

# Shelby

## Chapter One

### The Beginning

Shelby saw the old church in the distance as the bells sang a warm welcome with their, *ding-dong-ding* chimes. The morning was gloomy, shrouded in mist, and the air was thick with its dampness. She walked across the newly-tarred gravel parking lot after parking her old gray station wagon in one of the many empty spots available farthest from the entrance.

The church was set back a ways from the old highway. It was small but sufficient for the bantam white church. Capacity seating for the inside was one hundred and fifty at its fullest. The old church, which had been built in the 1800s still held that old Country charm. Just inside the large glass doors to the left sat a beautiful bouquet of newly cut spring flowers; the scent of dianthus and violets inviting her in. The wooden pews with the newly-padded cushions were shouting a warm comfortable welcome. The wooden armrests recently shined to a glossy sheen, were ready for a full house.

This Sunday morning was special. The lady's fellowship group were putting together a nice brunch for all the surrounding farmers and local community... a wonderful way to meet the neighbors if one were so inclined.

She ambled into the church lugging a basket full of homemade corn muffins and saw the Pastor and his wife standing out front, greeting the folks as they entered. She carried the basket into the kitchen and set it gently on the counter top, leaving them as she made her way to the Sanctuary. With purpose to her stride, she scurried over to greet the young Pastor and his new bride

She waited patiently as she watched the church filled with the worshippers. She scanned the Sanctuary until her eyes landed on them. She hastily made her way over to the third pew from the front and managed to squeeze in beside a younger couple. She smiled shyly and stated just as sweet as apple pie, "What a blessed morning it is!"

Unbeknownst to them of the danger, the young couple beamed at her. They proceeded to introduce themselves along with their two-year-old daughter, Mary Elizabeth.



## Chapter Two

### The Box in the past

I sat on the top step, swatting at the mosquitoes as they landed on my arm. Sweat steadily streamed down my neck. My eyes darted over the front yard, and I sighed, knowing it was in need of a mowing. Winter was over, and spring was rearing its head with the bursting of flowers, new leaves, and foliage, along with increased activity from the wildlife in the outside world. I noticed for the first time all the weeds along the cement walk. Funny I hadn't noticed them before. I twisted my body around and glanced up at the house. The once-yellow house was now a dull tan with peeling paint and torn window screens.

*When had the house turned into an old worn shoe?* I wondered to myself. My mom kept up on those kinds of things. I twisted back around and leaned back on my hands, stretching my legs out in front; letting them dangle over the steps. The slight breeze cooled my face.

We lived off the main road about two miles down a dirt trail. We didn't have any close neighbors to speak of, and the school bus was the only vehicle besides our own that I ever saw coming down this path.

I was sure glad school had been out for the summer. None of the kids liked me. They all made fun of me, calling me poor white trash. I don't care, really. I would rather be poor than a snob.

The familiar sound of a car coming down the road drove me off the porch and running back into the house, the screen door slamming behind me. I skidded into the kitchen; grabbed the bag of potatoes out of the pantry and set them down in the sink. I grabbed a pan and a peeling knife and quickly began washing and peeling.

"Shelby? We're home! Come and help with the groceries!" Momma hollered when she came in the house.

I wiped my hands on the towel that hung off the refrigerator door handle and went to help with the bags. I skirted around Momma and ran smack into my stepfather, Jack.

"Whoa, there kid... slow down," he sneered at me. He grabbed my arm and squeezed tightly, making me wince.

When my mom married Jack, I had just turned five. He was nice to me at first. He would lift me up onto his lap and always hugged me, often buying me new dresses as if on a whim. It didn't take me long, however, to fear him. He got angry real fast.

It wasn't until I turned seven when I realized he wasn't such a nice man. Momma had taken to her bed that day. She was sick with the bug that was going around town. Jack was sitting on the couch, watching the news after supper and had called me over to sit on his lap. He had begun rubbing up and down my leg, his hand slowly moving up onto my thigh. He had slipped his hand under my dress and touched my privates. Trembling, I whimpered and jumped off his lap. I ran into my room.

That had been the first time of many.

I snatched my arm away, running down the steps to grab the groceries out of the backseat of our old maroon Chrysler. I picked up the last two bags and carried them inside, setting them

none too gently onto the table. I looked around, wondering where Jack had gone. I was always leery where he was concerned.

“Momma, how did it go today? What did the doctor say?” I asked while taking groceries out of the bags and putting them away.

“Nothing for you to concern yourself with, Shelby.” She laid the package of chicken breast onto the counter. “I’m just fine. Now, don’t you worry none.” She glanced at my face, knowing I was doing just that. She walked over to me and wrapped her thin arms around me and gave a soft squeeze. “I love you...you know that, right?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t get past the lump forming in my throat. I choked back a sob. I felt the moisture pool in my eyes. This couldn’t be good. I just knew something bad was going to happen. I squeezed her real tight, feeling comfort in her thin frame.

“Shelby?”

“Yes, ma’am, I know you love me,” I mumbled. “I love you, too.” I pushed my face into the front of her apron mostly to hide my wet eyes, but also because I loved the smell. She always smelled like a blend of roses and fresh baked sugar cookies.

Mamie Lee pulled away and grabbed a towel off the fridge door. Using the corner of the towel, she dabbed the corners of my eyes.

“Come now, I’ll help you. We best get this dinner going.” She turned away from me and began peeling the potatoes that I had started earlier.

Dinner was a soundless affair. Jack wasn’t saying much, which was odd. He usually bellyached about something. Momma, with that sad look on her face, kept right on eating, once in a while glancing up and looking at me with a sad smile. I smiled back worriedly. I feared what was coming. She was sick.

Momma began going to see the doctor off and on about a year ago. I noticed a change right away. Instead of smiling and laughing all the time, she frowned and would be moody. At night, I would hear her crying softly, but only when she didn’t think I was watching or listening. I made an extra effort in helping around the house, although it was getting harder to stay away from Jack’s clutches.

One day in particular, I was reading on the porch in my favorite swing when Jack called out to help him in the garage. He needed me to hand him some tools while he worked on the car. Reluctantly and dragging my feet, I did as I was told. When I had walked into the garage, Jack had snuck up behind me and grabbed me, snaking his arms around my middle. He whispered in my ear, “I got you now, little honey.”

I cringed and tried to get away, but he held on tight, sucking the air out of my lungs. He was hurting me.

He spoke in the same whisper that seemed tainted with undertones of crawly things that lay rotting in a sewer. “Now you stop that moving around Shelby, and I won’t hurt you. I just want a little touch... that’s all. Don’t you holler none either. Your Momma’s sick and doesn’t need to be bothered.”

I quit squirming and with tears running down my face; I squeezed my eyes shut real tight. Jack had slid his hand down to my stomach and into my shorts. I screeched and twisted away from his dirty hands. I knew it wasn’t right; what he was doing.

I started crying. “Stop it, Jack! That’s wrong, and you know it!”

“Hush Shelby, your Momma might hear,” he chuckled darkly. “I’m a grown man with needs that she can’t provide me with no more and soon you’ll just have to take her place, I believe. So you shut your mouth now, or I’ll make it real tough for you. You hear me, girl?”

I shook my head and pursed my trembling lips, “Just leave me alone!” Terror poured into my soul.

I started to take off into a run, but he had grabbed a hold of my arm again, this time holding me with his hand over my mouth. He pulled me onto the old canvas that he used when he

worked on the car. Using one arm and his legs to hold me down, he used his free hand to hurt me.

Mamie's voice carried into the garage, "Shelby? Where have you gone off to?"

Jack swore under his breath and sat up. He pulled me up by my arms. "Go on, get. Don't say anything about this either, Shelby or so help me, I'll hurt you really bad next time."

I didn't utter a word. I wiped the tears off my face and on wobbly legs, ran back out of the garage.

"I'm here, Momma!" I called back as cheerily as I could while trying to keep the tremble out of my voice.

"Come on, girl, I need some help with the laundry."

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That was just one of many little incidents. I soon learned it was best just to steer clear when he was around. I placed my fork on the edge of the plate. I didn't feel much like eating. The dinner was good and all, but my stomach was pinched in fear. I just knew that my momma was dying.

"Momma, may I be excused?"

"But, Shelby dear, you've hardly taken a bite! Are you feeling well?" Mamie raised her brow and guided her thin hand to my forehead.

"You don't feel warm." A frown marred her features.

"I'm fine, Momma... just don't feel much like eating, is all."

Mamie picked up her fork, "Well... if that's all then yes, you may be excused."

I scraped my chair back and with excited feet, ran up to my room. I fell to my knees next to the twin bed and reached my arm underneath, searching for my most favorite thing in the whole world. When my small fingers touched upon the smooth surface, I pulled it out.

A few years back on my eighth birthday, my momma had brought home a pretty pair of shoes that someone at the church had given to her. It was the first real pair of new shoes I had ever gotten. I had kept the box and decorated it with pretty rocks that I had gathered and collected around the yard. I kept all my favorite treasures inside the box, including all my money.

Today, I found a quarter between two floorboards on the porch. I took a quarter out now and put it into the box. I looked inside, and a smile broke out on my narrow face.

I'm saving all my money. One day, I'm going to buy my momma a new house! I knew we didn't have any money right now to buy one, but I would get her one! Why, the only reason she had married Jack was because we needed his money. The house was falling down so when Jack came to live with us; he had fixed it up some. The roof still leaked, however.

Maybe if I bought her a new house Jack could leave us alone, so whenever I found a coin or two, in my box it went. Sometimes momma would give me some money if I had to do extra chores.

That went in the box, too.

The lid was my favorite. I decorated it with real pretty rocks. It sparkled from all the shiny white stones. I quickly closed the lid and pushed it back underneath my bed. The bed creaked from my added weight as I laid back and stared up at my ceiling.

I clasped my hands together and laid them near my heart as Mamie taught me and closed my eyes. "Dear Jesus, please help my Momma. I'm real scared she's sick. I don't like Jack much, Jesus, but you already know that. It's just... something isn't right about him. I'm sorry for it, I know he's my step-dad and all but Jesus, he just don't do right. I'm trying to be good, but it's real hard sometimes."

It always seemed to help when I talked to Jesus. I always felt better afterward, like I had just confided to a friend who smiled at me no matter what I had to say.

I rolled over onto my left side and stared at my calendar hanging on the wall. Summer never lasted long. I know I have to make the most of it. Tomorrow I would have to mow the yard and pull some of those ugly weeds. I know Jack isn't going to do it. He never did anything anymore. He stayed in the garage and drank beer most days and only came in to eat and sleep. I don't know why she keeps him around.

Mamie Lee yelled from down below, "Shelby?"

I jumped up off the bed and walked to the top of the stairs, looking down towards the bottom where momma was standing.

"Yes Ma'am?"

"I need to move a few things around and clean my room up. Would you like to help?"

"Sure!" I stepped down excitedly. I was never allowed in her room.

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Mamie asked an hour later, "Shelby, what do you think of this?" She held up a pearl necklace.

My eyes widened. "It's real pretty!" The necklace had rows of light pink pearls on a gold chain.

Mamie laid the pearls back into the box and closed the lid tight. "Those were my Mother's." she said, smiling wistfully, if not a little sadly. She laid the box on one of the many piles they had made in the room. After a few hours, there were only two large piles stacked up. Mamie grabbed one of the larger boxes that I had piled in the corner.

"Help me put these things in this box, Shelby."

I helped her stack the items, and when that was accomplished, she taped them up and wrote on each one, marking the contents. The tall box, she wrote my name on the lid with a black marker. She turned to me, "Shelby, this is for you. Take this one to your room."

"Yes Momma, I will... but why are you giving all of this to me?"

Mamie sat down on top of the big quilt that lay on her bed. "Because I don't need it anymore. Just keep it in your closet for a while. Now go on, sweetie. Your momma needs to rest. That took all the energy that I had left!" She said, smiling sadly.

I picked up the box, surprised that I could lift it; and even then, just barely. With a grunt, I took the stairs one at a time, wincing as the box cut into my arm. When I made it to my room, I placed the box on the floor in my closet, pushing it all the way to the back. I wasn't sure why, but the need to keep it hidden was strong. My closet was sparse, only containing a few items. I didn't like to wear dresses. Only on Sunday's and school days was I made to wear them. I only owned two pairs of shoes. One, a tight pair of black dress shoes and the other, a pair of Oxfords I only wore to school. The rest of the time, especially during the summer, I just went barefoot. The bottoms of my feet were hard and callused, not soft like my mom's.

I washed my face and brushed my teeth, then discarded my clothes into the laundry basket.

With one of my momma's old shirts for a nightgown, I crawled underneath the cool blankets and closed my gritty eyes.

I fell asleep instantly.

## Chapter Three

### Run

*The night was almost upon me. I pushed my matchbox car around in circles on the dry dirt. I could hear bells in the background and a woman crying. I picked myself up off the ground in search of the sad sound. My eyes lit upon an old church with white peeling paint. In slow motion, I followed the sound until I lighted upon the front door to the church. Faintly, I could hear someone calling out in a tearful voice, "Lizzy? Lizzy? Where are you?" The sound was made in desperation. A coiled knot of fear twisted inside my stomach. My knees began to knock. A heavy mist formed around me. A door appeared and with a trembling hand, I reached toward the knob. It opened suddenly, and Jack leered down at me, Lizzy?*

*Shelby?*

"Shelby!"

"Uh?" I jerked awake.

It was Jack. "Shelby! Open this door! It's your Mom. You need to come down *now!*" He was hollering from the other side of the old wooden door in a voice I had never heard from him before. It was a frantic, almost panicked.

I gasped in fear, jumping out of my bed and quickly dressed in a pair of cut-off shorts and a white t-shirt. I threw my bedroom door open and flew down the stairs then stopped short as if I had hit an invisible wall. My eyes widened in shock at the sight before me.

Two men in blue attire were carrying my mom out on a stretcher while another was talking to Jack in hushed tones. I ignored them and ran after the stretcher.

"Momma?" My eyes filled with tears and my heart was beating erratically. I was having trouble breathing.

"Momma?"

Another man also in a blue shirt, pulled me back. "Stand clear, please."

"*NO!* That's my *Momma!* Please, why are you taking her?" Fear raced up and down my spine like chilling fingers.

The blue shirt man gently pulled me back again. "We're taking her to the hospital. Go to your dad now." The men loaded the stretcher into the back of the ambulance and then jumped in, closing the doors with a slam.

*Bam!* Went one. *Bam!* The other.

The slamming of the ambulance doors will always be imprinted in my mind like a burn. Jack directed me to the car, and we followed the ambulance to the hospital. The smell of the place wasn't something I will ever forget.

I sat inside the lobby, waiting to hear something... anything. The clock barely registered a.m. as I yawned, it being a reminder how early it was. I bent over and wrapped my arms around my middle. If anything happened to my momma, I didn't know what I would do.

For the second time in my life, I was truly frightened. Jack wasn't a nice man like my mom thought. Maybe I should have told her about all the times he tried to touch me but I had no place else to go and didn't want momma mad at me, or calling me a liar. I would have given anything to have an older sibling or at least someone to talk to. I did a quick scan of the lobby

seeing it was full of people waiting to hear something about their own loved ones, she supposed. It was sad, really. They all spoke in hushed tones, some holding each other. I wrapped my arms tighter around myself, me having no one there to comfort me, but me. I counted the black squares on the floor; every other one being black. I was now up to one hundred and thirty-two, and I stopped, swiping at my face; my hand coming away wet. I looked up when I heard Jack's voice and saw he was walking towards me along with the Doctor. I watched as they got closer and saw Jack frowning. When we made eye contact, he motioned for me to come over where they both were standing.

"Shelby, the Doc here wants to talk to you. I need to go fill out some paperwork." With that, he turned on his heels and left.

A man in a long white jacket smiled down at me. "Shelby, is it?" At my nod he continued, pointing to some chairs in the far corner of the lobby.

"Let's sit over there."

I followed him dragging my feet. Once we were seated, he faced me.

"Shelby, did you know your Mother had been ill for quite some time?"

I didn't answer, only nodded my head instead. A lump the size of a golf ball had now settled in my airway.

"She had cancer, Shelby... do you know what that is?"

*Yes, I know what cancer is,* I thought. The lump in my throat increased in size.

I cleared my throat, "Kind of."

"Well...it spread throughout her whole body until it took everything. I've been her doctor for over a year now. She was a fighter. I know she loved you." He paused, then:

"Your Mother has passed away, Shelby. I'm very sorry."

A loud buzzing began in my head. A cramp took hold of my tummy and turned tighter and tighter. How does he know she loved me? Did she tell him that? Why didn't she tell *me* that? Why is he saying my momma was dead? I pinched my arm as hard as I could so I would wake up. There I would see my momma sitting on my bed and then she would lean over and kiss me, and I would hug her. Then we would go downstairs, and she would make me breakfast and then... and...

Instead of my bed, I was still sitting in the sterile and cold waiting room, smelling old people and death. Now I could smell death. It was the worst thing I have ever smelled in my life, and it was all around me.

"But...what will happen to me?" I began to weep openly as everything around me started to pulse in and out, like I was in a mirrored funhouse at the Carnival. Momma took me there once, and we laughed when we saw each other in the warped mirrors...and we laughed and laughed and laughed...

He took my hand, his face gentle. "Your father will take care of you now, Shelby. I know it hurts." The doctor stood up and seemed to open his mouth to say something else, and then closed it and walked away, his shoes echoing off the floor.

My mouth fell open. *It hurts? That's all I get?* This isn't real! I can't live with Jack! Even in my shock at that moment, my mind blew open in panic-stricken terror.

*He'll hurt me! I just know it! No!*

I felt completely lost now; nothing more than a little fluff of dandelion seed floating loose in a terrible hurricane-force wind. Unsure before, now I had absolutely no idea what my future holds. I watched as Jack moved in closer.

"Come on, Shelby. Let's go home. I need a drink." With that, he walked right past me and headed out through the double doors. I stood frozen for a good minute then on wobbly legs--and with nowhere else to go--I hurried after him.

In the car on the way home, I was nothing but numb. I stared straight ahead at the cars whizzing by, not seeing nary a one.



Jack spoke in almost a jovial tone. "Well kiddo, it's just you and me now." He looked over at me and grinned. Fascinated and in deep shock, I marveled at his silver tooth which seemed to wink at me.

Arriving home, and while Jack was busy locking up the garage and taking his bottles of 'hidden' liquor out to display boldly on the kitchen counter, I ran upstairs to my room. I grabbed my old school backpack and dumped out all the junk it held onto my bed. I crammed my backpack full of clothes, adding a toothbrush and a brush for my hair. My eyes scan over my sparse room. I quickly slide out the box momma had left me, remembering everything we had put in there. I felt physically ill knowing I would have to leave some, if not most of this behind. I opened up the flap and spotted the jewelry box with the pearls inside. That's when I saw it...a large yellow envelope with *Shelby* written on top. When had she put that in there? I picked up the envelope and walked over to my bed and sat down. After carefully turning it over in my hands, my nervous fingers traced my name. The envelope opened easily, as if my momma knew I would be reading it very soon. I pulled out a sheaf of paper and a folded up wad of money. The letter was addressed to me. I began to read:

*My dearest little Shelby,*

*If you're reading this, it means that I have finally gone on to be with my heavenly Father. I will make this quick. You know how I don't like to write much. I've left you some money in case you need it for anything. It was all I had. I wish I could give you more. The house is yours, but you can't have it until you turn 18. Jack has promised to take care of you, but I don't trust him. I knew what he was trying to do to you, Shelby. I'm so sorry, please forgive me. By the time I had figured it all out, I was already too sick to fight. I have something to tell you, hon. A long time ago, I lived in a small town down in the south of Florida called Laurel Hill. Every Sunday I went to a little country church, and that's when I first saw you. You were so pretty and sweet, and I wanted a little girl real bad. And I couldn't have any children of my own, so I just took you. Your real name is Mary Elizabeth. I don't remember your last name. I have never regretted taking you, and for that I know I will be punished, but I loved you too much for any regrets. As soon, I grabbed you and left, I drove as far away as I could. That's when we came to live in Wyoming. I found our small house and fixed it up for us. I forged a new birth certificate for you. It was so easy, even I was surprised. Made one up on a computer. Take this money Shelby, and get a bus ticket. Don't talk to any strangers. You go find your real mother and father if you want. Get away from Jack. He's not right, and I'm afraid he'll hurt you once I'm gone. I have always loved you as my own, Mary.*

*Yours forever until time ends,*

*Mamie xxxooo*

I gasped, reading the letter over and over again. I now felt as if my entire life had been ripped in two. One part of me still wrapped in her arms while the other part now invisible.

Everything I thought I had known was a lie.

“Shelby? Come down here a minute!” Jack shouted.

*Oh no! I took too long! What was I going to do? I’ve got to get out of here and now before he comes for me.*

With hands shaking, I shoved the money and letter back into the envelope and stuffed it in my bag.

Jack hollered again, ‘Shelby?’

“I’m coming, Jack! I’ll be down in a minute.” I couldn’t let him get a hold of me! He was probably drunk by now. My eyes slid to the window as I tried to pull myself together, almost staggering over and looked out. There wasn’t any time to think this through.

I slid my window open and looked down. It would probably break my leg if I jumped, but the tree closest to the window was kind enough to offer a few sturdy branches that I could use to climb down. I hooked my backpack on and had one foot out the window when I remembered my box. I hurried to my bed and fell to all fours, snatching it up. With my bag snug on my back and the box tucked safely under my arm, I crawled out onto the ledge and jumped onto one of the branches of the big oak, quickly scampering down. Once I hit the bottom, I took off in a run down the dirt road, never looking back. I didn’t stop until I knew I was far enough away to not be seen from the house. He will come looking for me, I know this... and he will be spitting nails in anger and drunken rage.

I had to reach the bus stop. I didn’t have time to try and think about anything else because my mind was nothing but a jumbled mess of disconnected thoughts. First of momma, then the hospital, then the doctor, the letter; everything. When I got on the bus, maybe then I could breathe.

*If, I got on the bus,* I reminded myself.

I kept to the side of the road, watching both directions for momma's car. It wasn’t long before I heard the familiar whir of the motor. I veered into the woods past the tree lines, so that he wouldn't see me. I hid behind a big pine and watched as the Chrysler came into view. He’s driving slowly. I know he's looking for me, but he wasn't going to find me. Never again was he going to touch me! My stomach rumbled uncomfortably, and I prayed he wouldn't stop. It was loud enough for anyone to hear within five feet of her. I tightened my stomach muscles, resolute.

It’ll be a while before I get anything to eat. I don't believe I could eat anything anyway; my entire life had changed. Everything I knew... gone. *Momma, why did you have to go?*

I stayed hidden, letting the tears fall from my cheeks as I watched the Chrysler slowly move away from me. After the car passes far enough, I began walking again but this time, I stayed hidden in case he doubled back, keeping the road to my right and always in my line of vision. It was late in the afternoon by the time I made it into the town proper. I knew where the bus station was as my Aunt Lilly came to visit occasionally, or used to before Jack moved in. The question was could I make it without Jack finding me first? I was keeping my eye open to every car that approached or came up from behind me, my heart freezing every time one resembled the Chrysler in any way at all. I try to keep myself hidden by ducking behind trees that lined the streets and between the parked cars. I can smell gas fumes and tar as I bent down on hands and knees, waiting... then getting up to continue.

When I spot the bus station, I also spot the maroon Chrysler right out front. My heart dropped to my feet, unsure what to do. I knew I would have to wait it out until he left, no matter how long that took. I found a 'look-out' spot behind a large tree I was able to peek around it and

watch the station without little chance of being seen. I don't hear anyone come up behind me until it's too late.

"Shelby, what are you doing, honey? Playing hide-n-seek?"

I jumped as if I had been electrocuted and turned around to face Mrs. Hendrix, my math teacher from the previous year.

"Hi!" I squeaked. I looked behind me toward Jack's car and my only means of escape from this town.

"Yes, Mrs. Hendrix, that's right! I'm playing hide and seek. I have to go now, so I'll see you later." Mrs. Hendrix's arm wrapped around my shoulder when I tried to run past her to find a more inconspicuous place; it seemed. She pushed her glasses up her nose.

"Shelby, I heard. I'm so sorry to hear about your mom. Are you okay? If you need anything, please let me know, dear."

"Sure, Mrs. Hendrix, I will." Since when did she ever care about me? It made me mad when grown-ups played at caring. "I'm sorry, but I have to go before they find me." I snatched my arm back and sprinted past her. I ran up the sidewalk in the opposite direction from the bus station, I veered to the right running between two houses. I came upon a gate that was connected to one of the brick homes and opened it, now walking through the back yard until I reached the back fence. I jumped over and took off at a flat-run.

I wasn't sure how far I had gone before I had to stop from lack of oxygen. I bent over, taking in great gulps of air. Once my breathing returned to normal, I glanced around, knowing exactly where my running had led me. I've entered what was called by the locals, *The Black Forest*. There was a legend about the forest, something about wood sprites living here and such. Supposedly, (according to legend) they protected the forest with magic. It was darker in the woods with tall, thick evergreens surrounding me at every turn. The ground was thick and soft, and my small feet sunk in then pulled out with a soft slurpy sound with each step, but I wasn't about to go back yet. I was simply too tired and hungry. I hadn't eaten anything since yesterday afternoon, and the backpack was heavy, causing my shoulder to ache.

I walked a little further into the dark and eerie woods, the tall trees with their spindly branches seeming to point accusing fingers at me. The rustling of the leaves I was sure were caused from the sprites watching my every move. I shivered and kept walking. There was no way I could go back at this point, anyway... I was too deep in. The legends stated that the sprites protected everything in their woods and now as I was in them meant I was protected, or at least that was how I thought of it. I relaxed my shoulders, pondering on this.

I almost walked right past it, but something caused me to look down, and I saw a hole big enough for someone to lie in at the bottom of a large tree. I fell to my knees and peered in. Nothing but a few spiders. It would be perfect! When a long stick to my right caught my attention, I snatched it up and poked it into the hole, snatching at the cobwebs and making an 'eww' face, removed them.

I pulled the backpack off my shoulders and sat it on the ground, my slender shoulders sighing a thank you. I unzipped it and pulled out a clean shirt, pulling off my dirty one slipping the much warmer and cleaner one on. I wrapped the dirty one around the stick and used it to brush away any remaining webs or spiders. When that was accomplished, I shook it out and wadded it up, placing it into the hole to use as a pillow. It would still get chilly tonight, but this would be a perfect place to sleep and at least keep some of the chill off until morning. I crawled into my makeshift little nest and curled into a ball. I was too tired and hungry to do much else but sleep.

My dreams were fitful; causing me to moan out as creatures of the night came to my unconscious form to gaze or sniff at this strange newcomer into their forest.