



# Chapter One

“If I were you, kiddo,” the bat remarked, “I’d close your mouth. Dangerous, leaving it open like that. Never know what might pop in. Flies, midges, the odd moth. Furry things, moths. Not nice unless you’re used to them.”

Prince Marcus, second in line to the throne of Gorebreath, did as he was told. “But where IS she?” His voice was shaking. “One minute she was leaning against that tree, and then— WHOOOMP! She was gone!” He rubbed his eyes. “And was it that tree? Or that one? They all look exactly the same! Did you see, Marlon?”

“Cool it, kid,” the bat said. “Alf’s ahead of you. Alf? Where are you?”

“Here, Unc!” The small squeak came from some way away.



Marcus stared at Marlon. “What’s he doing?”

“Hanging on a branch.” Marlon sounded pleased.

“Marking the tree. Good work, Alf!”

Marcus shook his head. “That can’t be right. Gracie was here beside me. I *know* she was!”

Marlon sighed. “Look at your map, kiddo. Where are we? The Unreliable Forest. Now, the thing about unreliable forests, in case you hadn’t guessed, is that they’re unreliable. See a handful of berries you fancy? Walk towards them, and— FFFFT! They’ll be behind you.”

Seeing his companion’s doubtful expression, the bat sighed again. “Try it for yourself. Got a hankie? Well, tie it to a branch.”

Unwillingly Marcus did as he was told. The scarlet handkerchief, emblazoned with the royal arms of the House of Gorebreath, fluttered in front of him ... and vanished.

“That’s gone too!” The prince took a step backwards and looked at Marlon. “What’s going on?”

“Turn round.”

Turning, Marcus was just in time to see the tree his hankie was tied to make a sudden sideways leap and hide behind a substantial oak. The oak showed no inclination to move, and Marcus leant against it,

feeling breathless. “That’s SO weird,” he said. “And however are we going to find Gracie?”

Marlon twitched his wings. “Kiddo,” he said, and he sounded far more solemn than usual, “we need help on this one. You stay here. Keep an eye on Alf.”

“What?” Marcus stared at the bat. “Where are you going?”

“Trust me, kid. I’ll be back pronto.” Marlon was circling high in the air. A moment later he was gone.

