

## WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ...

The Ives Mystery House is not your ordinary escape room. It's a death trap containing the secrets about Demi's missing dad and Liam's missing sister. As the clock ticks down, so do their chances of surviving and finding their loved ones alive. Before you start reading, clear your calendar, because you won't be able to escape this story until it ends.

— KRISTEN HOGREFE PARNELL, AWARD-  
WINNING AUTHOR OF THE CROSSROADS  
SUSPENSE SERIES

As filled with twists and turns, intrigue, dead ends, and hidden clues as an actual escape room, *The Escape Game* kept me guessing—and rapidly flipping pages—until the very last piece of the very last puzzle clicked into place.

— SARA DAVISON, CAROL AWARD-  
WINNING AUTHOR OF *LOST DOWN*  
*DEEP AND DRIVEN*

*The Escape Game* is a breathtaking thrill ride! Gina Holder cleverly weaves intricate puzzles within the mysterious house while layering in a faith element that adds depth and hope, leaving readers breathless—and eager to read it again to admire how beautifully it all comes together.

— DARLENE L. TURNER, *NEW YORK*  
*TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Gina Holder is a master at creating puzzle mysteries, and she is at the top of her form in *The Escape Game*. I was glued to the page from the beginning to *The End* with all the twists and turns threatening her characters. It's a story that will leave you wanting more.

— PATRICIA BRADLEY, *ECPA, PARABLE, & USA*  
*TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR*

If you enjoy decoding word and cypher puzzles, then you'll love *The Escape Game*. Gina Holder has crafted a dizzying array of puzzles throughout the book, along with a satisfying mystery and a sweet romance between the hero and heroine.

— SARAH HAMAKER, AWARD-WINNING  
AUTHOR OF THE COLD WAR LEGACY AND  
SEEKING JUSTICE SERIES

A genuinely fresh premise, protagonists worth rooting for, and suspense that earns every twist. The tension never lets up, but it's the characters and their faith journey that stayed with me. *The Escape Game* is the kind of book that follows you around for days after you finish it.

— ELLE E. KAY

*The Escape Game* never lets up. With a clever premise and unexpected turns, Gina Holder delivers a story that held my attention from the first page to the last. I'll be looking to see what this author writes next.

— USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR ROBIN  
PATCHEN

A deadly escape-room mystery collides with small-town secrets and faith under fire in this brilliant, claustrophobic thriller. Gina Holder masterfully weaves intelligent puzzles with gut-wrenching emotion and Kingdom truth—proving the real prison isn't the room, it's what the past stole from her. Readers who love suspense with soul will be wrecked in the best way.

— URCELIA TEIXEIRA, BESTSELLING  
CHRISTIAN MYSTERY, SUSPENSE & THRILLER  
AUTHOR

Smart, intense, and utterly gripping!

Gina Holder takes suspense to another level in *The Escape Game*, delivering a pulse-pounding story packed with clever puzzles, escalating danger, and a race against time that kept me turning pages late into the night. With sharp writing and a chilling premise, Holder proves once again she knows how to keep readers trapped in the best possible way.

— NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
MARY ALFORD

Gina Holder's book, *The Escape Game*, presents readers with the ultimate puzzle. It's a beautifully layered story that will not only keep you turning the pages but will also compel you to try to solve the intricate clues right along with her unique characters. The plot is deliciously complex and engaging. I highly recommend it!

— NANCY MEHL, AUTHOR OF THE ERIN  
DELANEY MYSTERIES SERIES

Just when you think you know the rules, Gina Holder changes the game. The second installment of *The Game Master* series is a puzzle in itself, with a plot that twists in the most delightfully unexpected ways. What starts as an inventive escape room challenge becomes something far more dangerous—and personal. With a ticking clock, a frantic search for a missing person, and a romance that catches even the characters off guard, this story delivers suspense with heart.

—JOANNA DAVIDSON POLITANO, BEST-  
SELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CURIOUS*  
*INHERITANCE OF BLAKELY HOUSE*



# THE ESCAPE GAME

THE GAME MASTERS | BOOK TWO

GINA HOLDER



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*To my Daddy. I will always love you.*



*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?  
(Hebrews 2:3a KJV)*

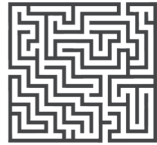


## FROM THE AUTHOR

*The Escape Game* is a blend of fact and fiction, of science and mythology. Some events that take place may stretch both the mind and the imagination. Enjoy the novel for what it is—a work of fiction.



## CHAPTER 1



Thursday, April 9th

**T**hey were *not* going to win. Not today. Demi clutched the cold metal decoder ring dangling from her necklace and leaped from her seat. “It may be a decrepit old house to you, but it’s my home. You can’t just purloin it.”

Anger churned in her gut like an unexpected storm on Lake Superior. She squeezed the spindle railing until her knuckles turned white and her fingers ached.

The combined smell of wood varnish, lemon furniture polish, and Old Spice cologne tickled her nose. The only adornments in the courtroom were the Minnesota and American flags, one on each side of the judge’s bench.

Clean, professional, and heartless.

Judge Randall Hayes’s gavel pounded, and he eyed her like a mother disciplining a naughty toddler. “Sit down, Miss Kayne. One more outburst from you, and I will hold you in contempt of court. Where is your lawyer? Why aren’t they here?”

Demi lifted her chin in quiet defiance. “I chose to represent myself.”

He arched one eyebrow. “What makes you believe you’re qualified to represent yourself in a court of law?”

Did she dare answer his question at the risk of sounding arrogant? Did he honestly not know who she was?

She locked eyes with him and steadied her voice. “I graduated from Harvard with an MBA at fifteen. I’m smarter than anyone in this room”—the corner of her mouth tugged upward—“including you.”

Judge Hayes’s eyes flashed, and veins popped out on his neck. He grunted and stammered, his words incomprehensible.

Why had she said that? This man stood between her and losing her home forever. Now she’d given him a reason *not* to rule in her favor.

Demi lowered her eyes and dipped her chin. She sank onto the chair. The muscle in her cheek twitched as she clenched her clammy hands together in her lap. “Forgive me, Your Honor. I apologize for my hubris.”

She released the building sneeze.

Judge Hayes cleared his throat and turned to address the snake of a lawyer retained by the town of Silver Falls. “You may continue, sir.”

The lawyer shook his wild curls and glared at Demi for a moment before facing the bench. “Your Honor, the property in question constitutes a public eyesore. And it is preventing the furtherance of an important flood mitigation initiative for our beloved town.”

A ditch. They were taking away her home for a ditch.

Creaky boards. Rotting beams. Time and the Minnesota winters had not been kind to the old Victorian, the only home she’d ever known. Captain Samson Earl, one of the greatest

captains to ever pilot the temperamental Lake Superior, had built the house in 1878. Back when Silver Falls was nothing more than a provisions port for early French trappers and Scandinavian settlers.

Despite its significance, the town's historical registry didn't list her home. Whether the captivating stories Mother had told of the great Captain Earl were factual or fictional remained unproven. Hence, the omission.

The lawyer continued, "We have extended an offer to the defendant that exceeds fair market value." His nasally voice grated on Demi's last nerve. "However, Miss Kayne has refused to accept any reasonable terms. Therefore, the city of Silver Falls is petitioning for the exercise of eminent domain to acquire the property for the public good. If Your Honor would refer to Exhibit A, we have detailed the city's offer and the corresponding justification for this action."

Judge Hayes picked up a piece of paper from the bench, and his eyes flickered as he scanned the text. "This is a generous offer. Why have you declined, Miss Kayne?"

She folded her arms. "I don't want the money. I want my house."

The judge lowered the proposal. "Miss Kayne, are you the legal owner of the property in question?"

Her confidence faltered. "Um, I—"

"She is, Your Honor." The lawyer capitalized on her hesitation. "The property passed intestate to the late Anja Kayne, wife of the late Everette Kayne, professor of—"

"He's not dead!" She sprang to her feet.

The gavel pounded again. "Miss Kayne. Be seated." The judge's tone grew sharper, his patience wearing thin. "One more outburst, and I will have no choice but to fine you."

Demi swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked back tears. "But he's not," she whispered as she returned to her seat.

The lawyer rolled his eyes. “As I was saying, the estate passed to the late Mrs. Kayne once she had her husband declared deceased, four years after his disappearance. Upon her death, it transferred again to Miss Demetria Kayne. If Your Honor would refer to Exhibit B, we’ve provided the death certificates for the parties in question. Miss Kayne is the current owner of the estate.” He heaved a heavy sigh. “And has proved herself to be quite difficult to work with.”

Judge Hayes fixed his gaze on Demi. “Miss Kayne, do you have any objections to the sale of the property beyond the one expressed today? That you, quote, don’t want the money, you want your house, end quote?”

“No, Your Honor.”

“Would you speak louder for the stenographer to record your answer?”

She lifted her chin and met the judge’s stony stare. “No, Your Honor. I have no further objections.”

The gavel banged, and Demi flinched.

“Request granted. Fair market value is to be paid no later than the seventeenth of this month. Demetria Kayne, you have thirty days to vacate the premises.”

As the judge scribbled his signature on the paper on his desk, Demi’s vision blurred, and a numbness spread from her head to her toes.

*That’s it? Thirty days?*

Her fur-lined winter boots weighed her feet like cement as she exited the courthouse. If someone tossed her into the lake right now, she’d sink to the bottom, never to be heard from again. A gust of wind penetrated her coat and bit her exposed cheeks and nose. The outdoor temp had warmed to 33 degrees—a temporary heat wave, but winter was far from over.

Vehicles passed on the public street, sloshing and spraying dirty slush behind their snow tires. In the other

direction, they slowed for the four-way stop on the town's primary thoroughfare. Blackened, half-melted snow blocked empty parking spaces and piled at the base of the streetlights.

Demi paused at the top of the concrete stairs. Frosty steam billowed from her lips as she tugged her beanie down over her ears and zipped her parka.

Her phone vibrated in her pants pocket. "Hey, Maddie. What's up?"

"How'd it go?" Her best friend's voice warmed her insides like a toasty fire on a bitterly cold night.

"I have thirty days to move out."

Thirty days to box up a lifetime. Nothing more needed to be said.

The call ended, and she dropped her cell into her purse, shifted the long strap, and brushed away her tears before they froze on her cheeks.

She gripped the decoder ring tighter—found years ago, buried among the chaos on Dad's desk. Keeping it close kept him close.

He'd left without a word. Vanished in the dead of night, an encrypted message his only goodbye. She and Mother had been unable to decipher it. Mother was sure his journal held the key to discovering his whereabouts.

They'd torn the house apart hunting for it, but to no avail.

Had he taken it with him? Why that and not clothes or a toothbrush? Nothing but his wallet and keys. As if he'd run out for milk.

Vicious rumors circulated around town, but Demi couldn't and wouldn't believe them. Something or someone had called him away that night. And something had prevented his return.

Without the key, without the journal, decoding that message had been, and still was, impossible.

*Dad, I need you. I miss you. You're all I have left. Please come home.*

---

Demi fit the final block into the wooden brain teaser, and the crowd of customers broke into applause. She punched the button on the stopwatch and reveled in their admiration.

Fourteen minutes and twenty seconds. A new record. Not bad.

The Japanese ladder puzzle ranked as one of the most difficult in the world. Solving it took most people a minimum of several hours. For some, it took days. Almost impossible.

*Almost* being the operative word.

The audience dispersed, hopefully inspired to attempt some puzzles of their own.

Maddie exited the storeroom, arms full of brand-new jigsaws. Her dark brown hair with magenta highlights flopped in a messy bun as she headed for the center display.

“Are you showing off again?” She grunted and set the stack down. “I think I carried too many that time.”

Demi flashed a smile. “It’s not conceited if you’re actually good.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it still is.”

Maddie rested her elbows on the tower of boxes. She grinned, exposing a row of perfect white teeth, and her bright blue eyes twinkled. “Why is it I do all the work while you entertain the customers? You’d think you were the boss or something.”

Demi reached for the new product. “Aww, you know the customers love it.”

A comfortable silence settled over them while they set up the display.

After several minutes, Maddie's hands slowed, and her eyes shifted to a blank spot on the wall, lips twisting into a frown. "Dems, I've been wanting to talk to you about something. Bobby and I—"

A cell phone jingle cut her short. Maddie retrieved the phone from her jean skirt pocket and swiped the screen. "Hey, Bobby."

As she listened, her eyes grew wide, and her eyebrows rose. "No, I'm on my way." A pause. "No, I'm not still talking to Demi." She winked and chuckled. "I'll be at your house soon. Love you."

She lowered the phone. "I forgot we made plans, and Bobby will never let me hear the end of it if I'm late again. We'll talk later, okay?"

"You betcha." Not like Demi had anything else going on.

*If it gets me out of packing, we can chat all night.*

Maddie disappeared into the storeroom, then reappeared a minute later, garbed in a parka and winter accessories, with her purse over her shoulder.

"Before I forget—" She dug into her massive handbag and removed a mangled half-sheet of paper. "A new escape room opened last weekend in Duluth. I thought it'd be fun to do together. You, me, and Bobby."

The bold print grabbed Demi's attention as she took the promotional flyer.

Grand Opening

Escapology: Final Enigma

Will you escape in only 60 minutes?

Call (218) 555-0193 to reserve your time slot  
for the world's most difficult escape room ever!

The world's most difficult escape room? That sounded like

a load of marketing hyperbole. Not that she had any experience with which to compare it.

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s an improvement. See you later?”

“I’ll be there.” Demi pulled a set of keys from behind the counter. “I found these out back.” She tossed them to Maddie. “Oh, and stop picking the lock when you lose them.”

Maddie laughed, head tilted back, twirling the key ring around her finger. “I didn’t think you knew about that.”

“Oh, please, I knew. The fact that you’ve never broken the mechanism tells me you’ve done this before, and I do mean on more than my storefront.” Demi rolled her eyes. “Have fun. And you should treat that man better. He puts up with a lot.”

“Don’t I know it. He’s the best.”

The bell jingled, and the glass door swung shut behind Maddie.

With a shake of her head, Demi stacked the remaining puzzles in an eye-catching pyramid, then returned to her place behind the counter, where she set the flyer aside.

*I’m not interested in going to the escape room. I wish Maddie would leave me alone. I’m doing fine as I am. Next thing I know, she’s going to set me up on another blind date.*

A woman approached the register, an overloaded shopping basket in one hand and two small children at her heels. With a heavy sigh, she set down the basket. The tiny girl clung to the woman’s skirt, two fingers in her mouth, while the boy, about six or seven, pressed his lips to the glass counter. Condensation frosted the pane. His big brown eyes peered over the rim.

Demi gave him a smile as she unloaded the basket and scanned the barcodes. “Did you find everything you were hoping for?”

“Yes, thank you.” The woman turned her attention to

something in her purse. “You have so many options, it was hard to choose.”

“Can you do all the puzzles in the whole wide world?” Missing both front teeth, the little boy lisped.

“Yes.” Demi pinched her lips together as her cheeks burned. That had sounded a lot less pompous in her head. “Well, maybe not all. Some are pretty hard. I’ve heard of one that takes over twenty years to complete.”

Her stomach knotted. If she’d started the night Dad had disappeared, she’d be finishing it now.

She packed the woman’s purchases into a brown paper bag. “Do you like puzzles?”

Most of the family’s picks were marked for ages 6 to 10.

“Ah-huh.” The boy ran his tongue back and forth, streaking saliva across the plexiglass.

“Stop that.” The woman leaned to swat his shoulder, then straightened. “We enjoyed your show earlier.”

“Thank you. That’ll be fifty-four ninety-eight.”

The woman paled. “I-I wasn’t expecting s-so much.” Her hands trembled as she rolled out her cash—a wad of crushed bills mixed with dimes and quarters that attempted escape across the flat surface. “It’s his birthday.” Her quivering chin jutted at the boy. “Puzzles were the only thing he asked for. I—I can put some back.”

Demi totaled the available funds. Twenty dollars short.

She cleared her throat. “You know what? We have a special for birthday boys. Anything you want is fifty percent off. Your new total comes to twenty-seven forty-nine plus tax.”

She hit a few buttons on the register and changed the total.

Tears sprang to the woman’s eyes. “Are—are you sure? Should you get the manager’s approval?”

“It’s no problem. I’m the owner.” Demi leaned across the counter on her tiptoes. “Besides, anything for a fellow

puzzlehead.” She dropped back on her heels, counted out the correct change, and handed the woman the paper bag. “Have a nice day, and thanks for shopping at The Puzzle Box. Happy birthday, little man.”

“Happy birthday!” The boy waved and followed the woman and little girl out the door at a fast skip.

Demi pulled a bottle of disinfectant from the shelf, rounded the counter, squatted, and cleaned the smudges with a paper towel.

Female voices carried from the board game aisle. “She had so much potential, but she threw it all away.”

“She’s a bona fide genius, but she gave it all up. For what? That house and this podunk town?”

Heat warmed Demi’s neck. Were they talking about her? Within earshot? What an unfair assessment. She’d remained loyal. That’s all. Why couldn’t anyone understand that?

Not even Maddie comprehended her need to remain close to her hometown.

The voices grew faint as the gossips moved into another part of the store.

How could she give up on the person she loved most in the world? Was she supposed to forget he existed? Memories clung to her soul like ... well, sometimes they felt like snowflakes on eyelashes. Other times, like insects caught in a spider’s web, death looming nearby.

Still, she wouldn’t give up hope. He was out there. Somewhere. And someday, he was going to come home. Back to her. Back where he belonged.

“I am so sorry for what transpired today. How are you holding up?” Pastor Bellamy’s raspy voice behind her made her jump.

“Thank you. I’m fine.” She stood, squared her shoulders,

and lifted her chin. Her heart palpitated. Really? Lying to a minister?

*I'm not fine. I'm hurting. I'm anxious, and I have no idea what to do next.*

Pastor Bellamy's expression softened, highlighting the creases at the corners of his eyes. "You're not fooling me for one minute, but don't despair. God has a purpose in all our trials."

She nodded slightly, though doubt rolled in like lake fog. She'd always done the right thing. Why was God letting this happen to her? If Pastor Bellamy believed God had a purpose, it must be true. Still, the knots in her stomach refused to untangle.

"That was a kind thing you did for that young family."

"It was nothing. If we can't show a little kindness now and again, what good are we?"

The pastor's white beard and expanded midsection gave him the appearance of Saint Nicholas. He held a jigsaw puzzle depicting a Thomas Kinkade painting under his arm.

"You're so right. I'd like to buy this. A little present for my niece."

Demi circled the counter, stowed her cleaning supplies, and checked him out.

"I've been wanting to thank you for all your help with the blessing baskets at Christmas. I heard you packed well over a hundred by yourself. You are a selfless woman, Demi Kayne. You always go above and beyond, and it's much appreciated."

A flicker of warmth spread through her limbs. "Happy to help."

But had she done enough? Maybe picking up some hams or donating some store stock would have been useful ...

"Will you be at Sunday service?"

She blinked as his question pulled her from her self-doubt. “Do I ever miss?” She handed the pastor his debit card and gift.

He took it and chuckled. “Not in all the years I’ve been here. God bless you, my dear.”

The pastor exited the store and headed for his car.

Demi focused on her remaining customers. A young couple compared two jigsaw puzzles from the center display. A middle-aged man tried to solve the metal rings. His scrunched face and frustrated grunts made her chuckle.

The doorbell jingled, and an icy breeze swept through the entry as a tall man with broad shoulders, dark hair, and a five o’clock shadow stepped inside. He wore a navy sports coat, white dress shirt, tie, and navy slacks, and carried a worn backpack slung over his shoulder. His polished shoes reflected the fluorescent lights overhead. His gaze swept the store and settled on her. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he advanced with quick, agitated strides, leaving wet footprints on her floor. Didn’t he notice the slush-soaked, salt-crusting mat?

“Welcome to The Puzzle Box. What can I do for you?”

The store closed in thirty minutes, but she wouldn’t turn down another sale before cashing out for the night.

“The name’s Liam Shepherd. I’m looking for someone.”

He had dark chocolate irises hooded with thick, bushy eyebrows. A solid chin and Roman nose, and a faint scar that traced the length of his temple. His voice carried a slight accent—an odd combination of British and New Englander. Definitely city folk. He was dressed too fine for cabin people. But he needed warmer gear if he planned on staying long.

“Demetria Kayne. Silver Falls is a small town. If they live here, odds are I know them and can point you in the right direction.”

He moved his left hand in and out of his pocket and chewed his lower lip, shifting from one foot to another. “In the

past week, has a woman with brown hair, about this tall”—he held his palm level with the tip of his shoulder—“dorky glasses, a terrible sense of fashion, and answers to the name of Alexis come into your store?”

The corner of Demi’s mouth twitched at his description. “Do you have a recent photo? I might remember her. We don’t get many visitors during the winter months, so strangers tend to stand out.”

He pulled a wallet-sized picture of a young woman, dressed exactly like he’d described, from his leather billfold.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t seen her. Let me guess, she’s your sister?”

Eyebrows arched, he tucked the photo back into his wallet and returned it to his rear pocket. “How did you know that?”

“You used yourself as a reference point for her height, and your ... colorful description implies a close relationship. You’re not wearing a wedding band, so you’re not likely married, and I wouldn’t expect someone to describe their girlfriend with words like *dorky* and *a terrible sense of fashion*. That sounds like something a brother would say. When was the last time you spoke with her?”

Liam jammed his hands into his coat pockets. “About ten days ago. Before I boarded a plane in—” He cleared his throat. “I tried to call during my layover in France, but she didn’t pick up. The airline canceled my flight to Myanmar because of bad weather. When I arrived at our apartment, I found this on the kitchen table.”

He pulled a wrinkled piece of paper from his pocket and laid it on the counter. The bus route from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Silver Falls.

Something in his eyes—a protective spark—made her heart flutter and skin grow warm. She tucked a flyaway curl behind her ear. “Any idea why she’d come here? We’re not

exactly a tourist destination in the Minnesota travel guide.” Was he going around to every merchant in town, or did he target her store on purpose? “Does she enjoy puzzles?”

“She’s crazy about them. I’d hoped she’d stopped in here.”

Demi’s heart sank. “I’m sorry I wasn’t more helpful. Have you gone to the police?”

“And tell them what? She’s an adult. Legally, she can disappear if she wants to. It’s not like she skipped town or ghosted bill collectors.”

“Did she give you any sign she was in trouble the last time you talked to her?”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “I can’t explain it, but something’s not right. Alexis and I have never been apart for more than a couple of weeks. I can’t imagine her going off on her own without telling me.”

“You should tell the police that. They’ll take it into consideration, I’m sure.”

“Unless I can prove she’s in danger, it seems a waste of their time. I’ll keep asking around. Thank you for ...” His focus shifted. “What’s that?”

Demi pushed the flyer forward with her fingertips. “It’s an escape room business in Duluth. They opened a new room last weekend.”

His lips moved as he read to himself. His expression grew sad, and his chest swelled. “Alexis loves escape rooms.”

Promising. “Could she have gone to Escapology?”

“Possibly. But why map out the route to Silver Falls and not Duluth?”

Demi bit her lip. She had no answer.

“Would you mind if I took this?”

“Help yourself.” It was the least she could do. She didn’t want it anyway.

He folded the flyer and tucked it into his front pocket. “Have you ever done an escape room?”

“No, have you?”

“A few.”

“My friends invited me to that one, but I don’t know. I mean, the world’s most difficult escape room? It can’t be that hard.”

“How would you know if you’ve never done one?” He cracked a smile. Was he making fun?

“If they’re easy enough for the public, they’ll be a breeze for me.”

He arched his eyebrow. “You seem very confident. All right. I dare you to take your friends up on their offer. Or better yet, once I locate my sister, we should have a go at it before I leave town.”

We? As in her and him. Together? On a date? “I don’t think ...” She didn’t even know this guy. What would Maddie say?

She’d tell Demi to go for it.

“I’ll ... I’ll consider it.”

The middle-aged man with the mechanical puzzle approached the counter.

Liam tapped the glass. “You have a customer. I’ll let you get back to work. Here’s my number in case you decide to go.” He scribbled ten digits on the bottom of a receipt from his pocket, left it on the counter, and headed for the exit.

“Liam.”

“Yeah?” He halted and glanced over his shoulder.

“I hope you find her.”

His lips curved into a faint smile. “Thanks. Me too.”