

Bruce
and
the Road
to
Justice

by
Gale Leach



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Bruce and the Road to Justice

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For Craig, Cyndie, and Elizabeth

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Day One

Bruce and the Road to Justice

Chapter 1

Stang Alive!

How could that be? Bruce thought back to what his friends had told him about the cat catching Stang. No one had actually seen the bat die. Now the little owl had said Stang was back and coming after them.

“What do you think he wants?” Bruce asked Milton, as he searched the bits of sky he could see through the trees for a dark shape that might be a bat. At times like this he felt it would have been nicer to be a hawk or an eagle than a caterpillar.

Milton swayed from side to side, his expression serious. “Other than revenge for destroying everything he had and nearly killing him?”

Bruce knew that Milton was uneasy, despite his clever remark. The spider tapped his forelegs as he scanned the area around them. As a jumping spider, Milton had a definite advantage with his eight eyes.

“Stang is the bad bat from the cave, right?” Carly said, looking up at Milton. “I thought you

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said he was dead.”

“We thought so. Looks like we were wrong.” Milton curled one of his legs over Carly’s shoulders, being careful to avoid the stinger poised over her back.

Henry nestled deeper into the fur on top of Milton’s head. “What are you going to do?” the small stinkbug asked, his voice trembling a little.

Everyone looked at Bruce, and he knew they were waiting for him to give an answer. He wondered why they always thought he knew more than they did.

“I don’t want to hang around here and wait for him to come looking for us. I think we should go back to my village.”

Milton nodded. “Sounds right to me. It would be a good rest after the long journey, anyway.”

“What about you two?” Bruce asked. “Carly, you’re a pretty big scorpion now, and Henry, you’ve got your stinking mostly under control. It might be safer if you two go your own way instead of staying with Milton and me. I’d feel terrible if something happened to either of you.” He felt the wind pick up, swirling the leaves around on the ground, and he shivered.

Carly didn’t answer right away but instead studied her companions, one by one. She flicked her stinger tail over her back as she did sometimes when she was deep in thought. “I don’t have anywhere else to go. You’ve been good to me, taking care of

Stang Alive!

me like you did. Besides, I like you—at least some of the time,” she said with a devious smile. “If it’s my choice, I’ll go with you.”

“Me, too,” Henry said without hesitation. “Besides, I have to meet your father—you know, the *other* Henry. Anyway, you might need me along. I can still stink when I want to.”

“Don’t start proving that now,” Carly said, reaching out and trying to catch the little bug in one of her pincers. This had become a recent game with the two of them. Henry launched upward, circling over her head, as she clicked her claws together in the air. She didn’t pinch hard, and Bruce knew Henry’s tough body armor would protect him, even if Carly did manage to catch him.

As Henry flew in circles over her head, it didn’t take long for the scorpion to get dizzy, and she fell over on her side, laughing. Henry dropped down, landing on a weed near her, and he giggled until the others began to smile.

With the mood lightened somewhat, Bruce felt better. “Come on, you two. Get up, and let’s get going.”

Although he knew it would probably be safer for the others to leave, Bruce felt glad they wanted to come with him. He realized, too, that he looked forward to getting home and seeing his parents. When he’d left home the first time, he hadn’t considered their feelings, and they had been worried about him. This time, his parents knew he

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left, but the terms of his departure were no better. Leaving home in search of his “egg parents” had caused his mom and dad much grief. Now he was going home, no wiser than before about his egg parents, but definitely wiser about who his *real* parents were. Bruce still didn’t know what he would become when he changed from a caterpillar, but he accepted that whatever it was would have to be fine. Part of him secretly hoped that he might become a moth, so he might be with Angie, but he’d always thought of himself as a soon-to-be butterfly, so that kind of thinking was hard.

Bruce saw a shadow pass over the ground near him. He looked up and automatically went on guard, remembering Stang, but the shadow was only a falling leaf.

He put on his backpack. Everyone waited for him to lead, so he headed back the way they’d come, and the others followed.

“Be safe,” Conrad called, as they moved out of the clearing and deeper into the trees.

Bruce looked back at Conrad and wondered why he was acting so kindly. Thinking about the owl’s motives made Bruce wonder about Stang again. What did he want? How had he survived? Everyone said they’d seen the farm cat, Samson, run away with Stang in his mouth. Still Bruce supposed Stang might have gotten away from the cat.

Bruce crawled under a branch that had dropped across the path and watched as Carly copied

Stang Alive!

him and Milton jumped over. Henry flew above, zigzagging back and forth as he dodged low branches and leaves.

Bruce thought back to Conrad's parting remark and remembered their first meeting and all that had transpired because of it. Conrad had lied to them. This talk of Stang might be a lie, too. Bruce started to tell the others what he was thinking when he realized Conrad couldn't have known about Stang. They'd never mentioned the bat in front of Conrad, had they? Bruce didn't think so. Perhaps the owl was telling the truth after all.

It was very confusing. Either way, going home seemed like a good decision now. He put these thoughts out of his mind and kept walking.

Chapter 2

Heading Home

The walk downhill from the owl's meadow on Stony Ridge was easier than it had been going up, and it didn't take the travelers long to reach the main road. They'd gone only a little way when Bruce heard a young butterfly calling from behind them. He turned and saw her struggle to keep her balance as wind gusts came and went. He recognized her as Wilma, one of the caterpillars he'd known in school. She'd never paid much attention to him before he left on his first adventure, but after he returned home and became something of a celebrity, she always seemed excited to see him. Even though Bruce liked the attention, he thought it was wrong that she and the others liked him now only because of something he'd done.

"Hi, Bruce," Wilma said, as she fluttered toward him, only to flit away again in fear when she saw Carly.

"Don't be afraid," Bruce said. "These are my

Heading Home

friends. You remember Milton? The others are Carly and Henry. They won't hurt you."

Wilma hesitated a little, as a small gust of wind picked her up and then let her go, but she flew closer and landed on the ground near Bruce. "Where are you going?"

"We're on our way home from Stony Ridge. Where are you headed?"

"I'm going home, too. I've been visiting with my aunts and uncles who live in the village up the road. When I saw you, I thought—"

"Listen, Wilma—will you do me a favor?"

"Of course!" Wilma said, fluttering her wings and smiling. "What can I do?"

Bruce suppressed a grimace. He had thought it would be a good idea to have Wilma tell his parents that he and his friends were on their way. Not only would his parents be prepared for his coming, but they would learn he had additional friends with him. He hoped they'd realize he also wasn't thinking only of himself for a change. "Will you tell my parents I'm on the way home with my friends?"

"Sure! I know they'll be glad to see you. *I'm* glad to see you again, too, Bruce," Wilma said, fluttering her wings even more than before.

Bruce forced a smile. "Um ... yeah. Tell them that we'll be there in a day or so, and that I'll be ready to change when I get back, okay?"

"Oh, Bruce, that will be wonderful!" Wilma said, beaming.

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"Yeah ... sure. Thanks. I, uh ... I appreciate it."

Wilma lifted off the ground and fluttered a few feet above the others. "See you soon, Bruce." She flitted this way and that, until a strong gust picked her up and sent her high into the air. When she recovered her balance, she flew away from them, high above the road.

"When did you get a girlfriend?" Milton asked, as Wilma flew out of sight.

Bruce scowled. "I *don't* have a girlfriend, and if I did, it wouldn't be Wilma. She just thinks I'm special because of our adventure with the bats and everything."

Milton raised his voice as high as he could so he sounded like Wilma. "I'm so happy to help you, Bruce. Oh, I think you're so wonderful, Bruce. You're my hero, Bruce. I want to—"

Bruce tackled the spider, and the two of them went rolling in the dirt. Bruce knew he couldn't come out ahead in this tussle, but sometimes he had to get back at Milton when the spider teased him. Bruce thought it was odd that Milton could tease him and he didn't mind. In fact, he liked it, although he outwardly pretended to be upset. Tackling Milton was part of that, and, of course, he knew that Milton knew it, too.

The spider pinned him to the ground. "Give up?"

"I give up, but I *don't* have a girlfriend."

Milton let him go, and Bruce stood, brushing dirt and dust from his smooth skin.

Heading Home

Carly moved forward and removed a weed that had caught on one of Bruce's feelers. "Milton told me Angie is your girlfriend."

Bruce reddened and looked at the spider, who grinned widely. "Carly, don't believe anything that overgrown flea tells you. Angie is a girl, and she is my friend, but that's it."

He turned and stalked down the road. The others followed, trying to stifle their smiles and chuckles. The more they tried not to laugh, the worse their giggling became, until they had to stop to catch their breath. Scowling, Bruce quickened his pace until he had moved far ahead of the rest of them.

He walked around a curve in the road and reached a small outcropping of rock. Out of breath, he decided to take cover beneath the overhang. He couldn't see the others from there, but he knew they'd be coming along eventually, if they could ever stop laughing. He was tired and frustrated, thinking about what Carly had said. Why would Milton say Angie was his girlfriend? And worst of all, why would he tell *Carly* about it?

He thought about Angie and saw her soft fur and pretty face in his mind. The last time he'd seen her was when they were starting out on this trip. They hadn't had time to be together then. Originally, Bruce had hoped they might go back by her village so he could see her. Now he didn't think he wanted to, because the others would say that he was going to see his "girlfriend."

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He looked back up the road and saw Milton and Carly come into sight around the bend. He thought he could also make out Henry's small shape darting here and there above their heads. As they got closer, Bruce ducked as another shadow passed overhead. He looked up, expecting it to be another leaf. Instead, he recognized the dark shape. A bat was flying toward his friends—and he thought it might be Stang.

Chapter 3

Taken

“**W**atch out! Bat!” Bruce cried, but his words were lost in the wind.

The bat flapped on toward the others. Bruce noticed it veered from side to side as it flew.

Milton and Carly were still laughing and not paying attention. Milton turned his head at the last minute, but it was too late. The bat dropped down, grabbed Milton’s shoulders in its claws, and flew upward and away from Carly’s pincers snapping at the empty air. Milton struggled to free himself from the bat’s claws.

“Milton!” Bruce cried, so like the time when Angie was taken that he couldn’t believe this was happening again. The bat veered in mid-air and circled around. Bruce crouched again, moving under the overhang so the bat couldn’t grab him.

As the bat got closer, Bruce saw his torn wing, which explained the erratic flight. He also saw that

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one of his ears was missing and he had a scar along his face where his eye should have been. The horror he'd been imagining had happened. Stang was *here!*

"Thought you were done with me, didn't you, little worm? Thought you'd seen the last of me when that mockingbird friend of yours knocked me into the cat's claws, didn't you? Oh, no, no, no. Stang is stronger than that, stronger than this ridiculous spider friend of yours, and stronger than you, too. *All of you!*" He dipped down, sweeping his wing claw toward Bruce, who cringed. "I've come back, like GrayBat of old. You can't kill me—no one can! Where's your courage now, worm?" Stang flew higher again and circled overhead.

"I understand this bug likes riddles," Stang called as he swooped low, smashing Milton straight into Henry, who tumbled to the ground and lay stunned for a moment. "I like riddles, too," Stang said, and he laughed as he rose higher again. "What has eight legs and eyes and then has no legs and eyes? Give up?" Stang made a wicked laugh. "Oh, I see you're worried about your eight-legged friend. Couldn't be him in the riddle, could it?" Stang dove low, dragging Milton's legs on the road, and rose again, flying higher than before.

"Can't a bat have a little fun?" he called, as he circled upward. Bruce saw blood coming from one of Milton's legs, as he struggled to grab some portion of Stang's body, but dangling from the bat's claws, he hung too low to manage it.

Taken

“For such a *small* worm, you had a lot of fun at my expense. I built an empire. I had a harem and many babies soon to be born.” Stang made a strange noise that almost sounded like a moan. “Oh, my sweet babies ...” Stang moaned again, and then his tone turned harsh again. “You changed all that. You took everything all away and left me nothing. *Nothing!*” He flew higher and higher, until he’d soared far above the treetops. Then he simply dropped Milton.

Carly let out a cry, Henry made a stink, and all of them watched as Milton fell, spiraling and tumbling in the air, his legs flailing. Bruce’s mind conjured images of his friend crushed and broken on the dirt. But faster than he thought Stang could fly, the bat swept down, grabbed the spider from the air, and flew up with him again.

“Oh, I *am* having fun,” Stang called, as he circled above the travelers. “Since it’s my turn to have fun at *your* expense, here’s another riddle for you. Solve it, and maybe you’ll find your friend before he becomes ant food. Everyone says you’re smart. I guess we’ll see, eh? First a little story, to be sure you know your history. It’s about GrayBat. You remember the verse?

“GrayBat died, but lived again: from the battlefield, his body, bloody and torn, was lifted, and on the next morn, the spark of life was gifted. Two days they carried him to the Owl, Great and Old, who pronounced a miracle, and spoke of legends, long been told, and

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proclaimed GrayBat the bringer of life, whose touch would heal and end all strife.'

"Well, my little friends, GrayBat's been reborn a second time—his spirit is reborn through *me!*—and we will rise again, stronger than before. We will drink the blood of our enemies and feast on their entrails!

"But enough history. To find your friend, you will be making your way to me. I want you to suffer, little worm, and I will enjoy watching your friends suffer, too, since that will hurt you more than any pain I could cause you directly. But know that I will not stop until I have you, so keep that in mind while you answer this: *Two ears it has, yet it cannot hear. A tail it has, but it does not wag. The more taken away, the greater it is.* Find this place and you will find your spider friend. Don't delay, if you like him having eight legs and eyes."

Stang flew away, with Milton still struggling to get free. Bruce watched until they became a small speck of brown against the green trees. Then they were gone.

Bruce couldn't stop looking in the air where Stang had been, seeing Milton dangling from Stang's claws in his mind. He could do nothing. *Again.* How he wished he had wings to fly and claws to fight and teeth to bite! He was useless.

Bruce closed his eyes, wishing he could go back in time. If he had stayed with Milton and Carly and Henry, maybe he would have seen Stang

Taken

coming, and they could have escaped. But he knew eventually they would have let their guard down, and Stang would have found them and captured one or more of them again.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Carly standing in front of him, also looking away toward the trees, a tear in her eye.

Chapter 4

The Hope of Help

“**W**here do you think Stang went?” Carly asked. She had grown so big that her color was nearly all brown. Bruce thought the little scorpion must have venom in her sting now, too.

“Do you know the answer to the riddle?” Henry asked.

“Who is GrayBat?” Carly continued.

“I don’t know where he went, and I don’t have any idea how we’ll find out.” Bruce couldn’t imagine losing his best friend. Without Milton, he didn’t feel nearly as courageous as when his friend was there. He couldn’t think. What could they do?

He had to try to get Milton back. He thought about Wilma and the message she had probably delivered to his parents, telling them he’d return soon. Now his mom and dad would be doubly worried, and all because he’d tried to do a good thing and let them know he was on his way home.

The Hope of Help

Bruce sighed. They would just have to be worried. He was going to find Milton.

He glanced up in the sky again. He saw a hawk circling in the distance, probably looking for a mouse or rabbit that would make a good meal. That gave him an idea.

"I think we should go back and see Josie. I don't know if she'll come, but I hope she might help us look for Milton. He helped save her once—now I hope she'll help save him in return."

"That's a great idea!" Henry said. "She can run a lot faster than any of us, and maybe she won't mind if we ride on her back."

"That's what I thought," Bruce said. "Let's hope she'll do it."

They headed back the way they'd come, toward Conrad's clearing. Bruce had to work hard to keep his feelings in check. He kept thinking of Milton and what Stang might do to him. Stang had looked so horrible! The old scar across his eye had always made him look frightening, but now, with his torn wing and missing ear, his appearance was ghastly. Bruce shuddered and thought again of Milton, dangling from Stang's claws, struggling to get free.

"You didn't tell me about GrayBat," Carly said.

Bruce shrugged. "I don't know why he said that. GrayBat lived a long time ago. He was a huge bat who led a group of other bats into battle against rats who had overrun their villages and were destroying everything. Even though the bats were

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smaller than the rats, and there were fewer of them, GrayBat and the others defeated the rats and made them retreat, saving many villages. The legend says that, during the last battle, GrayBat received some terrible wounds and died. But the next morning, as they started to bury his body, he came back to life. They took him to the great owl, who said there had been a miracle, and GrayBat went on to live to an old age. He was a great hero." Bruce's face looked grave. "But Stang is no hero. He's horrible, and he's nothing like GrayBat."

"Maybe Stang thinks he is," Carly said.

"Well, he's *not*," Bruce said, and he walked ahead of Carly so she would be quiet.

They reached the clearing faster than he'd thought they would. Perhaps his mind was so focused on other things that the journey seemed to go more quickly.

Bruce looked around but didn't see any predators, although he knew that many could be hiding in the trees, even as he knew Conrad lived up there somewhere. He called out softly.

"Josie? Josie, are you here?"

"Looking for the mouse?" said a voice from above. Startled, Bruce looked up and saw the little owl above them, in the tree. "She went this way before you did, but I saw her travel through the clearing only a little while ago. She's probably on the other side by now."

Bruce thought about traveling around the

The Hope of Help

clearing to look for her, but if she continued moving, they could travel in circles endlessly and he would never find her. Feelings of helplessness overcame him. He hung his head.

“Where’s your spider friend?” Conrad asked.

When Bruce didn’t answer, Henry said, “That bat you said was looking for us? Well, he came and stole Milton, and he’s going to hurt him if we can’t find Milton first.”

“Hmm. I’m sorry about your friend. But why are you looking for the mouse? Shouldn’t you be looking for the spider?”

Bruce glowered at Conrad, his anger rising. “None of this would be happening if you hadn’t tricked us into getting that stupid cookbook.”

Conrad fluffed his feathers and turned on the branch. He looked as if he might fly away.

“That’s not true,” Carly said.

Bruce glared at her. “I suppose you’re the authority on everything these days,” he said.

Carly flicked her tail. “You know that it wouldn’t have mattered where you went or what you did. Stang would have found you eventually. Conrad didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“Maybe that’s so, but ... look, it doesn’t matter now. Let’s go around the clearing and find Josie.”

“I can find her and ask her to come to you,” Conrad said.

Bruce looked up at the little bird. “Why would you help us?”

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Conrad scratched his head with his claws. "Consider this a new start for me. I'm sorry about your friend and what happened. Why do you want to talk to Josie anyway?"

"Bruce is hoping she will help us look for Milton," Henry said from his perch on Bruce's shoulder.

The owl nodded. "I'll be back, with a mouse not far behind." Conrad spread his wings, leaped from the branch, and flew into the air over the clearing. They watched him lift higher and Bruce wondered how he could see anything on the ground from so far up in the air. He stayed there for a few moments and then swooped down toward the ground. He flew above the ground for quite a way until he dropped behind some bushes where they couldn't see him anymore. A few moments later, he reappeared, flapping his wings and gaining altitude, and landed back in the tree where he'd begun.

"I found her," he said, and he took a deep breath. "She was quite startled and didn't believe me at first. She said she doesn't believe I will keep my word and not eat her, but she agreed to come. She should be here soon."

"Conrad, what did you mean by a 'new start'?" Carly asked.

The owl turned his head to look at the scorpion. "I gave thought to what you and the caterpillar said before. I haven't been happy for a long time. I have

The Hope of Help

no friends. When I saw the four of you together and how much you enjoy each other, I realized what I've been missing." Conrad gazed off into the distance. "I've been afraid for a long time. Being so small, I always thought the larger birds were going to catch me. A few of them tried, until I came here and was protected because of the great owl. But I have no friends. No companionship. What's worse, I'm still afraid. I think it's time for a new start for Conrad the owl. Not a little owl who is afraid of everything, but a new Conrad. I want to be like you. I want to be brave."

Chapter 5

Josie

No one said anything for a little while. Bruce thought about what the owl had said. “Conrad, we went on the first adventure because we couldn’t let a friend of ours be taken by bats without trying to get her back. We were probably more stupid than brave, but we made it through with luck and perseverance. This time, I know it was stupid for me to leave home, but good came of it anyway—well, at least I thought so until now. But we’re not that brave, Conrad. We try to stand up for ourselves and those we love, that’s all.”

“But that’s the problem. I don’t have anyone who loves me. Nobody I can even call a friend.” Conrad looked down at his talons. “I wish I had friends like you.”

Bruce took a moment to compose his thoughts before answering. “You may have to prove yourself to those who might be friends. It may take some time for those who know you to believe you’re

Josie

different now.”

A noise startled Bruce. He turned and saw Josie, who had crept up behind him.

“Josie, I’m happy to see you. Thanks for coming back. I’m hoping you might help us with a problem.”

“That’s what Conrad said.” Josie never took her eyes off of the owl. “I wasn’t sure if this was one of his tricks, or if you had really come back. What do you need?”

“There’s a horrible bat named Stang. We thought he was dead, but he’s come back, and somehow he followed us here. He wants to hurt us because we stood up to him and we were responsible for his being killed.” Josie looked at him strangely, and Bruce realized what he’d said. “Well, almost killed. Now Stang came and took Milton and flew away with him. We don’t know where he went, but we have to find him. Stang said he’d kill Milton if we don’t.”

“But what can *I* do?” Josie asked. “I don’t know this Stang or where he went.”

“I’m hoping you’ll help us search for Milton by carrying us on your back—or at least me. I know it might be a long search, but we’ll never find him in time without help. Since Milton helped you when you were wounded, I thought that—”

“That’s true,” Josie said, her eyes darting between Bruce and Conrad, “and I wish I could help, but I can’t leave my young ones behind, and I won’t take

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them on a dangerous journey where they might be killed. I'm sorry, Bruce. I can't help you."

Bruce had assumed that Josie would willingly take them, since he felt she owed it to Milton to go. It never occurred to him that she might have other responsibilities keeping her here. "Of course, you're right, Josie. I didn't know you had a family."

"Yes. Seven young ones, born while you were on your journey to the island. I'm actually more beholden to you and Milton than you knew: you saved my life and my unborn babies, too."

Bruce thought about how Milton had found her lying in the grass when he searched for food. She had a large wound on her side that probably would have killed her if it hadn't been treated. While Bruce held the gash closed, Milton bound it with his spider silk so the wound would stay closed and heal. Bruce felt glad Josie had survived and had her babies, but now he had no one to help him find Milton, and he found it hard to be happy. He hung his head again.

"I'm not the only one who owes you something, though," Josie said, and Bruce looked up. "This owl took advantage of you and gave you little in return. Perhaps you should ask *him* to help. Besides, when I arrived here, I overheard him saying he wished he had friends." Her whiskers twitched as she fixed the owl in her gaze. "One of the best ways to make friends is to do something good for someone else. Here's your chance, Conrad."