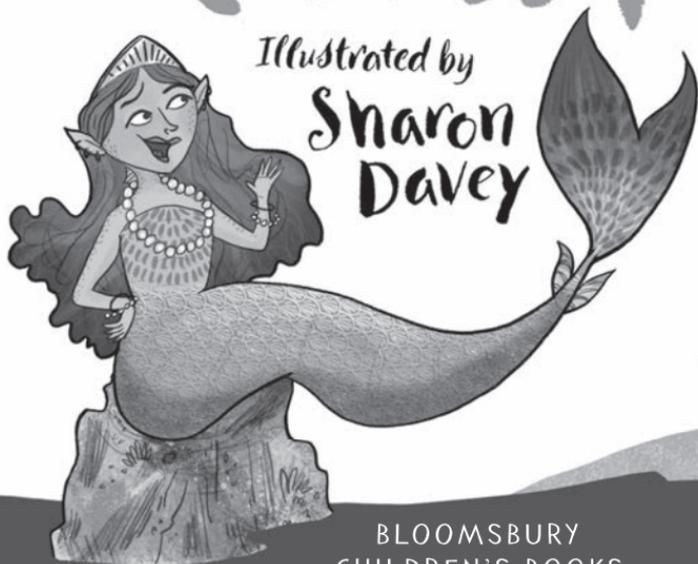


Michelle Robinson

DO NOT
MESS
WITH THE
MERMAIDS



Illustrated by
Sharon
Davey



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TO
THE
OUTER
OCEAN

DO NOT Mess with the Mermaids

WONDERMERE
CASTLE

DO NOT Disturb the Dragons

LAKE WONDERMERE

DO NOT SWIM

Forest
Market

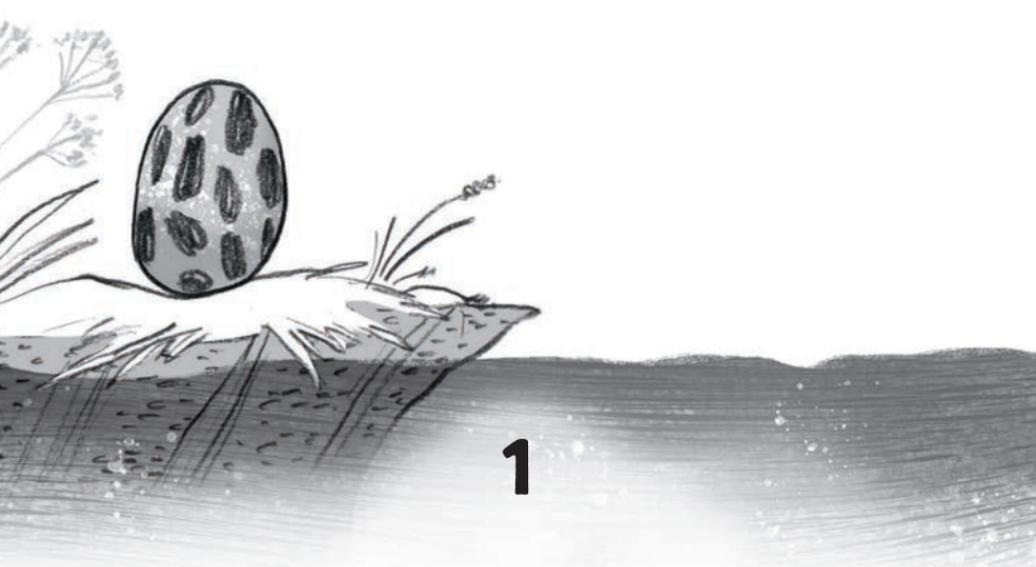
DO NOT HAGGLE

Bram's
Tree House

DO NOT LOITER

WONDERMERE FOREST





1

DO NOT SWIM IN PURPLE WATER

The sign was almost as big as the castle drawbridge.



It was hard to miss. Although you *might not* spot it if you'd never visited Wondermere Castle before.

In that case you'd be so busy admiring the dragons in their turret-top nests, you wouldn't notice the state of the castle moat.



Not only was it surrounded by warning signs, but the water in it had turned the most shocking shade of purple.

It bothered the moat's resident mermaids. They'd packed their things and gone to stay in nearby Lake Wonder. It bothered the king. He was expecting very important visitors and wanted the castle to look its best. But it didn't bother his daughter. Then again, nothing really bothered Princess Grace.

She'd arrived on the orphan cart at just two years old, taken one look at the dragons' nests and climbed up the nearest turret to get a better look. She'd broken several of Wondermere's rigid rules in the space of just five minutes, getting covered in sparkling dragon poo while she was at it. But at least she hadn't disturbed the dragons. Everyone agreed she must have the most astonishingly good luck.

And perhaps Grace really *was* lucky, because, as the next eight years passed, she got away with breaking just about every rule in Wondermere's very old-fashioned book – and there were certainly plenty of rules to break.

**Princesses do not wear armour.
Princesses do not ride unicorns.
Princesses do not sneakily enter
the annual Troll-o Tournament –
and they *definitely* do not win it.**

Grace had been there, done that and got the trophy, accompanied by her smart and caring sister, Princess Portia. King Wonder had to admit that his daughters' rule breaking hadn't done the dragons any harm. In fact, they seemed happier than ever. They'd even started laying eggs, and their nests were overflowing with plump baby dragons.

If the dragons were happy, the princesses were happier still. They'd been knighted by the king – the first girls ever to become *sirs* – and each was now in charge of something truly important.

As Champion of Dragon Studies, Sir Portia's job was to keep an eye on dragon behaviour, and, as Champion of Troll-o, Sir Grace helped other girls train and play with the boys for the first time in history.

Troll-o was the nation's favourite sport, and Grace lived for it. She loved nothing better than to put on her armour, mount her unicorn and chase after the ball-troll, mallet in hand. As captain of the league, she was in her element. No wonder people called her the luckiest girl in the kingdom. But was she lucky enough to get away with

swimming in forbidden purple water ... ?

‘I only want a little dip,’ Grace said as she rode Poop, her disobedient unicorn, through the castle courtyard towards the main gates. ‘A swim in the moat after troll-o practice is practically tradition.’

‘I thought you hated tradition?’ said Portia with a smile. She was riding beside Grace on her beautifully turned out unicorn, Sprinkles. As ever, she was riding hands-free and reading a book about dragons.

Worn out from practice, Poop’s hooves plodded heavily across the cobbles. But Grace knew better than to ask him to speed up. Her grumpy, grotty steed always did the exact opposite of what he was told. Thankfully she knew exactly how to handle him. ‘Take your time, boy, I’m in no hurry for a swim.’

Poop pricked up his ears, gave a mischievous snort and shot out of the castle gates, dumping Grace into the moat with a **SPLOOSH!**

Portia urged Sprinkles into a trot and caught up, coming to a stop on the drawbridge. ‘Dad’ll go mad if he catches you,’ she called down to Grace. ‘Our guests will be arriving any minute! No one from the Outer Ocean has ever visited Wondermere before. You know how important it is we make a good impression.’

Grace spat out a mouthful of purple water. ‘They’re merfolk,’ she said, ‘and not just any merfolk. They’re champion swimmers! I bet they’ll be glad to see we like water too – isn’t that right, Poop?’ Poop gave a bored snort and began to nibble on a patch of pixie wort.



Portia looked longingly at the water. ‘Dad *did* say this visit’s all about showing our guests how much we value their customs ...’

‘You should join me,’ Grace suggested, treading water as she tugged off her armour. ‘Although I’d recommend getting changed *before* jumping in. If my troll-o kit goes rusty, I’m blaming Poop!’

Portia bit her lip. ‘What’s the water like? Does it feel any different to normal?’

Grace peered into the moat’s purple depths. ‘It feels great,’ she said.

It really did feel good. Grace was hot and sticky from the morning’s troll-o practice. She and Poop had scored three goals, much to the delight of the ball-troll, who loved nothing better than being whacked on the bottom by a mallet. Grace loved whacking

them, too – although it did make her arms ache. A quick swim would soon fix that.

She floated lazily along on her back and gazed up at the castle turrets. The adult dragons were teaching their new babies how to fly.

Up on the bank, Portia tucked her reading book into her saddlebag, took out some parchment and a quill and began taking notes. She soon forgot all about the visitors, allowing herself to become completely absorbed by the dragons. ‘They’re absolutely fascinating,’ she said, resting her quill to watch.

An enormous blue dragon nudged its baby gently to the edge of its nest, then gave it a good, hard shove.

The girls gasped. For a heart-stopping

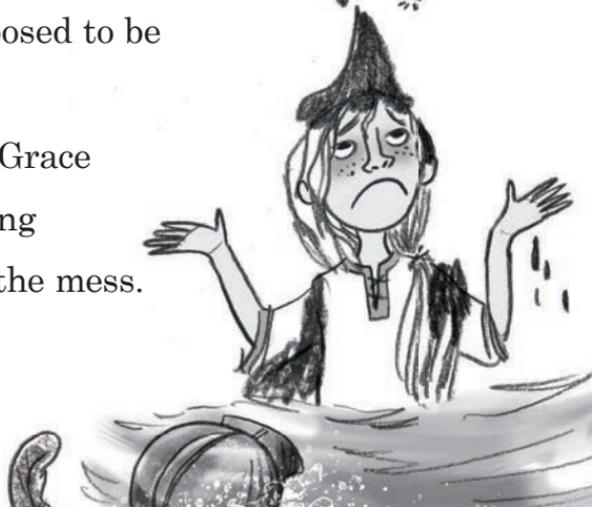
instant it looked as though the little dragon would plummet to the ground. But at the last moment it flapped its wings and soared skyward, turning joyful cartwheels above the moat.

SPLAT! The little dragon's glittery dung hit Grace right in the eye.

'UGH!' she cried, flailing about in the water. 'Why does that always happen to me?!

Portia laughed. 'Don't complain, you know it's supposed to be lucky!'

'It's also *gross*,' Grace grumbled, splashing about to wash off the mess.



‘Tell me more about the water,’ Portia said, licking the tip of her quill. ‘Does it still taste like sugar lumps?’

Grace was busy rinsing dragon dung out of her hair. ‘Right now it tastes kind of poopy.’

‘How about the temperature?’ Portia asked. ‘Is it hotter? Colder?’

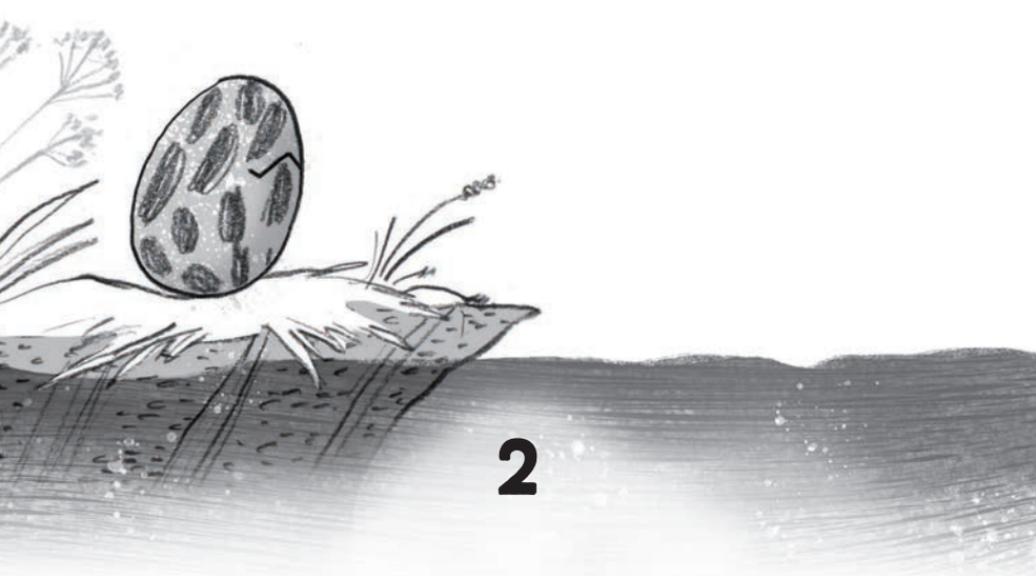
Grace frowned. ‘Now you mention it, it *does* feel kind of warm ...’

The water around Grace began to bubble. ‘You’re disgusting,’ said Portia.

‘It wasn’t *me*,’ Grace said, her eyes widening. ‘I think there’s something else in here ...’

‘Get out, quick!’ Portia held out a hand.

‘No chance,’ Grace said. ‘I want to find out what it is!’ She took a deep breath, kicked hard and swam down into the moat’s murky, purple depths.



2

DO NOT TOUCH A DRAGON'S EGG

Grace kept her eyes open as she dived deeper, following the steady stream of bubbles.

Maybe they had something to do with the water's unusual colour? There was only one way to find out.

The moat felt oddly empty with its mermaids gone, but its sandy bottom was still strewn with coins and jewels that had

been accidentally dropped by the dragons or kicked out of their nests over the centuries.

As Grace swam, shy water nymphs darted out of her way, hiding among strings of brilliant blue bogweed. On any other day she might have tried to catch them, but there was no time for that. She'd noticed a large spotted egg lying cushioned in the soft sand.

There was no mistaking it – it was a dragon's egg. She'd seen them close up once before. Although dragons' eggs didn't normally *glow* ... Perhaps this one was broken? There was the tiniest crack in its side, and out of the crack came bubble after bubble.

Touching a dragon's egg was forbidden, but



Grace couldn't resist. It was glowing so brightly she had to squint as she reached out and carefully picked it up. She gasped, letting out a stream of bubbles of her own. The egg had a heartbeat. Portia *had* to see this! Grace clutched the egg to her chest and kicked hard for the surface.



The egg was large and heavy. Portia helped Grace roll it out of the moat and on to the grassy bank.

‘Careful,’ Portia said, her eyes wide and twinkling with pleasure. ‘No one’s touched a dragon’s egg before, you might damage it.’ She dried her hands on her dress, picked up her quill and began making a sketch of the egg.

Grace clambered on to the bank and started pulling her armour back on over her wet Under-Wonders. ‘I haven’t damaged it, it has a heartbeat,’ she said, tugging on her breastplate. ‘Anyway, it was already broken when I found it. See? There’s a little crack in it; it’s where all those bubbles were coming from. I swear it was glowing before. Perhaps

I was imagining things?’

‘Maybe I’m imagining things too,’ Portia said, ‘but isn’t the water looking a little less purple?’

Grace frowned. ‘Maybe, just a bit.’

Portia pushed her glasses up her nose and pointed to the nearest turret. ‘It must have rolled out of that nest. Its poor parents must be worried sick! We ought to leave it here on the bank. Maybe they’ll find it and pick it up?’

Grace didn’t reply. She’d just begun to drift into a lovely daydream about keeping a pet dragon when a voice squeaked out behind her, making her jump.

‘Ah, princesses! Getting ready to welcome our visitors, are we?’

It was Taffy Trafalgar, the king’s

right-hand troll and the girls' tutor. He came bustling out of the castle gates, accompanied by Sir Oliver and Sir Arthur. Grace quickly tugged Portia's cloak from her shoulders and tossed it over the egg.

'What in all Wonder ...?' began Sir Arthur, but he hadn't noticed the egg. He was simply watching Grace drip. 'Did you fall in the purple water?'

Sir Oliver gave Grace a concerned look. 'Are you feeling all right, princess?'

'Oh, I haven't been in the moat,' Grace fibbed. 'I just had a shower after troll-o.'

Sir Arthur looked puzzled. 'In your *clothes*?'

'They needed a wash, too.'

Taffy Trafalgar was hopping excitedly from one long, rabbity foot to the other.

'Excellent thinking, your highness. We all



need to be well turned out today. We mustn't give our visitors a bad impression. Boys, take down all the warning signs!

The boys bowed to the princesses and got to work.

'You may as well leave the signs up,' Grace said, wringing out her hair. 'The visitors are

hardly going to miss the fact the water's bright purple.'

'With any luck they'll be so busy admiring the dragons they won't notice,' Taffy said, foot thumping the ground impatiently.

'Besides, the knights will line up to greet them and keep the worst of it hidden. Now go and put on your frilliest dresses! Queen Jeen and her waterfolly squad are expected any minute and we need you at your best.'

Grace sighed. 'I'm at my best in armour, not skirts.'

'Please, princess,' Taffy said, tugging at his ears. 'The merfolk have never been further inland than the Western Beaches. This is the first time they've ever set fin on soil. It's an epic moment in Wondermerian history!'

'The goal I scored earlier was pretty epic

too,' Grace said grumpily, 'and I did it in a perfectly good suit of armour.'

'You absolutely walloped that troll,' Sir Arthur said. Taffy glared at him, so he got back to work helping Sir Oliver take down an enormous **OUT OF BOUNDS** sign.

Taffy wagged a hairy finger at Grace. 'Complain all you want, but remember: it's *your* efforts to promote troll-o that brought our visitors here in the first place.'

Grace rolled her eyes, but in truth she felt proud. She'd turned what was already a popular sport into a real craze. The whole realm was abuzz with troll-o fever! No wonder the merfolk wanted to see what all the fuss was about.

Taffy took Grace's hand in his paws and looked her in the eye. 'The merfolk are

coming to learn about our legendary pluck and team spirit. As Champion of Troll-o, your father expects you to show that more than anyone.'

Grace sighed. 'I know.'

'You can wear armour for the exhibition match later tonight, but please,' he begged, '*please* go and put on a dress?'

'Fine,' Grace said, rolling her eyes. 'But not a frilly one.'

'Don't worry, Taffy,' Portia said, giving the old troll her sweetest smile. 'We'll be beautifully turned out in no time.'

'And no mischief?' Taffy added anxiously.

'No mischief,' Grace said, carefully scooping up Portia's cloak and the egg that was hidden inside it.