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THE WORST WITCHY



JILL MURPHY

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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First U.S. edition in this format 2014

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 99054542

ISBN 978-0-7636-1254-2 (paperback)

ISBN 978-0-7636-7260-7 (revised paperback)

14 15 16 17 18 19 BVG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Berryville, VA, U.S.A.

This book was typeset in Baskerville.

The illustrations were done in ink.

Candlewick Press

99 Dover Street

Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

visit us at www.candlewick.com

For Reeeney



CHAPTER ONE



MISS CACKLE'S Academy for Witches stood at the top of a high mountain surrounded by a pine forest. It looked more like a prison than a school, with its gloomy grey walls and turrets. Sometimes you could see the pupils on their broomsticks flitting like bats above the playground wall, but usually the place was half hidden in mist, so that if you had glanced up at the mountain you would probably not have noticed the building was there at all.

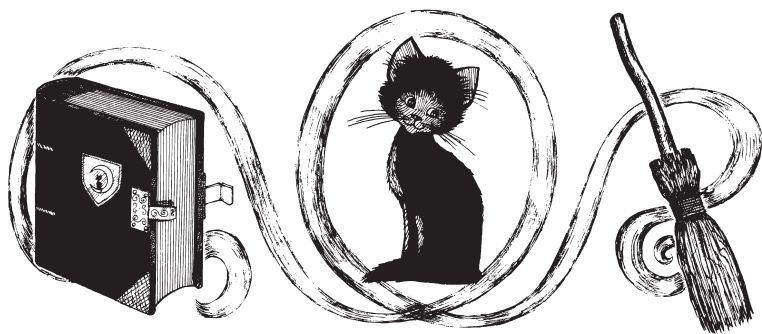
Everything about the school was dark and shadowy. There were long, narrow corridors and winding staircases—and of course there were the girls themselves, dressed in black gymslips, black stockings, black **hobnailed** boots, grey shirts and black-and-grey ties. Even their summer dresses were black-and-grey checked. The only touches of colour were the sashes round their gymslips—a different colour for each house—and the school badge, which was a black cat sitting on a yellow moon. For special occasions, such as prize-giving or Hallowe'en, there was another uniform consisting of a long robe worn with a tall, pointed hat, but as these were black too, it didn't really make much of a change.

There were so many rules that you couldn't do *anything* without being told off, and there seemed to be tests and exams every week.

Mildred Hubble was in her first year at the school. She was one of those people who always seem to be in trouble. She didn't exactly mean to break rules and annoy the teachers, but things just seemed to *happen* whenever she was around. You could rely on Mildred to have her hat on back-to-front or her bootlaces **trailing** along the floor. She couldn't walk from one end of a corridor to the other without someone yelling at her, and nearly every night she was writing lines or being kept in (not that there was anywhere to go if you were allowed out). Anyway, she had lots of friends, even if they did keep their distance in the potion laboratory, and her best friend, Maud, stayed **loyally** by her through everything, however **hair-raising**. They made a funny pair, for Mildred was tall and thin with long plaits, which she often chewed **absentmindedly** (another thing she was told off about), while Maud

was short and **tubby**, had round glasses, and wore her hair in bunches.

On her first day at the academy, each pupil was given a broomstick and taught to ride it, which takes quite a long time and isn't nearly as easy as it looks. Half-way through the first term they were each presented with a black kitten, which they trained to ride the broomsticks. The cats weren't for any practical purpose except to keep **tradition** going; some schools present owls instead, but it's just a matter of taste. Miss Cackle was a very traditional headmistress who did not believe in any **new-fangled nonsense** and trained her young witches to keep up all the **customs** that had been taught in her young day. At the end of the first year, each pupil received a copy of *The Popular Book of Spells*, a three-inch thick volume bound in black leather. This was not really to be used, as they already had paperback editions for the



classroom, but like the cats it was another piece of tradition. Apart from yearly prize-giving, there were no more presentations until the fifth and final year, when most pupils were awarded the Witches' Higher Certificate. It did not seem likely that Mildred would ever get that far. After only two days at the school she crashed her broomstick into the yard wall, breaking the broomstick in half and bending her hat. She mended the stick with glue and sticky tape, and fortunately it still flew, though there was an ugly bundle where the ends joined and sometimes it was rather **difficult to control.**

This story really begins halfway through Mildred's first term, on the night before the presentation of the kittens. . . .

It was almost midnight and the school was in darkness except for one narrow window lit softly by the glow of a candle. This was Mildred's room, where she was sitting in bed, wearing a pair of black-and-grey striped pyjamas and dropping off to sleep every few minutes. Maud was curled up on the end of the bed, enveloped in a grey flannel nightdress and a black woollen shawl. Each pupil had the same type of room: very simple, with a wardrobe, iron bedstead, table, and chair, and a slit window like the ones used by archers in castles of long ago. There was a picture rail along the bare walls, from which hung a sampler embroidered with a quotation from *The Book of Spells* and also, during the day, several bats. Mildred had three bats in her room, little furry



ones which were very friendly. She was fond of animals and was looking forward to the next day when she would have a kitten of her own. Everyone was very excited about the presentation, and they had all spent the evening ironing their best robes and pushing the dents out of their best hats. Maud was too excited to sleep, so had sneaked into Mildred's room to talk about it with her friend.

“What are you going to call yours, Maud?” asked Mildred, sleepily.

“Midnight,” said Maud. “I think it sounds dramatic.”

“I’m worried about the whole thing,” Mildred confessed, chewing the end of her plait. “I’m sure I’ll do something dreadful like treading on its tail, or else it’ll take one look at me and leap out of the window. *Something’s* bound to go wrong.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Maud. “You know you have a way with animals. And as for treading on its tail, it won’t even be on the floor. Miss Cackle hands it to you, and that’s all there is to it. So there’s nothing to worry about, is there?”

Before Mildred had time to reply, the door crashed open to reveal their form mistress, Miss Hardbroom, standing in the doorway wrapped in a black dressing



gown, with a lantern in her hand. She was a tall, terrifying lady with a sharp, bony face and black hair scragged back into

such a tight knot that her forehead looked quite stretched.

“Rather late to be up, isn’t it, girls?” she inquired nastily.

The girls, who had leapt into each other’s arms when the door burst open, drew apart and fixed their eyes on the floor.

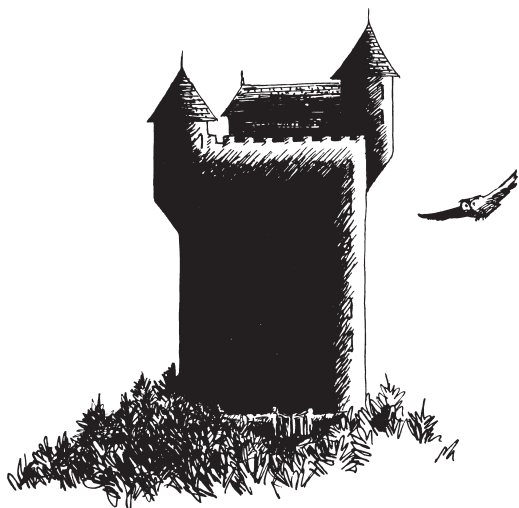
“Of course, if we don’t want to be included in the presentation tomorrow we are certainly going about it the right way,” Miss Hardbroom continued icily.

“Yes, Miss Hardbroom,” chorused the girls miserably.

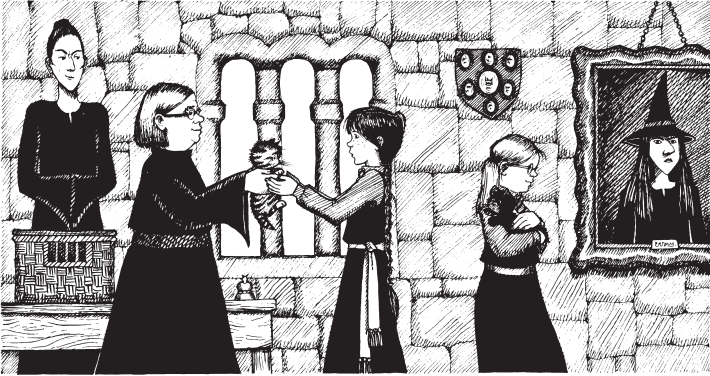
Miss Hardbroom glared meaningfully at Mildred’s candle and swept out into the corridor with Maud in front of her.

Mildred hastily blew out the candle and dived under the bedclothes, but she could not get to sleep. Outside the window she could hear the owls hooting, and somewhere in the school a door had been left

open and was creaking backwards and forwards in the wind. To tell you the truth, Mildred was afraid of the dark, but don't tell anyone. I mean, whoever heard of a *witch* who was scared of the dark?



CHAPTER TWO



THE PRESENTATION took place in the Great Hall, a huge stone room with rows of wooden benches, a raised platform at one end, and shields and portraits all round the walls. The whole school had assembled, and Miss Cackle and Miss Hardbroom stood behind a table on the platform. On the table was a large wicker basket from which came meows and squeaks.

First of all everyone sang the school song, which went like this:

*Onward, ever striving onward,
Proudly on our brooms we fly
Straight and true above the treetops,
Shadows on the moonlit sky.*

*Ne'er a day will pass before us
When we have not tried our best,
Kept our cauldrons bubbling nicely,
Cast our spells and charms with zest.*

*Full of joy we mix our potions,
Working by each other's side.
When our days at school are over
Let us think of them with pride.*

It was the usual type of school song, full of pride, joy, and striving. Mildred had never yet mixed a potion with joy, nor flown her

broomstick with pride—she was usually too busy trying to keep upright!

Anyway, when they had finished droning the last verse, Miss Cackle rang the little silver bell on her table and the girls marched up in single file to receive their kittens. Mildred was the last of all, and when she reached the table Miss Cackle pulled out of the basket not a sleek black kitten like all the others but a little tabby with white paws and the sort of fur that looked as if it had been out all night in a gale.

“We ran out of black ones,” explained Miss Cackle with a pleasant grin.

Miss Hardbroom smiled too, but nastily.

After the ceremony everyone rushed to see Mildred’s kitten.

“I think H.B. had a hand in this somewhere,” said Maud darkly. (“H.B.” was their nickname for Miss Hardbroom.)

“I must admit, it does look a bit dim,

doesn't it?" said Mildred, scratching the tabby kitten's head. "But I don't really mind. I'll just have to think of another name—I was going to call it Sooty. Let's take them down to the playground and see what they make of broomstick riding."

Almost all the first-year witches were in the yard trying to persuade their puzzled kittens to sit on their broomsticks. Several were already clinging on by their claws, and one kitten, belonging to a rather smug young witch named Ethel, was sitting bolt upright cleaning its paws, as if it had been broomstick riding all its life!

Riding a broomstick was no easy matter, as I have mentioned before. First, you ordered the stick to hover, and it hovered lengthways above the ground. Then you sat on it, gave it a sharp tap, and away you flew. Once in the air you could make the stick do almost anything by saying, "Right! Left! Stop! Down a bit!" and so on. The

difficult part was balancing, for if you leaned a little too far to one side you could easily overbalance, in which case you would either fall off or find yourself hanging upside down and then you would just have to hold on with your skirt over your head until a friend came to your rescue.

It had taken Mildred several weeks of falling off and crashing before she could ride the broomstick reasonably well, and it looked as though her kitten was going to have the same trouble. When she put it on the end of the stick, it just fell off without even trying to hold on. After many attempts, Mildred picked up her kitten and gave it a shake.

“Listen!” she said severely. “I think I shall have to call you Stupid. You don’t even *try* to hold on. Everyone else is all right—look at all your friends.”

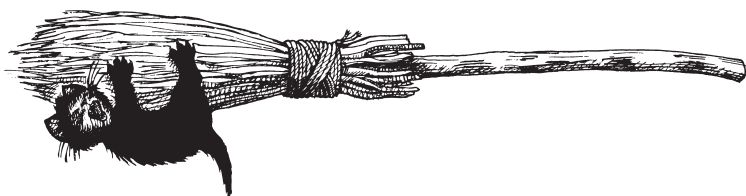
The kitten gazed at her sadly and licked her nose with its rough tongue.

“Oh, come on,” said Mildred, softening

her voice. “I’m not really angry with you. Let’s try again.”

And she put the kitten back on the broomstick, from which it fell with a thud.

Maud was having better luck. Her kitten was hanging on grimly upside down.



“Oh, well,” laughed Maud. “It’s a start.”

“Mine’s useless,” said Mildred, sitting on the broomstick for a rest.

“Never mind,” Maud said. “Think how hard it must be for them to hang on by their claws.”

An idea flashed into Mildred’s head, and she dived into the school, leaving her kitten chasing a leaf along the ground and the broomstick still patiently hovering.



She came out carrying her satchel, which she hooked over the end of the broom and then bundled the kitten into it. The kitten's astounded face peeped out of the bag as Mildred flew delightedly round the yard.

“Look, Maud!” she called from ten feet up in the air.

“That's cheating!” said Maud, looking at the satchel.

Mildred flew back and landed on the ground, laughing.

“I don’t think H.B. will approve,” said Maud doubtfully.

“Quite right, Maud,” an icy voice behind them said. “Mildred, my dear, possibly it would be even easier with handlebars and a saddle.”

Mildred blushed.

“I’m sorry, Miss Hardbroom,” she muttered. “It doesn’t balance very well—my kitten, so . . . I thought . . . perhaps . . .” Her voice trailed away under Miss Hardbroom’s stony glare, and Mildred unhooked her satchel and turned the bewildered kitten onto the ground.

“Girls!” Miss Hardbroom clapped her hands. “I would remind you that there is a potion test tomorrow morning. That is all.”

So saying, she disappeared—literally.

“I wish she wouldn’t do that,” whispered Maud, looking at the place where their form

mistress had been standing. “You’re never quite sure whether she’s gone or not.”

“Right again, Maud,” came Miss Hardbroom’s voice from nowhere.

Maud gulped and hurried back to her kitten.

