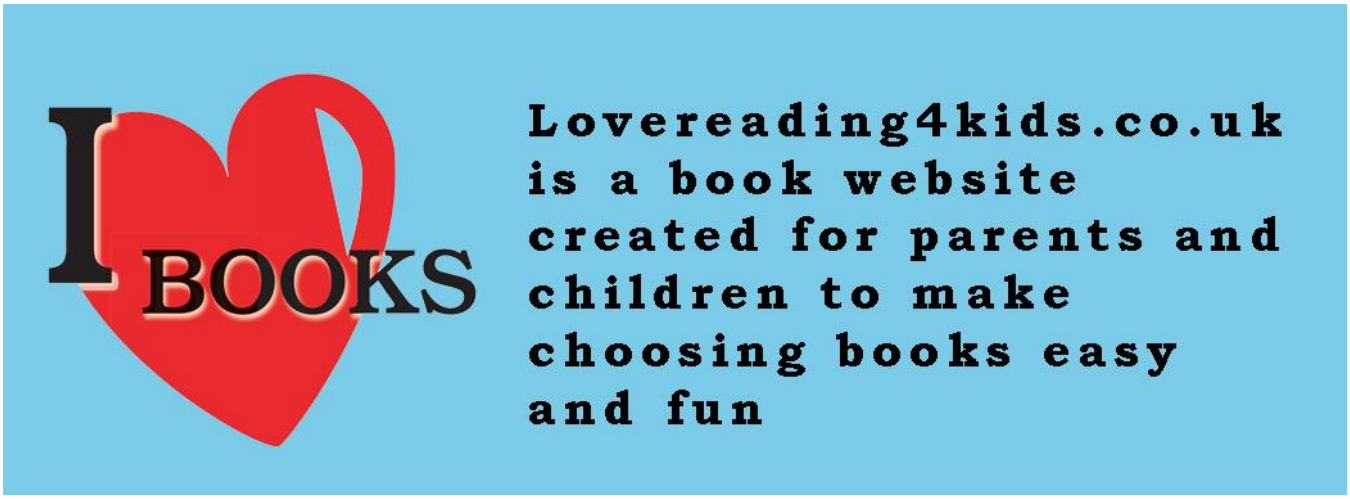


Opening extract from

Beetle Boy

Written by

M. G. Leonard

Published by

Chicken House Ltd

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First published in Great Britain in 2016
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

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Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White
Cover and interior illustrations by Júlia Sardà
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

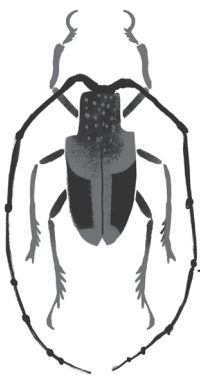
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-910002-70-4
eISBN 978-1-910002-98-8

Chapter One

The Mysterious Disappearance of Bartholomew Cuttle



Dr 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 thirteen-year-old son.

The police report stated that the 27th of September

had been an unremarkable Tuesday. Dr Bartholomew Cuttle, a 48-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 neighbours 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 got out of that vault.

SCIENTIST DISAPPEARS! headlines screamed.

POLICE ARE FOXED! 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 out 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 double 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 himself 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 further apart and Darkus watched with cautious joy as his father awoke from his long sleep of sadness. He became a proper dad again, playing football 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 the stomach with fear, because he couldn't think what that something else could possibly be. So when they asked their stupid questions, he jammed his hands in his pockets, scowled at the 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 parade 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 leant 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 oversized green jumper to his body and looked down to see his scruffy jeans were torn at the knee.

Because of his dark skin, 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 toilet.' 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 hard-backed atlases and loose-leafed 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.