

Stick Bugs!

Lyle Garford

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2013 by Lyle Garford

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by:
Lyle Garford
North Vancouver, Canada
Contact: lyle@lylegarford.com

ISBN

Cover Art by Rowan M. Davis
www.Rowan-Davis.co.uk

Book Design by Lyle Garford
lyle@lylegarford.com
www.lylegarford.com

First Edition 2013

Dedication

This is for people that need to believe in themselves, wherever they may be.

Chapter One

The car trunk was stuffy and dark. Sticks and his stick bug family were on edge all day, wondering each time the car stopped what would happen. The trunk opened at last and a man peered in.

“Oh no,” he said with a soft groan. “I forgot about these bugs and I've got no time to get them to the animal shelter now.” He paused, struggling over what to do. Reaching a decision, he closed the trunk.

The stick bugs became very anxious hearing this. They'd been very happy pets for the little son and daughter of the man since coming from the pet store two years ago. The children, who could talk with and understand the stick bugs, warned them the family was moving and couldn't keep them anymore. Sticks, the oldest of the family and his twin sister Leaf, now both young adults, did their best to help Mom and Dad stick bug comfort the rest of the family. The wait wasn't long.

The man drove the car a few minutes before stopping and opening the trunk again. As he lifted their cage from the trunk the stick bugs were shocked by their surroundings. They saw a deserted, dead end street with tall trees and rainforest looming over them. As he walked into the forest with their cage he made sure he wasn't being observed.

The man went deep into the forest. Finally stopping, he put down the cage. Talking to himself, he removed the cover and the stick bugs from the cage. "Sorry guys. It's back to the forest for you." Like most other adult humans he didn't know the stick bugs could understand him. “I know it's maybe been a while but you'll remember how to survive here. Wish I could do better.” Taking the cage, he walked away retracing his steps.

The stick bugs were stunned, watching him leave. Huddling close together, they looked in fear at their surroundings. The day was almost over and the sun was going down fast. The lower growth of the forest was already dark and murky.

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

Hugging the little ones around him close Dad stick bug shook his head. "I don't know kids. I don't think the man understood that 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. I guess we're going to have to learn fast, aren't we?" he added, looking in fear at the growing darkness.

Sticks was dismayed and angry seeing the fear his overwhelmed parents and family were feeling. Knowing they had to find a safe new home, Sticks vowed to use all of his strength to help. Sticks and Leaf looked at each other, both feeling the same burning need to help the family.

Just as night fell a rain shower soaked everyone, driving the desperate family to find shelter. They made do with a rock on the side of a little hill with an overhang and a dry ledge. They passed the rest of the night there, huddled in a group to stay warm.

Finding ways to stay warm was only one of their problems, however. Constant, frightening noises came from all directions. The family was exhausted from fear a predator would come their way, cowering every time noises came too close.

By dawn everyone was miserable, looking bedraggled, and shivering from the cold. Sticks voiced what everyone was thinking. "Dad, how much longer is this going to go on?"

"I don't know, but it's not over yet. In fact, I think the fun is just starting. Have you all noticed the birds have started chirping?"

Sticks was the first to understand. "You're right. The birds are going to be more active and they'll be able to see us. Do birds eat stick bugs?"

"I think so, but then what do I know, I'm a pet store bug like you. We better assume we look like food. Keep your heads down everyone."

Slow and wary, Dad stick bug left their shelter to scout for trouble. An owl with sharp eyes saw his movement and dove to attack. Sticks saw the bird coming and, horrified, he shouted a warning. "Behind you!"

Dad stick bug dived aside just in time and got back to safety. Flying low past their hiding place, the owl knew they were out of his reach. Giving up, the owl left to find a place to sleep for the day.

The sky was brightening fast and the stick bugs knew a predator would soon see them. Everyone was hungry too. The stick bug elders faced the family after a hurried conference.

"Time to move out," said Dad stick bug. "We can't stay here. Sooner or later something unpleasant will find us. We need food and better shelter. We've decided to try making our way back to the city. Maybe we'll find another little girl or boy willing to take us. Along the way we can look for food. When we find some food everyone needs to fill up, because I don't know where or when we'll get our next meal. Understand?"

Summoning courage, they left their little hideaway. The still distant glow of city lights showed the way to go. Dad led, sticking to the undergrowth. Progress was slow, but they were safe from flying predators as a result. Their fortunes changed when Sticks found a bush with the kind of leaves they could eat. The hungry stick bugs spread out and began gorging themselves.

Sticks was grazing a little apart from the rest when he discovered he wasn't alone. A young adult cat with charcoal gray fur was watching from the other side of the clearing between them. Sticks knew he had to warn the family and defend them if needed. He was about to call a warning when he realized the cat didn't seem about to attack.

The two animals stared at each other for a few moments. "Who and what are you?" said the cat, breaking the silence. "I've never seen anything like you before."

Wary of attack, Sticks replied. "My name is Sticks. I'm a stick bug."

"Huh. Well, Sticks the stick bug, you're new to me. My Mom never told me about creatures like you. I suppose I should be thinking about eating you, but I just had breakfast so it's your lucky day. Would you like to play?"

"Play?" said Sticks, still looking wary. "I'm not sure what we'd 'play'. Besides, aren't you a little old for that? My Mom figures I'm too old for that sort of thing now, I'm supposed to be grown up."

"Yeah, yeah, my Mom says the same thing. I figure if something is fun it's definitely not something grown ups would do, so I've decided I'm just not going to grow up. Here, let's play soccer. We can use this pinecone. Your goal is between those two rocks over there and mine is that stump and this rock here. Winner is first to score ten goals. Ready?"

“Lets go!”

The cat kicked the cone hard over Sticks's head in the direction of the goal. Sticks leapt and batted the cone away out of mid air. Dancing back and forth, Sticks dribbled the cone in a blur of moves that almost froze his opponent. In a sudden dash to one side, Sticks launched the cone over the cat's head toward the goal. With a huge leap the cat flicked the cone aside at the last second.

“This is going to be a good game,” said Sticks. “Hey, what’s your name?”

“Oh yeah,” laughed the cat. “Mom says I have no manners. My name is Oscar.” Laughing together they ran about the clearing, oblivious to all else.

They didn’t see the crows until it was almost too late. Sticks heard the rush of wings of the lead crow at the last second, leaping out of reach with no time to spare. The crow squawked in frustration and then alarm, as he couldn't stop himself from flying face first into a bush.

Two other crows dove to the attack, but Oscar planted himself between the birds and Sticks. The crows came screeching to a halt, as Oscar made himself big and hissed at them. The first crow recovered and joined the others.

Squawking, they all glared at the cat. “Better get out of our way, kitty. I’m hungry and that bug is breakfast,” said the lead crow, still angry over missing Sticks.

“Sorry. He’s my friend and you flying turkeys don’t scare me,” said Oscar, baring his teeth.

“Turkeys? Suit yourself. On second thought, maybe I’ll have a kitty cat for lunch. Get him!”

The three birds rushed at Oscar, forcing him to give ground. Within moments he was bleeding from two vicious pecks, but the cat fought back, cutting the leader's face with a powerful swipe of his claws.

The crows had forgotten about Sticks, and didn't know he was a lot stronger than he looked. As they attacked Oscar, Sticks found a suitable stick, bigger and longer than he was himself. Sneaking up he dealt one crow a solid whack to the side of the head, putting all of his might into it. Stunned, the crow stumbled to the side. The next bird saw the threat and was just fast enough to dodge most of the next swing, taking only a glancing blow. Oscar and Sticks pushed their advantage, driving the remaining two crows back, but the third

now very angry crow rejoined the fight. The little stick bug and the cat fought hard, but they were outnumbered.

Both were getting tired, wondering how to escape, when a mature adult cat bowled into the three birds, forcing them back in surprise. With a menacing hiss the cat planted herself in front of the birds, glaring at each of them in turn.

"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 massed together for a full on assault. They stopped short as two more cats came out of the bushes on the other side of the clearing. These were twins close in age to Oscar, both with the same features and coloring. They joined the adult cat with hungry looks on their faces.

Squawking frustration, the crows knew they were beaten. Two of the three birds took to the air in a rush of wings. The still bleeding, furious leader glared about and crowed his anger.

"Okay, you won this time. I won't be forgetting you anytime soon though. I've got lots of brothers and sisters. You'll pay for this!"

The adult cat leapt at him with incredible speed in response. Desperate, he flapped his way to safety as her claws slashed the air where he'd been only moments before.

Growling their own frustration the cats watched the birds fly off. The adult cat, still angry, turned and stalked over to Oscar, giving him a big swat on the side of the head.

"Owww!" he howled. "Mom! What was that for?"

"What was that for, he says. How do I deserve a knucklehead like you for a son? There are dangers everywhere and here you are playing around again. At least your sisters have the brains to stay near to me in case of trouble. You, well, you just wander off and start playing around." Noticing Sticks standing beside Oscar and looking guilty, the Mom cat looked puzzled and glared at him. "And who are you? Come to think of it, what are you?"

"This is my friend Sticks. He's something called a stick bug," said Oscar. "We were playing soccer when that bunch came after us."

"I'm pretty sure this is my fault," said Sticks. "They came after me. I guess stick bugs look tasty to them."

"Huh. Well, I don't know if you're tasty, but food is food and you could certainly fit the bill." Turning, Mom cat looked at Oscar. "And why haven't you eaten him?"

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

The Mom cat considered this for a moment. “Yes, I saw he was helping you so I guess I can live with that. But you can’t go making friends with your potential dinner all the time, you know. Especially when I can’t guarantee where or when that will come from.”

“Okay. Hey, maybe we can we take him with us?”

“Take him with us?” replied Mom cat, looking exasperated. “What, another mouth to feed and we don’t even know how long we have to go yet?”

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

“Leaves,” said Sticks.

Both cats burst out laughing. “Well, if that’s all you eat I guess we won’t be competing for food, will we?” said Mom cat.

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

“Well, I suppose. Does he even want to come with us or know where we’re going to?”

“Ah, I hadn’t got that far with him yet, but if Junk Town is as nice as we hope it is I’m sure he’ll want to come along,” he said, turning to Sticks. “What do you think?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. What is this Junk Town and why would I want to go there? Where is it?” Glancing over their shoulders, a sheepish look crossed his face. “By the way, I should tell you I have my family to consider, too.”

“Family?” said Mom cat. Turning to follow his gaze, she was stunned to see the entire stick bug family sitting high in the branches of the bush behind her. Hearing the sounds of the fight they arrived in time to see Mom cat turn the tide.

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

Shaking her head, the Mom cat laughed. “Well, you’re welcome. I guess if we aren’t going to eat him we can hardly consider eating his family.”

Dad stick bug was encouraged. “So what is this Junk Town you were talking about? Why are you going there?”

“Junk Town?” said Mom cat. “Well, we don’t know much. We think it could be a safe home for us. Ah, I guess I you need some

background. My owners abandoned us when they realized I was going to have more kids. I've raised them out here, but it wasn't easy. We've been scrambling to find food every day. I'm not looking forward to winter because it's only going to get colder and wetter. We need shelter. Anyway, a few days back we were told about this place called Junk Town. Apparently there are lots of other abandoned animals like us making a home there. We were told it's maybe a couple of days to walk there. We thought we'd take the chance and give it a try."

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

"We met this funny bird in the forest one day. Said he was a parrot. He told us about this place and gave us directions once he realized we were homeless. We saw potential so we've been heading in the direction he pointed us ever since. He said he lived there himself."

"Ah, this bird," said Dad stick bug. "What exactly does he look like?"

"Well, he's about my size and is very colorful. He has a big yellow beak and squawks a lot. Actually, he talks all the time, you can hardly get him to shut up. He also wears a hat and a suit jacket, if you can believe it. Why?"

"Well, I'm wondering if that might be him?" Turning, everyone looked where he was pointing in the air above the Mom cat.

The most colorful bird any of them had ever seen descended in a rush, landing in the middle of the clearing. Seeing the crowd staring at him, the bird fluffed his feathers and doffed his hat with a huge smile to the Mom cat.

"Rawwkk! Hey, is this a party? I saw those crows take off. I knew you guys were around and came to see how you were doing. Guess you didn't want to hang out with that bunch, eh? Rawwkk! Can't say I blame you. They aren't any fun at all. Wow, where'd you find all these bugs? I don't think we have any quite like this in Junk Town. Hmm, well, hang on, there's one that's kind of similar. Rawwkk! You guys are making good time. Say, has anyone got any seeds? I'm starving! Flying all that way makes me hungry. I've got to keep energy up for my shows. Performers have to live on something. Rawwkk! Hey, I think a storm is coming. But you'd never guess...."

The Mom cat interrupted, looking at the stick bug Dad. "Yeah, this is the one. Like I said, you can't get him to shut up most of the time. He keeps talking about being a performer, but I've no idea what that's about."

Turning, she looked at the parrot. "These are stick bugs. They're interested in knowing more about Junk Town, if you can keep it short. I don't think we want to hang around here much longer. That one crow was real mad. We won't want to be around if they come back here with reinforcements."

"Rawwkk! Okay, okay. Junk Town is a place for animals like you that don't have a home or an owner. It's not easy living in Junk Town, but at least it's more or less safe. Safety in numbers, rawwkk! You can make your own shelter around a little old barn there. Junk Town has an old human there, too, and he understands us. Some of the animals work with the human and he buys food for them. Rawwkk? How's that for short?"

"Good enough! And I agree with you, I think there's a storm coming. We're going to need to find somewhere to ride it out and stay warm," replied Mom cat, turning back to the stick bugs. "Well, if you're going to tag along with us you'd better make up your mind, we need to get moving."

