

M. G. LEONARD

# BEETLE BOY

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died, but one day his father vanished from a locked vault at the Natural  
History Museum, and now he lives with his eccentric uncle—but one day  
he finds a large and unusually intelligent and self-aware beetle, and soon  
he and his two friends are caught up in a struggle to protect an intelligent  
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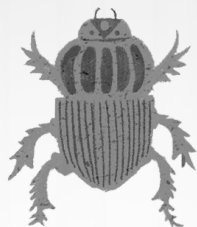
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## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Mysterious Disappearance of Bartholomew Cuttle*



*D*r. Bartholomew Cuttle wasn't the kind of man who mysteriously disappeared. He was the kind of man who read enormous old books at the dinner table and got fried egg stuck in his beard. He was the kind of man who always lost his keys and never took an umbrella on rainy days. He was the kind of dad who might be five minutes late picking you up from school but he always came. More than anything else, Darkus knew his dad was not the kind of father who would abandon his twelve-year-old son.

The police report stated that September 27 had been an unremarkable Tuesday. Dr. Bartholomew Cuttle, a forty-eight-year-old widower, had taken his son, Darkus Cuttle, to school and gone on to the

Natural History Museum, where he was the Director of Science. He'd greeted his secretary, Margaret, at nine thirty, spent a morning in meetings discussing museum business, and eaten lunch at one o'clock with an ex-colleague, Professor Andrew Appleyard. In the afternoon, he'd gone down to the collection vaults, as he frequently would, via the coffee machine, where he'd filled his cup. He'd exchanged pleasantries with Eddie, the security guard on duty that day, walked down the corridor to the vaults, and locked himself in one of the entomology rooms.

That evening, when his father didn't come home, Darkus alerted the neighbors and they called the police.

When the police arrived at the museum, the room Dr. Cuttle had entered was locked from the inside. Fearing he may have suffered a heart attack, or had an accident, they produced a steel battering ram and smashed the door open.

The room was empty.

A stone-cold cup of coffee sat with some papers on the table beside a microscope. Several Coleoptera specimen drawers were open, but there was no sign of Dr. Bartholomew Cuttle.

He had vanished.

The vault had no windows or doors other than the one he had entered by. It was a sealed chamber with a controlled atmosphere.

The puzzle of the disappearing scientist made the front page of every newspaper. The unsolvable mystery drove journalists crazy, and not one of them could explain how Dr. Cuttle had gotten out of that vault.

*SCIENTIST DISAPPEARS!* headlines screamed.

*POLICE ARE OUTFOXED!* newspapers cried.

*ORPHANED BOY PLACED IN CARE!* they reported. *HUNT IS ON FOR ONLY LIVING RELATIVE, FAMOUS ARCHAEOLOGIST MAXIMILIAN CUTTLE.*

And the next day: *ARCHAEOLOGIST LOST IN SINAI DESERT!*

*BOY ALONE!* they wailed.

Outside the foster home, journalists stopped Darkus in the street, taking pictures and shouting questions:

“Darkus, have you heard from your dad?”

“Darkus, is your father on the run?”

“Darkus, is your dad dead?”

Five years earlier, when his mother died, Darkus had retreated inside himself. He stopped playing outside with friends or inviting anyone over. His mum, Esme Cuttle, had been taken away suddenly by pneumonia. The shock was terrible. His dad was overcome with grief. Some days—blue days, Darkus called them—his father lay in bed and stared at the wall, unable to speak, tears rolling down his cheeks. On the bleakest blue days, Darkus would bring tea and biscuits and sit beside his dad, reading. It was doubly hard, losing Mum *and* Dad being so sad all the time. Darkus had to learn to take care of himself. At school, he got along with everyone, but he didn’t have close friends. He kept to himself. The other children wouldn’t understand and he wasn’t sure he could explain it. The only thing that mattered was taking care of Dad and helping him get happy again.

Finally, four years after Mum's death, the blue days got fewer and farther apart, and Darkus watched with cautious joy as his father awoke from his long sleep of sadness. He became a proper dad again, playing soccer on Sundays, smiling at Darkus over the breakfast table, and teasing him about his unruly hair.

No, Darkus was sure his dad wasn't suicidal, or on the run, or living a double life. Something else had happened in that vault, and that made him sick to his stomach with fear, because he couldn't think what that something else could possibly be. So when the reporters asked their stupid questions, he jammed his hands in his pockets, scowled at their notebooks, and refused to answer.

*BOY WITH BROKEN HEART STOPS SPEAKING!* the papers told the world.

When Darkus's uncle, Professor Maximilian Cuttle, was finally tracked down in Egypt, he flew straight back to London to look after his nephew. The papers, unable to solve the mystery of the disappearing scientist or make up new stories about Darkus, lost interest and left him alone. Uncle Max brought Darkus home to his flat above Mother Earth, a health food store in a row of shops between Camden Town and Regent's Park.

"I have to warn you, my boy," Uncle Max said as they climbed the stairs, "I've always lived on my own. Travel a lot, you see. Never much liked England; it's all this blasted rain—dreary, and not much fun on a dig, I can tell you. I'd rather be in the Sinai Desert, riding a camel." He paused to catch his breath. "Anyway, long and short, not much good with guests. Like them, just not sure what to do with them; same goes for children."

Darkus followed his uncle silently through the front door, enjoying listening to a voice so similar to his father's.

"Kitchen." Uncle Max first pointed to a bright orange room on his left and then up some steps to his right. "Living room."

As they passed the living room, Darkus stared at a series of long-faced wooden masks hanging on the midnight-blue walls, and they stared back at him. Climbing another flight of stairs, to the second floor, they arrived outside Uncle Max's bedroom and a large pink bathroom.

"Because I work abroad most of the year, the university won't give me an office, so this is my office as well as my home," Uncle Max said as they climbed a third flight of stairs into the loft, "and up until now, the room you'll be sleeping in has been my—um, well—my filing cabinet."

When they reached the low-ceilinged landing of the third floor, Uncle Max leaned against the wall and made a show of being tired. Pulling a handkerchief from his shirt pocket, he nudged up his safari hat with the swollen knuckles of his right hand and mopped his tanned, leathery forehead.

"Phew," he grimaced, "whatever you do, don't get old, lad. Lord only knows how I'll make it back down. You may have to carry me!" He chuckled heartily to show he was joking, but when Darkus failed to join in, he smiled sadly and shook his head. "You might look like your mother, but you're Barty through and through. Esme would always laugh at my jokes, especially the unfunny ones."

Darkus tried to be polite and smile, but it came out like a grimace. Conscious of Uncle Max studying him, he hugged his oversize green

sweater to his body and looked down to see that his scruffy jeans were torn at the knee.

Because of his dark skin and hair, and coal-black eyes, people said he had his mother's Spanish looks, but when he thought of Mum, it was her wide smile that filled his head. His mouth was shaped like hers, but when he realized his smile made Dad sad, he'd stopped doing it.

"What happened to your hair?"

"They shaved it off at the foster home." Darkus rubbed his hand over his stubble. He didn't want to tell his uncle about the bully who had shaved a stripe into his hair on his first night in that unfamiliar house. "There were nits," he muttered.

"I see. Sensible precaution, I suppose." Uncle Max frowned, returning his handkerchief to his pocket. "Righty-ho." He pointed at the door in front of them. "That's a bathroom." Then he walked along the landing: "And this is your room." Uncle Max gave Darkus an apologetic grin before pushing the door open. "Ta-da!"

A piece of paper, covered in scribbled notes, floated into the hall and landed at Darkus's feet. The room was tiny. Piles of paper hid the floor and boxes were stacked clumsily on top of one another. Objects wrapped in yellowing newspaper hung out of half-opened packages, and the air was thick with the aroma of mildew and dust.

Darkus sneezed.

"*Gesundheit*," said Uncle Max, reaching inside the doorway and switching on the light.

Beyond the boxes was a wall of black filing cabinets. Several drawers were half open, paper spewing out. On the top, rows of hardback



atlases and loose-leaf maps slumped against one another. Darkus noticed a skylight in the roof, its external pane spread so thick with grime that it filled the room with shadows.

"You must hate filing," he said.

"Well, yes, I suppose it has been some years." Uncle Max coughed. "Come to think of it, I'm not sure when I last came up here. It might have been before you were born."

Darkus smiled weakly, not wanting to appear rude. Pleased that his nephew was warming, Uncle Max picked up a book from an open box. "*An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*—I've been looking for that." He raised his eyebrows twice and dropped the book back down.

A cloud of dust erupted from the box and broke over Darkus's face.

Uncle Max laughed as Darkus frantically waved the dust away with one hand, sneezing, and then—unable to resist the infectious nature of his uncle's roars—laughing.

"The upshot, lad," said Uncle Max, offering Darkus a clean handkerchief from his back pocket, "is it needs work. However, if we put our backs into it, I'm certain we can make this into a bedroom of sorts."

Darkus put his suitcase down in the hall. "It'll be fine, Uncle Max. Thank you."

"Of course it will." Uncle Max clapped Darkus on the back, knocking him forward. "It'll be a rum old place when we're done." He took off his safari hat, his hair springing up above his tanned scalp like a cloud of silver thoughts. "First, I suggest we move everything out into the hall, because there's some cleaning to be done before this room is fit for human habitation."

Darkus got to work. He pushed up the sleeves of his green sweater, exposing dark skinny arms, and dragged a heavy box across the room. As he hauled it through the doorway, he stumbled backward, ripping the carton open to see a stack of folders marked *Fabre Project* and scattering what looked like human teeth on the floor.

“I—I’m sorry, I . . .” he stammered.

“Ah, the teeth of Nefertiti.” Uncle Max knelt down and carefully gathered the teeth into his hand. “Let’s put these somewhere safe, shall we?”

“The actual teeth of Nefertiti?” Darkus asked, wide-eyed. “Are you serious?”

“Deadly serious.” Uncle Max nodded. “I discovered her tomb. People will tell you it’s still lost, but I found it. These teeth”—he held up his hand—“are plucked from the casket of the infamously beautiful Egyptian queen.”

“Did you pull them out of her skull?”

Uncle Max shrugged. “Well, she wasn’t using them.”

Darkus picked up a stray tooth. “Shouldn’t they be in a museum?”

“They *would* be in a museum, lad, if anyone had listened to me,” Uncle Max said. “But no, they wouldn’t hear of it. A junior archaeologist making such an important discovery? A mere boy? They said it was impossible, but they were wrong. Just because a person is young doesn’t mean they don’t have the curiosity, determination, and grit to do what a grown-up can do, eh?” Uncle Max sniffed. “When they finally decide to find the thing—and they will, because I’ve told them where it is—old Nefertiti will be toothless, and these beauties will

prove categorically that I was there first.” He carefully poured the teeth into an envelope. “The past always has a way of catching up with you, lad, even when you don’t want it to.” He folded down the flap and sealed it. “It was one of my first Egyptian excavations, you see. I was fresh meat, newly qualified, and didn’t understand the rules of the game. Grown-up life can be awfully dull, Darkus; it’s full of politics and compromise . . .”

Uncle Max rambled on about the trials and tribulations of being an archaeologist, and Darkus nodded or shook his head as they cleared, swept, and dusted the room together. A brightly colored Moroccan cloth was thrown over four boxes of books to make a table, and three empty containers were stacked one on top of the other to make shelves for clothes.

Uncle Max climbed onto a stool and scrubbed the inside of the skylight with vinegar-soaked newspaper. As he reached up to open the window and clean the outside, Darkus saw something black sitting on the glass. A creature . . . with seven legs . . . or was it six legs . . . and a horn?

“Wait!” Darkus called out.

But Uncle Max pulled the window toward him, and the creature leapt into the air, zooming away.

“What was *that*?” Darkus pointed, wanting to scramble up onto Uncle Max’s chair and get a proper look.

“What was what?” Uncle Max looked up, but whatever the beast was, it had gone.

Six legs meant an insect, didn’t it? No animal had seven. Maybe it

was a bat or a small bird, or two. But bats didn't have horns, and even two birds only had four legs. It must have been an insect, but he'd never seen an insect that big before.

"The sun is setting," Uncle Max said, his head out of the window. "It's not an Egyptian sunset, but I must admit the city has a beauty of its own."

Darkus surveyed the tiny room. "Uncle Max?"

"Yes, lad?"

"Where am I going to sleep?"

Uncle Max popped his head back into the room.

Darkus threw his hands out. "I don't think a bed will fit in here."

"And I don't have a spare bed, even if one would fit, which it wouldn't." Uncle Max nodded in agreement.

"I suppose I could sleep on the floor."

"Or on the ceiling," said Uncle Max.

"Right." Darkus scratched his head, unsure if Uncle Max was joking again.

"In a hammock," Uncle Max said. "A hanging bed sort-of-a-thing. Sailors and archaeologists use them all the time. They're very useful for avoiding the deadly sting of a fat-tailed scorpion—not that there are any scorpions here, you understand . . . well, not ones that are alive, at any rate. So, how does a hammock sound?"

"It sounds good."

"Excellent, because I have a spare one of those." Uncle Max went out into the hall and returned with a blue bag. Inside was a sandy yellow stretch of canvas gathered around two large copper hoops. "I

thought we could hang it up there.” Uncle Max pointed to the roof space above the filing cabinets.

Darkus nodded eagerly, and Uncle Max reached into the bag and pulled out two brass hooks and a mallet. “Run down to the living room, lad, and grab the sleeping bag—it’s on the leather armchair—and bring up a cushion from the sofa.”

When Darkus came back upstairs, Uncle Max had hung the hammock. He eagerly clambered onto the cabinets and flopped into his new bed, which rocked him gently from side to side. Cocooned in the canvas, he was completely hidden.

“I love it!” he said, poking his head out.

Uncle Max passed him the sleeping bag and pillow. “Not bad,” he agreed, looking around with a satisfied smile. “Now then”—he picked up Darkus’s suitcase and placed it on top of the filing cabinets—“we should see about getting you some clothes.”

“I’ve got clothes.”

“Some new ones.” Uncle Max smiled. “That sweater wouldn’t look out of place on a tramp.”

“This is Dad’s sweater,” Darkus said quietly.

“Oh.” Uncle Max looked crestfallen. “Forgive me, Darkus. I’m an old fool.” He cleared his throat. “Terribly insensitive of me.”

“Uncle Max . . .” Darkus swallowed. He couldn’t look his uncle in the eye. “Now that you’re back . . . the police will have to start looking for Dad again, won’t they?”

Uncle Max nodded. “I have an appointment with Scotland Yard tomorrow.”

“Tell them”—Darkus leaned out of the hammock—“he wouldn’t run away. He’d never leave me, not with Mum gone. Something must have happened to him in that vault. Something bad.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m going to tell them.” Uncle Max looked up with an apologetic grimace. “Darkus,” he paused, “I’m truly sorry it took me so long to get back to you.” He put his hat back on his head. “I feel terrible about it, and I will do my level best to find out what’s happened to your father and bring him home. But if, as I suspect, the police aren’t going to be very helpful, we may have to do a bit of investigating on our own—and that will require grit and determination from both of us.”

“You can count on me,” Darkus said earnestly.

“I knew I could.” Uncle Max smiled. “Dinner’s at seven.” He stepped out of the room and saluted. “And it’ll be fish and chips.”

Darkus listened to his uncle go downstairs. Then he leaned down and pulled his suitcase up onto his lap. Opening it, he swept his clothes aside and took out a framed photograph of his father. Looking down at Dad’s sandy hair and smiling blue eyes, he felt his chest tighten and his stomach twist. He stroked the glass. He missed his dad so much it hurt like a stitch in his chest.

Darkus lay back in the hammock and propped the picture on the pillow beside him. Gazing up through the skylight, he watched the first stars appear. Tracing the constellations his father had taught him to recognize, he wondered if somewhere under this night sky his father was looking up and thinking of him.