



ROMAN'S

WHEN THE WORST HAPPENS

by Andrew McLean

Before heading out for our first and last run together, I knew Roman Latta just enough to make our relationship dangerous. We both worked at Black Diamond Equipment in Salt Lake City, Utah, I'd been backcountry skiing for all of two years, and Roman had entered an extreme skiing contest. So with that in mind, we made a plan to ski some steep terrain on Saturday, April 3, 1993.

I invited my then-wife Christina as well, and the three of us met at the Grizzly Gulch trailhead just above Alta, where we ran into Chris Harmston—a fellow BD employee—and his friend Tim Gibbs. The five of us headed toward Wolverine Cirque to see what we could ski.

It was a perfect late season ski day, with clear, sunny, calm weather, and though no one had gotten through to the Utah Avalanche Forecast Center's report, it seemed safe enough.

We watched artillery trigger a major in-bounds avalanche at Alta Resort on the same aspect we were trying to ski, but its significance didn't register. After all, that was heavy-metal explosive work and we were lightweight backcountry skiers.

Two-thirds of the way around Wolverine Cirque, we came to a pristine chute, now known as "Roman's," guarded by a cornice and filled to the brim with snow. It starts with a 50° couloir before opening up onto a wide apron below. Knowing enough to be cautious, I tied off a 50' length of rope and rappelled into the couloir.

I ski-cut the top of the couloir on belay, and it seemed bomber, so Christina rappelled in, skied the 350-vertical foot couloir, then pulled out underneath a rock wall above the lower apron. The snow looked creamy, and there were no signs of instability.

Roman said he was going to skip the tiny four-foot rappel and just jump. This sounded rational to me, and I would have done the same thing at the time. I got my camera ready. But instead of cooing over the cornice, Roman backed up, got a bit of speed and jumped far enough off the cornice to land on a whale-sized pillow of snow below the cornice. As he flew through the air, I snapped a blurry photo. Click. It was the last image taken of him.

When he hit, the entire pillow broke loose, and he started tumbling down the chute in a frothy cloud. Initially, it wasn't that alarming, but then I heard shouting from above and started a high-speed slide-slip down the chute to see if everything was alright. When I reached Christina at the base of the couloir, she was standing just above a 30° fracture. The initial slough triggered a much larger avalanche that stepped down and propagated to each side of the couloir, then funneled into an eight-foot deep debris pile at the bottom. Roman was buried.

Christina looked like I felt; blinking in disbelief, shocked, bewildered, and wondering what to do next. I still regret the nanosecond of time I wasted taking a breath, closing my eyes and wishing the situation away.

Fighting panic, I switched my beacon to "search" mode, and started slipping down the debris pile as the others joined me. Chris was the first to find a signal, and we instantly converged on the spot and began digging. After an initial enthusiastic rush, reality set in. Someone gravely said, "He's deep." Shovels tangled, people were bumping into each other, everyone was overheating, and the clock was ticking. As the hole deepened over our heads, it became more crowded and harder to excavate. It was apparent that this was taking far too long.

Then a helicopter landed nearby, and rescuers rushed to help. A ski resort employee had witnessed the accident and called it in.

With fresh energy and big shovels, the new crew set to work and almost immediately exposed part of Roman's torso. With Roman out of the hole, one of the rescuers said, "No breath." After everything—work, panic, and anxiety—the words crushed us.

Another helicopter landed. The Pros were here. We were saved. Everyone stood aside as they moved in. They hooked a cardiogram up to Roman and said a word which still brings tears of frustration, regret, and sorrow to my eyes: "Flat." No heartbeat.

Undeterred, they unwrapped syringes, gel-packs, and vials before setting to work. I was an IV stand, holding a bag of fluid as high as I could, while the needle in Roman's wet arm kept falling out. "CLEAR!" They shocked Roman once. Nothing. Flatline. They cranked up the voltage, injected him with more adrenaline, and shocked him again. This time it worked. The cardiogram monitor proved Roman's heart was beating again. We loaded him into the helicopter, which immediately took off in a roar of snow and wind that scattered ski gear, medical wrappers, shovels and clothes.

Then it was quiet again. Everyone came together in a sobbing embrace of intense emotional release. "Did that really happen? Oh my God. Jesusfuckingchrist." I was crying so hard it was difficult to breathe, yet elated that Roman was alive.

Another helicopter transported us from the backcountry into a world of flashing lights, cars, ambulances, people, and confusion. In the waiting room, an avalanche official walked in and said, "I'm (name withheld). I knew something like this was going to happen to you."

For the first time that day, it occurred to me that I was the designated leader of the group. It seemed like we were all in it together and being safe. In retrospect, we were clueless novices, and made some very basic, obvious mistakes.

The second night after the avalanche, Roman was still in Intensive Care, and my adrenaline had started to dissipate. I was in the middle of a deep sleep, when the spelled out word "DEAD" flashed into my head, and I awoke in panic. I got the official call in the morning: "Roman died last night." He was surrounded by friends and family, but never regained consciousness.



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