



ALONG
CAME
THE
RAIN

ALISON R. SOLOMON

SUMMARY

Wynn Larimer would be the first to admit she has a bad memory and that lately it's been getting worse. But that doesn't explain how she has ended up in jail, accused of kidnapping two teenage foster kids. Now she's in the fight of her life to clear her name. Her burning question: who has framed her and why?

Wynn's partner, Barker, is hanging by an emotional thread. Not only are the missing girls her social work clients, but to make matters worse, her beloved Wynn seems to be losing her mind. How can she ensure the girls are brought to safety while dealing with a partner who is increasingly scattered?

Wynn and Barker must race to uncover the truth before Wynn is charged with a serious crime that could imprison her for years. But what will happen to their relationship when both discover things about each other that will change their lives forever?

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Along Came the Rain

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Editor - Heather Flournoy
Book Designer - LJ Reynolds
Cover Designer - Michelle Brodeur

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Dedication

To Carol, with my deepest love

Acknowledgments

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I'd also like to acknowledge the tremendous work of social workers and caregivers who give tirelessly of their time to those who are often marginalized by society.

Prologue

Well-intentioned. That's what those birth moms are. The ones who won't let their kids be adopted by some do-gooder, middle-class stranger. Year after year, they try to get off drugs, give up the abusive spouse, and get themselves a permanent job so they can provide a stable home. Sometimes they succeed for a while, and the kids come home. Then something happens and they fall back to worrying more about where they'll score their next hit than who's hitting on their daughters.

They make me sick. They remind me of Claude, a cat I used to own, who would catch a bird in its mouth, drop it, play with it until it was half-dead, then walk away.

I know the drugs are to blame but it's the kids I feel sorry for. While the politicians and activists argue about mothers' rights versus children's rights, nothing changes and the kids keep getting chewed up in the system, until they end up in the same sorry situation their moms were in.

Enough is enough. Someone needs to do something drastic, and that someone is me. It won't be pretty, and a few people may have to suffer along the way, but it'll be worth it. You'll see.

Part One

Chapter One

Wynn, June 22

It's raining when they arrest me. Not a light New England drizzle, but a heavy, Florida- summer downpour, the kind that creates puddles in seconds, and floods in minutes. As the two police officers hurry me out of the front door and down the drenched flagstone path, I have to keep myself from slipping on the wet ferns and sodden, scarlet hibiscus scattered in the storm. Barker looks like she is in shock. She keeps repeating in a low voice, "I'll get you out of there," like a Buddhist mantra. Poor Barker. She must be beside herself with worry.

It all happens so quickly. One minute we are sitting in the living room, watching a rerun of one of our favorite episodes of *Friends* (the one where Ross finds his red sweater). The next, Barker answers the door to two uniformed police officers who tell her they need to take Wynn Larimer down to the station for questioning. I don't know who was more shocked—her or me. I could understand being arrested if I had committed a crime, or if I knew someone who had, or if I were connected in any way to any kind of criminal activity. I could comprehend it if I had a hidden past that had finally caught up with me, but I have been a model citizen from the time I was a straight-acting kindergarten teacher in my twenties to my current status as a middle-aged, suburban, jewelry-making lesbian.

"She's on Aricept," Barker yells at the officers as one of them pushes down on my head, shoving me into the patrol car. "It's very important she doesn't miss a dose." She thrusts a prescription bottle at the male cop but he holds his hand up and says he isn't allowed to take it. The young female one tells her to put it in my pocket. "She won't be able to keep it, but when they take her property, they'll have an accurate record of the dosage. If they keep her, they'll make sure she gets some, eventually."

My memory medication is the least of my worries right now.

The AC blows harshly on my wet legs and arms as I shiver in the back of the car, shaking out my dripping, lanky curls. I try to get the attention of the cops, but there is a metal grill separating us and they have no intention of turning around. When we arrive at the police station, and they bundle me out of the cruiser, I ask what I'm being charged with. The Mean Cop mumbles contemptuously, "Like you don't know," while the younger one says, with almost a hint of sadness in her tone, "We're just arresting you. We don't have to bring any charges yet. But if we do, it will most likely be for false imprisonment." False imprisonment? *Isn't that what you're doing to me?* I want to ask, but it doesn't seem like a good idea. When I used to visit Mom in the nursing home, half the ladies there would tell me they'd been kidnapped and were now falsely imprisoned. I hardly want to sound like one of them. But I've never imprisoned anyone in my life. Why would they think I have? Who did I imprison?

The next part is a blur but I know it involves being photographed and fingerprinted and repeating my name and address several times. Then they tell me I'm going to a holding cell. I can barely bring my feet to move as a large-boned officer walks me down the corridor. We pass cells that have no doors, just metal grates from top to bottom, where you can see everything the women in the cells are doing: slouching on their cots, shitting on the toilet. A young woman in a red bustier, black leather shorts, and boots that come up to her thighs, yells, "What did the old lady do? Rob Medicare?" I'm offended that she thinks I'm

old, but I feel grateful for my age when we stop at a cell that has a proper door, with just a small metal grate in it, that they can pass food through.

After the door clangs shut, I look around me. Mom would have described this cell as barely having room to swing a cat, and although I detest that expression, it's true. Two steps in one direction, three in the other and I'm at the perimeter of the cell. A foot away from me is the lower of two concrete slabs, each with a mattress so slim it would be more accurate to call it a gym mat. The slabs are attached to the wall and narrow enough to preclude two cellmates lying together should they be so inclined. I ought to claim one of the bunks as mine, since it appears I may be here for a while, but my choice is between a rock and a hard place. The upper bunk involves climbing up a little ladder, but lately my balance is so bad, I don't think I should risk this. However, if I lower myself onto the other one, which is about knee-high, I may not be able to stand up again. So for now, I perch on the stainless steel toilet, which is awkward and extremely uncomfortable as it has no lid and the rim is cold and hard.

Sitting on the edge of this metal toilet, my whole body aches. I can feel the arthritis in my hips starting up and if I really have to sleep on that yoga mat, I won't be able to move by tomorrow morning. I want Barker. I want a lawyer. Nobody comes to get me, nobody interacts with me. As the hours wear on, I feel like I may go crazy in this cell, all by myself, with no one to talk to. It must be late evening by now. I thought they'd have had a detective ready to talk to me as soon as I got here, but perhaps they're trying to psych me out by making me wait. They want me to confess to something I didn't do. I've read about upright citizens who committed crimes with the Black Panthers or the Symbionese Liberation Army in their youth, who finally get caught when they're middle-aged, but I'm not one of them. (And yes, I get that Ms. Bustier and Black Boots might not categorize me as middle-aged, but when she gets to be my age, I guarantee she will no longer think of fifty-nine as old.)

I wonder what Barker's doing now. Did she walk the dogs? Of course she did. I'm the one who sometimes forgets, until I see them standing in front of me, their mournful eyes begging me to give their bladders some release. Did she heat up the curried vegetables I cooked earlier today for our dinner? Probably not. If she had any appetite she probably took a hot dog from the freezer, microwaved it, and slapped it on a bun with some ketchup. Hopefully, she's frantically calling anyone she can think of to get me out of this mess. She knows enough people in her line of work. One of them has to be able to help me.

I keep going back to that idea of false imprisonment. Who could I have imprisoned? The only people I know of who are kept somewhere against their will are either spouses—and clearly Barker's at home, so that's not it—or girls who go missing and are forced into sex work. Barker has two clients who are missing right now, fifteen-year-old foster kids who disappeared when they were being transferred from a foster home over a week ago. She's voiced her fear several times that they were abducted and are being kept somewhere. Could it be them? Do the police think I had something to do with their disappearance? That makes absolutely no sense.

Which brings me back to the thought that went round and round in my head while I was shivering in the police cruiser.

Someone has set me up.

Chapter Two

Barker, June 15

I ease my green pickup truck into park in front of the Clark's sprawling ranch home and sit for a few more moments, unable to tear myself away from Terry Gross interviewing the first Iranian transgender politician on NPR's *Fresh Air*. How that woman consistently finds such interesting people to put on her show is beyond me. Although I love being on the road for my job, it's frustrating as hell when I arrive at my destination and have to turn off the radio in the middle of a good interview. In theory, I could listen later on the Internet or via a podcast, but I always forget. And the times I do remember, I get too distracted, knowing I could be washing dishes from dinner (my job; Wynn cooks), catching up on the never ending pile of unfinished client paperwork, or taking the dogs out for a walk. Maybe today I'll remember to listen. Meanwhile, I still the car engine reluctantly and make my way to the front door. If I have to interrupt Terry, at least it's one of my favorite home visits.

When nobody answers the doorbell, I step back and walk around to the side of the house. The garage door is down so there's no way of knowing whether or not a car is parked behind it. Mrs. Clark has been a Jade County foster parent for four years and she's one I rely on a lot. We don't have many foster parents willing to take on teenagers, but she does a fantastic job with them. First she fostered Latoya and Kenya for a year till their birth dad won custody, then Bobbie and Chris, the adorable sisters who stayed with her for almost two years before they were claimed by a newly sober aunt, and now it's Kallie and Michaela, the troubled teens, though not as troubled as they used to be. Mrs. Clark is a natural; she gives them the parenting they need, and she also works really well with the county workers, willingly completing the ever-changing training and documentation requirements. Our scheduled appointment isn't until next week so I wasn't planning on coming out here today, but I received a call from the camp director where the girls are enrolled for a summer program to say that they hadn't showed up. I asked her to please call Mrs. Clark and she said she'd tried but that there was no response. I know there's a simple explanation, but now I have to squeeze an extra home visit in to cover my bases.

I ring again, standing back to inhale the strong scent of gardenia from the bush by the door. Still no answer. I know I should call her cell phone but I'd really like to make the most of having this free hour, so I decide instead to go sit in the car, write up the evaluation I performed this morning, and best of all, listen to the end of *Fresh Air*.

A knock on the car window startles me. I turn the radio down and open the window.

"You lookin' for Mz. Clark?" The child is about ten, a neighbor kid, I presume.

"Sure. You know where she is?"

"On vacation. Left a couple of days ago. I feed Molly for her."

"Molly?"

"The cat. She's giving me \$5 a day. I change her litter too. Pretty cool, huh?" The young girl smiles.

"Very," I concur. "But you probably shouldn't be telling strangers nobody's home."

I ought to let my supervisor know that something's going on at this home, but I don't have a direct one at the moment. Gracie retired in June and they haven't replaced her yet. Sam intimated to me that I'm in the running. He said I'm the longest serving caseworker, and encouraged me not to do anything that might mess up a possible promotion. When I asked who I should check in with, he said I don't need to report to anyone for now. "Just let things tick over for the summer," he told me when I caught him in the

parking lot as he hurried to his large GMC Yukon. I could see his young grandson bouncing around impatiently as he waited to be whisked away to Cape Canaveral. Being a supervisor would be a big promotion, so I don't want Mrs. Clark, or anyone else, messing it up. I decide I better call her cell phone after all and tap out the numbers on my Android. A high-pitched tone accompanied by a mechanical voice tells me that this number is no longer in service.

A little knot begins to form in my stomach. Where has she gone? These two girls aren't just any foster kids. They've been my clients longer than any others, and if I'm honest, I have to admit they're my favorites. It didn't start out that way. The first time I met Kallie, I wondered if I had what it took to be a foster care social worker. At my student internship, I had counseled college girls with eating disorders, but when detective Gordon tagged me to accompany him on a drug raid, I knew this was a whole different ball of wax. In fact, it was like something out of a movie: they busted the door down, literally stomping over the smashed shards of wood, weapons drawn. But the scene that greeted us wasn't dangerous, it was pitiful. The men Gordon was after had left hours before. In front of us two women lounged on a sagging, low-slung corduroy couch, their eyes glazed over, giggling, even as the cops told them to raise their hands. It was only after the women fell silent that I heard sniffing. That was when I saw Kallie, a torn T-shirt exposing her tummy, a dirty pink sandal on one of her feet. She was cowering in the corner of the room, clutching an armless Barbie. I walked slowly toward her and extended my arms, ready to give her a big bear hug.

"Hi, sweetie. I'm here to keep you safe." I smiled at the little girl encouragingly.

"I don't need you," she snarled. "Get away from me!"

I was disarmed, but I tried to sound calm and confident. "Your Mommy's gonna need to go away for a little while. I'll find you a nice place to stay until she comes back."

"No!" It was a low guttural scream and before I could stop her, Kallie flew across the room toward her mother. The strung-out woman held out her arms to the little girl who ran into them and folded herself as close as she could into her mother's body. The woman was practically skin and bones. Her cotton tank top was falling off her shoulders and her cutoff shorts were loose around her waist.

"Don't let them take you away!" the five-year-old screamed.

"I can't stop them, honey," the woman drawled as she pushed Kallie toward me. "But I'll be back. Go stay with whoever the lady finds you. And wait for me."

That was ten years ago. Every time I think I've found Kallie a permanent home with parents who are willing to adopt her, Kallie's mom shows up to claim her. Usually she holds it together for a couple of months—once she even lasted eight—always just long enough to blow the placement. Finding good placements hasn't been easy, because Kallie's always been convinced that her mom would get clean, stop dating violent men, and turn her life around. I thought if she went to the adoption parties, she might realize how much better her life would be if she'd let go of that hope. But whenever she attended them, she always hung back, which meant prospective parents ignored her and went to talk to the amenable kids—the ones who smiled and said what the desperate, childless couples wanted to hear. I never could get those desperate would-be parents to understand that it was the kids who hung back who made the better placements. Kids who greet potential adopters like long-lost family feel absolutely no attachment to them and once the honeymoon wears off; they're usually deeply troubled.

Michaela was one of those children. Even though her mom was in the picture, she was more than happy to try to get into a fost-adopt situation. She'd sidle up to every adult in the room, smiling coyly, willing them to talk to her. The first time I placed her with a friendly, well-meaning couple who'd made a conscious decision to adopt instead of having biological children, I hoped this was a Happily Ever After scenario. The Fords adored Michaela. I explained Attachment Disorder to them so they wouldn't be

surprised at how she might veer between appearing so loving but acting in ways that might show a total lack of emotion. They were willing to overlook her stealing food from the fridge and hoarding it in her bedroom. They were willing to hold her when she tantrumed for hours at a time. But when she cut off the dog's tail ("he kept whacking me with it when it wagged") they gave her back.

I didn't give up. Next, I placed her with the Ortegas, an overweight couple who'd been told they'd never be able to have a child. Lorna Ortega was thrilled to have a little girl who had the same black eyes and dark skin she had, the same thick hair snaking down her back. Michaela settled in and stopped hoarding food. When she put pepper in the cat's eyes to watch if it would sneeze, they carefully explained to her why she must never do it again. Her behavior improved and so did her school grades. I was all ready to terminate parental rights with her mom and set an adoption date, and then I got the phone call.

"We're pregnant!" Lorna Ortega was laughing and crying at the same time.

"That's wonderful. Michaela will be thrilled to have a little sister." My excitement mirrored hers. I was genuinely excited for her.

"Yes, well, that's the thing. You know we love Michaela, but...but..." Lorna had started crying and her husband took the phone from her. "But we can't risk her being around a newborn," he said firmly.

When Mrs. Clark's home became available, I knew it was the ideal placement for Kallie and Michaela. The two had met several times at holiday parties the agency held, as well as at gatherings for prospective adoptive parents. By the time they were teenagers, they didn't bother mixing with the adults. They took the soda and snacks into a corner with them and played Angry Birds on their cell phones until everyone left. I used to watch them and it broke my heart.

Since they moved in with Mrs. Clark, things have definitely been on the upswing. She enrolled them in tennis lessons—tennis of all things!—which they love. Kallie has a natural talent and Michaela's not bad either. They spend hours practicing together and even started playing in some junior tournaments before school ended. Their grades are getting better and since Kallie's Mom is now in jail for at least eighteen months, Kallie's settled down too. More importantly than all of that, they really like Mrs. Clark. She's the right mix of loving and firm and they thrive on it. We were all devastated when Mr. Clark died suddenly, but the girls turned out to be a great comfort to Mrs. Clark. I've been trying not to get my hopes up, since both girls steadfastly refuse to give up on their moms, just as much as their moms refuse to give up on them. Still, I can't help visualizing the adoption ceremony, the judge in his red robes, the girls standing on either side of Mrs. Clark, beaming. But this sudden absence is troubling. I thought we had all agreed on a plan for the summer. I'm worried for my own skin and I'm annoyed with Mrs. Clark for making an unapproved change.

I trust Mrs. Clark and don't want to make trouble for her or for myself, so I'll make some reassuring noises to the camp director and wait a little while before I report the absence, but I can't wait too long. "Please," I breathe. "Let her come home soon."

About the Author

Alison grew up in England and lived in Israel and Mexico before settling in the USA. Despite being the proud holder of three passports, she is not on any national or international Wanted list.

Alison's short stories have been published in the USA and Mexico. As a former clinical social worker, she has presented at conferences worldwide and been published in academic textbooks, anthologies, professional journals, and newspapers on feminism, diversity and mental health.

When she's not writing, Alison can be found chasing dolphins, messing up her knees because she insists on playing tennis, or planning a road trip with her wife Carol, and their two rescue dogs.

You can contact Alison at:

Website: www.AlisonRSolomon.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/AlisonRSolomon