

...from 'Fingerprints'

There was a little daylight left, just enough to make out a long corridor lined with many doorways, flexes dangling from ceilings, graffiti scribbled on walls, a tiled floor with here and there pieces of the pattern missing. The smell was familiar. School assemblies. Cabbage. Something else. Callum curled up his nose. There were puddles on the floor. The rain must have dripped in through holes in the roof and squeezed through cracks in the ceiling. He began to walk. He had brought a torch, it was in his coat pocket with the phone – but he wouldn't use it yet. He wiped his palms across his chest. They were sticky with sweat.

The first room he looked into must have been an office. There were empty filing cabinets, the old kind that held those strange suspended cardboard folders. Callum had seen them on films. A broken chair had collapsed into the cream-tiled hearth. An ugly fireplace framed a rusty, metal-barred electric fire. Otherwise the room was empty. Callum wasn't sure what he had expected, but this was just a room. He went further along the corridor, growing in confidence as he nudged open door after door to reveal more empty rooms. Occasionally he came across the metal frame of a forgotten single bed or an abandoned wooden chair, but that was all. He found some toilets, ancient tiled walls and wooden seats, scratched and dented. But nothing more, nothing to be frightened of. Remembering, he pulled the phone from his pocket, keyed in the code Jamie had given him and took a photograph. There was a noise in the corridor. He froze. There it was again – and again.

"Who's there?" Callum shouted, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "Jamie? Is that you? I know it is."

Of course, the boys would have followed him in, he thought, trying to scare him.

He stepped out of the toilets as the bird swooped back along the corridor, flying just below the ceiling, missing Callum's head but still making him crouch to avoid its black, beating wings. He edged back to the door, feeling his way along the wall, because now the daylight had gone – and opened it wide to let the bird escape. On its return flight, it carried on, out into the darkness, and Callum banged the door shut behind it.

"There'll be ghosts," the others had told him. "People died in there. Died in horrible ways."

Jamie had said there were bodies buried underneath the cellar. His dad had told him. But Callum, braver now after dealing with the bird, pulled his torch from his coat pocket and switched it on, revealing cracked walls and paper hanging from ceilings – but no ghosts. No bodies. Just an old hospital, waiting to be demolished as the past made way for the new.

Louise Holmes