FIRST PRIZE FOR THE WORST WITCH



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2018

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Typeset in Baskerville MT Std
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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

ISBN: 978–0–141–35509–2

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL



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CHAPTER ONE



Mildred Hubble was cruising above the trees and villages, on her way to Miss Cackle's Academy for the start of Summer Term. Like all her classmates, she was longing to get this last term over with and go up to the very top class next year, when they would be the proud wearers of the Year Five uniform to set them apart from the lower school. In fact, there was not much difference to the usual uniform, only a multi-striped tie and braid sewn round their cloaks, but Year Four couldn't wait to be wearing it.



There seemed to be more luggage with each passing term, especially *this* one, Mildred reflected, as she peered down through the treetops, looking out for the usual landmarks. Apart from her bags of clothes and books, and her cat, Tabby, and tortoise, Einstein (both tucked up safely in the cat basket), there was also Star, the stray dog she had found last term. Star had proved to be such a natural acrobat that he and Mildred had won the national swimming-pool competition for Miss Cackle's Academy. After such a triumph Mildred had been allowed to keep him as her broom-companion.

Star was perched behind Mildred, on top of a box of books, as if it was the most natural place in the world for him to sit, and every now and then he let out a volley of barks, which made Mildred feel as if he was talking to her.

'Come on, Star!' Mildred called back to him. 'You can sit at the front with me if you like. We'll be flying for at least another hour – we've only just passed over the watermill at Greater Bustling.'

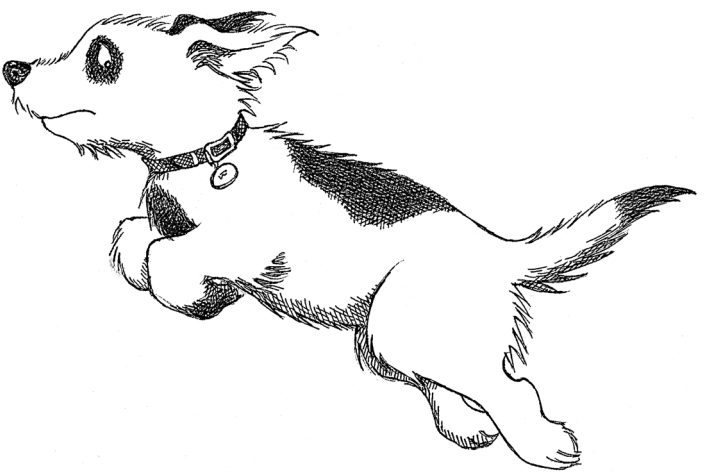
Star leapt over her shoulder in an instant, landing neatly in her lap.

'*Woof!*' he barked, giving her a joyful slurp under the chin.



'Oh, look!' exclaimed Mildred. 'There's a big striped tent down there at the edge of the village – it must be a circus! What a shame it's so far from the school or we could have pleaded with Miss Cackle to take us there for an outing.'

As she said this, Star took a flying leap back over her shoulder and dived between the book box and the cat basket.



'Hey!' said Mildred. 'What's the matter, boy? Is it a bit too windy for you up this high? Come on – let's fly a bit lower down.'

A blustery wind had sprung up, and the broomstick was swaying from side to side and making sudden lurches, hindered by the luggage piled on top and hanging from the back of it.

Mildred dropped down six metres, hovering evenly like a helicopter.

'There you are,' she said to Star. 'That's *much* better – hardly any wind at all. You can jump back if you like.'

However, to Mildred's surprise, he didn't move from his hideaway and no amount of cajoling, even the offer of a treat, could tempt him out.

Twenty minutes passed by and Mildred still hadn't seen anyone from the academy. She was just beginning to wonder if she'd got the wrong day, when, to her great relief, she saw Maud flying along steadily in front of her.



'Maud! Maudie!' she yelled, delighted to see her best friend. 'What a fantastic bit of luck! You're the first Cackle-ite I've seen this morning.'

'Millie!' squealed Maud, equally thrilled.

They tried to fling their arms round each other but gave up, laughing as they clashed broomsticks and narrowly avoided falling off.

'*Concentrate, girls!*' bellowed Mildred sternly, doing an excellent impression of



Miss Hardbroom, the strictest teacher in the school. '*I don't expect to see such* silly nonsense *from fourth-years!*'

'Gosh, Mildred,' said Maud, 'you sound scarily like her. I wonder what ghastly projects she's lined up for us this term.'

'Well, one thing's for sure,' said Mildred. 'There's going to be a lot of swimming!'

'Oh yes, of course! I'd forgotten about the swimming pool,' said Maud. 'Do you think they've actually built it yet?'



'I don't know,' said Mildred, 'but I had a crash course of swimming lessons during the hols, just in case.'

'I didn't know you couldn't swim,' said Maud. 'You managed all right when we went on holiday to Grim Cove.'

Mildred smiled. 'I just pretended,' she confessed. 'I hopped along on one foot and did swimming movements – I didn't want Ethel sneering!'

Over the years Ethel had somehow become an implacable enemy of Mildred, and never missed an opportunity to make her look small.

'Well, no one noticed,' said Maud.

‘And now they never will!’ said Mildred. ‘I can do ten lengths of our local pool, which is huge. The school pool will be a quarter of that size, so it should be fine.’

‘It’s going to be brilliant,’ said Maud happily. ‘Lovely, warm clear water, with sparkly blue tiles – and all thanks to Mildred Hubble and Star! Where is he, by the way? He’s too big to go in the cat basket.’

‘He’s hiding in between the luggage,’ said Mildred. ‘I don’t think he’s feeling too well. He was fine when we started out – I probably shouldn’t have given him any breakfast.’



CHAPTER TWO



On the last day of Summer Term there was a ceremony called Fourth Year Firsts, when prizes were awarded to pupils who had proved themselves best in certain subjects over the past four years. It was also the occasion when the witch chosen to be Head Girl for the coming year would be solemnly announced. This event was actually more important to the girls than the final year itself, when there would be no time for distractions, as everyone would be working madly to pass the Witches' Higher Certificate.

'Have you got any hopes for Fourth Year Firsts?' asked Maud, passing Mildred a chocolate biscuit as they coasted along smoothly, cloaks and hair streaming behind them in the wind.

'Not *exactly*,' replied Mildred. 'What about you? Tell me yours and then I'll tell you mine.'

'Well,' said Maud, 'I'm sort of average at everything, but there *is* a First Prize for Team Spirit, so I'm going to work on that one – you know, being extra helpful and so on. What about you?'

'If I tell you what I'd like to get,' confided Mildred, smiling shyly at her friend, 'you have to promise not to laugh.'



'Cross my heart!' promised Maud.

'OK then,' said Mildred. 'It isn't *exactly* a first prize, more of an honour, but it would be the only first prize that I would want.'

'Go on!' urged Maud, intrigued. 'Tell me!'

'You mustn't laugh!' Mildred reminded her.

'My word is my bond,' said Maud, looking at Mildred with a very serious face.



'Right,' announced Mildred. 'I'd like to be chosen as Head Girl for next year.'

Maud really did try to keep her serious face on, but almost immediately she erupted into such peals of laughter that she nearly fell off her broom.

'You promised not to laugh!' exclaimed Mildred indignantly. However, within

seconds she was drawn into Maud's infectious and unstoppable fit of giggles, and soon the two of them were doubled over on their broomsticks, desperately trying to steer and keep their balance.

'It isn't *that* funny!' snorted Mildred. 'I have done quite a few good things for the school, in between disasters!'

Maud was now laughing so much that tears streamed down her cheeks and blew away in the wind. 'Sorry, Mil!' she howled. 'It's just so incredibly un*likely*.'

'Understatement of the year!' Mildred laughed, beginning to wonder why she had ever mentioned it in the first place.

'And anyway,' continued Maud, between fits of mirth, 'if there's a Hallow in the school, it always goes to them and we've got Ethel Hallow –'

'*Un*fortunately!' commented Mildred.

For some reason, this observation struck them both as so utterly hilarious that they could hardly see – what with their

screwed-up faces and their tears of laughter and the buffeting wind – and they suddenly realized that the treetops were alarmingly close.

'Come on, Mil!' said Maud, trying hard to calm down. 'Let's land in that nice big field down there and take a ten-minute break before we have a crash landing.'

'Good idea, Maudie,' agreed Mildred, explosions of laughter still erupting every few seconds. 'I must say, there really is *nothing* quite like a good fit of the giggles!'

