

M. G. LEONARD

**BEETLE
BOY**

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Summary: Darkus Cuttle had taken care of his father ever since his mother
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
superspecies of beetles.

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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.