

Chapter 1

Molly Wears Bruises

Stand, Bunky, stand,” Shelby said to her tiny black Pomeranian. She lifted the six-month-old puppy a few inches off the bathroom counter and gently set her on her feet. The dog sat down. Shelby smiled. “Hunny bunny,” she said patiently, “one thing you have to know how to do is stand correctly.”

The dog’s registered name was Princess Ebony, but it had somehow changed to Bunky most of the time - and other times whatever came to Shelby’s mind. She lifted the dog again and stood her on the counter. The dog’s feet fell into perfect position, front feet a few inches apart, toes pointing straight forward. Her back feet pointed forward too, a few inches apart and one foot slightly ahead of the other. Shelby held up a hand. “Just a little longer,” she pleaded. The dog stood like a statue. A perfect Pomeranian statue. “Good girl!” Shelby said a moment later. “Good...”

The bathroom door slammed open and against the wall. Molly, her neighbor from across the road, burst in. “You spend more time with that stupid dog than you do with me, Shelby!” she screeched. “I need you, and that dog doesn’t care if it ever goes to a dog show.” (Molly had a bad lisp, so she couldn’t pronounce her s’s. Her words sounded like: “You thpend more time with that thtupid dog...”)

Shelby smiled. “Hi, Molly. I’m fine. How are you?”

Molly didn’t return the smile. “Come on. Let’s go for a bike ride.”

Shelby had lived with her aunt and uncle in tiny Veneta, Oregon, since her mother died, about nine months ago. She’d felt sorry for herself until Molly Lindstrum had moved in across the road. Molly lived with her father and stepmother. “Wicked stepmother” described the woman exactly, and her father wasn’t any better.

Molly couldn’t use the phone, have anyone over, or go to other kids’ houses except when her folks were gone and she sneaked over to Shelby’s. She had to live in her bedroom most of the time so she wouldn’t mess up the house. Added to that, she had to do all the laundry and vacuuming and have dinner ready for her parents every night.

Shelby had tried to be friends with Molly, but it was hard. Molly wasn’t a very likable person and seemed to be getting worse all the

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time. But Shelby had talked to Uncle and Auntie about Molly, and they'd decided Molly needed a friend really badly.

"Sure," Shelby finally said. "Bunky's getting tired, anyway." Her green eyes lighted up. "She's really good, Molly. We're going to win that dog show!"

"Who cares?" Molly growled. "Get rid of the dog, and let's go."

"Sure. Let me get my bike." Bunky didn't like to be alone - ever - so Shelby took her to Aunt Rachel. Auntie did typing for people on a computer she kept in her bedroom-office.

"It's been a long time since we went riding," Shelby said as she opened the garage door.

Molly almost laughed. "Not so long for you. I saw you out trying to ride in about twelve inches of snow a couple of weeks ago." (Molly's words really came out, "In about twelve incheth of thnow")

Shelby laughed. "I tried, but it didn't work. I kept sliding around." She walked her red bike from the garage, put down the door, and hopped on. "Where we going? The oak tree by the lake?" She noticed that Molly wore sunglasses. She'd never seen her friend in shades before, and it seemed odd that she should be wearing them now, since the sun wasn't about to shine in March in western Oregon.

Molly nodded and climbed aboard her bike. She stood about six inches shorter than Shelby and six inches wider. Before Shelby got her bike, she used to run to the oak tree while Molly rode. Today Molly puffed before they reached the end of Marina Drive, the road the girls lived on.

Finally they made the last turn, dropped the kickstands, and eased to the cold, damp ground beneath the oak tree. Shelby looked across the mud flats of what was a lake each summer and imagined boats racing around. The engineers drained Fern Ridge Lake each fall for winter flood control.

"I'm not hanging around that place anymore," Molly said after a few moments of silence.

Shelby jerked upright. "What place?"

"What place do you think? The place those jerks I live with call home."

"Where you going?"

Molly shook her light blond hair. "I don't know. Maybe I'll run away."

Shelby tried to look at Molly, but she really couldn't see her with those dark sunglasses. She leaned over and lifted them from Molly's

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nose. Then she understood the sunglasses on a cloudy day! A black right eye stared at her, plus purplish red bruises high on her right cheek!

"Molly!" Shelby whispered. "What happened?"

Molly laughed a hard, tight laugh. "I didn't get the floor clean enough for the queen," she said.

"Does your dad know?"

Molly shrugged. "He has eyes,"

Shelby took several deep breaths. She'd heard about child abuse, but this was the first time she'd seen it with her own eyes. She stared at Molly's bruised face. "We have to report this to the police," she finally said.

Molly jumped off the ground faster than Shelby thought her plump friend could move. "Oh, no, you don't!" Molly screamed, her eyes wild. Then she lowered her voice to a whisper. "You can't tell a soul in the world. Promise, Shelby. Promise me!"

"This isn't the first time she's hit you, is it?" Shelby asked.

Molly scrunched down, apparently trying to get more comfortable. "No, but this is the first time it's showed."

Shelby touched Molly's arm. Molly jerked back. "Don't you think someone will notice tomorrow at school?" Shelby asked.

"Nooo," Molly said, drawing it out. "Because I'm not going to school until it gets well."

"Oh. But Aunt Rachel knows how to help. She's helped you before." Shelby remembered back several months when Molly got sick and Auntie took lunch to her for several days, and before that, when Molly hurt her foot. Auntie had helped her then too.

Molly nodded. "Yeah, she helped. She's good. But she got me into trouble too. It'll be worse this time. If you tell her, I'll say you made it up. I will, Shelby."

Shelby had heard enough about child abuse to know she should do something. But what? Finally, she shrugged. "OK, I won't tell if you promise not to run away. Awful things happen to kids who run away. You really should be asking me to tell, Molly."

"Why? So I could get another good one?"

Shelby had no answer to that. Aunt Rachel had reported Molly's folks to the police for child abuse once before, but her dad and stepmother had denied hurting Molly - and Molly had agreed with them! Then, after the police left, they hurt Molly more than ever.

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Shelby leaned against the big oak tree, thinking. Maybe she'd lost her mother, but her uncle and aunt loved her a lot and tried their best to make her happy. Her eighteen-year-old cousin Sandy had welcomed her too. In fact, Sandy had been the one who taught her to play the flute. Shelby missed Sandy, who was a senior at Milo Adventist Academy in southern Oregon.

A warm feeling swept over her. She'd loved her mother a lot and felt awful when she died, but still she had things a lot better than Molly. Thank You, dear Jesus, she prayed silently. And please help Molly's life to get better.

The girls soon wandered back to their bikes and headed home. "Want me to bring your assignments?" Shelby asked when they reached their driveways.

Molly shook her head. "Nope. They don't want anyone to know how they treat me, so I'm not studying." She hopped on her bike and sailed down her driveway.

Shelby shook her head a few minutes later as she put her bike away and went into the house. Molly had to do her schoolwork, not her dad or stepmother. She'd have to make it all up sometime. If it were Shelby, she'd want to keep up with it each day.

"What's new with Molly?" Uncle asked as they ate dinner.

His words startled Shelby. How'd he know? "Wait a minute," she told herself. "Don't panic. He doesn't know anything." She shook her head. "Not much that she wants told."

He glanced at Shelby, then at Aunt Rachel. For an instant a knowing look passed between them.

"I'm going to work with Bunky a little while after dinner," Shelby said, eager to change the subject. "She's nearly ready for her first dog show."

"Better be sure," Auntie said. "What does she have to know?"

Shelby drank the last swallow of milk and wiped her mouth. "She has to know how to stand, how to heel, and how to walk and trot. She can do it all."

Later she put on Bunky's collar and chain and took her out to the sidewalk. As always, Shelby held the leash in her right hand and passed it through her left to control the puppy on her left side. The tiny black ball of fluff pranced along beside Shelby, her little front feet lifting high at each step. "You think you're a royal princess," Shelby said, laughing. No matter how Shelby turned, Bunky stayed beside her left heel exactly

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as she was supposed to. Every time Shelby looked down at her, the fluffy little tail wagged over her back.

The next morning the sun shone brightly from a clear blue sky. The sun hardly ever shone in March, and Shelby should have felt good. But she ran out to the road feeling lonely. Molly wouldn't be going to school today.

However, when Shelby got to school, LeeAnne greeted Shelby with such cheerfulness that she forgot all about Molly. LeeAnne, a beautiful black girl, was one of Shelby's best friends, along with Molly. LeeAnne played a flute, as Shelby did, and she enjoyed most of the same things Shelby did. Some of the kids gave LeeAnne a bad time because of her skin color. One of the worst, a boy named Jonathan Greenflower, gave Shelby a bad time too, calling her an orphan. And she was an orphan. Maybe that's why it hurt so badly when the boy yelled it all over the school.

This particular day, the principal, Mr. Brickner, a short, wide, balding man, had called an assembly after lunch. After congratulating the students for a great year so far, he told them that the entertainment committee had suggested they have a Spring Thing - a party celebrating the arrival of spring. "They've suggested we elect a spring king and queen to reign over our banquet," he said. "What do you think?"

The students yelled, whistled, clapped, and stomped.

Mr. Brickner held up his hand for quiet. When the uproar died down, he asked how they'd like to elect the king and queen.

Suggestions came from all over the gym. "Have people sell things." "The kids with the best grades." "The best athletes." "The most popular."

Finally Mr. Brickner held up his hand again. "Do you want to have an election?"

The kids roared out a big Yes.

"All right. Stand up if you'd like to nominate someone. The first five boys and the first five girls chosen will run for this honor. Election will be two weeks from today."

A bunch of kids jumped to their feet, and Shelby couldn't believe she stood too. "I move Brian Keeler be king," someone yelled from the front row. "I move Jenny Drew be queen," a high voice called. "I move Jon Greenflower - uh, - you know," another girl's voice shouted. Then Mr. Brickner pointed at Shelby. "I move LeeAnne Burton be our queen." As she sat down, thankful to get off her wobbly knees, she heard someone yell out Shane Anderson's name. Shelby had met him

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soon after she came to Veneta. They'd laughed over the fact that they were both Shanes, although Shelby's last name was spelled S-h-a-y-n-e. He was a nice kid. In a few minutes the ten were nominated, and the kids headed back to class.

"Why did you do that?" LeeAnne asked as they hurried toward the band room. "Those kids wouldn't elect me for janitor."

"I did it because you're the prettiest girl in school, inside and out."

LeeAnne acted a little embarrassed. "Oh. Well, it's hard for me to be mad at someone who talks like that!"

Just then, they burst through the door into the band room. "Well, if it isn't the Spring Thing herself," Jon Greenflower said. "I mean Spring Queen." Jon was the boy who kept calling Shelby an orphan. She'd had major trouble with him, including the time he teased her so bad that she stomped on his foot and broke a bone in it. He'd deserved it, though. He'd stolen her flute. She'd gotten the flute back, and Jon's foot was nearly healed.

She gave LeeAnne a little push to remind her not to answer Jon back. The girls hurried to their seats, lifted their flutes from the cases, and put them together.

"Hey," Jon yelled across the room. "Don't you know that black people aren't queens? They're scrubwomen."