

Flicker

Erik practically lived at the theater, but no one ever saw him.

The Astoria Gateway Cinema only had eight projectors, and they ran on a continuous loop system, so he was able to manage them all by himself. Continuous loop meant there were no changeovers, cue marks, or cigarette burns.

The only burns Erik had to worry about were from the projectors themselves. The Gateway still used xenon bulbs. Erik had to wear a face shield and Kevlar smock every time he changed a bulb.

Erik had been working at the Gateway for six years without a single blown bulb, which probably explained why he wasn't wearing his face shield the day Projector Five's xenon bulb exploded.

The movie in Auditorium Five was *When a Stranger Texts*, and Jill had just realized that the text was coming from inside the house. The audience screamed as shrapnel rained down on them.

Christine didn't hear their screams, because the soundproof auditorium doors were shut, and her head in the popcorn machine.

She did hear Erik's screams.

Christine found him laying face down on the projection booth floor. When she turned him over, most of his face stayed down.

Christine had been working at the Gateway ever since she got kicked out of school for her production of *Sweeney Todd*, even though she had warned them that the first five rows would get wet.

Christine always asked for closing shifts so she could help Erik put the projectors to bed. She always got closing shifts because no one else wanted them.

Closers dropped off the deposit. They cleaned out the industrial popcorn machine. They did the final walk through of the auditoriums, using flashlights to check for outside food or romantic dates that had gotten a little too romantic.

Sometimes Erik filled in for Crew Members, but the only other time they saw him was when he came downstairs for free popcorn.

“How’s it going, Erik?” asked Christine.

“Five by five.”

“Five by five” was radio shorthand for the best possible signal on a scale from one to five. Gateway Crew Members used walkie talkies to communicate when the theater got busy. They didn’t know radio shorthand, but *Faith the Vampire Slayer* had come out last October.

A customer approached the concessions counter. “Give me a medium popcorn.”

“You can get a large for a quarter more,” said Christine.

“That’s suggestive selling, isn’t it? What do they give you for doing that?”

There was an employee incentive program. If Christine told corporate they could get a large for a quarter more, she won twenty dollars.

Christine smiled. “It gives me the satisfaction of knowing that I’ve saved you money.”

“Really?”

“No,” she said. “They’re holding me hostage. Get help.”

Erik went back upstairs to start *When a Stranger Texts*.

When Erik returned to the Gateway, they saw even less of him. He wore an allergy mask, ostensibly to protect his burned lungs, but Christine knew better.

Erik put the projectors to bed by himself. He didn’t fill in for Crew Members. No one asked him to. Not even Ralph, who liked to say, “All hands on deck,” which they liked to deliberately mishear. Erik didn’t even come downstairs for free popcorn.

Flu season came, and Ralph went home with a fever, even though he didn’t handle the money, food, or used condoms.

Christine and Erik were the only closers. She prepared the deposit during the dead period, when the movies were rolling in every auditorium and everyone had their large popcorn for a quarter more. With the auditorium doors closed, the only sound was the

storm raging outside. By the time she was finished, the last movie was wrapping up.

Someone screamed.

It hadn't come from the auditorium. *Saw: Uncut* was scarier than it sounded, but that wasn't saying much.

It had come from right behind her.

Christine spun around. There was nothing behind her, except for the soda fountain and the popcorn machine.

She laughed.

It took a little digging to find the walkie talkie, but her hand was cleaner than than the popcorn.

Christine held down the trigger button. "How's it going, Erik?"

"Five by five."

The lights flickered and then went out.

"Is this another prank?" she asked.

"Not one of mine."

Christine looked past her reflection in the glass doors. An electrical pole had come down. It was hanging over Marine Drive, strung up by its remaining wires, like a broken marionette.

Erik came downstairs just as people began flooding out of *Saw: Uncut*. Together, they distributed reimbursement tickets in the dim glow of the flashlights. When the last customer was gone, Erik went back upstairs to put the projectors to bed.

Christine was almost finished cleaning when she heard the door open. She pulled

her head out of the popcorn machine to see a man in a sweatshirt with the hood pulled up.

He looked like corporate. Christine was about to suggestively sell him something when he asked, “What’s playing?”

“I’m afraid the movie theater is closed, sir. There’s been a power outage.”

“If it’s closed, then how did I get in?” asked the man.

“Our security system must be down.”

“That was a rhetorical question, bitch. You still in school? It sounds like you never picked up a book in your life. Learn how to speak proper and shit.”

“I’m a drama major,” Christine said.

“Drama major,” the man pursed his lips, so when he sighed, it whistled. “Does that mean you’re going to scream?”

He grabbed a handful of her Gateway uniform, which were uniform only in their inability to flatter anyone.

Before Christine could scream, Erik had hit the man with the Jackhammer.

Corporate purchased buckets of solid coconut oil that had to be melted with the Jackhammer, like wax around a wick. Only then could it be tube-fed into the popcorn machine.

The man suffered some soft-tissue damage, but not enough to render him unconscious. His retreat seemed to be more motivated by the fact that Erik wasn’t wearing his mask.

When Ralph came back to work the next day, he was wearing a face mask like Kuchisake-onna’s from *Carved 3: Uncut*.

Erik took one look at him and smiled. They couldn't see it, but they could see his eyes, which were more wrinkled than Freddy Krueger's in *Friday the 13th Part 13*.

"I was thinking we could all wear masks for Halloween. You could help take tickets. All hands on deck," said Ralph, which they deliberately misheard. "Christine, let go of Erik."

"I could leave the mask off for Halloween," said Erik. "And just say I'm an Astorian on vacation."

Ralph caught his eyes. Erik tilted his face up, like he was an Astorian on vacation and Ralph was the sun. The kiss was chaste, because they were wearing masks. Their eyes were wrinkled when they pulled back.

"Is this okay?" asked Ralph.

The wrinkles had moved to his forehead. Christine smoothed a hand over his brow, the same as she had when they woke up that morning. It felt hot, but she knew that wasn't a fever.

"Five by five," she said.