

# ESCAPE FROM DANGER

*An Escape from Reality Cozy Mystery #1*



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Tuesday, March 14th

When I started the business of my dreams, I forgot one important thing. Being a business owner means having a set schedule. And a set schedule means getting up early. Have I mentioned yet I hate mornings? I hit snooze for the 10th time (let's be honest, I'd given up counting after the third one) when my phone chimed.

"Heeyyyyyy sleepyhead! Get up! It's time for our run!" said the chirpy voice on the line. It was Jared Hayes, my best friend and partner in crime since we were in kindergarten.

"You add extra y's because you know it irritates me. Just five more minutes," I said.

"Shay Reynolds, you get your rear in gear and meet me at the rec center in 30 minutes," Jared said before disconnecting.

Ugh. That's me, Shay Reynolds. I'm 26 years old and never thought I'd be back where I grew up in Deadwood, South Dakota. Three months ago, I lived in Arizona, working for a newspaper, and living my

dream. No snow in sight and my entire future ahead of me. Then, I got laid off and got the news my dad had died.

I wasn't over the whirlwind of emotions that had followed that terrible day. Not only had my dad died, but he'd left a large life insurance policy, and his will had some specific instructions for me. I knew he'd always wanted me to come home, but his last wishes were for me to start the business I'd always talked about and give living back home a full year before deciding.

I shuffled to the kitchen to make some black tea to clear my head. While the Keurig burred to life, I threw my hair up into a messy bun and glanced down at my PJ's. Capri leggings and a t-shirt? That seemed fine for a morning run to me. Problem solved, I moved on to thinking about the rest of my day. As I slipped on my sneakers and brewed my tea, I glanced over the to-do list I'd left on the counter last night.

My first order of business, after my run, would be to make sure the deliveries had arrived for my new venture, Escape from Reality. I'd discovered escape rooms in Phoenix and had been hooked. My dad knew about my dream and had made it possible for it to come true. I swiped at my eyes as tears sprang up.

"Get yourself together, Shay."

Determined to get moving, I grabbed my tea, scalded my tongue, and headed out the door. Spring had come early to the tiny town I thought I'd never come back to. Nice days in March were rare. As I walked down my street to the rec center, my neighbor, Shelly Myers, hollered at me.

"Good morning, Miss Shay!"

"Good morning, Shelly."

"It was a shame to hear about your father, but it's so good to have you back."

"Thanks, Shelly. I'm glad to be back, but I sure miss my dad. Maybe we can catch up later."

I stretched and went down the street at a slow jog, admiring all the Victorian homes on my way. Deadwood is a town of contradictions - original period homes and modern, jarring casinos, but somehow, it all comes together.

“Turn that frown upside down!” Jared said as he enveloped me in a much-needed hug.

I stepped back and looked at my oldest friend. He was tall, blonde, and handsome, even if he used old phrases that made me cringe.

“What’s so good about it?” I asked, determined to stay down in the dumps.

“Knock it off, the sun is shining, we’re reunited, and you’re about to take on a challenge and do what you’ve always wanted,” He sang. “Now, let’s get our run on!”

Jared’s right. I shouldn’t wallow, but hey, I’m not a morning person.

“Did you check-in at the building yet,” I asked.

“Yes, I did. While you were resting your pretty head, I was taking care of all the details for your new business. And while we’re talking about your pretty head, dear God, what is wrong with your hair?”

I self-consciously ran my hand over my tangled bun. “What? It’s fine!”

“Sometimes, I just don’t know about you, Shay. You’ve got all of this glorious blonde hair, and half the time, you look like someone pulled you through a bush backward.”

“What does that even mean? Who gets pulled through bushes backward? How does that work? You need to stop reading so many Regency romances.”

Jared rolled his eyes and gave me what we call “the look” when one of us calls the other out.

“Whatever - let’s focus on the business,” I said as I ran faster, determined to outrun this awkward critique of myself.

The escape room would open in three weeks. I was stressing over the whole thing. Coming up with original mysteries for each room was the simple part. Decorating was a whole other story.

“All the props for the first room are here. We’re still waiting on the props for room two. I’m expecting them in later today,” he said, wheezing as we picked up the pace. “I’ll finish up running the camera and sound system today and get the components hooked up.”

Setting up the escape rooms was difficult. Keeping people engaged and not having the mystery be too tough to solve meant finding the

right balance. I was relying on my love of old mystery novels to see me through this challenge. My degree in literature might pay off!

“Let’s stop.”

The hills in Deadwood are killer, but they were great for cardio. We slowed to a walk and headed over to Jill’s Cafe, a local hangout we used to visit when we were in high school. We’d be meeting the third of our fearless trio, Abby Cooper, for some breakfast and a quick strategy session.

Abby is the girliest girl who ever lived, and I loved her with my whole heart. We may be opposites, but there’s no one else I trusted more. Jared, Abby, and I had bonded in elementary school, and we had been inseparable ever since (despite my defection to warmer climes.) They had both welcomed me back with open arms and hearts when I got the news about my dad.

I couldn’t help but admire Abby. She’d always known that she wanted to own a clothing store. She’d saved throughout high school and then worked two jobs until she had the money put aside to open her own shop. Her drive and ambition had made her store one of the best in the state. She had inspired me to try opening my own business.

Tears welled up again as we approached the table where Abby was waiting. She took one look at me and rushed over to give me a big hug.

“Shay, it’s gonna be alright,” Abby said while holding me tight. “You’re gonna get through this.” She held me at arm’s length and gave me the once-over. “Are you wearing your pajamas?”

Abby always dressed appropriately.

“Maybe... but anyway, let’s talk about getting Room 2 decorated,” I said, desperate for a change in subject.

I’m most commonly found in yoga pants and tees or yoga pants and sweatshirts, depending on the season. The only time I traded in my Converse shoes was when it snowed. What can I say? I liked to keep things simple. I sat down. Jared flopped dramatically in his seat, making me giggle.

“Abby, you know it’s a losing battle trying to get Shay to dress nice,” Jared said. “We’ve been trying for fifteen years and it’s never worked.”

“We will never give up!”

I knew what they were doing, and I appreciated their efforts to keep me cheerful and distracted.

“What can I get for you three?” asked Jill, the café’s owner.

Jill is in her sixties and dresses as though she lives in a 1950s sitcom. Her cafe had a wonderful vibe that made you feel as if you’ve stepped back in time. It was always a hit with tourists.

I looked around the crowded cafe and didn’t see anyone else helping her.

“Where’s Cindy, Jill? I thought she was helping you wait tables?”

“That girl, I swear, it’s always something with her. Today, it’s a flat tire. Tomorrow, who knows? Anyway, what you guys want? I got a lot going on.”

Don’t let her attitude fool you. Jill may be all business and come off grumpy, but she’s a big old softie.

“I’ll take my usual, French toast with bacon and a Coke.”

Jared hemmed and hawed like he always did before ordering his usual, too. “I’ll have the Denver omelet and an orange juice.”

“I’ll have the egg white omelet with an English muffin, no butter, and water to drink,” Abby said.

Jill walked away, writing as she went. She glanced over as a tourist banged his empty coffee cup on the table. “Coming, coming.”

Looking over at my two friends as they teased one another, I realized how lucky I was. Even though I may not have planned it, I guess everything works out the way it’s supposed to.

Jared recently got laid off from the hotel where he worked in IT. He was the perfect person to help me with the techie side of running the escape rooms. I excelled at the planning, organization, and decoration. Without his expertise at adding sound effects, hooking up the computer system, and making everything run, I would have been lost. He was even doing my website and managing the booking system.

“I love you guys,” I blurted out.

Jared looked over at me and grabbed my hand. “We love you, too, Shay-Shay.”

Jill dropped off our food. I dug in, excited to get going with the day and get my second room all decorated.

“Jared, you said the props for room two are coming?” I asked around my French toast.

“Yeppers, I opened up the doors early this morning so the delivery guy could drop off the boxes. In fact, they should already be there.”

We finished up our breakfasts, said our goodbyes to Abby, and headed over to the escape rooms. I’d found a great, historic building that had that true Deadwood vibe. It was located just doors from where Wild Bill Hickok had met his grisly end, and I thought it was the perfect spot for what I had planned.

We based most of the rooms on Deadwood’s colorful past. Between bank robberies, a suspected serial killer, and plenty of mining disputes, let alone all the colorful cowboys and cowgirls, I was sure I had a lot of material to pull from.

My first room was themed as a bank heist. Visitors had an hour to follow the clues and unlock the vault before time ran out. The second room was one I was excited about. It was a murder mystery where a man was discovered dead in a prostitute’s room. Guests would have an hour to find clues to reveal who had done the deed.

We walked up the steps, and I admired the new decal on the door with our name, *Escape from Reality*. A thrill went through me, making me excited for what was to come.

“Jared, I just can’t believe it’s happening,” I said, as we walked inside. I went behind the front desk. I pattered around the waiting room as Jared ducked into the bathroom to change into his work clothes.

“It’s exciting,” Jared said, as he went to check room two for our deliveries. “Um, Shay.. I think you might need to call the police.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as I ran back there.

I stopped in my tracks. There, on what was to be the prostitute’s bed, was the body of a man. Judging from the uniform he was wearing, this must have been our delivery guy. I thought about checking to see if he was alive, but the open-eyed stare and the amount of blood soaking through the covers and onto the floor was a pretty good sign he was dead.

My hands were shaking as I dialed 9-1-1. This could not be happening.

## AFTERWORD

Thanks for reading the first chapter of Escape from Danger!

If you enjoyed it, here's the link to get the rest of the book:

<https://amzn.to/3jniA3n>

Also available on Kindle Unlimited!

