

Bluebell Skinks, Wheelchair Kid

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The Plan

Bluebell Skinks and her sister had a plan. She was going to secretly enroll herself at Mortimer Potts Elementary School, and in only three weeks, she would become the most popular kid in the history of the school—maybe even famous! All she was waiting for was her father to leave town so he wouldn't find out what his daughters were up to.

Bluebell practiced wheeling herself around the bedroom in a purple wheelchair. It was the latest model, with a padded seat and a supersmooth turning radius. She executed a triple spin before crashing into the wall. Pausing, she cocked her head to one side and listened to make sure that Doris, the housekeeper, wasn't coming up the stairs to investigate the noise. Bluebell didn't detect any footsteps, so she resumed whipping the chair around in circles.

"Perfect!" Bluebell declared. "I'm getting really good at this." Bonnie, who had been watching her sister's practice session, rolled her eyes in response.

Even though the girls were sisters, they didn't look alike. Bonnie wore glasses, and her blonde hair was neatly tied back with a bow, which contrasted with Bluebell's freckles and wild, frizzy red hair. Their father often said that his daughters' hairstyles matched their personalities. Bluebell was bold and impulsive, whereas Bonnie was calm and organized.

Bonnie was perched on the window seat that overlooked the circular driveway to Skinksberry Mansion. She kept a sharp lookout because at any moment, a pair of massive wrought iron gates would slide open and the family limo would roll through. Dad was due home from work and definitely wouldn't approve of what the girls were about to do.

"The coast is clear. Dad's not home yet," Bonnie announced. A movement to the left of the gates suddenly caught her attention. She spied a boy climbing over a brick wall. He dropped to the ground and walked briskly up the driveway toward the front door, which was two floors below her window. "Oh look! That kid we met yesterday, Frederick "French" Frye, is here."

"Doris will let him in. Let's do this fast," said Bluebell, coming to a sudden stop. "We don't have much time to get me enrolled in school." Bonnie nodded and quickly entered the phone number for Mortimer Potts Elementary School on her cell phone. French poked his head into the doorway just as Bonnie's call connected.

"Hi, guys," he called out cheerily. "Can you believe it? The first day of school, and I have homework piling up already." He took his hat off and ran his hand through his hair. "Wow. You guys live in a really fancy house. It reminds me of a castle."

Bluebell wheeled herself over to Bonnie and grabbed the phone. "Quiet, French Frye!" she commanded.

“We’re calling the school. It’s ringing. Come in and shut the door!” Shifting her weight more comfortably in the wheelchair, she cleared her throat. In the highest-pitched, snooty voice she could manage, Bluebell spoke into the receiver.

“Hellooooo . . . This is Mrs. Melvin Skinks II. I must speak to the principal at once on a matter of utmost importance!”

“Bluebell,” French sputtered, “this is not a good—”

“Helloooo!” Bluebell shrieked. “Yesss . . . to whom am I speaking? Principal Grimble! You lucky, lucky man!

My lovely and talented granddaughter, Bluebell Skinks, has decided to attend your little school.”

Bonnie waved at Bluebell to get her attention. “Don’t overdo it,” she whispered. “Get off the phone as fast as you can before he can think up a lot of questions.”

Bluebell coughed a few times and spoke faster. “She will be arriving tomorrow, sharply at one o’clock p.m. . . . I trust that you will meet her personally at the front door of the school . . . fourth grade . . . Yesss . . . my son is *that* Skinks, the rich one, the head of Skinks Industries . . . Yesss . . . I said one o’clock p.m. My son expects you to extend every courtesy . . . Oh! One more tiny detail—my granddaughter is in a wheelchair. Goodbye!”

Bluebell ended the call with satisfaction. She tossed her long, frizzy hair and turned to face French. “There! All set. Now, all we have to do is wait for Dad and Bonnie

to leave town tomorrow morning, and the coast will be clear so I can go to your school. This is perfect. French, don't you think that this is a great plan?"

French dropped to the plush purple carpet in Bonnie's bedroom, groaning and burying his head under a pile of pillows that Bluebell had tossed on the floor. His voice was muffled. "I can't believe that you two are actually going through with it. You are going to get into so much trouble."

"You worry too much," said Bluebell. "Watch how good I'm getting at driving this thing!" She spun the chair around in a circle, backed up to the wall, and suddenly shot out, twirling the chair around the pillow pile. "Whee!" she called out. "My own obstacle course!"

"Watch out!" French yelled, pulling his feet in to save them from being run over.

Bluebell pushed off from the other wall with her hands, knocking over a lamp in the process. French jumped up and caught the lamp just before it hit the floor. Bonnie laughed so hard that she nearly fell off the window seat. Just at that moment, a sharp knock sounded, and the girls' father walked in. The trio hadn't noticed Mr. Skinks' car arriving while Bluebell was on the phone. The girls' father looked surprised to see a strange boy holding a lamp.

"Dad, you're home," Bluebell said hurriedly. "This is a friend of ours. Meet French Frye."



“Hello, lad.”

“It’s Frederick Frye, sir. Bluebell thinks it’s funny to call me French Frye.” Frederick shot an annoyed look at Bluebell. He shook hands with Mr. Skinks.

“Well, that’s fine, fine indeed, that Bluebell and Bonnie have a new friend,” Mr. Skinks declared heartily. Bluebell tugged on her father’s sleeve.

“Bonnie and I were playing catch yesterday. French was walking by and brought the ball back to us when it went over the wall. He goes to Mortimer Potts Elementary School. He’s a great guy! I’ll bet the other kids at Mortimer Potts are great, too.”

Mr. Skinks glanced over at French and lowered his voice. “This young man seems nice enough, but you don’t realize how unkind other young people can be when they are together in a large group. No daughter of mine will be subjected to that kind of rudeness. Mortimer Potts Elementary School is out of the question. You girls are both lucky enough to have private tutors, and that’s what you will continue to have. I’m sorry, Bluebell, but the subject is closed!” He turned to French.

“I’m glad that Bluebell has found a friend. Perhaps you can spend some time here at Skinksberry Mansion over the next three weeks while Bonnie and I are away.” He then looked over at Bluebell. “Honey, I’m sorry that this year’s visit is ending with your sister and me leaving on a trip, but try to be good for Grandmother Skinks.

You can make good use of your time practicing the lessons you had this summer at the Musical Arts Academy. Before you know it, your mother will be here to pick you up and take you to Europe.”

Mr. Skinks caught French’s puzzled look. “Bluebell’s mother and I are no longer married,” he explained. “Bluebell lives with her mother and visits Bonnie, Grandmother Skinks, and me here at Skinksberry Mansion each summer. This year, her mother will be a few weeks late picking her up, so come over whenever you can to keep her company.” After reminding Bonnie to finish packing for their upcoming trip, Mr. Skinks left the room.

“Wow!” French said. “He doesn’t think much of the kids at Mortimer Potts, does he?”

“He just doesn’t know any better, French,” Bonnie explained. “He thinks that the other kids will be mean to somebody who can’t walk and uses a wheelchair. He’ll come around.”

“Bluebell,” French said, “what did your father mean when he said you were going to Europe?”

“Oh, that. Like my dad said,” Bluebell explained, “I live with our mother, and I go wherever she goes. She’s a dancer. Mother’s dance troupe is going on tour to Europe. They’re busy rehearsing for the next three weeks, and she can’t pick me up, so don’t you see? That’s why I can go to your school.”

Bonnie added, "Dad and I will leaving home tomorrow, and we'll be gone for the same three weeks for a bunch of appointments we do every year. Nobody will be here to stop Bluebell from trying out the school on her own. This is the perfect opportunity to prove to our parents that kids in wheelchairs shouldn't be treated any differently than other kids." The two girls high-fived each other.

"But your grandmother will still be around," French pointed out. "Won't she figure out that you aren't here during school hours?"

"No problem," Bluebell smiled. "Whenever I visit, I take lots of classes at the Musical Arts Academy in the city. Bonnie and I have been going there all summer. They teach all kinds of instruments and dancing lessons." Bluebell pointed to the flute and music stand in the corner. "The school runs year-round, so Grandmother Skinks will just assume that's where I am every day. Anyway, she's in charge of putting on some big charity event. She'll be so busy during the day with lots of meetings and other stuff; I doubt she'll even notice I'm gone."

"This doesn't make any sense," French complained. "You should just do like I do and bug your parents until you get your own way. It would be a lot safer than this nutty plan."

"We've tried talking to them and it didn't work,"

said Bonnie. “But when Dad and Mother see how well Bluebell does at Mortimer Potts, they’ll have to admit that a wheelchair kid belongs in a regular school instead of just having a tutor.”

French nodded slowly.

“My job is to keep Dad from getting suspicious while we’re away,” added Bonnie.

Bluebell chimed in, “And MacDougal, our chauffeur, will drive me to school. The only thing that I don’t have is a spy on the inside.” Both girls looked at French expectantly, but he didn’t answer.

Bluebell wheeled herself over and faced French with a sad expression. “You have to help us, French, because if I can’t do this, just think how lonely I’ll be with Bonnie away. And you’ll be in school having all the fun. I’ll be soooo bored all by myself.” She made a pitiful moaning sound and blew her nose into a tissue. “Plus, Bonnie and I will never prove to the world that kids in wheelchairs are just like anybody else.” Tears trickled down her cheek.

“Okay, okay,” said French. “Don’t cry, Bluebell. I can’t believe that I’m saying this, but I’ll help. Just tell me what to do.”

“Great,” Bluebell sputtered into the tissue, trying not to laugh. Being able to cry on demand came in handy from time to time. *Maybe I should become an actress*, she thought.