

# 1

2010

## Top of her profession

Liz dominated the vast stage of the lecture theatre. She was picked out by a single spotlight on her head and shoulders giving her an ethereal appearance. The modern oak lectern she stood behind was warmed by a shaded light glowing across its surface. Vast sponsor adverts were backlit either side of the stage, promoting arthritis cream on one side and a surgical instrument on the other. Liz was a tall, statuesque figure in a perfectly fitted designer suit, crisp white blouse, and expensive flat black shoes. Her lithe physique had been toned in the gym and on the road, but her unshakeable confidence was forged in the tense heat of the operating theatre. All eyes were fixed on her. She turned away from the screen and looked down at the ground, savouring the moment. Feeling the wooden platform beneath her feet, and the slightly raised crack where the two pieces of stage came together, she was grounded, and ready. The spotlight warmed her shoulders,

and she sensed the contrast between its heat and the cool air of the stage on her legs. She was aware of the crowd immersed in darkness out of the corner of her eye and felt its energy seeping into her. She silently pressed the slide changer held in her left hand and felt a subtle give as the button depressed. With a distant mechanical clunk, the final slide appeared, flooding the screen with intense, vivid blue. A picture of an old man sitting with his head bowed, shoulders hunched in defeat, and a female doctor with her hand on his shoulder giving reassurance. Liz looked up from the floor and fixed her eyes on the audience, searching the faces one by one in silence. Dozens of moon shapes shrouded in shadow, like expectant ghosts waiting for her next words.

“Always remember, it is a privilege that the patient has invited us into their lives and entrusted us with the care of their health.”

She paused for a second, building anticipation, and then said in a firm, accusative voice “Do... not... willingly... fail... them. Thank you!”

After a two-second hesitation, the room erupted like an earthquake. The clapping was thunderous. Those at the front of the hall were on their feet, some with tears in their eyes. Students at the back stamped their feet. Those at the edge of the rows were in the aisles clapping with their hands held high. Cheers, whistles, and shouts of “hear, hear” cut the air. Anyone who entered the hall now would be in no doubt Dr Liz McClennan was a god within the medical profession. She published papers in leading scientific journals, authored textbooks which all students

read, and even had a surgical procedure named after her. She exuded confidence and majesty from every pore. She lived in a secure development of flats protected by their own concierge, drove a brand-new white, whisper-quiet Mercedes, and exercised in an exclusive members-only health club. She had truly made it and then some.

As she left the stage the crowd was still in rapture, and she was guided to a side door by a friendly hand. Walking down the corridor outside the lecture hall, she could still hear the wall of noise, and she tried to maintain a friendly but neutral facial expression, walking with slow, measured steps. The air of the corridor felt cool and fresh in contrast to the pressure cooker of the lecture theatre. The dimmed lighting was welcome after the darkness of the crowd. She passed through the fire doors into the trade show, and the bright lights made her squint. People broke off their conversations and turned towards her as she arrived. Moving forwards, she shook hands with several members of the great and the good, smiling and making small talk as she did so. Sales reps who had not heard the lecture but were aware of the noise whispered to each other and looked in her direction as word went around that something memorable had occurred. Gradually, a few brave students came up to her and asked questions, and eventually she was surrounded by a small throng of admirers wanting to bathe in her glory. She chatted, answered questions, and posed for several selfies with them.

“I loved your paper on the fallacy of scans,” said a voice.

“Thank you,” she replied to the group in general.

“Would you sign my book, Ms McClennan?”

“Of course. Who should I address the message to?”

She smiled at a young male.

“Your paper on subjective and objective examination got me through my finals!”

“Good to hear, thank you.”

Fifteen minutes later, walking from the trade show to the reception hall, she was greeted by an enthusiastic Dr Kerry, the conference organiser.

“Your keynote went down really well; people are still talking about it!”

“Thanks, they were a great audience which always helps.”

This was a line which Liz had used many times before and was always amazed that it had an effect. Conference organisers liked to view keynote speakers as rock stars, imagining the audience to be as enthusiastic as Glastonbury. The fact was that the speaker stood on stage behind a lectern picked out by a spotlight, and the audience was seated below in dimmed house lighting and looking up. The effect was a sea of unrecognisable faces, with any individual reaction impossible to see.

“Have a sherry!” Dr Kerry looked at Liz and smiled while he held out the glass.

A smiling male holding out a drink and the smell of alcohol punched the breath from her chest and made her feel giddy. She had to widen her feet to steady herself and make an effort to consciously retain her smile. She had always hated the smell and taste of alcohol. She was brought up in a virtually teetotal house – sherry for the

few guests they ever had, with her dad having half a lager if he went out for a drink with workmates at Christmas. Her first taste of alcohol as an experimental teenager resulted in her throwing up after trying vodka from a bottle one of the girls had smuggled into the Friday night school disco. But there was more to it than that, much more. The smell, taste, and very thought of alcohol knotted her stomach and turned her legs to jelly. It took her back twenty years to a party in Leeds in freshers' week that had changed her life. Ever since that day, a fear had haunted her. When her mind wandered, it would creep in as though someone was just there, just out of sight, watching her. She would sometimes wake in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, fearing that someone was standing over her. Dreams would involve music, a bedroom, and the clawing sickly smell of alcohol. She would wake scratching at her face, trying to get it away, but it never really left. Relationships with men failed each time, casual but never long term. Normal relationships are between two people, but they did not work for her because in her mind there was always another person there, watching, judging, sneering. As she touched the glass, the contrast between the high energy of her lecture and the utter failure of the personal life struck her like cold stone. Yes, she was successful but not with men. It was as though she had two parts since university. One had grown, gained numerous qualifications, and become a leading practitioner. The other had not changed since that bedroom. It was stuck never to move on. Something tethered her to that night and would not let go.

Liz knew a few things about bones, and she recognised

a fracture when she saw one. She had been fractured in an upstairs room at a uni party in her first year, and she now knew beyond any doubt that she had not healed. The fragments inside her mind had not mended and the sore was still festering after all these years. It underscored everything she did, every relationship she tried. Wounds that are not clean do not heal; they needed drastic action. Cut into the patient, wrench the tissue layers apart, and scrape out the infection. Build a scaffold around the pieces, with wire, plate, or pins. Pierce, screw, hammer, twist. Nothing subtle, nothing mild. It took confidence and courage, and that is what she must display now. It came to her as an almost divine flash. She spread her feet slightly to firm her stance and reached out to grip the sherry glass offered to her. She fixed Dr Kerry's eyes in a cold hard stare and a look of shock flicked across his face as though he had been slapped.

“Thank you,” she said and turned away. The first step had been taken.

## 2

1978

### Schooldays

Liz sat in the second to front row between Rachel on the right and Tommy on the left. Liz and Rachel often shared coloured pens, and both had the same set from the stationery shop in the high street. They had three shades of green, but four of blue, which Liz preferred. Liz's pencil case was very neat because each evening she would remove any pieces of fluff which became trapped in the zipper. She pulled it all out, dropped it on the floor and hid it under the bed. Tommy often forgot his pen and Liz would have to lend him one. She always gave him an old one because he was a boy, and anyway he would chew the top off it if the teacher asked him a question, leaving it with teeth marks. She could always recognise a pencil that Tommy had chewed because it had two small indentations on one side and one on the other. Liz got on with the boys better than the girls really, as she found the boys played better games and the girls often just talked about TV shows or clothes.

Her dad said she was becoming a tomboy, but she didn't mind. Rachel and the other girls went to ballet classes, but Liz went to Brownies. She had once tried ballet, but they had to wear a green leotard which she thought looked silly. Liz's and Rachel's mums would often get together after school and the girls would play upstairs in Rachel's house. Liz thought the house smelt of flowers, and it had a bottle in the kitchen with a melted candle in the top. Rachel had two dolls which Liz thought were boring, so she would go into Rachel's brother's room and play with his Lego bricks. She once built a tower up to the ceiling, but Rachel had come in and pushed it over.

When it came to sports at school, she didn't really like netball, and hockey was always cold outside because you just hung around until someone passed to you, which, in Liz's case, they rarely did. They had once had to run around the school field, which the games mistress told them was called cross-country. All the girls had complained and kept stopping and starting, but Liz just ran and ran, feeling the wind in her hair and smelling the newly mowed grass beneath her feet. She could hear the birds singing and thought it was fantastic being outside in the middle of a school day. When she got to the end of the two laps, the teacher said, "Well done," and she realised that the next girl had been miles behind. She told her dad when she got home, and he said she was obviously a natural runner.

From then on, Liz ran through life. She was chosen for the house team because they knew she would do well, and she ran the cross-country in the winter months, getting lots of points for her schoolhouse.

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When she went to secondary school, Liz was in the top sets and got a reputation for being a bit of a bookworm. As an only child, she would spend most of her time studying in her bedroom. She loved the smell and feel of books. The shiny paper and crisp flick of the pages, the reassuring weight in her hand. She would cover the pages with adhesive page markers and write pencil notes in the margins. She had a white metal bookshelf over her desk, with the books arranged in height order and held in place at one end by a pottery bookend shaped like a rabbit. Matching posters from a zoo trip when she was thirteen lined one wall, each in assorted colours arranged in a perfect row on her wall. On her ceiling she had luminous stars arranged in a circle above her head which glowed reassuringly at night. Her dad had put them up one summer when she was young, and she always remembered him doing it when she looked at them. As Liz got older and bigger, her bedroom seemed so much smaller, but it still felt homely. At night after her mum and dad had said goodnight, she would lie awake looking at the stars until the next thing she knew it was time to get up and go downstairs for breakfast. One summer when she went back to university, she took a solitary star with her and put it on the ceiling over the bed in her shared student house. A reminder of home and an anchor to her roots.

At school in the sixth form, Liz got top grades in her mock exams and she was encouraged to apply to leading universities and go into a profession. The careers advisor

talked about medicine and law. She thought law would be boring and always inside sitting at a desk. She was interested in the body, and her best subject was biology, but she did not like blood and thought she wouldn't cope with injuries and ill people. She thought about being a PE teacher but did not think she would like teaching at a school. One day in the library, she was reading a university prospectus and came across sports science. She had never heard of this subject but thought it would be really interesting because it dealt with the body but without sick people. Also, in the pictures they had a runner on a treadmill wearing a mask with a tube connected to a computer. As a runner herself, she thought this was really interesting, and much better than doing PE, having to play hockey and netball which she wasn't any good at. The careers teacher said she was undervaluing herself, but Liz was determined. She wanted to play with Lego, not dolls. She thought green leotards were stupid, and she liked running but not sports. She would go to university to study sports science, not medicine, and that was that.

After the exams, her parents took Liz to the cinema, and they had a pizza afterwards. Normally, Liz sat in the back of the car, with her mum in the front. Today they swapped around with Liz in the front, as her dad said it would be good for her to watch him changing gears and get to know about clutch control when pulling off from junctions. She was going to have driving lessons for her seventeenth birthday, as had some of her friends. Aimee had only taken ten lessons to pass, but Liz thought she might need more. In the cinema they all had popcorn, the salty one, not the

sweet one, as her mum said it was better for her teeth. In the restaurant after the film, she and her dad ordered pizza and her mum had a salad with low-fat dressing.

“Can I have a shandy?”

“No, because you’re not eighteen and it contains alcohol,” her mum replied.

“But Rachel had alcohol at her party, and I can’t even have a shandy!”

“Go on, let her have a shandy,” said her dad.

Liz and her dad looked at each other, and there was a twinkle in his eye.

“She can wind you around her little finger! It’s been the same since she was five!”

“What can I say – dads and daughters. Sometimes you just have to take a risk!”

They all laughed, and Liz felt warm and cosy. Here with her parents, in the town where she grew up. The pizza restaurant with its dimmed lights and flock wallpaper, on the street where she caught the bus to go swimming with her friends in the summer holidays. Across the road from the stationery shop where she bought all her pens and pencils since her days at infants’ school. She remembered when the light-up bollards at the end of the road had been replaced by ones on big springs, and when someone from the street parallel to theirs had been knocked off her bike at the T-junction. This was her entire world, and it had nurtured her and kept her safe. A baby bird secure in its down-filled nest. But soon Liz would leave as the baby had outgrown its nest, and she felt a little flutter in her stomach at the thought.

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The sixth-form chemistry lab always made Mark uncomfortable. He would get butterflies in his stomach as he walked up the stairs and into the short corridor leading to it. With his mates he was always slightly over chatty as he approached it, a nervous tick he had since starting secondary school. He often got overexcited in situations and would lose control. Queuing outside today, he was in the middle of the group. Ahead were the three girls who always got top grades in their homework, and were known amongst his friends as the Supremes, after the American pop group. He had once stood in front of them doing a little jig and singing 'A Woman Needs a Good Man'. He had gone bright red when Donna, one of the three, had pointed out that the song was by The Three Degrees and not the Supremes. Next were two boys he hardly knew, as they were in a different schoolhouse. Mark and his friends were in Oak, and they were in Birch, so any sports teams were different. He sometimes played in the Oak rugby team because he was big. However, he regularly dropped the ball so nobody passed to him, and he would just run up and down until there was a scrum when he was one of the props. He would just push and elbow people out of the way if the scrum collapsed. As they went into the sixth form and rugby became more skilled and less of a free-for-all, he was often left out of the team and would be picked only if Oak struggled for numbers.

Lab 2B was a place where his experiments always went wrong or failed completely. Chemistry lessons left him

floundering as he did not understand the basics and as the class moved on, he was left behind. He tried to cover this up by joking and being disruptive. He would distract Stewart sitting next to him by writing messages in the margins of his file, and kick Belinda's chair from behind until she turned around and scowled at him. He always sat on the back bench, trying to avoid the teacher's gaze and would look down, avoiding eye contact whenever a question was asked. He had read all the initials and words carved into the ageing wooden surface and all the rhyming lines inked over them and usually misspelled. He hated the pairs of gas taps because they brought back memories of the first time he lit his Bunsen burner and the flame went too high, making everyone laugh. The walls were covered with reminders of his inadequacy. The periodic table of elements he knew so little about, safety notices for procedures he could not do, examples of top-grade work which were never his. The fume cupboard was the only thing remotely acceptable to him because it was an ancient wooden contraption with a very stiff vertical sliding door which some of the girls could not lift, so he was asked to help. He liked being able to use his strength to show up the puny boys and help the girls, and he associated the acrid smell of generations of chemicals with a small reprieve from academia.

As they had moved into the sixth form and many had Saturday jobs in shops in the town, conversation turned to things they wanted but could rarely afford. They had taken to speaking in pseudo-posh accents they had heard on the TV.

“I can buy a pro camera, my old sport, even a 35mm SLR!”

“Yeah, well, I’m good for Ace trousers and shirts. So, who pulls now, hey?”

Mark and Pete both had jobs in small independent stores. Mark’s was working at ISO400, a small camera shop in Swindon, and Pete was in Henry James, a younger-men’s fashion store. Both were able to get staff discount, so spent all of their money on stuff from the stores. Mark was buying a second-hand Hanimex 110 camera and Pete had his eye on a bomber jacket he had seen worn on *Top of the Pops*.

“Why do you want a 110 camera, anyway, thought you said the Zenit B was the one you would go for?”

“Yeah, well, the Zenit has a better lens and the 35mm negative gives a top-quality picture, but the Hanimex is smaller so you can take pictures without anyone knowing.”

“Sneaky, so a bit of a James Bond, are you?”

“Something like that, sport. If it works, you’ll be well impressed, believe me.”

Over the holidays Mark had worked two weeks in ISO400, and some days trade was very slow. He would end up playing with the cameras when the manager went round the back of the shop for a cigarette. Mark had discovered he could press the shutter of a camera without anyone nearby hearing it if the camera was held close to the ground. He had tried this several times without any film in the camera while showing products to customers. It was better to hold the camera with his fingers and fire the shutter with his thumb. That way, he could point the

lens forwards or even upwards. After practising a few times with some out-of-date film, he was ready to impress.

Stuart from his chemistry group was always bringing in pictures he had cut out from his brother's *Men Only* magazines. In one, Mark had seen an upskirt photo and thought this was incredible. It was a real girl, not a glamour model, and apparently taken on the underground by a bloke standing behind the girl on an escalator. He had never been on an escalator, but at lesson change the boys often deliberately lagged behind so they could follow the girls upstairs. They would stay two steps below and bend down pretending to tie a shoelace, challenging each other to see what colour knickers a particular girl was wearing. Stuart had won last time, saying that Gayle Duncan was wearing pale blue, but then someone had said his sister always wore pale blue anyway because that's what his mum bought her. His mum had said if she bought white, they went pale blue eventually because one of the boy's navy socks always found its way into the wash, so what was the point.

The plan was for the boys to follow the girls up the stairs as they went from maths<sup>1</sup> to physics. Mark had brought his camera in and would take the picture while Pete was look out, making sure none of the girls looked around. They chose Gayle Duncan's group because she always walked around with Susan Pritchard and Clare Smith. Mark thought Gayle was nice, but Pete was keener on Susan, as she always left the top button of her blouse undone after PE and he was sure she was teasing him.

On the day, they gathered outside the maths room

as the bell went. Mark showed them the camera, demonstrating his holding technique and how the shutter fired. Pete wanted to have a go, but Mark wouldn't let him. He only had twenty-four frames on the film cassette and had already taken fourteen, so might need all ten left. They followed the girls up the corridor, about three steps behind. As the girls climbed the stairs, Mark pointed the camera up and bent down to touch his shoe, firing the shutter at the same time. He dropped the camera, sending it clattering down the three stairs to spin on the floor at the bottom. He ran down to retrieve it, only to find Duncan Hoodie's group on top of him.

"What's that, Smith? You mum's best camera?" and he kicked it, sending it spinning towards the skirting board of the corridor. It struck the skirting and bounced off.

"If you've broken that!"

"You'll what, Smith? Tell your mum?"

The whole group laughed. Mark felt his face go hot. The girls were going through the physics room door on the top corridor now as the bell rang. Mark had to pick up the camera and race up the stairs two at a time after his friends not to be late.

### 3

1981

Off to uni

**L**iz drove down to university with her mum and dad and a car full of belongings. After her results, she worked in the local supermarket over the summer. She had felt free. For the first time in her life, she was not thinking about schoolwork or exams. In the summer she had talked to her mum a couple of times about the practicalities of leaving home, which clothes to bring and what to take. But her mum had never been to university, so it was her dad she learnt most from. He had actually lived the experience of university, so understood what she was going through.

As she sat in silence in the back of the car, she looked up and saw her dad's eyes looking back at her in the driving mirror. He smiled gently and briefly raised his eyebrows, and she knew he was in her corner, as he always had been. As they drove on, her mind wandered back to the period when she had looked at universities. She had mainly visited her various choices with her mum. It was

good, but her mum pointed out all the logical stuff, which was good, but... When she travelled with her dad, it had been fun. She felt a twinge of guilt feeling this, because she spent hours just sitting and talking to her mum, but with her dad, it was different. She was in Trentfield Hall at Leeds, and they had been shown around. She remembered her initial shock at the old building, with long corridors, a green carpet with hideous, spiral pattern and the paint was flaking off the walls. They had been shown inside a room, and her face dropped. It had drawing-pin holes in the wall, the mirror was cracked, and the carpet threadbare. It had a slightly musty smell reminiscent of the storeroom in the art block at school. In the car on the way back home, her dad had said that when he was at university, he had to tape plastic sheeting over the window in his room as it had no heating and was freezing in the winter. Also, he had had to share with another boy who had very smelly feet because he only changed his socks once a week. This had made her feel her situation wasn't so bad, and they had laughed so much about it on the way home that Liz had tears streaming down her face.

As they turned off the main road and into the drive up to Trentfield, she felt butterflies in her stomach and thought she was going to be sick. This was her first time away from home and it felt like jumping off something and being in mid-air. She couldn't cling on to the security of the home she had known as a child but had not yet reached firm ground. She felt alone and afraid. As they swung into the car park, it was like arriving at a fair and her mood instantly changed. There were five or six cars with boots open and

bags on the floor. People her age milled around, hugging younger siblings and parents, and carrying bags and boxes in and out of the building. As she approached the door, she noticed a big banner saying, 'Welcome class of 1981', and as she walked through the door, she noticed out of the corner of her eye her dad put his arm around her mum's shoulder and slowed down. Briefly she wondered why he had done this and then an explosion hit her. A wall of sound greeted her with whistles, football rattles, and party horns. There were balloons hung everywhere in a blaze of colour and people clapped and cheered each student as they came in. They were all like her, young, smiling faces with life in front of them. She was excited, embarrassed, relieved, and happy all at the same time.

Liz and her parents made several trips from their car to her room. She got the key to her room and a goody bag, and they went upstairs and put the key in the lock. She had a brief pause as she thought, whatever is on the other side will stay with me for at least a year, but then she turned the key, and they were in. It was the same musty smell she had noticed when she visited earlier in the year with her dad, but it had an opening window and overlooked some parkland with trees which she liked. During the road trip, she had felt trepidation, and then elation during the welcome downstairs. Now she felt satisfaction that she was actually here. She had clothes, trainers, running kit, pots and pans, her old music player, and a much-loved stuffed bear called Heston. She put Heston on her pillow, squidding his black nose as she did so. She remembered washing him when she was about seven, and her mum

mending one of his seams. He was a bit worn now, but, still, he was family. Liz's mum had said she could always come home for a weekend to pick anything up that she had forgotten. At the time this had made her feel secure, but now all she wanted was to stay and fit in. As they were unpacking her case and boxes, someone knocked the door, and she looked at her mum, who just waited. It was the first time it dawned on Liz that she was the one in charge in her world now. When she opened the door, a girl was standing in the corridor in jeans, trainers, and a blue sweatshirt. She had dyed green hair with a bright red pointed paper hat on top. She smelt faintly of strawberries and was carrying a shiny toy wand.

“Hi, I'm Judith. I'm your wizard.”

Liz stared at her blankly.

“Did they not explain? All new students get a second year to show them around and introduce stuff. We are called wizards because we're supposed to be able to make things happen for you!”

“That's brilliant! That's what I get for not reading all the bumf they sent through. Nice to meet you.”

“I can see you have your folks with you, so I'll leave you alone. I'm in room 224 if you need me. See you tonight at the welcome party.”

When they had finished unpacking – clothes in the wardrobe, books on the shelf, and multiple pairs of trainers under the bed – it was another hour before the welcome speech, and Liz had left her door open to see people coming and going. She was just going to suggest tea when a girl put her head round the door.