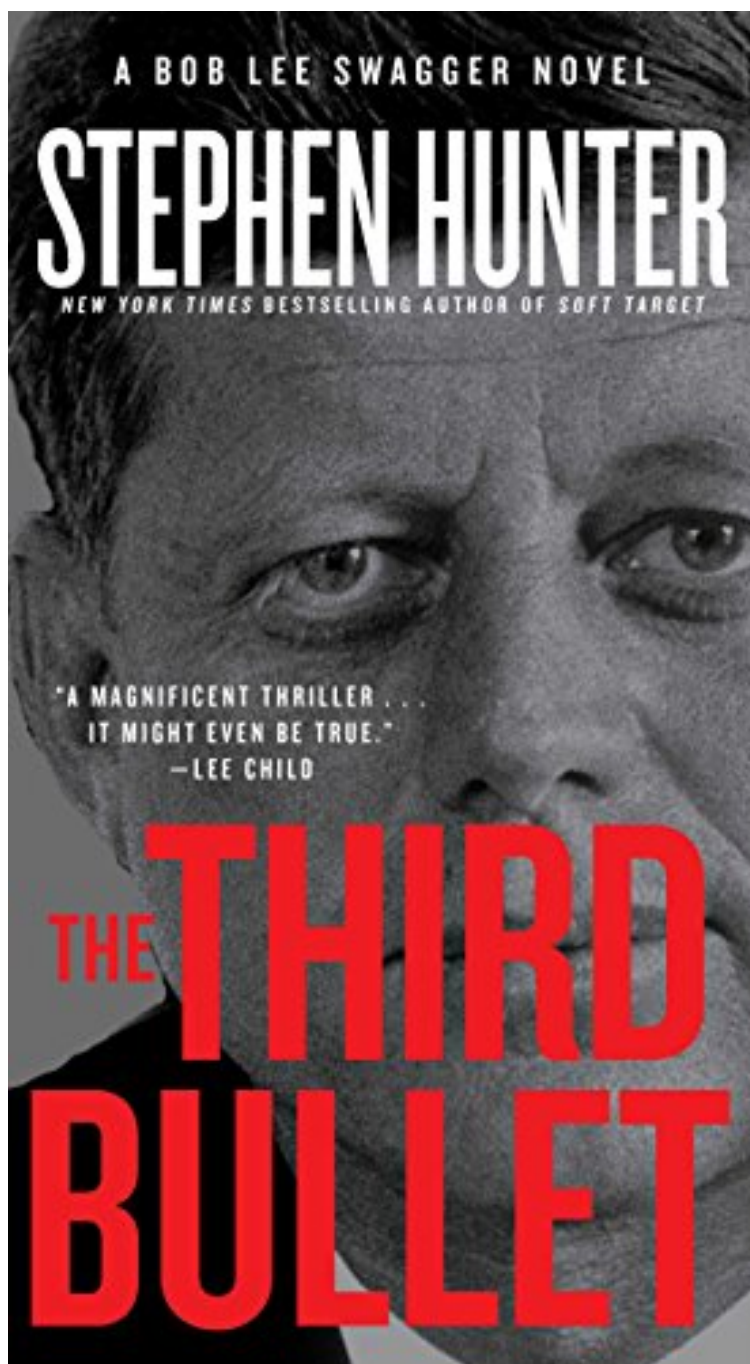


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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFormer marine sniper Bob Lee Swagger investigates one of the most enduring controversies of our timethe JFK assassinationin this New York Times bestselling terrific thriller (Booklist, starred review).Bestselling author Stephen Hunter takes on one of the most shocking crimes in American

history when his celebrated hero ex-Marine sniper Bob Lee Swagger follows the smallest hint of a lead to its staggering conclusion about the fateful third bullet that ended the life of President John F. Kennedy. . .

.ExtraitThird Bullet CHAPTER 2 Idaho In Cascade, everybody goes to Ricks. Even Swagger. He showed up every once in a while, maybe three, four times a month, preceded by myth, isolated by reputation, and cloaked in diffidence. He sat alone, if he came, at the counter, and had a couple of cups of coffee, black. Jeans, old boots, some kind of jacket, and a faded red Razorbacks ball cap. He could have been a drifter or a trucker or a rancher or a gunfighter. The body was rangy, without fat, slightly tense, also radiating signals of damage. He always arrived, if he was to arrive at all, at 5 a.m. with the ranchers. It was said he had trouble sleeping, said, that is, by Swagger watchers, since the man himself spoke hardly a word and if he was still awake when the sun cracked the edge of the world, he'd drive from his place out on 144 to Ricks, not so much to join in the community but to reassure himself that community was there. That was pretty much Ricks purpose in the general scheme of things. The food wasn't much, it was primarily a breakfast place whose short-order cook knew every way to wreck an egg and had the gift for the right fusion of crunch, grease, and chew to pan-fried potatoes and the early risers who drove the Cascade economy, paid the taxes, hired the Mexicans, guided hunters for a week or so in the fall, and plowed the roads, always stopped there to fuel up for whatever the long day of honest labor held in store. Swagger, though no glad-hander, seemed to like the company, to enjoy the ranch badinage and the talk of Boise State football and the weather complaints, because he knew no fool would come up to him with questions or requests or offers, and that these sinewy gentlemen, themselves joshers but not speech givers, always played by the rules. As for them, they knew only what they'd heard, though they weren't sure where they heard it. War hero. Retired marine. Lots of deep-grass stuff in a war that we lost. Supposedly the best shot in the West, or at any rate, a hell of a shot. Gun guy, got a lot of stuff from Midway USA and Brownells. A late-arriving daughter, Japanese by birth, who was the twelve-and-under girls roping champ and seemed born to horseback. Beautiful wife, kept to self, running the barns the family owned in three or was it four states. Business success. Knew of the big world and chose to live in this one. Out of a movie, someone said, and someone else said, Except they don't make them kinds of movies no more, and everybody laughed and agreed. That was the easy truce that reigned at Ricks, and even Rick and his two gals, Shelly and Sam, seemed okay with it. That is, until the Chinese woman showed up. Well, possibly she wasn't Chinese. She was Asian, of an indefinite age somewhere between young and not young, with a strong nose and dark, smart eyes that could pierce steel if she so desired. Though she seldom showed it, she had a smile that could break hearts and change minds. She was short, rather busty, and looked pretty damned tough for someone who was probably soft in all the right places. She showed at 5, took a seat at the counter, ordered coffee, and read something on her Kindle for two hours. At 7, she left. Nice tipper. Pleasant, distant, not an outreach, but at the same time completely unfazed by the masculine brio of the 5 a.m. ranch crowd at Ricks. She came every day for two weeks, never missing, never reaching out, maintaining her silence and her secrecy. It didn't take the fellows long to figure out that none of them was of interest to a crafty, contained beauty, so she had to be there for Swagger. She was stalking him. A reporter, a book writer, a Hollywood agent, somebody who saw a way to make some bucks from whatever secrets Swaggers war mask of a face concealed without murmur or tremor. Yet when he came in, she made no move toward him, nor he noticed her instantly, as he noticed everything instantly toward her. They sat with an empty stool between them at the counter, each drinking black coffee, while she read and he ruminated or remembered or whatever it was he did when he came in. This ritual continued for another week or two, and it consumed the Cascade gossip circuits, such as they were. Finally, almost as if to satisfy the town gabbers instead of any genuine impulse of his own, he walked over to her. Ma'am? Yes? she said, looking up. In the light, he saw that she was quite beautiful. Ma'am, it seems the fellows here believe you're in town to have a chat with a man named Swagger. Im Swagger. Hello, Mr. Swagger. I wanted to spare you any more trouble, because I imagine you've got better places than Ricks in Cascade, Idaho, to spend your time. I have essentially retired from the world, and if you're here to see me, I have to disappoint you. I don't see anyone. My wife, my daughters, and my son, that's about it. I just sit on a rocking chair and watch the sun move across the sky. I don't do a thing no more. My wife does the work. So whatever it is you want, Im sparing you the time by telling you it's probably not going to happen. And this is more than Ive said in a year, so I better stop while Im ahead. That's fine, Mr. Swagger, she said. Time isn't the issue. Ill stay years if I have to. Im in this for the long haul. He didn't know what to say in response. He just knew he had no need whatsoever to go back to what he called, in the argot of that war so many years ago, The World. Each time he went, it seemed to cost him. The last time it had cost him a woman he'd allowed

himself to care about, and he did not relish a revisit to that grief, at least during waking hours. He had enough to worry about with two daughters and a son, and at sixty-six, with a steel ball for a hip, enough scar tissue across his raggedy old body to show up on satellites, and so many memories of men dying, he needed no more adventures, no more losses, no more grief. He was afraid of them. Then she said, I know about you and what you did in the war. It seems to be a profession that prizes patience. You sit, you wait. You wait, you wait, you wait. Isn't that right? Waiting is a part of it, yes ma'am. Well, I can do nothing to impress you. I can't shoot, ride, climb, or fight. No book I've read would amaze you, no accomplishment I've achieved would register on your radar screen. But I will show you patience. I will wait you out. This week, the next, this month, the next, on and on. I will wait you out, Mr. Swagger. I will impress you with my patience. It was a terrific answer, one he'd never counted on. He let no emotion cross the Iron Age shield that was his face.

Possibly he blinked those lizard eyes, or ran tongue over dried lips, as he was a dry old coot, wary and contained, who made noise when he moved because one adventure or another had left him with a limp, and even if the wind and the sun had turned his face the color of Navajo pottery, his eyes had somehow bled themselves of color and were reptilian irises, untainted by empathy. Yes ma'am, he said. So we'll wait each other out. It took over three weeks. Each time he showed, he thought she'd be gone. But there she was, tucked away in the corner, not looking up, her face illuminated by the glow of the reading machine or whatever it was. He skipped for ten days straight and assumed that would surely drive her away. It did not. Finally, halfway into the fourth week, she went to her rented car in the general cloud of pickups pulling out for the day's first duty station and found his truck, a black Ford F-150, next to hers. He lounged against its fender, ropy and lean in his baseball cap, a high-plains drifter, a Shane, a truck driver off the interstate. All right, he said. If you were in this for money, you'd be long gone. If you're crazy, the jabbering of those old men in this joint would have sent you off to the nut bin. What I'm getting is some kind of stubborn in you that usually equals high purpose. You win. I'll give you what you want, as much as I can and stay my own man. It's not much, she said. No, no money, no contracts, no angles. I'm not from a big flashy city, just a blue-collar rust bucket called Baltimore. I want your judgment, that's all. You know things I don't. I want to put something before you, and then I want you to tell me if it's anything or if it's craziness, coincidence, whatever. That's all, except I forgot the best part: it's very dull and boring. All right, he said, you have earned the right to bore me. I can be bored, it's not a problem. Can you meet me at the T.G.I.F.s off the interstate in Iron Springs tomorrow at two? It's a crap-hole, but it's crowded and loud and nobody'll notice a thing. We'll drink coffee and talk. I chose that place because I don't want the old goats in this place all giddy over seeing us. Fair enough, Mr. Swagger. I'll see you there. She was punctual and found him sitting in a booth in the rear of the gaudy place, whose cheesy cheerfulness seemed in counterpoint to his grave countenance and all the hollows and planes of his tight old face, with its deltas of fissure extending from each eye like the broken cataracts of an ancient river of kings. Or maybe, sans the warrior romance, he was just a beat-to-hell old guy.

Meanwhile, the kind of citizen who defines the interstate as freedom and paradise swirled and bobbed through the busy place, raising clamor, eating ice cream, yelling at children, and exhibiting all the discontents of motorized civilization that one can manage. Ma'am? Say, I don't even have a name for you. She sat across from him. My name is Jean Marquez. I'm Filipino by heritage, born and raised here. I am a journalist by profession, though this is not about a story, and I'm not working for my newspaper. I'm the daughter of two doctors, fifty-five years old, and a widow. I'm sorry to hear of your loss, Ms. Marquez. I've lost some very close people and understand the hurting. I thought you might. Anyhow, you should call me Jean. Everybody does. My husband was named James Aptapton. Does that name mean anything? Hmm, he said, and somehow, yes, it did. His mind and face fogged in search, and finally, he said, I'm coming up with some kind of writer. Wrote about snipers? Knew guns, is that right? Don't believe I ever met the fellow or read his books, but I'd run into the name here and there. I'd get asked, now that I remember, if I was some hero he wrote about, Billy Don Trueheart, something like that? Something like that. Yes, Jim was a gun guy. He was one of those men who loved guns, and if you lived with him for twenty years, as I did, you got used to guns everywhere. He eventually got wealthy enough to spend seventeen thousand dollars on a Thompson machine gun. If you want to rent a Thompson machine gun, let me know. I can let you have one at an affordable daily rate. I'll bear that in mind, but I hope my Thompson days are long over. Anyhow, the guns everywhere, the gun magazines, the biographies of people like Elmer Keith and John M. Browning, the dead animal heads, all that, that was who he was, and I knew that going in and accepted it. His politics, never, but the gun thing, it was okay because he was also funny about it, as he was funny about everything. He was also kind, and even when he became successful, he never turned into an asshole and stayed true and decent

to his kids and my family and his mother and the people he knew. It was never about getting to the table where the cool kids sat. It was about buying guns, drinking vodka, and making people laugh. Everyone who knew him is missing him and will for a long time. Is this about his death? Yes. The idiot went to a bar one night and had three instead of the allowed one martini. He walked home, reflexes all messed up, and managed to get himself killed by a hit-and-run driver. It was merciful, they say, he went fast. Im sorry. Did they catch the driver? No. Thats part of the issue. It seems that over two thousand people a year are killed by hit-and-runs, and about ninety-eight percent of those cases are solved. There are those that arent, and it is remotely possible that he was murdered. I know, I know, it was probably some kid high on meth in a hopped-up car who saw an old guy staggering down the street and stomped on the pedal. For kicks, for laughs, for the warm and fuzzy memories, I dont know. But... maybe not. I have had experience with a man who killed by car. Its more than possible. Driven by a professional, it can be a lethal instrument. I suppose youre going to tell me why this could be a murder. I am. We are at the boring part. Maybe youd better pour yourself a cup of coffee. I like your husband. I like you. Its fine. Go on, try to bore me. As I say, its a story in which almost nothing happens. It has no vivid characters, no sudden turns of fate, no dramatic reversals, no humor, no drama. Its about something that happened in a workplace a long time ago. So far, so good. It cant be verified. Its hazy in parts. It might be a hoax, though its so dreary, I cant imagine how anyone could gain anything off it. I dont have the exact dates. It was first told in a letter, then years later in another letter, then years after that in a third letter. Ive read none of the letters, and the passage of time between each installment suggests the erosion of failing memory. On top of that, my only experience with it was as told to me by my husband, and I must confess I didnt pay much attention, so my own memory is questionable as well. All in all, as evidence of a crime, its a pretty pathetic deal. It must linger? It does indeed linger. People cant quite put it aside. They think they have, and go about their lives, and then it comes back in the middle of the night and pokes them awake. It did that to the three letter writers and to my late husband. It did it to me enough times that I found out about a Mr. Bob Lee Swagger and tracked him to a flyspeck diner in a dying wide-spot in the road called Cascade, Idaho, and invested close to two months in earning an audience with him. The lingering part is very interesting. So far, youve got me hooked. We start with a young man, a recent graduate of an engineering school in Dallas, Texas. The time is unknown, but Im guessing mid-seventies. Hes smart, ambitious, hardworking, decent. He wants to join a construction firm and engineer giant buildings. The first job he gets is entry-level, for an elevator contractor. Elevators? Right. Not exactly the glamour trade. But elevators, which we all take for granted, are heavily engineered. That is, they are overdesigned, overmaintained, overregulated, and no one involved with them takes them for granted. His firm installs them and maintains them on contract so they can pass their yearly examinations and dont drop ten people fifty stories. Sounds reasonable. Its hard, crummy work. The shafts and engine rooms, as they call the motor and pulley devices that make them run, are dark, poorly ventilated, and not air-conditioned. Even more so back then. The space is cramped, and it involves a lot of twisting and bending to get access. The work is intensive and highly pressurized, because the building managers hate it when they have to shut down the elevators and the tenants hate it and everybody hates it. Are you getting a picture? I am. This young man and his crew are in the engine room on the roof of a particular building, and theyve set up lights, and theyre measuring cable wear, gear wear, electrical motor wear, lubricating, trying to work fast so they can get the box, as they call it, back in service. Its hot, crowded, and except for the light beams, dark. Not pleasant, not happy, and suddenlykaboom. Kaboom? One of the workers, maybe resting, maybe backing away to make room for someone else, maybe doing whatever you do in an elevator engine room, bumps into something on the wall, and theres a loud crash and the sound of stuff falling to the ground, a big cloud of acrid dust, everybodys coughing and wheezing. All the flashlights go onto it, and they discover that hes bumped into a shelf on the wall, and for whatever reason the screws rusted or came out, the brick or stucco or whatever gave way, the metal itself sheared when he jostled it, it collapsed, dumping its pile of whatever was stored there to the ground. Thats the action scene, by the way. The shelf falling, thats as exciting as it gets. My hearts beating so fast, I can hardly stand it. Heres the really boring part. They figure out whats wrong with the shelf, and somehow get it remounted, and start restacking the stuff on it. The stuff is carpet remnants. That is, the lobby of the building has a big carpet, and they ended up with remnants that they had to keep around for patching or whatever, so they had a shelf in the engine room and someone decided that would be a good out-of-the-way place to store the remnants. Sounds pretty top-secret to me. And someone says, Hey, look at this. Be cool if it was a rifle, huh? Or a box of ammo, a telescopic sight, a spy radio, something really James Bond? That would be very interesting. Sorry. Its just a coat. I told you it was a boring story. It aint without

interest. Please go on. It turns out to be a mans overcoat, XL, tan gabardine, fairly high-quality, in extremely good condition. Maybe almost new. It had been methodically folded and slid into the pile of carpet remnants in the engine room sometime in the past. Again, no dates, no specifics, nothing. Ive got it, said Swagger. They unfold it and immediately make a discovery. It stinks. Unfolding it puts out some kind of chemical stench, very unpleasant. Flashlights go onto it. It seems that the left breast wears a rather gaudy petro or chemical stain, and even now, who knows how many years later, the odor of that stain is powerful. It hasnt gone away. Instead of finding a free coat, theyve found a fixer-upper, which would involve dry cleaning, which might or might not get the stain and the smell out, and no one is interested, and so it goes into the trash. It is thrown out. It disappears. It is gone forever. End of story. Not much of a story, is it? No, but I give you its got some moments, Bob said. Somewhere in his rat-pointed tactical brain, he was beginning to play with them. Something had been subtly provoked. Dallas. Abandoned overcoat. Strange smell and stain. Okay, she said. The Engineer is promoted, and he leaves the firm and goes to that big construction outfit. Again, he is promoted, because hes very intelligent and hardworking. Hes the type that built America. He becomes a partner. He marries his high school girlfriend, they have three beautiful daughters and move to the suburb where partners live. He joins a country club. He becomes venerable. His daughters marry wonderful men. Im actually making up the details, but you get the picture. One of the daughters becomes engaged to the son of a rancher, another prosperous fellow. The Rancher and his wife invite the Engineer and the wife out for a get-to-know-you weekend and barbecue. Theyre sitting there in the big paneled living room looking out the picture window to the swimming pool and the white horse fences and the green meadows, and the Engineer notices something: dead animals all over the place. Turns out the Rancher is a hunter. Hes been all over the world. Lions and tigers and bears. Ibexes and sables and kudus. Theyre all drinking highballs and having a good old time and the Rancher says, Say, Don, care to see the shop? Don nods and off they go. They walk into a big gun place. Guns, heads, safes, benches, targets, photos of men with dead animals, maybe an old Marilyn calendar, tools, all that, the sort of thing my husband had, although Im guessing this Rancher kept his a lot neater than my husband did. And whammo, the Engineer is hit by an odor. Its an old, old odor. I dont know if you know it, but psychologists consider olfactory cues the strongest reminders. A smell can take you back to a time and place and re-create cues to all the other senses. So suddenly, youre back where you were when you first hit that smell, and of course, Don is back in the engine room of the elevator in that building in Dallas thirty-odd years ago. GI or Hoppes 9? Bob asked. Hoppes, she said. Yes. Barrel solvent. Chemical cleaning fluid especially for guns. Been around since the twenties. Thats what Don smells in his new pals shop, and he realizes thats what he smelled all those years ago in the building that I of course didnt name. Youre going to tell me it was the Texas Book Depository? If only. No, its the building across Houston Street from the Texas Book Depository. Its called the Dal-Tex Building. It was there in 1963 too. Dal-Tex doesnt mean Dallas, Texas, but Dallas Textiles, as it was the headquarters of the Dallas wholesale garment industry. Actually, Abraham Zapruders office was there, along with a hundred other offices. Nothing particularly special except that it did offer close to the same angle and elevation down Elm Street next to Dealey Plaza that our friend Lee Harvey Oswald used. You can see why it lingers. I can, said Bob, trying to conjure the structure from a rush of image memories of Dealey Plaza, that triangle of grass at the heart of American darkness. He got nothing, no vision, no sense of place. Its figured in a few of the thousand conspiracy theories. I checked into them; none of them are that interesting or convincing. Someone claims that a photo shows a rifle on a tripod on the fireplace, but its just shadows. There were some arrests after the building was closed down a few minutes after the shooting, but nothing came of them. Some people claim without evidence that it was one of the nine or is it twelve shooting sites that the CIA, Sears, Roebuck, the Canadian Air Force, and Proctor and Gamble used in their conspiracy. All in all, its not much. Bob nodded. But it lingers, she continued. For the Engineer, particularly. He cant get it out of his mind. You see why, dont you? The Hoppes suggests that someone had need to clean a rifle, which suggests the presence of a rifle. And you can assume the juice was somehow spilled or leaked onto the coat during the cleaning process. But the coat was carefully hidden, as if whoever had spilled the Hoppes, with its chemical smell, didnt want it exposed to the public eye or nose. Lots of folks in Texas would recognize it right away, including most policemen. It was the universal gun cleaner then. All this could have happened on or around November 22, 1963. Theres your lingering. It puts a rifle where there aint been one. But it is thin. Its real thin. It gets thinner. A few more years pass. The Engineer doesnt know what to do about it. Hes no dummy; he gets how thin it is too, way too thin to take to law enforcement. Then he reads a book. The book is called Shootout on Pennsylvania. It was written by my husband and a friend. Its the story of an assassination

attempt on Harry Truman in 1950 that ended up in a gunfight in the middle of the street in the middle of the day in the middle of downtown Washington, right across from the White House. Two men dead, three wounded. Almost totally forgotten. Anyhow, the Engineer reads the book. He reads in particular about a Secret Service agent named Floyd Barring, who was in command of the watch at Blair House, where the fight happened, and was considered the hero. He shot one of the bad guys in the head and took him down and maybe saved Harry Trumans life. The Engineer finds from the book that Floyd is still alive and that, thirteen years after being a hero in Washington, he was the agent in charge of the Secret Service advance party for the Dallas trip, and was in Dallas for the assassination and testified before the Warren Commission and all that. The Engineer takes a shine to Floyd, who seems upright, decent, hardworking, committed. Since Floyd is retired yet invested in the assassination, he seems like a candidate to hear the Engineers tale. So heres the first letter: the Engineer writes to Floyd and details everything I have laid out to you. You never read the letter, however. Not even close. Im telling you more or less what I later heard from Jim when I wasnt listening hard. Swagger nodded, seeing the old agent getting the thick packet from an unknown person in Dallas and slowly considering its contents. What did this Secret Service guy do? For whatever reason, nothing. In fact, he probably threw it out. Crazy Kennedy bullshit, you know the drill. He was sick of it, as hed figured in some theories too, and he didnt like it. He was also in ill health, living in a geriatric apartment in Silver Spring, mourning the death of his wife, and knew he didnt have much time. I see. Yet it lingered. He couldnt put it out of his mind. A few years after that, he writes a letterhalf a letterto my husband. He never finishes it. He never sends it. Maybe he thinks better of it. Who knows? Anyway, he dies. And that would seem to be that. No more lingering. The lingering is over. But then: his daughter finds the letter a few years later. So she sends it on to Jim. So years after the coat was found, years after the identity of the smell was discovered, years after it was communicated to a retired Secret Service agent, years after he died, courtesy of his daughter, it was sent to my husband. And he sees the possibilities? More than most. Hes looking for a project. He has a contract that calls for a book a year, hes just finished one, but theres no rest for the wicked, and when he gets the half-written letter that Floyd almost sent him concerning the lost letter the Engineer sent to Floyd, he sees something. He spends a few days researching, looking at maps, reading books or at least examining them, and then he has some kind of eureka moment. He claims hes solved the JFK assassination. I suspect vodka played a part. It turns out he means he has an idea no one else has had. And he has to go to Dallas. And so he goes to Dallas. Was he successful? He talked to a bunch of people, I think he got into Dal-Tex, he came back very excited. He started working like a madman. One day a week later, he goes off to a bar for a drink and ends up with a broken back and pelvis in an alley. You think he was killed because he was looking into a certain idea about JFKs death? I havent said that. Ive spoken only in facts, and the fact is that now Im the worlds sole possessor of the story. And it lingers. I cant get it out of my head, and the connection between it and Jims immediate death by possible homicide wont let me sleep at night. I have to do every last thing to make sure that the story is properly processed. Someone has to deal with it, judge it, assess it, contextualize it, someone who knows this stuff and has worked in this world. I have nominated you for that high honor. So now I ask the question I came all this way for. Is it anything? He let out a large breath. What does that signify? she asked. You think Im an idiot? The whole thing is nonsense? What a colossal waste of time? No. I can see how it provokes. I aint denying that. And Im not saying Im a hundred percent Warren Commission lone-gunner guy. I havent looked at it hard enough, but I do think, like you, that a lot of the theories are stuff people dreamed up to make a buck. I also think that the thing has been looked at so much by so many people for so long that its highly unlikely theres anything left unfound. Fair enough. Let me put it before you in a different way, all right? I think youre missing something, and I think your husband missed it and Floyd missed it, all the way back to the Engineer. That thing you all missed is Texas. Texas is gun country. You may have to explain why you have a gun in Baltimore, but you sure dont in Texas. Everyone has a gun in Texas. They have em to wear to barbecues or the opera or the swim meet. Nobody blinks an eye, and that was especially true down there then, before JFK. Nobody thought a thing about a gun. It just was, thats all. The presence of a gun in that building isnt remarkable. In fact, its nothing. I can think of a hundred reasons for a gun in that building other than killing a president. Maybe some boys were heading out for deer season straight from work. Save time, get there opening-day morning. They brought their rifles in, and one of them knew his needed cleaning, so he does the job. Nobody says a thing because it aint remarkable. He leans the gun in a corner and it rubs up against somebodys coat. When that guy gets his coat, he sees its ruined, it goes into the wastebasket, and later that night the janitor finds it and decides to scavenge it. He hangs it up to dry out, but Hoppes being powerful,

the stink never does go away. So he stuffs it somewhere, meaning to check it out later, and forgets about it.

Years later, the elevator people discover it. That could have happened not just for deer season but in pheasant season too, as they kill a lot of them birds down there, and doves and pigeons and anything that flies. So you have found the suggestion of a gun in a building in Texas, and it surprises you only because you dont know guns or Texas. I see, she said. MaamJean, if I mayyouve got what the Marine Corps would call intelligence that doesnt rise to the actionable level. It doesnt carry enough meaning to be acted on. There are too many other possibilities here for anyone to do anything about it. My best advice is to congratulate yourself for following up on your duty to your husband and then go back to your life. I think your husband would have found that out in time too. Maybe he could do something with his discovery if it were a fiction book, but I dont see it as having any real meaning in the world, and it sure didnt have anything to do with his death. Sorry to be so blunt, but you didnt come all this way and invest all this time for sugarcoating. No, I didnt, Mr. Swagger. I believe youve set me straight. I hope I helped, maam. And Im very sorry about your husband. Maybe by the time you get back, they will have caught the boy. Maybe so. Let me walk you to your car, and well get you out of this godforsaken place. Thank you. They both rose as he peeled off a few bills for the waitress and headed out to her Fusion. I guess well never know, she said as she got to her car, who ran over the mystery man with a bicycle. He was only half listening at this time, trying to sneak a look at his watch to see what time it was and how soon he could get back, because hed promised to help Miko on her low-roping skills and Im sorry, he said. What did you say? Oh, the back of the coat, it had a smear on it that appeared to represent a tread. The Engineer thought it could have been from an English bike, you know, thin-wheeled. It was an impression, about an inch long, where it looked like a tread mark had been printed.

Thats all. A minor point, I forgot to Do you have a list of the people your husband visited? I have his notebook. Its hard to read, but it does have some names and addresses there. Why, what is I have to set some things up. Itll take me a week. I want you to go home and find that notebook and FedEx it to me. If he had computer files on the Dallas trip or notepapers, get me that stuff too. Ill get down there as soon as Im set up. Do you want to borrow the tommy gun? No, not yet. Youre not joking, are you? No maam. Do you want me to help defray the expenses? I mean, I seem to be wealthy now, and I No maam, said Swagger. This ones on me.[Third Bullet CHAPTER 1 Baltimore The sidewalk before him bucked and heaved, blown askew by high winds howling through the night. Oh, wait. No. Lets edit that. There was no bucking and heaving. Ditto with the blown askew and the high winds howling through the night. It just seemed so to Aptapton, because the winds that toyed with the stability of the sidewalk blewhowledonly through his own mind. They were zephyrs of vodka, and theyd substantially loosened his grip on the solidity of the little chunk of earth that lay between the bar hed just exited and the house where he lived, a few hundred yards ahead. Aptapton: alcoholic, writer, success, melancholiac, and gun guy, was in a zone that might be called greater than a buzz but less than a full staggering drunk. He was one sheet to the wind, you might say, happyhappyhappyhappy, as three vodka martinis will do to a fellow with only moderate capacity for drink, and what lay ahead, although slightly challenging, didnt really seem insurmountable. After all, he had to walk only another few feet, cross the street, and then Digression. Pause for autobiographical interlude. Its allowed when under the influence. One thing suggests another, and in this case the suggestion is appropriate. The street was called Light, and that suggested a kind of hopeful conclusion to the evening. Light as in light of heart, light of spirit, light at end of tunnel, light as in amusing, fey, witty, light as symbol of hope and life. But also: Light as in Light for All, as a famous newspaper, located a mile or so up the very same Light Street, had proclaimed on a daily basis for 175 years or so, twenty-six of which hed spent in its employ and where his wife to this day toiled. Yes, he was that James Aptapton, minor local journo celeb whod gone on to minor fame as a writer for money of hardcover books about gunfights and the stoic heroes who won them, and now he found himself at sixty-five improbably successful (in a small way) and awkwardly pleased to be himself. He had it all: beautiful wife, a couple of mil, a nice house in a fabulous part of town, a minor reputation (enough to take some pleasure in), a grand future, a munificent multibook contract, a really cool project ahead, and a lot of guns. The reason for the three vodka martinis was liberation, not celebration. His wife was absent, ha ha ha, too bad for her. She was at some newsroom woman thing, birthday party, maybewhy did women take birthdays so seriously, by the way?and so hed wandered on his own to the nearby bistro, had a burger with a Bud and then V.1, which weakened his resolve to resist V.2, which shattered his resolve to resist V.3. Fortunately, thered been no V.4, or hed be asleep in the mens room. Now. Where was I before digression? What place is this? Where am I now? Ha ha ha ha. Oh yes: home is the hunter. He. Was. Walking. Home. The street slanted, then rolled. Ahead, it humped up, then dipped down to permit a view of

the valley. It rocked. It rolled. It shook, it rattled, it coiled, it double-bubbled, boiled, and troubled. He laughed. Do you find yourself amusing? his wife always asked, and the truth was, yes, he did find himself amusing. The mood, like the geography, chemically amplified by red potato crushed by kulak descendants, was quite good. That James Aptapton had been recognized. It happened. Rare, but not without precedent for your minor-league non-qual-lit celeb. Mr. Aptapton? Halfway through V.3, hed looked up to see an earnest young fellow, possibly the assistant manager. I just wanted to say, Ive read all your books. My dad turned me on to them. I really, really love them. Well, said Aptapton, say, thanks so much. The young man sat and gushed Aptapton love for a bit, and Aptapton tried to give him a meaningful Aptapton experience. The transaction worked out well for both of them, in fact, and at the bottom of V.3, a pause in the praise gave Aptapton the time to gracefully excuse himself, bid Tom? maybe Jack? possibly Sam? good-bye and make his exit. So his mood was mellow and radiant. Hed cross Light Street here, and only the narrow alley called Churchill lay between himself and horizontality in bed, his destination. The Russian watched from the stolen black Camaro parked on Light. This looked to be the night. Hed been stalking for three days now, in his patient, professional way, and part of his talent lay in understanding exactly when the arrangements favored him and when they did not. Thus, a police scanner played out its truncated cop-speak ten-code and laconic locality identifiers, and it suggested no police presence here in the immediate Federal Hill area. Thus, it was late enough that the action in this night-town district had played itself out and the streets, though glistening with dew, were largely empty, and only periodic parties of drunken twentysomethings rolled this way and that. Thus, finally, the target had emerged, functionally reduced by alcohol intake and self-love, and bobbed his way along the street. The Russian saw a man in jeans and a tweed coat with a pair of writer-like glasses, Trotsky out of Orwell by way of Armani or some such. You saw glasses like that in New York. The man had a round, pleased face, bearded after Hemingway and to disguise jowls, narcissism blasting out of him more powerfully than any other human attribute. Expensive shoes. Nice shoes. A well-turned-out fellow. Barring the unforeseen arrival of some whimsical force that favors thriller writers above all others in the world, it was probably going to happen tonight. The Russian did not believe in whimsical forces: he believed only in the power of a fast car to break the spine of a poor unsuspecting fool like this one a hundred times out of a hundred times. He had seen it, he had done it, he had the nerve and the cool and the coldness of heart to do such damage without a lot of emotional involvement. He was a professional and well paid. The target for tonight, joints loosened by the alcohol, managed to get himself across Light Street without falling. He navigated with that overcontrol typical of the drunk. Great forward movement, momentum building, but without the capacity of adaptation; he arrived at where he tended, not at where he aimed, and at the last, lurching moment, he bumbled through a sideways correction, a sort of exaggerated funny-walk bit. All of this meant nothing to the Russian, who found nothing funny. He noted distances, angles, and surfaces as a way of computing acceleration rates into speed on impact. The Russian prosaically jacked two wires together in the torn-out key unit of the dashboard, and the beast of a car stirred to life. He was not showy or stylized, so there was no gunning of the engine to allow the horses under the hood to roar and the exhaust pipes to bellow steamy toxins. He eased into first, nudged his way into the empty street, and waited just a bit, because he needed at least three seconds of acceleration time in the alley to get to fifty miles per hour, which was the killing impact. On either side, there was nothing but Baltimore. At the mouth of Churchill, a church to one side and a typical Baltimore row house meant for the miniature people of the 1840s to the other, Aptapton re-aimed himself and pressed onward down the concourse. It was listed as a street in city records but had been constructed as an alley many years ago, its tiny brick dwellings serving as servants quarters or backyard administrative units for the larger houses that faced outward to prouder, wider streets. For a hundred years this back way had probably been the province of pig and horse shit commingled with blood and Negro or immigrant sweat, where the invisible servers lived to sustain the opulent ease of those in the big houses. Then it became the inevitable slum, but that condition never quite went terminal, as the dwellings were too cute for demolition. Now, of course, gentrification had come in the form of museum-quaint cobblestones, which gleamed moistly as if at an art directors bidding, little mock-gaslight streetlamps, lots of gardening and painting and each tiny building essentially remanufactured from the inside out, so that they had become nesting sites for the young urban hip. Aptapton, that Aptapton, began to amuse himself by inventing sexual perversions he imagined were ongoing on either side of Churchill. Then he heard the sound of a car engine. Agh. This meant hed have to re-adjust his somewhat sloppily functioning internal gyro and get himself off the cobblestones and onto the little shelf of sidewalk. He heard basso profundo, deep-chest utters, and turned. He made out the streamlined form of the Camaro one hundred feet away and felt himself

seized in its illumination. A friendly type always, he raised a hand and smiled, and indicated that he yielded to superior power and would manfully attempt to arrive upon the threshold of the curb. At the same time the whole thing reminded him of something, and it froze him in place as his mind examined its files. Finally, it came to him: an image from one of his own books. Didn't he do one where the bad guy, some kind of car genius, used Camaros and Chargers and Trans-Ams to take people out? He'd thought he ought to get away from guns for a bit, and so he'd moved on to the high-pro muscle car as weapon of choice. Nobody seemed to like it very much, however. He'd also tried swords in one, to much chagrin. He was a gun guy, so he did best when he stuck to his guns. Anyway, this was setting up sort of like a scene in *Thunders Evening*, as the one had been called, and he had to laugh (Are you amused by yourself?) at the thing at the end of the alley, hazy in the glare of its headlights but sleek and black and damp, the odd refraction of street- and houselights playing magically off its shiny skin, film noir to the very end. It's from my id! he thought. In the next second it accelerated. It came at a speed he'd never imagined possible, as if it had gone into warp drive, blurring the stars, and well before this information could be processed, he was airborne. He was airborne. There was no pain, though the blow he'd been delivered must have been a mighty thud. Again, when he rejoined Earth in a heap of breakage and ruin, there was no pain. He lay askew on the cobblestones, thinking, Oh, she's going to be so mad at me, because he knew he was in big trouble with his wife.

Revue de presse
The Swagger novel we've all been waiting for, and the Swagger novel Stephen Hunter was born to write . . . a magnificent thriller and it might even be true. (Lee Child #1 New York Times bestselling author of *A Wanted Man* and *The Affair*) Like an elite sniper, Stephen Hunter zeroes in on one of the most infamous shots ever fired and delivers a mind-bending thriller that answers the question What if? in astonishingly plausible detail. The Third Bullet is his best Bob Lee Swagger thriller yet. (Vince Flynn #1 New York Times bestselling author of *Kill Shot*) Former Marine sniper Bob Lee Swagger tackles the granddaddy of all conspiracy theories—the 1963 Kennedy assassination—in his latest adventure. . . . The author's obsessive attention to the events of Nov. 22 yields a stunningly plausible theory that will have readers holding the book in one hand and Googling satellite photos of Dealey Plaza and the Texas School Book Depository with the other. (Entertainment Weekly) Hunter is extremely well-versed on guns and ballistics, and Swagger is nothing short of a legend. . . . It'll be catnip to conspiracy-minded readers. . . . The whole thing ends with a shootout in rural Connecticut that's so tense you'll burn your dinner rather than stop reading. (Washington Post) Hunter's action-packed new thriller, *The Third Bullet*. . . introduces a shockingly plausible alternative to the Lee Harvey Oswald-lone gunman explanation. (Fort Worth Star-Telegram) For nearly 50 years, the world has been obsessing over the assassination of JFK, from grassy knolls to magic bullets. Finally, though, there's somebody on the case who likes to act more than talk: Bob Lee Swagger. . . . like Stephen King in 11/22/63, Hunter has used the assassination to forge a terrific thriller. (Booklist (starred review)) Bestseller Hunter's solid eighth thriller featuring master sniper Bob Lee Swagger . . . plunges into the byzantine world of conspiracy theory. Hunter develops some new angles on the JFK assassination. (Publishers Weekly) Some of Hunter's best writing can be found here, along with new revelations about Swagger. . . . Then, of course, there is the investigation into Kennedy's death on that fateful day in Dallas and its conclusions. Hunter raises some thought-provoking questions, and while the who in the equation may still be in doubt, the answers to the what and how may be contained in this work, which is labeled as fiction but could be much more. (Bookreporter.com) *The Third Bullet* is as riveting as it is ambitious. It's Stephen Hunter's best so far. (Michael Connelly #1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Drop* and *The Black Box*) Stephen Hunter is the bullseye ace of the modern thriller, a cerebral mix of mystery, blood, brutality, treachery and suspense. *The Third Bullet* is Hunter at the absolute apex of his art. Come on! It's time to hunt! (Stephen Coonts New York Times bestselling author of *The Disciple*) One of the hardest things for a writer to do is establish an identity, but there is no mistaking Stephen Hunter's thrillers. They have a unique insight into what it takes to be a hero, combined with an unequalled lyrical, even poetic approach to the ballistics, tactics, and firearms of a gunfight. Hunter's novels (what a great last name, given his themes) combine authenticity with fascinating, compelling, real-feeling characters, and in *The Third Bullet*, he even adds a further dimension, experimenting with structure while embedding literary quotations. To me, he's a model of what a thriller author can be. (David Morrell New York Times bestselling author of *First Blood*) Only Stephen Hunter, with his brilliant knowledge of firearms, could have produced *The Third Bullet* and offered up a plausible explanation for one of our nation's greatest mysteries. Despite the explosive subject matter, there is a jauntiness approaching pure joy in both the reading and the storytelling. This book will be huge. (C.J. Box New York Times bestselling author of *Force of Nature*) Mr. Hunter, as adept at spinning a yarn as Swagger is at hitting a bulls-eye, has had the freedom to

not only theorize, but also to create characters and situations designed to answer most of the questions raised by skeptics over the years. This transparency permits his clever, smartly constructed, and well-researched plot to fit the known bits and pieces of what happened on that dark day in Dallas into a completed jigsaw puzzle that shows readers precisely why the crime was committed and who did it. No big surprise: It's not Lee Harvey Oswald. . . . Ever since Swaggers first appearance in *Point of Impact* (1993), the author has provided his hero with antagonists worthy of the name. Meachum is a cut above the usual, not merely aristocratic, arrogant, powerful and resourceful, but unexpectedly humane, at times whimsical and sentimental and, for much of the book, surprisingly compassionate especially when considering the enormity of his crime. In short, to modify the Tom Wolfe title, he is a villain in full. (Dick Lochte *New York Journal of Books*)

Stephen Hunter's novel on the assassination of JFK is captivating, compelling, and thoroughly engrossing. The history has been painstakingly researched. The plot is classic Hunter: twisty, gritty, and fast-paced but tempered by the humanity of Bob Lee Swagger. In short, *The Third Bullet* is riveting storytelling for fans of fiction or non. (Sandra Brown, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Low Pressure*) Hunter is at the top of the list when it comes to modern thriller writers. (Breitbart.com)