

Chapter 1 - Pet Palace

“It's time to go, Bella!” Mom shouted for the third time.

“O-KAY, o-KAY! I just have one more fox to catch.....then.....GOT 'IM! Ok – I'm coming!”

“At 10 years old, maybe Dad should start teaching you about how to catch REAL foxes on the property that keep attacking our chickens rather than absorbing yourself in catching Minecraft foxes. And look! Now we're going to be at least a half hour late to Pet Palace!”

“Well, you should have called me earlier. I'm trying to build a fox army so I can fight off more enemies.”

“Bella, you're going to have to cut your time on Minecraft if you intend to be the owner of a dog, especially a puppy. Remember our agreement. Two months trial period, then we will make a final decision if the dog can stay.”

“I'm NOT giving up Minecraft,” Bella mumbled to herself.

Mom pulled into the parking lot of Pet Palace USA which was hosting the puppy adoption event that day. It was packed! She found a space in the far corner and they hurried over to the penned area where all the cute furry pups were surrounded by kids and parents interacting with them, each hoping to find that perfect new member of their family.

Bella scanned the pen, searching for the young border collie she had picked out a few days ago. At that time, the puppies were receiving their final health check-ups at the local dog rescue before the event.

“Be sure to come early to get the puppy you want,” the rescue worker had told them. “They go fast at these events!”

“Do you see him, Mom?” asked Bella. “That's the one I wanted! He crawled up on my lap and followed me the rest of the time we were there. He can't be gone!”

But he WAS gone. Mom saw the family with the squirming collie puppy in the arms of a young boy, trotting off to their car, all smiles. She put her arm around Bella, directing her gaze toward the car. When the puppy saw her, he gave a little yelp. Bella's eyes flooded with tears. She was heart-broken.

Chapter 2 - Finding a Dog

Bella was quiet the next few days. She was angry and sad at the same time. Having missed out on getting the puppy she wanted at the adoption event, she now sulked around the house. She regretted her choice to finish her Minecraft game instead of coming the first time Mom had called.

It was spring. Plenty of work needed to be done on the 20 wooded acres around their property. Bella was helping her dad repair chicken fence and remove deadwood from their land.

“Dad!” she shouted.

“What is it, Bella?”

She pointed to the remains of a pile of feathers and bones from dead chickens that lay at her feet.

“Looks like we need a few traps,” Dad sighed. “Once a fox discovers where he can get a free dinner, the family moves in. Be sure to completely wire that fence closed then grab some clean shoes and get in the truck,” he told her. “We're going to need help.”

“But, Dad, I've already worked two hours and wanted to play my game!” she began to argue.

“Bella. No arguing, please. Just finish, get your shoes, and get in the truck.”

She turned away, sat down on a rock, and started complaining to herself.

“Finish up, Bella!” called Dad.

Grabbing the wire, she trotted off, too angry to complete her work.

“Why do **I** have to come?” Bella complained as she shut the truck door.

“Because we need help, and we must get it now,” is all Dad would say.

Fifteen minutes later, Dad pulled into the parking lot of Pet Supplies Plus where a large banner was waving: Dog Adoption Day. There was a small crowd with only a dozen dogs and a few puppies. The event would be over in just a few minutes.

“I can't be patrolling our 20 acres all the time. I need help, and I can't wait. Let's see what's here.”

Bella was speechless! Another chance to bring home a puppy. She ran to the pens.

“Look, Dad!” Bella pointed to a young pup in the corner spinning around, chasing its tail. He was still full of energy and highly entertaining even after hours of visitors. Several kids were in the pen, laughing at his performance.

“Seems odd that this little guy is still here,” remarked Dad to the rescue worker.

“Oh, not really,” she replied. “Cattle dogs are super high energy and need lots of property to run on. Not many people can handle them.”

“Perfect!” smiled Dad. “We'll take him!”

Chapter 3 - The Great Escape

Oscar, the name Bella chose for their new 12-week-old puppy, was an indoor tornado! Not only did he spin in circles chasing his tail, he ran up and down stairs; jumped onto beds, dragged toys and rugs through the house, and decided Bella's bedroom was the best choice for a bathroom!

That first week was a nightmare for her parents, but in spite of the constant cleanup and failed attempts to de-energize her puppy, Bella loved Oscar more each day. Yes – he was a terror, but he was so innocent and cute, she found herself growing more and more fond of him, especially during those rare moments when he snuggled next to her at night.

During school, Bella's mom kept Oscar behind a gate in the laundry room. Bella thought this to be terribly mean as Oscar whined every time he had to be shut in.

“I can't watch him every minute of the day while trying to do my own work,” said Mom. “When he's trained, he can roam freely, but not now. Dogs left to themselves cannot be good companions. They need to respect the wishes of their owners – and that's you, my dear!”

Yes. Bella knew the agreement: Two months trial period, then they would make a final decision if the dog can stay.

The doorbell rang. It was Saturday morning and Bella's friend had come to meet Oscar. Nathan brought Dexter, his own dog, hoping they could play. When Bella opened the door, Oscar bolted out.

“Oscar! Oscar! Come here!”

But it was useless. He had seen the chance to escape and took full advantage. Dexter stood quietly at Nathan's side, looking up at him. Nathan waved his hand and Dexter knew he was given permission to go play.

The two dogs ran freely, chasing one another, play-fighting, and barking. After about 10 minutes, Nathan shouted, “Dexter!” and patted the side of his leg. Dexter instantly obeyed with Oscar following. Bella quickly grabbed her dog before he could take off again.

Bella was amazed.

“How did you teach him that?” she asked.

“With LOTS of patience!” replied Nathan.

Bella took Oscar inside and put him behind the gate. He whined.

“I'm sorry, Oscar, but you can't go running out the door like that. You could've been hit by a car! For now, it's best for you to stay behind the gate.”

Chapter 4 - Losing the PlayStation

Nathan agreed to help Bella with Oscar's training. After her puppy had escaped last week, she knew it was time to begin obedience lessons if she wanted to keep him. Nathan would come on Monday afternoons.

Bella was allowed one hour each day on the PlayStation, but only *after* her homework was finished. She played with Oscar for a bit after school on Monday, then completed her math assignments. She still had a science project to finish, but she needed a break and decided she would play just a *little* Minecraft then finish up.

“Bella,” Mom interrupted as she came into the den a little later, “Nathan just called and said he would be here in about 20 minutes. I assume your homework is finished?”

“I did my math,” is all she said.

“Your science is out on the table. Did you do that, too?”

Bella thought about lying, but decided against that. Instead she made an excuse.

“I couldn't focus anymore, so I took a break. I'll finish it now.”

“Bella, you know the rule. No PlayStation until after the homework is finished. You'll have to wait a week now before you can play again.”

“That's not fair!” Bella argued. “I DID do homework – ALL my math. I was just taking a break!”

“You did *half*. What would happen if I only took *half* the garbage out every week? Would that be good for our family? We've talked about the importance of obeying right away and completely. If I let you get away with only doing things half-way, I would not be a very good or loving parent.

“Remember these bible verses? '*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother... that it may go well with you.*'

“Obedience isn't about what's good for *me*, Bella, it's about what's good for *you*. I know learning obedience isn't easy, but it's necessary and good for us. As God's children, your dad and I are *still* learning how to honor the Lord and *still* working at obeying Him.”

Bella had nothing to say.

“I'm sorry, Bella, but you can't use the PlayStation for a week.”

Chapter 5 - Shadow's End

Bella was grumpy after losing her Minecraft privilege for the week, but when Nathan and Dexter arrived, she perked up. She let them in then closed the door so Oscar wouldn't escape again. Oscar was practically climbing the gate when he saw Dexter!

Bella grabbed the leash. “If you learn to come when I call, then we won't need this leash or a gate,” she told Oscar.

As they walked to the yard, Bella noticed how often Dexter gazed up at Nathan. Oscar, on the other hand, was tugging on the leash with his eyes fixed on Dexter!

“I really want Oscar to be as obedient as Dexter is,” said Bella. “How in the world did you ever get him so well-trained?”

“I used the IF-THEN method,” he said. “IF he did what I was teaching him, THEN he would get a treat. He had to do it *perfectly* before he got a treat so I knew he would obey when it really mattered. A couple of years ago I learned that a disobedient dog can quickly become a disabled dog.”

“What do you mean?” asked Bella.

“Shadow was my first dog. I was pretty good about training him, but I wasn't strict enough about making him come the first time I called. It was March and the ice on our pond was getting soft. Shadow and I had been ice skating a lot that winter. Well – he didn't skate, but he chased me. We headed out to check the ice, but he saw a rabbit and took off. The rabbit made it across the pond just fine, but I wasn't sure if Shadow would be too heavy. I called him three times, but he was determined to get that rabbit. He hit a soft spot and fell through. By the time I reached him, he was frantic since his back legs were in the freezing water while he tried to pull himself out. But it was too slippery. My dad came running and finally rescued him, but he ended up losing one of his legs. Then it got infected a few weeks later and he died.”

Bella was almost in tears by the time Nathan finished.

“So, when I got Dexter, I made sure I would never let that happen again. It took LOTS of daily work and patience. But now I have a best friend that will never run away and that loves me as much as I love him.”

Chapter 6 - Listen and Live

Nathan was an excellent teacher! Not only did he show great patience with Oscar, but with Bella as well. Being a couple of years older, he was able to understand her frustrations since he had experienced the same feelings not too long ago while training Dexter.

He demonstrated the proper hand signals for teaching Oscar to sit and wait and repeatedly reminded Bella to keep her other hand still so Oscar would only have one movement to focus on. Nathan would gently push Oscar into a sitting position when Bella spoke and used the hand signal, then he would hold him there for 10 or 15 seconds. During that time, Oscar was anxiously watching Bella's hand with the treat in it, which he desperately wanted after smelling it!

After an hour, Oscar completely lost focus, so they went into the barn, closed the doors and let the two dogs run and play for a while. As they jumped on and off the stack of straw bales, no one noticed the large wire cage at the top of the stack was slowly being pushed toward the edge. But when Oscar unintentionally slammed into it, the cage teetered and slid off the top, plummeting straight downward – right where Dexter was standing!

“DEXTER! COME!” shouted Nathan. The dog immediately obeyed, barely escaping being crushed. Nathan threw his arms around Dexter's neck, heart pounding, as he hugged his best friend and praised him over and over for being such a good boy.

Oscar was standing at the top of the straw stack, peering over at Bella as she dragged the cage to a corner. He seemed clueless as to what just happened.

“If that had been MY dog,” she thought, “he would be...” She couldn't even say the word.

“He MUST learn to obey me if he's going to live very long!”

As they walked out of the barn, Dad was coming on his way in. He was carrying two dead chickens.

“Fox?” asked Nathan.

“I think so,” replied Dad, “but I haven't been able to trap any to know for sure. All I know is that our fence was not secured very well. I just fixed several gaps.”

Bella pretended she wasn't listening.

Chapter 7 - Oscar Learns to Sit

Since Bella couldn't play on the PlayStation all week, she spent that time training Oscar to sit. She went into the laundry room with him so he couldn't run all over the house and would be more likely to focus on his training.

Without Nathan to push Oscar's backend down, it was difficult to hold the treat in one hand and keep him in a sitting position at the same time. She held her left hand above her head with the treat so Oscar would look upward, making it more likely that he would sit, just like Nathan had shown her. But when she moved her right hand to push his back end down, he would take his eyes off her left hand and start dancing around. Bella got so frustrated she threw the treat outside the gate.

“This is impossible!” she shouted, glaring at Oscar who was now whining as he stared at the treat that just went flying over the gate.

Mom peeked around the corner. She picked up the treat and stepped into the cage.

“Here, honey. I'll help you.”

Mom sat alongside Oscar. Every time Bella held the treat up and Oscar looked up, Mom gently pushed him into a sitting position. Each time she did this, she used less and less of her hand until she was only touching Oscar with one finger and hardly had to push. She stepped over the gate and now stood behind him. Bella took another treat, raised her hand and commanded, “Oscar, sit.” Mom watched, but did not touch him. He wiggled his back end a bit and looked like he was about to jump.

“Oscar, sit,” Bella said once more. With eyes fixed on that treat, Oscar obeyed! Bella held the treat up for 10 seconds and then dropped into his mouth.

“FINALLY!! You did it!” Mom and Bella both cheered and clapped!

“GOOD BOY!” Bella praised him over and over.

“Thank you, Mom!”

“You're very welcome, Bella. Everyone, even puppies, need a helper sometimes to come alongside them to guide them in doing the right thing.”

Chapter 8 - “I Need Your Help”

Bella was full of chatter at dinner as she told her dad how well Oscar had done in his training earlier that day.

“I was ready to give up, but Mom came and helped Oscar obey until he finally sat down all by himself without Mom touching him at all! I just know he’s going to be a great dog!”

Dad was all smiles. “As soon as he learns to come when he’s called, he’ll be able to run free on the property. That may be a while, but you’ve got a good start.”

Bella and Mom cleaned up the dinner dishes while Dad opened mail.

“Department of Finance?” he blurted out. “What’s this about?”

Bella watched her dad’s face grow angry as he read the letter.

“What is it, John?” asked Bella’s mom.

“Parking ticket. They say they have my truck on camera in the city on May 23 in a parking spot for 15 minutes after the meter ran out. And now they want me to pay 50 bucks or go to court on June 15. No way!” He tossed the letter across the counter and left the kitchen.

“Thanks for helping, Bella,” said Mom. “Why don’t you take a few minutes with Oscar and see if he remembers what he learned today? A little review would be good for him.”

As Bella climbed over the gate, she could hear her parents upstairs.

“15 lousy minutes and they want me to pay 50 dollars? That’s insane! You know what, Ellen? I don’t think I’m gonna pay!”

“Sooo...you’re going to appear in court instead?” she asked.

“NO. I’m going to do NOTHING!”

“I don’t think that’s an option,” said Ellen. “Look, John. I know this isn’t what you want to hear right now, but how are we to insist that Bella honor and obey *us* - her authorities - if we don’t intend to obey *our* authorities? There are proper ways to challenge this ticket if you want to do that.”

(short pause then sigh)

“You’re right...*as usual*.” “Oh, Lord,” he prayed, “I need Your help to have the proper attitude here and to honor these governing authorities - whether I like it or not.”

“Did you hear that Oscar?” Bella whispered in his ear.

He must have! Because when Bella held up the treat and commanded him to sit, he did it the first time!

“Mom! Dad!” shouted Bella. “Oscar obeyed again - the *first* time!!”

Chapter 9 - “Come!” The Most Important Command

“Teaching Oscar to come when you call is probably the most important command he needs to obey,” Nathan said. “It’s also probably the hardest to learn!”

Bella had been having training sessions with Nathan every Monday for many weeks. Oscar was quite obedient when told to sit, stay, and heel beside her while they walked. But he was still on a leash when outside because he had not learned to come immediately when called.

“I wish I could explain to him why this is so important,” Bella said as she sat down next to Oscar. “I wish he could hear and understand what happened to your first dog. Maybe he would obey then.”

“Ha! I doubt it,” said Nathan. “My parents told me *many* times to make Shadow come immediately - the *first* time I called - but I just didn’t see the importance of it. He was a *pretty* good listener and I was ok with that. I should have taken their advice. So if I, a person, didn’t take their advice, I doubt if Oscar would do any better at taking your advice. *You’re* the one who has to insist he obeys. It’s for his own good and I hope my story reminds you of that so you won’t give up.”

When Nathan was there, He would be holding a long rope clipped to Oscar’s collar. Bella would tell him to sit and stay. She held the treat in her right hand at her side, next to her leg. After backing up a few feet at first, and then reaching a distance of 50 feet, she would stop and call: “Oscar, come!” and slap the side of her leg. He would race toward her - *most* of the time. Sometimes he would get distracted and run off, but the rope would stop him.

“Remember, Bella,” said Nathan, “IF he obeys completely, THEN he gets the treat. If you give him the treat because you feel sorry for him, you’re teaching him it’s ok to disobey sometimes and it confuses him.”

Bella loved Oscar way too much to let him end up like Shadow. She did exactly what Nathan said day after day after day.

At last the day arrived when Oscar came 10 times in a row without getting distracted - even when Nathan threw a toy rabbit out to test him! Bella was so full of joy, she burst into tears!

Chapter 10 - The Sleepover

“You know,” Dad said to Bella, “I’ve had traps set all summer and haven’t caught one fox. Strange.”

“Maybe they smell Oscar,” replied Bella. “I’ve taken him around the chicken pen since I got him, so he knows to guard them. He always takes a few laps around the pen whenever we go out.”

“Maybe,” said Dad. “But with winter coming and less food available, I think it’s time to check the fence again.”

He handed Bella some wire and a wire cutter.

“Take Oscar, and after you clean the coop, carefully check the pen. Close up any gaps, no matter how small.”

“It’s fine, Dad. I want to get ready for my sleepover tonight. I’ll do it tomorrow,” Bella stated.

“No, Bella. I want it done now.”

“Why do I *always* have to work on Saturday? It’s supposed to be my day off!” she complained.

“Enough,” Dad said firmly. “Two or three hours of work on Saturday has always been the rule. No work - no sleepover.”

Bella stomped off. “Come on, Oscar.” He rushed to her side.

Oscar ran way ahead, but trotted back as soon as she called. While walking around the pen, she noticed one section had pulled away from the steel post about two inches. She wired it shut then went inside to shovel out the straw and put in a fresh batch. Still irritated with her dad, she took a quick glance at the rest of the fence then raced with Oscar back to the house to get ready for Josie, Pam, and Myrna who were coming to spend the night.

The three girls arrived at 5 pm. Mom had planned a scavenger hunt and sent them out while she waited for the pizza to arrive. Pam was the first to return with all the items on the list, followed by Josie, Bella and then Myrna.

“I love all the paths you have cut through your property!” Josie exclaimed. “We should plan a dark hunt sometime with flashlights!”

After pizza, a movie, and a long pillow fight, Mom reminded the girls 11pm was lights out. “You can whisper all you want, but we parents need some sleep!”

“Ok, Mom,” called Bella.

A few minutes after 11, Bella turned off the lights assuming the fun and games were over.

But Josie had other plans.

Chapter 11 - A Daring Adventure

Bella’s sleepover with Pam, Myrna and Josie was nearly over as they whispered quietly for about an hour. Oscar had crawled into Bella’s sleeping bag and was snuggled beside her. She could feel his heart beating close to hers.

“Nighty, night, Oscar. I love you.”

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“Bella! Wake up!” Josie shook her. “We want to play *Courage or Coward* - like the TV show - and run the paths on your property. The moon is out and it’s really bright. Come on!”

Three eager faces were staring at her, ready for the daring adventure.

“I...don’t know. I’ve never been out there at night by myself.”

“Coward?” Josie asked. “It’s your own yard! Come on, Bella. It’ll be fun!”

Bella was scared. But if she said no, she knew Josie would tell everyone what a coward she was.

“Ok. But you can’t ever tell anyone we did this - or I’ll be grounded forever!”

After putting on their sweatshirts and shoes, they tip-toed out the side door. Once outside, Bella and Oscar led the way. No one said a word. It was chilly and the light breeze gave a ghostly appearance to the trees’ shadows as they twisted and coiled on the ground beneath the moonlight. As they approached the chicken coop which stood near the entrance to the path that led into the woods, Oscar began to whine.

“Quiet, Oscar!” whispered Bella. He darted out ahead, like he always did, to run around the pen. The chickens were cackling, obviously upset.

Just as Oscar disappeared around the back side of the pen, Bella saw another shadow on the other side, pulling at the fence with its teeth. A wave of fear suddenly flooded over her. Alarmed by Oscar, the enormous wolf came bounding into sight. The girls screamed as the beast hurled forward. Oscar emerged from the far side of the pen just as the beast was beginning to leap in his direction. Oscar would be torn to bits if caught!

“OSCAR!” screamed Bella. “COME!”

Just as the wolf was about to pounce on Oscar, he veered away, dashing straight toward Bella.

At that moment, the booming voice of Bella’s dad pierced through the dark. Several rocks whipped past the trembling girls, one striking the wolf’s face. A cry of pain ensued as the wounded beast retreated back into the woods.

Bella ran into her dad’s arms, sobbing.

“Well, that explains the empty traps,” murmured Dad as he escorted the terrified girls to the house.

Chapter 12 - Grace

Josie, Pam and Myrna’s parents came to pick them up that night when Bella’s dad called them. They were very grateful he had decided to check out why Oscar was outside whining and saving the girls from the wolf attack.

“Bella,” Mom began, “do you have any idea what could have happened to you and your friends, not to mention the chickens, because of your disobedience?”

Bella sat on the floor hugging Oscar, her loyal companion as she cried.

“Yes, I do, Mom. When I saw the wolf about to jump on Oscar, I knew he would be killed. I screamed for him to come and he obeyed instantly, which saved him. Then Dad came, just in time, to save ME even though I had been so bad. I can’t imagine life without Oscar because I love him so much. What if no one loved me enough to protect me?”

“I think if there were a dog bible,” said Dad, “the first verse would be: ‘Puppies, obey your owners for this is right. Honor them that it may go well with you and that you may live a long and happy life.’ ”

They all giggled at the thought.

“I didn’t want to go outside,” Bella confessed. “I was scared. I knew it was wrong, but I didn’t want my friends to call me a coward. That was so stupid.”

“We understand,” said Mom. “We want to do wrong because of the sin inside us, but our spirit wants to do right. It’s a constant fight. That’s why God sent Jesus. He’s the only one who is stronger than the sin inside us. He alone can save us and forgive us of our wrong-doing. Jesus bought forgiveness for us by giving up His own life when he died on the cross. We aren’t getting the punishment we deserve. It’s called grace. When we obey God, we strengthen our spirits and weaken the sin in us. Since he loved us first before we ever loved him, we know he will *keep* loving us as we learn to obey him, no matter how many times we fail.”

“I get it now,” said Bella. “I loved Oscar first so I taught him to obey. And because he did obey, he is safe and happy in my love. I guess that’s what you want for me, too.”

“I’m so sorry. I really want to honor and obey you. Will you forgive me and pray for me?”

“Heavenly Father,” prayed Dad, “we *all* need you. We can’t overcome sin without your help every day. Thank you for the grace you give that forgives us when we fail. Remind us of your great love for us and help us choose obedience that it may go well for us. Amen.”

“Bella, your Mom and I agree that you have learned far more tonight than any disciplinary action we would take. Let it be a lesson about obedience and grace you won’t forget. More importantly, let it be a reminder of God’s greatest gift of grace through Jesus.”