RAYNE & DELILAH'S MIDNITE MATINEE

ALSO BY JEFF ZENTNER

The Serpent King

Goodbye Days

RAYNE & DELILAH'S MIDNITE MATINEE

JEFF ZENTNER



CROWN
New York

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supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

For Tennessee and Sara, my salvations

For Jessi Zazu (1989–2017)
and all young women
who make things together,
who burn bright

Josie

Here's the thing with dreams—and I'm talking about the kind you have when you sleep, not the kind where you're finally learning to surf when you're fifty: they're carefully tailored to the only audience who will ever see them, which is you. So I'm not big on telling people about my dreams for that reason.

That said, there's this recurring dream I have. It comes around every couple of months or so, but I wish it were more often because it's awesome, and when I wake up from it, I lie there for a few moments, wishing I could reenter it. In this dream, I'm at a familiar place. Often it's my grandma's house.

Her house was tiny. It always smelled like quilts and oatmeal cookies and that musty odor when you first turn on a window-unit air conditioner after winter. It had a cellar that smelled like cold dirt even during the summer, where she kept store-brand cans of creamed corn, jars of home-pickled dilly beans, and two-liter bottles of Diet Coke. In my dream, I descend into the cellar. I find a door leading to a passageway. I go in. I follow it for a long way; it's cool and dark, and I'm not afraid. Eventually it opens into this grand, palatial, brightly lit marble room. There are columns and fountains, and the air smells like flowers. I push forward and find room after room. It's all grand and glorious, beautiful and perfect. It's not what you would expect to find.

But there it is, and for those few minutes (I've heard that dreams are never more than five minutes long, which I totally don't believe, but whatever), you get to experience the most unexpected grandeur, running like a rabbit warren under my grandma's little house in Jackson, Tennessee.

And then I wake up, the thrill of possibility and discovery drifting upward off me like steam. It's such a delicious feeling. *Just stay a little longer,* I say. But it doesn't.

Yet another reason it sucks to tell people about your dreams is that then they suddenly become amateur dream interpretation experts: [Nondescript German psychiatrist voice] *Well, you see, when you were riding that bicycle made out of fish sticks while wearing an adult diaper, it symbolizes . . .* That you're afraid of failure. That you're filled with seething rage. That you're afraid to become such a grown-up that you no longer call fish sticks "fish dicks." Who knows?

But dreams are their own universe. They exist in you, and you're the God of that universe, so no one can tell you what they mean. You have to figure it out, assuming dreams have any meaning at all, which I think they only sometimes do.

This dream, though—the one about finding all the hidden rooms—I think it does mean something. I think it means there's something great inside me, something extraordinary and mysterious and undiscovered.

That's a thing I tell myself. It's a thing I believe.

Delia

I love mediocre people. The ones who try their hardest to make something beautiful, something great, something that someone will remember and talk about when they're gone—and they come up short. And not by a little bit. By a *lot*. They're my people. We laugh at them, but you really have no choice in this life but to believe with all your heart that you're extraordinary. You have to hold this conviction against all evidence to the contrary. Living is too sad otherwise.

I wonder sometimes if I'm really the mediocre person I think I am, because probably one of the deals with being mediocre is you don't realize you are. In fact, I bet you've got to think you're *better* than everyone else to attain full mediocrity. Some of these movies Josie and I watch? They must be the product of a megalomaniacal mind. Any self-awareness at all would keep them from being put out into the world. Bad monsters. Nausea-inducing (and not in the good way that you want from a horror movie) camera work (bonus points for obvious attempts at "artiness"). Bizarre, tossed-off romantic subplots that are often more terrifying than the threat at the heart of the movie. Nightmarish musical interludes (the more whimsical and unrelated to the plot or theme of the movie, the more unnerving). Abrupt, anticlimactic endings that look like the money ran out before the story did.

I feel this obligation to bear witness to all of it and give others the chance to also. A duty, I guess. *Here, this is the work of my brothers and sisters in garbage. Remember them and what they tried to do.*

I also love mediocre people because we're always getting left behind. When someone leaves you, maybe you get a reason and maybe you don't. I don't know which is better. If you get a reason, I guess you can work on improving or something. So that the next time you don't get left behind. That probably works better with boyfriends and girlfriends than with dads. You only get one dad, and if he scoots, it sorta doesn't matter if you get a reason because it's not like you can work on it for your next dad.

I don't know why Dad left. I don't think it's because either Mom or I was mediocre. He loved mediocrity as much as I do. At least I think he did. All the movies were his. Or his and Mom's.

Someday I want to ask him why.

Josie

"New pants?" I ask as Delia gets in my car.

"Yep. Seven bucks on Ebay, not including shipping from Slovenia."

"Leather?"

"For seven bucks?" Delia starts sniffing the air like a bloodhound. "It reeks in here."

"Whatever, weirdo," I say.

"It's, like, kerosene-y and skunky."

I sniff so hard I get light-headed. "Nope. Nothing here."

"Is it Buford?" Delia says, casting a glance at the back seat, where my basset hound, Buford T. Rutherford B. Hayes, is sprawled like a tan garbage bag of dog Jell-O, looking doleful. Looking maybe even a bit more full of dole than usual, sensing he's being scapegoated.

"Buford is innocent before God, Delia Wilkes. How dare you? And why would he smell kerosene-y and skunky?"

"Because he has, you know, flaps. And he's farty."

"Well, one, I gave my farty, flappy dog a bath like a day ago. And two, I know his bouquet, and it's not so chemical-y."

Delia sniffs again, harder, closing her eyes. "So you *can* smell it."

"Yes, Hannibal Lecter, I can now," I say. "My car smells like a gas station that hosted a skunk orgy. I get it."

Delia says nothing but lifts one of her black-vinyl-clad legs to her nose. She sniffs a couple of times, drops her leg, and looks out the window silently. Guiltily, if we're being honest. A tiny smile tugs at the corners of her mouth.

I pounce. "Oh *ho ho*! What did you discover?"

"Nothing." The corners of her mouth lift a little higher.

"Has the stink hunter become the stink hunted?"

"I want you to know that this smell is not issuing forth from my ass."

"*Issuing forth?* Who says that?"

"I'm just saying, my ass is clean."

"Mmm-hmmm."

"Don't give me a skeptical mmm-hmmm. These pants didn't smell when I opened the package yesterday. It's like a heat-activated funk."

"Mmm-hmmm." The AC in my Kia Rio definitely isn't keeping up with the late-April heat. It feels like spring stumbled while carrying a load of summer in its arms.

"Seriously," Delia says. "How do you de-reek vinyl pants? Run through the car wash while wearing them?"

"Are you even sure they're vinyl as opposed to skunk leather?" This whole situation is so quintessentially Delia. If you told me that Delia had ordered a pair of pants off Ebay for seven bucks, I would *assume* that they'd arrive smelling like cyborg sweat. It's the kind of luck she has. One time she found a spider in a banana. As in, she opened the banana and boom—spider.

We pull up to a red light. The driver next to me gives me a long stare. Fair enough. It's not every day in Jackson, Tennessee,

that you see two girls dressed like vampires—wearing red-lined black capes—driving down the street. We're both also sporting some dramatic makeup because we don't have time to apply it at the studio. Arliss runs a *very* tight ship.

"By the way," I say, "don't you owe someone an apology?"

"Sorry for accusing your car of smelling."

"No." I turn back to Buford and nod. He glances up with a hangdog expression. I think the word *hangdog* was invented to describe expressions like Buford is giving me, because he literally looks like a dog that's melting off a hanger. "Him."

Delia turns back and grabs Buford by the jowls and scratches his head and neck vigorously. "Oh, aren't you a good boy and not a stinky boy. Auntie Delia's sorry for saying that you smelled like a skunk soaked in kerosene when it was Auntie Delia all along."

He whimpers and lays his head back down on the seat. He hates us both. I mean, we basically torture him . . . but in a loving way? Is that a thing? He's like four hundred in dog years, and he's profoundly over our nonsense. He never signed up for this.

I try to tell him *Mama loves you* with my eyes. "Can you even imagine the assault you've been mounting on poor Buford's nose?" I say to Delia. "His sense of smell is a million times better than ours."

"He's fine. He probably likes it. Dogs eat their own puke." Delia's phone buzzes. She pulls it out like it's a live cicada in her pocket, stares at it for a couple of seconds, and puts it away with a faint sigh. Probably her mom having some weird deal. By now, I know better than to ask. But I do anyway. "Your mom?"

Delia usually has an air of nervous good cheer before we film, but the good-cheer part flickers from her face like a lightbulb

not screwed in all the way, leaving just the jittery energy. "Waiting on an important email."

Delia is not the important-email type. "College stuff?" (She's also not the college type. More like community college, which is where she's going.)

She shakes her head. "My dad."

"He get in touch with you?"

"I saved up and hired a PI to track him down."

"Seriously? You walked into a PI's office like an old-timey dame?"

"No, I emailed her like a new-timey dame. She's supposed to get back to me today."

"Do you not have an aunt or an uncle or something who knows where he is?"

"His dad died when he was a kid. His mom died when I was like three. I think he has a couple of half siblings that not even he knew. We're not in touch with any of his aunts or uncles. I'd have had to hire a PI to track *them* down."

"Wow. So . . ." I'm pretty surprised, honestly. Delia isn't what you'd call a go-getter. Her grades suck. She skips class a bunch. Starting this show was the most motivation she's ever displayed. Tracking down a long-lost dad is *very* proactive for her.

"Yeah. But talking about it is making me nervous. I'm not a TV natural like you. I gotta concentrate."

A few seconds of charged silence tick by.

"Speaking of doing TV professionally, get this: my mom tells me she's been in touch with this friend from law school who works for Food Network, and apparently they have offices in Knoxville, and she told her that she could get me an internship." Even as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Just because a

segue is natural doesn't mean it's a great idea. That's probably a good thing to keep in mind if I want to make it in TV.

Delia stares at me. "When would you . . . ?" She trails off.

"I don't even know if I want to do it. It's TV and it might be a good start to my career, but I'm not sure about Food Network."

"So it would be—"

"During the school year."

"But aren't you still planning on going to UT Martin?"

"Yeah." I feel a strange twinge of something as I say it. I can't quite identify what it is. Like I'm lying, but I'm not.

"But you still haven't committed to UT Martin. Like formally."

"I have. But I also committed to UT Knoxville."

"Is that even allowed? Committing to two schools?"

"I mean, I think it's definitely frowned upon. But the deadlines were coming up and my mom wanted me to see what she could do with the internship thing before I really committed to a school. So now I have until fall to cancel on one of them."

"If you don't go to school around here, we can't do the show."

"What if you came to Knoxville with me?" I should cut this off. I can sense Delia's panic. This is a terrible time to be discussing this. Not that there's a great time.

"We already know Knoxville public access isn't into the show. We've tried like fifty times to get them to syndicate us." Her voice is rising and brittle.

"What if I came home on breaks and we recorded a bunch of episodes?"

"No way would Arliss be up for that. And my work schedule wouldn't allow it."

There's a moment of awkward silence.

"We're a team," Delia says. "We're way better when we do the show together. I need you."

"Okay, I told you. I'm going to UT Martin. Don't freak out." I'm pretty sure I'm not lying to Delia, but I'm not 100 percent sure. More like 95 percent. Or 94 percent. Or 94.7 percent.

"I'm not freaking out."

She is unequivocally freaking out.

The light turns green. I give the driver next to me a curt nod before driving off. He stares straight ahead.

Delia

And now I'm kind of freaking out on top of my stressing over the PI. Thinking about even the slimmest possibility of Josie leaving is exactly the thing I don't want to be doing right now. And . . .

"Oops." I clap a palm to my heavily made-up forehead.

"What?"

"We gotta stop at Dixie Cafe and get some chicken livers for Buford's segment."

"DeeDee."

"I forgot! I was preoccupied with the PI thing!" And more recently with the *best friend possibly betraying me by leaving* thing.

"That is in the opposite direction. If we're late . . ."

"I have no idea if the twins' friend's dog will cooperate without the chicken livers."

"You know Arliss."

"I know Arliss."

Josie hits the brakes and makes a U-turn, drawing a honk. "We need some energetic bongo music to play when we have to drive really fast because you've forgotten something."

"I'll text Arliss and tell him we're running late."

"Because he's super good about checking texts."

"I'll tell him we're bringing him dinner."

"You're paying," Josie says.

We drive with the chicken livers like they're going to be transplanted into several very important chickens, barreling up to the TV Six studio—Jackson, Tennessee's only truly local television station.

Arliss Thacker stands outside the back door of the studio, smoking. He squints at us like we pulled up on a parade float celebrating the word *moist,* hitting your funny bone, phlegm, and leaning your seat back on airplanes. He consults his watch with conspicuous deliberation and concentration.

"He hates us so much," I murmur.

"Do you blame him?"

"Oh, I one hundred percent do not."

Josie fumbles with her sticky seat belt. "We've only brought him misery."

"Probably."

"No, I definitely know because he told me. He literally said to me once, verbatim: 'You two have only ever brought me misery.' "

"Sounds right."

Josie gathers the lacy black skirts of her gown and gets out, whistling for Buford to follow her, which he does with the resigned reluctance of a man going to a public colonoscopy, waddling behind her flappily. She carries the Styrofoam container of pulled pork, squash casserole, and fried okra that we got Arliss.

I go around to the back of Josie's Kia, grab our plastic tub full of props, and heft it, starting toward the door on Josie's heels. The tub begins to slip. "Hey, Arliss, could you—"

Arliss is a big guy—a honey-baked ham of a man who looks like a biker—but he never offers to help us haul stuff in. He ac-

tually reminds me of Buford. That spiritual kinship is probably why Buford is the only one of us he's ever happy to see.

He squats to scratch Buford behind the ears, ignoring Josie even after she wordlessly hands him the dinner container. "What have I told y'all about load-ins?"

"That you've done enough for ten men's lifetimes." I recall Arliss saying he used to be a bass player for some country band in the nineties. He's pretty tight-lipped about his past, which has led to rampant speculation on Josie's and my part.

"I said that I've done enough for a *hundred* men's lifetimes." He stands to let Buford pass, takes one last long drag off his cigarette, flicks the butt to the ground, and grinds it out with his boot heel.

"Right," I grunt, and the tub slips from my grasp and tumbles to the ground as I climb the concrete steps. The lid pops off, and puppets and plastic candelabras spill out.

Josie returns to help me.

"I was actually hoping y'all wouldn't show. You had two more minutes," Arliss says, leaning back against the open door.

"But then how would you spend your Friday night?" I ask.

"By not missing you at all and doing something more fun like eating a frozen chicken potpie and thinking of all the ways I've disappointed the people who love me."

"What would TV Six show at eleven on Saturday night instead of *Midnite Matinee*?" Josie asks, tossing our Frankenstein puppet, Frankenstein W. Frankenstein, into the tub.

Arliss shrugs. "Mormon Tabernacle Choir? *Hunting and Fishing West Tennessee with Odell Kirkham*? Dead air? Who cares? I'd go with the dead air, personally."

"What would they show in Topeka, Macon, Greenville, Des Moines, Spokane, Fargo, and Little Rock?" Josie asks.

"Whatever the people in those cities like to ignore or watch while they're too high to operate Netflix."

I pick up the tub and walk in. The studio is well insulated from the outside. It's cool and dark and has the warm, metallic smell of electronics combined with the mustiness of a basement. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust. Arliss has displayed rare initiative by already having our antique red velvet chairs set up in the corner where we film. I pull our faux-brick cloth backdrop out of the tub, unfold and unroll it, and start tacking it up. It gives a dungeon-like appearance. Oh, don't worry, we've gotten letters from viewers about how this is unrealistic for the old New Orleans house where our characters supposedly live. People have a lot of free time, apparently. Especially the kind who pay for postage to "well, actually" a public access show.

Josie sets our plastic electric candelabra on the thrift-store table between our chairs and plugs it in, then sets a plastic skull next to it and clips a plastic raven to the back of her chair. She begins her vocal warm-ups. *Tip of the tongue, top of the teeth. Tip of the tongue, top of the teeth. Topeka bodega Topeka bodega Topeka bodega. Many mumbling mice are making midnight music in the moonlight, mighty nice.*

I finish tacking up our backdrop and hang the nylon spiderweb with a rubber black widow that occupies the top right corner of our set. I accidentally put it up on the left side once. We got letters about that. Multiple letters.

Arliss looks on glumly, dinner box in one hand, shoveling squash casserole into his mouth with the other, Ritz cracker

crumbs cascading onto his Chris Stapleton T-shirt and resting on the swell of his beer gut.

I pull a white lab coat and a pair of goggles from the tub and extend them to Arliss. He just stares, unblinking, and takes another bite. I roll my eyes, pull an envelope from my pocket, and hand it to him.

"Don't roll your eyes." He belches into his closed mouth, buries his fork in the remnants of his squash casserole, and takes the envelope delicately between his index and middle fingers, like it's a secret message he's going to tuck away in his décolletage. Still with the one hand, he opens it and counts. "Twenty, thirty, forty, forty-five . . . fifty."

"We good?"

He folds it and stuffs it in his back pocket. "Good as we ever are."

"All right, Professor. Get dressed." I hand him the lab coat and goggles.

He turns, tosses the remains of his box into a nearby garbage can, and takes his costume. He grunts as he puts on the lab coat and pulls the goggles over his head, resting them on his brow. "This is the worst job I've ever had, and I've had some bad ones."

"So you've said." I check my phone. My adrenaline flares like lighting a stove burner after leaving the gas on too long. I have a new email. I click on it, and it's junk. A sharp wave of disappointment neutralizes some of the adrenaline, but I still have to wait for the thudding of my heart to subside.

Josie

Someone pounds at the back door. Arliss goes to answer.

"It's the twins," I call after him. "They're supposed to have their friend with another basset with them."

Arliss grunts in acknowledgment and opens the door. He steps aside to let them pass.

Colt and Hunter McAllen are frequent guests on *Midnite Matinee.* They don't particularly love the kind of horror movies we show. They're not great friends with Delia and me. They're *emphatically* not geniuses. But they share one shining, redeeming trait that makes them perfect guests: they're willing to do dumb stuff, no questions asked. It occurred to us to invite them onto our show after they got suspended for riding dirt bikes down the halls of our school. From there, it was no great leap to put on black spandex skeleton costumes and plastic skull masks and, for no compensation of any sort, dance with the most utterly joyous, unfettered abandon you can imagine. Putting on the skeleton costumes is, for them, like putting on a mantle of courage. And they have *zero* skill as dancers. But they'll just go for it. Anything. They'll try doing splits. Hunter almost took out half our set once attempting a backflip that he only halfway landed. Which is an apt metaphor for our show, I guess.

"What up, JoHo?" Colt goes for the high five.

I let him flap in the breeze. Guess how much I enjoy being called JoHo. "Let's see the dog."

In the darkness of the hallway behind him, I hear a jingling of dog tags and a yip. A smallish beagle trots up to me excitedly, followed by his owner.

Reflexively, I kneel to pet the dog, scratching him behind the ears. "Hey! Aren't you a sweetie!" Then I stand, turn, and face the twins. "What is this?" I ask in a low voice (I guess so the beagle won't get his feelings hurt).

"The dog you asked for," Hunter says.

"I told y'all we needed a basset hound."

"Yeah," Hunter says.

"So this is a beagle. I say bring me a basset hound; you two Bill Nyes bring me a beagle."

"I think it would be 'Bills Nye,' " Delia says, joining us. "Nice beagle, guys. I thought we asked for a basset hound." She hands Colt and Hunter their costumes.

"I told them Tater was a beagle," the beagle's owner says. "They said it was fine."

"Beagles and basset hounds are the same thing. Just that beagles become basset hounds," Hunter says with an air of unearned authority.

"What are you *talking about*?" Delia's face is incredulous. "That's not even *sorta* how it works."

"Yep. Like how cats become raccoons," Colt says.

"In the wild," Hunter adds.

I don't know where to begin. "I—wait—cats become—no, hang on. One thing at a time. You thought beagles get older and shorter and saggier and their ears get longer and we start calling them basset hounds?"

"We're not dog scientists, y'all," Colt says. "Hell."

"It's just our opinion," Hunter says.

"That beagles become basset hounds?" Delia asks. "That is your opinion?"

"Yep," they say together.

"Well, that's not how opinions work," I say.

Hunter shrugs.

"Like, science wins over opinions," I say.

"That's *your* opinion," Hunter says.

"Just to be clear," Delia says. "You two live in a world where animals spontaneously change species and animals within the same species become other types of animals?"

"Our cousin seen it happen," Hunter says.

"By the way, let's just go with what y'all are saying and assume that beagles magically transform into basset hounds at a certain point in their lives—I can't believe I'm doing this, good lord. *This* particular beagle has pretty obviously not yet made the change to basset hound, right?" I say like I'm speaking with a very young child.

Hunter and Colt would probably look sheepish at this point, but their faces already have a sheeplike quality.

"So even in your deeply strange worldview, y'all blew it," I continue.

Hunter and Colt look at each other, their exchanged glances saying *You wanna field this?*

"Did y'all literally split a single brain when you were in the womb and each one of you ended up with half?" I ask.

This sends them into gales of laughter. They love it when I insult them. They must have some weird crush or something. I think it's why they're so easily persuaded to relinquish their

dignity for free on a public access show. They start trying to thwap each other in the nuts.

I turn from them to the beagle's owner and finally get a good look. There wasn't enough light in the hallway to see him well. His face is nothing special, but one of his eyes has a faint purple bruise encircling it and he has a Band-Aid slightly below the bridge of his nose.

The owner raises his hands in surrender. "All they told me was that they needed to use Tater. But I came along to help because they don't know much about dogs."

"They don't know much about dogs? *Oh, really?* Let me ask you something: did you have any expectation that your beagle would transform into a basset hound?"

"Nope. That's not how it works."

"I am so glad to hear you say that." I walk quickly back to the tub, pull out a dog-sized skirt and blouse, and hand them to Tater's owner. "Dress him."

"Bet you didn't expect your life to turn out this way, buddy," Arliss says to Tater's owner before turning to Delia, who hands Arliss a VHS tape and a typed sheet with segment cues mapped out.

I face Tater's owner and motion at my eye and my nose. "What's with this . . . dude?"

He extends his hand. "Lawson Vargas."

I shake his hand. "Josie Howard. Who threw you through a plate-glass window?"

"I fight MMA. Got kinda banged up in a match a little while ago."

"Good times. You're not gonna MMA us or anything, are you?"

He smiles. His face is kind when he smiles and becomes a lot more interesting. "Naw."

I raise my finger to tell him to hold on. I walk back to the tub and return with a black robe and a *Scream* mask. "Okay, Lawton—"

"Lawson. It's fine."

"Right. Sorry. Lawson. You're gonna dance with your idiot goofball friends." I shove the robe and mask into his hands.

He accepts them tentatively. "I'm not a dancer."

"And Tater isn't a basset hound, but oh! See how I don't care."

"I can't."

"You can roundhouse-kick people in the throat, but you can't dance?"

"Different skill sets."

"This show has a very limited pool of resources. We use whatever we have at hand, and you are at hand. Plus, you need to be punished for not owning a basset hound and not having smarter friends."

He looks at the costume he's holding and smiles a lopsided smile of concession.

He actually does have a nice face, I guess, upon reflection. He should try to get kicked in it less.

Delia

I hand Arliss the VHS tape with my dad's writing scrawled on it in Sharpie. "I bet you didn't know that the dude who directed *A Christmas Story* also directed a horror movie in the early seventies called *Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things.*"

Arliss eyes the tape like I've handed him a revolver and told him to kill his grandmother or be killed. "So that's our dreck of the week."

"For a seventy-thousand-dollar movie, it's actually pretty decent."

"*Arliss Shouldn't Help Make This Show.* Get it?" Arliss says.

"You wanna know what it's about?"

"I do not."

"So this theater troupe goes to this island off the coast of Florida, where there's a graveyard. And they're led by this hippie doofus who's full of hot turds, and he suggests they do this weird ritual and raise a corpse from the dead, but—"

"Lemme guess: children shouldn't play with dead things?"

"You might enjoy this one."

"So far, we're zero for however many episodes we've done in the last year and a half."

I hand him a sheet where we've mapped out the time cues and where to cut in the segments so he doesn't have to watch

the movie. Also a CD. "This is new intro music that our friend Jesmyn composed and recorded for us."

"We'll get letters."

"Always."

"Let's get this show on the road. I have a very important date with not being here."

"Arliss? That movie was my dad's, and—"

"I know, they all are."

"Yeah, but . . . this is one of the ones he and I actually watched together, so . . ."

"It's special. I'll be careful," he says, suddenly quiet and sober, looking me in the eye. Arliss has always treated my growing up without a dad with more respect and gentleness than he affords anything else.

"I'd hate if he ever came back and—"

"I'll treat it with ten times the care that went into the making of the actual movie."

"Do twenty times." I turn to Josie, who has apparently just handed the poor beagle owner a costume. He's blushing. "You ready, Rayne?"

"Ready, Delilah."

• • •

I don't know who watches *Midnite Matinee* or why.

I mean, I have some idea from letters we get. Here's my guess: it's lonely people. People who don't have a lot going on in their lives, because they have time to sit at home on a Saturday night (that's when we air in most markets, including our home market) and flip through channels. People who aren't rich, be-

cause if they were, they'd have more entertainment options. People who aren't hip, because if they were, they'd seek out higher-quality entertainment options. People who don't truly love to be frightened, because if they did, they'd find actual scary movies. People who prefer their awful movies straight, with no commentary, because otherwise they'd watch old episodes of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. People who still write letters.

It's a very niche crowd.

Most of all, I think it's people who love to be reminded that sometimes you do your best and you come up short, but there's still a place in the world for people like that. People like them. It might be 11:00 on a Saturday night on a public access station in Topeka, Kansas, but it's a place. It's comforting to know that you don't have to be excellent to not be completely forgotten. Maybe it's people who feel like the world is leaving them behind.

Maybe it's people who simply want to remember a time when they were happier and their lives were easier. That's why I would watch.