



**The Unbreakable Spirit**

of

**The**

**UNBREAKABLE**

**MAN**

written by Maxine Steele

# **The Unbreakable Spirit of the Unbreakable Man**

**A true story of personal survival by**

**Maxine Steele**

## **Dedication from Nicholas Steele**

This book is dedicated to my family and friends. You stood by me through the toughest of times, offering nothing but love and support, never once giving up on me. You showed me the human spirit at its best.

Mother, I could not have gotten through this without you. In addition to all your unconditional love and support, you also took my story in hand and wrote it yourself when I could not, shouldering a huge burden and then pulling off the task with aplomb and talent. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you dearly.

To all the healthcare professionals and firemen who worked with me: you were responsible for saving my life, and I will be forever in your debt.

And finally, to my true inspiration, best friend, and reason for living: my son. You always believed in me and kept a smile on your face no matter what the circumstances. You took care of me, and tried to protect me from harm whenever I needed help. You are the reason I am truly alive and walking today. Because of you, son, I never gave up hope. I love you with all my heart, and I am the proudest father in the world.

## Author's Note

Although this memoir is written in first person, the subject—my son, "Nicholas"—was unable to write it himself due to his lingering physical disabilities. Therefore, I have taken it upon myself to put pen to paper and document his incredible story. Over the past several years, my son has suffered enormous pain, tragedy, and trauma—both mentally and physically—but has survived every obstacle life has thrown at him with enormous courage and determination. Some have even called him a miracle, and questioned whether they themselves would have been able to carry on through so much devastation, betrayal, sadness, and hurt.

I have written the story as if I were him, using his own words and describing his emotions and situations. I have drawn this material from a number of sources. The first was a personal narrative that he recited into his computer using special software, as both therapy to help him get through his situation and as a way to record his experiences for the future, so that his personal history would remain true and clear to him. I referred to these printed notes to reconstruct most of what happened. Some of these events I personally witnessed, as I was his primary caregiver for many months, so I know these parts of the story intimately. The rest I learned from the terrible things he told me during the long, interminable hours of his "Feeds." He often sobbed uncontrollably as he recalled his pain and darkest memories.

The words I have laid down here are mine. I decided to write this book and seek publication, because I wanted to provide a true account of his story as I believe it should be told. But the story is very much my son's, and he has approved the content. I believe that his tale is worth telling not just because it's a touching human interest story that many people will be able to relate to and empathize with, but also because readers will be inspired by his

courage and motivation—which I hope will demonstrate conclusively that anything is possible, as long as you never give up hope.

For reasons of privacy, I've changed the names of everyone mentioned in this memoir—including my son. For similar reasons, I've slightly modified certain circumstances of my son's life. However, every tragic and traumatic event recounted here is absolutely true.

*-- Maxine Steele  
April 2012*

## Introduction

*"Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending." -- Maria Robinson*

It's rarely possible to make sense of life as it happens, but sometimes, when we look back, we can find a purpose and meaning in the most random and cruel events. I can safely say that I've suffered through more of both in the past few years than most people experience in their lifetimes. In fact, if this story were fictional, you might think I was piling on the agony a bit too much; but as so often happens, truth is stranger than fiction. Life has sent me a series of brickbats, but I have refused to lie down and give up; I keep getting back to my feet, even when people have told me it was literally impossible to do so. I have refused to give up hope. I have refused to accept my ending as written, but have changed it, against all odds.

Today, I live by three guiding principles:

- *Anything is possible.*
- *The power of the mind is incredible.*
- *You must never give up hope.*

My story is far from over. I'm still fighting—and I'm about to start a new chapter in my life, forging a new path. I hope that sharing my story will bring new and exciting experiences into my life, and will help other people, inspiring them to rewrite their own endings.

## Chapter 1: Happy Families

*"Accept no one's definition of your life; define yourself." -- Harvey Fierstein*

By the age of thirty-five, I had a great life, a beautiful and loving wife, a healthy and happy one-year-old boy, two adorable dogs, and a very successful career. Sarah and I had met at work, six years previously. I was a Sales Manager and she was the National Training Manager. We didn't hit it off at first, as she thought I was arrogant and cocky, whereas I preferred to think that I was very confident, as I was the top manager in the company. She ran training and development programs for my team, and was extremely well liked and respected throughout the whole company, being not merely confident and outgoing, but also highly competent, excelling in her role.

Sarah was a stunner: tall, slim, and curvaceous, with blonde hair and bright blue eyes. The first time I saw her, I thought, "Wow." As I worked with her and got to know her better, I became mesmerized by her exuberant, outgoing personality, and soon felt myself falling for her.

We eventually got together after spending a few days away with our sales unit, where we worked closely to develop the training program, delivering it together. We spent time talking and finding out more about each other in the evenings, until one night, as a dare, she threw a bottle of red wine over my white shirt, and then proceeded to pour a bottle of white over it to remove the stain. Everyone found this hilarious, and she walked me back to my room so I could change shirts. This was when we exchanged our first kiss, and arranged to meet up a few days later. Our romance blossomed and we fell in love, moving in together a year later and getting married shortly after.

After Alex was born, Sarah decided that she didn't want to return to full time employment, and instead set up her own successful telemarketing company. This gave her the flexibility to work hours that suited her, so that she could devote her time to raising Alex.

We owned a five-bedroom house in a quiet, middle-class area surrounded by countryside, parks, and forests, with the local pub and restaurant only a short walk away; and we could afford all the little luxuries of life. I lived a healthy lifestyle, didn't smoke, and drank very moderately. To keep fit and strong, I trained in the gym five times a week. I'd been training since the age of sixteen, initially to build up my strength for golf, which was my number one hobby until bodybuilding took over. I loved the way bodybuilding made me look and feel, getting a high each time I lifted a heavier weight, giving me a sense of strength and power. I was six feet one inch tall, weighed 215 pounds, and was quite muscular.

My wife and I were totally dedicated to each other and our son. She was my best friend and soulmate. Together, we felt we could beat any obstacle that life threw at us and, when the challenges arose, we did. We were a great team, a solid family unit, and people commented on how much we were in love and how wonderful our life was.

However, beginning in 2003 our perfect happy life would be disrupted by a number of very tough challenges that involved my health, challenges which would test the strength of our relationships and our collective ability to cope with huge mental and physical pressures. In fact, from 2003 onwards, our lives changed forever.



## Chapter 2: Trouble in Paradise

*"Don't be afraid of the space between your dreams and reality. If you can dream it, you can do it."* -- Walt Disney

One morning in August 2003, I woke up to immense pain in my neck, back, left shoulder, hip, and leg. It felt as if my body were trying to break itself, as if my shoulder and hip were pulling out of their sockets and my spine and neck were bending backwards with such great force that they might snap.

I was accustomed to back and neck pain as, at the age of 21, I was involved in a high-speed car collision while I was a serving police officer in London. I was a passenger in a police car on my way to help another officer who needed assistance. My car had its blue lights flashing and its siren sounding—and we were hit head-on by a much larger vehicle driven by a drunk driver. Ever since that day, I'd suffered from severe back and neck pain, and lived on high doses of pain medication. I also visited an osteopath weekly.

I had been medically discharged from the police force, which initially was very disappointing; I had always believed in fairness and justice, and loved upholding the law and taking care of people. The team I worked with on the force was an incredible group of men and women, coming from many different backgrounds and from all over the country. I trusted them all with my life, and couldn't imagine not being with them. But I had to find a new job; and as I'd worked closely with people in my role as a police officer and was a very confident, extrovert person, I began a career in sales.

As for the constant pain, I dealt with it. I accepted that it would be with me for life, but didn't let it hinder me in any way. In fact, it made me a very strong person. I trained harder in

the gym, and worked longer hours than anyone on my sales team to become the number one sales person in my company, because I was determined not to let the pain beat me or to become an excuse for not succeeding in life.

However, the pain that morning was so severe I couldn't move. Every time I tried, I screamed in agony, as I felt that my body was trying to snap itself in half. Sarah helped me take high doses of painkillers, but they didn't seem to work. I even started to struggle to breathe: it felt as though someone were putting a knife into my chest and twisting. We had to call the doctor, who administered morphine. Eventually this helped ease the pain, but afterward, I had difficulty moving my left arm and left leg.

While this level of agony took me by complete surprise, I had noticed over a period of several months that my pain had been getting worse. My joints had been getting tighter in my legs and shoulders, I had a slight stoop, and to look someone in the eye, I had to slightly bend my knees and lean back. I'd put this down to having a bad back after my accident, being heavily built, and getting older.

My doctor recommended that I get an opinion from an orthopedic consultant immediately. Luckily, I had private health coverage and was able to visit the consultant the following day, although I needed two friends to carry me into the consulting room, as I was in immense pain and couldn't walk. After an MRI and CT scan, the doctor discovered that I had late end-stage ankylosing spondylitis (AS), which is a chronic degenerative disease with no cure. It solidifies and bends the bones and can cause many other health issues, including heart and eye problems.

The orthopedic consultant told me, "Mr. Steele, I'm very sorry, but there is nothing that I can do for you. Your condition will only get worse. In your case, your whole spine has been affected, bent, and solidified. It will probably also affect, and seems as if it *is* affecting, your shoulders, hips, and knees. You need to resign yourself to the fact that more than likely, you're going to end up in a wheelchair."

Both my wife and I were stunned. "Surely there's something you can do," I said.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Steele, but the condition is degenerative. I can only help with the pain."

"Well, you're wrong," I told him fiercely. "I'll fight this. I'll beat the pain; there is *no way* I'll spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair. I'll find someone who can help me."

I vowed to Sarah that we would beat this and, for the next two to three weeks, even though I was in immense pain and on huge doses of painkillers, we researched the disease and worked out what we would do next. I visited two more orthopedic surgeons who agreed with the first consultant, telling me there was nothing they could do and that I would end up in a wheelchair. I told them all that they were wrong.

Over the period of the next month, with the help of the pain clinic and my doctor, I started to get the pain under control, and finally my body didn't feel as if it were going to break in half all the time.

Next, I went to a private hospital for an appointment with a rheumatologist. He looked at my MRI and CT scans, along with my blood results and reports from the orthopedic surgeons that I had visited. He agreed with their view that I did indeed have late end-stage ankylosing spondylitis. "I can't fix or cure you," he told me bluntly, "but I know a man who can straighten

you up and give you a better quality of life." By now, my stoop was more pronounced. I couldn't straighten up or turn my head from side to side; and to look at people's faces, I now had to bend my legs as if I were sitting on a chair, and lean back.

The rheumatologist walked into the consulting room next to his, spoke to the surgeon inside, then returned and asked me to go and see him. Nervously, I went in and sat down. The spinal surgeon introduced himself as Mr. David Walsh.<sup>1</sup> The first words he said to me after that were, "You have late end-stage ankylosing spondylitis, for which there is no cure, as I'm sure you've been told. I can see that you have a stoop and must be in great pain. I can't cure you, but I *can* straighten you up, give you a better quality of life, and enable you to live normally—albeit with reduced mobility."

"How?"

"What I suggest is that I break your spine, then install titanium rods and screws to straighten it up and hold it together. This is a high-risk operation for which there are many dangers, which include the chance that I could paralyze you. Worse, because the operation is such a long and complicated procedure, you may not survive. However, that is the worst-case scenario; I have to let you know what can go wrong. On this basis, would you like to make a proper appointment to come and see me, to discuss what we could do next to put some normality back in your life?"

For the first time, I'd met a surgeon who was positive and straight talking. I really believed that he would take care of me, and that my operation would be successful. Mr. Walsh exuded confidence and positivity. I immediately felt a connection with this amazing man. "I

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<sup>1</sup> In the U.K., surgeons prefer to be addressed as "Mister" rather than "Doctor."

want the operation no matter what the risks," I told him. "All you have to do is straighten me up, and leave the rest to me."

Later, during my proper consultation with him, he fully examined me, took new MRI scans, and explained that the operation would consist of two parts. He would first break my lower back, and then insert two metal rods. Once I had recovered from this operation and was strong enough to undergo another one, he would break the top half of my spine and insert two more rods. This would ensure that my spine couldn't bend anymore. He reiterated the dangers, and suggested that I make a video for my son, just in case I didn't survive the operation. He also recommended that I get a second opinion with another spinal surgeon, and explained how long it would take me to recover from the operations and the resulting pain. Again, I said to him, "You just break my spine and straighten me up, and leave the recovery and healing to me. I'll be in the gym within six weeks."

He laughed and said, "No, you'll be in the gym in about three to six months, for gentle rehab and physiotherapy work. Your bodybuilding days are over."

I laughed back at him and replied, "I'll make you a bet that I'll be bodybuilding again within six weeks of each operation."

Making a video for my son was one of the most heartbreaking things I've ever had to do. I tried to explain to him who I was and what I believed in, what I would like him to achieve in his life, and how much I loved him. Just writing about it now still brings tears to my eyes and puts a lump in my throat. How do you tell a loved one that you may never see him again?

Sarah and I made the video together, and it took us at least twenty attempts. We both kept breaking down. We held each other many times, and I kept comforting her, letting her

know that I wouldn't leave her, that all would be fine, and I would continue to be her big, strong husband who would love her and take care of our family forever.

### Chapter 3: My First Operation

*"Life is hard. It always has been and always will be. Accepting this reality somehow makes it easier."* -- Brian Tracy.

In December 2004, after many sleepless nights, the time arrived for me to undergo my first operation. My wife and I packed my hospital bag, which included pictures of my family and friends, a small radio, and good luck cards. I arrived at the hospital full of apprehension. Wonderful, friendly nurses showed me to my room, explaining that Mr. Walsh was an amazing surgeon and that everything would be fine. The room was small but clean and comfortable, with its own wheelchair-friendly shower. I unpacked my things, set up the pictures of my dogs, wife, family, and friends, put out the good luck cards, and sat on the bed with my wife, wondering what would happen next. My palms were sweaty, I was anxious, and Sarah was beside herself with worry. Then the commotion started.

Nurses arrived to take my blood, weight, and height, and asked if I was allergic to anything. When the junior doctors arrived to take a look at me, they explained that the procedure would take between 12 and 15 hours, and arranged for another CT scan and X-ray to be done immediately. Next, the anesthetist arrived. She was a woman full of confidence and authority, who introduced herself and explained what her role would be throughout the operation. "You have nothing to worry about, love," she told me, "as Mr. Walsh thinks that spinal surgery is more exciting than sex, and your spine really turns him on!"

Both Sarah and I burst out laughing, and I said, "I really appreciate that I can turn on a surgeon!"

As I lay on the bed waiting to see what happened next, many thoughts went through my mind. I told myself that if I survived this operation, it was about time that we started living life rather than letting work dictate what we could do. It made me appreciate what I had: a beautiful, loving wife, a fantastic son, my gorgeous dogs, great friends, and a loving family.

When Mr. Walsh finally arrived and asked how I was feeling, I told him, "I'm bloody nervous," and Sarah looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"Mr. Steele, when you recover from this operation, your quality of life will be greatly improved," he assured me, and then pointed out that this operation was going to be exhausting for him, at which point he laughed. Then he left the room, and the anesthetist returned with sedatives to try to calm me.

An hour later, the porters arrived and wheeled me down to the operating theater. Sarah went with me, holding my hand all the way. I was very sleepy at that point, but aware of my surroundings. As I opened my eyes I saw my wife looking at me; she gave me a kiss and said she would see me in a few hours' time. The anesthetist found a vein, slid in a needle, and I felt a warm liquid enter my arm. She started counting...and I was asleep.

The next week was a real blow, as I was in Intensive Care on high doses of morphine with a nurse at the end of my bed the whole time. I only remember slipping in and out of consciousness a few times, and this was mainly when either the nurse tried waking me or my wife, family, or friends turned up to visit. I wasn't able to speak to them, but I knew they were there. Sarah told me that there were tubes going in and out of me in both arms, and that no one was able to get close to me because of the machines around me. My head was extremely swollen, and I was unrecognisable. Even a close friend of mine, a hard-nosed bodybuilder and



security guard who came to visit, had tears in his eyes when he saw me, as I looked so ill, weak, and vulnerable.

The main thing I remember is feeling warm and wanting to sleep, but this caused a problem with my breathing. Apparently I wasn't breathing deeply enough, and the doctors were considering putting me on a respirator to help me breathe. However, I remember Sarah shouting at me, screaming at me, swearing at me, telling me to breathe, breathe deeper, *breathe*—while all I could think was, *Leave me alone. I'm so comfortable...I want to sleep.* But she didn't give up. She kept shouting at me, and so I tried taking deep breaths. Doctors even tried waking me up to get me to breathe into a machine, to blow as hard as I could to strengthen my lungs and make me breathe deeply again. I don't know how many times they woke me up to do this, but I do know that it happened over a period of days, and all through it Sarah stayed by my side, telling me, begging me, screaming at me to breathe.

Ten days later, I woke up in my hospital bed feeling very lightheaded and fuzzy. I was extremely tired and felt as if someone had punched and kicked my whole body, from my head all the way down to my toes. I was plugged into monitors and saline drips, and felt disorientated. I was attached to a morphine pump, and fed a steady diet of other strong painkillers that made my skin feel clammy and sweaty; but I was alive. I'd made it. I'd gotten through the first operation. I didn't know if it had been a success, but I was alive. Later, Mr. Walsh came to visit and told me that he had carried out the procedure exactly as planned, and that within the next two days he wanted me weaned off the morphine and up walking as quickly as possible.

The intense pain hit when the nurses came in to turn me to check my wound and my bandages. I screamed in agony. I could literally feel my spine moving; it felt like it was shifting away from where it had been broken and the metal inserted. I felt as if someone was banging my back with a metal bar, and the pain was so bad I didn't want anyone to move or touch me. But the nurses had to sit me up to feed me, give me oral medication, and wash me. Every time they came into the room to do this, I dreaded it. I knew I was going to be in extreme anguish.

While in hospital, I slept through most of the day, only waking when the nurses needed to move me, clean me, or check on me. At least throughout the day, there was comfort in knowing that there were people around me, that my wife, son, and friends could visit. Night-time was difficult. There wasn't the sound or bustle of people; the hospital seemed eerily quiet, and sometimes I could have sworn that the hospital was talking to me. I found it difficult to sleep through the night, as my pain always seemed to be worse and, when I pushed the bell for help, it seemed to take an age for a nurse to appear. I watched TV and tried to ignore the pain, telling myself that as each day went past the pain would be less and less, and I would start to heal and get stronger.

Two days later, a man of his word, the surgeon appeared in my bedroom and told me it was now time to get out of bed and start walking.

I said, "You've got to be joking! It feels as if my spine is trying to pull out of my body. The pain is incredible. It's like the whole length of my spine is moving from side to side—and you want me to *walk*?"

"I want you to walk every day as many times as you can, and get the physiotherapist and nurses to walk with you," Mr. Walsh told me. "I want you walking up and down the corridor at least four to five times a day until you're strong enough to walk unaided."

He then called in the nurses and physiotherapist. I had a team of five people around me; with their help I turned onto my side and got up onto my bottom, with my legs hanging over the bed. The pain was so severe it took my breath away, quite literally; I struggled to breathe. I took shots of morphine, and then the physio and surgeon pulled me up onto my feet. I was standing for the first time after having my back broken only 14 days previously, with two metal rods and a number of screws holding me together. By then, I was sweating as if I'd run a marathon; perspiration was just pouring out of my skin. I scrunched up my face in pain. My legs trembled. I wanted to lie down again and take a dose of morphine.

But suddenly, I realized at a visceral level that I was standing upright. I didn't have to bend my knees to look Mr. Walsh in the face. I was totally straight! I was amazed, exultant, absolutely elated. This amazing man had kept his promise, and had totally straightened me up. The feeling was incredible. However, this feeling soon fled as the surgeon told me to take a step forward. I took a deep breath and tried a very small tentative step and, as I did so, pain shot up my whole body, into my back and my neck, and I wanted to scream. Then I moved my other leg, and again pain shot all over my body. I was taking very shallow breaths, trying to get oxygen back into my lungs, as it was being forced out due to the sheer pain. But the surgeon wouldn't let me return to bed. He told me to keep walking, to keep taking small steps and deep breaths. The pain would soon go, he said, but I had to walk. I had to get stronger. He wanted me out of

the hospital, recovering at home. "The only way you will get better," he pointed out, "is by facing your pain and forcing your body to work."

So slowly, I took more small steps, trying to take deep breaths as I did so; but the air was forced out of my lungs every time I moved, even as my spine seemed to sway from side to side like a pendulum.

Over the next couple of days, the nurses and physios got me out of bed and walking, until eventually I could hold on to a frame and walk up and down the corridors by myself. I took on the pain, knowing it wouldn't last forever; I decided I had to get as fit as possible as quickly as possible so I could get back home into my own bed. So whenever a friend or my wife visited, we called the nurse to help me get out of bed, and then I stood holding my frame and walked up and down the corridor for as long as I physically could.

By now it was also possible to have a shower, and the feeling of having warm water and soap on my body after it had been covered in a film of sweat for the past several days was blissful, even though I had to stand there naked with the nurse washing me. I tried not to blush. My shyness didn't last long: After a week of this routine, it's amazing how you get used to a stranger standing with you in a shower, washing you and talking with you, as if it were the most normal thing to do.

After two weeks, Mr. Walsh declared that I was strong enough to return home. Sarah was dreading it, as she knew that she would now have to take over the role of nurse and caregiver, as well as looking after our little boy and dogs.

By the day of my departure I was walking with the aid of crutches, and a close friend came to collect me from hospital with my wife. He helped me to the car, and I saw that he had

put a plastic bag on the seat so that when I got in, he could pick my legs up and easily swing me round into the car. The drive home was difficult, as I felt every bump and hole in the road. Each time the force hit my back, and sent shockwaves through my spine and body.