

A Pair for the Ages

The answer to six months of disappointment was staring me in the face; still I wanted to ignore what seemed impossible. Some things you do without thinking, and tying a shoe is one of them.

The euphoria from solving a cold case can justify a mountain of frustration. I moved away from my home state of Alaska fourteen years ago to be nearer family. After ten years on the St. Louis police force, bouncing from one emergency to the next, I resigned to become a private investigator. Two years ago, I shifted my PI practice from the mundane cases to those requiring a prescription for recurring headaches.

Angela Nicole Talbot's disappearance, five years and three months ago, made headlines in the L.A. Times. No body, no evidence of foul play – nothing. A prominent detective who had quit the case stated that “she must have stepped into a galactic transporter”.

Throughout high school, the attractive dead-ringer twin sisters, Angela and Antika, were involved in extra-curricular activities. Angela, an under-study for Antika's prominent role in Neil Simon's *Rumors*, filled in when her sister suddenly became ill. Only when the performance was over did everyone, including the director, learn the actress was Angela.

Antika, now known by her middle name – Nicole, the same as her twin's – contacted me six months ago, and offered me \$25,000 to find her sister, whom she believed was alive. All but \$3000 of my fee was contingent upon solving the case, which meant finding Angela, her body or

undeniable evidence of her death. Perhaps my ego deserved a comeuppance for the case remained as cold as an iceberg.

Nicole stated she moved to St Louis five years ago, married a year later, birthed a daughter three years ago and has been working the last two. Something for each year, I noted, and this year it was the search for Angela. When I asked ‘why St. Louis’ she told me Angela had often talked about this city.

When Nicole showed me pictures of Angela, albeit over five years old, I quickly realized that they were the epitome of twins – an exact physical copy. No wonder their high school play director was fooled. I continued my Alaskan upbringing; when you enter, take off your shoes. When Nicole re-tied her shoe laces upon leaving I observed that she tied a double loop knot exactly as I did. We had a good laugh about that.

For the first three months, Nicole would stop once a week to check on my progress, which was nil. Assuming Angela had the same affection for her twin, I dismissed the possibility of a runaway. A gregarious, attractive woman like Angela wouldn’t voluntarily recluse herself. If she were alive and free, Nicole would know. However, that alone would nullify her need to engage me. What gives?

Friday, I will hand her a written resignation, and accept the \$3000. My record will be no better than that L.A. detective’s and my ego will take a beating.

I hate failure. My eyes were downcast as she walked across the floor toward my desk. I noticed that she hadn’t taken off her shoes. I was about to say something when she remembered, bent over and unlaced one. I told her don’t bother, so she re-tied the shoe. She grabbed the loop

in her right hand for the double tie, and went *under* the other loop, not over as I did. Seemingly, not a big deal except that people habitually tie their shoes the same way *every* time.

Only one explanation fit, absurd as it seemed.

From my small office refrigerator, I pulled out a bottle of White Zinfandel and filled two stemmed goblets. Grasping it low, I placed hers on the coffee table.

“Are we ending this today?” she asked.

“To the contrary,” I replied. “Let’s toast the finding of an important clue.” I watched as she gripped the goblet in her right hand, and then clinked the rim of my extended glass. One big swallow and then she set the goblet on a coaster. *Perfect.*

“What is it?” she demanded.

“Can’t tell you today. I’m working on a confirmation,” I truthfully responded.

“I didn’t pay you to keep secrets from me!”

“Ah, but you haven’t paid me anything yet. Listen, I don’t want to give you false hope. Can you come back next week?”

”I’m in training next Friday – remember?” A long pause. *Perhaps she was accessing her Internet calendar telepathically.*

“Oh, but there’s a break next week. So, sure.”

“If my hunch pans out, we can finish off the bottle.” She left wearing a puzzled expression.

I slipped on a pair of light vinyl gloves and packaged her glass. Several hours later the goblet was queued up at a forensic lab, which I had dealt with repeatedly as an officer, awaiting dusting for prints. However, only half of my work was done. Whether the other half could be done next week was beyond my control but based on her delayed response today, I was optimistic. Regardless, I'd need another 'excuse' for our next session.

As the week rolled by, once again I pondered the 'why'. Ego couldn't drive this madness – could it? Something must not be perfect or the boat wouldn't be rocked. Motives tumbled through my tired brain but nothing stuck.

As usual, Nicole arrived on time, sporting a cheerful disposition. She took off her shoes without prompting. After a few minutes of small talk, she said, "Tell me about your discovery and where we now stand. Is the news good, or bad?"

"Well, only you can judge that," I said. "However, I don't yet have everything I need. But I feel optimistic that by next Friday I can close this case." *Still I hadn't lied.*

"Why are you being so vague? If you have found Angela, tell me now!"

"I only know that she *is* alive – but not where."

"How do you know that without knowing where she is?" Nicole asked.

"By the evidence I've collected. Odd as it may seem, telling you any more today might make it impossible to learn the 'where'." I hoped this was hazy enough so she wouldn't figure out my intentions. I decided to take back control.

“Let’s have another toast to our upcoming success. If you aren’t satisfied that I have completed my work when you leave next Friday, I will resign from this case, and you owe me nothing.” *Did I really just say that?* I poured two glasses of wine.

“You PI’s are all alike. Lots of huffing and nothing else. This will be our last ‘toast’, then next week *you* will be toast!” She laughed at her own quip, took the goblet of wine, tapped my extended glass and drained hers. I was betting that this was the last time I’d see her laugh. She wasn’t getting off scot-free, or even for three thousand – but the full twenty-five G’s. When she got up to leave, I accompanied her to the door, eager to see what I needed to back my premise. Her fingers nimbly tied the laces exactly the way I did!

Unbelievably, the lab results weren’t conclusive. According to Geri Dickerson, the lab’s forensic consultant, the differences were minor. The probability they were from the same woman was high. My heart sank.

Several days later, Geri surprised me with a call. I detected excitement overriding her usual professional demeanor. Under closer examination, she had found ‘indications’ that the second Nicole’s prints had been altered. However, she couldn’t assure me that this would stand up in court. I was willing to gamble that whatever the outcome, the resolution wouldn’t be through a court.

During the next two days, I thought long and hard about what would be my best strategy. What I needed to discover is where the ‘other’ Nicole resides. The ‘why’ of this whole complicated charade was ferociously gnawing on me, however, I wasn’t about to venture a guess – yet.

Telephone conversations and emails can be traced so I figure they are meeting, and my guess is the other's abode. I have the married Nicole's home address, so that's where I'll start. Tail her until she meets with her twin. Take time-stamped videos of them coming and going.

Only after telling my sister, Laurie, that I need help solving a nagging case did she agree to be my chauffeur. I also wanted her to get the second Nicole to come out for the final photo shoot, after the first one left. I figured the Nicoles had to meet during the husband's working hours but while the kiddo was with a sitter; and that's how it turned out.

Nicole left home at 2pm driving a white Kia, stopped at a mall and then continued west to a condo plaza. We stopped a block away where I set my lens on zoom and followed her all the way into an empty double car garage. She parked in the left bay. Less than twenty minutes later, another Kia driven by the other Nicole pulled up to the rising garage door and parked in the right bay. *Two Nicole's, each with identical cars!* The urge to knock on the door was tantalizing but I fought it off.

An hour later, I videoed one of the Nicoles, dressed in the first one's clothes, leaving the condo in the left-most Kia. Could they be switching places at 'home' also? My thoughts turned to the husband – whose husband?

A few minutes later, Laurie dropped a give-away necklace on the sidewalk near Nicole's door, and then knocked. When the remaining Nicole emerged to look at the necklace, I got a zoomed-in video. She shook her head and went back inside, none the wiser. Laurie settled for a dinner at the most expensive place in town.

I had the fingerprint documents and the photos laid out under a poster board on my desk when Nicole arrived. She skipped the small talk and demanded I present my evidence. Just as well start out with the bombshell and see where the debris lands.

“Would you call your sister and ask her to come over?” I said.

“What kind of a joke is this?” she indignantly replied.

I didn’t answer but instead asked another question.

“Are you Antika Nicole or Angela Nicole?”

“If you don’t start talking sense, I’m going to fire you!”

“The time for games is over. You hired me to find her and I have.” I lifted off the poster board. “The fingerprints off the wine goblet last week are different from those the week before.” I looked deeply into her eyes, which resembled a deer’s flooded by headlights. Silence.

“Okay, here are pictures, extracted from a video of you and your sister coming and leaving the condo: unit 3A at 4810 Wilson Avenue. An hour for a little chat and a change of clothes, then off in the other car, probably headed home to hubby.”

Her chin dropped, her eyes closed and then she softly said, “How did you find out?”

“Wasn’t from the fingerprints, but from watching you and her tie your shoe laces.”

“There is no difference,” she said, “We each tie a shoe clerk’s knot.”

“Yes, but it’s the *way* you tie it that differs. Are you the one who laughed with me at the end of the first day when I said ‘that’s exactly how I tie my laces’?”

“Yes ... how does Angela tie her’s?”

Admission!

“On the double bow she starts by going *under* the other loop with her right hand. You go *over* just like I do.”

“Oh, God ... now what?”

“Antika, let’s get together with Angela and go over your options. You may have a number of bureaucratic problems that include marriage, custody, employment, licenses, charge cards – just to name a few. Who’s married to the husband? Does he know?”

“He’s *our* husband! If Greg knows, he hasn’t let on.”

Incredible! How could they be *that* much alike in those *other* ways? Perhaps he’s playing a game of his own. Living in a dream world – two wives without a worry of quarrels or polygamy, or supporting more than one. I wondered if I could do that – living on the edge.

“Even after I saw what was going on, I couldn’t figure out the ‘why’.”

“Angela can’t have a baby – hysterectomy after a miscarriage – so we came up with this solution. Being good actresses, we thought we could fool the world forever. This whole thing takes a lot of precision. It’s an every day performance, but what a rush!”

That wasn’t an explanation that I had considered. My sentiment softened.

“Did Angela consider adopting a child?”

“Yes. But only initially. She wanted the genetics to be ours *so* badly.”

“Why put this all in jeopardy by hiring a PI?”

“Part of the game! Oh, you’re not the first! We’ve fooled them all ... two before you, and before that, the stuffy L.A. detective. We were so confident in our skills and preparation that we didn’t consider being ‘outed’, so to speak. Previously, all but a few hundred dollars were contingent upon resolving Angela’s disappearance. You were our grand finale.”

“Hmm ... who is *legally* married to Greg?”

“Why, Nicole, of course!” Antika said, sounding disappointed with my question. “How much do you want to forget the whole thing?”

Twenty-five grand would be a good start. However, the most intriguing story of the century was lighting up my gray cells.

“I’d like to discuss this, and where it leads, together with both of you. We’ll go over the problems and how the options may impact your lives.”

“Why can’t I just pay you the three-thousand now, and you move on to your next case?”

“Nicole ... Antika ... it’s 25 grand ... did I not succeed in finding Angela?”

“We don’t have it! Not even ten-thousand.”

She sat down, put her hands over her face and sobbed. *Was this for real, or just another act?* I sat there quietly, awaiting her next move. I suspected she wanted consolation, and then for me to offer her leniency. As the seconds passed, I fought the urge to do just that. Finally her head came up. I slid a tissue box across the desk and watched while she dried her face.

“Would you work for us? Help us keep our secret. No one is being hurt. Greg and our child are happy. Our boss has given us a raise. We are well-liked in the neighborhood. Please ... please ... consider this request.”

“You can’t pay me now so how can you continue to employ me?”

Once again, she hung her head, and then she wiped away more tears.

“Are you married or committed to anyone,” she unexpectedly asked.

“No.” *Could she really be going where this seemed to point?*

“We’ll sell the condo, pay you off and one of us becomes your ‘wife’!”

If three can play, why not four?

“Which one?”

“Why, Nicole, of course!”