Friday marked a week since Bullock’s murder and a week before *Jaws* would start. *Rollerball* and *French Connection II* had both played themselves out. Kenny and I figured that even the start of the weekend would be slow. We figured wrong.

Possibly it was curiosity about the theater because of Bullock’s murder, or interest generated by the coming of *Jaws*. In any event, we had good-sized crowds for the first two shows, which made me anxious. The platter machine still needed servicing in theater two. This wouldn’t happen until Monday when a new system would be installed in the main theater. And with every showing we had detected yet another strange sound coming from the projector or one of the platters.

I didn’t want to deal with a lot of refunds if the projector malfunctioned, and we couldn’t fix it. The company required that we only give money back to people who still had their ticket stubs, but some would lose them or throw them away. We could offer passes, but tempers would flare. For me, this was the worst part of the theater business.

I stuck my head in the projection booth to check on the platter rotation. The film had broken and was spewing onto the floor in a pile already a foot high.

“Damn that machine.” I stared at the lower take-up platter that spun with the one end of film flapping like a
snake’s tongue. The machine was supposed to cut off if the film broke. *Don’t panic. Keep calm.* Kenny was over in the theater one. Until someone told him about it, this would be up to me to fix.

Maybe, just maybe, after stopping the machine, I could pull out the broken end of the film without creating a snarl or knot and splice both ends together. It might take only two minutes. Then I could feed the film onto the platter. The pile, though scary big, seemed free of tangles. Could I do it? I was about to find out.

I mashed the shutdown button on the machine. The sprocket wheels clattered to a stop, and both platters froze. The projector bulb faded.

Someone in the crowd called out, “Hey, the bulb blew!”

More shouts followed, but I blocked them out as I knelt to examine the pyramid of film. Careful to avoid movement in the pile, as if I were playing a high stakes game of pick-up sticks, I parted the film at a place where the broken end might be. No luck. I tried another section. Still no luck. The air in the booth was thick and warm, and sweat broke out across my forehead and upper lip.

I heard light footsteps racing up the stairs. It was Carrie. “Mr. Burton, the projector. Oh, Jee-sus.”

“I’m trying to fix it,” I said, now extra worried whether I could handle it in front of her. A drop of sweat fell from the tip of my nose against the film.

“This looks—impossible,” Carrie said.

“You can help. If I can just find the end. There, got it.”

I gently pulled the broken end out from under the pile
and extended it a few feet, watching for any knotting as I pulled. I extended it further so that the end reached the splicing table.

“Carrie, see the other broken end, on the lower platter. Unwind enough so I can splice it. Bring it over here.”

She moved over to the platter. “The crowd’s freaking out!”

“I know, I know. Ignore ’em. We’ve got time before they go completely berserk. Let’s do this.”

“Pull it?”

“Yeah, it’ll unwind. Quick.”

As she unwound it, I placed my end on the splicer and cut off the frame where the film had broken. She handed me the other end, and I grabbed her end. But my hand was slick from sweat, and it slipped from my grasp.

“Damn!” I said.

Carrie reached and caught it in midair.

“Good catch,” I said. And I meant it.

I held the film extra tight this time and snapped the end sprocket hole into the splicer, making a clean cut. I brought the two ends together and applied the splicing tape.

“Good. That does it. Now let’s see if we can wind it onto the platter. This is where we’ll need some real luck,” I said, praying to myself. “You turn the platter and I’ll feed it. Take it slow. I need to watch for twists.”

“Got it.”

It went smoothly at first, but a knot appeared halfway through the pile.

“Hold, hold. Wait a second,” I said, shaking the film,
praying that the knot would free itself. It loosened and straightened itself.

“Great, no tangle. Go. A little slower, slower.” Another half minute and all the film was safely wound onto the platter.

“There is a god,” I said. “Let me get her started again.” I did a fast inspection of the film for proper looping at each sprocket wheel. Good to go. I hit the start button, and we were back in business. Cheers erupted from the crowd. We’d fixed it in less than two minutes.

“Carrie, you were stellar.”

“I guess so. You too.”

I wanted to hug her, do something. But I felt myself soaked with perspiration. With a brush of my sleeve, I wiped the sweat from my forehead and upper lip.

We stood looking at each other for an awkward second.

“Tell you what,” I said. “How about you checking everything’s cool downstairs?”

Carrie left with a bounce in her step. Owen was one lucky guy. And the world was not a fair place.

I took another close look at the machine. It seemed to be operating normally, with only a slight, uneven tension in the film on the lower platter. We’d be fine until Monday, I hoped.