Keewatin

a novel

Paul Sullivan

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In Memory of
Paul Jacob Sullivan
1914–1994

This book is a novel. It is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, and events either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or places or events is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter One
Simply the Fuel Pump

This was the sixth day, Jake thought, but he wasn't certain. The sun never dropped below the vast Arctic horizon this time of year. He may have lost a day. He was confused—perhaps from lack of sleep, perhaps from lack of food. It could be seven days. But he was sure that the bear had been with him for three.

Now he pushed his belly deep into the snow where he lay and squinted his eyes against the glare of the sun on the tundra. The bear was some distance away, sitting lazily on its hindquarters. It was watching him, as if waiting for him to move.

Jake pulled a hand free of a mitten. Almost immediately the cold air bit his fingers. With his freed hand, he brushed the snow from his face. Small particles of ice clung to his eyelashes and eyebrows, and he pulled them away painfully. Ice crusted his beard. It formed with his breathing, and there was no way of keeping it away. He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked again over the tundra. He could see more clearly now, but it changed nothing; the bear was still waiting.

The land was white and rolling, and the bear was on a spot of high ground. The sky was a wet blue and free of clouds, except one—a low, powdery cloud just above the horizon. Jake knew that such clouds formed over open water when the ice broke up. His eyes drifted across the horizon and then back to the bear, white on the white snow and impossibly big.

A deep silence lay in the space between the man and the bear. Jake could hear the snow glisten in the sun. He could hear the water sweat from the great boulders of blue ice. He could hear the breath from his nostrils that fell as frost on his beard. He could hear the beating of his heart.

He slipped his hand back into the mitten and felt the burning in his fingertips from the little warmth the covering offered them. He clenched his hand into a fist to slow the burning.

The air was bitterly cold—a dry cold that was deceiving to the flesh—but at least there was no wind. In the back of Jake's mind, there was always the terrifying fear that the wind might come. The wind worried him as much as the bear, although for the moment, the bear worried him more.

He pulled the rifle up beside him and brushed the snow from it. He lifted the bolt and drew it back partway to see if it was free. The brass jacket of a cartridge moved back with it, out of the chamber, so he pushed the bolt forward and down. The slide and fall of the bolt broke the silence, and when he looked up, the bear was gone. The tundra was empty. The single cloud lay on the horizon.

He waited. There was nothing.

"He hasn't gone away," he said, and his voice sounded unreasonably loud. He'd been talking to himself for the past two days. He'd been unaware that he was doing it at first. Now he knew, but the sound of it still surprised him. "No, he hasn't gone away," he said now. "He's like a big, cautious dog that just keeps following. Isn't that right, bear? You just keep following." He had even started talking to the bear.

He didn't move from his prone position in the snow. It was almost comfortable. His body was tired. His mind wanted sleep. He couldn't remember when he had slept last, but he knew that it had been a long time ago, and then only for a short time. He could sleep if he covered himself with the blanket and covered the blanket with snow. When the sun had stayed bright and warm and the wind hadn't come, he'd slept without worrying about freezing to death. But now there was the bear. He couldn't sleep knowing about the bear.

He worked himself up to his knees and then slowly to his feet. The land was empty, silent. He lifted the rifle and the blanket. The blanket he tossed over the shoulders of his parka.

He stood for a long time looking out over the white, frozen land. The land was as endless as the sky. He turned, looking back at his tracks in the snow and the direction from which he had come. He had walked a long way, but he had traveled carefully, always fixing a point in his mind, a place on the land, and reaching that, fixing another. That's how the

Inuit did it. "If you know where you've come from, you will know where you're going," he said softly.

He was moving northeast, but he didn't know how fast he was going. Perhaps in another day or two, he would reach Eskimo Point. He had left the McConnell River when he'd seen the bay. If he could keep the bay on his right, he could make it. But Hudson Bay was frozen solid and snow-covered and looked little different than the land itself. He had to look for the barrier ice that marked the shoreline. The ice told him all he needed to know.

Without the ice to guide him, Jake's chances for survival were small. He could stray out over the frozen surface of the bay to walk endlessly to his death. Or he could drift to the west and be lost in that great white land they called Keewatin—a native word for the north wind. Even the name of the place worried him. The north wind was deadly, and to name a place after it was to acknowledge that place's ruthlessness, its indifference to the life that was on it.

Jake knew Keewatin from the air. On the ground he was a stranger to it. The Inuit could live here. They were not strangers to it. They understood it. But he would die.

He fixed a point in his mind, a spot on the horizon, and started walking. He chose the high ground where he'd last seen the bear. The same cloud hung beyond it. There must be open water there. He would see when he reached the high ground. Perhaps the bear had gone to the water. Maybe there would be a seal. The bear would go there hunting seal.

Jake could kill a seal with the rifle. That would be food enough to last him. He only had two cartridges for the rifle, but he would take a chance with one to get food—if the bear wasn't in sight.

The sun and the snow had started to work on his eyes, and his mind wanted sleep, but even if conditions were right, he wasn't a good shot. He was honest with himself about that. If he wasn't honest with himself, he would never reach Eskimo Point.

"Most people are good at something," he said as he walked. "Some people can balance books. Some can take apart engines. I can fly an airplane. I'm good at that. I am not a hunter."

He thought about his plane miles back under the ice of the McConnell River. "Of all the bad-luck things to happen," he muttered.

As he walked, he kept his eyes fixed on the high ground. He was tired, but the walking felt good. It worked his body; it made his blood flow, and he wasn't as cold.

He had only the two cartridges, and he had to use them wisely. He had thought about killing the bear, but he realized that he might only wound it, and he didn't want to face a wounded bear on the open tundra—or any other place—if he could avoid it. And anyway, the bear hadn't shown any signs that it would attack. It was just there, following him, watching him.

"I wish he would go away."

Two cartridges. He didn't know if he could bring down an animal like that unless he was very close, and he didn't want to get that close. Plus, he would need to hit it just right, in the right place.

It was big, this bear. He had seen a lot of them from the window of his plane out on the ice floes. He had always admired them—their strength and awesome beauty. White ghosts of the north, he called them. Nanook, the Inuit called them—the snow bear. This one was the largest he had ever seen; he knew, even from a distance. It weighed more than a thousand pounds easily and reached a good twelve feet when it stood upright. Jake didn't want to hurt the bear. This frozen land belonged to it. He only wished to travel safely. He would be on his best behavior, like a guest in a strange house, like a stranger in a strange land.

The snow was hard on the surface and crushed loudly under his boots. He could feel the icy air filling his lungs with each breath. "It's not that far," he told himself. But it seemed a very long way.

He looked up again at the high ground. It really wasn't that high. Nothing on the tundra was all that high. The snow was getting deeper as he neared the place. He could feel the muscles in his legs working, starting to ache as he plowed his way through. Soon it came up to his waist, and then he was no longer walking but pushing, fighting the snow with his body, using the rifle for balance. He thought of the bear and stopped. What if the bear was still there? He imagined nearing the top and having the bear rise up to meet him. He waited, breathing heavily.

He started moving again. He reached the slope, and the deep snow was gone, swept away by the wind. He climbed to the top and dropped to his knees. His heart was pounding. His body was spent. He dragged the rifle over and rested it against his legs. He fixed the blanket over his shoulders and waited for his heart to slow.

There was open water not far from the shoreline beyond the barrier ice. The cloud hung directly above it. Because there was no wind, the water was still, like a black mirror under the sun. It was the first open water he had seen since he'd lost the plane. He looked for signs of life but saw none. There was no bear. There was no movement of any kind.

A seal would be nice, he thought. *If I could catch a seal on the ice in the sun, one bullet would do it. I could crawl out on my belly like the Inuit do—out close enough for the one bullet.*

He needed food. He'd never eaten raw seal, but he'd seen the Inuit do it. He was certain he could, too.

He kept his eyes on the open water, but nothing appeared. There was only the water, ice, and snow. The cloud lingered like soft smoke in the sky.

He thought about the ice. It had been frozen for months. It had to be several feet thick, but still it scared him. He remembered the plane dropping low over the surface of the McConnell River. He saw the shadow of the wings darting over the snow and the boulders of ice that marked the riverbank. He heard again the sound of the engine sputtering, trying for life, and dying. The smell of burnt oil

came back to him, then the sound of the skis touching the ice of the river, the engine quitting for the last time, and the prop making one last half-turn and skipping back.

He'd landed safely, but ten minutes later, the ice had started to break up. The little plane had lifted and the wing tipped as the river opened to swallow it. The ice broke and roared, with huge blocks of it pushing up into the air and great slices slipping away. And then the whole river was in motion, tearing from its banks, crushing the plane like a toy. He'd grabbed the rifle and the blanket and had gotten away over the breaking ice with his life.

He'd waited by the river for three days, but nothing had happened. At first, he'd believed that they would find him in a matter of hours. But the hours passed, and he grew tired of watching the empty sky, of listening for the sound of an engine over the breaking ice of the river. Twice the sun fell to the Earth and lay on the horizon and then lifted again. On the third day he started walking. That had been three days ago—or was it four?

Are they still searching for me? he wondered. *Or did they stop?*

He'd estimated Eskimo Point to be about thirty miles away. It was right on the edge of the bay, a settlement of maybe 1,200 people. There was a Hudson Bay Store. There was a Royal Canadian Mounted Police post. Maybe they were looking for him. The hunters might go out.

"No, I'm *sure* they will go out," he'd said.

He knew most of them, and they could travel a long way by dog team. At the very worst, he could make it on foot in a day or two. "If the wind doesn't come."

Now he lifted his eyes to the north. The sky was empty, but even empty it worried him. The thought came to him suddenly: *What if I don't make it?*

He shook his head. "Don't be foolish. Of course you'll make it."

He thought about it. "But you *are* foolish," he said. "A rifle with two cartridges. A radio you didn't use."

He was quiet. The land was quiet. "I didn't think I needed to use the radio," he objected. But then, "When you go down in this country, you give a location, no matter what the reason."

The reason was simply the fuel pump. He could have fixed it in less than an hour. He had done it a dozen times. But the river had changed all of it.

He stood up, hung the rifle under his arm, and looked around. He needed to be moving. He had to fix a point in his mind and go toward it. He turned and looked back from where he had come and hesitated, trying to adjust his eyes to the sun on the snow. He blinked and looked again. The big white bulk of the bear came into focus, its body matching the white of the land but clearly defined against the blue of the sky. It was waiting, watching from the same place where the man had been watching it.

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Jake pleaded quietly.

They each, for a moment, stayed fixed on each other across the white tundra. Then Jake turned his back and moved down the far side of the high ground toward the open water.

Chapter Two
The Prow

"You've got to be having all the bad luck there is in this world," Jake said to himself, and he pulled the blanket tightly around his shoulders where he sat on the ground. He was shaking with the cold.

The sun had moved slowly down to touch the Earth, lingered there less than an hour, and was rising again. That was the Arctic night. It never got truly dark—not this time of the year. The tundra had been covered briefly in a gray half-light, and now the lifting sun was burning that away. A wind had come, but not the kind of wind that worried Jake. Perhaps in this one thing his luck had held. But it was a cold wind that lifted snow from the surface of the frozen land to coat the blanket and the parka and his beard. It stung his face and made seeing difficult.

He had come to a river. It lay below him, and he watched the broad beam of the sun cross the flat ice that marked it as a river. But with the river, his certainty was shattered. If this was a river—and there was no question that it was—it could only be the McConnell.

"No," he said, "it can't be the McConnell." He thought about it long and hard. It could be a river not on the map. The tundra was laced with rivers that were locked in ice for most of the year. And there were a lot of things in this land that didn't appear on maps.

He rocked slightly under the blanket. His body wouldn't stop shaking. He listened to the wind cross the snow. It carried with it an empty, lonely sound, like the land itself.

He had been so careful. He had measured and marked his way. How could he be wrong? How could he be so wrong about the river?

He shook his head in disbelief. He went over it again and again in his mind, but it didn't change the fact that this river lay before him, and it was a big one. It was wide across and reached out from deep in the land. It was a river that would not have been omitted from a map—a river the size of the McConnell.

"No," he insisted, but he could think of no other river it could be.

That meant that Eskimo Point was a long way away. He had already spent much of his strength and determination, and now there was fear. If he had been wrong all this time, then he could be wrong again. And still there was the bear, following him like white death.

He worked himself up off the cold earth and stood for a moment facing the sun. It gave light but little warmth to the frozen land. He looked back from where he had come and then turned to face the way before him. Then he picked a

point on the far side of the river—a block of ice probably, with an odd shape to it—and, fighting back the fear, he began moving toward it, slowly at first but more surely as the blood pumped through his body and brought with it some warmth.

He was weak from hunger. That, the lack of sleep, the vast sameness of the land, and the lonely cry of the wind all worked on his mind. His thoughts seemed to drift from where he was to all of the warm places he had ever been. But though he stopped more often now, he held his line, heading directly for the river. He dragged the rifle along behind him.

He had not seen the bear all that day, but that afternoon he'd come across the animal's tracks in the snow, so fresh that the wind had not yet taken the edge from them. They were terribly large. He had looked at them with disbelief. *Could the bear be that big, or is my mind just that tired?* he'd wondered. But he knew that the bear was that big. And still it followed him.

He reached the river ice and started across it. The ice worried him, but his mind was too tired to argue. On the far side was the point he had fixed in his mind. It protruded out of the frozen surface near the bank, a black-gray mark against the white and blue around it.

It wasn't ice; he could see that now. It rose from the surface of the frozen river in an odd shape, like hands at prayer. It was human-made. His pace quickened. Once he dropped the rifle, realized it, and went back for it. Then he hurried again toward the object. It didn't belong here. It was out of place.

It was the prow of a boat locked tightly in the river ice, held and crushed below the surface as with the fist of a giant. It had been caught in the ice and abandoned. Now it rested silently in a winter grave. The men who had worked the boat had realized her fate and were long gone. She was built of wood and iron. Her timbers were splintered and the iron twisted. The wind sang through cracks in her hull.

In that one moment of realization, everything in Jake turned positive. In his hurry to reach her, he slipped on the ice. He went down hard, and the rifle slid away from him. He got to his feet, retrieved the rifle, and moved on. He reached the broken prow and leaned the weight of his body against it. His heart was pounding. Despite the bitter cold, he was starting to sweat under his heavy parka. The wind cut at his face.

He worked his way around the hull and came to an opening in the timbers under the twisted iron. It was such a small opening that he had to lie flat on his belly to struggle through it. Inside it was dark and silent, but there was no wind. He pulled the rifle in after him and then the blanket. He moved as far back into the darkness as he could, but that wasn't far. There he wrapped the blanket around him and waited for his heart to slow.

After a time his eyes adjusted to the darkness. It was almost a blessing after the long days of constant sun on the tundra. Thin slivers of light slipped through the splintered wood and crossed the ice floor on which he sat.

I can build a fire, he thought, *if I can pull away enough wood. I have matches.* Just knowing that it was possible made him feel better, but his body was too tired to try it. He rested the rifle nearby and pulled the blanket over his aching legs. He would rest first, and then he would build a fire. A small one was all he needed—the kind of fire the Inuit built.

He rested his head back and closed his eyes and saw the fire in his mind. *I wish I were an Inuit*, he thought. *Then I would survive this land.* Then, moving his cracked lips, he whispered, "You will survive this land"—if he could rest now, if he could have a fire to warm him, if he could find food enough to gain his strength back. Yes, he would survive this land. Others had. He could, too.

But a lot of others haven't, he thought. *Plenty of others have been lost in this white land and never heard of again.*

And thinking about it, he wondered again how he had gone wrong. How could he have been so wrong about the river? He was certain that the river he'd landed on was the McConnell. But if it wasn't and this was the McConnell, then he still had a long way to go.

With rest and warmth and food I can make it.

"And if this river starts to break up like the other?"

Then I'll lose my shelter.

"No, you'll lose your life."

For a moment he thought of the river rushing under the ice on which he rested: how cold it was, how deep it was, how black it was.

"But there's no sign of this river breaking up. You crossed it on foot, and there was nothing. It's frozen solid, like a floor of concrete."

But so was the other one, remember?

He thought about it, seeing in his mind the surface of the river with its great blocks of ice lifting into the air. He saw the dark water come up around him. Then, strangely, he laughed, and the sound of his laughter hung in the icy timbers of the wreck.

"Don't be foolish, Jake," he said. "There's nothing to debate. You can take your chances here on the ice of the river, or you can take your chances out there with the bear. What is there to debate? It's one or the other."

He pulled off his mittens and rubbed his fingers until some warmth came to them. They were as stiff as dried twigs, but after a moment they started to bend. He rubbed them over his lips and his beard. His beard was caked with ice.

He pulled the blanket up over his chest. A short time later his mind drifted into sleep. He didn't fight it. His hands slipped down to rest on the blanket. His breathing was deep and content.

Dreams flickered through his mind—not complete dreams, but pieces, like cuts of old film flashing on a screen. Some things were sharp and clear, while others fell back in shadow. The sound of the plane engine was clear. The white land slipping under the wings was perfectly clear. But he

was a shadow, as if the plane were flying itself. He seemed to control it yet to have no control over it.

There were voices—the sounds people make when they gather—and laughter. He saw a large window, and beyond that a heavy snow falling in the black night to cover the street. There was teasing, some mild arguing, several warm greetings. He heard his name called out as he brushed the snow from his parka. The faces were all friendly, and he was in the Ptarmigan Inn in Frobisher. There was the heavenly smell of food cooking back in the kitchen.

Now on the ice, he moved his legs under the blanket. The dream broke away. He moaned and found it again.

Max passed him a beer and slapped him on the back. There was a big grin on his face. His teeth were white against his weathered skin.

"How did you get back, Max?" Jake asked him.

Max replied, "I'm not back. I'm here with you, Jake. Remember? You're lost. Just like me."

"I'm not lost," Jake said in his sleep. "I'm going to Eskimo Point."

"You're lost," Max assured him.

"I searched for you up north of Baker Lake. I searched a long time."

"I knew you would," said Max. "I knew all the time that you would."

"Did you ever find Koluc? How's the old Inuit doing?"

"That's a long story," said Max, and he started to move away.

"I miss you, Max. You were a great friend—a true friend."

But Max faded, still grinning, like he had the best joke in all the world. Then he was gone.

On the ice, Jake moved his body. He came from a deep sleep to a half-sleep. A strange feeling had come over him, like there was another person in the room with him, sharing his dreams.

The bear clawed at the timbers and scratched at the ice. It pushed its nose through the hole to breathe into the small shelter, and its breath fell on the blanket. It could smell the man inside. It left the wreck and came back again. Lifting up on its hind legs, it was as high as the top of the timbers. It dropped down to all fours and again clawed at the ice. Then it tossed its head, showing its great teeth. At last it turned and lumbered away.

Jake rolled to one side. His hand reached out to pull the blanket up around his shoulders. His mind moved from the half-sleep back into a deep sleep. "I should have fixed that fuel pump better than I did," he mumbled. "I was never the mechanic you were, Max."