



TINSEY  
CLOVER

The title "TINSEY CLOVER" is rendered in a highly decorative, blackletter-style font. The letters are filled with intricate floral and vine patterns. A stylized branch with leaves and small flowers is positioned above the word "TINSEY", and another similar branch is positioned below the word "CLOVER".

Chelsea Walker Flagg

# CHAPTER ONE

Today's the day. The day I'm finally going to sneak out of Snugglepunk to explore the rest of the Bungaborg Forest. Of course, I said the same thing yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that. But, today, I really mean it.

I brush a strand of shaggy purple hair out of my full moon emerald green eyes and make a thirty-degree turn to the right followed by forty-four paces. A full right-angle turn to the left then another hundred-and-seven steps. I calculate the path with precision, quietly weaving my way in and out of massive brown tree trunks so old, you could climb into their wrinkles and stay hidden for weeks. The trees shoot up most likely all the way to space, spreading their enormous, greedy branches to hog all the sunlight for themselves.

Not to brag or anything, but I'm pretty much an expert sneaker. I mean, when you've done something as much as I've done this, it's hard not to be an expert. Another ninety degree right turn. I'm close now. Thirty more yards, which is no small distance when you're only the size of a chipmunk. Still, my bare feet know the way by heart. They glide quickly over the mossy ground beneath me.

I tune into my slightly pointy ears for a second. Part of being a great sneaker is using all your senses. I hear the call of the morning Icelandic birds and a soft, melodic humming of the other trealfur elves waking up. It's not an unusual sound. Trealfur elves always hum. It's just something you do when you've got the best singing voices in the forest.

I never hum. Because, unlike every other trealfur elf in Snugglepunk, my voice does not sound like chimes tingling on a soft breeze. No way. I'm pretty sure a better comparison would be to say my voice sounds like an angry honey badger with a head cold. Who's also dying. That about sums it up.

In front of me, a solid vine wall comes into view. The twenty foot wall my grandpa built before I was born that wraps all the way around the perimeter to keep Snugglepunk safe from the rest of the Bungaborg Forest. The border that's always made me feel trapped.

Last year, when I was only ten, I found a good size hole in the vines. Approximately twelve inches by five inches I'd say, which would be just big enough for an elf my size to slip through without too much trouble. Guess how many times I've thought about doing just that? That's right. A lot. I run the remaining few feet and stop at the looming wall.

I press my copper hands against the thick vines and stand on my toes, the tip of my tongue pushing out of the corner of my mouth like it always does when I'm concentrating on something. I close one eye and take a peek. Even though I've seen this view at least a hundred times now, it still sends chills right down my spine. It's the only exposure I've ever had to the outside world.

I know from my lessons that the Bungaborg Forest is set up

in a faery ring, which is exactly what it sounds like: a thick of trees that makes the shape of a giant ring. All the different forest people, or Huldufolk, live in separate villages spaced out within the wooded ring. In the center of the ring is a wide-open meadow, or the engi. No one lives there. At least no one with half a brain. It's far too dangerous and exposed for anyone to survive out there. Or so everyone says. But, dangerous or not, the engi is pretty awesome looking.

I push myself even higher on my tiptoes and try to see as much as I can. The little rays of morning sunlight are firing everything up and turning the engi into a vast, golden space. In the far distance, I can just barely see the other side of the faery ring. I shift my gaze fifteen degrees to the right and gasp. There it is. Plethora, the blomalfur elfin town. At least I'm pretty sure it's Plethora. The trees are spaced in exact increments and I swear, especially at this time of day, I can even see perfectly-placed sparkles glowing in the trees.

From what I've heard, the blomalfur elves love beauty and math. Why wouldn't they intentionally space their trees and add something glittery to make their village shine? I'm pretty sure there was a mistake when I was born. I was supposed to be a blomalfur elf, not a trealfur elf. That's why today's the day I'm gonna sneak out of here.

"Hey, dork, your tongue's sticking out again," my brother's voice taunts me from behind.

It gives me just enough of a startle to lose my concentration. And my balance. I topple forward into the vine wall, bounce off, and land face up on the mossy ground. I scramble to my feet and brush my clothes off. Not that it matters much. Trealfurs aren't

known for their sense of fashion. We use rabbit hair to stitch together dull bits of soft tree bark and dying leaves, and call it an outfit. Boring, right?

*Leaves more creativity and time to focus on our music*, Mom always says, even though I don't see why we can't be efficient and fashionable all at once.

"You're a punk," I scold my brother, a chunk of my purple hair flopping itself right over my eyes. "You can't just come up and scare me like that."

How did he follow me here without me noticing? So much for thinking I'm such a great sneaker.

"Serves you right," Aspen teases with a shake of his head.

Even with the movement, his icy blue hair sits annoyingly still on his golden forehead. It wouldn't dare venture down to his eyes like mine does, because like everything else about Aspen, his hair is perfect. I resist the urge to reach out and tussle it.

"You're the one who's always spying on the blomalfurs," Aspen says. "I mean, what's so great about them anyway? They're elves just like us."

"They're geniuses," I correct. "I bet they even think in numbers. I want to be just like them when I grow up."

"Yeah, well that's never gonna happen," Aspen shrugs. "You're a trealfur, not a blomalfur. Besides, you're not supposed to be here. Mom and Dad would be livid if they knew you spent all your time peeking out of this little hole so close to the engi."

Aspen used to be fun. Like, really fun. We used to skip out on our chores all the time to run around Snugglepunk. We'd pretend we were explorers on dangerous expeditions, or sometimes pirates searching for lost treasure. Not anymore,

though. Ever since his thirteenth birthday, Aspen's been acting more and more like a stodgy old grown-up. In other words, he's become Boring with a capital B.

"I should totally tell on you," he says.

I shake my head so hard, it makes me dizzy. I do not need my parents, or even worse, my uncle, to know I'm here. Even though he's a punk, Aspen let's the topic go.

"Anyway," he changes the subject, "we've gotta go. Uncle Vondur's called an emergency council meeting. Another fire just broke out at the other edge of Snugglepunk, the second one this week! Still no idea who keeps starting these things. This is getting pretty serious, Tins. Mom asked me to come and find you."

## CHAPTER TWO

Council meetings are the worst. Talk about Boring with a capital B. Not all the kids in Snugglepunk have to go to them, but when your mother is the sister of the King and his only heir, you're expected to attend humdrum events like council meetings.

Aspen's walking away from me, and as much as I'd rather stay right here and try to count the glitter in the Plethora trees, I know I need to go with him. He starts chanting a loud, strange yipping noise that sounds absolutely ridiculous. However, whatever he's doing is working because out of nowhere, a pair of sleek, arctic foxes sprint out of the trees, breaking through the last wisps of fog floating just over the ground. They stop right in front of Aspen. The animals tilt their heads from one side to the other, listening closely to his noises. Finally, they nod their response.

"They said they'll take us so we can get there quicker," Aspen calls out. "C'mon!"

I'll never admit it out loud, but I will say, I feel a teensy bit jealous looking at those foxes. Aspen's ability to communicate with animals popped up on the exact morning he turned eleven. My birthday was three whole days ago, which technically makes

me eleven-and-point-oh-oh-eight-years old, and my gift still hasn't shown up. I'm trying to be patient, but I can't wait to see what unique power I land. Maybe I'll be able to summon windstorms just by humming like Dad. Or what if I get something like Mom's power? When she sings above a certain pitch, the entire forest—huldufolk and animals alike—stops for a split second to listen. I'm not sure what good that will ever do her, but it's still pretty awesome.

What I'm really hoping for is the power to get out of Snugglepunk and go somewhere I won't get laughed at when my mind thinks in numbers, not music notes. Like Plethora. Of course I can be patient for something like that.

"Seriously, Tins, I'm gonna leave without you," Aspen breaks into my thoughts.

I huff extra loud to make sure he can hear me, then straighten my green duds and saunter into the woods. Very. Slowly. Sometimes it's necessary to act like a brat to your brother for no good reason.

"Your funeral, not mine," Aspen shrugs.

I speed up and scramble onto one of the fox's backs, feeling bad for tugging at its fur. It doesn't even seem to notice, though. That's both the joy, and the frustration, of being the size of a chipmunk. I could never make enough of a dent in things for it to matter much.

We speed through the forest, zig-zagging between tree trunks so huge not even a giant could wrap his arms around one, let alone find the radius and diameter on the thing. The morning fog's mostly gone now, which makes it much easier to see the little burst of reds and yellows from the wildflowers that grow

here. The most colorful item around though is Aspen's hair. Although, I must say, it looks less like hair and much more like a blue blur as he races ahead of me on his fox.

Pretty soon, all the head honcho trealfurs come into view, sitting knee to knee to form an oval. At first, each of the trealfurs looks like a tiny ant, but they quickly grow as our foxes dart closer toward the council spot.

Aspen barks sharply, and his fox comes to a halt right away. Of course. My fox, on the other hand, doesn't even slow down, let alone stop. Maybe it didn't hear Aspen's orders, but I know better. This fox is just being cheeky, because that's how wild animals are with me sometimes. It's like they know I don't fit in here, too. All I can do is hold on as my rowdy critter runs at full speed straight into the circle. Trealfurs scatter and roll everywhere, trying not to get run over. And still, my ride barrels forward. That's another thing about animals: they are not always sensible.

Tucking my chin to my chest, I let go and bounce off, hitting the cold green blanket of moss and leaves on the ground. I don't have much time to notice how it feels to have the air knocked out of my lungs before my whole body rolls noggin over knees and shoulders over shins. Funny sounds pop out of my mouth that I have absolutely no control over.

"Ooof! Eeef! Ouch!" And, my personal favorite: "AIEEEEE!"

I summersault straight toward Uncle Vondur, the King of the Bungaborg Trealfurs, forcing him to dive out of my way. But, I don't stop there. No sirree. I careen right past him and into a large bush. Some might think rolling into a bush is a lucky thing, and usually I would agree. Unless it happens to be a very healthy

thistle plant. Don't get me wrong, the purple burrs on a thistle plant are quite beautiful, but just not so much when you're rolling around in them.

The second that plant latches onto me, it's clear it has no intention of ever letting go. It holds firmly onto my golden arms, my pointed ears, my freshly tangled purple locks. *At least it's keeping my hair out of my eyes*, I think, trying to stay positive. Mom would be proud of me for that.

Where is Mom anyway? I scan the circle, which is really more of a pile now. Mom's near the top of the stack of trealfurs, her light pink hair looking like a worn-out daddy long-leg spider on her head. She stares straight back at me with the same emerald eyes she gave me. I manage a little smile and mouth the word *oops*. Mom smiles back at me with a twinkle in her eyes, as if to say *it happens to the best of us*, even though I know it most certainly does not.

After an exhausting struggle, I finally free myself from the wrath of the thistles. Meanwhile, the pile of trealfurs has rearranged itself back into a wonky oval. I'm not sure why my people can't even make something as simple as an oval look right. Even still, they all look so put together, it's almost as if a wild animal hadn't just smashed through, playing bowling for trealfurs. Of course, the looks on everyone's faces suggest otherwise. Everyone's grumbling at me as though I just brought a falcon into the council meeting or something. Yeesh. Like I'd ever do anything that nasty.

Aspen takes a seat on the ground next to Dad, which leaves only one spot open for me. Right in between Mom and Uncle Vondur, aka King of the Trealfurs. Yikes. Talk about bad luck. That thistle bush suddenly doesn't seem like such a terrible place to be.