

TAKING
My Life
BACK

My Story of Faith, Determination, and
Surviving the **Boston Marathon Bombing**

REBEKAH
GREGORY

WITH ANTHONY FLACCO



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For Chris, Noah, and Ryleigh

You three are the reason I get out of bed
and put my leg on every morning.

Contents

Introduction 9

Part One Bombs and Hospitals

1. Grim Reapers and Their Cooking Pots 15
2. Arms of Love and the Terrorist Down the Hall 25
3. Piece by Piece 35
4. Prayer without Words 51

Part Two Finding My Way

5. The Visitation Blues 69
6. All Hat, No Cattle 81
7. Dangle Time 87

Part Three Hiding from Shadows

8. Pushing the River 97
9. The Mom Machine 101
10. Silent Explosion 113

Part Four The Whirlwind

- 11. The Many-Headed Media 121
- 12. Losing Weight on the Wax Fruit Diet 129
- 13. It's Not You, It's Me 139

Part Five Running toward a New Normal

- 14. Looking for the Helpers 151
- 15. Serious Improvements to the New Normal 157
- 16. The Terrorists' Leftovers 179

Part Six Where We Landed

- 17. When You Try to Stop Smiling and You Can't 197
 - 18. Ryleigh Michelle and Noah Michael 211
- Conclusion: Happy Continuations 223
- Acknowledgments 227

Introduction

On April 15, 2013, the world came to know me as “Rebekah Gregory—Boston Marathon bombing victim.”

I’d gone to Boston to cheer on a runner participating in the marathon. What should have been a day of celebration turned into the second largest terrorist attack on United States soil and the first time the American public heard of using pressure cookers to concentrate bomb blasts.

I almost died that day.

My son was sitting at my feet when the bomb went off behind me. My legs saved his life, and eventually I would lose my left leg despite valiant efforts to save it.

While my physical recovery is a credit to the excellent doctors and nurses who provided weeks and months of wonderful medical care, I believe with all my heart that I survived this traumatic experience to help others.

I have had many opportunities to tell my story of what happened that day, and people often share with me their own personal struggles with pain and loss. I’m always struck

by how often we can relate to each other even though our circumstances vary.



Do I wish things were different? Every day. There is nothing I wouldn't give to have one more afternoon with my precious son before terrorism became part of our lives. But that is not possible. Instead, what is possible is to cherish the life God has blessed me with, because I have seen what it is like to almost lose it for good.

That is one of my main reasons for writing this book. It is less about my personal struggles and more about what each one has taught me: life is short. This is not just a cliché. It was not until a bomb shattered my world that I realized I had been doing everything wrong.

These chapters were painful to write. Even my closest friends don't know some of the details. So, if you expect to read about a perfect Christian life with a pretty little bow on it, you have picked up the wrong memoir. What you will read about is someone who tries to live the Christian life, who tries to walk with God, and who has not always succeeded in getting things right.

Life is messy and complicated. Things happen every day that can cause us to lose sight of our joy. Yet we were never promised a life without hardship. I have learned that first-hand. And I can tell you that every obstacle I have experienced and decision I have made have helped me become a stronger person.

Who knows—if my story would've started the day of the bombing, my feelings might not be the same. But it didn't. And looking back now, at every obstacle I have encountered

Introduction

prior to April 15, 2013, I wonder if I was being prepared to tackle the biggest one of all just a little bit better.

While we cannot predict what will happen to us or if a bomb will go off at a marathon we are attending, I believe we can take comfort that God is in control.

In the media, I'm often referred to as a victim of the Boston Marathon bombing. I am not a victim. I refuse to see myself as a victim.

I am a survivor.

This is the story of how I took my life back.

Part One



BOMBS *and*
HOSPITALS

-1-

Grim Reapers and Their Cooking Pots

On April 15, 2013, the crowds who swamped the finish line for the Boston Marathon repeated a tradition that had taken place for the past 116 years. We took pride in attending the world's oldest annual marathon, a public celebration of exertion and stamina.

The weather was clear and perfect, but several hours had passed since the race began. Boredom and anxiety mixed for the spectators while people bunched near the finish to see their friends and relatives cross the line.

We were three hours and forty-eight minutes into the race, and the top runners had long since finished. The best of them had been done long enough to get back to their hotels or homes and be soaking in the Jacuzzi.

Nevertheless, the finish line area along Boylston Street was packed, and there were over five thousand runners still out

on the course. Spectators who remained at the finish were there because they knew at least one of the runners yet to come in and appreciated how hard they were working to make the distance.

It was my birthday weekend and my first time in Boston. I was there with my five-year-old son, Noah, and a guy I had been casually dating. His mother was running in the race and was due at the finish line any minute. The presence of so many inspired runners filled the air with a contagious feeling of hope. The celebrations at the finish created a sense of community that we all seemed to feel.

But not everyone felt that way.

It was 2:49 in the afternoon. Noah had started out the day enthused to be at the race, but at his age he soon grew tired of waiting for the runners to finish streaming by. So I set him down on the sidewalk at my feet, with his back resting against my shins.

We were both in that position when the first bomb went off.

The blast wave hit like a freight train and I felt as if the street itself had exploded.

All of a sudden I found myself thrown back, sprawled on the ground, like something out of a movie. *What? What just happened?* Somehow I wasn't knocked out, but the power of the blast flattened me so hard and fast that it had me in a world of its own. A deafening clang reverberated in my head.

Smoke filled the air. I tried to move, but my limbs felt paralyzed.

The Boylston Street sidewalk was now a canvas for the widespread scattering of blood and bones.

Breezes stirred the smoke into isolated wisps. I managed to slightly lift my head, enough to see my body covered in

blood. Bits of flesh, including pieces of my own leg bones, were plastered all around me. I raised my gaze a little higher and saw other victims. There was no telling how many.

Wide streaks of crimson showed in every direction. Pieces of metal were scattered everywhere. Random body parts were strewn among the bodies themselves.

The entire finish line was no longer recognizable. We were in a war zone. But as horrific as that scene was, my true nightmare came a few moments later when my mind cleared enough to remember that Noah had been sitting on my feet with his back against my legs.

Now my legs were shredded and I couldn't see my son anywhere.



I tried to scream for someone to find him, but I could barely hear myself or anything else over the gong reverberating in my head. Then a few moments after the first explosion (I didn't know until later that the interval was twelve seconds), the second bomb went off. It didn't seem to be that far from us, and it nailed down the certainty that this was some sort of deliberate attack. Now the pandemonium was thick. Panicked bystanders and baffled officials struggled to respond.

From the corners of my limited field of vision I saw the yellow jackets of race officials swarming the scene, joined by a few of the spectators. Some of those who had escaped injury were attempting to provide first aid or perhaps comfort the dying.

I felt as if I were being torn apart by a predator. It was more than my mind could process. I mustered any physical strength that was left in me and tried to scream again for

my son, for Noah, but everyone within earshot was either injured, stunned, or preoccupied with first aid and essential medical help.

At that point my initial shock subsided enough for the pain to come roaring in. It was paralyzing, unlike anything I've known. The pain also made it clear that this thing might have already killed me. My instincts seemed convinced that I would be pulled down the same road as the nearby silent victims unless I fought back. I struggled to comprehend.

Where's Noah? We're hurt. Where's Noah? An explosion. He was sitting against my legs. Where's Noah?

I was helpless. Smoke kept getting in my eyes, making it hard to see.

An instinctive force compelled me to find Noah and start taking care of things, but at the same time I realized this was a futile impulse. My muscles and bones couldn't obey. Trying harder didn't help. All of a sudden my entire body was the wrong tool for the job.

At that point, that very instant, I felt the way I had when I was a little girl. It was like running into a bully you haven't seen in years. My memory flashed fear and outrage from a time when I had no power to change my circumstances and could escape only by retreating into a fantasy world.

But on this day, in the aftermath of the explosion, my lifelong skill at distancing myself from turmoil was useless. The reason was Noah. My love for him nailed me to the present moment and to the loathsome power of the facts that my legs were destroyed and my little boy had vanished from my sight.

The smell of the explosives lingered, and the sounds of panic filled the air—the screams of injured blast victims and

the screams of their loved ones. Over the ringing in my head, those screams were tiny and faint.

None of us who were conscious knew anything about terrorism yet, only that something had exploded behind us. Inside the carnage, its cause didn't matter.

The thought of Noah also being a victim of this thing hurt like taking a spear to the chest. Instinct kept telling me I was in danger of bleeding out, but I didn't want to know anything else except what had happened to him. The prospect of leaving this world before I could do anything to help him was unbearable. I'm certain every parent feels something similar for their child in dire circumstances. I had to know what had happened to him. No matter what the truth was, I had to know.

My eardrums felt as if they had been blown out by the blast (and it turned out they had). The gong still reverberated deep in my skull and threw up a din that drowned out nearly everything else. The throbbing pain was matched by the burning stabs from the shrapnel punctures all over my body. Shrapnel also covered everything else around me, as if a cloud of metallic insects had died in flight and fallen straight to the ground.

By the time I noticed my clothing was also smoldering, one of the first responders had already run over and began pulling the burning clothes away from me. All I remember is that he was male.

He put his forehead next to mine and shouted loudly enough for me to hear him, assuring me I would be taken care of. I couldn't make coherent responses, but I understood he was there to give me a chance at life.

He was doing this even though the second explosion had made it plain nobody was safe. For all he knew, a third bomb

and a fourth bomb were about to go off, taking him out along with me.

He should have run for his life. Instead, he became my visiting angel.

I remember lying back and looking up at the sky. I said a silent prayer: *God, if this is it for me, take me, but let me know my son is okay.*

I want to warn skeptical readers in advance that I can't explain what happened next. But while I lay there, barely able to see, barely able to hear, I got the distinct impression of Noah's voice hollering, "Mommy! Mommy!" from somewhere close behind me. I couldn't see him and I shouldn't have been able to hear him. The ringing in my head covered all but the loudest sounds.

But his voice was clear to me. (In video of the event, he can be heard calling out to me.) The explosion had left me on the street at an angle, and I was able to twist my head to see him on the ground a few yards behind me. I couldn't tell how injured he was. Since my legs were useless, my first reaction was to stretch out my arms to pull him toward me, even though he was too far away for that to be possible. The feeling of fire blazing in my left arm caused me to glance at it while I attempted to reach out. For the first time, I saw that my left hand was shattered, with bones sticking in all directions. The skin had peeled back all the way to my wrist.

Noah was right there, but I was unable to pull him to me and embrace him. Now, as much as the physical pain, it was frustration that fueled my agony.

My friend's aunt was nearby, unhurt. She and some first responders picked Noah up and began to tend to him. Videos of the scene show him in the arms of a police officer, although I missed seeing that happen. Amazingly, he hadn't been badly injured. There was very little blood, and he wasn't burned. His leg was bleeding, but it appeared he wasn't damaged anywhere near the extent that I was.

And at that point Noah's safety was all that mattered. It made no sense to me that he was so free from injury, but gratitude filled my heart anyway. I call it a Jesus moment, because even though my body was on fire, my terror for my child eased. *Noah was alive.*

Out there on that street, I felt my priorities shift the instant Noah's survival was confirmed; I could let my own condition become important. Surviving became my goal. My first question was the same as it would be for any other single mother: *Who will take care of my child if I'm not here?*

Unless I could somehow rally, my son would have been spared from the explosion only to watch me die on that pavement. My gratitude for his survival was muted by my wondering what it would do to him if I succumbed out there. My sense of helplessness became a force as great as my physical pain.

Time broke into pieces after that, like a sketch artist flipping through a stack of progressive drawings. I lay there for what felt like forever. The whole time my body burned with pain that was amplified by my panic. They blended together and became a fearsome thing.

An emergency medical technician leaped from an ambulance that was suddenly close by. I could faintly hear him shouting right next to me, "We need to get her off the street

or she'll die here!" I was only vaguely aware that he was referring to me.

I felt myself lifted onto a gurney, and the movement woke up every nerve cell in my body. None of us knew if more carnage was still to come, but professional first responders, as well as brave Good Samaritans, were all around me, moving fast and with determination. They are the reason I am still here to tell you this.

However, even in rescue, my sense of helplessness persisted. I had no choice but to relax into their care. There was far too much to deal with on my own. The pain was too much. The fear of dying before I saw Noah again was far too much. At the rate I was bleeding, I had only a few minutes left.

I felt them load me into the ambulance, locking me down and checking my vitals. I tried to get them to look at my hand. Instead they seemed a lot more concerned with my overall condition. We all knew it was bad.

I glanced up at the guy who had loaded me into the ambulance just in time to see him yell to the driver, "We have an amputee . . ." His voice barely penetrated the ringing in my ears, but I read his lips and was alert enough to understand him. Even if I survived, life as I knew it was over. I didn't take that thought any further, though. I couldn't.

We pulled away in the ambulance and reality started fading in and out. I begged them to put me to sleep, but instead they kept shaking me to keep me awake. In my confusion, their kindness felt cruel.

I remained conscious throughout the ambulance ride. I'm certain it was only an illusion that the driver aimed for every pothole that came along. Nevertheless, by the time we got

to the hospital, the jostling had lifted my pain level to an obscene degree. It was a complete assault on my senses.

The doctors gave me a quick look and immediately called out to prep me for surgery. Just before they began to administer the anesthetic, a lady came in and asked me if there was anyone she could call for me. I tried over and over to get my mother's number out. It was ridiculously hard to pronounce . . . those . . . few . . . digits.

When she finally got it all down, that was it for me. My strength was down to the dregs. At last they pumped me full of medicine, and the anesthesia helped me to melt out from under the pain.



Whether or not my surgeons already knew about this new tactic of using pressure cookers to magnify blast pressure, I later learned they could tell by the pattern of damage across my body that I had been only a few feet away from the sidewalk blast. They did their best to repair me on the operating table and made valiant efforts to save both of my legs and to give me back a left hand that might be functional one day.

The challenges they faced turned out to be too much, despite their depth of skill. They could save my life, but my legs were so ruinously shredded that it was doubtful both could be saved. Even if they could be repaired to some degree, it would require numerous surgeries over time. As for my general injuries, my body was riddled with bits of bomb shrapnel. The nails, nuts, and bolts packed in the bombs that hadn't landed on the street had ended up inside everyone within range. Some of the bits that tore into my flesh could be teased back out through weeks of surgeries, but to this

day I still carry others in places where their retrieval is too risky to justify yet another operation.

I had no sense of time. I had simply felt the doctors and the operating room drift away. I passed through a weird form of nothingness . . . and then opened my eyes again.