

WE WENT ON HOLIDAY *FINN NEVER CAME BACK*



On their dream trip, Larissa Stawicki, 29, lost the love of her life in a tragic accident

Taking a few more steps and keeping up the pace, my whole body ached. It was August 2019 and my boyfriend Finn, 28, and

I had spent the last five months hiking along the Pacific Crest Trail. 'We're almost there,' he said as, after 2,147 miles, we'd finally reached The Bridge of the Gods, which spans the Columbia River between Cascade Locks, Oregon, and Washington state.

We were exhausted, but knowing we would make it to our final destination along the Canadian border, another 503 miles away, felt like such an achievement.

And it was made even better by sharing it all with the love of my life.

I was 16 when I met Finn at school. With his long, blond hair, black jeans, and black heavy-metal T-shirts, he was just my type. But it wasn't until we were 18 that we became a couple.

Finn had such a way with words, always so kind and thoughtful. He was excellent at football, too. It was no secret that he had a desire to see the world, and I longed to join him. So, in September 2012, before starting university, we took

two and half years to go travelling. We began in Australia, where we worked at a water park, then we went to New Zealand, Southeast Asia and China. It was an incredible experience and I loved sharing it with Finn. Even when we returned home, we'd fantasise about our next trip.

'I want to hike the Pacific Crest Trail,'

Finn announced one day, explaining it's a 2,650 mile route stretching from Mexico to Canada, through mostly wilderness.

I was sceptical at first, unsure if we were up to it.

But Finn was looking for a real adventure, something that would push him. Then, when a friend was diagnosed with a brain tumour, it hit me how precious life is, so I agreed to go. Upon our return, we'd settle down and start a family, something we both wanted.

READY FOR THE OFF

In 2018, we ordered a map of the trail and hung it on a wall in our flat. We spent five hours having fun at an outdoor shop, trying out different tents. We bought

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Travel was their passion



Finn was so kind

backpacks, trekking poles and saved up enough money to see us through our trip.

The long-distance hike would take up to six months, and we'd both miss our families terribly. Finn was particularly close to his mum, Meike, and she'd said that she and Finn's dad would fly out to visit at some point.

On 30 March 2019, we began our hike at the Mexican border in Campo, California. Within a few weeks,



Finn and Larissa were planning to start a family

everything hurt – my feet, my knees, and Finn’s Achilles tendon was giving him trouble. Yet despite the pain, we kept going. We’d plan our days based on where we could find fresh drinking water, and we’d pitch up our tent for the night.

My biggest fear was coming face-to-face with a bear, but in reality we were up against rattlesnakes. ‘There’s one!’ I’d scream to Finn. He was so courageous and had no fear, using a pole to gently push them aside.

In May 2019, Finn’s parents met us near the Mojave Desert and we spent an evening in a nice hotel. ‘What a treat to be in a hot tub,’ I laughed as we enjoyed the luxuries we’d gone so long without.

The next day, we were back trekking, making good progress over the next few months, averaging 30 miles a day.

On 27 August, three days after having passed The Bridge of the Gods, we were taking a break on a wooden bridge in a forest with other hikers we’d befriended, Melanie, Corey and Philip. Finn was across from Melanie and I when we heard a loud cracking sound. ‘What was that?’ I asked, looking at the trees around us.

Then everything happened so fast. A tree started to fall, and while Melanie and I jumped out of the way, Finn took a step in my direction.

The next thing I knew, the tree had struck him, pinning him between bridge and tree. I thought he was dead, but then he made a noise, so I sent an SOS through our satellite communicator and, in the two hours it took emergency services to reach us, I sat with Finn, holding his hand. He was having difficulty breathing, and could barely speak, but as terrifying as it was, I tried to keep calm.

HEARTBROKEN

When the rescue team arrived, I watched helplessly as they managed to pull Finn free and perform CPR as he had stopped breathing. But they were unable to save him and confirmed he had died. I was devastated.

While we waited for someone to arrive to transport Finn’s body,



Finn's parents came to visit

I held him in my arms. For some reason, I couldn’t cry. Instead, I simply cherished those last few moments I had with him.

In a haze, I drove with Corey to his parents’ house in Portland, Oregon. When I phoned my parents to tell them, I could barely get the words out. ‘Finn’s gone,’ I said, still unable to cry. They were heartbroken and promised to visit Finn’s parents to tell them. I changed my flight home and organised Finn’s return, too.

Two days later, I flew home, but I was so traumatised, I needed counselling.

Over 350 people came to Finn’s funeral – a testament to how loved he was. I refused to allow my grief to consume me, so every day I went running. To mark the two-year anniversary of Finn’s death, I self-published a book about us filled with photos from our travels.

I’m still close to Finn’s family, especially his mum, who I speak to regularly. Talking to her helps me feel closer to Finn. He was an adventurer and I want him to be remembered for his amazing, fearless spirit. Losing the love of my life, and witnessing Finn’s death, was hard. The only comfort I can take is knowing that he died doing what he loved.

* Larissa’s book is available through her website, dirty-colors.com

‘HE WAS IN GOOD SPIRITS’

Meike Bastian, Finn’s mother, says, ‘The last time I saw Finn was on 22 May 2019, when my husband and I flew to Tehachapi, near the Mojave Desert, where we spent the night in a hotel with Finn and Larissa, hearing stories of their travels. He was in such good spirits. After Larissa returned home, she came straight to our house, and as she unpacked his backpack filled with his belongings, I cried. He had a cap adorned with colourful daisies, which I keep on my desk with a

picture of him wearing it. Larissa is like a daughter to me. Through our grief, we have become even closer. She will always be a part of our family.’