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RAINBOW
ROWELL



Slow Dance
a novel

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.....
A Novel

RAINBOW ROWELL

wm

WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

*For my friends
Kai and Paul, time
machines*

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Kai and Paul,
time machines*

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One

January 2006 The wedding invitation came, and Shiloh said yes, of course she'd be there.

 Mikey was one of her oldest friends, and she'd missed his first wedding. She couldn't afford the trip to Rhode Island at the time. (She still couldn't afford a trip to Rhode Island.)

 But this time he was getting married here in Omaha, right down the street—of course Shiloh would be there. Everyone would. Everyone loved Mikey. He held on to people. Shiloh had never been sure how he managed it.

 She checked *yes* on the RSVP card and wrote in, *With bells on!*

 The week before the wedding, she bought a new dress on clearance. Deep-burgundy floral with a low-cut neck. It was meant to be tea length, but it came to Shiloh's knees. The sleeves were a little short, too—she'd just wear a denim jacket over it. (*Could* you wear a jean jacket to a wedding? A second wedding?) (It would be fine. She'd pin a silk flower to the chest.)

 The wedding was on one of Ryan's Fridays. Shiloh waited until he picked up the kids before she started getting ready. She didn't want Ryan to see her wearing makeup. Or heels. She didn't want him to see her *trying*.

 Maybe some people wanted to look good for their exes, to show them what they'd lost or whatever. Shiloh would prefer that Ryan never thought of her at all. Let him think he was too good for her. Let him think that Shiloh had gone to seed.

 Shiloh was a thirty-three-year-old divorced woman with two children under six—maybe she literally *had* gone to seed.

 Ryan was late, even though she'd told him she had somewhere she needed to be. (She should never have told him she had somewhere to be.)

He was late, and the kids had gotten tired of waiting. They were hungry and sullen when he finally showed up and blustered his way into the living room like she'd invited him in.

"They're hungry," Shiloh said.

And Ryan said, "Why didn't you feed them, Shy?"

And Shiloh said, "Because you were supposed to take them for dinner."

And then he said—

It didn't really matter what Ryan said after that. He was just going to keep saying the same old things for the next fifteen years of coparenting, and Shiloh was going to have to keep listening, because . . . Well, because she'd made a *series* of *serious* mistakes and miscalculations.

It was funny, almost, how poorly Shiloh had built her life—especially for someone who had once prided herself on her ability to make decisions.

That's something she'd decided about herself when she was a teenager. She'd thought she was good at making decisions because she *liked* making them. They felt good, they gave her a zing. If someone was lingering over a decision or seesawing between two options, Shiloh loved cutting in and settling the matter. The world would spin faster and with more clarity if Shiloh were in charge.

If Shiloh could talk to her teenage self now, she'd point out that deciding wasn't any good if you weren't deciding correctly—or even in the neighborhood of correctly.

Ryan finally left with the kids. And Shiloh tore the clearance tags off her dress. She put on makeup. She pinned up her hair. She stood on tiptoe to get her boots zipped over her calves.

She'd already missed the wedding, but she wouldn't miss the reception. No one would. Everyone would be there.

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Two

The reception was in a rental hall on the second floor of a youth wrestling club. Mikey had married someone from the neighborhood this time, a girl who had been a year or two behind them in high school.

It was a plated dinner, with assigned tables. Fancy.

"Shiloh!" someone called out, as soon as she walked into the lobby. "We thought you weren't coming!"

It was Becky. Shiloh and Becky had been on the high school newspaper together. They'd been thick as thieves—they'd actually stolen a traffic barricade once—and they still talked sometimes. They were friends on Facebook. (Shiloh almost never logged in to Facebook.)

"I'm here," Shiloh said, mustering up a smile. There was going to be a lot of mustering tonight, she could already tell.

"You're at our table," Becky said. "It's practically a journalism reunion. Everyone's here. Oh god, wait—you *were* at our table, but we thought you weren't coming, so we gave your seat to Aaron King, do you remember him? He was a sophomore?" "I remember him—it's fine."

"But you should still come say hi. Everybody's here." "No one can say no to Mikey," Shiloh said.

"You're so right," Becky agreed. "Plus we all thought there'd be an open bar." She laughed. "Oh well."

Shiloh followed Becky into the reception hall. She held her head straight and kept her gaze fixed, deliberately not scanning the room for familiar faces.

Anyone that Shiloh would recognize was going to have to *force* their way into her field of vision.

They got to their table. There was Becky's husband and Tanya—god, Shiloh hadn't seen Tanya for years. And Tanya's husband, yeah, they'd met, hi, hi. Hugs. Hi. Nia. And Ronny. Shiloh hated Ronny. At least, she used to hate Ronny—did she still hate Ronny? She hugged him anyway. People, all these people. From the same tiny part of Shiloh's life (it hadn't felt tiny at the time). All these people who knew her and remembered her. They were all eating salads and sorry that they'd given away her seat—but that was okay, Shiloh didn't mind. She'd pull up a chair later. It was good to see them, she said—and it really was. It was good to know now who was here, from the old days. And who wasn't.

It made sense that he wasn't here—he was in Virginia, wasn't he? The last time Shiloh had heard, he was in Virginia. Maybe someone would mention it later . . .

Of course he wasn't here. He was in the Navy. He was probably on the ocean somewhere. Probably didn't get back home much. She'd heard once that he didn't get back home much . . .

He wasn't here, and other people were, and she could enjoy this now. Enjoy them. Enjoy *something*.

Shiloh didn't want to stand there hovering over her old friends while they finished their salads. She squeezed a few shoulders, then squeezed between tables to get to the one in the corner where Aaron King had been assigned to sit. (She actually *didn't* remember him.) There was a couple sitting there, surrounded by empty chairs.

"Mind if I join you?" Shiloh asked.

They didn't mind at all. They introduced themselves—Mikey's aunt and uncle—and told her they'd already eaten her dinner roll.

"We ate all of them," the uncle said. "We thought we had this table to ourselves!" The aunt cackled warmly. "We were gonna eat your cake, too."

“You still can,” Shiloh promised, sitting down. There was a white jar candle next to her plate, branded *Mike & Janine, January 20, 2006*. Shiloh picked it up and sniffed it. Lavender.

She could look around now—now that she knew he wasn’t here. It was safe.

The tables were set up at one end of the reception hall, and there was a dance floor on the other. Spotlights were already flashing onto a disco ball in the corner. Shiloh had been to three or four weddings here before, but this was probably the best she’d ever seen this place look. Someone had wrapped all the fixtures in Christmas lights. The chairs were swathed in tulle.

Shiloh *liked* weddings. Improbably. Still. She liked seeing people’s best outfits. She liked beginnings. She liked the flowers and the favors and the little bags of Jordan almonds.

A lot of the other guests were people Shiloh vaguely remembered from high school . . . all of them looking a little older and fatter and knocked around by life to varying degrees.

It was easy to pick out Mikey’s New York City friends. Art-world people. There was a woman in a bright yellow bandage dress and a man wearing black culottes and platform boots.

Shiloh used to take great pains not to be dressed like anyone else in a room—but she’d lost her edge. And she’d never had as much edge as these people. She felt dowdy in comparison. Thrown together. Even though she hadn’t tried this hard in years.

She scanned the crowd for Mikey. She’d have to apologize to him for missing the ceremony. Maybe he hadn’t noticed. He surely had plenty of other things on his mind.

Someone near Shiloh started tapping a fork against a wineglass, then other people picked up the clanging, everyone eagerly turning to watch the bride and groom kiss. Shiloh followed the wave to the head table.

There was Mikey. With his curly blond hair and big, goofy smile. He was wearing a white suit. That was obviously Janine next to him in the wedding dress. Then the bridesmaids in pale green satin. And the groomsmen. And Cary.

Cary.

Shiloh clenched her hands in her lap.

Cary was a groomsman.

Right . . . *Right*—that made sense.

Of course Cary was here.

Of course he wouldn’t miss it.

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Three

Shiloh had been imagining this moment since she got Mikey's invitation—but she hadn't known how to picture Cary. He wasn't on Facebook. He didn't turn up in Google searches.

She kept picturing him the way he'd looked in high school—in his ROTC uniform, weirdly—even though she'd seen him since then . . . At their fiveyear reunion. Standing across from her in the same old circle of friends. She and Cary had hardly spoken that day. Shiloh had brought Ryan to the reunion; they'd already been married a year. (They hadn't invited Cary to the wedding.)

Shiloh had been imagining this moment—the moment she'd see Cary again—for months, but even in her imagination, it wouldn't mean as much to him as it did to her. Cary wouldn't have been thinking about it all day. He wouldn't have been wondering, worrying, that Shiloh might be here. He wouldn't have bought a new dress, so to speak, just in case.

Cary looked good. Here. Now. From a distance. He looked sharper than the rest of them, less worn down on the edges. He looked tan. His hair was still so short . . .

He turned, almost like he could feel Shiloh watching him. She was too far away to say that their eyes met—or even to know whether he recognized her—but she smiled a little and raised her hand to wave. Cary waved back. He might just be waving because someone had waved at him.

Shiloh's hand dropped. Cary was still looking in her direction.

He stood up and moved behind the bride and groom. He was saying something to Mikey. He glanced up toward Shiloh again, then shuffled behind the bridesmaids' chairs and out onto the floor, heading toward her.

Shiloh straightened her jean jacket. (Why was she wearing a jean jacket?) Cary was wearing a navy blue suit; people must not rent tuxes anymore for weddings. He was walking toward her table now, and Shiloh stood up, then thought that she probably shouldn't have done that—like she was the gentleman, and he was the lady—but it would be weird to sit down now. She straightened her jacket again. Cary was looking at her like, *I'm coming*. And she nodded like, *I see you*, and smiled. She waved again, and he waved back. He was nearly there—the tables were packed too tightly, it was slow going. Shiloh wondered whether she should hug him when he got to her. She'd hugged nearly everyone at the other table, plus some of their spouses. She'd gotten very good at casual hugging.

"Shiloh," Cary said when he got to her.

"Cary." She smiled at him.

He smiled back.

He looked *good*. Even up close. Cary had blondy-brown hair and a heart-shaped face with a narrow jaw and a pointy chin. She'd only ever seen him clean-shaven. (Were you allowed to have a beard in the Navy?) He'd been built like a stick of gum back in high

school, but he'd filled out now. He looked grown-up. Settled. He looked like he'd gotten out of North Omaha.

"It's good to see you," Shiloh said.

"Yeah," Cary said, nodding. "You weren't at the wedding."

"I wasn't," she agreed. "There was a mix-up with my kids." Did Cary know she had kids?

He nodded, he must know.

"You're a groomsman," she said.

"I guess I did so well the first time, I got invited back."

Shiloh hummed a laugh. "Do you have to give a speech?"

"No, that's the best man—Bobby. He's really drunk, so I'm excited to see how it turns out." "Maybe you should prepare something just in case."

"I'll improvise."

Shiloh nodded. Then nodded again. "Nice suit."

Cary looked down. "Thanks. We had tuxes at the last one, but this time, Janine was like, 'You don't have to rent a tux, you can just buy a navy blue suit that you can wear again.'" Cary looked back up at Shiloh. "I don't think she realizes it's *way* more expensive to buy a suit than to rent a tux." "She probably doesn't care."

"Yeah, probably not. It's her big day. I'm just an accessory."

"Did you fly in?"

"Yeah." Cary nodded. "Yeah."

"From Virginia?" Shiloh was pointing for some reason.

"From San Diego, actually."

"Oh." Shiloh moved her hand to point in the other direction.

"You were right the first time," Cary said, moving her wrist back.

She laughed, embarrassed. "North, south . . ."

Cary was laughing, too, a little bit. "East, west."

"Right, right."

"I *was* in Virginia," he said. "But I got stationed in San Diego two years ago." "I thought maybe you were on a boat somewhere . . ." "I do work on a ship," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He nodded again. He was still kind of laughing. "But I live in an apartment." "So, like, your office is on a ship?"

"Yeah."

Shiloh was still kind of laughing, too. Even though nothing was funny and everything was awkward. "I don't have any idea how the Navy works," she admitted.

"That's okay," he said. "Why would you?"

Yeah. Why would Shiloh know how Cary spent his days and nights? Or where he'd been? What he did, how he felt . . . "Well, I do pay your salary," she said. "So I should really be better informed."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that . . ." Shiloh huffed out a laugh. "Have you."

He was smiling right into her eyes. Shiloh had heels on, so she was a little taller than him. "Mikey says you're still in Omaha," Cary said. She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "I am."

"He said you're in theater."

"I'm not in theater," she said quickly. "I work at the children's theater."

"That's *in* theater."

"It's mostly administration."

"It sounds interesting."

"It's . . ." Shiloh was shaking her head. "Very nonprofit."

"And you have kids. I mean, your own." "I do," she said. "Two. A girl and a boy." Cary was nodding.

"Six and almost three," Shiloh said.

"I should have asked how old."

"You're not obligated."

"Do you have photos?"

"Um . . ." *Did she?* She glanced down at her bag.

"It's okay," Cary said, looking apologetic. Awkward. "Sorry. I thought you'd want me to ask."

"I guess I never do that—show pictures. Because I never know what to say when people show *me* pictures of *their* kids, and I'm a parent."

"I usually say, 'Well, look at that.'"

"That's a good line." Shiloh laughed. More naturally. "It's not that my kids aren't cute or something. They're very cute—you'll just have to take my word on it."

"I do." Cary was smiling again. His mouth was closed, and there were deep lines in his cheeks. He'd always had a face full of lines—in his cheeks, under his eyes, in his forehead. Even in high school. Like he had a little too much face for the space. Cary crinkled when he was happy and creased when he was angry.

He was so familiar to Shiloh.

Standing *close* to him was so familiar.

They could be standing by their lockers. Standing by his mom's station wagon.

Standing in line at a movie theater.

"It's so weird to be talking to you," Shiloh said. She tried to laugh when she said it—like, *Isn't it weird? Isn't it funny?*

Cary looked hurt. "It is?"

Shiloh felt her face fall. "It's so weird to be talking to you," she said again without laughing, "and not know, you know . . . *anything*." Cary pushed his tongue out over his bottom lip.

And not know everything, Shiloh thought.

A waitress swung around their table with a serving cart. She picked up two plates and looked at the elderly couple. "Chicken? Chicken?"

Shiloh looked at Cary. She had to make this less weird. This was their first conversation in fourteen years, and she didn't want it to end like this. She didn't want it to *end*. "Maybe we can catch up more . . ." "Chicken?" The waitress was pointing at Shiloh. "Yes," Shiloh said, "thank you."

"Chicken," Cary said, raising his hand.

The waitress dropped two plates on the table in front of them. Shiloh turned to him. "Don't you have to sit at the head table?" "No one will miss me," he said.

"I think you probably get special food up there . . ."

"Special chicken?"

"And free beer."

Cary pulled out her chair. "No one will miss me," he said again.

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