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The School Run

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HARRIET

'This is Capital Radio and it's nearly seven a.m. on a lovely bright summer morning . . .'

'The *phone*! ForGod'ssakewillsomeonegetthe*phone*? Who's taken it? Why doesn't anyone put the flipping thing back when they've finished? Find it, Bruce – quickly. It might be Dad. Great. It's stopped. Now look what you've done. Can you hear me or am I just screaming at myself?

'OhforGod'ssake don'ttellmeyou'renotevenup? Do you know what time it is? Jess, *out* of bed, now, or I'll take you to school without you. Yes, I know that doesn't make sense, but you're fuddling my brain. No, Bruce, I don't know where your school trousers are. *Don't* say they're still in the tumble-dryer. Doorbell! Get it, someone. No, Jess, you *can't* open the packet. It's for Dad. Where do you want me to sign? Right. You wouldn't like to drop the kids off on the way, would you? Just joking. *Quick*. It's the phone again. Got it? Charlie? . . . Oh, Pippa . . . No, that's fine. Just a bit frantic this end, that's all . . . I see. Poor you. Maybe it's that virus. Half Bruce's class has got it. Oh, and, Pippa? We might be a bit late. OK?'

'We're coming up to eight a.m. and it's nearly time for the news. This is Capital Radio, bringing you the latest—'

Harriet switched off the radio, squeezed her pelvic floor up to the third storey and crunched into fifth gear instead of

third. Charlie's gears were different from hers but it made sense to use his bigger car while he was away. The steering was heavier too and her hands were sweating (gosh, it was warm today) on the steering-wheel. There was also the smell of cheese and onion crisps, which she'd foolishly allowed them to eat last week, despite Charlie's No Food in the Car rule – she'd have to clean it before he got back. A quick squirt of Chanel should help.

Squeeze, squeeze. Only recently, when she'd sneezed, had she realised she'd got so . . . well, out of condition. The book she'd bought had suggested doing exercises in the car or when she was washing up. You pretended your inside was a lift, going up three storeys and then down, one by one. She always descended in a splodge.

I might as well slap an 'Out of Order' notice on myself, thought Harriet, grazing the kerb as she swung out into the main road. Bother. She'd only just had the rear tyres replaced last week even though they weren't that old. 'Wear and tear,' the garage chap had said, when she'd balked at the size of the bill. 'Volvo tyres don't come cheap.'

'But I only use it for school runs and the odd bit of shopping,' she had protested.

The mechanic had grimaced. 'School runs are the worst. All that stopping and starting. Wears the tyres out.'

And to think the government wanted more kids to walk to school, thought Harriet, wryly. Fine, if you live round the corner or have a chauffeur, like most of the cabinet, but it would take hours for Jess and Bruce to get to St Theresa's and, besides, she wouldn't consider them crossing these roads on their own even if Bruce was nearly thirteen. Anyway, the school run gave you time to talk to the kids and catch up with their news and gossip. Anything to divert them and deflect questions on when Daddy was coming home.

'Don't you have a spelling test today, Jess? . . . Jess, will you listen to me or shall I get your hearing checked again?'

'She's got her Discman on, Mrs Chapman. Shall I tell her you're trying to talk to her?'

Harriet squinted as the low sun momentarily blinded her, flicked her fringe out of her eyes (she really must book that cut before Charlie got back on Friday) and wondered, not for the first time, why her kids couldn't be as polite as Pippa's. 'Thank you, Beth. That would be very kind.'

'Jess, your mum's trying to talk to you.'

'Wha'?'

Harriet yanked down the sun visor, took a deep breath and a sharp corner at the same time. 'The word "what" had a T in it the last time I looked. Anyway, it's "sorry" or "pardon". I said, haven't you got a spelling test today?'

'Sort of.'

'Well, you've either got one or you haven't. Pass me the list.'

'That's dangerous, Mum,' said Bruce, sternly. 'You can't read and drive at the same time.'

Couldn't she? She could put on her lipstick – with the spare she kept in Charlie's glove compartment – do her pelvic-floor squeezes *and* drive simultaneously, although now that the new law had been passed she didn't like to answer her mobile. She'd only got three points on her licence, which was nothing compared with some of her friends, but they niggled. One of the mums at school had lost hers altogether after one too many ladies' lunches and it was costing her a fortune in taxis. Still, that's what they all were, weren't they? Unpaid taxis doing the school run and the husband-to-station run. *When* your husband happened to be at home.

Swiftly she glanced at the spelling list, then back at the road. 'Hyacinth,' she said. 'How do you spell that?' Someone, she noticed, had tied a fresh bunch of roses to the lamp-post at the corner of Acacia Road. There had been flowers there for over two years and they always made her shiver. So many people seemed to do that now, when their loved ones had

accidents. Far more effective than those 'Speed Kills' signs but horribly macabre. Like having a coffin open at a funeral. She slowed down automatically, as she approached the new speed bumps.

'Hyacinth,' she repeated. 'Come on, Jess.'

Jess hesitated. 'H-I . . .'

'No, Jess, *no*. Don't you remember anything from last night? It's H-Y. Now, go on.'

'H-Y-I . . .'

Harriet gripped the steering-wheel. Spelling came naturally to her but Bruce was hopeless and Jess was worse. What was it with them? Or was she just particularly tetchy today? She certainly had an excuse for the latter. This week was the one that would decide the rest of her life – and the children's. No wonder she hadn't been able to eat any breakfast even though her stomach was rolling on empty. She hadn't even had the heart to flick on her customary coat of mascara, unlike some of the mums on the run who looked as though they'd popped in to the Clinique counter.

'Shall we try singing it?' piped up Beth. 'Mum sings our spellings with us. She says it makes them go down more easily. We do it to a really pretty tune called "In an English Country Garden".'

How typical of Pippa! She was so nice, even to her own kids under pressure. Harriet had been like Pippa before children. Now she was always snapping. And hating herself for it. 'OK,' she said, making a sharp left. Blast! Another traffic jam. 'Let's sing it, then. Come on everyone. H-Y-A—'

'That sounds awful,' giggled Jess.

True, but giggling wasn't going to help her daughter in the morning's spelling test. If she didn't improve, she'd be moved down. Mrs Wilson had already warned her about that at the last parents' meeting.

'Beth and Lucy's mum's not feeling well today,' piped up Jess.

'I know. Don't change the subject.'

'She had a row with Dad too,' said Beth, quietly.

'Beth, I *told* you not to say anything,' said Lucy, angrily.

Bruce snorted. 'All parents argue. You should hear Dad when he gets going. Talk about flying saucers!'

'Bruce is right, dear.' Oh, God, how much had he noticed? 'It's normal for parents to quarrel sometimes, just like children do. Don't worry about Mum – she's probably got that bug that's going round.'

She'd have to buy some more echinacea, Harriet reminded herself. A cold was all they needed at the beginning of the summer holidays next week. There was the sound of a quiet snuffle in the back. At the red traffic-lights Harriet turned round briefly and took Beth's small warm hand reassuringly. 'I'm sure it'll be fine, sweetie.'

Beth smiled bravely although tears were glistening in her eyes. Why, wondered Harriet, could she be so nice to other kids yet so foul to her own? But it was easier, wasn't it, to be nice to children who didn't really know you and who weren't likely to tell you to shut up or, as Bruce last week, to sod off?

'Open the window, Mum,' whined Bruce. 'I'm baking.'

'It will interfere with the air-conditioning.'

'But I'm hot and I've got Betty Swallocks.'

'Betty Swallocks? What on earth's that?'

'You just change the letters round, Mrs Chapman,' announced Lucy. 'It makes Sweaty Boll—'

'I get it,' said Harriet, quickly. 'Bruce, I don't want to hear that again. Especially not in front of your father when he returns.'

The lights changed and Harriet crunched into first, trying to work out her priorities for the day. She'd ring Pippa as soon as she got back, although maybe she'd still be in bed or at the doctor's if she'd managed to get an appointment (unlikely on a Monday morning). It would be good to talk to her and

offload some of this awful tension that was making her feel sick and, if she was honest, causing her concentration to waver. Why, oh, why hadn't Charlie rung? For nearly a week, she'd been expecting him to confirm the arrangements for Friday.

She tried to think straight. Dubai was four hours ahead. He'd be in the office. Or lying on a beach. Or . . . Sometimes, she wished she didn't have an imagination. It was too easy to conjure up what might not be happening at all.

'Did Dad text you last night?' she asked, as she pulled up outside the school gates.

'No. And he *promised*,' pouted Jess, hauling her bag out of the back seat.

'Never mind, he'll probably ring tonight.' Harriet put out her hand to stop the bag scratching the Volvo's rear end. 'Mind the paintwork or Dad'll go mad. You shouldn't have so much in that, Jess – you'll hurt your back. Bruce, stop. You've forgotten your sports kit.'

He took it, wordlessly.

'"Thank you, Mum." That's a pleasure, Bruce,' she said tartly.

Defiantly, her son untucked his shirt so it hung fashionably out of his trousers, the way Harriet (and the teachers) hated it. It added to his generally unruly appearance, which included odd socks (what was it about footwear that divorced overnight in the linen cupboard?).

'Whatever, Mum. See you.'

''Bye,' she called, suddenly repentant. Before Children she'd never have been sharp like that. 'Have a nice day, all of you. And tuck your shirt *in*, Bruce.'

They'd gone. Only the two who didn't belong to her bothered to turn and wave. Almost immediately they were sucked into the tidal wave of schoolchildren making their way reluctantly to the school gates, weighed down by massive designer shoulder-bags that would undoubtedly destroy their posture for life.

Beth disappeared through the primary school entrance while the older ones, who went to the senior school next door, strode boldly along with the kind of confidence Harriet would have loved at that age. A tall girl, with a bouncy blonde pony-tail, wearing a prefect's badge but no uniform, swanned past, arm in arm with a youth carrying a trumpet case. He bent to kiss her as they passed and Harriet found herself unable to look away. The boy seemed impossibly young, with his smattering of acne, while the girl, wearing flawless makeup, could have passed for her early twenties. The look in her eyes said it all. First love. True passion. Which Harriet had never felt for Charlie.

Alongside her a car hooted, and the driver gesticulated, wanting to know if Harriet had finished with her space. She shook her head and fished around in her bag for her mobile. Quickly, she scrolled down for Charlie's number, which was too long to remember.

'Hello, this is Charlie. I'm not available at the moment but please leave a message and I'll come back to you shortly.'

'Charlie? It's me. The kids thought you were texting them last night and they're a bit disappointed. Do you think you could remember tonight? Ring me about Friday. I could pick you up at the airport. I want to talk before we get home, because of the children. 'Bye.'

Harriet hoped her voice had conveyed the right mixture of disapproval about not texting with a businesslike attitude to Friday. It seemed almost impossible that two months had passed since that terrible evening when the phone had beeped in the bedroom while Charlie was showering and she had automatically pressed the open-message button in case it was something urgent from the office.

'Thanks for last night.' That was all. Followed by a row of Xs. No name.

As she had stood there, staring with disbelief at the screen, he had come out, a towel wrapped round his waist. Unable to speak, she had merely handed him the phone.

He glanced at it disinterestedly. 'It's not what you think.' He looked at her straight in the eye, unblinking. 'She's just a girl in the office who's a bit friendly. I helped her with a file last night and we've had the odd drink but that's it.'

Harriet's voice came out as someone else's: 'Charlie, she sent you a row of kisses.'

He snorted. 'She's a kid. They all do that. Stop making a fuss, Harry. And haven't you got any more towels? This one's wet.'

'Sod the towel.'

'So you don't believe me?'

His eyes challenged her and she hesitated. Unlike her father, Charlie simply wasn't the type to be unfaithful. He was too straight, sometimes too abrupt. But totally honest. They both were. She could never understand how people lived their lives in any other way. 'Yes, I do believe you, but I think we need to talk.'

He turned round to slip on his pyjama bottoms and she suddenly realised, with a shock, that he didn't want her to see him naked. 'OK, if you want to talk, Harriet, we'll talk. I haven't been having an affair but if I had no one could blame me. You never show me any affection and it's as though I come in at the end of your day like an appendage. As for sex – well, forget it. It hardly ever happens.'

Her chest tightened. 'That's because you're tired and so am I. You don't know how much time the children take up. And I never ask you to do bedtime or get up in the night when they wake.'

'Harriet, I've got a *job* to do.'

She'd been scared then, really scared. 'Don't, Charlie, don't say any more.' She tried to put her arms round him but he pushed her away, then sat on the edge of the bed, looking up at her, his eyes hard and angry.'

'Can you honestly say, Harriet, that you never wonder if there's more to life than this?'

'More to life than our children? What else is there?'

He stood up when she tried to sit next to him. 'Exactly. That proves my point. Look, the office wants me to go to Dubai to handle the takeover. I was going to do it in several trips but I could stay there for the two months it'll take. Let's use it as thinking time. We'll tell the kids it's a business trip.'

'You've got it all sorted, haven't you?' Harriet's legs felt like water. She'd read about this happening. Seen it from a distance with other mothers at school. But no one had ever told her that it was like being run over or having your breath squeezed out of you while you felt violently sick. She glared at him. 'I suppose this admirer of yours from the office will be there too?'

He shook his head. 'No. And I told you. She meant nothing. She was just someone who showed me the kind of care and affection that you don't.'

'*Care and affection?* What are you? A kid yourself? Perhaps I should have a Baby On Board sticker on the car.'

'There's no need to be nasty.'

She could feel the heat of her anger rising up her neck in red blotches. 'But how could I have known something was wrong or that you were feeling neglected if you didn't tell me? You're a bastard, Charlie, do you know that? Go to Dubai for two bloody months. And take that time to think it over. Don't worry about us. The kids and I will look after ourselves. We always have done. And we don't need you.'

Briefly, he had looked frightened, as though he had understood suddenly what he was throwing away. Then his eyes narrowed. 'I'll spend tonight in the spare room.'

'Fine.'

When she'd woken that morning and remembered what she'd said about not needing him (he must know it wasn't true) she'd felt sick and chilled, but he had already gone, leaving her to tell the children that Daddy had rushed off on another business trip. Not even a note.

What had happened to the Charlie she once knew? When had this callous stranger slipped into his place?

Over the weeks, he had rung the children and texted them most nights. Occasionally he had spoken to her but mainly to discuss practical matters like finance and when the boiler blew. They spoke politely, as though the argument had never happened, and Harriet was scared to raise it in case she precipitated something worse. Part of her had yearned for a 'Sorry' phone call or a bouquet of flowers. Nothing. And now, this Friday, he was due to come home. Reckoning time at last. Part of her was so hurt she couldn't breathe, yet another part was desperate to see him. It might have helped, she thought, if she still felt that initial anger but, inexplicably, she could now only feel hurt. And disbelief.

She'd talked to only two people about this, Monica and Pippa. But neither could do what she really wanted, which was to glue life back to BTM (Before Text Message). If you were lucky, thought Harriet, you had a normal life but it wasn't until it stopped being normal that you began, with hindsight, to appreciate it. And then it was too late.

Someone in a turquoise Discovery hooted at her. An irate mother in sunglasses indicated that as Harriet's car was empty she could darned well move and let *her* deposit her own small, wriggly charges.

EV1 – personalised number-plates were *so* common – hooted again. Harriet flashed the woman a dirty look and moved off, noting with satisfaction in her rear-view mirror that the blonde was having great difficulty in squeezing her shiny turquoise bottom into the space Harriet had just vacated.

It was just as she approached the traffic-lights – green for once – that the mobile rang. Sugar! Where had she put it? Frantically, with her left hand, she scrabbled in her bag for her phone. It was like that party game she'd played when you felt a sock to guess the contents. She could detect her purse, keys, lipstick – everything but the small plastic rectangle she

needed. The jingly tone rang mockingly. Someone hooted. Help – she'd drifted over to the centre of the road. Pull in. Where? Don't stop ringing. There's a space! She wrenched on the handbrake, tipped the contents of her handbag out on to the front seat and the ringing stopped. At that moment she saw the phone in the dashboard drinks container. Smirking.

DAD, it said on the screen.

Harriet hit the green button. 'Hello, this is Charlie . . .'

She flung the mobile on to the front seat and allowed hot tears of frustration to roll down her cheeks. She'd missed him. Again. But this time it felt like an omen.