



SECOND PLACE RECIPIENT

What Stuck With Me

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WESTVIEW HIGH SCHOOL

The summer before junior year. My uncle pulled a few strings and suddenly I was waking up at 6 a.m., throwing on dusty work boots, and riding in the back of a beat-up work truck with guys who'd been doing this kind of labor since before I was born.

It wasn't glamorous work—mostly sweeping sawdust, hauling in heavy boxes of flooring, and trying not to screw up—but there was something kind of satisfying about it. My hands got calloused fast, and at the end of each day, I felt like I'd actually earned the dirt under my fingernails.

One job we did was in this massive house in Del Mar. Picture wide windows, ocean air sneaking through open sliding doors, and rooms big enough to get lost in. It was the kind of place that made you wonder what the owners did for a living.

Midway through the week, one of the guys on our crew, probably late 30s, always joking around, always chewing sunflower seeds—asked me to grab a few extra boxes of planks from the truck. Nothing unusual. I brought them in, dropped them near the stairs, and went back to sweeping.

Later that afternoon, I saw him loading two of those boxes into the bed of his own truck. Real casual. Like he was moving his lunchbox or something. I remember thinking, Wait, those aren't extra. We still have the back rooms to finish.

I didn't say anything. I was sixteen, barely knew what I was doing, and the last thing I wanted was to start drama with a guy twice my size who actually knew how to install flooring. But the

thought followed me around the rest of the day, like a splinter under the skin—small, but sharp.

That weekend, I told my dad what I'd seen. He didn't lecture me. Just looked at me while he stirred his coffee and said, "Would you be okay with someone doing that if it was your name on the truck?"

That stuck.

The next Monday, I told Tyler—the site manager—what I saw. I wasn't trying to get anyone fired. I just couldn't ignore that splinter anymore. Tyler thanked me, didn't make a big scene. But the slacker wasn't on the job the next day. Or the day after that.

The crew got quieter around me after that. Fewer jokes, less small talk. I felt like I'd stepped on something sacred—some unspoken rule about keeping your mouth shut.

But even now, years later, I don't regret it. That summer taught me that integrity doesn't come with applause. Most of the time, it's quiet. It's choosing to speak up when staying silent would be easier. It's doing the right thing even when it costs you comfort, or popularity, or an easy ride.

It's a lesson that's stayed with me—like the glue under my fingernails that took weeks to finally scrub off. Some things just stick.