

9/11 nearly BUT NOW THAN EVE

Elissa Williams escaped from the World Trade Center's South Tower as the hijacked planes struck the buildings. Ten years on, she tells *Bella* how the tragedy changed her life in ways she never imagined...

Opening my eyes, I stared into the face of my flatmate and work colleague Andrea.

'Wake up!' she said. 'We're late!' 'No,' I groaned.

I dashed around, packing my gym kit. I exercised every day after working as an administrator for a financial company in New York's World Trade Center.

It was a beautiful day as we left the apartment to walk to work.

At the South Tower I showed my pass to the security guard.

'I'm going to get breakfast from the cafeteria,' I told Andrea.

'Okay,' she called, getting into the lift to our office on the 53rd floor.

My lift came. As we waited for the doors to close, an enormous bang shook the building.

'What was that?' I thought.

The lift stayed open and seconds later there was another explosion.

My instinct told me to get out, so I made my way across the ground floor. It was eerily quiet. Looking out of the window, I saw the sky was full of burning debris.

Maybe it was a bomb?

Suddenly, people were rushing inside to shelter from the wreckage. Still, something told me to head outside, so I ran against the crowd and headed for the exit.

'We've secured the building,' a guard said, blocking my way.

Then moments later, another

guard screamed: 'It's a bomb! Let everyone out!' The doors opened and we poured out into the street.

'Don't look back, just keep running!' shouted a police officer.

I did as I was told.

Above me I saw the North Tower smouldering. The air smelt of chemicals, rubber and burning fuel. It made my stomach turn.

I dug my phone from my pocket and punched in Andrea's number, then my dad's in Long Island, New York. But there was no signal.

A block away from the tower I stopped at a pay phone, my heart thudding. I got through to Dad.

'I'm okay,' I said, breathlessly.

'What do you mean?' he said.

'What's happening?' He didn't know anything about it. I didn't have time to tell him more as suddenly there was a roar of an aircraft engine.

I watched in horror as a plane flew into the South Tower, just where I would have been at my desk. A ball of fire filled the sky. I could feel the heat on my face.

Slamming down the phone, I started running again.

Around me, people were hysterical, fleeing in different directions. Traffic was gridlocked.

I passed a young woman screaming hysterically. 'Come with me,' I said. 'What's your name?'

'Kathy,' she sobbed.

When we reached the East

River, I was able to get hold of my brother Sean. 'I'm okay, I'm coming to you,' I said.

Then I felt the ground shaking like an earthquake. I didn't realise it, but that's when the first tower collapsed, followed quickly by the second.

A tidal wave of people was coming towards us. Dust was filling the air and I could hear screaming.

But as we headed away from the devastation, life was going on as normal – a delivery boy riding his bike, people buying groceries. In a pizzeria, a few guys were gathered around a TV. I saw the towers on the screen, but I didn't stop to find out more – I had to get home.

Miraculously, we found a bus going to Long Island. As we sped through the tunnel, I buried my head in Kathy's lap and sobbed.

'It's okay, we're safe now,' she said, soothing me.

People around us were talking about planes hitting the towers, but no one knew what was going on.

Sean met us at the bus. He drove us to his house and Kathy's family came to collect her.

It was over – or so I thought.

I sat for hours in shock. I turned on the TV – but I couldn't bring

My destroyed me I'M STRONGER



Elissa survived the World Trade Center tragedy

myself to watch the carnage.

I finally got hold of Andrea later that evening. She'd got out too.

'Thank God you're okay,' we both cried.

Nearly 3000 lives had been lost yet I'd been saved. I was overwhelmed with guilt. Why did I get a second chance?

In the weeks that followed, my life slowly fell apart. I suffered flashbacks and was put on anti-anxiety medication.

When I went back to my apartment, all I wanted to do was hide under my duvet. If I thought about going outside, I'd sweat and my throat would tighten.

Two weeks after the attacks, I went back to work in a temporary office my company had set up – 295 of my colleagues weren't at their desks. It could have been me.

What would have happened if

I'd got to work earlier? If the lift doors had closed?

My friendship with Andrea disintegrated. She reacted to the tragedy differently to me and we both changed as people.

I turned to food for comfort. Before, I liked keeping fit and eating healthily, but now I gorged on cookies and ice cream. I spent

whole weekends in bed eating.

In May 2002, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I experienced panic attacks when I went near work, and in June I quit and was put on disability allowance.

My life seemed to be spiralling out of control.

A few months later I went to visit a friend in Florida.

I loved being away from New York and the reminders of what had happened, so I stayed there, living on my own.

I was diagnosed with agoraphobia. I still couldn't work and food was my only comfort.

I knew I was putting on weight. My size-10 clothes no longer fitted, but I'd stopped caring.

By 2006, I weighed more than 21 stone. Even at 5ft 8in that was far too much. The sociable girl, who ate sensibly and worked out daily, was a distant memory.

In August 2008, I decided that living in Florida wasn't making me better. So I moved to North Carolina. It was more peaceful and the pace of life less hectic.

When I arrived I registered with a new doctor.

'You realise you're obese,' she said. 'You're endangering your

health. You need to start eating sensibly and exercising.'

She was right. I vowed to get my life back.

I cut out sugar and takeaways, and used the treadmill every night.

Soon the pounds fell off. It took 18 long months for me to reach 11 stone, but I felt like my old self again for the first time in years.

Last year, I went back to Long Island for Sean's 40th birthday. I hadn't seen everyone for more than two years and I was excited about showing off the new me. The compliments were a huge confidence boost.

It's taken 10 years, but I finally feel ready to start my life again.

Thousands of lives were blown up that day, including mine. But I'm rebuilding it – and my faith in humankind keeps my hope alive. ■

From right: Elissa before 9/11

After the attacks, she turned to food for comfort

Now a slim Elissa feels she's ready to start her life again



Words: Jeff Maysh, Ellie White. Photos: Coleman-Rayner, PA Photos