



Key Lardo: A Chet Gecko Mystery

By Bruce Hale

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Hold on to your fedoras, Gecko fans, a new detective has arrived at Emerson Hicky Elementary. His name's Bland. *James* Bland. And he immediately cracks a case that has baffled Chet and Natalie. Do our favorite PIs get jealous? You'd better believe it! When Bland suddenly goes missing, the blame falls squarely on everyone's favorite gecko. So Chet will have to rescue his tubby rival or face a stint behind bars--and we're *not* talking the jungle gym.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for books in the Chet Gecko series:

"Zesty and entertaining . . . Young readers . . . will want to scuttle along with this schoolyard sleuth."--*The Bulletin*

"Those who haven't read a 'Chet Gecko' mystery don't know what they're missing."--*School Library Journal*

About the Author

BRUCE HALE is the author of five picture books as well as the Chet Gecko mystery series. A popular speaker, teacher, and storyteller for children and adults, he lives in Santa Barbara, California.

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Penguin Pal

It all started with a muffin. And despite my best intentions, it went downhill from there, quicker than a walrus on roller skates.

Wednesday is Italian Day in the cafeteria. On this particular Wednesday, Mrs. Bagoong and her cooks had worked their usual magic—spaghetti with millipede meatballs, eggplant à la fungus gnat, and honey-glazed Madagascan Hissing Cockroach muffins.

The muffins set off a taste explosion that had my tongue dancing the Madagascan Mambo (or whatever kind of hoofing they do over there).

I pushed back from the table and headed over to score another one. Most kids don't get to have seconds. But I'm not most kids.

Bellying up to the lunch counter, I could tell that the baked goodies had been a hit. All had vanished but one. And that one had Chet Gecko's name on it.

"Hey, Brown Eyes," I said to Mrs. Bagoong. "What would it—"

A plump figure barged in front of me. "I say, dear madam," he said. "Could a poor bloke please have another of those heavenly muffins?"

Mrs. Bagoong's smile sent dimples burrowing into her scaly face. "Why, how you talk," said the big iguana. "There's one left, just for you."

She lifted the golden muffin with her tongs.

"But!" I squawked. "That's mine!"

The queen of the lunchroom raised an eyebrow. "Now, now. This charming penguin asked first, and he asked politely."

"But—"

Mrs. Bagoong's frown could have brought on an eclipse at high noon. "Why, Chet Gecko," she said. "I'm surprised at you. Can't you be generous with the new boy?"

"New boy?"

I stepped back to size up the muffin thief.

His webbed feet were planted wide, to support his swollen belly. The penguin's broad butt tapered to a small head, giving him the look of a bowling pin that needed to hit Weight Watchers.

Topping it all off were a midnight blue bow tie and bowler that would've looked better on a banker than a

school kid.

Having snagged my treat, the creature turned with a vague smile.

“Don’t believe we’ve met,” he said, extending a flipper. “The name’s Bland. James Bland.”

He reeked of fermented fish and onions.

My eyes watered. I returned the briefest handshake. “Gecko. Chet Gecko.”

Mrs. Bagoong beamed. “So nice to see y’all getting along. James, you’ve found a new friend already.”

“Friend?” I said. “Now, wait just—”

The lunch lady’s glare cut me off like a sushi chef hacking a halibut. “Chet will be happy to show you around, introduce you.” Her eyes completed the thought: If he ever wants to have seconds in my lunchroom again.

I heaved a sigh. A good detective can tell when he’s outmaneuvered.

“All right, Bland. Come on.”

“Good-o,” said the penguin. “Ta-ta, madam!” He waved a flipper at Mrs. Bagoong, who simpered back at him. And if you don’t think the sight of a simpering iguana is enough to curdle your French fries, think again.

I shuffled toward the nearest table. “So, uh, where are you from?”

“Down Under actually, but I’ve spent donkey’s years in Albion,” he said.

“Living with a donkey?”

“No, living in England.”

Swell. Not only was he a muffin bandit, the guy could barely speak English.

I eyeballed his plate. “Pretty big dessert after such a full meal. Need help?”

“Oh, I’ll muddle through,” said James Bland. He plunged his beak into the treat and gobbled down about half of it.

So much for the old guilt trick.

A ragtag group of kids ringed the table. Among them sat Frenchy LaTrine, Bo and Tony Newt, Cassandra the Stool Pigeon, and Shirley Chameleon (who had a wicked crush on me)—all eating, laughing, and spraying food.

“Hey, sports fans,” I said. “This is James Blond.”

“Bland,” said the penguin.

“Ain’t that the truth,” I said. “Anyway, he’s a new kid, from Down Over.”

“Under,” said Bland.

“Whatever.” I gestured to the group. “James, guys; guys, James.”

The penguin bowed. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said.

Frenchy LaTrine giggled. “Cool accent!”

“Do you know any kangaroos personally?” asked Tony Newt.

“A few,” said the penguin. He scarfed down the rest of the muffin as I watched sadly. “I say, do you know what they call a lazy kangaroo?”

“No, what?” said Frenchy.

“A pouch potato,” said Bland.

The girls shrieked with laughter; even my buddy Bo chuckled.

I didn’t care. So what if the new guy was funny?

Shirley Chameleon elbowed Bo Newt. “Scoot over for James.”

She didn’t suggest they make room for me.

The penguin squeezed his bubble butt in between them. He vacuumed the last muffin fragments off Shirley’s plate.

“What do you do for fun, James?” she asked, batting her eyes.

I didn’t care. Although Shirley had a crush on me, she was free to fling her cooties wherever she wanted.

Bland angled his hat. “Actually, I do a spot of detective work,” he said.

Now, wait just a boll-weevil-pickin’ minute.

“Fascinating!” said Frenchy, resting her paw on his flipper. “Tell us more!”

The penguin leaned forward. “Well, on one occasion, Her Majesty rang me up for a special—”

My face went all hot.

“You know the Queen of England?” I said.

“Rather.”

“Sure, and I know the pope.”

“Really?” said Bland, half turning. “Does he mention me often?”

I spluttered.

The kids shushed me. “Ignore the lizard,” said Frenchy. “Go on, James.”

“So when the crown jewels went missing—I say, you’re not saving that last bit of eggplant, are you?”

Wordlessly, the mouse slid her tray over.

My tail curled.

“Thanks awfully,” said Bland. He slurped up her leftovers. “Now, where was I . . . ?”

“The crown jewels,” said Shirley. She shouted over to the next table, “Hey, you guys! He was a detective for the queen!”

“You don’t actually believe this bozo?” I choked. “He’s making it up!”

Shirley twisted to look at me. “Oh, Chet,” she said. “You, of all people.”

“Yeah,” said Frenchy. “Listen and learn!”

“Learn?!?” The table of kids ignored me. They were riveted by Bland’s bogus tale of jewel thieves, secret passages, and narrow escapes.

Someone tugged on my arm. “Chet?”

It was my partner, a wisecracking mockingbird named Natalie Attired. She nodded toward the door. I followed.

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“Why, despite years of daylight saving time, we’ve still only got twenty-four hours in a day?”

“No,” I said. “Why they fall for that . . . that potbellied fraud.”

“What’s wrong with the penguin?” asked Natalie.

I ticked off his faults. “He stuffs his face constantly, all the girls flirt with him, he tells bad jokes, and on top of that, he claims to be a detective.”

Natalie eyed me. “Hmm, sounds a lot like someone I know.”

“I’m serious.”

“Ah, the green-eyed monster has raised its ugly head.”

“Herman?”

“No, bug breath. Jealousy.” She rested a wing tip on my shoulder. “You’re jealous of him.”

“Of James Bland? No way.”

“Yup,” said Natalie. “And I know just how to get you over it.”

“How? Drop him into a vat of boiling broccoli?”

She shook her head. “Start a new case.”

Despite my grumpiness, the corners of my lips tugged upward. “All right, then. But this penguin PI better keep his beak out of it.”

“Don’t worry,” said Natalie.

But I did, a little. And before long, I’d wish that I’d worried a whole lot more.

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