

Susan J Crockford

EATEN

A novel



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BY

SUSAN J. CROCKFORD

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Published in 2015 by CreateSpace

Cover design by Nigel Sutcliffe

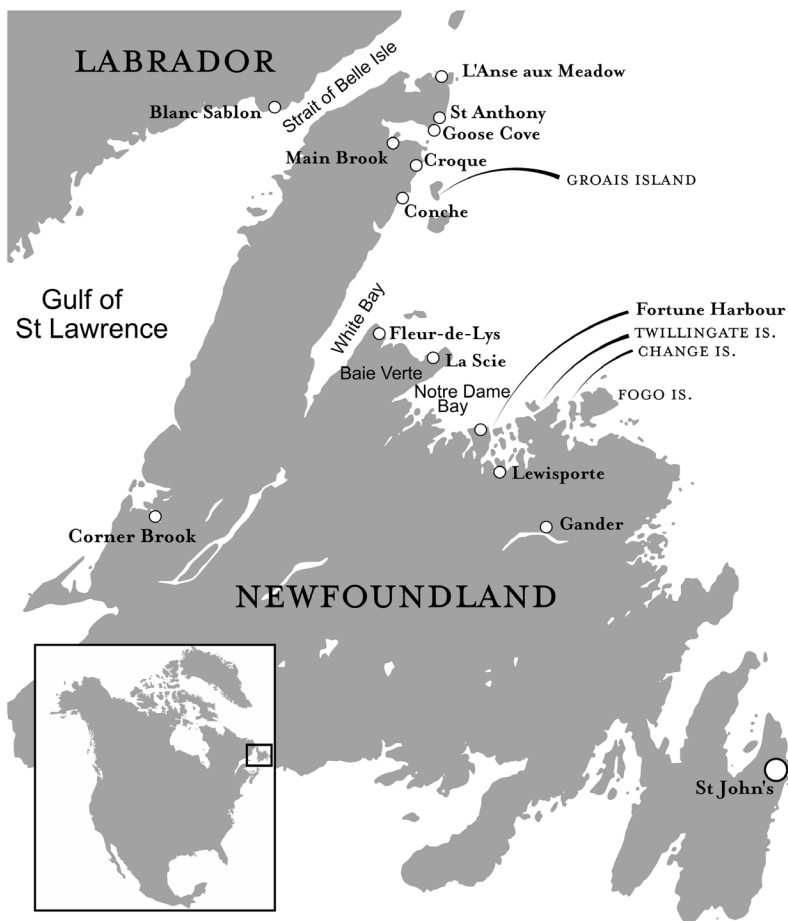
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Interior layout by MrLasers.com

*Sacred heart o' Jesus boy,
that 2025—it were
a bad year for polar bears*

NEWFOUNDLAND



See also <http://tinyurl.com/oxduxm8> for a Google Maps version where you can see all the small outposts.

CHAPTER I

St. Anthony, Newfoundland

Saturday, 8 March 2025, 2:05 p.m.

A young woman turns and pulls the front door shut, one arm holding a baby snug against her hip. Off the other arm hangs a bag of groceries. She walks carefully along the path to the car, both of which have recently been cleared of snow. Elsewhere, thick snow softens edges and flattens hollows. But it is now clear and cold, with no sign of another storm.

The squat beige bungalow is set farther back from the street than its neighbours in the cul-de-sac. This is the sort of subdivision where only this peculiar jog in the arrangement distinguishes this unremarkable house from the others, making the flat shore of the frozen sea a stone's throw from the back door. A nearby patch of thick spruce forest makes the house vaguely resemble an isolated cabin in the woods.

A young girl of elementary school age rushes ahead of the woman, who smiles as the baby tries to bounce on her arm. The girl runs along the path and bolts around the front of the car parked in the driveway.

As quick as the girl is, the bear is quicker. He bounds

out from the corner of the house in a flash of white that belies his size. With one lightning move, he hooks his huge right paw around the girl's body and clamps his jaws around her head. Although the girl manages one gargling cry, she is all too soon silent.

The woman freezes, her pinched eyebrows and open mouth registering her shock and disbelief. She drops the bag of groceries before she can make a sound, clutching the baby tighter. A glass jar explodes against the rock path at the same instant as her desperate scream.

The bear stops and turns toward the house. The girl's limp body swings with his movements, her head still in his mouth. One blue-booted foot bangs against the house as her body sways languidly from the neck, as if she's a bizarre rag doll. He lets go of the girl, and her lifeless body crumples to the ground. His broad head goes down, and his ears go back. The woman begins to turn back toward the door, a frantic expression on her face.

But the bear is on her before she makes a full turn, his massive bulk slamming her forward onto the path. The baby flies out of her arms with a brief startled cry but the bear seems not to notice. His jaws go instantly to her head, and in a few sickening bites he silences her as well.

He pokes the woman's motionless body, his brows wrinkled in an animal frown as he prods at the down jacket bunched up around her neck. The jacket has ridden up, exposing her belly. He pokes the exposed skin, burying his nose in its. He finds a spot on the waistband of her jeans that he can get his teeth into and pulls. One rip, then another,

and in short order, the woman's left thigh is uncovered.

His front teeth puncture the skin and peel it back. He laps at the exposed fat with his black tongue, rasping it away and nipping chunks off with his front teeth. He visibly relaxes and settles into the feed but moves quickly to the belly fat. When he is done, he works his way up to one milk-filled breast, then the other, before moving to the right leg.

Thirty short minutes later, he is finished with the woman. He settles back to lick his paws, and then stops and looks up. He appears almost puzzled, the skin above his eyes wrinkled. He rises slowly to his feet and pads back toward the car. He pulls the little girl's flaccid body through the snow in front of the car to a spot beside the house. He looks all around, checking for something. Finally, he sits and begins stripping the fat from the chubby youngster.

A few moments later, he stops and cocks his head at a sudden loud noise. As it gets louder and louder, he bolts behind the house, then on toward the beach. The roar of the engine and the crunching of tires on the snow finally stop, but the bear runs on. He doesn't look back.

The sight that greeted the driver of the old blue truck as she pulled in behind Pauline's car was hard for her to comprehend. What was that red lump on the path? Ella was on time, she knew, to babysit John while Pauline took eight-year-old Amanda to play hockey. Usually Amanda was out front, ready and eager to go. Today, Ella knew, Amanda was to be the starting goalie—a first for her.

Warily, Ella got out of the truck and stood with the door open. From this elevated perspective, she could see the lump better now, and her stomach lurched. Pauline had a jacket that colour. Had she fallen?

She took a few steps closer, and that was enough. The partially consumed body was as ghastly a sight as she'd ever seen. Worse than a beached whale, she thought. With the crushed face and shiny red muscle tissue gleaming in the sunlight, it looked nothing like the mother of the baby she'd cared for, off and on, for the past six months. Yet it wore her jacket.

Thinking of John, she looked all around her. Where were the children?

"Amanda!" she called again and again. No answer. Wait . . . was that a whimper?

"John-John, can you hear me? Where are you?" she pleaded, panic making her voice tremble.

She heard something then, definitely—a muffled cry from beyond the jacketed monstrosity. The snowbank! There was a baby-sized hollow, she now saw, in the snow heaped aside to clear the path.

Trying hard to block out the sight of the bloodied mess on the path, she plowed across the lawn. Almost afraid to look, she peered over the edge of the hole. And there was John's sunny face, beaming up at her now that he recognized who it was.

"John-John! Are you okay? There's my big boy—do you want to come out?" she cooed at him, relief softening her voice.

John lifted his arms up to her, and Ella reached in to lift him out. He wrapped his arms around her neck, and she held him tight, rubbing his back to sooth herself more than to settle him down. She felt all over his arms and legs, pulling him away a bit to see if he was hurt. He seemed unmarked—no rips in his all-in-one snowsuit, no blood.

Ella now felt a desperate need to get away from this carnage. I'll get help first, she thought, get them to come back to see about Amanda. She was so shaky, she wasn't sure she could drive, but she had to, had to get John away and safe—and above all keep him from seeing, and herself from seeing any more.

I'll just grab his carrier from Pauline's car, she thought, take him home with me. She held the baby close and went behind the car to get to the back door on the passenger side. But she made the mistake of looking up, past the front end of the car. There she saw a boot sticking out beyond the edge of the house—Amanda's bright blue boot. It didn't move, and this time she was truly too afraid to look.

She quickly opened the car door and put John in the foot well so she could use both hands to unclip the car seat. At this indignity, he howled.

But it took only half a minute, and she quickly scooped him back up and grabbed the seat. She didn't bother closing the door, just ran to her truck. Yanking open the driver's door, she threw the carrier the length of the bench seat and got in behind the wheel with John still in her arms. She pulled the door shut so hard, it bounced open again. She pulled it tight and slammed down the lock.

Taking a moment to draw a deep breath, she then set John on the seat beside her and reached across to lock the other door. She struggled to wrap the seat belt around the base of the seat. It wouldn't be secured like it should, but it would have to do.

Marginally calmer now, Ella lifted John into the seat and fastened the harness, tightening the straps as she'd seen Pauline do. Satisfied he was as safe as she could make him, she pulled the keys out of her pocket. Her hands were still shaking as she put the key into the ignition and gave it a turn. She just had to be gone, be home to Granddad.

She threw the truck into reverse and backed out of the driveway as fast as she dared, then sped home.

Sully was out front tending the garden when he heard Ella's old truck roaring down the road, a sound he knew well by now. What was she doing back so soon? Damn thing really needed a new muffler, he thought as he worked his way up from the ground, his seventy-five-year-old knees crunching a bit with the effort.

He'd only just turned around to face the road when the truck pulled to a screeching halt on the gravel verge and the door exploded open. Ella leaped out and flew across the lawn into his arms.

She almost knocked him over with the force of her flight, but Sully caught himself just in time. Her arms went around his neck, and her face burrowed into the side of his beard as she burst into deep sobs.

“What on earth is wrong, girly? You got banshees after you? You hurt?”

“Granddad, it was so awful! Pauline! Something got her—and Amanda too, I think. All guts on the front path, blood everywhere. I found John—he’s all right—but I had to get out of there. Some kind of animal. A black bear, maybe?”

“Okay, calm down now. Take a breath. There now, one more. That’s it. She’s dead, you think?”

“Yes, she has to be. Amanda too, but I didn’t look close at her. I just couldn’t.”

“But you have John, you say? Where is he?”

“In the truck. I got his seat from Pauline’s car.”

“Good thinking. You’re all right now—I’ve got you.”

“I should have done something!” she wailed. “But I didn’t know what to do except come home!”

“No, no, you did just right. Here’s what we’ll do now: get John out of there and get the both of you into the house. You call Pauline’s mum and get her over here. Here, I tell you—not Pauline’s house. Just tell her to come here. Don’t give her any details. Just say you’ve got John and you need her help right away. I’ll get over to the house and see what’s up.”

“What if whatever got them is still there?”

“Don’t you worry about me, girly. I’ll take my gun and get Connor to come with me. We’ll be fine. Now take hold of yourself and get that baby inside.”

Pauline took another deep breath and then headed for the truck to fetch John, who had started to whimper.

Sully climbed the steps to the porch and grabbed his

shotgun from its locker. Then he headed across the lawn and through the side gate to see Connor. He was a good kid, that Connor, and a good neighbour. Though not so much of a kid anymore, really, with a wife and two young ones of his own. Not really his fault he was out of work.

He and Connor would see what was up at Pauline's. Ella must have it wrong—it was too early for bear trouble. Black bears were still hibernating.

That evening, after Ella had gone up to take a bath, Sully picked up the phone to call his friend Joe Carroll in Lewisporte.

He and Joe had known each other for decades, having met on the ferry that ran from the Newfoundland mainland to Fogo Island, a large isle of outports to the east of Notre Dame Bay. At the time, Sully was fishing and sealing with his dad out of Tilting, and Joe was just a wee dark-haired lad with a dream of being a Mountie one day.

Years later, Joe landed a permanent post at the Lewsiporte RCMP detachment. No more moving about the country for Joe, as all the young Mounties had to do. He was darn lucky to have made it back to Newfoundland, let alone to find a placement so close to his ancestral home. That didn't happen very often, Sully guessed.

The two men were distant cousins, they discovered. Both their people, way back, came from the small outport of Webbers Bight in Fortune Harbour, closer in on Notre Dame Bay. Although this was not far from Lewisporte, all the family—nay, the whole community—was long gone from

the bight, abandoned in 1935. Scattered to the winds, they had—only Joe had settled even close to the homestead after all these years, as far as they knew.

Sully's dad had married a Cull from Barr'd Island off the north end of Fogo and moved down the coast to Tilting, to fish the inshore cod and hunt the Front for seals. Sully stayed on with his dad and raised his own family there. But when Sully's beloved Mary died just as the cod were giving out in the late 1980s, he moved west with their girl Maggie to St. Anthony. He managed to work construction off and on as more and more folks moved to town—enough to get by, anyway.

Times had been so tough for the young ones in the 1990s, and not just for the boys. Maggie's choice of a mate tried his best but wasn't able to make a go. And rather than face a new future together in a new place, he ran off to Jesus knew where and left Maggie behind. He didn't know about the child to be born. It wasn't his fault that Maggie hadn't told him, but there it was. Sully and Maggie together raised that child and had done okay—until a collision with a bull moose sheered the top off Maggie's car on the way home from an errand south and left Sully to finish the job of raising Ella on his own. He couldn't imagine losing Ella like that, like Pauline and her oldest—gone like a beast in the forest. Not a human way to die, that brutal end.

He'd already called his local RCMP detachment, their only police force, about Pauline and Amanda. It was too late for an ambulance, for either of them. The locals had it in hand, thank you very much, and he was dismissed. But he

wanted to talk to Joe, get his take. It didn't seem to him that the locals were as concerned as he was, though it was a confusing situation to be sure.

Joe picked up on the third ring.

"Hey, Joe, it's Sully. How's the missus?"

"Hey, Sully! Maude's good, thanks. How's that Ella?"

"To be honest, Joe, not so good. We've got a bit of misery over here that I'd like to run past you."

"Teen trouble?"

"No, no, nothing like that," said Sully gruffly. "Ella looks after the baby of a single mother who lives in town here, in that new subdivision off the East Road, along Trawl Cove. She went to the house this afternoon as usual to find Pauline and her girl dead and the baby face-up in a snowbank, alive. She grabbed the baby and came to get me.

"I had to see this for myself," he continued. "It just didn't seem right, what she said she'd seen. So I went with Connor from next door to check it out. Jesus, man, it was a sight like as such neither of us had seen before. Dead, they were, both of them, and partly eaten. Ella had guessed a black bear—she's seen what they can do to a moose calf. But I tell you, Joe, these were polar bear kills."

"Jesus, Sully. This time of year? That beggars belief."

"Aye, I know. But these were different from black bear kills I've seen. These girls had the fat stripped off their bodies, even Pauline's breasts, if you can believe it, but hardly any muscle gone and the guts still there as well. Black bears eat flesh and guts, those I've seen anyway. And their skulls were totally crushed. I just can't see a black bear doing that kind

of damage, even a big boar. And the tracks in the snow? Those were definitely polar bear. A big one.”

“Jesus wept, Sully. That would have been a real fright for Ella. I don’t think we’ve ever had a polar bear attack on a person, not since I’ve been here anyway. Nor any reports that I’ve found in the old files. We get problems with those off the ice in April some years, wandering about and getting folks all excited. But a few shots and a shout, and they’re usually off. A full-on attack? A full-on fatal attack? I’ve not ever heard of that here.”

“There was one attack I heard about, back in 1935, out on Fogo,” said Sully. “I remember my granddad talking about it. The guy attacked wasn’t really hurt, but it scared him silly. His friends got the bear, a young one it was, maybe two years old. Later they saw tracks on the shore ice that might have been its mother. It was even earlier in the year than this, though, if I remember right. Before February, anyway, well before even the most eager of the sealers would head out for whitecoats and bluebacks.”

“Killed by a bear, and eaten, is a whole different story, Sully,” remarked Joe. “Being eaten by a bear is a gruesome end for anyone.”

“Aye, you’re right on that. I’ve been giving it some thought. Timing of this bothers me, as well as the eating. Seems to me these bears must be hungry, real hungry. And in my experience, when black bears have a bad year, it means their food’s in trouble. Berries dried up, salmon not running, something like that. And with black bears, if one bear is having such a bad year he turns to killing people. Sure as I’m standing here,

a whole bunch of bears are having a bad year.”

Sully continued ominously. “What I’m trying to say is that this might not be the first kill there’s been—and it might not be the last.”

“I hear you, Sully, but surely that’s not possible. I’ve never heard of such a thing. Last I heard there were lots of seals out there, now that the hunt’s gone belly-up.”

“Aye, I know. I’m just telling you how it seems to me.”

“Sure enough, and thanks for that,” Joe added. “I’ll keep an ear out. Your locals will do it right, though, never fear. They’ll bring the coroner in. And I’m sure they’ve got the conservation office on it—they know the bears best. We have people to deal with this kind of thing, and I’m sure they’ll do their jobs. Still, you watch yourself out there, Sully, and Ella too. And keep in touch.”

CBC News, Saturday, March 8, 11:23 a.m.
L’Anse au Loup, NL

Ice storm hits southern Labrador coast

The weather is adding to the woes of southern Labrador residents. After ferry service between the region and Newfoundland was halted Thursday due to heavy ice in the Strait of Belle Isle, the region has been hit by a rare ice storm.

The storm began in the early hours with high winds

and freezing rain. By the time it stopped, most areas had accumulated 60-90 millimetres (2.36–3.56 inches) of ice, with a few districts topping 120 millimetres (4.7 inches). Power lines are down across the region due to the weight of ice or tree branches falling on them. Virtually all community cellphone towers have been damaged.

The storm has affected an area of the coast as far north as Rigolet and south to Blanc Sablon. About 5,000 people are said to be without electricity, Internet, and cellphone service.

Due to unusual offshore winds along northwest Newfoundland, the two storm tracks—one coming from the northeast and the other from the south—just missed the town of St. Anthony, population 2,637, on the tip of the Great Northern Peninsula. Instead, the storm converged on the sparsely populated coast of Labrador north of Belle Isle.

Power authorities said it could be three to five days before power and other services are restored.

* * *

CBC News, Saturday, March 8, 5:43 p.m. St. Anthony, NL

CCG icebreakers requested for Fogo Island

Canadian Coast Guard icebreakers are heading to

the waters connecting Fogo Island and Change Islands to the Newfoundland mainland, as their icebreaking ferry has been struggling to move in the heavy ice of the Atlantic Ocean.

A CCG icebreaker initially called in to assist on the St. Barbe-Blanc Sablon run between the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland and southern Labrador across the heavily iced Strait of Belle Isle was redirected because of the ice storm that has paralyzed the southern Labrador coast since Thursday.

The icebreaker will instead head east to assist travel between Fogo Island, Change Islands, and Farewell, to support the icebreaking ferry MV Veteran. It should arrive in Farewell by Monday.

“The ice on the northeast coast is coming down from Labrador and in the last few days has been pushing south, causing a lot of pressure,” said Peter Gabriel, the coast guard’s acting superintendent of ice operations with the Atlantic region.

In the interim, the Department of Transportation and Works has arranged for fixed-wing plane service between Gander and Fogo Island, and a helicopter will operate a load-and-go run between Gander and Fogo Island, Change Islands, and Farewell, weather permitting.

* * *

CBC News, Saturday, March 8, 7:20 p.m., St. Anthony, NL

BREAKING NEWS

First fatal polar bear attack in Newfoundland

Police on the Great Northern Peninsula are advising residents to be wary after a mother and daughter were attacked and killed by a polar bear this afternoon, the first known fatalities from a polar bear encounter in Newfoundland and Labrador. The St. Anthony RCMP said that Pauline Story and her daughter Amanda were pronounced dead at the scene. A large male polar bear apparently ambushed the pair in the front yard of their east side home as they were leaving the house.

Officers responded late this afternoon to a call from Michael Patrick Sullivan (known as Sully), grandfather of Story's 19-year-old babysitter, Ella King. King witnessed the aftermath of the attack when she arrived at 3:30 p.m. to look after Story's infant son, John.

She found the nine-month-old baby unharmed and took him home. Sullivan first confirmed King's suspicion that the mother and her daughter were dead, and then called police. The baby is now with his grandmother, Rebecca Peters.

Tracks in the snow indicated the bear may have headed back onto the sea ice, but dogs brought in to assist lost

the scent before the bear could be located. The RCMP is reminding residents that polar bears can be dangerous, and to remain vigilant until this animal is found.

It is early in the season for polar bears to be onshore in the province, and police consider this an isolated incident. Last year there were more sightings of polar bears than usual and numerous nuisance incidents involving break-ins, property damage, and livestock kills during April and the first week of May.

A senior polar bear scientist at Environment Canada, who asked that his name not be used, commented that such problems were anticipated as effects of climate change: "More problems with polar bears onshore are exactly what we predicted because of reduced sea ice due to human-caused global warming."

While Inuit hunters and residents in Labrador continue to insist that polar bear numbers have increased substantially over the last 10 years, the Environment Canada scientist pointed out that there is no scientific evidence of such an increase: "The last population survey of the Davis Strait subpopulation undertaken by biologists was done in 2007. We simply don't know how many bears are in the region. However, sea ice there has continued to decline as it has all over the Arctic. If it disappears completely in summer by 2100, as predicted, polar bears will likely become extinct.

Unless we reduce our use of fossil fuels, that is the fate polar bears face.”

Autopsies on Pauline and Amanda Story will be conducted by a representative from the medical examiner’s office in St. John’s.

If you see a polar bear or spot polar bear tracks, please call the St. Anthony RCMP detachment office.