

THE VANQUISHED

Also by David Putnam

The Squandered

The Replacements

The Disposables

THE VANQUISHED

A BRUNO JOHNSON NOVEL

DAVID PUTNAM

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*To Jo Ann June, the greatest woman in the world: our mom.
A woman who nurtured my voracious need to read everything
in fiction. Without her, I would not be an author today.
She passed away during the writing of this novel.*

THE VANQUISHED

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

LYNWOOD SHERIFF'S STATION
1988

TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE I met Maury Abrams and realized his life would be marked for a cruel and inevitable death, I walked down the long hall that led to the watch commander's office.

I stopped at his door and looked back for Sonja. It would be just like her to follow along and stand tall in front of the WC and take the lumps we had coming. Do it together. But I was the training officer, her TO. This landed square on my shoulders. I should never have let this happen. I knocked and waited.

Lieutenant Carr yelled, "Come."

I opened the door and stepped into his office. I wished this hadn't come down to Carr, the one lieutenant at the station who knew about the street, what it was like to chase calls, to deal with the abrupt violence that tended to catch you unaware. I respected the man too much, and with that respect came the shame for my stupidity.

Carr sat behind his desk, the one he shared with the other lieutenants on different shifts. His gray eyes followed me. I stood in front of his desk, my hands folded at my Sam Brown buckle. My leather creaked when I moved, even though I had two full years working the streets.

“Sit.”

“I think I’d rather stand, sir.”

“What kinda stick you got up your butt, Bruno? Relax, would ya? I didn’t call you here to chew your ass. Wait—you do something that warrants an ass chewin’?”

“What? Ah, no, no not at all, sorry. I think I got a bad taco at Lucy’s.” I held my stomach and grimaced.

I’d almost blown it. And still, I fought the urge to spill it, to come clean with him. He looked at me a moment longer.

“I called you in to tell you that, at the end of the month, we’re going to rotate the trainees. We have a new group of five comin’ in, and you’re the best we got for Phase One. I don’t have to tell you Phase One’s the most important. It lays the foundation for these new guys and helps set their moral compass.”

“Sure, right, no problem.”

I didn’t have time to dwell on the irony of his statement. A large trapdoor opened and my stomach went into a freefall. Sonja would be with another TO. Probably even on another shift. I didn’t want her out of my car. I didn’t want her out of my sight. I wanted her close enough to feel her breath. I wanted her with me all the time.

Right at that moment I realized I had not told her. I’d not told her how I felt about her. Sure, she had to know, if by nothing else than by our nonverbal communications, the hot passionate kisses, the gentle caresses—everything, sure, everything else, but not the spoken words. I’d been a coward and had not said those simple words. Twenty-four years old and I acted like a sixteen-year-old high school kid mooning after his first crush.

“From the look on your ugly mug, I think there might be a problem. Spill it, Bruno.”

“Ah, it’s just that Phase One is two months, and I’ve only had Sonja—I mean Kowalski—for little over one month.”

Carr looked at me another long, agonizing moment. He'd promoted out of homicide and came with a reputation of being their best interrogator. Now I understood why. He looked down at the desk, shuffled a file folder, and picked up a trainee eval. "Says here your trainee's more than competent, 'above average' in fact. Twenty-six years old, mature for her age, with a degree in sociology." He looked over the top of the papers at me. "We discussed this at the TO meetings. No trainee was to get above 'competent' in Phase One in case we have to wash them out in Phase Two or Three. Later on it makes it too difficult to justify having above average marks and then having to shift to 'needs improvement.' So I assumed this trainee has to be some kind of blue-flamer, that is if Bruno Johnson's giving her the seal of approval. Am I wrong here, Bruno? Am I missing something?"

"No, not at all, sir. She's an excellent trainee. Who are you going to put her with?"

He picked up another paper on his desk. "We're a little jammed up right now with TOs. She's above average, according to you, so Sergeant Cole's put her with Good. He's our newest Training Officer."

My mouth sagged open. I recovered, closed it, then opened my mouth to protest vehemently against the choice, and realized that to advocate for Sonja would lead me down the wrong path, lead Carr right to the dirty little secret. Sonja would just have to live with this terrible choice the training staff had made. Good Johnson, of all people. Damn.

"Yes, sir, and who will I be getting?"

"That's part of what's at issue here. I'm putting you with a kid named Bobby Crews. Great kid, great evals from MCJ, he just needs to be brought down a notch or two. He's a little full of himself, and you and I both know overconfidence will get you killed out there. That's why I'm putting him with you."

“Yes, sir. Crews, no problem. Anything else?”

He hesitated a moment longer, his look burning a hole right through me. “No, that’s all, Bruno.”

I turned and headed for the door.

“Bruno?”

I stopped and turned.

“Everything all right with you? You seem distracted. You’re not smiling. You’re always smiling.”

“Fine, sir. I’m just fighting off that bad taco, that’s all.” I put my hand to my stomach again and gave him a fake little burp.

“You take it easy, and if you need some sick time, you take it. I know how you are.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“And knock that ‘sir’ shit off when it’s just you and me.”

“Yes, sir.” I turned and headed out.

Now I had to face Sonja. Give her the word.

CHAPTER TWO

SONJA WAITED FOR me in the stairwell. I put my finger up to my lips and waved her to follow me. We went down the second flight of stairs, across the briefing room, and out to the landing that led to the rear parking lot.

“What happened?”

“It wasn’t what we thought.”

Her smile returned. I liked it when she smiled.

“Whew,” she said, “that’s great. What a relief. Hey, there was a four-hour overtime slot open for a Willowbrook car on graves.”

She, too, felt it.

Working a two-person patrol car in the ghetto with her—someone I cared about—could be more intimate than making love. The need to rely so heavily on one another brought us together even closer. And once I’d tasted that level of intimacy, I never wanted to let it go.

She said, “I hope it’s okay, I took the shift, I signed us both up for it. What? What’s wrong?”

“The LT called me in to tell me that they’re rotating TOs.”

Her smile fled and shifted to a look of concern. “You’re kidding. That’s bullshit, we have one more month in Phase One, right?”

“I know. They want me to handle this new kid coming in. He’s got a bad case of ghetto gunfighter, and he isn’t even here yet.”

She looked away as her mind absorbed this new information. “I guess that’s not so bad. In fact, maybe it’s for the best. We can still . . .” She looked around the parking lot to see if anyone stood close enough to hear. “We can still see each other after shift, right?”

I didn’t answer her soon enough.

“What? What’s wrong?” she asked. “You’re not telling me something.”

“It’s your new TO.”

“Who?”

I said nothing.

“Who, Bruno? Tell me.”

“It’s Good.”

“The other Johnson? Good Johnson? I hate that asshole.”

Hate was a heavy word. I didn’t think *I* hated him. I felt sorry for him more than anything else. When I arrived at Lynwood station two years before, the station already had one Johnson, a white one. The other Johnson, a sadistic racist right from the start, called me “boy.” The other deputies called us “the good” and “the bad” Johnsons. That’s how I got stuck with “Bruno The Bad Boy Johnson.” I made Training Officer before Good and it really chapped his ass. He had more time on and he was white.

“I know,” I said, agreeing with her rather than arguing, “but you’re just gonna have to bite the bullet through Phase Two. You’ll get someone different for the final phase, Phase Three.”

“Maybe I could get you back for Phase Three?”

“Sure, sure.”

We both knew those were long odds.

“I have another month in Phase One,” she said, “so that means I’ll have that asshole Good for three months, the last half of Phase One and all of Two. I can’t take three months with him, Bruno. I’m telling you right now. I won’t be able to take one week with him. I’ll end up capping his sorry ass.”

She already talked like a seasoned veteran. Maybe she, too, had a touch of the ghetto gunfighter syndrome. Had I failed to see it because of my feelings for her? Had I done her that disservice?

I wanted to put my hands on her shoulders. I needed to touch her and couldn't. "I know it's going to be bad but you can—"

The outside PA blared, "Two-Fifty-Five to handle, Two-Fifty-Three to assist a two-eleven with a man down. Just occurred at 16637 White Avenue, Compton. Tag one-zero-one. Two-Five-Five handle Code-Three."

We ran for our cop car. We jumped into the Dodge Diplomat, and I started up and slammed it in gear. The tires screeched out of the station's rear parking lot. Normally a hot call would jack up my adrenaline. Normally with a trainee I'd go over what she needed to do once we arrived on scene. Not this time. This time my mind wouldn't move away from the idea, the cold emptiness that would come with being away from her. I didn't want that to happen.

Sonja flipped on the lights and siren. The noise snapped me out of my dangerous funk. I spoke over the loud whine. "What are we going to do when we get there?"

"Secure the scene, make it safe. Contact the witnesses and the victims, and put out a broadcast to other Lynwood units to be on the lookout for the suspects."

"What else?"

"If the suspects are still on scene, we take cover and contain, request backup."

"If it goes to guns?"

"Watch my backdrop and shoot for the largest part of the body."

I nodded, and for the first time since she got in my car as a trainee a few weeks prior, I realized I didn't want her going on a dangerous call. I wanted to protect her, to keep her out of harm's way.

How could that be?

How could that possibly work?

She wore the same uniform I did, the same badge. She carried the same gun. She had sworn an oath to protect and serve. But worse, far worse than those things, was that she, too, possessed the same drive I did to jump right in to the most dangerous situation, to live in the moment way out on that narrow ledge where safety no longer mattered.

What a screwed-up mess I'd made. What a God-awful mess.

I shook it off and tried to get my head back in the game. I stole a glance at her. With her left hand she held on to the upright shotgun in the rack. With the other she grasped the spotlight handle, her eyes front, alive with excitement, the adventure of responding to a robbery call, alive with the threat of the unknown.

The cool wind off the ghetto blew in through her open window, making her squint a little. She sensed my quick glance. She turned in time to catch me.

In that brief second I realized I didn't have to tell her that I loved her.

She already knew.

CHAPTER THREE

I WHIPPED THE car in a tight turn off Atlantic to westbound Rosecrans, then made a quick left onto White Avenue.

Large old houses sat quiet and dark, houses left over from a time when East Compton was all white and affluent. Now the houses came retrofitted with bars on the windows and doors, making them nocturnal caves to wait out the evil that walked the night.

Graffiti marked every available wall with gang monikers declaring territory not to be violated by rivals. Monikers like Spooky, Lil' Gun, Big Mac, Junior, and K-dog. The roll call went on and on, interspersed with "RIP" next to some to indicate the members who'd given the ultimate sacrifice for their hood. What an absolute senseless way of life.

I didn't have to tell Sonja. She picked up the mic and said, "Two-Fifty-Five is ten-ninety-seven, tag one-zero-one, Two-Five-Five."

We were about to go on-scene.

Dispatch came back with "Ten four, all Lynwood units limit your air traffic, Two-Fifty-Five is ninety-seven on a two-eleven with a man down."

I shoved it in park and got out. "Watch your back and don't forget to look up."

Out on dangerous scenes, cops are notorious for tunnel vision. They do a good job watching what comes right in front, but in the heat of the moment, they tend to forget their flank and hardly ever

look up. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen. Crooks sometimes double back. They come in from behind or climb a tree or lie low on a roof or overhang in a perfect position to ambush.

Sonja drew her service revolver and said, "Roger that."

We moved up the sidewalk toward the house. I whispered, "Don't turn your flashlight on until you have to, then hold it away from your body."

"Bruno, take it easy. I got this."

I nodded in the dark. She couldn't see me nod; her focus remained on what lay ahead, her eyes wider than normal, taking it all in.

The old three-foot chain-link gate hung open and crooked. Even in the moonless night the discoloration from all the rust stood out. Shrubs and trees grew out of control and obscured the windows and front door to 16637 White Avenue.

I took the lead and we passed through the fence. The black wrought-iron security gate at the front door also hung open. Behind the gate the thick door stood ajar. A subdued yellow light sliced into the darkness angled away from us. Splotches of fresh blood marred the waxed tile porch. I pointed to it. Sonja nodded.

I stopped at the entrance, peered in, and yelled, "Sheriff's department."

No answer.

"Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. We're comin' in." I moved up closer and eased the front door open the rest of the way. In the living room, a frail, elderly gentleman sat on an ottoman covered in an antimacassar from the divan. He held a bunch of wadded-up paper towels to his head. They'd turned red, saturated with blood.

"Where are they? How many were there?" Sonja asked as she moved past the old man, following her extended gun to check out the rest of the house.

“They’re gone. They ran out that way.” His voice was feeble. He took his bloodied hand with the towels from his head and pointed to the front door.

Sonja checked anyway. She turned on her flashlight and disappeared down the hallway, her shadow tall and dancing.

I put my hand on the old man’s leg, which was covered in thick cotton pajamas. “What happened?”

“I’m a fool, a doddering old fool. That’s what happened, Deputy.”

I said nothing and waited for him.

“I knew better, I did,” he said.

“In here. Bruno, there’s an old woman in here. She’s okay.”

Low murmurs came from the bedroom as Sonja spoke with the old woman.

The old man got up, his legs shaking, and headed toward Sonja’s voice. “That’s my wife. We’ve been married for fifty-five years,” he said over his shoulder as I followed him.

“Wait, you shouldn’t move around. Paramedics are on the way.” I caught up, took him by the arm, and fought down my reaction. His arm had hardly any muscle at all, just bone.

“I’ve always protected her. Always. Until tonight. Tonight I let her down. I let those ugly people into our house. And I let my wife down. I jeopardized her safety.”

The man looked to be in his mid- to late-eighties and was decrepit with age. His hair was snow-white, now matted with wet red. With his slumped shoulders and no ass, I don’t know how his pajamas stayed up. He couldn’t defend his wife against any kind of threat. Maybe if he had a cast-iron frying pan he could defend against a charging mouse. But then he wouldn’t have the strength to lift the frying pan and wield it with any effectiveness.

The carpet under our feet looked Asian, a long runner over a polished hardwood floor. At one time this old white man and woman lived an affluent life in an all-white Compton that had turned bad

on them. Their problem: they'd lived too long. They outlived their savings and had been forced to stay in the same house in the same neighborhood as it deteriorated all around them. The criminal element moved in, the gangs. I'd seen it far too often.

In the bedroom Sonja stood over by the nightstand, the phone to her ear. "Have paramedics roll in, it's Code-Four here, suspects fled the scene. More to follow on the broadcast."

On the street out front, the patrol unit's PA blared out into the neighborhood and repeated some of her disposition of the call. "Two-Fifty-Three, Two-Five-Five is Code-Four, shut down your Code-Three and continue for an area check. Broadcast of suspects to follow."

The man's wife lay in bed with the covers pulled up to her nose, her eyes clouded with cataracts. Her overly wrinkled skin made her face sag, hound-dog style, her wispy white hair in disarray. "Maury," she said, "it's not your fault. Quit talkin' like it's your fault."

This man and woman had no business living alone in the ghetto. They needed to be in an assisted-care home. I eased him down to a sitting position at the foot of the bed. Something out of the ordinary caught my attention. I raised my head and sniffed the air. The house smelled of old age, that hint of sour and dust combined with musty clothes and mothballs. But something else layered in with it that I couldn't quite place, and it niggled at my brain.

The old man patted the bed. "Sit. Sit."

I got down on one knee. "Please tell me what happened. What did they look like? Which way did they run? What were they armed with?"

We'd been in the house for about three minutes and needed to get out the broadcast update.

"Sit, sit." He patted the bed again.

I sat down next to him. I got a closer look at his injury when he took his hand away. He'd been whacked with a long and slim and

heavy weapon that had torn his paper-thin skin. The wound sagged open with an ugly goose egg underneath. When he'd pulled away the wad of paper towels, a rivulet of blood ran down next to his eye, filling the wrinkles and branching out like a river delta to meet up again and roll down to his chin, where it dripped in fat droplets on his pajama leg.

The unit PA outside blared again. "Two-Fifty-Five, shots fired, man down, 14367 Rose Avenue cross of White, tag one-zero-two, handle Code-Three."

Sonja started to move on past us and hesitated, not knowing what to do, conflicted with going to the call or staying to help the old couple. She chose correctly to respond to the call. She picked up the old man's hand and said, "Listen, we have to go, but we'll be right back, I promise you we'll be back. The paramedics will be here in just a minute."

"No, please, don't go. Please."

She looked at me, expecting me to say it was okay, we could stay. I shook my head.

She said to the old man, "Sorry, we have to go."