

Chapter 11

Carol Schmidt, a diligent employee at Valley Foods, is working the late shift, mopping the store after closing time. She prefers this shift despite its challenges, as she has few personal obligations beyond caring for her dog, Bridger. As she cleans, she reflects on the typical late-night customers—lonely men and intoxicated teenagers—who often leave the floors messy. When she hears unexpected footsteps in the store, she assumes it might be a liquor store customer who wandered in through an unlocked connecting door. Her initial annoyance shifts to unease as she spots a running pickup truck outside with a familiar license plate.

Schmidt attempts to assert authority by identifying herself as the night manager, hoping to escort the intruder out. However, her confidence wavers when she recognizes the man's voice from a past incident where he callously ran over a neighbor's dog. The man, a large, imposing figure with white hair, approaches her register with an odd assortment of items. Schmidt's fear grows as she recalls his face from a local newspaper photo, though she struggles to remember his name or significance. The tension escalates when she confronts him about the dog incident, revealing her resentment toward his cruelty and her frustration at not being taken seriously by authorities.

The man's demeanor shifts from amused to threatening as he subtly acknowledges her previous complaints about him. Schmidt's fear intensifies when she suddenly remembers his connection to a disturbing incident involving the local mill burner. Trapped behind the counter, she realizes her vulnerability—her purse with a .38 is out of reach, and the store's alarm system is disabled. The man's mocking tone and physical intimidation, including gripping her hand, make it clear he is toying with her. Schmidt's attempts to deflect him by claiming the register is closed only provoke him further, exposing her lies and heightening the danger.

The chapter ends on a chilling note as the man whispers a veiled threat, urging Schmidt to “mind her own business” and stop reporting issues to the authorities. His menacing presence and cryptic warning suggest he is involved in darker activities, possibly linked to the mill’s suspicious smell. Schmidt’s terror is palpable as she realizes she is powerless against him, leaving the reader with a sense of impending danger and unresolved tension. The encounter underscores themes of vulnerability, intimidation, and the consequences of speaking out against powerful figures in a small town.

