

THE FIRST

# *A Mouse Is Born*

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## *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.”

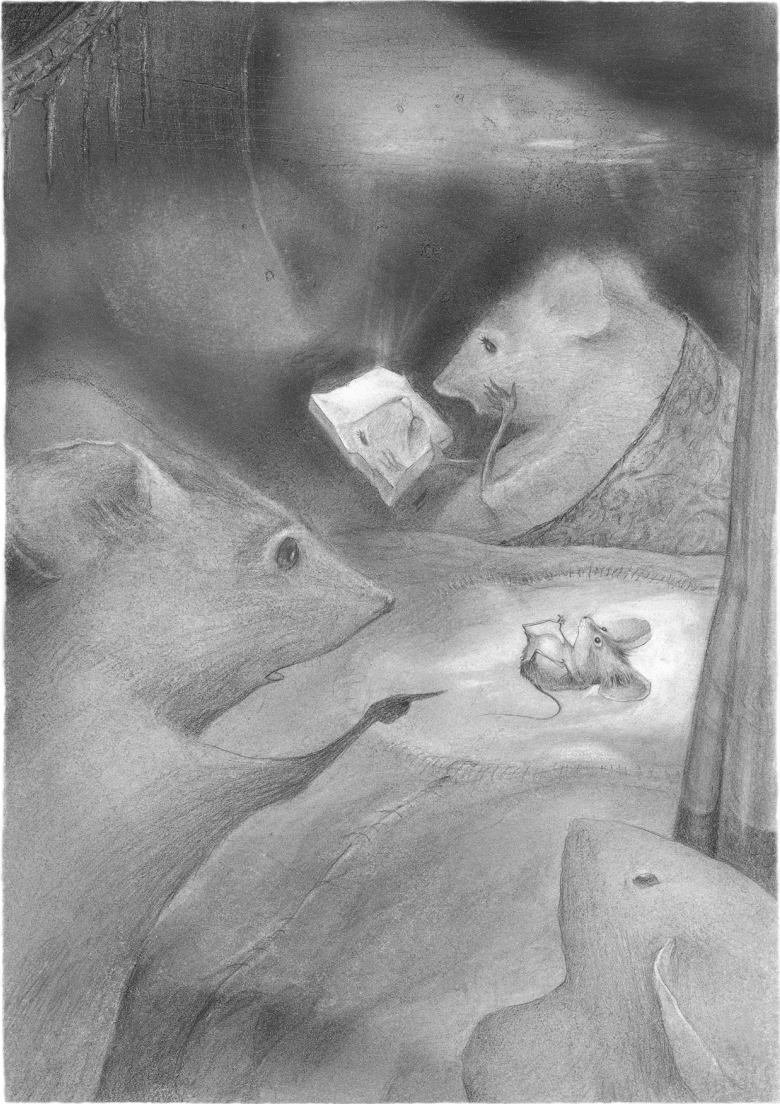
“Look,” said a brother named Furlough, “his eyes are open. Pa, his eyes are open. They shouldn’t be open.”

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. They ruin, for



*Despereaux's eyes should not have been open.*

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 *bear* 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.