

JADE HAMEISTER POLAR EXPLORER



Feiwel and Friends
New York

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*To my beautiful family, Paul, Vanessa,
and Kane, for supporting my dreams.*

The past couple of years have been filled with crazy new experiences – experiences that have transformed me and my soul. New pins on my map, new smells, new tastes, new friends, new cultures and a new mindset. I've pushed myself past what I once thought were my boundaries and challenged what other people once thought was possible for young women. I've set world records, been to places where no human has ever set foot before and fully immersed myself in the here and now of each new challenge. I've chased moments that I can't explain. Moments with emotions and adrenaline highs, where I felt on top of the world or in the depths of despair. Moments that can't ever be replicated or relived. I've constantly been in good company and surrounded myself with humans who make me a better version of the person I was yesterday. A lot of people tell me I'm crazy and ask me why I would do something so insane. But I think the real question is, why would I not do something I'm so insane about? I think you're crazy not to chase your wildest dreams. Crazy to live a safe life with no risk and to not do the things that set your soul on fire. The best stories are the unexpected, unplanned ones. This constant passion and fire inside of me that drives me to want to explore and experience the unknown is my why. These are the things I live for. The moments that make me feel alive. Thank you for allowing me to share my journeys with you.

Jade x

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PROLOGUE THAT SANDWICH

For the last three years, I have dedicated my spare time to achieving my dream of the Polar Hat-Trick – skiing to the North Pole, crossing Greenland coast to coast and skiing from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole.

When I'd returned home from reaching the North Pole, at 14 years old, TEDx approached me with the opportunity to deliver a talk discussing a 'big idea worth sharing'. It was a life-changing experience and I was a combination of excited and nervous.

My TEDx talk – which was about trying to shift the focus for young women from how we appear to the possibilities of what we can do – was then uploaded to YouTube so that it was

free for anyone around the world to watch. It was incredible to have this platform to share a message so important to me with so many young people, but what I hadn't really wrapped my head around was the possible online trolling in response to my talk. The majority of responses it received were of support and encouragement, but there were some negative comments, too – most of them demeaning to women.

Make me a sandwich.

Good on you, sweetie. Maybe you could find a successful husband and make him a sandwich.

Sorry little lady – you were designed to be a homemaker, have babies and take care of them. Not to trot around in snow to prove a point. ACCEPT YOUR ROLE AND PLAY IT.

Make me a sandwich.

Every time someone posted a positive comment, these trolls would respond with: 'Make me a sandwich.'

My first reaction was just to laugh, but deep down I was also kind of annoyed. The people who make these sexist comments and bully online are doing it, usually anonymously, from behind the safety of a keyboard. Not only are they insecure, but they're dinosaurs – the world has moved on and they've been left behind.

Later, when we were on our way to the South Pole, occasionally we would joke about these comments on my talk. When we finally arrived at the Pole we spent the day cleaning

out our sleds and getting ready for our flight back to Union Glacier the next morning. Dad was pretty tired, so after dinner he went back to our tent to call Mum and I stayed up with the rest of the team and a few other adventurers watching *Back to the Future*. It was then that I decided to carry out a joke – make a sandwich and walk the kilometre from camp back to the Pole and take a photo to post to my Instagram account. Heath and Ming also agreed to come with me and take the photo.

It was around 11 pm when I went back to the tent to tell Dad what we were planning to do (it is 24-hour daylight in Antarctica in summer, so there were no issues there). He told me it was a stupid idea, and that I should just zip myself into my sleeping bag and get some recovery rest. When I told him I was going to do it anyway, he asked me not to wake him up when I got back in the tent.

I posted the photo that night along with the words, ‘... for all those men who commented “make me a sandwich” on my TEDx talk ... I made you a sandwich (ham & cheese), now ski 37 days and 600 km to the South Pole and you can eat it xx’.

At the time, I had about 3000 Instagram followers and I only wanted to take the sandwich picture mainly for a bit of a laugh. Obviously, there was a message behind it to the men who’d made the comments, but I hadn’t really analysed it in that way, and I was pretty sure none of them followed me on social media, so they would never see the photo to get my message anyway – it was more symbolic.

But around the time we got back home to Australia, the social media site AJ+ had already made a video telling my story

and picked up the sandwich photo. It was viewed more than five million times and things just snowballed from there.

Within a few weeks, I had more than 12,000 Instagram followers and there were media enquiries coming in from all over the world. I was spending more time on Skype doing interviews than I was catching up on my homework. I felt there was a lot of pressure and, in some cases, I was being labelled a feminist icon.

But I'm not sure that's what I am or want to be. For me, it's about equality. I've been brought up in a family where the fact that I am female has never entered any discussion about what is possible. There is no 'us and them' in my mind. We absolutely need to empower women around the world, but everyone, both male and female, should benefit from that empowerment. We all need to work together as one human race to make our world a better place.

All the stories that followed also stirred up thousands of online comments. Lots of men responded that I was just being a compliant female and doing what I was told to do – I went and made that sandwich.

The truth is, I didn't. I asked the camp's male chef, Michel, if he could make me a sandwich to take to the Pole for the photo, and he did.

So the joke was on the dinosaurs, again.



© Paul Hameister

Me and Michel, the French chef at the South Pole camp, who made me that sandwich.

HOW
IT ALL
BEGAN

1

BORN TO BE BRAVE

My parents have always said that they believe I was born a fighter.

I arrived into this world at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne on 5 June 2001, and as far as anyone could tell, I was a healthy baby girl. But three days later, and for no apparent reason, I stopped breathing.

I was in my crib in Mum's hospital room. Dad was there and one of Mum's friends was visiting. Dad looked over and saw that my face had turned purple. He didn't say anything to Mum, but calmly picked me up, took me over to the nurses' station and asked if they thought there was a problem. The movement must have made me breathe again,

because when the nurses looked at me, there was nothing wrong.

Dad took me back to Mum's room and put me in the crib. He said nothing to Mum and her friend, but he didn't take his eyes off me.

Within the hour, I went purple again. Again, he picked me up and took me to the nurses. This time, I didn't resume breathing.

The nurses hit the code-blue alarm, and medical staff ran from everywhere to try to resuscitate me. They then rushed me off to the special care unit – and Mum and Dad's nightmare began.

Mum had heard the commotion outside her room, but she had no idea that I was the cause of all the fuss until Dad asked her friend to leave, then explained to Mum what had happened. Mum has told me since that when it happened, she felt her heart stop. Her brain froze and she doesn't remember when it started working again. Instead of being in my crib beside her, I was now in the care of others and all Mum was left with were questions. What was wrong with me? Was I going to survive? Would I have brain damage from lack of oxygen? She was terrified.

To make matters worse, there were no answers. I would unexpectedly stop breathing – sometimes half-a-dozen times a day or more. Mum was discharged and sent home without me (Dad said she was a wreck) while I remained at the hospital with an army of doctors and specialists running tests, trying to work out what was going on.

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Mum would return to spend all day at the hospital with me while Dad was at work, then Dad would sit by my crib all night. They were determined to watch over me every minute, so that if something went wrong they could make sure I got the attention I needed. Dad would read me stories through the night. He says his favourite was *The Lion King*, except he made Simba a lioness. As he watched over me, so small and helpless, he promised me that, if I lived, he would do anything in his power to help me achieve my dreams.

After two long weeks, the doctors still didn't know what was causing me to stop breathing. Eventually, when I'd gone a couple of days in a row without an episode, I was allowed to go home. Like most parents, Mum and Dad were excited the day had come, but also extremely anxious. They were taught how to perform CPR on a newborn and were provided with a breathing monitor and plenty of good wishes.

The breathing monitor was connected by sticky tape to the place where my umbilical cord had been. When I stopped breathing, an alarm would go off and that's when Mum and Dad were supposed to start the CPR – though the doctor told them that if it got to the point where I needed CPR, it was probably too late anyway . . . I'm sure that was reassuring.

Mum was so worried about being alone with me in case something should happen that Dad decided to take a year off work so he could be there with us. Mum told me later that it was the worst of times, but also the best. She and Dad worked together as a team and it made their marriage stronger than ever.

After seven or so months, my breathing problems cleared up. I had proven to be a survivor. I have no doubt that this beginning altered something in my chemistry.



Some of my earliest memories are of Dad going off on adventures. He began climbing big peaks in 2007. He'd also had a couple of near-death experiences in his life – one when he was just seven years old and was hit in the head by a tyre rolling fast down a steep hill, resulting in a multiple-fracture exploded skull. These experiences led him to believe he should never take life for granted. He was constantly reminding me and my younger brother, Kane, of this when we were little – and he still does!

His taste for adventure and exploration has taken him from surfing three-metre swells on newly formed breaks in Indonesia's remote Banda Aceh shortly after the 2004 earthquake and tsunami, to an extended whitewater rafting expedition in Nepal. He's even walked the Kokoda Track twice – once with his dad and again with Kane when he was thirteen. And earlier this year, Dad and Kane covered around 1000 kilometres exploring remote and unexplored parts of the Amazon jungle with Matsés tribesmen as their guides and Peru Special Forces escorts.

When I was about five years old, Dad decided he'd like to climb Mount Aconcagua in the Andes. Aconcagua is the second-highest of the Seven Summits (the tallest mountain

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on each of the seven continents) and the highest peak in the Southern Hemisphere.

He was one of only three of his party of 11 to reach the peak on that expedition. A man in the group ahead of Dad's team died from altitude sickness and one of the guys Dad reached the summit with fell on the way down and knocked himself unconscious, which made for a very slow descent in bad weather. Off the back of this climb, Mum and Dad raised \$20,000 to purchase new breathing monitors for the Royal Children's Hospital.

Dad went on to climb Mont Blanc (completing a climb that normally takes five days in less than 24 hours), Kilimanjaro in Africa, Russia's Mount Elbrus, Vinson in Antarctica, Denali in Alaska and, of course, Mount Everest. He reached the top of Everest in 2011. By 2013, he was the twelfth Australian to have completed the Seven Summits.

In 2008, the whole family climbed Mount Kosciuszko. I was six years old at the time and Kane was just four. It felt great to be at lunch during primary school and able to say we had climbed the highest mountain in Australia on our holidays, though in reality it's not very extreme! From an early age, adventure was just a regular part of our family life. Dad would come home laden with photographs and stories, and Kane and I thought taking on massive challenges and pushing boundaries was just a normal way to live.

2

BIG DREAMS

At the age of 12, I somehow convinced the rest of the family to go to Nepal and hike to Everest Base Camp together. Base Camp is 5400 metres above sea level and it takes 12 days to get there. The summit of Mount Everest is 8848 metres above sea level and was first climbed by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953. I'd heard a lot of Dad's stories about climbing Everest and I really wanted to be a part of that world and see the places I had only created the image of in my mind.

Climbing the tallest mountain in the world was never going to be possible for our whole family at the ages of 12 and 10, but trekking to Base Camp was still an incredibly exciting adventure. It was such a magical part of the world to spend

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time in. Dad arranged for us to trek with a team that included some of his old expedition friends who would continue on in an attempt to summit Mount Everest. Each day we trekked through villages, met some of the beautiful local people and spent the evening playing cards with the sherpas and mingling with other travellers. I can honestly say that the experience changed my life. It made me think about what I could potentially achieve as a young woman in the world of adventure and exploration.

One of the members of our group who was going on to climb to the top of Everest was Vilborg Arna Gissurardóttir – or Villa, as we called her. Villa is from Iceland and she had already skied solo from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole and had also crossed the Greenland ice cap. As we walked during the day, Villa would share stories with me about her expeditions and answer any and all of my questions. I'm sure I got pretty annoying at times, since she was trying to focus on her attempt at sumitting the highest mountain on the planet, but she was very generous with her time and I will be forever in her debt. She had an incredible 'anything is possible' kind of vibe. All her adventures sounded so crazy – but so crazy awesome.

Villa didn't make it to the top of Everest on that trip – there was an avalanche in the Khumbu Icefall and the season was shut down before anyone could attempt a summit. She returned the following year and was caught in the avalanche at Base Camp caused by the terrible earthquake in Nepal. Again, the season was cancelled. But she didn't give up. In 2017 she became the first Icelandic woman to make it to the top of Everest.

Villa's words of encouragement on my trek to Everest Base Camp stayed with me, and after we arrived home I began to create my own ideas of adventures in my imagination.

When I was in year seven, I decided to run for middle school captain. It was my big goal that year and I had my heart set on it. However, I didn't get chosen, but my best friend did. While I was incredibly proud of my friend (and she did an amazing job in the role), I was also quietly really upset at the time. It seems like such a small thing now, but it fired me up and made me determined to find something else to work towards – something that was important to me but which wasn't related to school. Adventure was second nature to me so that was where my focus naturally turned. I decided I wanted to ski to the South Pole, just like Villa had done.

I mentioned the idea to Dad first, and the two of us agreed we should do some more research into it as I really had no idea what I was asking for. Dad spoke to an expedition company he had used many times before, and they assured him it was possible to ski to the South Pole at 14 years of age if one was properly prepared. Armed with that knowledge, we sat down with Mum and Kane and told them what I wanted to attempt to do.

Mum and Dad were, in principle, in support, but with the condition that Dad would have to go with me given my age.

But before I was given the go-ahead, Dad said I had to prove that this was something I was really passionate about and committed to doing. He devised a rigorous training program and my goal was to stick to it. I didn't miss a session.

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But life in the suburbs of Melbourne hadn't exactly given me the skills I'd need to ski for weeks on end while dragging a sled in some of the coldest parts of the world. In fact, I had never really skied before – however, I was willing and excited to learn.

Dad and I organised a trip to New Zealand so we could both learn how to cross-country ski at a place called Snow Farm. Honestly, I hated it at first. I loved the snow, but I felt incredibly uncoordinated the first time I put on skis, and my muscles ached in ways I never expected. I remember watching the experienced skiers and feeling so out of place, but for some reason that only motivated me more.

We then flew by helicopter to the Tasman Glacier in the middle of one of New Zealand's coldest winters. There, Dean Staples – a good friend of Dad's, who had been his guide on Everest (Dean has summited Everest nine times) – taught me all sorts of polar expedition skills. Dad wanted to see if this really was something I was going to enjoy. He told me later that he'd half expected me to say it was a lot harder than I'd thought it would be, and to give up on the journey to the South Pole.

In temperatures as low as -20°C , I learned to walk on icy slopes in crampons, harness a huge sled to myself and, wearing skis, drag it across the snow for hours. I also learned how to get myself out of a crevasse. Crevasses are dark, seemingly bottomless cracks in the ice that are mostly hidden beneath thin layers of snow. Falling into a crevasse was one of my greatest fears from the beginning; I knew I'd have to learn how to deal with it myself if that was to happen, though, and I was dreading it.

After teaching me some theory and showing me how to tie various knots, Dean created an anchor at the top edge of the biggest crevasse we could find and lowered me in. I was then left in mid-air, dangling off the side of a crevasse in the middle of nowhere. I had to use two small loops of rope called prusiks, which were attached to the main safety rope on my harness, to slowly inch my way up the ice wall to the ground above me.

Dad walked away at this point. He told me later that it wasn't because he didn't care, but because he knew it was going to be really difficult and frustrating and I needed to find a way to work through it on my own.

It took me almost an hour to get out. I was in tears and shaking the whole time. My hands were numb and aching from the cold. I kept creating scenarios in my head where the rope would snap or the anchor would break loose. I felt like giving up multiple times and yelling to Dean to just lift me out, but I couldn't let myself; I made it out on my own and when I reached the surface, I received the most incredible thrill.

I was hooked.



Everything we did during our time in New Zealand was completely new to me, but it made me really hyped for the future. I was ready to train hard and do anything else necessary to get to the South Pole at the end of the year.

Back in Melbourne, while we were driving to the gym for another gruelling training session one day, Dad hit me with

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some bad news. He'd received a phone call from the owner of the expedition company we were going to use for my South Pole trip. The logistics company in Antarctica had advised them they wouldn't allow me to ski to the South Pole at the age of 14 – it was a long-standing rule that the company would not support expeditions for anyone under sixteen. Dad told me he had tried everything he could think of to find a way around it, but their decision was final.

I was gutted. I'd already done so much preparation. Fortunately, we'd kept my plans very secret, so I didn't have to explain to everyone what had happened and could work through my hurt without a thousand questions.

After feeling sorry for myself for a few days, I decided I wasn't going to let this setback wreck my dream. With Mum and Dad's encouragement, I began to consider what other trips I might be able to do before I turned 16 to help me prepare for Antarctica.

After a lot of research, I came up with a new plan for us. First, I would like to ski to the North Pole, which I could do at 14, but at this early stage I hadn't really considered or understood the decisions that needed to be made around starting points for this trip. Then I would like to try to cross Greenland, the second-largest ice cap on the planet. This was a common preparatory expedition for a full-length South Pole trip, so it seemed to make sense before I headed to Antarctica. And if I managed to complete all three expeditions, I would have achieved what is known as the Big Three polar expeditions, or the 'Polar Hat-Trick'.

I now had a new polar dream, and it proved to me once again that everything happens for a reason – that setbacks can be transformed into opportunities.

Having revised my goals, we only had about nine months in which to try to put all the pieces in place to make the North Pole a reality. The North Pole expedition season starts in April each year and it's short – there are only a few weeks when it's considered safe to attempt the journey.

To start with, we needed a guide.

After a few emails and phone calls, we found Eric Philips, the first Australian to ski to the North and South Poles. He had been guiding polar expeditions for 25 years, lived in Tasmania and owned a company called Ice Trek. Eric flew to Melbourne to meet me and get comfortable that a 14-year-old would be up to the task. He signed up to be our guide on the expedition.

We then needed to confirm funding for the expedition.

When Dad had summited Everest, he and Dean, who was also a cinematographer, had filmed their journey. The resulting documentary, *Everest: The Promise*, was distributed by a Melbourne film production company, WTFN, and it aired on the Discovery Channel. Dad mentioned my quest to complete the Polar Hat-Trick to the CEO of WTFN, Daryl Talbot, and Daryl asked if I would be interested in allowing a cameraperson to accompany me on my journey. WTFN then took the idea to a few different organisations they thought would be interested in helping with finance and logistics, and National Geographic said yes, and made a significant financial commitment.

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Having the financial support of Nat Geo was unbelievable, but, looking back now, I realise that the money was the least valuable piece of my partnership with them – it opened up so many new opportunities for me. I am so grateful to have had such an incredible organisation involved with my journeys.



For the following months, getting to the North Pole was my focus. I would go to school and continue to do everything a normal 14-year-old would do, but I was also planning to ski more than 150 kilometres over a new and harsh environment. I had to get used to juggling the two worlds I now lived in.

Dad and I would go the gym four or five times a week to work on strength training, plus we'd do another two sessions to improve our aerobic conditioning. That could involve anything from dragging tyres on the beach using a harness (the closest we could get to pulling a sled on snow) to hours of stair climbs. Each of these sessions lasted anything from 90 minutes to two hours and they were as much about pushing on when you felt like giving up as they were about building fitness. As physically strong as I needed to be to take on this expedition, it was going to be the mental side that would really test my limits.

THE NORTH POLE

EXPEDITION 1

Destination: The North Pole

Distance: A 150-kilometre journey from outside the last degree, starting at 88°40'

Duration: 11 days, May 2016

Goal: To be the youngest person in history to make the trip

Team: Me, Dad, guide Eric Philips, cameraman Petter Nyquist

Big challenges: Dad's kidney stone, delays from cracks in the ice runway, danger of falling into the freezing Arctic Ocean, open water leads, compression zones, polar bears, a race to beat the end of the season

Everyday challenges: Skiing, homesickness, wondering if Dad was okay

3

FALSE STARTS AND MIDNIGHT EMERGENCIES

Just when you think everything is going to plan, things can change in an instant.

For more than a year I'd been training hard to tackle my first polar expedition. I was feeling physically ready for the North Pole trip, but I had some concerns too.

I remember one specific night at the gym, where I had a major episode of self-doubt and fear. I wondered just what we thought we were doing even attempting this expedition. Here I was, a 14-year-old girl from Melbourne who had barely even seen snow, attempting to set a world record on skis. Who did I think I was?

I was also starting to dwell on the dangers we could encounter along the way. There was the real possibility of plunging through

the thin floating sea ice on which we would be travelling, into the freezing Arctic Ocean below. There were also polar bears, who can smell humans from up to 20 kilometres away and have been known to stalk polar adventurers for days. But because the actual trip still seemed like a dream, these hazards did too.

The night before we were due to fly to Oslo and then on to Svalbard, Dad and I went through all of our gear one more time, just to make sure we weren't leaving anything behind and that everything was working as it should be. All that was left to do was pack it all into our bags. To keep things calm and at least semi-normal, Kane and I decided to play a game of cards after Mum had dished up one of Dad's and my last home-cooked meal for a while. Dad told us he didn't feel very well and he went up to bed early.

I'd only been asleep for about an hour when I woke to the sound of Dad's voice.

'I'm going to go downstairs to sleep, so I don't keep you awake,' he said to Mum.

It was only about half an hour later when I woke again. This time the voices were louder, more anxious.

'Do you want me to call an ambulance?' Mum asked.

What? Ambulance!

I went downstairs to find Dad doubled over in pain on the floor. He'd been busy all week with work and organising the final details for the trip, and had been ignoring some abdominal issues. But this was bad – I could tell immediately from the grimace on his face.

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Mum called emergency services, but when the ambulance hadn't turned up 20 minutes later, Dad decided he was going to drive himself to the hospital even though he was in excruciating pain. Mum was trying to help him, but he kept saying he could look after himself.

The situation quickly became very chaotic. We had no idea what was wrong with Dad and he was starting to make less sense as his pain intensified. What if Dad was seriously ill? What if we had to abandon everything we'd worked towards?



The next morning, Mum told me that Dad had a large kidney stone and would soon be going into surgery – the day of our departure – to have it removed. I was almost convinced that our big adventure was going to be over before it even began. But Dad being Dad, he'd told Mum before he went into surgery that he was going to get on the flight, even though the surgeon was strongly recommending that he shouldn't travel so soon after his operation.

I tried to believe it was possible, even though as the hours ticked away, we had no news from the hospital. I fought hard to keep in the flow as if everything was proceeding as normal. Thankfully the day was full of distractions – a blur of interviews and filming with National Geographic. I didn't love having a camera shoved in my face to capture my raw emotions, but my polar journey was now being filmed for a documentary, so it was necessary. My two best friends Zoe and Mia came over after school to say goodbye and it all became very real.

Dad arrived home from hospital at 6 pm – after only waking up from his general anaesthetic at around 4 pm! He was very groggy and we worked together to finalise the packing and zip up our bags. Our taxi was picking us up at 7 pm to head to the airport, so we ate a rushed meal together and said our final farewells. It was obvious Mum was more than a little worried.



The travel was incredibly long. Melbourne to Dubai was a 14-hour flight, and from there, another seven-hour flight to Oslo. We then had a nine-hour stopover before the final leg of just over two and a half hours of flying to Longyearbyen in Svalbard. I spent most of the journey worrying about Dad. He now had a plastic stent between his kidney and bladder to help him pee – unfortunately he was peeing lots of blood – and his forearm was bleeding from the hole left behind when a nurse had pulled the IV drip out in the car park. (He'd left the hospital in such a hurry the nurses forgot to remove it, and he was halfway home before he realised and had to turn around. A nurse met him in the car park to take it out.) He was wearing special circulation socks on the plane to stop the blood from clotting after the surgery, and seeing them kept reminding me of what had just happened.

Eric met us at the airport in Longyearbyen and checked us into the hotel, where we called Mum and Kane before falling asleep.

The next day, Eric (who was staying across town) was due to pick us up at midday to explore a bit of the town. I sat in

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the hotel foyer writing in my diary and admiring the unique landscape out the window. I became more and more nervous. It was so cold outside and I knew it would be about 20 times colder out on the ice – and we were going to be out there for the next couple of weeks.

I was already homesick and missing Mum and Kane like crazy. Mum sent me a thought to consider over the coming days, and it really rang true: ‘If I quit now, I will soon be back where I started. And where I started I was desperately wishing to be where I am now.’

I knew right then that if I decided to quit, I’d regret it forever. I had to keep at it.

I knew this in my heart, but my head was still loud with doubt.



Longyearbyen is the largest town in Svalbard, Norway – though with a population of about 2500 people it’s not really large at all. It started out as a coal-mining town in the early 1900s, but these days it’s the centre of the tourism industry for the Arctic. Cruise ships leave from here to explore the fjords, icebergs and wildlife of the ice-bound north and it’s where anyone like us, preparing to ski to the North Pole, does their final preparations. The town consists of heaps of colourful houses and buildings, a few shops, some restaurants, a bar and a museum. Not that we had much time to explore. Our second day was all about making the final preparations before heading off.

We were doing this journey ‘unsupported and unassisted’ – that was our plan for all three expeditions. These are technical

terms used in the adventure community to help classify expeditions. ‘Unsupported’ means no support is received via using dogs, kites, vehicles, etc. – you can only use human power to progress. ‘Unassisted’ means that you carry all your needs in your own sled – you cannot receive any resupplies along the journey, either by way of air drop or depots. Unsupported and unassisted is obviously the hardest way to undertake these expeditions, but also the purest – that’s what appealed to me – the risk of failure would be higher, but the feeling of achievement would be so much greater if we could pull it off.

Amongst the contents of our sled was all our food rations. Breakfast would be Eric’s ‘breakfast bomb’ (protein powder, powdered milk and pecans and shredded coconut for flavour). Lunch would consist of a chunk of salami and a chunk of cheese, a packet of two-minute noodles and a few dried biscuits, but I’d never eat everything because my hands would get too cold and eventually be too painful to function. Dinner would be dehydrated packeted meals and Dad and I’d share a double serve in the tent at night. We’d also have a hot drink in the morning (chai latte) and a hot drink at night (Milo). We needed to eat about three times as many calories as we normally would to ensure we had enough energy. The only thing we wouldn’t be carrying was water. We’d be travelling across ice, so there’d be no shortage of it to melt. The only issue was that, because the ice we’d be moving across was frozen sea, it might be hard to find water that wasn’t slightly salty. The older the sea ice, the less salt it contains. In multi-year ice, nearly all the salt has drained away and it makes fresh water that is fine for drinking

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when melted – such ice is a different colour and not too hard to identify with a bit of coaching.

Eric showed us how to pack the sleds for while we were out on the ice. Everything we needed during the day had to be placed at the front of the sled, because the last thing you'd want to be doing is unzipping and unpacking the sled to find something while your body is very quickly cooling down as you've stopped moving. We didn't know what the weather would be like, and we needed to prepare for the worst.

We first met our cameraman, Petter Nyquist, in Longyearbyen too. I became really good friends with him over the course of the expedition. This North Pole expedition was my first experience with the camera in my face and I hated it to start with, but after becoming quite close with Petter, I would just pretend as though I was having a conversation with a friend when he asked me questions on camera. He was the perfect personality for a novice like me – Petter was patient, funny and really cared about how I was feeling. He would prove to be an expert skier and the hardest-working member of our expedition. Petter carried all the camera equipment himself in his sled – the camera people for Greenland and the South Pole would have an assistant to drag these heavier loads.

That night, we had dinner with two other teams that were also undertaking expeditions to the North Pole. There were incredible people on our table, and they were all experienced adventurers with so many stories.

Colin O'Brady was at the dinner and was aiming to do the Seven Summits and the two Poles in five months – otherwise

known as the Explorers' Grand Slam. He completed this feat when he reached the peak of Denali in Alaska on 27 May 2016, nearly two months after we met. He set a speed record of 139 days, which was 58 days faster than the previous record holder. This was made even more amazing by the fact that Colin had suffered second- and third-degree burns to 25 per cent of his body during an accident in Thailand at the beginning of 2008. He'd had multiple operations and, at one point, doctors thought he may never be able to walk properly again.

Then I met Dixie Dansercoer, one of the world's most renowned polar explorers, who had completed land to land crossings at both Poles. He has achieved some extraordinary feats: he was the first to trek from Siberia to Greenland in 2007 and completed the first full circumnavigation of the Greenland ice cap in 2014. Dixie never explores just for the sake of adventure, though. All his expeditions also incorporate a scientific element, which I think is really cool.

Audun Tholfsen was there as well. He had skied and kayaked from the North Pole to his home town of Longyearbyen in 2012. The journey took more than two months, and he received the Shackleton Award, which honours outstanding expedition achievements, for his efforts.

It certainly felt weird being the only female, not to mention the only 14-year-old, among these inspiring people. They had so many stories to tell, while my story was just beginning.



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During our third day in Svalbard we got out on the ice to test our systems, pulling our sleds behind us for four hours to replicate the conditions we'd encounter over the next couple of weeks. I could see that Dad, still fresh from surgery, found this tough going, but he assured me he was fine. Eric also showed us how to set up the camp and light the gas stoves. The tents were a lot bigger than I'd imagined, which was a bit of a relief since Dad and I were going to be sharing one. We'd be spending every moment of the next two weeks together, and although we were really close, being in such a confined space with anyone for so long was going to be a challenge. I knew we'd be pushed to physical extremes and I'd trained myself as hard as I could for that, but how I would cope with the emotional and psychological part of this journey, I was unsure.

I was made even more unsure when the bad news continued to roll on in. Victor Serov, the key liaison person for operations at the Barneo camp, arrived in Svalbard. Barneo is the Russian camp built each year on the sea ice, from where North Pole expeditions depart. He was there to tell the various teams that were preparing for the trip that the runway built on the floating sea ice had cracked in a couple of places. One of the fissures was 30 centimetres wide and the other 20 centimetres. He and his team were searching for a new ice floe on which to construct another runway, but he estimated that would take about a week. In fact, all the expeditions that had been booked were being reconsidered. Someone suggested that instead of the last two degrees of latitude, we just do a single degree, which is the last 112 kilometres to the Pole, in order to make sure we get there in

time before the season is over. As much as I wanted to make it to the Pole in time, the double degree, 224 kilometres, was always the first plan and I wasn't interested in taking the easy way out.

Eric was adamant this setback wouldn't affect us at all – that the Russians would work out some way to get the season back on track. During all this craziness, I also found out that the plane that took people to Barneo last year had crashed after the landing gear failed. Luckily, no one died.

The delay of a few days meant we were going to miss some really cold weather, with temperatures dropping to below -40°C around the Pole. As we waited, I caught up on some schoolwork. I was missing a few weeks of school to do this trip and I knew there would be a bit to catch up on when I got home. It also took my mind off the broken runway for a while. Dad was very relaxed about the delay. He saw it as a chance to slowly rebuild his strength post-surgery.

Later, we were alerted that another crack had opened up on the runway. You get yourself so hyped up and ready to go and then – boom! – something goes wrong and there's another change of plans. By now, it was starting to become draining and, for me, quite upsetting. But I had to remind myself that everything happens for a reason, and avoid getting upset about things that were out of my control.

While it seemed that nothing was going according to plan, it was still overwhelming to be in such a unique environment. To fill in the time, Dad and I went on a few mini adventures. We went dog sledding and ice caving, took a cruise to an old Russian town, and practised pulling our sleds and getting used

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to our skis, considering we were both still very uncoordinated. So, while the delays were a disappointment, Longyearbyen had provided me with some of the greatest experiences of my life so far and I would definitely be back.

A week later, the Russians still hadn't managed to create a new runway. Eric and the other polar guides were told there might not be any expeditions at all to the North Pole that year. This was unprecedented and really opened my eyes to the changing climate, which I would have otherwise been oblivious to. If the season had been cancelled completely, I would have been devastated. When Eric briefed us that this was a real possibility, it was an emotional low point, especially for a 14-year-old who didn't know better.

The North Pole Marathon, which is run in multiple laps around a short course at Barneo (not at the North Pole), was supposed to start at about the same time as our expedition, so the whole town was full of competitors, all of them waiting for their flight onto the sea ice and trying to shuffle around hotels as their check-out dates came and went with no departure for Barneo. We were all wandering around in a state of limbo.

Just when I'd almost convinced myself we'd be heading back to Melbourne without even beginning, the Russians managed to finish building their fourth runway this season. Overnight, no less! We were told we'd be on the first flight to Barneo, departing at midnight, with the other longer-distance North Pole expedition teams.

Finally, we were packing our sleds for real and on our way to the airport.

SOME COOL FACTS ABOUT . . .

The North Pole

- The Geographic North Pole, the goal of our expedition, is the northernmost point on the planet and is the top of the axis on which Earth is spinning. It's a fixed point and is diametrically opposite to the Geographic South Pole.
- The location of the Magnetic North Pole changes daily based on the planet's magnetic field. When you use a compass, it points to the Magnetic North Pole, not the Geographic North Pole.
- The North Pole is located in the middle of the Arctic Ocean on a massive ice floe, a floating piece of Arctic sea ice, that can shrink to half its size in the summer.
- The nearest land is about 800 kilometres away.

- An expedition from land to the North Pole is considered almost impossible these days, given the extent of sea-ice melt from global warming.
- On 4 May 1990, Børge Ousland and Erling Kagge reached the North Pole on skis without resupply, after a journey lasting 58 days, making them the first people to reach the North Pole from land unsupported.
- The Soviet Union built the first North Pole ice station, about 20 kilometres from the actual North Pole, in 1937. Four men conducted scientific research for the following 274 days before they were collected by an ice breaker ship. By then, the station had drifted 2850 kilometres towards Greenland.
- Planes first reached the North Pole in 1948. Since then, expeditions by ship, skidoo, dog sled, submarine and car have all reached the Pole.
- In 1987, Australian Dick Smith became the first person to fly a helicopter there.
- About 30 per cent of the world's untapped oil

reserves are located beneath the ice of the Arctic Circle, and a number of countries lay claim to them.

- Each year, about 250 people from around the world run the 42 kilometres of the North Pole Marathon around Barneo Ice Camp.
- The Arctic is warming faster than any other part of the world. Some scientists predict the sea ice will completely disappear during Arctic summer within a generation, and it will then be possible to sail all the way to the North Pole.

4

GOING NORTH

Finally boarding the Antonov An-74 aircraft for the two-hour flight to the floating ice runway at Barneo was a huge relief. At last, we were on our way to the starting point. I was in awe as I looked out the window. In all directions, as far as I could see was white. Peering closely, though, I could see little lines of blue, known as open water leads, and as we got lower, darker lines, which were the shadows from compression ridges buckling the surface.

Barneo is a temporary camp set up each year by the Russian Geographical Society for the summer season. Scientists, pilots, engineers and explorers all use it as their base.

The Russians look for a good area of sea ice, then a team of people jump out of the back of a plane with parachutes.

A couple of tractors and all the tents and gear they will need are dropped onto the ice with them. Their job is then to establish the base and construct the runway. At the end of the season, everything they can't fly out again sinks to the bottom of the ocean as temperatures warm and the sea ice melts.

When we arrived, we headed by helicopter straight to our starting point, which we had decided would be at 88°N 40'. The Russians had told us and all other teams that because of the delays and how thin the sea ice was this year, they had a fixed end date for all expeditions. If we weren't at the Pole by that date, they would be picking us up by helicopter regardless of where we were and taking us back to Barneo. It meant we effectively had only around 12 days to get to the Pole. We did our maths and, after much discussion, decided to make our starting point around 150 kilometres from the Pole, which meant we had to cover greater distances each day than we had originally planned. Importantly, though, we would have air support for evacuation if something went wrong.

At Barneo, I couldn't find anything resembling a female toilet, and there were big Russian military guys carrying guns everywhere, so I figured it was time to try using a pee funnel for the first time, so that I could pee standing up and not worry too much about privacy. I walked over to the area where all the men were standing up to pee in a couple of barrels in the snow, in full sight of everyone, and tried to act confident, like I'd done it a hundred times before. In fact, Dad had been hassling me to practise using the funnel for weeks before we left, and I'd only pretended to listen.

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My first attempt failed miserably. My thermal pants under my shell were soaked in my own pee and I tried to downplay it as people walked past me. But I was in tears behind my sunglasses, and I privately decided I wouldn't be using the funnel for the rest of the trip – I was a girl and I was going to pee like one.



Our transport from Barneo to our drop-off was in an Mi-8 helicopter, a huge beast commonly used by the military. It was about 3 am when we took off, but it was approaching summer at the North Pole so the sun was still shining, as it's 24-hour daylight at that time of year.

We shared the Mi-8 with two other teams heading to drop-off points near our own. These would be the longest journeys attempted that season because most other teams had decided to attempt the last degree to the Pole only. I was the only woman on the helicopter and I was surrounded by big men who all had vast expedition experience. One of the teams even had three serious-faced British ex-special forces soldiers. I can only imagine how I must have looked to them: a little 14-year-old girl in her brand-new pink polar shell (sitting in wet pee pants). It was super intimidating.



The Arctic landscape is beyond words and no image online or created in my mind could have prepared me for the real thing.

It was also impossible to prepare for the cold. When we landed it was -29°C and, coming from training on Victorian beaches, it was a completely new kind of cold to me. It seemed insane to think that we had been dropped right in the middle of the frozen Arctic Ocean. There was nothing but white as far as the eye could see and the sun was low in the sky.

By the time we'd stepped out onto the ice, I'd already thought a lot about the challenges we'd face over the coming days. We needed to cover an average of 12.4 kilometres each day to make it to the Pole on time. It doesn't sound like much, but in cold conditions and on rugged terrain, progress is slow. You are almost never skiing in a straight line. The surface is like a maze of cracks and compression zones that have to be negotiated. We all knew this had to be a tightly run expedition.

But the biggest challenge, I thought, would be for sure the mental one. I knew there'd be times when I'd really want to give up, but I remembered what Mum had said, that if I quit I would regret it forever. I wasn't planning on it.

By the time we were dropped off, it had been more than 24 hours since we'd slept. Everyone was tired. Nevertheless, we decided to get moving rather than make camp and rest at the drop-off point. We got off to a good start and it didn't feel as hard as I'd thought it might be. As the day progressed, though, the wind picked up and the going got harder.

We hadn't been skiing long before the rough landscape became more obvious. On the horizon, the ice was cracked and folded. We needed to pick a path that headed north, but it was like an obstacle course. It's difficult enough pulling a

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60-kilogram sled across flat ice, when you only weigh about the same, but once we started to encounter ridges of crumbled ice it really became tough. I had to get my ski poles behind me, bury them solidly in the ice and use them to push myself up and over the ridges, hauling the weight of the sled behind me. Pressure ridges are caused by two masses of sea ice colliding with great force, creating rugged ice shards above (and below) the water level. In some cases, they rise about eight metres above the surface. It's not as if they are smooth either – they're bumpy and cracked, sometimes making it hard to find a spot where you can place your skis flat and grip the ice. Sometimes, we had to take off our skis and strap them to the sled while we hauled individual sleds up and over as a team.

It wasn't just exhausting and time-consuming; it was dangerous. The sled hovered at the top of the ridge before tumbling over the edge and down the other side. If you were already on the other side, you had to move quickly as it hurtled down towards you.

It didn't take too long to get used to the conditions, but Dad was struggling with the constant pain from his stent. Not that he told me, of course – the last thing he wanted me to do was worry about him.

To drag our sleds, we attached them to harnesses on our backs that mainly pull from the hips. With every step, the harness was pulling on Dad's stomach and sending a stabbing pain through his groin. Not only that, but his pee was bright red. If that was happening at home, anyone would freak and go straight to the doctor. But I couldn't even guess how far

away the nearest doctor was now. If the rough terrain was hard on me, it was even more so on Dad (after arriving home, he confessed it had been like torture).

Surrounding us, though, was a white wonderland. Blocks of blue ice with sheer sides erupted from the landscape, and the ice sometimes formed unusual shapes, like beautiful ice sculptures. While the bigger-picture view was astonishing, we also got down closer to the sea ice to look at some of the crystals. They were like delicate feathers that disintegrated when you touched them.

One of the most bizarre things I discovered in the early part of our journey was the path of the sun. Because we were at the top of Earth, the sun continued to move around us at the same distance above the horizon, never rising, never setting. At home, you can tell roughly where east and west are by tracking the movement of the sun. But it is so different in the Arctic and almost impossible to imagine what it would be like in the Northern Hemisphere winter, when the sun is at the opposite end of the planet and the North Pole is plunged into 24-hour darkness.

Our first day was a success, in my eyes. We only managed to cover 10 kilometres but I'd enjoyed every second of this new lifestyle. By the time we were ready to set up camp, though, I was completely exhausted. I fell asleep on my sleeping mat in its chair position inside the tent, fully clothed in my polar shell, while Dad made our first dehydrated dinner.



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One of my favourite things about life on the ice is the silence. I will never be able to properly explain this, but when there is an absence of wind, the only sound is the noise that you make. The ever-changing ocean currents cause the ice to shift, so occasionally the stillness is broken by what is almost a symphony of groaning and wailing made by the movement of the ice. It was a constant reminder that we were skiing on frozen water and, if we ever misjudged our path, we could possibly plunge through the ice into the freezing ocean below. On average the ice is no more than two metres thick. In some places, it was incredibly thin and we were careful to avoid the darker-looking ice that indicated water was not far beneath us.

We came to a few spots where an open water lead exposed the ocean. Falling into that water would have certainly been the end of the trip, but it was also extremely cool to get this perspective. It looked a bit like a river, with thick crusts of ice forming the banks. There are a few options when you come across a lead. One is to change course and follow it to see if it closes up again, but that might have taken us kilometres off course and we were already on a tight schedule. Another was to make a small floating bridge from the sleds and carefully move across to the other side. The final option is a bit more extreme – and to keep us on course, at one point Eric decided that this was what we would do. First, he would swim across, then pull Dad, Petter and myself across by rope on a raft made from our sleds. He put on a dry suit (otherwise known as an immersion suit), which is both buoyant and waterproof, and slid carefully into the water. He had to be sure to keep his face

out of the icy water, as the suit's opening for his face was the only place water could get in. He managed the manoeuvre successfully and stroked across the 10 or so metres of ocean, pulling his sled behind him. There was a little ledge of ice on the other side of the lead and Eric pulled himself and the sled out of the water. Dad and I roped our sleds together and I carefully climbed aboard, one knee and one hand on either sled, then Eric slowly pulled me across the open ocean. Dad yelled jokingly across to us just before he climbed onto the sleds: 'If I get this wrong, Jade, your North Pole dream could be over.' He was just stirring though and, thankfully, the crossing went without any mishaps.



No matter how hard you train, nothing can prepare you for the tedious hours of the constant movement of skiing across the ice all day – my neck and shoulders became incredibly sore.

Surprisingly, the low temperatures didn't feel too bad as long as we were moving, but it always felt painfully cold when we stopped at breaks, especially lunch. The bitter chill would seep in and the moisture from my breath would freeze my face mask to my skin. Once we started skiing again it would take a while for my body to reheat. However, some parts – my fingers mainly – would stay cold and ache with a pain so intense that I still cannot really describe it, especially after going to the toilet during the breaks. We were not far into the journey when I realised that toileting would be one of the worst aspects of

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the trip for me. Compared to the guys, it took me a lot longer. I had multiple zips and layers of clothes to manage, which meant I had to take my big polar mitts off and be in just liner mitts. I decided I had to walk away from the group and find a stack of ice to hide behind. I'm sure Dad and the others thought I was being a bit precious, but I wanted to maintain at least a little bit of dignity. It was already in short supply after walking away from the group carrying a roll of toilet paper. The average temperature during our trip was -27°C and it soon became obvious there was absolutely nothing comfortable about a comfort stop. Once I'd dropped my pants for a pee the tops of my legs and my butt were exposed to the brutal conditions.



On one of our first mornings, Eric called Victor, our liaison person at Barneo, to confirm our position, and received some daunting news. The ice runway had cracked again. They needed to attempt to build another one to get us out. They'd also cancelled all the incoming flights from Longyearbyen, which meant the North Pole Marathon had been cancelled, along with Dixie's expedition and another family's.

The uncertainty of the situation put me on edge. Without an operating runway, there was no real way we could get off the sea ice and back home. I'm not a morning person at the best of times, but this worry made me extra snappy. Luckily, Dad was aware of this and was incredibly patient when I wasn't in the best of moods. It's not easy sharing a tent with anyone, let

alone your dad, and there must have been moments when he wanted to let off some steam, too. Luckily for me, he held back!

It was thanks to Dad that I was able to attempt such a trip in the first place. I couldn't have done it without him. But as the days went by I could see that he was in serious pain. The plastic stent between his bladder and kidney was supposed to be removed a few days after the surgery, but because we'd flown out the same day, it had to stay inside him for over a month. He kept joking that every time he peed and left a bright red bloodstain on the white landscape, he was leaving a trail for the polar bears to find us. Not entirely funny, since polar bears can smell blood from up to 20 kilometres away.

We did have plenty of laughs, despite the harsh conditions – or perhaps because of them. Lunch quickly became one of the highlights of the day, even if it involved eating frozen salami, which is almost impossible to bite into. As we were sitting on our sleds one day digging into dry biscuits, Dad asked me what I'd be eating if I was at home. I knew straight away: avocado smash and goat's cheese on sourdough toast with tomato and salt and pepper. Everyone else groaned and called me cruel for teasing them.



When you're travelling across floating sea ice, you are at the mercy of the ocean currents. If the ocean movement was away from the Pole – known as negative drift – we could literally be going nowhere each day and really struggle to reach the

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Pole in time. However, we had a strong easterly drift for most of the trip and, on one night, even drifted two kilometres closer to the Pole. I was pretty chuffed about that.

Eric wanted to help me learn as much as I could about the polar environment during our first time on the ice together, so one day he taught me how to navigate using the sun, and encouraged me to take the lead. Most of the time, the four of us travelled in single file in the tracks Eric laid first. Soon I found I really enjoyed being out the front – knowing that you're the first person to have walked there is an incredible feeling.

But the isolation can also be intimidating. We were reminded of some of the dangers out there when Eric spotted polar bear tracks in the snow. They were very clear and so big I could fit my entire hand in one. Eric had done this trip many times before and he told me he was constantly looking around us and even over his shoulder in case of a bear in sight. This was a huge bear, he said, and its tracks were quite fresh. I started looking over my shoulder too.

In recent years, with the changing climate, polar bears have had to travel further over the ice to find what little prey is left in that part of the world. They don't really seek people out, but if they haven't eaten in a long time, or feel threatened, they will attack and kill. The sad truth is, we are a much bigger threat to polar bears than they are to us. They spend 50 per cent of their time hunting, mostly for seals, but the loss of ice is affecting them greatly. As they become less likely to find food in the wild, they spend longer on shore and often come into contact with communities, resulting in interactions that usually end

badly for the bears. Scientists estimate the wild population of polar bears to be somewhere between 22,000 and 31,000. These numbers are already in decline, and the US listed the species as threatened in 2008. I fear for these beautiful creatures and for this entire environment if something isn't done about the changing climate soon.

During the day, as we were skiing, there was a lot of time to think, and I thought a lot about the fact that this part of the world might not be accessible in just a few years' time due to global warming. There was even a possibility we could be the last people ever to reach the North Pole; all those cracks in the runway may have been a sign. So I decided it was important for me to capture as many memories and as much footage of this amazing environment as I could. Soon I would be back at home in my everyday routine, but for the moment it was anything but everyday. Being constantly aware of where I was and being grateful for the opportunity became my goal for the rest of the trip.



On day six, we hit the halfway mark. We'd pushed so hard already to get to this point, but we still had another 75 kilometres to go. Eric was very encouraging, telling me he admired my stamina and determination. Out there, every little bit of support helped.

We'd been away from home for almost three weeks now, and I was getting pretty homesick. Fortunately, I was able to call home on the satellite phone every day, even if it was only

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for a couple of minutes. It immediately made me feel better, even though Mum and I spent most of our time talking about Dad and how he was coping with the pain.

By the time we got to the eighth day of the trip, we were ready for our final push towards the North Pole, but in the morning before we'd packed up the camp we got a radio call from Victor back at the base. The landing strip at Barneo still wasn't fixed, and the ground conditions for the rest of the trip were forecast to be very tough with extensive compression zones. Plus, we only had five days to reach the Pole before the season ended, and they would pick us up regardless of whether we'd reached the Pole or not.

Overnight the wind had picked right up, and when we went outside in the morning our tents and sleds had been completely covered by snow. Up to that point it had been all sunshine and blue skies, but suddenly it was overcast and the visibility was really low. At least the wind was blowing towards the Pole, as a headwind could have pushed us backwards.

The landscape was beautiful – like a frozen white ocean – but the wind made it even colder than we'd become used to and the terrain became more rugged and slowed us down as we dragged our sleds over the increasing number of compression zones. The horizon was chaos, with no clear route to follow.

Dad was still struggling with the pain and for the first time it was really affecting his pace. The harness pushing up against the plastic stent caused him sharp pain and the ups and downs of the terrain exacerbated the movement. Eric admitted to us after the trip that at one stage he had seriously considered

having Dad evacuated – it was his job to make sure we arrived at our destination safely, after all – but I’m glad it never got to that point. I think Dad was more worried about being the reason we didn’t make it than he was about his own health.

The worst part was that the terrain continued to deteriorate. Even Eric was struggling, and at times it took three of us, as Petter was filming, to get each other’s sleds over the ice rubble. It was almost as if the landscape was fighting us from every angle. Surprisingly, we still managed to cover 14.5 kilometres most days, which just shows how far a little persistence could take us.

When Eric mentioned on day 10 that we were the most northerly people in the world at that point in time, it blew my mind. I imagined us on the top of a little toy globe. As we settled down for the night it really sank in that, unless something went horribly wrong, we were going to reach the Pole the next day.

On what was supposed to be our final day, I woke feeling incredibly excited. Eric had heard from Victor that the Barneo runway was operable again, so once we got to the Pole it seemed highly likely that we’d be able to get out. The conditions had eased and now there was just a light wind.

At our last drink break before the Pole, we looked up to see an Air Berlin plane fly over our heads. I think it was filled with tourists doing a sightseeing North Pole flyover. Obviously, that’s a pleasant and far easier way to see this magnificent landscape, but there was no way I would have swapped my experience on foot for any number of scenic flights.

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Eric gave me the GPS and told me to take the lead and find 90°N. It was strange to see the GPS just click over to nine-zero and almost unbelievable that we had finally made it. I turned to Eric in disbelief and he assured me that we were there. It was just our luck that at the time we arrived at the Pole, it was in the middle of a large compression zone, which meant dragging our sleds the last few minutes to our final objective was super hard work. There is no permanent marker at the North Pole because the sea ice is very quickly drifting on the ocean currents.

It was snowing lightly and Dad and Eric both gave me a big hug, which isn't easy when you're wearing skis and attached to a sled.

I was now the youngest person ever to have skied to the North Pole from anywhere outside the last degree, and it was one of the greatest feelings in the world. All the hard work had paid off. We celebrated by sticking a ski pole into the snow where the North Pole would be, and I ran around the world, crossing every line of longitude in a matter of seconds – again, my mind was blown.

Dad went over to his sled and pulled out a little parcel – a present from my brother, Kane. He had made me a painting with the words: 'Limits are illusions that we create to protect ourselves from ourselves.' It captured the moment perfectly.

Dad also handed me a letter from Mum.

*To my dearest baby girl, Jade. If you are reading this letter
it's because you have just reached your goal of the North Pole.*

Wow! Wow! Wow! Breathe deeply and enjoy every second of what you have just achieved. I feel like I have been with you every step. I could not be any prouder of you than I am, having watched you grow from a small baby to a beautiful, happy, courageous, strong young woman. You amaze me every day. I love you so much and I love you more. Mum xx

Our final day also happened to coincide with Anzac Day, the day Australians and New Zealanders remember the sacrifices made by our armed service men and women. I hadn't missed the annual Dawn Service at the Shrine of Remembrance since I was born, so we decided to hold our own small service on the ice. Dad read the story of the youngest Anzac – a 14-year-old boy. Then he played the Last Post on his iPhone and together, we sang the national anthem.

I placed a note I had written in a sealed container and buried it in the ice. I knew the ice would drift towards warmer oceans and eventually melt and then my note would wash up on a beach somewhere, hopefully to be opened and read by someone in the future.

Finally, we set up camp, excited to be sleeping at the Pole, even though we were already drifting away from it on ocean currents.

We'd only just settled in and I'd just called home when the call came through that the Russians were on their way to get us, so we had to pack up all our gear again. I was on a toilet break when I heard the helicopter approaching and had to run back to the others while doing up my pants. Eric went

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out into the snow to direct the helicopter towards us and, as it dropped out of the sky, he disappeared in a flurry of white. It was quite spectacular. We hauled our sleds and ourselves onto the helicopter and took off for Barneo, leaving the Pole behind.