WISH YOU WAS

ALEXANDRA PAGE

ILLUSTRATED BY
Penny Neville-Lee

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Alexandra Page, 2021
Illustrations copyright © Penny Neville-Lee, 2021

Alexandra Page and Penny Neville-Lee have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author and Illustrator of this work

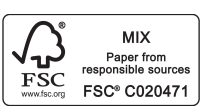
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5266-4121-2; TPB: 978-1-5266-4191-5; eBook: 978-1-5266-4119-9

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters

With all my love to Andy, for sharing this journey with me from the very first word

AP

For Mum and Dad

PNL





1

The Sorter

It was a rat.

At least, Penny thought it was.

A small shadow dropped out of the letterbox on to the doormat, then scuttled across the floor of the post office, trailing a thin, worm-like tail. Penny froze where she sat on the window sill, her skin prickling. Through a crack in the curtains, she followed its path along the edge of the darkened room. It darted behind a wastepaper basket.

Must be looking for food, Penny thought, hoping that once it found only old paper and envelopes in

the bin it would leave. But a second later it re-emerged and scurried under the ledge where customers filled in forms. From there it moved in quick jerks, getting closer and closer to the long wooden serving counter. It crouched at the bottom, almost like a little customer itself, and for a moment Penny smiled. Then she jumped as the shadow leaped on top of the counter.

Penny heard something drip and glanced down with a groan: the fountain pen she was holding had spattered all over the letter she'd been writing to her mother. The date – *21st December 1952* – was now a blotchy, ink-stained mess.

By the time she looked back up, the rat had vanished and the post room was silent. Somehow, *not* knowing where it was made her goosebumps rise even more.

Penny left the pen on the sill and wiped her inky hands through her black hair. She slipped the letter inside her satchel, slid off the window sill and scanned the room.

It was too dark to see much. She lifted a curtain, but barely any light seeped through from the street

lamps beyond the bay window. The great smog had blotted everything out – all the streets and houses and buses and people were lost somewhere in the thick haze of chimney smoke and fumes. Even the postbox outside the window was a shapeless red smudge.

Penny lowered the curtain and stiffened. A scratching sound was coming from behind the counter. Then she heard a *click*, like something being unlocked. But that didn't make any sense. There was nobody else in the room except her and the rat. What was it *doing*?

Swallowing her nerves, she tiptoed closer and ran her eyes over the spotless countertop, the polished brass weighing scales and soldier-like row of letter stampers. Nothing moved there. She peered at the sorting frame on the back wall, with its rows of cubbyholes for sorting letters. Beside it stood cabinets stacked with stationery for sale. She couldn't see any sign of the rat there either.

Then she caught the unmistakeable sound of a drawer sliding open. The hairs on her neck stood straight up.

I should tell Uncle Frank, she thought – and straight away changed her mind. He'd demand to know why she was in the post office out of hours, and that would mean losing her precious hiding place, from where she could catch the first glimpse of her mother. Penny's worries rushed up – *What if Mum flies her plane back to London too soon, then lands badly in the smog and … ?* She shook herself and squashed the thoughts back down. She had to be brave. Starting with the rat.

Penny lifted a hatch in the counter and ducked through to the other side, but it was too shadowy to see anything. She fumbled inside her satchel for her torch, clicked it on and shone the light along a row of drawers.

She startled as a sharp *crack!* echoed around the room, followed by a terrible, high-pitched squeal. Penny waved the torchlight. At the far end of the counter one of the drawers was ajar, the handle rattling madly on its hinges. She tensed, expecting the rat to wriggle out at any second. Instead the

drawer began to shake and a muffled squeaking came from inside. Was it stuck?

Penny edged nearer. As the torchlight hit the gap, the drawer fell still. She reached for the handle, then stopped herself. If she freed it, the rat might leap out and bite her. She opened the stationery cabinet and chose a large, stiff brown envelope. Holding it in front of her as a shield, she reached out a finger and gave the handle a swift tug, then jumped back.

Nothing happened.

Penny craned forwards, but all she could see inside the drawer was an addressed envelope and a few loose paperclips. She took a tiny step closer.

There! Wedged in the back corner was a trembling brown lump, balled up like a pair of socks, not at all as terrifying as she'd expected. Penny lowered her envelope, feeling silly. Tea-coloured fur shone soft as velvet in the torchlight. And something silvery glinted beneath it.

'Oh!' Penny gasped. 'A trap!'

The small ball shifted, revealing a smear of blood



on the bottom of the drawer. The spring of a rat trap had snapped on to the middle of its slender tail, slicing the skin open.

'You poor thing!' Penny said. 'So *that's* why you couldn't get out.'

As she spoke, a small round ear popped up, followed by another. Then two huge, white, watery eyes peeped up at her, like miniature moons. They glistened in the torchlight. It didn't look much like a rat at all, close up.

Peering into Penny's eyes, the strange creature unfolded a paw. Four long, twig-like fingers reached towards her.

Penny felt her heart squeeze. She couldn't leave it like this.

Resting her torch on the counter, she pulled her coat sleeves over her hands. 'Please don't bite me!' she said. Inch by inch she reached in until she could grasp a corner of the trap. The creature balled itself tight as she levered up the metal spring, just enough for it to whip its tail out. Penny snatched her hands away.

There was a soft, sucking sound, and the creature

began to uncurl. Four pink paws emerged. Then a nose poked out, not sharp like a rat's, but stubby and soft, more like a kitten's, with a white streak down the middle and a small, upturned mouth beneath it. The little creature crouched on long, folded-up legs and sucked its tail, keeping its huge eyes locked on Penny's.

She noticed a paperclip dangling from a string around its neck. She reached in again to untangle it, but the creature popped its tail out of its mouth and scurried backwards.

'Don't kill me!' it squeaked.

Penny froze, her hand hovering in mid-air. 'W-what?' she stammered, blinking hard. She'd imagined it, she *must* have. After a moment, just to be sure, she said, 'Can … can you say something else?'

The creature puffed its chest out as if trying to look bigger, but said nothing.

Penny reached towards it again.

'Keep back!' the creature warned, bunching its paws.

Penny's breath rushed out of her. She shut her

eyes and pinched her hand in case she'd fallen asleep on the window sill, but when she looked again the creature was still there, raising its tiny fists at her.

'I isn't afraid of you!' it said.

Penny realised how giant she must seem, even though she was small for ten. She knelt so that her face was on the same level as the creature's, and smiled. 'Don't be frightened, I won't hurt you, I promise!' she said. 'I think it's cruel to trap rats.'

The creature's fur darkened and its cheeks swelled as if it had swallowed two marbles. 'I is NOT a rat!' it burst out. 'I is a Sorter. Second Class,' it added, jutting out its tiny chin. Then its eyes widened and it slapped both paws over its mouth, dropping its injured tail.

Fresh blood welled from the Sorter's wound. 'I'll find you a bandage,' Penny said. 'Don't go away!' She rifled through the drawers until she came across a sheet of red tuppenny-ha'penny stamps with the new Queen's head on them. She tore one off. It was the perfect size.

The Sorter shrank into the corner as she reached into the drawer once more. It squirmed so much

it was difficult to get hold of, but at last she managed to pinch the end of its tail between her fingers and wrap the stamp around the cut. When she let go, the Sorter grasped its tail and stared at it, stroking the curled-up face of Queen Elizabeth. After sniffing the stamp and whirling in a circle to see it at all angles, the Sorter turned to face Penny and, looking into her eyes, held out a spindly paw.

'I is Wishyouwas,' it squeaked.

Penny held out her finger and Wishyouwas's velvety paw curled around it, sending warm tingles up her arm. 'I'm Penny Black,' she said, grinning.

'Is you a he or a she?' asked Wishyouwas, tilting his head.



Penny snorted. 'A she,' she said. 'What about you?'

'I is a he,' Wishyouwas answered.

'I could see you weren't a rat,' Penny said.

Wishyouwas ruffled his fur. 'Humans always think we is. My pa was killed by poison.'

'I'm sorry,' Penny said. 'I lost my father too, in the war.'

Wishyouwas shuffled closer. 'Does you live here?' he asked.

Penny shook her head. 'I'm staying with my uncle as an emergency. He's the postmaster here. I live on the other side of London with my mum. She's an airmail pilot – you know, flying letters and parcels.'

Most people frowned or tutted whenever they heard that, as if it weren't the sort of job her mother should do. Uncle Frank didn't seem to approve either, because he wasn't happy when he had to collect Penny from the childminder three days ago. But Wishyouwas's eyes stretched wide and his cheeks lifted in a way that made her feel proud.

'She only does short trips,' Penny added. 'But this time she got stuck in France and can't fly back to London because of the smog. She telegrammed my uncle to ask him to look after me, but there was

no return address.' She remembered the unfinished letter in her satchel, which she'd add later to the growing pile of unsent letters in her room. A lump started to rise in her throat, so she asked instead, 'What about you? Where do you come from?'

Wishyouwas fiddled with his tail. He seemed about to answer when his ears pricked on high alert. A second later Penny caught a series of small thuds against the ceiling, followed by the creak of footsteps descending the stairs.

'Quick, Wishyouwas, hide!' she said and switched off the torch. She stumbled out from behind the counter, ran to the window and scrambled on to the sill, drawing her knees under her chin. She had only just folded the curtains around her when a door inside the post office swished open and the ceiling light snapped on. Penny watched in horror as the fountain pen she'd left on the sill rolled towards the edge and toppled off with a clatter.

She winced as the *tap, tap, tap* of a walking stick crossed the floor, coming straight for her.