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LAPD protocol demands you always keep your police scanner on even while off duty. Alexa reached into the glove box as we hit the 101 freeway and flipped the switch. A steady stream of low-value mistakes bubbled out at us, all of it delivered in a flat, rambling female monotone.

“One X-Ray Seven, meet L-Fifteen Code Six at the market, 3316 West Olympic,” the RTO said. “Cross street is Western. Felony 211 suspect needs transport to MCJ for booking.”

It went on like that. Nothing too big seemed to be going down at the moment.

Since it was relatively late, I was using the freeways, taking the long way home in miles, which at this hour should turn out to be the short way in minutes.

I was tooling along, glad to be out of that party, when Alexa said, "I saw you talking to Sally. What a shame about her little girl."

"Yeah, she thinks if they start working with specialists right now, they can minimize the effect of the autism. Tara's so young, it's hard to test her, so the doctors don't really know how severe it is yet."

Because Alexa ran the Detective Bureau I couldn't help but wonder if she'd seen Captain Jeb Calloway's new Homicide Special partners list, so I casually floated the question.

"I'd sure like to know who Jeb's gonna put with me. You heard anything?"

We were about five miles from the transition to the San Diego Freeway, which would take us to Venice Beach, where our little canal house was located on one of the waterways there. When Alexa didn't answer I glanced over.

I knew that expression. She was trying to make up her mind. It was always a problem for us when she knew something that affected me but that she wasn't supposed to confide.

"I'm hoping it's not going to be Sumner Hitchens," I gently prodded.

Then she said, "I think Detective Hitchens is going to be transferred to CAPS in the Valley. But please don't say anything because I don't think he's been told yet."

CAPS was Crimes Against Persons, and if that was true, it was a big demotion for him to go from the elite Homicide Special squad where he was currently assigned to some Valley purse-snatch detail.

Hitchens, or "Hitch" as he preferred to be called, had somehow gonzo'd his way into our unit, then had burned through three partners in less than a year. All of them eventually became so frustrated with him they demanded reassignment.

"You sure he's going to the Valley?" I asked.

"It's just something I think I heard," she responded vaguely.

"Okay, that's good. Actually, that's great. But it leaves us with an

odd number up there. Means they'll have to transfer in someone new to partner with me. Bobby Shepherd has been trying for the unit. I worked great with him when we were in patrol. You think you could put in a good word? I'd love to get Shep as my new partner."

She poker-faced my dash.

"I hope making captain isn't going to fuck up that nice, easy management style you're so widely appreciated for," I said, trying to kid her along.

"Come on, Shane, you know who gets in Homicide Special is Jeb's call. I can't micromanage my commanders and then hold them responsible for their performance."

At that moment the radio call that put this story in motion burred out of the scanner.

"All units and One Adam Twenty. A 415 with shots fired at 3151 Skyline Drive. Nearest cross street is Mulholland. One Adam Twenty, your call is Code Three."

"Isn't that about a mile or two up there?" Alexa said, pointing off at the hills to my left where some very pricey real estate was located. We'd both been patrol officers for five years and as a result had a pretty thorough knowledge of the city.

"Yeah," I said. "I think Skyline Drive is just off Mulholland near Laurel Canyon."

Alexa snatched up the mike and keyed it.

"This is Delta Fifteen. Scully and Scully. Off duty, but in the immediate vicinity. We will take the Skyline Drive 415 shots-fired call."

"Roger that," the RTO replied. "All units, all frequencies, Delta Fifteen is in the vicinity of 3151 Skyline and is responding Code Three. All other units, your call is now Code Two."

Code Three is red lights and siren. I hit the switch, and the strobes I'd had installed in the grille and back window of my Acura flashed

on. Simultaneously Alexa reached out and flipped another toggle and as the siren began to bray I floored it.

A 415 radio call is a disturbance where the 911 caller is so hysterical or incoherent that dispatch doesn't know the exact reason or nature of the event. In the Patrol Division, 415s were dreaded calls because you could be rolling on anything from an old lady locked out of her house to something as deadly as the North Hollywood bank shootout.

One night, years ago, when I was still in an X-car, I got a "possible major 415 with knives and chains." It sounded like a riot. We squealed in with our adrenaline surging and our weapons out. It turned out to be two eighty-year-old men fighting over a garden hose. We were so keyed up, and the lighting in the backyard was so bad, we could have easily shot one of them by mistake.

You had to be extremely careful but ready for anything on 415s. The shots-fired tag definitely upped the ante.

We exited the freeway on Laurel Canyon and headed into the hills. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Alexa fishing in her purse for her 9mm Spanish Astra. I caught her eye just as she tromboned the slide, kicking a fresh round into the chamber, then clicked on the safety.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," she deadpanned.