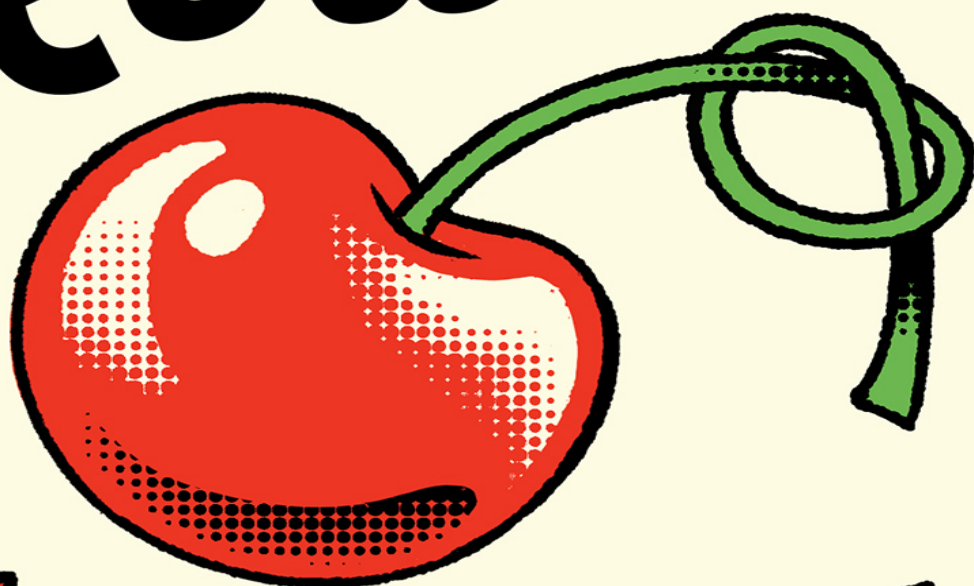


#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

**Rainbow
Rowell**



**Cherry
Baby**

a novel

Cherry Baby

a novel

*Rainbow
Rowell*

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

Chapter 56

Chapter 57

Chapter 58

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

Chapter 63

Chapter 64

Chapter 65

Chapter 66

Chapter 67

Chapter 68

Chapter 69

Chapter 70

Chapter 71

Chapter 72

Chapter 73

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Rainbow Rowell

Copyright

About the Publisher

Chapter 1

“**N**o.

“I said *no*. Not now.

“Steven, *please*, I’m begging you . . .

“No—

“No—

“I know what you want, but I just—

“I’m wearing *black*, Stevie. I just want—

“For *once*, I just—”

Cherry’s phone chimed. She ignored it. She was trying to hold an overgrown dog at arm’s length while she got out the door.

Trying unsuccessfully. Stevie was too big and too *eager* to be contained—she pushed forward, tail-wagging, brown eyes pleading for affection. Stevie had human eyes. Like a gorilla.

“Okay, *fine*.” Cherry gave in, lifting her arms. “Fine, fine, fine.”

Stevie leapt forward, rubbing her big head against Cherry’s black pants, first one thigh, then the other.

“I know . . .” Cherry sighed and patted the dog’s broad back. “You’re a good girl, Stevie.”

Stevie was a two-year-old Newfoundland–Great Pyrenees mix. (Some people called this a “NewfiePyr.” Cherry was not one of them.) She was huge and white, with black spots around her eyes and ears—and she was as fluffy as a sheep or some sort of mountain goat. There were dog owners who actually collected their Great Pyrenees’ fur and made *sweaters* from it. (Again, Cherry was not one of them.)

Stevie looked like a polar bear wearing a burglar’s mask, and she was probably the nicest dog who’d ever lived. Her full name was Stevie Nicks. Cherry’s ex-husband had named her.

Cherry's phone chimed again. She kept ignoring it. Stevie was still trying to push closer. She was always like this when Cherry had been at work all day.

She wedged her head between Cherry's legs and charged forward. This was apparently a show of submission—it was one of Stevie's favorite moves—but Cherry had short legs, and the dog practically knocked her off her feet every time she attempted it.

"Stevie!" Cherry shuffled back, trying to find her balance. "Jesus!" Her phone double-chimed, two texts landing one after another.

Stevie was between Cherry's legs and also wrapped around her knee. (She was as long as a Chinese dragon.) It was too much.

"That's it—*house!*" Cherry ordered. "You have to go to your house, I'm sorry. I can't do this right now."

Stevie heard the word "house" and dutifully trotted over to her wire kennel. The dog was well trained, Cherry would give Tom that. She handed Stevie a probiotic treat and closed the door. The kennel took up half the small front room they used as a foyer.

Cherry reached for a lint roller and started at her wrists. She was covered in white hair, even in places that Stevie hadn't touched. There was hair in the *air* in Cherry's house. It was a full Pig-Pen situation. Maybe Cherry should change her clothes . . .

Or maybe she should just stay home.

She didn't really want to go to a concert by herself. She'd planned to go with her friend Stacia, but Stacia had flaked out, and Cherry couldn't think of a *single* other person who might want to take the extra ticket.

Cherry was thirty-six. Her friends didn't go to concerts anymore—they had kids. Or they watched prestige television. Or they liked to get to sleep early so they could make it to spin class or whatever this year's version of spin class was. *Cherry* didn't even go to concerts anymore.

Tom hated concerts. He didn't care about music, and he didn't like people. Anytime Cherry had tried to take Tom to a concert, he'd spent the whole night frowning at everyone, and he didn't even realize he was doing it. Tom had resting uncomfortable face.

Cherry started with the lint roller again at her shoulders. Her phone chimed.

She'd bought tickets for this concert on the day that it was announced. Goldenrod was her favorite Omaha band. She'd seen them play live twice, before Tom—and before the band had gotten kind of famous and broken up. Tonight was a reunion show. They were going to play their first album

straight through. Cherry didn't want to miss it. She was tired of *missing* everything.

Her phone chimed, and she pulled it out of her back pocket to take a look. The group chat with her sisters had thirty-five new messages. Cherry opened it.

The first text was from her sister Honny:

"THE THURSDAY TRAILER JUST DROPPED! THIS IS NOT A DRILL!!!"

Cherry silenced the phone and shoved it back into her pocket. She set the lint roller on top of the kennel and gave Stevie a stern look.

Stevie was looking up at Cherry with needy eyes. Stevie had resting *yearning* face.

"I'm going to let you out," Cherry said, "but you *cannot* jump on me. And you're not going with me."

Stevie yearned silently.

Cherry unlocked the kennel. "Stay down."

Stevie hopped to her feet inside the cage.

"I'm serious, Steven." Cherry backed toward the front door.

Stevie looked ready to bolt.

Cherry ran for the door and slammed it closed behind her.

Chapter 2

Cherry parked on the street, as close as she could get to the concert venue—a small club in an industrial part of downtown Omaha. It was raining and already dark.

Maybe it was foolish to go out at night by herself like this. Cherry should at least tell her sisters where she was going, to be safe. (Though that always seemed less like a protective measure than a way to streamline the process later when people were looking for your body.)

Cherry's sisters were still blowing up the group chat—and they'd also started texting her individually, to ask why she wasn't replying. Cherry continued to ignore them. She shoved the phone and her wallet into her pocket and got out of the car, sprinting for the club door.

The young guy taking tickets barely looked at her when he checked her ID. She hoped she was early enough to get a table. The only seating in this place was at a few high-tops near the bar.

Cherry got inside and made a beeline for the last available table, hopping a little to get up onto a stool. *Victory!* she thought, then immediately felt foolish. (When had victory become a chair?) But she felt exhilarated, too, just to be here—to be *out*.

She felt *daring*, to be out by herself.

She felt old . . . already . . . compared to everyone else here.

She felt fat. (Always.)

She felt kind of cute, in her dark jeans and gauzy olive-green sweater . . .

Cherry liked everything she was wearing tonight: Chunky baby blue leather boots that she'd ordered from Denmark. Dangly pink earrings made by a plastics artist she'd found online. A vintage heart-shaped locket that she wore with almost everything.

She had cute clothes—too many cute clothes, probably. She'd taken over their bedroom closet, and then the entire spare bedroom. Tom had had to keep all his shoes and dress clothes in a closet downstairs. (He never made her feel bad about that.) (But also he never wore dress clothes.)

Clothes were important to Cherry—her appearance was important. Every weekday morning, when she rode the elevator to her office on the twelfth floor of the Western Alliance building, she took real satisfaction in seeing her reflection in the mirrored brass doors.

Cherry had always been able to see herself clearly. She had a good eye, and she could turn it on herself. She knew what she was working with.

Like—she had long, thick hair in a beautiful, unusual shade of chestnut brown, and she knew it. She had hazel eyes and thick lashes. Really nice freckles across the bridge of her nose. Dimples. A good smile. Cherry knew all this about herself. She could see it.

Also . . . she was fat.

Not fat like most women think they are. Cherry was *actually* fat. Objectively. And she *knew* it. She could say it out loud. She didn't hide from it.

Cherry came from a long line of fat women. (There were three fat women lighting up her cell phone right now.) She'd been a fat kid, then a fat teenager, and now she was a fat lady.

She knew how she looked, how people saw her—she thought about it constantly. Whatever else Cherry was thinking and doing (which was a lot; if Cherry were a train car, she'd be the locomotive), she was *also* thinking about being fat.

Cherry was so used to thinking about being fat, she hardly even noticed that she was doing it. She was so used to thinking about being fat, she never *thought* about it.

There was dog hair on her sleeve. She frowned and plucked it off.

More people were showing up for the concert now. Cherry watched them pour through the door. The crowd was younger than she was expecting. Weren't these kids too young to know Goldenrod?

Maybe this was just the crowd for every concert here . . . Guys with patchy beards. Girls with blunt haircuts and tattoos creeping up their necks and onto their cheeks. Everyone had tattoos now. Literally, everyone. Even soccer moms and elementary school teachers. It must be difficult to be young and rebellious these days—you had to get a tattoo right across your face if you wanted to stand out. You had to wear clothes so deeply unflattering that no one over thirty would dare try it. The girls at this concert were wearing what used to be called mom jeans. Waist-thickening, ass-

flattening jeans. Mom jeans and dad sneakers. Cherry didn't have the heart for any of it. She was too old and fat to lean away from her strengths.

She wished that Stacia was here . . . or somebody.

In the old days, Cherry would have come to the concert with a big group of friends from work or school.

Your friendships change when you get married. And then they change again when everyone starts having kids. Cherry had been left behind at the kid stage. And now Tom was gone, and it was worse than being left behind—it was like getting thrown back to the start.

Maybe she needed younger friends.

She wasn't the *oldest* person here, at least. There were even a few people she recognized, just from living in Omaha her whole life and showing up in certain kinds of places.

She spotted a guy who used to work at the record store . . . back when Omaha had record stores. And a woman who used to work for the newspaper, back when Omaha still had a real newspaper. Sometimes the world was so new, it made Cherry dizzy—and she was only thirty-six. No wonder her mom always seemed confused.

Someone touched her shoulder. A young woman with short, unfortunate bangs wanted to know if Cherry needed the other chairs at her table. Cherry said she didn't. The woman dragged them over to the bar for her friends.

Cherry watched them for a while—then realized she was staring at people like some sort of twentieth-century weirdo. She should stare at her phone, like a normal person. She glanced over at the bar one more time—and right into the eyes of someone who was watching *her*. A man. He smiled.

Cherry frowned. *Was that . . .*

It definitely *was*. She smiled, surprised. The man was already walking toward her. She smiled bigger.

"Russell Sutton!" she said as he stepped up to her table. "As I live and breathe."

"Cherry, Cherry," he said, grinning at her. "You're a flashback—look at you."

"Look at *you*," Cherry said. She *was* looking at him. He looked . . .

Well, god, he looked the same way he always had. Like he'd dropped out of his mother's womb with a good haircut and tortoiseshell glasses. Like he was *born* with that smirk. Russell Sutton of the Fairacres Suttons. Talk about flashbacks. Talk about concussive blasts from the distant past.

"What are you doing here?" Russ asked, smiling with all of his teeth, like he couldn't help it.

Cherry laughed. It was a dumb question. "I came for the show."

He leaned on the high-top table. A lock of brown hair fell onto his forehead. "You know what I mean. I haven't seen you around for *generations*. Are you by yourself?"

"Yeah, you?"

Russ shrugged and swept his hair back with his hand. "Ish. I came by myself—but you know, I know everyone here. *You're* the fresh face, Cherry. Where have you even been?"

She laughed again. "Nowhere. Around. I still live in midtown. I still work for the railroad."

"I didn't know you worked for the railroad—what do you do?"

"I sit in an office and give orders."

He laughed. "I'll bet you're good at that. You're married, right? To that guy who does the cartoon? They're making a movie, isn't that right?"

Cherry clenched her teeth. For just a second. She didn't stop smiling. "That's right—*Thursday*."

He looked confused. "They're making it on Thursday?"

"No," she said. "That's what it's called. The comic. *Thursday*."

"Oh." Russ's mouth quirked down on one side, sheepish. "Sorry. I've never actually read it."

"That's—" Cherry smiled for real. "That's okay." She shook her head. "And anyway, I'm actually . . ." She shook her head again and flapped her left hand. "Divorced."

Russ stood up a little. "Oh."

"I mean, we're *getting* a divorce."

His face was serious. "I'm sorry, Cherry."

"No, don't be. It's . . ." She waved her hand again. "You know."

"I've been divorced for three years," he said.

"Oh. Russ." Cherry finally stopped smiling. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He shrugged. "I lived."

His eyes were soft. She smiled at him.

He leaned toward her and bumped his elbow against hers. "You'll live."

She laughed a little. "Thanks."

"Do you want a drink?"

Cherry looked over at the bar. "Yeah, but I don't want to lose my seat."

"I'll get you something," he said. "What do you want?"

She bit her lips, humming. "Nah. I'd just have to go to the bathroom when the show starts, and *then* I'd lose my seat."

"Oh my *god*," Russ said. "Just tell me what you want. I'll protect your seat all night, Grandma."

She pointed at him. "Seriously, do you promise? I can't stand through a concert."

Russ made a face. "I've stood with you through several concerts, Cherry."

"That's the problem. I ruined myself with long nights in high heels."

He grinned again, nostalgic. "Oh yeah, you did. You used to wear those little pin-up girl shoes." He held up his thumb and forefinger. "They made your feet look tiny."

Cherry kicked his shin with her clunky boot. "I want a Coke Zero. And you have to come back in an hour to watch my seat while I go to the bathroom."

"I won't leave your side," Russ said, loping away from her toward the bar.

Cherry smiled after him. Then tried to shake it off. But her face still felt like it was smiling even with her lips pressed together.

Russell Sutton. Who would have thought?

Chapter 3

Russ brought back a Coke Zero for Cherry and a beer for himself. And he kept his word—he stuck to her table. The opening act had started playing—a local band that never broke out, Sacagawea—but Russ and Cherry just huddled a little closer and kept talking. Cherry told him a bit more about her job. She’d started out as a graphic designer—he knew that—then she got promoted to team leader, then manager, and now she ran the railroad’s marketing department. The woman above her *officially* ran the department. But Cherry was the brains of the operation and frequently the mouth, and always the person who made sure that everything got done. (She was a little more self-effacing as she explained all this to Russ.)

Russ had been working in and around government since college. He was the mayor’s chief of staff now—even though the mayor was a Republican and Russ was a lifelong liberal. (His grandpa had been governor, back when Nebraska still elected Democrats.) And he was active in a bunch of civic groups. For voter turnout. Literacy. Arts programs in marginalized neighborhoods. He really *did* know half the people in the room—they kept stopping at the table to say hello. He kept introducing Cherry. (“*Do you know my friend Cherry? We were practically roommates at Creighton.*”) Russ still went to a lot of concerts. He still saw a lot of movies. He still ate dinner once a week with his parents. He was still really, *really* attractive.

“Handsome” wasn’t the right word for Russ. He wasn’t especially tall or broad. His features were kind of sharp. He looked like the token Irish actor on a BBC drama—a little flintier than everyone else and a little more alive. His eyes were dark blue and set deep, and his color was high. When he was excited or drunk, he looked feverish.

He looked a little feverish tonight.

Russ had gotten married after law school to someone Cherry had never met—a Marian girl who worked at the Community Foundation. (Marian was one of the Omaha schools where rich Catholic girls went.) They had one kid, an eight-year-old boy named Liam—he was at Saint Margaret Mary now. Did Cherry want to see a photo? Yeah. She did. She looked at Russ's phone and smiled. His son was a doll. She said so.

Cherry didn't have any photos to show Russ. She wasn't going to show him a picture of Stevie—that would be too sad. (. . . Even if Cherry did have a thousand of them on her phone.) And she didn't want to talk about Tom. She *couldn't* talk about Tom the way Russ talked about his ex-wife—like she was just another thing that had happened in the years since he and Cherry last talked.

"I can't believe you work in *management*," Russ said. The opening act had finished their set. Goldenrod would be starting soon. "You were always so creative."

"I'm still creative," Cherry said, affronted. She was chewing on ice. She swallowed it. "There aren't very many people who can be creative *and* practical. It's my magic power, actually. I can make sure the work is good, and I can make sure it gets done. And I can talk to the numbers and money people."

"Huh." Russ looked at her glass. "Do you want another Coke Zero?"

She shook her head.

"Don't you miss being an artist?" he asked.

"I know I'm supposed to say yes, but . . . I think I'm a better executive. I don't think I was *ever* much of an artist."

"Sure you were."

She rolled her eyes. "When did you ever see my art, Russ?"

He shrugged. "I just don't think you would have been an art major if you were shitty at it."

Well. That was true. "I got by," Cherry conceded. "But I wasn't an artist." Not like the other people she went to school with. Not like Tom. "If I had to go back to design, I'd miss what I'm doing now."

"I just can't picture you at the railroad," Russ said. "As an *industrialist*."

"I'm not a robber baron."

He laughed. "Do you still see Stacia and all those guys?"

Cherry nodded. Minimally. "Yeah. Same old crowd."

Russ shook his head, like he was remembering something fondly. Cherry could imagine some of the details.

A guy walked past their table and waved at Russ. Russ waved back.

"Do you ever wish that you got out of Omaha?" Cherry asked.

He cut his eyes toward her. “What do you mean?”

Cherry looked up at him. He was a bit taller than her, standing by her chair. “Just . . . the same old faces,” she said. “The same old intersecting circles. Do you ever wish you’d gotten out?”

Russ smiled a little. His eyes looked extra alive. “Not tonight.”

Cherry ran to the bathroom before the show started, and when she came back, Russ was sitting in her seat. He smiled at her and got up. The band was walking onstage. Cherry climbed onto the chair, clapping. She was so excited for this show. Even more excited now that it was starting.

The first song began—and Cherry immediately felt herself sliding backwards. Back to her early twenties. To her senior year of college, when she’d had this CD on repeat. Goldenrod was the band that made “Omaha emo” a thing. Simple, pretty guitars. Whiny, breathy vocals. Base-level unhappiness. All of Goldenrod’s songs were about being lonely or feeling guilty. The lead singer was a famous depressive. He was wearing a paper crown tonight, playing the first few chords of the song on an acoustic guitar.

God, Cherry *loved* this song. She loved this *feeling*. She laughed a little, just for the joy of it. People around her were whooping.

Russ had moved to Cherry’s side of the table, to face the band. He turned to her, smiling, and sang the first lyric—“*I was young, and I was tired, and I was splitting in three.*”

Cherry grinned.

These concerts were all the rage now—bands playing their best-loved albums all the way through—and after a few songs, Cherry could see why. It was *delightful*. Hearing all the songs you wouldn’t usually hear at a concert, the not-even B-sides. Hearing the songs in the precise order that you knew them best.

Cherry kept smiling. She kept tearing up. She kept looking over at Russ—she still wasn’t over the shock of *seeing* him again, and there he was, standing right next to her. Standing so close that his arm brushed against hers every time he took a drink. *Russ Sutton, as she lived and breathed.*

There were songs on this first Goldenrod album that had always reminded Cherry of Russ, that she’d twisted to fit her hopeless crush on him—*obviously* she’d had a crush on him—and now he was right there beside her, singing along.

Maybe this was a message from the universe . . .

It *had* to be a message from the universe—it was too strange and specific for happenstance.

Cherry had gone out for the first time since Tom left to do something just for herself—she'd gone out *by* herself for maybe the first time ever—and this strangely perfect night was here waiting for her. A band she loved, an album she loved . . . and a boy she'd once liked an awful lot.

An awful, *miserable* lot.

Maybe the universe wasn't on her side—would a benevolent god send Russ Sutton onto Cherry's path? This ache in her stomach was familiar and delicious, but it had never led to satisfaction, not where Russ was concerned.

And *yet* . . .

There was satisfaction in feeling *something*, wasn't there? In standing close to someone this attractive and exciting? It felt good to *be* attracted. To buzz a little.

Russ shifted his weight and rested his arm on the back of Cherry's chair. And Cherry let herself enjoy it.

Chapter 4

Everybody was going to the Galway that night.

They were twenty-two and still feeling like they had to go out and drink legally every weekend just because they could—because it's what adults did. Adults drank in bars, not in dorm rooms and basements.

On Friday and Saturday nights, and sometimes on Thursdays, Cherry's friends put on low-cut, high-cropped, slit-up-the-side silky tops, and they went out to the bars.

Cherry was never the most enthusiastic participant—partly because she was too fat to pull off a crop top, but *mostly* because her dad was an alcoholic. Being around drunk people made Cherry anxious, not merry. And being drunk herself didn't improve the situation.

Cherry didn't *get* drunk the way her friends did. She had to drink way more than they did to feel anything at all. Because of her weight, maybe. Or possibly genetics. Cherry could pound shot after shot and never feel soft or silly. She'd feel persistently sober for a couple rounds, then overheated for the next couple, and then—if she kept going—sick.

There was no upside to it. She didn't take any pride in holding her liquor. Cherry didn't want to be one of those women who was always proving she could drink like a man. That seemed . . . expensive. And caloric. And sad.

However . . . it *was* Friday night. And everyone was going out. And Cherry *liked* to go out. The Galway at least had music . . .

She put on a tight dress with a low-cut neck and a full skirt, and offered to drive.