

LEAD WITH YOUR HEART

Words
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INSIDE HER HOUSE, a cozy cabin with a cherry red door that neighbors a cross-country ski center in Tahoe City, California, Lel Tone is frying a salmon she caught herself in a pan in her kitchen. She uncorks a bottle of wine and chops broccoli on a cutting board. She's petite—5 feet 2 inches tall—but strong, with brawny arms and a sharp jawline. She has wispy blond hair and a perky, unassuming smile.

"A lot of little things can go wrong when you're in a hurry," she says, cutting methodically. "Like being around a helicopter—if you don't shut the door properly, or put your ski strap on properly, shit can hit the fan. You've got to move slowly and deliberately, be focused and present."

It's good advice for life in general but imperative for Tone's life in particular. While she's built a successful career in the mountains, she's achieved it thanks to an extreme level of care and caution. You should be intimidated by Tone, but you won't be, because she's too damn nice.

First, her resumé: Tone, 48, has worked as a heli ski guide in Alaska for the last 18 years—as a lead guide with Chugach Powder Guides and Tordrillo Mountain Lodge. She's guided athletes and film crews from Warren Miller and Standard Films around the Chugach. She's been a Squaw Valley ski patroller for 24 years and she's one of a few patrollers who can lead every avalanche control route on the mountain. She's a certified instructor with the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education and a co-founder of the women's avalanche safety clinics, S.A.F.E. A.S.

In 2015, Tone was on the winning team of a National Geographic Channel reality show called "Ultimate Survival Alaska," where she and a mountain climber and four-time Iditarod champion were dropped in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness with minimal supplies. They went on to beat out competitors, like a former Navy SEAL and veteran mountaineers, in a 13-leg trek to the finish line across glaciers, peaks, and swollen rivers.

She's an Alaskan fishing guide and former pro mountain bike racer; she's worked pit crew for off-road races across the desert; and she lives out of a truck in Baja, Mexico, for weeks at a time during the shoulder season. If you go paddleboarding with her, you will not be able to keep up. (Although she

will kindly wait for you.)

Tone may be a literal savior in the mountains, but she's also human. She has fears, insecurities, and an unexpected gentleness. In disciplines like heli ski guiding and ski patrolling, where being macho and brave are reigning characteristics, Tone is above all else, vulnerable.

"There's this perception that Lel's this complete badass. And yes, she's strong—she's more ripped than most fit people half her age," says Maura Mack, one of Tone's best friends for the last two decades. "But if you know her well, you know she lives with her heart forward. She makes a point of truly connecting with people."

When Mack first met Tone, on the side of Thompson Pass, outside of Valdez, Alaska, in the mid 1990s, Tone invited Mack, then a total stranger, inside her RV for a meal. "Here we are in the middle of nowhere, in an RV, and Lel is like, 'Do you want some salad?'" Mack remembers. "I was struck by how welcoming and instantly nurturing she was."

Unlike most brawny, steel-faced mountain guides, Tone has a rare level of compassion and empathy. And that's precisely what makes her so valuable in emergency situations. She will fix your flat tire on a mountain bike ride, then, when you catapult head-first into rocks because you're trying too hard to keep up with her, she will clean your wounds and call you that night to make sure you don't have a concussion. On a backcountry tour, she will point out islands of safety, set the skin track, share her snacks—and then let you drop in first.

"She doesn't try to be someone else nor does she try to impress others," says Scott Schell, executive director of the Northwest Avalanche Center. "It seems that so many athletes and guides in the industry are constantly trying to be bigger than life, but not Lel."

So where does that compassion come from? And why has she dedicated her life not just to spending time in the mountains but to saving others when they're at their weakest? And if she's so busy helping others, does she have a chance to save herself? To find those answers, you've got to look back at the moments in Tone's life when trauma derailed her path and she made the deliberate decision to keep barreling through.



LESLEY TONE WAS BORN in New York City, but her parents flew her to Switzerland when she was just a few days old. Her father, Pascal Tone, was the president of an American college in Lugano, Switzerland, so that is where Lel—her nickname from a young age—and her younger brother grew up, attending Catholic school and speaking Italian.

Every Wednesday, as part of her schooling, she'd load a school bus with her classmates and ski at a local resort. When her family moved back to the U.S. when she was 10, settling in northern Massachusetts, they began spending weekends in Vermont to ski.

She had a smooth, easy childhood—until the day her mom vanished. When Tone was 15, her parents took a trip to the Caribbean island of St. Barts. Her mother, Sanda Coogan Tone, went for a walk on the beach and never returned. Tone's father and local law enforcement searched for Sandra, but there was no trace. Pascal flew home and told his children that their mom had disappeared.

"I remember my brother was in pieces, and I realized, as I'm sitting there listening to my father tell me that my mother is missing, that I needed to step up to the plate right now," Tone remembers. "That has got to be the most brutal thing for a father to tell his children."

With her mother gone and her dad and brother unraveling, Tone had no choice but to stand strong and help the family get their lives back on track. Four years later, when Tone was 19, a kid looking for his ball behind a church in St. Barts found a skeleton next to a tree. It was Sandra. Her cause of death has never been confirmed.

"My dad is my total rock. I'm surrounded by that survivor attitude," Tone says. "It's served me well in my adulthood. In this life, you can either lay down and let it bury you or break you, or you can move forward. There are these finite moments when you have a choice: You can let this thing crush you, or you can grow from these experiences, come to grace, and find the beauty."

Years later, Tone would ski a first descent in Alaska and name the line "Coogan's," after her mom.

The same year her mother's body was found, Tone took a year off between high school and college and got a job as a ski patroller at Sunday River, Maine. That winter, she was the first responder on the scene when a young man, a year younger than her, collided with another skier and flew off the trail into a



As a ski patroller, guide, and instructor, Tone has been a valuable mentor for countless skiers.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: Christian Pondella, Tim Zimmerman, Tim Zimmerman



In her career, Tone has been a heli ski guide, ski patroller, certified AIAARE instructor, fishing guide, professional mountain biker, and more—and yet she maintains humility, kindness, and warmth.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: Tim Zimmerman, Christian Pondella

tree. Tone jumped into action, employing all the skills she'd recently learned in her EMT training, but the man died on the scene. He was the nephew of the ski resort's owner, Les Otten.

"In the heat of battle, you go into auto pilot," Tone says. "You do what you're trained to do, and you do it mechanically. You put all your emotions in a box."

She did a debriefing with her patrol director, went home, and convinced herself she was fine. But she woke up in the middle of the night throwing up. "That was the first time I realized that in a traumatic situation, your brain is such an incredibly powerful tool that it can trick your body into thinking you're OK," she says.

That first ski patrol job wasn't easy, but it gave her a taste of real-life rescue work, and she was hooked. She realized not only was she good at it, but she loved the feeling of being able to help others when they needed it most.

In 1990, she entered Vermont's Green Mountain College to study English Lit and walked onto the school's Division III ski team without any previous ski racing experience. She spent her summers working as a wrangler in Colorado, taking kids on horseback into the backcountry. It was there, in the vast, wide-open West, where Tone started to find her true self. The more rugged the environment, the more comfortable she felt. "I was yearning for bigger mountains and more wilderness," she says. "Nature became something that I needed to spend more time in."

After college, she moved to Tahoe and applied to be a ski patroller at Squaw Valley. She was 24. In 1999, two years after her friend Kevin Quinn opened a heli ski operation in Cordova, Alaska, called Points North Heli-Adventures, he invited Tone to guide and serve as their medical coordinator. She was responsible for ordering all the emergency medical gear, coordinating with local rescue centers, and writing operations and safety manuals for the business.

That year, a couple of Tahoe friends, including filmmaker Steve Siig and aspiring pro skier Dax Willard, drove to Alaska for a ski film they were working on and spent a few days skiing with Tone as their guide. On the final day of their trip, Tone wanted to give Willard, then 21, a first descent, so he could leave having named a run in Alaska.

They scouted a line from the helicopter, but at the last minute, they opted



Tone has encountered her fair share of tragedy in the mountains. But she keeps coming back to the wilderness because that's where she finds the most joy.

Photos: Christian Pondella

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for a different route, a steep, hourglass chute on an opposing aspect. Siig got into position to film and Tone had her eyes on Willard when he dropped in first. He made two turns before the slope shattered like a pane of glass.

Instantly, Tone yelled, “Avalanche!”

Siig shouted back, “We’re in rescue! I do not have visual.”

Willard disappeared into a truck-sized cloud of smoke and got swept through a narrow notch and carried some 2,500 vertical feet downhill. Before the slide even stopped moving, Tone had her beacon out, started commanding orders to the rest of the team, launched herself off the three-foot crown onto the icy bed surface, and began chattering her way down the mountain in search of Willard.

“All I could think about was Dax’s parents and how I was going to tell them that their son was dead,” says Siig. “Then I remember how calm and collected Lel was. There was urgency in her voice, but there was no panic.”

Meanwhile, thousands of feet below, they found Willard with his ski ripped off, but miraculously, his head was above snow.

“When I stopped, I was in total shock, but then I looked up and I could see Lel coming down,” says Willard, who’s now 40 and runs his family’s ski shop in Tahoe City. “What a relief that was—I had such confidence in her and I knew I’d be OK as long as Lel was there.”

Afterward, Tone wrote in her journal about what went wrong. She’d let the camera and the desire for a first descent fog her judgment, she remembers, swapping runs at the last minute without thinking it through. She would never make that mistake again. In fact, she would share the story of this incident many times over the years—in avalanche classes she was teaching or with rookie guides she was mentoring—so that nobody else would make the same mistake either.

Tone is not flawless—she has made errors in the mountains, just like the rest of us—but what sets her apart is that she takes these missteps and channels them into an opportunity to learn and grow. But still, the traumas take their toll. And because she leads with her heart, that’s the first thing to get hurt.

MORE RECENTLY, it’s been a tough couple of years for the normally stalwart Tone. In 2017, her friend and fellow Squaw Valley ski patroller, Joe Zuiches, died from a detonated avalanche explosive while conducting routine control work. After his death, Tone was the one who brought Zuiches’ wife, Mikki, to the point on the mountain where her husband had been killed.

That summer, Tone suddenly began to suffer from an acute, severe depression for the first time in her life. It was a kind of bleak, months-long hopelessness that meant she couldn’t sleep but also couldn’t get out of bed. “It was the darkest place I’ve ever been in my life,” Tone says. “I thought, ‘How can I move through this with grace?’ But you don’t always have answers for things.”

Friends helped dig her out of the trenches, and she sought professional help from a variety of sources. “It was such a stark opposition to how she normally is,” says Mack. “I’ve never seen her like that before—she was honest and vocal about what she was going through, but it just seemed like she was in angst.”

Then, in March 2018, a Whistler heli ski guide named Lisa Korthals, a veteran guide and ski mountaineer and longtime friend of Tone’s, was killed in an avalanche while guiding near Pemberton, British Columbia. Korthals’ death hit Tone hard.

After so many years of seeing harrowing things happen to people in the mountains, Tone was starting to feel the impact. Decades of high-anxiety moments and tragedies unfolding around her were finally starting to weigh her down. The depression was her body’s way of saying, ‘You can’t just power through everything. You can’t always be unwaveringly strong in the face of trauma.’

She knew she had to make a choice: commit to this life and take everything that comes with it. Or walk away for good. “There are times when I’m like, I don’t want this. I don’t ever want to be in this situation again. I don’t want any of this to be on my hands,” Tone says. “But the reality is, this is the life I love. This is the life that makes my heart beat faster. So we need to have a reckoning and have this moment where you say: Do you choose this? Or do you not choose this? If you choose this life, these things will happen. It’s part of the life we live.”

So, naturally, she committed. Because that’s what Lel Tone does. She accepts that the life she’s chosen will inevitably bring sadness and heartbreak. But that’s not the attitude she’s bringing with her. She should be a hardened soldier after all she’s seen in the field, a tough shell of a human being. But she’s not. She’s way too joyful for that, too spirited, and too sensitive.

Last spring, Tone was at the Anchorage airport baggage claim, waiting to collect 140 pounds of ski gear before catching a bush plane to Tordrillo Mountain Lodge. She was feeling upbeat, excited. She had a fresh season of guiding ahead of her. Before flying to Alaska, she had dyed her hair purple on a whim, for no real reason other than the fact that she could. But it was a good way to remind herself that life is beautiful and unpredictable and she might as well be, too. *