

# Nikki Gets Too Big for her Britches

Once upon a time, there was a boy named TJ. He lived in a big house with his mother and father, his little sister Tracy, and his cat Nikki. When Nikki was a kitten, she loved to play games. This was not unusual. All kittens love to play games, and Nikki was fortunate that there were several other kittens in the neighborhood she could play with. They would stalk each other, and race each other, and play tag with each other, and sometimes they would just jump on top of each other and wrestle. The kitten who wound up on top, holding the other kitten on the ground, was the winner.

Nikki was very good at stalking. Stalking requires a lot of patience, as you have to move very slowly so you don't make any noise. You have to stay low so you're hidden in the grass. You have to listen for any sounds the other kitten makes to know where it is. Most of all you have to resist the temptation to raise your head up, stretching your neck to see where the other kitten is. If you do that, the other kitten is almost sure to see you, because any movement at all will attract a kitten's attention. They might not see your head if it was low in the grass, but as soon as you moved it above the grass they would see it. Nikki never raised her head, and she moved so quietly that even Rex, a neighborhood cat with huge eyes and even bigger ears, never heard her coming or saw her moving. Nikki didn't understand why the other kittens weren't as good at stalking as she was. To her, it seemed simple. To the other kittens, it wasn't so simple. It was hard for them to resist their natural curiosity to see if the kitten they were stalking was still there. Sometimes they got so curious that they would leap into the air to get a better view. If the sight of a kitten bouncing across the sky wasn't enough to attract the attention of the other cat, the crash when the kitten came back to earth was enough to jar the stripes off a sleeping tiger. Nikki just shook her head in amazement when she saw kittens do this. Nikki had tried that once when she was little, but she immediately saw that it was a mistake and she learned from her mistakes. Nikki was pretty smart for a kitten, and she had excellent self-control.

Nikki was not as good at playing tag or racing. Most of her friends were bigger and stronger than she was and they had longer legs, so they won most of the races. What Nikki was really good at, though, was wrestling. Even though most of her friends were bigger than she was, she

had learned “tricks” that helped her win. If the other cat was on top of her, she had a special way of twisting sideways until she could get both back paws on the ground and flip them over. If they were sitting on her head she could lift her tail up and turn a summersault, which put her on top. If they pinned her front paws down she could put her back paws in their face and push them over backward. She knew lots of tricks like this. She had discovered them by accident while wrestling, but she was a smart little kitty and she remembered these winning moves.

Once Nikki realized she could out-wrestle every other kitten, she won every game they played because she could always turn it into a wrestling match. If she was stalking another kitty, she’d pounce on it and wrestle it to the ground. If the other kitty was stalking her, the moment it pounced on her she’d flip it over and wrestle it to the ground. If the other kittens wanted to play tag or race, she’d pounce on them whenever they got close and wrestle them. And of course if they wanted to wrestle, she always won the wrestling matches. Nikki thought this was great fun. She won every game! For about three days. Then the other kittens stopped playing with her.

“You cheat!” they shouted at her when she asked them to play. “All you want to do is wrestle, even when we’re not wrestling.”

“Sore losers!” Nikki yelled back. Then she marched away with her nose and her tail held high. “They’ll be back” she thought. She went back to her house and played with her catnip mouse. Then she discovered the mother was sitting in her bedroom, knitting a sweater. The ball of yarn bounced crazily on the floor every time the mother pulled yarn off it. Nikki very carefully crept up on it, hiding behind the bed for as long as she could, while the tip of her tail twitched with excitement. When she got to the end of the bed she hunched down behind the mother’s knitting basket and crept even closer. Finally she was close enough to pounce! She flew through the air and landed on the ball with all four paws. She rolled over onto her back and kicked the ball across the floor. It bounced crazily with Nikki close behind. When it rolled underneath the dresser she pounced again, this time smacking it so it bounced off the end table beside the bed and wrapped several times around the leg of the dresser. The mother stood up and quickly rushed to the dresser to untangle the yarn, dropping her knitting on the chair. The silver knitting needles clacked together and reflected the light in flashes as they bounced on the chair. Nikki instantly pounced on the flashing needles. Her claws got caught in the knitting when she

landed and she held up first one paw and then another, shaking them violently to shake off the knitting. One of the knitting needles slipped out of the yarn and fell to the floor. Nikki was on top of it in an instant, but since her feet were still caught in the knitting she landed face first on the floor. With a yowl she rolled onto her back and began frantically kicking her paws in the air. The tattered remains of the mother's knitting finally flew under the bed.

Nikki started to scramble after the knitting, but she felt herself being picked up by the mother. She carried Nikki to the doorway and unceremoniously dumped her into the hall, closing the door before Nikki could scramble back in. Nikki pawed at the door a few times, hoping the mother would open it so she could go back in and play with the knitting again, but the mother didn't seem inclined to do that. Nikki finally gave up, walked downstairs to the living room, jumped on the couch and napped until dinner.

The next day Nikki went outside and hunted for the other cats, but as soon as they saw her they yelled "Cheater!" and ran away. Nikki trudged back into the house and moped around until she found a white Tinkertoy piece behind a radiator. That was great fun! She carried it upstairs to the hardwood floor and batted it down the hall, bouncing it off doors until it clattered down the stairs. She zoomed downstairs after it, carried it back upstairs, and chased it again. The third time she did this the father came out of the bedroom, where he'd been taking a nap, picked up the Tinkertoy, dropped it into a drawer on the hall table, and closed the drawer. Then he walked back into the bedroom and shut the door. Poor Nikki. She wandered back downstairs, lay down on the back of a couch, and stared into the back yard.

On the third day Nikki didn't even bother to go outside. She just moped around the house. Most of the time she sat on the back of the couch and stared into the yard.

"What's the matter with Nikki?" she heard TJ ask his father. "She doesn't play with the other cats anymore."

"I think it's the other way around," his father answered. "The other cats won't play with her. I saw her playing with them the other day, and she kept jumping on them and knocking them to the ground. They finally ran away. I think maybe Nikki's gotten too big for her britches."

“I am not!” thought Nikki. “I don’t even have britches, whatever they are!” Still, there was a nagging voice inside Nikki’s head that kept telling her that whatever was wrong, it just might be her fault.

On the fourth day the other cats ran away from her again. This time they laughed as they shouted “Cheater! Cheater! Nikki’s a cheater!” and ran away. Nikki decided it was time to talk to Amber. Amber was a wise old cat who could usually be found napping on top of a high hill behind the woods. Nobody knew whether Amber lived with people or lived by herself in the woods. She was older than anyone could remember and she kept to herself, but she was always friendly to visitors and if you asked nicely she would often offer advice.

Nikki walked for what seemed like miles through the woods. It was shady and cool underneath the trees, and the ground had a mossy fresh smell. She walked on a thick carpet of dead leaves. For most of the way the path followed a small stream that trickled through the woods, occasionally making splashing noises when a large rock or a fallen tree created a tiny waterfall. Finally the path veered away from the stream and headed uphill. The trees got thinner until finally they disappeared altogether and Nikki found herself on a sunny hillside. The sun was warm on her fur, almost hot as Nikki followed the path up the steep hill. At the top of the hill the ground flattened into a small plateau covered with grass and wildflowers. Just a little way to the right of the path there was a large rock. Beside the rock, Amber was sleeping peacefully. The rock sheltered her from the breeze, but the sun still bathed her fur with warmth. She was lying upright, with her front paws tucked neatly beneath her chest in the peaceful, dignified way that old cats often lie. She was an orange tiger cat, with tinges of gray in her fur. Her eyes were closed and she breathed very slowly and shallowly.

Nikki knew it wouldn’t be polite to wake her, so she lay down in front of Amber in the same dignified pose, with her paws tucked under her chest. As she waited for Amber to awaken she began to feel drowsy herself. Soon she drifted off into a catnap. When she woke up, Amber’s eyes were open and she was smiling at her.

“Good morning, little one.” Amber said. “You’ve traveled a long way and waited very patiently to visit me.”

“Good morning, Miss Amber” Nikki replied as politely as she could. “I waited to ask you a question. What does it mean when somebody is too big for their britches?”

“It means that person is being too bossy. They are acting as though they are more important than they really are, and they are not showing proper respect to the rights of others.” Amber waited a while so Nikki could think about this. Then she asked “Why do you ask? Do you know someone who is acting that way?”

“No . . .” Nikki said hesitantly. “No one is actually acting that way, but someone said I was too big for my britches. But I’m not. Really! I’m just better at wrestling than they are. And they’re sore losers!”

“I see” Amber said quietly. “And do they win when you play other games?”

“Well, we usually don’t play other games” Nikki answered. She decided not to say anything about turning every game into a wrestling match.

“That’s very unusual” Miss Amber replied. “Most kittens play lots of different games. But your friends only want to wrestle, and they always lose when they wrestle. Most unusual. Would you be a good loser if you only played one game and you always lost that game?”

“I, I think so” Nikki replied. “I think I would respect the skills of the kittens who won the game and I would congratulate them.”

Amber looked at Nikki for a long time before speaking. “Well, if it is as you say and your friends only want to play one game, and you are simply better at that game than they are, and they do not congratulate you when you win, then perhaps you are right. They are all poor losers. I’m afraid I cannot offer any advice on this situation. You can only change yourself. You cannot change others.”

“Thank you, Miss Amber” Nikki said politely. “I’d better be going home now.”

“Good bye, my young wrestler. Please come see me again if your situation changes” Amber replied.

Nikki felt confused and uneasy all the way home. Miss Amber had agreed with her that her friends were sore losers, but she hadn't offered any advice on how to change them. She was supposed to be such a wise cat, but she said you could only change yourself. What good would that do? She wasn't the problem! So why did she feel guilty?

Nikki was still wrestling with her thoughts that evening, as she sat on the back of the couch and watched the twilight slowly fade into night. The color fled with the light and the back yard was a tapestry of grays when her sharp eyes suddenly detected movement in the grass. Was there a cat out there? She stared intently at the grass until a slight movement revealed a tuft of black fur. Another movement showed a glimpse of white. Muffin! Nikki couldn't believe Muffin had the audacity to show up in her back yard at night, not after she had called Nikki a cheater and run away with the other cats that morning. This was Nikki's chance to teach Muffin a lesson. She'd show Muffin a bit of stalking she'd never forget!

Nikki begged to be let out and then silently crept up on the intruder. She kept low, but her eyes had fully adapted to the darkness and she could see the grass moving where Muffin was hiding. Soon Nikki was close enough to hear the sound of claws scratching at dirt. What was Muffin looking for? It didn't matter. The noise helped her zero in on her target. Finally she was within range. She coiled into position and then leapt.

As Nikki sailed through the air she realized the intruder was not Muffin. It was a strange cat she'd never seen before. Black, with a white stripe down its back and its tail. It turned its head to look up at Nikki, and it wasn't a cat's head. Its nose was too pointy. Just before Nikki collided with it, it raised its tail and . . .

Whoosh! The stench hit Nikki like a sledgehammer. She'd never smelled anything this bad. It burned her eyes and her nose. She couldn't see and she couldn't smell anything except this horrible odor. She bounced off the animal, which she later learned was called a skunk, and rolled in the grass, trying to wipe off the terrible smell. Then she ran back to the house, yowling in distress. She didn't get more than two steps into the kitchen when the mother clapped her hand over her nose, yelled for the father, and ran out of the kitchen, closing the door behind her to trap Nikki.

A few minutes later the father came into the kitchen. He, too, clapped his hand over his nose. Muttering some strange words Nikki had never heard before he picked her up, thrust her into the kitchen sink, and began spraying her with the sink sprayer. Then he shampooed her with dish soap, all the while uttering strange incantations. Neither the dish soap nor the magic words seemed to help much. In the days that followed Nikki would be bathed in tomato juice, lemon juice, hydrogen peroxide, and a special shampoo that came from the vet's office. For a cat that hated baths, this was almost more than she could stand. Worse yet, every bath was followed by a withering storm of hot air from the blow dryer. With each bath the smell got a little less intense until it finally faded into a bad memory.

Even though the smell faded away, Nikki's friends didn't return. Nikki brooded about that, and she also had a guilty conscience about her talk with Miss Amber. While she hadn't actually lied to Amber, she hadn't told her the whole story either. Finally she walked back through the woods, up the hill, and told Amber about how she had turned every game into a wrestling match and then bragged about winning.

"So," Miss Amber said gently. "It was not just that your friends were sore losers. You were being a poor winner, too. And while your friends are wrong to run away from you, do you think perhaps it is not fun for them to play with you because you always win?"

"Maybe." Nikki looked down at the ground as she said this.

"So what do you think you should do about it?" Amber asked.

Nikki shrugged, still looking at the ground. "Let them win sometimes?" she suggested.

"Oh no!" said Miss Amber. "You must never *let* them win. That's not being truthful with them, and it's not being fair to yourself. When you are good at something, it is a gift. Don't hide your gifts. You must share them."

"How can I share the fact that I'm good at wrestling and not win all the time?" Nikki asked in confusion.

"Well," Amber asked thoughtfully, "what is it you do that makes you so good at wrestling?"

“I know lots of secret moves” Nikki said excitedly. “Whenever another cat is about to pin me, I can flip around and pin them.”

“And have you taught these secret moves to your friends?” Amber asked.

“Well, no.” Nikki answered. “If I showed them the moves, they wouldn’t be secret. They’d use the moves on me, and then I wouldn’t . . . oh.”

Amber smiled. “It’s not fun to lose all the time, but it’s also not fun to win all the time. Not if it’s too easy and you know you’re going to win. It’s only fun to win if it’s a challenge. If you try as hard as you can and you think you might lose, but then at the last minute you win – that’s when winning is a joy. If you teach your friends your tricks you’ll be evenly matched. It will be a challenge. You may lose sometimes, but sometimes you’ll win, and everyone will have fun.”

Nikki thanked Amber and ran off to look for her friends. She looked for Muffin first, because she and Muffin had been friends for a long time. Nikki couldn’t even remember a time when they weren’t friends. She found Muffin in the woods, pawing at some cinch bugs that were hiding under a log.

“Oh, hi Nikki!” Muffin said. She sounded a little uneasy, like maybe she was feeling guilty about having joined the other cats and run away from Nikki. “I haven’t seen you for a while.”

“I’ve been hiding indoors” Nikki said. “I got sprayed by a skunk.”

“Really?” Muffin said excitedly. “How did that happen?”

“I thought it was you” Nikki said truthfully. “It was night, and all I could see was a little patch of black fur and a tiny wisp of white fur. I crept up behind it as quiet as a mouse. Then I leapt into the air to pounce on it, and while I was in the air it lifted its tail and sprayed me good. Boy did I stink! My family had to give me four baths before I could even stand to be in the same room with myself.”

Muffin laughed so hard she fell down on the ground and rolled over on her back. “I wish I could have seen that” she gasped between peals of laughter. “I can just picture you up in the air



with a smile of triumph on your face that suddenly changes to a look of terror when you realize you're pouncing on a skunk. Did you paw at the air and try to go backwards before you hit it?" Muffin laughed some more.

After Muffin stopped laughing they talked for a while about what they'd been doing. Then Nikki suggested "You want me to teach you some of my wrestling moves?"

"No thank you" Muffin immediately responded. "You always win, and I don't feel like having my face mashed into the ground right now."

"No, no" Nikki said. "I don't mean we'll wrestle. I mean I'll teach you the moves I use to win, and then maybe you can win sometimes."

"Well, maybe" Muffin said suspiciously. But Nikki was true to her word. She didn't try to win a wrestling match, she taught Muffin some of the best moves she knew and she let Muffin practice them on her. Before long they were laughing and having lots of fun. A little later Snowflake joined them and they taught her some wrestling moves. Then Miss Pittypat joined in the fun.

In a couple of days everything was back to normal. Nikki and her friends played every day, and they played lots of games. When they wrestled Nikki still won sometimes, but she didn't win all the time and she didn't try to turn every game into a wrestling match. Nikki helped some of the other kittens learn to stalk better, and they helped her learn to be better at playing tag.

Nikki almost forgot how unhappy she'd been when the other cats wouldn't play with her, but she didn't forget who had helped her. One day she made the long walk through the woods and up the hill to thank Miss Amber. She told Amber how she had gotten back together with her friends, and she described all the fun they were having together. Then she paused for a moment and grew thoughtful.

"Miss Amber," she said. "Do you think I'm too big for my britches?"

Amber smiled. "No, my young friend. I think you're just the right size for your britches."