

**THIRST**

**L.A.  
LARKIN**

PIER **9**

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23 Hickson Road  
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[www.murdochbooks.com.au](http://www.murdochbooks.com.au)  
[info@murdochbooks.com.au](mailto:info@murdochbooks.com.au)

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*To the men and women working in Antarctica.*



Satellite image of Antarctica's Pine Island Glacier (known as PIG) and the Amundsen Sea Embayment, partially clogged with sea ice.

Image: T. Scambos, J. Bohlander and B. Raup, 1996. *Images of Antarctic ice shelves*, accessed 16 February 2012. Boulder, Colorado, USA: National Snow and Ice Data Center. Digital media. [http://nsidc.org/data/iceshelves\\_images](http://nsidc.org/data/iceshelves_images).

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A few years from now ...



## T MINUS 5 DAYS, 2 HOURS, 53 MINUTES

5 March, 9:07 am (UTC-07)

Pine Island Glacier, Antarctica, 74° 55' S, 101° 11' W

At minus thirty degrees Celsius, the trickle of blood on Mac's beard froze rapidly.

'Wh – what do you want?' he stammered, spreadeagled on his back.

His masked attacker didn't respond. In the struggle, Mac's prescription goggles had been torn off, so the man pointing an assault rifle at him was a terrifying blur.

Minutes earlier, Mac had been helping Dave to remove fragile scientific equipment from the camp's red, domed pods, known as 'apples'. The Walgreen Crevasse project was complete and they were shutting down camp for the winter. The snowmobiles were loaded up, and Mac, chilled by the winds, had started swinging his arms and stamping his feet. His initial excitement at swapping shifts with Luke – the project's glaciologist – had waned as the intense cold clawed at his bones.

Now his heart was racing and sweat trickled down the back of his neck. His ribs had been broken by a savage blow from a rifle butt and every breath was torture. A few metres away, near the crevasse edge, Dave lay with his arms raised, two guns trained on him. The last of the four strangers was unarmed and watched from



a distance. He was the leader – it was clear from the way the others deferred to him.

‘Who are you?’ Mac asked, dumbfounded. There were no other field sites for at least a thousand kilometres, and he knew the nearest station, Li Bai, was currently unmanned.

Still no response. Had they heard him above the katabatic winds that hissed down the mountain and across the glacier, blowing stinging spindrift into his face?

The leader moved closer. As he bent over Mac, some of his features came into focus. He rolled his balaclava up and away from his mouth, revealing thin lips and sparse black hairs on his boyish chin. ‘Did you report our presence here?’

His voice was surprisingly deep. Authoritative. Some kind of accent ... American?

Before Mac could answer, his interrogator gestured to the nearest subordinate, who kicked him in the kidneys. Mac convulsed, vomiting bile.

‘Answer. Did you radio your station?’ the man yelled like a drill sergeant.

Panting, and with his eyes now watering, Mac could barely make out the black blobs of his shattered two-way radio on the ground. They hadn’t had time to call for help. Dressed in white, the strangers had been virtually invisible. When they appeared out of nowhere, Mac and Dave had simply gawped. In Antarctica, there was no reason to assume strangers were anything but friendly, part of the international research fraternity. And they never expected visitors to be armed.

‘Yes,’ said Mac, hoping his lie would be believed. He had made his scheduled call to Hope Station at 09:00, but that was ten minutes ago.

The man in charge glanced at the radio shards, then leaned closer to Mac’s face. His small but perfect teeth were unnaturally whiter than the glacier. His eyes studied Mac’s with clinical precision. ‘I don’t believe you.’ He smiled, stretching his lips so thin they almost disappeared. ‘And you’re from Hope, the Australian station?’

Mac just managed to shake his head, although his body shrieked in pain. The last thing he was going to do was lead them to his mates.





‘I see.’

The man walked to where Dave lay, pocketed his working radio and then kicked the sole of his captive’s boot, as if inspecting a car’s tyres. Dave kicked back but his assailant jumped aside and issued orders in a language Mac didn’t understand. Two of the attackers kneeled on Dave’s arms, one on each side.

Young and fit, he struggled hard. ‘Get off me, you fuckers!’

‘Did you radio Hope Station?’ the leader called to Mac.

One of their attackers – wide-framed and short-legged, like a bulldog – pulled off Dave’s hood to reveal a mop of light-blond hair. He moved with the speed of a man used to combat.

‘Let me go!’ Dave yelled, kicking and writhing.

Mac struggled to go to the aid of his friend, but his guard shoved a rifle muzzle in his face. The broad soldier straddled Dave’s chest and slapped him twice. In the second or so it took Dave to recover, his assailant took hold of his head, a hand on either side, and twisted it sharply to the right. Despite the whining wind, the crack was unmistakable. Dave no longer moved.

Too late, Mac shouted, ‘No! No, we didn’t. For God’s sake, we never radioed.’

As the tears ran down his face and onto the hair at his temples, they froze in tiny pear-shaped beads of white.

‘That’s better. Your hesitation cost your friend his life. Don’t treat me like a fool.’

Unable to speak, Mac stared in horror as Dave, still in his safety harness, was dragged to the crevasse lip and thrown in. The ropes pinged tight, as the three metallic anchors, hammered deep into the ice, strained under his weight. For a fleeting moment, Mac imagined Dave hanging like a macabre marionette.

Mac was yanked to his feet, the pain in his ribs like an ice pick in his side. Two men held him fast. As they pulled him towards the crevasse, Mac’s terror mounted. Its mouth gaped a few metres wide, and it plunged into a deep and jagged V-shaped chasm.

He managed to tear an arm free but a rifle butt hit him between the shoulder blades and he crumpled, yelping. Mac peered down into his turquoise tomb. Faced with imminent death, all the fight drained

from him and he released the contents of his bladder.

‘Please don’t,’ he begged. ‘I won’t say anything, for God’s sake.’

‘Do you promise?’

‘Yes, I do, yes. Not a word. Please, I have a wife and daughter.’

His captor barked instructions. Mac’s smashed radio was dropped into the crevasse, then the men used hammers to dislodge the ice screws still holding Dave’s weight. Once loosened, they zipped across the surface and disappeared into the depths, taking the ropes and Dave’s body with them.

‘A tragic accident. This poor man,’ the leader gestured towards the crevasse, ‘tried to save you. But unfortunately his anchors didn’t hold. Such heroism.’

‘No, not down there!’ cried Mac, attempting to pull back from the edge. ‘No! Don’t let me die down there!’

The leader placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. ‘My friend, this is not personal. In fact, we probably want the same thing.’ He paused. ‘I don’t want to hurt you.’

Mac was released. He could barely stand but a glimmer of hope gave him strength and he staggered round to face his aggressor.

‘But you see,’ said the leader, gesturing to his second-in-command, ‘it has to be done.’

A kick to the stomach propelled Mac backwards, and the lip of the crevasse gave way beneath him. He was too stunned to scream. With a thud his body bounced off an ice ledge and into the blue void.