**Prologue**

On a Key Largo beach in November’s chill, a tall, lanky man strips to his shorts and walks into the turbid waters of the Atlantic Ocean. It is a celebratory plunge at the finish of a journey that saved his life, and baptism for a future free of his demons. Body and soul cleansed, the man retreats to the beach, leaving saltwater footprints on the sand, turning back to look far to the east, across swells undulating in an endless rotation of ups and downs. The sea’s changing identity mirrors what he has endured in his own life, but he sees in the waves that there is always an up, a time to be above, with a clear view of what lies ahead. And in the orange glow of a Florida sunset, he whispers a prayer of thanks.

One hundred days earlier, Steve Knowlton sleeps in fits and starts in a hard plastic chair in the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. It is July 29th, 2010, and tomorrow he will run from here to the other side of the country, covering 30, 40, even 50 miles every day. He will rest when necessary, in whatever shelter will have him, be it the boughs of a tree, tent in a roadside ditch, or more civilized hostel or hotel. He will transport a modest collection of gear, pushing it along in front of him in a three-wheeled jogging stroller. His 3,717-mile route is set on paper, but there will be diversions, roadblocks to his goal, crises to overcome. There will be mountains, extreme heat, wind, rain, and cold. He will meet dozens of people from as many cultures in communities from high alpine to backwater bayou. He runs with Crohn’s disease, attacking him since high school, and alcoholism, fighting with him since college. He runs to beat those adversaries, runs for forgiveness, runs for rebirth.

What drives a person to attempt a feat like this? At what point in your life do you wake up one day and decide this is the day to take on a challenge rife with the unknown, but bright with promise of triumph? Sports annals, books, online pages, local legends; they’re all filled with exploits of superhuman accomplishments by highly trained athletes, and other unlikely victories by regular Joes. But somewhere along the line they all had that inspiration, a calling in some form that they answered in what for many was the biggest event of their lives. A circled date on a calendar might have been their siren song. A specific goal and the culmination of months or years of focused training and preparation. Recovery from a debilitating illness perhaps inspired a runner, climber, cyclist, paddler, adventurer, to go do something great in celebration of new life. A friend or family member tragically lost to accident or disease can be the impetus to honor the fallen by, ironically, risking life and limb on a quest dedicated to them and to raise awareness for a cure. For some, it is simply one of those moments of bold declaration: I’m going to do this, and I’m not stopping until I get there.

For Steve Knowlton, inspiration came when he got booted off his elementary school bus.

*“Nice backpack, Steven,” Andrew says, stretching the vowels of my name lest anyone within earshot confuse his taunt with a compliment. He had oozed up the aisle like a lava flow, from the back of the school bus where the self-anointed cool kids and scattered ruffians gathered, and sat on the edge of the seat across the aisle from me. I pretend not to hear him and stare out the window, concentrating on triangular shadows of spruce trees and the morning sun reflecting from last night’s rainwater puddles in the street gutter. We are both sixth-graders, but Andrew is bigger, taller and more popular than me, an arsenal with which every schoolyard bully wields upon the meek. The lucky of those of timid stock glide through middle school years as unnoticed as a new potted plant on the teacher’s desk, or the custodian wearing blue suspenders instead of the red ones. Unluckily for me today, sitting quietly alone, shoulders hunched in shyness and defense, I was noticed and targeted for a little harassment. I generally ignore sticks and stones-type insults, but lately they had been regularly fired, pestering my pride and ego, and my blood boiled.*

*At a young age, my father always taught my brother and me to stand up for ourselves. In school, we are taught a completely different thing— discount the bullies and report them to a teacher. Everyone knew that you would be labeled a tattletale the moment you opened your mouth to an authority figure, and that would not do, so I instinctively resorted to the offensive.*

*“What’s your problem, Andrew?” I shot back at him. The bus was slowing to a stop to drop a group of kids. “You are,” Andrew said, standing up and clearly ready to take this a step further. In a split-second decision to take Dad’s advice, I rose up to face off with the enemy.*

*“Well, why don’t you do something about it?” I say, antagonizing him with a smirk. He pauses, not expecting any sort of defiance. Before he reacts, I push him. He pushes back and we start wrestling on the seat, spilling onto the floor in a tangle of skinny, flailing arms and legs. Other kids start chanting, “Fight! Fight! Fight!” The bus driver, Big Bill we called him for his round, bearded face and ample belly, pulls the emergency brake into place and rumbles toward us; other kids scatter off, knowing the action is at an end. He breaks us up and glares my way.*

*“You!” he bellows. “You’re going to the principal. I am taking you back to school and he can deal with you.” Big Bill stalks to his perch and I wonder why me what about the other kid? It just wasn’t fair. Kids were still filtering off the bus and before Bill can close the doors, I sprint off the bus, a diatribe of heated declaration in my wake. “You’re banned from ever riding this bus again, kid!” he screams.*

*I catch up to some of the neighborhood kids, and they are all talking about the fight and my escape from Bill. “So, if you’re banned from riding the bus, what are you going to do?” one of the girls asks. I thought about that for a second, realizing if I tell my parents what happened, the reckoning to follow will be a far sight more frightening than anything Big Bill could wield. My only answer is to walk all the way to school. The next morning I follow the customary routine, trying to act like it’s just another day, but a foreboding hovers over my bowl of Cheerios. My mother has a sense for things, especially a kid about to pull a fast one, but she remains quiet, says goodbye and I head down the street.*

Steve’s plan goes into action at the bus stop, where instead of waiting on the corner with the other kids, he remains concealed in shrubbery until his friends board and depart, then runs the three miles to school and back again at the end of the day. The ruse continues for two weeks, and word spreads about the running kid, his arrival to school with sweat-soaked clothes and wind-tangled hair amplifying further suspicion. Pity is eventually bestowed by teachers, parents, even Big Bill, and he is welcomed back on the bus. The daily exercise paid off, though, as he would make the school run many more times when he missed the bus altogether and his mother held firm on withholding a ride, like a gym teacher ordering laps around the field for goofing off in practice. But somewhere within all that drama, a seed was planted.

The kid could run.

**Washington**    
   
July 29, 2010

The jetway’s square metal corridor disgorged 150 weary passengers into the Sea-Tac Airport’s 1:00 a.m. stillness. I shuffled out halfway through the procession in a zombie walk of fatigue and questionable intentions. The subway’s first run of the day doesn’t glide away from the airport until just before sunrise, and I need one to get out to Waterfront Park, the launch pad for this little cross-country jog. Four hours to kill, and I drag my gear around and settle in to the comfiest-looking solid plastic chair I can find and try to sleep. A droopy-eyed night-shift worker drives slowly back and forth on one of those mobile floor- scrubbing machines, making a distracting racket. Even so, I can’t help but admire the bright luster he leaves in his wake. Overwhelmed with what I have committed to, cold, hungry, and tired, I grumble at the machine’s noise but soon fall asleep to its one-note lullaby.

Jolted awake by a spasm cramp in my left leg at 4:30 a.m., I shoulder my pack and plod to the subway station for the first ticket to downtown Seattle, and the gleaming blue and white bullet floats past the city’s early morning slumber to my selected stop at Waterfront. This is it, the place it all starts. I stand there for long minutes, looking for confirmation, and I would be content with any kind of sign that I am not in over my shoelaces, but all I hear is my stomach rumbling for attention. A Starbucks provides fuel and a temporary base to mull over the next 24 hours. Full of coffee and a bagel sandwich, I check in to a nearby hostel, stow my gear, and wander about the area’s sights and attractions to calm my nerves a bit. What the hell was I getting myself into?

Spaghetti was the antidote. The hostel served it up that night and 50 people from all over the world loaded plates and sucked in noodles and bantered back and forth in different languages. Seven of the group are my roommates and back at the room I commandeer a top bunk, followed up with some calls to the press, and mulled, dissecting my thoughts and my checklist, but there was no way to plan for what is ahead. One thing I do know is in the morning I will set off running with a 60-pound pack of gear, headed east for the other coast. That thought breeds others of its ilk and almost on cue, my bladder joins in, forcing me out of bed in the middle of the night. I do a little jump at what I thought was the bottom of the bunk ladder and slam my shin into the rung, hatching a golf ball-size lump on one of the appendages I need most. Sleep was fleeting beforehand, and now simply out of the question. I lay awake the last few hours of the night with an ice pack on a lumpy leg, tense, scared, excited. Ready.

**Seattle—Day One**

I chew on an Egg McMuffin and look east, trying to see across the 3,000 miles ahead of me. Time to run. A slug of coffee washes down the sandwich and I thread my way through Seattle’s morning din beneath a gunmetal gray sky when the phone chirps with a call from a local radio station, requesting a live interview. Of course I will and strut the rest of the way to Waterfront Park like a real celebrity, on the air while on the move. Three television news stations camped at the park, looking for the runner, and I gladly talk to them all, fueled with excitement and now itching to get started. I wondered if this is how John Wallace felt on his first day. Wallace was one of the first to complete a cross-country, solo run and he is here at the start with encouragement for a safe and speedy trip.

I finally start running, stretching the meaning of that word like an overworked rubber band. I have 43 miles to run today, and the heavy pack makes it more of a shuffling gait, a cross between a fast walk and stumbling, army patrol jog. The NBC news station easily keeps pace, following me for three miles through the city on a mobile feed, which turns fortuitous when I get lost. The newscaster kindly conceals his amusement and points the way to a bike path that allegedly leads where I need it to, across to an island and toward the mainland. I chuckle at the scene, asking directions from the guy doing the interview. Hey buddy, which way to Key Largo? The interview ends and the van drives off, and two miles later I almost call them back to ask directions a second time. I keep meeting signless, Y intersections on the path and am lost again, running an extra six miles just to get out of Seattle. Almost tripping over my own feet with frustration, I eventually reach the mainland and get a first glimpse of the toothy Cascade Mountains in the distance, a high altitude reminder of a large helping of considerable effort on my itinerary. The mountains couldn’t be any worse than this bike path labyrinth, which gradually veers me deeper into the woods where the paved trail fizzles into dirt and melds with its earthen surroundings.

Still unsure of my location, I consult the one and detail-weak map I have of the area, but can hear traffic on Highway 90 so I simply follow the drone through the woods to the highway, which is cordoned off with the silver metal weave of a menacing chain link fence, ten feet high and stretched as far as I can see in either direction. Only day one and filled with roadblocks and mental battles threatening to derail my fortitude. But I didn’t come this far to be thwarted by a fence, so I claw my way up with 60 pounds of gear and gravity both fighting to pull me back down, wedging one rubber-soled foot at a time into diamond-shaped openings not sized for feet like mine. Over the top and mostly falling to the ground on the other side, I triumphantly stride through a grassy ditch to meet another fence closer to the road, this one just a six-footer, easy pickins’ given the state of my mood and ability to scale would-be barriers.

Standing on Interstate 90’s cracked, eastbound shoulder, I feel oddly relieved to be close to civilization after my unintended walkabout through the forest, and take a few long minutes to assess the six lanes of high-speed obstacles now impeding progress. If I wanted to play by the rules and run against traffic, I had to be over there on the westbound side, so I do my best Carl Lewis sprint to the opposite shoulder, bound through the steep easement ditch, and since running on Washington interstates is against state law, I run instead in the grass bordering the highway, still 20 miles out from North Bend and already mentally and physically exhausted. Twelve miles later, a Subway restaurant appears like a mirage in the desert, and I charge in to devour a footlong and a quart of water. Rejuvenated, I fairly cruise the final eight miles to the North Bend exit, and another four to reach downtown and a place to sleep—a shabby, dive motel that looks like the Ritz to me. After another big meal and hot shower to close this first arduous day, I sit for a long while on the edge of the lumpy bed, my mind dancing with a mix of excitement, fatigue, and perhaps a little nervous fear at just how far away Key Largo is from this motel room.

Addiction

*The operation’s residue barely scrubbed from doctors’ hands, a directive to muffle the post-surgery pain turned out to be the incubus for a new and more volatile battle. I was ordered to take Demerol for a week after surgery, and slowly wean as the pain subsided. The highly addictive narcotic did its job taking me away from the hurt, and simultaneously introduced a sensation new to my world, one I rapidly embraced. I was instantly hooked on the drug’s euphoria and welcomed its animated effects on my personality. I morphed from a shy and quiet wallflower to a chatty, outgoing, full of life guy. I didn’t know I had an addictive personality until I was introduced to painkillers—my pharmaceutical saviors to help me deal with the anguish of the surgery. With each pill, I yearned for a better high without realizing I was chipping away bits of my soul. I started to lose focus of the concrete things around me and began concentrating on a surreal, trancelike life, trapped in my own bubble of addiction. I was served prescription drugs every three hours, and soon lost sight of tangible memories, looking ahead only to the next delivery of my fix.*

*One afternoon, my grandparents came to visit. By this point, my attention was only on the nurse. Where is she? Where is she with the pills? Throughout most of my grandparents’ visit, I was so drugged up I didn’t care what I ate, who was with me or even if my hospital gown fell down and showed the world every inch of my sick body. I had not a care in the world except watching the clock.*

*Of course, once I left the hospital that bubble was popped, leaving me empty and bare. Two weeks after returning home from the hospital, reluctantly weaned from the Demerol therapy, I wound up at a high school classmate’s party, tables heavy with various alcoholic temptations that piqued my curiosity. Prior to this I was snow white, never once drinking alcohol or experimenting with drugs of any kind. My experience with Demerol numbed my mental pain as well as physical, and now without it, I was searching for an outlet to fulfill the complacent high delivered from a prescription bottle.*

*It is fascinating, looking back to times like these, how you never seem to realize the effect a single moment will have on your life. I of course never had the slightest hint that in that precise instant of decision to take my first-ever taste of beer; I was balancing on a precarious tightrope, about to plunge into a sea of fogginess, blunders, and regrets. I tested those unfamiliar, alcohol-tinged waters and to my delight found myself on a similar tide as the Demerol, but this euphoria came with fringe benefits. Alcohol made it easy to talk to women; they laughed at my jokes and everyone got a big kick out of me. It felt like the hole in my life, and my soul, created by Crohn’s was replaced with the euphoric effects of alcohol. I was off to the races with my new best friend. We went everywhere together, and I became so enamored I couldn’t attend an event, or have as much fun out there, without my partner in crime. Intoxication coursed through my body, and in my clouded mind boosted my confidence, veiled as it was by drink’s temporary friendship, building an alter-ego of my formerly shy self and helping me forget my imperfections, allowing me to be the person I (thought) I wanted to be.*

*Mountain Home*

Like those old cartoons, when the aroma of something really good visibly drifts into the room and under the noses of the guests, I wake to the irresistible smell of a home-cooked meal and make tracks downstairs to the sight of the biggest breakfast spread I’ve ever seen—pork chops, eggs, sausage, toast, fresh fruit with yogurt, coffee and juice. As much as I could eat. Heavenly. I linger for a long while, reluctant to leave such a welcoming place, but we all say our goodbyes and I make my way out to the interstate to start this 27-mile day.

Today is my birthday, and I am in good spirits. I couldn’t know it, but that mood would be tested along the road ahead, starting with the first ten miles, uphill into a consistent headwind. A cyclist passes me, also struggling with the wind, and we exchange a few words of encouragement, as he, too, is laden with gear for a long ride. Before the rider is even out of sight, nature suddenly calls and I realize right quick that I am on a desolate stretch of highway, in the desert with only intermittent, and short, shrubbery to offer concealment. I keep running, with an altogether different style, looking at every possible shred of cover, and am right at that point of just kneeling behind the stroller right there on the shoulder when I spot a respectable copse of scrub that provides sufficient camouflage, and even a little shade. I take my time heeding the call.

From here, the road seems to roller coaster nonstop through the mountains, but I am rewarded with a stop-in-your-tracks view at mile 20, where the highway skirts the southwest edge of the Sawtooth National Forest. I oblige and stop in my tracks at this particular high point for calendar shot-worthy panoramas of verdant valleys flanked by hedges of round-topped mountains, silver ribbons of rivers, and flat-topped mesas beyond. As I ogle the scenery, an editor from *Mpls.–St. Paul* magazine calls to verify some information for a story on the run for the next issue. It is nice to see some more positive press from my home state, and that boost of goodness carries through when five miles later a Glenn Ferry police officer stops me and says they have received calls about a man pushing a child in a stroller on the interstate. I gladly show him my gear and he realizes I am not hiding any children in there, and wishes me well. With some luck, he will alert his dispatch to hold off any more of the posse.