

Bruce
and the
Mystery
in the
Marsh

The Bruce and Friends Series

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Bruce
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in the
Marsh

by
Gale Leach



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Bruce and the Mystery in the Marsh

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*For Rebecca
with great affection*

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Cast of Characters

(* indicates the character appeared
in a previous book)

- *Agatha A praying mantis who is a Master Chef.
- *Arlene A butterfly. Bruce's mother.
- *Angie A moth. Good friend to Bruce, Milton, and Carly.
- Armand A salamander who lives not far from Cecil.
- *Bruce A butterfly and the hero of the story, which is told (mostly) from his point of view.
- *Carly A scorpion. Friend to Milton, Bruce, and Angie.
- Cecil The victim, a walking stick insect. The first master chef and Agatha's mentor.
- Devon A dung beetle. Cecil's student who discovers his body.
- *Dora An orb weaver spider. Friend to Milton, Bruce, and Angie.
- Elvira A slug and elderly neighbor to Cecil.
- *Eugene A ferret (weasel). Brother to Lilly.
- Frederick A walking stick insect. Cecil's brother.
- George A gerbil. One of Cecil's students.
- Horace A dragonfly who was Cecil's helper.
- Isabelle A salamander who aspired to master chef status.

Jemma	A jumping spider who lives in the marsh.
Kyle	A crab. Bodyguard for Armand.
*Lilly	A ferret. A past friend to Bruce, Milton, and Carly.
Lydia	A walking stick insect. Both Cecil and Frederick were in love with Lydia.
*Meryl	A mockingbird (deceased). Bruce's first real friend who died battling with Stang.
*Milton	A jumping spider and Bruce's long-time friend.
Nadine	A shrew. One of Cecil's students.
Orville	A woodchuck. A trader in goods and services.
Polly	A walking stick insect. Cecil's daughter.
Rodrigo	A walking stick insect (deceased). He and Agatha were in love before he died.
Sam	A butterfly who is traveling in the marsh.
Seymour	A beetle who is caught stealing Cecil's things.
*Stang	A bat (deceased). An evil fruit bat who terrorized other bats into doing his bidding.
Tanya	A shrew. Nadine's mother.
Vivian	A salamander. Armand's cousin.

Chapter 1

The Death Is Discovered

“Agatha! The Master Chef is dead! I think he was murdered!” The dragonfly flitted from side to side, and his beating wings caused bits of dust to fly around Agatha, who stood at the entrance of her home in the willow tree.

“Whatever are you talking about, Horace? Calm down,” Agatha said. “I’m the Master Chef!”

“Not *you*,” Horace said, panting. “The first Master Chef—Cecil. He’s dead!”

Bruce and his mother, Arlene, who were visiting, appeared behind Agatha.

“Horace, come inside and explain all of this properly.”

The dragonfly shook his head, puffing to regain his breath. “Can’t do that. Have to spread the word. Lots of chefs to tell.”

“COME IN!” Agatha bellowed.

The dragonfly’s wings stopped beating for a

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moment, and he fell, landing with a plop on the ground. Even Bruce and Arlene cowered a little and moved a step back from the praying mantis, Agatha, who was obviously agitated.

"All right, all right! You don't have to shout," Horace said, as he straightened his wings and composed himself.

Agatha relaxed a bit and said, "Come here and explain what happened. I'll give you some tea."

Looking a bit less upset, Horace started to shake his head again, but evidently thought better of it. "Well, just a little. I can't stay long. Have to spread the word."

He flew up and flitted inside the opening, followed by the two butterflies, Arlene and Bruce, and finally Agatha, who set about preparing the tea.

"All right," the mantis said. "Now start over and explain what happened."

The dragonfly took a deep breath. "Some time ago, Cecil—"

"Cecil Thornberry, the first master chef and my mentor," Agatha said to Arlene and Bruce.

Horace frowned at the interruption. "As I was saying, Cecil asked me to stay with him. He was getting old, and he found it hard to get around. He wanted my help with errands and cleaning. In return, he said he would teach me how to become a chef."

Arlene returned from her cooking area carrying a small tray loaded with cups of tea. She set the tray

The Death Is Discovered

down and placed one cup near the dragonfly, who sipped it.

"Oh, that's hot, but it's good. Thank you," Horace said, taking another sip.

"I can't believe Cecil is gone," Agatha said, her eyes misting over. "He won the first five cooking competitions, you know. Everyone said his cooking was the finest they'd ever tasted. I was in awe of him after I decided to become a chef. One day he took me aside and offered to teach me what he knew. By that time, he'd retired from the competitions, but he was always there, watching and commenting about what the chefs were doing. One of his comments actually helped me win the first time I entered."

"How did that happen?" Bruce asked.

Agatha opened her mouth to reply, but the dragonfly interrupted. "Agatha, I can't stay all day."

Agatha's face darkened in a scowl. "Horace—how did Cecil die?"

The dragonfly looked so upset, Bruce thought he might cry. "I don't know. When I came this morning, and I found him—I was so bothered seeing Cecil just lying there. I saw a note on his desk—it talked about murder. I came straight to you because you always know what to do at times like this."

At the word "murder," Agatha looked a bit ruffled. "I'm glad you did. You were always good to Cecil. He couldn't have asked for a better assistant." She took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh.

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"It's not the trip I planned to take, but I need to get to the bottom of this. I owe Cecil that much and more."

"Agatha, I'm sorry to have brought this sad news," Horace said, taking a last sip of tea. "I must be going. I want to let others know about Cecil, too."

Agatha shook her head. "No, Horace—don't do that. In fact, we must keep this quiet until I can get there and examine the scene. I'd like you to return to Cecil's home and keep everyone outside, away from his body, until I arrive. Make sure nothing is disturbed."

The dragonfly nodded as he walked to the doorway. "All right. You'll come soon?"

"Yes. Thank you, Horace," Agatha said, as he zoomed away. Turning to Bruce and his mother, she said, "Horace is a little slow sometimes, but he's a good sort all the same. He doesn't always get the facts straight, though, so I won't know for sure what happened to Cecil until I get there." She spread her wings a bit and ruffled them before laying them back down again—a trait which Bruce recognized as a sign of her nervousness. "Arlene—I've enjoyed having you and Bruce here. I don't like ending our visit early, but I must."

"Agatha, I'm so sorry," Bruce's mother said. "Cecil must have meant a lot to you."

"I can't believe he's gone," Agatha said. "I had planned a trip to see him again soon, and now it's too late." She sighed.

The Death Is Discovered

“I would go with you,” Arlene said, “but I must get back home to tend to the nectar we harvested. Another few days and it will be too late.” She regarded Bruce and twitched one of her feelers. “I know you were eager to help us store the nectar,” she said with a smirk.

Bruce turned red. Ever since he’d been old enough to help, he’d always tried to find an excuse to keep him from assisting with that particular chore. When he was a very young caterpillar, he offered the thought that he was too small, but his mother found tasks he could do. When he grew larger, he said he had homework, but that didn’t work, either. Now that he’d become a butterfly, Bruce knew he was stuck.

His mother continued, “However, you worked hard with the harvest this season. I think we can manage on our own. Why don’t you go with Agatha and make sure she gets there safely?”

Chapter 2

Off with Agatha

Bruce couldn't believe what he'd heard, and he lifted his wings high, hoping to convince Agatha to take him along before his mother changed her mind. He wasn't particularly excited to see a dead chef, whatever kind of creature he might be, but it had to be better than dealing with all that sticky, gooey nectar. "May I go with you, Agatha? I'll be good company."

Agatha smiled. "Better company with me than groaning with your mother while you finish the nectar? I'd think so." She winked at Arlene. "Of course you may come, and Milton's tree is on the way, I believe. He'd be welcome, too, just like old times."

"That would be great!" Bruce said, but then his face fell. "I just remembered. Milton may still be visiting the orb weaver spiders. Would we be going in that direction?"

"I'm afraid not. Cecil lives—" She paused, looking stricken. "I mean, lived—in the marsh,

Off with Agatha

not far from the docks where you got on the ship to go to the cooking competition on the island. In the days when Cecil was my mentor, I lived much closer than I do now."

"Do you still have family there?"

"Yes. But families of mantises don't stay together like yours do. Mantises have a habit of eating each other, you know. Our family reunions would be grizzly affairs at best."

Bruce's eyes widened, and he thought back to his first adventure. He'd run away from home because the other caterpillars teased and bullied him. He hadn't wanted to change into a butterfly because he was afraid of heights and had no desire to fly. He'd met some new friends, and all of them agreed not to eat each other. In time, their group included a mockingbird, a jumping spider, a firefly, a moth caterpillar, and others, including Agatha. They had traveled to a cooking competition where the insects and animals abided by that same code. He didn't worry about getting eaten when he was with them. He was still careful when he flew from place to place, however. Just as when he'd been a caterpillar, he knew that great numbers of other birds, insects, and reptiles loved to eat butterflies.

"Probably better if we don't go there, then," Bruce said, smiling. "So Cecil was a praying mantis, like you?"

"No. He's a walking stick." Agatha paused again, looking at her teacup. "Or, rather, he *was*

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a walking stick. If you haven't ever seen one, I wouldn't be surprised. Most creatures miss them completely, because they look just like twigs."

"You said Cecil was your mentor? He taught you how to cook?"

"I knew how to cook," Agatha said. "Cecil taught me to be a *chef*. I spent many days with him, while he taught me how to use spices properly and how to make food look appealing. I learned about new types of food I hadn't heard of before—foods from other parts of the forest and from distant deserts, where they have ingredients that don't grow here. He and I traveled quite a lot, experimenting with new foods and combining them in new ways. He also taught me a great deal about other uses for herbs and ingredients, such as poultices and medicines."

Agatha was animated now, thinking about times gone by. Her eyes twinkled. "I enjoyed those days immensely, and Cecil always encouraged me, although he allowed no foolishness. I worked very hard, but it was fun." Agatha's smile faded a little. "I'm going to miss him very much. I'll be glad to have you along with me to say goodbye—and Milton, too, if we find him at home."

"Agatha—" Bruce thought about how to ask his question without upsetting the mantis. "Horace, the dragonfly who was here, said something about murder. Do you think Cecil was murdered?"

"I don't know, Bruce. I hope to find out. Then I'll know what to do."

Off with Agatha

“What do you mean?”

“If I discover he *was* murdered, I intend to find out who killed him.”

“And when you figure that out?”

Agatha’s eyes flashed. “I’ll make sure he gets what he deserves.”



It was a quick departure. Arlene gathered her things, hugged Bruce, and even hugged Agatha—a difficult task, but they managed it as best they could.

“When I get back, Arlene, and this is settled, I’ll come your way and we can talk more about your entering the cooking competition,” Agatha said.

“Don’t worry about that,” Bruce’s mother said, as she headed outside. “Do what you need to do. I’ll see you both soon! Bruce—be careful! Watch out for—”

“I’ll be fine, Mom,” Bruce said, wondering if he would ever be old enough that his mother wouldn’t think of him as a tiny caterpillar any more.

Arlene lifted her wings and caught a draft that took her upward. Bruce watched her go, as she flew close to the trees and the bushes that had sweet nectar to sustain her along the way. He hoped she would be safe, too.

Bruce had only his backpack with him—the one his mother had remade so that it fitted his new, slender body—so there wasn’t much for him to prepare. Agatha brought out her large satchel and

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loaded it with food, herbs, spices, containers, and assorted tools Bruce didn't recognize. She bustled about, muttering to herself, and finally closed the satchel and hefted it onto her shoulder.

"This bag is heavy," Agatha said, "but I have no idea what we'll need. I'd rather be prepared with too much than find I didn't bring something and wish I had. Besides, if I get tired of holding it, you'll carry it for me, won't you?"

Bruce's head snapped around and his eyes grew large. He stared at the huge satchel and then at Agatha, only to find her grinning and realized she was teasing. It took him by surprise, as he'd never known Agatha to tease about anything before. He liked it.

"Of course! No problem," he said with a grin.

They both laughed, and Bruce thought the sad situation made the humor feel even more welcome.

Chapter 3

Milton

Once they'd started out, they made good time getting to Milton's new tree home. Bruce couldn't believe how quickly his wings took him from place to place compared to when he was a caterpillar and had to crawl everywhere. His first taste of flying had been a long time ago, when he met Meryl, his first friend, after running away from home. Meryl was a mockingbird who didn't like to eat bugs. She'd been teased and bullied as much as Bruce had, and having that in common was their first step to becoming good friends.

After that, they'd met more companions, including Milton, the jumping spider, and Angie, a beautiful moth caterpillar. Then Angie was abducted by a bat, and Bruce was determined to rescue her. Meryl suggested he fly on her back so they could get to the bat cave sooner. Despite feeling terrified, Bruce climbed up and finally grew accustomed to flying.

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A hint of sadness overcame Bruce as he thought about Meryl, who died while saving him from Stang, the leader of the evil bats who took Angie captive in the first place. Bruce knew he would never stop missing Meryl. He wondered if Agatha felt the same way about Cecil.

He didn't fly as fast as Meryl used to because his wings were much smaller than hers. Still, because of her, he was able to enjoy being a butterfly, and he never regretted changing.

Bruce navigated toward Milton's tree without any trouble, even though things looked very different from the air than they had from the ground. As he got closer, Bruce knew they were in the right area because he spotted large webs glistening in the sunlight. Agatha ran and hopped along the ground for the most part. Bruce knew her satchel was much heavier than she was used to carrying. He couldn't imagine why she'd brought all the things she had, but she certainly should be prepared for whatever might be waiting when they arrived at Cecil's home.

"I see webs," Agatha said. "Be careful you don't get caught."

"I see them, too," Bruce said, even as he veered around the first one. He spotted Milton in the distance spinning a web. He was surprised to see Dora there, in a web of her own. Bruce noted that Milton's web looked very nice. Dora had taught him well.

Milton

Bruce flew very quietly and landed on a branch behind Milton, careful not to make a sound. Just as Milton was about to tie a strand together in the center of the web, Bruce shouted, "BAT!"

Milton tumbled forward into the web, as Bruce giggled. Milton waved his legs this way and that, getting completely stuck to the glistening lines. The more Milton struggled, the more Bruce laughed, until he lost his footing on the branch and fluttered to the ground. He leaned against a rock, laughing until his sides hurt.

Milton had stopped moving and hung upside down from the strands. "All right, all right. You've had your fun. Get me out of here!"

"Actually, I think you look rather handsome in that beautiful web," Dora said, "or at least it was beautiful before you became its first victim." She giggled, while Milton glowered. Then Dora's smile turned into a wicked grin. "Perhaps *I* should come and set you free?"

Bruce knew this was a bad idea. Dora was an orb weaver spider they'd met on their first adventure. It was one thing for Dora to teach Milton how to spin a web from a distance. But to have her get close to Milton ... no. Just as Agatha's family tended to eat one another, so female spiders often ate their mates, as well as other spiders who got caught in their webs. While he didn't think Dora would give in to her desires and threaten Milton, he wasn't taking any chances.

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“That’s all right, Dora. Agatha and I will help this clumsy guy,” Bruce said, as he lifted off the ground and flew toward his friend.

He and Agatha set to work snipping the web strands. This was so much like the first time Bruce met Milton that he thought of Meryl again. Agatha was not like Meryl, but she had become a good friend, too. He hoped Milton would be able to join them on this trip and that the two of them could assist with Agatha’s investigation.

When they cut the last strand, Milton scowled.

Bruce ignored the look. “You know, the last time I helped free you from a web, you told me you were in my debt and must repay me. I assume that applies again?”

“Not in the least,” Milton said, unable to hide his smile any longer. “It was my own clumsiness that caused me to get caught in my web the first time. This time I was ambushed, and by my best friend, too. Sad state of affairs when your best friend can’t be trusted.”

Suddenly, Milton leaped from the web toward Bruce. He calculated the jump perfectly so that Bruce would think he was going to collide with him on the branch, but at the last moment, he somersaulted and landed on the tree trunk instead.

Bruce let out a squeal and lifted into the air, flapping his wings as fast as he could. Milton laughed so hard, he almost fell from the tree. Bruce made a rude noise and fluttered to a branch near his friend.

Milton

“Well, are you coming with us or not? No evil bats this time, but Agatha’s on a quest, and I’m helping her.”

“Oh, a quest!” said Dora, who peered at them from her web above. “I enjoyed helping with your last quest, you know. If you need assistance again, come and ask me, all right?”

Milton nodded in her direction, starting to pull small bits of web from his furry legs. “Dora’s expert teaching has gotten me about as far as I can go with web spinning anyway.” He waved a foreleg and bowed to the large orb weaver, who saluted in return. Turning back to Bruce and Agatha, he said, “Of course, I’ll go with you. When do we leave?”

One strand was still stuck to Milton’s head, and it made Bruce giggle to see it dangling between his eyes. “We’re waiting on you.”

“Well, then,” Milton said, as he leaped from the branch to the ground and landed neatly at Agatha’s feet, “lead on.”

Chapter 4

On the Way

Bruce was excited. Although the occasion of their going was a sad one, he couldn't help but feel something more was going to happen. He watched Milton, who had gone ahead and was waiting for them to catch up, swaying from side to side. Bruce knew Milton was excited, too.

It had been quite a while since their last adventure. Milton had remained with him for a long time after he changed, and Bruce loved having him there, although things had been different between them. They couldn't wrestle any longer, as that might damage Bruce's wings. However, when Bruce was on the ground or sipping nectar from a flower, Milton still enjoyed sneaking up behind Bruce and pouncing, landing right next to him and scaring him. This had been a favorite game for some time. Bruce was glad he'd had a chance to turn the tables on his friend this time. He also knew Milton would return the favor soon.

On the Way

Bruce hadn't really thought about how different his life would be once he became a butterfly, because he never planned on becoming one. When he was young, the prospect of becoming a butterfly had scared him so much that he would simply put the thought out of his mind. Consequently, he'd never asked questions of his parents, such as what it's like to sip nectar, whether you get hungry without eating leaves, where your legs go—things like that. Now he was having to learn all kinds of little things about his new life: which flowers had good-tasting nectar, how to gather pollen, what to do if you got caught in a strong wind, and more. But he was a fast learner, and he'd found the new tastes of nectars and pollens to be very enjoyable. Not only that, it was a food that he and Milton could share, something he liked very much.

They had gone quite a way when Agatha said, "It's nearly sundown. Perhaps we should camp here and get some dinner before it gets too dark."

Bruce glanced at Milton, whose many eyes reflected the rays of the setting sun. Bruce was suddenly consumed with a great rush of affection for the spider. They had been in so many situations together, always watching out for each other, always friends. Bruce couldn't imagine a friend more different than he was, nor one who could be better. It would be good to be out together again.

But despite the similarities to their original trip, Bruce realized he'd changed. He'd grown up,

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and in more ways than just losing his legs and gaining wings. Now he was aware of the things that could happen to his friends and family, as well as to himself. That gave him a moment of doubt about the journey, thinking of the dangers that had happened before and wondering what might befall them this time.

Bruce gazed toward the sunset, which had bloomed into deep crimson and orange. He glanced back at Milton and smiled, but a nagging uncertainty was still there.

Chapter 5

The Scene of the Crime

Despite Bruce's doubts, they made it to the marsh by late morning without any serious problems. Once, they'd hidden after Milton heard something. It turned out to be a fox chasing a vole. Another time, they heard men in the distance and changed their route to avoid them.

Agatha said Cecil lived in a fallen tree that would be easy to find because its branches and roots now stuck up into the air the way its trunk used to. Bruce realized the tree wasn't completely dead. That meant some of its roots must still be underground.

As they got closer, Horace flew into view. The dragonfly buzzed closer and hovered in front of them.

"Thank goodness you're here. I've had a terrible time trying to keep the other animals and insects away from him. I'm only a dragonfly, you know. I'm not suited to fending off creatures larger than

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I am. You wouldn't think so many other creatures would find a dead body interesting, but apparently they do." Horace flitted close to Agatha, who had a pained expression. "Oh, I'm sorry, Agatha. I hope I didn't upset you, but it's true. Oh, and quite a few others have come by to pay their respects. Cecil's daughter, Polly, and his brother, Frederick, were both here, along with many of the other chefs. I don't know how they found out about it, but apparently everyone knows. I've seen gerbils, finches, shrews, rats, wasps, grasshoppers, spiders, snakes, cicadas, bees, lizards, salamanders, toads, a turtle, a chameleon ..."

"I appreciate your diligence in guarding the remains," Agatha said, cutting off the winged creature's tirade. "Before we go in, tell me when you last saw Cecil alive."

"I checked in with him before I went home yesterday, a little before sundown. He was fine then. It must have happened sometime between sundown and early morning, when poor little Devon—he's Cecil's first student—found him this way."

"Thank you, Horace. Now, if we may have a look?"

The dragonfly flitted sideways, making room at the entrance for Agatha to pass. "The letter Cecil was writing is on his desk."

"Thank you, Horace. We'll look at that."

"I'll stay out here," he said, with a sniffle. "It bothers me to see him this way."

The Scene of the Crime

"I know. We'll be out soon."

Bruce hadn't ever seen a walking stick, and he wondered how large Cecil's hole in the log would be. Then he realized that if Agatha could fit inside, neither he or Milton would have trouble getting in. Agatha disappeared into the hole.

Bruce landed on one of the nearby branches and looked at Milton. He suddenly realized he wasn't eager to come close to a dead body. A shiver ran through his wings. He motioned toward the opening, indicating Milton should go first. "After you."

"Oh, no," Milton said, shaking his head. "After you. I insist."

Agatha's voice carried from inside the log. "You two stop that and come in here. I could use your help."

Bruce glided down just outside the opening. It was dark inside the passageway, and he walked forward slowly, letting his eyes adjust to the blackness within the hollow tree. He smelled burned wood and ash and realized that the tree must have been struck by lightning, which is probably why it fell.

He felt more than saw Milton behind him. Following a curving wall of wood with the tips of his wings, he rounded a bend and emerged into a large open area. The space had been outfitted nicely: a table on one side of the room was covered with utensils and bowls; in one corner at the back of the room was the cooking area, with a fireplace and

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an oven; and on the other side was Cecil's sleeping area, with a bed made of woven reeds stuffed with cattail down.

Yet Bruce didn't see any of that right away. His eyes were locked on the motionless body lying in the middle of the floor.

It looked just like a collection of twigs had fallen to the ground. Bruce didn't think he had ever seen a walking stick insect before, but after seeing Cecil, he realized he might have seen many without knowing it. He thought their ability to blend into their surroundings must be superb.

Agatha had plenty of room to move around, as Cecil had been even larger than she was. His body was probably half again as long as hers, and his legs, now bent close to his body, were at least as long.

Bruce had seen a dead body before. The father of one of his classmates had died not long ago, and Bruce had gone to see the body before it was buried. Somehow, this felt different. Perhaps because they were in his house and it seemed more personal.

"Come here, please, but don't touch anything unless I tell you to," Agatha said, motioning for Bruce and Milton to join her near Cecil's body. "Look at this."

He moved closer and stared at Cecil's head.

"Do you see that his head is quite a bit more red than the rest of him? If it's what I think it is, poor Cecil *was* murdered."

The Scene of the Crime

"How do you know?" Milton asked, backing away from the body.

"I don't know for certain, but I believe so. Milton, would you fetch my satchel?"

Milton jumped over to Agatha's bag, which was on the ground near the entrance to the room. The satchel was half as large as he was. He struggled to lift it and, groaning, eventually hoisted it onto his back. He staggered back to where Agatha and Bruce were discussing Cecil's body. He dropped the satchel behind Agatha with a thud, and Agatha jumped, flapping her wings. The resulting breeze knocked Bruce off his feet, almost causing him to fall on top of Cecil. When Agatha and Bruce regained their composure, they glared at the spider, who held up his front two legs, looking abashed.

Bruce's antennas swirled in circles as he studied the body again. "Who would want to murder Cecil?"

"I don't know," Agatha said. "There are probably some who didn't like him beating them in the early cooking competitions, I suppose. Sheer jealousy of his incredible cooking prowess might have been a reason. He was a fabulous chef. Agatha looked around the room. "I really don't know much about what Cecil was doing lately," she said, "but I guess I'm going to find out."

"What do you mean?" Milton asked.

"If Cecil was murdered, I need to discover who did it, and I want you to help me."

Bruce and the Murder in the Marsh

The spider bounced up and down, obviously excited. "How will we do that?"

"We'll ask questions and take notes and see if we can piece together what Cecil was doing recently and find out if anyone had a reason to want him dead."

Bruce, who loved puzzles, was getting excited now, too. "What will you do if we figure that out?"

Agatha raised her forefoot, pointing directly at Bruce. "I'll make sure he gets all that's coming to him!"

Chapter 6

Searching for Clues

Start by looking through Cecil's belongings," Agatha said, pointing to the different corners of Cecil's room. "Each of you start in a different place. Milton—why don't you search some of the cubbyholes where Cecil kept his kitchen tools and other implements. Bruce—examine Cecil's shelves with his personal things. I'll look through the papers and books on Cecil's desk."

"What are we looking for exactly?" Milton asked.

"I don't know. We just need to hope something turns up that will give us a clue."

Bruce searched, but everything he'd found so far was ordinary. He kept turning around to look at the body, expecting Cecil to wake up and demand to know what they were doing in his home. There was something creepy about looking through somebody's belongings when his dead body lay in the middle of the room.

Bruce and the Murder in the Marsh

He watched Agatha walk around Cecil's body several times, looking at him from different angles, and she kept bending down to examine some part of him more closely. Finally, she knelt on the floor and peered at the ground around his body. When she stood up, she looked at Bruce. "Find anything?"

"Not yet. Some history books and story books, and a lot of cookbooks. A collection of pretty stones. Stuff like that. Did you find something?"

"Besides the note Horace mentioned, nothing much out of the ordinary. The papers on his desk are mostly recipes and notes about cooking. Milton—how about you?"

"Nothing strange around his cooking area. Pots and fireplace tools, wood for the fire—things you'd expect. I haven't—wait." Milton reached into the fireplace and pulled out a small scrap of paper. Much of it had burned, leaving charred edges, but Milton brought the remaining piece to Agatha. Bruce moved closer to see it.

The scrap was covered with a flowing script. "Looks like part of a letter, I think," Milton said.

"Let me see." Agatha took the scrap from Milton and held it closer to the light coming in from the ceiling where she could see it better. "Most of it has been burned away, but yes, it appears to be a letter." She handed the scrap back to Milton and walked to her satchel. She dug within the contents and produced something circular that was flat and hard and completely transparent. Taking the paper

Searching for Clues

back from Milton, she held the circle close to it. "My eyes are not what they used to be. I found this one day, and it has been a marvelous treasure as it makes things look bigger. Bruce, fly up here and take a look."

Bruce fluttered upward, landed on Agatha's shoulder, and peered through the circular item. He was amazed to see that the words on the paper appeared to be twice their original size. "A lot of it is charred, so you can only read a few words. Those say, 'I'm sorry ...' I can't read the next line ... then 'I won't let you go ...' and another break. '... waiting for you' ... 'At your place—I'll wait ...' 're-entering the competition ...'" Suddenly, Bruce lifted his wings, flew to the desk, and landed on one of Cecil's notebooks. He shuddered. "The last word I could read said 'poison.'"

Agatha lowered the scrap of paper. "Milton—are you sure there are no more pieces of this letter in the fireplace?"

Milton crawled back into the fireplace and searched around it. "Yes. Nothing else. Just a lot of ashes and charred sticks." He crawled back out and wiped the tips of his legs on the floor, as he swayed from side to side. "I wonder why Cecil burned the letter?"

"We can't assume Cecil burned it," Agatha said, "although he may have. Whoever killed him might have tried to hide something that would incriminate him or her. In the case of this letter, I think it was written by a female because the writing is curvy,

the kind of thing many females do.”

“So whoever wrote the letter killed Cecil?”
Bruce asked.

Agatha tipped her head sideways as she often did when she was thinking. “That’s possible, especially since the letter uses the word ‘poison.’ But other possibilities exist, too. We need to check into all of them before making a hasty decision.”

“What about the letter Horace mentioned? The one talking about murder?”

Agatha pointed to a neatly written note on the desk. “It is addressed to the Cooking Competition Commissioner.”

Bruce glided over and examined it.

“What does it say?” Milton asked.

“It reads:

Dear Commissioner Marquez,

It pains me greatly to share with you information that came as a great shock to me. While visiting friends a few moons ago, an associate of mine overheard a neighbor, one of our own chefs, admit to the theft of another chef’s cookbook. Having no proof, I said nothing about it then.

During the most recent small competition, however, I realized that the recipe supposedly created by this same chef was, in fact, Rodrigo’s own. Yes, it was Chef Rodrigo’s cookbook that was stolen.

I ask that you ban this chef from further participation in future cooking competitions, small or large.

It is also my belief that this same chef is most likely responsible for Rodrigo’s death. I lack proof of this yet, but I will continue to look into it as I can. The chef I ~~~~~

Searching for Clues

"And that's where it ends, followed by a squiggle." Bruce looked up from the note. "It almost seems like Cecil might have died while writing this."

Agatha nodded. "I think so, too." She walked toward Cecil's bed, surveyed the items on the side table, and scanned the other areas of the room she hadn't searched. Bruce thought she might be trying to contain her emotions, as he had seen the sadness in her eyes.

She wandered back to the desk. "If the creature who killed Rodrigo found out that Cecil was onto him or her—or would be soon—that would be a reason to kill him: to make sure he didn't tell anyone else."

Agatha walked to Cecil's cooking area and leaned over to sniff the contents of the items there. She also picked up and smelled many of the containers around the cooking pots. Finally she sniffed the stew that sat in a cauldron.

"Ah. As I suspected. It wasn't poison, although the effects are similar. Whoever killed Cecil used peanut oil," Agatha said. "Cecil was horribly allergic to peanuts and took great pains to make sure he never came in contact with them in any way. Someone added peanut oil to this stew. I can smell it." Agatha shook her head. "Poor, poor Cecil. Who would want to murder you?"