

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

RAINBOW ROWELL

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



IF THE FATES ALLOW

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

RAINBOW ROWELL

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

IF THE FATES ALLOW

Text copyright © 2021 Rainbow Rowell
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Amazon Original Stories are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

eISBN: 9781542034494

Cover design by Micaela Alcaino

Christmas 2020

Reagan was carrying too much. Her overnight bag and groceries, plus a glass pan of Jell-O salad—*too much* Jell-O salad—because she didn't have a smaller glass dish, and Grandma had always made it in a glass dish, so you could see all the colors.

Reagan was carrying too much, and the driveway was slick as fuck. There was snow on the ground, and her grandpa hadn't salted the driveway or shoveled his walk. She couldn't really blame him—he never went anywhere. Her parents dropped off his groceries once a week.

She walked extra slow, taking small steps.

“Hey there!” a man called.

Reagan looked up, and her foot hit a patch of ice. She went down quick, landing on one knee—and then on her hip, and then on the groceries, twisting the whole time to keep the glass pan in the air. “*Fuck.*”

“Holy shit!” the same voice swore. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine!” Reagan shouted from the ground.

“Don't move!” Whoever it was was getting closer.

“*You* don't move—are you wearing a mask?”

“Oh . . . no.”

“Then stay where you are!” Reagan set the Jell-O salad on the ground. “I'm fine!”

She pushed up onto her knees. She could see him now, the neighbors' son—the quiet one with no chin. Standing about ten feet away from her. He had his arms out like he was still about to help her up.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“No.” She was a *little* hurt. Her knee felt scraped, and her hip was already throbbing. She lifted herself up onto her feet—

Then hit another patch of ice. The guy darted toward her. She caught her balance and pointed at him. “No!”

He stopped, his hands still up. She could see his breath.

“I swear to God, Mason”—Reagan didn't even remember that she

remembered his name—"I have been quarantining for two weeks, and I am *not* giving my grandpa Covid because you can't listen."

"Okay," he said. Then he pulled his scarf up over his face—and Reagan thought at first that he was trying to hide his nonexistent chin. But then she realized he was trying not to blow germs at her. "Just be careful," he said.

"I was *being* careful before you tripped me!"

"Before I tripped you?"

"You yelled at me!"

"I was saying hello so that I didn't startle you."

"Well, good work!"

"Reagan?" someone new shouted. "Are you okay?"

She looked up. Her grandpa was standing at the front door.

"I'm fine, Grandpa!"

"Did you fall?"

"No, I'm fine!"

"Let me get my coat."

"No, Grandpa—stay!"

"Don't come out, Al—it's slick!"

"Is that you, Mason?"

"Yeah, don't come out—I'll help her."

"*Don't you dare*," Reagan hissed.

"Just go," Mason said. "Walk in the snow. It's safer."

He was right. She inched over to the snow, then stepped into it—even though she was wearing ankle boots, and the snow immediately fell over the tops. She got to the porch and up to the door—her grandpa was just coming back with his coat half on. Reagan hurried past him into the house and closed the door behind her.

And then there they were, she and her grandpa, standing not a foot apart. His coat was still hanging from one shoulder, and Reagan had tracked snow onto the carpet, and all she could think about in that moment was the air between them—the constant flow of droplets and microparticles. Her grandpa looked thinner than she remembered. Older than he'd looked just a few months ago. Like she could knock him over by breathing too hard.

This is okay. She'd taken every precaution. Reagan had been careful, anyway, for months—and then she'd practically sealed her little house off for two weeks so she could be here. She hadn't even opened her mail.

She was as clean as she could be; she wasn't going to hurt him.

“Hi, Grandpa,” she said. And then she dropped her bags and stepped forward to give him a hug. It took him a second to catch up. Reagan didn’t blame him; she hadn’t hugged anyone in months, and neither of them had ever been huggers anyway. *Grandma* was the hugger. Grandma was the one who made you go find your grandpa and give him a hug. Reagan and her grandfather had probably never hugged before except under orders.

Reagan was the wrong choice for this.

If you could only spend Christmas with one person, no one in her family would pick her. (No one in the world would pick her.)

Reagan was the person you called when you wanted someone to talk you into leaving your husband. Or when you needed someone to call the bank to straighten out your overdraft fees.

Her niece called Reagan when she needed help getting birth control. And Reagan’s mom called when she wanted someone to go to the Ford dealership with her dad, so they didn’t end up paying too much for a truck.

No one called Reagan for comfort.

No one called Reagan to offer any.

No one ever said, “*I’m lonely, could you come by?*”—and no one ever came by.

Even before this bullshit.

Her grandpa felt more solid in her arms than he looked. He was a big guy once, and those bones were still there. “Thought maybe my hugging days were over,” he said.

Reagan laughed and pulled away. “Me, too. It smells good in here.”

“You thought I couldn’t make a turkey?”

“No, I believed in you.”

“I didn’t bother with the potatoes.”

“I brought potatoes,” she said. “I told you I would.”

“Well, all right . . .” He seemed awkward. Standing there in his own living room. Everything looked the same as it had when her grandma was alive. Either he kept the place pretty clean, or he’d cleaned up because Reagan was coming over.

“Well, all right,” she said. “Let’s get them started.”

Grandpa turned toward the kitchen. Then the doorbell rang, and he turned back. Reagan caught his arm. “Don’t answer that,” she scolded. “You don’t answer the door, do you?”

“Well, I look to see who it is. I get a lot of deliveries.”

“I’ll check. There’s no reason for you to be answering the door right now. Nobody needs you.”

She looked out the window. She didn’t see anyone. Who was making deliveries on Christmas Day? Fucking Amazon Prime.

Reagan opened the door. The Jell-O salad was sitting on the welcome mat.

She picked it up, then went inside and wiped the glass down with a Clorox wipe.

Her mom texted while Reagan was peeling potatoes.

I’ve been thinking and I just think it would be okay if you brought Grandpa over for dinner.

You always think it would be okay, Reagan texted back.

Well it has been so far!

Her older sister, Caitlin, was on the thread, too.

I mean, Caitlin texted, Mom’s right. We haven’t seen each other in nine months, and none of us have had Covid. So that’s nine months we could have seen each other.

Reagan wanted to say, “*Maybe that’s why we haven’t had Covid.*”

But she wasn’t even *sure* that no one in her family had had Covid. They wouldn’t tell her if they had. Half of them didn’t wear masks—half of Nebraska wouldn’t wear a mask. Her brother kept posting conspiracy theories on Facebook, and Reagan was the only one arguing with him.

Also, Reagan’s family *had* seen each other. The rest of them had. They’d all gotten together for Thanksgiving. “*We’re socially distanced over here,*” her mom had called to tell her.

“*You put the leaf in the dining room table,*” Reagan replied. “*That’s not social distancing.*”

Only Reagan and her grandpa were taking this seriously. They each spent Thanksgiving alone—Grandpa here in Arnold, the little town where most of her family still lived, and Reagan a few hours away, in Lincoln.

“*We’re all so worried about you,*” her mom kept saying to her. “*You’re becoming a recluse.*”

“*I’m simply following the recommendations of the CDC,*” Reagan would say.

“Oh, the CDC . . .”

Reagan didn't need to get Covid. She was fat and prone to bronchitis. She was exactly the sort of person who showed up in those “Who we've lost” retrospectives in the local newspaper.

If you asked Reagan, every single person in her family looked like someone in a Covid obituary. They were all fat. Her dad was diabetic. Her mom was a cancer survivor. Her sister still smoked. What were they playing at? They weren't lucky people. They were the sort of people who got laid off right before Christmas and got pregnant in the back seat of cars. Why were they willing to roll these dice?

Her grandpa had locked down right away.

“I'm worried about your grandpa,” her mom said back in April. *“He won't let me come over.”*

Good, Reagan had thought.

“He's still grieving,” her mom said. *“He shouldn't be alone.”*

Reagan couldn't really argue with that. There was no good argument. There was no answer. No good way to deal with any of this.

She'd called Grandpa on Thanksgiving Day and cooked up a plan for Christmas. She'd had to convince him it would be safe.

“I'll stay home for two weeks, Grandpa. I'll be totally quarantined.”

“Well, I don't know that I want you to do that for me, Reagan . . .”

“I want to do it.”

“That's a long time for a young person to stay home.”

“I'd be home anyway, Grandpa.” Reagan hadn't seen friends since March. She hadn't been on a single date.

“Well, I don't know . . .”

“I'm coming,” she'd said. *“We're going to have Christmas together.”*

Reagan didn't know how to make mashed potatoes. (Single people didn't make mashed potatoes.) But she'd looked up directions online, and it didn't seem hard.

Her grandpa made the gravy.

He'd already set the table with her grandma's red poinsettia tablecloth and gotten out two of the good plates, the not-quite-china with the purple flowers around the edges.

Reagan had never seen this table so empty.

Normally it was so crowded with food there was no room for your dinner plate. And no room for anyone under forty, anyway. Reagan had spent every Christmas of her life sitting at one of the card tables set up in the living room. The kids' tables.

This wasn't how she wanted to move up.

God, even if this were a normal Christmas, the only reason there'd be more room at the big table was because Grandma was gone. Would they even *have* Christmas here anymore? Or would Reagan's parents take over? Would their extended family split into smaller units, all the aunts and uncles doing their own thing? They were all grandparents now. All matriarchs and patriarchs. Who would get custody of Grandpa on Christmas—would it rotate? Maybe Reagan wouldn't see her cousins again until the next funeral. The next Zoom funeral.

Motherfuck, this was a bleak line of thinking. This was a bleak time to be alive. And this was definitely a bleak motherfucking table.

She set out the potatoes, the gravy boat, the lasagna pan full of green Jell-O salad, the dinner rolls Grandpa made from a can . . .

Grandpa brought out the turkey. Reagan laughed when she saw it.

"Why are you laughing at my turkey?"

"Because it's *massive*."

He set it down. "It's eighteen pounds."

"That's huge, Grandpa."

"I only know how to make an eighteen-pound turkey. I didn't feel like experimenting."

"I guess you'll have leftovers for sandwiches," she said.

"You can take some of it with you."

She nodded.

Grandpa sat at the head of the table, and Reagan sat next to him. He started carving the turkey with an electric knife that was probably older than she was. "It's your lucky day," he said. "You don't have to fight anybody for a drumstick."

She laughed. She was glad for his dumb jokes. They'd already run out of things to talk about in the kitchen. There wasn't much. He was a retired rancher who watched a lot of television. She was an accountant who worked from home. They talked about Covid news and theories. They'd read all the same newspaper stories. Her grandpa watched cable news but didn't trust it. Reagan had never really had a conversation with her grandfather before.

They'd always been part of a larger group—always with her grandmother, usually with her parents. They didn't really have an existing dynamic. So they talked about the things that had brought them together today: Their worry. Their caution. Their firm belief that most people were idiots.

That was a nice discovery, that her grandpa seemed to dislike people as much as she did. Had he always been that way? Or was he just getting crotchety in old age and loneliness? Reagan had always been that way, and it was only getting worse.

"Your grandmother would want us to say grace," he said, after they'd piled up their plates.

"Hmm." Reagan was noncommittal. She'd already taken a bite of turkey.

"But if she wanted me to keep saying grace," he went on, "she should have outlived me."

The turkey caught in Reagan's throat. She looked up at him, to see if he was being bitter or morose—but he just looked matter-of-fact. He was buttering his roll.

Reagan finished swallowing. "She really should have."

He set the roll on his plate. "I kept telling her . . . that if she wanted me to get into heaven, she'd have to deliver me herself."

Reagan laughed. There were tears in her eyes. "That woman had no follow-through."

Her grandpa looked up at her. His eyes were shining, too. "Exactly."

"Do you think Grandma would have been as careful as you? Through all this?"

"Heck no, I would have had to nail our windows closed."

Reagan's grandmother had been a short, wide woman who dyed her hair red and always wore pink lipstick. She was active in her church, active in the community. The type of person who went to all of her grandkids' recitals and school plays, even after she had twenty of them.

She framed every school photo the grandkids ever gave her, always leaving the old ones inside so that the pictures stacked up and made the backs hard to close. Reagan's senior picture was sitting on a coffee table in the living room, and if you opened it up, her whole childhood would spring out.

"I can't even imagine your grandmother wearing a mask," Grandpa said.

"Maybe she'd get into it," Reagan said. "It would have given her

something to do with her old quilting scraps.”

“Those homemade masks aren’t good for anything . . .”

“Better than nothing,” she said.

“I’ve got some N95s for when I work with insulation. Remind me to give you a couple when you leave.”

“All right.” The potatoes were sticky, but the gravy was good. Reagan’s whole plate was brown and white. The only green thing was her dish of Jell-O—she should have brought a vegetable. “My mom hates wearing a mask because she says they smear her lipstick. So then I say, ‘Don’t wear lipstick,’ and she acts like I said, ‘Don’t wear pants.’”

Her grandpa laughed. But it turned sharp at the end. “I wish she’d be more careful.”

“Me, too,” Reagan said.

“To be honest, sometimes I’m glad your grandma didn’t have to live through this. I think about it sometimes, that she never heard about it. She never worried about it. She never lost anyone to it. She left before she ever had to take on this burden. And I’m glad for that.”

Reagan nodded.

She couldn’t really think of anything to say after that. And her grandpa didn’t seem to want to talk more, either. And there was no one to make them be sociable.

Reagan had quit smoking a long time ago. After college. Smoking used to make her feel like such a badass. But then she got out of school and started working—and smoking just made her feel hard. Even the way she held the cigarette in her hand and in her mouth . . . It was like she was always smirking. Always making a face like, “*Well, isn’t that fucking perfect.*”

Reagan already felt hard enough. She didn’t need any accessories. She didn’t need to telegraph it out to the world.

Also she kept getting bronchitis. It was a fucking drag, so she quit.

But she still missed cigarettes. She missed having the excuse of them. The “*Be right back*”s. She missed the way decent people would leave you alone as soon as you pulled out the pack.

She still took cigarette breaks sometimes.

After dinner, she and her grandpa moved into the living room to watch television. Reagan didn’t want to watch Fox News, so they settled on the

Weather Channel. He sat in his easy chair, and Reagan sat on the couch, fiddling with a crochet hook she'd found tucked between the cushions.

After a half hour, she said, "I'm going to get some air."

Her grandpa nodded.

She put on her coat and headed out onto the back deck. It was too cold for the snow to melt, but it wasn't freezing—or it was just barely freezing.

"Hey," someone said.

Reagan jumped.

It was Mason again, standing on his parents' deck. "I swear to God," he said. "I'm not trying to startle you."

"Jesus *Christ*, Mason."

"Sorry."

Reagan frowned at him. "What are you even doing out here?"

"Getting some air. Do you want me to put on a mask?"

She looked between them. They were at least twenty feet apart. And they were outdoors. "Yeah," she said. "If you're gonna keep talking to me."

Mason fished a mask out of his pocket.

Reagan did the same thing. She wasn't sure why she was bothering; she should just go back inside. "What are you out here avoiding?" she asked, sliding the elastic behind her ears.

"Who says I'm avoiding something?"

"Well, you're standing outside in the middle of winter. And you're not smoking a cigarette or waiting for a bus."

Mason laughed. "I'm just taking a moment for myself."

Reagan hummed. "Me, too."

"Hey, I'm, um . . . I'm sorry for your loss."

"Oh." She wasn't expecting him to say that. "Thanks. I guess that's what I'm out here avoiding."

"Your loss?"

"Pretty much. I thought I was doing my grandpa good by making sure he could still have a Christmas, but I think I'm just reminding him that it's Christmas and that she isn't here."

Mason didn't reply to that. Why should he? He was a complete stranger.

"Sorry," Reagan said. "I think I've forgotten how to talk to people."

He laughed again. "Don't worry about it. This is the first in-person conversation I've had with anyone other than my parents—and your grandpa and the UPS guy—in months."

“Yeah? You pretty locked down?”

“Oh yeah.”

“I thought this was no-mask country,” she said.

“Maybe it is, I wouldn’t know. I don’t leave the house.”

Reagan smiled. He couldn’t see it. “You live there with your parents?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “I mean—I guess I don’t know how to answer that question.”

“O-kay . . .”

“Technically, I live in DC. I have an apartment there. But I was going a little crazy after two months of isolation, and I was worried about my mom and dad . . .”

“So you came back to Arnold?”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“You’d rather quarantine in Arnold, Nebraska, than in Washington, DC?”

“I mean . . . *yeah*.” He was smiling. She could sort of hear it. She could imagine his chin disappearing. “Honestly,” he said. “It’s been nice. I took my brother’s old room—it’s huge. It’s half the size of my apartment in DC. And I can be outside here without wearing a mask. You know, usually. And my parents are much less irritating than I remembered from high school. I watch *M*A*S*H* every night with my mom. It’s kinda *great*.”

“So why are you out here getting some air?”

Mason was quiet for a second. Then he said, “I don’t remember you being this chatty back in school.”

“Well, I don’t remember you at all.”

He laughed.

“Seriously,” she said, “were we in school together?” She wasn’t trying to be mean. (She didn’t have to try. It came naturally.) She just recognized him as her grandparents’ neighbor.

“There’s only one high school, Reagan.”

“Yeah, but you’re a lot younger than me, right?”

“I’m two years younger than you.”

“*Really*? I thought you won the state wrestling thing when I was in college.”

“That was my brother, Brook.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. We were in band together—you and me.”

“I think I blocked that out. I hated band.”

“I could tell,” he said. “You were terrible.”

“I didn’t even play half the time. I just moved the clarinet around.” She reached in her pocket for cigarettes. She didn’t have any. She hadn’t had any for years. “Sorry I don’t really remember you.”

“That’s all right. We were all trying to stay in your blind spot anyhow.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you were mean as shit.”

“I was not.”

“Yes, you were—you called my friend ‘Mr. Toad.’”

Reagan cackled. “You were friends with Mr. Toad?”

“I was.”

“How’s he doing?”

“All right. He manages the nursing home.”

“Oof. What a time to work at a nursing home.”

“Yeah . . .”

They were quiet again.

“Your grandpa is careful,” Mason said, like he could hear her worrying. “Your parents come by, and they talk through the storm door.”

“That’s good,” Reagan said.

“I should have salted his driveway.”

“What?”

“I didn’t realize it had iced up, or that he was having company.”

“Oh God, don’t worry about that—that’s not your job.”

Mason shrugged. His hands were in his coat pockets. “Well . . .”

“He says you shovel the walk, so the mailman can get up to the porch.”

“Only if your dad hasn’t come by.”

“Well, that’s still nice of you. Thanks.”

“It’s nothing. I didn’t do it to impress you.”

Reagan made a face. “Why *would* you do it to impress me?”

“I . . .” Mason was probably making a face that she couldn’t see. “That’s what I’m saying.”

“Anyway,” she grumbled, “I’m not that impressed.” Reagan should go inside. She should sit on her grandparents’ couch and scroll Instagram and silently judge everyone she knew for having big-ass family dinners. “So you work from home?” she asked. “I mean, remotely?”

“Yeah,” Mason said.

“What do you do?”

“I fact-check audio content for news websites.”

“That does not seem like a job a real person would have.”

He laughed into his mask. “My eight-year-old self would be mortified, but it’s interesting work.”

“What did your eight-year-old self want to be?”

“Professional rodeo cowboy. What about you?”

“Oh, my eight-year-old self would be thrilled with my life. She just wanted to get the hell out of Arnold.”

Mason laughed some more. He leaned against his deck railing. Reagan took half a step back from hers.

“You live in Lincoln,” he said, “right? What do you do?”

“Accounting. For the Department of Agriculture.”

“You like it?”

“It’s fine. I can do it from home. I’m lucky,” she said—because you had to say that, that you were lucky you *could* be careful. Even though most people around Reagan who *could* be careful *weren’t*.

“Yeah, me, too,” Mason said, nodding.

The conversation died again. He was looking down at the ground between their decks.

“I don’t feel lucky,” Reagan said out loud.

He looked up. “Yeah? Me, neither.”

She couldn’t really see him. It was dark, and he was wearing a fabric mask that sat high on his face, under his glasses. She hadn’t taken a good look at him before he put it on. He had longish hair, with a little bit of wave to it, but she couldn’t tell what color. He was taller than her, probably. Nondescript in his baggy jeans and heavy canvas coat. She wouldn’t be able to pick him out of a lineup, even if it happened right this moment. He could be anybody.

“I am hiding,” he said.

“What?”

“I’m hiding out here. My brother and his family came over after dinner. To exchange gifts. And we were all supposed to stay outside. But it was cold. And . . .” He shook his head. “It felt ridiculous. To be out on the porch, standing six feet apart. So my mom said, ‘This is stupid, just come in,’ and they did.”

“And you came out here?”

“I did.”

“What did you tell your family?”

“I didn’t say anything. I just walked right through the house, out the back door.”

“Are they going to be mad at you?”

“Maybe. They won’t mention it, though.”

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t do that. We’re stoic, Germanic types—inscrutable plainsmen. Aren’t you?”

“No,” Reagan said. “My family is very scrutable. Our closest neighbors growing up were five miles away, and they could still hear my sister and me fighting.”

“Well . . . Nobody will say anything. If I go back in.”

“If?”

“Well, my brother’s family just broke down our wall, you know? They crossed our perimeter.”

“I do know.”

“Any one of them could have Covid. They have three kids—kids don’t even get symptoms half the time. They could be giving my parents Covid right now.”

“Probably not.”

“How do *you* know what’s probable?” He raised his voice and his shoulders. “How does anyone? It’s like—the air in there is different now. And if I go back in, I’m part of it. I keep thinking about all the terrible things that could happen from this moment on. Taking care of my parents. Taking care of myself. You can’t even visit someone in the hospital, you know?”

“I know.”

“And my brother will feel like shit if that happens. He’s not a bad person.”

“Is this the wrestler?”

“Yeah. I mean, not anymore. But yeah.”

“So you’re going to . . . what?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “You must think I’m crazy. Paranoid.”

“I would have,” she said, “before. But now . . . I don’t even know what it means to be crazy. If you’re as careful as you’re supposed to be, you seem neurotic. I feel neurotic. Now. And I never used to be. I’m the sort of person

who'd share an ice cream cone with a dog."

"That's disgusting."

"I know. But I've never cared about that sort of thing. I go swimming in lakes. I wear shoes in the house. If I drop my hot dog in the grass, I'll just brush it off and eat it."

Mason laughed.

"But now I wipe down my mail."

"They say you don't have to wipe down your mail," he said.

"I know, but I'm in the habit now."

"You get a lot of mail? I don't get any mail."

"I'm a homeowner with a retirement plan," she said.

"Now you're just bragging."

Reagan laughed. She leaned on the railing of the deck. She was tired of standing.

"They're in there eating pie," Mason said.

"How long has it been since you've all gotten together?"

"Indoors? Months. Probably June or July."

She nodded.

"Is *your* family all being careful?" he asked.

"God no, they're all at my mom's house. They've been acting normal this whole time. I haven't seen my mom since March."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. She still calls me every other day. And texts me weird YouTube videos."

Mason laughed. "I don't think my mom knows how to get on YouTube."

"Count your fucking blessings."

"I do." He looked down again, still kind of chuckling. "It's not fair," he said, more seriously. "I made that pie."

"I'm impressed," Reagan said. "I struggled with the Jell-O salad."

He looked up. "I thought that might be Jell-O salad . . . What kind did you make?"

"Green."

"Green is the *best*," he said.

"Green *is* the best," she agreed.

"*I'm* impressed."

Reagan smiled at him. Only because he couldn't see it. "Wait right

there.”

She turned around and walked into the house. Into the kitchen. The Jell-O was in the fridge.

“You talking to somebody?” her grandpa called from the living room.

“Just Mason,” she said.

“I like that Mason. He’s got a job in Washington.”

“Mm-hmm.” Reagan got two everyday bowls out of the cupboard. Blue-and-white Pfaltzgraff. “Do you want anything while I’m in here?”

“No, thanks. I’m still stuffed.”

“All right.” Reagan took the bowls out onto the deck. Mason was still standing there, with his hands in his pockets. He laughed when he saw her.

“I’m not sure how to do this,” she said.

“You could set it on the deck, then back away from it.”

“Yeah, all right.” She set one of the bowls down and then stepped back.

Mason sat on the edge of his deck and slid under the wood railing, hopping to the ground. It wasn’t much of a drop. He took the bowl and climbed back onto the deck, using the stairs. Then he leaned against the railing across from Reagan again. “It looks perfect,” he said. “Are there layers?”

“It’s just Cool Whip and cherries,” Reagan said. “Also—there are pecans in there.”

“Yeah there are.”

“In case you’re allergic.”

“I’m not.”

“Well, good.”

He was looking at it.

“You can eat it,” she said.

“Now?”

“Yeah, we’ll just keep our distance.”

“All right.” He sat down at one end of his deck.

Reagan sat on her grandpa’s deck, at the other end. Mason took off his mask and smiled over at her. She’d been a little hard on his chin before—it was present. He had a square face. Narrow eyes. Lips that didn’t quite close over his smile. He looked like a chipmunk. She definitely would have pointed that out in high school; he was right to steer clear of her.

He was already taking a bite. “That’s the stuff,” he said.

Reagan took off her mask. She always had room for Jell-O salad.

“Is that pineapple?” he asked.

“Yeah. Pineapple, pecans and cream cheese.”

“And marshmallows.”

“You’ve got quite a palate over there,” she said.

“My grandma used to make this.”

“Mine, too.”

“God.” He was grinning at the bowl. “This stuff is like a time machine.”

Reagan was smiling at him. “I’m glad you like it.”

“She used to make the other one, too. With the um . . .” He squinted and snapped his fingers. “Pretzels.”

“With raspberry Jell-O.”

He pointed at her. “Yes!”

Reagan shook her head like he was being stupid, but she was laughing.

“I love that one,” Mason said, taking another bite. “My mom never makes anything like this. She says my grandma cooked everything with packets of Jell-O and cans of soup.”

“We used to give my grandma such a hard time,” Reagan said. “It cracked us up that she called this a salad. ‘You kids want some more salad?’”

Mason laughed.

“I couldn’t imagine Christmas without it,” she said.

He looked up at her, still smiling. He tipped his head a little.

Reagan looked away. “So do you still have friends around here?”

“Oh . . . ,” he said, “you know.”

“Not really.”

“Some of the people from high school are still here. But I see them more on Facebook than anywhere else. I’m not exactly hanging out at the Co-op.”

“I guess not,” Reagan said.

“What about you? You still have friends in Arnold?”

“I’m not sure I ever had friends in Arnold.”

He waved his hand, dismissing her. “You can’t lie to me about that—I remember you and your friends. I always thought you were going to marry Levi Stewart.”

Reagan curled her top lip. “Why’d you think that?”

“Everyone thought that.”

“Not me.”

He pulled his head back. “That’s harsh.”

“Pfft. Levi’s fine. He’s got a wife and three kids and fifty bison.” She still talked to Levi once a week, even though they broke up in college. (Reagan didn’t let many people into her life—but once she’d gone to the effort, she didn’t like to let go of them.)

“Bison, huh? That sounds interesting.”

“You should friend him on Facebook, he’ll tell you all about it.”

Mason was finished with his Jell-O already. He was putting his mask back on. Reagan was sorry to see his smile go.

It was colder now that she was sitting on the deck. She shivered.

“Here,” Mason said. Then he tossed something onto her deck. Two somethings.

“What are those?” Reagan was squinting over at them.

“Handwarmers—I guess I should have asked if you wanted them. Are you worried about surface contact?”

“Um . . .” Reagan had hand sanitizer in her coat pocket. Mason watched her spray the handwarmers. He didn’t make fun of her. She slipped the paper pouches into her pockets. They really were warm—how did that even work? “Oh,” she said. “That’s *nice*. You sure you don’t need them?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I’ve been warming my hands this whole time.”

She sat down again, hanging her feet off the deck. “Just watching me suffer.”

“Exactly.”

Mason was sitting at the very end of his deck, leaning against the beam. Both decks looked like they’d been built by the same person. Unfinished cedar, with one railing. If you were a kid, you could fall right under the rail. Reagan and her cousins used to push each other off.

Reagan looked down at her feet. “Sorry I don’t remember who you were going to marry in high school,” she said.

“It’s okay,” Mason said. “I didn’t marry her.”

Reagan nodded, at another loss for words. What had this pandemic done to her? She’d never been much of a talker, but she’d always been able to find words when she wanted them. Now her head and mouth felt empty. She felt like she carried emptiness around with her, a six-foot radius of it.

“*Reagan*,” Mason hissed. “Look!” He was pointing away from the deck. Three mule deer were running through her grandpa’s yard. Nearly silent in the snow.

There were only two houses on this road, and they backed up to a field,

with an old fence that stretched behind both yards. (This must have been one property once.) The first two deer got to the fence and sailed over it, out into the field. The third one stumbled. It stumbled and didn't get up.

"Shit," Mason said, sliding off his deck.

Reagan watched him run across the yard. "Careful," she said, too quietly for him to hear. He was already closer to that deer than he should be. "Careful!"

She hopped off the deck and landed in the snow. Her hip twinged, and her knee hurt more sharply. "Fuck," she muttered, still watching Mason. He was walking up to the deer with his hands out in front of him. Reagan followed—but hung back, staying well away from both of them. "What are you doing?" she shout-whispered.

"It's caught in the fence," Mason said.

The deer was staring at him. Completely still. It hadn't made a sound.

Reagan crept to the side to get a closer look. It looked like the deer had managed to snag its foot between two crossbars and a small tree that was growing right next to the fence.

Mason was still inching toward it, with his hands out.

"What are you *doing*?" Reagan asked again.

"I'm going to help it get free."

"It'll get itself free."

"I don't think it will. It's wedged pretty good."

The deer broke into frantic movement, struggling against the fence.

"It's going to injure itself," Mason said.

"It's going to injure *you*."

This wasn't a fawn or a hungry little doe; the deer was as long as Reagan was tall—it must have weighed two hundred pounds.

"Shhhh," Mason was saying. Maybe to the deer, maybe to Reagan. He was crouching behind it, which seemed like the dumbest decision in the world.

"*Mason*," Reagan whispered.

"It's all right," he said, reaching for the trapped hoof. "Her other legs are on the other side of the fence."

"I think that's a buck."

"She's not a buck, look at her head."

The deer struggled again. Mason froze. Reagan took another anxious step toward them.

When the deer stilled, Mason shot forward. He bent the tree back and grabbed the trapped hoof, lifting it free.

The deer pulled the leg forward—and in the same motion, kicked its other hind leg through the fence, catching Mason in the chest.

“Oof,” he said, falling backward.

The deer ran away, and Reagan ran to Mason. “Jesus Christ!” she shouted. “I told you!”

Mason was lying on his back in the snow. Reagan went down on her knees beside him. Her right knee hurt like a motherfucker. “Are you okay?” she asked, touching his arm.

His eyes were wide. “I’m fine,” he said. “Just surprised. Is she okay?”

“The *deer*?”

He nodded.

“She’s fine,” Reagan said. “She’ll live to spread ticks and disease, and destroy crops. Where’d she get you?”

He pointed to his shoulder.

“Can you move it?”

He rotated his shoulder. He was broader than he looked from a distance. Broad even under his coat. His neck was thick, and one of his ears was partly inverted, probably from an old injury. He had snow in his ears and his hair. His hair was much darker than Reagan’s, almost black.

“Did you hit your head?” she asked.

“No. I think I’m okay.”

“That was so stupid, Mason—that could have been your *face*.”

“I think I’m okay,” he repeated. He lifted his head up out of the snow and pushed up onto his elbows.

Reagan moved away from him.

He stood up, so she stood up, too. The pain in her knee flared. She hissed, shifting her weight off it.

Mason caught her arm. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Reagan looked up at him. He was an inch or two taller than her. Not very tall. “That could have been your *neck*,” she said. “That was so *stupid*.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“God damn it,” Reagan said. Her heart was still pounding.

Mason looked worried. There was snow on his glasses, and his mask had fallen below his nose. He was holding her arm. “I’m sorry, okay? Are

you hurt?”

“No,” Reagan said. “I’m just . . .”

Mason was holding her arm. He was standing right next to her. She’d put herself this close to him, and she wasn’t even wearing a mask—*where was her mask?* He was so close, she could see his chest moving.

He reached up, slowly, with his free hand, and tugged his mask back into place over his nose.

Reagan watched him through the fog of her own breath.

Then she reached up, with her own free hand, to touch his cloth-covered cheek.

He didn’t move away.

She pulled his mask down. Slowly. Deliberately. Under his soft chin.

Mason watched her face. He wasn’t smiling, but she could still see his two front teeth.

Reagan made a fist in the suede collar of his coat and pulled herself closer to him.

His head dipped forward, more fiercely than she was expecting, to kiss her.

She closed her eyes and just let it happen for a few seconds—he was kissing her. He was in her space. Past her perimeter. This was the second person to touch her today. The second person in ten months. (If Reagan had known in February what was coming, she would have thrown her body into more arms.) (She didn’t need people the way other people needed people, but she still needed . . . *something*.) Mason squeezed her arm. She felt herself waking up. She pulled hard on his collar and kissed him hungrily—he tasted green. *God. God damn it.* He wrapped his arm around her waist and held her even closer. They were both wearing thick coats. Reagan was still wearing her ankle boots. Her feet were drenched. That deer was probably long gone. *God damn it. Damn it. Damn it.*

Mason pulled his mouth away. “Hey,” he whispered. “Are you okay?”

Reagan was fine.

“Reagan . . .”

She was fine. She was alive. She was lucky.

“You’re crying,” he said, loosening his arm, letting go of her elbow. “I’m sorry . . .”

“No.” She shook her head. “It’s not . . .” She didn’t have the rest of that sentence. She was at a loss for everything. Mason was just standing there,

with Reagan's hand holding his collar. She pushed her face into his shoulder.

"All right," he said, touching her back again gently. "It's okay."

It wasn't. It maybe never would be. Reagan was crying like . . . like she was someone else. Someone she'd judge too harshly to pity.

"All right," Mason was whispering.

Reagan let go of his collar. She lifted her head. She looked up at his face. She didn't remember him from high school. She shook her head but couldn't find anything useful in it.

She took a step away from him and thought about apologizing, but she wasn't sure how. She ran back toward the house, past the deck and around the front.

When she rang the doorbell, her grandpa answered it.

Christmas 2021

The house was full of Reagan's relatives.

It still felt surreal to Reagan, to be this close to people. It still felt unsafe.

But her grandfather had decided it was probably as safe as it was going to get. Half the family was vaccinated, he argued, and the other half had already had Covid—a few of them had had both. *“I’m tired of waiting for it to get better, honey. It feels like we should all get together before it gets worse.”*

Grandpa had just gotten his booster shot, and he was feeling invincible. Reagan couldn't imagine that feeling.

She'd spent too much of the last two years feeling paranoid and vulnerable. She'd gotten through Thanksgiving at her mom's house by sitting next to an open window. And she got through most other social situations by avoiding them. She was still working remotely, by choice. And she still used the drive-up lane for groceries.

She'd tried going out with her friends a few times, this summer, when the future had felt brighter—but even then, it was hard not to look around a crowded bar and wonder how everyone there had spent the last year. *Had they been the ones making it all worse?*

Her friends said she was bitter. Levi said she had PTSD.

“I’m not so sure about that P,” Reagan told him. (Easy for Levi to shrug it all off. He was surrounded by fresh air and bison.)

Her family wouldn't even talk to her about Covid anymore. Reagan's sister Caitlin had been down for about two months this spring, and she was still having trouble climbing stairs—but she'd told Reagan to stop checking in with her. *“I can feel you judging me.”*

Reagan didn't know how to tell her sister that she only sort of judged her. That she wished Caitlin had been more careful, but that she also didn't believe that being careful was enough. And more than all that, she was just *worried* about her. She was constantly worried about all of them.

Reagan's mother had called the week before Christmas to make sure

Reagan was coming home. *“You worry too much,”* her mom said. *“The CDC says the risk for vaccinated people—”*

Reagan had cut her off. *“Oh, the CDC . . .”*

“Sometimes I think you don’t want to get back to normal, Reagan. Sometimes I think you like it better this way.”

Sometimes Reagan agreed with her.

But Reagan had made the drive out to Arnold, anyway. She’d even come a day early to carry the folding chairs up from Grandpa’s basement and to wash all the not-quite-china. And here she was, sitting at a table crowded with family—and even more crowded with food. (She’d claimed a chair at the grown-ups’ table without consulting anyone. Her thirty-eight-year-old brother was at one of the kids’ tables, and Reagan didn’t feel a tiny bit bad about it.)

She was sitting between her mom and her aunt, facing the window that looked out on the house next door. Reagan had spent the last twenty-four hours not looking in that direction, but now she was stuck.

The neighbors had a full house today, too; the street outside was bumper-to-bumper trucks and SUVs. The two houses were set so close that Reagan could see right into the neighbor’s dining room. She could see people sitting at the table . . .

She could see Mason staring right at her.

Reagan froze.

He was smiling at her. His gentle little chipmunk smile. He slowly raised a hand and moved his fingers to wave. Reagan nodded, but she wasn’t sure he’d see it, so she raised her hand, too, then quickly put it back under the table.

“Who are you waving at?” her mom asked.

“One of the kids next door.”

“We should close those curtains.” Her mom flagged down one of the great-grandkids who was walking by the window. “Grace, close those curtains.”

“Leave them open,” Reagan’s grandpa said. “This isn’t a funeral.”

“Dad, the McCrackens are watching us eat.”

“They aren’t watching us eat. They’ve got satellite TV over there. They’ve got better things to do.”

Reagan avoided the window for the rest of the meal. The few times she glanced up, Mason was sitting there, probably talking to someone; it was

hard to tell. Then she glanced up again, and someone else was sitting there. She relaxed a little after that.

After dinner, she helped her mom and her aunts clear the table. Reagan picked up the glass lasagna pan of Jell-O salad that she'd brought. It was still half-full. She grabbed two wet spoons out of the dish drainer and headed out the back door. "Be right back."

He was standing on his deck, leaning on the railing, looking out into the field. She'd known she'd find him out here . . .

No, that wasn't quite true. She'd just hoped that she would.

Mason turned when he heard her door open. He smiled a little. "Hey."

"Hey," Reagan said. "Who're you hiding from this time?"

"I'm not hiding," he said.

It was still full daylight. Winter daylight—bright yellow shot with gray. Mason was wearing a red sweater with Rudolph on the front. His face was flushed. It wasn't cold enough for a heavy coat—there wasn't any snow on the ground—but he had on a faded denim jacket with a flannel collar. His hair was cut short over his neck and ears. That must have been Covid hair, last year. This was what he really looked like.

Reagan held out the pan of Jell-O salad.

He lowered an eyebrow.

"I've got spoons," she said.

Mason laughed and sat down on the edge of his deck, hopping off.

He came around the side of her grandpa's deck, taking the steps. Reagan prepared herself for it. She still wasn't good in these moments, when someone was approaching her.

She saw the top of Mason's head on the stairs. And then the rest of him. She could see his body more clearly than she had last year. He had broad shoulders and a barrel chest. Thick arms. A belly. He looked young. The way country boys look young. Even this side of thirty.

When he got to the deck, Reagan took a step back. He stepped back, too, to the edge of the stairs.

She kind of shrugged the pan at him. Like she wasn't sure what to do next. There weren't any chairs out here, and she was already losing her nerve.

"I have a mask," Mason said, reaching into his pocket.

"It's okay," Reagan said. "We're outdoors. And . . . it's okay."

"Here . . ." Mason backed down a few steps and sat, leaving room for Reagan at the top. "Yeah?"

“Yeah,” she said, sitting. She stuck a spoon in the pan and passed it down to him.

He took it. “Is that what I think it is?”

It absolutely was. Raspberry pretzel Jell-O salad. Reagan didn’t say anything. Just watched him take a bite.

“Oh my God,” he said. “Why don’t people still make this?”

Reagan laughed. He held the pan out to her, and she took a bite, too.

Mason was clean-shaven. His eyes were blue. He was square-faced and handsome.

He motioned at the front of his sweater with his spoon. “We do this ugly-Christmas-sweater thing now.”

Reagan nodded. “My family does that, too.”

He looked down at her chest, confused. She was wearing a snug black V-neck.

“Not me,” she said. “Fuck that.”

Mason laughed and offered her the pan again.

Reagan took another bite of Jell-O salad. There were three layers—raspberry Jell-O, whipped cream cheese with sugar, and crushed pretzels. “So are you back in DC now?”

“I was,” he said, “for a month or two. Then I bought a house in Omaha.”

Her head jerked up. “You moved back to *Nebraska*?”

Mason nodded. He was more earnest-looking this close. In the daylight. (And he’d already seemed pretty earnest in the dark.) “Yeah, DC just felt too far, after everything. And my apartment seemed so small . . . So I bought a house in Omaha. My brother says I got ripped off, but it’s *palatial* compared to what I could afford back east. I feel like a Major League Baseball player.”

Reagan laughed. This was a lot of laughing. “Did you quit your job?”

“No. I’m still remote.”

“Me, too.”

“That’s good.” He frowned. “I mean, is that good?”

“It’s what I wanted,” she said.

“Well then, good.” He took another bite of Jell-O salad. He had the pan in his lap. “I’m eating a lot of this, is that okay?”

“God, yeah,” she said, “my nieces and nephews won’t touch it. They say dessert shouldn’t be salty.”

“Okay,” he said with his mouth full, “well, *one*, this isn’t a dessert; it’s

a salad. And, *two*, the saltiness is the best part.”

“You can have as much as you want,” she said.

“I will.”

Reagan smiled—then bit both her lips for a second. “Was, um . . . was everything okay last year?”

Mason looked up into her eyes. “Last year? You mean . . .”

“With your family,” she said. “Your brother coming into the house.”

“Oh, yeah.” He shook his head. “It was fine. I mean, of course it was, right? What were the chances?”

She nodded. “Did you get vaccinated?”

“Fuck yeah,” he said. “I don’t care if it makes me grow another leg. I was first in line.”

Reagan nodded some more. “Yeah, same.”

“Give me some of that hot, fresh gene therapy,” Mason went on, chewing. “I mean . . . hopefully we *don’t* all grow extra legs . . .”

“Yeah,” Reagan agreed. “Hopefully. If we all die, the only people left will be these shitheads.” She waved her spoon around. Indicating half the county and both her brothers.

“That’s a little harsh,” he said.

I’m a little harsh, she thought.

Mason was smiling up at her. “I always thought you had red hair. In high school.”

“I did,” she said. “I stopped dyeing it last year. I didn’t want to do it myself, and then I just got used to this color.”

“That’s your natural hair color?”

She nodded.

“It’s great,” he said, still smiling that chipmunky smile. “It’s exactly the color of wildflower honey.”

“Dirty blonde?”

He shook his head, but he looked more amused than anything. “Harsh . . .”

“Mason,” Reagan said, more serious. Her eyebrows were low, and she’d squared her shoulders. “Last year. I’m sorry that I—”

“Hey. It’s okay. You don’t have to—”

“No, I want to—”

“Reagan.” His voice was gentle. His whole posture was gentle. “It was just a moment in the woods, right?”

“What?”

“You know, the Sondheim musical?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Mason huffed out a laugh. “I don’t know. Just—you don’t have to—”

“I’m sorry I ran away,” she said. “I’m sorry I cried.” She licked her lips. “I’m sorry I reacted like kissing you was a bad thing. *It wasn’t.*”

Mason had stopped arguing with her. He’d stopped smiling.

“It was not a bad thing,” Reagan said as clearly as she could. “Kissing you.”

“It wasn’t,” he said.

She shook her head no.

“No,” he said, “I’m agreeing. It very much wasn’t. Also. From my perspective.”

“Okay,” she said. “Well, good.”

“All right,” Mason said, nodding.

Reagan nodded.

He scratched his head with the hand that wasn’t holding a spoon and grinned at her. “This Jell-O salad has served its purpose, don’t you think?” He held up the pan.

Reagan looked down at it. She took it from him and set it behind her.

As soon as it was out of the way, Mason was pushing up, over her lap, to kiss her. He’d turned so that he was kneeling on one stair, with his other leg stretched behind him.

She hadn’t kissed anyone else in the last year.

It was an extraordinary dry spell, for Reagan—she was a curmudgeon, but she’d never been a monk.

The pandemic had changed her.

She’d gotten a lot pickier about who she let get this close. She’d gotten kind of fixated on repercussions.

But Reagan had kissed Mason before, and nothing bad had happened. It was a purely good moment in the middle of a very bad time. She hadn’t forgotten it. She hadn’t stopped wondering what might have happened if she could have kept her shit together.

Mason was leaning over her. He had one hand on the railing and one under her chin. She liked the way he kissed—gentle, but with purpose. She put her arms around him, to hold him steady.

They kissed for a long time. Until Mason pulled away to look at her.

“What,” Reagan whispered.

“I was making sure you weren’t crying.”

She poked his ribs. “Shut up.”

“You’re shaking,” he said.

“I’m just cold.”

“It is December.” He was standing up, taking off his jacket.

“I’m not going to wear your jacket,” she said. “I’m not a fifteen-year-old cheerleader.”

“You *were* a fifteen-year-old cheerleader,” he said, holding out the jacket.

She took it. “How do you remember that? I got kicked out after one semester.”

He shrugged. “Put on the jacket, so I can kiss you again without feeling guilty.”

Reagan did. It was quilted inside, and still warm from him.

Mason sat down beside her on the top step. She had to scoot over to make room. He leaned behind her to take another bite of Jell-O salad.

She craned her head to look over her shoulder. “You can take that with you,” she said. “You don’t have to finish it right now.”

Mason smiled with all of his teeth. He slid his arm around her waist. “I’ll get the dish back to you.”

Reagan looked down the steps, out into the yard, past the fence. “Yeah,” she said. “All right.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © 2013 Augusten Burroughs

Rainbow Rowell is the award-winning #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Eleanor & Park*, *Fangirl*, *Landline*, and the Simon Snow trilogy. She lives in Omaha, Nebraska, and loves every kind of Jell-O salad.