

Fairy Free:

Chapter 1:

Poppy Elver clung tightly to the leaf stem that stood up from the branch she was sitting on. Along with her older sister, Lily, she was balanced near the top of the blossom laden cherry tree as an overly warm spring sun crept overhead. Poppy sighed. The chore of collecting petals for Mum was turning out to be not only time consuming, but mind-numbingly boring

“Are we nearly done?” Poppy asked. She was trying to keep from thinking about their great height by listening to a far-off tree frog’s song. It wasn’t working.

“Not quite,” Lily answered evenly. “Though if you’d venture from that spot you’ve planted yourself in, we might finish a little sooner.”

“I’m just resting for a few moments,” Poppy said, though, truth be told, she was waiting for the west wind to die down before regaining her feet. The small breeze was jostling their high bough in a way that was both unpleasant and more than mildly alarming.

A brief glance down at the too-far-away earth, and Poppy’s heart tumbled into pounding rhythms in her chest. *Some proper fey lass I am.* While most fairies would be dreaming of riding the gentle air currents, her wings itched only to carry her from her high perch and deposit her once again on solid ground.

Feeling slightly woozy, she jerked her head up too quickly, catching her wild, honey-colored hair on a stray shoot behind her. “Oh bother!” she cursed softly and glanced over at Lily to see if she’d heard. But her sister still knelt gracefully on the narrow branch, sorting through her basket of blossoms, a peaceful smile on her perfectly heart-shaped face.

Oh, to be so beautiful. Having just turned eighteen, Lily was the picture of what a fairy lass should be—tall and ethereal, with flowing black hair and startling violet eyes.

As Poppy freed her unruly locks from the tree, she caught sight of her own reflection in a patch of dew on one of the burgeoning leaves.

Ugh. Why did I bother? She'd known what she would see there—a messy mass of blond ringlets, eyes the color of ash bark in winter and a spattering of perpetual freckles across her nose.

Her da told her often how fortunate she was to have been kissed by the sun, and that only one in a thousand fairies of the Hyter clan had such beauty marks. But Poppy didn't feel lucky. In fact, on many days she would happily give her left wing to be one of the other nine hundred and ninety-nine with skin the color of the first season's snow. That way, she wouldn't have to wash her face with stinging lemon juice every night, as Mum stood over her, silently appealing to the Fair Spirit of the Maiden. Mum believed that with enough citrus and equal amounts of prayer her younger daughter's unsprightly spots would disappear in time for her fifteenth birthday gala only a few months away.

Finally freeing herself from the clinging branch, Poppy tucked an errant curl behind her ear. Too late, she realized that her hand was now covered in thick, sticky cherry sap.

Heavens, what a mess I am. She sighed again, emphatically, as she stared out across the rolling field that separated the Hyter Copse from the Ordinary Lands beyond.

“Moaning and groaning isn't going to fill your basket.” Poppy jumped when Lily tapped her lightly on the shoulder with one of her gossamer wings. Lily tended to keep her pennons

unfurled even when not in flight. Poppy couldn't blame her. They were as lovely as the rest of her.

“Hello, Argemone, are you listening to me? Mum needs one hundred perfect petals in order to finish the quilt for the Spring Fete tomorrow, and I only have sixty-seven that are fit to be sewed.”

Tearing her eyes away from the view, Poppy turned to her sister with an impish smile. “That means you only have twenty-three to go, Lil,” she teased. “And please don't call me Argemone. You know how I detest my botanical name.”

Lily tried to look stern, but her sweet face wouldn't allow it. “It's thirty-three, you goose, and as far as I can see, you haven't gathered a single one. What will Mum say when you fly back with an empty hamper?”

Poppy lifted her eyebrows and shot her sister another grin. “Perhaps she won't find out? Because my kindly, older sister will give me half of hers?”

Lily shook her head, but smiled in return. Luckily for Poppy, Lily was as gentle and as kind as she was beautiful and, for some unknown reason, adored her little sister.

Watching a sparrow darting merrily around a nearby, budding birch, Poppy propped her chin on her sap-free hand. “Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just work a charm, and all of the best and most beautiful blossoms would fly into our baskets and we'd be done with it? Then we could—”

“Sometimes you frighten me, Poppy, truly,” Lily scolded. “You know that magic can only be used to protect and serve. And only by those authorized to do so.”

“Yes, I know. And only by lads, never lasses.” This was a regulation Poppy didn’t agree with, but she knew arguing the point with her rule-abiding, well-behaved sister would do no good. “But, my word, Lily, this is so tedious. How can you stand it?” She beckoned with her head over toward the wider world. “Wouldn’t you rather be out there? Doing something import—?”

“Oh!” Poppy gasped quietly, cutting off her own words, as her heart skipped like a skittish pond skimmer in her chest. Because across the field, the boy—her boy—had appeared in the yard of the yellow house—and seemed to be staring straight at her.

“Who’s to say gathering blossoms isn’t important, goose?” Lily asked, not noticing Poppy’s sudden silence. “Mum could win the Best in Show with her quilt and finally beat that old, thorny Mrs. Glower. Besides, sewing is a skill you need to learn if you ever hope to snare a beau. No one will ever ask you to go on a fly-about if you don’t know how to take care of house and home. Do you think Jay Kingfisher would have ever looked at me twice if I spent all my time daydreaming as you do?”

As Lily droned on about what it took to be a proper young lass, Poppy tried hard to keep her expression neutral. In truth, she was completely and utterly entranced by the mortal boy with the chestnut-colored hair, as she had been since he’d moved into the long vacant cottage a few months back. But so far, their long-distance relationship had been completely one-sided, consisting of her watching him from afar and his not knowing she existed. *But that’s going to change, isn’t it? And soon, if I can—*

“Whatever are you gawking at?” Lily asked, her eyes following her sister’s out across the wide field.

“What? Nothing!” Springing to her feet in an attempt at a diversion, Poppy teetered on her toes and nearly lost her footing. When she reached out to steady herself on a low-hanging bough, a squall of pink petals cascaded down around both their heads.

Poppy’s heart started hammering, not only from the height, but because she didn’t want Lily to see what, or whom, she had been gazing at.

Still on her knees, Lily looked up at her sister, suspicion marring her beautiful face. “What is going on with you? What were you just you looking at?”

“Nothing!” Even to her own ears, Poppy’s voice sounded shrill. “I was just thinking about what you said. In my opinion, our lives consist of more important matters than just landing a beau.” She worked to calm herself.

“And, as for Jay Kingfisher, he couldn’t help but fall for you, even if you did nothing but sit around sipping on morning glory nectar all day long. Because you are the comeliest, sweetest lass in the entire Copse, probably in the entire realm. Though I’d have no real way of knowing that, since I have never been anywhere else in the realm but here. Because I’m not allowed to go anywhere because I’m a lass, which we both know is ridiculous and if I have anything to say about—”

Poppy abruptly stopped talking and felt her cheeks flame red with the sudden knowledge that she had almost exposed herself.

Eyes narrowed, Lily unfolded her legs. In one graceful movement, she stood, brushing the pink blossoms from her feathery, red dress. “You’re babbling, goose, which means you’re

hiding something.” Easily peering over Poppy’s head, her taller sister exhaled a puff of disapproval. “You were gaping at those mortals, weren’t you?”

Poppy stared down at her feet to avoid meeting Lily’s gaze. She considered herself a practiced, almost professional, untruth teller and could lie to anyone—except her good-natured, entirely honest sister. Turning back to glance across the field, she felt a moment of relief followed by a keen disappointment. The tall, brown-haired boy had gone, leaving behind only two tiny, Ordinary girls tossing a ball in the high grass.

Her lie, at least, wouldn’t have to include the fascination she felt for their new, engaging, teenaged, *human* neighbor. “It just looks as though the girls are having a grand bit of fun is all.”

Lily’s dainty nose crinkled in disgust. “They’re tramping all over the violets and hyacinth and disturbing who knows how many creatures with their thoughtless ways. I can’t see anything fun about that. They’re careless, rude, uncouth, dangerous, and egotistical.”

Poppy recognized that description as the mantra that all fairy lads and lasses were taught from their first year of school—human beings were C.R.U.D.E. “They’re just children,” she objected.

Lily laid a delicate hand on Poppy’s shoulder and looked down at her with concern. “Children or no, they’re not like us. They have no regard for life other than their own. You know that.”

Poppy remembered almost the same exact words coming out of the mouth of the Mortal Perils teacher, Mr. Grosbeak. “I’m sure they’re not all like that. Just as bad fairies sometimes live among us, I’m certain good humans must exist. Why I’ve seen—” Once again Poppy had to stop herself. Being deceitful with someone so trusting was definitely harder than it looked.

Lily's wings twitched in alarm. "You've seen what?"

Poppy silently admonished herself. She had to be more careful. No telling what would happen if her secret came to light. Every fairy knew they were to have absolutely no contact with the non-fey world for fear that the delicate balance existing between the two planes might topple causing unknown chaos and calamity.

Will I be punished if found out? Or perhaps even banished from the Copse? She could imagine her da's genial face falling and her mum's tears. Lily's anxious voice brought her out of her frightening, yet all-too-real, reverie.

"You haven't been wandering near the edge of the wood, have you, Poppy? No. You're not that foolish." Lily sounded unsure. "You're not, are you? You don't want to end up like Dillie Plover, trapped in a jar in some Ordinary's dark cellar."

Despite the seriousness of the moment, Poppy couldn't help tease her well-meaning, loving sister. "Last week you told me she'd been eaten by a whisker-claw."

Lily's slight shoulders quivered at the thought. "Either way, smart aleck, she never came back. No lass has ever come back once they crossed the no-fly zone without Special Sanction. You know that. Promise me you're not doing anything unwise, goose."

Poppy looked up into her sister's worried eyes. Even though bending the truth made her soul ache, she had no choice. Trying to keep her face a blank, she surreptitiously crossed the toes on her right foot. After all, telling a tale wasn't really lying if she crossed her toes. "Of course I'm not, Lily. I would never be so foolish a fairy as to mingle with mortals. I know how terrible such an act would be."

"Okay, then." Lily turned toward the end of the branch, seemingly satisfied with her sister's assurances. "I see what may be some perfect petals out toward the tip. Let's harvest them

and get home, so I have time for a bath before Jay's visit later this evening. And no more daydreaming," she chided, as she started to move away.

It was Poppy's turn now to shiver. "Yes, please," she muttered under her breath, "let's head out to where the stick we're standing on is even more flimsy." She risked one last backward glance across the field but saw only the gossamer dust the children had stirred up as they passed through the grass. "I don't think you're all terrible," she whispered as though they might hear. "As a matter of fancy, I think that at least one of you might be quite wonderful." Her wings curled slightly, and the excitement of her secret tingled throughout her body.

"Poppy, come along. I swear you're moving slower than sassafras syrup today."

The way Poppy's luck ran, she would probably fall and crack her skull the very day she'd decided to break all the rules and leave the Copse to get a closer look at the boy. Body aquiver, she turned, and ever so carefully, followed her sister further out on the limb.

Chapter 2:

The lasses flew side by side as the sun arced into the western sky, beckoning them toward home. Grateful that Lily was considerate enough to cruise at a slightly lower altitude, Poppy concentrated on syncing her wingbeats to those of her graceful sister. Her basket was brimming with petals, thanks to a generous donation, and it was all she could do to hang onto her plunder as Poppy smiled to herself. Perhaps Mum would be so pleased with their haul that she would allow them a small sip of cactus nectar later with supper. The sweet yet tangy concoction, in small supply since it grew exclusively in a distant part of the realm, was Poppy's favorite. Such a special treat would be just what she needed to fortify her for the adventurous night ahead.

Distracted by a pair of shiny, blue dragonflies flicking in and out of a stand of white hollyhocks, Poppy whiffled on an errant air current and nearly lost her grip on her basket. She

had been flying on her own for years and still had trouble navigating through all but the slightest of breezes. *A right fairy I make—afraid of heights and unable to fly a straight line.*

Correcting herself, she snuck a peek to see if her sister had noticed her mishap. But Lily's attention was on a gray grouping of stones nestled next to a small stand of birches below. Poppy peered down briefly, only to see two familiar lads waving up at them.

Lily slowed down to a vinegar fly's pace. "Poppy, let's..." she started.

"Jay will be picking you up in a few hours, Lil. Surely you can wait to see him 'til then." Poppy wanted nothing more than to get back to their flat, eat her supper and flee to the privacy of her own room as soon as she possibly could. She was afraid if she didn't escape her sister's honest presence, her secret would gush out of her like water from an underground spring.

Lily's face lit up with a hopeful smile. "Please, goose. Just for a few moments—a quick hello. He's been gone nearly a week on his jaunt with the Scouts. Besides, Robby's down there too."

Poppy glanced down again, and indeed her lifelong best friend, Robby Swift, was gazing back up at her. Raising his hand in greeting, he shot her a wide grin. Perhaps saying hello would be nice, and they could take a few minutes to catch up. And maybe, just maybe, she could glean a little more information from him before making her daring attempt later that night.

She would have to be careful though. If Robby knew what she was planning, he would never let her go through with it.

Wavering, Poppy nodded her agreement. Then before her lips could form a “yes,” Lily was making a beeline for the ground. With a shake of her head and a slight smile, Poppy followed, much more slowly, in her sister’s wake.

Despite desperately trying to make a nimble landing, Poppy stumbled as she lighted on the hard stone surface. She would have fallen to her knees had Lily’s beau, Jay, not grabbed her elbow and kept her standing. Looking up at him, she felt the heat of embarrassment creeping up her neck into her face.

Jay Kingfisher was, in a word, stunning. Tall and well-built with cave-black hair, dark-blue eyes and fine features, he was everything that the son of the Head of Copse Council ought to be. Lily was smitten, believing that Jay could make the flowers grow and dance with nary a wayward glance.

It’s truly a shame that he’s such a termite, Poppy thought.

“As light footed as ever I see, Argemone.” Jay’s voice was deep, tinged with just the right amount of pomposity that clearly signaled his privileged position.

His air of superiority bit Poppy like a brier thorn in her side. “Your carefully coiffed mane is all mussed today, Jay,” she responded, and nearly laughed when he automatically reached up to smooth his unruffled hair.

Other fairies might kowtow to the heir apparent but not Poppy. She was just about to comment on his incredibly loud purple jacket, when Lily moved close to him. Going up on tiptoes, she whispered something to Jay that Poppy couldn’t hear from where she was standing.

“Jay and I are going behind the outcropping for a little while.” Lily’s smile was so bright that Poppy thought it could be used to run the power mill down at the brook. “We won’t be long.”

“Don’t miss me too much, Argemone.” Jay smirked, looping his arm possessively around Lily’s narrow waist.

As she watched her sister and Jay disappear around the corner, Poppy frowned and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Uh oh, I know that look.”

Poppy turned with the beginnings of a smile that dropped as she craned her neck to look up at her old friend’s face. Having recently celebrated his sixteenth birthday, Robby had gone through the male growth spurt at a rapid pace.

Poppy had always been tiny by fairy proportions. But as she stood on the rock, she realized that the top of her curls barely reached the bottom of his breast pocket, which led her to notice that his shoulders had grown two-fold broader and his jaw had become more square than round.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing.” No matter how much he had changed, Robby’s cinnamon-colored hair was as shaggy as ever, and his pale-green eyes shone with the same calm and cheerful intelligence they always had. “Just Jay. You know...”

“Don’t let him bug you. He’s not a bad guy, simply preening for Lily.”

“Please, Robby, not you, too. I know Jay’s the leader of your Scout squadron, but I hear far too many excuses for him from my enamored sister. If you fancy him so much, maybe you should go on a fly-about with him tonight instead of Lily.”

Poppy was relieved to see a familiar grin light up Robby’s face. She didn’t want to think about the matter too deeply, but Robby had been acting strangely over the past few weeks. He had been looking at her with a sick expression on his face and lapsing into awkward silences. The last time they had been out with a group of friends, he had ignored her completely, except to shoot her random glowers. That night had bothered Poppy so much that she had asked Lily, once they got home, if she thought Robby might be ill.

Lily had just smiled knowingly and said, “It’s nothing that time itself won’t heal.”

Poppy hadn’t understood what that her sister had meant and wasn’t certain she wanted to find out. And, yet again, there he was, looking at her with those searching green eyes. Poppy’s head was buzzing. What had they been talking about? She’d lost track.

Robby’s grin widened. “You’ve gone all daisy-eyed, Pop. Where did your head go just now?”

“What? Nowhere...I, um...it’s good to see you.”

“As it is you. It’s been too many days.” He gestured down toward the basket that had fallen by her feet upon her landing. “Out picking posies, were you?”

“Don’t remind me. Mum changed her quilt design again, and with the Spring Fete upon us, she needed extra material.”

Robby's mouth quirked, and Poppy's stomach constricted strangely. Maybe she was the one coming down with something. "So, how did your jaunt go? You and the other cadets were away for quite a while."

Robby puffed out his chest and stood up straighter. "We collected enough stones to replace all the chimneys in the Council Hall before next winter. It took longer than we thought, since the river was running hard, and we could only work by moonlight, which, you know, is only a crescent this time of month."

"You are so lucky," Poppy groaned, flopping dramatically to the ground—right on top of her hamper of petals. Her friend—her best friend—let out a small, strangled laugh. Smiling despite herself, Poppy pulled the basket out from under her, and sat down beside it, staring at it woefully. "I daren't even look to see how many I've ruined. I'll hear no end of it, to be sure."

"Um, Poppy, your dress..."

Looking down, she found her brown, ankle-length skirt had scrunched up somewhere around mid-thigh. She fixed it quickly, but couldn't make herself look back up. The tips of her ears burned with a fiery embarrassment.

"Um, I could go, quick as a gnat, and pick some fresh petals for you," Robby offered. "If it'll help."

For some reason, his kind words nettled her. "I could do it myself if I wanted to, Robin Swift. I'm not as hapless or hopeless as you seem to think."

"I never said you were, *Argemone Elver*. What's prickling you today?"

Realizing she did sound more than a bit crab-applely, Poppy let her shoulders drop. “Nothing. But for glory’s sake, sit down. I’m about to willow my neck looking up at you.”

Robby sat, but left a good distance between them. “I was only trying to help. We can go together if you like.” A furrow appeared between his eyes, and he looked away. “Or not. Whatever you want.”

Poppy’s uncontrollable hair had come loose from its knot, and she used it as cover to cast a sideways glance at her friend. He looked ill at ease sitting there with his long legs splayed out in front of him as if they had grown so fast he wasn’t sure what to do with them. Even worse, his face had taken on that sickly cast again.

“I’m sorry, Robby. It’s been a perfectly monotonous day. But I shouldn’t take it out on you. I am most definitely done with picking petals. I’ll just have to endure whatever disappointed scolding Mum has in store.” She bit her lip, hoping a change in subject might sooth the uneasiness between them. “Would you mind if I asked you a question?”

Robby’s spine stiffened and his expression grew even more miserable. “Aw Poppy, I said more than I should have last time. I could get into real trouble if anyone finds out that I’ve told you anything about the Fowl Charm. You’re a lass. You shouldn’t know about these things. You shouldn’t even *want* to know.”

“I was only going to ask you if you’re attending the Fete tomorrow,” Poppy lied. Her temper, already close to the surface, boiled over. “But why shouldn’t I know? Why shouldn’t I get to do anything that you do? It’s ridiculous that I need Special Sanction to cross the plane, just because I’m not a lad. I’m perfectly capable of joining the Scouts, being part of a squadron. I could go on jaunts and do important things to help the Copse—”

Robby held up his hands in mock surrender. “Hey, I’m not the one who wrote the laws. Besides, you are helping out the Copse, by doing the things that lasses do.”

“Cooking and cleaning, flora-keeping and fauna-tending? While you get to train with the Border Scouts, patrolling and going on adventures across the mortal-fey plane?”

“They’re not exactly merry, little escapades, you know. The patrols and jaunts are hard work, and dangerous. I came yea-close to an Ordinary out there yesterday. For a moment, I thought she saw through the Fowl Charm...saw me as I really am and not as some commonplace bird. A few humans have the Sight, you know, and can see through the spell. I thought I was caught. It wasn’t a fun time, believe me.”

Poppy wasn’t taken in by his seemingly reasonable words. “It’s doing *something*, at least. I’m going to be fifteen this summer. That’s when you fellows start training, right? I could do it too—as good as you, maybe better than you.” Poppy stopped herself. The last thing she wanted to do was whet Robby’s curiosity. He might start to ask questions that she wouldn’t be willing to answer.

“Come on, Pop, you can barely wend a straight line. Bees drunk on fermented honey fly better—”

She swatted at him and caught his arm. “Take that back,” she said, but her lips were twitching with an oncoming smile. Because he was right. She was a complete disaster in the air.

“Youch,” he said, but chuckled. “Drunk *and* violent, not a good combination.”

Poppy wagged her head at him, laughing too. “Take it back, or I’ll tell your grandda about the afternoon you and your fellow cadets got loopy sipping that honeysuckle sap.”

“You wouldn’t dare. I have too much dirt on you. And as I recall, you were there that afternoon too. You had on that yellow dress. I remember you smelled like spring beans.”

“Like spring beans? That is an awful—”

“It’s a compliment! The other lasses had layered on the jasmine and rosewater to try to compete with the honeysuckle. You just smelled like new beans, fresh and sweet.”

Poppy could only gawp at him. Her face felt funny, all wobbly and hot. “Robby, I…” Her words died on her lips, as Jay and Lily suddenly appeared from around the corner. Poppy nipped to her feet and grabbed her basket, hugging it close. “I need…we need to get home, Lily.”

“Problem between the young lovebirds?” Jay taunted.

Poppy’s face burned red. “You best shut your beak, Jay Kingfisher.”

“Struck a nerve, did I?”

Robby stepped in between them. “Leave her be, okay, mate?”

He turned to Poppy, and she noticed the high color in his cheeks too.

“I’ll see you at the Fete?” Robby asked.

Poppy didn’t trust herself to speak and was relieved when Lily stepped up and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. The younger fairy was torn between being incurably embarrassed and toad-hopping mad.

“Yes, we’ll see you then, Robby.” Lily spoke quickly, keeping her voice light. “And I’ll see you in a few hours, Jay.” Before Poppy could protest, Lily picked up her own basket and

unfolded her wings. She leaned close to her sister's ear. "Unfurl now, goose. Before you say or do something that *I'll* regret."