

Stick Bugs!

Lyle Garford

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Stick Bugs!

Dedication

This is for people who need to believe in themselves.

Chapter One

The car trunk was stuffy and dark. Sticks and his family were scared, wondering each time the car stopped what would happen. The trunk opened at last and a man looked in.

“Oh no,” he sighed. “I forgot about these stick bugs and there's no time to take them to the animal shelter now.”

Sticks and his twin sister Leaf were worried. The man closed the trunk and soon the car was moving again. The rest of the family was afraid, too. Since coming from the pet store over two years ago life was good being pets for the little son and daughter of the man. The children learned to talk with the stick bugs and one day they warned them the family was moving to another city.

The car stopped and the trunk opened again. As the man lifted their cage from the trunk Sticks was shocked. He saw an empty, dead end street with tall trees and forest everywhere. The man walked deep into the forest with their cage before stopping to put it down. Reaching in, he removed the stick bugs, talking to himself as he did. Like most other adults he didn't know the stick bugs could understand him.

"Sorry, it's back to the forest for you. I'm sure you'll remember how to survive here."

When they were all out he took the cage and walked away. Sticks was stunned watching him leave. The family drew close together, looking around in fear. The sun was going down fast and the low bushes of the forest were already dark.

“Dad?” said one of the smaller children. “What are we going to do? I’m scared!”

Hugging the little ones close Dad stick bug shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t think the man understood none of us have ever been in the wild before.”

“What about you, grandpa?” said Sticks. “Have you ever been in the wild?”

“No. I was born in the pet store like your parents.”

Sticks was both sad and angry at being abandoned. Sticks looked at Leaf and he knew she felt the same burning need to help the family.

As night fell a rain shower soaked everyone. They hid under a rock sticking out from the side of a little hill, giving them a dry place to stay. The rest of the night was spent trying to keep warm, but that was only one problem. Scary noises came from all directions. The family feared predators would come and were nervous every time the noises came

close. By dawn everyone was shivering from fear and cold.

Sticks spoke up. "Dad, what do we do now?"

"I don't know, but we aren't safe here. The birds have started making noise."

Sticks understood. "Yes, the birds are awake and will see us. Do birds eat stick bugs?"

"Maybe, but what do I know? I'm a pet store bug like you. I'm sure we look like food. Stay here while I look around."

Dad stick bug crept out of hiding. An owl with sharp eyes dove to attack, but Sticks saw the bird coming.

"Behind you!"

Dad stick bug jumped back to safety in their hiding place and the owl flew away. The sky grew light fast and everyone feared another predator would come, but hunger forced them to act.

"Time to leave," said Dad. "We need food and shelter. We're going back to the city. Maybe we'll find another little girl or boy willing to take us. If we find food along the way everyone needs to eat lots, because I don't know when we'll get our next meal."

They went toward the distant glow of city lights in the sky. Dad led them as they crept through the low bushes. When Sticks found a bush with the kind of leaves they could eat the hungry stick bugs spread out and began eating.

Sticks was eating leaves in a clearing when he saw a young cat with gray fur sitting nearby watching him. Sticks was going to run away, but the cat remained sitting. The two animals stared at each other.

"Who and what are you?" said the cat. "I've never seen anything like you."

"My name is Sticks. I'm a stick bug."

"Really? Well, Sticks the stick bug, you're new to me. My Mom never told me about bugs like you. I suppose I should be eating you, but I just had breakfast. Would you like to play?"

"Play? You look a little old for playing. My Mom says I'm too old for that."

"Yeah, my Mom says that too. If something is fun adults won't do it, so I've decided I'm not going to grow up. Hey, let's play soccer! We can use this pinecone from that tree. Your goal is between those two rocks over there and mine is the stump and this rock here. Winner is first to score ten goals. Ready?"

Sticks laughed. "Sure!"

The cat kicked the cone hard over Sticks's head toward the goal, but

Sticks batted the cone away. Dancing back and forth, Sticks kicked the cone fast to confuse the cat. Dodging to one side, Sticks kicked it over the cat's head toward the goal, but the cat stopped it at the last second.

“Hey, you're good,” said Sticks. “What’s your name?”

“Oh, right. Mom says I have no manners. My name is Oscar.”

They didn’t see the crows coming for Sticks, but he heard their wings and jumped aside. The lead crow squawked in alarm, unable to stop from flying face first into a bush.

The two other crows attacked, but Oscar stood between the birds and Sticks. The crows stopped as Oscar hissed at them. The first crow joined the others. Squawking, they all scowled at the cat.

“Get out of our way. I’m hungry and the bug is breakfast,” said the lead crow, angry at missing Sticks.

Oscar growled. “Sorry. He’s my friend and you flying turkeys don’t scare me.”

“Turkeys? Get him!”

The three birds rushed to peck at Oscar. Within moments he was bleeding from cuts, but he fought back and slashed the leader's face with his claws.

The crows were ignoring Sticks, not knowing he was much stronger than he looked. He grabbed a stick, bigger and taller than he was himself. He snuck behind one crow and put all of his strength into a solid hit to the side of the bird's head. Stunned, the crow fell to the side. The second bird dodged the next blow. Oscar and Sticks drove the two crows back, but the first crow returned. The little stick bug and the cat kept fighting hard.

Both were getting tired when an adult cat smashed into the three surprised birds. With a hiss the cat scowled at each of them.

“I haven’t eaten crow before, but there’s always a first time. Who wants to be my breakfast?”

The crows squawked in anger at this new threat and seemed about to attack, but stopped when two more cats appeared. These were twins close in age to Oscar. They wore hungry looks as they joined the adult cat.

The crows squawked, knowing they were beaten. Two of the three birds took to the air. The still bleeding leader screeched his anger.

“You won this time, but I won’t forget you. I’ve got friends. You’ll pay for this!”

The adult cat jumped to catch him, but missed as the crow flew to safety. The cats growled and watched the birds fly off, before the still angry adult cat turned and went to Oscar, giving him a big slap on the head.

“Owww!” he howled. “Mom! What was that for?”

“What was that for, he says. How did I get a fool like you for a son? There are dangers everywhere and here you are playing around. At least your sisters have the brains to stay near me in case of trouble.”

Seeing Sticks standing beside Oscar looking guilty, the Mom cat stared at him. “And who and what are you?”

“This is my friend Sticks. He’s something called a stick bug,” said Oscar. “We were playing soccer when the crows attacked.”

“I think this is my fault,” said Sticks. “They came after me first. I guess stick bugs look tasty to them.”

“Well, I don’t know if you’re tasty, but you could be.” The Mom cat turned to Oscar. “And why haven’t you eaten him?”

“Well, I wasn’t hungry and I was curious. We were having fun. Please don’t eat him, Mom. He helped me fight off those crows.”

The Mom cat paused to think. “Yes, I saw he was helping you. But you can’t go making friends with your food, you know.”

“Okay, Mom. Hey, maybe he can come with us?”

The Mom cat groaned. “Come with us? What, another mouth to feed and we’re not even sure how far we have to go yet?”

“Well, it’s not like he’s going to eat a lot given his size,” said Oscar, looking at Sticks. “Say, what do you eat, anyway?”

“Leaves,” said Sticks.

Both cats burst out laughing and a smile appeared on Mom cat's face for the first time. “Well, we don't eat leaves so that won't be a problem.”

“So how about it, Mom? Can we take him with us? Please?”

“I suppose. Does he even know where we're going?”

“Ah, I haven't told him yet, but I’m sure he’ll want to come to Junk Town,” he said, turning to Sticks. “What do you think?”

“What is this Junk Town and why would I want to go there? Where is it?” As he spoke he looked over their shoulders. “By the way, I should tell you I have family here, too.”

“Family?” said Mom cat. The cats turned to find the entire stick bug family watching from high in the branches of a nearby bush.

Dad stick bug smiled. “Hello. Thanks for not eating my son. Hopefully you won’t want to eat the rest of us either.”

The Mom cat laughed. “Well, you’re welcome. I guess if we aren’t going to eat him then we can't eat you either.”

Dad stick bug smiled again. “So what is this Junk Town? Why are you going there?”

“Junk Town? Well, we don’t know much. We hope it could be our new home. Our owners abandoned us and I’ve raised the family out here, but

finding food has been hard. Winter is bad because it's cold and wet. We need shelter. Anyway, a few days back we heard about this Junk Town. We were told lots of other abandoned animals like us live there. It's supposed to be a couple of days walk from here. We thought we'd try it."

"We've been abandoned too, so we could be interested. How did you hear about this place?" said Dad stick bug.

"We met this silly bird in the forest. Said he was a parrot and he lives in Junk Town. He told us about it and gave us directions. We've been travelling ever since."

"Hmm," said Dad stick bug. "What does he look like?"

"He's about my size and is very colorful. He has a big yellow beak and squawks a lot. You can't get him to shut up. He also wears a hat and a jacket, if you can believe it. Why?"

"Well, is that him?"

Turning, everyone looked. The most colorful bird any of them had ever seen landed in a rush in the middle of the clearing. The bird fluffed his feathers and tipped his hat with a huge smile to Mom cat.

"Rawwkk! Hey, is this a party? I saw those crows take off. I came to see how you were doing. I understand why you didn't want to hang out with them. Rawwkk! They aren't any fun at all. Wow, where'd you find all these bugs? I don't think we have any like this in Junk Town. Hmm, well, there's one that's similar. Rawwkk! You guys are making good time. Rawwkk! Hey, I think a storm is coming. But you'd never guess...."

Mom cat interrupted, looking at the stick bug Dad. "Yes, this is the one. Like I said, you can't get him to shut up. He told us he's a performer, but I've no idea what he means."

She turned back to the parrot. "These are stick bugs. They want to know more about Junk Town, if you can keep it short. That crow was mad and we don't want more coming back."

"Rawwkk! Okay, okay. Junk Town is a place for animals like you, those without a home or an owner. It's not easy living there, but it's better because you have safety in numbers. You can make your own home. Junk Town has an old human, too, and he understands us. Some of the animals work with him and he buys food for them. Rawwkk? How's that for short?"

"Good enough! And I agree, I think there's a storm coming. We're need to find somewhere warm and dry."

Mom cat looked at the dark sky before turning back to the stick bugs. "Well, if you're coming with us you'd better make up your mind. We're leaving now."