

**WHERE  
MONSTERS  
LIE**



Also by Polly Ho-Yen and published by Corgi Books:

*Boy in the Tower*

# WHERE MONSTERS LIE



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CORGI

*For my sister, Hanna*

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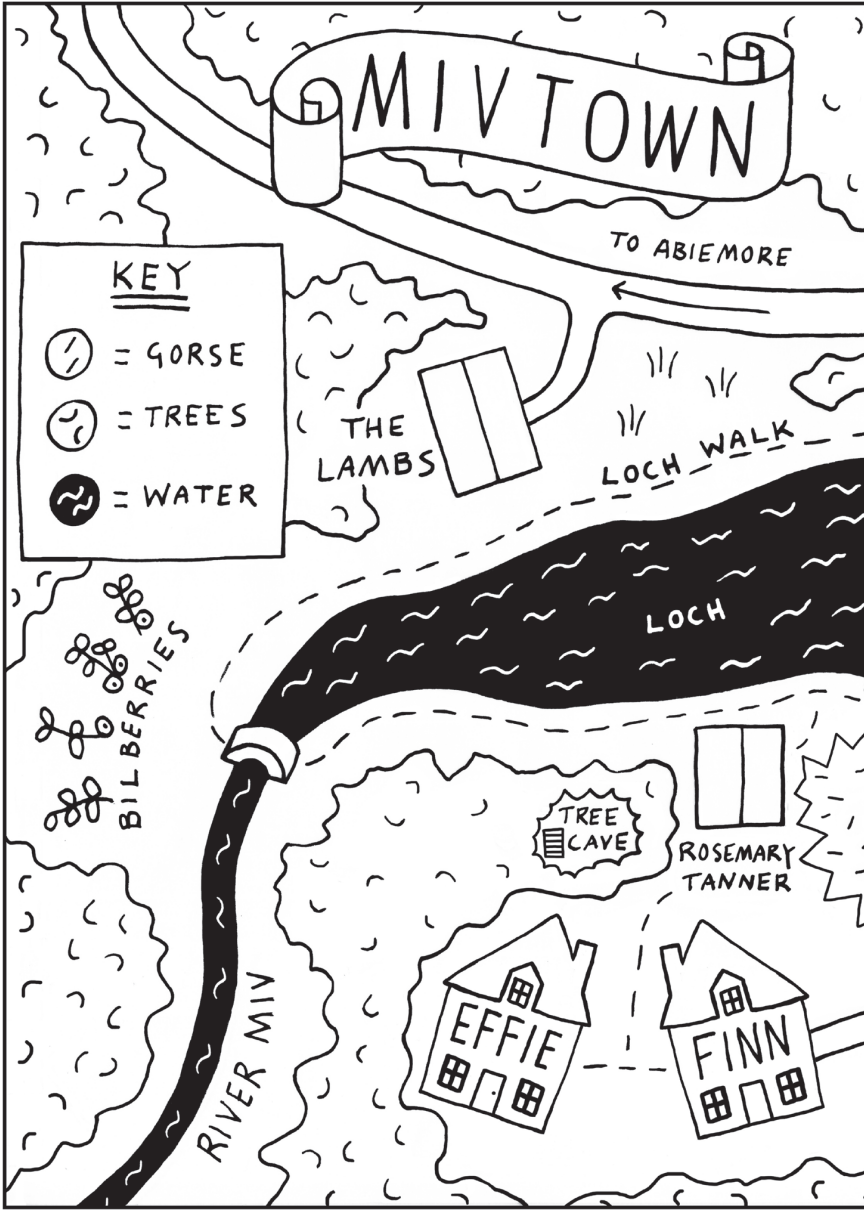
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*The loch looked black today. Blacker than it ever has. As dark and black as the sky at night, but it was daytime. It was daytime.*

*I felt as if I was being drawn to it. I had to see it – I wanted to, or needed to. Or both. I had to see the water for myself.*

*It's as though, if I don't keep my eye on it, it might rise up. It would engulf me, sink me. If I keep my eye on it, I feel safe.*

*But what do I do when I fall asleep?*









## Chapter One

It began on the night of the offering. The night Buster disappeared.

Buster's my rabbit. Or he was, anyway.

It was dark that night. The kind of darkness that becomes one with the cold. It crept around our necks, biting at our toes like something living. Though I knew the loch lay before us, I couldn't see it. All I could see in front of me was blackness.

I was with Finn and all the other kids in the village. We were crowded around Old Bill, one of the oldies, who held the food parcel high above our heads with one hand while we chanted at him to '*Throw it, throw it, throw it!*'

Just as Old Bill lobbed the package, wrapped up in string like a present, high, effortlessly, into the air, I heard Mum behind me.

'Effie! Careful! Stand back!'

I wasn't even standing that close to the edge, but Mum pulled me backwards behind Finn, so

I missed the food parcel finally sinking into the loch's waters and disappearing for good beneath its glossy dark surface.

Before I could protest, Rosemary Tanner, another of the oldies, cleared her throat as though she were about to give a speech.

'Yes, better stand back from the water,' she said. 'You don't want the monsters to get you.'

'Here, here!' muttered Mr and Mrs Daniels, and Old Bill mumbled something too.

Mum pulled me back further still, until I was standing behind everyone else, enveloped in her arms.

There was a legend in Mivtown about monsters awakening from the loch. The adults used it to scare us away from the water, but we were hazy about what the monsters actually were or even what would raise them. All we knew was that the monsters were supposed to lead you into the water.

They were the reason why we were standing there on that cold, cold night, stamping our feet to stop the raw air numbing them, watching our breath unfurl like smoke from a chimney.

Every year, at the winter and summer solstice, we would throw a parcel of food into the loch. An offering to the monsters. Or 'a bloody waste', as Dad would say.

But me and Finn didn't really think they were real, and that winter solstice, as we'd gathered in the village hall, as was our way, I noticed that the only people who watched the parcels of cakes and tarts sink beneath the black waters of the loch were us kids and the oldies. Everyone else had stayed in the hall, and when we went back inside, their cheeks were flushed red like the glasses of wine in their hands.

Apart from Mum, of course. She'd come out when she saw that I was going.

Mum has never liked the legend. She huffs under her breath whenever someone brings it up, as though trying to get rid of something inside her. She doesn't really enjoy coming to these village things, but I insist on it. Otherwise we would be left out. The only family in the village not there.

I had tried to take Tommi, my little sister, out with us, but she refused. She was quite content playing by herself in a corner of the hall. Tommi's like that. She'll disappear, hidden in a little den, amusing herself for hours on end.

We weren't gone long that night, not really, but when we got home, Dad found that Buster's hutch was empty.

I didn't believe him at first and ran out to see for myself, checking every corner of the itchy hay

for his furry little body, and after that I stayed out in the garden with a torch, calling for him and checking under bushes and along the narrow shadowy strip behind the garden shed. Even down the road all the way to Finn's house, which stood out, lit up and welcoming in the dark – until Mum called me to come in.

Because rabbits don't just disappear.

Do they?

## Chapter Two

I couldn't sleep that night for thinking about Buster.

I kept imagining him, scared and alone, outside his hutch, which was dry and sheltered and packed with sweet-smelling hay. Sometimes I managed to doze, and in my half-dreams Buster would be with me, sitting contentedly on my lap. He seemed so real that I felt sure I could feel his fur between my fingers, the weight of him on my legs. Then, all of a sudden, I would jerk awake and realize that it wasn't real at all, that Buster was gone and I had no idea where he was. After that, I tried to keep myself awake.

The next morning, in the weak light of the winter sun, I searched the garden and lane again. Tommi came with me, both of us with stubs of carrot in our hands, calling and calling his name, until we got so cold that we had to go back inside to warm up.

Time seemed to pass in fits and starts that

day. The moments when I was alone seemed to draw on endlessly, but then, when Mum asked me to help her sort out the old Christmas ornaments, time suddenly sped up. At one point I saw the light dimming outside and realized with a jolt that Buster had been missing for almost twenty-four hours. How could it have been so long?

News about Buster's disappearance had spread quickly through Mivtown. Dad told Mr Lamb, who told Mrs Daniels, and after that everyone knew. There are only five families in Mivtown. There's my family and Finn's, and then just three others: Mr and Mrs MacGail, whose daughter Stephanie has grown up and now lives in Abiemore; the Lambs, who've just had a baby called Colan, who makes Tommi seem very big; and the Wells family, who have two little boys, Danny and Tom. And then there's the oldies, who run things in the village and make sure everyone knows everything: Rosemary Tanner, Mr and Mrs Daniels and Old Bill.

It was Old Bill who discovered the body that evening.

From the slow trudge of his steps on the path I knew it was Old Bill before he'd even knocked on the door. And there was someone else with him too. The brisk, light gait of Rosemary Tanner beside him.

Old Bill spoke to Dad in a low voice at the door so I couldn't hear properly, and then I saw him pass over a bundle wrapped up in a towel, not unlike the food parcel we'd thrown into the loch the day before. Dad turned to me, but his gaze was lowered, as though he couldn't meet my eye.

I knew then that it was Buster.

I felt paralysed; something like heat, or the sensation of being turned inside out, travelled through my neck and shoulders and arms and landed somewhere in my stomach.

I couldn't take my eyes off the bundle that Dad held carefully in his hands, and then I heard someone speaking to me.

'Effie? Effie?' the voice was saying insistently, as though someone were trying to wake me up. 'Bill found him by the loch,' Rosemary Tanner was saying.

I stared, unblinking, at her inquisitive face, which seemed far closer to me than it actually was. Her grey hair was knotted into a tight bun. I'd never seen her look any different.

Finn and I used to wonder if she slept with her hair in its rigid silver bun, and if she did, how she could possibly sleep. Not on her back because the bun would get in the way; not on her side because the hairpins would stick into her head. And what

did that leave? Face down on the pillows? But how would she breathe?

It was one of the little mysteries of Mivtown that you tried to unpick because there was nothing else to talk about.

Rosemary Tanner tilted her head to one side, bird-like, as though she had seen something of interest. She muttered something under her breath that I didn't hear properly. Something about the offering. Then she flicked open the black book that she always carried around under her arm, as though she might start reading one of the passages aloud. Because Rosemary Tanner was one of the oldies, she had the job of writing about the village. She was called the village chronicler, but Finn and I liked to call her the Crunkler because we thought it sounded like a made-up monster from a story.

Finn and I had a half-dare with each other that we would try to steal a look in the black book to see what was really in it. Finn thought it might be full of cartoons that Rosemary drew of us all. It was a half-dare because neither of us thought we would actually do it. We were too afraid of what Rosemary Tanner might do if we did.

At that moment Mum came through from the kitchen. She flew across the room and shut the



door on Rosemary Tanner and Old Bill so forcibly that I wondered for a moment if they'd been hurt.

She shouted. Something like, 'Enough!' or 'No more!' as the door closed in their faces.

'Tori!' Dad said.

'I'm sick of their interfering,' said Mum, reaching up as though to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, although there was nothing out of place. 'It's none of their business, Kev.' She took the little bundle gently from Dad's hands and turned to me. 'Effie? Are you OK?'

I didn't answer her but looked at Dad and asked, 'Is it . . . ?'

'It's Buster, love,' he said. 'He's gone.' He came over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. It had begun to shake and wouldn't stop.

'Oh, Effie,' Mum said. 'Let me put him outside.'

Dad kept saying things like 'You're all right, Effie, you're all right,' and 'He was a good rabbit, wasn't he? He had a good life,' over and over until I stopped shaking

'It must have been foxes, Effie,' Mum told me. 'Poor old Buster.'

'Bustaaa!' repeated Tommi. She thought we were getting him out when she heard us talking about him. She loved him almost as much as I did.

‘No, Tommi,’ I said quietly. ‘Buster’s gone now.’  
It made it seem more real, saying it aloud.

Tommi looked at me solemnly, blinked a few times as though she were taking in the news and then toddled off into the living room.

‘Can I go and see Finn?’ I asked, and then, seeing Mum’s face turn to disapproval, I added, ‘Just quickly?’

Finn lived next door to us. I say ‘next door’, but Finn’s house was a good ten-minute walk away. But it was the closest to ours and so he was technically our next-door neighbour.

That’s what Mivtown’s like. Our houses are scattered across the valley and around the loch like a handful of autumn leaves released into the wind.

Finn’s my best friend in the whole world. We like to joke that we’ve been friends since before we were born. I even have a photograph of my mum and Finn’s mum, Kathleen, standing opposite each another. They are holding hands, wearing matching flowery dresses, their heads turned towards the camera and smiling. The round, pregnant bumps of their bellies almost touching.

We were both born just a week after it was taken. On the very same day.

When we were younger, we used to wind each other up, saying that they'd mixed us up when we were born, that we'd been swapped around and no one had noticed. There's a picture of us when we were just days old and we look exactly alike – little wrapped-up sausages, side by side. Our tiny red faces are screwed up into identical grimaces, both of us shocked to be out in the world. We are wrapped up in yellow blankets so you can barely tell us apart, and this little detail only added fuel to our fantasy.

We would spend as much time together as we could, and whenever we weren't together I seemed to be locked in a battle of wills with my mum, asking if I could go and see him.

'Please, Mum, can I go to Finn's?' I asked again. 'Please. He'll want to know about Buster, and I—'

'All right,' she said. 'But quickly. Don't be too long, OK? You must be back for dinner in half an hour.'

I tore off down the road to Finn's and was breathless by the time I got there.

Finn opened the door. As soon as he saw my face, he knew.

'Buster,' he said. His forehead wrinkled with concern. 'What happened?'

‘He was . . . by the loch. Foxes, Mum says.’

Finn’s eyes filled with tears.

‘Finn . . .’ I said, but I couldn’t finish my sentence.

I didn’t need to speak. Finn just understood.