Dear Reader,

The story within these pages is one of adventure, bravery and hope. It is a story of the Dockland Rats that live alongside the Thames as it twists and turns through the city of London. Their fate is bound to a cursed black diamond stolen from a far-off land, from a time gone by. But this could be a story about you and me too, for humans are not so dissimilar from rats; fierce and brave, quick to love and quick to fight, capable of both great generosity and greed, both honesty and deceit.

Ultimately this is a story about finding the truth.

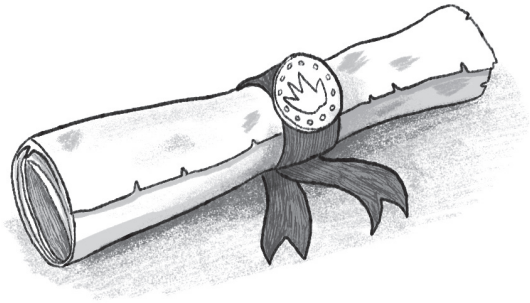
But what even is the truth?

We all have our own version, as no one wants to be the villain of their own story.

And sometimes we choose to believe the stories that others weave around us, for it can feel safer to be wrapped in the comfort of home, than to search for answers in the unknown.

This is such a tale, about a young rat named Tilbury.

And in a world of so many different stories, maybe the greatest truth of all is when we know the truth of our own selves.



Also by Gill Lewis

The Closest Thing to Flying

Eagle Warrior

Gorilla Dawn

Moon Bear

Run Wild

Scarlet Ibis

Sky Dancer

Sky Hawk

A Story Like the Wind

Swan Song

White Dolphin

A Street Dog Named Pup

Crow Wars

Song of the River

For younger readers:

Puppy Academy – Scout and the Sausage Thief

Puppy Academy – Star on Stormy Mountain

Puppy Academy – Pip and the Paw of Friendship

Puppy Academy – Murphy and the Great Surf Rescue

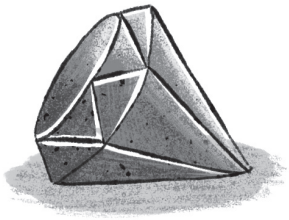
Willow Wildthing and the Swamp Monster

Willow Wildthing and the Dragon's Egg

Willow Wildthing and the Shooting Star

Willow Wildthing and the Magic Spell

MOON FLIGHT



GILL LEWIS

Illustrated by
Pippa Curnick

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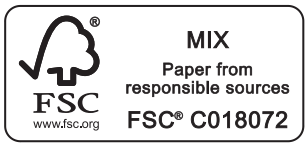
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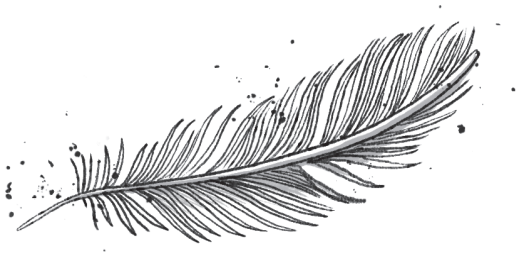
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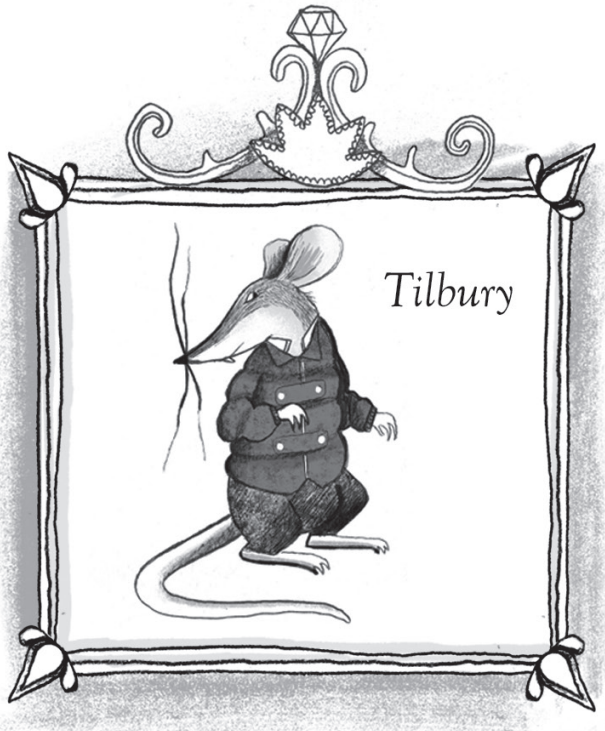
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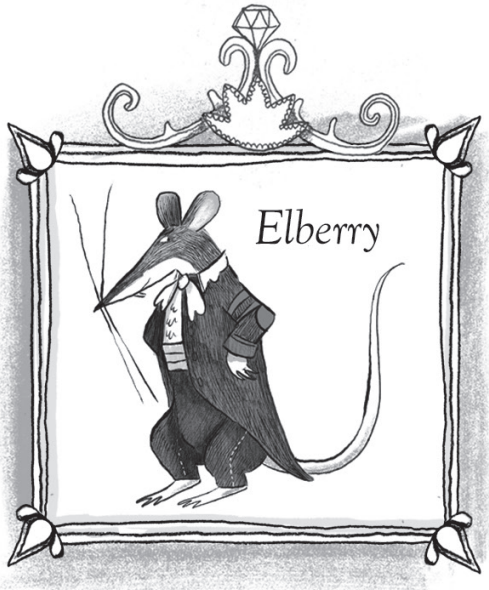
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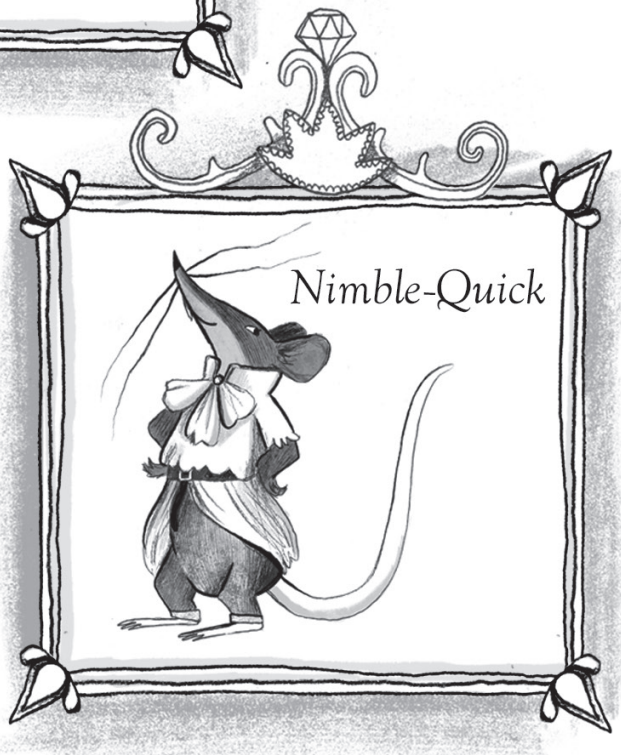
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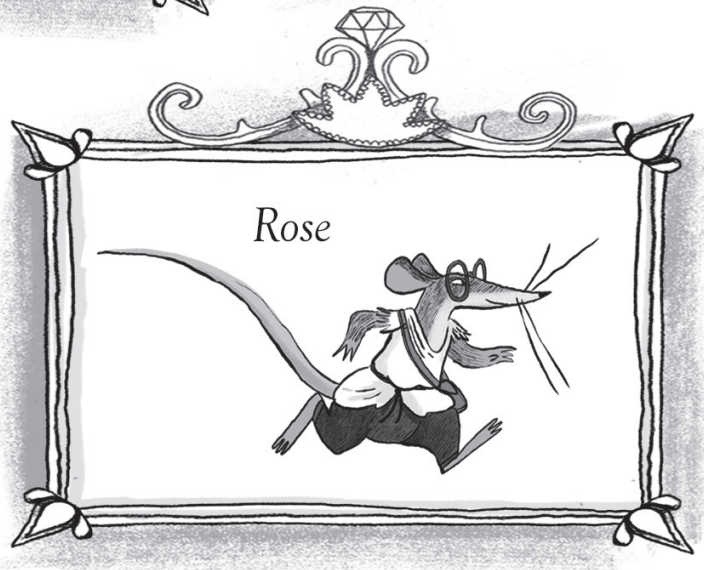
who has guided my little ship through stormy waters

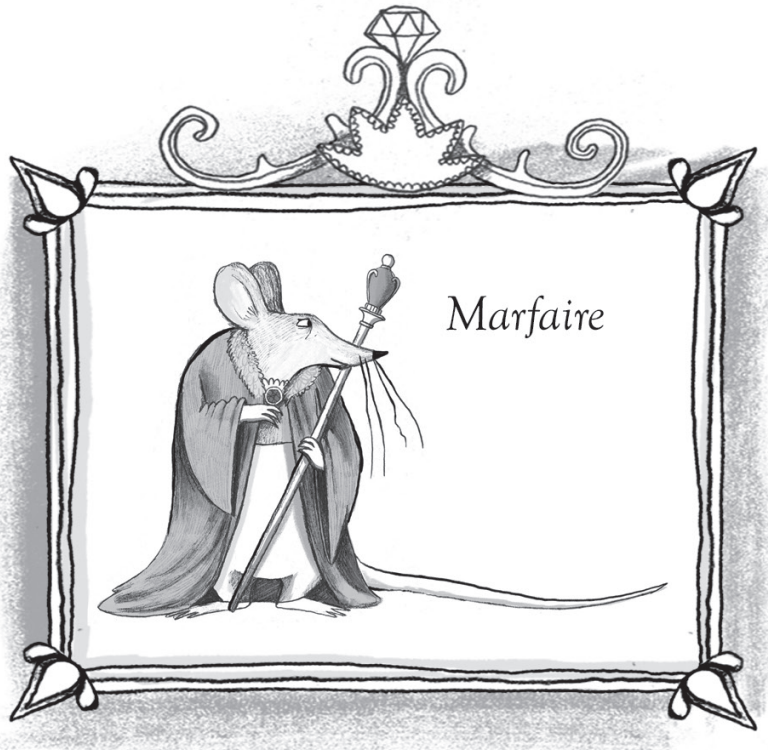
and found a harbour for my own stories, in a world of so many stories.


Tilbury

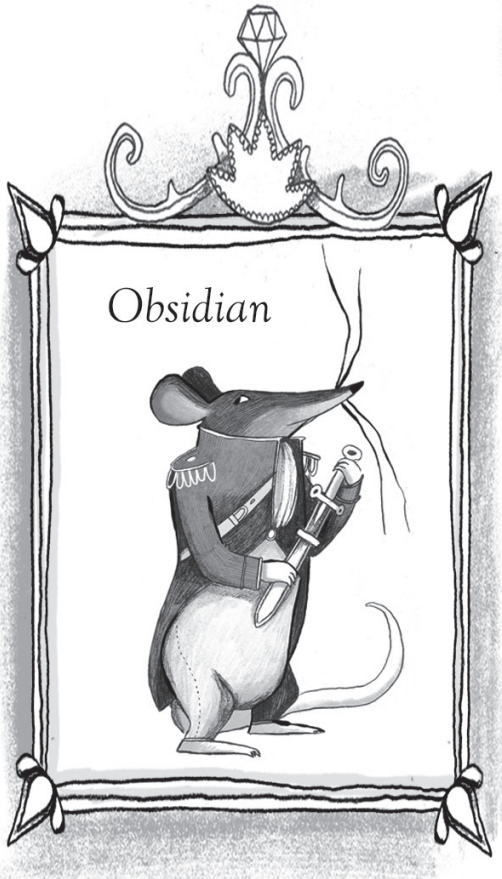

Elberry

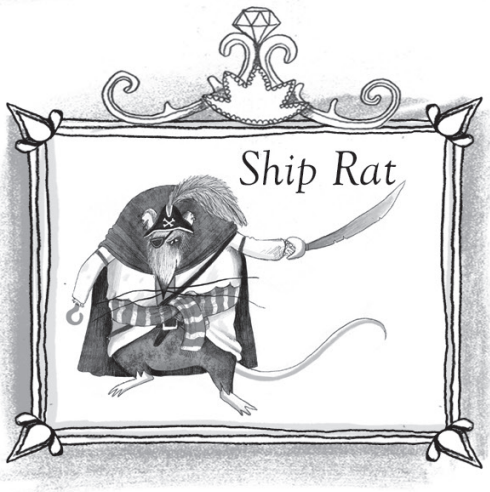

Nimble-Quick


Rose

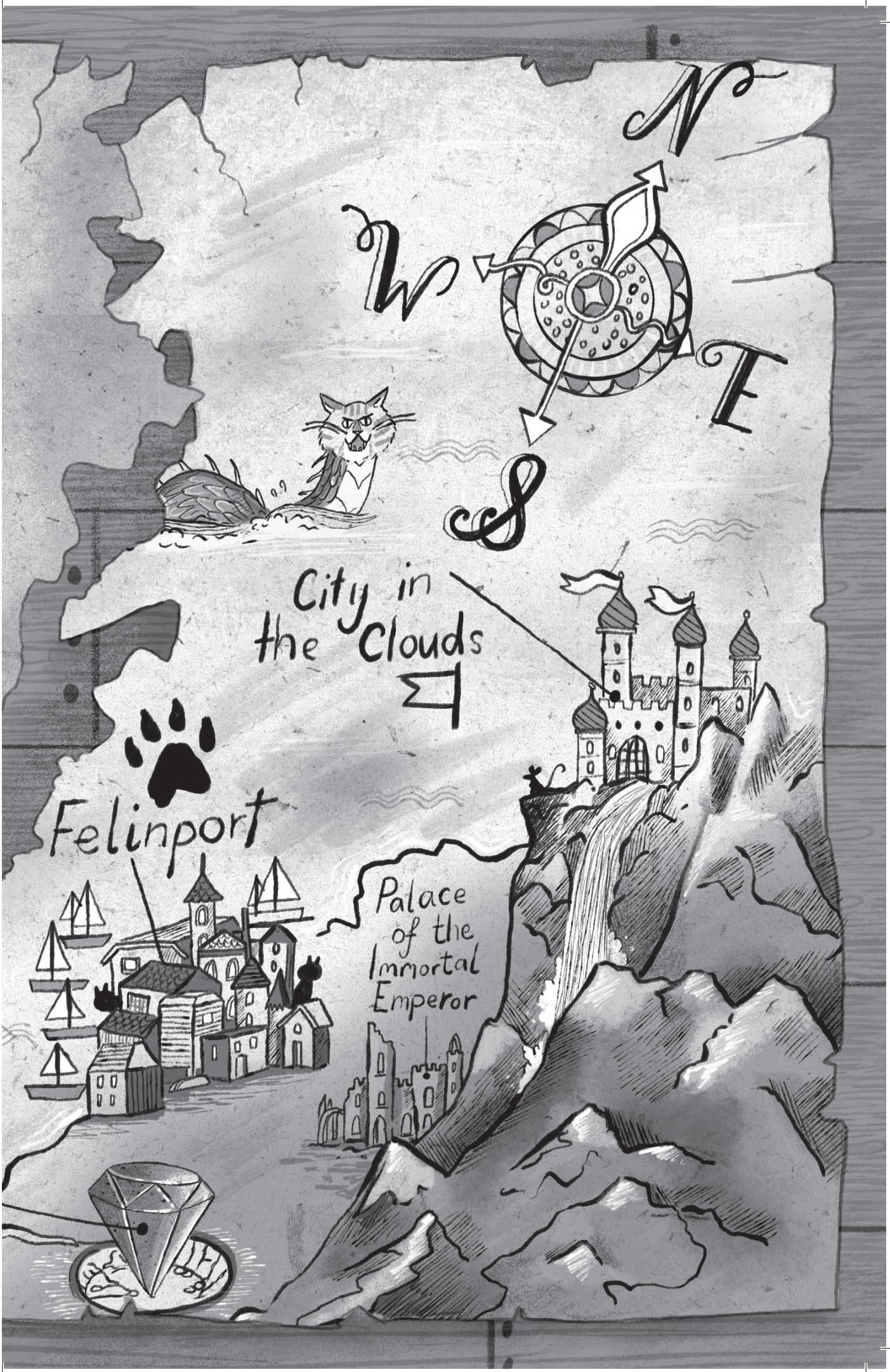

Marfaire


Yersinia


Obsidian


Ship Rat


Tower of London
Tilbury Docks
River Thames
Diamond Mines


N
W
E
S
City in the Clouds
Felinport
Palace of the Immortal Emperor

PROLOGUE

The Seventh, Seventh-Born

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the seventh-born rat of the seventh-born litter is a rat in want of adventure.

Tilbury Twitch-Whiskers was no exception.

He just didn't know it yet.

Mrs Twitch-Whiskers, upon the birth of the seventh rat baby of her seventh litter, looked at the little squirming infant and wept salt tears. For he was so much smaller than all the others. His skin was so pale and thin that she could see his little pink heart beating inside his chest. And she never wanted that little heart to stop. So she announced to anyone that would listen that Tilbury was actually her eighth-born ratling, and that her seventh-born had already been taken by a marauding crow. Indeed, a marauding crow had taken nearly all of Mrs Twitch-Whiskers' seventh litter, except for little Tilbury and his fierce sister, Nimble-Quick. Tilbury had entwined his tail around Nimble-Quick's, holding her tightly, as she fought back at the crow.

Maybe this was why Tilbury and his sister became so close, because they had clung to each other during this terrible moment and survived.

'Tilbury is my eighth-born ratling,' insisted Mrs Twitch-Whiskers. 'But he has a weak heart and a weak chest and must stay with me.'

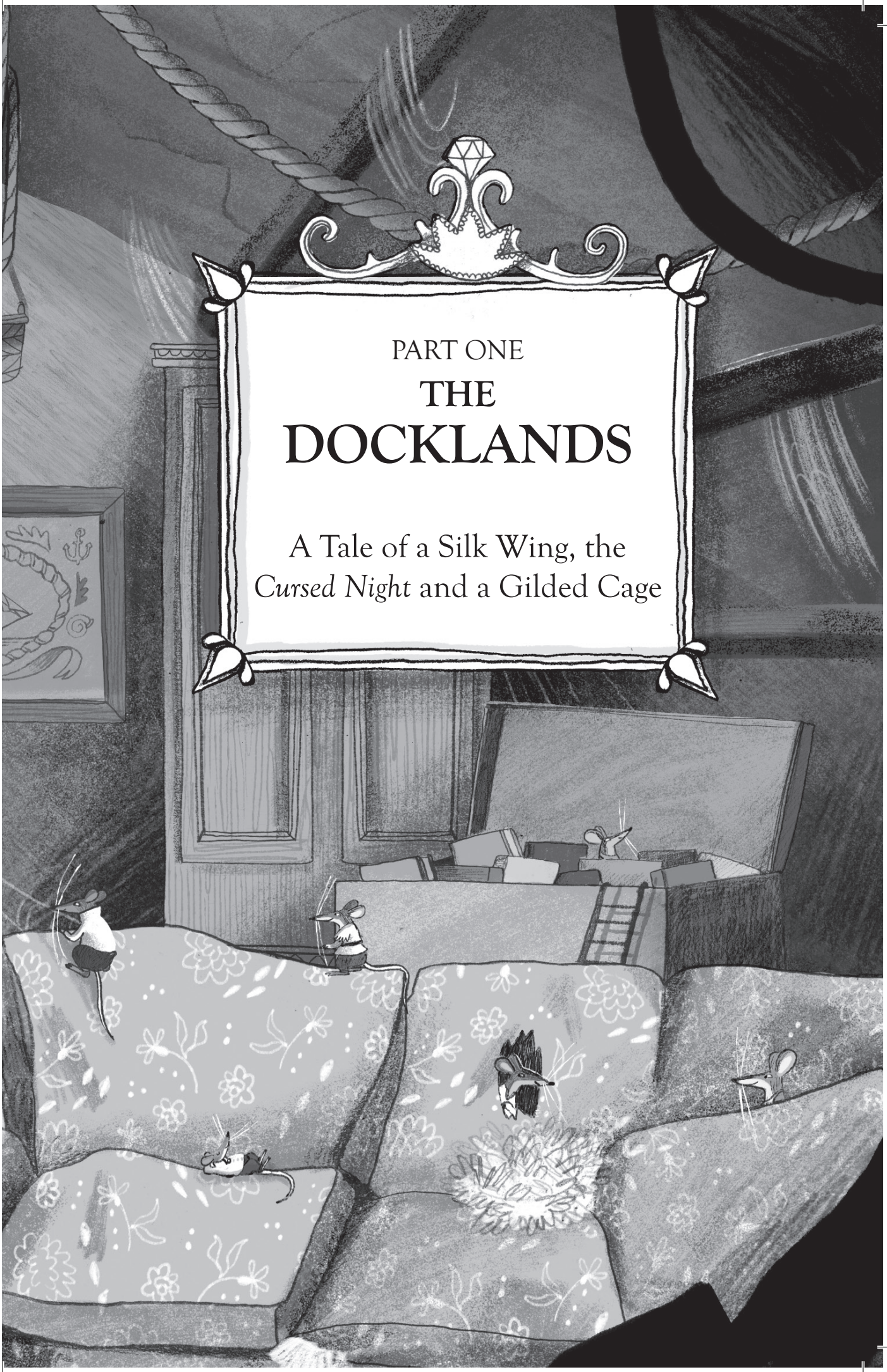
No one challenged her on this, because it is also a truth universally acknowledged that a rat in want of adventure does not last very long in the world.

Piers Piccadilly, the seventh-born rat of the seventh-born litter of Peter and Penelope Piccadilly, was accidentally swallowed whole by a seagull when he chewed his way into a discarded ice-cream cone. Millicent Morden, the seventh-born rat of the seventh-born litter of Merry-Weather and Marylebone Morden, was struck by lightning when she tap-danced across the lead roof of St Paul's.

It was no surprise to find that Mrs Twitch-Whiskers forbade little Tilbury to venture to the outside world. In fact, she told him so many tales of all the terrible things that could befall him, that it was no surprise either that Tilbury grew up to be a nervous little rat, scared of his own shadow. So, he spent his days inside the chandlery of Tilbury Docks, and his little nose never smelled the outside air. He only ever saw the sky through the glass pane of a window.

But an adventurous spirit cannot be contained, for if adventuring cannot be undertaken in the outside world, then the curiosity and imaginings of such a mind are turned inwards and can be the beginning of some of the greatest adventures of all time.

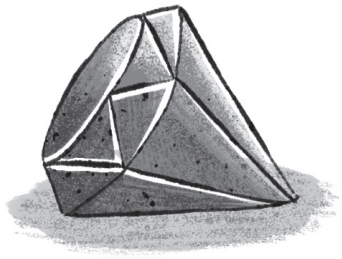




PART ONE

THE DOCKLANDS

A Tale of a Silk Wing, the *Cursed Night* and a Gilded Cage



CHAPTER ONE

The Chandlery, Tilbury Docks

'Tilbury, sit still or this needle will pierce right through you.' Mrs Twitch-Whiskers held the needle deftly in her paw, but little Tilbury wriggled and fidgeted, impatient to leave. He had important things to do today. She pushed more featherdown into the lining of his jacket and stitched the pieces together, making sure it fitted him perfectly. 'Remember that weak bones need protection,' she fussed. 'If you tripped over your tail, you could break your little legs.'

Tilbury waited while his mother fastened the front of his jacket. It was made from soft brown velvet that she had traded from the Rubbish-Tip Rats. His little trousers were padded with featherdown too. Mrs Twitch-Whiskers had indulged in her love of bling, and had made them from silver sequined material, safe in the knowledge that no sharp-eyed magpies could reach him indoors. In fact, the only parts of Tilbury's body now exposed were his paws, his tail and his head.

'Don't forget your hat,' she said.

Tilbury picked up the padded hat and pulled it over his head, wriggling his ears free. The hat was made from a tough brown leather and lined with soft fleece. His mother tied the ribbons underneath his chin and patted his head, checking the padding was thick enough to protect him. She stood back and admired her work. Her tailoring skills were well known amongst the Dockland Rats, and she traded her magnificent sartorial creations at the monthly market. For it is also well known that rats have a good eye for neat needlework and can be a little vain when it comes to fashion.

'There now. Off you go and make sure you come to no harm. And stay inside,' she called after him as she did every day. 'For a rat with weak bones and a weak heart must not go seeking grand adventures of his own. You could catch your death of cold.'

And little Tilbury duly paid attention to his mother's words. For the world outside was vast and terrifying. And besides, the chandlery held everything little Tilbury could ever want to know.

Tilbury lived with his large, unruly extended family in the attic rooms above the chandlery at Tilbury Docks, where the city of London ends, and the Thames reaches out into the sea. Ma and Pa, his brother and sisters, and aunts and uncles and all his cousins lived there. The broken windowpane that had perilously let in the marauding crow had since been blocked with pieces of wood and old carpet. So, the attic rooms were now snug and dry, but most importantly, safe.

Aunt Swinney, Uncle Tubs and their children lived in the grand doll's house, Aunt Lily-Mae slept with her family in the old suitcase, Uncle Eddy and the cousins made their home in the wardrobe amongst the moth-eaten clothes, and Cousin Jak lived in the old trunk full of books.

Tilbury's ma and pa had taken up residence in an old saggy sofa. It was big enough for all the forty-two children from their seven litters, and yet small enough to feel cosy and like home. Being from the seventh-born litter, Tilbury and Nimble-Quick were the youngest and smallest in the family, but they quarrelled and played, fought and frolicked with their older brothers and sisters like any large family. The cushions of the saggy sofa were stuffed with goose feathers, and there, curled up with his sleeping siblings, was the warmest place Tilbury could be on a cold winter's day.

And today was one of those days, at the end of winter when the sky is the colour of forget-me-nots and ice crystals grow their own pattern of flowers on the windowpane.

But little Tilbury was not in bed with the others.

Tilbury had plans.

'Come on, Nimble-Quick,' he called. 'Today's the big day.'

Nimble-Quick raised her head from the sibling pile. 'Is it morning already?'

'Come on,' said Tilbury, impatiently. 'We're going to make rat history.'

Nimble-Quick yawned and stretched. 'Coming.'

Their mother insisted on dressing Nimble-Quick in a red

woollen smock with white lacing. She licked her paws and smoothed down her youngest daughter's fur. 'No ratling of mine leaves the attic ungroomed,' she scolded.

But Nimble-Quick had no interest in fashion and wriggled away as soon as she could. She grabbed her sewing bag and hurried after Tilbury.

'Where are you going with that bag?' called Ma.

'I have some embroidery to finish on a dress,' said Nimble-Quick.

Ma frowned. Nimble-Quick often neglected her sewing, even though she was deft with a needle. Ma couldn't help thinking there was some other purpose to the sewing bag today. The ratling was definitely up to no good. 'Look out for your brother,' Ma insisted. 'For the cold will snap his bones.'

Tilbury and Nimble-Quick set off, but then Tilbury turned back. 'I almost forgot,' he said. He pulled a large piece of cheese from the food store and put it in the rucksack too. 'I promised Marmalade Paws his favourite snack.'

The two siblings slipped through a gap in the wainscot, their feet pattering on the dusty wood. Then they squeezed through a crack in the chimney brickwork and scrambled down, their claws and tails gripping onto the uneven chimney walls.

Down,

down,

down,

down,

down . . .

Through the darkness.

All the way to the chandlery basement.

Tilbury sat still in the old basement fireplace and sniffed the air. The grate hadn't been used for over a hundred years and it was full of soot and sticks and feathers from ancient crows' nests.

It was always dusty and musty in the basement. The air was still, and shafts of sunlight sliced through the dust from the grille high above at ground level. Humans hardly ever came down to the basement. It was filled with wondrous things. There were nuts and bolts and fine wire. There were ball bearings, clips and screws, pins, spring barrels, cogs and wheels. It was an emporium of mechanical delights that offered Tilbury inventions of endless possibilities.

Today, he and Nimble-Quick would attempt something that hadn't been done in Dockland Rat history in nearly two hundred years.

'Come on,' Tilbury called to Nimble-Quick.

Tilbury stepped out into the basement, and as he did, a large ginger paw curled around his tail and lifted him high up in the air.

And little Tilbury found himself face to face with an extraordinarily large ginger tomcat, its smile showing yellowed, but very sharp, teeth.

