

**THE
SQUANDERED**

Also by David Putnam

The Replacements

The Disposables

THE SQUANDERED

A BRUNO JOHNSON NOVEL

DAVID PUTNAM

 **Oceanview Publishing**
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FIRST EDITION

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*To my best friend, partner in crime, and true love,
Little Sweet Mary*



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CHAPTER ONE

WILLOWBROOK, SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES, 1988

“IF YOU HAVE to go hands on with a suspect, you take him fast, down and dirty. You don’t mess around. Forget the policy. Forget using the escalation of force they taught you in the academy. You understand what I’m telling you here?”

Trainee Robert Crews didn’t look like he understood at all. He’d only been in my car for two weeks, after doing four years in the Men’s Central Jail waiting for his turn to go out on the streets. Four years working MCJ—Men’s Central Jail—had rubbed some of the shine off of him.

But not enough.

What his time in the jail did do, worked against him. He now thought he possessed all the information needed to handle the criminal element out in the real world. He didn’t. Inside the jail, concrete walls and steel bars created a controlled environment, nothing even close to the unpredictability of the streets.

We stood outside the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s black-and-white patrol car in Lucy’s parking lot on Long Beach Boulevard eating HO, half-off tacos over the hood. The unit’s PA blared, and the calls echoed off the buildings, the night hot even for July. Cars zipped by in the street and pedestrians moved both ways on the sidewalk, none of them making eye contact. Mostly coked-out

thieves and degenerates lost to the world, and prostitutes, women and girls who'd fallen in love with the glass gun. One puff and they too disappeared from the real world. Coke ruined lives; rock coke ruined a generation.

Crews possessed that new-guy energy, that drive to get into the action that as a trainee you either overcame or it ate you alive. He wanted to be a ghetto gunfighter and didn't understand the job wasn't about the badge and the swagger. I grew up a couple of miles from Lucy's. This was my home. He drove in from yuppie town, USA, and went back there every night to his safe neighborhood, and to his girlfriend who worked in a middle-class job.

I didn't want the street to eat him.

He nodded, acknowledging the question, chewing his taco.

"What, I didn't hear you?" I said.

He swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

"You don't understand, I can see it in that sappy face of yours. You're just paying me lip service. Look, when you step away from this cop car, you no longer have the radio. The radio is your umbilical cord to your fellow deputies, the guys who are gonna bust their ass getting to you if you call for help. But if you're out of your car, and you can't get to your radio, you're on your own."

Trainee Crews didn't understand, and his ignorance would get him in deep shit a lot sooner than later. In his four years at the jail, he'd used his time to work the weight pile at the Bauchet Street Gym, Bauchet being the name of the street MCJ occupied, an entire city block, miles north of Willowbrook, in downtown LA. The jail had a gym exclusively for the deputies to use on their time off and lunch breaks. Crews wore his blond hair in a standard buzz cut, his blue eyes alive with the desire for action, his uniform shirt tailored and stretched tight around bulging biceps and shoulder muscles. He oozed with overconfidence.

I'd lost my appetite envisioning Crews stepping out of his car on a call and walking into a problem he couldn't handle. "Okay," I said, "Let's say you go hands on. After you've first tried verbally to have the guy turn around and put his hands behind his back. You go hands on and try and take him down and dirty like I've shown you, but it doesn't work, he's a bad ass. You're fighting him in the street at a traffic stop or inside a house, what do you do?"

He let the taco he'd put up to his mouth sag as he thought about an answer I wanted to hear, and not what he needed to know as the truth. He shrugged, "I guess I beat his ass."

"No. No. What did I tell you? You better pay attention to what I'm saying here or someone's going to hand you your ass. And it's not going to be some big muscle-bound criminal. It's going to be some highly motivated, skinny little punk.

"If you're fighting all out for sixty seconds, no matter who it is, and you're not getting the upper hand, you disengage and get away from him. You run if you have to. After sixty seconds the odds of overcoming your opponent start moving against you in a serious way. Don't be too proud to run. You understand?"

He nodded again and I thought I broke through to him this time, until he let the essence of a smile creep in. He just didn't believe me. He'd have to find out for himself; an ugly proposition.

I shook my head and took a bite of taco just to help mask my disapproval.

"What?" he asked.

I didn't have time to answer; another Lynwood unit on the street slowed and stopped. The Good Johnson piloted the black and white. He, too, had a trainee in the car. Too bad. Good Johnson would instill all his own biases and prejudices in the fresh-faced new guy. I wish I could say Good developed these horrible traits and cynicism over a long, storied career, but he'd only been on

the street one year longer than my two. I feared his hatred came to him genetically, and if true, what chance did this world have?

He went by the nickname Good. He was the white Johnson. I was the black Johnson. When I first arrived at Lynwood, right from the gate he started calling me “boy.” With the confusion in the names, the veteran deputies called me the bad Johnson. We became the good and the bad, and I was Bruno-the-Bad-Boy Johnson. He harbored an unwarranted dislike for me, and I wanted to believe it wasn’t solely based on skin color. I’d never given him any other reason to treat me the way he did. I tried to get along even though the man didn’t possess any redeeming qualities and worked as a detriment to the community.

Good smiled from his open car window and nodded to Crews as he pointed at me. “Hang in there, kid, you only have another two weeks with this weak sister, then you’ll be in my car, and I’ll teach you all that you need to know.”

Crews didn’t know how to react and just looked down at his taco and nodded. Crews nodded a lot, a generic response that kept him out of trouble with the deputies during his hazing period. Most trainees were not allowed to eat standing at the hood of the patrol car, not until they’d earned the right to, usually in phase three of their training. They normally ate sitting in the right front passenger seat, the “bookman” seat of the patrol car, alone, listening to the radio, completing the shift log, or hand writing the crime reports. I didn’t believe in treating him like a grunt.

I didn’t give Good the satisfaction of telling him to take off. It wouldn’t have worked anyway. Good would do whatever he damn well pleased.

Over the loud patrol unit PA, Dispatch said, “251 to handle, 251 Adam to back a 211 silent at the Stop and Go, 16711 Platt Avenue cross of Century Boulevard.”

A 211 silent. An armed robbery call where the clerk had tripped the alarm.

I wadded up the rest of my dinner and tossed it in the trash can. “Come on, let’s go. That’s not us, but we’re close.”

Good took off from the curb, his unit tires chirping and his engine roaring as he put his foot in it. I got in the unit and started up. “Stay off the radio. Let the assigned units coordinate the call.” I pulled out of the parking lot and tried to catch up to Good.

Two fifty-one Adam, the deputy in the other patrol car, came up on the radio. “251 Adam, I’m going 97 and I have a vehicle leaving at a high rate of speed. I’m in pursuit.”

I turned on the lights and siren and slammed my foot on the accelerator.

CHAPTER TWO

LUCK WINKED AT us. Frank Wilson, in 251A, a new guy who'd just finished his training three months earlier, changed direction and chased the robbery vehicle our way. Good Johnson, up ahead, kept going north on Long Beach Boulevard. I waited for traffic to clear and pulled a U-turn, went to the curb, and waited. I watched the rearview.

Behind us, at the next intersection, a Chevy Impala busted through the red signal, sending east- and westbound cars skidding into each other to avoid a broadside with the robber. Wilson, with nine months total on the street, hung on the guy's tail far too close. Traveling ninety miles an hour, he should've stayed back a couple more car lengths. He knew better. I'd had him in my car during his phase two. His excitement in the chase overrode his good sense and training.

I took a second to look at Crews twisting in the seat next to me to see behind us, his eyes wild with excitement, his body humming with it.

The Impala blasted by close enough to see two suspects, the driver in the front and the passenger in the right rear, an odd configuration for only two. They wore the folded and tied blue bandanas on their forehead just above their eyes, standard garb

for the Crips, a violent street gang. These two paid our patrol car no mind. They looked straight ahead, intent on shaking Wilson loose before the airship could catch up to the pursuit and their chances of getting away dwindled to nonexistent.

I pulled out right behind Wilson and put my foot on the accelerator, the back tires screaming and sending up a cloud of white smoke. We now had the number two position in the pursuit. Policy dictated we take over the job of calling out location and speed so the lead car need only drive. Crews knew the job, picked up the mike and called out our speed and DOT—direction of travel.

Behind us, Good made a dangerous U-turn in front of other responding units instead of waiting for them to pass. He'd put the other deputies' safety at risk to make up for his poor positioning at the onset. He'd also slowed the other units' response to the pursuit.

Up ahead, the suspect continued to blow through north-south intersections, unheeded, all of them red signals.

Two streets later the Impala careened around a corner in a wide sweeping right turn and banged off an uninvolved civilian headed eastbound. Over the loud sirens of both our units, Crews spoke calmly but rapidly. "253, we just turned westbound on Rosecrans."

I corrected him. "We're on Compton."

Crews said into the mike, "We're on Compton, not Rosecrans."

He'd just earned himself some major verbal abuse from the veterans later on in the locker room.

The Impala let up on the speed just a little, not much, though. "Okay," I said, "they're looking for a place to foot bail. When they do, you stay with me, you understand? You stay right on my ass, you understand? And if it goes to guns, watch your backdrop."

He didn't answer, too caught up in the chase.

“Hey, pay attention, you hear me? You understand, stay right on my ass and do exactly what I tell you.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Impala took the next left down a narrow street with cars parked on both sides, leaving room for only one car to travel north or south—our cars. If anyone came north, the Impala would be trapped with no outlet. The driver must’ve realized his error, because he increased his speed.

Up ahead, headlights appeared just beyond the next intersection. If that car made it past the intersection, headed right at us, the Impala would only have two choices: stop, or ram the car head on.

The Impala almost made it to the intersection in time—almost. The Impala turned hard, cut it too short, and bounced over the curb. The driver lost control, his terminal speed for the turn too great, at least sixty miles per hour. The Impala bounced like a billiard ball across someone’s front yard, mowing over the fence, kicking shrubs out the back, and smashing head on into the front wall to the house. The impact, an explosion that shook the entire structure, sent up a cloud of steam and dust and pulverized plaster.

The Impala was shoved deep into a dark living room that glowed with the subdued and flickering light from the television.

I locked our brakes up, skidding to a stop. Our stopping took only seconds. In that time the two suspects bailed out of the crashed car and instantly disappeared into the night.

Inside the house, a woman shrieked and shrieked, “My baby. My baby. Oh my God, where’s my baby?”

The exterior gaped open, exposing the television on the left and the Impala impaled into a couch, which was now shoved deeper into the house, the interior a compressed wreck.

I jumped out and drew my service .357 and pointed it at the car. In my peripheral vision, Crews followed Wilson, who had taken off after the suspects. “Crews. Get your ass back here. Now.”

Crews stopped and looked to where Wilson had disappeared, wanting to follow and knowing what was right: doing what the training officer told him.

I advanced on the Impala, my focus entirely on the car. “Cover the car. Clear the car first. Always clear the car first if you don’t want to get shot in the back.”

He returned and took up a position beside me, breathing hard. “They ran off. We’re missing the foot pursuit.”

“We clear the car first. Wilson shouldn’t have moved on past before he cleared the car. That’s the fastest way to get yourself shot.”

“I told ya, I saw both of the suspects run off.”

“Pay attention. Take that side. I’ll cover this one, and we move up together.”

We advanced across the torn-up front yard as more sheriff units skidded to a stop behind us.

From seven feet away, still moving up, I pointed the flashlight beam into the car, which appeared empty from where I stood. Crews moved up on his side faster, intent on getting it done too quickly. All of a sudden he stuck his gun out farther and yelled. His voice hit that squeaky high note that told everyone he’d crossed over into a fear he’d never yet experienced. “Freeze. Show me your hands. Show me your hands.”

“Crews, go easy.”

“I got one in the back seat,” he said. “He’s on the floor between the seats. I can’t see his hands.”

He’d gotten that part of the training right: the gun never killed you, the hands did each and every time.

I didn't have time for these asshole crooks. I had to get inside the house and help the woman find her child. What a nightmare we'd dumped into her life. Who wouldn't believe their world safe behind a closed and locked door, watching their favorite sitcom? And then out of the blue their house comes down around them?

I yelled, "Just hold and cover. Don't move up any farther."

I shuffle-stepped up and peered into the car. Dust from the torn-up yard and the demolished wall settled in a cloud, dimming the view and diffusing the flashlight beams. In the rear compartment, a fat black guy lay facedown, wedged in between the back of the front seat and the backseat. He wore khaki pants and a gray sweatshirt shoved up, exposing his back. The light black skin was tattooed with "Dust Town Hogs" and the bust of a woman wearing a bandana, topless, her breasts huge, artistically well-defined. The right breast of the tattoo bled profusely from a large entry wound. This kid of seventeen or eighteen had been shot in the back in a bad place, the liver.

"Watch him," I said to Crews.

I moved up and shone my light into the front compartment and found a second suspect. He was on his back, his head shoved up under the dash, with his legs on the front seat. Nobody in the car wore seatbelts, and the impact had created havoc with their bodies, tossing them around like crash dummies. The guy in the front seat didn't move, his legs spread eagled. The right one canted off at an unnatural angle, the blue denim sopping wet with blood, the indentation of the seat filling with it. I looked closer. An exit wound out the front of his leg gaped through a tattered hole that exposed white bone reflecting in the flashlight beam. This damage also came from a large-caliber weapon. This kid had also been shot from behind, his leg all but blown off.

The woman inside the house continued to scream. A deputy

on the street directed his unit's spotlight on the scene, and then another and another until the whole place was lit up bright as a sun-filled day.

Backing deputies moved in to assist. I let them take control. I holstered and climbed across the hood, boots thumping on crumpled metal and on into the house.

A black woman stood pinned at the knees by the couch, her back up against the far wall in the small living room. Her hands up by her face as she keened over and over, "My baby, where's my baby?"

I grew sick to my stomach with the fear of what I'd find in that room.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DUST FROM the outside wafted in thick and obscured the room, but not enough to hide the terror in the mother's eyes.

"It's okay, take it easy. I'll help you find your baby. I'll find him, I promise."

"My baby," she shrieked. "My baby."

I climbed across chunks of the folded wall and over the couch to get to her. The dust now filled my lungs and I coughed as I hugged her trembling body. "It's okay, I'm here to help."

I let go of her to move the couch, but she glommed onto me. I couldn't budge the couch. Her legs had to be compromised at least to some degree, broken or crushed. "Where's the last place you saw your child?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure anymore. Over there, I think. What happened? Was it an airplane? Did an airplane crash into our house? My baby, please help me find my baby."

"How old is the child and what's his name?"

"Delbert Fawlkes, I named him after his daddy. Everyone calls him Del, jus' like his daddy. His daddy works for Papa Dee. You know Papa Dee?"

In her hysteria she'd gone to jabbering to help bury the reality of the moment. Of course I knew Papa Dee; everyone in South

Central LA knew him. He controlled all the rock cocaine in the projects—Jordan Downs, Nickerson Gardens, and Imperial Courts. Word went around that Papa Dee was on the move to expand. The poor bastards gunshot in the Impala—if they lived, it wouldn't be for long, not once Papa Dee found out what happened to his people, driving a car into their house like this.

A child cried.

“My baby, that's Del. Help my baby. Please, Lord God, help my baby, mister.”

Not ten feet away, the length of a car, six or eight deputies dragged the wounded suspects from the Impala and not too kindly. Their racket covered the baby's cry.

I moved toward the direction of the sound and coughed some more.

Del cried again. I shone my light into the darkness. A toddler stood in the hall that led to the back of the house. He wore a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pajama top and a diaper, his chubby little legs slightly bowlegged. Tears glistened on his smooth black skin. Blood trickled from his lip and his nose, not much, not enough to worry about unless it came from internal injuries. He must've been in just the right position to be shoved into the hallway when the car came through.

One lucky little guy.

I made it over to him, cooing, saying his name. The poor child shook with fear, half-scared out of his wits. Who could blame him? I picked him up and carefully carried him back to his mama. Her legs were still pinned to the wall by the crunched-up couch. I handed him to her just as firemen climbed through the opening with a large light, tools, and medical boxes. I left them to it and went to find my other obligation, trainee Crews.

* * *

Crews stood off to the side with three trainees, in a separate group from the field-training officers and other patrol deps. I headed toward Crews, weaving in and out of the emergency vehicles now jamming up the street and blocking in our patrol car, just as Sergeant Foreman came out of the darkness. “Bruno, get your ass over here.”

Foreman always made it a point to go out of his way to make my life miserable. I deserved it. Not all that long ago, I’d gone to a call, one that always popped up in my memory tagged as *The House That Bled*. I found a gunshot child at the location and rushed him to the hospital in the patrol car against Foreman’s direct orders. He had wanted me to wait for paramedics. I should’ve been reprimanded, but instead, the station captain squashed the reprimand. He said to Foreman, loud enough for witnesses to hear, “Now, just how the hell do you think that would look if Bruno fought this reprimand and the press got a hold of it. The kid lived, you dumbass. Get the hell outta my office.”

Further rubbing salt in the wound, the training lieutenant made me a training officer.

Deputy Good stood among the other deputies gathered for Sergeant Foreman’s briefing.

Foreman looked at me when he spoke. “Okay, no guns were found in the car.”

Wilson, the new guy, who’d gone on scene of the robbery and started the pursuit, said, “How’d they get shot, then? Without any guns in the car, how’d they get shot?”

Good Johnson grunted, said, “Rookie.”

Foreman nodded in agreement to the rookie comment and said, “In all the excitement the guns discharged inside the car, and then when you got onto them, started the chase, they tossed the

guns out the windows.” He looked from Wilson to me, “That’s why I want you, Bruno, to take all three trainees, divide up, and walk back the entire length of the pursuit. We gotta recover those guns. We can’t afford to let any kids get a hold of them or it’ll give the sheriff’s department a black eye.”

I wanted to say, “Right, and also endanger some kids as well,” but I held my tongue.

“Yeah, have a good time with that, Bad Boy,” Good said, “while us real deputies handle the tough calls.” He laughed, along with some of the others who held the same prejudices.

I left that group without further comment and went over to the three trainees. “Okay, follow me.” I kept walking right on by them and moved between the cars.

The pursuit hadn’t lasted that long, but at eighty miles an hour, we’d covered a lot of ground—ground that in reverse and on foot, would take hours to search. I moved out of the street and up onto the sidewalk. “You two take that side, one in the street and one on the sidewalk. We’re looking for guns tossed during the pursuit. Do a good job, because if you miss it, and it’s found later, there’ll be hell to pay. Me and Crews here will take this side. Keep your partner in sight and don’t separate for any reason. We’re still deep into Indian country, and you cherries don’t know your heads from your asses and you will get eaten. You understand?”

All three answered in unison, “Yes, sir.”

“Get to it.”

They moved out.

Crews and I started our sweep. The more I thought about what happened, the more I knew Foreman and the others were wrong. I thought I knew what had happened, only I couldn’t leave to check it out, not when left with the responsibility for the safety of three new guys.

We made it to the main artery we'd turned off of, Compton Avenue. I stopped. Crews looked up from scanning the ground with his flashlight. "What? You find something?"

"No, but this is ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Never mind."

He came over close. "How am I going to learn if you don't tell me?"

I waved the two trainees across the street to keep going, then looked at Crews. "Okay, back there at the scene, inside the car, before anybody was moved, what did you see?"

He thought about it. "Two suspects with GSWs, both dressed like gangbangers. Two shot, two got away on foot, total of four. What am I missing here?"

"Entry, exit?"

He took a second to think about it. "I didn't really look when—"

"Details, pay attention to the details, they'll save your life one day."

"Okay, I got that. What did I miss?"

"Both were shot from behind."

He shrugged. "I'm still not following you. Oh, wait. Sergeant Foreman said he thought they were ADs, accidental discharges. I gotta tell ya that sounded a little screwy to me when he said that."

"Why?"

"Well, I could see one AD, inside the car. The assholes get excited and the gun goes off. But not two." He snapped his fingers. "And then you add in that they were both shot from behind and no way could that happen like that, especially in the car."

I snapped my fingers like he did and pointed at him. "Give the rookie a cracker."

He beamed. "So what are we going to do?"

“Foreman already hates my ass, but what’s right is right.” I yelled at the other two deputy trainees across the street. “You two, keep going, stay together and stay on your side of the street. We’re gonna be right back.” They nodded and kept looking, intent on being the ones to find the sought-after evidence that I knew wasn’t there and they believed would make them look good in the eyes of their FTOs, their Field Training Officers.

“Come on,” I said to Crews, and stepped into the middle of Compton Avenue to flag down a passing car.