

INBOUNDS INVINCIBILITY SYNDROME

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BY BRIAN SCHOTT | PHOTO BY DAVE COX

The avalanche hit me as I faced the hill. I never saw it coming. I was suddenly tumbling head over ski boots, carried by a river of snow. I thought I knew avalanches. I had studied slabs and sluff, wind loading, cornice collapse, and slope angle. Practiced rescues with buried dummies and dogs. Dug snow pits. Analyzed snow stability. But I forgot it all on that deep December morning 20 years ago. I was inbounds, in my comfort zone, invincible. I had no beacon because we had no plans to leave the resort boundaries.



November had been dry and December started no better for Whitefish, Montana. And then a storm dumped a foot overnight. Anticipation woke me early, and I rode first chair with friends. Bombs blasts

echoed as patrol worked. The snow was heavy, laden with moisture, and small slabs broke from the bulletproof bed. We skied laps, breathing hard and whooping it up—free from scratchy turns for the first time that winter. Signs of avalanche potential were everywhere. I registered them, but inbounds felt comfortable. Familiar. When we cut through new snow, cracks shattered the surface. I felt my adrenaline spike. In the backcountry, I would have retreated. But at the resort, in the middle of the season's first storm cycle, I plowed ahead. Twenty years on, I still get tempted to ignore impulses and blindly chase deep powder. Fatter skis make it easier than ever. We're all storm skiers now. But avalanches know no boundaries.

We caught the rope drop at the East Rim, a finger of rocky ridge that harbors steep, technical pitches. I remember every facet of that day: Traversing the ridge ahead of my three friends. Entering an open face that funnels into narrow chutes filled with rocks and wind-twisted trees. Floating turns through hissing powder. Checking my speed at the top of a small chute. A deep breath and I ski in. Five clean turns. Catching a ski tip on a small tree, I cartwheel. Rolling back up, one ski sticks vertically out of the snow near the top of the chute. I yell for my friends, but no answer returns through the thick clouds. And in that quiet, the wall of snow I never saw engulfs me.

Somersaulting, blinded by white, I land hard on my stomach. Swinging my arms to swim, the slide accelerates and I throw my hands in front of my face to break the impact of a small tree. I kiss it, and then grab the trunk as the slide slows, covering my body. Darkness. Panic. As the snow settles, it feels like I'm underwater looking up into the light. Thrusting my head out of the snow, I'm buried to my chest. Above the surface, the only sound is me sucking air. I taste blood.

The avalanche carried me 200 feet downslope. My goggles, hat, and one ski pole are gone. My face hurts. I think of my friends. Have they been caught? I scream through the fog. I hear voices. Jeremy appears, his vague form coming into focus holding both my skis. Then Don materializes. Like a pot boiling over, the slope begins to move again. Then it stops. Joe skis in from above. They hadn't seen the slide. No one knew I had been caught. What if I'd been fully buried? My friends collecting my skis, no clue where to look for me.

I click back in and we tiptoe through the debris to the main cat track. Back at the base, safe and wide-eyed, I lick my swollen lip and tell my brother about the near miss.

Today, I remember that hefty withdrawal on my luck whenever I'm rushing for first chair on a powder day. And then I put on my transceiver.

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