

In for a Penny

I was sweating in my box-like rented office like a politician testifying under oath. It was August, and despite my best attempts to get my desk fan to work by jabbing a screwdriver into the electrical parts, the blades refused to turn. In my desk drawer was a bottle of bourbon. I could trade some of it for ice from the accountant down the hall, but I wasn't that desperate. Yet.

I was still deep in that mental debate when a feminine voice waltzed across the room and cut in on my reverie.

"Hello," was what I thought I said but the word came out like the last gurgles of a coffee maker. There are women who can make a lumberjack gnaw through a redwood, and I was looking at one.

"Are you private investigator McMurtry?" she twirled.

My name is on the door and the office is big enough to hold me, a desk, a guest chair and a filing cabinet that doubles as a coat rack. I swallowed my sarcasm and nodded.

Penny was a meandering conversationalist. I didn't have anywhere to be, so I let her spill her life story. It was an idyllic childhood. Her parents sent her to Singapore when she was seven so she could work in a T-shirt factory. At 12, they moved her to Okinawa where she learned martial arts from an old Japanese guy. At 16 it was on to India, where they arranged a marriage. She was divorced at 18 because her husband didn't want to join her in the seven-year biosphere experiment her parents had signed her up for.

"Sounds swell," I said. "Any regrets?"

"I never learned to carry a jug of water from the river on my head," she said.

"Everyone needs a marketable skill," I said "So why do you want to engage the services of a private investigator?"

"Oh," she said, as if the thought of hiring a detective had just occurred to her. "I want to find my twin sister, Paige. I tried using the internet to search for her but I kept getting 'Error 404, Paige not found.'"

OK, so she wasn't tech savvy.

"Does Paige have a last name?"

"Of course. Well, she used to," she said.

I looked at her like a dog staring at a can opener.

"I mean, I'm not sure what it is now. It used to be the same as mine."

I waited. She smiled and waited. I broke first.

“And your last name is ... “

“Pierre,” she said. I tried to wrap my mind around the perverse parents of Penny and Paige Pierre.

I looked at the remnants of my coffee and the little torn paper next to it. “Pierre like the Pierre sugar packets?”

She giggled. She actually giggled. “Like the Pierre Sugar Corporation,” she said. “My parents are rich. Well, they were rich until they died. Now I’m half rich and Paige is half rich.”

I’m not Stephen Hawking but I do know that half of any figure with a lot of zeroes behind it is still a figure with a lot of zeroes behind it.

“Sweet,” I said, and then immediately regretted it. But my mind was already starting to envision a transmission repair for my Toyota coming out of the payment for this job. And then, dammit, my better angel made an appearance. “Don’t you have a lawyer who can tell you where she is?”

Penny pouted pointedly. “That meanie won’t tell me anything. He just keeps sending me checks.”

I poked my better angel in the eye with the screwdriver and quoted her an exorbitant price, plus expenses. She signed a contract. And then Penny Pierre floated out of the office on a cushion of wealthy privilege.

I took a drink to celebrate, then got to work. It took eight minutes on Google to crack the case. Yeah, I timed it. I searched the society registers for Paige nee Pierre and found a wedding announcement. For a beautiful rich girl, she had married well. From there it was a hop, skip and a dark web jump to an address. It was the kind of address where the cops pull you over for driving a Toyota and then Taser you through your open window.

Screw the Toyota. I leased a Porsche and added it to my expenses.

I pattered up to the Paige Pierre Pendergast household and rang the bell. You could have knocked me over with a sugar cube when she answered the door herself.

After I explained who I was, she invited me in and browbeat me into having a bourbon with the deftly logical argument: Would you like a drink?

A few sips later, I laid out my purpose and Paige Pierre Pendergast went pale.

“You simply can’t tell Penny where I am,” she said. My curiosity was piqued. And then she offered to cut me a check for an amount that slapped my curiosity around like a punk and stuffed it into a trunk alongside my gagged and bound better angel.

For one month I shuttled back and forth. I told Penny that Paige kept moving and changing her name. I told Paige that Penny was closing in and I had to throw her off the trail. They kept writing checks.

OK, maybe you think I’m a bastard. Sometimes I do too. Sometimes I wonder why one rich sister wants desperately to find the other and the other rich sister desperately doesn’t want to be found.

And then I sit back on the porch of my new vineyard in the south of France, open a bottle of Penny red or Paige white depending on my mood, and all those feelings just swim away.

Then I wonder if naming my vintages Pierre wasn’t a bit too cheeky. But who would buy a wine called McMurtry?