



first
edition

a Pussy
Katnip
story



A
HAND
OF
GOLD

by Brett A. Brooks

Preface

PREFACE

For five hundred years, the women of the Katnip clan have held a secret. Something passed down from mother to daughter, revealing a ritual which leaves only one woman with the knowledge to create a potion. A magical brew granting the female members of that family increased strength, speed, durability, and healing. It also grants them obscure visions of things yet to come.

In a pact dating back to the origin of the potion, the women have vowed to stand up for the rights of the downtrodden. Fighting against those who would oppress their freedom.

The latest in the line is a young woman who owns a nightclub in the heart of Mutt Town called The Kit Kat Klub. She is also the star performer. But if you have a problem, she might—just might—be able to help.

She calls the potion Fizz.

Her name is Pussy Katnip.

A Hand of Gold

The music wasn't loud. It didn't need to be. People filled the dance floor anyway. Most were doing their best to impress the person across from them, with a handful out there just to have fun. The audience kept the conversations low. Somewhat to be polite, but just as much to allow themselves to hear the singer.

And the singer was on. Her voice hit every note like a piñata on a nine-year-old's birthday. Jenny Foal wasn't the star of the show, but she was good enough to headline almost anywhere else. The fact that she stayed at the Kit Kat Klub was a testament to the owner.

The table farthest from the stage was set off from everything. Red ropes surrounded it, but in every other way it looked like any other table. Except for perhaps its only inhabitant. The woman everyone came here to see.

Pussy Katnip watched everything. Her fingers tapped the tabletop in perfect time with the tune. The only break they took was to wrap around the nearby glass and transport it to her lips.

The glass had to share some space on the table. A bottle of whiskey carrying a price tag high enough to frighten off most customers waited to refill the glass. And the stack of papers to the left of that bottle lingered patiently for their turn. Just as they had all night long.

"You okay, Miss Katnip?" His accent was a little more sharp than normal for this part of the country. It fit him like a glove.

"I'm fine, Robert. Just fighting a horrible case of the lazies." She raised an eyebrow. "And shouldn't you be at the bar? We're a bit busy tonight."

"I got a minute. Desiree's got everything in hand."

A glance past him revealed the employee in question. The ebon-black beauty moved with a cat-like grace equaling her appearance. All the men at the bar couldn't take their eyes off her. All the women made it a point to stay close to their men.

"So I can see." Pussy gestured to the chair across from her. "Have a seat."

He spun the chair around and threw one leg over it. The stage lights behind him made his feathery coif of scarlet atop his head burn like the sun. "So what's the buzz? Why you sittin' down here trying to work? I ain't never seen you bring no paperwork down here before."

Her eyes went to the stack of papers. Without thinking, her hand followed to flip through them. "Not during business hours. I guess I just didn't want to be alone up in my office tonight."

"Everything's okay, right, Boss? We ain't on the nut, is we?" he asked.

“Far from it,” she chuckled. “Just paperwork for the pencil pushers so they can make sure the feds are happy. A night like tonight, though....”

“I hear ya. It’s always best to start out the year with loved ones or family.” He crossed his arms over the back of the chair. “Where is George tonight, anyway?”

The mention of his name brought a smile to her lips. The thought of his current location took it away. “Working. He’s stuck at the station all night.”

“He’s the Fire Chief! What’s he doin’ workin’ tonight? Couldn’t he give himself the time off?”

“Sure, but you know better. George is going to let everyone else have the night off if they want it.” She took time to exhale. A little more deeply than she intended. “So, he’s working. But then, when isn’t he at work?”

“Hey, don’t be like that! You got us tonight! Me, Jenny, Desiree, and Robin are all here for ya! It’ll be swell. We’ll make sure to be together at midnight.” He reached across the table.

“I’m sure it will be, Robert. Thanks.” She took his hand for a moment. “Why don’t you head back to the bar. I’m going on stage in a bit anyway. I should probably get ready.”

“You bet.” He stood up and swung the chair back around in a single motion. “And if you get to feelin’ low, just come on over. Des and I will keep you entertained.”

“I have no doubt.” She nodded. It was enough to send him off.

A quick glance at her watch gave her the time. Twenty minutes past eleven o’clock. She booked herself for a set at eleven-thirty. She liked to be on stage to ring in the new year. It was something of a tradition for her.

As she rose to her feet her hands brushed down the front of her dress. The black fabric moved like satin, poured over her body like a silky second skin all the way to the floor. A large bow gathered the waist to her left hip, and was the only thing breaking the line from her feet to her bust line. A quick tug pulled each of the matching opera length gloves tight. It was time to head back stage.

She didn’t make it two steps.

“Pussy! Pussy, please! Pussy!” The squeak in his voice made her flinch. He dashed up to her side. His eyes darted in a constant motion around the room. “Do something! You must help me, Pussy. Please!”

“Hello, Rodney.” Pussy purred. “Now, why would I want to stick my neck out for you?”

“Get back here!” It was a little late, but Robby’s kid sister came running up behind the squirrely man. “I’m sorry, Miss Katnip. He just burst through the door. I tried to stop him.”

“It’s all right, Robin.” Pussy waved her back. “I can take care of Rodney. You head on back to the door.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The look from the smallish woman pushed Rodney a little farther behind Pussy. “Sorry, again.”

Pussy took a large step away from her new guest. “Now, Rodney, didn’t I tell you just last month that I didn’t want to see you in here anymore?”

“Yes. Yes, you did.” His head nodded like a jackhammer. “But this is special. I need your help, Pussy. Please!”

“I don’t know, Rodney,” Pussy raised the knuckles of her open right hand to her chin, “I’m not very keen on letting people who’ve stolen from me back into my club.”

“But this is different, Pussy! It’s a matter of life and death. My life! My death!” He panted out the words as his eyes danced between the entrance and her face.

“All right, Rodney,” she pulled out a chair for him, “maybe you should tell me what’s going on.”

He scampered onto the chair. She leaned back against the table.

“There are some people—bad people—who are looking for me,” he whispered.

“Sounds like you need to go to the cops. I can give you directions to the station.”

“No!” His eyes screamed just as loud as his voice. “No cops. There’s, uh, well...I ain’t sure I can trust them is all.”

“All right, let’s make this easy.” She picked up her glass from the table. “You’ve got until I finish my drink to convince me.”

His entire body twitched and squirmed, but he stayed in his seat. “I’ve been doing some work for these people. They pay very well. And that should have been enough, Pussy. It really should have, but I have problems.”

She took a sip from her glass.

“It’s my fault, I know, but I can’t help myself. You see, I didn’t think that they would notice. It was such a small little bundle, and, well, they have so much already that...”

“You stole from someone else, didn’t you?” Her words were almost enough to dry up the rest of the whiskey in her glass.

“It wasn’t that much. And I would have paid them back, you see. I just—“

“How much?” Another sip of whiskey went down her throat.

“Five hundred.” His eyes looked down to his hands, which wrung together in a constant circle.

“Let me ask you a simple question, Rodney,” she set her glass back down,

“have you tried paying them back?”

“Oh, I would. I would give it all back to them...if I could.”

“So, what did you do with the money?” she asked.

“The cards haven’t been very kind to me lately,” he mumbled.

Pussy stood up and brushed the front of her dress smooth once more. “I’m done with my drink, Rodney. You haven’t convinced me that this is my concern at all. Sounds like my suggestion of the police is still your best bet.”

“But they’ll kill me!” he pleaded.

“Which is why you need to go to the police.” She moved behind him and rested a hand on his shoulder. “You know the way out.”

“But Pussy,” his hand flew up, pointing towards the exit, “they’re already here.”

Her eyes followed his arm. Five figures stood at top of the stairs leading into the room. In any other circumstances, she would welcome such well groomed visitors with a smile and a warm feeling.

These five sent a chill through her blood.

Four men and one woman. All of them cut from the same cloth, both in appearance and clothing. Their suits were tailored to fit no other person alive. Each one as black as their complexion, set off only by the tan running from their nose down past their neck and throat. One of the men stepped forward, and the other four moved behind him like a pack on the prowl.

Her eyes were on him. And he was staring back at her.

“Stay here, Rodney.” The gentle pat on his shoulder was enough to drive him into the chair. “If you leave this table, I can’t promise anything.”

“Thank you, Pussy! Thank you!” he squeaked. “Are you going to get rid of them?”

She gave him a quick glance over her shoulder as she stepped out of her private section. “Absolutely not. I’m going to go seat them.”

There was chattering behind her. It faded with every step she took. A different level of noise rose up as she walked closer to her new guests.

“...will find something for us. We did not come in here to be denied, young lady.” His tone was gentle on the surface, but jagged beneath.

“I’m sorry, but the club has been sold out for weeks.” The waitress was doing her job to a tee. Polite. Firm. Friendly. “There are no tables available.”

With a delicate touch, Pussy placed her hand on the waitress’s shoulder. “I’ll handle this one, Janet.”

The waitress turned to her. For a second there was concern in her eyes. It went away with a knowing nod from Pussy.

“Welcome to the Kit Kat Klub.” Pussy stepped between the five individuals

and the exiting waitress. "How may I help you this evening?"

The man's eyes never left her face. "My friends and I wanted to come in to see the establishment. I hope that you will be able to help us out."

"My employee was correct. We've been sold out for weeks." His mouth opened. She shut it with her words. "But I think I can find a place for you. Will you follow me?"

There was no waiting for an answer. She was walking with a purpose towards the intended table. She wove her way through the crowd, barely acknowledging the greetings from the other tables. The occasional glances to those tables were enough for her to make sure the others were following.

She stopped at a table directly in front of the stage, plucking the "reserved" sign from it as they arrived. "Here you are. I always try to keep an extra table or two for special guests."

The man who spoke stopped beside her. The other four stopped behind him. "We were hoping perhaps for something not so near the stage. Perhaps," he gestured towards Pussy's private table with his left hand, "something over there?"

"I'm sorry," Pussy shook her head, "it's this or nothing. Which would you prefer?"

His posse of four stared his direction. With a simple nod they moved into position and sat around the table.

"Thank you," he stated. "It is an honor to meet you, Miss Katnip."

"You have me at a disadvantage, Mr...?" She extended her right hand towards him.

"Actually, I would say you have the advantage on me." His right arm came up. It ended in a stub, covered by a thick leather cuff. "I am Corson."

"Oh, my apologies. I didn't realize." She dropped her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Corson."

"No, just Corson." He pulled out a chair beside her. "Please, honor us by sharing our table."

"I'm afraid I'll have to decline for the moment, as I'm due on stage. Perhaps after?" The chair eased back under the table with a push from her.

"Of course." He glanced to the side, looking at Pussy's private table. "I'm sure I can find something to keep me occupied until then."

"I hoped you would stay for my performance. I'd be very disappointed otherwise." Every word came out with an edge.

"It would be a crime to upset you in any way." Corson bowed his head. "I look forward to our drink."

"Then I shan't keep you waiting." There was only a hint of a smile as she

turned and walked away. The path backstage was short, but it was long enough to find someone.

Pussy stopped one of the waitresses with glance.

“Yes, Miss Katnip?” she asked.

“Watch table six. Make sure they get whatever they want, but if any of them leave the table, notify me immediately. Is that clear?” she explained. “And have Robert pour me a drink. One of my specials, please. I need it right away.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The waitress nodded once and hurried on.

The lights backstage were almost blinding after the ambiance of the main room. Pussy sat at a dressing table. The woman in the mirror across from her took Pussy off guard. She leaned in closer.

Pussy was never able to describe the look in her mother’s eyes right before she drank Fizz. Many terms kept falling short. Desperation. Anxiousness. Fear. Longing. No matter the lack of words, the look always disturbed her. Seeing it in her reflection chilled her to the core.

“Miss Katnip.”

Pussy shook her head. The waitress placed the glass on the table and took a step back.

“Do you need anything else?” she asked.

“No.” Pussy stared at the drink. “No, that’s enough. Thank you.”

The liquid in the glass swirled in shades of red. Her hand twisted around to make the swirls move faster, without ever fully blending together. Without a word she brought the glass of Fizz to her lips and drained it dry.

Color faded away. Black figures walked through the fog, their faces hidden in the mist. Slips of paper fell from their hands, drifting to the ground one right beside the other. A glint of light shone from the fog, tinted yellow in a morass of grey. An image of the world hung in the air, motionless. And then a giant black hand reached up and grabbed it in a vice-like grip.

“Miss Katnip?”

Pussy shook her head. Colors poured back over her and everything shifted into perfect focus. “Yes?”

The face of the waitress she spoke to prior to coming back stage stared back at her quizzically. “You asked me to come let you know if anyone left table six. Two of the men just headed towards the restroom. I don’t know if that—”

“Thank you,” Pussy interrupted. “That didn’t take long. Go on back. I’ll be out in a moment.”

Pussy stood up, turning to the side as she rose. The mirror remained the focus of her attention. Her hands ran down the front of her body, and she studied every line, but only for a moment. She didn’t want to take the chance of looking too

long and seeing something she didn't like.

Stepping back onto the floor, Pussy checked a few spots in particular order. First and foremost, she made sure that Rodney was still in his seat. Sure enough, he was sitting there twitching and doing his best to hide behind the table. Her eyes moved to table six. Three people, just as the waitress stated. The other two were nowhere to be seen.

Pussy lingered at the door until Jenny turned her direction. Discretely, she gestured to the singer. Pussy pointed one finger to her, then pulled her hands apart slowly. Jenny understood, and gave an almost imperceptible nod, letting Pussy know that she would stay on stage as long as needed.

Making a bee line towards the bar, Pussy raised her hand up to grab Robby's attention. He met her at the end of the bar as she arrived.

"What's up, boss?" He wiped his hands on the towel at his waist.

"I need your help. Follow me." She didn't wait for a reply. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Robby signal Desiree.

"Where are we going?" He sped up to be at her side.

"You are going in there." They stopped in front of the men's restroom. "I'm going to wait until you come back out."

"Oh, well, y'see, boss, I don't gotta go just now." He looked towards the floor and brought his hand up to scratch the side of his head.

"You don't have to. Just go inside. I want you to see if there are two men in black suits inside." Her hand waved out in a grand gesture. "If you don't mind."

There was a moment where he couldn't quite close his mouth as the words ran through his mind. It passed. He shut his mouth and went into the bathroom.

About a minute later he returned. "Nope. Only person in there is Tom Limpet. I think he's just scared to come out, honestly. Looks like he's been in there for a while. I'm betting that—"

She walked past him and into the men's restroom.

"Mr. Limpet." The announcement of her arrival was for both parties comfort.

That didn't prevent him from fumbling around like a guilty teenager. "What? I wasn't doing anything! I'm just in the bathroom!"

"No doubt," Pussy replied. "I need to know if two dogged gentlemen were in the bathroom in the past few minutes? Wearing dark suits, perhaps?"

"Miss Katnip!" Robby whispered loudly behind her. "This is the men's room. You can't be—"

"A simple yes or no will do, Mr. Limpet," Pussy pressed.

"I didn't...no," he mumbled.

"You don't know if they were in here?" Pussy stepped over to him.

"No, I know." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I mean, no, they

weren't in here."

"There we go. That was easy now, wasn't it." Pussy turned to walk out. "Oh, and Mr. Limpet, you might want to join us out in the main room. It's all right to step out of your shell every once in a while." She glanced at her bartender. "Robert, please comp the gentleman his first drink."

"Whatever you say, Miss Katnip." She heard him continue after she exited. "Sorry about that, Tom. Come by the bar, I'll take care of you."

When Robby emerged, Pussy continued. "Go talk to Robin. Have her keep her eyes open for the two men. Let me know if they show up. Thank you."

"Hey, Miss Katnip, what's the hubbub about?" Robby asked.

"I'll tell you later." She walked back into the room, quickly scanning for both Rodney and Corson and his crew. Corson was sitting with two of his guests. Rodney was alone—for a moment. A waitress brought him something. His hands fumbled with the folded paper, eventually opening it enough to read it. The paper fell like the tree it was made from as he scurried from the table.

Shaking her head the whole way, Pussy followed behind. The only pause was long enough to pick up the discarded note.

The message on it was short and succinct. Meet out behind the club in two minutes and all was forgiven. Double the money paid out for the return of what Rodney stole.

Pussy's pace picked up as she tucked the folded note into a her belt. The trail led through the kitchen and to the back door of the club. It opened with a heavy clank, and Pussy saw what she feared.

Another ten seconds might have been too late. Rodney's feet dangled several inches off the ground, held up against the wall by the slightly larger of the pair.

"...gotta go get it! Just give me a chance!" Rodney was already pleading. Likely for his life.

"Not part of the deal, ya dope!" The gentleman to the side seemed to be doing the talking. "This is a short ticket out."

"Seems like you gentlemen aren't giving him a chance." All three of them turned her way. "Why don't you put him down."

"This is none of your business, doll," the talkative one replied. "Now get back inside before you get hurt."

"Actually this is my business. In every sense of the word." Pussy took a half step towards them. "Now put him down, or I'll put you down."

"Dumb way to start the year, but it's your funeral. Hold onto him, Bruno. I'll be right back." The talkative one moved. Pussy moved faster.

A fist to the gut and every bit of air exited the man's lungs. Pussy was already pulling her hand back as he doubled over. His shocked expression almost

made Pussy smile, but her elbow was already moving towards the back of his head so his expression was short lived.

In less than three seconds his unconscious body was on the ground at her feet.

“So, Bruno,” she rested her hand on her hip, “do we want to make it two for two, or do you just want to put him down and go back inside?”

Bruno’s eyes flashed down to his fallen companion, and then focused back on Pussy. Rodney slumped down and gasped for air, but he made no move for the door. Bruno’s only move was to assume a defensive fighting stance.

The element of surprise was gone, and Bruno appeared a little more competent than Pussy hoped.

He stepped away from her quick jab and returned one of his own. It missed by a mile. He might have reach on her, but she more than made up for it with speed.

Apparently, he figured that out, too.

Both of his hands covered up his face as he rushed in. Pussy threw a punch towards his gut, but it didn’t stop his momentum. Bruno crashed into her, driving her back into the wall of the club. She winced, but kept her footing. His hand drove into her side, trying to finish what he started and put her on the ground.

Three shots in rapid succession did their best to knock the air out of her. They almost succeeded, but really only made her mad.

Her right hand grabbed his belt. The left went to his throat. She lifted, turned around, and slammed him against the wall. And then did it again. Plus a third time for good measure. As he slumped down, her right hand drove across his jaw, dropping him for the night.

“And that’s how we do that,” she muttered. Her eyes shifted at a shuffling sound behind her. “Rodney, you lied to me.”

The sound stopped. “Uh, what are you talkin’ about Pussy? You saw ‘em! They was tryin’ to off me!”

“Which wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t come outside.” Her feet swiveled around and the rest of her followed. “And you wouldn’t have come outside unless you had money to trade them.”

“Wh-what? No, they made me—”

“I read the note,” Pussy interrupted. “Where’s the money?”

“Well, that’s just it, Pussy, I kinda—”

“Where’s the money?” He jumped at the volume of her voice.

“I only got half.” His hands were in and out of his pockets in a second. A bundle of bills hung loosely together. “Just half.”

She held out her hand. “Give me those, and go back to my table.” He stared

at her hand. Then at the money. Then back at her hand. “I’m not taking it. I need it, but you’ll get your money back.”

“You promise?” His hand barely moved away from his body.

“Get back to the table, Rodney.” She snatched the money from his hand. “And this time, don’t leave.”

One of the men on the ground moaned. It was enough to motivate Rodney to hurry back inside. Pussy looked at the man. A glint of metal caught her eye.

She crouched beside him and turned out the lapel of his jacket. A gold pin of a sphere—a globe—with a hand gripping it tightly from below. It went with her as Pussy stood up. She turned it over once in her hand. The money rested in her left, the pin in her right. She locked the door behind her as she stepped back inside the club.

The sound of Judy’s voice penetrated all the way to the back of the kitchen. The crowd’s response to it was almost as clear. Pussy could barely hear it through her own thoughts. She exited the kitchen and went straight upstairs to her private quarters. Money and pin fell beside each other on a small table. She slid the money free of the loose-fitting wrapper and thumbed through it, counting quickly.

“Not quite half, Rodney,” she mumbled, “and nowhere near enough money to commit murder.”

Like a green fan, the money spread out in her hand. The paper felt worn and used, but the bills were still somewhat crisp. She dropped them back down onto the table. Her eyes lingered on them. Once more her fingers moved the bills, this time spreading them apart.

“I’ll be....”

One swipe of her hand gathered them together. Moving to a bookcase, her hand pushed it aside, revealing a hidden safe. Tumblers fell, followed by the click of the latch, and the contents revealed themselves. Only one thing held Pussy’s attention, and she took it out in an instant. The safe door closed, followed by the bookcase, leaving none but herself the wiser.

The wrapper that previously surrounded Rodney’s bundle of cash went around some new money, and she headed back downstairs.

“Robert!” Pussy called ahead as she stepped up to the bar.

“Yeah, Boss?” Robby wiped his hands on the rag at his waist as he stepped up.

“I need you to do something.” Pussy handed something to Robby, and then laid out her plan.

A minute later, his expression didn’t inspire Pussy with confidence.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Trust me on this, Robert.” Pussy stood up straight. “Besides, it might not happen. This is just a conditional situation.”

“That’s a heck of a situation, Boss.” The short, sharp whistle added his own exclamation.

“Just watch for my signal, Robert.” She left him in his doubt and wonder.

Judy was still on stage, and the crowd couldn’t take their eyes off of her. With a few exceptions.

“Not enjoying the show?” Pussy stepped up to Corson’s table.

“The singer is delightful, but I must admit to being distracted this evening,” he replied. “I thought you were about to go on stage. What changed your mind?”

“Oh, some unexpected business came up.” Pussy pulled out a chair. “May I?”

“Of course!” Corson gestured to the chair. “Out of curiosity, what was your business?”

Pussy held his eyes as she slipped onto the chair. Her hand rested on the table. When she pulled it back, she left something behind.

“What’s that?” Corson stared at the table.

“Your money,” she answered.

He looked up. “I’m sorry?”

“All five-hundred. Rodney apologizes for his...indiscretion.” Pussy all but purred.

Corson pulled the bundle to him and flipped through the bills. He pushed it back towards her. “That’s not my money.”

“It’s five-hundred dollars,” Pussy said.

“Not my five-hundred.”

Pussy leaned back and crossed her arms. “And I wonder exactly what that means?”

“You don’t want to get involved in this, Miss Katnip. I don’t know your connection to Rodney, but my—”

“I took the money from him,” she blurted. “He owed it to me.”

She counted the seconds before he spoke. It was four. “You have my money?”

“That’s your money.” She pointed to the bundle. “Paid in full.”

“It’s not *my* money. If you do have it, I will give you the opportunity to return it to me, or else things will become...unpleasant.” He spoke slowly, with nothing but ice in his words.

“Really?” Pussy put her hand back on the table. Her fingers pushed a golden pin forward. “I already found two of your companions entertaining enough. What do you have to offer?”

The stub of his arm crept onto the tabletop, coming to a stop halfway

between them. "Would you like to guess how I lost my hand, Miss Katnip?"

"You've always had trouble finding a girlfriend?" she answered.

He half chuckled. "No. One day I found myself confronted with an impossible situation. A life or death choice that was too bizarre to be real. A demon stood before me, looking to take my life. There was nowhere to run. No chance to escape. So I did what I needed to do. I plunged my hand into the demon's chest and took hold of his heart. I crushed the organ, feeling it stop beating even as the intense heat from his soul burned away my flesh, leaving nothing but a stub. There was no blood. The end of my arm was cauterized instantly. It was painful, but it was a sacrifice that I was willing to make." He pulled his arm back beneath the table. "Tell me Miss Katnip, are you willing to make such a sacrifice?"

"Cute story. I don't believe in demons," Pussy stated.

"It doesn't matter what you believe, Miss Katnip. What matters is what the hand shows you," he drawled.

"Oh, Corson, I assure you, I haven't even shown you my hand yet." She motioned towards the bar. "It seems to me that if someone is more interested in some paper rather than the money it represents, there is something other than cash at play. I want to know what it is."

"It's a bigger game than you want to play," he answered.

"Try me."

"You have a nice city that you play in, Miss Katnip, but the world is a large place. Where do you see yourself fitting in?" he asked.

She paused. "I saw the pattern on the bills. Clearly counterfeit money. The serial numbers followed the strangest order. Tell me what it means."

"She knows too much," Corson's female companion commented. He only responded with a wave of his hand.

"Have you ever heard of C.R.O.W.N., Miss Katnip?" His eyes were locked with hers.

"Beyond the obvious answers, no."

"It's a rumored organization. One that supposedly has its sites set on controlling the world. The Covert Rulers Of the World's Nations. Stories of them have been circulating since The Great War."

She glanced down at the pin on the table. "Stories. Of course."

"You're a capable woman. I believe that you might prove to be a benefit to us in the long run," he stated. "Before I can answer your questions, I will need a gesture on your behalf. Something to instill a sense of trust between us."

"You want your money," Pussy replied.

"It seems like a reasonable request," Corson said.

They stayed locked in the moment. It was broken when Pussy stood and retrieved the money she had placed on the table. "I'll be back in a minute or two."

She sauntered through the crowd, barely acknowledging anyone along the path to her destination. The smile on her face as she walked up to Rodney was less than comforting.

"What did you bring into my club?" Her words came out slow but sharp.

"I don't know what you—"

"Stop." A touch of fang appeared. "No more lies. If I question one word from here out I'll hand you over to that man myself. Now tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything, Pussy. Honest!" Rodney was sweating enough to fill barrels.

"Then tell me what you don't know," Pussy growled. "Corson says he's part of some secret organization. How did you get hooked up with them, and why do they want that money?"

"I..." He swallowed. "They needed someone to move on the streets for them. They came to me, I swear. Said I was the perfect guy. That I knew what they needed. I swear."

All of his words translated inside Pussy's head. "You weren't a threat and they could control you. But then you went and tossed a monkey wrench into their theory and nicked some cash. Why?"

His finger pulled on the collar of his shirt. "I just took the cabbage. I didn't mean for this to happen. Then I heard them talking about the gold, and...."

"Gold?" Her eyebrow went up.

"Yes. They said...they said that money was for them to buy gold. It didn't seem like enough to make a difference to me, though." He grabbed the remains of a drink from the table and downed it. Pussy was pretty sure it was hers.

"Rodney?" He looked away from the glass and up to her. "If you ever come into my club looking for help, don't forget to tell me everything." Her foot had barely moved before she stopped. "Better yet, if you ever feel the need to come into my club...don't."

His head nodded up and down like a stuttering jackhammer.

Robby was waiting for her at the bar as she walked up.

"Are you finished?" she asked. "You saw my signal, didn't you?"

"Much as I hate it, yeah," he sighed. "Why did you make me do that, Miss Katnip?"

"Did you mix it in with the rest?" She pointed to the ceiling.

"Just a minute ago. And I'm gonna cry when midnight hits," he stated.

She glanced at her watch again. "In only five minutes, too. If you'll excuse

me, Robert, I have someone to see about some gold.”

“What?” His question faded behind her as she weaved through the crowd.

Once more Pussy found herself standing beside Corson’s table. She sat without asking permission.

“What news do you have, Miss Katnip?” he asked her.

“Routing numbers? Shipping numbers? What is it?” she answered with a question of her own.

“Miss Katnip, I—”

“I mean, there’s a code, obviously. I have no idea why it was transferred to you in a bunch of counterfeit bills, but that’s what you’re after. And since you are so desperately trying to get these bills back, clearly this is information that you won’t be able to get again. At least not easily.” She felt her blood racing through her veins, desperately trying to pound itself out of her body.

“Just give me the money, and we’ll be gone. It’s that simple.” Corson growled.

Keeping it as casual as possible, Pussy leaned back in her chair. “No, I don’t think it is. You’ll pardon a small-time business owner, but I know the cost of running my operation. And if that were to go global, then I’d be looking at an exorbitant amount of money.” She smiled. “You’re going broke, aren’t you?”

“Miss Katnip!” Corson stood up. The other two at the table joined him. “I demand that you return my money to me this instant!”

“Sit down.” Pussy eyed all three. “I actually have every intention of giving you your money.”

His mouth dropped open. The other two looked his way, and he motioned them to sit. As soon as they were down, he followed. “I’m happy to see you’re as smart as you are beautiful.”

A faint taste of bile hit her throat. “Oh, I’m full of surprises. In fact, I—”

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” Jenny announced from stage.

“Wait!” Pussy stopped herself. “It’s that time.”

“On behalf of the staff and everyone here at the Kit Kat Klub, why don’t you help me welcome in the new year!”

A cheer swelled up from every table, filling the room. Every table save the one where Pussy sat.

“Let’s count down!” Jenny began. “Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six.” Pussy’s eyes were locked with Corson. “Five. Four. Three. Two.” She smiled. “One. Happy New Year!”

The ceiling exploded into a rain of confetti, showering down upon the room. The band broke into a familiar tune, and Jenny led the crowd as they all sang along.

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should oil acquaintance be forgot,
And old lang syne?*

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll take a cup of kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.*

*And surely you buy your pint cup!
And surely I'll buy mine!
And we'll take a cup of kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.*

"I'm waiting, Miss Katnip." Friends everywhere began to embrace, and those closer kissed in the new year. Corson barely moved. "Where's my money?"

Pussy turned her head to the left, and then to the right. "What do you mean? I just gave it to you."

The confusion on his face spurred her along. She picked up a handful of confetti from the table. "Don't you recognize it? Look closely, I'm sure you'll see some in there."

Immediately Corson and his two cohorts grabbed the shreds of paper. Their fingers shuffled through them at lightning speed.

"You didn't!" Corson shouted.

"I did. Every single piece of it." Pussy held out her hand and let the confetti sprinkle from her hand back down to the table. "Now, do me the favor of getting the hell out of my club."

The other man at the table almost leapt from his chair. Pussy's eyes locked him in place. "Don't you dare."

"She's right," Corson said. "This isn't the right time or place." He stood slowly and straightened his jacket. "I want you to realize that you have made a powerful enemy tonight, Miss Katnip."

Pussy stood up to stand beside him. "I don't like bullies. And ones who have delusions of grandeur are even worse. Now, do I need to show you to the door, or do you know the way?"

He turned and walked. The other two fell in behind him.

"Corson!" She spoke loud enough to get him to turn. "Happy New Year."

She watched him turn, and kept her eyes on him until he went up the stairs exiting the room. The moment he was out of view her shoulders dropped and her breathing resumed.

Dozens of patrons spoke to her as she crossed the room, but she heard none of it. Soon she was at her private table and the guest huddled behind it.

“He’s gone, Rodney,” she stated.

The squirrelly man’s gaze ran through the room, seemingly trying to account for every single person. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. You stay here another hour, and then go home.”

“What if they—”

“I’m pretty sure that I made him mad enough that you aren’t going to have to worry about him anymore.” She leaned in. “You just have to worry about me. Got it?”

She could see him swallow. “Yes, Pussy. Yes, I understand. Thank you, Pussy. Thank you.”

There was nothing she had to say to him. As she approached the bar, she held up to fingers. Robby had the drink waiting for her when she got there.

The whiskey burned as she tossed it back. She relished the sensation.

“Pussy?”

The voice was familiar and welcome. She felt the smile grow on her face as she turned. He stood there in a formal uniform, with his hat tucked up under his arm. The fit was a little better than perfect.

“George,” she purred, “I thought you were working.”

“I am. I just took a few minutes off to come see you,” he answered. “Is everything okay? You look upset.”

A dozen answers ran through her head. Each one appropriate and deserved. She ignored them all. Her body pressed tight up against him. “Right now, I feel great.”

“Good, I just....” He licked his lips. “Happy New Year, Pussy.”

Her hand came up to rest on his cheek. Lifting onto her toes, she brought her lips up to his. There was a tingle across her mouth for the moment that it lingered, and then he gently broke free.

And suddenly, the night wasn’t that bad after all.

“Happy New Year, George.”

The End

Afterword

I certainly hope you enjoyed *A Hand of Gold*. I meant this story to be an introduction into the world of Pussy Katnip, and hopefully it will get you interested in her and her adventures. And you can continue them in a number of ways. Throughout the year of 2017 I will be releasing a new story in this world every month. Not all of them will star Pussy Katnip, but they will all be set in the same world. Or you can check out one of the novels, starting with *Red Is The Darkest Color*.

As always, though, we rely upon you to help things continue. Word of mouth is the best advertisement that we can get, and anything that you can do to help us out will keep Pussy and her stories coming back again and again.

So, leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads or Smashwords or anywhere at all. Tell a friend. Share your opinion on social media. That's the lifeblood of worlds like this one. Let's keep Pussy Katnip alive for a long time.

And if you get a chance, sign up for my mailing list at publishing.pandahead.com. I'll give you a free original short story just for signing up.

Thanks for reading. See you again soon.

- *Brett Brooks*

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