

Margin of Error

by Robert Burton Robinson



GENRE: Suspense/Crime. LENGTH: 2,863 words. SYNOPSIS: An ambitious campaign manager claims she can deliver a victory every time—once she gets the poll numbers within the Margin of Error. But she learns too late that not everything in life works like an election. And that statistics can only be carried so far...before you *become* one.

“Have a seat, Lucinda.”

“Thank you, Sir—I mean *Mayor*.”

The mayor smiled. “I do like the sound of that. But I couldn’t have done it without you.”

And I’m glad you’re smart enough to realize it, thought Lucinda. “Oh, I don’t know about *that*, Mayor.”

“No, no. Don’t be modest. I hired you to pull a rabbit out of your hat, and you did it. It was impressive. When you came in, I was down twenty points, and—”

“—twenty-three.”

“And somehow you turned public opinion around. Nobody thought I could beat Elderman—until my poll numbers started getting better every week.”

“Once we tied him, I knew he was goners.”

“You kept saying that. But we never *did* tie him. He was still four points ahead in the last poll.”

“Right. We were within the *margin of error*.”

“Oh, you and your margin of error. I’ve heard that every day for the last month. Margin of error *this*, margin of error *that*.”

“Hey—you won, didn’t you?”

The mayor grinned. “I sure did. And now you’re gonna be my chief of staff. Right?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“No, you’re not. You want the job.”

“It depends.” Lucinda smiled seductively. “Do you have any dinner plans?”

“Uh, yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Sorry.” He checked his watch. “Well, thanks again, Lucinda. Wonderful job. Now, why don’t you walk down the hall to your new office and get to work.”

She frowned at him.

“It’s the biggest office in the building.”

“Besides this one.”

“Well, yes, of course.”

Lucinda stood up.

The mayor got up and walked around to the front of his desk. “Oh, and our first order of business: the homeless.”

“I know. *Job One: Clean Up the Streets.*”

He smiled. “It was a great slogan.”

“Thank you.”

“Your idea of doing our own private polling was *genius*. I knew people were upset about all the homeless guys hanging around restaurants, begging for handouts. But I had no idea it was the number one concern.”

“Yeah. Elderman probably thought we were nuts to go with that campaign slogan.”

“And by the time he realized we were on to something, it was too late.” He laughed. “It was brilliant.”

If you really want to show your appreciation, thought Lucinda, how about a hot, wet kiss?

“And now it’s *your* Job One, Lucinda. Go clean up the streets.” He walked her to the door.

“I’m going to need some money.”

“No problem.”

“Don’t you want to know how—”

“—I don’t *care* how you do it or how much it costs. Just get it done.”

The mayor had avoided Lucinda for two weeks. He was always too busy to meet with her. She guessed it was because of her romantic interest in him.

“Close the door and have a seat, Lucinda. I want to talk to you about these poll numbers,” said the mayor.

Lucinda smiled. “You’re looking great, Mayor. The people are very happy with you.”

“Except when it comes to the homeless.”

“What do you mean? You got a ninety-six percent approval rating on that. And our margin of error was four percent. So, you were perfect.”

“No, Lucinda. I don’t want to hear anything about a margin of error. I want to see one-hundred percent approval on this thing.”

“But, Mayor—”

“—look. You and I both know there are still bums out there on the streets. And all it takes is one or two business owners calling some reporter down at the TV station and they’ll do a story on the total failure of my cleanup efforts. I can’t have that, Lucinda. Fix it. Now!”

“Yes, Mayor.” She stood up. “I’m on it.”

She walked down the hall to her office, shut the door, and flipped open her cell phone.

“It’s been two weeks, Frank. When are you going to be finished? The Mayor’s losing patience.”

“I’m done.”

“I don’t *think* so. I saw two men lying on the sidewalk outside Pappy’s Pancake House this morning. You’re not done.”

“Look, almost all of the people took the cash and got on a bus. And believe me, I put the fear of God in them. They won’t come back.”

“I believe you. But what about the others?”

“I tried everything. But they’ve got to be able to stand up and walk onto the bus. You can’t *carry* them on. They’re so messed up—some of them don’t even know who they are.”

“You can’t *scare* them into going?”

“I told one guy if he didn’t get up and come with me I was gonna slit his throat. I even pulled out a knife and held it to his neck. He didn’t care. Maybe he *wanted* me to do it—just to put him out of his misery.”

“Well, what am I gonna do?”

“That’s your problem. I want my cash. Meet me in thirty minutes.”

“But...”

She took the phone away from her ear and looked at it. He had already hung up.

“Aren’t you going to count it?” said Lucinda.

“I trust you,” said Frank, as he put the thick envelope into his coat pocket. “This guy might be able to help you.” He handed her a slip of paper with phone number on it.

“Who—”

“—don’t ask,” he said. “And you didn’t get that from me. Good luck.” He got up from the booth and walked out of the restaurant.

Lucinda looked around. She checked her wig for the tenth time, making sure it was still securely attached. Nobody

would recognize her anyway. The townspeople didn't even know her—except for the mayor and his staff.

She dropped a five-dollar bill on the table for the coffee, and walked out to her car. The phone number on the slip of paper was from another area code.

It would be crazy to hire some anonymous man over the phone. But she was desperate to complete her task. She couldn't give up now. Lucinda would finish the job, and then get what she wanted most: a date with the mayor.

The services she required were in the gray area, legally speaking. *Dark gray*. No matter, she thought. Whatever it takes.

She punched in the numbers and waited.

“Yeah?” It was a deep, gruff voice.

“Uh...somebody gave me your number, and—”

“—*who* gave you my number?” He sounded even scarier than Frank.

“I can't say. But I may have a job for you.”

“What does it pay?”

“Five thousand.”

“Call somebody else.”

“No, wait. I can go as high as ten.”

“What’s the job?”

“Getting the homeless people off our streets. We managed to get most of them to leave town by giving them money. But the others—they’re just too messed up in the head. You can’t reason with them.”

“How many people are we talking about?”

“Probably less than a dozen.”

“When do you need it done?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Tomorrow night. And don’t be stupid enough to try to rip me off.”

“I wouldn’t do that. But I don’t even know your name.”

“I don’t yours either. But I have your phone number. I’ll look up the rest.”

Suddenly Lucinda felt dangerously exposed.

“And don’t bother trying to trace *my* phone. It’s a throwaway.”

If it was a throwaway, how did Frank have the number? “I won’t.”

The line went dead.

“Hello?”

“Ten is not enough.”

Lucinda jumped up from her desk, hurried to the door and closed it. “That’s was the deal.”

“You said there were less than a dozen. The number’s more like sixteen. I’ve taken care of eleven. So, I’m done. And I want my money.”

“No, that’s not good enough. They *all* have to go. It doesn’t do me any good unless every one of them is off the street.”

“Then you’ll pay me an extra ten.”

“What? No. I’ll pay an extra five. That’s all.”

“Fine. Then you can get somebody else. But I want my money today.”

She couldn’t pay him another ten-thousand dollars. But where would she find somebody else to take care of the last few bums? The mayor was giving a speech on Thursday night. He wanted to be able to claim success for cleaning up the streets. She had to get it done.

“Okay. I’ll pay the extra ten. But you’ve got to finish it tonight.”

“Done.”

Lucinda rolled over and stared at the glowing numbers on her alarm clock. It was after three. She wondered if he had finished the job.

Since she couldn't sleep anyway, she decided to go for a drive. She passed Pappy's. Yes! No more homeless. Then she drove by a few of the other popular homeless hangouts. They were all gone. She couldn't believe it. How had he done it? What difference did it make? They were all gone.

As she drove toward her apartment, Lucinda felt a great sense of satisfaction. Now that the pressure was off, she had a craving for a good cup of coffee and a piece of pie. And she knew just where to get it.

She took a shortcut through the high school parking lot on her way to Bill's 24-Hour Coffee Shop. It hadn't taken long to discover that Bill had the best Apple pie in town.

But as she drove past the high school, she noticed something odd. In the moonlight, above the building there was a cloud of smoke. Perhaps it was just an optical illusion. Yes, she thought, it was probably a cloud way off in the sky.

Lucinda stopped the car and rolled down her window. It was no cloud. She could smell the smoke.

She killed the engine and got out of the car. If some kids were up to no good, she didn't want to alert them to her presence until she could see who they were and what they were doing.

She ran around to the back of the building to take a look. The smoke was coming from the school's incinerator. The gate was open. An old commercial van was parked in front of the incinerator. The engine was running, but the headlights were off.

A man walked around from the back of the van with something across his shoulder. He carried it to the incinerator and dumped it into the open hatch.

Then it hit her. Surely this is not the man I hired, she thought. And surely the thing he just threw into the incinerator was not a...

The man walked to the back of the van, closed the doors, and then went back to the incinerator to close the hatch. He got into the van and drove away with his headlights still off.

Once he was gone, Lucinda hurried over to the incinerator. She found a crumpled paper bag on the ground to use as an oven mitt. When she opened the incinerator hatch, she gasped and jumped back from the searing heat. Then she eased in—just close enough to see down inside.

A set of eyes in a burning face looked back at her. The man must have been so full of drugs or alcohol that he was just waking up to the excruciating pain of the fire engulfing his body. He looked as if he was trying to scream. Perhaps his vocal chords had already burned away. His eyeballs suddenly burst into flames.

Lucinda turned and vomited repeatedly.

When the queasiness began to subside she turned around to close the hatch. Something shiny on the ground caught her eye. She picked it up and studied it in the light of the raging fire. It was a silver necklace with a seven-sided silver charm that had two letters in the center: AA. Undoubtedly, it had belonged to one of the drunks who were now being cremated. They should have stayed on the program, she thought, as she put the necklace into her pocket.

She closed the hatch and walked back around the building, got into her car and drove away, praying nobody had seen her.

Her craving for pie was gone.

“I didn’t see any bums on the streets this morning.”

“And you *won’t* from now on, Mayor,” said Lucinda.

“Wonderful. Great job.”

And now, how about a dinner date, she thought.

“I’d like to bounce something off you, Lucinda. I’ve been working on my speech for tomorrow night, and there’s a spot that’s not quite right. But I just don’t know how to fix it.”

“I’ll be happy to help.”

The mayor read the passage, and asked her what she thought.

“Well, it sounds pretty good,” she said, getting up from her chair and walking around behind his desk. She pointed. “But right here—I would swap these two sentences. And remove this one. It’s redundant.”

“Yeah—I think you’re right. Thanks.”

Lucinda had never been on the front side of his desk. “Oh, this is a nice picture. What a fish.”

“Yeah, that was a great day.”

“Is that your son standing next to you?”

“Yes, that’s Andy. That was before he got into drugs and moved out of the house.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. I blame Aaron. That’s him in the picture with us. He and Andy are best friends. And they’re a singing duo. They were actually very good—before the drugs.”

Lucinda gulped. “What are those necklaces they’re wearing?”

“They had those made right after they started performing in public. The ‘AA’ stands for Andy and Aaron. They were great kids—before they got all messed up.”

“Is that what led to your divorce?” She quickly added, “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“It’s okay. Yes, it was a big part of it. Peg thought I was too hard on Andy. I told him he could either give up the drugs or move out.”

“So, he chose to move out.”

“Yeah.”

“Out of town?”

“No. He’s still around. I saw him the other day walking down the sidewalk with Aaron. They were completely zoned out though.”

No, thought Lucinda, it couldn’t be.

“Well, thanks again. There will be a nice bonus in your next paycheck.”

“Thanks.”

She went to her office, closed the door, grabbed her purse off her desk, and began to riffle through it. She pulled the necklace out and held it up. There was an inscription on the edge of each of the seven sides. The lettering was so tiny that Lucinda had not even noticed it before. She strained her eyes to read each word: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, and Pride.

It was the seven deadly sins. And she had committed them all. “Oh, God, what have I done?”

Lucinda found it tougher than ever to fall asleep. It had been hard enough to live with the guilt of killing hopeless drunks and drug addicts. Now she had the blood of a teenager on her hands. Or maybe two...or more!

Somehow, she finally dozed off.

A couple of hours later she awoke to a sharp pain in her arm. She opened her eyes and saw a man standing over her. She tried to jump up and run away, but she couldn't even lift her head off the pillow.

The man's face was just beyond the range of the nightlight. She cringed when she saw the empty syringe in his right hand. No wonder she felt so weird and weak. He had drugged her.

He held up his left hand. The necklace dangling from it was the one she had so foolishly left on her nightstand. This man had somehow figured out what she had done.

He threw the empty syringe on the floor and leaned down to her. She could almost make out his face. Then he pulled a necklace out of the top of his shirt and let it hang from his neck. It was exactly like the one in his hand!

"I'm sorry," she said. Her speech was uncontrollably slurry. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for anybody to get hurt."

The man took a syringe out of his pocket.

"Which one are you—Andy or Aaron?"

“I was the last one in the van. Whatever he drugged us with didn’t work as well on me. I ran into the woods before he could come walk back to the van and get me. After he drove off, I saw you holding Aaron’s necklace. And when I found out you worked for my father, I knew you were the one who had hired that man.”

He took the cap off the syringe.

“No. I didn’t mean for that to happen.” She began to weep. “I’m sorry. Please don’t kill me.”

He stuck the needle into her arm.

Lucinda had no strength to resist. She felt herself sinking into the bed.

The mayor had gotten what he wanted. The streets were free of homeless people. Maybe he would even get his son back.

Once the police figured out what she had done, it would be easy for them to believe she had committed suicide. How could any decent person live with that kind of guilt?

Lucinda lay helpless as she melted slowly but surely into the narrow sinkhole...of her own MARGIN OF ERROR.

THE END

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