

BOONE SHEPARD
AND THE
ALPINE ADVERSITY
By Gabriel Bergmoser

Being unable to ski is a reasonably common issue, and as such it's hardly anything to be ashamed of. Even calling it an issue is probably a bit much considering its only real impact on your day to day life is if you're enthusiastic about strapping bits of wood to your feet and sliding down steep slopes. If you lack that particular desire, then there is no reason that not being able to ski should be in any way problematic.

As such, if we can all be in agreement that there is nothing wrong with not being able to ski we can probably also agree that there is nothing wrong with accepting certain rules that come with being unable to ski; in fact, accepting those rules is probably the bare minimum of what you should do if you are unable to ski, especially when saying 'rules' is already something of a lie. There is only one rule and that rule is simple; if you are unable to ski, do not ski.

I like to pretend some rules don't apply to me. When it came to this one, it was very hard to pretend.

Standing at the top of a very high, very steep slope, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. My feet felt constricted by my heavy boots and my inclination to pace was somewhat hampered by the skis I had strapped to the aforementioned boots. In my gloved hands were a pair of long sticks people assured me were called 'poles' that seemed to have no discernible purpose, and doing a very poor job of protecting my body from the cold was a collection of warm clothing and a pair of large, absurd looking goggles worn over my glasses.

I would have felt more ridiculous if I had not quite often looked stupider and also if the slope before me wasn't covered with lots and lots and lots of people dressed quite the same, albeit with a little more evident glee towards what they were doing as they zig zagged across the snow, yelling and cheering and having enough fun to make me feel somewhat miserable. Not because I begrudged them having a good time; because I knew the time I was about to have could only be described as good if you were watching it from a safe distance and not at all a part of it.

I glanced up to my right at the bobbing, precarious shape of a chairlift crawling up a suspiciously thin looking cable to a building just behind me. Aboard the chairlift was a single figure, difficult to make out at this distance and yet familiar to me by merit of his bright purple ski gear. Wolfgang Von Widdershins was arguably the greatest skier of all time - arguably because the ability to slide very fast down a mountain and not die seemed like it was probably down to luck more than skill, and also because I didn't like him. To be fair I had not met him and had no intention of talking to him for a second longer than not at all, but he had something that belonged to me, something I had to get back no matter the cost. That made him an obstacle and I was not a fan of obstacles.

Wolfgang's chairlift disappeared into the building and I looked down at my skis again, wishing they would magically turn into a motorbike and then retracting that wish when I visualised how a motorbike would look attempting to descend a snowy slope. No, I was stuck with skiing, which I had no business doing, but was my only way to steal a very dangerous book back from the world-famous skier who was currently keeping it in the pocket of his gear as reading material for the long trips up the hill on the chairlift. I had already tried twice to tail him down the slope, one ending with my having rather more close contact with a tree than I would normally like, the next with ducking the viciously swung ski-poles of a very large woman who for some reason took issue with having barely evaded the chaotic flailing of my own poles as I torpedoed past her. Thankfully Wolfgang was still unaware of my tailing him, but I was keenly aware that every peaceful trip back up the slope meant him delving a little further into the book and coming a little closer to the secret I could not afford anyone to discover. So that meant I would keep trying until either Wolfgang discovered what I could not afford him to or that woman found me again and impaled me on her alarmingly pointed pole. Neither was desirable and both, at this rate, were more likely than me actually managing to get my book from him.

From the building behind me came a distinct purple blur, one that made the bruises I had collected in the last hour ache even more as I realised I had to try again. Quicker than I would have liked that blur had raced past me and before I even had time to take a deep breath or mutter something indignant I had jerked myself forward and, once again, without any control whatsoever, I was barrelling down the slopes towards the distant purple shape of Wolfgang Von Widdershins.

As a general rule I like trees. That rule changes in a big way when they are dotting the slope ahead, almost always in such positions that I had to just throw myself to the side and hope for the best to avoid yet another collision. Yet this time, I seemed to be lucking out. This time I only had to dodge one or two and what's more, it seemed like Wolfgang was getting closer by the second. While he was enjoying his holiday, I was on a mission and also could not ski, which meant that at least this once I was going faster, even if that speed was not matched by control.

But in the absence of inconvenient trees and angry pole wielding women, I was actually quite enjoying this. The bracing wind in my face, the flashes of colours as I passed everyone, the feeling of exhilaration as I—

—slammed into Wolfgang Von Widdershins' very purple back.

For a moment, the slopes disappeared as I was embroiled in a tangled mass of flailing limbs and German swearwords. My bruises got bruises of their own as I was flung over and over again and then finally thrown free to land face first in the freezing snow.

For a second, all was still. For a second I considered just lying right there and sleeping off all these aches. Then I looked up to see a battered, hardcover old book lying in the snow just feet in front of me. It must have been flung clear in the crash, but I didn't care. It was right there. I forced my screaming muscles to move and in the process realised that I had lost my skis and my poles. That was probably not the worst thing to happen, considering the circumstances. I pulled myself forward and my hand landed on the book just as a very German voice rang out from behind me.

'When I saw you causing much trouble on the mountain I thought you were an idiot. Now I know you are a thief as well, that suspicion is confirmed.'

I rolled over, clutching the book to my chest. Several feet in front of me stood Wolfgang, glaring down at me over his large German nose and thick German moustache.

'Sorry,' I said, 'but I need this more than you.'

'I just got up to the bit where Boone and Marbier are heading to Greenville to deal with the wolf.' He took a step forward and I realised that he had lost his skis as well. 'Is it a real wolf? Will they survive? I need to know.'

'Okay, well let me—'

'No spoilers!' he shrieked.

'Spoilers are the best you're going to get,' I said. 'You can't have this book.' I forced my body to stand.

'Nobody steals from Wolfgang Von Widdershins,' he growled.

'I just did,' I said. 'And without your famous skis, I'd like to see you stop me.'

He smirked. 'I may not have my famous skis, thief, but I have my famous security team.'

I laughed. 'Okay, nice try. I've been watching you all afternoon and—'

He didn't let me finish. Wolfgang whistled loudly and suddenly it seemed like the whole slope had gone quiet. He grin grew and in that instant I realised that Wolfgang was very rich, very pampered and very much not in the habit of letting anyone steal from him. So I took the only option left to me.

I ran.

Running, usually, is something I'm fairly used to and, conveniently, something that is fairly easy. Running, however, becomes a challenge when you are wearing heavy boots, are aching from head to foot, and every step is burying your feet deeper in lots and lots of snow.

And yet it's funny how some things can motivate you, and the whistle of several arrows flying past my head was very much the kind of thing that could motivate me. So, despite the sheer difficulty, I kept running, making for the darkness of a forest that fringed the edges of the slope. In the shadows of the trees escape might be easier. Maybe. I was rolling the dice on a very uncertain outcome here.

A noise from behind me made me duck and a thunk ahead announced that I was close enough to the trees for the arrows to start hitting them. So, despite pain and tiredness and exasperation and all the rest I powered forward until I was inside the trees. More thunks behind me indicated that at least some of the arrows were hitting trees instead of me which was reasonably encouraging but far from a guarantee of continued existence, which was sort of what I was looking for at this point.

Getting deeper into the trees I glanced behind me and almost froze in place at what I saw. It was not Wolfgang Von Widdershins who approached; no, rather it was a collection of about ten dark suited people skiing towards the trees. They held no poles; after all, that would have made it somewhat difficult to carry the crossbows they all had aimed at my general direction. Evidently Wolfgang Von Widdershins took his reading very seriously; normally an admirable quality, less so when it had a good chance of resulting in your swift transformation into a pin cushion. So instead of considering the fact that the champion sportsman was in fact a well-read literary type, I kept running.

I emerged into a clearing, through which ran a small stream. For a moment I stared at it, despairing over how I was meant to get across, then I realised it was only about five inches thick. Maybe what really concerned me was the moose drinking on the other side, who had looked up at me with an expression that could be anywhere between annoyed, curious and pleasantly surprised.

'Hello,' I said. The moose did not reply. I wracked my memory to try and work out if moosen (correct plural?) were carnivorous, then another arrow shot past my head and I realised I didn't care. I stumbled forward and crossed the stream.

'Look, I'm not sure how to broach this subject,' I told the blank-faced moose, 'but I'm going to need to ride you.'

The moose didn't reject this out of hand, which I took as an invitation. Although perhaps that was premature because the moment I pulled myself up onto the animal's back it reared, made a noise that I could only read as disconcerted, pulled itself around and took off through the trees.

There are moments in life where you have to weigh up your circumstances. On the one hand I was on the back on an angry and out-of-control moose being carried deeper and deeper into a dark forest, on the other hand I was going in the opposite direction of the crossbow wielding men who were trying to kill me. When all was said and done, I was still alive which meant I was going to have to preference the moose at this particular point in time.

I glanced over my shoulder and any sense of relief vanished as I realised the men were very close behind me, dodging and weaving the trees as they raced towards me. I ducked again as another three arrows shot over my head. Swiftly I re-evaluated my preferences and decided the moose was certainly the better option. Provided we got out of this alive.

I dug my heels in, which did not make the moose go faster but did make it snort on a way that suggested that I should avoid doing anything similar in future. As it stood, the moose *was* going fairly quickly while not colliding with any trees, so I could hardly complain. So I just threw myself forward, clinging to the back of the moose as it continued to gallop through the trees.

After what felt like about an hour but was probably closer to several seconds I glanced behind me. The forest was as empty as it was dark and vast; it seemed I had managed to escape Wolfgang's security crew, but in the process had gotten very, very lost on this mountain.

The moose was slowing down, as if it had sensed that the danger had passed. Guessing that perhaps it wasn't too in love with a man in heavy ski boots riding it, I swung off its back and gave it a pat, to which it responded with a disgruntled look. I would have apologised, but then without the moose I would have been dead so it was hard to feel especially sorry.

The moose sauntered off into the trees and I looked back the way I had come. Was it safe to walk yet? Rich people could be odd and I wasn't sure if Wolfgang Von Widdershins had a certain point at which he was willing to call off the pursuit and accept that he would never know how the book ended. Still, for now I seemed safe and the forest remained silent. I took a deep breath and began to walk back the way I came.

'Stop there thief.'

I stopped there. I knew that voice. Angry and German, it could belong to nobody but the last person I wanted to see at that moment. Slowly, I turned. Skis on his feet, Wolfgang stood behind me, a crossbow in hand, aimed at my heart.

'You rallied quickly,' I said.

'World's best skier,' he replied. 'Now toss me that book.'

I tried to think, but my brain was too focused on bodily pains to address any realistic means of escape. So I reached into my jacket and withdrew the book. I looked down at it and tried to force myself to focus.

'Hurry,' Wolfgang said. 'I may not have all day, but I have a lot of arrows.'

I sighed. He raised a good point. As scary as what was in that book was, it wasn't worth dying for. So, almost unable to believe what I was doing, I threw it to him.

He caught it in one hand and grinned. 'You thought you had the better of me, didn't you?' he chuckled. 'Well let me tell you, no-one gets the better of Wolfgang Von Widdershins. And when Wolfgang Von Widdershins wants to read the end of a book, he reads the end of his book.' With a one-handed flourish, he flipped the book open. 'Now if you'll excuse me...'

But he trailed off as he stared down at the page. Something had stopped him and he gaped at whatever was in front of him.

I didn't move. I had a pretty decent idea of what he had seen.

'This...' he breathed, eyes still on the photo. 'This is you.' He looked up at me. I said nothing. Just held his gaze.

'You're Boone Shepard,' he said.

I was as much Boone Shepard as I was disinclined to explain how that was possible. But if it meant avoiding exposure, the choice was no choice at all. I opened my mouth to speak.

'Can I get your autograph?' Wolfgang managed.

I gaped at him, stunned.

'You can have the book,' he said. 'You wouldn't want it without good reason. But may I at least take the first page with your signature on it?'

After all he had put me through, did I want to begrudge him that? Yes, very much. But for the sake of a peaceful resolution...

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes you can.'

Eyes like saucers, he moved towards me, holding out the book.

'Are you going to ask?' I said, as I signed.

'Ask what?' he replied.

'Ask how I'm here,' I said. 'It's 1965. That book was published in 1882.'

'No,' he said, as I tore the autographed front page out and handed it to him. I don't need to know how it happened. Knowing it happened is good enough.'

I frowned. 'Is that so?'

He smiled, a disconcerting sight on a face that previously seemed so angry. 'Was any story ever made better by explaining how it came about?'

I opened my mouth to reply, but had no answer. So I just gaped like an idiot as, grinning, Wolfgang pocketed the torn out page, then turned his skis with obvious skill and, waving, disappeared into the trees.

I looked down at the book in my hand. Maybe it was a good story. Maybe there was something of value there. But the problem was that not everyone was Wolfgang. Too many people would want to know how it came about. For now, that was a danger I had to put an end to as best I could.

For now.

The End