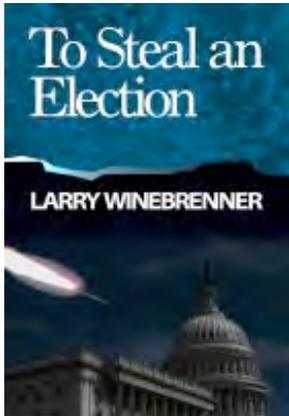


To Steal an Election

LARRY WINEBRENNER





Raymond Muirel is dropped right in the middle of a conspiracy investigation. Marianna LaGrange, head of the congressional investigating committee, is exploring the hot rumors about the conspiracy.

The conspiracy is to take over the government by stealing an election in process. They plan to do this by murdering the major candidates on the eve of the election.

The question is, who are parties in the conspiracy and who are genuine patriots fighting them? And can Ray and Mirianna - even with the help of a Raymond Muirel-trained crew - thwart the conspiracy?

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by Larry Winebrenner

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TO STEAL an ELECTION
The World Domination Conspiracy

by

L. M. Winebrenner

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First Edition

This book is dedicated
to my faithful wife of 59 years
Joyce Opal Embry Winebrenner
with love and admiration.

Recognition

This book in its present form would not exist, save for the hours of work, and the many mini-miracles performed by Daniel Snow Dean, my editor and close friend. He guided me from many a literary quicksand bog and sharpened a multitude of dull expressions. Did I forget a question mark or comma? He ferreted it out. Did I misplace a dash or leave off a quotation mark? That was the drudge drill for Daniel. His outstanding achievement was remembering a detail in chapter 3 that affected a comment in chapter 103. That is a bit of hyperbole to make a point. Names, places, events were kept in orderly fashion by his eagle eye and rapier mind. He reminded me of English grammar I forgot fifty years ago, and taught me elements of English I never learned. He must have memorized that Chicago rule book*, for he kept me on the straight and narrow by yielding it like a club. When he finished editing my novel, he had a literary miracle to be proud of. If any error has crept into this work, it's my fault. Either I failed to make a suggested change, or, in my bull-headed way, I refused to listen to him. So don't blame him. He is fantastically great, nothing short of a genius.

**Chicago Manual of Style*

Chapter 1

The man smearing road tar, bug guts, and dust into an opaque film on our bus windshield was a retired-full bird colonel. He was both pastor of our church and driver of the vehicle. He spoke with a Cuban accent, even though he had lived in the United States for fifty years and served as a military chaplain for thirty of them.

We were stopped at an eight-island filling station half a mile from I-26. We were several miles beyond the Columbia bypass.

Oh Lord, I thought. *I'm going to have to put on that damned prosthesis.*

He was an excellent driver, a very good preacher, but a piss-poor windshield washer.

It was a weird duplex—an eight-island, shiny-clean filling station on one side of the concrete apron, and a shabby 1930s convenience store on the other. A men's room inside was where my best friend, Albert, was relieving himself.

The sunlight reflected by the chrome and glass of parked cars was suddenly shut off as a big camper, too tall to fit under the shelter over the pumps, pulled in at the end of the rows of pumps and lanes. The view of a helicopter hovering over I-26 was not cut off. I figured it was a news copter reporting on traffic to frenzied fans on their way to a Gamecock home game.

Pennants peppered the station, both for the University of South Carolina and Virginia Tech. I wondered why none of these husky farm boys could help Alfonso with the windshield. I'd have had different thoughts had I known that many of them would be targeted for annihilation before the day was over.

Albert pushed open the old screen door with its dangling Holsum Bread sign, drink cup in one hand, a bag of corn chips in the other, and headed for Pastor Alfonso. Great! Now I didn't have to put that fake leg on.

Just then a van, twin to ours, pulled up alongside us. As the driver lit, bent his back backward to crack the crammed vertebrae, I couldn't help but note how much we looked alike.

I mean, essentially. Of course, I had a ponytail and beard—much to my three adult children's disgust. He was clean-shaven, face and head. But the jut of his chin, {threatening to shelter a double chin at any moment), large cheekbones, high brow, ears flat to the head, suspicion of a smile on his lips—so many features like mine. No one would ever accuse us of being twins. He was black. I was white. Before the year was out, I'd mourn his death.

More striking, however, was the blonde in the passenger's seat. In his backward stretch, he had suddenly become alert. He focused on the copter. He pointed it out to the young woman. That's when I was struck like a match.

The woman, whom I would later discover to be Mariana LaGrange, head of a congressional investigating committee, was my wife's doppelganger. Both had tawny-blond hair, styled in a pageboy cut. The small, slightly upturned nose I caught from her profile just before she turned away.

She turned back and said something to the driver in an authoritative manner, expressing no authoritarian mode as she did. Three other businessmen, or so they seemed, stopped conversing and moved to where they could observe the craft. A lively, low-tone discussion began to take place. A

few furtive glances at our vehicle—which seemed to be the center of their concern.

About this time our women emerged from the convenience store. There was a scramble to get seated and buckled in. I noticed the windshield was crystal clean. Albert slid the side-door. It slammed shut. The women were putting on their shoulder belts and chatting. I didn't get a chance to point out my wife's twin to her.

Alfonso cranked the engine and eased out. "Next stop: the steak house in Walterboro," he announced. He avoided two coeds who had begun celebrating their anticipated victory early.

We followed a parade of game-goers until we reached the I-26 entrance ramp. We were heading south. Everyone else seemed to be heading for the game. I didn't notice the helicopter following us.

The sun created an oven of the eleven-passenger van almost immediately. Air conditioning was a joke, except for the driver and the front seat passenger.

I was alone on the backseat. Prone. I tried to nap as we traversed the sunbaked South Carolina interstate. I'd not put the prosthesis back on. Too hot to wear it.

It was about to get hotter. Much hotter.

Bullets came zinging through the roof. They tracked through both sides of the vehicle. Two exploded the heads of the Alfonso and the front seat passenger. The projectiles continued on through the midsections of the two passengers in the second seat. Finally, they pierced the floor and found their way into the gas tank.

The second pair of bullets went through the heads of my wife and her friend. I was lying flat on the seat. That saved me. They passed over me. The deadly projectiles smashed into the baggage on the floor behind the seat.

The third pair of bullets slammed into the back doors. The doors were knocked off their hinges.

The gas tank exploded. The blast lifted the seat in front of me against the ceiling of the van. The passengers would have been crushed to death if they had not been killed earlier by bullets. The seat I was in was blown out the back doors. It skidded like a sled on ice. With me on it.

The wind whipped my hair and beard, as if in a gale. The "sled" carried me down an embankment. Down into the smelly drainage ditch.

Three startling events in perhaps three seconds, and my life alone was spared. It happened so fast. It's still only a foggy image. Part of a horrible nightmare. It really didn't happen. I'd wake up in a cold sweat any minute.

The bus traveled at seventy-five miles an hour. The bullets hit. It careened on down the highway. It went off the road into a culvert. It was in flames. It exploded.

The helicopter hovered above the scene. I wondered, how a news chopper could get there so fast. It must have been the one I saw over the interstate earlier.

Suddenly, I realized. It was the attack plane. How could I ever forget the sound of an attack plane?

I scrunched further down in a thick patch of weeds. The stems scratched my ear. I ached. My stump ached. The smell of scorched hair on my face and head stung my nostrils.

The helicopter landed. Had they seen me? Not so far as I could tell.

Why? Why had the aircraft attacked us? We were simply a small group of church members returning from a spiritual life retreat. Happy. Singing choruses until the heat got to us. Unseasonable heat for October.

My first thought was terrorists. It was the obvious answer for such an unwarranted attack.

Then the men emerged from the 'copter. They didn't look like terrorists—whatever terrorists look like. When they spoke, they didn't sound like terrorists.

"Shee-it!" said a voice, a thick southern drawl. "You hit the wrong van. This is a church van." Then to another man, "Henry, keep the traffic movin'. Don't let anyone stop. Get those rubberneckers in the far lane to movin'. Stop any traffic approachin' from either direction. A whole mile back."

The noise of the copter engine made it hard to hear. Where they now were standing, I couldn't see at all.

I crawled to the brow of the drainage ditch. A bush there hopefully would hide me. The pollen was strong. I fought a sneeze. I peeped through the pollen-laden bush.

The man who had been giving orders could be identified by his posture. He wore a smart, brown uniform, a military hat, black cowboy boots with trousers tucked in. His meaty face and comfortable paunch bespoke affluence. He was ramrodding the action, no question about it.

He said, "Call that tow truck standin' by. We'll just have to crush this'n the way we planned to get rid of the other'n."

"What about the people inside?" asked the pilot.

"They're cremated. Leave 'em be. And kick that baggage down the bank. Drag those van doors back up here."

I looked. Scattered for twenty-five yards down the highway was luggage. Some was blasted away when I was blown out. The rest dribbled out as the van surged forward toward the culvert. It left a trail like Hansel and Gretel's. Slow-moving vehicles swerved to miss the debris.

Miraculously, my wheelchair had rolled upright, still folded, next to the median rail. The two men kicking debris off the road didn't seem to notice it.

Cowboy Boots and the pilot were talking again.

"Where's that damned tow truck?"

"It's the traffic, Sheriff," said the pilot. "Accident like this always slows traffic, y'know."

"How could you make such a dumb-ass mistake?" demanded the sheriff.

"It happened back at the gas station. Our target CIC van went under the shelter. A camper hid it. When that church bus came out from under the shelter, it looked like our target."

"Couldn't you tell the difference between an official government van and a dumb-ass church bus, you damn fool?"

"Not from the air, Sheriff. Both vehicles were white vans. You couldn't tell the difference. We thought our van drove through."

"You can believe it'll be a hundred times harder to make the hit now," said the sheriff bitterly. "They'll know this hit was meant for them. The coalition isn't going to like this one little bit."

He spit from a chew of tobacco in his jaw.

I remembered the helicopter. The one I figured was a news chopper. Reporting on traffic flow for the game. The driver in the other van at the gas station pointing at it.

The tow truck arrived. Traffic stopped while the burned-out hulk of our church van was dragged up onto the bed of the tow truck. Two eighteen-wheelers were stopped next to each other in front of me. One was in the lane occupied by the copter, the other in the far lane. While everyone was watching the van, I crawled under both trucks. I prayed the traffic wouldn't start while I was under a truck.

Once across the highway, I crawled along the grass. I went to where my wheelchair stood. I lifted and pushed it across the metal barrier that separated the northbound and southbound lanes.

It screeched like hard chalk on a slate blackboard. My skin crawled. My heart thumped, fearful they heard. The noise of loading the wreck covered the sound.

I couldn't see any damage to my chair once it was over the barrier.

By now, people were noticing me. I was afraid they would call me to the attention of the attackers. Luckily, they were only curious, only entertained. I snaked over the barrier I'd just pushed my chair over.

Traffic, across the road from where the loading was taking place, crawled. I opened my chair and clambered into it. I grabbed the tailgate of a passing pickup. I let it pull me along, maybe a thousand yards from the action. As traffic picked up speed, I let go of the pickup and steered myself toward the side of the road.

Several cars went by. Then a truck pulled out of the lane of traffic. It's stainless-steel bumper caught the sun. It reflected right into my eyes. The Dodge Ram headed right for me.

It's just not my day, I told myself. I reckoned it was one of the sheriff's goons. Someone had seen me. He had called the man in to finish me off.

I closed my eyes. Let the impact come. I ached so much I just didn't care anymore. My eyes were still closed when I heard the voice.

"Hey, buddy," drawled a voice. "I saw y' hitchin' a ride on that pickup."

I opened my eyes. The truck was next to me. The driver leaned his head out of the passenger's window, talking.

"That's a mighty dangerous way t' travel."

"Tell me about it," I said.

Maybe he wasn't an executioner.

"I'm goin' t' Columbia. I'll toss y' chair in back o' muh truck. Give you a ride that far, if y' like."

I looked at his grin. Was he joking?

During my days in the Corps, a couple of buddies and I were on US-1 in South Miami. We pulled up to a bus bench. Three young women sat on a bench. Jailbait.

"Want a ride into town?" I asked through an open window.

They looked at each other.

"Sure!" they said enthusiastically.

"Good. There'll be a bus comin' by 'fore long," one of my buddies said. We laughed as we drove off.

Were the chickens finally coming home to roost?

"I'd be much obliged," I said, confident he would drive off laughing.

But he got out. He helped me up into the cab. Then tossed my chair into his truck bed with a thump. The thought crossed my mind. *Maybe he didn't finish me off because of witnesses.*

"Y'know what a driver says to a one-legged hitchhiker?" he asked.

It was as old as the towering oaks beside the road and as mossy, but I let him have his fun.

"No. What?"

"Hop in."

He roared with laughter. I joined in. After all I was getting a ride. One way or the other.

"Know what a driver says to a hitchhiker with no legs?" I asked. Two could play at this game.

He puzzled over the question for a long time. I was about to think he hadn't heard me. Finally he gave in.

"Whut?"

"Can I give you a lift?"

He was quiet for three ticks of a hall clock. Then he exploded with laughter.

"Good'n," he said.

I breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't bright enough to be a hit man.

But there were no more riddles all the way to downtown Columbia. I think he was trying to remember that last one to pull on his buddies. Or maybe just enjoying the wind blowing in the windows. And the scent of the piney woods it brought with it.

OK. So now what was I going to do in Columbia? I knew nobody there. I had no change of clothes. The ones I wore were filthy, smelly. My hair and beard were scorched. I had six dollars in my pocket. And I hoped I was presumed dead by my attackers.

I had no idea what to do next. But my fate was about to be taken out of my hands.

Chapter 2

Joe, the truck driver, dropped me off in downtown Columbia. I wheeled a lonely street about ten minutes. Friday night probably emptied the capital.

“Want me to gi’ ya a push to th’ mission?”

I turned toward the voice. He was an old man of indeterminate age—Fifty? Sixty-five? In his seventies? His white hair fluffed thinly around a bald pate, much like his thin, scraggly beard. He smiled a broken-toothed grin and stuck out a dirty, bitten-fingernail, hand.

“M’ name’s Joe.”

“I just got a ride with a man named Joe,” I said.

“Do tell. Well, hit’s a purdy uncommon name. ‘Bout th’ mission. Ya git a free meal. A shower if’n y’ want. Y’ c’n trade y’ duds fer ‘nother set o’ clean‘ns. But y’ gotta listen t’ th’ Holy—pardon th’ ’spression—Joe preach. Fair trade, I’d say.”

Well, it might not be a bad starting place. What else did I have to do?

“Be obliged,” I told him.

That’s how I met Jerry the Conspiracy King.

Jerry was a beautiful man. Not handsome. Beautiful. He might have been called Goldilocks had he not cowed all who came before him. Ringlets of hair the color of a sunbeam graced his head. He had a small mouth, a button of a nose, and ears that did not imitate Clark Gable’s or Prince Charles’s. He spoke with authority, but softly, like a man carrying a big stick.

“Razors work better than blowtorches,” he said when first he saw me.

I wasn’t exactly intimidated. Yet, I felt put in my place.

“Depends on whether you want to cut a throat or inflict pain,” I said.

His gaze held mine for a long minute. Finally, he stuck out his clean, well-manicured, soft hand.

“Name’s Jerry. Sit next to me at supper and I’ll protect you.”

“From what?”

“Sit and see.”

Homeless feeding wasn’t exactly new to me. I helped oversee the Breakfast Club back in Miami every Sunday morning. I participated in the county-operated Partnership with the Homeless program. Yeah, fights broke out from time to time, but we quickly settled them.

What I really needed protection from was the Holy Joe whose real name was Leslie Bennet. He chose me as his target for conversion.

At one time he came right out of the pulpit. He stood over me. He preached at me for a full seven minutes. I know. I timed him by the Coca-Cola wall clock. And I held my breath off and on six and a half of those seven minutes. Garlic spray would have improved his breath.

Jerry elbowed me as Leslie headed back to the pulpit.

“Get converted or we’ll be here three hours.”

“But I don’t need to be converted,” I avowed.

“You do if you want to eat before midnight.”

When Leslie entered the pulpit, I stood up on my one leg. I shouted, “Hallelujah, Holy Joe! I’ve seen the light. I know heaven’s my home and Jesus is my brother.”

“Not like that,” muttered Jerry out the side of his mouth.

But Jerry was wrong. Leslie wanted to baptize me right then.

“Down to the river!” he shouted.

The grumbling filled the room.

“Brother Bennet, I need time to prepare,” I pleaded. “I don’t want to be like those backsliders who get baptized one day and lose their souls in a liquor bottle next. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

The piano player, who was as hungry as the rest of us, began playing *Just as I Am without One Plea* on the out-of-tune upright. People began to march around the chapel and out the door. Leslie ran quickly to the front of the line. To lead them. To get a good seat in the dining hall.

“You know all the right words,” Jerry told me as we marched toward the door.

We weren’t at the head of the line. Jerry and his guest—me—had places waiting.

I was surprised that we were served while seated. I mentioned it to Jerry.

“Back home, folks have to go through a serving line,” I told him.

“And you had arguments. People jumped the line. Folks went through more than once. You found food guys didn’t like on the ground.”

“Yeah.”

“We don’t have those problems here. I set up a volunteer-servers system. Those that serve don’t have to listen to the Holy Joe. They eat first instead.”

“And you have trouble finding volunteers.”

He laughed.

The biggest black man I’d ever seen walked up while he was laughing. And I’ve seen some big ones—black and nonblack. This guy made the Dolphins’ guards and tackles look like midgets. He didn’t look mean. He radiated mean.

“Looks like y’ fairy godmother tickled ya, King,” he said to Jerry. “Y’ wanna share ’im?”

“Back off, Sissy,” Jerry murmured softly.

“Says who?” snarled Sissy.

“Says me. Otherwise I’ll make you arm wrestle me for him.”

I didn’t like the way this was going. I looked around. Men, women, and children were sitting at their places. Looking our way. Grinning.

Leslie studiously avoided looking our way.

“Wait a minute,” I said quietly to Jerry.

“Shhh,” he said.

“Awwwright!” snickered Sissy. “Le’s do’t.”

He placed his ham on the table between Jerry and me. He looked into my eyes and winked. Jerry grabbed Sissy’s hand.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready,” said Sissy.

Jerry poked his finger in Sissy’s ribs. The giant’s hand flopped backward on the tabletop.

Jerry held it there. He continued tickling Sissy.

“Stop, King!” he yelled through his laughter. “Please stop. Please stop.”

“Back off,” said Jerry.

“OK. Just stop.”

Jerry stopped and let go of the other man’s hand. Sissy fled the dining hall amid hoots, catcalls, and jeers.

“Poor guy has a short memory,” said Jerry. “That’s the third time this month. Every person here has a weakness. Discover the weakness. I use it to control them.”

“You know my weakness?”

“Not yet,” he said, “but I’ll discover it and use it to control you.”

“Thanks,” I said as sarcastically as possible. I changed the subject. “He called you ‘King.’ King of the hill?”

A server came up with a tray. On the table he placed a plate filled with rice, green baby lima beans, ham hock, and lettuce salad covered with freshly chopped tomatoes, bell peppers, onions, and jalapeños. Freshly chopped onions. The scent hovered over the salad. My eyes watered, and so did my mouth.

“Any o’ dat y’ don’ lack?” the server asked me.

“It looks like ambrosia from the gods,” I replied, and received a duplicate serving.

“King of conspiracy,” said Jerry.

“Conspiracy?” My interest was piqued. Immediately. “What kind of conspiracy?”

He waved one of the servers over.

“Coffee and bread,” he told the server.

“And you, pal?” he asked me.

“You have iced tea?”

“Anything for you, pal,” he said, patting my shoulder.

Jerry gave him a warning look.

“Sweet,” he said, and paused, “or unsweet?”

“Sweet,” I said sweetly.

Jerry roared.

I looked around for Sissy. He didn’t reappear.

“This place a hangout for gays?”

“Why? Are you homophobic?”

“No, but I am heterosexual. I’m beginning to feel I don’t fit.”

He smiled sweetly.

“Have no fear. Jerry is here.”

“Are you gay?”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

I started to wheel away. He touched my forearm.

“Stay,” he said. “You’re only being approached because they think of you as weak. Helpless. You know, the wheelchair.”

“They?”

To Steal an Election

“Yes. I’m heterosexual too. Or, more precisely, asexual.”

I was sorry I had opened this whole line of discussion. I tried to turn it.

“What kind of conspiracy?”

He placed a forkful of rice and beans in his mouth. He chewed slowly and gave me another long, searching stare. Finally, he swallowed.

“I’m disappointed in you,” he said.

“Go ahead.”

“You ask me about conspiracy. And here you are, right in the middle of one.”

Chapter 3

I was startled.

“Me?”

“You.”

“What do I have to do with any conspiracy?”

I was no longer startled. I was rattled. Surely he didn't know about the van. About my escape. My hands became sweaty. My mouth dry.

“You're here, aren't you?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts about it. I brought you to my mission to protect you.”

This was getting screwier by the minute.

“Your mission? You had me brought here? By Joe?”

I thought he meant Joe the truck driver. If that were so, he must have known about the attack. He probably knew about my miraculous escape. I soon found out I was wrong.

“I saw that truck driver pull your chair off his truck bed and help you get in it,” he said. “I knew right then you were ripe for picking. *Picking* being picked up by the law. I sent Joe to bring you in.”

“You did? Why me?”

“Nothing personal. I just hate the bastards working on this conspiracy. Our sheriff is one of them.”

Maybe there was something to this conspiracy theory after all. Jerry's comments brought back the landing of the helicopter. The instructions to dispose of the van the way they had planned to get rid of the other.

It also brought home my loss. What was I doing talking about homophobia and conspiracy anyhow?

I lost my wife, the mother of our three children.

I lost my pastor. I lost my best friend and his wife.

The tears, belatedly, began to flow. I didn't bawl, but I couldn't stop the tears. Nor did I want to. Why hadn't I died with the rest of them? Why must I suffer such remorse?

Jerry noticed the hot, salty drops streaming over my cheekbones, dripping off my chin.

“Crying won't help,” he said. “You have to fight the bastards. If we stop them here, that'll put a chink into their national plans. If they can't implement their national strategy, their dream of world domination is compromised. That's why our local work is so important.”

“For want of a nail . . .” I muttered, sobbing.

Jerry gazed intently at me.

“Exactly,” he said.

We both knew I referred to the old saw:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe the horse was

lost. For want of a horse the rider was lost. For want of a rider the battle was lost. For want of a battle the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

I said it, but I didn't believe it. I was in some kind of crazy nightmare. I would awake any moment. I'd hug my wife, and she'd wonder why I'd become so amorous at once. But she wouldn't object. She was used to my whims. She said that's what attracted her to me. It separated me from all the other marines being feted at old White Temple Methodist Church in downtown Miami. Back before it burned.

But I didn't wake up. This nightmare was real.

"You have to fight the bastards," repeated Jerry.

He was trying to recruit me. For what, I wasn't sure.

"I'm sorry, Jerry. I'm not your man. I'm not a fighter. I'm a crip. Couldn't fight if I wanted."

He didn't look at me. He seemed to be measuring the large dining hall by sight calculation. He might have been looking at the dingy, off-color green walls. Perhaps he was inspecting the linoleum floor for dirt tracked in by the diners. He could have been figuring out where to hang lamps to speed away the dim. Like the wits of over half the room's population.

But he didn't look at me.

He talked to an empty table against one windowless wall. Talked low, but distinctly. With passion.

"I knew I couldn't create this mission. I didn't have money. No organizing skill. No respect. The Crazy King of Conspiracy town folks called me."

He might have been a king, but this building was no palace.

"Cicero said, 'King, ya gotta do sumpin. Winters get cold. Even here in South Ca'lina. You de smaht'un,' he said. 'Do sumpin.'"

He looked at me.

"You don't argue with Cicero, even if he is slow on the uptake."

"Cicero? I don't think I've met him."

"Cicero Conrad. CC."

"CC? Sissy?"

"Yeah. He got stuck with the name as a kid. When he got big enough to change it, he liked it, kept it. He doesn't like me to call him Cicero to his face."

He looked away again.

"I figured that if Cicero figured I could do something, I ought to give it a fling. I knew this old building was a problem for Columbia, but nobody knew just what to do with it. There's some question of ownership. I went to a chamber of commerce meeting one day. I offered to get the homeless and derelicts off the streets if I just had a place to do it. The man who had arranged for me to talk to the chamber suggested they provide me with this building. We wintered here last year. I never knew I could do it."

"Good thing you weren't a pacifist crip," I muttered, spiking his gun before he could fire it.

He looked at me again.

"Not so dumb, for a crybaby. Too bad I was addicted to alcohol and two drugs. Too bad I

was homeless, able to keep my shoes only through Cicero's watchful eye. Too bad I was dirty. Too bad I was smelly. Too bad I had rotten teeth. Too bad I thought my problems were caused by someone else. Too bad I was a loser."

I tried to visualize him as he described himself. It just wouldn't work.

"You went to the C of C like that?"

"Leslie turned my life around."

I didn't want to hear this. Another derelict transformed by the love of Jesus. Where was Jesus when those bullets smashed my life as surely as if they had pierced my heart? I changed the subject.

"I take offense at your calling me a crybaby. I had reason to shed those tears."

"Oh I didn't call you crybaby because of the tears. We all weep, some for one reason, some for another. I called you crybaby because of your self-pity. Your use of your handicap to excuse you from acting. I wonder what Stephen Hawking would have achieved had he taken this attitude. Or whether the Brooklyn Bridge would ever had been built."

I was intrigued.

"I know who Hawking is. But the Brooklyn Bridge?"

"It's a long story."

"I'm not going anywhere. At least not tonight."

"Perhaps you know the bridge was conceived by a creative engineer named John Roebling. In 1883 he had an idea to build a spectacular bridge connecting New York with Brooklyn. Bridge-building experts throughout the world thought that this was an impossible feat. They told Roebling to forget the idea. Not possible. Not practical. Never been done."

Jerry glanced at me. I tried not to show too much interest.

"He took the idea to his son, Washington. His son was an up-and-coming engineer. They argued whether the bridge in fact could be built. But the old man prevailed.

"They worked together for the first time. They developed concepts, how it could be accomplished, how the obstacles could be overcome. Great excitement and the headiness of a wild challenge before them led them to hire their crew. They began to build their dream bridge."

"So, they had an impossible dream," I said. I started to leave.

"OK. You don't have to listen to the story."

"You told me the story," I answered, but a hint of curiosity held me there.

It was an amazing story, he continued. The project started well. Then the world fell apart.

"When the project was only a few months underway, a tragic accident happened. It took the life of John Roebling. Washington was injured. He was left with a certain amount of brain damage. The result? He couldn't walk. He couldn't talk. He couldn't even move."

"Aha!" I chortled. "A paraplegic. You're going to get your cripple into the story after all."

"I wish you wouldn't refer to handicapped individuals as 'crips.' You may have a problem, but it doesn't give you the right to put everyone else down."

I was a bit ashamed. I really didn't talk like that. All sense of propriety seemed to have been blown away with my wife and companions. I really meant it when I said, "I'm sorry."

"In spite of the mockery," said Jerry. "And his handicap," he added. "Washington was never discouraged. He still had a burning desire to complete the bridge. His mind was still as sharp as

ever.”

Jerry moved closer. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper.

“Suddenly an idea hit him. All he could do was move one finger.” Jerry paused to let that sink in, then continued, “He decided to make the best use of it. By moving this finger, he slowly developed a code of communication with his wife.”

“OK. You have my interest,” I said. “How did the code work?”

Jerry laid a finger on my forearm.

“He touched his wife’s arm with that finger,” said Jerry. “Once she understood, there was no stopping. He indicated to her he wanted her to call the engineers. He used the same method of tapping her arm to tell the engineers what to do.”

Jerry tapped my arm as he spoke. Then he removed his hand and finished his story.

“Foolish as it may sound, the project was underway again. Washington tapped out his instructions with his finger on his wife’s arm for thirteen years. As you’re well aware, the bridge was finally completed.”

He didn’t moralize. He made no statement that today the spectacular Brooklyn Bridge stands in all its glory, a tribute to the triumph of one man’s indomitable spirit. That it illustrates one handicapped man’s determination not to be defeated by circumstances.

He could have.

He might also have stated it was a tribute to the engineers and their teamwork. Their faith in a man who, considered mad by half the world—like Jerry?—was vindicated.

But the point missed me. All I could think of was the bridge as a tangible monument to the love and devotion of his wife.”

And I had no wife.

Chapter 4

Jerry didn't push me. I knew he had some task, some spot he wanted me in. But he was sharp enough to know too much pressure builds defenses. Instead, he became my "pal."

"Joe should have told you that you can get food, clothing, and shelter here."

"He did."

Jerry nodded his head thoughtfully. It suddenly dawned on me that I'd been appreciating his cologne without being aware of it; you didn't smell it. You subconsciously opened yourself to its subtle embrace.

He stopped nodding his head, as if aware I'd just detected his cologne. He made a quiet announcement.

"Ray, we have just one rule here. The rule of respect. We treat everyone else here with respect."

"Like Sissy's attempt to rape me." I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice.

Jerry laughed. Then turned serious.

"My turn to say I'm sorry. I was testing you."

"Testing me? For what?"

"To see if you would fit into my community. Many are called, but few are chosen."

"That borders on heresy," I said. "I don't think I want to be part of a new religious cult. If you'll excuse me, I'll thank you for a delicious meal and go see if I can find a bridge to sleep under."

"I can't let you do that."

"I'm sure you could have Sissy stop me. But you can't hold me forever. I'll find a way to escape."

"I'm sure you will," he told me. "But I didn't mean I was going to hold you prisoner. I simply meant I couldn't let you go out and submit yourself to one of the pickup patrols. It's past curfew. If you go out now, you'll find yourself in the poky for thirty days for vagrancy. If you insist on leaving, I'll give Cicero a permit to take you to the Y. On me. We have a great YMCA here. Tomorrow you will be on your own. I'd suggest you find a way to move on. Don't stay another day in Columbia."

"You're serious."

"Yes. I'm serious."

"Well, if this isn't a religious cult, what is it? And why me?"

He considered me for a long minute. He looked into my smoky-blue eyes and probed the depths of my soul.

"Of all the people I've come across, I thought you would know. When you got out of that truck, I said, 'That's the one. He'll understand.'"

"Understand?"

"How to fight the conspiracy."

Whoops. Here we were back on Night Mare Alley. This guy really believed there was a conspiracy.

“Suppose I were the one,” I said. “Understand, I’m not saying I am. But suppose I were. What evidence do you have? Other than some vision. Some gut feeling. What evidence do you have there is a conspiracy?”

“Conspiracies are hard to verify. For example, today an investigative team from Congress came to town. Their trip was supposed to be very hush-hush. But I knew about it. You can bet the conspirators knew also. I know they knew, because an attack was made on the vehicle they were believed to be in. Obviously, they weren’t in that vehicle. They arrived safely.”

I stared at him fearfully. Did he know I was in that vehicle?

“The point is, you won’t even be able to prove there was an attack on the vehicle. There are no news stories. There is no wreckage. There are no survivors. There is no evidence an attack took place. I know you won’t believe me since I can’t provide proof. And that’s the way it is with conspiracy. You can’t gather evidence to prove it.”

“Yeah?” I said in a strained voice. “So how do you know about the attack?”

“A phone call. You won’t believe this, but I can’t let you talk to my informer. He’s in hiding. He believes everyone within a mile of that attack is marked for annihilation. Satellite photos will identify every car coming from either direction—maybe fifty, maybe a hundred. That means fifty to one hundred accidents in the next week. Car crashes. Robbery victims. Hunting accidents. Drownings. Heart attacks. Drug overdoses. Suicides. Fifty to one hundred.”

“How about survivors?” I asked.

“There were no survivors. But let’s say for the sake of argument a woman was blown out of the car through a window all the way over into the piney woods. Saplings broke her fall. She survived. The satellite picture would identify her. She would be located. Erased.”

“The satellite record!” I said louder than I intended. “That would be evidence.”

“So. You’re beginning to believe. That’s good. But the conspirators will destroy the satellite pictures once they have made use of them. Their tentacles snake into every corner of the nation.”

“Including your mission.”

He looked around the dining room. It was empty, but army cots from World War II were being unfolded and set up. A low rumble from another room was probably caused by a televised Friday football game. He echoed my comment.

“Including my mission.”

I decided to get an immediate shave and haircut. And to dispose of my clothes. Maybe I could leave the mission early the next day and make the changes without notice. And I had to get a prosthesis and abandon my chair. Not easy. But I had the inkling of a plan. So far, only a plan of survival.

It was still dark when I awoke. I conjectured that the patrols, if they existed, could have completed their work by midnight. Maybe a roving patrol or two would still wander the streets. But by morning, even they would be off duty.

“Whe’ y’ goin’, Yankee?”

It was my watchdog, Sissy.

“Take a leak. Maybe get a breath of fresh air.”

“Y’all is all ’like. Air ain’t fresh. Hit’s col’, man. Down in th’ forties.”

He pulled the blanket over him and rolled over. No one stopped me.

I’d noticed a diner near the place Joe the truck driver dropped me off. If truckers heading out stopped there for a bite and cup of coffee, maybe I could depart this crazy place.

As I slipped out the door, Jerry appeared. I thought he would stop me. Instead, he held the door so I could maneuver my chair more easily through it.

“I hope you’ll come back,” he said. “Looking different. Those satellite photos have only so much definition. It should be easy to change your looks enough to fool them.”

He handed me a paper bag.

“There’s a clean change of clothes in here. Find a private place to change. Burn the clothes you’re wearing.”

He laid the sack in my lap and slipped back inside.

I wasn’t happy about burning what I was wearing. I had on a pair of comfortable brown jeans my wife had ordered from Haband, and a forest-green guyabera shirt. I especially liked the four pockets on the shirt. I was partial to bright-green socks and cordovan shoes with Velcro closing straps. This was my constant outfit, except for different-colored shirts. Burning my clothes was burning my past.

There were no trucks at the diner. Next to it was a construction site with a Porta Potty on the lot. I looked around. No one around at this hour. I slipped in and latched the door.

There was hardly enough room to change clothes. I’d had to leave my wheelchair outside, and the filth on the toilet seat complicated things more. Fortunately, a former occupant had stuck a folded newspaper behind a vent pipe. I opened it and spread it over the dried feces and stains on the seat.

After almost half an hour I emerged wearing a red flannel shirt, blue dungarees, a black sock, and a deck shoe. The bag contained not only clothes, but a twenty-dollar bill and a throw-away razor. I tried, but couldn’t shave. In the sack were my clothes, including my wallet, driver’s license, and credit cards. If I were going to disappear, it all had to go, including the picture of my wife I’d carried twenty-seven years.

Parked in front of the diner was a camper. Two fishermen sat in the diner, swilling coffee. The shower I’d taken before going to bed had made me presentable enough to enter the diner without much notice. Of course, a wheelchair always attracts some notice.

I lifted myself from the chair to a stool next to a fisherman. I ordered peach pie and coffee. The man next to me looked over.

“Ya do that right smartly,” he said.

“I’d rather sit at th’ counter an’ eat than t’ do it in muh chair,” I commented in my best southern drawl. “Y’all a-comin’ or a-goin’?”

“Goin’, we hope. This old boy down in Orangeburg’s gotta launch on Lake Marion. We s’posed t’ pick ’im up in ’bout an hour. You ever go fishin’?”

“Useta.”

He looked at my wheelchair, then said apologetically, “Oh.”

“Y’ know, I’m headin’ fer Orangeburg. ‘S long push on a wheelchair.”

To Steal an Election

The two fishermen looked at each other. The one on the far stool spoke.

“Y’ c’n ride wi’ us, if’n y’ like.”

“I’ll pay fer th’ gas,” I offered.

“Th’ hell y’ will,” said the guy next to me, and reached over and grabbed my check.

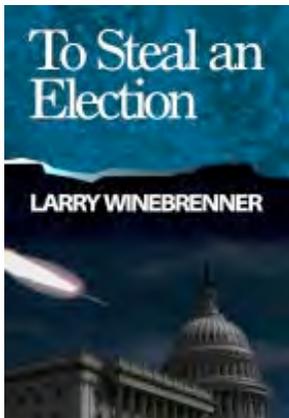
I normally would have argued about this action, but I was trying to develop a new persona.

“Hey! If’n I’d knowed y’ was buyin’, I’da ordered a full breakfast.”

“Go ‘head,” he offered. “But get hit t’ go ’n’ eat it on th’ way.”

In five minutes I was on the way to Orangeburg.

Without breakfast.



Raymond Muirel is dropped right in the middle of a conspiracy investigation. Marianna LaGrange, head of the congressional investigating committee, is exploring the hot rumors about the conspiracy.

The conspiracy is to take over the government by stealing an election in process. They plan to do this by murdering the major candidates on the eve of the election.

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