


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 side to side,” instructed Furlough, scabbling 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 colors? 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 molding.

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.”

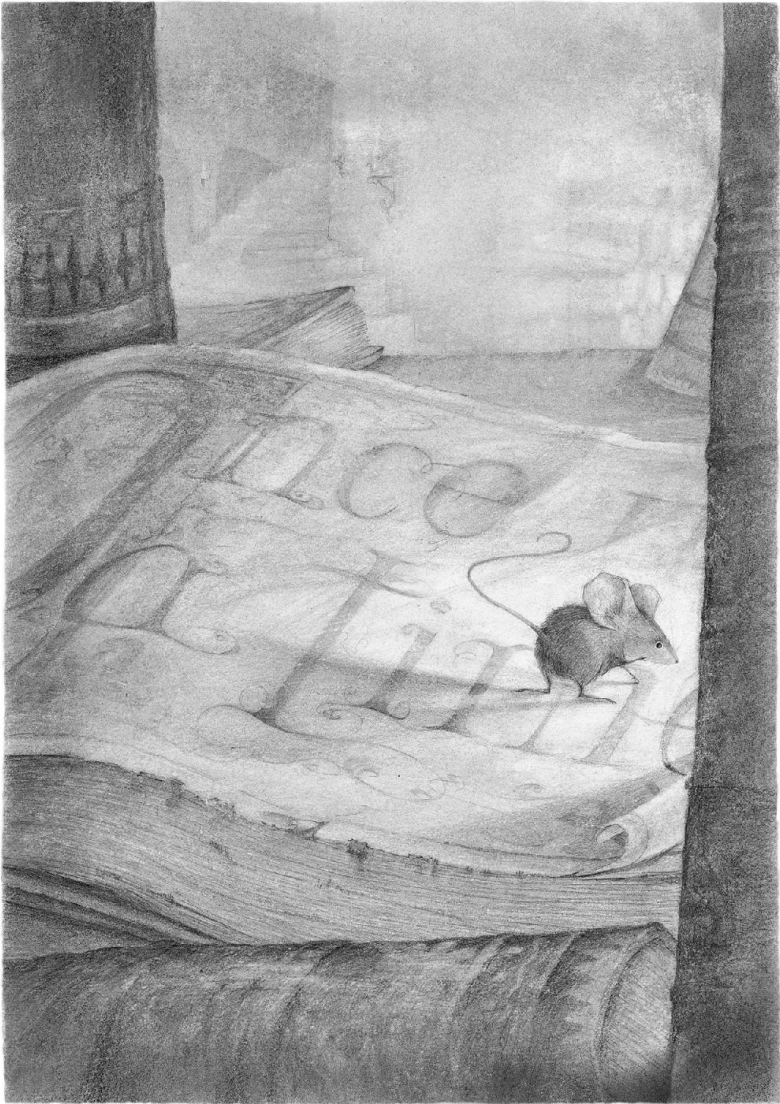
Despereaux looked down at the book, and something remarkable happened. The marks on the pages, the “squiggles” as Merlot referred to them, arranged themselves into shapes. The shapes arranged themselves into words, and the words spelled out a delicious and wonderful phrase: *Once upon a time*.

“Once upon a time,” whispered Despereaux.

“What?” said Merlot.

“Nothing.”

“Eat,” said Merlot.



“Once upon a time,” whispered Despereaux.

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

“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 honors 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.

