAPTER ONE

The day the house bled started out sunny and warm. I was a rookie street cop in South Central Los Angeles. I worked uniform patrol for the sheriff's department, a job that could impact the community in so many positive ways. I ferreted out the predators, either put them in jail or prodded them until they moved on to another neighborhood. I liked working with the kids the most. I tried to find them before they were corrupted by the cancerous part of the street. There were the lost causes, but most kids wanted to better themselves and were hungry for guidance.

The absolute worst part of the job was bearing witness to the lowest ebb of humanity. I never could understand the motivation, the reasoning, the excuses for harming children. Because there weren't any. Not in this world or any other.

The day of the horrible bleeding house incident started out great. A Blood by the name of Little Ghost had been dodging me for weeks. Anytime I was able to feed my handcuffs with a predator gave me a warm feeling. He'd set up shop slinging rock cocaine two blocks from a middle school, and I hadn't been able to nab him. That day I put on a gray raincoat over my uniform and snuck up on him through a back alley, caught him right in the middle of a hand-to-hand deal.

So I was having a good day until the call to "keep the peace" came my way. I pulled up to a house in East Compton. White Street, west of Atlantic. A house like any other on the street, light blue with dark blue trim, maybe maintained a little better with a

mowed lawn and a trimmed hedge. A man in slacks and a long-sleeve blue dress shirt stood out front wringing his hands, his expression one of genuine concern. I pulled up and parked half in the driveway, half in the street, and got out. “How can I help you, sir?”

“My name’s Micah Mabry, and I’m worried about my kids, Jonas, Betsy, and Sally. Jonas is five, Betsy’s seven, and Sally, she’s...she’s eight. Yes...yes, she’s eight last October. I knocked and knocked and they won’t answer the door. Please, you have to help me. Please.”

“Okay, Mr. Mabry, slow down and start from the beginning.”

“Right, right, sure. My wife Bella and I are separated. We’re getting a divorce.”

“I’m sorry.”

He waved off the apology. “It’s okay, it’s a long story. But two nights ago she was supposed to meet me at McDonald’s. I was supposed to get my three kids for the weekend.”

Dispatch hadn’t told me this was a hostage exchange—the term used for child custody conflicts. The adults never acted like adults, and the losers were always the children caught between parents they loved, with their petty conflicts and wounded egos. The parents’ bitter emotions were the worst to deal with in these incidents. People became irrational. Child custody calls tore at my gut. I couldn’t stand to see children cry and I always had to suppress the urge to do something about it.

Mabry continued, “She never showed up. I’ve tried to call her for the last two days, so I came over here. Listen, I’m going to tell you up front, she has a restraining order against me, and I’m not supposed to be here.”

No wonder she wasn’t answering the door. I couldn’t allow him to stay if he was telling the truth about the TRO, the temporary restraining order. I said, “Do you have the court custody papers signed by the judge?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.” He pulled them from his back pocket. I checked; they were complete and in order. He was right, it was

his turn to have the kids. “Okay,” I said, “Here’s the deal. All I’m allowed to do in this case is take a report and submit it to the DA as a violation of a court order, a PC 166.4—”

“You can’t make her give me my kids?”

“No, you have to have your attorney pull her back into family court.”

“Come on, that can take forever.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” I sat in the front seat and filled in the report form while he stood in the open door of the patrol unit staring down. I knew he was staring at me, and I couldn’t look up at him. He pulled out his wallet. “Deputy Johnson, you have kids?”

I was raising my daughter on my own and found it damn difficult to juggle her upbringing with an ever-shifting patrol schedule. I knew how hard it was to raise children and disliked him a little for throwing the kid card.

He held out his wallet, the plastic sleeves cloudy from overuse. The kids were cute. What child wasn’t? I wrote the case number down on a business card, got out, and stood in the open door. I handed it to him. Micah Mabry stared at the card as if it were a disappearing lifeline.

I said, “Ah, hell. You knocked?”

“Yes, yes. I’ve been here for an hour. I’ve knocked again and again the entire time. I know they’re in there. Please, Deputy?”

Son of a bitch. I reached in and picked up the mic. “Two-fifty-five-Adam, start another unit to back. I’m going to force entry.”

I’d hardly unkeyed the mic when Sergeant Foreman came up on the air. “Negative, Two-fifty-five-Adam. Stand by, I’m responding.”

Once Foreman arrived, no way would he do anything other than what the book said.

I tossed the mic onto the seat. The window configuration of the house, outlined in dark blue paint against the light blue of the house, made the windows look like the eyes of a monster.

I walked with purpose to the front door. I'd made up my mind and didn't want to think about the consequences. I knocked loud enough for the neighbors to hear. No answer. "What's your wife's name?"

"Bella. Her name's Bella, but this won't do any good. I've tried."

I believed him and was beginning to have a bad feeling about the entire situation. I yelled, "Bella, this is Deputy Johnson with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. I need you to open the door. Come to the door and talk to me. Now." Something was wrong about the whole setup. Anxiety rose up in me, and I could no longer follow proper protocol.

I looked down just as water, a little at first, then more, seeped under the door and out onto the porch.

I stepped back and booted the door.

## CHAPTER TWO

The door burst inward. The inside knob embedded in the drywall and kept the door from ricocheting back. Water flowed in a wave from the house out onto the stoop. Little rivulets of blood floated on top of the water coming toward me. I drew my service pistol. “Stay here.”

“Just try and make me.”

“Then stay behind me.” I would have had to beat him down to keep him from following.

I stepped in. The water was three to four inches deep. A peculiar odor rolled out across the water—humidity mixed with a tangy iron residue—along with a heavy dose of sorrow.

Two steps to the left was the open entrance to the kitchen. The two sink drains were clogged with towels, the faucet on full blast. It had to have been that way for hours and hours.

Behind me, Micah Mabry wailed, “My God. Oh my God.”

Focus. I had to focus. I already knew and feared what I was going to find. Three more sloshing steps and the short hall gave way to the spartanly furnished living room. On the couch lay an inert person, a woman. Micah Mabry pushed around me, sobbing, wailing. The woman wore a thin, transparent nightie, soaked down to her waist with blood. Locked in her hand, resting on the floor at the base of the couch, was a .22 pistol. She’d shot herself in the chest.

Micah Mabry stood there frozen, shoulders slumped, his chin on his chest as he wept. He whispered, "Why, Bella?"

With wooden feet, I sloshed back to the main hall heading for the bedrooms, a deep pain in the pit of my stomach. I didn't want to go. No way did I want to do this.

The blood path on the water had not mixed and was a small stream atop a river of water. My black boots swished it together to a consistent pink. I moved past an open bathroom door. The bathtub and sink ran over, their drains clogged and faucets running full out. Why had she clogged the drains and turned on the water? What could have possessed the woman?

The gun, heavy in my hand.

My socks soaked, sloshing in my boots.

In the first bedroom I found two dead, both shot in the head.

Young children. The young girls: Betsy and Sally. The older one, Sally, her golden hair in a fan on the pillow, her one whole eye locked open, staring at the ceiling.

These children had depended on their parents to keep them safe. My face turned wet with tears.

With each child I felt for a pulse, their skin waxy and stiff. And terribly cold.

Oh, so terribly cold. I turned and went to the last bedroom. One more. The same as the others. The youngest, the boy Jonas, five years old. Yet he was different than the others. Bella had not shot him in the head. He had blood on his chest, close to his heart.

One of my senses pulled me out of my trance. What was it? Focus.

Jonas' skin had been warm and pliable. I turned back, fumbled at his neck, probing for a pulse.

Thready.

Thready, but still there. He clung to life. Five miles to the hospital. It would take longer to wait on the paramedics. I scooped Jonas up and ran. Water splashed up on the walls.

As I passed the first bedroom an image flashed in my adrena-

line-fueled flight. Micah Mabry on his knees at the bed keening, a child in his arms.

Out front, Jonas in my arms, I only slowed to gently ease us into the front seat of the patrol car. I slammed the door and jammed the gearshift into reverse, smoking the back tires as I held the delicate child in my other arm. In drive, going forward, I brought my knee up to hold the wheel in place while I grabbed the mic and keyed it. “Two-fifty-five-Adam. I have a one-eight-seven with four down. I am responding code three to St. Francis. Advise St. Francis I’m rolling in hot with a critical child.”

The dispatcher replied. “Two-fifty-five-Adam, ten-four, I’m making the notification now.”

“Two-fifty-Sam.” Sergeant Foreman came up on the frequency. “Negative, Two-fifty-five-Adam, pull over and stand by for paramedics.”

I came out on Atlantic and dropped the mic, grabbed the wheel just in time to avoid hitting a Ford Taurus.

Back to the knee driving. “Two-fifty-five-Adam, I have heavy traffic on Atlantic northbound. Are there any Lynwood units available to block intersections?”

“Two-fifty-three-boy, Bruno, I got Alondra, twenty seconds out.”

“Two-fifty-one-Adam, I’ve got Compton, I’m there now.”

The station watch commander, the lieutenant, came up on the frequency. “Negative. Lynwood units do not block the intersections. Two-fifty-five-Adam, pull over and stand by for paramedics.”

I shot past Alondra, the intersection blocked by Two-fifty-three-boy, also disobeying direct orders. Deputy Ortiz stood outside his patrol car, arms raised, stopping traffic. I keyed the mic. “Is there anyone for Rosecrans?”

“Negative. Negative.” Lieutenant’s tone said there was going to be hell to pay. “All Lynwood units stand down.”

“Two-fifty-Tom-one, I got your back, Bruno, I’m shutting down Rosecrans now.”

I shot past Compton and Rosecrans making excellent time. I only had Century Boulevard left, the largest, most dangerous intersection—and there was nobody left.

The boy in my arm, held lightly against my chest, let out a little gurgle.

A bad sign.

“Come on, kid, hold on. We’re almost there.”

We came up fast on Century. The entire intersection was shut down with two fire trucks. Fire fighters stood in the street waving me on. I took the corner with five big blocks left.

I pulled into the back of St. Francis. Three nurses and two doctors waited for me with a gurney. They yanked open my door and took the child, ran with him on the gurney. They disappeared into the hospital. I couldn’t move. I shook all over. Blood soaked my uniform shirt. Feet cold and numb in wet boots, I sat there a long time before I was able to put it in gear and head back to my crime scene, one I’d had no right to leave in the first place.

## CHAPTER THREE

Twenty years after the house that bled, I was tending the cabana bar at La Margarite in San José, Costa Rica. The usual suspects were in attendance, and I mean just that—four regulars who started around noon and stayed for hours, day after day. All four expats from the US. All four had fled under dark or morally corrupt circumstances. Like me, all four were criminals.

I'd brought my patchwork family to San José to dodge the law in the US.

The US could extradite those who sat at my bar, but instead, they worked under the theory that Costa Rica could deal with the nefarious and disreputable hiding out in their country. Only a few had been extradited since the treaty in 1992. Why bring them back for an expensive trial and incarceration?

Everyone who was not a local in the small village just outside San José had something to hide. I, too, had fled under unfavorable circumstances. I needed to know with whom I associated as a matter of self-preservation.

The first three of my regulars had been no challenge at all, not with my prior law enforcement experience. When time allowed I worked on the fourth. The last holdout, Jake Donaldson, was a hard nut to crack.

With the first three, I'd employed an elementary interrogation technique. When I had one of them alone, before the others arrived, and after he'd had a few drinks, I'd admit to my own culpability in a major criminal enterprise. Not the real ones, of

course. Looking them in the eyes, trying for compassion, and then, when the time was right, I'd reach over and lay my hand on their arm. It was the touch that did it. They opened up every time, like little children standing in front of their mothers with their slingshots clutched in their fists behind their backs.

Mike Olivares and John Booth were both tax evaders owing \$1.5 and \$2 million, respectively, to Uncle Sam. With interest and penalties, that number would easily triple. Neither had to worry too much about the US government coming south to scoop them up. Not for taxes. Not for that paltry amount.

Ansel Tomkins, the most cunning of the three, had been a certified public accountant who'd managed a big movie star's finances. An embezzler, he'd robbed the fat piggy bank and left the movie mogul with nary an IOU. I'd read about it in the *LA Times*, a paper they usually left lying around the bar. These men missed their abandoned lives and avidly pored over every inch of every column. Or maybe they just wanted to see if they had made the news again, craving an additional spotlight in their fifteen seconds of fame.

I hoped they hadn't seen my ugly mug on the front page nine months ago. All of *that* mess had calmed down now. The bullet wound in my ass had healed. The scar tugged and pulled if I stretched to reach the Patrón Silver bottle high on the top shelf. Though it was likely the men had seen my picture and read the story, they never put it together. Lucky for me. Once given the information, the Feds would gladly sneak down on a black bag operation and snag me up in an illegal extradition. They were beyond mad that I had slipped through their fingers on the lam. The main reason why I wore shirts that covered my BMF tattoo, an identifier from another lifetime. I'd also changed my name from Bruno Johnson to Bob Johnson. Johnson was like Smith, there were tens of thousands of us. I always wore an old Cincinnati Reds ball cap and dark sunglasses. Not a great disguise, but enough that I didn't think anyone so far south would identify me.

The hotel insisted that the television suspended from the

ceiling remain on. When I turned to take some glasses out of the warm soapy water, Barbara Wicks, in a Montclair Police Department blue uniform, appeared on a CNN news item. For a long moment I stood there stunned, watching, unable to move.

Her husband had been the one who'd shot me the first time three years ago, and again nine months ago. But that was a long, sad story, one I was trying hard to forget.

The four gold stars on her collars indicating chief status caught my eye. Nine months ago when I had left, Barbara had been a lieutenant. Good for her. She had worked hard, first as a patrol officer, then as the department's first female homicide detective. She had excelled as an investigator and quickly moved up to watch commander. And now chief.

Way back, Barbara and Robby had been good friends of mine. I missed them both. The camera came in tight on her face. I stared at the screen. "At seven thirty yesterday morning, eight-year-old Sandy Williams was taken from her home on Buena Vista Street in the City of Montclair. The suspect jimmed the back door to get in, as the parents were home preparing to go to work. Montclair Police Department is working every possible lead, and we are using every available resource. This is a crime of unimaginable horror, not only for the Williamses, but for any family with children. The citizens in our city have to be able to feel safe in their own homes."

"Hey, Bobby J," Ansel said, "turn that crap off. We don't want to hear it. It'll ruin our buzz."

I kept my eyes on the screen, eager to hear the rest, and I tried to keep the anger out of my tone, "Ruin your buzz? How do you think that child, Sandy Williams, is feeling right now?"

I'd taken—rescued, really, eight children—though some might describe the rescuing as kidnapping—and brought them to Costa Rica. Had this suspect taken Sandy Williams like I had taken my children? Taken her from an abusive home, where she'd been doomed to a life of pain and agony? Taken her with no other intent than to trundle her down to Costa Rica, where it would

be safe for one and all? No chance, there were no statistics for what I'd done with my kids. No one had ever rescued children like I had done. Mine had been a one-time shot.

This kidnapping was the worst kind, the suspect's motivation too difficult to ponder. I knew the odds were not in Sandy's favor. This kidnapping, like most others, was not going to end well.

My attention returned to Barbara Wicks on the screen. "We now have compelling evidence that the East LA kidnapping of Elena Cortez two weeks ago is related. We have put together a joint task force with Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and with the FBI as advisors. If anyone has any information about either of these children, please contact us at the number listed on your screen." She looked into the camera. I couldn't help thinking she was looking right at me, right through me. She paused, then: "Now I'll take questions."

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So this was a serial kidnapping. Some animal was on the loose. My first instinct was to return to the States and manhunt him. Of course, I had to resist. I wanted to listen to the rest of the broadcast, but couldn't. The thought of what those kids were going through cut too deep. I lowered the volume with the automatic control and tried to distract myself by washing the rest of the glasses and filling drink orders for Becca, the server working the pool area. Lots of tropical drinks with little umbrellas and ice-cold Mexican beers.

Images of the children continued to pop up unbidden. I needed a stronger distraction. What I really needed was to go for a long run. That would clear my head, straighten things out. But I couldn't leave the bar. All I had left was to talk to the regulars. A mild distraction was better than nothing.

Ansel, if that was his real name, held up his empty highball. "Hey, Bobby J, how about doin' this again?" I filled his glass with Jack and Coke and made the seventh tick on the paper I used to keep track of 'who' drank 'what' and 'how many.' I set down the drink in front of him. He took the glass and leaned over the bar

for a private word, his breath sweet with whiskey and mulled cherries. The other guys were talking amongst themselves and weren't paying attention to us. "Hey, Bob," Ansel half-whispered, "you been working ol' Jake? You get a story outta him yet?"

I shook my head, "No luck."

"Man, that's driving me nuts not knowin'. You know what I'm sayin'? I'm thinking real estate fraud. He skedaddled with all the proceeds from some big land grab. He looks like some crotchety old realtor, don't he? Whatta ya think?"

Ansel didn't have a lot of imagination. I'd fed the guys the story that I had fled the States on the heels of a major real estate fraud. I said, "Let me try something else."

Three of my customers at the cabana bar—Ansel Tomkins, Mike Olivares, and John Booth—had had an overwhelming desire to tell their stories. Their consciences demanded it. With the help of Jack Daniel's and the need to wallow in self-pity, they'd all opened up.

All except Jake Donaldson.

Jake's insistence to hold on to his dirty little secret had always piqued my curiosity. I decided to take a different tack with Jake today. This time I'd conduct my interrogation with his drinking pals sitting right next to him. I'd try for a little peer pressure.

Jake was older than all of us. His head balding with wispy white hair, his skin tanned nut brown from the intense sun. He possessed that old man kind of strength with little body fat to hide the sinew and muscle that rippled when he moved. He'd been hiding out down here the longest.

I stepped over from Ansel, the Jack bottle in hand, and refilled Jake's glass, intent on further softening him up before getting started with the softball questions. He'd been hitting the Jack harder than normal. After each glass I poured him, he'd slump a little lower over the bar. I'd ask him where he grew up, how many sisters and brothers did he have—that kind of thing—that, if answered, revealed little by little a history of the man. I stood there not marking down the ticks for each drink, trying not to be too

obvious. The other three pretended not to be watching or listening, and whispered to each other as Jake's inebriation continued in earnest. Finally, I said, "Jake, old buddy, what'd you do in the States before you came down here? What were you into, huh, buddy?" He didn't answer right away. His cheek touched the smooth bamboo bar as he began to speak, his words aimed down the length of the bar, not directed at anyone in particular, jumbled and incoherent.

I said, "Jake, old buddy, sit up, look at me. Come on, man, sit up. What did you just say?" I thought he'd said I was his best friend.

Jake's head rose and swayed as if too heavy to hold, his eyes bleary, unfocused. I repeated the question, "What'd you just say?"

His jerky head turned, looked down the bar at his three fellow compatriots all intent to know his secret. Jake, his voice a low croak, said, "He was my best friend."

"Who's that, Jake," I asked. "Who was your best friend?" The four of us held our breaths waiting, watching his eyes. With a "best friend" used in the past tense, maybe I didn't want to know this.

He raised his head, face flushed red. Tears brimmed and rolled down, leaving glistening trails.

This was bad, too much emotion. Now I didn't want to hear this man's tortured secret. I'd been toying with these men for my own security and some entertainment, but this one wasn't going to have a happy ending.

"Jake, wait, don't."

With his mouth in a straight line, he brought a drunken hand up and waved me off. "Freddy. That's who. My best friend, that's who. You black bastard. I know what you're doing. I know you've been talking to these assholes about me. So you want to know the rest of the ugly truth? I'll tell yeh, you black bastard." He swayed on his stool. Waved his hand in a wider arc. "I'm not like these other pussies here, these spineless little chickenshits with their petty white-collar crime bullshit."

In the six months I'd known him, Jake had never opened up like this, never used such strong words. I realized, in part, this

came with his new South American persona that included an accurate portrayal of a harmless nerd, a geek. But now he was shedding that skin, revealing the real man. I had awakened a sleeping ogre. I was getting old and rusty and had not seen the signs. Here was a street-smart crook, and I had pushed his buttons. I wasn't afraid of him; I was forty-five to his sixty-five, and I outweighed him by thirty pounds. And I was sober.

Though another major consideration, Jake had on a light linen jacket that could easily conceal a weapon. I remembered what Robby Wicks, Barbara's husband, used to always say, that God created men, and Samuel Colt made them equal. Robby had died by those words. My next thought was, what would Marie and the kids do if this wrinkled, bag-of-bones of a man threw down on me, shot me dead?

In the last nine months since I'd been in Costa Rica, I had allowed my instincts to wane. I would never again disregard my street sense and let it fade away like that.

I straightened up and pulled my shoulders back. I did what I used to do while working the streets on the Violent Crimes Team for the Los Angeles County Sheriff when confronting a rabid predator: I returned his stare the same as you would with a vicious dog.

"If you're going to tell us, old man, get to it. We're not getting any younger."