

UnThinkable



2.4-MILE (3.9 KM) SWIM



112-MILE (180 KM) BIKE



26.2-MILE (42.2 KM) MARATHON RUN

THE TRUE STORY ABOUT THE FIRST DOUBLE AMPUTEE TO
COMPLETE THE WORLD-FAMOUS HAWAIIAN IRONMAN TRIATHLON

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WITH JENNA GLATZER



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*This book is dedicated to
my brother Tim,
the real Ironman of our family*

CHAPTER 1

“Please, mister, get this trailer off me! Please help me!”

I didn’t remember saying that, but he sure remembered hearing it. The man had tears in his eyes as he filled in the gaps in my memory, explaining that I had grabbed his arm when he came over to ask what he could do.

He was the driver of a truck that was behind the eighteen-wheeler that had sideswiped our pickup, causing me to go flying off the side of our truck’s toolbox and bounce up and down the hot asphalt of the roadway for 324 feet. When the pickup finally stopped, what was left of my right leg was trapped under a trailer carrying three tons of lawn-mowing equipment, and my back was a mass of third-degree burns from scraping along the pavement.

I was just a kid at the time—eighteen years old, fresh out of high school and working a summer landscaping job with a couple of my best friends. It was a great way to work on my tan and my muscles while making some spending money—and I liked the work. We had a boss we called “Unc,” an African-American in his late sixties with a grandfatherly manner, who looked out for us. The housing authority of Camilla, Georgia,

had hired us to mow lawns in the city's housing projects and some smaller surrounding communities.

When we drove to the smaller towns, three guys would ride in the cab of the truck, and three guys would hop into the back and sit on the toolbox with their backs resting against the cab. Once we were all aboard, we would drive to our location for that day. On July 23, 1986, we headed to Norman Park, a small, unincorporated town near Moultrie, Georgia. I drove the truck that morning—way too fast for Unc's taste, as usual. Having grown up watching movies such as *Smokey and the Bandit* and *Cannonball Run* and television shows such as *The Dukes of Hazzard*, whenever I went somewhere, I always wanted to see how fast I could get there.

My friends and I liked working in Norman Park because it was a bit of a distance from Camilla—by the time we finished the job and made it back to the housing authority office, it would be about time to break for lunch. We always drove at or just under the speed limit on the way back because we were kids and were getting paid by the hour. Plus, you can't hit a road sign with a bottle at high speeds. Yes, we were mischievous, but not malicious.

Whenever we rode in the back of the truck, we played games to see how many road signs we could hit. My competitive nature would take over, and soon we would be throwing cinder blocks, and then larger objects, until Mike McClain—always the voice of reason on our crew—would suggest that maybe throwing a table at a sign might be a little over the top.

Once we arrived back at the Camilla Housing Authority, we'd partake of our favorite event of the day: eating. With the metabolism of eighteen-year-olds, we ate anything and everything in sight. We would head to Guy Watson's house, which was within walking distance, and we'd scarf down soft drinks, pizza, and any other food that had not been properly hidden.

We'd also watch television, but not just any television. It

had to be *Bodies in Motion*, a half-hour fitness and aerobics workout show on ESPN. The star of the show was an Olympic athlete named Gilad Janklowicz, but that's not what kept us glued to the television. No, we tuned in to see Gilad's assistants—the most amazingly beautiful women—exercising in skimpy spandex outfits. These women put Olivia Newton-John and her *Physical* video to shame.

But even though *Bodies in Motion* was an intellectually and culturally stimulating program, it could sustain our knowledge-seeking minds only so long before our food coma kicked in. Then we'd fade peacefully into a thirty-minute nap, and I'd dream about blades of grass gently swaying in the breeze until it was time to head back to work. All in all, it was a glorious summer experience.

That particular day, we finished our morning work and went to the store to get some cold drinks and snacks. After we loaded up on enough junk food to put a dent in our \$3.35-per-hour paychecks, it was time to head to Guy's house for lunch. I hopped back into the driver's seat, and my right hand had a firm grip on the steering wheel when Unc said, "Why don't you let someone else drive?"

It didn't bother me. I loved and respected Unc—he loved us and we were his boys. He was a great manager because he was tough but fair. I'm not sure if Unc knew how to read or write very well, but that wouldn't have changed my opinion of him. I was proud that he had a managerial role. Growing up in the South could not have been easy for him, yet he showed no bitterness or prejudice against white folks.

Often, he was thinking ahead about what he wanted to tell us, and he would get so caught up in his words that he would mix up our names. He'd say, "Now, Tommy, . . . I mean Mike, . . . I mean Guy," and then he would pause and collect his thoughts. "Now, Scott, I wantcha ta go over there, and cut the grass on dat part of dat dem buildings." That was our Unc.

We shared the driving duties all the time, and I knew that Unc wanted a slow pace on the way home.

“Tommy, you drive us on home,” he said. Tommy Hilliard was a couple of years younger than Mike, Guy, and I were—a good farm kid from a great family. His mom ran the Camilla Housing Authority. Although he was the youngest, Tommy was probably the best driver of us all.

I often replay in my mind that moment of getting out of the driver’s seat. It was such a small event, but it changed the course of many lives. I have to believe that Unc and Tommy must have reflected on that decision as well. Unc was right to let Tommy drive. I always drove way too fast because patience was not one of my virtues.

Being behind the wheel was a circus act for me. I was an early practitioner of multitasking. My mouth would run double the speed of the vehicle while I stuffed my face full of chips and washed them down with a cold drink and somehow reached to turn the channel on the radio. My talking or deejaying didn’t annoy anyone—the others were too gripped with fear by my haphazard attention to the road. Tommy, on the other hand, was patient and careful when driving.

Who knows how different things might have been if I had stayed at the wheel?

Tommy slid into the cab for the leisurely drive back to Camilla. I hopped in the back of the truck and slammed my dirty, grass-covered shoulders right next to my best friends, Guy Watson and Mike McClain. I sat on the left side of the truck behind the driver’s seat, Mike was in the middle, and Guy was on the right. Tommy, Unc, and Demetrius—the other member of our crew—rode in the cab. Jacked up from the sugar of a Snickers bar and the caffeine of a Mountain Dew I had inhaled, I proceeded to give my friends an earful of my philosophies of life.

Guy was one of the best and funniest storytellers I had

ever met, with a particular aptitude for impressions. His parents, “Mr. Bill” and “Miss Janie,” were like a second set of parents to me. I had known Mike since eighth grade, when he and his family moved to Pelham, a town near Camilla. He was a great athlete because what he lacked in size and strength, he made up for in intelligence. His thinking was calculated and methodical. Okay, there were a few times when he didn’t make the best decisions, but that was usually when he’d had too much of the spirit (and I don’t mean the holy one). Between Guy’s constant humor and my reckless abandon, Mike brought a good balance of levelheadedness to our version of the Three Musketeers.

We proceeded down the highway, checking occasionally to make sure that Tommy was not going faster than the speed limit and reminding him quietly that getting back to the office sooner meant we would have to do more work. Unc made the most of every minute that he had us.

Shoulder to broad shoulder, we were squished together on the lid of the toolbox with our legs dangling in the bed of the truck. The wind whipped around our heads as we bounced and swayed along the country road with the summer sun baking the backs of our necks—blissful, except when we would encounter the occasional June bug at forty-five miles per hour, hitting the backs of our heads like a tiny baseball.

“Ouch! That’s gonna leave a mark! You wanna know the first thing that came to that June bug’s mind when he hit me? His butt!” I would say as I cackled like a laughing hyena. I have been told that my laugh is also loud, vociferous, and contagious. Once I get started, it’s hard to stop until the tears get rolling.

When I got tired of yapping, I relaxed and listened on my gigantic Walkman to one of my all-time favorite rock bands, an Australian group called Models. I still remember the lyrics perfectly:

Hey, hey, honey, when I'm without you,
I get a chill up and down my spine. . . .

A quintessential summer tune to fit the mood. There we were, three buddies enjoying our final summer together. We were getting a sweet tan, building our muscles, having great banter, and loving the pride that came from earning a little money by the sweat of our own brows. We were headed to different colleges soon, and deep down we knew things would never be the same after that. This stage of our lives was ending, but for now, there was nothing better than being on the back of that truck after a solid day's work out in the blazing sun, feeling the good kind of tired and the good kind of dirty. We smelled like manual labor, freshly cut grass, and the gasoline and oil of the mowers.

Being red-blooded teenage boys, our conversations ranged from verbal insults that were really terms of endearment to reminding one another of the many foolish and embarrassing decisions we had made to, inevitably, our favorite subject: girls.

These serious topics—well, they were serious to us teenage boys—were interrupted only by the more analytical and thought-provoking discussions of what might be the proper trajectory to give us the greatest opportunity to hit the most road signs using the fewest number of bottles.

Meanwhile, up in the cab of the truck, Unc would be seated with a toothpick in his mouth and one arm hanging over the ledge of the passenger-side window. That was the way Unc always rode. Either he was hard of hearing or he had decided there were bigger issues that he could address, but he never said anything to us about the bottles.

It's not that we ever consciously thought about how dangerous it was or that we were destroying government property or the consequences if we were caught—we were just

being boys, keeping ourselves entertained. Boys are immortal and bulletproof, right?

That July day, an eighteen-wheeler had been following us for at least ten miles at a safe distance, but then it started to creep up closer behind us. If we noticed it at all, we didn't think much of it at the time.

"Hey, Scott, let me listen to your Walkman," Guy said, leaning across Mike to reach for it.

"Gumby," I said back. That was Guy's nickname, from Eddie Murphy's character on *Saturday Night Live*. "I just got this new tape. I want to listen to it first."

"Fine." He turned his back to me, tossing his legs over the side of the truck with his feet dangling toward the edge of the road as if he would leap off at any second. It was a very dangerous way to ride and certainly the easiest way to get knocked off, but like me, Guy was fearless.

And I, I feel so hot, and the pain won't stop
Tearing at this heart of mine. . . .

My mind wandered to the driver of the eighteen-wheeler behind us. I wondered what it would be like to have a career like that. Growing up in the late seventies and early eighties, I'd watched a show called *B. J. and the Bear*. It was about B. J. McKay, a trucker who traveled in a red and white Kenworth K100 cabover semi with his pet chimpanzee, Bear—named for the famed college football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant. They were always getting in trouble with the local sheriffs as well as uncovering corruption. It seemed like a very exciting job—and apparently one filled with flirtatious, buxom, blonde, lady truckers.

Here I was, about to start my journey into figuring out what to do with my life, and this guy had already made his decision. Why truck driving? I wondered if it was a good job

and as adventure-filled as it seemed on television. I wondered if he had kids at home and a wife cooking him a fancy dinner.

In just another two months, I was going to begin reinventing myself. At college, you get to wipe out your entire academic and social past and get a “do over.” I wished I had listened to my mom and applied myself better in school—I regretted that I hadn’t followed Mike’s example and made better grades. Mike was the salutatorian of our graduating class and voted most likely to succeed. Guy was a good student also.

With a chance at redemption, maybe I would turn into a real intellectual in college. Not likely, but anything was possible. And maybe I’d get out of my dating rut, too. I was really fortunate to go to a high school where there were lots of beautiful girls. Rival high schools loved to play us because we had the prettiest cheerleaders and girls in the stands. But I was too shy and insecure to ask them out, so many times I settled for playing it safe and staying in the “friend zone.”

I grew up on films like *Making the Grade*, *Weird Science*, *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *St. Elmo’s Fire*. I dreamed of being the good guy in the movie who got the pretty girl at the end. In college, I hoped, I would find the courage to be proud of who I was and what I had to offer. Plus, college girls all had shiny hair and short skirts and slim waists. At least that’s what I’d heard. I’d find out for myself soon enough.

Relationships were on my mind because I had just broken up with my girlfriend, one of the few really pretty girls I had ever worked up the nerve to ask out. She was six feet tall, with long brown hair, and had won a modeling contest earlier in the summer. Instead of being proud of her success, I was sad and jealous and afraid she would leave me. Two weeks earlier, we’d gotten into a fight and called it off. That was okay, though, because there was another girl I had set my sights on. I was going to call her when we got to Guy’s house.

Well, come a little bit closer now;
I've got something to say to you. . . .

My girlfriend and I had had a tumultuous high school relationship filled with insecurity, jealousy, and immaturity. I spent most of my time worrying about how I could get her to like me more and fearful that she would one day leave me. I hated dating and the fear that was brought on by it. I would rather play it safe and go out with friends.

Serious dating was rare in high school unless you were "going with someone" or "hanging out." Mostly, my friends and I just drove around town, meeting in parking lots to talk to girls from other schools and trying to buy beer with other high school kids who were also driving around with no particular destination.

Now that I think of it, it was kind of a pre-mating ritual for us guys. Like bantam roosters strutting their stuff to see who could attract the most attention, we would show up in our nicest clothes, best-combed hair, and—yes—even jewelry to impress the young ladies. We'd make a big deal out of finding these pretty girls and trying to impress them. Most of the time, we'd egg each other on to go ask out one of these elusive creatures, and then we'd take turns chickening out.

Unless you've traveled extensively, when you live in a small town you get a sense that the world is very tiny and that you're a big deal if you have more than the next guy has. The reality was that the rich kids' parents had either inherited their money, worked very hard for their wealth, or they were up to their eyeballs in debt.

On the football team, guys would sometimes wear shirts underneath their pads, and the rich kids would show off by wearing Polo or Flying Scotsman shirts—their way of saying, "I'm going to trash this really expensive shirt because I have so much money it doesn't matter."

The guy who most incited my jealousy had that kind of money. He was a doctor's son and our rival high school's starting quarterback. Even his name sounded cooler than mine: Mattison Dunaway. When I saw my ex-girlfriend in his car, it made me even more enraged. I thought, "I'll show her!" Later that week, I called Mattison and told him he could have her—I wanted nothing to do with her. *See how cool I can be?* I thought.

I had liked the fact that my girlfriend was so tall that I had to look up to kiss her. I would probably miss that. And she had a really nice complexion. The more I thought about it, the more I thought that breaking up was kind of a bummer.

Out of mind out of sight—
Gotta keep my body tight. . . .

As the music blared in my ears, I noticed something that bothered me. The eighteen-wheeler behind us was getting closer and closer, its speed increasing as if the driver had floored the accelerator. He got so close, I thought he was going to run into the back of us, but at the last moment, he shifted his massive vehicle into the oncoming lane of the two-lane country road. That wouldn't have been so scary except that we had just passed the break of a curve with plenty of signs indicating that this was a no-passing zone, and when I glanced over my shoulder at the road ahead of us, I saw that we were approaching a spot where the roadway narrowed between two guardrails as it passed over a little creek.

Surely he doesn't mean to pass us now, does he?

Maybe he thought we were going too slow, or maybe he hadn't liked our earlier bottle throwing, but it became clear that he did indeed intend to pass us. I grabbed on to the rusty old toolbox under me, thinking that he was a little too close for comfort.

As we closed in on the narrow bridge ahead, I looked at the trucker in his side window and then glanced at his cargo. He was pulling a load of phosphorus, probably for fertilizer. My stomach tightened with the hunch that he wasn't going fast enough to get past us in time.

At that very moment, he seemed to realize that both vehicles weren't going to fit on the bridge. He would have to move his truck closer to the double yellow line in the middle of the road. When he did, a perfect storm ensued. His right front cargo jack was even with our trailer's left front tire. When the truck driver moved closer to our vehicle, his cargo jack punctured our trailer tire, causing it to blow out, careening our three-ton trailer into the guardrail with full force.

Hold on!

We all rocketed off the toolbox and into the air. My body flew over the side of the truck, and I grabbed on for dear life. *Hold it, hold it. . . You can do it.*

As I struggled to pull myself back into the truck, I thought, *All those hours of lifting weights, all that time getting stronger—where's my superhuman strength?* I fought with everything I had in me.

I can do this. . . I have to do this. . .

But I couldn't. We were going too fast and my legs were being dragged on the road. I lost my grip.

My buddy Mike grabbed Guy around the neck and kept him from falling off the other side and being crushed between the side of our truck and the guardrail. He then frantically reached out for me, but I was gone.

As I dropped off the side of the truck, my body was flung backward into the narrow corridor between the pickup and the eighteen-wheeler, but my right leg did not clear the trailer. Instead, it became stuck in a brace that was attached between the two trailer wheels. Once my leg was caught, my body smashed against the pavement and I was dragged along the

hot Georgia asphalt farther than the length of a football field. Each contact with the road tore more flesh off my back.

The fact that I lived through the accident doesn't make any sense at all. My head should have been split open ten times over. As it was, I must have struck my head on the pavement at least once, because later at the hospital, I had a bald spot and a gash on the back of my head. The doctors diagnosed a concussion, but that would prove to be the least of their worries.

Brooks Mulliford, who was driving the truck behind the truck that hit us, later told me that I was reaching for the huge ropes that were securing the large lawn mowers. "It seemed like something—or someone—was holding your head up off the pavement, keeping you alive," he said.

I'd love to tell you I had all sorts of profound thoughts during what should have been my last moments on earth, but in those nine seconds, all I could think was, *What's going on? How did I get here? Where am I? Help!*

Mike frantically beat on the pickup's back window to tell Tommy to stop. By the time he did, my leg was pinned underneath the trailer and I was unconscious. My friends thought I was dead. Their fear must have been almost unbearable, but when it happened they didn't hesitate in the face of such a shock. Mike ran to me and Guy went to go find help. Then, to everyone's great relief, I opened my eyes. The first thing I remember seeing was Mike's face, looking ghost-white. I hadn't yet made sense of what had happened, but I knew my body felt wrong.

Hey! Who hit me? What was his jersey number?

While playing high school football, I always tried to hit people as hard as I possibly could. For the most part, I hit people within the sound of the whistle, but there were a few occasions—okay, several occasions—when I hit an opponent rather late. I soon learned, however, that what the Bible says is true: "You will reap what you sow." So, yes, I got hit plenty

of times in return and was almost knocked out a few times as well. Another truth I learned is that you often reap *much* later than you sow, and *more* than you sow.

During those brutal hits on the football field, you're stunned and your head feels numb. You hear a ringing, and it's not the angel Gabriel playing his harp. There's a funny little expression to describe this feeling: They say you got your "bell rung." Well, that's how I felt at first out there on the road, like I had my bell rung.

Whenever I felt that way in a football game, I'd spend the rest of the game trying to get back at the guy who had tackled me—which was exactly what I wanted to do now; I wanted to know who had caused the accident so I could go tackle him. I tried to get up and look for the guy, but my head was lying in Mike's lap.

What happened? Why is he looking at me that way? Why is he sweating so much?

Through the ringing, I heard Mike say, "We've been in an accident, and help is on the way." He's sensible that way. He pushed me back down gently and told me to lie still. The guys took their shirts off and put them under me on the pavement and tried to keep me cool.

One time, when I was playing Little League baseball, I got nailed in the nose by a fastball from James Jackson. James had a cannon for an arm and would later become the starting quarterback for the University of Georgia Bulldogs. When he hit me, blood went everywhere and I had tons of people looking after me. That time, someone found me some ice and I was fine after a few hours, but this felt different. This was my best friend looking down at me, and he looked scared. Why did he look so scared? I wondered if someone was going to get me an ice bag.

Am I hurt?

Mostly what I remember was feeling hotter than I ever had

in my life. I was lying on asphalt that had been cooking in the Georgia heat all day, and my body was one giant open wound. It felt as if my entire body were on fire, and I was as dirty as if I'd been in a dust storm. The humidity didn't help as the dirt and sweat clung to me in a sweltering blanket.

As I faded in and out of consciousness, I heard the chirpy, nervous voices of everyone debating what to do. If they took the lawn mowers off the trailer one by one, I'd bleed to death. Even if they could get a helicopter to rush me to a hospital, it would be useless unless it had a crane to pull the trailer off me. What we really needed was a large vehicle to lift the weight off me—something like a tow truck. But for all they knew, the nearest tow truck could be in the next county.

Still, despite the severity of my injuries, many things were happening in my favor. The rim of our flatbed trailer's wheel was pinning my right leg to the ground, and its weight was acting as a tourniquet. Brooks Mulliford had had some paramedic training, so he was helping and telling the boys what to do. We were in a very rural part of southwest Georgia, where it could have been miles to the nearest phone, but we ended up between two houses and someone was home when Guy knocked on the door to use the phone. In this era before cell phones, we needed a landline to call an ambulance. Also, the nearest hospital could have been almost an hour away—but we happened to be within twelve miles. When you're bleeding to death, every minute counts. The one thing I still needed to save my life was a tow truck to pull the trailer off me.

And then a tow truck showed up.

Let me tell you, tow trucks don't just appear out of nowhere in Moultrie, Georgia. And here's the crazier part: The guy pulled up, said, "Do you need help?" and after he pulled the trailer off me, he drove away. To this day, I have no idea who he was. I've met the EMTs, nurses, doctors, and everyone else associated with my accident, but no one was ever able to track down

the tow truck driver. He didn't show up to take credit even when the newspapers turned their attention to my accident that week.

Who was he? What was he doing there? Where did he go? He was like Michael Landon in my personal *Highway to Heaven* experience.

After calling for an ambulance, my friends called my mom. How do you break this kind of news to someone's mom? They didn't, exactly.

All they said was, "Mrs. Ruth, there's been an accident, and we think Scott's leg is broken. We're going to take him to the hospital in Moultrie." So my mom took a book and some stationery with her—she figured it might be a long evening if the doctor had to put a cast on my leg.

The coincidence is that when I was a sophomore in high school and playing spring football, I went out for a pass and Mike tackled me. When I jumped up, I realized my thumb was broken—the only time I'd ever broken a bone. My mom got the call, and off we went to the doctor for a cast. So, when my friends told her that my leg was broken, she was thinking about that experience. She had no idea what she was really in for.

When the EMTs arrived and examined me, they told my friends to go look for my heel bone on the road. What does a heel bone look like, anyway? And how would you recognize it amid all the trash and torn-up clothes strewn along the way? It was important to find that piece of bone because I wouldn't have a foot without it—nothing like putting people under pressure! They never did find it.

I don't remember being put into the ambulance or the ride to the hospital. Maybe they gave me pain medicine to endure it.

When my mom got to the hospital, the doctor made her lie down on a hospital bed, and he put up the side rails before he would speak to her of my condition. Then he told her the truth,

in harsh terms: "Your son has been hurt from one end of his body to the other." He told her that I had already lost a leg, I had lost a lot of blood, and they didn't know yet what kind of internal injuries I had. They weren't even sure if I was going to live or die.

My mom called my dad, told him what had happened, and said to be sure to have someone drive him over. He called my cousin, Dean Daniels, but didn't explain anything to Dean. He just said, "I need you to drive me to Moultrie."

Dean was thinking, *He's a grown man. Why does he need me to drive him?* but he went to pick him up anyway. During the car ride, my dad told Dean that I'd been in a serious accident and that I might not make it. It was a very quiet ride the rest of the way.

My first memory in the hospital is seeing Dean's face, even before I saw my parents.

"Man, I really messed up, didn't I?" I said to him. "How bad is it?"

"It's bad," he admitted, "but you're going to make it, Scott. You're going to make it."

He later told me that he didn't believe what he was saying. I was sedated at that point and feeling no pain so I had no idea my life was in jeopardy, but it was painfully clear to everyone else. No one knew the extent of my internal injuries, and it was anyone's guess as to whether any of my major organs had been damaged.

"If you're going to do something, do it right," I said to Dean. "I did a darn good job, didn't I?"

"You sure did."

When my mom came to see me, two nurses escorted her, one on each side, in case she fainted. She did not want to see my legs or my back and is still very glad that she never saw that gruesome sight.

Taking X-rays proved to be a challenge because pebbles

and gravel and dirt were actually falling out of my back and clanking on the glass of the X-ray machine. I could hear the *tink-tink-tink* as they rained down. Cleaning out the embedded debris from my body was excruciating, and it took several tries. (My entire back looked as if someone had taken a cheese grater to it and sliced off the first couple layers of skin.)

Following that, I lost consciousness again. The next thing I remember is waking up in a very white room and having no idea where I was.

I heard a man nearby say, "We're going to have to amputate his right leg. We should amputate both of them; it would be better."

Was that guy talking about me? Did he say that he was going to remove my legs? I have only one scar on my body. I'm a weight lifter! I'm a runner! You leave my legs alone!

I said it in my head before I could say it out loud. My brain felt like it was floating in Jell-O, and I struggled to regain enough wakeful strength to argue. I was unaware that the bottom half of my right leg was already effectively gone. From the middle of the shin on down, it was just barely hanging on, and there was no way to save it.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" I yelled. "Who said that?"

I sat up in bed, a feat my mom says should have been impossible. One leg was shredded, and my other thighbone was broken, but I summoned all my energy to find out what in the world was going on.

The doctor appeared and placed my X-rays on a lighted board behind him. Next to him, my father was holding my mother and they were both looking at me.

"Son, there's no getting around it," the doctor said.

"What do you mean? You're going to take off both my legs?"

"We may have to, to save your life."

You can't take my legs! I thought. *I am not a guy with no legs. That's not who I am.* I was the picture of fitness and

health—a football player who spent his summers voluntarily pushing manual mowers all day rather than using the ride-on ones. Then I would go to the gym and work out with weights before I ran several miles.

What the doctors had told my parents was that there was zero percent chance of saving my right leg, and only a 20–30 percent chance of saving the left one. My parents thought it would be too devastating for me to lose both legs.

“If there is a chance of saving one, I want to try,” my dad told the doctors, despite their recommendations to amputate both legs. And with that, a surgeon carted me away to sever my right leg about five inches below the knee, only a couple of hours after I had been running around with my friends.

My dad had to sign the paperwork for the surgery. I can’t even imagine what a difficult decision that was for him. My mom supported his decision, but that’s really a choice no parent wants to make.

Sometimes, something happens in life that’s just so big that everything leading up to it is “Before” and everything that follows is “After.” The accident was mine. The next time my friends would see me in the hospital, half my leg would be gone. Nothing was ever going to be normal again.

AFTERWORD

Has my story inspired you in any way to do something extraordinary with your life? If you are like most people, doing something huge and life changing might be unthinkable. You may have a circumstance that you feel prohibits you from moving forward. That could be the case, or maybe that's just your perception. Allow me to change your perspective. The more difficult your circumstance, the more the odds seem to be stacked against you, the more you've been told it's not possible, then the more opportunity you have to do the unthinkable.

God can take an ordinary life and do extraordinary things.

Over the past two years, I have been blessed to speak to thousands of kids, soldiers, teachers, athletes, doctors, parents, CEOs, troubled youths, pastors, celebrities, and government leaders. Able-bodied and physically challenged alike, we all share common emotional and physical challenges. We also share a passion to find our true purpose in this world.

As you may have learned through my story, I am truly just an ordinary guy whose life experience has been magnified by a roller coaster ride of obstacles and miracles. I'm no scholar—or as my friends like to say, I "ain't the sharpest knife in the drawer." So, when I address an audience during a speaking engagement, I speak only from my own failures, accomplishments, and experiences. But I also speak from my heart.

If you're ready to begin your unthinkable journey, I want

to encourage you to contemplate the five key steps that I took to cross my finish line and change the world.

1. HAVE A DREAM

Nothing can happen until you have something big in your heart that drives you. Your dream is yours alone, and it doesn't matter whether or not the dream seems unattainable right now. In fact, searching for your dream may be a process you need to go through before it is fully revealed. Whatever the path, you must be willing to try, and you will know you're on the right course when that dream becomes bigger than yourself. It will become your passion. Just spend some time thinking about what you'd really love to achieve, and pray for God to begin the process of discovery for you by opening new doors.

2. BUILD A GOOD SUPPORT TEAM

Big dreamers take big risks, and going it alone means almost certain failure. Your support team doesn't have to include your family, and it may not even include your friends. Find people who can help you on your journey, and then ask them to join you. You'd be surprised how often people will step up to help someone achieve a dream. Don't be afraid to approach the people you admire and ask them for advice or help along the way. If they don't know you need help, they can't help you. In my case, finding my support team actually became part of the journey. When you're doing the unthinkable, those in your camp actually share in the ultimate journey with you.

3. CHOOSE FAITH OVER FEAR

In every situation, you can choose to make decisions out of either faith or fear. We all play self-defeating mind games that define our thinking and perceptions of ourselves and others. When I started my Ironman journey, I had no money and no

experience. I was overweight, too old, and going through difficult relationship issues. What it all boils down to is that poor self-image and personal negativity are really just expressions of our own fears. Fear is the leading cause of the death of our dreams. The only antidote I know is to choose faith. Faith will lead you to face your fears and point you straight to the core of how to withstand the doubt and uncertainty. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Faith is taking the first step, even when you can't see the whole staircase."

4. EXPECT AND OVERCOME OBSTACLES

Anything worth doing will present some challenges; otherwise you'd have done it already! However, no matter how much faith you exhibit, the "day of trouble" will come. According to Jeremiah 16:19, that is precisely when God becomes our *strength*, our *fortress*, and our *refuge*. Expect that you're going to face some difficulties along the way, plan for how you are going to address them mentally and physically, and commit to reaching for your goal in spite of them. There will be days when you won't feel like putting in the effort, or the conditions may be such that you want to give up. Those are the days when you must push past the fear or pain, for it is the strength you have gained during those days of difficulty that you will rely on when the unanticipated obstacles appear. Training breeds perseverance and instills confidence that you will be able to move past the obstacles, no matter what.

5. CROSS YOUR FINISH LINE

Somewhere along your journey, you envisioned what the experience was going to be like when you approached your finish line. Your dream may have taken months, years, or decades to achieve, but the finish line is always there for you to cross. If your mission is truly "unthinkable," then your finish line will be characterized by the following truths:

- *Your “unthinkable” finish line was originally inconceivable and unimaginable.*
- *The line that you must cross cannot be moved closer in or lowered to make it easier.*
- *Pursuit of your goal will scare you out of your comfort zone.*
- *Your goal will cause you to doubt yourself, and others will tell you that your goal is crazy.*
- *The mountain you must climb will be taller than anything you have ever done.*
- *You will experience many setbacks and failures on your way to success.*

Your finish line is where you’ve placed it, and once you get there, you may find that it was the experience of getting there that has made you stronger and more capable of taking on additional finish lines.

You might even find—as I did—that your dream becomes a *mission*, and your mission changes the world.

I wish you all the best in living your own “unthinkable” dreams.

Resources Mentioned in This Book

- All3Sports** (www.all3sports.com)
- American Society for Plastic Surgeons** (www.plasticsurgery.org)
- Athletic Training Services** (www.athletictrainingservices.com)
- Atlanta Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Center**
(www.atlantasportsmedicine.com)
- Body Vision Studio** (www.bodyvisionstudio.com)
- Carole Sharpless** (www.carole-sharpless.com)
- 55nine Performance** (www.55nineperformance.com)
- Freedom Innovations** (www.freedom-innovations.com)
- Georgia Sports Chiropractic** (www.georgiasportschiropractic.com)
- Georgia Sports Massage** (www.georgiasportsmassage.com)
- Hope for the Warriors** (www.hopeforthewarriors.org)
- Ironman** (www.ironman.com)
- King & Spalding** (www.kslaw.com)
- Paces Plastic Surgery** (www.pacesplasticsurgery.com)
- ProCare-Prosthetic Care, Inc.** (www.procareprosthetics.com)
- Puako Bed and Breakfast** (<http://bigisland-bedbreakfast.com/hosts.php>)
- Rick Gunther/Coldwell Banker Real Estate** (www.rggunther.com)
- The Scott Rigsby Foundation** (www.scottrigsbyfoundation.org)
- Robideaux Motors** (www.robideauxmotors.com)
- Skyline Northwest** (www.skylinenw.com)
- SRM** (www.srm.de/index.php?lang=us)
- SwimAtlanta** (www.swimatlanta.com)
- Tri4Health.com** (<http://tri4health.com>)
- Vertical Earth** (www.verticalearth.com)
- YourDay E.T.C.** (www.yourdayetc.com)
- Zoot Sports** (www.zootsports.com)

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acknowledge what is truly important in life: the grace to hold our heads high while smiling in victory and in defeat, the strength to give our all in every event, and the unselfish service of others.

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Unthinkable

I am so blessed to have worked with you, but I am even more blessed to have made a friend in you for life.

To my sisters and brother—Elizabeth, Ann, Susie, Emily, and Jim. I love you, and I'm sorry for all the heartache I caused you over the years. I am grateful and thankful for your love and support and for not giving up on me.

To my brother Tim. The doctors said you wouldn't live past infancy, and now here you are in your forties. One of the greatest moments of my life was when I was able to put my Ironman medal around your neck. One day, when you get to heaven, you will be able to hear; you will be able to speak; you will be able to walk; and greatest of all, you will be able to run, if you want to. You are the reason I finished those *excruciatingly* painful last three miles of the Hawaiian Ironman. I love you, and you are my inspiration.

To Mom. Thank you for the nine months you carried me; for the nights that you sat up with me, whether it was caring for me when I was sick, watching a pet who was dying, nursing the pain of my broken heart, or wiping away the tears from my cheeks as I faced the fear and uncertainty of an unknown future without legs; for doctoring me; for teaching me the Bible; and for kneeling by your bed and praying for me every night. I am so sorry for all the time, tears, and pain I cost you through the years. For the nights filled with worry, I apologize. I am grateful for your godly advice and the sound wisdom you have shared with me. Always know that I will remember what you prayed most for me: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6, KJV). I am doing my best to honor the ways you taught me. I love you.

To Dad. Though we have never seemed to see eye to eye on things, if it weren't for the tenacity you passed on to me, I would not have finished this race, inspired millions, and fulfilled God's plan for my life. I am grateful for your provision—that I've always had plenty to eat, clothes to wear, a car to drive, and a roof over my head. I love you because you're my dad, and I don't regret that God gave you to me. You are a blessing!

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About the Author

Scott Rigsby is a professional speaker and certified counselor who encourages people to “Do the Unthinkable.” He has completed more than twenty triathlons, and in 2007, he became the first double amputee to complete the Ford Ironman Triathlon World Championship using prosthetics to swim, bike, and run the 140.6-mile course. He is the founder of the Scott Rigsby Foundation, a Georgia-based nonprofit organization that exists to inspire and enable physically challenged individuals and athletes. In 2008, he was named World Vision’s Advocate for Children with Disabilities. Scott lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

Jenna Glatzer is the author of seventeen books, including *Celine Dion: For Keeps*; *Bullyproof Your Child for Life*, with Joel Haber; and *The Marilyn Monroe Treasures*. She has written hundreds of articles for magazines such as *Woman’s World*, *Prevention*, *Women’s Health & Fitness*, *Contemporary Bride*, and *Physical*. She is also a contributing editor for *Writer’s Digest*.

Notes

1. <http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org/life/quotes.htm>.
2. When asked about his decision to roll across the finish line at the Hawaiian Ironman in 2005, Jon Blais said, "During a radio show with Mike Reilly, I said that if I got close enough to the finish line, they could just log-roll me across. I was able to do my own log roll across the line." At subsequent races, representatives of the Blazeman Warriors have honored Jon's memory by log-rolling across the finish line. See <http://ironman.com/columns/ironmanlife/ironmanlife.com-32>.
3. "From the Inside Out," by Joel Houston (HillsongUnited, 2006).