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Anybody tries to tell you honesty is the best policy should've talked to Al.

I'm sitting here in the hot seat in the county courthouse waiting for the jury to come back with the verdict. All because of honest Al. Some guys just don't understand. If you can get away with something and nobody gets hurt, I say, why not?

Dammit, why'd Al have to call that Security hotline? It was only a twelve-inch wrench I wanted. So I help myself to a few things now and then, so what? I got some of the best stuff in my workshop that way.

Al knew I'd lifted a few other tools, and made it clear he figured I was going to take that wrench. "C'mon, Bix. You keep doing that stuff, you label all of us that work here 'union mentality,'" he told me. "We can't afford to have that moniker hung on us."

Like I cared about labels. Like he was so much better and smarter than me.

"That won't happen if nobody knows," I said.

"I know about it," Al said. "That's enough."

I thought that'd be the end of it. But it wasn't.

Al called security, told them I was going to steal a damn wrench! Big deal.

Those calls are supposed to be confidential. I'd never have known about it, but my nephew, a clerk in Security, slipped a copy of the tape to me. "Check this out, Unk," he said. "You're gonna be in big trouble." He frowned. "What's the deal? I thought that Al guy was your buddy."

Some buddy all right. Saint Al. I was mad at him before, but now I was madder than hell. I stewed about it all the next day.

Should tell you here that, me, Al and Roscoe work the night shift at the pulp mill. We're in charge of the two biggest vats we fill and leave to soak all shift. Everything's on computers now, so the three of us can handle what used to take five or six guys.

Just before we clock out we start the machinery, sucking the sludge down into swirling blades that cut and grind it into mush to make paper. Like a kitchen blender, only lots bigger. Lots tougher.

All day while I was home cutting the grass and fixing little stuff around the house I thought about Al, and I thought about those vats. Thought about those sucking, swirling blades that could break just about anything into mush.

Including bones.

That night the little shrimp that runs Plant Security pulled me aside. Small guys are always the most annoying, especially when they've got a badge. He came right out and asked me questions about the wrench, which, of course, I showed him since I hadn't taken it. Yet. "Al's just blowin' smoke," I told him, all pleasant-like. "See?" So the matter was closed, as far as Security knew.

But it wasn't closed for me. 'Course I confronted Al when he walked into the plant that night. I was still seething, ready to fight. I shook the tape in his face.

"You know what this could get me? Fired!" I had to yell over the clattering machinery in the vat room.

He just frowned, looking at me like I was something stuck on the bottom of his boot. He started to walk past me toward the locker room.

"I got a family!" I yelled at his back. "Bills to pay. Kids to send to school."

Al stopped and turned around. He shrugged. "So don't take the wrench, no problem. Buy your own. You make enough money." He went on to the break room. He didn't say it out loud, but I could tell he was thinking I made more than I was worth.

I was sweating like a fool there in that hot room, my temper raising right up to the temperature of the pulp vats. Just then Roscoe, the third guy on our shift, came in.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, chewing on a jelly donut. Powdered sugar fell down his chin and onto his coveralls. He brushed it away with a little cloud of dust.

"Look like you got your shorts in a bundle."

Roscoe's not smart, but he likes me. Fact is, he'll do just about anything I ask, no questions. Makes me look good, which a lot of the time, I need.

It came to me then, an idea as seductive as the thought of sex with a dangerous woman. I guess it'd been smoldering in the back of my brain for most of the day. I almost grinned. "Hey, Roscoe. Want to help me give Al a little lesson?"

"What for?" Roscoe stuck a crusty-nailed finger in his mouth and scraped some jelly from his front tooth, frowned, then sucked the sticky goop off his finger with a wet smack. "He make you mad or somethin'?"

"Yeah, or something." I looked over at Vat One, where a ladder was propped against the side. "Let's you and me give Al a swimming lesson."

Roscoe shook his head, grinned and wiped some more jelly off his chin with the sleeve of his shirt. Never saw such a mess from one donut. "Can't swim in that, Bix. It'll suck him right down to the grinders."

I grinned back. "Ain't that the truth. Here." I handed him the wrench--my wrench, the one that caused all this trouble--and told him what to do.

"Really? You serious?" Roscoe frowned. He shook his head. "I never liked Al, 'specially, Bix, but..."

"No buts, Roscoe. "Like the Nike ads say, just do it."

So when Al walked past him, Roscoe whapped him solid on the back of the head with the wrench. The hollow-sounding thud was loud enough to hear over the machinery. Laid him out flat.

Then we struggled his dead weight up the Vat One ladder and pushed him over the edge.

"When we gonna pull him out?" Roscoe asked, grinning. "Shift's almost over."

"We aren't," I said.

"Really?" Roscoe's eyes opened so wide I could see white all around his brown pupils. He wasn't grinning any more. He looked a little sick.

"Really."

It was time to start up the grinder. So I did. One simple little push of a button and Al's body was sucked into the vortex of the swirling pulp.

"Now," I said to Roscoe, who seemed sort of dazed, didn't seem to understand the whole of what had just happened. "You don't say one word, not one, about what happened here tonight. You're the one killed Al with that wrench, sure as the world, and all I did was help you throw him in there so nobody would know what you did. He'll be ground up to little bitty pieces and flushed out with the pulp and that will be the end of it."

Roscoe swallowed hard. He wasn't very happy, but he agreed.

The cops didn't come to the mill until the next night after Al's wife had reported him not coming home. She thought he might have gone fishing for the day right after work and hadn't told her. His pickup was still in the mill's parking lot. Don't know why I hadn't thought about that. His keys would've been in his locker. I should have taken them and his wallet and driven that damn Chevy truck down to the river and pushed it in. It's pretty deep right near the mill, probably they wouldn't have even thought to look there.

Anyway, the cops searched and questioned, searched and questioned. Got the whole mill into the act and of course nobody knew anything. Except Roscoe. Even if anybody else did, they probably wouldn't have admitted it. That's the union mentality Al talked about. Us guys stick together.

I was pretty sure that by this time Al's body would have been nothing but more pulp, and as long as Roscoe kept shut up we'd be in the clear.

But Roscoe just couldn't handle the sight of that wrench we had to keep using. He blubbered the whole story out and that's why I'm sitting here today.

Waiting.

Finally, they're coming from the jury room. Their faces are set in stone. None of them are looking at me.

"What say you?" asks the judge.

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

"Guilty."

I quit listening along about number six. Pretty sure I won't be going back to the pulp mill. Neither will Roscoe.

All I can say is, don't believe everything you're told. If Al hadn't been so damn honest, I'd have my wrench and none of this would have happened.

The End