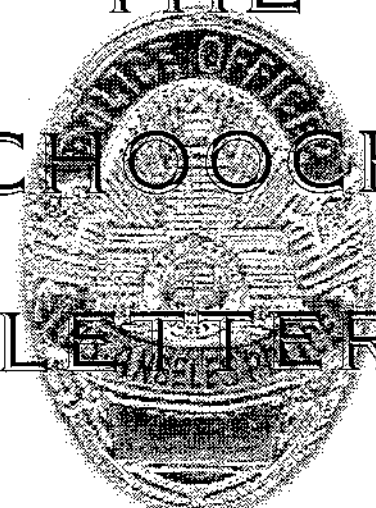


THE
TIN
COLLECTORS

Principles serve to govern conduct when there
are no rules.

—LAPD MANAGEMENT GUIDE
TO DISCIPLINE

THE
"CHOOCH"
LETTER



Dear Dad:

Charles Sandoval, who everybody calls Chooch, arrived this afternoon as planned (actually, I picked him up). This is already shaping up as one of my biggest boners. I pulled up at the fancy private school Sandy's got him enrolled in and I had to go to the principal's office to sign the pickup permission slip. The principal, John St. John, is a wheezing, hollow-chested geek who seems to honestly hate Chooch. The way he put it was: "That child is from the ninth circle." I had to ask, too. It's from Dante's Inferno. Apparently, the ninth circle is the circle closest to hell. Now that I've met Chooch, not an entirely inappropriate analogy. Then, this pale erection with ears hands me a packet of teacher evaluation slips. For a fifteen-year-old, his rap sheet is impressive . . . pulled fire alarms, and fights in the school cafeteria (food as well as fists). Mr. St. John informs me that they have notified Sandy that Chooch is not to return to the Harvard Westlake School next semester and that I need to get him enrolled elsewhere (like this is all of a sudden supposed to be my problem). But it's not as if this boy doesn't have a good reason to be angry. I think I wrote you, he's a love child with one of Sandy's old clients. Making matters worse, Sandy doesn't want him to know how she makes her living, so she's been shipping him off to boarding schools since third grade.

Needless to say, I had no idea what I was getting into here.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

Maybe I can last the month until Sandy takes him back or sends him to the next sucker on her list. One way or another, I'll work it out.

I'm planning to get out to Florida again sometime next year. I was thinking you and I could rent one of those fishing boats like we did last time, drink some beer and cook what we catch over a beach fire. Those memories are treasures in my life.

I know, I know, cut the mush, blah . . . blah . . . blah. I miss you, Dad. That's all for now.

*Love,
Your son,
Shane*

USE OF FORCE

SHANE WAS IN deep REM black. Way down there, but still he heard the telephone's electronic urgency. The sound hung over him, a vague shimmer, way above, up on the surface. Slowly he made his way to it, breaking consciousness, washed in confusion and anger. His bedroom was dark. The digital clock stung his eyeballs with a neon greeting: 2:16 A.M. He found the receiver and pressed it against his ear.

"Yeah," he said, his voice a croak and a whisper.

"Shane, he's trying to kill me," a woman hissed urgently.

"What . . . who is this?"

"It's Barbara." She was whispering, but he could also hear a loud banging coming over the receiver on her end, as if somebody was trying to break down a door.

"He's trying to kill you?" he repeated, buying time so his mind could focus.

Barbara Molar. He hadn't seen her in over two months, and

then just for a moment at a police department ceremony, last year's Medal of Valor Awards. Her husband, Ray, had been one of three recipients.

A crash, then: "Jesus, get over here, Shane. Please. He'll listen to you. He's nuts, worse than ever."

Shane heard another crash. Barbara started screaming. He couldn't make out her next words, then: "Don't, please . . ." She was whimpering, the phone was dropped on a hard floor, clattering, bouncing, getting kicked in some desperate struggle.

"Barbara? Barbara?" She didn't answer. He heard a distant, guttural grunting like a man sometimes makes during sex, or a fight.

Shane got out of bed and started gathering up clothes. He slipped into his pants and grabbed his faded LAPD sweatshirt. He snapped up his ankle gun, hesitated for a moment, then pulled it out, chambered it, and strapped it on. He ran out of his bedroom toward the garage without even looking for his shoes. He was already behind the wheel when he realized he had forgotten that Chooch Sandoval was asleep in the other bedroom. He wasn't used to having fifteen-year-old houseguests. He knew he shouldn't leave Chooch alone. The garage door was going up as he backed out his black Acura. Grabbing for his cell phone, he dialed a number from memory. He streaked down the back alley away from his Venice, California, canal house, as cold beach air slipstreamed past the side window onto his face.

Brian "Longboard" Kelly, his boned-out next-door neighbor, picked up the phone. "Whoever this is, fuck you" was the way he came on the line.

"Sorry, Brian, it's Shane. I got called out, and Chooch is still asleep in the guest bedroom."

"Chooch? Who the hell . . ."

"The kid I told you I was taking for the month. Sandy's kid. He came yesterday."

"Ohhh, man . . ."

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"Look, Brian, just go over and sleep on my couch. The key is in the pot by the back door."

"Good place, dickbrain. Who would ever think to look there?"

"Just do it, will ya? I'll owe ya."

"Fuckin' A." Longboard slammed the phone down in Shane's ear.

Shane was now at Washington Boulevard. He hung a left and headed the short distance to the Molar house. When they'd still been partners, he'd made this trip at least once a day to pick up Ray, heading across Washington to South Venice Boulevard, through Gangbang Circle, where, once it got dark, the V-Thirteens and Shoreside Crips staged their useless, life-ending street actions, occasionally killing or wounding a tourist from Minnesota by mistake.

He shot across Abbot Kinney Boulevard and turned right onto California, finally coming to Shell Avenue. All the way there, he wondered why Barbara would call him. Why not dial 911? Of course, the answer was sort of obvious after he thought about it. Even though she was scared spitless, she still didn't want another domestic-violence beef in Ray's LAPD Internal Affairs jacket. He was a thirty-year veteran with a big pension, which another DV complaint would jeopardize. That pension was an asset that was half hers.

Still, Shane Scully was the last guy Ray Molar would want to see coming through his door, quoting departmental spousal-abuse regulations at two A.M. *So why Shane? Why not Ray's current partner?* He guessed he knew that answer, too. She called him because she thought she could control him, use him for protection, then keep him from talking. Also he was handy, only five miles away. . . . Just like before, he had turned up as the double zero on her slow-turning roulette wheel.

When he got to Ray's small, wood-sided house, he pulled into the driveway behind Ray's car and jumped out. The hood was warm on the dark blue Cadillac Brougham; the lights were on in the house. Then he heard muffled screaming.

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"Shit, I hate this," he mumbled softly, feeling the cold grass on his bare feet. He moved toward the house, tried the front door and, to his surprise, found it was open. Reluctantly, he stepped into his ex-partner's living room.

Ray's house always seemed delicate and overdecorated. Too much French fleur-de-lis upholstery, too many knickknacks and hanging lamps. It was Barbara's doing and definitely didn't seem like the lair of a street monster like Ray Molar. Ray should live in a cave, cooking over an open fire, throwing the gnawed bones over his shoulder.

Shane could hear Barbara's screams coming from the back of the house, so he moved in that direction. He came through the bedroom door just in time to see Ray Molar hit his slender, blond wife in the solar plexus with the butt end of his black metal street baton. Then, as she doubled over, he expertly swung the nightstick sideways, catching her in the side of the head with a "two from the ring" combat move . . . a baton-fighting tactic taught to every recruit at the Police Academy. Shane stood frozen, as Barbara, her head bleeding badly, slumped to the floor, almost unconscious.

"Ray . . ." Shane's voice, a raspy whisper, cut the temporary silence like a sickle slashing dry wheat. "What's the story here, buddy?"

Ray Molar swung around. He was at least six-four and weighed over two-forty, with huge shoulders and long arms. He had bristly blond hair and a corded, muscled neck. Adding to these Blutoesque dimensions was a huge jutting jaw and almost total lack of a forehead. "Get the fuck outta here, Scully. We don't need the Boy Scouts," Molar growled, his pupils round points of focused hatred.

Shane had seen that look in the street many times before and had come to fear it. "Let's just back off, slow down, and give it a rest, Ray." Shane was moving slowly toward him, not wanting any part of the fury and craziness he saw on his ex-partner, but

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feeling compelled to get close enough to protect Barbara if he swung on her again. When Ray lost control, he could turn instantly murderous. He spewed white rage without thought, violence without reason.

"You got anything to eat?" Shane said, trying to refocus the energy in the room. "I'm starved. Missed dinner. How 'bout I get us a beer and a sandwich, something. . . . We chill out a little . . . Cool out . . . Talk it down . . . Get solid . . ."

"You wanna eat somethin'? Eat shit, Scully!" He was halfway between Shane and Barbara, still brandishing the black metal police baton.

"Ray, I don't want trouble, but you can't go hitting Barbara with the nightstick, man. You're gonna fuck her up bad."

Then Ray started toward Shane, swinging the metal stick in a loose arc in front of him. "Yeah? Who's gonna stop me, dickwad?"

"Come on, let's stay frosty here, Ray. Let's . . . let's—" And he stopped talking because he had to duck.

Ray swung the nightstick. It zipped through the air an inch from Shane's ear. As he was coming back up, Ray swung a fist, hitting him with a left hook that landed on Shane's right temple, exploding like a pipe bomb, sending him to the floor, ears ringing. Then Ray yanked a small-caliber snubby out of his waistband. It looked to Shane like an off-brand piece, a European handgun of some kind, maybe a Titan Tiger or an Arminus .38, definitely not standard police issue. Ray always kept a "throw-down gun" on him to drop by a body if some street character got funky and had to take a seat on the sky bus.

"Put it away, Ray."

"You fucking this bitch, too? You fucking her? 'Cause if you ain't, you should get in line—everybody else is."

"Come on, Ray, that's crazy. I never touched your wife; nobody's messin' with Barb, and you know it. Why're you doin' this?"

"She's been getting snaked by half the fuckin' department."

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He turned back and glowered at her. "Am I right, baby? Tell him 'bout all the wall jobs you been doin' in the division garage."

Barbara groaned. Ray, turning now, aimed the gun at Shane, pulling the hammer back. Shane watched the cylinder begin to rotate on the center post as Ray applied pressure on the trigger. He was strangely mesmerized by the hole in the barrel; a dark eye of damnation, freezing his stomach, dulling his reactions. He was seconds from death. . . . Almost without realizing it, his right hand slipped down to his ankle, fingers encircling the wood-checked grip of his 9mm automatic. He slid the weapon free.

Shane dove sideways just as Ray fired. The bullet thunked into the wooden doorframe behind him. Shane was operating on instinct now, with no control over what happened next, going with it, not questioning, rolling, coming up prone, his Beretta Mini-Cougar gripped in both hands.

As Ray turned to fire again, Shane squeezed the trigger. The bullet hit Ray Molar in the middle of his simian brow.

Huge head jerking back violently.

Brainpan exploding, catching the 9mm slug.

Then Ray looked directly at Shane as the gun slipped from his meaty paw and thumped onto the carpet. Ray's pig eyes, bright in that instant, registered hatred and surprise, or maybe Shane was just looking for something human in all that animal ferocity.

Ray Molar took one uncertain step backward and sat on the edge of the bed. Even though his heart was probably still beating, Shane knew that his ex-partner was already dead. But the street monster sat down anyway, almost as if he needed a moment to consider what he should do next or where he should go, momentum and gravity making the decision for him, toppling him forward, thudding him hard, face first, onto the carpet.

Shane looked over at Barbara, who was staring at her dead husband, her mouth agape, her puffed lip split and bleeding.

"Whatta we do now, Shane?" she finally asked.