

'Rebecca Raisin's books are always gorgeous'
JAIMIE ADMANS

Elodie's Library of Second Chances



Chapter 1

I turn the page of my book as I'm gently poked and prodded from every angle while my hairdresser works his magic, taking me from average thirty-something woman to red carpet ready. You'd think it'd be exciting, but after years of these events it's just another chore to add to the list.

I squirm sideways in an effort to see the words on the page. 'Stop fidgeting, Ellie,' says Jonas, who tabloids have coined *coiffeur* to the stars, a fancy term for hairdresser. He's as flamboyant as he is talented and the best in the biz. He's been doing my hair and make-up for years now and we've grown close.

'Thirty minutes until the limo arrives to transform this sweet thang into a goddess,' he says under this breath.

'Did you just call me *sweet thang*?' Only Jonas could make that expression sound right.

'I did.'

I shake my head with a laugh and continue reading, only stopping every now and then to ponder what I'd do if faced with the same scenario my characters are.

'We're a little behind schedule here.' Jonas grimaces as he glances at his watch.

'Just put my hair in a topknot.'

He raises well-groomed brows. 'Oh, no, no, no can do. Your mother wants loose Hollywood curls.'

'Again?' I say with a what-can-you-do shrug. I don't get a say in these things. Besides, allowing Mother to arrange the styling gives me more time to read while everyone else fusses behind the scenes.

'Your look today is old Hollywood glamour.' While my life might seem exciting from the outside, it's empty on the inside. I'm ferried straight from the office of Astor News and Media to nightly events, which doesn't leave a lot of downtime. Usually after a twelve-hour day my rigor mortis smile is fixed into position, giving me lockjaw, and I pine for a life other than this. Reading is my happy place, my go-to where I can forget the world and relax no matter how short a time I have to get lost in the pages.

'Speaking of glamour . . . where the bloody hell is Holly?' Jonas asks. 'She's supposed to have the frock ready to go! If she comes traipsing in here with the wrong dress again, I'm going to need a stiff drink and a long lie-down.'

'Don't worry, she'll be here soon.'

Jonas puts the finishing touches on my curls and moves on to my make-up. He's a man of many talents but gets worked up when he knows the likelihood of bumping into my mother is imminent.

'OK, OK. My nerves are shot is all.'

I give him a supportive pat on the hand. 'You need to lose yourself in a good book every now and then to help you relax.' I'm rewarded with a dramatic eyeroll. 'I have tequila if all else fails.'

'Now *there's* a book I could get into . . . *Tequila Mockingbird*.'

'Jonas!' I throw my head back and laugh. 'Sounds like the name of those ultra-hip cocktail bars you frequent on a Friday.'

'Thursday is the new Friday, darling. But you wouldn't know – you're too busy strutting the red carpet.' Jonas is a bit of a celebrity himself these days and is always getting write-ups in the press as he hops from one bar to the next with his fabulously fashionable entourage.

'Is it? I have *no* clue. If I have a night off the last thing I want to do is head out.'

My gaze wanders back to my book. *The Last Days of Rabbit Hayes* is heart-wrenching, but I can't bear for it to end. An ugly cry every now and then is good for the soul but now is not the time for that sort of thing. Still, I really need to know what happens . . .

Jonas glances at his watch again. His worry is contagious, and I only hope Holly *is* on her way here. I don't like being late – it screams diva and that is something I'm not. Plus, I don't want to put any more pressure on my anxious *coiffeur*.

'Tilt your head to the side, darling,' Jonas says. I give in to it and forget about the dress, and my assistant who is MIA. Poor Holly will be running all over London trying to find the right garment, one specifically requested by my mother, with only a vague description of where it actually is – Mum can be very Miranda Priestly at times.

I get to an emotional scene in the book and despite my trying to hold it in the floodgates open. I thought there'd be a miracle, something, anything for it to end another way. I swallow back tears, knowing I'm only a moment away from a sob fest I might not recover from. The shattering of my heart is almost audible, like the splintering of a thousand shards of glass.

'Darling are they *real* tears?' Jonas scrutinises me. 'Is my queen *crying*?' He peers closer, which only make the tears fall harder. Jonas's expression appears positively worried.

'Sorry! It's this book.' I wave it in the air as I try to swallow my heartbreak and compose myself. 'It's. Just. So. Devastating.' The words come out haltingly. I take a deep centring breath and expel some of the grief. 'Yet it's somehow uplifting. I don't think I'm going to be able to sleep tonight thinking of it.' My bottom lip wobbles as I put on a brave face.

'You're too good for this world, with a heart bigger than Texas – that's you. It baffles me because you're the *opposite* of your mother. I often wonder where you get your empathetic streak from, but that's a conversation for another day. Can I get you a tissue, a . . . tequila?'

'I'm good, I'm fine. Have I ruined the make-up? Sorry, I know we're already pressed for time.'

Jonas shakes his head. 'It's not a problem, darling. Nothing these nimble fingers can't fix.' He dabs under my eyes to repair the damage. Really, I should know better than to read such an emotional tale before a red-carpet event.

With that my brother Teddy wanders in. 'Elodieeeee.' He draws my name out as if it's a song lyric. He's the only person who doesn't call me Ellie. I'm sure he does it just to annoy me. Kid brothers, eh?

'What's with the tears?' he says, his eyebrows pulling together.

I sigh. 'A deeply moving book that I've been emotionally invested in.'

'This?' He takes it from my hands but trips on the hair curler cord and drops it. The novel lies forlornly on the carpet, its pages mussed, as if it's suffered an injury.

I motion for Teddy to pick up the book before its pages are indelibly wrinkled.

Teddy rescues it and straightens it out. 'What's so earth-shattering about this particular tome?'

'It's too hard to explain – you'll have to read it. My heart . . .'

'Ellie *felt her feelings* and is a little fragile now.'

'Unfortunately I felt my feelings all over my make-up so now poor Jonas is back to square one.'

Teddy tuts. 'Must be a good book.'

'The best.' I sniff, thinking of Rabbit, Molly and Juliet. 'They felt so *real*. It's as though I've just closed the door on my best friends and the innermost workings of their lives.' I double blink in an effort not to weep. 'What I need is to throw myself onto the sofa to process it all. Not a red-carpet event and a hundred flashing cameras pointed at me.' I hold a hand over my heart, knowing those characters will stay in there for the rest of my life.

'I wish I could take your place,' Teddy says lightly. 'I'm not tired of the spotlight, or red-carpet events. I don't think I ever will be.'

For a very brief stint, Teddy worked alongside me at the family biz. He didn't take his role seriously, made a splash being papped doing silly things like guzzling out of magnum bottles of champagne or dancing on tables. Nursing a sore head, he'd call in sick time and again. I covered for him as long as I could but even I couldn't magic away those awful paparazzi pictures of Teddy in our rivals' glossies. When Mother found out she was furious and fired him on the spot. He's been trying to claw his way back ever since, but she won't hear a word of it. It's a shame because Teddy could charm the socks off anyone, and he's made progress sorting himself out.

'I'd trade places in a heartbeat.' I give him a sad smile. There's no convincing Mother when she's made up her mind. She's steely, at the best of times.

That's why I'm grateful for my brother, wayward as he can be. We're close and rely on each other a lot, especially when it comes to speaking up for each other. Our parents subscribe to the stiff upper lip style of parenting, and don't always understand when I quite readily *feel my feelings*. My mother claims those kinds of *histrionics* are not necessary. If she caught me crying over fictional characters, she'd give me another talking-to about learning the art of regulating one's emotions. We're different, that's for sure.

Teddy cranks some happy music on his phone, no doubt to distract me.

'That's more like it,' Jonas says, and softly sways to the music as he highlights my cheeks with an angled brush. 'My blood pressure is through the roof knowing your mother is about to sneak up at any moment while I've got her golden child sitting here with red-rimmed eyes clutching her heart. It doesn't look good.'

'I don't blame you for being worried, after that last fiasco with the small hair fire,' Teddy blurts out and I swear Jonas's complexion turns a radioactive shade of green.

'I'll handle her,' I quickly reassure him, giving him a sunny smile. Mother was incensed about the small hair fire – you'd have thought *her* locks went up in flames. At the time, I'd been so engrossed in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* that I leaned too close to a scented candle and next minute my hair caught. Jonas managed to stamp it out fast, but my mother walked in at that exact moment and all hell broke loose.

Since then, she's been wary about Jonas, but I've explained a million times it was *my* fault and an accident at that. It's only hair, but she's all about aesthetics, that woman. I quite liked having an excuse to chop my long locks off, but a pixie cut was vetoed by Mother as not the right look for Astor and now it's grown long again anyway. I mean, seriously. I have a degree in librarianship and here I am still needing permission for a hairstyle! Just how did I let this happen to me?

'Louise is going to be there tonight,' Teddy says. Aha, now his impromptu visit makes sense! He's not here to commiserate with me, he's here for intel.

‘Yes, I know.’ Teddy has been in love with actress Louise for years, but she won’t give him the time of day. They’d make a lovely couple if Teddy did manage to settle down. The thing is, his reputation precedes him, even though he’s managed to get his act together over the last year or so.

‘Why not invite her to an intimate dinner party you’re hosting?’

‘Erm, what dinner party would that be?’ I cock my head.

He stares down his nose at me. ‘Do it for your baby brother, Elodie . . .’

I cross my arms. ‘Louise will see right through me, you know.’ She knows full well I do my brother’s bidding for him! He’s got me wrapped around his little finger.

‘Yes, she’s certainly got my measure.’ He grins. ‘That’s what I love about her. She’s so clever. It’s not just the way she looks – she’s the whole package. I *adore* her. And I always will.’ His eyes are bright as he drifts off to dreamland . . .

‘I’ll see what I can do.’ As usual Teddy’s puppy-dog eyes get to me. The poor fool adores a woman who doesn’t even give him a second glance. It’s so like Teddy to choose the hard road.

‘I’ve heard she’s shooting a movie soon with Dillon Hollander,’ Jonas says, voice lilting like it does when he’s sharing gossip.

‘That slimy so-and-so?’ Teddy says, his voice full of disgust. ‘Really?’

‘Yep. But methinks Louise will make short work of him if his hands do go a-wandering. Why he’s still in the movie business is beyond me.’ Jonas always has the inside scoop on celebs. ‘Proves it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.’ Dillon is the progeny of a famous director who mainly does superhero movies. That’ll open doors, like nothing else will. Talk about nepotism, though who I am to judge?

‘Does Louise know what he’s like?’ I ask.

‘I better text her and give her a heads-up,’ Teddy says. ‘Do my civil duty.’

I smile. ‘You do that.’

Twenty minutes later my assistant Holly appears, sweat beading her brow, slinky dress held aloft. ‘Don’t ask,’ she says. ‘Let’s just get this on you. Your mother’s on her way up!’

At the mention of my mother panic reflects in Jonas’s eyes. He moves quickly and finishes spritzing the setting agent for my make-up. ‘Get out of here, Teddy, so we can dress our queen,’ Jonas screeches. ‘She’s got to be ready on time! I really can’t cop another bollocking from Dorothea – I’m still traumatised over the last one!’ Mother can be downright terrifying if you’re not family – it’s all smoke and mirrors but most people don’t recognise that.

‘Knock ’em dead, Ellie,’ Teddy says. He makes a hasty exit with a backwards wave and shuts the door behind him.

Once he’s gone Jonas slips off my robe – he sees me as nothing more than a mannequin, a job, not a red-blooded woman. Holly pulls the satin bias-cut dress over my head. It floats down in liquid rivulets and my hair and make-up remain pristine. As the drape of the golden dress touches the marble floor, my mother appears wearing her supercilious trademark look, better known as: resting bitch face.

Mother gives me a slow once-over. ‘You didn’t fast today, dear?’ she asks, her gaze settling on my stomach.

‘No, of course I didn’t.’ Her rules for red-carpet appearances are antiquated to say the least.

She raises a brow as if I’ve let her down. ‘You know what the press are like with their camera angles.’

I let out a sigh. ‘Well, bad luck.’ High heels are the work of the devil and I won’t be convinced otherwise. Trying to keep my energy levels up all night is even worse. Tonight I’ll be strutting down the red carpet to promote a documentary the family company has produced and then attending an after-party.

‘Your eyes are slightly bloodshot, Ellie. Are you getting enough sleep?’

I dart a glance at Jonas who looks as if his head is about to explode.

‘Probably not,’ I say. ‘There’s never time for rest, is there?’

She shakes her head. ‘Don’t start with all that blather about downtime again. You don’t know how lucky you are; millions of women would swap their lives with you in a heartbeat.’ Mother heads towards the door, calling over her shoulder, ‘The car will be here in five. Don’t keep me waiting.’

‘I’ll do my level best.’ We collectively let out a breath as she leaves. Dorothea Astor has that effect on people. As if on cue my stomach starts to rumble. I really should have eaten something before now; lunch seems like light years ago.

‘I don’t know how you stand it,’ Jonas whispers and goes to the fridge, before returning with a plastic-wrapped Reuben sandwich. ‘Have this. You need to eat.’

‘Thanks, Jonas. You’re a lifesaver but I’ll only have half.’ Jonas is forever eating on the run between clients and stashes his booty in the small bar fridge alongside the bottles of bubbles I keep on hand in my dressing room for my team.

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘What’s tonight’s premiere about again?’ Holly asks, as she riffles through her Mary-Poppins-sized tote bag before brandishing her phone and taking arty snaps of me for the Astor social media pages. I really hate these candid pictures – they seem so self-aggrandising but my mother won’t be told.

I unwrap the sandwich and wonder how I’m going to eat without messing up my lipstick as my stomach rumbles in protest. ‘It’s a documentary called *Eyrie*. Focusing on the lives of free solo climbers and the reasons they take such huge risks, without ropes or safety equipment.’

‘Why do they?’

I take a moment to reply. ‘It’s just them and the mountain; they’re not chained to anything. They’re driven by this indelible need to escape and when they get to the top, the eyrie, it’s only them and the stunning view. I expect it’s liberating. They’re totally *free*.’ How I wish I was too.

‘Right,’ Holly says with a shake of her head as if it doesn’t make any sense to her. She glances out the window. ‘The car is here.’

Jonas fluffs my hair before air-kissing me. ‘Enjoy the night, darling.’

Holly motions for me to take a bite of my sandwich before she snatches it away, as this duo have managed once again to transform me into something I’m not.