

— KATE —
DiCAMILLO

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR



The story of a mouse, a princess, some soup and a spool of thread.

THE TALE OF
Despereaux

Illustrated by Timothy Basil Ering

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Kate DiCamillo is a *New York Times* bestselling author whose books have been translated into over thirty different languages across the world. She is also a regular winner of awards, most notably the prestigious Newbery Medal, which she won for both *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* and *The Tale of Despereaux*, which was made into a feature-length film in 2008. Of *The Tale of Despereaux*, Kate says, “My best friend’s son asked me if I would write a story for him. ‘It’s about an unlikely hero,’ he said, ‘one with exceptionally large ears.’ ‘What happens to this hero?’ I asked. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘That’s why I want you to write the story, so we can find out.’” Kate DiCamillo lives in Minneapolis, USA.

Books by the same author

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THE TALE OF
Despereaux

*The story of a mouse,
a princess, some soup and
a spool of thread*



Kate DiCamillo

illustrated by Timothy Basil Ering



WALKER
BOOKS

*for Luke, who asked for
the story of an unlikely hero*



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Contents



Book the First
A MOUSE IS BORN
9

Book the Second
CHIAROSCURO
83

Book the Third
GOR! THE TALE OF MIGGERY SOW
123

Book the Fourth
RECALLED TO THE LIGHT
173

Coda
270



The world is dark, and light is precious.

Come closer, dear reader.

You must trust me.

I am telling you a story.





Book
THE FIRST

*A Mouse
Is Born*

Chapter One ~ *the last one*

THIS STORY BEGINS within the walls of a castle, with the birth of a mouse. A small mouse. The last mouse born to his parents and the only one of his litter to be born alive.

“Where are my babies?” said the exhausted mother when the ordeal was over. “Show to me my babies.”

The father mouse held the one small mouse up high.

“There is only this one,” he said. “The others are dead.”

“*Mon Dieu*, just the one mouse baby?”

“Just the one. Will you name him?”

“All of that work for nothing,” said the mother. She sighed. “It is so sad. It is such the disappointment.” She was a French mouse who had arrived at the castle long ago in the luggage of a visiting French diplomat. “Disappointment” was one of her favourite words. She used it often.

“Will you name him?” repeated the father.

“Will I name him? Will I name him? Of course, I will name him, but he will only die like the others. Oh, so sad. Oh, such the tragedy.”

The mouse mother held a handkerchief to her nose and then waved it in front of her face. She sniffed. “I will name him. Yes. I will name this mouse Despereaux, for all the sadness, for the many despairs in this place. Now, where is my mirror?”

Her husband handed her a small shard of mirror. The mouse mother, whose name was Antoinette, looked at her reflection and gasped aloud. “Toulèse,” she said to one of her sons, “get for me my make-up bag. My eyes are a fright.”

While Antoinette touched up her eye make-up, the mouse father put Despereaux down on a bed made of blanket scraps. The April sun, weak but

determined, shone through a castle window and from there squeezed itself through a small hole in the wall and placed one golden finger on the little mouse.

The other, older mice children gathered around to stare at Despereaux.

“His ears are too big,” said his sister Merlot. “Those are the biggest ears I’ve ever seen.”

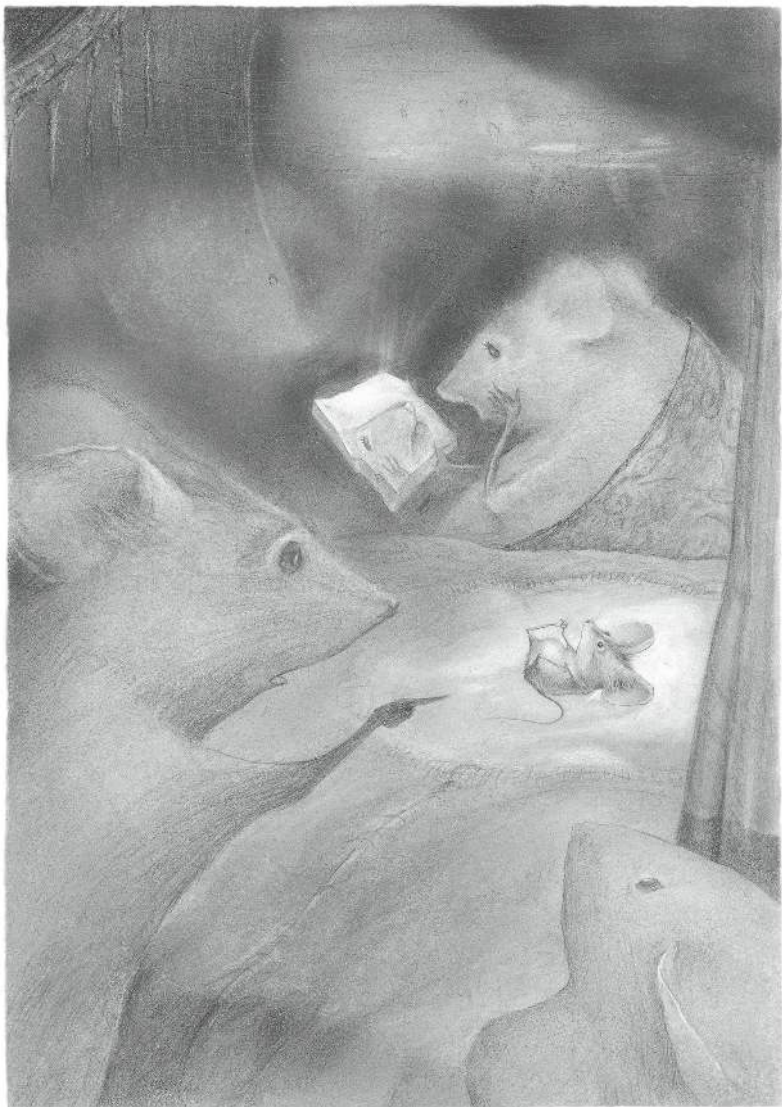
“Look,” said a brother named Furlough, “his eyes are open. Pa, his eyes are open. They shouldn’t be open.”

It is true. Despereaux’s eyes should not have been open. But they were. He was staring at the sun reflecting off his mother’s mirror. The light was shining onto the ceiling in an oval of brilliance, and he was smiling up at the sight.

“There’s something wrong with him,” said the father. “Leave him alone.”

Despereaux’s brothers and sisters stepped back, away from the new mouse.

“This is the last,” proclaimed Antoinette from her bed. “I will have no more mice babies. They are such the disappointment. They are hard on my beauty.



Despereaux's eyes should not have been open.

They ruin, for me, my looks. This is the last one. No more.”

“The last one,” said the father. “And he’ll be dead soon. He can’t live. Not with his eyes open like that.”

But, reader, he did live.

This is his story.

Chapter Two ~
such a disappointment

DESPEREAUX TILLING LIVED.

But his existence was cause for much speculation in the mouse community.

“He’s the smallest mouse I’ve ever seen,” said his aunt Florence. “It’s ridiculous. No mouse has ever, ever been this small. Not even a Tilling.” She looked at Despereaux through narrowed eyes as if she expected him to disappear entirely. “No mouse,” she said again. “Ever.”

Despereaux, his tail wrapped around his feet, stared back at her.

“Those are some big ears he’s got, too,” observed

his uncle Alfred. "They look more like donkey ears, if you ask me."

"They are obscenely large ears," said Aunt Florence.

Despereaux wiggled his ears.

His aunt Florence gasped.

"They say he was born with his eyes open," whispered Uncle Alfred.

Despereaux stared hard at his uncle.

"Impossible," said Aunt Florence. "No mouse, no matter how small or obscenely large-eared, is ever born with his eyes open. It simply isn't done."

"His pa, Lester, says he's not well," said Uncle Alfred.

Despereaux sneezed.

He said nothing in defence of himself. How could he? Everything his aunt and uncle said was true. He *was* ridiculously small. His ears *were* obscenely large. He *had* been born with his eyes open. And he was sickly. He coughed and sneezed so often that he carried a handkerchief in one paw at all times. He ran temperatures. He fainted at loud noises. Most alarming of all, he showed

no interest in the things a mouse should show interest in.

He did not think constantly of food. He was not intent on tracking down every crumb. While his larger, older siblings ate, Despereaux stood with his head cocked to one side, holding very still.

“Do you hear that sweet, sweet sound?” he said.

“I hear the sound of cake crumbs falling out of people’s mouths and hitting the floor,” said his brother Toulèse. “That’s what I hear.”

“No...” said Despereaux. “It’s something else. It sounds like ... um ... honey.”

“You might have big ears,” said Toulèse, “but they’re not attached right to your brain. You don’t *hear* honey. You *smell* honey. When there’s honey to smell. Which there isn’t.”

“Son!” barked Despereaux’s father. “Snap to it. Get your head out of the clouds and hunt for crumbs.”

“Please,” said his mother, “look for the crumbs. Eat them to make your mama happy. You are such the skinny mouse. You are a disappointment to your mama.”

“Sorry,” said Despereaux. He lowered his head and sniffed the castle floor.

But, reader, he was not smelling.

He was listening, with his big ears, to the sweet sound that no other mouse seemed to hear.

Chapter Three *once upon a time*

DESPEREAUX'S SIBLINGS tried to educate him in the ways of being a mouse. His brother Furlough took him on a tour of the castle to demonstrate the art of scurrying.

"Move from side to side," instructed Furlough, scrabbling across the waxed castle floor. "Look over your shoulder all the time, first to the right, then to the left. Don't stop for anything."

But Despereaux wasn't listening to Furlough. He was staring at the light pouring in through the stained-glass windows of the castle. He stood on his hind legs and held his handkerchief over his heart

and stared up, up, up into the brilliant light.

“Furlough,” he said, “what is this thing? What are all these colours? Are we in heaven?”

“Cripes!” shouted Furlough from a far corner. “Don’t stand there in the middle of the floor talking about heaven. Move! You’re a mouse, not a man. You’ve got to scurry.”

“What?” said Despereaux, still staring at the light.

But Furlough was gone.

He had, like a good mouse, disappeared into a hole in the moulding.

Despereaux’s sister Merlot took him into the castle library, where light came streaming in through tall, high windows and landed on the floor in bright yellow patches.

“Here,” said Merlot, “follow me, small brother, and I will instruct you on the fine points of how to nibble paper.”

Merlot scurried up a chair and from there hopped onto a table on which there sat a huge, open book.

“This way, small brother,” she said as she crawled

onto the pages of the book.

And Despereaux followed her from the chair, to the table, to the page.

“Now then,” said Merlot. “This glue, here, is tasty, and the paper edges are crunchy and yummy, like so.” She nibbled the edge of a page and then looked over at Despereaux.

“You try,” she said. “First a bite of some glue and then follow it with a crunch of the paper. And these squiggles, they are very tasty.”

Despereaux looked down at the book, and something remarkable happened. The marks on the pages, the “squiggles” as Merlot called them, arranged themselves into shapes. The shapes arranged themselves into words, and the words spelled out a delicious and wonderful phrase: *Once upon a time*.

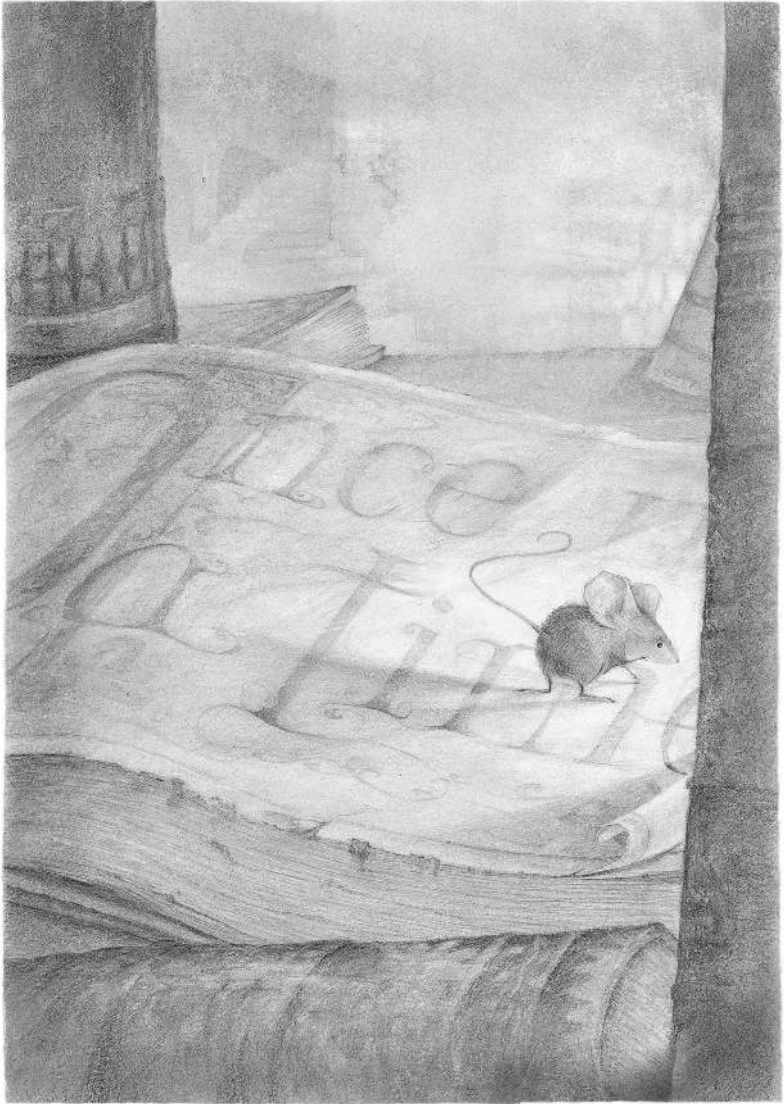
““Once upon a time,”” whispered Despereaux.

“What?” said Merlot.

“Nothing.”

“Eat,” said Merlot.

“I couldn’t possibly,” said Despereaux, backing away from the book.



“‘Once upon a time,’” whispered Despereaux.

“Why?”

“Um,” said Despereaux, “it would ruin the story.”

“The story? What story?” Merlot stared at him. A piece of paper trembled at the end of one of her indignant whiskers. “It’s just like Pa said when you were born. Something is not right with you.” She turned and scurried from the library to tell her parents about this latest disappointment.

Despereaux waited until she was gone, and then he reached out and, with one paw, touched the lovely words. *Once upon a time.*

He shivered. He sneezed. He blew his nose into his handkerchief.

“‘Once upon a time,’” he said aloud, relishing the sound. And then, tracing each word with his paw, he read the story of a beautiful princess and the brave knight who serves and honours her.

Despereaux did not know it, but he would need, very soon, to be brave himself.

Have I mentioned that beneath the castle there was a dungeon? In the dungeon, there were rats. Large rats. Mean rats.

Despereaux was destined to meet those rats.

Reader, you must know that an interesting fate (sometimes involving rats, sometimes not) awaits almost everyone, mouse or man, who does not conform.

Chapter Four ~
enter the Pea

DESPEREAUX'S BROTHERS AND SISTERS soon abandoned the thankless task of trying to educate him in the ways of being a mouse.

And so Despereaux was free.

He spent his days as he wanted: He wandered through the rooms of the castle, staring dreamily at the light streaming in through the stained-glass windows. He went to the library and read over and over again the story of the fair maiden and the knight who rescued her. And he discovered, finally, the source of the honey-sweet sound.

The sound was music.

The sound was King Phillip playing his guitar and singing to his daughter, the Princess Pea, every night before she fell asleep.

Hidden in a hole in the wall of the princess's bedroom, the mouse listened with all his heart. The sound of the king's music made Despereaux's soul grow large and light inside of him.

"Oh," he said, "it sounds like heaven. It smells like honey."

He stuck his left ear out of the hole in the wall so that he could hear the music better, and then he stuck his right ear out so that he could hear better still. And it wasn't too long before one of his paws followed his head and then another paw, and then, without any real planning on Despereaux's part, the whole of him was on display, all in an effort to get closer to the music.

Now, while Despereaux did not indulge in much of the normal behaviour of mice, he did adhere to one of the most basic and elemental of all mice rules: Do not ever, under any circumstances, reveal yourself to humans.

But ... the music, the music. The music made him

lose his head and act against the few small mouse instincts he was in possession of, and because of this he revealed himself; and in no time at all, he was spied by the sharp-eyed Princess Pea.

“Oh, Papa,” she said. “Look, a mouse.”

The king stopped singing. He squinted. The king was near-sighted; that is, anything that was not right in front of his eyes was very difficult for him to see.

“Where?” said the king.

“There,” said the Princess Pea. She pointed.

“That, my dear Pea, is a bug, not a mouse. It is much too small to be a mouse.”

“No, no, it’s a mouse.”

“A bug,” said the king, who liked to be right.

“A *mouse*,” said the Pea, who knew that she was right.

As for Despereaux, he was beginning to realize that he had made a very grave error. He trembled. He shook. He sneezed. He considered fainting.

“He’s frightened,” said the Pea. “Look, he’s so afraid he’s shaking. I think he was listening to the music. Play something, Papa.”

“A king play music for a *bug*?” King Phillip wrinkled his forehead. “Is that proper, do you think? Wouldn’t that make this into some kind of topsyturvy, wrong-headed world if a king played music for a bug?”

“Papa, I told you, he’s a *mouse*,” said the Pea. “Please?”

“Oh, well, if it will make you happy, I, the king, will play music for a bug.”

“A *mouse*,” corrected the Pea.

The king adjusted his heavy gold crown. He cleared his throat. He strummed the guitar and started to sing a song about stardust. The song was as sweet as light shining through stained-glass windows, as captivating as the story in a book.

Despereaux forgot all his fear. He only wanted to hear the music.

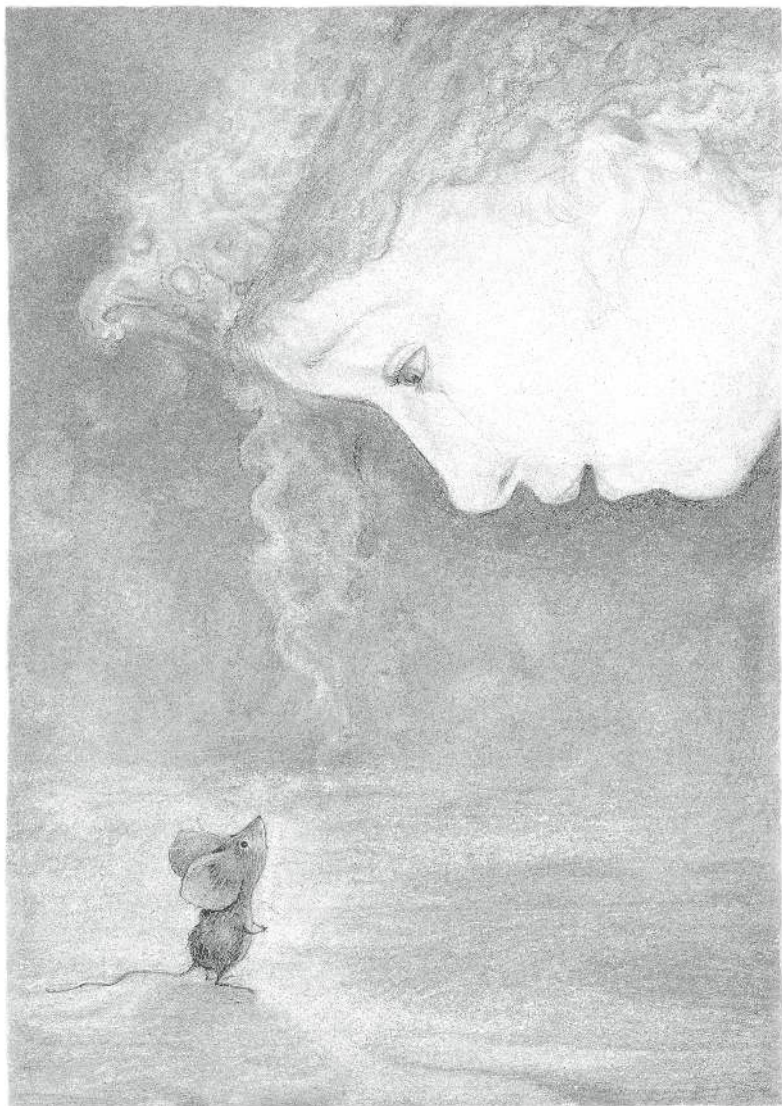
He crept closer and then closer still, until, reader, he was sitting right at the foot of the king.

Chapter Five ~
what Furlough saw

THE PRINCESS PEA looked down at Despereaux. She smiled at him. And while her father played another song, a song about the deep purple falling over sleepy garden walls, the princess reached out and touched the top of the mouse's head.

Despereaux stared up at her in wonder. The Pea, he decided, looked just like the picture of the fair maiden in the book in the library. The princess smiled at Despereaux again, and this time, Despereaux smiled back. And then, something incredible happened: The mouse fell in love.

Reader, you may ask this question; in fact, you



Despereaux stared up at her in wonder.

must ask this question: Is it ridiculous for a very small, sickly, big-eared mouse to fall in love with a beautiful human princess named Pea?

The answer is ... yes. Of course, it's ridiculous.

Love is ridiculous.

But love is also wonderful. And powerful. And Despereaux's love for the Princess Pea would prove, in time, to be all of these things: powerful, wonderful and ridiculous.

"You're so sweet," said the princess to Despereaux.
"You're so tiny."

As Despereaux looked up at her adoringly, Furlough happened to scurry past the princess's room, moving his head left to right, right to left, back and forth.

"Cripes!" said Furlough. He stopped. He stared into the princess's room. His whiskers became as tight as bowstrings.

What Furlough saw was Despereaux Tilling sitting at the foot of the king. What Furlough saw was the princess touching the top of his brother's head.

"Cripes!" shouted Furlough again. "Oh, cripes! He's nuts! He's a goner!"

And, executing a classic scurry, Furlough went off to tell his father, Lester Tilling, the terrible, unbelievable news of what he had just seen.

Chapter Six *this drum*

“HE CANNOT, he simply cannot be my son,” Lester said. He clutched his whiskers with his front paws and shook his head from side to side in despair.

“Of course he is your son,” said Antoinette. “What do you mean he is not your son? This is a ridiculous statement. Why must you always make the ridiculous statements?”

“You,” said Lester. “This is your fault. The French blood in him has made him crazy.”

“*C’est moi?*” said Antoinette. “*C’est moi?* Why must it always be I who takes the blame? If your son

is such the disappointment, it is as much your fault as mine.”

“Something must be done,” said Lester. He pulled on a whisker so hard that it came loose. He waved the whisker over his head. He pointed it at his wife. “He will be the end of us all,” he shouted, “sitting at the foot of a human king. Unbelievable! Unthinkable!”

“Oh, so dramatic,” said Antoinette. She held out one paw and studied her painted nails. “He is a small mouse. How much of the harm can he do?”

“If there is one thing I have learnt in this world,” said Lester, “it is that mice must act like mice or else there is bound to be trouble. I will call a special meeting of the Mouse Council. Together, we will decide what must be done.”

“Oh,” said Antoinette, “you and this council of the mouse. It is a waste of the time in my opinion.”

“Don’t you understand?” shouted Lester. “He must be punished. He must be brought up before the tribunal.” He pushed past her and dug furiously through a pile of paper scraps, until he uncovered a thimble with a piece of leather stretched across its open end.

“Oh, please,” said Antoinette. She covered her ears. “Not this drum of the council of the mouse.”

“Yes,” said Lester, “the drum.” He held it up high above his head, first to the north and then to the south, and then to the east and the west. He lowered it and turned his back to his wife and closed his eyes and took a deep breath and began to beat the drum slowly, one long beat with his tail, two staccato beats with his paws.

Boom. Tat-tat. Boom. Tat-tat. Boom. Tat-tat.

The rhythm of the drum was a signal for the members of the Mouse Council.

Boom. Tat-tat. Boom. Tat-tat. Boom.

The beating of the drum let them know that an important decision would have to be made, one that affected the safety and wellbeing of the entire mouse community.

Boom. Tat-tat. Boom. Tat-tat.

Boom.

Chapter Seven ~
a mouse in love

AND WHAT WAS OUR OWN favourite member of the mouse community doing while the sound of the Mouse Council drum echoed through the walls of the castle?

Reader, I must report that Furlough had not seen the worst of it. Despereaux sat with the princess and the king and listened to song after song. At one point, gently, oh so gently, the Pea picked up the mouse in her hand. She cupped him in her palm and scratched his oversized ears.

“You have lovely ears,” the Pea said to him. “They are like small pieces of velvet.”

Despereaux thought that he might faint with the pleasure of someone referring to his ears as small and lovely. He laid his tail against the Pea's wrist to steady himself and he felt the princess's pulse, the pounding of her heart, and his own heart immediately took up the rhythm of hers.

"Papa," the Pea said when the music was over, "I am going to keep this mouse. We are going to be great friends."

The king looked at Despereaux cupped in his daughter's hands. He narrowed his eyes. "A mouse," he muttered. "A *rodent*."

"What?" said the Pea.

"Put it down," the king commanded.

"No," said the Pea, who was a person not at all used to being told what to do. "I mean, why should I?"

"Because I told you to."

"But why?" protested the Pea.

"Because it's a mouse."

"I know. I'm the one who told you he was a mouse."

"I wasn't thinking," said the king.

“Thinking of what?”

“Your mother. The queen.”

“My mother,” said the Pea sadly.

“Mice are rodents,” said the king. He adjusted his crown. “They are related to ... rats. You know how we feel about rats. You know of our own dark history with rats.”

The Pea shuddered.

“But Papa,” she said, “he is not a rat. He’s a mouse. There’s a difference.”

“Royalty,” the king said, “has many responsibilities. And one of them is not getting personally involved with even the distant relatives of one’s enemies. Put him down, Pea.”

The princess put Despereaux down.

“Good girl,” said the king. And then he looked at Despereaux. “Scat,” he said.

Despereaux, however, did not scat. He sat and stared up at the princess.

The king stamped his foot. “Scat!” he shouted.

“Papa,” said the princess, “please, don’t be mean to him.” And she began to weep.

Despereaux, seeing her tears, broke the last of the

great, ancient rules of mice. He spoke. To a human.

"Please," said Despereaux, "don't cry." He held out his handkerchief to the princess.

The Pea sniffed and leaned down close to him.

"Do not speak to her!" thundered the king.

Despereaux dropped his handkerchief. He backed away from the king.

"Rodents do not speak to princesses. We will not have this becoming a topsy-turvy, wrong-headed world. There are rules. Scat. Get lost, before my common sense returns and I have you killed."

The king stamped his foot again. Despereaux found it alarming to have such a big foot brought down with so much force and anger so close to his own small head. He ran towards the hole in the wall.

But he turned before he entered it. He turned and shouted to the princess, "My name is Despereaux!"

"Despereaux?" she said.

"I honour you!" shouted Despereaux.

"I honour you" was what the knight said to the fair maiden in the story that Despereaux read every day in the book in the library. Despereaux had

muttered the phrase often to himself, but he had never before this evening had occasion to use it when speaking to someone else.

“Get out of here!” shouted the king, stamping his foot harder and then harder still so it seemed as if the whole castle, the very world, were shaking. “Rodents know nothing of honour.”

Despereaux ran into the hole and from there he looked out at the princess. She had picked up his handkerchief and she was looking at him ... right, directly into his soul.

“Despereaux,” she said. He saw his name on her lips.

“I honour you,” whispered Despereaux. “I honour you.” He put his paw over his heart. He bowed so low that his whiskers touched the floor.

He was, alas, a mouse deeply in love.

Chapter Eight ~ *to the rats*

THE REST OF THE MOUSE COUNCIL, twelve honoured mice and one Most Very Honoured Head Mouse, heeded the call of Lester's drum and gathered in a small, secret hole off King Phillip's throne room. The thirteen mice sat around a piece of wood balanced on spools of thread and listened in horror while Despereaux's father related the story of what Furlough had seen.

"At the foot of the king," said Lester.

"Her finger right on top of his head," said Lester.

"He was looking up at her, and ... it was not in fear."

The Mouse Council members listened with their mouths open. They listened with their whiskers drooping and their ears flat against their heads. They listened in dismay and outrage and fear.

When Lester finished, there was a silence dismal and deep.

“Something,” intoned the Most Very Honoured Head Mouse, “is wrong with your son. He is not well. This goes beyond his fevers, beyond his large ears and his lack of growth. He is deeply disturbed. His behaviour endangers us all. Humans cannot be trusted. We know this to be an indisputable fact. A mouse who consorts with humans, a mouse who would sit right at the foot of a man, *a mouse who would allow a human to touch him*” – and here, the entire Mouse Council indulged in a collective shiver of disgust – “cannot be trusted. That is the way of the world, our world.

“Fellow mice, it is my most fervent hope that Despereaux has not spoken to these humans. But obviously, we can assume nothing. And this is a time to act, not wonder.”

Lester nodded his head in agreement. And the

twelve other members of the Mouse Council nodded their heads too.

“We have no choice,” said the Head Mouse. “He must go to the dungeon.” He pounded his fisted paw on the table. “He must go to the rats. Immediately. Members of the council, I will now ask you to vote. Those in favour of Despereaux being sent to the dungeon, say ‘aye’.”

There was a chorus of sad “ayes”.

“Those opposed say ‘nay’.”

Silence reigned in the room.

The only noise came from Lester. He was crying. And thirteen mice, ashamed for Lester, looked away.

Reader, can you imagine your own father not voting against your being sent to a dungeon full of rats? Can you imagine him not saying one word in your defence?

Despereaux’s father wept and the Most Very Honoured Head Mouse beat his paw against the table again and said, “Despereaux Tilling will appear before the mouse community. He will hear of his sins; he will be given a chance to deny them.

If he does not deny them, he will be allowed to renounce them so that he may go to the dungeon with a pure heart. Despereaux Tilling is hereby called to sit with the Mouse Council.”

At least Lester had the decency to weep at his act of perfidy. Reader, do you know what “perfidy” means? I have a feeling you do, based on the little scene that has just unfolded here. But you should look up the word in your dictionary, just to be sure.

Chapter Nine

the right question

THE MOUSE COUNCIL sent Furlough to collect Despereaux. And Furlough found his brother in the library, standing on top of the great, open book, his tail wrapped tightly around his feet, his small body shivering.

Despereaux was reading the story out loud to himself. He was reading from the beginning so that he could get to the end, where the reader was assured that the knight and the fair maiden lived together happily ever after.

Despereaux wanted to read those words: *Happily ever after*. He needed to say them aloud; he needed

some assurance that this feeling he had for the Princess Pea, this love, would come to a good end. And so he was reading the story as if it were a spell and as if the words of it, spoken aloud, could make magic happen.

“See here,” said Furlough out loud to himself. He looked at his brother and then looked away. “This is just the kind of thing I’m talking about. This is exactly the kind of thing. What’s he doing here, for cripes’ sake? He’s not eating the paper. He’s *talking* to the paper. It’s wrong, wrong, wrong.”

“Hey,” he said to Despereaux.

Despereaux kept reading.

“Hey!” shouted Furlough. “Despereaux! The Mouse Council wants you.”

“Pardon?” said Despereaux. He looked up from the book.

“The Mouse Council has called you to sit with them.”

“Me?” said Despereaux.

“You.”

“I’m busy right now,” said Despereaux, and he bent his head again to the open book.

Furlough sighed. "Geez," he said. "Cripes. Nothing makes sense to this guy. Nothing. I was right to turn him in. He's sick."

Furlough crawled up the chair leg and then hopped onto the book. He sat next to Despereaux. He tapped him on the head once, twice.

"Hey," he said. "The Mouse Council isn't asking. They're telling. They're *commanding*. You have to come with me. Right now."

Despereaux turned to him. "Do you know what love is?" he said.

"Huh?"

"Love."

Furlough shook his head. "You're asking the wrong question," he said. "The question you should be asking is why the Mouse Council wants to see you."

"There is somebody who loves me," said Despereaux. "And I love her and that is the only thing that matters to me."

"Somebody who loves you? Somebody who you love? What difference does that make? What matters is that you're in a lot of trouble with the Mouse Council."

“Her name,” said Despereaux, “is Pea.”

“What?”

“The person who loves me. Her name is Pea.”

“Cripes,” said Furlough, “you’re missing the whole point of everything here. You’re missing the point of being a mouse. You’re missing the point of being called to sit with the Mouse Council. You’ve got to come with me. It’s the law. You’ve been called.”

Despereaux sighed. He reached out and touched the words *fair maiden* in the book. He traced them with one paw. And then he put his paw to his mouth.

“Cripes,” said Furlough. “You’re making a fool of yourself. Let’s go.”

“I honour you,” whispered Despereaux. “I honour you.”

And then, reader, he followed Furlough over the book and down the chair leg and across the library floor to the waiting Mouse Council.

He allowed his brother to lead him to his fate.

Chapter Ten ~ *good reasons*

THE ENTIRE MOUSE COMMUNITY, as instructed by the Most Very Honoured Head Mouse, had gathered behind the wall of the castle ballroom. The members of the Mouse Council sat atop three bricks piled high, and spread out before them was every mouse, old and young, foolish and wise, who lived in the castle.

They were all waiting for Despereaux.

“Make way,” said Furlough. “Here he is. I’ve got him. Make way.”

Furlough pushed through the crowd of mice. Despereaux clung to his brother’s tail.

“There he is,” the mice whispered. “There he is.”

“He’s so small.”

“They say he was born with his eyes open.”

Some of the mice pulled away from Despereaux in disgust, and others, thrill-seekers, reached out to touch him with a whisker or a paw.

“The princess put a finger on him.”

“They say he sat at the foot of the king.”

“It is simply not done!” came the distinctive voice of Despereaux’s aunt Florence.

“Make way, make way!” shouted Furlough. “I have him right here. I have Despereaux Tilling, who has been called to sit with the Mouse Council.”

He led Despereaux to the front of the room. “Honoured members of the Mouse Council,” shouted Furlough, “I have brought you Despereaux Tilling, as you requested, to sit with you.” He looked over his shoulder at Despereaux. “Let go of me,” Furlough said.

Despereaux dropped Furlough’s tail. He looked up at the members of the Mouse Council. His father met his gaze and then shook his head and looked away. Despereaux turned and faced the sea of mice.

“To the dungeon!” a voice cried out. “Straight to the dungeon with him.”

Despereaux’s head, which had been full of such delightful phrases as “happily ever after” and “lovely ears” and “I honour you”, suddenly cleared.

“Straight to the dungeon!” another voice shouted.

“Enough,” said the Most Very Honoured Head Mouse. “This trial will be conducted in an orderly fashion. We will act civilized.” He cleared his throat. He said to Despereaux, “Son, turn and look at me.”

Despereaux turned. He looked up and into the Head Mouse’s eyes. They were dark eyes, deep and sad and frightened. And as Despereaux looked into them, his heart thudded once, twice.

“Despereaux Tilling,” said the Head Mouse.

“Yes, sir,” said Despereaux.

“We, the fourteen members of the Mouse Council, have discussed your behaviour. First, we will give you a chance to defend yourself against these rumours of your egregious acts. Did you or did you not sit at the foot of the human king?”

“I did,” said Despereaux, “but I was listening to

the music, sir. I was there to hear the song that the king was singing.”

“To hear the what?”

“The song, sir. He was singing a song about the deep purple falling over sleepy garden walls.”

The Head Mouse shook his head. “Whatever you are talking about is beside the point. The question is this and only this: Did you sit at the foot of the human king?”

“I did, sir.”

The community of mice shifted their tails and paws and whiskers. They waited.

“And did you allow the girl human, the princess, to touch you?”

“Her name is Pea.”

“Never mind her name. Did you allow her to touch you?”

“Yes, sir,” said Despereaux. “I let her touch me. It felt good.”

A gasp arose from the assembled mice.

Despereaux heard his mother’s voice. “*Mon Dieu*, it is not the end of the world. It was a touch, what of it?”