

Chapter 1

I dreamed I was dead.

Dead and free.

I was flying over England, looking down, my body feather-light but powerful as it soared. I don't know if I had wings but I felt the cool damp air on my skin: fresh and clean. Sometimes the cloud blocked my vision of the land but for the most part it was clear; beautifully clear.

I know where I got the image from. I remember flying on Turkish Airlines- flying home to London for my grandad's funeral, just three months before I lost my nan. Ten minutes into the descent into Heathrow, the cabin crew switched on a bird's-eye camera on the belly of the plane so we could watch the myriad of greens and browns and chalky yellows of the fields below: a patchwork of hand-cut farmland carved out centuries ago and expanded or divided since; the grey and red tiled roofs of the workers' cottages, the grand country estates surrounded by vast expanses of well-kept green lawn and the grey-blue twisting snake of the River Thames winding through the landscape.

Like a spirit set free, I flew over it all.

Smiling, I looked to my right and saw a boy flying beside me. He did have wings- huge, white, soft feather wings spread as wide as his arms.

He grinned at me and I laughed and reached for him and we linked fingers and looked once more down at my country.

No. Not my country. My mother's country.

My country was Georgia. His too, I thought, this boy-angel beside me.

Ilia.

Ilia from Svaneti.

He'd been with me for as long as I could remember: never changing, while I grew from child to teenager. When I was little, my parents and teachers had been amused by my imaginary friend, indulging me with smiles when I told them I was "playing with Ilia." Then, when I didn't grow out of him, they started taking me to head doctors. I was doing well at school, making normal friends, but they'd occasionally catch me talking to him or laughing at a joke he told me. "You're too old to have an imaginary friend," they admonished.

I remember sitting in one psychiatrist's office describing what I saw in the shadow pictures the doctor kept holding up.

"Hairy mushroom," Ilia whispered in my ear. I giggled and repeated what he'd said.

“This guy before he lost all his hair,” he whispered about the next one- clearly supposed to be a clown.

I burst out laughing, then repeated the description.

The doctor frowned and my mother gasped.

“Ilia said it, not me,” I told the doctor, trying to hold back the laughter.

“Ilia does not exist!” my mother said through gritted teeth.

They put me on medication for a while- drugs that made me sleepy. They talked about electro-therapy but my father drew the line at that.

“They don’t want me to be with you anymore,” Ilia told me sadly as he sat by my bed one lunchtime on another day of missed school, holding my hand.

“You won’t leave me, will you?” I asked him, my eyes wide, the fast beating of my heart fighting back the drowsiness.

“Ara- no,” he said with a reassuring smile. “I’ll be with you as long as you need me.”

Then he kissed my forehead.

We spent the rest of the day talking about how to hide him from my parents. It took a few weeks of practice but he learned not to comment when there were people around, not to do anything to distract me when I was in class. And I learned not to look at him too much, or to answer him without first checking we were alone. He started leaving the classroom when I was studying, and fading out of sight- even invisible to me- during family dinners or parties. I missed him, but I knew he was only trying to protect me. And when the doctor asked me about Ilia, I lied and said he was imaginary and had gone away. I even told my parents I wanted to do after-school dance classes just to show them I was busy and ‘normal.’

They never knew I practised dancing with Ilia late at night. It turned out he’d been the best in his village when he was alive.

We were happy in our secret world: I loved him and he loved me.

But everything changed between us the year I turned 16.