

A CAT NAMED NIKKI

Once upon a time, a kitten was born in Hawaii. There was nothing very unusual about this, kittens are born in Hawaii every day, but this was a very special kitten. When she was born she was a little brown ball of fur, with tiger stripes on her back and tiny tufts of black fur on the tips of her ears. When she grew up she would be called Nikki, but she had no name when she was born because there was no one to name her. Her mother was one of the many cats who lived wild amid the palm trees and hibiscus bushes near Pearl Harbor. Nikki had two brothers and three sisters, and her mother taught the kittens how to hunt mice, drink the rainwater that pooled in tree roots, and make a soft cozy bed out of dry grass. She also taught them to always hide from people, because she had never lived with humans and didn't know how kind they could be.

Nikki loved her island paradise. She loved her brothers and sisters, and of course she loved her mother. They had hours of fun together playing tag amid the flowers that grew wild in Hawaii, stalking bugs, and pouncing on their mother's tail when it twitched. When night came they curled up together in a warm ball of fur and slept beneath the tropical stars. They grew strong together, and eventually they grew so big that it was time for them to set off on their own. They didn't set off all at once, but each day their adventures took them a little further away from their nest and one by one they found homes of their own.

Nikki found a perfect spot for her home, a cool dark cave under a metal storage shed behind a big tan house. There was a family of humans who lived in the house. Nikki didn't like living so close to the humans, but it was cozy and dry under the shed and she kept well out of sight whenever the humans came near. There were plenty of mice to be found, and best of all the

smaller humans often left things lying in the grass where Nikki could find them when she went exploring at night. Nikki was fascinated by these treasures -- little plastic Army men, a doll with soft curly hair, and balls which rolled across the ground when she batted them. Once they left a pair of socks on the ground, and Nikki quickly dragged them under the shed to make a soft fuzzy bed. She was always careful to keep out of sight, but gradually she grew used to the sounds and smells of the humans.

One night when Nikki went exploring there were no mice to be found anywhere. This was very unusual. The mice always came out at night and Nikki was very good at finding them. There was a strong wind blowing that night, making it impossible to distinguish the smell of a mouse from the bewildering mixture of smells which swirled about in the wind. A dark layer of clouds hid the stars overhead, and when Nikki turned toward home she thought she smelled rain in the wind which flattened her fur against her face. She started to run for the shed, but the wind was blowing so hard it was difficult to make any headway. By the time she reached the shelter of the shed giant raindrops were beginning to smack against the ground, sending up little geysers of dust and mud. As she crawled into her little cave the wind began to blow even harder, and the rain made a deafening roar as it beat against the metal sides of the shed. Nikki didn't know what a hurricane was, but she knew this was the worst storm she had ever seen.

All night long the wind howled and the rain thundered against the metal shed. Nikki burrowed deeper into her nest and tried to hide from the storm, but gusts of wind whistled under the shed and pelted her with stinging raindrops. The shed itself trembled and swayed from the force of the storm. In the morning a cold gray light filtered through the clouds, but still the storm raged on. Once in a while, the storm seemed to let up a bit, only to begin again with a new fury.

Suddenly, a tremendous gust of wind lifted the shed off the ground and sent it tumbling across the lawn. Nikki was now exposed to the full force of the storm. The wind knocked her off her feet and the rain pelted her from all sides. She let out a plaintive wail, but it was lost in the roar of the wind. Time and time again she tried to stand up, only to be knocked down and rolled across the soggy ground. Finally, she rolled into one of the concrete blocks that the shed had been resting on. She crawled into a hole in the block and cowered against the concrete. Almost magically, the storm stopped and the sun broke through the clouds.

Nikki didn't know it, but this was only the eye of the hurricane. In a few minutes, the rain would start again and she would be exposed to the second half of the storm. All Nikki knew was that she was scared, soaked to the bone, and colder than she had ever been before. She huddled inside her concrete cave and cried for her mother.

Taking advantage of the lull in the storm, the man who lived inside the house rushed into the yard and tried to salvage what he could from the overturned shed. He was just about to go back inside when he heard a plaintive mewling. At first he didn't know where it was coming from, but he listened carefully and gradually approached the concrete block. Getting down on his hands and knees, he peered into the block and saw a soggy kitten hiding inside. "Well hello there!" he said. "Where did you come from?" Talking softly, he slowly reached inside the block.

Nikki was terrified. Her mother had always taught her to run away from people, but she was so scared she didn't know which way to run. At first she shrunk away from the man, but his voice was soft and kind and his finger stroked her under her chin. Trembling with cold and fear,

she let herself be picked up and cuddled against his chest. His shirt was warm and dry, and she burrowed her head into it. Still talking softly, he carried her into the house.

Suddenly Nikki was surrounded by people, all talking at once and reaching out for her. "Oh, the poor thing." "Wherever did you find her?" "Can we keep her, Dad? Huh? Can we keep her?" A boy named TJ took her from his father and dried her with a towel. Then he brought her a saucer of warm milk, while a girl named Tracy petted her constantly. Warm and dry, Nikki began to purr.

"What shall we name her?" the mother asked.

"How about Iniki?" the father replied. "That's the name of the hurricane that brought her to us."

"That's too fancy" said TJ. "Let's just call her Nikki."

Outside the storm began to rage again, but inside the house it was warm and dry. Nikki finished her saucer of milk and curled up on the carpet while the two children petted her. She purred drowsily, and then drifted off to sleep. Nikki had found a home.