

The roots of the tree had taken residence in Amy Hogan's heart, where they wouldn't let go. She could see it in her mind, feel the rough bark against her fingertips. The way its branches spread out like the hands of God. Amy had never seen the tree, but she would soon.

The Survivor Tree.

A hundred-year-old American elm growing out of what used to be a parking lot in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in the heart of Oklahoma City. Now its boughs shaded the highest part of the memorial site. The place where an evil man parked a moving truck loaded with fertilizer and blew the federal building to bits.

Amy was only twelve. She wasn't alive when the Oklahoma City bombing happened way back in 1995.

She had no idea what it was like to be part of the terrible morning when the truck bomb ripped through the building that April 19. She didn't know the specific aftermath of twisted metal and broken bricks and battered men, women and children that made up the imagery of that horrific day when 168 people died.

But she could imagine the screaming and anguish; she could almost feel the glass in her skin, the blood on her body. She could picture the looks on the faces of the survivors.

Because Amy was a survivor, too.

And that's why the tree meant so much to her, why she could hardly wait for spring break to begin. When her family would take a road trip to a dozen different destinations. But one of them would be the Oklahoma City National Memorial.

It all started with a photo Amy had found.

She lived with her Aunt Ashley and Uncle Landon, and their kids. Her cousins, Cole, Devin and Janessa. In every possible way this family had taken her in as one of their own. Sometimes she even thought of her Aunt Ashley as her mom. Because her aunt loved her that much.

One of the ways Aunt Ashley proved it was how she had set up Amy's room. In the corner was a chair that faced the window. So Amy could sit and talk to God about her family in heaven—any time she wanted. Next to the chair, against the wall, was a bookcase full of everything that reminded Amy of her childhood.

A teddy bear her daddy gave her when they went to the fair the year before the car accident. A small treasure chest full of notes her mom had written while Amy was growing up. Notes just for her. Because taking time to put her feelings on paper was important to her mother. That's what Aunt Ashley said.

Amy took a break from packing for the trip. She sat on the bench at the end of her bed and stared at the bookcase. There were also a dozen framed photographs scattered on the different shelves. Photos of Amy and her mom, Amy and her dad. One of both her parents and her all snuggled up on the couch on an ordinary day.

Back when they thought they had forever.

And then there was Amy's favorite photo. The one of her whole family. Her parents and three sisters and her. They had been getting pictures taken for their Christmas card and the photographer had already snapped a million shots. Amy stared at the image across the room and let it fill the broken places in her heart one more time.

She could still hear her mother telling their story. How her mommy and daddy had been praying for a child when a social worker told them about Amy. Of course, Amy was just a little baby back then. But her birth mother had been a drug addict, and at the last minute the woman decided to keep Amy. That's when God brought Heidi Jo along. The littlest olive-skinned sister in the group. But as soon as her parents adopted Heidi Jo, they got a call from the social worker. The woman was on drugs again and she had been arrested. Which meant not only Amy but also her two older sisters were available for adoption.

Her parents were thrilled and pretty much overnight they went from having no children to raising four little girls. Clarissa, Chloe, Amy and Heidi Jo. The first three

all tan with pale blond hair. They were the closest four sisters anyone ever knew.

Until the accident.

Amy stood and walked to the bookcase. A layer of dust dimmed the black frame. Amy hated dust. She picked up the photo and lightly brushed the edges clean, then she looked again at the people she missed so much. Her mom and dad were on either side of Amy and her sisters. The girls had their arms around each other and they were laughing. Laughing so hard that this picture had turned out to be the best that day.

For a few seconds Amy closed her eyes. The sound of her family still filled her heart. Still made her smile on days when she wasn't sure she'd survive the missing and hurting. The terrible losing. She blinked and her eyes focused on Clarissa. It was Clarissa, her oldest sister, who had said something funny that day. Something about her mouth feeling frozen or how she was glad she wasn't a model because of all the smiling.

The details weren't as clear as they used to be.

Whatever Clarissa had said, the day instantly became one of their favorites ever. Amy touched the glass over her sister's face. It was good to have these memories. That was something Aunt Ashley talked about a lot. Memories were God's way of saying something had actually happened. And it mattered a great deal.

Amy returned the frame to its spot in the bookcase. Then she stooped down. The bottom shelf was filled with eight photo albums. All the ones Amy's parents had

ever put together. When everything from Amy's old home in Texas was gone through and sorted, after the furniture and the house had been sold, her Aunt Ashley had collected a few boxes of things for Amy.

She would always be grateful to her aunt for saving them. Every item and picture mattered. They were all she had left of her old life. Before the car accident that took everyone else in her family home to heaven. Everyone but her.

Yes, she understood what it meant to be a survivor.

Amy pulled the fourth book from the bottom shelf and took it to her chair by the window. She flipped to the back page and looked for the photo that had started her interest in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Before they'd adopted Amy and her sisters, her parents had taken a trip to Oklahoma. Amy's daddy had cousins in Oklahoma, and one of them had hosted a family reunion.

The album told the story. There were pictures of Amy's parents with people Amy didn't know or couldn't remember ever meeting. Most of them had reached out when the accident happened. A few of them had written letters since then. Her daddy's parents were dead, but his great-aunt had started a scholarship account for Amy. So she would always know how much they cared about her. They came to visit every summer for a few days.

Amy scanned the images. There were photos of sunsets and scenery, her mom and dad happy and in love. But the picture that caught hold of Amy's heart was one

of her mama. While they were on their trip, her parents had gone to the Oklahoma City National Memorial. In the photo her mother was standing at the base of the Survivor Tree, her hands on its thick trunk, eyes lifted up to its beautiful branches.

Amy read her mother's words, written next to the photo: "*Me at the survivor tree. With God, there is always a way to survive. I love this living reminder.*"

Amy ran her fingers over the image and then lightly over her mother's words. Her mama was tender. That's what Aunt Ashley said. She had a heart deeper than the ocean. No wonder she and Amy's daddy went to the memorial site while they were in Oklahoma.

Amy hadn't heard of national memorials until last fall, when her history class was studying them. But the idea filled her heart. Places of recognition and honor for very great losses suffered by Americans.

A few weeks after that lesson in class, Amy was looking through her photo albums when she saw the picture of her mother at the Survivor Tree. She Googled what had happened that day.

That's when she found the history of the Oklahoma City bombing. And the tree.

Amy looked out the window at the storm clouds drifting closer. The tree had been there before anyone thought about putting a federal building on the site. When it came time to pave a parking lot, someone must've decided the tree was too pretty to cut down.

So they built around it.

And that's how the tree stayed for lots and lots of years. Decades, really. Right up until the bomb went off. The bomb was so big it had something called shock waves. It meant that cars parked nearby exploded and the tree caught fire. Pieces of glass and metal from the blast shot out and struck the old elm's base. Most of its branches were cut off by flying debris. When the dust settled, all that was left was a smoldering, blackened, barren trunk.

In the weeks that followed, the people cleaning up after the bomb intended to cut the old tree down. The elm was dead, they figured. Of course it was dead. But they left it standing because of the glass and metal lodged in its bark. The way the pieces were positioned told investigators what they needed to know about the location of the bomb.

So since the tree trunk was evidence, it stayed.

Then something beautiful happened. On the one-year anniversary, survivors of the bombing and family members of the victims, as well as firefighters and police officers, all gathered at the old parking lot to remember.

That's when a police officer noticed something amazing about the tree. Sprigs of green were coming from the bark. The tree was alive! Horticulture experts were called in to tend to the tree and help nurse it back to health. The glass and metal were removed from the trunk and the tree was fed good nutrition. One year led to another and its branches began to grow again.

Today it was one of the biggest, most beautiful trees in Oklahoma City. Each spring workers at the memorial swept up seeds from the boughs. The seeds were grown into saplings, and every year those little baby trees were given out to people who wanted them.

People who had survived something.

People like Amy.

It was just as her mama had said all those years ago. The Oklahoma City tree was proof that with God, there was always a way to survive.

So Amy had gotten an idea, and a few months ago she shared it with her aunt. Maybe they could go to the memorial site for spring break, and maybe Amy could get one of the saplings.

She could plant it out back near her Grandma Elizabeth's flower garden, and it would grow and give shade and comfort and a reminder of the family she'd lost. Then Amy would have her own Survivor Tree.

For spring break, they had been planning to visit Branson, Missouri, and Silver Dollar City and spend time on a houseboat on Table Rock Lake. But her Aunt Ashley and Uncle Landon talked about it and decided, yes, they would go a little further and visit the Oklahoma City National Memorial, too.

They were going with Amy's Aunt Kari and Uncle Ryan and their family. Two cars, caravan-style. Aunt Ashley said that on the day they'd visit the memorial it would just be the two aunts and the older kids. The

younger kids would go with the uncles to Frontier City for rides and stuff.

The memorial would be too sad for them.

But it wouldn't be too sad for Amy. She wanted to be there, wanted to see the empty chairs and tall gates that had been built in honor of the victims. She could hardly wait to stand next to the tree and feel its trunk against her hands.

The way her mama had felt it.

Because the tree's roots really had taken hold of her. And somehow, she knew that God was letting her go there, not only to see the tree. But to learn something from Him.

Something about surviving.