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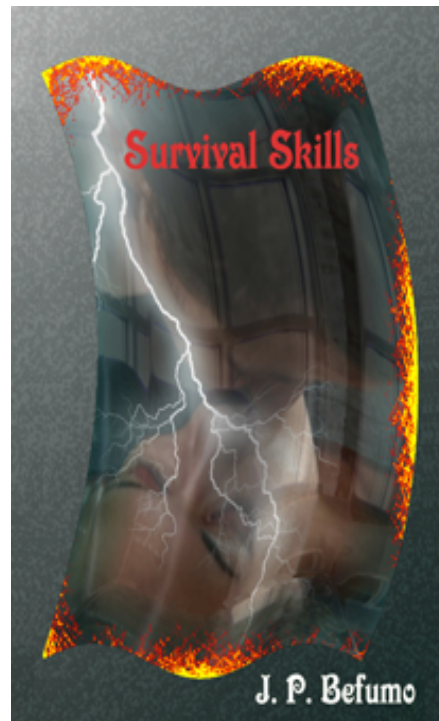
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## **Survival Skills**



**By J.P. Befumo**

**Excerpt:**

Joanna made a final adjustment on her plain white dress, gave her hair a perfunctory correction, drew a deep breath, and headed down the steps. Somehow, she had always expected her wedding day to be more ... well, different. She had to remind herself that Linwood had already been married once, and nobody in either of their families was in a financial position to fund a fancy wedding.

She gingerly stepped her way through sawdust and construction debris, passing the unsheathed wooden studs on the structure's main floor. Bobby, Linwood's father, had gutted the house in preparation for a total renovation. The project had been underway for eight years already, with no end in sight. The family had lived largely in the basement during the two years that Joanna had known them.

The morning scene in the basement was a study in pandemonium. The television, as always, was on; way too loud, considering that nobody appeared to be watching it. Linwood's two youngest brothers were arguing about something, and seemed on the verge of coming to blows. Their father was loudly telling them to pipe down, oblivious to the fact that they were paying him absolutely no attention. He showed no sign of having noticed Joanna's presence. Buttons, a porky beagle who looked more like a fur-covered slug than any proper kind of mammal, was howling inside a cage only slightly larger than herself. So far as Joanna had been able to deduce, the dog spent her entire life in that cage, like some obese flightless bird.

Joanna hurried through the battle zone toward the small, concrete-floored kitchen in the rear of the basement, next to the furnace, water heater, and laundry facilities.

"Morning, Duncan," she greeted Linwood's seventeen-year-old brother. Of all Linwood's kin, Joanna liked Duncan the best. He always seemed to remain insulated from the family chaos, while not appearing at all aloof. Joanna was reminded of the ancient Zen adage: like a lotus flower in muddy water, be touched, but not soiled."

"Hi Joanna," he replied as he filled a cup with hot water from the sink. "Coffee?"

Joanna would have liked nothing better than a cup of real coffee, but knowing that Linwood's family drank nothing by instant, she declined.

Duncan grinned, as if he'd read her thoughts. An open saucepan of water was already near boiling on the stove, and he simply added his measured cup of hot water to that. Just then, Linwood's mother, Dorothy, emerged from the bathroom, catching Duncan in the act.

"Damn you!" she shrieked. "I'm late for the hairdresser as it is!" So saying, she poured the entire pan of water into the sink, refilled it with precisely one cup of water, and replaced it on the burner.

Joanna and Duncan exchanged glances, but said nothing. By now, after knowing the family for two years, and living in that house for nearly three weeks, Joanna was quite familiar with Dorothy's peculiar sense of logic. Of the four sons, Joanna could see how Duncan's stoic nature was the only sure defense against the dysfunction of these surroundings. His ability to keep his temper was a constant source of admiration.

"Where's Linwood?" Joanna asked, hoping to ease the tension.

"Linwood!" Dorothy repeated, glaring at Joanna, then at Duncan, then back at Joanna. "So you're still going to go through with marrying him, after everything I've told you. Well, you'll be sorry, mark my words! Just like all the others."

"Others?" Joanna repeated.

"She means Gabriella," Duncan annotated.

"You're just the latest victim," Dorothy continued, ignoring Duncan's correction. Her water was boiling now, and she poured it into a cup of powdered coffee, powdered cream substitute, and artificial sweetener. At five-foot tall, and one-hundred eighty pounds, Joanna reflected, a teaspoon of sugar could hardly be the worst of her worries.

"He went out for a walk," Duncan said, answering Joanna's initial question at last.

"He drove her to suicide," Dorothy continued, ignoring the momentary interlude.

"I hardly think—" Joanna began, but Dorothy would not be interrupted again.

"And you must be out of your mind, agreeing to work while he goes to college full time. He couldn't even finish high school, imagine college!"

"But--"

"And why physics, of all things? I'll tell you why—it's the influence of that meddling grandmother of his. What can you do with physics, except be a dreamer? He should study to be a lawyer, or a teacher, or an accountant; not that he'll ever finish anything anyhow."

"But Mom--"

"If anything, he should be working and you should be staying home. It's a man's job to support his family, and not have his wife working."

Joanna considered pointing out how Linwood's father had stopped working at the age of fifty, pulling a phony disability claim, while Dorothy took a job at a bank to make ends meet, but thought better of it—even if she could have gotten a word in edgewise.

"And why does he have to go to college in Massachusetts anyway?" she demanded. "It's not as if there aren't plenty of colleges right here in New York."

Joanna dug deep inside herself for patience. "I told you, Mom, a publishing job at my level of management isn't something you find every week in the Sunday paper. I tried the major publishing houses in New York, but there just wasn't anything available. I was fortunate to find something as close as Massachusetts, and Linwood was lucky to be able to get into college there, particularly with an equivalency degree."

"He'll probably wait until you've put him through college, then run off with someone else," Linwood's mother concluded.

"This is just what I wanted to hear on my wedding day," Joanna finally managed to say, then burst into tears and rushed from the room. In the next room, the boys were still arguing, the television was still blaring, her future father in law was still talking, apparently to himself, and the dog was still howling. Nobody seemed the slightest bit surprised, concerned, or in any way affected as she ran past them and out the basement door to the front yard.