

The *Black Diamond* was the only pub in the village. The main alleyway was illuminated by the oil lamps hanging from the porch of the pub. The glow of their flames danced on the uneven cobblestones of the pedestrian road, like the guardians of an abandoned city left to the gods.

Wintertern was barely populated by a thousand people. Located in the south of Scotland, it was in the path of many travellers who decided to put their travel to a pause for the night before continuing their journey to the big cities.

Mostly used at weekends, the *Black Diamond* only barely hosted more than ten people. Two rooms were available for passers-by, fifteen place settings were provided unnecessarily each night and three people worked there. The pub was passed down from generation to generation, it had been in the Shawning family for nearly a century. Charles, Elizabeth and their daughter Ella Shawning were the proud owners.

Wednesdays were the quietest evenings at the pub, and Ella often offered her parents the chance to take the evening off. She served the few customers who came in for a drink before inviting a few of her friends.

Those friends always chose the same table. It was in a corner of the main room, just within sight of the counter. That night, Anthony, his girlfriend Daphne, Mark and his fiancé Harry, as well as Paul, Hannah, Willow and Emma were sitting there. The whole gang was together. As they did every week, the three girls had reserved the benches and, for once, no boy had made the mistake of sitting there. They had come to understand that this was an implicit rule among them all.

Ella had smiled with amusement at the alarmed look on Anthony's face when Paul had been approaching it.

She was still busy cleaning up the drinks they had brought in and waiting impatiently for the pub's clock to strike ten. Her mother allowed her to leave her post to join her friends from that time onwards, provided she served any customer who deigned to come through the door. Ella knew, however, that in this winter time, only a few people who were brave enough would dare to go out for a drink in the cold.

"Come on, Ella!" Anthony shouted at her as she put down her third clean glass. "We're waiting for you to start playing!"

She rolled her eyes. She didn't feel like leaving her counter and her dirty glasses anymore. It was the same scene every Wednesday. They would play cards without her for more than two hours, then the girls would get tired of the obvious cheating from the boys and refuse to continue until the teams were balanced. Then Anthony would give in and ask Ella to join them so that Emma, Hannah and Willow would agree to resume the game, along with their friend.

Ella didn't like the game, if she was honest. Although she guessed every cheating technique of Mark and Anthony, she couldn't understand why they were so attached to rules that were stupidly invented when they were still in high school.

It was Theo who had come up with them, before he left for Boston to pursue his studies. The concept was rather simple, a kind of team war, girls on one side, boys on the other, where each defeat resulted in a childish forfeit and each duel in a drink for the loser.

Besides being silly, this game rarely ended well. The last time, Mark was required to ask Paul for help to get Harry home because the man was far too drunk.

"Ten more minutes," Ella replied.

She would have liked to join them without playing, but the apologetic look on the face of her boyfriend, Paul, confirmed that it wouldn't be for tonight.

She sighed and bent down to put away the clean glasses under the counter. If she managed to stay hidden like this, maybe they'd leave her alone. She winced, she felt ridiculous for not just telling her friends that she didn't want to play.

However, the last time she had tried to do so, the other girls had said that she was abandoning them to their fate just because she was afraid of reprisals from the boys' pledges. Something she hadn't really been able to argue with, since the forfeit she remembered best was the one Theo had given her a few months ago. She had to wear make-up and heels for a whole week. A way of annoying her because he didn't think she was feminine enough. It had been a joke between them for years after all.

The mere memory of the blisters she'd been dragging around for days, combined with the fact that she'd had to match her pumps with dresses, only increased her annoyance. She didn't feel like playing at all, damn it!

Then, suddenly, the front door of the bar opened and let in a customer she had never seen around. A rush of relief went through her and, if she wasn't an atheist, she probably would have thanked the gods with offerings or whatever religious custom it was from.

The man who had just entered was not very tall, looked to be in his sixties and was rather thin. He had quite a long beard and small glasses on his nose. He was wearing a long grey coat, an orange scarf, black trousers and a beret of the same colour. He took off the latter once he was inside the bar and went towards the counter.

Ella couldn't take her eyes off him. She was delighted to have to deal with this new customer and intrigued that she had never seen him before. She loved meeting these travellers who

were always happy to tell her about their adventures. She wondered if this one was from Scotland or England. It had been a long time since any Scotsman had passed through here and she dreamed of plains, ruined castles and lakes as far as the eye could see.

As he approached, she detailed his face more precisely. His eyes sparkled, and that was the first thing she noticed. When he directed his gaze towards her, Ella felt as if she had been x-rayed, as if he knew exactly who she was and what she was about to say. It was unsettling.

"Good evening, sir," she said when he was only a few inches away from her.

"Good evening, Miss," he replied with a warm smile as he settled into a bar chair.

"Can I get you anything?"

"A scotch, please."

She smiled and complied without hesitation.

"Very good choice, we have the best in the country!"

"I bet you do."

She set a glass in front of him, pouring the amber liquid down to halfway. She wasn't lying when she said that the bottles they bought from local producers were the best. She had tasted many of them herself since she was old enough to drink—for science purposes, of course!—and she had to admit that the Evans' were excellent. Of course, she was completely objective.

"Are you coming here for the first time?" she asked the man opposite her, as she put away the bottle she had taken out.

"No, I'm visiting my mother," he replied, taking a sip.

She did her best to hide her surprise. But how old was he?

He chuckled as he watched her do it. Obviously, she hadn't been very discreet.

"You'd be surprised how healthy she is," he laughed, offering her a wink.

She blushed and bit her lower lip. She felt ashamed to have let her surprise show so obviously. She was sounding like a fool!

"Don't worry, Miss," he continued, much to Ella's surprise. "I'm often given more than my age."

This only made her feel more embarrassed. She could feel her face boiling as she tried to distract herself by cleaning the bar's work surface with a greyish rag. How could he guess that she had overestimated his age?

"It must be the beard," he resumed, running his hand through it.

"It is very nice, by the way," she couldn't help but mention.

She was honest. She was impressed by the thickness of his facial hair, but also by how well he seemed to care for it. His hair was precisely trimmed so that it did not protrude from the mass he had formed. Her own father had never achieved such a result.

"Thank you, Miss. It's several years of hard work, if you must know. A castor oil bath every Sunday and you're done."

She laughed lightly, which was enough to relax her shoulders and calm the heat that surrounded her neck. She looked up at him and examined his features more closely. The man, for his part, was observing the various bottles on display behind the bar, as if he were looking for his next drink.

The more she looked at him, the more Ella felt she knew him, that she had seen him before. His voice sounded familiar, as if in a distant memory.

"Have we met before?" she asked, snapping her client out of his drunken reverie.

He turned his brown eyes towards her without breaking the smile he had been wearing since her arrival. A knowing smile, a warm smile, as if... as if he *knew*.

"I don't recall that," he replied, raising his glass to his lips.

She nodded thoughtfully, not stopping her circular motions on the laminate counter. She wasn't really paying attention to what she was doing anymore, she was searching deep in her memory for the face of this smiling man.

"What's your name?" she asked without thinking.

She bit the inside of her cheek as she realised that it was rather rude to ask a customer questions like that.

"Elijah," he said without letting go of that smile.

That bloody smile. It made Ella uncomfortable, she felt like he knew her better than she did, that he knew something she didn't, that he knew every one of her strengths and weaknesses. She slipped the rag into the belt of her apron and wiped her sweaty hands on her work jeans.

"Ella!" Anthony yelled from the back of the room.

She turned her eyes towards them and didn't know what to do. A few minutes earlier, she would have preferred to stay at the counter and pretend that she had to take care of her client at all costs to avoid having to join her friends. Now... she wasn't really sure.

This man was strange, he inspired something different, something disturbing.

"Are these your friends?" he inquired, running his index finger over the rim of his glass.

She looked at him again and nodded.

"Why don't you go and join them?" he continued.

"I'm alone at the bar," she replied immediately, the only excuse she could think of.

He raised an eyebrow and looked around the room theatrically to count the number of customers. When he fixed his gaze in hers again, Ella felt herself blush.

"Well?" he said with an amused smile this time.

She rolled her eyes and laughed softly. He was nicer than she had thought. His face no longer seemed to be looking for some strangeness or secret in her that he didn't already know.

"They're playing a silly game," she admitted as she leaned on the edge of the counter.

She glanced at the only group left in the bar and met Paul's gaze. He smiled and offered her a discreet wink.

"Which one?" Elijah asked.

"A reinvented War by Girl and Boy team," she said with a sigh. "The losers get a forfeit that is often chosen to make them look foolish."

He laughed lightly, which annoyed Ella. Of course, he couldn't understand. He must have thought she was still young and full of anger, as previous generations often imagined.

Again he surprised her by answering something quite different.

"Why don't you tell them you don't want to play, Miss?"

She did not answer. She knew the answer, but it seemed childish now. She was still staring at her friends while looking for a new silly excuse. She could feel the man's gaze on her face,

which bothered her more than she thought. She was so tense that her head was shaking from avoiding looking back at him.

"Why this team choice?"

She gritted her teeth at the question. How could he get it so right every time?

She shrugged, as if it didn't matter to her more than the grey colour of the walls.

"They thought it was more fun and we never changed."

"Yet that's what you dislike most about it."

He wasn't asking her. He was stating it. Ella looked down at her hands and chewed the edges of her fingers with her nails. She probably would have bitten her cuticles if she wasn't on shift.

He was getting on her nerves. She didn't like it when people understood her so easily, when they said such truths about her for her.

So she just shrugged her shoulders and looked at him less friendly than before.

"How do you know?" she said in an annoyed tone.

This only made Elijah smile wider. Ella held back a sigh.

"Because I've been in your shoes, Miss."

She widened her eyes and swallowed. He was lying, he had to be. She decided to keep her hands busy and grabbed some already clean glasses to clean them again. Yes, an occupation, that was what she needed. She had her back to Elijah, so he wouldn't be able to guess the heaps of questions that were piling up in her head.

Was it that obvious? Had she implied something? Had he implied what she was thinking? Did she have to change her clothes, her haircut, so that it wouldn't show?

She bit her lower lip. She suddenly felt cramped in her apron, in her t-shirt. It was too tight and she felt hot.

"You should tell them," Elijah resumed.

Tell them? No way!

"They'll never stop playing this game if they don't understand what's bothering you."

A rush of relief went through her body. The game. Yes. The game. That was all he could talk about, wasn't it? There was nothing else, nothing important.

She rubbed the bottom of the glass so hard that it ended up falling on the floor. Fortunately for her, it didn't break and she quickly picked it up. As she looked up, she met the man's eyes. Always that smiling, knowing, warm look. He *knew*.

She must have looked like a tomato, a sweaty, stinking tomato. Her shift would end in less than an hour and yet she already felt like running away and drowning in an ice-cold bath. She was ashamed, scared, her head hurt.

He blinked and smiled at her. At the same moment the door to the kitchen opened on her mother. Ella paid no attention to him.

"I'll leave you to your work, Miss Ella," he said then.

Then he got up and walked away to a table that faced the large windows of the bar. Ella stood motionless, unable to sort out her disturbed thoughts.

What had he just said? What had he called her? How did he know her name? She was sure she hadn't told him. And what was this tendency to call her Miss constantly? It was unbearable!

"What did he want?" her mother said suddenly, joining her behind the counter.

"Nothing special, just another chatterbox," Ella replied by automatism.

She was confused. She stared at the void the man had left without really realising what was going on around her. He knew her name. He had called her Miss throughout their conversation, as if he *knew*.

"His face looks familiar, did he tell you his first name?"

"Elijah."

"Oh, I love that name! Your father and I would have named you that if you were a boy."

Ella felt her eyes fill with tears.