

Chapter 5

The chapter introduces Pete Wexler, a janitor at Maxton Elder Care, who embodies cruelty and indifference toward the elderly residents. He takes pleasure in secretly tormenting them, particularly those with Alzheimer's, stubbing out cigarettes on their skin and relishing their pain. His disdain is especially directed at Charles Burnside, a resident whose soiled and disheveled state disgusts Pete. The narrative highlights Pete's smug attitude as he avoids responsibility for cleaning up Burnside's mess, leaving it for his coworker Butch Yerxa, who is momentarily absent. Pete's malicious humor and laziness underscore the bleak atmosphere of the facility.

Rebecca Vilas, the administrator's girlfriend, interrupts Pete's thoughts, demanding his attention. She is dressed elegantly, contrasting sharply with Pete's slovenly appearance, and carries an air of authority. Pete resents her but is momentarily distracted by her attractiveness and the expensive ring she wears. Rebecca orders him to the common room for preparations for the upcoming Strawberry Fest! dance, chastising him for smoking in patient areas. Her commanding presence forces Pete to comply, though he remains resentful and suspicious of her motives.

Meanwhile, Charles Burnside undergoes a startling transformation. The seemingly senile and helpless resident suddenly reveals a sharp, predatory intelligence, shedding his facade of decrepitude. His eyes gleam with malice as he picks up Butch's pet rock, hinting at a darker, possibly supernatural nature beneath his frail exterior. This shift suggests Burnside is not who he appears to be, foreshadowing danger and violence. The chapter builds tension by contrasting Burnside's hidden menace with the mundane cruelty of Pete and the institutional neglect of Maxton Elder Care.

The final section describes the common room, decorated for Strawberry Fest!, where elderly residents will later dance to big-band music. Rebecca has set up a podium and a vintage microphone for the event, while Pete reacts with petty jealousy, suspecting

her of trespassing in his closet. The scene juxtaposes the festive preparations with the underlying darkness of the facility, emphasizing the contrast between outward appearances and hidden horrors. The chapter closes with Rebecca's mocking smile, leaving Pete—and the reader—wondering what further conflicts lie ahead.

