

# BROKEN BRANCHES

BY

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*Benefit cheats, the feckless, work shy, tax avoiders, paedophiles, murderers, terrorists, imbeciles, morons, thieves, rapists, wife beaters, alcoholics, drug addicts, smokers, fatties, fraudsters, vulture fund capitalists, irresponsible mothers, abusive fathers, serial killers, repeat offenders, traitors, prisoners, hooligans, vandals, scroungers and any variation or combination you care to mention were allowed to procreate.*

*Absolutely any of them.*

*Godforsaken citizens with a proven record of unfathomable ineptitude had an inalienable right to continue replicating their own retarded lines in the gene pool, polluting it for everyone else.*

*Of course, that was then.*

*This is now.*



# CONCEPTION

OCTOBER



## CHAPTER 1

Grace held Tom tightly, anticipating a violent storm would rapidly sweep through the early morning gloom, tearing them apart before dumping her far out into the turbulent waves of Wigthorn Bay. An umbrella sheltered them both from the wind and onlookers, Tom took a step forward whilst tilting it upwards slightly, risking their cover for a better view of the protesting crowd.

The blustering rain nor the early commuter traffic dulling the hostile reception of demonstrators standing across the road in front of the old library, a government building reassigned from lending books to processing applications. Tom felt his wife tense even more, so he shielded her from any more unnecessary exposure by retreating back around the corner out of sight.

Grace looked back down the road they'd approached as she nestled her head into Tom's shoulder. A tree lined avenue covered by an archway of branches stretching across the road from either side, the leaves a shimmering sequin of autumnal greens permitting glimpses of the dawning sunlight to filter through.

"There's so many people Tom, we'll come back another day."

"This is a good day, believe me. I've been coming here every Tuesday for the past 4 months, this rain is doing us a favour right now."

"OK, so we'll wait until it's pouring down, thundering and freezing cold."

"We're here now. We're going in there today."

*Tom Webb (UK). Sire: Jake Webb (UK). Dam: Sarah Webb (UK). 3<sup>rd</sup> foal, excellent all round pedigree of 6 generations including disciplines such as science, sports and models. Confirmed ancestors; Crick, Evangelista, Black and Kline. Strong shoulders, good on firm ground, powerful lungs, prefers the flat, calm natured. Professional genetic matcher, solid employee. 5/8 of siring a top performer. Handicapped by marriage.*

Grace looked back along the avenue, the fallen leaves protected by the branches overhead. A protection she'd never felt until Tom walked into her life, and if she continued walking with him through the crowd into the government building, it would be a protection she'd have to extend to someone else. 'The Department of Family' expected acts of selflessness of all its applicants, whether you were successful or not.

Tom let the umbrella rest on his shoulder as he held the sides of Grace's head with both hands, tucking her wet hair behind her ears, "We're going in, now." Tom kissed her damp forehead, held the umbrella back over them both and led her back around the corner towards the crowd. Grace took one last look at the avenue behind, turned and focused on the building beyond the crowd, shutting everything else out; the shouts, the placards, the accusatory looks.

The protestors could immediately recognise the unconnected; head down, avoiding eye contact, hands in pockets, speeding up as they crossed the road to enter 'The Department of Family' building. Walking as though into an exam room for an exam they hadn't revised for.

Grace was tugging at Tom's arm to hurry him up but he was purposefully slowing her down so he could stand tall, looking the most vehemently opposed protestors in the eye. Some quietened, some looked away and searched out another target but most carried on spouting their vitriol.

Grace kept hurrying Tom along, curiosity getting the better of her as she looked up to steal glances of the protestors. They all merged into one angry, barricaded mass of sloganeering except for one face using his elongated nose to push itself to the front and lock it's tiny dark eyes on Grace. As Grace approached the building, the shadow of the overbearing nose gave way to an irregular crack of a mouth, it's owner finally pushing through the crowd, pointing at Grace and mouthing the word, 'You'.

*Grace Webb, a renaming from the old colonial title of 'Grace Falkland' after merging sovereignty with Tom Webb. Twinned with Charlie Falkland (independent sovereignty), Grace being the more hospitable and inviting of the two islands with her south-west facing beaches, rolling countryside and temperate climate. Located somewhere between the African and European continents, grappling to hold onto her African heritage within a European culture. Changed hands multiple times in her early history resulting in all colonial ties now being severed and discarded, no matter how insignificant or well hidden. Limited investment in education and health being no barrier to becoming popular and friendly, working in a local cosmetics factory. Tom Webb finally sealing joint administrative responsibilities with the UK government 4 years ago.*

Tom opened the door for Grace as she rushed in. He turned, still holding the door open, and waited until every protestor looked away before entering himself. He didn't have to wait long, their hostility wasn't for him.

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Grace and Tom sat next to each other, both their faces illuminated by the computer screen in front of them. Grace locked her arm firmly through Tom's, the nervous energy accrued from the protestors only intensifying as the dark spectre of the application process came ever closer.

An official popped his head up from behind the monitor, still eyeing the mysterious contraption he'd been playing with for the past few minutes, "OK, that just about does it, Mr and Mrs Webb. Retina scans, finger prints, DNA analysis and government documents have all been uploaded, confirmed and cross referenced. I'm pleased to say, you are who you say you are." The official smiled, blinking rapidly before settling his eyes on Grace and Tom, it was a tired joke he never tired of.

"Good." Tom looked at Grace wide eyed, gently squeezing her arm to signal his contempt for such humourless, paper pushers, "I mean, that's a relief! Always nice to know your wife isn't an impostor, right?"

Grace instantly released her grip on Tom's arm staring at him in disbelief. This was an apple-cart that shouldn't be rocked or mocked.

The official recognised this as a form of light-hearted response to help settle the applicant's own nerves; he'd learnt this in training. "Yes, sir."

Grace subtly changed her grip on Tom's arm to include the light impression that nails could be dug in deeper if required. Grace was apprehensive by the official's seemingly positive response, "Are we free to continue our application?"

"Why of course, Mrs Webb. Absolutely anyone is free to apply for parenthood, only the Great British public will decide if your application is successful."

"My 'situation' isn't a problem?"

"No situation is a problem at this stage Mrs Webb."



Tom took Grace's hand and urged the official onwards, "So what now?"

"Now you need to fill in the questionnaire on the screen, this will complete the application process and begin the approval stage."

"Which will take how long?"

"It will purely depend on the efficiency and consideration of the 46 randomly selected members of the parental jury. They have a maximum of three months to consider any application and if you hit the minimum 65% approval rate you'll be granted a parental licence."

"You ready love?" Tom knew Grace would never be ready but it was now or never.

Grace put up a front, "Yes."

"Let's do it then."

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Parental Jury Couple No.3 – Sunderland.

"Shall we get this thing done before dinner then?"

"Yeah, quickly though, the kids will be home soon."

"OK, the first application is a couple from Wigthorn."

"Where's that?"

"No idea."

"Oh have a look at this; the woman has no recorded family except a twin brother."

"Scrub 'em. I ain't having this country getting overrun with 'islands'."

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Parental Jury Couple No.9 – Llandudno.

"Love! We got another parental application to go through!"

"For the love of God! I thought we were over-populated, deny it and fix your son's bike before I strangle him!"

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Parental Jury Couple No.17 – Havant.

"Have you seen the amount of inbred families around here recently, I swear everyone's starting to look the same."

"That's just your imagination, what are the odds for this kid's future?"

"Look, forget that, we need some more mutations and serendipity in our gene pool, I'm letting this island through."

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Parental Jury Couple No.32 – Wolverhampton.

“Are you taking the kids straight round to your mothers after football practise? Good, I’m going to go through this parental application then get dinner on and we can have a quiet evening in together...Oh don’t be so boring, I remember how we used to spend our evenings before the gruesome twosome came along...Really? Listen to you, love, starved of affection and attention. I’ll tell you what I’m going to do; I’ll rush this latest application through and take my time preparing dinner. Yeah, yeah, the desert is absolutely covered in chocolate...I might save a bit to cover you in it too!”

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Parental Jury Couple No.38 – Battersea.

“What have you done?”

“I approved them.”

“You’ve only been at the computer for a minute, how can you possibly determine if they were suitable or not?”

“You never approve anyone; no-one’s ever good enough! If everyone acted like you our country would be virtually empty in a couple of generations!”

“If everyone acted like me we’d have a nation of thoroughbreds!”

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Parental Jury Couple No.44 – Wigthorn.

“Oh look love, this couple are from Wigthorn too. Remember when we went down and did our application?”

“Up the Wigthorn FC! Approve them love, we need all the fans we can get.”



*Beneath some trees lie strewn broken branches, scrambling in the dirt to catch a drop of rain or to feel a ray of light that has beaten the canopy's shadow. Broken branches cannot drift or journey, or set down roots and bloom into a new generation. They'll be forever disconnected, trampled upon and left to rot; superfluous to progress.*

*To be connected is to be supported. To be attached is to be held.*

*To be free is to be broken.*



FIRST TRIMESTER

APRIL



## CHAPTER 2

“Happy birthday Gracie!” Charlie gave his sister a hurried kiss on the cheek as he headed straight for the well-stocked, undefended dinner table. His dark brown curls, like a collection of wood shavings stuck upon a finely carved bust, bouncing and exaggerating the enthusiasm of his walk.

“Happy birthday to you too Charlie...and hands off the prosciutto, you’re not having any until Tom gets here.” Grace tucked in some errand hair into the blue paisley patterned handkerchief she always wore on her head when cooking. Charlie and Tom teased her that it made her look like an old West Indian housewife cooking up a feast on a beach for a gaggle of hungry children. It was part of a dress up game she used to play as a kid and the reason she continued was to keep her unknown past into the present. Her pre-cooking ritual involved pulling her hair up into the handkerchief and tying one of her brightly coloured aprons on in front of the mirror, imagining it was her mother looking back. Grace instinctively felt their mother provided the black half of her genome and their father the white. Charlie didn’t care. Their genes had zero history and therefore would have no future, what difference did the details make?

*Charlie Falkland, a fiercely independent nation state, regularly instigating temporary cross border links with other distant island states but never establishing permanent relationships. This constant detachment is only breached by the cliffs shielding its twin island from ocean waves and bad weather surfing in on them. Impenetrable due to its high cliff faced coast and densely forested interior resulting in only the most hardened of naturalists risking the journey and persisting with the almost constant grey clouds overhead. Despite this, or maybe because of it, an immense rugged beauty is maintained attracting developers from far and wide, only to be met by resistance and eventually deportation. A window cleaner enjoying the solitude and the view.*

Carrie, Charlie’s latest girlfriend, entered the kitchen quietly behind, subdued by an earlier argument with Charlie. He’d probably been in the wrong, he usually was, but if she was ever going to be more than flavour of the month she’d have to bite her tongue a little longer. “Do you need a hand with anything Grace?”

Grace did a double take at the punk/sari hybrid top wrapped around her slim frame. Homemade and decorated with her trademarked interlocking and repeating patterns, this one containing arrows of many different sizes and colours. “If you can mix this salad like your wardrobe, we’ll be good to go in no time.” Grace rescued the cold meats from under Charlie’s nose, “Just have one slice Charlie, then sit on your hands or something.”

Charlie took two. “So, Grace, how is turning 30 affecting you?”

“Age is just a number.”

“Well, you would say that, Tom is old.”

“Mature, you mean. You won’t recognise maturity until you’ve finally gone through adolescence.” Grace put an arm around Carrie as she mixed the salad, “Believe me love; you can do a lot better than my little brother.”

Carrie glanced up to see if she’d been joking but Grace’s rich brown eyes provided a distraction, as Charlie’s had a couple of months before. The twins imagined people examined them so intensely to reach the inner soul of an island in this land of connected thoroughbreds; the reason was much shallower.



*Carrie Lanka, located within the Palk Strait off Sri Lanka, is a small island close to the mainland struggling to establish permanent links to ensure economic and social stability to an otherwise fluctuating and fluid disposition. Both Buddhism and Hinduism are important bedrocks, the islanders devoting themselves to both, as a firm and guiding hand. A burgeoning textile industry is providing a new hope, although poor educational and business investment is halting real growth.*

Charlie scanned the table for more titbits, "Little brother? No-one knows who came first."

"It's obvious to anyone, isn't it Carrie?" Grace made her way to the kitchen door as she heard the front door close.

"Yeah, there's no way you're the oldest Charlie, you'd never have found your way out of your mother's womb without Grace's help." Carrie only ever teased Charlie when Grace was in the room with her.

"It's a wonder you made it here tonight." Tom closed the kitchen door behind him, placing a welcoming kiss on Grace's cheek, she reciprocated by snatching a quick hug. "Is this reprobate giving you hassle again?" Tom looked at his brother-in-law over Grace's shoulder and winked.

"Not a chance, its just Charlie stirring things up again as usual."

"Charlie, you should be up here doing the salad if you're such a tosser."

"Tom! I thought marrying you would bring some sanity and calm into my life, not another bloody brother!"

Charlie welcomed the banter, "Ooh harsh! You hear that Tom, Grace thinks of you as a brother, doesn't look like you're getting lucky tonight."

"No problem, football's on tonight." Tom went to place a hand on the small of Carrie's back and give her a kiss but resisted, fearing her ensemble may fall apart with the slightest touch. "Nice to see you again Carrie. Not often we see one of Charlie's girlfriends more than once; they usually see sense after a short time. Are you still with him for a bet or something?"

Carrie laughed nervously as she placed the mixed salad onto the dining table and sat next to Charlie, "I feel like I've won first prize, we both do don't we Charlie?"

"Yes love." Charlie hugged Carrie with one arm, the other holding onto another of his true loves, a can of beer.

The two men locked together their exaggeratedly horrified faces; Charlie's teetering on genuine terror, Tom's having to be reigned back from collapsing into giggles. Grace busied herself by over-buttering the sliced French bread, unable to compose herself enough to join the others at the table just yet.

Carrie was a tightrope walker balanced between ambition and desperation; she excited and nerved Charlie because he was always waiting for her to fall. They all were.

"How was work love?"

Grace adjusted her head scarf, "Why do you ask me that question, Tom? I help robots in a factory and I mean that *literally* not in some deep, metaphorical allegory about the modern, non-unionised labour force becoming slavish automatons. I actually work *for* robots, not in an engineering capacity but as an assistant; clearing their rubbish, delivering components, lubricating their

joints..."

"...that's more than you get, innit Tom?"

Grace continued, "...the same as everyday. So, how was work? The same as every other day. I've got the next 4 days off but please love, don't bother asking me again."

Tom sat down picking over the table's offerings whilst Grace wasn't looking, feeling the responsibility as host to move the conversation on, "Have you told Charlie the news yet Gracie?"

"Oh Christ Tom! I was going to wait until after dinner!"

Tom silently reached for the potato salad, looking at Charlie with raised eyebrows, mouthing various swear words.

Charlie could read his sister and never tired of seeing her fury directed anywhere but towards himself. "What news, Gracie?"

"I'll tell you after dinner." Grace bore a hole into Tom's cowering head, "As originally discussed."

Carrie looked at Charlie encouraging him to press further but recognising her place outside of this tightly knit family unit.

Charlie didn't need any encouragement though, "Come on, the cats out the bag now, you might as well go ahead and tell me."

"OK, but don't overreact or say anything stupid, alright?"

"Look, I can't promise because I don't know what you're going to say but you're hyping this up a little."

Grace ended the hype and just said it, "OK. There's no easier way of saying this; I'm pregnant."

Charlie momentarily froze before glacially contorting and twisting his face to match his reaction. Carrie took a step back in awe, the propagation of life was happening at this very moment, in front of her very eyes.

Charlie stood straight up, the chair scratching away the silence as it was forced back, "What the fuck are you doing!?"

"I said *don't overreact*."

"I didn't know you were going to come out with such fucking bullshit!"

"OK, OK, I get it." Grace averted an eye-to-eye slanging match by sitting in her chair, "You don't believe people like us should be getting pregnant and having babies but you know what, that's the fucking bullshit!"

Tom got behind his wife; holding her shoulders and standing firm, "Charlie, this is your sister. This baby is going to be your niece or nephew, your flesh and blood."

"Yeah, that's the problem!" Charlie pointed out the window. "No-one out there is going to be so understanding or forgiving about where it comes from. What can you offer it? What can any of us offer it? We're dead ends! Fresh starts! Isolated incidents! We're nothing without history."

"You've grown up with that shit ringing in your ears for so long you truly believe it, don't you?" Tom looked at all three of them, hoping for a shred of disagreement.

"Believe it?" Charlie replied through gritted teeth, "We *live* it each day. It's alright for you with your eight generations of ancestry all neatly connected, founded on famed alumni such as Mandela and Pele, giving you a soapbox to sound off from but in case you hadn't already noticed, life out there ain't so welcoming for '*islands*' like us. You think we got a Hawking or an Annan lurking in our genomes somewhere? You think Carrie's got a cover drive from Tendulkar or a turn of phrase from Rushdie written into her DNA? Doesn't matter! We're islands!"

Carrie batted away Charlie's *doosra*, maybe he was right. "How did you get approval?"

Charlie found he was in Carrie's wake for once, "Yeah, good question. How the hell did you get this through and stop shooting blanks?"

"Like anyone else, we applied."

Tom continued with pep, "They gave us approval four months ago and after a course of pills to reinstate the old swimmers after a lifetime of treading water, they've sprung into action and hey presto, you're going to be Uncle Charlie!"

Carrie hesitantly stepped closer towards Grace and Tom but remained at a civil distance away; she'd never knowingly been near a fertile man before. She couldn't be too sure how fertile he was. "What was it like being 'reactivated' Tom?"

Tom grinned, "No different really, I didn't feel any actual changes but there must have been something going on down there."

"Was it pills, injection, gene therapy or what?"

Grace stood up and opened a cupboard above the kitchen counter, "Just these pills once a day, it reverses the sterilisation for 24 hours and bam! He's packing a live one! I slipped one in his tea every morning, tasteless wasn't it love?"

"Yeah, never liked your tea." Tom urged his wife to sit, "We want an uncle for this kid. Yes, you Charlie, you nutter! He or she is going to need all the family it can get."

Charlie ignored the olive branch, "Hang on a minute, you haven't quite explained how you managed to get your hands on the pills to reverse your sterilisation. It's not as simple as applying, I've known islands applying before and getting rejected. If your genes are really that great how come they approved you to procreate with Grace...no offence Gracie. I mean, why dilute your genes with an island like Gracie when you should be breeding with a thoroughbred like yourself?"

"I told you Charlie," Grace indelicately put a pile of plates on the table, wanting the commencement of a normal evening, "Tom's made of some good stuff."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure the old dog is overflowing with black gold but my point is, why mix it with our untested, unrealised, mix-mash of old genes? It seems to go against everything this country is striving for when they allow an island to procreate."

"There are exceptions occasionally," replied Tom.

"I've never heard of any."

"There are, believe me. In my line of work, I've seen one or two."

“And Gracie is one of these?”

“Yeah, just by the very fact that we got approval.”

“But why? What’s so special about her? About us?”

“I don’t know, they don’t specify but some people must have seen something in her genome they liked the look of and decided to build bridges.”

Carrie gave Grace a hug, “This is amazing Gracie, I’m so happy for you.” Carrie held Grace’s arms and looked at her stomach, “I don’t think I’ve ever touched a ‘bump’ before.”

“Go ahead, touch it, there’s no movement at the moment but when there is I’ll let you know.”

Carrie tenderly placed a hand on Grace’s small bump, closing her eyes imaging what wonders might be happening inside. “Charlie, it’s amazing, come and feel.” Carrie looked round at Charlie, not relinquishing her touch on Grace’s stomach, “It’s part of you too, Charlie.”

Charlie didn’t move. Charlie didn’t say anything either though.

Carrie finally let Grace go, “Charlie, islands like us may be nothing without ancestry but you’ve been given a gift not many of us receive.”

“Without any of the hard work.” Tom said, “You’ll be the cool uncle, the one he goes to when his parents are being strict and over-protective.”

“Could be a girl.” Grace stressed.

“I hope so.” Carrie said.

“It’s just hard to get my head round, it’s not like we expect this kind of thing when we’re growing up.” Charlie walked over to his sister with open arms and an apologetic smile melting through. Grace stepped forward and let Charlie lift her off her feet.

These broken branches may not have had many roots running deep into the soil to establish a new line from which to sprout but everything has to start from somewhere. All life has a different world to grow up in than the generation before, new obstacles to negotiate and new problems to solve.

Carrie stood on the outside and looked in, watching the two parents and uncle congratulate each other. It was a scene she could never have imagined happening but one she wanted to be part of. As they hugged and kissed, made promises and predictions, Carrie opened the cupboard, slide aside the box of tea bags and saw the box of pills Grace had methodically and religiously given her husband so he could resume his natural role as provider, overturning the population controls controlled by the population. As she slipped a pill into a glass of beer and the remaining box into her pocket, Carrie looked enviously at Grace and her prized bump. It was destined Carrie’s own deceitful and enterprising genes should find a way to procreate, their determination would hurdle any barriers and justification would be found in the creation of life itself. Charlie didn’t need to know, he just needed to be ‘reactivated’.

Grace dabbed at an eye, “Look, dinners getting cold, let’s tuck in guys.”

“It’s salad Gracie.”

“Yeah, very funny Charlie.”

Tom sat down relieved, unknotting his stomach from weeks of anticipating this moment, “You know, this baby will have ancestry, he’s not going to be an island. It’ll have all my family on one side and you two on the other. He, or she, is not going to be bound up in the same crap as you guys. He’ll have more legitimacy than you’ve ever known, able to have kids of his own which will, in turn, have more ancestry than himself.”

Carrie brought over the beer and gave it to Charlie, “Relax Charlie, Tom’s right, with his history this kid will be alright. It’s not as though two islands like us are having a child.”

Charlie took a swig, “Yeah, I guess so. That’d be dumb as hell.”