

Two women. An unlikely friendship.  
One secret that will change their lives.

*Mother*  
of my  
*son*

A NOVEL

RACHEL  
ALLORD



# Mother of My Son

Rachel Allord

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## **Mother of My Son**

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## Dedication

To Mom and Dad  
for your steady, unquestionable love



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# Part One

## 1

*June 3, 1994*

The bundled towel in Amber's arms no longer stirred. Even the soft mewling had stopped. So it couldn't be real, after all.

Amber fixed her gaze on the dumpster across the street and then glanced back at her silent, brick apartment building. Dizzy, she peered at the dumpster once again and took a step forward. The full moon hung above her like a watchful eye, illuminating the metal bin that seemed to waver like water, like the sloshing peppermint Schnapps she'd downed in desperation hours ago.

A sudden gust of wind swept through her hair. She clutched the towel to her chest and stepped off the curb into the street, the blacktop cool and jagged beneath her bare feet. As if powered by something outside of herself, she took a step forward and then another. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked. The wind picked up. She broke into a run.

Her bare feet slapped against the asphalt, a deafening sound in the otherwise quiet night. A blast of pain shot through her insides as she reached the back lot of On the House, a small shabby bar beneath a

neon sign. She glimpsed a cardboard box next to the dumpster, overflowing with broken down cartons and paper. Hastily, she lowered the bundle into the box and straightened. She peered at her empty hands, then at the unmoving towel, her heartbeat rapid firing in her chest

She waited and watched. Nothing. No movement. No sound. No heartbeat anymore, probably.

The headlights from a passing car flashed over the side of the bar, jolting her with panic. She turned and ran, sprinted back to her apartment, breathless and dizzy.

A fleeting sense of horror washed over her. Who was this girl running in the darkness? Something inside of her pleaded for her to stop. Snap out of it. Wake up. Undo. Yet the urgings receded into the fog of her mind. She staggered down the common hall of her apartment, a trickle of blood snaking down her thigh inside her sweat pants. A shower. That's what she needed—a long hot shower to wash away the horror of the night, torrents of water to obliterate the thing that couldn't have happened.

She watched her hand turn the doorknob to her apartment, a hand that seemed disconnected to the rest of her, and stepped over the threshold. The trance shattered.

"Where were you?" Robin was standing in the kitchen with an open jar of peanut butter and a spoon.

Amber gripped the edge of the counter and closed her eyes, willing the figure away. When she opened them, her roommate stood waiting.

"I thought you were at Josh's for the night," Amber said.

Robin excavated a glob of peanut butter. "We had

a fight. I just got home, and I'm too ticked off to sleep." She stuck the spoon in her mouth, pulled it out clean, and gave Amber the once over. "What's wrong with you? You look awful."

The room took off in a spin. Amber turned and made her way to the bathroom, raking her hand against the wall for balance. Either she was going to be sick or pass out.

Robin trailed her. "What were you doing outside? It's three o'clock in the morning."

Her body pricked with sweat, Amber stumbled into the bathroom and knelt before the toilet.

"Oh," Robin said. "You're drunk." She disappeared down the hall.

Depleted, Amber wiped her mouth across the sleeve of her sweatshirt and plunked down on the floor.

Moments later, Robin reappeared. "Whose party?"

Elbows propped on her knees, Amber held her head with her hands. "No party."

Robin leaned in the doorway and crossed her arms over her chest. Her dark eyebrows knit together in scrutiny. "Something's wrong."

"Don't feel good. Just leave me alone."

Amber found a ponytail holder on the floor and bound her hair loosely at the base of her neck. Suddenly, Robin gasped. Amber followed her roommate's gaze to the bathtub and saw the streaks of red.

Robin's eyes grew as wide as a marionette's. "Amber, what's going on? Why is there blood in the bathtub?"

"Just go. Just leave me alone." She hung her head in her hands.

“What happened here tonight?”

“Nothing. It’s taken care of.”

Robin was silent for so long Amber finally looked up. Her roommate seemed drained of color. “What do you mean it’s *taken care of*? *What’s taken care of*?”

“Nothing. Never mind.” Giving in to exhaustion, Amber laid her cheek against the cold, linoleum floor.

Robin gave a little cry then cursed. “Amber, you’re bleeding.”

Amber glanced at the insides of her thighs where red stained her gray sweats. “I’ll be OK. I just need to sleep.”

“You’re not OK. You need help. You need a doctor.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You need *help!*” Robin looked around frantically. “You’re scaring me. We need to do something. We need to call someone—”

“No. Don’t call anyone. Please. Just let me sleep.”

Robin was silent for a minute. “Were you...?”

“Stop asking questions. Just leave.”

Robin paced down the hall and came back. “This is wrong. This is all so wrong.”

“Robin. Leave. For your own good. I took care of it.”

“It. What’s this ‘it,’ Amber? You were, weren’t you? And you were trying to hide it.” Robin clamped a hand over her mouth. “And now—where is it? What happened to it?”

“It died!” But even as she spoke, she recalled those first weak cries, while she tried to catch her breath in the bathtub, after the impossible happened. She thought she’d have more time. Why didn’t she have more time?

At first the signs were easy to push away but as her stomach grew harder and the strange internal thumping more frequent, she had to wonder. Wonder, panic, bury the thought, and get on with life. She couldn't think about that now. She had classes. Exams. It couldn't be happening anyway. And then another sensation would ripple through her abdomen. Another pair of jeans wouldn't button. She'd never been a beanpole, but even Robin mentioned, just last week, she might want to ease up on the take-out.

She looked at Robin's red blotchy face. "I took care of it. It's over."

Robin raked her hands through her pixie cut, her eyes blinking compulsively, a frantic Morse code. "Don't tell me any more. I don't want to know any more. I *can't* know. Just leave. Tomorrow. Get your things and yourself and be out of here by tomorrow, because I can't handle this. I can't know about any of this." She backed away, her hands a shield in front of her as if warding off a dog attack. She let out a whimper and disappeared down the hall.

Pulling her knees to her chest, Amber let her eyelids fall, her mind steadily circling one thought, one statement that might save her if she could manage to believe it:

It never happened.

\*\*\*\*

She was out of options. The reality of it made her sick, but there was only one person she could turn to now: her mother. Amber gripped the phone, scanned the script she'd jotted in her sketchbook, and rehearsed the words under her breath one last time. Then she

exhaled, punched in the number, and waited.

"Hi, Mom. It's Amber."

Her mother sighed into the phone. "Look who's finally calling. My long lost daughter. Your timing's not good though. My program's on."

In the background, Amber heard agitated TV voices and fought to keep her own tone even. "Yeah, sorry about not calling. I've been busy. And I haven't really been feeling that great—"

"*You* haven't been feeling great? You should have seen me last week. Had the nastiest head cold you could ever imagine. I finally went into the doctor and told him he had to give me something. Felt like I was going to die. Course you'd have known this if you ever called."

Amber closed her eyes to steady herself. She couldn't afford to blow this. "Sorry." She glanced at her script. "Hey, there's been a change of plans. My summer job fell through, so I thought maybe I'd come home for awhile, if that's OK with you."

"You want to come home? I thought you wanted to stay close to campus for the summer. I thought you found work."

Amber picked up her pencil and sketched along the edge of the page. "Plans changed. There wasn't anything I could—"

Her mother shushed her. "Hang on a second." The background voices intensified, and a female screamed, "You're not the father. Victor's the father!"

"I knew it," her mother said. "What were you saying?"

"That I'm coming home."

"How long are you staying?"

"I don't know. A couple of months. For the

summer maybe.”

“Until you go back to school?”

Amber sketched an oval on her paper and added a wide brow and a small chin. “Until I find a place of my own. I’m not going back to school.”

Her mother was silent for a moment. “That’s it? One year under your belt and that’s it? Well aren’t you the little scholar? Quitting already. What about that scholarship? What happened with all of that, Miss Smarty-Pants?”

Amber studied the oval she’d drawn and shaded in wide-set eyes. “College just isn’t for me.” Her voice almost broke under the lie. She swallowed hard. “It’s better that I figure that out now than sometime next year, right? I just don’t belong here.”

“I thought Mr. What’s-His-Name said you had talent? Went through all the trouble to help you fill out that paperwork and get you that scholarship and all. What are you going to tell him?”

The day Amber showed him the letter of award in the high school art room, a lifetime ago, Mr. Morton had beamed with pride. “What’s it matter to him? I’ll tell him it didn’t work out.”

“Let go of me!” The soap opera lady sounded hysterical.

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” her mother said. “I knew this whole college thing would be nothing but a waste of time. You just got too big for your britches.”

Amber squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, the small face on her sketchbook peered back at her. She added a diminutive mouth. “I’m not planning on staying long. Just until I find a place of my own. So, I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Her mom chuckled. “I’ll be sure to roll out the red

carpet.”

Amber hung up the phone and stared at the small, gray face. She darkened the pupils, erased a speck to add the illusion of light, shaded the lower lip and accentuated the divot between the nose and mouth.

The front door opened and shut. Robin was back.

Holding the pencil like a dagger, Amber scribbled through the drawing, tearing through the paper and leaving pockmarks on the page behind it. She tossed her sketchbook across the bed and started packing for home.

Home. Back where she started. And this time, she'd find no way out.

## 2

Standing outside her sister's ranch-style house, Beth pressed the doorbell and waited.

Eric grabbed her hand. "Bring on the chaos," he said.

Gretchen opened the door. Her eyes were puffy and she wore no makeup. She offered Beth a quick grimace, an attempt at a smile, tight-lipped and hollow, as she held a whimpering Evan against her ragged t-shirt.

Beth gave her sister and nephew a quick hug before making her way to the living room. She called out a happy birthday to her niece Lily who sat beaming from behind a barricade of presents.

Eric added their gift to the assortment.

As Beth passed her nephew Tyler, she ruffled the top of his head then slid into a chair. Immediately, Gretchen plopped Evan into her arms.

"You don't mind, do you?" Gretchen asked absently.

"Are you kidding?"

Beth tugged off Evan's tiny knit cap and weaved her fingers through his downy hair. He stirred, unfurled his fists, and emitted a breath. She brought him to her shoulder and rubbed his back through his blue terrycloth sleeper, intoxicated by his scent. After a few minutes, she watched as Lily clawed at the present covered in paper ballerinas.

“Card first, Lil,” Dave reminded from behind a video camera.

Lily reluctantly opened the card, regarded it with apathy, and glanced around the room. Beth waved and Lily grinned back. Within seconds, the girl uncovered the doll Beth had painstakingly picked out—a doll with the same strawberry-blonde hair as Lily. She hollered out a thank you and attacked the next gift.

Evan whimpered. Beth repositioned him to the cradle hold, and he rooted against her blouse.

Gretchen pulled a kitchen chair into the living room and sat beside Beth. “He’s probably hungry,” she said, already fiddling with her shirt.

Beth relinquished him, and Gretchen tossed a receiving blanket over her shoulder and swiftly tucked Evan underneath. Tyler climbed into Beth’s vacant lap, grinning like a chimpanzee.

Beth gasped. “You lost another one! Tooth fairy stop by last night?”

Tyler nodded. “Yeah, and guess what? I’m rich! Ten whole dollars!”

“Ten?” Beth eyed her sister. “My, your tooth fairy is pretty generous.”

“Or sleep deprived,” Gretchen muttered.

Lily unwrapped Twister, and Tyler jumped from Beth’s lap to have a closer look.

“I was tired, and in the darkness I thought it was a single,” Gretchen said. “Some precedent I’ve set, huh?”

Beth chuckled. “I remember when we were happy with a quarter.”

Evan made a spluttering sound from underneath the blanket. Gretchen peeked in at him, shifted positions, and then stared vaguely in Lily’s direction. After Lily unwrapped the last present, Gretchen

handed Evan back to Beth. "I need to frost the cake. Make sure he burps."

Beth grabbed a cloth slung over the arm of the sofa and thumped Evan's back until he accomplished the task. She swaddled him in his receiving blanket and carried him down the hall, burying her nose in the bread-dough suppleness of his neck. He found his fist and nosily sucked. A cool string of drool trickled down the front of her shirt. She kissed his head and scanned the pictures adorning Gretchen's hall.

Most were of the children—Tyler at the beach in a wide-brimmed hat, carrot-topped Lily nestled in Tyler's lap in front of a white tulle background at the JC Penny studio. A slightly faded one of Beth and Gretchen as girls, clad in halter-tops with droopy wildflowers curled over their ears, standing amidst prairie grass on the hill behind their childhood home.

Beth thought of the gift tucked under her chair in the family room and smiled. One more tribute, one more captured memory for Gretchen. Beth's throat constricted, and she burrowed her head in Evan's neck again, drinking in his scent like an antidote.

Eric came to stand beside her.

"Is he sleeping?" she asked, turning sideways so Eric could check.

"Looks like it."

"I'm going to put him down." She heard the false brightness in her voice, and before she could step away, Eric encircled her, his arms a strong rope holding her together. She commanded herself to recognize the gift before her: the husband who didn't blame, who'd seen her at her worst, who bore the brunt of her mood swings and didn't run away. Eric who grieved controllably so she could fall apart. She

smiled, finally, and he loosened his grip.

Beth settled Evan in his crib and remembered to leave the door open as Gretchen preferred. In a house like this, her sister had said, the kid needs to be able to handle a little noise.

Beth found Gretchen in the kitchen, rubber spatula in hand, jaw set. "This junk won't spread."

Beth watched her sister's attempt to coax a glob of white frosting across the top of a cake, eroding clumps in the process. "Maybe you didn't mix in enough milk."

Gretchen shot her a look. "What do you mean *mix in*? It's from a can."

"Oh." Beth stepped closer and poked her finger into the canister to sample the store bought butter cream.

"Hey, I'm running out. I need that." Gretchen snatched the canister, scraped out a glob, and smeared it over the cake. A chunk of cake dislodged and fell to the floor. Gretchen huffed and glared at the mess at her feet. With a fierceness that startled Beth, Gretchen hurled the spatula toward the sink. It smacked the counter, bounced off, and hit the floor with a splat. The collar of Gretchen's St. Bernard jangled from under the table, and Murray padded over, sniffed warily, then noisily lapped up the unexpected treat. Gretchen crossed her arms and glowered at the dog.

Beth stood quietly for a moment. "You haven't lost your pitching arm." She picked up the spatula, washed it off, dribbled in a splash of milk, and whipped the frosting into pliability. Rotating the cake plate with one hand, she spread the concoction along the side of the cake in slow, smooth motions and then carefully coaxed the frosting across the top.

Gretchen leaned her backside against the counter. "I should just let you handle this party. I'm not good at this stuff."

"You made your daughter a cake."

"It's from a box."

"You made her a cake. A beautiful cake."

Beth continued to stretch the frosting while Gretchen rummaged through the cupboard until she pulled out a package of pink paper plates. "If I could get one decent night of sleep I'd be a new woman."

Lily sprinted into the kitchen and held out her new doll, still imprisoned in the box. Gretchen closed her eyes and sucked in air through her nose. "Go ask your dad."

"I did. He didn't hear. He's talking to Uncle Eric."

The lines between Gretchen's eyebrows deepened. She yanked open a drawer, pulled out a scissors, and disappeared with Lily and the doll. A minute later she returned, doll-less and muttering. "How hard is it to cut wire *and* talk?"

"There," Beth said, scraping out the last of the frosting. "I hid the holes."

Gretchen handed Beth a package of sugar flowers and candles. "You do the honors. You earned it."

While Gretchen stood by mutely, Beth embellished the cake with the candy and pushed in four candles. Finished, she touched her sister's arm. "Hey. I have something for you."

Gretchen blinked. "It's not *my* birthday."

Beth went to the family room to retrieve the package. She returned and held it out to Gretchen. "It's nothing much."

Gretchen's mouth twisted into the beginnings of a smile. "'Nothing much' she says and hands me a box