

**Games We Play 1: Truth or Dare**

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eISBN 9781682522981

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Published in the United States of America

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## Prologue

*Atlas Beach, New Jersey*  
*Three months earlier...*

The last of the dishes had all been put away. The last of the guests had departed. The memorial for Moira Walsh Gallagher was well and truly finished. At the large staff table in the kitchen of the Wild Geese Inn, the small hotel Moira had owned and loved, her three grandchildren shared a last glass of whiskey and a last slice of apple pie. Pumpkin pie might have been a more traditional choice, given that it was now just days after Thanksgiving, but Moira had never cared for pumpkin.

"If we're really gonna do this," Brenda Donovan said in her usual bossy tones, "there are a few things we're gonna have to get straight right from the start."

Her cousins, Luke Kelly and Gwyneth Carmichael, exchanged a long-suffering look. Brenda was two months older than Luke, five months older than Gwyn, so they'd never really bought into her whole I-know-best-because-I'm-the-oldest superior attitude. You might think after twenty-eight years, Bren would have figured that out, but say what you will about Jersey girls, they're stubborn as fuck. Once an idea gets stuck in their heads, there's very little chance of it shaking loose.

"What do you mean *if* we're going to do it?" Luke glared at his cousin. "How is that even a question? We've talked about running the inn together since we were kids."

Gwyn nodded in agreement. "Grams could have sold the place numerous times over the years. It's not like there weren't offers. She turned them all down."

"She kept the place going for *us*," Luke added. "Until we were ready to take over."

"And you two think we're ready now?" Brenda protested. "Seriously?"

Luke scowled. "That's not what we're saying. But what other choice is there?"

Brenda shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe we should look into some of these offers, see if any of them are still on the table. I mean, look around you. There's no one here. How're we supposed to stay in business if we don't have any customers?"

"Of course there's no one here right now," Gwyn snapped. "You didn't expect us to have Gram's dinner here today and keep the restaurant open to the public at the same time, did you?"

"And the hotel? Did you close that too?"

Gwyn rolled her eyes. "Don't be dense. It's winter. No one vacations herein the winter."

"Exactly," Luke agreed. "They go to Florida or the Bahamas, places like that. That's why so many businesses in town are only open for the season—or only open weekends the rest of the year."

"We do that too, in a way, with the rental units," Gwyn said. "Most of them are only open in the summer."

"That's right." Luke nodded. "Maybe we should close the hotel in the winter as well? Or only take reservations for the weekend?"

"Oh, sure," Gwyn glared at him. "Great idea. The staff'll love that."

"It won't help anyway," Brenda said, sounding gloomier by the minute. "I looked at the numbers, you guys. We can't afford the upkeep if we're only open part of the year. We need to figure out a way to bring in *more* customers somehow, not less."

"The bar's still open," Luke pointed out, adding, "Not tonight, obviously, but in general. And we have customers who come in all year round."

"But even that's not pulling in enough," Brenda told him. "Sure, the bar's helping to keep us afloat in the offmonths—for now—but we're hemorrhaging money. I don't know how Grams made it work without going bankrupt or taking out a mortgage. But I don't think even she could have kept it going much longer. She hadn't drawn a salary

in years. Her savings are nearly gone. If this place is going to survive—not to mention pay the three of us—we’re going to have to make some hard choices.”

“We could advertise,” Gwyn suggested. “You know, ‘spend a romantic weekend at one of Atlas Beach’s most historic hotels’ and that kind of thing? Or offer special, prix fixe dinners for some of the winter holidays like, I dunno, Valentine’s Day, for instance?”

“We could hold special events in the bar too,” Luke added. “New Year’s, Mardi Gras, St. Patrick’s Day.”

Gwyn beamed at him. “We could do dinners for all of those too. Also Christmas and maybe Groundhog’s Day and—”

“Groundhog’s Day?”

“Sure. We could make it like the movie, with a dinner dance, or auction, or whatever that was. We could even have a screening in the game room.”

“C’mon, Brenda,” Luke urged. “What do you say? Don’t you want to do this?”

“Of course I do. It’s what I went to school for, isn’t it? But with the economy the way it is and the weather we’ve had the past few years, I don’t know if it’s feasible.”

“Stop with all the defeatist bullshit,” Gwyn said. “We need you, Brenda. I can take on a larger role with running the hotel and everything, and Luke’s got the bar under control.”

“Well, mostly.” Luke shot Gwyn an apologetic look. “It could do with some repairs, new furniture, new equipment, et cetera. And don’t look at me like that, Gwyn. She’s not entirely wrong. There’s a lot that hasn’t been kept up with.”

“Which is why we need Brenda,” Gwyn agreed. “Someone has to deal with the business side of things.”

“It would be a big adjustment,” Brenda pointed out. “I’d have to quit my job and move down here from the city.”

"Oh, please," Luke said. "You've been telling us for years that you miss it here, that you wish you could move back. Well, here's your chance. And don't even try and pretend like you wouldn't get a nice severance package, because I know you would."

"Think how much money you'd save on overhead," Gwyn added, "if you were living here rather than in the city. If it doesn't pan out, you could always go back."

Brenda sighed. "I guess." She eyed the others uncertainly. "So you really want to do this, huh?"

"Hell, yes, I want to do this," Luke assured her. "I've always wanted my own bar, even if it is haunted."

"Don't be silly," Gwyn told him. "The bar's not haunted."

"Of course it's not!" Brenda agreed.

"It's the *hotel* that's haunted," Gwyn continued. "The bar is infest—"

"Stop that," Brenda interrupted angrily. "That's what I started to say before. If you really want to do this, there are conditions. We have to stop with all the hocus-pocus."

"For example?" Gwyn asked.

"Number one," Brenda said, "the hotel is *not* haunted. It's an old building, Gwyn. I know you love it. But you have to admit it's not in the best of shape. The walls are too thin, the stairs creak, the pipes make noises, the lights flicker, it's drafty—that's all normal.

"And maybe you think it sounds romantic, but when you tell our guests that the hotel is haunted—"

"Which it is."

"—you're just calling attention to the hotel's deficiencies."

"What else?" Luke asked, jumping in before the girls got into it. Too much of his childhood had been spent watching the two of them fight and make up.

"Number two. There is *no* boggart in the bar."

"Okay, stop," he said, starting to get annoyed himself. "Now you're going too far. You don't know that for a fact."

Brenda shook her head. "C'mon, Luke. How's that even make sense? It's an Irish bar; what would a mischief-making Scottish spirit even be doing there?"

Luke grinned. "Making mischief. Obviously. Besides, it's people they attach themselves to, I think. They're family spirits, like the *bean sidhe*. Who's to say there's no Scotch-Irish somewhere in our family mix? There's some funny stuff goes on in that bar, Bren. I've seen it."

Brenda nodded. "I'm sure there is. Do you know why people go to a bar in the first place?"

"To have a drink?" Gwyn suggested.

"Exactly. And what happens when people have a few too many drinks?"

"We make money?"

"They get clumsy. They trip over their own feet. Sometimes they fall down. They misplace things—their keys, their wallets, their phones."

"Their clothes?" Gwyn smiled at her cousin. Brenda ignored her.

"They make stupid jokes and play stupid pranks and generally act—"

"Stupidly?" Luke supplied.

"And that's all there is to it. There's no supernatural troublemaker behind it. The only spirits in that bar are the ones that come in bottles."

Gwyn gasped. "There's a genie there now too?"

This time Brenda glared at her.

Luke sighed. "Is there a number three?"

"Yes." Brenda pointed toward the restaurant's dining room. "You know that odd-colored stone floor tile in the entryway?"

Luke and Gwyn exchanged a smile. "You mean the Blarney Stone?" they asked innocently.

Brenda glared. "No, I don't mean the Blarney Stone," she repeated mockingly. "For fuck's sake, guys. The Blarney Stone is right where it's always been. In Blarney Castle. It's part of the friggin' wall. No one chipped it out and shipped it across the ocean."

"Okay, fine," Gwyn said. "I'll give you that one. I always thought that was crazy. What would the *Lia Fiál* be doing here?"

"The what now?" Luke asked.

"The *Lia Fiál*," Gwyn repeated. "The Stone of Destiny? That's what they used to call it."

"Oh. Well, then that actually does make sense, doesn't it?"

"What does?"

"That business about how if you kiss your true love while standing on the stone you're destined to be together. Destined – get it?"

"Yes, Luke." Gwyn rolled her eyes. "We get it. It's still crazy."

"Number four," Brenda continued without waiting for the others. "There is *no* family curse."

Luke and Gwyn looked at her in pained surprise. "Well, of course there isn't," Luke said. "You mean the 'nothing will prosper the family Walsh in Atlas Beach until the Wild Geese return and are reunited with their loved ones' nonsense? Yeah, that's bullshit."

Gwyn nodded. "That was just our Great-Grandfather Walsh in a fit of temper, trying to coerce his ex-wife into taking him back after she'd kicked him out. People say a lot of things when a relationship is ending. Who knows what she might have said to him? It could have been something just as bad."

"Maybe she laid a curse on him too," Luke suggested. "So that he'd lose all his teeth or his hair would fall out."

"Or that he wouldn't be able to get an erection," Gwyn said.

"Can we be serious for a minute?" Brenda asked. "You really think we can do this?"

Luke and Gwyn looked at each other, and then at Brenda. "Yes!" they both said in unison.

"Of course we can do it," Gwyn added.

"Don't see why not," Luke agreed.

"All right." Brenda shrugged. "Then I guess I'm in too."

"Yay!" Gwyn clapped her hands. "It's about fucking time. This calls for a toast."

"Good idea." Luke picked up the bottle of whiskey and topped off everyone's glass. "What are we toasting to? Grams? The Lia Fiál?"

Gwyn grinned. "Boggarts and things that go boo in the night?"

"No." Brenda picked up her glass and smiled at the others. "To the Wild Geese."

"To the Wild Geese," Luke agreed as the three of them clinked their glasses together.

"The Wild Geese," Gwyn repeated. "May they all find their destinies."

## Chapter One

"I think someone must've left a window open."

Gwyn glanced away from her computer screen to see Eric, who was supposed to be manning the reception desk for another—Gwyn checked the clock on her computer—hour and a half, standing in the door to her office.

"Hmm? What was that?"

"It's cold in here this evening." Eric rubbed his hands up and down his arms and shivered in an overly dramatic manner. "There's this crazy draft. I don't know where it's coming from. Something has to be open. A door, maybe?"

"It's February," Gwyn replied, already losing interest in the conversation; she had more important things to think about. "It's always cold in February."

"Not this cold," Eric protested.

"Yes. Exactly this cold. Always. It's the worst month of the year. Which is why God made it the shortest. Haven't you ever heard that?" When Eric continued to stand there, she asked, "Was there something else you needed?"

"No. Well, yes. Maybe. It's getting dark already, and the snow is really starting to stick..."

"So you want to leave early?"

Eric gazed at her hopefully. "Could I?"

Gwyn sighed. She was sure either of her cousins would have told him no and gone back to their work, but she was a pushover. She'd been aware of *that* fact for a long time now. "Just give me a minute to finish up. I'll fill in for you until Sheila gets here."

"Thanks, Gwyn. You're the best." Eric flashed her a relieved smile and departed.

"Yeah, yeah," Gwyn muttered to herself as she saved her work and logged out. "The best at falling for a sob story, that is."

Within a few minutes Gwyn had set herself up at the reception desk. The desk, really a large cubicle of sorts with everything built in, was one of her favorite parts of the hotel. Her mother had worked at the hotel for awhile when Gwyn was very young. Gwyn had spent hours under the desk, hidden from view, drawing pictures or playing with paper dolls while her mother welcomed guests.

Stained glass letters over the front counter spelled out RECEPTION. They were reversed from her perspective, leading to a brief concern on the part of her teachers and her Aunt Joanne that Gwyn was dyslexic. The room's only entrance was a door in the back wall. It was unobtrusive, fashioned of the same paneling as the rest of the wall. In her mind, it was a secret doorway that led to...wherever. Other realms. Distant planets. The castle's dungeon. In reality, it led to a poorly lit service corridor, which also made for a good place to play.

Tonight, however, play was the last thing on Gwyn's mind as she pondered the reservation list for tomorrow's Valentine's dinner. The good news was that the restaurant was more than half-booked. Well, it was *mostly* good news, in a glass-is-half-full kind of way. People had paid in advance to attend – which had gone to pay for the food for the special menu. They'd been hoping to sell out, which so far they hadn't. Walk-ins could put them over the top, but if they *did* get a storm and people were snowed in, they'd be far more likely to stay at home. Which meant their profit would be less than she'd hoped for, less than they needed it to be.

Luckily, Brenda had convinced the restaurant critic for Atlas Beach's local paper to stop by and check it out. So at the very least, assuming all went well tomorrow night, maybe their next event would be filled to capacity. She could only hope.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flicker of motion on the stairs. She ignored it, as she usually did, and went on with her work. A moment later, a current of

air seemed to rise from nowhere. Outside the wind howled. A shadow passed across the wall. Cold air swirled around Gwyn for an instant and then was gone. That was a little more worrisome. In general, the ghosts only produced drafts when they were on the verge of manifesting something unusual.

Gwyn sighed and shook her head. Perfect. Because “unusual” was just what they didn’t need this weekend. Grams had always insisted the ghosts only hung around because they wanted to help the family. Gwyn had yet to be convinced.

Brenda could argue all she liked, but *everyone* knew the Wild Geese Inn was haunted. It was a big reason they found it hard to keep people on staff. There were doors that opened or closed by themselves, lights that flickered or burned out too fast, voices whispering in the hallways when no one was in sight. The staff had already presented her with a list of the rooms they refused to clean—a fact she’d been careful to keep hidden from her cousin. It wasn’t like those rooms needed to be dealt with very often anyway, unfortunately. When they did, Gwyn took care of them herself. As a teenager, she’d worked as a maid here every summer. It was like riding a bike.

A couple of minutes later, the hotel’s big double outer doors slammed open, banging against the walls of the enclosed entryway. Gwyn glanced up, annoyed. What in the hell were the haunts up to now?

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