The Old Cabin

By: April Oleson

The sound of her breath rapidly sped up with every step of her foot. The air around her was crisp as if to calm the nerves but it didn’t help her, especially in this situation. Nothing could have stopped this moment, and all Amber wanted was for the situation to go away. The moment that Amber discovered Benji was gone her heart sank. It was the last thing that her family needed. Between their father’s violent outbursts and their mother’s neglect of the situation, the three children had enough to worry about. It was almost like Amber and David were raising their youngest brother. Out of the three children Amber was the oldest at seventeen. Then it was David at fifteen and then Benjamin, who Amber often called Benji, at eight-years-old. She couldn’t let her family fall completely apart, not now.

Amber sprinted from door to door, asking all the neighbors if they had seen her brother, but every door just led to more disappointment and more fear coursing through her body. The air was getting colder as the sun sank below the ground. It was the beginning of fall in their small country town and everyone knew that after a certain time of night you did not go out into the cold without the proper attire on. Amber unfortunately didn’t have time to make sure she was properly dressed, but she prayed that her brother was smarter than she was. There had been many cases of children running off in the night and getting lost before freezing to death in some ditch or small cave. Ravenwood was the second coldest place to live in America and once summer was gone everyone knew it. Every morning there would be a light frost over the town and it wouldn’t melt till late afternoon. Just in time for the new frost to begin.

As she rushed around the last bit of neighborhood, she began to promise herself that things would change. After all the things she and her brothers had been through, they deserved a change. The verbal abuse had to stop; but every time she stood up to her father, he just sent her flying across the room leaving bruises and broken bones as a reminder to back off. Amber would tell herself that he really did love her. That he was only doing these things because he didn’t know how to channel his anger. She truly did love her father, but if she had told anyone of what was going on they would have never believed her. By now, the neighbors had to be aware of what was going on in the house. The screams and fighting that came from their home had brought the police to their front door on multiple occasions. However, her father was always able to hide what was going on. He had that way about him. When he was out and about in town he acted like a nice man. Smiling at people as they walked by and waving at all of his friends. Everyone knew her father and almost everyone became friends as soon as they got to know him. It was a mask that he put on and it worked. No one could believe that their family was breaking apart, and therefore, no one wanted to interfere with what was going on. She didn’t blame them. Who wanted to interfere with someone else’s business? After all it is not normal to step in and tell a family what they are doing wrong or how to live their lives. So what gave her the guts to do it?

Amber glanced at her watched and began to pick up the pace once again. She didn’t have much time before her parents came home, and if she came home without her brother she would be in so much pain the next morning. Tears began to fill Amber’s eyes as she went to the last door on her block. It was where Benji’s best friend Kevin McConnell lived. Kevin’s parents were so nice to Amber and her family. Whenever Benji needed to get away for a while he would go over to their house. The two of them were thick as thieves. Whenever they had a chance, Benji and Kevin were always together. Amber knocked on the door and waited. Mr. McConnell answered the door.

“Amber, what can I do for you?” He said with a smile.

“Have you seen Benji? Is he here?” Amber’s voice quivered as she tried to hold back the tears.

“I’m afraid not. What’s going on?” Mr. McConnell put a hand on Amber’s shoulder.

The touch of a kind heart was enough to make Amber lose it. She broke down and started to cry. Her shoulders shook up and down from the emotional state she was in.

“Why don’t you come in for a bit? We can figure this out okay?”

Amber remembered when they first met the McConnell’s. It was during another anger fit her father was throwing. David was five-years-old and was rolling a ball back and forth in the hall way. He rolled the ball faster and faster until it missed the wall and bumped into the end table with such a force that the glass vase on top fell to the ground and shattered into a million pieces. Their father was so mad and took his anger out on David, beating him until Amber walked in. She rushed over and grabbed her father’s arm stopping him from hitting David a second time. David ran outside and bumped into Mr. McConnell who was taking out the trash. When he saw the freshly beaten face of the young boy, he walked over to their house and tried to talk with their father. The two argued in their living room until Mr. McConnell finally called the police. When they came they arrested their father but it was only an overnight arrest. Without their mother’s consent to press charges, the police could not hold him. Amber knew that her mother was afraid her husband would come after her if she did leave so she left it alone. David came home with a broken collar bone, a broken nose and bruises all over his body.

Now Amber wanted to just run inside and let Mr. and Mrs. McConnell take charge of the situation but she knew she had a job to do. And she knew that if she did find Benji and they got involved there would be serious consequences waiting when she got home.

“Thank you, but I really should be looking for my brother.” Amber began to back away from the door.

“Amber”

“If you see him will you tell him to come home?”

She turned and walked quickly away from the one place she felt safe.

“Amber! Wait!” Mr. McConnell called out to her. “Please, wait!”

Amber ignored his calls and walked faster away. She didn’t want him to try and stop her. *What could have happened to Benji? Where did he go?* She ran back to her house knowing she had to make a move and fast. When she got home, her parent’s cars were in the driveway and she could hear yelling coming from inside. Amber didn’t want to enter her home but she pushed on through the front. When her parents saw her enter the room they stopped.

“Amber, go upstairs with your brothers until we are done.” Her mother seemed numb to the violence that her father was inflicting on Amber and her brothers. She didn’t even try to stop it in fear that she would be the one taking on the punishment.

“Mom I can’t. There is something you and Dad need to know.”

They both looked over to her.

“Benji is missing. I was doing my homework and the next thing I knew…”

“You lost him?!” Her father’s voice was not forgiving.

“Dad, please let me explain.” The tears began to fill her eyes again.

“See what your stupid daughter has done, Mary. She has lost our son. This is just great!” His face turned red with anger.

“Stop it! Don’t talk to her like that!” Rarely did her mother stand up for her, but Amber was always thankful for the moments she did.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I was just doing my homework and he was gone when I went in to check on him.” By now the tears were streaming down her face. “It’s your fault! You are always treating him like crap! Calling him names and telling him he is worthless. It is no wonder he ran away.” The slap that came next sent her to the ground. The pounding on her cheek was a harsh reminder for Amber to watch her words.

“Mark, stop it!” Amber’s mother tried to step in but she also suffered from the blow of her husband’s hand. She turned away from her husband and her daughter and grabbed her coat. She walked out the front door leaving Amber with her father. It wasn’t the first time her mother left in a bad situation. Amber always thought it was her way of coping with the situation: by driving around town for a while.

Amber turned around to notice David standing in the archway. At fourteen she thought he would have reacted differently but he just stood there. She believed this was because he didn’t want to make matters worse. Amber pulled herself to her feet to go to David’s side but he bolted up the stairs before she could do anything else. She turned to her father and glared at him.

“Oh don’t give me that look. I’m not the one who screwed up again, you idiot! Now go out there and find your damn brother. And don’t come back until you have found him.” He walked into the kitchen, grabbed a beer and sat down in front of the TV.

Amber walked up to her brother’s room to make sure he was ok. He was sitting on the bed staring at the ground. “Are you ok?” she asked him. She knew he wasn’t but she didn’t know what else to say. All he did was stare up at her silently. “David, please answer me.”

Through the tears in his eyes he replied, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I didn’t stand up for you guys. It was stupid of me. I should have done something but I didn’t want to make things worse.”

“It’s not your fault, I promise. What Dad has done has nothing to do with your actions.”

“Why did we get a father like this? I just don’t understand, Amber.” David sobbed holding his face with his hands.

She sat down next to him and hugged her brother tightly, reassuring him. “I don’t know why we are stuck with this life but I can promise you this: it will get better someday. But I need your help right now. Benji is missing, Mom is gone on one of her power drives, and I don’t know what to do.”

David stood up before she could say anything else. He grabbed the flashlight off of the dresser and his jacket from the desk chair. “Let’s go.” He said.

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Benji didn’t know where he was going, but he knew that he was free from the drama in his life. It took months to gather the courage to run away and weeks to actually come up with the plan. He was going across town into the woods where he and his sister played every day after school. There he would build a tree house and live there for the rest of his life. When everything was set up and it was safe, he would go back and get his brother and sister. That way they all could live there. No more hiding in the closet every time his dad came home. Benji knew his older siblings were scared too, but he didn’t want them to tell his mom what he was doing. Amber was trying to hide everything from him and act like the mother since their mom wouldn’t do the job. There was no hiding anything from Benji. After all, did they really think he was stupid?

As he turned the corner of Parr Elementary, where he went to school every day, he noticed a car sitting in the parking lot near the playground. Benji was not sure who this person was. He backed off a bit and began walking in the other direction. Whoever was in the car must have noticed him because they got out of the driver’s seat and started walking towards him.

*Maybe it is a police officer. Maybe he can help me and my family.* Benji thought to himself.   
 After all, the man was wearing a cowboy hat and holding a flashlight. *Maybe he is a sheriff like I saw in the movies.*

The lights from the car shadowed the stranger in such a way that he could only see a dark shadow approaching. The man wore a cowboy hat and boots but Benji imagined a gold sheriff’s star on his shirt.

“Hi, what is your name?”

Benji didn’t answer.

“What are you doing out here, its freezing.”

It was very cold. Benji had forgotten his gloves at home and the tips of his fingers were beginning to feel like they were falling off.

“Are you a police officer?”

There was silence from the stranger, and for a second Benji was frightened.

“Yeah, I am. Why don’t you get into my car and we will warm up, ok?”

Benji was cold, and if this was a sheriff, then he could really help him. Not thinking, he got into the car with the stranger and the two of them drove off.

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Amber and David searched everywhere they thought Benji would be. The skate park where Benji liked to ride his bike, the ice cream shop on Main Street he liked to visit, and now they were headed to the school playground where Benji went to school. They heard the roar of a car engine around the back of the school and headed in that direction. Amber heard Benji’s voice and stopped.

“Benji! Is that you?” She was probably too far for him to hear her. “Benji!”

“Amber, maybe we should hurry up. Something doesn’t feel right.”

David was correct. The two of them picked up the pace as they rounded the corner. They both saw Benji getting into an unmarked car driving off in the opposite direction.

“Benji no!” Amber sprinted towards the car but it was too late. They had driven off away from the school and away from safety.

David caught up with his sister just in time for her to fall to her knees. “Don’t worry, Amber. We will go to the police station and everything will be ok.” He tried to comfort his sister but the sobs coming from her body were just too much. David burst into tears by her side.

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As they were driving, Benji looked around the car. There wasn’t a radio to call into the station like the movies or a gun sitting next to the seat. His heart began to race faster and faster as he realized what kind of situation he was in. Benji tried to reach for the door handle but there wasn’t one and the locks were also missing.

“Where are we going?” His voice was frightened and he knew the stranger could tell.

“Don’t you worry, we are going to go somewhere fun, ok?” An awkward smile filled his face as he drove faster into the darkness.

“Let me out! I want out now!” Benji screamed and wailed at the man but it was no use.

The stranger smacked him so hard that Benji’s head bounced off of the glass window, knocking him out cold.

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The crunch of the gravel underneath their feet seemed to make them run faster. Amber and David were determined to stop something bad from ruining their family. Amber couldn’t afford to think badly, but everything in her worried for her youngest brother. Nobody knew anymore what was going to happen, and that gave them a sense of urgency to push on even when they felt tired. The police station was about a ten minute walk from the school but they might be able to cut that time in half if they ran all the way.

Amber remembered the day Benji was born. Her mother had been in labor for over twenty-four hours and she was getting anxious to meet her little brother or sister, although she was secretly hoping for a little sister. When she got the news that it was a little boy, she was overly excited to meet him. She had her grandmother (her father’s mother) take her to the store to buy him a stuffed bear. It was a stuffed pooh bear that she decided on. It seemed fitting for some reason.

When she, David and her grandmother arrived at the hospital, they could not wait to see him. They turned the corner into the hospital room where her father and mother were sitting together on the bed. They looked so happy back then. Not once did her father ever abuse her in any way. It must have been something later on that triggered it, maybe a mid-life crisis. Amber went over and sat down next to her mother. Since she was the oldest of the children, she got to hold him first. His pink skin was so smooth and gentle, and she was almost afraid to touch him. Amber did not want to drop and break him, but her mother placed him in her arms anyways. That moment was one she would never forget. He looked up at her and Amber introduced herself to him as his “big sister”. Instead of smiling back at Amber, Benji began to wail. Amber thought she had done something wrong.

Her mother could tell that she was upset and took the little baby boy back. “Don’t worry, Amber, he’s just tired from a long day; I promise.”

Amber wasn’t sure if that was the case, but none the less, she set the stuffed bear down on the bed next to her mother and walked over to her grandmother’s side.

Her mother was right. From that moment on, Benji warmed up to his big sister, and Amber looked out for Benji as the years went by. They became closer and closer throughout the years.

As Amber and David arrived at the police station, they tried to catch their breath. But there was no time for that. Amber ran up to the front desk. The receptionist was on the phone, but as soon as she saw Amber’s tired, scared face she hung up.

“What can I do for you?”

“Please, you’ve got to help us!” Amber pleaded in between desperate gulps of air. Over the next twenty minutes she explained what had happened that night and how they couldn’t return home until they found her little brother. The receptionist called back to the chief to come out and help. The chief was a burly man; someone who looked like he could take down an ox with one hand.

“You know we have to contact your parents, right?” His voice was gentle but firm. “I can’t do anything without knowing their part in this.”

Amber’s heart sank. She knew the only person home was her drunken father. She nodded her head and sat down on the nearby bench. David, who had been quiet this whole time, sat down next to his sister and held her hand.

“What is your phone number sweetie?” the receptionist asked.

Amber just sat staring at the floor. *What will Dad do? Will he be as daring to hit me in front of the police officers or will he put on that stupid mask that he always puts on?*

“It is 555-0214.” David became her voice and she was thankful for this. The fear of never seeing Benji again filled her heart.

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When Benji awoke he found himself in an old cabin. Lined on the walls were the heads of stuffed deer. The furniture looked dusty and worn like the furniture at his grandmother’s house. There was a stale smell in the air, along with a familiar scent. Benji knew it all too well. It was the way his father smelled when he was angry. It was also the smell that warned him to go to his room and hide from his father.

Benji looked round the room more and noticed a man sitting in an arm chair surrounded by empty bottles. It was the same man who picked up Benji at the school. Benji began to fidget but noticed his wrists and ankles were bound together by rope. A flood of panic filled his mind. He didn’t want to be here. All he wanted was to see his sister and his brother again.

“Please let me go.” Benji begged. “I want to go home.”

The man just sat in silence staring down at the boy he had in his grasp. Benji began to cry. The man stood and walked slowly over to Benji’s side.

“If you are good I will untie your hands and feet, but you have to prove to me that you can be a good little boy, ok? Okay?” He stroked Benji’s hair like he was petting a dog. He then proceeded to turn on the TV. “How about some cartoons? We all love cartoons don’t we?”

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The phone rang, jolting Mark up from a drunken state. Next to his side lay at least a dozen beers if not more. He was not sure if they were all from tonight or if they had accumulated over the past couple of nights. All he knew was that the room was violently spinning and the damn phone wouldn’t stop ringing. He stumbled towards the phone and reached it just at the last ring.

“Hello?” It better not be one of those damn telemarketers or I’m going to give them a piece of my mind. Mark hated those people who called just to get him to buy something. What did they expect? He wasn’t made out of money.

“Is this Mr. O’Neill?” The voice on the other end sounded familiar but he wasn’t sure why.

“Yes, can I help you with something or can I just go back to sleep, because if this is one of those telemarketers I have a word or two to say to you.”

“No, Sir, this is Officer Davis with the Kalispell Police Department.”

Mark froze. He had been in trouble with the police many times before, and he wasn’t about to give away the fact that he was now drunk and make things worse for himself. “What can I do for you, officer?”

“Well, I have your children Amber and David down here at the station, and they are claiming that your youngest, Benji, is missing. Is this correct, Sir?”

“Yes, but it isn’t my damn fault to get the kid back. After all, Amber was the one who was supposed to watch him. Just send her out to look again. I’m sure she isn’t trying hard enough.”

For a moment there was silence on the other end of the phone and Mark wasn’t sure what to say.

“Um, Sir, we have it on good authority that your son has been kidnapped. Can you come down to the station to discuss this please?”

Mark grunted and groaned but rummaged around for a coat and shoes to thrown on. “Yeah, yeah I’m on my way. But if you ask me this is all just a big mistake.” He hung up the phone and headed out the door towards his car pulling out the keys from his jacket pocket. He knew he shouldn’t be driving but he didn’t give a damn at the moment.

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By the time their father had stumbled into the station, the chief already had four officers making phone calls and many more out looking for the young boy.

“Where is he? Where is my son?” He could barely formulate his words without slurring them.

The chief walked over to their father’s side. “Sir, how much have you had to drink?”

“That is none of your damn business.” He replied as he fell into the seat next to his daughter, “I will deal with you when this is all over.”

Amber squeezed her brother’s hand even tighter than before.

“Dad, Amber did everything she could to find Benji.”

Once again Amber was thankful to have her brother by her side.

Their father reached across Amber grabbing David by the shirt collar. “You listen here, boy. When I want your opinion I will ask for it. But until then, shut your damn mouth.”

The chief ripped him off of David before any more damage could be done. “That’s enough!” He said in a stern tone. “Where is your wife? Perhaps she can be a bit more helpful.

“I don’t know where that whore is. Why don’t you ask her ex-boyfriend?” With those words he passed out in his chair.

The chief looked over at the children. “Do either of you know where your mother is?”

Both of them shook their heads solemnly.

"It’s alright; you guys have done enough for one day."

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Benji sat on the floor of the cabin living room. The taste of the sandwich still lingered in his mouth. His eyes were starting to grow dim and a wave of exhaustion came over him. He looked up at the clock which read 8:32 pm. It wasn’t even close to his bed time, and he wasn’t sure why he was so tired. He could barely keep his eyes open. His head hit the ground with such a force it let out a bang.

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*What has he done? Oh gosh, please be alive Benji, please.* Mary drove up the dirt road as fast as she could without spinning out. When all of this started she didn’t mean any harm. She definitely didn’t want to hurt her children but she was so unhappy. Nothing her husband did could possibly make her stay. The abuse he was inflicting on her and now her children had to stop.

Mary pulled up to the old cabin where she and Steve first slept together. Turning off the engine, she jumped out of the car and sprinted to the door.

“Steve!” Mary banged as loud as she could on the front door. “Steve, please, I know you are in there. I want to talk. I-I need to talk to you.”

With those words Steve opened up the door. “Mary, thank goodness. I did what you asked. I got Benji for you. He’s safe now.”

Mary ran to her son’s side. “Benji, talk to me, Sweetie.” Mary shook her son but there was no response. “What did you do to him?”

“I just gave him something to help him sleep.” Steve came closer to Mary and reached out his hand for her to come to him.

Instead Mary stepped backwards.“I told you not to do it. I didn’t actually think you would kidnap my son.”

“I did it all for you. Now we can be a family together.” Steve stepped closer once more, this time grabbing for Mary.

“Stop! Don’t come near me.” Mary was frightened. She knew that Steve was sick but she didn’t think he was this sick. “Benji, baby, please wake up. Mama needs you to wake up now.” She called out to her son but still no answer. Mary reached into her pocket and grabbed her cell, but before she could dial a number Steve knocked it out of her hands.

“Don’t do that. We are going to be a family now and no one can stop us.”

“Steve, I’m taking my son back home. Now let us go.”

Mary went to pick up her son, but Steve grabbed her by the neck. He threw her to the ground and put his hands against her throat tightening his grip until she began to grasp for air.

“You are staying here with me, no matter what!” He squeezed tighter and tighter feeling her body struggle underneath him.

Slowly the life began to drain from her face. Her fingers twitching with motion and then nothing. Silence filled the room as he looked down at the cold lifeless figure that lay before him. Steve reached out and brushed the hair from her face. He sat in silence for a few moments not sure what to do. Steve looked over at the sleeping boy that now lay next to him. It was too late to go back now, too late to change what he had already done, so he stood to his feet and went to the shed to grab a shovel and two black trash bags to finish the job.

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By the time officer Davis pulled into the driveway of the old cabin, the rain was pouring hard. The reflection of the police lights reflected off both the house and every rain drop that fell, each one catching the reflection of what was going on. Deep in his gut he knew he was not going to find the family alive. As he got closer to the cabin he heard a digging noise coming from around the back along with some mumbling. He pulled out his gun, carefully turning the safety off, and turned the corner of the cabin. The scene he now saw before him made his blood turn cold. There he found a man digging what looked to be a grave. His eyes were dark with horror and his body shook violently, either from the storm or from what lay beside him. Next to his feet lay two body sized objects wrapped in black trash bags. The man mumbled but Davis could not hear what he was saying.

“Sir, I want you to drop the shovel and put your hands in the air.”

The man just stood there shoveling and mumbling.

“Sir, did you hear me? Put the shovel down and put your hands in the air.”

There was still no change in the man. Davis went over to the man’s side, slowly reaching for the shovel but the man yanked it back instead.

“Always mine! Always mine!” He yelled over and over returning to his shoveling.

Another officer went over to the bodies, which were out of the man’s sight. He lifted one end of the bag and placed his hand on the neck of each victim. With one shake of the head Davis knew the sadness that was about to be put on the family. In less than a minute the officers had the man lying on the ground in handcuffs. The whole time he yelled, “Always mine! Always mine! Always mine!”