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Opening extract from **The Worst Witch**

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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 hob-nailed 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 absent-mindedly (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. Halfway 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 uniforms and polishing their boots. 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.

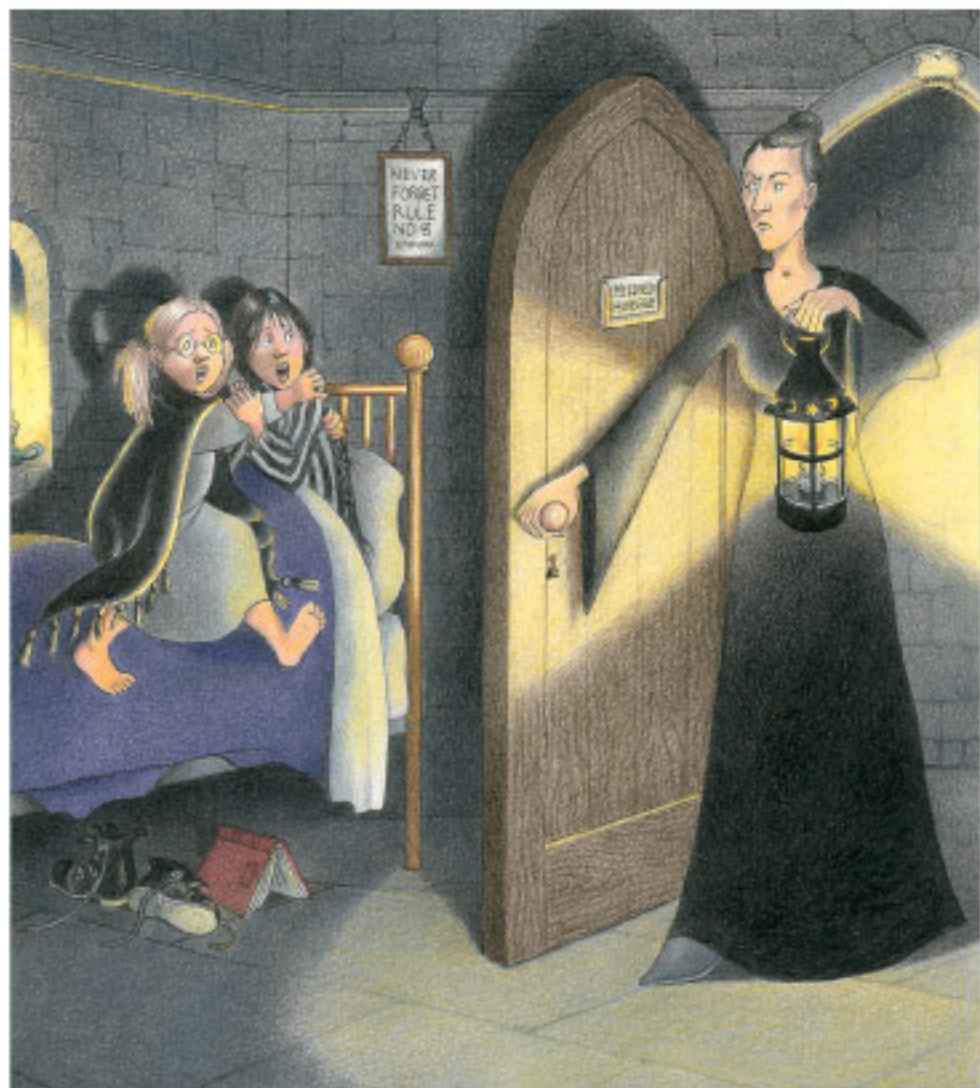
‘Rather late to be up, isn’t it, girls?’ she inquired nastily.

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 let anyone know. I mean, whoever heard of a *witch* who was scared of the dark?

