

# HAVANA



*How the Mob Owned Cuba—  
And Then Lost It to the Revolution*

# NOCTURNE

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T. J. ENGLISH

 HarperCollins e-books

In memory of Armando Jaime Casielles  
(1931–2007)

*y para el pueblo cubano*

And in my imagination's dreams I see the nation's  
representatives dancing, drunk with enthusiasm,  
eyes blindfolded, their movements dizzying, their  
momentum inexhaustible . . . Amid this sinister  
splendor, a red specter lets out a strident cackle.  
They dance . . . Dance now, dance.

—José Martí, *Cuban patriot*

She can wiggle her ass, but she  
can't sing a goddamn note.

—Meyer Lansky on Ginger Rogers,  
*opening night at the Copa Room,  
Havana, Cuba, 1957*



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## INTRODUCTION

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**ON STORMY DAYS AND NIGHTS IN HAVANA, CUBA, THE** ocean batters the sea wall that rims the northern edge of the city. Waves crash against the rocks and splash upward, spraying the sidewalk, avenue, and cars driving along the famous waterfront promenade known as the Malecón. Briny saltwater rushes inward sometimes as much as a full city block. Huge puddles ebb and flow as the result of turbulent winds that sweep down from the north—*Los Nortes*, Cubans call them. Pedestrians and cars are forced to use inland streets to avoid the expanding pools. Water seeps into cracks and crevices, eating away at an already crumbling infrastructure. On days and nights like these, it is as if *La Habana* were under siege from a powerful, pounding deluge that threatens to undermine the very groundwork on which this glorious Caribbean city was founded.

Half a century ago, another kind of tempest swept across this storied island republic. Unlike the tropical squalls that form in the Gulf of Mexico and assault the city from the north, what happened in the decades of the late 1940s and '50s was initiated from within the country's political and economic structure.

At first, this upheaval appeared to have a positive side: if it was a

malignant force, it was a malignant force that came bearing gifts. Over a seven-year period—from 1952 to 1959—the city of Havana was the beneficiary of staggering growth and development. Large hotel-casinos, nightclubs, tourist resorts, tunnels, and highways were constructed in a whirlwind of activity. Neon, glitter, the mambo, and sex became the hallmarks of a thriving tourist business. The allure of organized gambling, along with fabulous nightclub floor shows and beautiful women, brought an influx of money into the city.

The flash, ample flesh, and entertainment venues in Havana were the most obvious manifestations of the gathering storm. The gaudy gambling emporiums, racetracks, and back-door sex shows brought in the tourists and created a veneer of prosperity, but the true force behind the maelstrom was bicoastal in nature.

The fabulous nightlife was a lure used by the Cuban government to attract foreign investors, mostly from the United States. The country's most precious resources—sugar, oil, forestry, agriculture, refineries, financial institutions, and public utilities—were all up for sale. Foreign capital washed over the island. Throughout the post-World War II years and into the 1950s, direct U.S. business investments in Cuba grew from \$142 million to \$952 million by the end of the decade. Such was the extent of American interest in Cuba that this island, roughly the size of the state of Tennessee, ranked in third place among the nations of the world receiving U.S. investments.

The financial largesse that flooded Cuba could have been used to address the country's festering social problems. Hunger, illiteracy, subhuman housing, a high infant mortality rate, and the dispossession of small farmers had been facts of life in Cuba throughout the island's turbulent history. It is true that Havana had one of the highest standards of living in all of Latin America, but this prosperity was not spread evenly throughout the nation. And as the decade wore on, the gulf between the haves and the have-nots continued to widen.

To those who cared to look below the surface, it was apparent that Cuba's startling economic windfall was not being used to meet the

needs of the people but rather to pad the private bank accounts and pocketbooks of a powerful group of corrupt politicians and American “investors.” This economic high command would come to be known as the Havana Mob.

It is a historical fact—and also a subject of considerable folklore in Cuba and the United States—that the Havana Mob comprised some of the most notorious underworld figures of their day. Charles “Lucky” Luciano, Meyer Lansky, Santo Trafficante, Albert Anastasia, and other gangsters who came to Havana in the late 1940s and 1950s were men who had honed their craft and amassed or inherited their wealth during the “glory days” of Prohibition in the United States. These mobsters had always dreamed of one day controlling their own country, a place where they could provide gambling, narcotics, booze, prostitution, and other forms of vice free from government or law enforcement intrusion.

Gaming and leisure were only part of the equation. The idea formulated by Luciano, Lansky, and others was for Havana to serve as the front for a far more ambitious agenda: the creation of a criminal state whose gross national product, union pension funds, public utilities, banks, and other financial institutions would become the means to launch further criminal enterprises around the globe. The Havana Mob could then bury the profits from these criminal operations underneath the patina of a “legitimate” government in Cuba and no one would be able to touch them.

Political developments on the island would play a large role in determining the Mob’s fortunes in Cuba, but its efforts were also shaped by events back home. Luciano and Lansky may have wanted to establish Cuba as a base of operation as far back as the 1920s, but history sometimes got in the way. Economic downturns, wars, and the efforts of U.S. law enforcement caused retrenchments and changes in strategy. The plan was not formulated in its final form until the postwar years of the late 1940s, and even then there were interruptions. Much of the onus would fall on Lansky, who would devote a good portion of his adult life to formulating the necessary relationships and providing the impetus.