

G O R D O N   K O R M A N

BOOK THREE: ESCAPE

I S L A N D

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# SEPTEMBER 3, 1945

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*The Second World War ended on September 2, 1945, after the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japanese cities. Most of the planet had suffered six terrible years of fighting and destruction, so there was rejoicing throughout the globe. Millions of soldiers worked around the clock to shut down their military operations and return to their families.*

*At a small U.S. Army Air Corps installation located on a tiny unnamed island in the Pacific, twenty-six airmen rushed to load equipment onto a transport plane bound for home. Their presence there had been so top secret that not even the Secretary of Defense knew about them. Their mission was to deploy a third atomic weapon — code name: Junior — a backup bomb. It was only to be dropped in the event that the first two failed to end the war.*

ESCAPE

The day was burning hot like every day on the tropical island. But today the sweat on the faces and bodies smelled distinctly of champagne. The celebration that marked the end of the war had set corks popping long into the night. Most of the men struggled through splitting headaches after little or no sleep.

When the heavy crane seized up, Staff Sergeant Raymond Holliday pounded the controls in frustration. "Blast these hydraulics!" The lift mechanism had been acting up for months, but it was impossible to get parts way out here in the Pacific. The crew had been told to "make do."

Barely a foot off the ground dangled Junior, the third bomb. Holliday tried the stick again. Nothing.

From the pit, Corporal Connerly hoisted himself up by the chain, setting his feet down on the curved surface of the bomb. He had no fear of the weapon going off. It would have to be armed first. "Dead?" he called to the sergeant.

Holliday scratched the fire-ant bites on his arms and thought longingly of his home in Michigan. "For good this time."

Both men looked to the landing strip a quarter of a mile away. Junior weighed over nine thousand pounds. Without the crane, there was no way to get it into the plane's cargo bay. They were silent as the sun beat down.

"We're going to be the last guys home from this war," Connerly said with melancholy conviction. "And for what? To nursemaid a souped-up firecracker on an island that Rand McNally himself couldn't find with a telescope!"

The corporal was wrong on two counts. First, he was reunited with his family within forty-eight hours. And second, someone did find the tiny secret island.

Fifty-six years later, six young people, survivors of a deadly shipwreck, washed up on the sandy shores.

# CHAPTER ONE

Day 16, 3:35 P.M.

Luke Haggerty peered out between the palm fronds. "Call me crazy," he said in amazement, "but I think that's a *chicken*."

The feathered creature perched on a fallen log was smaller than a farm hen, and a deep rusty brown rather than the usual white, speckled, or Rhode Island red. Otherwise, it was a dead ringer — the same four-toed bird feet, fleshy crest, and gizzard. It bobbed as it moved, pecking absently at the rotted wood, clucking softly.

"It *is* a chicken," confirmed his companion, Ian Sikorsky. "Before they were bred for food thousands of years ago, all chickens were like this — the Pacific jungle fowl, living in the wild."

Luke shot him a cockeyed look. "You're putting me on."

"No, really," Ian insisted. "It was in a show I saw on the Discovery Channel. This is a living fossil."

Luke grinned at the younger boy. He knew from experience that Ian was never wrong about something he'd seen on TV. Pushing up his too-long sleeves, Luke stepped out from behind the

tree. With their own shorts and T-shirts in rags, the castaways had taken to wearing fatigues from the abandoned army installation on the other side of the island. These were in perfect shape, if a little faded. But they were adult size. Slight Ian's new clothes hung on him like a tent.

Ian grabbed the baggy fabric of Luke's shirt. "Where are you going?"

"We've been living on fish and bananas," Luke replied. "If that's a chicken, it's dinner. It'll be our present for Will."

Will Greenfield rested back at their camp with a bullet wound in his thigh. Today was his birthday, or at least as nearly as they could reckon the date it was. There had been so little to celebrate lately — so much danger, so much fear. But real meat — their first in weeks — that would be a worthy present. It would also be the only present. As their fellow castaway J.J. Lane put it, "None of these coconut trees take American Express."

Luke approached the log from behind, stepping softly in the tangle of vines and underbrush. The bird clucked and pecked, seemingly unaware. Then, just as the boy lunged, it took off, flapping furiously. Luke tumbled painfully over the log, landing in a heap on the ground. Ian grabbed at the fowl, but it beat its wings in his face before flying off through the rain forest.

Yelling, Luke ran after it, Ian hot on his heels. It was an awkward chase. Every ten feet or so, the bird would have to land, its chicken legs pumping like miniature pistons before it could take off again. The castaways were faster, but they had the jungle to contend with. Branches and palm fronds slashed at their bodies and faces, and low vines tripped them up.

Ian pointed. "It's heading for the beach!"

Lyssa Greenfield handed her brother, Will, a small aluminum cup of water and a single pill. "Happy birthday," she said dryly.

Will sat up on his "hospital bed," the wooden raft that had brought four of the castaways to the island more than two weeks earlier. "It's better than what you gave me last year — cracked ribs."

"You melted my computer disks," she reminded him.

Will swallowed the capsule and regarded his sister. She looked too upset to be still angry over a fight they'd had a year ago. "What's the matter, Lyss? Was that the last pill?"

Ever since the shooting, Will had been taking the antibiotics from the first-aid kit. He was pretty certain that this was what had kept infection from



setting in. But he had always known that the pills would not last forever.

She nodded. "Great present, huh?"

Will tried to sound upbeat. "It doesn't hurt anymore. It's just kind of numb."

Lyssa tried to hide her wince. The patient always looked away when his bandage was being changed, but Lyssa had seen that wound — swollen black and blue around a tattered, gaping hole. Add infection to that —

Infection. At home or in a hospital, it was a pretty simple thing. But here in this sweltering, insect-laden humidity, with medical attention hundreds of miles away, it was a death sentence.

Her brother struggled up to his knees and tried to shift a little weight to his bad side. He shrugged. "With any luck it's healed already."

With any luck. Luck had abandoned them so long ago that Lyssa couldn't remember what it felt like to be lucky. Not just shipwrecked — *ma-rooned* on an uncharted island. And then there were the smugglers — murderous dealers in ivory and illegal animal parts. They were gone now, flown off in their floatplanes. But they would be back. The old military installation was the perfect place for them to carry on their illicit trade.

Anyway, the damage had already been

done. The bullet in Will's leg had come from one of their guns. Not on purpose — the smugglers had no idea there was anyone else on the island. No, it had been a stray shot. Collateral damage. Yet another piece of the castaways' brand of luck.

She grimaced inwardly. There was also this little matter of an atomic bomb. Of course, it had been there for more than fifty years, so it probably wasn't going to go off in their faces. But if the smugglers ever found it . . .

She tried to smile over at Will, but the corners of her mouth simply refused to turn up. Small wonder. Lyssa honestly felt she might never smile again.

Suddenly, a cry from the jungle:

"Dinner! *Dinner!*"

The Greenfields exchanged a bewildered look. That was Ian. What was he babbling about?

As they watched, Luke and Ian burst out onto the beach. They were running full speed and screaming. What was Luke saying?

"Grab that chicken!"

*Chicken?!*

But then Lyssa saw it — a scrawny, under-sized brown hen, flap-hopping for its life.

"I got it!" Charla Swann ran across the beach, lining up the bird with her keen athlete's eye. She lunged, arms outstretched, hands ready. But the fowl squawked loudly and scrambled just out of her reach. Charla went down, eating sand.

The sixth castaway, J.J. Lane, pulled a four-foot branch out of the woodpile. "There's only one way to hit a knuckleball." He cocked it back over his shoulder and took a home-run swing.

"Strike one!" he cheered, fanning.

"Get out of the way!" panted Luke.

But J.J. lined up the chicken and took another cut. "Strike two!"

Will flattened himself to the raft. "Hey, watch it with that thing!"

But it was hard to stop J.J. once he had decided on a course of action. He raced into position, colliding with Luke, sending the two of them staggering. J.J. recovered, pulled back his "bat," and took his final swing. "Strike — "

*Whack!*

J.J. himself was the most surprised person on the beach when he made contact. The bird sailed twenty feet through the air and fell to the sand, stone dead. J.J. dropped the branch as if it had suddenly become electrified.

Charla turned on him. "J.J. Lane, how could you do that to an innocent little bird?"

"And why were *you* chasing it?" J.J. sneered. "To give it a check from Publishers Clearing House?"

"No, this is good!" Ian exclaimed. "It's a Pacific jungle fowl — "

"It's Will's birthday present!" added Luke, glaring at J.J.

Charla was still mad. "You didn't have to bludgeon it!"

J.J.'s father was the movie star Jonathan Lane. Growing up in a rich and powerful family had given him little patience for criticism. "The bird had to die somehow, right?" he argued. "What difference does it make if I Babe-Ruthed it?"

"It makes a difference to the bird," Charla insisted.

"Not anymore," J.J. chuckled.

Luke turned his attention away from his irritation with J.J. "This is *meat*. Less fighting; more eating."

The castaways soon learned that having meat was much more complicated than merely opening a shrink-wrapped package from the supermarket. The fowl's head and feet had to be removed. The carcass had to be sliced open. It was a gruesome job. The smell of warm blood in

the tropical humidity was nauseating. Luke fought hard to keep from throwing up as he used the knife from their survival pack to scoop the innards away. Lyssa held her nose with one hand while using the other to bury the mess in the sand.

"I don't think I can eat it now," breathed Charla.

"We've come this far," Luke groaned. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of J.J. strolling away. "What do you think you're doing?"

The actor's son paused. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going. I thought I'd, you know, get going. Maybe take a swim — "

For Luke it was the last straw. J.J. was always goofing off. The spoiled Hollywood brat had probably never done any real work in his life and for sure not any dirty work. Daddy's staff took care of all that.

But the famous Jonathan Lane wasn't here right now.

Luke stood up. "All right, smart guy. You're going to pluck this chicken."

"In your dreams," laughed J.J. "If it wasn't for me, you'd still be chasing that dumb bird around the beach. I'm the hunter; you guys are the kitchen staff."

Luke fixed the actor's son with a murderous

look. "No matter what we do, you're always standing around cracking jokes. Well, today you're going to make yourself useful." He held out the bloody carcass.

"If you don't want that up your nose," J.J. said warningly, "get it out of my face."

"I'm not falling for that!" snarled Luke. "Fighting's just another way for you to goof off!"

"You and me," J.J. said evenly. "Right here, right now."

*"Enough!"*

It was a cry from Will that froze everyone like the subjects in a still picture.

"I don't want any chicken!" Will exclaimed bitterly. "Not if it means a big stink like this! It's my birthday, and I'm lost, and I'm shot up, and I'm probably never going to see another one! So take that dumb chicken and throw it in the ocean for the fish!"

J.J. snatched the carcass out of Luke's hand. "I'll pluck it," he mumbled.

"I can help," Ian volunteered.

"Forget it," said J.J. "Go watch the Discovery Channel."