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I reading

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Chapter Four



'I've joined a new book group,' announced Mum the next morning, as she merrily drowned the half-dead basil plant before plonking it back on the windowsill to fend for itself for another week.

'Cool,' gurgled Charlotte, through a mouthful of muesli. She didn't bother to lift her head from *Jane Eyre* because this was nothing new. Her mum was *always* joining book groups . . . and leaving them in high dudgeon when she disagreed with the choice of book. She'd been a member of three at the last count. At the same time. The thought of so much enforced reading made Charlotte's eyes go all blurry.

There was Mum's highbrow book group, which

discussed horribly clever books with thin pages and small writing. Charlotte wasn't even sure that her mum enjoyed it and suspected that she only went for form's sake. Her lowbrow book group talked about fun books, but not fat books with gold writing on the cover, because Mrs Penman absolutely drew the line there. She had standards, as she told her daughter on a regular basis. Whatever they talked about in the third book group, it certainly wasn't books, because Charlotte had overheard them when it was Mum's turn to host. There seemed to be a lot of giggling and a tremendous amount of red wine involved, but not a single mention of *Jane Eyre*, which made it utterly pointless as far as she was concerned.

'So I'll be going tonight,' said Mum, popping a sweetener into her coffee.

'Hmm?' Charlotte had already drifted back to Thornfield.

Mum tutted. 'The book group. Tonight. Seven o'clock. You'll be OK on your own for a couple of hours, won't you?' She aimed a splash of milk at her cup and missed, spattering the worktop instead.

Charlotte hadn't believed that her mum could get any clumsier, but apparently she'd been wrong. 'No problem,' she said, turning her attention back to her book. . . back to the gloomy drawing room

where Rochester was interrogating Jane. She couldn't help thinking that if he hadn't decided to be a flawed romantic hero, he could have been a teacher instead.

'And you won't—'

Charlotte looked up blearily, automatic replies at the ready. 'Play with knives? No.' Her mum's questions were nothing if not predictable.

'Or—'

'Reveal personal details in online chatrooms? I'm not daft, Mum.'

'But you might want to—'

'Yes, I'll phone Grandma and Grandad,' said Charlotte. 'Aren't they coming down soon?'

Mum nodded. 'Next month.'

'Cool.'

It was impossible to concentrate on The Book while Mum was in this sort of mood. Charlotte closed it with a snap. 'So what are you reading?'

'Hmm?'

Charlotte sighed. Parents could be amazingly contrary. One minute they wanted your full, undivided attention. The next, they were visiting Cloud Cuckoo Land. 'Which book are you reading?' she repeated. And then, when there was no response, 'For the book group?'

‘Oh, we haven’t decided yet,’ mumbled Mum, who’d developed a sudden interest in the inner lining of her briefcase. Then, without warning, she shot to her feet like a jack-in-the-box. ‘Are you ready to go? I’ll drop you off if you get a wriggle on!’ She said it as if getting to school early was a good thing.

Charlotte smiled to herself. She didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to work out what was going on. The real reason why Mum was so eager to leave early was to give her bonus time for flirting with the new French teacher in the staff room. As for this supposed book group . . . Charlotte seriously doubted its existence. It was simply an elaborate ruse to allow Mum to go out for drinks, food or whatever it was that forty-somethings did when they were too old for clubbing. Her companion for the evening? Mr Grant, of course.

She didn’t fool Charlotte one bit.