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28.20 FEBRUARY 2012

STANDING in front of the mirror as my dressmaker puts the finishing touches on my wedding gown, I'm choking back the tears. But instead of tears of happiness, as is normal of brides-to-be, I'm dizzy with fear and gut-wrenching anxiety.

Because the harsh reality is that my future husband may not live long enough to see me walk down the aisle in just under five weeks time.

Instead of helping me plan the first day of the rest of our lives, my fiance Cas, 29, is risking his life – and our future – trekking 2200km from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole and back to raise much-needed funds for teen cancer charity You Can.

It's such a treacherous expedition

and determination. We soon started dating and fell madly in love, me all the while assuming the South Pole expedition was way off in the future.

As a professional ballet dancer, I'd always treated my body as a temple but I quickly discovered that Cas was an adrenaline junkie who thrived on pushing himself to the limit.

Instead of dinner dates, he took me rock climbing and canyoning in the Blue Mountains – and I loved every minute of our adventures together.

But he also often went away solo climbing or on adrenaline-charged expeditions. During these times I'd try to distract myself, but the truth was I'd be on tenterhooks waiting for a call to say he'd got back safely.

We'd been together for about a year when Cas and Jonesy started planning their expedition to Antarctica; they'd secured sponsorship and were doing their trek to raise money for You Can.

Their route across the ice would take three months and push their abilities to the absolute limits. No one had ever successfully completed the journey to the South Pole and back without assistance.

The boys would be dragging everything they needed, including food and camping gear, across the ice in 160kg sleds. They'd walk and cross-country ski, and they'd face temperatures of -30°C.

Cas warned me that many polar explorers returned with missing ▶

'Their ICE ROUTE would take THREE MONTHS and push their abilities to the ABSOLUTE LIMITS'

that in 100 years of polar exploration no one has made it before. I can only hope and pray that he's the exception.

I first met James, who everyone calls "Cas", at a party in Sydney in 2008. It was held in honour of him and his best mate Jonesy, to celebrate them making history as the first to kayak 3318km across the Tasman Sea from Australia to New Zealand. I couldn't help but be impressed.

"Jonesy and I are planning a trek to the South Pole next," Cas told me when we started chatting on the dance floor later that night.

I found myself admiring his courage



**WILL HE
DOWN MAKE IT
THE AIS**

THE BRIDE
*Planning the
wedding alone* >>

THE GROOM
*Risking death
in the Antarctic* <<

In the lead-up to his big day, James Castrission is on a dangerous South Pole trek for charity. His bride Mia Ballenden, 29, shares her fears for his safe return

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fingers or toes from frostbite. I was terrified. Yet the biggest danger they faced were crevasses – hidden canyons in the ice up to hundreds of metres deep. If one of them accidentally fell into one, even if they could contact their rescue team they were hours from help. They could die from hypothermia or injury.

No matter how skilled or highly trained the boys were, Antarctica was totally unpredictable and the danger frighteningly real. I couldn't bear to think about it and I wanted to beg Cas to change his mind, but I knew deep down it was an important goal for him – and it was for charity, after all.

In 2010, Cas and I travelled to Tanzania as part of his gruelling training schedule for the trek. Together we climbed Mt Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak, over five days. When we finally reached the summit, he got down on one knee and asked me to marry him. Although I was giddy from the 5895m altitude, it was the most amazing moment of my life and I didn't hesitate in saying yes.

Back in Sydney, Cas urged, "We can't put our wedding plans on hold just because I'm doing the trek. Let's get married as soon as I get home from Antarctica." I was thrilled (and relieved because the certainty in his voice assured me he'd come home in one piece).

So we set the date for February 25, 2012 – three weeks after Cas and Jonesy are due back. We booked our venue, a five-star resort in Krabi, Thailand. But that was the only involvement Cas would be able to have in the planning.

Friends and family thought we were crazy to dive into the planning when there was a very real risk that Cas might not make it back in time – or alive.

The six months before the expedition was terrible and put a huge strain on our relationship. Talk of the trek consumed everything. I didn't try to talk Cas out of it; I couldn't bear to be the one to stop him realising his dreams. After all, his courage, determination and craziness were the reasons I fell in love with him.

But at times I felt beyond frustrated and longed for us to be like any other engaged couple, getting caught up in the stress and excitement of seating arrangements and choosing a menu.

As his departure date drew closer, I helped Cas prepare. A trained dietitian, I put together meal plans for the guys

to ensure they gained the 20kg they needed before the trek. They'd burn around 25,000kJ a day in Antarctica, losing around 30kg during the trek.

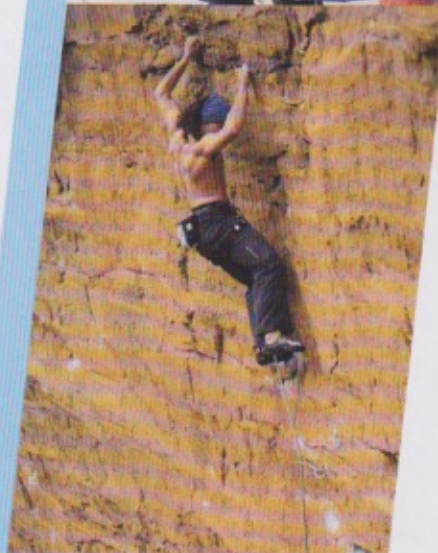
In October, I flew with Cas and Jonesy to Chile where they boarded a plane to Hercules Inlet, Antarctica. Kissing Cas goodbye was the hardest thing I've done.

"This is the last adventure I'm going on without you," Cas said, as tears streamed down my face. Our only communication would be the occasional call via satellite phone. Devastated, I flew back to Sydney and the boys began their dangerous trek.

Desperate to push the fear from my mind, I threw myself into the wedding plans. I missed discussing the details with Cas – like the colour of the groomsmen's ties. It felt wrong making all the decisions on my own. It was almost laughable at



From top left: Cas and Jonesy 'cross the ditch'; Cas proposes to Mia on Mt Kilimanjaro; the boys brandish the Aussie flag at the South Pole – now they just need to get back; adrenaline junkie Cas in action



times – I couldn't even order his suit because I had no idea what size he'd be.

It hasn't been easy since Cas left, but thankfully I've been able to talk to him twice a week, and it's those conversations that keep me going. But they can also break my heart. Especially during the dark moments, like when Cas developed a skin infection on his thighs that made it difficult and painful for him to walk or ski. "I'm not sure I'll make it," he confessed during one call. But I had to be strong for his sake, so I told him how much I believed in his strength.

Christmas Day was rough and, after putting on a brave face for so long, I finally broke down on the phone. As much as I respected what the guys were doing, secretly I just wished it was over so we could move forward with our lives.

On New Year's Eve, after two months on the ice, Cas and Jonesy made it to the South Pole. What an achievement! I felt so proud. But the worry is far from over – they still have the gruelling 1100km trek back to Hercules Inlet. Already behind schedule – and rationing food as a result – they face an uphill battle if they are to return in early February as planned.

Now, as I finalise all the wedding arrangements, I'm acutely aware that the clock is ticking towards the day we're due to tie the knot. I can only wait and hope my groom will be beside me.

To sponsor a step on Cas and Jonesy's Antarctic journey for You Can, visit www.casandjonesy.com.au