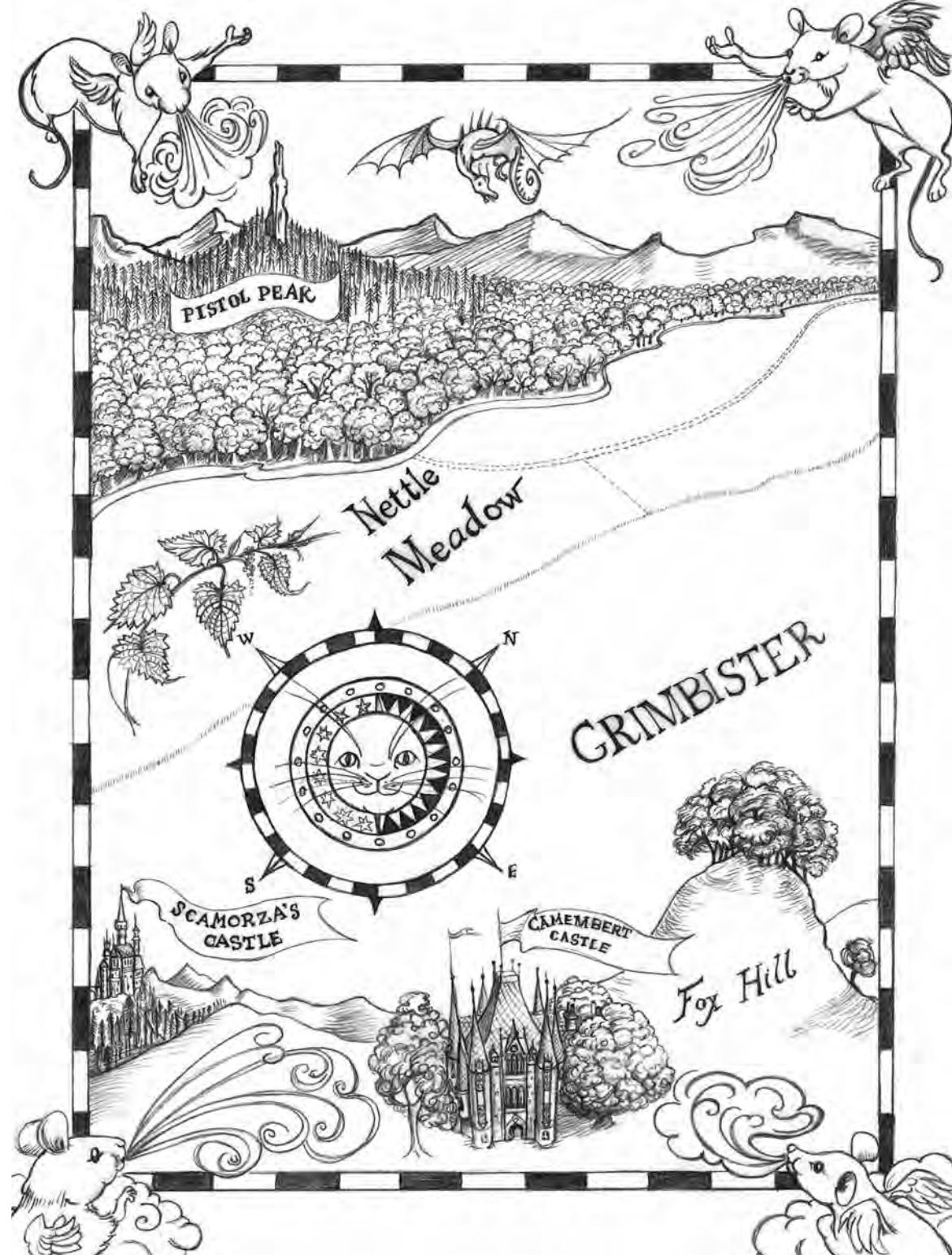




The.
Taming
of the
Cat



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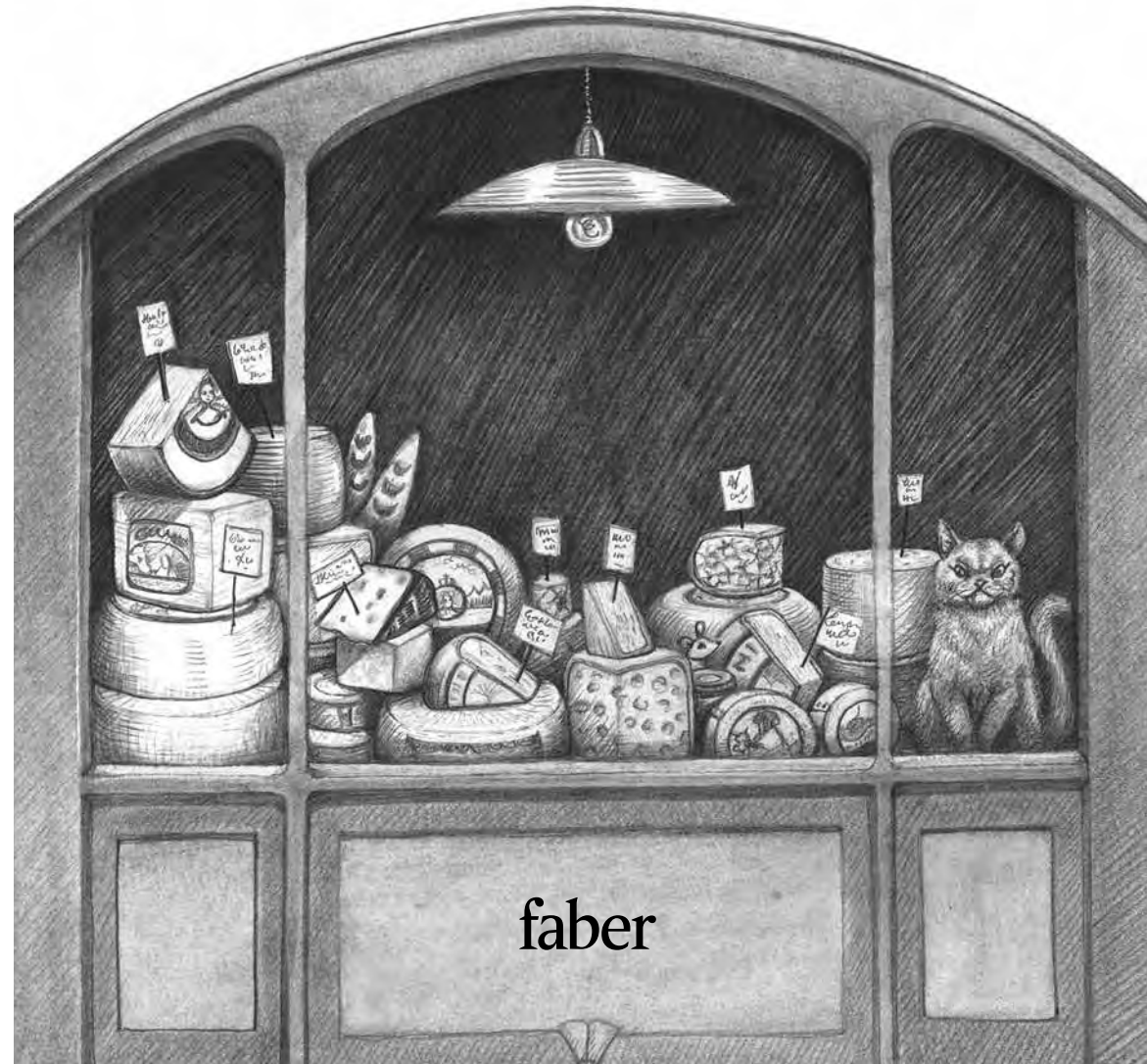


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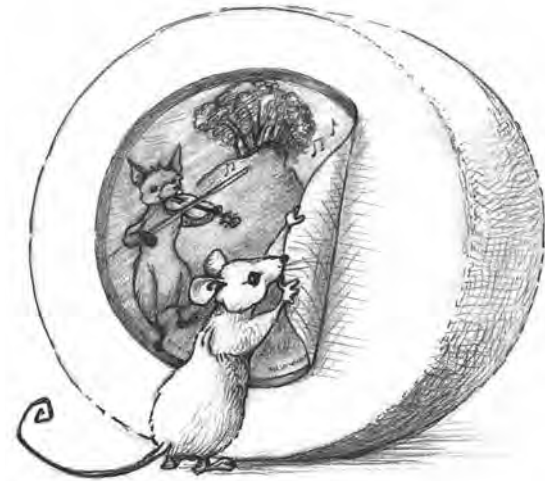
The Taming of the Cat

HELEN COOPER



faber

*For Maya, Margaret and
Trevor Civval with love*





There was once a fabulous cheese shop that was guarded by a fearsome cat. Gorgonzola was her name.

She had sharp eyes, sharp claws, sharp thoughts: her schemes – even her dreams – were full of mice.

She liked to murder them at night.

And worse, whenever she caught a mouse, she played cruel games. She tossed the mouse, allowed it to run . . .

. . . then, when it had almost escaped, she'd capture it again. Occasionally mice broke free, but that was rare. Most were eventually crunched.

Munched up.

All but their tails.

And this was a problem for the hero of this story because it so happened . . .

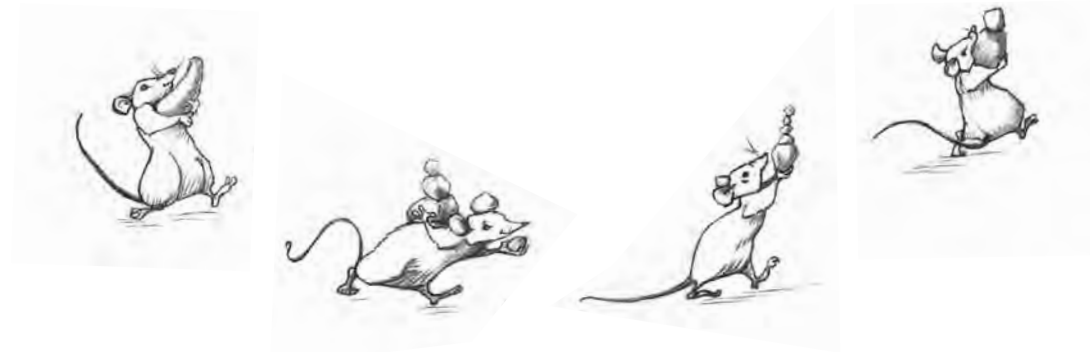
. . . he was a mouse too.

His name was Brie. He was one of the colony of mice who lived between the walls and beneath the floor. Those mice would have gnawed every cheese in the shop if it hadn't been for Gorgonzola the cat.



They were at war.

Yet even cats have to sleep. Gorgonzola slept with her eyes half open, but she snored. That gave her away. When the snoring began, the mice crept from a hole to snatch whatever cheese they could.



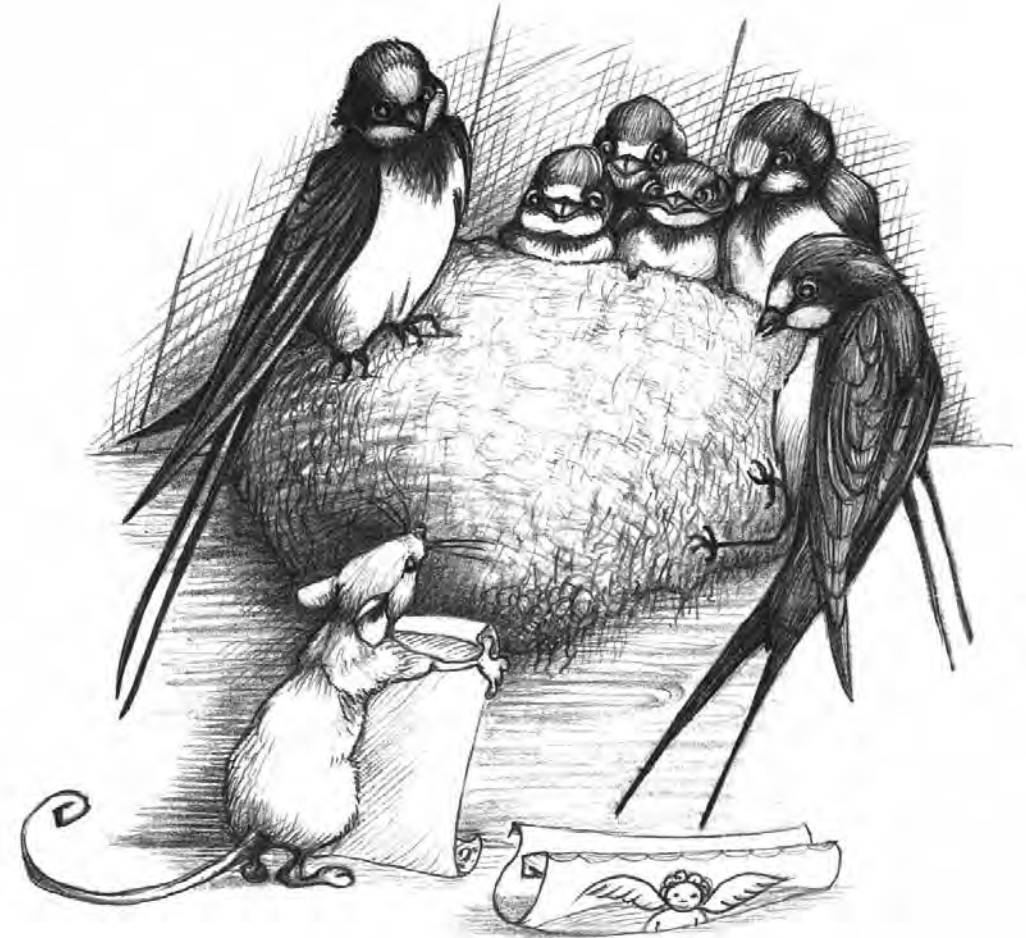


All except Brie. He preferred grain and breadcrumbs. Although he did collect up the cheese labels – he liked to line his nest with them. The pictures on the labels gave him ideas. As he looked at them, stories came alive in his mind.

But the other mice said they were too busy to listen to his stories. Besides, they preferred jokes and games. So, on summer evenings, Brie often rolled up one of these labels, then carried it to the attic where the swallows built their nests.

The swallows were migrating birds and had travelled the world, so they knew more than Brie about the pictures on the cheese labels. And they

liked Brie's stories. They even helped him to make his stories better. As for the labels themselves, Brie and the swallows thought them very beautiful.



The other mice didn't agree. Under the floor, in the central nest, they gossiped about Brie:

'That mouse is weird.'

'Not really like us.'

'He doesn't eat cheese.'

'His nest is a mess. He doesn't shred the paper he has in there. Just saves it and stares.'

'And he tells strange stories and talks to foreign birds.'

'They talk about cheese art!'

'Best not to listen,' they told each other. 'Best to ignore him.'

At least I have the swallows, thought Brie sadly, when the other mice shunned him. But when the first nip of frost minted the air, the swallows flew to their winter homes in warmer lands. Brie was left with no friends.

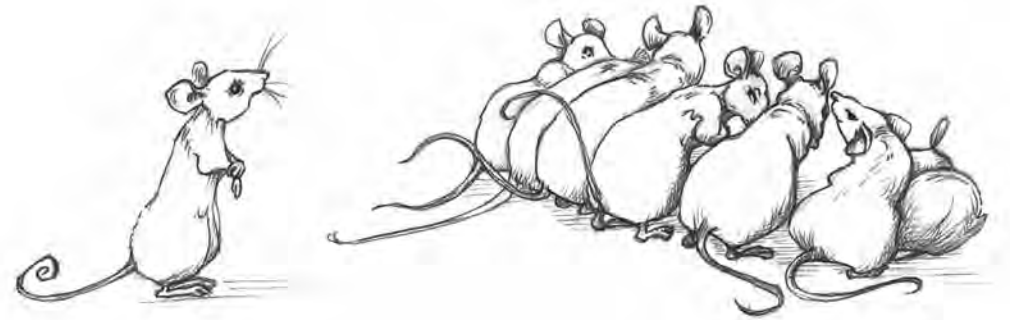
The smaller you are, the more likely it is that you'll die in cold weather. And Brie began to feel the cold because, in winter, mice should huddle together to stay warm. That is what the other mice did in the

large central nest, which they'd lined with fluff and shredded paper. But every time Brie went to join them, they turned their backs

and

shuffled

away.



One wintry night, when he tried to tell them a story, a mean mouse called Lymeswold did worse than that.

'Stop that jibber-yabber-yatter,' she snarled, and bit him hard. Then a mouse called Crottin scratched his face.

Brie fled.

Back in his own nest it was bitterly cold. He lived at the edge of the community, right beside the outside wall. He knew that if he stayed there all that frosty night, he'd freeze to death.

Either he had to find somewhere warmer, or he would have to chew up the lovely labels on his walls and use them as bedding. That was the sensible thing to do, of course. But Brie loved those labels so much that he chose to do something very dangerous instead.

Cheese shops are generally chilly because cheese keeps best in the cool. And the softest cheeses are kept in a fridge. Fridge motors work by absorbing any warm air in the fridge and pumping it out at the back. That is why there has to be a gap between most fridges and the wall – a gap that is usually cosy and warm.

Gorgonzola had a cushion on top of the fridge. It was her favourite perch. She could see the whole shop from there and bask in the warm air that rose

from the gap. There was a cat-sized space around the side of the fridge too, so the back of the fridge was a perilous place for a mouse to hide. But that night was the coldest Brie had ever known.

He felt icy.

He felt desperate.

In the end he poked his nose through the mouse hole, checked that the cat was snoring – she was – then he whisked across the shop floor and crept down the side of the fridge.

Of course it was risky.

But it was better than freezing to death. And he knew exactly where Gorgonzola was; he could even see a huge cat paw flopping over the edge. She was still snoring.

Besides, Brie only meant to doze in the delicious warmth until his shivering had stopped.

Instead . . . he fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Cats wake silently.

They can jump silently too.



Brie awoke. **BOOM** went his heart: *ka-boom, ka-boom, ka-boom*, till he felt as if his chest would burst. As the cat dragged him out he knew he'd pay for his recklessness. The price would be his life.

And Gorgonzola could squidge herself around the side of that fridge when she wanted.

Brie slept on, unaware of his peril.

For a moment Gorgonzola watched him with her tail twitching.

Then she pounced.