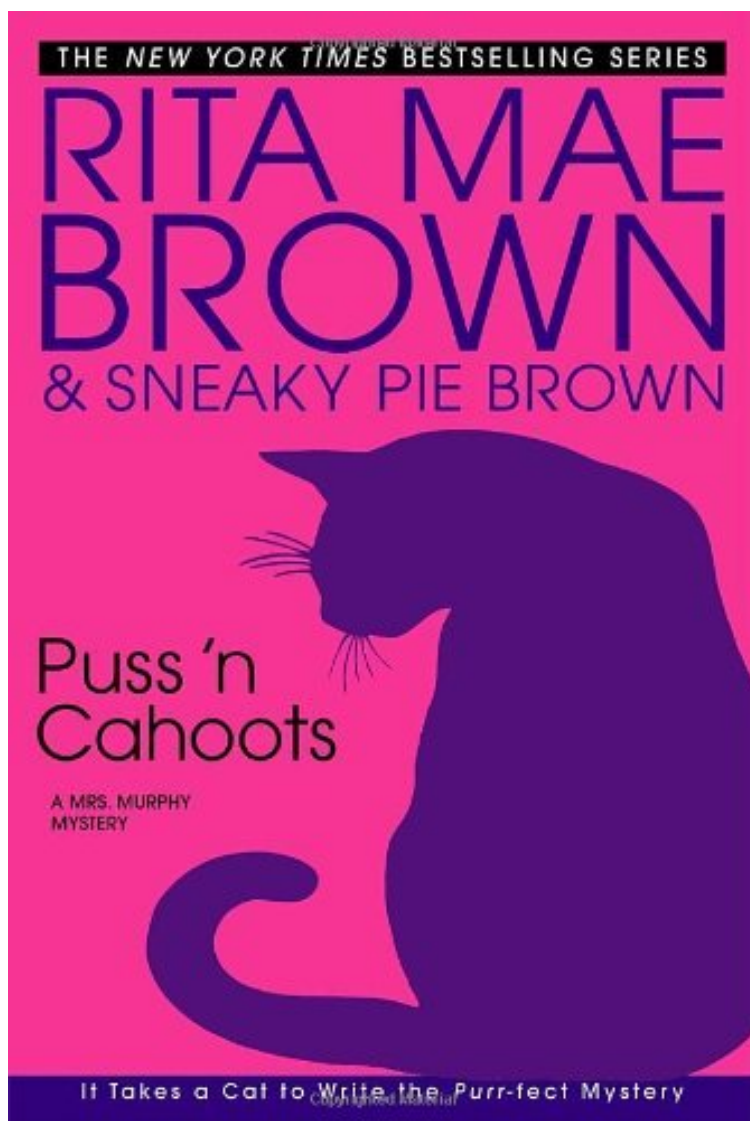


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Puss 'n Cahoots: A Mrs. Murphy Mystery



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurInstead of a proper second honeymoon, the newly remarried Harry and Fair Haristeen leave cozy Crozet, Virginia, for Shelbyville, Kentucky, site of the famous saddlebred horse show. There theyll visit dear friends Joan Hamilton and Larry Hodge and enjoy a week among some of the finest horses, trainers, and riders in the country. But soon after they arrive, events veer mysteriouslyand murderouslyoff course. First, Joans ruby and sapphire horsehead heirloom pin is stolen from her private box at the fairgrounds. Next, a young film stars prize three-gaited mare disappears into thin air. There is no lack of suspects, from hotheaded trainers and jealous rivals to vicious ex-spouses. Then a body is found flagrantly murdered and its obvious to Harry that someone at Shelbyville is sending a strong message: winning is only secondaryfirst prize is survival. As Harry searches for clues, rediscovers life as a married woman, and deals

with her upcoming fortieth birthday, her four-legged detective friends are already on the case. But is animal instinct any match for human depravity? Especially with two humans to protect and a killer on the prowl? From the Hardcover edition.

Chapter One Long, golden rays raked the rolling hills surrounding Shelbyville, Kentucky, on Wednesday, August 2. At six p.m., the grassy parking lot of the famous fairgrounds accepted a steady stream of spectators. By seven p.m., the lot would be overflowing and the shift to backup parking would begin. A soft breeze carried a hint of moisture from the Ohio River about twenty-five miles west, which separated the state of Kentucky from Indiana. Barn swallows swooped through the air to snare abundant insects, as crows, perched on overhead lines, watched, commenting on everything. Cattle dotted pastures. Butterflies swarmed the horse droppings at the fairgrounds. While butterflies liked flowers and flowering bushes, they also evidenced a strong fondness for manure. Each time a maintenance man dutifully picked up the manure, a cloud of yellow swallowtails, black swallowtails, milk butterflies, and small bright blue butterflies swirled up from their prize. No matter how lowly their feeding habits, it was a beautiful sight. "If I weren't in this blasted collar, I'd snatch one," Pewter bragged. "Maybe two." "They are tempting," Mrs. Murphy agreed with the fat gray cat. Mrs. Murphy, a sleek tiger cat, was carried by Harry Haristeen. Pewter was carted by Fair Haristeen, DVM. The cats eagerly awaited the beginning of the first night's competition. Shelbyville, the second glittering jewel in the Saddlebred world, attracted the best horses in the country. The show commenced a full two weeks before the Kentucky State Fair, the blowout of Saddlebred shows. The four jewels in the crown were the Lexington Junior League, Shelbyville, the Kentucky State Fair at Louisville, and the Kansas City Royal, the only big show held in late fall, November. All the others were summer shows. Throughout America, but most especially in Kentucky, Indiana, and Missouri, the Saddlebred shows added sparkle to the season and coins to the coffers. Every town bigger than a minute hosted one, no matter how humble. No one ever accused the Shelbyville show of being humble. A grandstand encircled the immaculate show ring oval. Most of the seating area was covered. The south of the lighted ring was anchored by an imposing two-story grandstand, where food was served if one had a ticket for the feast. The aroma of the ribs tortured Tucker, the corgi, walking between her two humans. She drooled with anticipation. "How long before we eat?" "I don't know, but I could faint with hunger." Pewter sighed. "Oh la." Mrs. Murphy thought to say more but realized if she started a fight she would unceremoniously be taken back to their suite at the Best Western hotel. Harry and Fair paused to watch horses being worked in the practice ring on the east side of the fairgrounds. Booty Pollard, a famous forty-one-year-old trainer with a fully dressed monkey perching on his shoulder, walked next to a junior riding a three-gaited country pleasure horse. The walk, trot, canter horse was one of those wonderful creatures that take care of their young rider. Fortunately for the junior, this mare's three gaits were smooth. They were leaving the ring. Booty turned his head upon hearing another trainer raise his voice. Charles "Charly" Trackwell, a big-money trainer and a peacock, shouted at a stunning young woman on an equally stunning chestnut three-gaited horse, Queen Esther. Queen Esther was much fancier than the country pleasure horse Booty's junior was riding. Queen Esther's trot just threw the beautiful woman up out of the saddle. Renata DeCarlo had paid two hundred fifty thousand dollars for the mare. Renata meant to win. She had to work harder than other competitors for the judges to take her seriously, but she liked hard work as much as she liked winning. At thirty-eight although her "official" bio shaved six years off that age saying she was thirty-two she was a movie star and there weren't many stars bred in Lincoln County, Kentucky. While everyone wanted to look at her, spectators and judges could be prejudiced. Envy from others found odd ways of expressing itself. Renata often received a ribbon lower than she should have earned. Her gorgeous mare merited being pinned first, the blue ribbon, more often than not. Shortro, her young gray stalwart three-gaited gelding, also endured lower pinnings than was fair. But Shortro, unlike Queen Esther, was happy if he won a blue, red, yellow, green, white, pink ribbon. Queen Esther always wanted the huge best-in-class ribbon, as did Renata. Horses, like people, are fully fledged personalities. "Relax your shoulders, Renata," Charly growled. "Beautiful," Harry commented. "Fabulous mare." Fair prudently focused on the chestnut mare, which made Harry laugh. They passed the white barn closest to the practice ring, the silver tin roof showing some wear and tear. The old barns might need a coat of paint, unlike the grandstand, but they were airy and quite pleasant. The number of competitors was so great that tent barns had been thrown up to handle the overflow. Each day hundreds of horses competed, some being driven in, vanned, for that day only. Keeping track of what horses were on the grounds proved overwhelming sometimes, because not every horse was competing. Some were companion horses to keep the star horse company. The temporary stalls, bisected by two aisles, were also completely full. The great stables marked off one or even two stalls for a

hospitality suite, which would be outfitted with canvas panels and drapes in the stable's colors. Many boasted a tented ceiling inside to further enhance the welcoming atmosphere. An open bar and refreshments added to the festival atmosphere. Directors' chairs again in the stable color stack trunks, bridle cases, ribbons hanging on the "walls," as well as lovely photographs of clients and horses completed the setting. The labor that it took to create these oases of cheer, along with another stall made into a special changing room for the riders, often behind the hospitality room, amazed Harry each time she visited one of the big Saddlebred shows, which she did once a year. Although a passionate Thoroughbred woman, she loved the Saddlebred.

She'd trained a few from Kalarama Farm to be foxhunters. Saddlebreds could jump, really jump, which delighted Harry. The Thoroughbred, with its sloping shoulder and lower head carriage, ideally has a long, fluid stride. The Saddlebred's energy is expended upward, high stepping with some reach, and the head is held high. Go back one hundred fifty years and the two different breeds share some common ancestors. Joan Hamilton, one of Harry's best friends, was the driving force behind the breeding program at Kalarama Farm. Her husband, Larry Hodge, trained and also rode many of the horses. As often happens in the horse world, when the right two people find each other, a magic glow shines on everything they touch. On the way to the Kalarama ringside box, Harry and Fair strolled the midway crammed with a lot of stuff you'd like to buy and a lot of stuff you wouldn't. The jewelry shop tempted Harry. She stopped to admire a ring with square-cut rubies and diamonds set in a horseshoe. It was the most beautiful horseshoe ring she'd ever seen. The ubiquitous funnel cakes cast their special doughy scent over the area, as did hot dogs, ribs, slabs of beef, and delicious chicken turning on a spit. The food shops, jewelry shop, and clothing shops were interspersed with people from the local farm bureau and various civic organizations running the booths, all having a good time. Most of the civic booths were under the grandstand facing the midway. A gleaming SL55 Mercedes lured folks to buy raffle tickets, one hundred bucks a pop, proceeds going to charity. Flattening your wallet proved all too easy walking along this small, seductive thoroughfare. The uncovered western grandstand loomed over one side of the midway, and there were booths under it, as well. Everywhere you looked, right or left of the short midway, there was a booth. Right in front of the western grandstand, smack on the rail, were boxes, with six or eight folding chairs inside. These, rented by the great stables, were magnets for the spectators. Riders, breeders, and owners usually repaired to their boxes, which unlike the rented stalls did not bear the stable colors but sported a chaste white rectangular sign with the name of the box owner in simple black Roman letters. Joan leaned forward to talk to her mother, the diminutive, lively Frances, and her father, Paul, as they checked their programs. Paul was one of those people who exerted a warm charisma, drawing people to him. Neither of the elder Hamiltons ever met a stranger. Harry stepped into the box, Mrs. Murphy in her arms. Fair, Pewter, and Tucker immediately followed. After hugs and kisses all around, everyone settled in their seats. Cookie, Joan's brown-and-white Jack Russell, squeezed with Tucker on a seat. When Harry and Fair had arrived yesterday, they viewed Joan's yearlings, mares, and colts, and watched Larry work the horses. Harry learned from watching Larry, who knew exactly when to stop the lesson. So many trainers overtrained, the result being the horse grew sour or flat. Since a Saddlebred must show with brio, overtraining proved a costly mistake. Frances, wearing a peach linen and silk dress with a corsage, turned to her daughter and said, "Joan, did you show the newlyweds Harlem's Dreamgirl?" "Yes, I did." Paul, a twinkle in his eye, twisted in his seat to wink at Fair. "You got the dreamgirl." Fair slapped the older but still powerfully built World War II Navy vet on the shoulder. "I think we both married our dreamgirls." "Paul and I married in the Dark Ages." Frances laughed. "Still a honeymoon," Paul gallantly said. Joan took off her beige silk jacket as the heat bore down. A gorgeous pin, a ruby and sapphire riding crop intertwined through a sparkling horseshoe, graced the left lapel. "Joan, did you fix the clasp on that pin?" Frances asked. "Yes, I did, and it's tight as a tick." "Good. You know I think that's the prettiest piece of my mother's jewelry." Joan, knowing her mother wouldn't be satisfied until she had examined the pin, slipped her coat off the chair, handing it to her mother. Turning the lapel back, Frances fingered the pin. "Well, that should hold it." Before handing it back to Joan, she noted the careful work the jeweler had performed. "You know that's our lucky pin. You wear it when it counts, but always on the last night of the show." "Everyone studied their programs." "Third class has that movie star in it." Paul read down the list. The third class was the adult three-gaited show pleasure. "She's going to have a tough time beating Melinda Falwell." Joan folded back her program. "Booty's client." Paul named Melinda's trainer, a gregarious man still recovering from a sulfurous divorce last year. The recovery was financial as well as emotional. It was Booty who Harry and Fair had seen walking out of the practice ring. Five years ago an intense rivalry set off fireworks in the Saddlebred world as the old guard began to retire or die off, leaving the younger men and a few women in their middle

years to come forward in a big way. Larry Hodge, Booty Pollard, and Charly Trackwell had taken up where Tom Moore, Earl Teater, and the late Bradshaw brothers had left off. Pushing behind Larry, Booty, and Charly were men and more women than in previous generations, in their late twenties and early thirties, one of whom, Ward Findley, evidenced special talent. Saddlebred trainers rode the difficult horses or the horses in the big classes, which would add thousands of dollars to the horse's worth if the animal showed well. In the Thoroughbred world, trainers did not ride in the races. Here they did, which gave the shows an extra dimension. It was as if Bill Parcells played quarterback or Earl Weaver stepped up to the plate. The amateur riders, coached by the trainers, didn't necessarily ride easy horses, but usually the horses were more tractable and less was at stake. A win at one of the big shows could send a horse's value skyrocketing. Few people are immune to that incentive, hence the enduring appeal of the trainer/rider. Ward Findley, who was twenty-nine and had close-cropped, jet-black hair and sparkling blue eyes, quickly came up to the Kalarama box, leaned over, and whispered to Joan, "You'd better get to the barn." Right behind Ward came Booty Pollard, his pet monkey on his shoulder. "Trouble," Ward continued. The monkey, Miss Nasty, chattered as she peered at everyone in the box. Miss Nasty loved Booty, but she hated his snake collection, which he kept at home.

She, at least, got to travel. Fortunately, the snakes did not. Booty did have peculiar tastes in pets. Paul, overhearing, stood up. "Daddy, you stay here. People need to see you and Mom." Joan was already out of the box. Fair, an equine vet, followed her. Kalarama had their regular vet, but he didn't attend the shows. The organizers kept a vet on the premises so there was no need for each competitor or breeder to tie up their own vet for the four evenings of the show. Not to be left behind, Harry scooped up both cats, her progress slowed by the two unhappy kitties squirming in her arms. "If you'd put me down, I could follow just fine," Mrs.

Murphy complained. "She thinks you'll run off," Tucker, excited by the tension in the humans, commented. "You're a big, fat help," Mrs. Murphy growled. "I'm a dog. I'm obedient. You're a cat. You're not." Tucker relished the discomfort of her two friends, since they often lorded over her. The conversation abruptly ended as they reached Barn Five, where three horses were being led into the barn, Charly Trackwell trotting after them, his face grim. They were not Joan's horses. "Isn't that the chestnut mare from the practice ring?" Pewter studied the gleaming animal, her long neck graceful. "Yes." Mrs. Murphy was happy when Harry unhitched Pewter's and her leash and quickly deposited them in the hospitality room. Pewter used the opportunity to jump onto the table, snatching a succulent square of ham. "You're a goddamned diva!" Charly shouted at Renata DeCarlo, who stormed ahead of Charly. The loss of board and training fees for three horses would hurt Charly a bit, but the real blow was losing his movie-star client. Joan prudently stood by a stall, since Charly now faced Larry, Renata to Larry's side. Fair stood behind Larry. "I'm sick of you shouting at me, Charly." Renata, face flushed, was remarkably calm. Charly turned to Larry. "You're behind this, Hodge. You've been trying to steal Renata away from me since she came to my barn." "That's not true." Larry kept his voice level. "You love the glamour. And you'll make a bloody fortune. You always do." Charly, shaking with rage, stepped toward Larry. Renata grabbed Charly's arm, which he threw off. "You've criticized me one time too many. You're an egotistical shit and I'm sick of it." Much as he wanted to hit her and Larry, too,

Charly managed to control himself. He stopped breathing for a second, then gulped air. "Renata, you redefine the word 'ego.'" "We can all sort this out tomorrow when everybody has calmed down," Larry sensibly suggested. "The hell with you." Then Charly wheeled on Renata and pointed his finger right in her face. "I know about you." With that he turned on his booted heel and left. Presentation de l'diteur Instead of a proper second honeymoon, the newly remarried Harry and Fair Haristeen leave cozy Crozet, Virginia, for

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