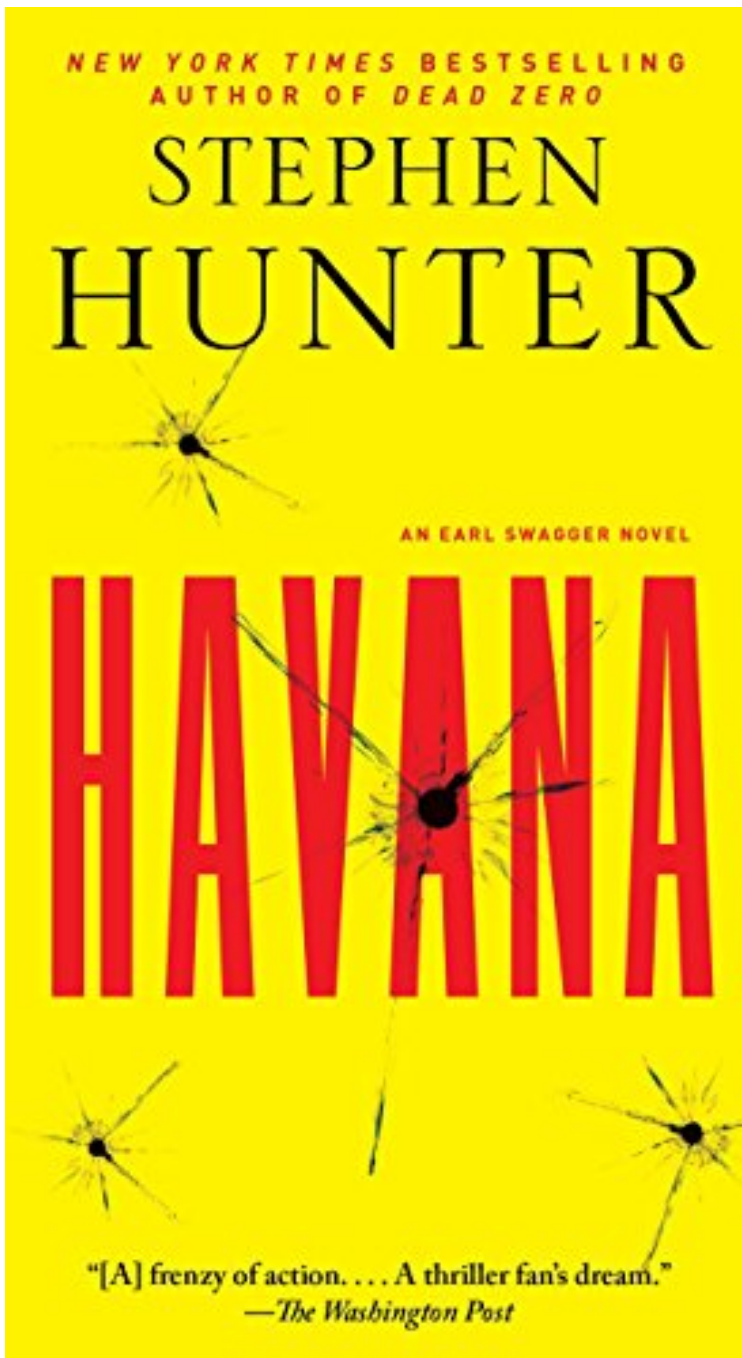


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Havana: An Earl Swagger Novel



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Description : Description du produit Havana, the sultry spring of 1953: gambling is expensive, sex is cheap, and death is free. A half-hour by air from Miami, it's the world's hottest -- and most dangerous -- city. From the plush mobster casinos in Centro to the backstreet brothels on Zanja Street, you can get anything you want, for a price. The city is the linchpin of many empires: the Mafia's, the CIA's, numerous American corporations', El Presidente's, and even the vice lords' of Old Havana. It must be protected at all costs. But

now there's a threat. A young lawyer, a kid named Castro, is giving speeches. He speaks of reform, of change, of self-determination. He speaks of...of revolution even. This danger must be dealt with. So, into the steamy, sunny climate of corruption come two men, both unafraid, both skilled, both tough as ball bearings. They would be friends in a sane world, for they are so similar in their capabilities and experiences. But now they have to be enemies, because the Cold War is at its apogee: one is American, the other Russian. The American is named Earl Swagger. A Medal of Honor winner on Iwo Jima, a toughened gunman from adventures in Hot Springs and the swamps of Mississippi, Earl has been conned by two young Old Boys of the CIA to become Our Gun in Havana. The Russian, Speshnev, also a veteran of tough battles (from Spain in '36 to Berlin in '45, with a few stays in the gulag just for seasoning), has a similar assignment: he too is sent by strategic gamesters to pay attention to that same young orator. But his job is protection, not elimination. Neither man's assignment will be easy. For, like an orchid hot house, Havana's climate grows spectacular specimens: the wise old mobster king Meyer Lansky, who runs the casinos for his nervous New York sponsors; the syndicate hitman Frankie Carbine, Frankie Horsekiller of the famed Times Square massacre; the secret police officer called Ojos Bellos -- Beautiful Eyes -- for his penchant to interrogate at scalpel point; the beautiful Filipina Jean-Marie Augustine, who knows so much; and even those crew-cut, cheery young CIA fellows on the embassy's Third Floor, behind whose baby-blues and tender faces lurk all manner of deviousness. And everybody wants something. In Havana, Stephen Hunter has produced a truly epic adventure story, shot-through with violence, eroticism, and the pressures of big money and big politics, set in a legendary time and place. His hero, Earl Swagger, fights his enemies, his superiors, and his own temptations and, in the end, has to decide what is worth killing for -- and what is worth dying for. He knows only one thing for certain: that he's a pawn in somebody else's game. But a pawn with a Colt Super .38 in his shoulder holster and the skill and will to use it fast and well is a formidable man, indeed.

Prsentation de l'diteurHavana, the sultry spring of 1953: gambling is expensive, sex is cheap, and death is free. A half-hour by air from Miami, it's the world's hottest -- and most dangerous -- city. From the plush mobster casinos in Centro to the backstreet brothels on Zanja Street, you can get anything you want, for a price. The city is the linchpin of many empires: the Mafia's, the CIA's, numerous American corporations', El Presidente's, and even the vice lords' of Old Havana. It must be protected at all costs. But now there's a threat. A young lawyer, a kid named Castro, is giving speeches. He speaks of reform, of change, of self-determination. He speaks of...of revolution even. This danger must be dealt with. So, into the steamy, sunny climate of corruption come two men, both unafraid, both skilled, both tough as ball bearings. They would be friends in a sane world, for they are so similar in their capabilities and experiences. But now they have to be enemies, because the Cold War is at its apogee: one is American, the other Russian. The American is named Earl Swagger. A Medal of Honor winner on Iwo Jima, a toughened gunman from adventures in Hot Springs and the swamps of Mississippi, Earl has been conned by two young Old Boys of the CIA to become Our Gun in Havana. The Russian, Speshnev, also a veteran of tough battles (from Spain in '36 to Berlin in '45, with a few stays in the gulag just for seasoning), has a similar assignment: he too is sent by strategic gamesters to pay attention to that same young orator. But his job is protection, not elimination. Neither man's assignment will be easy. For, like an orchid hot house, Havana's climate grows spectacular specimens: the wise old mobster king Meyer Lansky, who runs the casinos for his nervous New York sponsors; the syndicate hitman Frankie Carbine, Frankie Horsekiller of the famed Times Square massacre; the secret police officer called Ojos Bellos -- Beautiful Eyes -- for his penchant to interrogate at scalpel point; the beautiful Filipina Jean-Marie Augustine, who knows so much; and even those crew-cut, cheery young CIA fellows on the embassy's Third Floor, behind whose baby-blues and tender faces lurk all manner of deviousness. And everybody wants something. In Havana, Stephen Hunter has produced a truly epic adventure story, shot-through with violence, eroticism, and the pressures of big money and big politics, set in a legendary time and place. His hero, Earl Swagger, fights his enemies, his superiors, and his own temptations and, in the end, has to decide what is worth killing for -- and what is worth dying for. He knows only one thing for certain: that he's a pawn in somebody else's game. But a pawn with a Colt Super .38 in his shoulder holster and the skill and will to use it fast and well is a formidable man, indeed..comThe field of male fantasy fiction receives a generous literary boost with the publication of Havana, Stephen Hunter's third novel (following Hot Springs and Pale Horse Coming) to feature straight-shooting ex-Marine and Arkansas state policeman Earl Swagger. Reluctantly leaving his wife and hero-worshipping son at home, Swagger flies off to Cuba in 1953 to act as a bodyguard for "Boss" Harry Etheridge, a rainmaking Southern

congressman who proposes investigating the influence of New York gangsters on the Guantanamo Naval Base. Almost as soon as his lungs fill with the humid Caribbean air, Swagger regrets accepting this assignment. Not only must he contend with posturing, backstabbing U.S. intelligence agents, but Boss Harry proves to be both incautiously lustful (forcing Earl to rescue him from a Havana brothel confrontation) and a big target for mobsters who don't want American politicians or anyone else upsetting the profitable criminal equilibrium of Batista-era Cuba. Swagger exacerbates the risk to his longevity by agreeing to help the U.S. government assassinate Cuba's revolutionary darling of the moment, Fidel Castro--a task that will pit this Arkansas lawman against a disenchanting Russian killer who's been charged with protecting and mentoring the 26-year-old agitator. Given Swagger's well-established weaponry skills, it's hardly surprising that Havana is peppered with tightly choreographed shootouts, both on dusty country roads and in a Zanja Street porno theater full of moaning patrons. That's the male fantasy part; this novel's literary inclination shows in its portrayal of Havana as a richly decadent city full of shiny-fendered Cadillacs, jaded whores, and casinos flushing money onto Florida-bound boats. While Ernest Hemingway and mob boss Meyer Lansky make cameo appearances here, only Castro leaves much of an impression, whether he's bumbling through an attack on a military barracks or defending himself against a father who thinks him lazy, vain, and "womanly" ("I am between opportunities, but I swear to you, I am a man of destiny"). Although Swagger's climactic gunfight tests the limits of credibility, Havana remains an unusually substantive page-turner, expertly blending hostilities with humor and heart.

--J. Kingston Pierce

Extrait Chapter 1

It was a perfect O. It floated from the smoker's mouth, an amazing confabulation, and then caught a small charge of wind and began to drift, widening, bending a little, until at last, high among the buildings, it atomized to wisps, and then nothing. "How the fug they do that, Lenny?" Frankie Carbine asked. "It's a machine, Frankie. They have machines for everything now'days. You got a machine there too, Frankie." It was true. Inside his overcoat was a machine from across the seas, Denmark, a place so far away Frankie couldn't begin to imagine it. Not that he would have tried. Frankie didn't care much for stuff like that. Anyway, this machine was a gun, just an assortment of tubes and housings and plastic handles and prongs and things that slid in and out. It was a Danish Model 46 9mm submachine gun with a thirty-two-round magazine, though Frankie, not interested either in the technical, didn't know that. Someone who knew guns somewhere in the thing said this was the best gun made for the kind of work the thing did. Frankie had no imagination for the theoretical: he just knew that it was much lighter and more concealable than the old-fashioned tommy guns because its stock was a bent metal shape on hinges -- which meant it could be folded and made smaller -- and that it fired faster, kicked less and was easier to use. You pointed it, you sprayed, you walked away. That was his job. Frankie -- born Franco Caribinieri forty-three years earlier in Salerno, moved to Brooklyn when four, a common enough trajectory for a midlevel soldier -- idly watched as another vaporous O was manufactured and dispatched into the loud air near Times Square, courtesy of the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. Camels, said the launching platform, a billboard that sheathed the entire front of the building between 44th and 45th right on Broadway, NO. 1 FOR SMOKING PLEASURE. The hole that belched the ring was cleverly situated at the mouth of the painted face of a movie-star handsome fellow, while over his shoulder some classy blonde dame with lips like roses looked seductively out upon the anonymous masses who hastened by foot, automobile, bus and cab through the great metropolitan space. The air was almost blue with smoke, the people were gray with exhaustion, worry or hurry, the cars were still mostly black except for the cabs which were yellow, and everybody was in a hurry. It was also loud. Honks, squeals, yells, the roar of engines, all of it pounding away. It gave you a headache. Frankie loved it. He sat in the back seat of a freshly stolen '47 DeSoto, black; he shared the cushion with a teddy bear, a doll and a Lone Ranger comic book. He wore a blue serge pinstriped suit, a black wool overcoat (to keep the gun hidden, not to keep him warm; it was spring and in the sixties) and, because everyone he knew and respected did, a black fedora pulled low over his eyes. "I wonder, I got time for an Orange Julius?" asked Lenny. It was an easy reach; the OJ stand was just across the sidewalk from the parked car, sandwiched between two theaters (Roman Holiday at one and Target Zero at the other), a souvenir shop, an entrance to the commercial floors above, and then a shabby bookstore with FRENCH BOOKS in big letters above it. "No," said Frankie. "You can get an OJ another fuggin' time. I don't want to come out of that place and find you wit' an OJ in your hand and the car turned off." "Frankie, it's an easy one. You get close, you squeeze, you see brains, you turn, we drive away." "It's always easy, until it's hard," said Frankie. Someone tapped on the farside window. It was a kid, Dominic's boy, fifteen, and he'd spotted the mark coming down the street. He made brief eye contact with Frankie, who repaid the gesture with a wink and a smile -- the boy loved Frankie, seeing him as one of the

coolest guys in New York -- and departed. "Yeah, I got him too," said Lenny. "You see him, Frankie?" "Yeah, yeah, I got him." The mark was a tall sprig of a guy in a raincoat. He had two salesman's bags under his arms and two black bags of approximately the same size under his eyes. His name was unimportant, his background meaningless, his identity unworthy of attention. He was hawking California wares in New York territory and he'd found a clown dumb enough to consider buying at quite a discount for being first, only he didn't know that someone in his own little fiefdom had already ratted him out. It was nothing a great one would be involved in. All that was finished now. Those had been great days, but somehow Frankie never got close to the action; he was just a mechanic on the outskirts, a gun toter for a crew that was affiliated to a mob that was affiliated to a bigger mob. He went, he did, he managed. But once at a club he'd seen them: the great Bennie Siegel, now dead, the great Meyer Lansky, now exiled, the great Lucky Luciano, with the one dead eye, now deported, such movie-star men, men of charisma and grace and beauty, the center of the universe. There was the romance of the life he loved: the power, the women, the way men made room, the respect, the way people acknowledged your importance. He loved that. He'd never had a fuggin' taste of it, not even a smell; he was just a cheap fug with a gun. So he was waiting outside a dirty-pix store to do a quickie, and get out. Five hundred bucks in the till, a yard for Lenny the driver, that's all. They watched as the mark slipped into the door beneath the FRENCH BOOKS sign and disappeared. "I'll smoke a ciggie, Lenny. Let 'em get comfy, get set up, get cool. Then Frankie Carbine transacts his business and we're home by noon." "A great plan, Frankie." So Frankie lit another cigarette, and tried to blow smoke rings for a few minutes, and his never quite cohered like the giant masterpieces floating above: another frustration, and the perfect illustration of the life he had as opposed to the life he wanted. "Okay," he finally said. "Good luck, killer," said Lenny. Frankie left the car and walked swiftly to the store, making eye contact with no one. No one noticed him, which was not a bad thing, for he was, he knew, an odd customer: a fellow in a heavy overcoat on a warm day, with one hand deep in his pocket, where it actually slid through the slash in his coat so it could grasp the grip of the Danish submachine gun. His coat hung too straight, because in the other pocket were two more thirty-two-round magazines, each weighing a pound and a half. His hat was too low, like Georgie Raft's in a picture. His suit was dark, he was a glowering death figure, a movie gangster, come to call. But no one noticed. It was New York, after all; who notices such things, when there is so much else to notice? Frankie evaded a popcorn cart, slipped behind a nigger working a three-card-monte con on stiffs, smelled hot dogs from another vendor on the street, wished he had time for a chocolate Yoo-Hoo, a favorite of his, and turned into the store. He had been in such places before and so nothing shocked him, except that every week it seemed they were getting more and more bold in what they sold. The windows had been painted black for privacy, and the interior lit by fluorescent glow, which cast a dead-bone color on everything and dazzled off the cellophane. There was a lot of cellophane, and behind it, flesh, everywhere, saggy and pale and raw, things you could see nowhere else. This broad had oval-shaped nipples, that one bad teeth and stretch marks, this one was a hot piece, the next your mother's mother's sister. Packets of cards lay on tables, sealed but promising whores showing off butts or coochies. The nudist camp stuff occupied its own tables, most of it from Germany, where dumpy blonde dames stood with towels covering their hair-pies, smiling as if photographed at a church picnic. Over on that wall men's magazines sold war atrocity laced with sex, where Japs were torturing busty American nurses behind screaming red headlines like BUNA BLOOD BATH! Behind the counter, reels of 16mm stag movies in boxes blank but for numbers had been filed, and maybe they gave you a glimpse of something you never saw anyplace except Havana, but you had to pay big for it. The smell of disinfectant hung in the air, and a bruiser cruised the aisles looking for dirty boys who were jiggling themselves under their clothes; that was never permitted. They had to be tossed. But Frankie knew the big kid wouldn't stand in his way, not once the fun started. That was the point of a subgun, even a Danish one: it spoke so loud and powerfully, Joes just melted into puddles of nothingness in its presence. Quickly, Frankie checked the place out, seeing only furtive men locked on what they were considering buying and sneaking home in lunch buckets or briefcases. Nobody would ever admit to being in such a place so no witnesses would come forth and no statements would be signed. That was what was so great. Frankie edged through the throng, bumping into a guy gazing yearningly at Black Garters magazine, and another, a homo, in the homo section where Male Call seemed to be the big item. At the cash register a surly creep reigned supreme and guarded access to the stag movies; behind that was the window of the office. Frankie might have to pop the creep first before he had a clear shot at the two in the office. He could see them, bent over the new product line from the sample cases. Shit, color! These California pricks had gotten so well established they could print out in color. Frankie's understanding of the business -- any

business -- was limited, but he understood that color was the next big thing in nudie books and pix. No wonder the big boys were so interested in sending a message to California: deal through us or stay off our turf. "Hey," said the clerk. "You here to buy or just to poke your pud? Get your goddamned mitts out of your pockets, pally, or take a hike." Frankie decided the man's fate in a second. It pissed him off to be dismissed so roughly. This fuggin' thinks he's tough? "Yeah, here's your hike," said Frankie. He shrugged to spread his coat and raised the muzzle of the gun, his left hand coming around to grab the magazine, clamping down a safety lever behind the magazine housing. The clerk's face went numb and he just froze up, like a guy who sees the car coming and knows there's no point. There wasn't one, either. Frankie fired. Three shots, but they ripped out in a millionth of a second or so it seemed, that's how fast the fuggin' gun fired. The light -- not much was there to begin with, but there was maybe a little -- left the clerk's eyes as the bullets speared him, and he said "Thelma!" to Frankie as he slid down. The moment froze. It was dead silent. Nobody moved, nobody looked, nobody even farted. The echo of the three shots seemed to clang through the smoke and the only noise was the light metallic grind of the spent casings rolling on the floor. The acrid smell of the burned powder overpowered and dissolved the disinfectant stench. The two men at the desk through the window looked at Frankie, who now transacted his day's labor. He fired through the glass, and watched it fracture into sleet, like the glinty spray of a Flatbush trolley through new snow on a winter afternoon in a long-lost childhood, all chaos and sparkle; and the bullets were like the arrival of a tornado, for as they dissolved the glass, they dissolved what lay behind the glass. The desk erupted in a riot of splinters and dust and smoke and nudie books flew into the air as if seized by a whirlwind. You couldn't say the two stiffs didn't know what hit them, because Frankie knew they did, in that split second when they'd looked over to him and seen their deaths in his eye. But in another second they were gone, for the bullets bullied them relentlessly, causing them to jerk and twist and lurch. One fell back into his chair and went limp, the other rose, twisted as if on fire, and beat with his hands at the things that tore him up, but then he slid to the ground, his skull hitting the linoleum with a thud. Again, silence. Each man lay still. Then not still: as if dams had been burst, a sudden torrent of blood began to empty from each penetrated man, from a dozen new orifices. So much, so fast; it soaked them, running from broken face to burned shirt to twisted arm to splayed fingers to hard floor, spreading in a satiny pool. Frankie squirted them again, to make sure. He turned, realizing the gun was empty, and hit a little lever to drop the one mag. Neatly he fitted another one in, felt it snap in place. Then he looked up. This was not working out. There before him, with a stunned look on his face and a copy of Gal Leg in his hand, a uniformed New York City policeman stood in stupefaction equal to Frankie's. The two armed men faced each other. "NO!" Frankie screamed, imploring the cop to cooperate as he knew clipping cops led to career difficulties, but the cop refused to cooperate, and his hand went inside his double-breasted coat and tugged the cop Colt out, and Frankie watched, as it seemed to be taking forever. He should have smacked him hard in the head with the gun barrel, but he didn't think fast enough, and about an hour later the cop got the revolver unlimbered, actually paused to cock the hammer with his thumb, and raised it onto Frankie, who again screamed "NO!" except that the word was lost in the thunder of the gun. It fired so fast, it slithered and twitched like a snake in his hands, desperate to escape. The cop fell sideways and back, the revolver clattering to the ground. He too immediately began to issue copious amounts of liquid from new openings. This was the one that unlocked the frozen customers. Now, frantically, they broke for the door, fighting each other to escape the madman's bullets. Someone broke the black painted window and rolled out, admitting a sudden piercing blaze of fresh light, which in turn caught the smoke and dust heaving in the air, glinted off of tits and coochies. The panic was contagious, for now it struck Frankie, and he too lost control and ran, as if fleeing a mad gunman, utterly forgetting the fact that he was the mad gunman. Again, it took a while. But eventually, the passage cleared and Frankie stepped out. He saw two things immediately. The first is that there was no Lenny and no car and the second was that there was a horse. It wasn't a cowboy horse at all, though for just a second that's what he thought, because cowboys were all over the place on the television now. It was a police horse, and on its back was a policeman and it cantered through traffic down Broadway, right at him, amid a screech of horns, and the screams of people who dived this way and that. Fug, thought Frankie. The officer on horseback had possibly himself seen a lot of television, for he had his gun drawn and he leaned over the neck of the plunging horse and began to fire at Frankie. Of course on the television or in the movies, somebody always falls, usually shot in the arm or shoulder, when this one is pulled off, but in real life nothing at all happened as the bullets went wild, though Frankie had a impression in his peripheral vision of a window breaking. Onward, onward rode the horseman, though nobody knew the reason why. Possibly it was stupidity, possibly heroic will, possibly an accident, he just rode right at Frankie

through the traffic, cut between cars to the sidewalk and cantered on as if to crush Frankie to the pavement. Frankie watched in horror, seeing the wide red eyes of the animal, filled with fear, the lather of foamy sweat, hearing the clatter of the iron-shod hooves against the pavement, and the heavy, labored breathing of the animal which was, he now saw, immense compared to him, and just about to squish him like a bug. He never made the decision because there wasn't a decision to be made, but Frankie found himself the sole proprietor of a rather angry Danish machine gun, which in about two seconds flat emptied itself into the raging animal. He himself heard nothing, for shooters in battle conditions rarely do. He felt the gun, however, shivering as it devoured its magazine, and sensed the spray of spent cartridges as they were spat from the breech this way and that, hot like pieces of fresh popcorn. The animal was hit across the chest, and, opened up in the process of the slaughter, it reared back in pain and panic, flipping its tiny rider to the pavement with a shudder. Then, huge and whinnying piteously, it fell to its forelegs, awash in blood from the sundered chest, and from its mouth and nose where blood from its lungs had overwhelmed its throat and nasal tubes. It thrashed, tried to rise because it had no clear concept of the death that now stalked through its body, and then its great head slid forward and it was still. "Fungola!" cursed Frankie, tossing the empty gun.

He looked and prayed for Lenny but Lenny had long since quit the field. Sirens arose and it seemed that several brave citizens were pointing at him. "You killed a horse!" a lady spat. Frankie did not think it the right time to offer explanations, and turned toward an alley and began to run like holy hell. Copyright 2003 by

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