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opening extract from

Pride and Penalties

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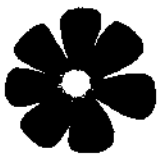

'Charlotte! I'm off now. Make sure you and Will come straight home after school.'

Mum, Tracy, a beautician and hairdresser, and the boss in our family. I don't bother replying; she always says the same thing. I've just noticed a spot on my chin and I'm examining it closely in the bathroom mirror. It's small but enticing, and potent, the middle erupting provocatively into a moist white pustule. I know you shouldn't squeeze spots because I've heard Mum say it makes the skin scar but it's irresistible. My nails close up tight, digging in underneath, and suddenly it bursts and lands splat on the mirror, a juicy globule of pus. Disgusting!

The door handle rattles, followed by three loud thumps.

'Charlie! What are you doing in there? Get a move on, I've got work to go to!'

Dad, Bob, and, don't laugh, he's a builder. I dab my chin then wipe the yuck off the mirror with toilet paper and study my face. No more sign of a festering zit, just two angry red indentations where my nails had dug in. I rub them, hoping no one will notice.

'Hurry up, Spider, we'll be late!'

Kid brother, Will, brilliant at everything and adored by everyone.

That's my family, plus me, the girl with three names: Charlotte, which Mum calls me, Charlie, which Dad calls me, and Spider, which everyone else calls me. (Except for teachers who call me 'Pay attention!' or 'I'm not telling you again!' or 'Do you *want* a detention?' Like, yes please!)

Oh no, this is coming out all wrong. I'm sounding like a real weirdo. Goodness knows what impression you've got of me with all this talk of festering zits and a name like Spider. And first impressions count, don't they?

I mean, you'd expect someone called Spider to be long and thin, all arms and legs, wouldn't you? Or am I getting confused with a daddy-long-legs? Anyway, I'm more of a rodent than an arachnid, because I'm small for my age with fine mousy hair that gets in my eyes and drives me mad unless I pull it back in a band, and I'm a fast mover.

No, that's worse; it makes me sound terrible. I don't look like a rat. I haven't got a long nose and sticking-out teeth or anything and I may be small but I certainly don't squeak. I'm tough as old boots, Gran says, unlike Will who's a bit of a wuss. And I'm definitely not covered in zits all the time like Wayne Dobson, the person I loathe most in the world; that spot was a one-off which was why I got so excited about it.

I unlock the door and smile sweetly at Dad who's hopping about on the landing, muttering under his breath about women and the endearing way they monopolise bathrooms. Downstairs Will says, 'What happened to your face?' and hands me my schoolbag and sandwiches and we set off for school. I like walking with Will, he's quiet and it gives me time to get my thoughts in order, so to speak. I think I'll start again. At the beginning.

I was born to play rugby.

You can take that in two ways.

It could mean that I really love the game and I'm good at it.

Which is true.

Or, less probably, it could mean I was conceived specifically to play rugby.

Which is also true.

If you think about it, babies are conceived for all sorts

of reasons, like wanting a girl or a boy to even up the numbers. (Dodgy, you might get the wrong sex.) Or to save a marriage on the rocks. (Even dodgier.) In the olden days, Gran says, they used to go for 'an heir and a spare' in case one of them pegged it. Some kid on telly was conceived as a match for his older brother who had some horrible disease. It was something to do with wanting the stem cells from his umbilical cord.

Wayne Dobson, my arch enemy since primary school, was probably the result of a doner kebab and a cheap bottle of plonk on a Saturday night.

Me, I was conceived to play rugby for England because Dad was supposed to but he got injured and had to give up the game. So he had me instead to make his dream come true.

Dad should have been over the moon when I was born. Trouble was, he got something he hadn't bargained for.

He got a girl.

Mum said he was so certain I was going to be a boy, he hadn't even thought of a name. So Mum got in with her choice quickly, Charlotte Tracy (after her) Ellis. Dad immediately shortened it to Charlie and went down the rugby club to wet the baby's head. When Mum took me out in the pram for the first time, everyone wondered why she'd dressed me in pink, assuming with

a name like Charlie, I was a boy. Dad had neglected to mention otherwise.

As you may have guessed, my parents are totally stereotypical. I guess I'm a disappointment to both of them. Dad wanted a big strong son who would grow up to score the winning try in the World Cup Final. And Mum wanted a pretty little daughter to dress up.

They got me instead.

Then Will was born two years after me into the right sex. Dad said it took Mum two goes to get it right. I heard him one night when they had friends round and he'd had a few. I wasn't meant to hear it; Mum nearly died when she turned round and saw me standing there in the doorway.

She made out he was joking but he wasn't, not really. Someone should tell him it's the man who's responsible for the sex of the child. Mind you, he wouldn't believe them if they did.

It's Will's fault I'm known as Spider.

When he was born Dad decided to call him William, after William Webb Ellis who started the game of rugby. But William Ellis wasn't good enough for a rugby fanatic like Dad.

So he changed our name by deed poll to Webb-Ellis.

It's not as mad as it sounds. You see, Mum's maiden name was actually Webb (she reckons that was the only reason he asked her to marry him) so he just double-barrelled it with Ellis.

He wasn't thinking about me at all.

Then came the day in the Juniors that Miss gave us a new book to read together in class. I stared at the cover in delight.

'This is a book about me! Someone's written a book about me, Miss!'

There was my name in big letters on the front cover.

'Charlotte's Web'.

'I thought you'd like that,' she laughed. 'Only it's not about you. It's a book about a spider called Charlotte.'

Everybody laughed and my cheeks burnt. At playtime, the boys tried to stamp on my toes, shouting, 'Kill the spider!' and the girls ran past flicking my hair and shrieking, 'Ugh, watch out for the spider's web!' When Wayne Dobson tried to force-feed me dead flies I'd had enough and punched him in the face. Then, to get everyone off my back, I announced to them I *wanted* to be known as Spider from now on. Everyone took me at my word because even at that age I could throw my weight about (small as I was) and the name stuck.

I should hate my brother for inflicting this name on me

and for being Dad's favourite and for being good at absolutely everything you can think of like schoolwork, art, music, games, you name it, not a bit like me who's hopeless at everything except sport.

But I couldn't hate Will if I tried (and believe me I have) because, even though he's quite big for his age, nearly as big as me, he's as gentle as they come and he hasn't got a mean bone in his body, unlike me who always seems to be having a go at someone or other. And, what's more, he thinks I'm the bee's knees and the best sister in the world and ever since I can remember I've been the most special person in his life.

Like, when he was a baby I used to love running out of nursery school to see him waiting for me with Mum. He was always so pleased to see me, he would screech with excitement and flap his hands and jiggle round in his buggy when he spotted me. Then we'd go home and watch cartoons on telly while Mum made us lunch and I'd put my hands over his eyes at the scary bits (not scary to anyone else but Will could be frightened by weird things like Mrs Goggins on Postman Pat).

He was such a scaredy-cat he wouldn't go to sleep without me so, once he was in a proper bed, Mum put us in together. We'd go up to bed at the same time to a room smothered in posters of rugby heroes going back years, put there by Dad, which suited me just fine. Will

Carling and Martin Johnson stared solemnly down at us as we changed into our pyjamas. Then we'd snuggle under the covers and listen to Dad's stories of the England legends of his day, with whom he would have played if he hadn't smashed his leg up playing for the Tinners, our local team, one Saturday afternoon.

After a while Will's breathing would slow down and deepen and he'd drift off to sleep but I'd listen, enthralled, to Dad's every word, until he switched off the light. Then I'd lie in the dark with Will's soft snuffles for company and dream of playing for England myself one day and making Dad proud of me.

Eventually, as we got older and Will grew brave enough to sleep on his own, I moved back into my old room, the one with the Teletubbies wallpaper, Teletubbies duvet cover, Teletubbies lampshade and Teletubbies rug. I can't ever remember liking Teletubbies. Mum said I could decorate it how I liked.

Poor Mum, she'd have loved a daughter who went for swathes of netting round the bedhead, pink frills and heart-shaped cushions. I was thinking Gothic, painted black from top to toe, mattress on the floor, get the picture? It was Dad who came to the rescue. He suggested England colours.

'How about red roses?' said Mum hopefully. 'A nice wallpaper with the England emblem on it?'

I rolled my eyes at Dad. In the end we compromised and Dad painted the walls white and ordered me an England bedspread. He got one for Will too. Naturally.

Then Mum went out and bought me a new inflatable mattress for when I had a friend to stay the night and Dad said, 'Get one for Will too' but Mum said, 'Just let Charlotte have something for once' and she sounded a bit sharpish.

I thought I'd better not say to Mum that, actually, I didn't have a special friend to invite for a sleepover.

I took Will Carling and Martin Johnson with me to my new/old room but the other day I noticed they were looking a bit tired and yellow and curling round the edges so I went into Will's bedroom to hunt for more posters. He was sitting on the floor, studying a leaflet that had come through the letterbox that morning.

'Don't mind if I take these, do you?' I stood on his bed and peeled the British Lions off the wall before he had time to say no. I needn't have worried, he was too engrossed. I spotted Dad's prize collection of international programmes and decided to push my luck.

'What about these?'

'Help yourself.'

I scooped them up quickly. I could have emptied the entire contents of his room and he wouldn't have noticed. I glanced at him curiously.

'What's that you're reading?'

He looked up at me, eyes shining. 'It's a show, on at the town hall next Saturday. Singing and dancing. It sounds brilliant, like the musical we went to see in London for your birthday. Do you want to come?'

'Nah.' I made for the door, my arms full of programmes and posters. 'Away game. We won't be back till late.'

'Oh yeah, I forgot.' Will's voice was flat. I shook my head. How could he forget? It was going to be the grudge match of the season and I'd been looking forward to it for ages.

Will and I have been going to watch the Tinners with Dad since we were little. It's in our genes, you see. Gran comes to the home games too. She's mad about rugby.

Her grandfather actually played in the Olympics back in the year dot. She's got the silver medal to prove it.

When Dad was picked for Cornwall, Gran says it was the proudest day of her life and she passed the medal on to him. But then he broke his leg and had to give up the game. She was devastated.

So was he. Mum reckons he's never got over it. I asked her once how it happened but she didn't know.

'It was before my time,' she said. 'He won't talk about it.'

But all is not lost. Now they've got Will to pin their hopes on.

When we get to school Will heads for the tennis courts where a gang of boys from my year are passing a ball around. They let Will join in because they know he's good, he's already a legend in the school. He should be too; he's been playing mini rugby on Sundays since he was seven and he's had Dad moulding his career since the day he was born. Now he's heading for the County Development Squad and he's not even twelve.

I stand and watch through the wire fence as a ball is sent his way and he catches it and drop kicks it back. The ball soars high into the air, out of the court. I walk backwards, never taking my eyes off the ball as it falls towards me and I catch it neatly, then my foot comes up to make contact with the leather and I return it in a perfect arc. A cheer goes up.

I'm good too but no one's ever given me a chance.

It's not fair.