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Opening extract from

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Jill Murphy

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

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CHAPTER ONE

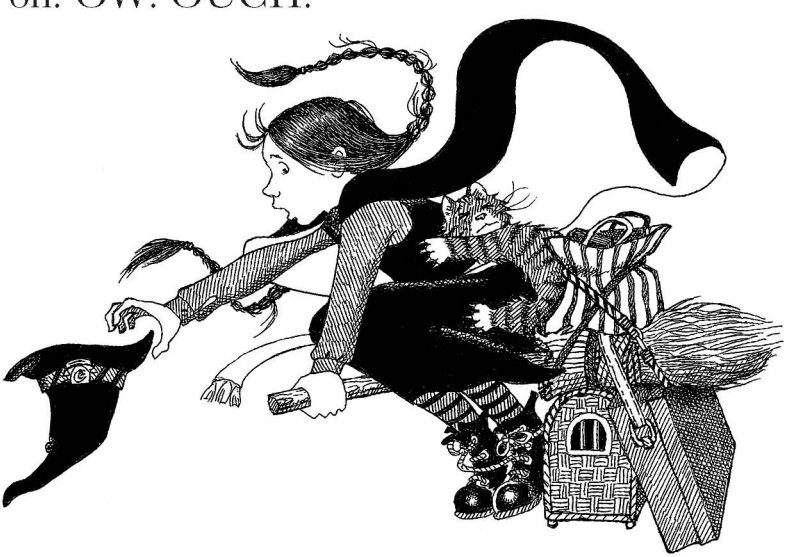


Squalling rain and a biting wind buffeted the pupils of Miss Cackle's Academy as they struggled to reach the school in time for the first day of the Winter Term. The girls' cloaks kept blowing inside out, then flapping round their faces like wet flannels, and most of the older pupils – who were expected to keep the cats sitting on their brooms at all times – had given up and crammed the cats into their baskets for safety.

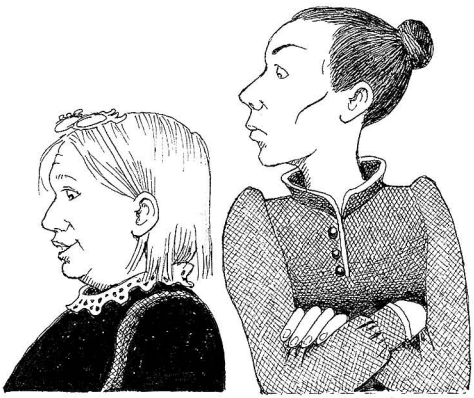
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Mildred Hubble, who was *not* one of the best fliers in the school, was valiantly trying her best to keep Tabby (her nervous striped cat) perched on the broom just in case anyone was watching when she arrived. She had wedged Tabby between her back and a laundry-bag stuffed with books, and she could feel his claws through her gymslip as the unruly cloak flapped and whirled above her shoulders.

'Ouch!' she yelled. 'It's all right, Tab, we're nearly there – hang on just a teeny bit longer – OW! I didn't mean *literally* hang on! OW! OUCH!'



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Mildred was quite right to be careful; someone *was* watching. Miss Cackle, their kindly headmistress, and Miss Hardbroom, her ferocious second-in-command, were lurking just out of sight in Miss Cackle's study, watching from the window as the girls wobbled or zoomed (depending on the gusting wind) over the wall and into the concrete playground.

'Well, just look at that, Miss Hardbroom,' exclaimed Miss Cackle. 'Mildred Hubble is the only senior pupil to have her cat *on* the broom, as stated in the regulations.'

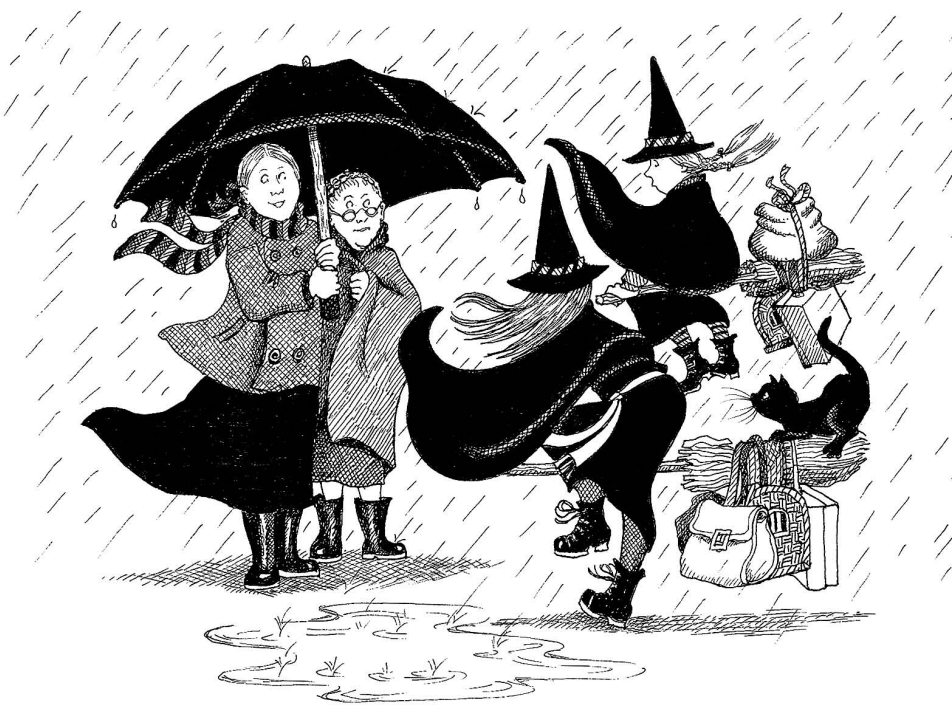
'Hmmm,' said Miss Hardbroom. 'Don't

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get *too* excited, Miss Cackle, I'm sure she'll manage some little disaster before too long – she usually does.'

'Now, now, Miss Hardbroom,' chided Miss Cackle. 'It's the first day of term and we must begin it with hope in our hearts – even when contemplating one of our more challenging pupils!'

Down in the wind-swept courtyard Miss Bat and Miss Mould were huddling beneath a huge dripping umbrella in the shelter of



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the castle wall, directing the pupils to put any free-roaming cats into their baskets, leave everything in the cloakrooms and go straight to the Great Hall, as it was obviously far too wet to assemble in the playground. As usual, the first-years (who seemed smaller with each passing year to Mildred and her friends) arrived on foot, looking bedraggled and terrified as they entered the prison-like school and heard the gate clang shut behind them.



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To the flying pupils' horror, the playground was full of puddles, so that the relief of arriving in one piece was ruined as the girls swooped and hovered, desperately trying to avoid landing in the water. One of the first rules of broomstick management is that brooms are badly affected if they are too near the surface of a large amount of water, which can make them stop working abruptly, and the last thing that anyone wanted was to crash-land in a puddle on the very first day.

Mildred was delighted to land safely, well clear of a deep puddle to her left. She jumped off and commanded the broom to wait and hover, while she reached round and detached Tabby, claw by claw, from his rucksack-like position under her cloak. She shoved him back on to the broom next to the laundry-bag just in time to grab her best friend Maud, who had made it safely over the wall but was now heading for a small lake along the edge of the playground.

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Maud was completely tangled up in her cloak and Mildred managed to catch her in the nick of time.

'Hold on, Maud!' yelled Mildred, flinging an arm round Maud's waist and restraining the broom with the other. 'Tell it to stop or you'll end up in that huge puddle!'



'Stay, broom!' shrieked Maud, unwrapping the cloak from her head and seizing her best friend in a bear hug. 'Thank goodness you saw me, Mil – you saved my bacon.'

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