

Nikki's Christmas

Once upon a time there was a cat named Nikki who lived with a boy named TJ, a girl named Stacie, a baby named Alyssa, and their mother and father. It was getting close to Christmas, and Nikki loved Christmas. When she was a kitten she thought the best part of Christmas was that they brought a tree inside! She had lots of fun climbing the tree, playing hide and seek around the tree with her cat friends, and using the tree trunk as a scratching post. Then the Christmas season came to an end, and the tree disappeared. Nikki still had lots of places to play and she could use the back of the couch as a scratching post. (TJ's mother and father got upset when she used the front of the couch.) It wasn't the same, though. Nikki missed the tree. So she was overjoyed the following year when the family brought another tree inside! "This happens every year at Christmas" her friend Muffin told her. Muffin was only a little older than Nikki, but she liked to act like she was the wise old cat who knew everything.

One thing neither Muffin nor Nikki realized was that they were a lot bigger than they had been the previous Christmas. They were no longer kittens. They still played like kittens, though. One day Nikki was chasing Muffin in a game of kitty tag. Muffin zoomed under the tree and shot up the tree trunk. Nikki was right behind her. "I've got you now" Nikki thought. "You're going to run out of tree and there's no place to go." She was surprised at how hard it was to climb the tree. The branches seemed much closer together than she remembered. "Maybe this is a different kind of tree" she thought.

When Muffin got near the top of the tree she realized she couldn't keep climbing forever. She didn't want Nikki to catch her, so she jumped away from the trunk, sailed past Nikki, and landed on a branch below Nikki. Nikki immediately jumped after her, and landed on the same

branch. As she landed, she felt the tree start to tip in that direction. She and Muffin scrambled back to the trunk and held on for dear life.

“T-i-m---b-e-r!” thought Nikki as the tree tipped further. She had heard a man on television yell that as a tree fell over. Suddenly the tree hit the floor with a tremendous crash! Nikki and Muffin ran out of the tree and hid under the couch. The floor was littered with ornaments and broken pieces of ornaments. The whole family came running to see what caused the noise. The mother and father were shouting instructions back and forth as they picked up the tree and mopped up the water from the tree stand. TJ and Stacie picked up as many unbroken ornaments as they could find and hung them back on the tree. “It must have been a defective tree” Muffin whispered, but Nikki wasn’t so certain.

Nikki never climbed the Christmas tree again, but she still loved Christmas. Everyone seemed extra happy around Christmas. There were wonderful smells in the air, and sometimes extra treats to eat. There were also ribbons, wrapping paper, boxes, and lots of new things to play with. One thing the cats never played with, though, was the Christmas House that the mother put on top of the piano. It didn’t look like a very fancy house, but there were little statues of people, sheep, camels, and an angel that went inside the house, all gathered around a statue of a little baby lying on a bed of straw. The cats seemed to know instinctively that this house was not something to play with. Well, instincts plus the fact that Muffin had gotten in a lot of trouble when she was caught batting a shepherd across the kitchen floor.

One year, just a few days before Christmas, the statue of the Christmas Baby disappeared! TJ and Stacie looked all over the house for it, and the mother kept asking everyone if they’d seen it but nobody had. The only thing they found was an acorn which had somehow gotten on top of

the piano and into the Christmas house. Nikki knew her people were really upset about this, because they spent a long time looking for the baby. Eventually they'd give up searching and sit dejectedly around the living room. Then one of them would say "It's got to be here *someplace!*" and they'd start looking in the same places all over again.

Nikki didn't like to see her family unhappy. "I'll find the baby for them" she thought. "I can crawl under furniture and look in places they'd never be able to reach!" She spent all afternoon looking for it, but with no luck. The next day she talked Muffin into helping her look, but even with both of them searching every nook and cranny of the house, they couldn't find the baby. They found pennies, hair bands, dust, and a little rag tied onto a string which Nikki had lost months earlier, but no sign of the Christmas Baby.

"I think we need to hire a professional" Muffin finally suggested.

"What do you mean?" Nikki asked.

"A private cat's eye. A gumpaw. A slaymouse." Muffin replied. Muffin spent a lot of time watching old movies on TV. Too much time, Nikki thought.

"Where in the world are we going to find a private detective?" Nikki asked.

"Buster. The cat next door. Remember when he found the cat food for us?"

"The food wasn't lost." Nikki responded. "We all knew where it was. Buster was just the only cat naughty enough to rip open the bag. We got in trouble for that, remember?"

"He found your collar when you lost it." Muffin argued.

"I didn't lose it. Buster pulled it off when he jumped out of a tree and landed on my back. His claw got caught in my collar and it pulled over my head when I wiggled out of the headlock he had me in. I had to give him my dinner that night to get it back."

“Exactly. That’s what I mean. He’s available for hire. You’ll probably have to give him several of your dinners to get him to find the Christmas Baby, though.”

Nikki noticed that Muffin wasn’t offering to give Buster any of *her* dinners. She also didn’t think Buster would have any better luck at finding the baby than they’d had, but she couldn’t think of any better ideas.

The next day was the day before Christmas. Nikki started looking for Buster first thing in the morning. She found him playing with an alley cat, having a contest to see who could tip over the most garbage cans. She told him about the missing Christmas Baby and he considered the matter. “What kind of cat food do you get?” he asked.

“Healthy Cat Original Flavor” said Nikki.

“Ugh. Hard tack. Don’t you ever get any soft cat food?” Buster asked.

“No, this stuff’s supposed to clean your teeth when you eat it.” Nikki answered.

“What about on Christmas, eh? I’ll bet you get some of that soft, fancy food in your stocking don’t you?”

Nikki thought of the special treats she often got for Christmas, sometimes including scraps of turkey. “Well, sometimes. . .” she said hesitantly.

“Then it’s settled” said Buster. “I’ll find your Christmas Baby and you’ll give me your Christmas treats.” Buster followed Nikki back to her house and they both slipped in through the cat door. Buster immediately jumped up on top of the piano and examined the Christmas House, looking for clues. Then he hopped down on the floor and started searching for the Christmas Baby. Nikki noticed that he was looking in all the same places she and Muffin had already searched. She didn’t have much faith that he’d find the baby. She started looking behind the

piano again, hoping she might find a crevice she hadn't seen before. Or maybe it had gotten caught on some sort of a ledge and never reached the floor. She was trying to climb up into the piano when she heard Buster shout.

"I've got him!" Buster cried triumphantly. Nikki came running and saw Buster with his paws clamped on something in front of him.

"Did you find the Christmas Baby?" she asked.

"No. Something better. I found a mouse!" Buster replied. His eyes were shining with excitement.

"Oh. He lives behind the fireplace." Muffin answered. "He's OK. Let him go, and let's look for the baby."

"Let him go?" Buster asked indignantly. "Not on your life. He's mine. I caught him fair and square. I'm going to take him home and leave him on the doorstep as a present for my people."

Nikki could never understand why some cats left dead animals on the doorstep. It was obvious that people didn't like these presents. And especially now, on Christmas Eve. . .

"He's our mouse" said Nikki. "He lives in our house. And I think he's got a family to feed. Let him go, and let's go find the baby. After all, it *is* Christmas."

But Buster paid no attention to her. His eyes were focused on his paws and the mouse underneath them. Nikki could see its tail poking out. It was trembling with fear. She realized nothing she could say would change Buster's mind. She needed another plan. Then she remembered her piece of cloth on a string. She ran under the couch, grabbed the end of the string, and started running circles around Buster. The cloth bounced along behind her on the string. She ran in smaller and smaller circles, so the cloth came closer to Buster with each circle.

Buster stopped staring at his paws and started following the mouse with his eyes. Finally, when the mouse actually bounced over his paws, he pounced. He trapped the catnip mouse under his paws and jerked the string out of Nikki's mouth. Meanwhile the real mouse took off like a shot and disappeared into a hole in the wall beside the fireplace.

"You tricked me!" Buster shouted.

"Like that was hard?" thought Nikki? She had the good sense to keep this thought to herself.

"Our deal's off! I'm going home!" Buster stomped out of the house.

Nikki spent the rest of the day searching for the Christmas Baby, but with no luck. That night the family had a special dinner. They laughed and played Christmas music while they drank egg nog. They even gave Nikki a small bowl of egg nog. She felt a little guilty when she drank it, because she hadn't been able to find the Christmas baby, but this was the only time of the year when she got egg nog so she didn't let her guilt spoil the treat. Finally the family put presents under the tree, hung their stockings, and went to bed. Nikki hopped up on an overstuffed chair to guard the presents. Even if she hadn't found the Christmas Baby, she could make certain no mice or other critters got into the presents. She was ready to stay up all night long to keep them safe. Only after a little while, she started feeling soooooo sleepy. Maybe if she just kept one eye open. . .

A few minutes later she woke up and discovered someone had filled the stockings and left more presents under the tree. The same thing had happened last year. Nikki never saw who did it, she just dozed off for a little while and when she woke up it was done. She sat up in the chair and stared at the glittering wrapping paper. She closed her eyes and inhaled a delicious mixture of pine tree, chocolate, and peppermint. She still felt bad that she hadn't found the baby, but

Christmas was too special to let that spoil it. She kept her eyes closed and thought about what a wonderful time Christmas was.

“Excuse me, Mr. Cat?” A small, timid voice was calling her. She opened her eyes and looked around. She could just see a little bit of mouse whiskers sticking out from behind the fireplace. The mouse was taking no chances, and staying inside the safety of his home.

“I’m a miss, not a mister, thank you. And my name is Nikki” Nikki replied.

“Begging your pardon, Miss Kittie, I mean, Miss Nikki. My name’s Thomas” the mouse replied. “I wanted to thank you for saving me from that other cat.”

“You’re welcome” said Nikki.

“But I’ve been sitting here wondering. Why did you do that?”

Nikki thought about that for a while before she answered. “Because it was Christmas” she explained. “He was going to give you to the people he lives with. But I realized it was Christmas for you, too. I knew your family would be really sad if you weren’t with them for Christmas. Besides, I knew his family wouldn’t want you. No offense, but most people don’t like mice.”

“No offense taken” said Thomas. “I don’t think I’d like being anyone’s present.” He was quiet for a little while. Then he added “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No” smiled Nikki. “Thank you for offering, but I don’t think there’s anything you could do for me.”

“Unless you know where the Christmas baby is” she said as an afterthought.

Thomas hesitated for quite a while before he spoke. “I might” he said.

“Where is it?” asked Nikki excitedly.

“I don’t have it” Thomas said quickly. “And I’m not the one who took it. My cousin Tex is visiting us. He’s a pack rat, and one night he traded an acorn for the baby.”

“A rat??” asked Nikki in alarm. She didn’t like the idea of a rat running around in the house. Letting a mouse go was one thing, but a rat. . .

“A *pack* rat” Thomas hastened to explain. “That’s just what they call them. He’s really more like a mouse than a rat. He has a furry tail. Anyway, he has it, not me.”

“He needs to give it back!” Nikki demanded. “It belongs to my family!”

“That’s not the way he sees it.” Thomas explained. Pack rats trade for things. He left an acorn for your family in exchange for the baby. I don’t know if I can talk him into simply giving it back, but he might be willing to trade it.”

Nikki didn’t like the idea of giving him anything. As far as she was concerned it was wrong for him to take the baby, but she didn’t see any other way to get it back. “I’ll give him his acorn back” she offered.

“He wouldn’t want to trade back. He likes the baby better than the acorn. That’s why he traded. We’ll have to offer him something he likes better than the baby.”

Nikki looked around the room. The stockings were filled with presents and candy. A few pieces of candy had fallen on the floor. Nikki picked up a piece of chocolate candy wrapped in shiny foil. She carried it over to the fireplace and dropped it in front of the mouse hole. “Do you think he’d trade for this?” she asked.

Thomas was still well back inside the hole, but Nikki could see his eyes shine when he saw the candy. “Wow!” he said. “I’m sure he’d like that.” Nikki pushed the candy into the hole and watched it disappear. After what seemed like a long time Thomas returned.

“Here you go.” He said. Then he carefully pushed the baby out onto the floor with one paw, while keeping his body well back from the doorway.

“Thank you” said Nikki. She picked up the baby in her mouth, hopped up on top of the piano, and gently set the baby back into place. Then she picked up a couple more pieces of chocolate and pushed them into Thomas’s hole. “Merry Christmas” she said. “These are for you and your family.”

“Thank you” said Thomas. “Merry Christmas.”

Nikki hopped up onto the chair and curled up in a ball. She felt happier than she had in a long time. Feeling all warm and cozy, she drifted off to sleep.

Christmas morning was a joyous occasion. Everyone was laughing and talking at once as they unwrapped their presents. Nikki got a catnip mouse and two cans of tuna! No one noticed the baby until after all the presents had been unwrapped. TJ was picking up the wrapping paper and putting it in a bag when he suddenly stopped and pointed at the piano. “Look!” he said excitedly. “The baby Jesus is back!”

Everyone crowded around the piano and stared at the crèche. “I didn’t put it there” they all said. “I wonder who put it back?” the mother asked.

“It must have been an angel!” said Stacie.

Nikki rubbed her cheek against the catnip mouse and purred.