



# The corridor

Since leaving school their lives could not have been more different – but they were still linked **By Pippa Kelly**

She popped another lemon sherbet in her mouth and scrolled down the list. Belinda Atkins. Captain of the First XI. She could see her now: charging down the hockey pitch, barking orders. Fiona got out of breath running for the bus, and without her glasses she couldn't see the ball. She clicked on Belinda's notes. "I'm a physio, living with my partner in Islington, having travelled the world." Fiona had once travelled to the Isle of Wight. Closeted in her room at B&B, she hadn't spoken to a soul. Little Imogen Dawes, almost as quiet as Fiona, but pale and pretty with it, was an artist in Italy. "Come and stay in Umbria," she invited Fiona from beyond the computer screen. Fiona doubted she'd want the company of an assistant librarian who lived alone with her tabby. As she moved through the names, her memory strayed down corridors of peeling paint. The click of the mouse became the click-clack of heels on tiles behind her. And through the double doors she could see a gaggle of older girls. Fear rose in her throat, but she forced herself to carry on. A name

shrieked out at her, making her jump. Fiona took a deep breath, clicked on the mouse and started to read.

In her office in Great Smith Street, the Minister speed-read the latest paper on the subject. It was a nasty business, and the statistics showed it was on the increase. Stella Rivers, who had only recently been promoted to Government, picked up the phone. The announcement would have to be brought forward.

The next day at work Fiona mulled over what she'd discovered. One of her colleagues asked if everything was OK. "Things on m-m-my m-m-mind," she said, date-stamping another book.

At first she'd thought it must be a hoax. It couldn't be true. But she double-checked in *Who's Who*; the entries were the same.

That evening, as she opened tins – Whiskas for Sammy, ravioli for her – she was still struggling to take it in. After doing the washing-up, instead of stacking everything neatly in the cupboard as usual, she left it on the draining board and hurried upstairs. She'd save

her chocolate éclair for later.

Fiona had discovered the internet just over a year ago. Every evening, after she'd had her supper and fed Sammy, she set off on her travels round the worldwide web.

Now, with Sammy asleep at her feet, she searched for friendsreunited.co.uk and composed an e-mail. "Remember m-m-m-me?" she typed.

Stella allowed herself a smile of satisfaction. The speech had gone well – delivered confidently, but without arrogance. And the journalists had picked up her teaser about the coming announcement. An e-mail whooshed into her in-box. She saw it was from her researcher and decided it could wait.

Fiona had worked in the library for 10 years, saying barely a word and usually going straight home to her cat. But recently, her colleagues had noticed she'd seemed happier, chattier, than usual. "Perhaps she's got a b-b-boyfriend at last," one of them joked, and they all laughed.

The e-mail turned out to have been an external message forwarded to Stella by her researcher. He'd added a note: "Your first e-mail since all Labour MPs had to register with Friends Reunited. Welcome to open government!"

Stella, who liked to be in control, found it unnerving. "Can we trace the sender?" she e-mailed back.

"No," came the reply. "Whoever it is used a Hotmail address."

One lunch hour, Fiona popped into town and bought herself a new dress. "You look lovely," said the assistant. She knew the woman was only interested in making a sale. Even so, she smiled at herself in the mirror.

At home, after steamed fish and low-fat oven chips, she headed upstairs. She browsed a few sites, then went to Friends Reunited. "Fancy ending up as M-m-m-inister for Schools," she typed. "Congratulations."

Stella frowned at the screen and shivered as someone walked over her grave. She clicked shut the e-mail and opened the Word document version of her coming announcement. Unusually, she was on her fourth draft: the right words kept eluding her.

Fiona walked past the bakery and into the grocers, where she bought a bunch of seedless grapes – the

sort that Imogen Dawes always had in her lunchbox.

She munched them that night as she went to [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) for the news. There was an interesting item about the government. Sammy, who hadn't been fed yet, jumped on to the table, miaowing loudly. She shoved him off. Behind her glasses, her eyes glittered as she started to type.

Stella's speech was gliding from the printer. The new legislation was tough, and was bound to be controversial. But necessary, read Stella, if we are to rid our schools of a classroom menace that can blight young lives. Whoosh. The sound was starting to seem insidious.

Fiona would have liked to join her colleagues for a drink, but she wanted to get home to her computer. She pushed through the front door, kicked Sammy to one side and hurried upstairs.

She allowed herself a smile of satisfaction as she read reports of Stella's announcement. The woman known for her bullish approach had been strangely hesitant. She had stumbled over simple words, appearing to lose her place, and at one point had stuttered to a halt.

Fiona went to friendsreunited.co.uk, typed her message and pressed "Send Now".

Stella stared at the screen. It was all so long ago, she'd forgotten about it, until the e-mails started arriving. It had been a bit of fun, a way of gaining popularity among the other girls who, let's face it, had all joined in. Even now though, after all these years, she could still see, behind the other girl's thick glasses, her haunted look.

Whoosh. Stella didn't want to return down the corridor, with its peeling paint, but she felt herself being forced along. Through the double doors, a dumpy figure was approaching. Stella saw the hesitation and knew the girl had seen her and was frightened. She clicked open the e-mail. ●

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