

SIN & *Redemption*

The Pink Elephant Connection



James E. McCarthy

“A rare, hopeful crime story that also manages to be deeply honest”
-Kirkus Reviews

Sin and Redemption: The Pink Elephant Connection

by James E. McCarthy

© 2018 by James E. McCarthy

ISBN: 978-1-944136-01-7 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-944136-03-1 (e-book)

© 2016 by James E. McCarthy

ISBN: 978-1-944136-00-0 (hardcover)

Ashanti Victoria Publishing

109 Ambersweet Way

Suite 313

Davenport, FL 33897

jamese_mccarthy@yahoo.com

www.jamesemccarthy.com

Disclaimer: This book is a work of fiction molded and adapted by the author's life experiences. All characters are fictional and while some locations are specific, their use as a setting is in a fictional manner in this book. Any similarities between characters and live people are purely coincidental. The author is in no way making any moral, ethical, or legal judgements or evaluations for the activities described in this book.

Permissions:

Stock Photography: Anna Baburkina |Dreamstime.com, Couperfield |Dreamstime.com, David Taylor |Dreamstime.com, Denis Aglichev |Dreamstime.com, Eldadcarin |Dreamstime.com, Elmirex2009 |Dreamstime.com, Laroslav Horbunov |Dreamstime.com, Kavida27 |Dreamstime.com, Paulus Rusyanto |Dreamstime.com, Pavel Chernobrivets |Dreamstime.com, Roman Hraska |Dreamstime.com, Sinisa Botas |Dreamstime.com, Tinamou |Dreamstime.com, Zim235 |Dreamstime.com

Newspaper articles / Court Documents: Supplied by the author.

Freehand Drawings: Supplied by the author.

Additional photography: Public domain from government sources.

Book Cover Design: Rik Feeney / www.RickFeeney.com



Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: Prime Target

Chapter 2: Trouble in Paradise

Chapter 3: The Rock

Chapter 4: Pink Elephant

Chapter 5: Nothing to Declare

Chapter 6: Fire aboard Flight 502

Chapter 7: The Golden Triangle

Chapter 8: The Snitch

Chapter 9: Pleading for Presidential Pardon

Appendix A: Corroborating Documents

Appendix B: Character Descriptions

About the Author

Ordering Information



Introduction

For more than a century, Heroin has increasingly plagued our society. But it wasn't until just a few years ago, that the Chinese Mafia imported heroin to the U.S. with their interesting Trademark Seal (the Pink Elephant) and the pink heroin- the most deadly opiate-type narcotic sold on the black market today.

On the cover of this book is a replica of the Seal or "Trademark" presently being used by the Chinese Mafia; it represents the world wide existence of their "Loose-knit Heroin Network." The Seal is mass produced in Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, Thailand and Mainland China; then shipped to nearby clandestine laboratories and safe houses for product labeling.

The huge prehistoric mammoth, with its bulging bloodshot red eyes is an expression of rage, symbolizing the very strength, which has given pink heroin its lucrative value. More secretive and aggressive than the United States Italian Mafia, the Chinese Mafia supplied the heroin that has given the world its massive addiction problem.



CHAPTER 1

“Prime Target”

Orlando, Florida 1967; 3:00 p.m.

A hot wind dripping with midsummer humidity is blowing in from the east but Joe Stegner is sweating for an altogether different reason. He is no closer to paying off his gambling debt than when he made the first payment.

The telephone rings. Joe is frightened. He receives a final warning: “Make the rendezvous.” He wonders whether to obey the order or leave town. He had two reasons for disobedience: one personal, one professional. The personal reason: he didn’t want to die. The professional reason: he couldn’t be seen gambling while his debt remained unpaid, his debt of \$20,000.

Joe didn’t want to risk his life without a good reason. He was torn between responsibility to his family and his gambling debt with the mob. He was supposed to go to the doorway of a condemned building between Fashion Square Mall and E. Robinson Street to meet his contact. Each would carry a Bible. If certain they weren’t being followed, they would agree that “John, Chapter 3: Verse 16” was “most inspiring.” Otherwise, one would say, “I’m afraid I haven’t read it yet.”

The building might not be there anymore, but that wasn’t what troubled Joe. His gut instinct told him they might be setting him up for a hit since the Mafia threw professionalism to the wind back in those heady days when Blackburn, Lanetti, and Gambino seemed to take over. Joe hadn’t trusted them since.

Against all logic, he wanted to make the prearranged meeting. It was a foolish risk, but the simple reason was... he had become unspeakably bored and tired of running. It had been 10-years since he experienced anything remotely close to “action.” Yes, he would make the rendezvous, but not in the way they expected.

Joe Stegner took his Bible and gun and stuffed them into his coat pocket. It was dark and damp outside, so he carried an umbrella. The rendezvous was set for some time between ten and eleven p.m. that night. He arrived at the condemned building at nine minutes past ten. The contact was in the doorway with a black-bound Bible under his arm. Joe hurried past; his head down. The man was a young Italian, of medium height, broad shoulders and a black mustache. He was chewing gum, preoccupied; waiting for the phone to ring from a nearby pay phone.

When Joe walked by the second time on the opposite side of the street, he spotted the tail (hit man). However, if the contact in the doorway couldn't get Joe out in the open, the tail in the alley would take over. Joe assumed the worst, then thought of a way to deal with it. There was a telephone booth in the parking lot next to the mall. He went inside and memorized the number. He then found “John... 3:16,” in the Bible, tore out the page, and scribbled in the margin: “Go to the phone booth near the mall.” Joe walked around the back street until he found an old drunk sitting on a doorstep.

Joe said, “Say fellow! Do you know the condemned building near here?”

The drunk's eyes rolled skyward. “Yeah..,” he mumbled as he staggered to his feet. “What's it to ya?” He fell into Joe's arms. Joe frowned, as a foul smell lingered in the air. He straightened the old man to his feet. Reaching into his pocket, he gave the drunk a fist full of money.

“You like money, old man?” he asked, waving the money in the drunks face.

“Why hell-yeah...!” the drunk replied forcefully with slurred speech, spit and all. “Whadda-ya want me to do for it-t-t?” The drunk lost his balance and fell into Joe's arms once again.

Joe helped him to his feet, handed him the torn Bible page and pointed him in the direction of the condemned building. “There's a man in the doorway, give this page to him and keep your mouth shut.” He shoved a fifty dollar bill in the man's dirt ridden coat pocket.

The man staggered off, Joe following in the distance. As he approached the

contact, Joe ducked into the doorway of another building. Watching from afar; observing the tail lurking in the dark shadows of the alley. Joe stood just outside a door pretending to be struggling with an umbrella to block him from the tails view. Both he and the tail watched as the drunk exchanged the message with the contact and walked off. Joe ended his charade with the umbrella and walked in the opposite direction. He looked back briefly to see the tail run after the vanished contact.

Joe decided to stop at the nearest telephone and dial the number to the telephone booth near the Mall.

Ring... ring... "Hello?" a deep voice answered.

"What's with the special rendezvous?" Joe asked.

"John... 3:16," the contact responded.

"Most inspiring," Joe confirmed.

"Yes, isn't it?"

This fool has no idea of the trouble he's in, the contact thought to himself. "I must see you," insisted the contact. "My orders come from high up... do you understand?"

Joe pretended to comply. "All right... I'll meet you," he said. "But in two days, bottom of the I-4 overpass at the 33rd Street Exit at eight a.m."

"Can't you make it sooner?" the contact uttered with urgency.

"No," Joe replied, hanging up the phone, quickly leaving the booth. He walked two blocks and came in sight of the telephone booth near the Mall. He saw the contact walking toward E. Robinson Street. No signs of the tail. He decided to follow the contact until he got to his car and drove away.

Joe decided to head home, thinking he outsmarted the contact, as he whistled a tune to his success. He strolled through a succession of residential streets, feeling at ease in his 'hood,' never looking over his shoulder even once.

On the way home Joe ducked into a rundown stash house; a second place away from home. The grass hadn't been mowed in months and the paint was dried and flaky from years of neglect. There was a wooden fence; broken where a tree rotted and fell to the ground. The house had a dormer window in the roof;

that would be a room, high up for better observation.

The hit man scanned the house from the opposite side of the street. Walking past Joe's house he turned the corner, walking to the next parallel street and counting the houses. Almost directly behind the house Joe had entered was a vacant house. *Good*, he thought to himself. His heart beat a shade faster. The game was on!

Dressed in a black woolen hat, leather flight jacket, and rubber-soled shoes, Nick the hit man would be almost invisible in the night's shadows.

After midnight, Nick drove through the quiet street; parking a quarter mile from his destination. He walked, not to Joe's house, but to the vacant house on the next street. It was dark, only a dim light from the neighboring houses and the cloud covered moon. Dogs barked in the distance. He entered the doorway and went through the house to the rear.

Nick jumped over a fence and walked to the kitchen window of Joe's house. He removed a small scoop-shaped blade from his pocket to remove the brittle putty around the glass. This was his way in. After some time, Nick was able to remove a pane of glass from the window and lay it down. Slowly he reached around and opened the latch to raise the window, and climbed inside.

The house smelled of moths and disinfectant. Nick unlocked the back door, a precaution for a fast exit before entering the hall. He shined his pencil flashlight on and off quickly. He observed a small table with one plastic lawn chair, a disheveled couch with the springs exposed and a pile of tattered clothes next to the staircase. Silently the hit man climbed the uncarpeted wooden stairs. Halfway up he noticed a light coming from under the door at the top of the stairs, followed by an asthmatic cough and the sound of a toilet flushing.

He froze against the wall as the door opened, flooding the stairs with light. An old man came out the bathroom and turned to walk into the dark bedroom to the left. Suddenly the old man stopped. He must see me, the hit man thought to himself as he pulled a dagger from his sleeve. The man, whose eyes were half open, turned back to the bathroom to turn off the light and grunted before stumbling back to bed.

The hit man crept to the door on the right. He gently tried to turn the handle. The door was locked. He removed a slim black case from his pocket which

carried his tools of the trade and picked the lock. Once the door was open he slowly edged inside. From the opposite corner of the room came the sound of deep, heavy breathing. He walked along the wall until he reached the bed where Joe slept.

He grabbed Joe tightly by the throat and quickly straddled his chest. In his raspy smokers voice he whispered, “2nd



Kings....1/12.” Joe struggled against the hit man, lack of air causing his eyes to water and bulge. The hit man loosened his grip and brought his dagger to Joe’s neck.

“You gonna let me up or what?” Joe asked demandingly.

“Why didn’t you cooperate? You were watched at the Mall.” The hit man said.

In a moment of desperation, Joe replied, “I... I had to be sure you all weren’t out to kill me!”

The hit man looked at him. Tightened his grip and said, “I think your right,” with a sly grin on his face. He placed his left hand on Joe’s chest firmly, with his right hand he thrust the dagger in just under the ribs and stabbed upward to the heart. Joe’s body convulsed as blood flowed onto the bed.

Going under the assumed name of Nick MaChinso, the “hit man” had been paid \$25k to do the job. He’d traveled from upstate New York leaving dozens of unsolved murders in his wake. He opened the closet and dresser drawers and tried to think like a burglar. He leaned over Joe’s body and pulled the rings off his fingers then quickly, but quietly ransacked the room.

Nick washed his hands and sat down to think of anything he may have missed. It had been the perfect ‘hit,’ evidence free until he remembered the old man. Then Nick made his way gently towards the old man’s room and suffocated him with a pillow, making sure no witness would be left behind.

Nick would have to spend the rest of the night in the open, and then shift to his second identity, still needing a new job, papers, passport, license, and social security card. With little fear of being caught by the police, the flashy, vulgar, commercial traveler who occupied the master suite at the Langford Hotel in nearby Winter Park looked rather different from the shabby, parcel clerk who had killed Leo’s father. Machinso took a last look around and walked off into the night.

A week later, the landlord discovered the bodies of the old man and Joe Stegner. The police notified Stella, Joe’s wife shortly after.

Stella was momentarily paralyzed at the news. She fought down the panic and tried to think rationally as her life shuddered to a halt. Joe had been murdered, leaving her alone with the kids and mounting bills. What would she do now? Whom could she call for help?

That night she called her father Lester over to the house to ask for guidance. Her soft voice flooded with tears, “What am I going to tell the children?”

“You’ll know then; I suppose,” her father replied; unsure what to say himself. Lester took Stella into his arms. Her eyes shut tight as she wept. “Don’t... you can’t let this thing get the best of you,” he whispered.

Lester and Stella talked quietly throughout the night making plans for the funeral and her family’s future.

The next morning Stella told her children as calmly as she could that their father had been murdered.

“Who murdered him?” Robert, Joe’s oldest son, asked.

“We don’t know, honey. Probably the people he gambled with.” Stella said.

“Does that mean he went to heaven?” Doris asked; she was Joe’s youngest daughter.

“Yes, I think so.” Stella replied, holding back her tears.

Leo; Joe’s youngest, son sat quietly and stared at his mother; as if he knew the answer to every question.

Days later Joe was buried on the west end of town, in the Washington Park Cemetery off of Bruton Boulevard. Two hundred or so members of the Mount Siani Seventh Day Adventist church came to offer condolences to the family. A bald preacher conducted the brief service, the pages of his Bible rippled by the gusty winds.

Leo stood away from the others, his head to one side, picking at his eye as if the wind had blown some speck in it. The way Joe was killed bothered 17-year-old Leo almost as bad as the times when Joe made the three of them stand in a belt line and recite all the books of the bible; from the Old Testament to the New Testament by heart. Leo remembered the night Robert missed one of the books of the bible and Joe had beat Robert’s ass as hard as he could with an extension cord, which was repeated nightly until they learned them. Leo would have to become a man now and help Robert defend their family. This would be the beginning of a new way of life for Leo.

Despite the beatings, Leo loved his father. He didn’t always like the way his father treated him, but he did love him and whoever had murdered him now had a serious problem named Leo Stegner.

Leo looked forward to the summer. He’d just graduated from high school and begun his search for a job. Most of the permanent jobs had been filled, and Leo didn’t score high enough on the entrance exam to get into college. Being a native to a less than wealthy lifestyle, he would have to come up with other ways to make a living. Nevertheless, Leo was determined not to let that limit his options. Easily influenced by his peers, and out of desperation from not finding work, Leo joined a group of thugs called the “Ring-Eye Gang.”

Ted Morgan was the leader of the gang. He was the meanest looking ‘black-

mother-fucker' Leo had ever seen in his life. He was only 24 but stood about 6'2, 240lbs. His nose had been broken once or twice, all gnarled up. He had a sinus issue that caused him to constantly sniffle and a multitude of old scars on his face. His mammoth hands were swollen and bent out of shape from whaling on numerous past opponents.

He led a gang of professional car thieves; one of the best in Florida at the time. Their reputation and specialty were as well known by the police as it was to Leo Stegner. They stole as many as ten cars a week. Most of the gang had been arrested, but never proven guilty let alone done any time.

They had become experts, never leaving fingerprints or evidence that could lead to their identities. So clever, they avoided committing a theft in the presence of unreliable people who might stand as witnesses in the case of a prosecution. They stole vehicles from car lots, hotels, malls, and restaurants. Places they were sure the owners would not return in less than an hour.

Ted Morgan wouldn't allow a member of the gang to keep any of the cars they stole. He had each car unloaded an hour after they were stolen.

If a car was locked and the Ring-Eye Gang wanted it, they would have it started within twenty-seconds from the time they spotted it. If a car had a hidden burglar alarm, the alarm would be disabled before it even went off. The secret was teamwork and know how. They specialized in Corvettes, Mercedes, Jaguars and Cadillac's. Their tactics were conducted in a military fashion, sometimes risky, but well sequenced.

Leo Stegner and his pals had become so popular that other gangs soon infiltrated the state. There were stories in the press, almost daily, about "gangs of thieving youths; a swelling army of young criminals."

The holiday season had already started when Ted Morgan went to pull his next job. Basically, he was a loner, but he was having more trouble than usual since every officer in the state knew him by face. He was driving the officer's nuts and they wanted him bad. On Thanksgiving Day, Detective Hood spotted Ted in a Mustang.

Det. Sergeant William H. Hood was a 54-year-old, short, stubby man and one of the Orlando Police Department's finest officers. He'd been with the department for nineteen years. Ted, as slippery a snake was determined not to let Hood ruin his glamour as the leader of the Ring-Eye Gang. He led Det. Hood on a high-speed chase throughout the city. The funny part of the chase was when Hood lost his composure and forgot to follow official police codes and

procedures.

He shouted over the noise of the siren and chase, “Damn-it! I can’t catch that son-of-a-bitch! Set up road blocks! Send out APB’s! And let’s force that motherfucker onto Interstate 4.” He paused for a quick second, to spit tobacco out the window and proceeded. “That son-of-a-bitch is driving a Shelby Cobra and he’s flying!”

Ted had stolen the Cobra with a 427 engine that had a L88 cam, headers, with a two four-barrel cross ram carburetor set up; from a car lot off East Hwy 50, intending to strip it for parts. As the chase continued, he knew they couldn’t catch him. After all, it was the fastest street car ever built at the time.

Almost instantly, a soft, sweet voice replied over the radio, “Copy Det. Hood, and will respond.” The OPD blocked off all exits leading out of Orlando, forcing Ted to take I-4 East bound, which runs high over the city in and around the downtown area. Both Ted and Det. Hood could view the approaching roadblock ahead.

“I’ve got your ass now Morgan!” Det. Hood said smugly.

Ted Morgan had other ideas. Under a hail of bullets, Ted gassed the Shelby Cobra up to 120 miles per hour as he went into an “S” curve. Ted lost control of the car, jumping the guardrail and plunging some 300 feet to his death. The explosion on impact lit up Lake Ivanhoe like the Fourth of July.

Det. Hood was angry as hell, until he got to the sight of impact and found Morgan’s body had been thrown clear of the wreckage. He scurried across the slippery green grass embankment then dove into Lake Ivanhoe and retrieved Ted’s body. Hood was after Morgan’s address book and he found it.

When Leo Stegner saw the shocking report on television his mouth snapped closed. He knew Ted carried a list of names and addresses in a little black address book in his pocket and the police would be closing in to round up the names listed for questioning. Leo couldn’t sleep at all that night. He was stressed and by morning had decided to leave town.

Leo was spotted trying to board a Greyhound bus bound for New York City by two policemen who stopped him to ask for his identification.

“What’s in the suitcase?” one officer asked.

“Just some personal stuff,” Leo snapped back.

“Then open it!” The other officer demanded, hastily grabbing the suitcase from Stegner’s hands. Upon peering inside the officer shook his head suggesting to his partner they had stumbled on the mother lode.

“Tools of a burglar’s trade; lots of money in small bills, a pistol, ammunition, and papers that says he’s an unemployed high school graduate. Let’s take him down for questioning, but first we better read him his rights.”

Several hours later, Det. Hood arrived at the police station and met with the two officers. “Let’s have a look at him.” They went down the corridor to the cells.

“This one,” said the turn-key cell guard. He opened the door and Det. Hood followed him in.

Leo sat on his bunk with his legs stretched out and his back against the wall.

“So this is one of the thugs in the Ring-Eye Gang, huh?” grunted Hood to the guard.

“It’s hard to be certain,” the guard muttered back.

“What’s your street name?” Hood demanded.

“Leo Stegner.”

“You don’t have a nickname?” Hood replied.

“No! Just Leo Stegner! And nothing else!” Leo said somewhat irate.

“I see we have us a smart ass,” Det. Hood commented. “Why were you carrying a gun?”

“Protection!” Leo fired back, “New York ain’t no picnic!”

“Where did you get it?” Hood insisted.

Leo sighed. “My father, he left it to me when he died.”

The guard glanced at Det. Hood, who shrugged, then said, “Your story sounds silly! You better start telling the truth!” Leo sat up in his bunk, and got loud.

“I am! You fool... you think I wanna be here?” Stegner yelled.

Hood’s face turned red as a fire engine. He turned toward the guard, took all the loose change out of his pocket and tied it in his handkerchief, saying nothing, swinging the little bundle in his left hand.

“Whaddaya know about the Ring-Eye Gang?” Hood shouted.

“Leo sighed, shook his head from side to side, “Nothing!” he replied.

“Nothing?” Hood fired back, “On your feet!” he demanded sharply, and then came forward and struck Stegner with the weighted handkerchief in one swift motion. The blow caught Leo on the bridge of the nose. Leo cried out. His hands went to his face.

“Stand at attention!” Hood insisted forcefully, “Now! Tell Me!”

Leo stood upright, frightened, then let his hands fall to his sides. “I don’t know what you’re talking about! And I demand to see my lawyer,” he shouted.

Detective Hood struck him again in exactly the same place. This time Leo went down on one knee and his eyes watered.

“You know something!” Hood insisted, “I’ll be damned if I don’t make you talk!” Hood pulled Stegner to his feet and punched him in the stomach. “Why were you carrying a gun? And tell me about Ted Morgan! You do know him!”

Leo shouted angrily, “But that’s about all, I just know him!”

Hood wasn’t satisfied; he punched Leo again, this time harder. Stegner fell to his bunk.

“That’s enough!” the guard shouted. He grabbed Hood’s arm just as he got ready to punch Leo again. “This is my station and I can turn a blind eye only so long.”

Hood rounded on the guard. “We’re not dealing with some punk kid! This son-of-a-bitch is involved in grand theft auto,” he shouted, outraged. “And I’ll do whatever I have to get a conviction.” Hood turned back to Stegner pointing; “And if that means the prisoner gets hurt, then I’ll just have to take that responsibility.”

“Not on this floor you won’t,” the guard responded. With pain written all over his face, Stegner took the opportunity to interrupt.

“Man-nn! What is this shit! A setup?” Leo yelled out.

Hood hauled him to his feet. “Aren’t you Leo Stegner, born November of 1950, here in Orlando?” Leo nodded. “And, wasn’t your father killed by some mobsters over a gambling debt?” Stegner nodded again. “Well... your name was found in Morgan’s address book the night he went off the bridge. And—“

Leo became brave. He snatched away from Det. Hood, interrupting him, then said, “That doesn’t mean I steal cars! You can’t just pin something on me just because of that! Besides, I haven’t even been identified yet!”

Hood looked at the guard, angry. “He hasn’t been identified,” the guard stated.

“But his name,” Hood insisted.

“Yes, I know,” the guard said, “But he could be telling the truth. And isn’t that for us to decide?”

Hood felt cheated. He stood silent for a moment, and then walked out.

“What’s his badge number?” Stegner demanded. “I’m gonna press charges against his fat ass!”

The guard turned toward Leo, then said, “If I were you, I’d just leave town and forget about what just happened.”

Leo Stegner turned his back to the closing cell door. He was hurting. He shut his eyes, closed his mouth and dropped his arms. Exhausted, he slid down the door and fell to the floor. The thought of leaving town sounded like a great idea, until moments later when flashbacks of Joe’s death began to hunt him. “Oh hell no,” Leo shouted out loud. “Somebody killed my motherfucking father and I’m not going anywhere. VENGEANCE IS MINE SAID THE LORD and somebody is going to pay.” Leo pulled himself to his feet, pacing back and forth in his cell. Thinking, thinking and thinking his next move.



CHAPTER 2

“Trouble in Paradise”

Ted Morgan’s death had given Leo a wake-up call. He was determined to get on the straight and narrow. In reading the classifieds, Leo discovered a legitimate career opportunity as a mail courier at the Kennedy Space Center. He believed this might be his way out of the hood and a way to hide in plain sight while he put together his plan to avenge his father’s murder. He pursued the career with NASA ostensibly seeking a path to a better life; far away from struggles of poverty, drugs, crime, and the stigma of being a black man in America in the 60’s.

Atlanta was the heartland of the South, but Orlando was becoming the pulsating center of tourist attractions. Orlando, Florida had been named the “City Beautiful,” however; Cape Kennedy Space Center held in its hands the fate of future space exploration. And he, Leo Stegner, was going to be part of it.

The physical presence of war and space technology was everywhere. If it came to war, such as the “Cuban Missile Crisis,” under President John K. Kennedy, Florida could’ve been the first possible hit.

Leo was bewildered by the presence of military uniforms that filled the streets of Orlando: Navy, Air Force and the Army Reserve. For the first time, he began to feel the grim possibility of war as something real.

Leo moved into a second floor walk-up apartment, with a fair-sized sunken living room. The apartment was perfect. It had an adjoining bedroom and a spacious kitchen. He spent the entire spring decorating his apartment and took

enormous pleasure in doing it... in everything from the painting and plastering to the selection of each and every object he acquired. The interior had been cleaned and aired and there were thick rugs on the stone floors. Leo had become independent of his brothers and sisters.

The pressure within Leo had lifted like vapor, leaving him empty with happiness. He saw this as an opportunity to get clear of the surrounding ghetto's and become the man his father never was. For Joe had instilled deep religious values in Leo and his siblings. Joe conducted himself as though he was a man of God going to church every Saturday never missing a day. He even went door to door soliciting; selling bible books, speaking to those about God as though he was God, but in reality Joe was a sinner in disguise.

Leo was delighted when he received word that he had been hired as a mail courier by TWA, a subcontractor within NASA's giant conglomerate.

Leo enjoyed working for TWA and the Space Program and had become comfortable and confident with his co-workers. It was the only decent job Leo could get and he decided he actually liked doing it.

As the months went by, he was less intimidated working around astronauts and NASA's Director, Werner Von Braun. Leo's fresh outlook on life had given him values and goals to shoot for and real hope for a successful future. He still went to work every day concealing from the world and his coworkers that burning need for vengeance against the man that is responsible for his father's death.

He worked on the first floor of the Headquarters Building, a thirty-story, twentieth-century sky scraper, carved from marble and stone. His job was one of awesome responsibility, with emphasis placed on the handling of top secret and confidential documents.

Alfred Nelson, a fat, jolly sort of fellow was Leo's supervisor. He was clean-cut, intelligent and well-dressed for his size. Nelson appeared to be efficient in his work and showed no prejudice towards him. In fact, they got along extremely well.

In the meantime; the J.F.K. Space Center was on "Full Alert" status making ready for the "First Three-Man Apollo" flight into orbit. Air force Officer's Virgil "Gus" Grissom, age 40; Lt. Col. Edward Higgins White II, age 36; and Lt.

Commander Roger B. Chaffee, age 31 were in gravity “G” force training in the M.O.S. Building, when word came from Mission Control (NASA), acknowledging their appointment for the mission. The M.O.S. was a multipurpose building where many advances in space exploration took place under strict security. Training maneuvers had become a part of the astronaut’s daily routine. Such as weightlessness, flight simulations, scuba diving and “G” force gravity training.



Later that January, word from Mission Control for “All Systems Go” was announced; the countdown to commence at 10 am. Weather balloons floated majestically in the blue skies. It was the coldest winter in fifty-years with temperatures reaching 18 degrees. The media had been notified to move into position, while crowds of people parked their cars along the embankment of the Cocoa Beach/Titusville shoreline.

The V.A.B. (Vehicle Assembly Building) was one of the largest and tallest buildings in the world. It was made of grey stone and slate, the color of the sea. It stood at the mouth of the Atlantic on the Northeastern end of Cape Kennedy. It was a multipurpose building, where advances in technology took place. It included tracking stations, backup systems, ground-to-air communications, deep space scanners, monitoring devices, chemical propulsion labs and computers; and the rocket stages and boosters were assembled there as well.

The three-man Apollo mission had been moved to Launch Pad 9 where high propulsion fuel had been pumped into its fuel tanks. Staff and employees were

on standby and had been evacuated from the back blast areas to the V.A.B. while astronauts Grissom, White, and Chaffee were being strapped into the Apollo Capsule.

Communication documents vital to the launch had to be delivered, however, Leo had not completed his mail route yet. He was on route from Patrick Air Force Base, roughly sixteen miles Southeast of Cape Kennedy.

The tires on the Dodge van he drove were badly worn, but Leo drove fast just the same. He had climbed a steep Pineda Causeway and just cleared the top when the right rear tire blew. The down side of the hill was steep and slippery. He could hear the distant roar of an approaching truck. The courier van's tires squealed as he skidded around the bends.

Damn he thought, "This bitch is going too fast." The back of the van skidded on a left curve. Leo down-shifted afraid to brake in case he skidded again. There was a sharp right-hand curve and he lost traction on the back of the van. The curve seemed to go on forever. The van slid sideways and turned one hundred and eighty degrees, so it was going backward, then continued to spin in the same direction. "My God!" he screamed. He heard a loud horn, and then saw the truck. It was struggling up the hill on the other side of the two-lane causeway at a snail's pace. Leo glimpsed the driver's face; the guy's mouth was hanging wide-open, he appeared to be standing up straight as he stomped on his brakes.

There was just enough room to pass the truck if he could regain control. He heaved the steering wheel over and touched the accelerator. The two vehicles nearly collided head on.

Leo was miles from the nearest telephone, and he could not afford to abandon the courier van, with top secret documents aboard.

Meanwhile Alfred Nelson, the mailroom supervisor, had become frantic with worry. He was pissed and at a loss for words. He rushed out of his office and headed to the mailroom floor, then yelled out aloud, "Where in the hell is Leo Stegner? Where can he be?" Alfred pointed his index finger shaking it up and down at one of the mail couriers sitting at a nearby desk and then said, "Grab a telephone. Dial Wackenhut Security and ask them to search all roads leading from the air force base, and to get Leo back at all costs! The Director of NASA is threatening to delay the countdown if Leo did not arrive with the weather reports."

Nelson raced back to his office and placed several calls in a desperate attempt to get a fix on his location. The weatherman at Patrick's Air Force Base had verified his departure nearly twenty -minutes ago, and the Bendix's people confirmed the same. Every department involved in the launch program was conducted in a classified manner and given a classified status. For that was the nature of the space program.

Leo had just finished changing the tire and lit a cigarette when security drove up. They jumped out of their cars with their hands on their guns and approached him with extreme caution.

"What the fuck!" Leo said. "Are you going to shoot me for smoking a motherfucking cigarette?"

"Are you Leo Stegner?"

"That's right," he replied. "What's going on?"

"That's what we want to know?" one officer said, craning his neck, looking right and left. "Everyone is looking for you!" His voice was angry, then alarmed. "You're delaying the launch and got the astronauts mad, and the Director is threatening to fire you."

Leo frowned "Well I don't give a damn! I almost lost my damn life fucking with this rush delivery shit, and I just finished changing a tire that blew out! Besides, I was given specific orders not to abandon the mail under any circumstance."

"Well, we can understand your position, but you can explain all of that when you get to Mission Control. Now let's get out of here. We will escort you!" another officer demanded.

Leo jumped into the van and they sped to the V.A.B. reaching speeds up to one hundred miles per hour. It seemed like hours before the V.A.B. building came into view. Leo steered toward it. There was a figure standing in the doorway, looking out at them. It was Nelson, who'd been worried about Leo's whereabouts, ran out into the street to meet them as they came to a screeching halt in front of the building. Nelson rushed to the van and snatched the door open. He noticed that Leo was inside, his hands and face, were filthy and dripping with sweat.

Nelson threw his arms up in the air. "What happened...what happened to you?" Nelson pleaded.

“I couldn’t call... had a flat on the way back,” Leo replied.

“Inside and get those reports to the tenth floor. Hurry! Hurry!! Hurry!!! Our careers are at stake here,” Nelson shouted in a sharp tone.

Leo ran into the building and took the elevator to the tenth floor. When the doors opened, Leo; who was sweating like a race horse, hurried to find the ranking NASA official at his huge semicircular desk, in his smart new suit, tapping his pencil on the paper blotter, looking annoyed.

Leo rushed into the office anxious and out of breath, not knowing what to expect. He threw up his hands and said, “I’m sorry I’m so late, I blew a tire. I got here as soon as I could!” He surrendered the documents and sat down. He began thinking about the near miss with the truck, and almost causing the halt to the three-man Apollo test launch. He could visualize the newspaper headline reading: “COURIER HALTS APOLLO LAUNCH/ FLAT TIRE.”

The countdown was to resume just in time. Over the loud speaker he heard; “T-minus ten, minutes and counting.” The “test” launch would commence, with hundreds of people and media affiliates watching seven miles off base. The on lookers had a view from every conceivable angle. The sky was crystal clear up and down range.

Nine minutes and several seconds later, the voice crackled over the loud speaker again. “Please stand by, please stand by... it is now T-minus eleven seconds and counting...Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One! We have ignition... we have lift off!!

The crowd of reporters, family members and employees applauded as the giant three-manned Apollo space craft roared into high gear as a simulated launch rehearsal.

All of a sudden, without warning, all hell broke loose. “There’s a fire in the cockpit...there’s a fire in the cockpit!” We’re on Fire, we’re on fire!!! The astronauts yelled. “HELP, HELP....Aahhhhhh!”



The giant Apollo space craft had become a towering inferno. Leo stood there utterly paralyzed while shock swept over the crowd watching the launch. In that instant, astronauts, Grissom, White and Chaffee were dead; there was nothing anyone could do to help them. The fire alarm echoed in the distance.

Though the fire had been the fault of an electrical shortage (causing sparks to ignite, and fire to rapidly spread) the fire had left its undeniable mark on Leo and triggered a new stage of depression in him.

Leo was dejected, unable to eat, and felt condemned that President Johnson had ordered a massive cutback of NASA's employees and all was forever lost. His misfortunes seemed to have been divinely planned one disaster after another, from his father's death to the Ring Eye Gang, now this.

Leo console himself by taking a prostitute out on the town and getting drunk. Distracting himself of his grief, he suddenly became aware of his obsession with prostitutes and liked it because it didn't require him to have developed skills and intellect.

