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Nikki's Choice
Angela C. Williams

In her day Nikki was good, really good—that is, the kind of good that comes only with hard work, divine intervention, and the determination and tenacity of a little bulldog. Once she got something between her teeth, she didn't let go.

Nikki was a female jock—a pretty and well dressed one—and she was also one of the hardest working basketball players to be found at the high school level. Her friend and mentor, Jenny, helped her with that. Nicole remembered the eye opening, one-on-one sessions when the former Olympian would push and shove Nikki into her basketball playing best. Those were the best of times.

She wasn't so good these days. Somewhere along the way Nikki had gotten old. The eyes that were once kerry blue now resembled thick clouds on a rainy day, the once spritely face now didn't smile at all, and the curly mop of white-blond hair that was once so striking was now a little dull.

Her days of ball playing seemed to have been over long ago. She didn't have her brilliant, glorious speed anymore, and the hands that once guided a basketball so unerringly to the hoop, the fingers that used to caress the ball so lovingly, now trembled ever so slightly.

Nicole sighed and looked away from the picture of her and Jenny together. She'd always felt that a player should play from the heart or not play at all; and by the end of the summer after her tenth-grade year, her heart wasn't in it. She'd played anyway, but you couldn't see any trace of the old Nikki there. And these days she sometimes felt so close to dying it wasn't funny: she didn't enjoy running or playing ball anymore—just the thought of going outside and shooting hoops made her cringe. She didn't really have the energy anyway. Her old friends never came around. Something had changed since the last time she saw Jenny.

Nicole looked down at her hands. Jenny used to tell Nikki she had the best hands any player could ever ask for. She remembered the day she met Jenny at a pick-up game at the high school gym. She also recalled, vividly, getting pounded...
on by the taller woman. At the time, Nikki didn't know she had just gotten whomped on by an Olympic Women's Basketball Team player.

After the game, feeling more than a little sore and grumblily, she followed the older woman out of the gym, and echoes of the word "broad" ran back and forth through her head. When they reached the yard outside of the school, Nikki saw her bend down and pick something up. She turned to Nikki and waited. When the girl came near, the Olympian proferred her hand. In the center of her palm lay an acorn. Nikki raised her brow at the offering.

"Take it," the tall woman urged gently.

Nikki picked up the acorn and gave her a rather strange look, something of a cross between a frown and a look of surprise. "What, dare I ask, is this for?"

Pointing to a gargantuan oak in the schoolyard, Jenny smiled. "You have to start somewhere before you can be as big as that." She turned to walk away. "Think about it..." floated over her shoulder.

"Huh?" Nikki was nonplussed, but at that moment her mom drove up, and she got in the car, the acorn clutched safely in her grasp. The former Olympian grinned and waved as the car passed by. Slowly, a smile began to gild Nikki's face.

The next week when she saw Jenny at the gym putting her court shoes on, Nikki went over and prompted nervously, "I didn't know you played in the Olympics."

Jenny's face smiled up at her as she laced her shoes. "I also used to play the bagpipes--bet you didn't know that."

Nikki frowned. "No, I didn't," she said. "So what were the Olympics like?" she blurted.

Jenny stood up, and Nikki would have sworn the woman was seven feet tall, she seemed so big. "Tough," she said and walked away.

Feeling as if she'd come only inches away from touching greatness, Nikki hurried after the woman in the Avia high-tops. "Hey, um, what did you give me that acorn for?"

Jenny stopped and waited patiently for the younger girl to catch up. She crossed her arms and cocked her curly-haired head to one side. "You know, kid, you've got some talent and a whole lot of determination. Keep working at it, and you could be good--really good." She added, "If you'd like, I could...

Nikki's eyes went wide, and her mouth opened and closed, but she couldn't quite spit the words out. Jenny touched Nikki's shoulder. "Take it that means yes, then?"

Nikki looked at her as if she was the benevolent goddess and barefooted fairy she was.

Jenny touched her again. It was then that a truly horrendous workout began. Meeting Jenny every night after school, Jenny would make her shoot 20,000 shots, until she was sure she could dribble, and then a soft left hand through.

"Oh my God!" she whooped. "sweetness!" She raised her arms and turned in a circle.

Jenny stood looking at the expressionless, her chest heaving. "I can't believe it!" Nikki stood gopher gone mad and grinned, "just kicked you bony butt!" Her mom would have just kicked you bony butt!" Her mom would have just kicked you bony butt!"

Jenny pursed her lips. "You'll have to work at that to happen."

Nikki snorted and went to a wall. "Yeah, well, I think your baby brother was a little high-schooler," she taunted.

"That's big, bad, Olympian at you butthead."

Nikki followed her and said, "Well, you think your baby brother was a little high-schooler, I'll bet you."

"You know, kid, you've got some talent and a whole lot of determination. Keep working at it, and you could be good--really good." She added, "If you'd like, I could..."

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Nikki didn't know she had a talent.

than a little sore and out of the gym, and back and forth through her third outside of the school. something up. She turned red and said, "I came near, the Olympian of her palm lay an acorn."

Jenny touched Nikki's shoulder and nodded her head, "I take it that means yes, then?" Her dark brown eyes were amused.

Nikki looked at her as if she were some kind of great benevolent goddess and barely managed to croak, "Uh-huh."

Jenny touched her again. "Great, then let's go."

It was then that a truly wonderful friendship and some absolutely horrendous workouts began. Nicole remembered meeting Jenny every night after school. She thought about how Jenny would make her shoot a shot over and over again until she was sure she could do it in her sleep blind-folded. She remembered the day she beat Jenny in a game of twenty-one for the first time when a reverse-fake, two steps, one dribble, and then a soft left hook flirted with the rim and fell through.

"Oh my God!" she whooped. "Sweetness! It's gotta be sweetness!" She raised her arms in the air and began dancing around in a circle.

Jenny stood looking at the hoop, her sweaty face expressionless, her hands on her hips. "I can't believe it!" Nikki stopped bouncing around like a gopher gone mad and grinned joyously at the other woman. "I just kicked you bony butt!" Her white teeth gleamed.

Jenny pursed her lips. "Yeah, well," she said, "I wanted that to happen."

Nikki snorted and went to grab her things over by the gym wall. "Yeah, well, I think your ego just can't take being battered by a little high-schooler. you big. bad. athletic woman-bitch."

Jenny followed her and sat down to take off her Avia's. "That's big. bad. Olympian athletic woman bitch to you butthead."

Nikki smiled and biffed her in the shoulder. "Oh you love me and you know it."

She raised her left brow at Nikki. "Yeah. well. just don't
push it. I may decide to no longer give you the benefit of my superior knowledge."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really."

Slyly, Nikki suggested, "Maybe I don't need it anymore."

She looked at her friend out of the corner of her eye.

Jenny got up and let her basketball drop into Nikki's lap with an unexpected plop. She shook her head. "Honey, you're always going to need me."

Nikki stood up and looked directly into her eyes. "You think so, huh?"

Jenny's lips twitched, and she shook her head and chuckled. It was a silly sound, not a giggle and not a laugh, and it made Nikki smile to hear it. "Not really, but we old ladies need our notions to cling to."

Nikki nodded and elbowed the laughing woman. "That's probably why I kicked your bony butt today—you're getting too old to keep up with the competition."

Abruptly, Jenny's laughter stopped as she craned her head as far back over her right shoulder as she could, closing her left eye, sticking the tip of her tongue out of the corner of her mouth, and peering down at her posterior. Bringing her head up she said, "It's not bony...it's, uh, muscular. Yes. It's definitely muscular."

She blinked her eyes innocently, then glanced over she shoulder again and added, "Bedsides, for being as old as it is, I think it keeps up pretty well."

Nikki cocked her head with a "Hmm," and brows puckered thoughtfully, moved to consider the area in question. She tsked several times and patting her friend on the back, leaned close to her ear. "Actually," she whispered, "I think it's getting a little bit soft."

The girl missed the slight narrowing of the Olympian's eyes and suddenly found a strong arm wrapped around her neck and her face at the woman's hip. She looked up at Jenny's grinning face.

"Honey, you'd better start giving this butt the respect it deserves, or you might find a very sore butt much closer to home."

"I can't get much closer than this," the girl croaked.

"Did you say something?" The headlock tightened.

Nikki looked up, then swept her foot underneath her friend's back at once she brought she arm. Her feet slipped and they both sprawled underneath the young woman, and shrieked as Jenny ticklish spot at her ribs.

"You brat! Let me go!"

Nikki laughed as she saw a long flailing legs. "Not until you tell me how to tickle you!"

"Okay."

"Okay." She tickled her friend's ticklish spot at her ribs. She pulled the sock off and pulled the stick from inside the girl's nostrils flaring. "Don't ever do that again..."

Nikki looked at the angry expression on her friend's face. She wondered in confusion what she missed.

Watching the emotions闪 the girl suddenly realized what her friend was trying to say. She felt a prickle of regret that she had barely missed her head. Jenny rolled over and saw where her feet were concerned.

"You're kidding."

"You're kidding."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Jenny rolled over and saw where her feet are concerned. "You're kidding."

The girl looked up, then

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"Did you say something?" The headlock tightened.
Nikki looked up, then she smiled. "No, of course not." All at once she brought her arms up around Jenny's waist and pushed off from her stocking feet on the varnished court floor. Her feet slipped and they both fell.

"Nikki!" Jenny screeched as they both hit the floor. She lay sprawled underneath the younger girl, her arms caught beneath her, and shrieked even louder when Nikki found the ticklish spot at her ribs.

"You brat! Let me go!"

Nikki laughed as she sat on Jenny's back and dodged the long flailing legs. "Not until you say uncle."

"Never."

"Okay." She tickled her ribs again and caught the foot that had barely missed her head. "I wonder if this foot is ticklish."

"It is," and brows puckered the area in question. She pushed as she craned her head as she could, closing her eyes innocently, then added, "Besides, for you to feel up pretty well."

She giggled and Jenny's nostrils flaring. "Don't ever do that again!" she bellowed.

Nikki looked at the angry woman, and the smile slowly left her face. She wondered if she'd gone too far as she tried to decide what to say next.

Watching the emotions play across the girl's face, Jenny suddenly realized what her words must have sounded like and felt a prick of regret that she'd barked so loudly.

"Nik--"

"Jen--"

They both spoke at once.

Laughing softly, Jenny touched Nikki's arm. "I didn't mean to yell at you, Nik. " She shrugged sheepishly and pulled on one earlobe. "I guess you might say that I'm a bit sensitive where my feet are concerned."

"You're kidding." The girl's voice was dry, her left brow arched.

Jenny's eyes crinkled warmly as she stood and reached down to help pull Nikki to her feet. "I'm serious. I swear to God. " She let her arm rest on the girl's shoulder. "Would I lie to you?" Grimacing at the skeptical look on Nikki's face, she added. "Well, anyway, come on." She raised her eyes heavenward. "Let's get our shoes on and run before I get myself into any more trouble."
Looking into her merry eyes, Nikki sighed. "Why I put up with you, I'll never know."

"Oh, you love me and you know it," came the ready reply. After that, they'd gone out jogging. The early fall evening was cool but comfortable, and both were enjoying the companionable silence and the oranges, reds, pinks, and purples of the sunset over Lake Michigan.

"Hey, Jen," Nikki puffed. "What do you know about men?"

Jenny's eyebrows lifted in the reddish glow. "Men?"

"Yeah, men."

Jenny pursed her lips. "Well, that depends. What do you want to know?"

"See, there's this guy in my class, Jason." She turned her head to look at Jenny as they ran. "He is so gorgeous, and I think he sort of likes me." There was a moment's silence.

"But?" Jenny prompted.

"But I think he thinks I'm gay."

Jenny's steps faltered slightly and she coughed. "Why do you think that?" She looked up into the pink sky.

Nikki sighed dramatically. "Because the other day I beat him one-on-one, and he hasn't talked to me since."

"When was this?"

"Just this past Friday." They rounded the corner and headed downhill towards the beach.

"And you've been twitching pretty heavy ever since?" There was a smile in Jenny's voice.

Absently, Nikki said, "He wasn't in class today."

Jenny crooked her head. "Well, my guess is that he hasn't had time to talk to you."

Nikki stopped and grabbed Jenny by her shoulders, jerking her to an unforeseen halt. Her eyes were huge. "You're absolutely right!"

Jenny shook her head. "What in the world ever made you think he thought you were gay?"

"Well, you know what they say about female basketball players." Nikki took off running and Jenny soon caught up.

"No, as a matter of fact, I can't say that I do." There was an almost undetectable "hmm" in her voice. "Why don't you enlighten me?"

"Well," Nikki began with the authoritative tone of an expert, "all the really good men are really any good. So they've all got to be a bit gay."

It was silent for a moment, and then Jenny, laughing at her. "Girl, some men do honestly believe only men could be gay."

"Well, that's your theory, that must mean they are gay," gestured to Nikki, "you're not a man--neither am I for that matter. But now that I think of it, I guess we are." Jenny looked at Nikki out of the corner of her eye. "But now that I think of it, I guess we are.

Nikki stopped abruptly. "What in the world ever made you think you're not a man--neither am I for that matter."

"Well," Jenny's mouth formed a smile. "I like you Jenny, and me, and I are the exception."

"Yes. Absolutely." Nikki, who found she couldn't quite hear Jenny at some imaginary dirt under her nose. "You're absolutely right!"

Jenny's mouth formed a smile. "I like you, Jenny, did you?"

"Yes, Absolutely." Jenny, who found she couldn't quite hear Jenny at some imaginary dirt under her nose, quit running in place. A dirt nose for a second, then for a second she twitched, and she looked at some imaginary dirt under her nose. "I like you Jenny, and me, and me, and I am the exception."

"That's a ridiculous question."

"Well, did you, me?"

"Yes. Absolutely." Jenny, who found she couldn't quite hear Jenny at some imaginary dirt under her nose, paused in place. A dirt nose for a second, then for a second she twitched, and she looked at some imaginary dirt under her nose. "I like you Jenny, and me, and me, and I am the exception."

"What do you mean, kind of gay?"

Jenny gave her a scathing look. "So what were they, kind of gay or what?" Her voice was emphasized.

"They did tell me I had great sportswoman."

Jenny straightened and said, "Did you meet all the good ones were gay?"

"Well, me, and me, and one time I had great sportswoman."

Nikki looked positively livid. "What do you mean, kind of gay?"

"Sorry, what were they, kind of gay or what?" Her voice was emphasized.

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Nikki sighed. "Why I put up with you, Jason," came the ready reply. The early fall evening Nere enjoying the reds, pinks, and pigan.

Do you know about men?" dish glow. "Men?"

What depends. What do you know about men? Jason." She turned her head, and I 

She coughed. "Why do you pink sky. Cause the other day I beat 
every body ever since." 

He is so gorgeous, and I had a moment's silence.

As she coughed. "Why do you like me since.

I said the corner and 

Heavy ever since?" There was a moment's silence.

My guess is that he hasn't touched her shoulders, jerking

Nikki paused. "Do you believe the world ever made you 

With female basketball

Jenny soon caught up. 

That I do." There was an 

"Why don't you

The irritable tone of an

expert, "all the really good ones have to be gay, because only men are really any good, and they must want to be like men. So they've all got to be a bunch of lezzies."

It was silent for a moment until Nikki realized Jenny was laughing at her. "Girl, sometimes I wonder about you. Do you honestly believe only men are any good? I mean," she gestured to Jenny, "you're not too bad talent-wise, and you're not a man--neither am I for that matter." She made a hmphing noise. "But now that I think about it," she wagged her finger at the girl. "I guess we are together most of the time." She looked at Nikki out of the corner of her eye. "In terms of your theory, that must mean that you and I . . . ."

Nikki stopped abruptly and gave Jenny, who started to jog in place, a look that broached utter mortification. "Oh my God! That is the most disgusting thing I have ever heard!" Each word was enunciated clearly, and she wrinkled her nose. "I like you Jenny, but I do not like you that much!"

Jenny's mouth formed an O as she tried not to laugh. "So you and I are the exceptions to your theory?"

"Yes. Absolutely." Nikki looked away pointedly, but she found she couldn't quite help herself: she turned back, picking at some imaginary dirt under her fingernail, and asked very casually, "Did you meet any in the Olympics?"

"That's a ridiculous question."

"Well, did you?" she pressed, hands on hips.

Jenny quit running in place and bent over, putting her hands on her knees. A drop of sweat clung to the tip of her nose for a second, then fell to the pavement. Her nose twitched, and she looked up. "Actually, there were a couple."

Nikki looked positively shocked. "You're kidding!"

"What do you mean, kidding? You're the one who said all the good ones were gay!"

Nikki gave her a scathing look. "That's not the point," she said. "So what were they like? Did they try to jump you or what?" Her voice was excited.

Jenny straightened and tried hard not to smile. "One of them did tell me I had great legs." She tugged at the leg of her sweats, her eyebrows arched. "I think she thought I was attractive." She emphasized the last word.
"Oh my God!" Nikki groaned. Her voice lowered until it was a whisper, "So what'd you do?"

Jenny mouth opened, but nothing came out. Then her eyes began to twinkle. "I told her I was saving myself."

They looked at each other, one's eyes huge, the other's mischievous. Suddenly, Nikki began to giggle. It started in the back of her throat and grew larger until she laughed so hard she began to snort. At the sound Jenny almost doubled over with her own laughter, and then her eyes began to twinkle. "I told her I was saving myself..."

They looked at each other, one's eyes huge, the other's mischievous. Suddenly, Nikki began to giggle. It started in the back of her throat and grew larger until she laughed so hard she began to snort. Finally, when they felt sure their ribs were about to cave in, they caught their breath and started running again.

Nikki ran next to the shoreline and jumped over the waves as they danced in and faded out. She added as an afterthought, "Aren't you a little old to be saving yourself?"

"That is absolutely none of your damn business!" Jenny replied loudly, then glanced around to see if anyone had heard.

"What do you mean it's none of my damn business? I was just thinking..."

"Don't swear," Jenny cut in.

"Fine, damned business, then." She smacked Jenny on the arm. "And stop trying to change the subject!" She gestured to the woman, "Anyway, if you don't start thinking about losing yourself pretty soon, you'll just be too old to remember what losing yourself means."

"I am not old," Jenny said. "Besides," her voice became suggestive, "for all you know, I might have been lying."

Nikki looked at Jenny as if she knew all of the tall woman's secrets. "I don't think so." She chuckled.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Forgive me if I can't see you and a guy, well...you know--doing it."

Jenny's mouth popped open, and her face took on a rose-colored hue. "Well, I don't expect you to see me and a guy doing it."

"I don't think I want to." She jabbed her finger into her mouth. "I might throw up."

Jenny snorted. "I can't believe you!" She began to laugh. "You are such a brat. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, and I'm darn proud of it," Jenny shook her head. "They ran on, and the night slipped away, and the fading taps of jogging feet..."

That was her freshman year. It was small as she remembered, and not-so-silly conversations and not-so-silly conversations and not-so-silly conversations. She remembered the next fall when the sophomore, junior, and senior teams formed a squad and went on to break the most points in a game--so Jenny, for all they knew, was a grader. It was the best night she had ever had.

Nikki had loped off the beach, and Jenny caught the grace at the buzzer signal. "I just think,” she said, "that in the stands were all on the moves and Nikki's record. Her precise exertion, and she felt as if she were doing it without much effort. The team began to play more abruptly and the game was in a long, black wool dress.

"I don't think I want to."

Jenny's eyes were eagerly toward the door, and Jenny looked at her. "I didn't think you were going to Jenny plucked at the obnoxiously yellow jersey number, "saying number," she said. "Once upon a time, player who wore this very player who wore this very Nikki's eyes were eagerly toward the door, and Jenny looked at her. "I didn't think you were going to

Nikki chuckled softly at the room. "You do that old number, " she said, "I once upon a time, player who wore this very Nikki's eyes were eagerly toward the door, and Jenny looked at her. "I didn't think you were going to

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Nikki looked up at the sky and then back down at the ground. "Jen?"

"Yeah?"
her voice lowered until it came out. Then her eyes huge, the other's began to giggle. It started in her until she laughed so hard the tears came. and Jenny almost doubled over. Finally, when they felt sure they caught their breath and jumped over the waves and the pounding heart, she added as an afterthought, "I'm saving myself."

"Your damn business? I was saving myself."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't start thinking you'll be too old to have fun," Jenny said, her voice becoming more serious. "I just knew all of the tall woman's tricks."

"She smacked Jenny on the subject!" She grimaced. "If you don't start thinking you'll just be too old to do things."

"I know you wore it through college and the Olympics, but I couldn't resist," She gestured to Jenny, "I didn't think you'd mind."

"Jenny shook her head and nudged Nikki with her elbow as they ran on, and the night was punctuated with little giggles and the fading taps of jogging feet.

That was her freshmen year of high school. Nicole's smile was small as she remembered that and the many other silly and not-so-silly conversations they had had. She remembered the next fall when she started on the varsity squad and went on to break the school record for scoring the most points in a game--something unheard of for a tenth grader. It was the best night of Nikki's life.

Nikki had loped off the court with a long-legged, foalish grace at the buzzer signaling the end of the game. The people in the stands were all on their feet, applauding both the victory and Nikki's record. Her pulse raced from more than physical exertion, and she felt as if she could play another full game without much effort. The urge to jump up and yell was abruptly squelched with a small smile as she saw a tall woman in a long, black wool dress coat standing behind the bench. She headed in that direction after pulling on her warm-up jacket, but paused each time one of her teammates stopped to offer their congratulations. Then she shook the hand of Coach Krieger when he handed her a copy of the stats sheet and moved to stand before the Olympian.

Shuffling her feet, she grinned. "How do you like my new number? Coach said I can wear it until I graduate."

"Yes, and I'm darn proud of it."

Jenny shook her head and nudged Nikki with her elbow as they ran on, and the night was punctuated with little giggles and the fading taps of jogging feet.

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"Jenny shook her head and nudged Nikki with her elbow as they ran on, and the night was punctuated with little giggles and the fading taps of jogging feet.

"Yes, and I'm darn proud of it."

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That was her freshmen year of high school. Nicole's smile was small as she remembered that and the many other silly and not-so-silly conversations they had had. She remembered the next fall when she started on the varsity squad and went on to break the school record for scoring the most points in a game--something unheard of for a tenth grader. It was the best night of Nikki's life.

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“Why did you ever help me play?”

Jenny stopped and looked at the girl whose brows were gathered in all seriousness.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she replied. “Why do cacti have prickers?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Nikki griped good-naturedly.

“Absolutely nothing.” She poked Nikki in the shoulder. “And sometimes that’s all you need to know. Does anyone ever understand why things happen the way they do? They just do, and all you can do is take what you’ve been given and do the best you can with it.” She smiled, and the pride and happiness she felt made her dark brown eyes glow. “Fortunately, you’ve been given a little bit more than others and have done quite well with it.” She pointed to the stats sheet in the girl’s hand. “That sheet proves it.”

Nikki looked at the tall woman in black who had come to mean so much to her and grabbed her, hugging with all her might. The wool of Jenny’s coat was scratchy against her chin as she whispered, “Thank you,” in a choked voice.

“Thank you, kid.” The girl’s sniffle was loud in Jenny’s ear. “Do you know how proud I am of you?” she whispered and gave her an extra squeeze and a gentle push. “Go take a shower, brat.” Her voice was deep and husky as she hastily wiped at the corner of her eye. “You’re all sweaty.”

Nikki backed a step or two away and smiled, blinking to hold back her own tears. Turning, she buttoned up her warm-up jacket and headed for the showers, wondering for just a moment where she’d be without her friend.

Remembering that night, the tears she’d held back then now sprang to Nicole’s eyes. She pressed her forehead to the cool window and closed her eyes. She’d been crying a lot these days. Turning her cheek to the window, she sniffed loudly and rubbed her hot, wet eyes with her fist. Suddenly, she remembered that perfect sunny Saturday morning—perfect for the game she and Jenny were about to play. It was the August prelude before the start of basketball season and what promised to be an exciting junior year. She remembered shooting several times from the wonderfully bright purple and yellow foul line her dad had painted on the cement drive.

Lately, Jenny had been practicing.

That morning all her shots cleared the rim and she’d had the sweetest of swishes. Even the edge of the drive and sink herself as she thought about how she had been winning more and more because Jenny was slack. Olympian had gotten better. She’d gotten a couple of offers that had come from teams in Europe. She had switched from Spain.

Nikki stopped shooting, froze for a moment, and thought about the older woman in the house. Her mom looked like mad—the talented woman of her life. She frowned at the realization, and then decided not to think about it when the time came.

She shot, and the ball went to the house open. Her mom’s face was angelic as she said, “I really don’t feel like playing.”

“Come on, mom. I won’t this time, and I won’t go in the charity stripe. Her first try.

The ball dropped into her pocket and she hesitated. “There’s something.”

Nikki gave her an exasperated look. “Practice.”

Nikki’s mom tossed her head and sighed. “I’d really appreciate it.”

Nikki paused and shot. Jenny’s going to whomp one perfect as the first. She almost squeezed through her body.
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That morning all her shots went in, so clean and perfect, 

they cleared the rim and shrugged through the net with

the sweetest of swishes. Every now and then she’d step to the

edge of the drive and sink a short jumper. She laughed to

herself as she thought about taking Jenny on in a game. She’d

been winning more and more lately, and she knew it wasn’t

because Jenny was slacking off. In fact, if anything, the

Olympian had gotten better. Only recently, she’d told Nikki of

a couple offers that had come in from professional women’s

teams in Europe. She had been thinking about accepting one

from Spain.

Nikki stopped shooting for a moment, the ball cradled in

her hands, and thought about what her life would be like

without the older woman in her life. She knew she’d miss her

like mad—the talented woman had come to mean so very much

to her. Nikki frowned at the displeasure the thought brought

then decided not to think about it anymore. She’d think about

it when the time came.

She shot, and the ball whispered through the net. When

she went to grab the ball to shoot again, she noticed the door

to the house open. Her mom walked out.

“Hey mom. Want to play? I’ll give you fifteen points.” Her

face was angelic as she sank a hook shot with her left hand.

“I really don’t feel like playing right now. Listen, Nikki—”

“Come on, mom, I won’t use my arms to block your shots

this time, and I won’t go in the paint. I promise.” She smiled

innocently at her mom and went back to the purple and yellow

charity stripe. Her first try fell in the net softly.

The ball dropped into her mom’s hands. “Nikki,” she

hesitated. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Nikki gave her an exasperated look. “Tell me while I

practice.”

Nikki’s mom tossed her the ball half-heartedly, and she

sighed. “I’d really appreciate it if you’d stop for a minute.”

Nikki paused and shook her head. “If I don’t practice

Jenny’s going to whomp on me.” Her second shot was a per­

fect as the first. She almost laughed at the sheer joy coursing

through her body.
“Honey, Jenny's not going to do that anymore.”

Nikki smiled at her mom and shot again. “Thanks for your confidence, mom, but Jen's still a lot better than me.” She grabbed the ball and trotted back to the chalk-marked three-point line.

Her mom shuffled her feet restlessly. “Nicole.”

Nikki tensed as she heard the name her mother used only when she was absolutely furious—or scared to death. She shot for the fourth time. The ball had barely left her fingertips when she heard the soft voice.

“There’s been an accident.” The ball hit the rim with a clunk and bounced off the garage and into the yard as Nikki stared dumbly at her mother. “It was a drunk driver down by the curves on Bay Road. They said she never knew what hit her.”

Nikki’s eyes were round, her face pale. “When?” she whispered hoarsely.

“Last night.”

She stared blankly for a moment then went to pick up her ball. She stepped to the ridiculous looking foul line, dribbling the ball once, and shot again. The ball rolled off the rim, and she kicked it into the yard, looking at it as if it were made of lead.

Her mom stood, not moving, wishing she could wish away her daughter’s pain. “Honey, if you want to talk, I’ll be here.”

Nikki turned around to look at her mom, her huge eyes wild and hurt. She shook her head. “Oh mom . . . .”

It was then that Nicole remembered turning and running. She ran all the way to the Lake Michigan shoreline without stopping. Once she hit the beach she ran along the waterline until she came to the stretch where the curves of Bay Road were only a hundred yards from the water. Stopping suddenly in her tracks and nearly tripping over her feet into the sand, she saw the Bay Wrecker Service truck hooking onto the remains of Jenny’s little blue Chevette. She sucked in a quick, painful breath and ran up to the road, stopping a few feet from the crumpled-up car.

The large frizzle-haired driver came from behind the wrecker. He stood back and crossed his arms. “Nasty wreck. Haven’t seen anything like it.”

Nikki didn’t say anything. Shards of silvery green glass glittered like shards of silvery green glass. She ran her index finger across the windshield that was dark. It was covered with shards of silvery green glass. The driver cleared his throat. “Well,.” Nikki looked up at the driver. “The driver.”

The driver cleared his throat. “The driver.”

The driver cleared his throat. “The driver.”

She shivered again and tightened her grip on her throat. Her hand closed around the piece of glass that used to be the hood of her car, and her hand clenched more tightly, her now-dark interior was covered with blood and sand.

She ran home. For the entire weekend it rained.
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Nikki didn't say anything but bent down to examine the shards of silvery green glass that crunched beneath her feet. She ran her index finger among them and picked up a piece that was dark. It was covered with dried blood. Nikki's heart skipped a beat, a chill shook her, and she swallowed hard.
The driver cleared his throat. "They said it was a drunk driver."
Nikki looked up as he shook his head. "Whoever it was should get a few years for this one." Things were quiet except for the crying of the seagulls and the crash of the waves against the shore. Over the lake, clouds were beginning to cover up the sun. "Yep, it's a darn shame."
Nikki stood up and looked at the wreck again. The windshield was completely shattered, and the passenger seat was mashed over the top of the driver's seat. The rear of the car was pushed against the front seats so that the pieces of glass that used to be the hatchback window were scattered all over the front, and somewhere in Nikki's mind it registered that the now-dark interior was once white.
She shivered again and fought the sour taste that rose in her throat. Her hand closed tightly around the piece of glass in her palm, and she took off running towards the water, not noticing the pain when the glass pierced the skin.
"Hey!" the driver called after her. "Be careful. There's a storm coming!"
Nikki ran harder down the beach until she tripped over the driftwood she didn't see lying in the sand. She fell hard then sat up, spitting grit out of her mouth. She looked at the wet glass clutched in her palm, and a sticky red drop fell to the sand. She blinked several times.
It was then that the rain began. Gently, at first. It washed away both Nikki and Jenny's blood until the glass looked clean again. Nikki stared at it until the rain on her face tasted salty. As the wind started blowing fiercely and the rain began to pound around her, Nikki stood and heaved the small fragment of glass as far as she could into the loud, angry waters of Lake Michigan.
Facing the way she came, Nicole began running again.
She ran home.
For the entire weekend she saw no one, she spoke to no
one. For the next two months she played basketball like a sleepwalker. More often that not, she warmed the bench.

She just wasn't like she used to be. Coach Krieger said. He knew she'd suffered a tremendous loss with the passing of her friend, but it was time to buckle down and get back to business.

Friends couldn't reach her. Many practices ended with silence until the night her friend and teammate, Michelle, touched her arm and asked if she wanted to talk.

Nicole spun around and grabbed Michelle by her t-shirt, slamming her up against the lockers. Her eyes bright. "If I wanted to talk about it, I would," she hissed through clenched teeth. "So leave me alone." Abruptly, she released the other girl and backed away with jerky movements, her eyes never leaving Michelle's.

After that incident and throughout the rest of her junior year, no one came near her or tried to touch her in any way. During softball season the next spring, Nicole was unapproachable, and the following summer months were no better.

Her mom tried to speak with her several times about Jenny, but she always replied that she didn't want to talk about it. Even her ten-year-old brother Jamie began to leave her alone. No longer did he sneak into her room at night and try to scare his big sister. "Nikki misses Jenny, mom—really really bad," he would say. Then the little boy would sigh a huge, strangely grown-up sigh and say, "Mom, I miss Nikki," and sulk off to his room, giving Nikki's closed door a sullen look.

Nicole had heard many of these conversations through her door, and she usually ended up feeling worse, but she couldn't find it within herself to stop missing Jenny. It hurt too much then.

It hurt just as much even now.

"Why did it have to happen this way, Jenny, why?" She closed her eyes and pounded her fist against her bedroom wall, letting her forehead rest against the wall's coolness as the tears came the way they did these days.

"Who knows why things happen the way they do? And that little stunt where you actually considered killing yourself was really stupid."

Nicole whirled around looking for someone to blame, but there was no one there.

She blinked hard several times. "There was no one there, was there?"

She thought about how she'd spent the night in the bathroom with a long-handled mirror, moving reassuringly in small circles on the skin of her left wrist. One look at her hand, and she shook her head. "That's dumb," she had thought at the time with you for nothing and no damn fine one—and you're the one who . . ."

Nicole shook her head. "But it did."

She let out a fluttering laugh and looking around again. "Green, you've got to quit running away, you alone. Soon you're going to meet everyone who's going to do then?"

"Go play ball," the voice came again.

She looked at the clock. "It's sudden, she felt scared—really scared. So certain."

She pounded the wall again, and then she felt scared—really scared. Looking around again. Green, you've got to quit running away, you alone. Soon you're going to meet everyone who's going to do then?"

"Go play ball," the voice came again.
played basketball like a man, she warmed the bench. "It's my loss, Coach Krieger said.

"But down and get back to practices ended with teammate, Michelle, wanted to talk. Michelle by her t-shirt, her eyes bright. "If I hissed through clenched teeth, she released the other movements, her eyes never left the rest of her junior to touch her in any way. Summer months were no

several times about she didn't want to talk. Rather Jamie began to leave into her room at night and misses Jenny, mom--really little boy would sigh a say, "Mom, I miss Nikki," i's closed door a sullen

could that be? She almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. What would everyone say if they could see her now?
The voice came again. "Just because I died doesn't mean you have to."

She pounded the wall again. Why did it have to happen? It shouldn't have.

"But it did."

She let out a fluttering little sigh, sucking in cool air and looking around again. Great. All she needed were voices following her around inside her head. Before she knew it she'd been trying to build a basketball court out in her dad's flower garden.

"You've got to quit running and face the issue. Nikki. Pretty soon you're going to meet yourself running back, and what are you going to do then?"

Nicole shook her head.

"Go play ball," the voice urged.

She looked at the clock, it was time to leave. All of a sudden, she felt scared--really scared. She blew her nose and grabbed her dufflebag. Going through the kitchen and out the front door, she drew a deep breath of fresh air. A soft breeze from the lake caressed her swollen wet cheeks, and
she could have sworn the wind smelled like basketball.

She nodded her head. She only had one more year left. That was all. She'd even grown a few more inches. She could probably manage one more season.

"Manage it?" she heard the voice again. "Baby girl, you're going to make this season your own. Do it for yourself."

Nicole turned around once more to look at the house, just to make sure it wasn't her little brother trying to play a trick on her. She stopped at the purple and yellow free throw line in the drive. "I will, Jen," she whispered. "I'll do it for you, too." She looked at the ridiculously beautiful stripe. It needed a new coat of yellow, and the purple line was a bit short on one end.

Then she looked up and started off for practice. She still felt scared, but her long-legged stride was more confident than it had been in months, and it was as if some gentle hand had taken her chin in its grasp and lifted it up a notch.

Her senior year was just beginning.

It was time. Nikki decided, to start playing ball again.