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Opening Extract from...

The Escape

Written by Lynda La Plante

Published by Simon & Schuster Ltd

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First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2014
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-47113-228-5
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-47113-229-2

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Typeset by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The Escape

During my research for the ITV series *The Governor* I worked with many prisoners and encouraged their writing projects. They told me many stories about their lives. *The Escape* is a work of fiction but based on a series of events told to me by two inmates. The names of the characters and the location of the prison have been changed. As that was some years ago, the prison systems have since been upgraded, but it remains a very moving and thrilling story.

Lynda La Plante

Chapter One

Colin lay on his prison bed, staring up at the ceiling. He had never in all his life felt as depressed and worthless as he did now. All he wanted was to be left alone in his one-man cell on West wing at Barfield Prison. His thoughts were cut into by the sound of the cell door being unlocked.

'Come along, Colin, you need to get your stuff together. It's time to move over to East wing and meet your new cellmate,' Officer Reardon said with a big smile as he entered the cell.

Colin rolled over and turned away from Officer Reardon, who sat down on the end of the bed.

'You can't let prison life get to you like this, Colin. I know you're deeply upset, but the Governor's not going to change his mind about your day release to be with Karen for the baby's birth. If you want someone to blame about being moved to another wing, then I can tell you that it was down to me.'

Colin, shocked by what he had just heard,

turned and looked at Officer Reardon. 'Why? Why do you have to move me? I'm not doing anything wrong and all I want is to be left alone. There's no crime in that, is there?'

'No, but I'm trying to help, not hinder, you, Colin. You haven't been eating properly or taking part in prison activities for nearly a month. You've shut yourself off and that's not good for your health, for your body or

your mind. Having a cellmate will give you someone to talk to and help get you back on your feet again.'

Colin let out a big sigh. 'But I don't need anyone else to talk to, Mr Reardon.'

'OK, here's the deal. Give it a couple of weeks and see how it goes. Your new cellmate is called Barry. He's a nice young lad like you and he's looking forward to a bit of company. But, if it doesn't work out, I will get you moved back here. How's that sound?'

Colin still wasn't happy about moving, but he liked and respected Officer Reardon. In fact, not one of the inmates on West wing had a bad word to say about Mr Reardon. He was experienced and kind-hearted, and he often helped to make prison life bearable. Colin got up off the bed and started to remove the blanket and sheets to take with him.

‘Good lad, Colin. I’ll do that while you get your wash kit and other bits together.’ Officer Reardon patted him on the back before starting to fold the blanket. Colin was ready to go after putting his few personal belongings in a clear plastic bag.

Colin Burrows was twenty-two years old and had two years to go before he had any chance of release on parole. He had pleaded guilty to burglary and handling stolen goods at the Crown court. The judge had granted him bail, but stupidly Colin went on the run. During the time it took police to find him, he had met and fallen in love with a beautiful and generous girl called Karen.

Karen had made him happier than he had been in his whole life. They got together when he found work as a painter and decorator for her father’s small company, where she was a secretary. Because of Karen, and her family’s support, he had been determined to go straight. They had been living together in Karen’s two-bedroom flat in Croydon for a year when she agreed to marry him. A month after their small wedding, she had proudly told him she was pregnant. They were both thrilled, and had just set about decorating the box room as a

nursery when the police came knocking at the door.

Colin's re-arrest had really shocked him. As the months had passed he had come to believe that the police had given up looking for him. Karen and her father had stood by him but they didn't know that Colin had previous convictions for petty theft. The judge took no notice of his having a job, his marriage to Karen or the fact she was pregnant. He was sentenced to a total of four years in prison.

Depression at the prison sentence had almost crushed Colin and he was shattered at being separated from Karen. He was relieved that she was still sticking by him and was visiting him regularly in prison. Her father had promised that, when Colin was released, he could return to work for him. But Colin doubted that would happen. His boss had been disgusted when he learned of his son-in-law's criminal record.

On her last visit Karen had said she would not be able to come again as the baby was almost due and she was finding it hard to travel. Colin broke down in tears when he got back to his cell and was so upset he couldn't eat. When his request to be released for the

birth of his child was then denied, his depression grew worse.

Officer Reardon escorted Colin over to East wing, where they were met at the entrance gate by another officer. Officer Reardon shook Colin's hand and told him to cheer up, be positive and not to look so down in the dumps. Colin still felt very depressed, but he didn't want to upset Mr Reardon. He forced a smile and thanked him for his kindness. The other officer then escorted Colin up to his new cell, unlocked the door and virtually pushed him in. Then he slammed the door and locked it.

'Hi, I'm Barry Marsden, and you must be me new cellmate. Colin, isn't it?' said the man on the top bunk, sitting up straight with a big welcoming smile. 'I've only been in a couple of days. The officer said you're a first-timer like me and been in a few months, but you was a bit down so I should try and cheer you up.'

Barry Marsden was twenty-one, a jovial friendly young man on remand in custody from the magistrates' court. He was a bit overweight, and had a pleasant face, though he looked a little nerdy with thick jam-jar glasses and he had bad body odour.

A sad-looking Colin said nothing as he placed his belongings, wash bag, bed sheets and blankets on the bottom bunk. He sat down on the end of the bed, put his head in his hands and began to cry.

'Cor blimey, Colin, you is in a bit of a state. Fancy a game of "I spy with my little . . ."?'

'No I don't. Just leave me alone,' Colin replied sharply.

Unlike most of the inmates, Barry actually liked prison life and more than anything enjoyed the three meals a day. He had come from a very difficult family, and had been in and out of a series of foster homes. Social Services had often been involved because of his step-father's drinking and violence. Barry's first attempts to make friends with Colin were met with moody silences, but finally his easy manner and persistence paid off. He felt very sorry for Colin, who was heartbroken that he would miss the birth of his first child.

Colin wrote endless letters and called home whenever he could, but hearing Karen's voice only made him feel worse. After a couple of weeks of watching his cellmate weep every night, Barry came up with an idea.

'I'm new to the wing, right? Nobody really

knows me, and I've never met any of the officers on the main gates.'

Colin shrugged, not at all interested, until Barry excitedly suggested the idea that he could, if they worked together, plan Colin's escape. Interested and slightly bemused, Colin asked what the plan was.

'It's simple. All we do is switch identities! You go in my place to the magistrates' court in a couple of weeks and do a runner when you get there,' Barry said.

At first, Colin thought it was the most stupid idea he had ever heard. Apart from having similar hair colour and being the same height, they didn't even look that much alike. And doing a runner from court was why Colin got four years in the first place. However, desperate to be at the birth of his baby, he decided to listen to more details of Barry's plan. The more the two of them discussed the escape, as far-fetched as the idea was, the more it seemed as if it might work.