

## STICKY FINGERS

by

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One morning during spring break, Jaybird announced, “Police are at Mizz Pink’s house.”

Sassy, nine, scooted between her hefty 12-year-old brother and the arm of the couch to look out the window behind them.

Jaybird said, “I’m seein’ what’s up.”

Sassy followed him closely out the door, across their backyard, and into the next.

A policeman walked by them as if they were invisible.

“Will you look at that?” Jaybird asked nobody-in-particular.

“Watermelons!” Sassy squealed.

“Just the rinds.” Jaybird pushed one over with his toe. “Imagine ole Mizz Pink havin’ a watermelon party in the backyard. But it’s not time for watermelons yet.”

Sassy wrinkled her nose at the flies already gettin’ down to their own picnic.

Just then, the officer noticed them and hollered, “You kids make yourselves useful and dump those things!”

Jaybird muttered, “Maybe we’ll find out something if we do what he says.” He picked up a rind and chunked it in Mrs. Pinkerton’s burn barrel.

Sassy dragged one through the short grass, got distracted swatting flies, and Jaybird had to finish the job himself—six halves in all.

Wiping his sticky palms on his jeans, he stepped up to the lady officer who’d just come out the back door. He asked politely, “What’s up?”

“Looks to be nothin’, boy. What’s it to you?”

“Mizz Pink’s a good friend.”

Sassy stood slightly behind her brother and said shyly, “She give us candy.”

Jaybird groaned and looked over his shoulder. “Sass, that hard candy’s no good.” To the lady officer, he said, “We visit Mizz Pink mostly for the ice cream.”

“Mostly?”

Jaybird looked all around and spoke to the air. “Well, she can tell a good story.”

The woman grinned at him. “I’m Officer Moseley. What’s your name, boy?”

“Jaybird Jones.”

“Jaybird?” She laughed. “How’d you get a nickname like that?”

Sassy squealed, “He ran outside naked as a jaybird!”

“Sass!”

“Mama said.”

Jaybird scowled. “You don’t have to tell everybody.” Staring into space, he explained to the lady officer, “I was smaller than Sassy then.”

The woman smiled down at the small girl. “Are you as sassy as your name, child?”

The girl giggled and replied, “Sassy’s short for Sassafra.”

Jaybird peered through the open back door into the kitchen. “Say, where’s Mizz Pink?”

“Emergency room. Nothing serious, just a bump on her head where she fell down. She can’t remember what happened. Her daughter called us to make sure there hadn’t been a robbery. No sign of it.”

The other officer shut and locked the back door.

“What about the watermelon rinds?” Jaybird asked.

“What about ‘em?” The woman walked off.

Jaybird said to nobody-in-particular, “Somethin’ ain’t right.”

They watched the police car drive off. Jaybird reached behind a large nandina bush growing near the back door and slipped a key off the finishing nail tacked to the house.

Sassy whispered, “Mizz Pink say that’s for emergencies. This an emergency?”

Jaybird shrugged. “If Mizz Pink got robbed, it is.”

“She fell.”

“After eating three old watermelons all by herself?”

Sassy giggled.

Jaybird led the way into the kitchen, marched straight down the hall, and crawled under Mrs. Pinkerton’s bed.

“Whatchya doin’?” Sassy asked.

Jaybird scooted out with a fistful of hundred-dollar bills.

Sassy’s eyes were round as an owl’s.

Jaybird announced, “Maybe she wasn’t robbed after all—unless the thief was too dumb to look under an old lady’s mattress.”

Sassy gazed at her brother in admiration. “You gonna keep all that money?” she asked.

“You crazy?” He dived under the bed again and came up empty-handed. “If we take her money, how’s Mizz Pink gonna buy us ice cream? Let’s get outa here.”

In the kitchen, Sassy said, “I got sticky fingers.” She held out her palms. They were slimy pink.

“What you been into, girl?” Jaybird pulled her by the arm to the sink and turned on the faucet. “Yuk! I got that goop on my elbow,” he said, noticing pink slime on the edge of the sink. His eyes roved the room. “Watermelon juice—all over everything!” His gaze froze on the freezer. The lid wasn’t shut all the way. Holding it up, he peered inside. Empty—or was it? Something shiny pink lay in the far corner.

“Come here, Sass.” He propped the lid up with a broomstick. “I’ll hold your feet and lower you down so you can get whatever-it-is.”

“I can climb in by myself.”

“No, you might get trapped. I’ll hold you. Do as I say.”

A few minutes later, Sassy’s feet landed on the kitchen floor, and her fist guarded the secret of the freezer. Jaybird cleaned his elbow and Sassy’s hands with a wet paper towel. Then he wiped clean the coin Sassy had lifted from the freezer.

Sassy whined, “Nothing but a quarter.”

Jaybird flipped the coin in his palm. “Mizz Pink told us a story once about old coins. They’re worth a lot of money if they’re really really old.”

“Is this one really really old?”

Jaybird nodded. “Eighteen forty-six,” he read as his fingers traced the numbers. “It’s older than the Emancipation Proclamation, even older than the California Gold Rush.” He stared at it reverently. “I like reading history, but here I got a piece of it right in my hand.”

Sassy asked, "What's it worth?"

"Dunno yet. Bet I can find out."

They locked the door, replaced the hidden key, and raced home.

Jaybird picked up the phone book and turned to the back.

Sassy asked, "Whatcha doin'?"

"Lookin' up coin dealers." He punched in the numbers. He sat up straight and tried to keep his voice from slipping and sliding while he spoke. "I've got this coin says 1846, and I'd like to know what it's worth." He listened to the voice at the other end of the line and replied, "On the front, there's this woman with a shield, and it says Liberty, and it's got stars around the edge. And on the back's this eagle with a shield, and it says Half Dol." After a second, he said, "D-O-L-Period."

Jaybird whispered to Sassy, "He's looking it up." Then Jaybird whistled and said, "No kidding! Say, anybody try to sell you sticky coins lately?" He frowned and said, "No, I'm not joking. Thanks." He hung up.

Sassy hit her brother's arm and said, "How much?"

"Two—maybe three thousand dollars." Jaybird felt his palm go wet beneath the coin.

Sassy squealed, "We're rich!"

Jaybird frowned. "Wait a minute, Sass."

"We found it together. I got it out of the freezer myself. You better split it with me."

She glared at him, her jaw jutting defiantly.

Jaybird shook his finger in her face and scolded, "It's a good thing Mama's still at work and can't hear you talk like that."

"Mama don't have to know. Mizz Pink don't have to know. Nobody has to know."

Jaybird rubbed his fingers over the coin affectionately. “I’d know,” he said quietly. “God would know.” He picked up the phone book again. “The coin doesn’t belong to us. Anyway, I’ve got an idea how we can catch us a thief.”

Sassy hung her head and muttered, “I’ll never get a President Barbie.”

Jaybird made another phone call. “Have you bought any sticky coins lately—I mean with watermelon juice all over them?”

He hung up and dialed the next number.

Sassy put her hands on her hips and asked, “What are you up to?”

Jaybird explained, “The way it looks to me, Mizz Pink was hiding old coins inside those watermelons in her freezer. Somebody found out and stole ‘em.”

Sassy put her forefinger on her chin and replied, “Ahhh.”

“Yessir, sticky with watermelon juice.” Jaybird was quiet a moment. “Great! They belong to Mizz Pink.” He was silent again. “Teen-ager? What’d he look like?” He listened. “That’s Biz! He mows her grass. I’m gonna call the police right away.”

Jaybird hung up and dialed again. While he waited, he whispered, “Sass, what was that lady officer’s name?”

Sassy answered, “Mostly!”

Jaybird grinned. “Officer Moseley, please. My name’s Jaybird Jones. She knows me.”

Officer Moseley answered the phone. “I’m busy, Jaybird. What is it you want?”

“We know who robbed Mizz Pink.” He told her about the freezer, the watermelons, and the coin dealer who bought sticky old money from the boy who mowed Mrs. Pinkerton’s yard.

That afternoon, Mrs. Pinkerton’s daughter brought her home. As soon as the daughter left, Jaybird and Sassy appeared at Mrs. Pinkerton’s back door.

Mrs. Pinkerton called out, “Come on in and have some Rocky Road! I bought some brownies at the bakery, but I can’t eat brownies. Can you?”

Jaybird and Sassy scrambled to the table, their eyes and teeth gleaming with delight.

Mrs. Pinkerton said, “Officer Moseley told me how you kids solved the mystery of my missing money. When Mr. Pinkerton passed, I was afraid his coin collection would get stolen. I was rather proud of my idea to hide the coins inside watermelons and store them in the freezer.”

She shook her head sadly. “If only I hadn’t been sick and missed going to the bank. Biz had the yard mowed before I could tell him I didn’t have his money. I told him I’d get it the next day, but he was angry at having to wait. I gave him a dime out of the freezer. It was worth at least twenty dollars, but he thought I was trying to cheat him. He must’ve seen me putting the watermelon back in the freezer.”

Sassy said, “Did Biz whack you from behind and steal all your coins?”

Mrs. Pinkerton nodded. “I wondered how I could fall forward and get a bump on the *back* of my head. They tell me Biz tried to trade the coins for cash at the bank. The folks at the bank sent him to the coin dealer.”

Mrs. Pinkerton put another brownie and scoop of ice cream in Jaybird’s bowl. “I’m so glad to have the coins back—even more because they were Mr. Pinkerton’s than for their value.” She shook her head slowly. “There was only one coin they didn’t recover...Mr. Pinkerton’s most prized possession...an 1846 half dollar.”

Jaybird fished in his pocket, pulled out the coin, and handed it to Mrs. Pinkerton. “Almost forgot. We found this in the bottom of the freezer.”

“Oh!” squealed Mrs. Pinkerton. “You wonderful children!” She squeezed Sassy against her hip until Sassy’s face turned pale. Then she turned to Jaybird and threw her arms open wide.

Jaybird ducked, saying, “That’s okay.”

Mrs. Pinkerton laughed. “I’ll give you your choice, children,” she said. “Which would you prefer—a coin worth twenty dollars or a twenty-dollar-bill?”

Sassy shouted, “A twenty-dollar-bill!” She whispered, “President Barbie—all mine.”

Jaybird scratched his ear. “I’ll take the coin. I want to start my own collection.”

Mrs. Pinkerton went down the hall and returned with a twenty, a shiny coin, three books, and a box of coin collector’s cards and plastic cases. She handed the twenty to Sassy and the rest to Jaybird.

“Wow, thanks!” Jaybird slipped his new old coin into one of the cases. He read the title of the first book and asked, “What’s numis-numismatics?”

Mrs. Pinkerton answered, “A big word for coin collecting.”

Jaybird thumbed through the pages until he found a picture of the 1846 half dollar. “You know, a coin dealer told me this half dollar is worth two, maybe three, thousand.”

Mrs. Pinkerton wagged her head and murmured, “I never would’ve guessed.” She gazed at Jaybird. “You knew what it was worth...and still, you gave it back to me.”

Jaybird looked around and then spoke to the ceiling. “Money isn’t everything.” He stirred the melting remains of his ice cream and said, “But you ought to find some other hiding place for those hundreds under your mattress.” He popped the last piece of brownie in his mouth and gave Mrs. Pinkerton a knowing smile.

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