



Outside of this hotel, it's snowing a few inches an hour. Inside, I'm shivering in a sleeveless, white wedding dress. Forget cold feet, I'm shaking head to toe.

This morning I skied lines in a full-scale blizzard, calling it quits early only because my mom forced me to get my hair done. Now, here I am, all primped and waiting for my cue to link arms with my dad and walk down this aisle, this line.

I peek out through the doorway to the big, crowded room—full of cousins and college roommates and soon-to-be in-laws all seated patiently in rows of chairs—and there's Dan, waiting for me at the other end, a proud and determined look on his face. He's dressed in a nice, gray suit. His feet couldn't be as cold as mine.

The thing is, I'm not worried about committing to a lifetime with him. I couldn't be more certain that it's the right thing to do. He is my light when darkness closes in. My partner in adventure. My closest confidant. The one I believe in even when I lose faith in the rest of the world. But still, I'm unsettled, and fear turns my spine to ice for a moment.

It's the avalanche. For the last month, it's always been the avalanche. It wakes me in a startled fright or sends me into a spiral of doubt. And it fills me with sadness so deep, I feel like I have no insides. I am unable to take a step forward. Like I'm trapped. Like no matter what joy and splendor might come my way, nothing will ever feel whole and right again.

After the slide, I swore I would never return to the backcountry. The place that once brought me peace had become a warzone.

That pledge didn't last long. That promise is not like the vows I will make today.

Because soon there will be another backcountry ski. The day after tomorrow, Dan and I will bring our closest friends and family members with us on a hut trip—a group honeymoon on skis. It seemed like a grand

idea months ago—a much-needed escape to the mountains after the hoopla of bouquets, cake cutting and first dances.

But then there was a hole where the mountain and my heart used to be. Suddenly, the thought of bringing our friends to a place so full of horror and sadness seemed to me like a preposterous concept.

Standing here in my snow-white dress, adrenaline pumping through me, I am frozen in place. Even the snow falling outside the windows, a sight of beauty, reminds me of the day I wish I could forget.

Here is the darkness closing in again. Time is running out.

I exhale. I lean over to see Dan's face again, and as I look down the line before me, I can see glimpses of our future together. In two days, we will descend through powder-choked, low-angle trees. I will remember how much I worship the sensation of being out there in the mountains. I will think of the men we lost, and I will cherish the company of the friends we still have.

Beyond that, I can see lives full of brilliance. Filled with a love that runs even deeper than my sorrow. We survived that day when others did not. We owe it to them to make the most of the time we have.

So for now, I have a job to do. I will cling to my dad's arm and step forward into that room. I will commit to the most demanding promise of my life. I will choose happiness. I will fight to keep it that way. I will breathe and push off and find the light that's standing right in front of me. —Megan Michelson

*Editor's Note: Forty-three days after the February 2012 Tunnel Creek avalanche that killed Chris Rudolph, Jim Jack, and Johnny Brennan, Editor at Large Megan Michelson married fellow survivor Dan Abrams. Since their group honeymoon, Megan and Dan have returned sparingly to the backcountry, only on the safest of days and always with close friends. They live in Tahoe City, California.*