




Mountains gave Hadley Hammer love, and they helped her heal after it was gone.  Blake Jorgenson

PARA

T I L L D E A T H D O U S

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It took 178 days for pro skier Hadley Hammer to fall madly in love with Austrian alpinist David Lama. It took one day to lose it all. The mountains brought them together, ripped them apart and carried her back from the gutter of grief.

by Megan Michelson



SMITH

THE NORTH FACE

THE NORTH FACE

line.

THE MORNING OF APRIL 18, 2019, THE WORLD WAS BRIGHT AND SHIMMERING. THE SUN SHONE ONTO PURE-WHITE SNOW; THE SKY WAS CERULEAN BLUE.

Hadley Hammer was in Tahoe for a team photo shoot for Line Skis, one of her sponsors.

After skiing that day, Hadley and her fellow Line Skis athletes returned to the team's rental house. Some went to the hot tub; others lounged on the couch. Hadley's phone rang. As she listened to the caller, color drained from her face. Those around her sensed a shift in the room. Something was terribly wrong.

A few minutes later, Hadley found Josh Malczyk, then the brand director for Line Skis and a longtime friend. "I've got to get out of here," she told Malczyk, between sobs. "My boyfriend just died."

From that moment on, everything was a haze. The minutes, hours, days following that phone call blended into one murky cloud of grief. Malczyk booked a flight for Hadley's best friend, Leslie Hittmeier, a ski photographer from Jackson Hole, who flew to Tahoe the next morning to be with her.

Hadley and Hittmeier then flew to Canada, where Hadley's boyfriend, famed Austrian alpinist David Lama, was reported missing and presumed dead in an avalanche on 10,810-foot Howse Peak in Banff National Park. On the plane, Hadley put her face in Hittmeier's lap, trying to muffle her sobs. "I didn't know that level of sadness existed in the world," Hittmeier says. "I knew it was going to be such a long road. She was going to be so sad for so long."

David, 28, had been climbing with American Jess Roskelley and Austrian Hansjörg Auer, his teammates from The North Face's climbing team. When the alpinists didn't check in after their summit bid, a search and rescue team was dispatched to the site. From a helicopter, rescuers spotted avalanche debris, stray pieces of climbing gear and a leg sticking out of the snow. There was no sign of the other two climbers.

[Facing Page] Hadley checks in with trusted friend and ski partner Leslie Hittmeier before dropping on Prospectors Mountain, Wyoming. [☞ Leslie Hittmeier](#)

[Right] Despite knowing each other for only 178 days, Hadley and David Lama shared a serious connection. [☞ Hadley Hammer](#)

Are you a line skier or a feeling skier, he asked as the mechanized chair swooped us up the mountain, past the iconic Toblerone-shaped pile of rocks. It was the second question David would ask me. Looking back, all of our conversations started with a single question—either a personal one about ourselves or an inquiry into a broader, more universal experience.

What do you mean, I asked. Well, said David, is skiing for you about seeking a single objective or seeking a certain feeling? When you look at a mountain, do you look for a line down? Or is it about the sensation behind a turn or a trick?

Line skier, I said, definitely.

Yeah, me too, he smiled.

The first question David asked was a few hours earlier as we sat in a restaurant with wall-to-wall views of the Alps. Can you stare at mountains endlessly, he asked after observing my outward gaze. With the first question, he could have probably answered the second one himself. It was another trademark of the relationship. It was the first time someone saw me as I see myself.

—HADLEY HAMMER,

THE DISCOURSE, MAY 16, 2021





[Top] Hadley may have finished last in her first big-mountain competition in La Parva, Chile, but it paved her path to becoming a professional skier. ☑ **Hadley Hammer**

[Bottom, Left] Mike and Francesca Hammer support daughter Hadley after she notched her first big-mountain competition podium in Big Sky, Montana. ☑ **Hadley Hammer**

[Bottom, Right] What are Hadley and brothers Michael and Max doing here? According to Hadley, they are “probably up to something mischievous.” ☑ **Hadley Hammer**

[Facing Page] Hadley lights up the first female descent of the Corrugated Spine Wall in Alaska. ☑ **Sherpas Cinema**

Griffin Post and Jess McMillan, who told her about big-mountain freeskiing competitions and encouraged her to sign up. In late summer 2011, Hadley got on a plane to the Southern Hemisphere and entered a contest at La Parva, Chile. She got last place. But here’s the thing about Hadley Hammer: Losing something just makes her want it more.

“With skiing, I was drawn to the fact that I wasn’t at the top yet,” Hadley says. “When I started doing the comps, the hook for me was that I wasn’t very good.” Former Freeride World Tour competitor turned fitness trainer Crystal Wright says, “I have never seen anyone progress so much and work so hard.”

With that mindset, Hadley told herself she was going to spend one year focusing on qualifying for the Freeride World Tour. But in December of that year, at age 25, she broke her back in a crash and was out for the season. Not one to give up, she came back even hungrier the next year, following the best skiers at Jackson Hole around at a distance, watching how they turned and what lines they chose. “I’d take advice from anyone who would give it to me,” she says. “I was spending a lot of time doing laps and chasing my local heroes, seeing if I could follow them down the Hobacks.”

A relentless desire to improve set Hadley apart from everyone else. She qualified for the Freeride World Tour in 2014 and spent the following two winters traveling and competing around Europe. After signing with The North Face, Hadley realized she could make a career of skiing. “She was totally crushing it,” Max says. “I’d watch her ski and think, ‘Whoa, that’s a huge cliff.’ She was the only woman taking that line.”

In 2016, Hadley got the call to film with Teton Gravity Research, and she and Angel Collinson ticked off bucket-list lines in the Jackson Hole backcountry for the movie *Tight Loose*. That same year, Hadley traveled to Alaska with skier Sam Anthamatten and snowboarder Ralph Backstrom to film with Sherpas Cinema. The trio hit first descents on a slate of dramatic lines known as the Corrugated Spine Wall on the St. Elias Range’s Tsirku Glacier.

It was the first spine she’d ever skied, and it was on camera. In the footage, Hadley makes her way down the steep face with grace and confidence. When the camera pans to her face, she looks elated, lit up by the mountains. She had just become the first woman to ski the Corrugated Spine Wall.

“People don’t look at me and think I’m an athlete,” says Hadley, who’s five-foot, three-inches tall and characteristically

THE HAMMER KIDS GREW UP beside a stand of cottonwood trees along the Snake River in Jackson, Wyoming. As the middle child between two rambunctious, tough brothers—Michael, the eldest, and Max, the youngest—Hadley spent her childhood running around the woods of the Snake River valley, climbing trees, canoeing and ice skating irrigation ditches, building forts and snow caves, and jumping off the roof of their house.

After ski racing alongside her brothers for a couple of years, teenage Hadley discovered Jackson Hole’s freeride team, where she became the lone girl in a crew of hard-charging high school boys. “She was always the shy, quiet one,” says Max. “Yet she was literally the only girl airing out of the halfpipe.”

She left for college on the East Coast, studying hospitality and economics at the University of New Hampshire, where she started rock and ice climbing. After graduating, she took a job at the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington, D.C. There, she studied for her sommelier certification and learned to carry dozens of wine glasses at once. But sitting at a desk in a big city didn’t suit her, so, eventually, she moved back home to Jackson.

Max, who competed on the U.S. Ski Team for several years, was working out at the Mountain Athlete gym in Jackson and invited Hadley to join him. There, she trained with pros like



quiet and self-deprecating. “I wouldn’t say I’m gifted athletically. It’s been a lot of hard work. I like to think the purpose of my career is to show that you can.”

From that point on, Hadley started venturing into bigger, more consequential terrain. She skied descents in Grand Teton National Park, the Dolomites, Bolivia and Chamonix. Mentally, she was training to make calculated decisions and endure long, sustained periods of physical exertion. On big days in the mountains, Hittmeier describes her as a closer. “She shines in those final six hours when everyone else is melting down,” Hittmeier says. In other words, when things get tough, instead of freezing or running away, Hadley walks steadily toward the fire.

I remember telling David about my dream line. About all that I wanted to ski in the future. The skier I wanted to become. Instead of telling me he didn’t think I could, he sat with me, and we outlined what I would need to learn. Lead climb 5.12 rock, ice climb WI5, summit 7,000-meter peaks, perfect glacier rescue and general rope work, perfect steep skiing technique and dial in the best gear. We talked about how many years it would take. Not one to blow smoke up someone’s ass, he didn’t say it would happen immediately, but he believed it would happen after the experience and work was put in.

—HADLEY HAMMER,
THE DISCOURSE, APRIL 11, 2021

HADLEY AND DAVID FIRST SPARKED over a bowl of pasta in a mid-mountain chalet in Zermatt, Switzerland. It was late fall 2018 and they had just met at a product launch for The North Face. Hadley, who’s not normally much of a partier, had gone out the night before, walking home from the bars alongside her fellow athletes as the sun rose. That day, the team got a late start to ski groomers alongside the brand’s sales reps.

When they stopped for lunch, Hadley ordered the carbonara, hoping it would sop up her hangover.


“I ordered that yesterday,” David told her, smirking. “It was terrible.”

She liked that he could poke fun at her, even though they barely knew each other. After lunch, he got up to go skiing. “I don’t know what possessed me, but I asked if I could go skiing with him,” she says. “We ended up spending all afternoon together. It was fun and calming; we had easy conversation.”

He told her, “This felt like a really good day.”

That night, Hadley had to catch a shuttle to an early-morning flight home to the U.S., and she figured, why bother going to sleep beforehand? David stayed awake with her. Two days later, he emailed. In a long-winded way, he asked if he could come visit her. Hadley said no, but they planned to meet for dinner during an upcoming trade show. They kept in touch, exchanging long emails and texts. Hadley told David she wasn’t up for a long-distance relationship.

Around the holidays of that year, her dad was undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. “Something about watching my dad in this precarious life situation made me think, ‘What am I doing?’”

Hammer Time: After record snowfall, Hadley punches the clock in the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort backcountry.  **Jay Goodrich**

Hadley says. “I kept thinking, ‘If my dad were to pass away, David is the type of person I’d want to walk me through this situation.’” So, she called him and said, “I’m ready if you are.”

From that moment on, David and Hadley spent hours on the phone each day; he would call from Innsbruck, Austria, where he lived, and she from Jackson, pacing parking lots and trails. David often called when Hadley was waiting outside her dad’s radiation room during his cancer treatment, usually in the middle of the night for David in Europe. They talked about everything, eventually starting to plan a future together, discussing when they wanted to have children and where they would live.

David, the Austrian-born son of a Nepalese Sherpa mountain guide father and a Tyrolean mother, grew up climbing from a young age, winning the European Championship for lead climbing in 2006 and bouldering in 2007. Later, he completed the first free ascent of the formidable Compressor Route on Patagonia’s Cerro Torre and the first ascent of Lunag Ri in Nepal. He was handsome, thoughtful and just the right amount of goofy. There was a meticulousness about his alpine climbing pursuits, with dialed first-aid kits and rope systems.

David always used to say, “There is no good luck. There is only bad luck.” He often told Hadley, “Never go into the mountains with a plan B. Only a plan A and an escape route.” His personal mantra: It’s not about performance, it’s about experience. Hadley related to that line of thinking, and the two of them bonded over their shared passion for experiences.

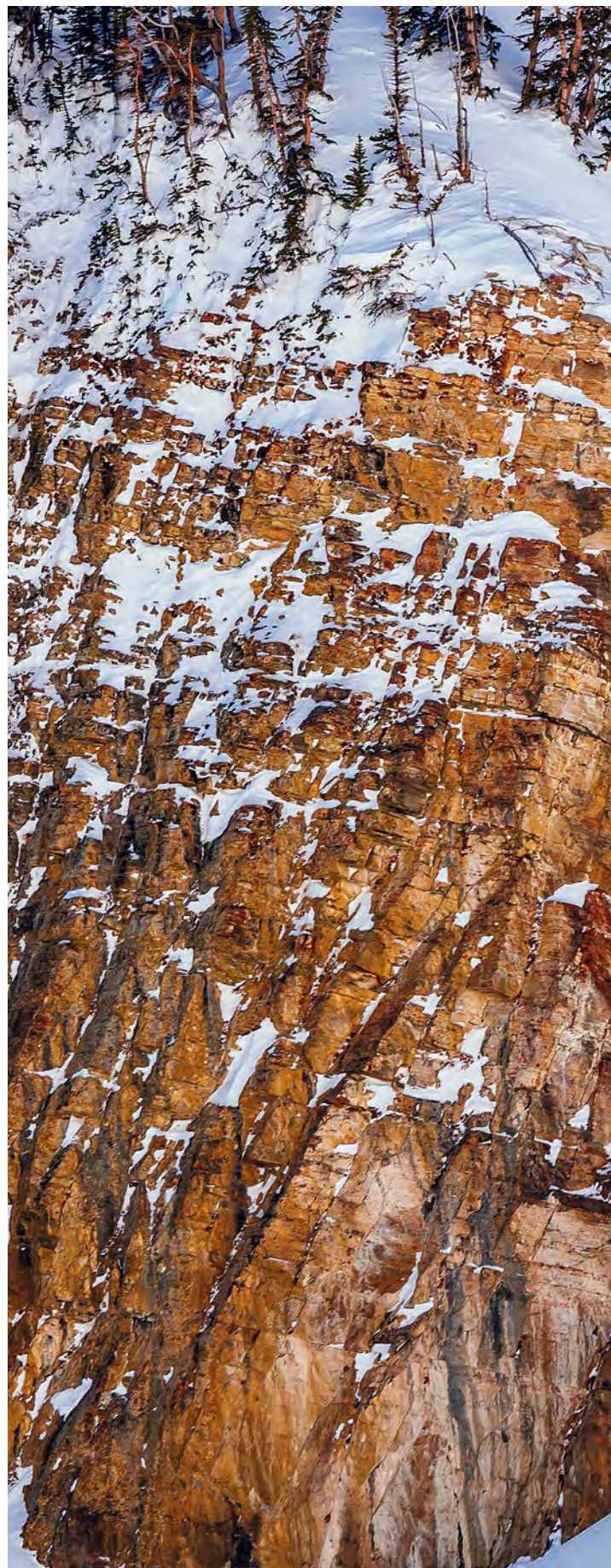
In February 2019, David came to Jackson to visit Hadley for 10 blissful days. Hadley picked him up at the airport and, back at her place, David told her he loved her. They hadn’t even kissed at that point. They climbed and skied the south face of the South Teton with Hittmeier. “They were so immersed in each other, and in being in the mountains,” Hitt-

meier says. “I’ve never seen Hadley ski like she did that day, ripping GS turns down the South Teton. She was totally showing off for him, having the time of her life.”

From Jackson, David and Hadley flew together to Aspen, Colorado, for an event for The North Face, and remained inseparable. After that, Hadley was heading to a wedding and then to Tahoe for the Line Skis shoot, and David was off to Canada for his Howse Peak expedition. They gave each other a tight squeeze at the hotel and said goodbye, planning to meet up after his climb and spend a week skiing and climbing in Canada.

In Tahoe, Hadley received what would be her last text from David, sent before he set off for the summit of Howse. “I can’t wait to be in your arms,” he wrote. “I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you. I love you so much.”

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My David, Remember the first day we skied together. And you said, this is a really good day. Did you know then that every day we would spend together since, every phone call, every adventure, would be a good day, a perfect day? The time spent with you is worth the years of pain ahead. Your love was the greatest gift I know I'll ever receive. Now, you are the compass inside me.

—HADLEY HAMMER,
INSTAGRAM, APRIL 21, 2021

AFTER DAVID DIED, HADLEY FELT like her entire future was shattered before it had even begun. Everything she and David had dreamed about was over in an instant. People around her didn't understand. After all, they had known each other a mere 178 days, just a few months into a shiny-new relationship.

"Hadley had this thing ripped from her early on in a relationship that seemed like a promising life. It hit her so hard," says Max. "For some of us, who never knew David or knew them together, it might have been confusing. But what wasn't confusing is how the loss impacted her. What do you do when this happens? There's no play-book."

Some of David's climbing partners met Hadley for the first time at his memorial service, held in July 2019 at the base of one of David's favorite peaks in Austria. Over a thousand people carried torches in a stunning sea of light. "David was always picky, but with Hadley, it was different," says Peter Mühlburger, one of David's climbing partners and closest friends. "He seemed so excited. He was ready for something serious. He used the word 'motivated' when he talked about her."

Hadley decided to follow through with the plan that she and David had made and move to Innsbruck. She went to Austria, by herself, where she didn't speak the language, and, with David's parents' permission, moved into his apartment. One of the closets still smelled like him, and Hadley would shut herself inside it and breathe him in. She loved that the sound of his coffee maker was familiar to her because she'd heard it many times over the phone while they talked.

"Everything in Jackson looked the same, but nothing in life felt the same. The novelty of living in Austria aligned better with the way in which all of my life felt unrecognizable," Hadley says. "I wanted to be closer to David and the people who were grieving him."



[Above] After a big day out, Hadley decompresses in her apartment in Austria, where she's surrounded by comfortable reminders of David.

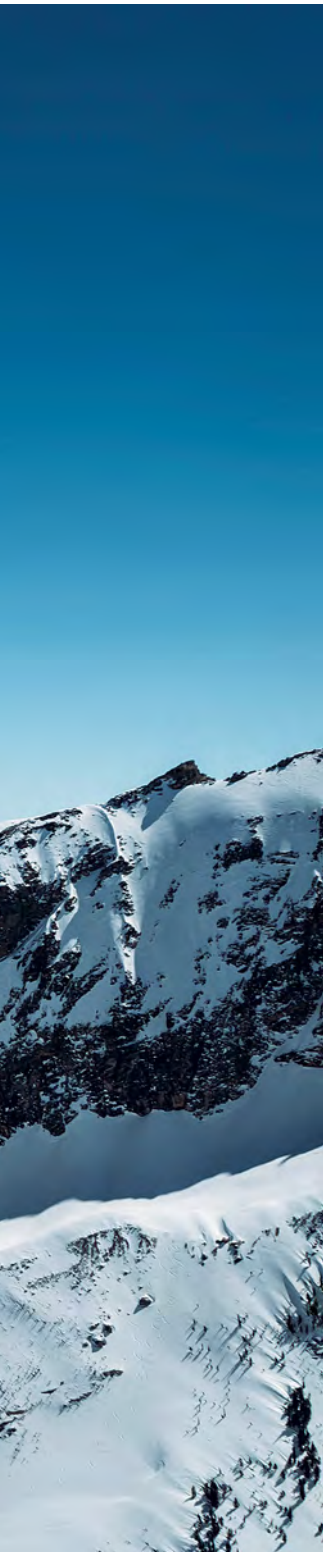
[Facing Page] Hadley shrugs off mediocre conditions in Italy's Dolomites. ☒ Leslie Hittmeier, both photos



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By winter 2020, Covid had set in, and Hadley remained in Austria to ride out the pandemic. An avid reader and talented writer who has kept a journal since childhood, Hadley took a virtual writing workshop. Her writing is raw, fluid and emotional. She's working on a memoir and has created an online writing community called the Discourse that sends out weekly email journals and writing prompts to a growing number of loyal subscribers.

The act of writing, she says, has helped her navigate the darkness. "The emotions were so intense, I needed an outlet," she says. "I felt so misunderstood throughout the early months, and the loneliness that stemmed from that felt overwhelming. Sharing my writing, sharing this experience, helped to feel a sense of belonging again."

The mountains, too, remain her solace. "Some people think it's a dangerous time to be in the mountains, but I think I was the safest I've ever been," Hadley says. "I felt like my awareness has never been sharper. I needed to be in places where I could apply that sharpness of thinking not to David or grieving. The mountains allowed me to be present."

Hadley's dad is still battling cancer, but in late July 2021, he celebrated his 80th birthday, and Hadley flew home to Jackson to be with him and her family. The first week of August was David's birthday; he would have been 31.

"What are you doing for David's birthday?" a friend asked her.

"I think I'll eat a ton of croissants and go for a long bike ride," she answered.

Hittmeier, who now lives in Montana, has visited Hadley in Austria, and the two skied big lines together, just like they used to. "I feel like Hadley has had to swim harder than everyone else. She's super resilient, but look at her past two years," Hittmeier says. "Hadley needs a win. She has these big things she still wants to do."

Now recovering from a knee injury and still calling Austria home, Hadley, 35, recognizes she is lucky to have a life to live, and she's ready to get back to the business of skiing. She has a ski film project she aims to finish this winter that is due out in fall 2022, a book to write and a ton of lines she wants to ski.

"I'm very much ready to return to my job. It's been a lesson in patience. Death has made me look at life differently," she says. "I'm getting ready; I'm training. I'm finding my line."

[Facing Page] Hadley and David relish a shared moment on Wyoming's South Teton. [Leslie Hittmeier](#)

[This Page] Who can eat more croissants in a single day? Hadley and David energetically and often asked each other that question. [Hadley Hammer](#)



There's a freedom found through losing someone. You almost think if life is going to play these games, I'm going to play right back. David dying felt impossible, though it was definitely possible, but now nothing in life feels impossible.

The rulebook dictated by society goes out the window. The way in which I've felt boxed in my ski career, I no longer feel like I need to stay in one lane or the other. I can ski how I want, I can communicate in a style that fits me. I could be a single mom at 40 if I want. I don't feel bound by rules that I so closely followed before. Funny enough, living with that sense of freedom is how David lived his whole life.

—HADLEY HAMMER,
EMAIL, SEPTEMBER 19, 2021