

Lone Wolf (Zack Walker)

By Linwood Barclay

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While the locals attribute the death to a bear attack, Zack suspects something far more ominous—a predator whose weapons include arson, assault, and enough wacko beliefs to fuel a dozen hate groups. Then another body is discovered and a large supply of fertilizer goes missing, evoking memories of the Oklahoma City bombing. But it's when he learns that his neighbor is a classic Lone Wolf—FBI parlance for a solo fanatic hell-bent on using high body counts to make political statements—that Zack realizes the idyllic town of his childhood is under siege. The fuse is lit to a catastrophe of unimaginable terror. And with time running out, Zack must face off with a madman.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Linwood Barclay is a columnist for the Toronto Star. He is the author of several critically acclaimed novels, including **Stone Rain** and **Lone Wolf**. He lives near Toronto with his wife and has two grown children.

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Chapter One

Trixie Snelling seemed to be working up to something over lunch this particular Tuesday, and really just killing time talking about scouring costume stores to find forehead ridges to please a client who liked to be dominated by a Klingon, but she never got to it because I had to take a call on my cell that my father had been eaten by a bear.

"There were those two Klingon chicks in the series where the bald guy was the captain, right?" Trixie asked me, because she knew that I was something of an authority when it came to matters related to science fiction.

"Yeah," I said. "Lursa and B'Etor Duras. They were sisters. They tried to overthrow the Gowron leadership of the Klingon High Council." I paused, then added, "Lots of leather and cleavage."

"I'm okay there," Trixie said, shaking her head at the useless information I had stored in my head. I wondered sometimes what important stuff gets crowded out when your brain is filled with trivia.

"My closet's so full of leather," Trixie continued, "I'm afraid it's all going to congeal back into a cow. I should show you sometime." Even though Trixie was dressed, at the moment, in a dark blue pullover sweater and fashionable jeans over high-heeled boots, it wasn't difficult to imagine her in full dominatrix regalia. I had seen her that way once—and not as a client—back in the days when we were neighbors. We'd kept in touch after Sarah and I and the kids had moved away, and even though we were just friends, and met regularly for lunch or a coffee, I never quite got over the novelty of what she did for a living.

She continued, "But getting these ridges onto my forehead, making them blend in with the rest of my head, then there's the makeup that makes me look like I've fallen asleep at the tanning salon, I mean, getting ready for this guy is a major production. Where are the guys who just want to be whipped by the girl next door? Plus, he wants me to torment him without wrinkling his Starfleet uniform."

"He wears a Starfleet uniform," I said. "What rank is he?"

"Captain," Trixie said. "There's these little gold dots on his collar that supposedly denote rank, but he just tells me to call him Captain, so that's fine. He's paying for it. I'm just glad he doesn't want me to call him Rear Admiral. Imagine what that might entail."

"I imagine that you are well compensated for your efforts."

Trixie gave me a half smile. "Absolutely." The smile disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. Trixie picked at her spinach salad as I twirled some fettuccine carbonara onto my fork.

"What's on your mind?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing." She picked at her salad some more. "What's going on with you? Things working out with Sarah as your boss?"

I shrugged, then nodded. I'd been working as a feature writer at *The Metropolitan* for more than a year now, having accepted the fact that I could not make a go of it staying home and writing science fiction novels. I'd been assigned to Sarah, whose responsibilities at the city desk included overseeing a number of feature writers, some neurotic, some egotistical, some neurotically egotistical, and then there was me, her obsessive, often pain-in-the-ass, husband.

"Oh sure," I said. "I mean, she wants to kill me, but other than that, the relationship is working well." I had a bite of pasta. "I'm on the newsroom safety committee."

"There's a surprise," Trixie said.

"It's no joke. We've got air quality issues, radiation off the computer screens, there's—"

"Let me see if I understand this. You work for a major daily newspaper, where they send reporters off to Iraq and Iran and Afghanistan and God knows where else, and they expose murderous biker gangs and do first-person stories about what it's like to be a skyscraper window washer, and you're worried about air quality and computer radiation?"

"You make it sound kind of weenie-like," I said.

Again, Trixie gave me the half smile. "Sarah okay with you and me being friends?"

I nodded. "I were you, I'd be more worried about my own reputation, hanging out with a writer for *The Metropolitan*."

"And how was your trip? Didn't you guys go someplace?"

"That was months ago," I said. "A little trip to Rio."

"Good time?"

I shrugged. "I found it a bit stressful." I paused, then added, "I'm not a good traveler."

"How's Angie?" Trixie asked. My daughter was nineteen now, in her second year at Mackenzie University.

"Good," I said. "Paul's good, too. He's seventeen now, finishing up high school."

"They're good kids." Trixie's eyes seemed to mist when she said it, and then she seemed to be looking off to one side, at nothing in particular.

"I keep getting this vibe that there's something on your mind," I said. "Talk to me."

Trixie said nothing, breathed in slowly through her nose. If she needed time to work up to something, I could wait.

"Well," she said, "you know the local paper in Oakwood? *The Suburban*? There's this—"

And then the cell phone inside my jacket began to ring.

"Hang on," I said to Trixie. I got out the phone, flipped it open, put it to my ear. "Yeah?"

"Zack?"

"Hi, Sarah."

"Where are you?"

"I'm having lunch with Trixie. Remember I said?"

"So you're not driving or anything?"

"No. I'm sitting down." My mind flashed to Paul and Angie. When you have teenagers, and someone's about to give you some sort of bad news, you know it's probably going to be about them. "Has something happened with the kids?" I asked.

"No no," Sarah said quickly. "Kids are fine, far as I know."

I let out a breath.

"So anyway," Sarah said, "there's this stringer I use sometimes, Tracy McAvoy? Up in the Fifty Lakes District? She does the odd feature, breaking news when it happens up there and we can't get a staffer there fast enough. Remember she did the piece about that seaplane crash, the hunters that died, last year?"

I didn't, but I said, "Sure." However, I could recall seeing the byline, occasionally, in the paper. Fifty Lakes is about a ninety-minute drive north of the city, lots of lakes (well, about fifty) and hills, cabins and boating and fishing, that kind of thing. A lot of city people had cottages up there. My father, for one.

"I just got off the phone with her," Sarah said. "She's got this story about a possible bear attack. Pretty vicious."

I could guess where this was going. Tracy was an okay reporter, she could file a basic story, but the city desk was wanting something more, some color, maybe a piece for the weekend paper. The sort of thing I was born to do. "Sarah, just get to it."

"Would you shut up and listen? It was in Braynor, well, in the woods outside Braynor."

"Yeah, okay. Braynor's where my dad's camp is."

"I know. Well, here's the thing. They found this body, this man, and I guess there wasn't a whole lot of him left to identify, and they found him right by Crystal Lake."

That was the lake where Dad ran his fishing camp. A handful of cabins, rental boats. I mentioned that to Sarah.

"I know, Zack. That's where they found the body. In the woods by your father's place."

"Jesus," I said. "I guess I should give him a call." I paused. "I can't even remember the last time I talked to him. It's been a while."

"Here's the thing," Sarah said, hesitating. "Nobody's seen your dad for a while. And they haven't identified this body yet."

A chill ran through me.

"I phoned your dad's place," Sarah added. "But there wasn't any answer."

I slipped the phone back into my jacket and said apologetically to Trixie, "Hold that thought. Something's sort of come up."

Chapter Two

My parents would take me and my older sister Cindy up to Fifty Lakes when we were kids. I guess we went up there two or three summers in a row, when Dad took a week off from his job at the accounting firm. There was a camp that rented out spots to people with travel trailers—Airstreams and the like—before everyone started going to Winnebago-style RVs that you didn't tow but drove.

We didn't have anything as upscale as an Airstream. Dad had gotten a deal, from someone he worked with at the accounting firm, on a tent trailer, which looked like a flattened box while en route, hitched to the back of the car. When you reached your destination, the contraption opened up with a canvas top, high enough to stand in, a big bed at each end, and a little sink with running water. Cindy and I weren't in our teens yet back then, so our parents had us sleep together on one side, while they took the other. I'd spend most of the night lightly running my finger along Cindy's neck so she'd think her sleeping bag was infested with spiders, and when she'd awake at midnight, screaming, I'd pretend to have been roused from a deep sleep just like my parents, who'd shout at her to be quiet, sometimes waking other campers in nearby spots. The hard part then was trying to roll over and not pee myself laughing.

That was probably the most fun thing about camping. The swimming and the fishing, those things were okay. But Dad spent so much time enforcing rules of behavior to keep us from hurting ourselves, or any of our secondhand camping equipment, that the appeal of vacationing was limited. Zip up the door fast so the bugs don't get in. Don't lean on the canvas or you'll rip it. Don't run on the dock with wet feet. Put on your life jacket. So what if the boat's still tied to the dock and the water's only two feet deep, put on your life jacket. Watch those fishhooks, for crying out loud, you get one of those in your finger and you'll get an infection and be dead before dinner.

He was something of a worrier, Arlen Walker was, and I'll understand if you find that amusing. His perpetual state of anxiety was as much of an annoyance for his wife and my mother, Evelyn Walker, as my conviction in the certainty of worst-case scenarios has been for my long-suffering Sarah.

"For God's sake, Arlen," Evelyn would say, "loosen your gas cap a bit and let the pressure off."

While family trips seemed to be sources of great anxiety for Dad, he still enjoyed his time in Fifty Lakes, away from the city, away from work. There were rare glimpses of something approaching contentment in this man who seemed unable to relax. I remember seeing him once, his butt perched on a rock at the water's edge, his bare feet planted on the lake bottom, water lapping up over his ankles. His shoes, a balled sock tucked neatly into each one, rested perfectly side by side on a nearby dock.

I approached, wondering whether I could get a couple of quarters out of him so Cindy and I could buy candy bars at the camp snack bar, and instead of reprimanding me for some misdeed of which I was not yet aware, he reached out a hand and tussled the hair on top of my head.

"Someday," he said, smiling at me and then looking out over the small lake.

And that was it.

"Someday" came eight years ago. Mom had been dead for four years at the time, and Dad decided the time had come to make a change. He retired from the accounting firm, sold the mortgage-free house in the city my sister and I had grown up in, and bought a twenty-acre parcel of land up in the Fifty Lakes District, south of the village of Braynor, that had two hundred feet of frontage on Crystal Lake.

He hadn't just bought a getaway property. He'd bought a small business, called Denny's Cabins (named for the man who'd originally built them back in the sixties). There were five rustic cottages, a few docks, and half a dozen small aluminum fishing boats with low-powered outboard motors bolted to the back. There was always one available for Dad to go fishing whenever he felt the urge, which actually wasn't all that often. He liked the tranquility of living at a fishing camp, even if he didn't drop his line into the water every day.

I'd only been up there a couple of times, the first soon after he bought it, to see what he'd gotten himself into. There was a two-story farmhouse and barn on the property, a couple of hundred yards up from the lake, but Dad had chosen not to live in it, preferring instead to take the largest of the five cabins, fully winterize it and spruce it up with new furniture and flooring and appliances, and live year-round at the water's edge, even in winter, when the lake froze over and the winds howled and the only people you were likely to see were lost snowmobilers and the guy who plowed the lane that wound its way in from the main road. Living in the farmhouse, with all that room to roam around in, would have been a constant reminder to Dad of how alone he was.

The second time I went up, a year or so later, I took Paul. He was eleven, and I'd had this notion that a father-son fishing trip would be the ultimate bonding experience, which it was not, because children who have grown up accustomed to blasting space aliens on a TV screen are ill equipped to sit in a boat for five hours waiting for something to happen. Anyway, I had phoned Dad and asked about renting a cabin for a weekend, not knowing that he'd berate me for two solid days about not getting our Camry rust-proofed.

"You might as well take a power drill to it now, get it over with," he told me. "Honestly, you spend that money on a car and don't get it rust-proofed, it's beyond me."

"Dad, the new cars already have perforation warranties."

"Oh yeah, right, like they honor those things."

We talked on the phone now and then, but not much. He'd actually bought himself a computer and occasionally I'd get an e-mail message from him, usually just a line or two to explain an attached photograph

of some big muskie or pickerel he'd caught. For an old guy who was resistant to change, he'd embraced some of the new technologies with enthusiasm. I think it must have been those long, cold winters that brought him around. He was tired of being isolated, and his computer connected him to the world in ways he'd never imagined possible.

Users Review

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