

# SURVIVAL<sup>1</sup>

by John M. Floyd

Ross and McLane stood together on the grassy ridge, looking down at the coastline.<sup>2</sup>

"If he left this morning," McLane said, "he should be back by now."

"He'll be back," Ross said.

"I don't know. He told Susan there might be pirates about." McLane was leaning on a crutch he had made from a tree limb, and gazing at the spot where the beach disappeared around a peninsula a mile to the west. They knew which way was west, at least, from the sun. That was about all they knew.<sup>3</sup>

"Let's just hope he finds the boat."<sup>4</sup> McLane nodded.

"Or more survivors. Right?"

"Wrong. We don't need more survivors. There's barely enough food for the four of us. What we need is the boat." All of them had seen it, just before dark last night—an empty rubber lifeboat, drifting in somewhere beyond the peninsula.

"What if he finds it," McLane asked, "and leaves us here?"<sup>5</sup>

"I don't think that's a problem." Ross turned to glance at Susan McLane, who was standing fifty yards away. She also was looking west, her hands on her hips and the sea wind rippling her hair.<sup>6</sup>

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I saw your pretty wife leave the campfire last night, while Antonio was out in the jungle somewhere. She stayed gone quite a while."

McLane's face reddened. "You're a fool, Ross. I may be old, but Susan's too smart to fall for Antonio, or for you either. Which has also crossed your mind, hasn't it?"

Ross made no reply.

Watching him, McLane adjusted his crutch and said, "When did he leave, exactly? And what was he wearing?"

"What?"

"Antonio. When did he leave?"

Ross frowned. "I told you, he left at sunup. In that red shirt of his, and jeans."

"You're certain of that?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Maybe he didn't leave at all," McLane said. "Maybe you just told me and Susan that, so we wouldn't be suspicious."<sup>7</sup>

"Suspicious of what?" Suddenly Ross blinked. "You think I killed him?"

"You said yourself, there's barely enough food. One less mouth wouldn't hurt. And if I were next, you'd have Susan all to yourself."

Ross glared at him. "Well, maybe that's—"

"There he is!" Susan shouted. She was down in a crouch, one hand shading her eyes, the other pointing west.<sup>8</sup>

Both men turned to look. Sure enough, a yellow lifeboat had rounded the peninsula and was coming this way. Inside it, paddling with what looked like a long piece of driftwood, was a man in a red shirt. Susan waved; Antonio waved back.

All of them watched until the boat disappeared beneath the brow of the ridge. The same thought was in all their minds: they were saved. Or at least they had a chance now. They knew their directions, and if they could find and pack enough water and food and row east, they would eventually hit the mainland.

Susan ran up to the men and said, breathless and grinning, "It'll take him a while to get up here. Come on, I want to show you both something."<sup>9</sup>

They followed her to a spot further inland, near where she was before. Here, the ridge ended in a sheer cliff.

"Look down there," she told them.

Carefully the two men walked to the edge and peered over. A hundred feet below, dark rocks covered the valley floor.

"What is it?" McLane asked.

Suddenly, without warning, Susan McLane snatched her husband's crutch away and shoved him over the cliff.<sup>10</sup>

For a moment Ross stood there stunned, gaping at her. Then, very slowly, his face changed. He broke out a smile.

"I knew it," he said. "Now all we have to do is get rid of Antonio and take the boat. Right?"<sup>11</sup>

Susan's face was flushed. "You don't think he'll suspect anything, do you?"

"Why should he?" Ross stepped cautiously to the edge and looked down again. "We'll just say—"

The heavy crutch caught him just behind the right ear. It didn't knock him cold, but it was enough. A second later he toppled over the edge.

Susan stared down at them both a moment, breathing hard. With a loud laugh she threw the crutch after them and turned away. Antonio was already walking toward her along the top of the ridge.

"It's done," she cried, running to him. "Now we can--"

She stopped. The man in the red shirt wasn't Antonio at all. He was older and leaner, with a world-weary face and tattered trousers. As he approached he pulled a short, ugly pistol from his waistband.<sup>12</sup>

Susan backed away, tripped on a rock, and sat down hard.

The man stopped five feet away.

"Are you a pirate?" she whispered, her eyes wide.<sup>13</sup>

"You've been watching too much TV." He waved the gun. "Stand up."

She stood up. "Who are you, then?"

"I'm with the cruise line. Assistant head of security. Three of us, two crewmen and I, washed ashore a few miles away. We thought we were the only ones who made it, till your friend showed up."<sup>14</sup>

"Why do you have his shirt on?"

"Because I didn't have one, and he was unconscious when I left. Dehydration. He'll be fine." The man studied her a moment. "He told us there were four of you."

"The other two aren't here."

"I know. I saw them leave."

Susan swallowed. "Oh." She looked about, ran a hand through her hair, then faced him again.

"Does this mean I'm under arrest?"

"You will be. I'm sure the search planes are out, and we found flares in the lifeboat. Someone should get to us soon."

She looked him up and down, thoughtfully. "I don't suppose there's anything I could do to...change your mind about this?"

"You could try to push me over the cliff too, but I wouldn't advise it."

Her face darkened. "In case you're wondering," she said, "Antonio was in on it, too."

"I'm sure he'll be glad you told me." He stepped back and motioned with the pistol. "Let's go, Ms..."

"McLane. Susan McLane. And you don't need the gun." She raised her chin. "I'm a corporate executive, believe it or not."

"Oh, I believe it," he said.

He kept the gun on her all the way to the beach.<sup>15, 16</sup>

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John Floyd is the author of more than 500 short stories and fillers in publications such as *Strand Magazine*, *Grit*, *Woman's World*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. His stories have been nominated for both the Pushcart Prize and the Derringer Award.

## VOCABULARY

(listed in order of appearance in the story)

**rippling:** making wavelike motion

**suspicious:** having a tendency to suspect; distrustful

**brow:** the projecting upper edge of a steep place

**tattered:** torn and hanging; in shreds

## QUESTIONS

1. Predict what the story is about.
2. Predict the setting of the story.
3. Would you like to change or add to your prediction of the setting?
4. What do you think has happened to the characters in the story?
5. Why would McLane be worried that Antonio would leave them on the island?
6. Sketch what you think Susan looks like.
7. Why would McLane be suspicious? This would be an assumption based on what you know from your own life.
8. Predict what you think will happen next.
9. Do you trust Susan right now? Why or why not?
10. Were you surprised by this turn in the story?
11. Why would Ross think that Susan would get rid of Antonio?
12. Predict the ending of the story.
13. Is the man a pirate?
14. Given this new clue, give the setting of the story, including a timeframe.
15. Predict what will happen to Ms. McLane after they return to civilization.
16. List the main events of the story as you remember them.