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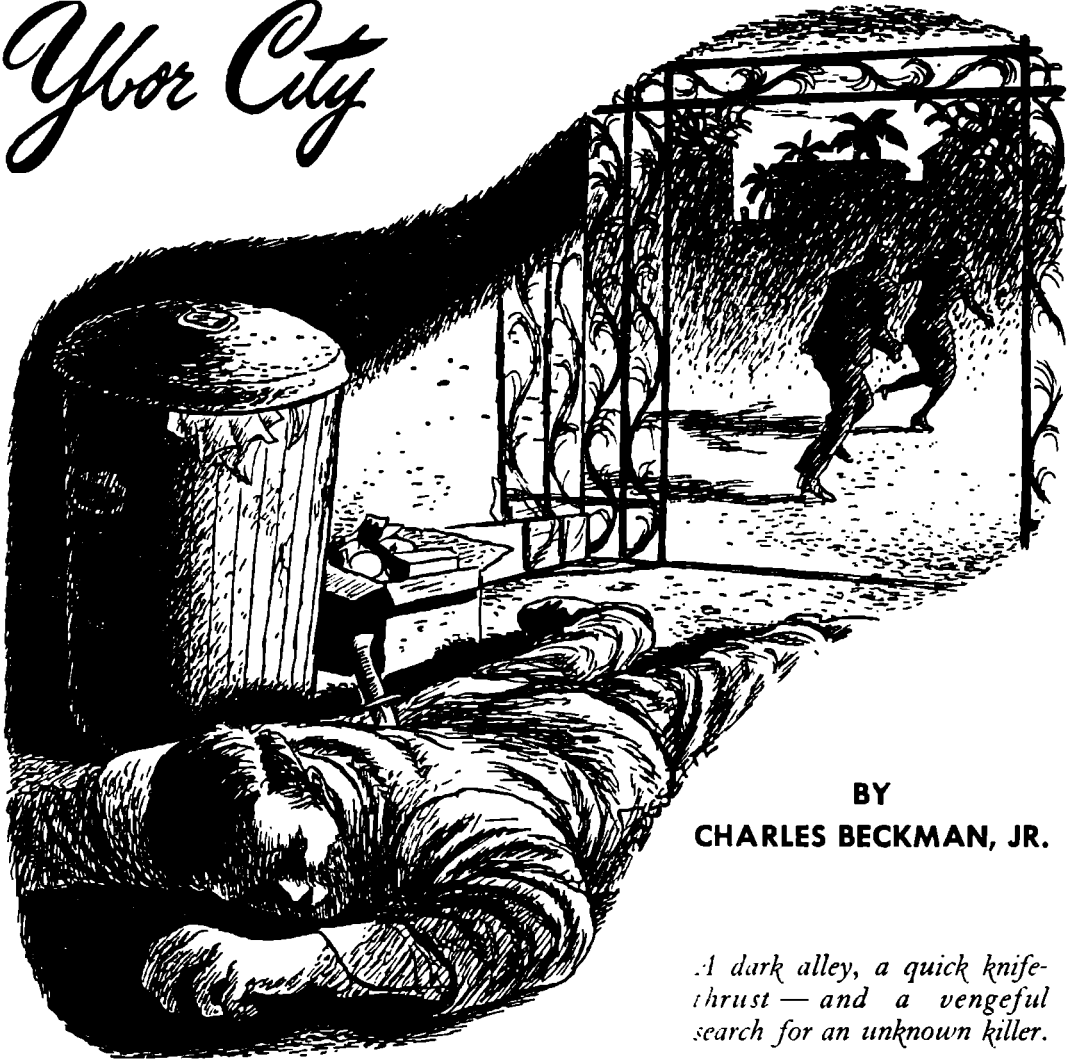
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# Ybor City



BY  
CHARLES BECKMAN, JR.

*A dark alley, a quick knife-thrust — and a vengeful search for an unknown killer.*

IT HAPPENED in an alley in Tampa, Florida, in the squalid Ybor City district. One minute he was a man, smoking a cigarette, waiting for me in the humid summer night. The next, he was a corpse, falling over with a knife in his back.

I never saw his killers at all, except for two blobs of shadow in the

stinking blackness of the alley. One of them was a woman. She collided with me, giving me the feel of her softness and the smell of her cheap perfume. Then she was gone.

Something had spun out of her hand when she plowed into me. I groped around for it. My hands came in contact with a woman's small

purse. Quickly, without looking at it, I stuffed it in my coat pocket. Then I walked down into the black maw of the alley where the dead man lay.

Stuccoed walls, crumbling with age, formed canyons around me. Outlined against the starry summer sky was filigreed iron grill work around a balcony, and the leaves of a banana tree waving above a courtyard wall.

The corpse was heavy, like an inert sack of potatoes. I shoved and wedged it into a doorway, and then I walked back to the mouth of the alley, lighting a cigarette. I was standing there, casually smoking, when the patrolman came up with his flashlight.

"Evening, officer," I said.

He shoved the blinding light across my face. When he got it out of my eyes, I could see by the glow of a streetlight that he was young and freckle-faced, built like a Notre Dame tackle.

I inhaled a lungful of smoke, let it drift away. His light whipped down the alley, crawled over garbage cans, packing crates, bundles of paper, went over the spot where the dead man had sprawled, and then made a circuit of the fire escapes and balconies.

"Something the matter?" I asked.

"I don't know. I thought I heard something. Some kind of yell. What're you doing here?"

"Just walking around. I heard it, too. In the alley. A couple of cats

fighting, I think. They make the damndest sounds. Like a woman getting raped."

He relaxed a little. "Yeah." He shoved the flash into his belt, lit a cigarette. Then he took out a handkerchief and mopped his freckled forehead, pushing his cap back. "God, it's hot tonight."

"Not a breath stirring," I agreed.

"Yeah, I guess that's what it was. Cats, I mean. We got a couple of old alley Toms in my neighborhood. Keep me awake squalling and fussing every night."

"They can raise a lot of hell, all right."

He stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket. "You better not hang around here by yourself," he said in a friendly tone. "Lousy part of town. One of these cigar rollers might slug you."

I shrugged and moved away from the alley. I walked down the street and crossed over to a drug store. Like the rest of Ybor City, it was all Spanish. A placard in the window said, *English Spoken Here*.

For a long time, I stared at the window. Then I walked into the place and examined some magazines. After a bit, I went out on the sidewalk again. The young cop had disappeared. The street was empty and lonely. I stepped back into the store, dropped a coin in a pay phone and called a taxi. Then I walked quickly back to the alley.

The dead man was where I had left him, doubled over in the door-

way. His skin felt clammy and damp to the touch. I lifted him, draped one of his arms over my shoulder and dragged him out of the alley. His head bounced and rolled and his hand flapped like a dead fish.

I stood there, holding him at the alley entrance. I was afraid to put him down because the taxi might come any minute and I was afraid if I stayed with him, the young beat cop would come by again, making his rounds.

So I stood there, sweating, my muscles aching, and cursed taxi companies. Finally, the cab turned a corner and rolled slowly down the street. I whistled and he pulled into the curb and opened a door.

I grinned and staggered, putting on a drunk act. In the darkness, the murdered man could pass for a friend who'd had more than his limit.

I got the corpse in the back of the car and slid in beside him. In a drunken voice, I mumbled at the driver to take us down to the Bay.

While he drove, I fumbled through the dead man's pockets, but found nothing. Finally, we reached a sandy strip under some waving palm trees, and the taxi driver stopped. I handed him a crumpled bill and dragged the corpse out again, thankful for the darkness here.

The driver stuck his head out. "Hey, he looks like he's in bad shape. You better get him to bed."

"Can't hold his liquor. . . ." I said thickly.

The man shoved his head out a couple more inches. "You look like you got blood on your face."

"Cut myself shaving," I said. "Beat it, friend."

He stared at me, his face a white blur in the night. Suddenly he started looking scared. He jerked his head back in like a frightened turtle, raked the cab into gear, and got out of there.

I dragged the murdered man along the beach. This was a lonely section: a few dark fishing shacks, some palmettoes, and a row of boats tied up at a rotting pier, slapping and bumping softly in the wash of surf.

I carried and dragged the dead man until my shoulder sockets were almost pulled apart and the sweat was a dripping, slimy film all over my body.

Finally I got down to the little cabin cruiser that had brought me across the bay from St. Petersburg earlier this evening. I worked the dead man on board and into the cabin. Then I went over him again in the darkness. With a pocket knife, I ripped out his pockets, the lining of his coat. He was clean. Not a thing on him.

I played the light of a small flash over his face. An aspen of a man, thin-boned and dissipated; pinched features with an angular design of sharp bones under tight skin.

I straightened my back and swore softly in the darkness. The muggy Florida night answered me across

the licking water with mocking silence.

Then I remembered the girl's purse. I took it out of my coat pocket and emptied its contents on a bunk, and snapped on the flash again. It was a tiny bag, the kind women take with them in the evenings, that contain the bare essentials of make-up. This one had a compact, a balled Kleenex smeared with lipstick, a package of Camels with two cigarettes remaining, a gold lipstick case, and a paper book of matches.

The lipstick had a name engraved on it: "Lolita." The matches bore a picture of a nude blonde sitting in a champagne glass, underneath which some printing assured the reader that the food at *Sagura's* was the best in Ybor City.

I wedged the murdered man in the cruiser's toilet and locked the door. I didn't want the police finding him yet. It would louse up the whole show, because he was not the man doing the blackmail. He had only been the boy who ran errands. True, he could have given me the key to the situation. But the big shot had gotten to him first, tonight, and stuck a knife in him. I needed more time — something I wouldn't have if this dead man became police property and Grace Perring's blackmail became a newspaper scandal.

So I went back to Ybor City, the Latin quarter that extended two miles east from Nebraska Avenue and south to Ybor estuary.

I returned and hunted up *Sagura's*, a typical Spanish restaurant, a place that cooked chicken and rice, yellow with saffron, black-bean and garbanzo soups, steak catalana, crawfish and spaghetti served with wine. I ordered a bottle of wine and sat at a table under potted rubber plants and watched a string band play Cuban music.

I turned over one of their paper book matches and looked at the picture of the nude blonde sitting in the champagne glass.

"Lolita been around tonight?" I asked the waitress who brought my wine.

She put the wine down and gave me a fleeting glance. "*Yo no se.*" She shrugged and went away. But in a little while the manager of the place came around and sat at my table. He was a fat man with a round face that looked like a greasy coffee bean. He mopped at it with a white handkerchief.

"This is a hot one," he said, sighing.

I drank the wine, looking at him. The band was playing a rhumba. A girl dressed in a spangled bra and ruffled split skirt came out on the floor and began shaking her rear.

"The waitress. She said you asked about Lolita." He looked around at the floor show, trying so hard to appear casual it was ludicrous.

I nodded and lit a cigarette.

"You are a friend of Lolita?" he asked. The sweat was coming through his seersucker coat.

"Maybe," I said. "What difference does it make?"

He made an elaborate shrugging gesture, ducking his bullet head between bulging shoulders and pushing fat, brown palms upward. "Please, Señor. I am not what you call sticking my nose in your business. Only, well, Vellutini — he's a powerful man around here. . . ." His voice trailed off with another shrug of his fat shoulders.

I nodded. "Of course." I drank some more of the wine, and wondered who the hell Vellutini was. "It isn't important. About Lolita, I mean. I'm related to her by marriage. Knew her when she was a kid in another part of the state. Just thought I'd look her up while I was in town." I said it flatly, casually, as if the subject no longer interested me.

The cafe manager stood up. "Well," he said, "she comes around here sometimes. But I haven't seen her in several days." In parting, he added, "You might try the place she works in daytime, the Veloz-Rey cigar factory. . . ." And he walked off.

I paid for the wine and left the place.

It was past midnight now and I thought I had better not go back to the boat. So I wandered around until I found a cheap hotel on a dim street, where a man could rent a room for a dollar and a half a night. I bought another bottle of wine in the store just off the lobby and went up.

I lay there, in the hot, stinking night, with the wine bottle on the bed beside me, and, in my rig, the heavy .45 that I had brought along to kill a man.

It was close to noon the next day when I awoke. After dressing, I walked down to the Veloz-Rey cigar factory. I needed a shave and my gray suit was rumpled and the collar of my shirt had soaked itself into a shapeless rag.

Veloz-Rey was one of the many factories of its kind in this part of Tampa. Smaller than most, it was housed in a time-blackened brick building. A rickety stairway led up to the main factory room on the second floor.

Here, the cigar makers, the *tabaqueros* who rolled the cigars, worked at long tables in double rows.

One of them was the woman who had helped kill a man in an Ybor City alley last night. . . .

I wandered among the workers, trying to attract as little attention as possible. Near the water cooler I started a conversation with one of the "strippers" who had paused for a drink. It was the stripper's job to remove the stems from leaves and pass the tobacco on to *boncheros* who made up the inside *tripa* or filler of the cigar.

"Lolita?" he said. Then he grinned knowingly. "Oh, *si*, that one." He nodded toward the *tabaqueros*. "The little one with the pointed chibabies." He took a frayed cigar out

of his wet mouth and spit on the floor. "Somebody tell you about her . . . ?"

But I was already moving down the long rows of double tables. Here, the men and women bent over their monotonous tasks, with slim, skillful fingers whipping the tobacco into shape. A radio was on, giving the news in Spanish.

I stopped behind the woman, Lolita. She was young, about twenty and her skin was the color of a dusky rose. Perspiration made her forehead shiny, soaked through her blouse, and ran in tiny drops down the shadowy valley of her bosom. The straps of her brassiere cut into the soft flesh of her shoulders under the filmy blouse.

She worked with a steady, detached rhythm.

An oscillating fan revolved in my direction, carrying to my nostrils a heavy, familiar perfume. And I knew I had the right woman.

"Lolita," I said softly, and put a hand on her shoulder.

She gave a little jump, and her head twisted around. I got the full force of her huge black eyes.

She stared at me for a moment, with her wide black eyes, and then she took my hand off her shoulder. "I'll have you fired, you bastard," she told me softly.

"I don't work here. I came up to ask you for a date."

She looked me over speculatively. Her lips curled. "You wouldn't have the price of a drink."

"I thought maybe we could talk. You know, about the little game you were playing in the alley last night. . . ."

As I said that, very softly, I dropped the lipstick in her lap. No one around heard what I said, but she heard all right. Her face lost its color. A drop of sweat ran down her cheek. She spread her fingers fanwise over her thigh, covering the lipstick, and she shivered. I bent over her and put my hand back on her shoulder, rubbing the soft flesh under the blouse with my fingers. I let my fingers trail around to the front of her blouse. "You want to tell me where you live, honey?"

She stared up into my eyes as if fascinated by them. Her lips drew back in a stiff grimace, showing the gleam of even, white teeth behind them. I thought for a moment she was going to be sick right there. But she gave me the address in a husky whisper.

"I'll see you there tonight after you get off work," I said. "And I wouldn't mention it to anybody, honey. There's no telling how much trouble it might cause you . . ." I smiled at her, and then I turned and walked out of the place.

I went down the street and found myself a bar. I sat there, drinking steadily, looking somberly at the glass and nothing else.

I sat there until dark and then I went up to Lolita's room. I hugged the gun under my left arm, feeling the good, hard outline of it.

She opened the door. Now, she had bathed and there was a flower in her dark hair. She looked fresh in a clean skirt, stockings, ankle-strap shoes and a crisp blouse with a low neck.

She was a hell of a good-looking woman, and they *were* pointed.

"Hello, honey," I said.

She looked at me.

I pushed her aside and went into the room. "I don't guess you mind if I look around." Hand on my gun, I went into the kitchen, a cubicle of a room with a pile of dirty dishes on the tile sink. One of them was a plate with yellow egg stains; the other, a half empty cup of coffee with a cigarette butt floating soggly in the cold, black liquid. I looked into her closets, the bedroom, the bath. Then I returned to the living room.

She sat on the couch and lit a cigarette nervously. Her skirt was tight across her thighs and an inch above her knees.

I helped myself to a can of beer.

Her sombre eyes flicked across my face. "So you were there . . . in the alley last night?" she asked. "What did you see?"

"I saw a man die," I told her, sipping the beer.

Her face was like a poker player's now, stiff and pale with nothing inside showing. It might have been carved out of wax. She raised one dark, plucked eyebrow. "That was important to you? Men die all the time." She waited.

"I know," I answered her.

"This one was a friend of yours?"

"He was nothing to me."

She snubbed out her cigarette in a cracked saucer on the table. Then she moved closer to me on the couch. Her fingers touched my arm and her thighs pressed against mine. "Maybe you will forget this — this little thing you saw in the alley? Maybe," she said softly, "Lolita can make you forget?"

"Maybe you can," I said. I put the beer down.

She was suddenly breathing hard, her sharp bosom straining against the flimsy covering.

I touched her thigh, feeling the roll of her stocking top under the tight skirt. A little moan escaped her lips. "Wait, honey. . . ." she whispered. She caught the "V" collar of her blouse in each hand and opened the buttons down to her waist. Then I reached for her and felt warm, satin-smooth flesh quivering under my hands. I pressed her back against the arm of the couch. She was twisting and moaning under me, damp with perspiration.

Then, suddenly, I wrenched her over, so that I had her right hand pinned under me. I grasped for her wrist, twisted it until I heard the clatter of steel on the floor.

I jumped up and kicked the little knife under the couch.

She sat up and buried her face in her hands. Her black hair fell over her finger tips. In the struggle, her dress had been torn and shoved up to



her hips. Her bare thighs gleamed whitely above the stocking rolls that dug into soft flesh.

I grabbed a handful of her hair and threw her head back. "So he told you to handle it alone," I said. "The man in the alley with you last night — you told him I'd talked to you. So he told you to get me busy on the couch and stick a knife in my back."

She looked up at me with her sweat-slick face, a pulse in her throat fluttering wildly, and said nothing.

I hit her across the face, twice, back and forth, so hard that her teeth clicked together and blood splattered on her naked breasts.

"I want his name, Lolita. You'll give it to me if you want to have any face left."

She panted with a hoarse animal sound. "Vellutini. Mike Vellutini."

The name the restaurant owner had mentioned.

"He your boy friend?"

She nodded.

"The dead man," I went on. "He was working for Vellutini, but he was just the errand boy, right? He collected the money from Grace Perring. But your Mike Vellutini is the real blackmailer. He's got the pictures that are making this Perring dame pay off. Yes?" I gave her hair another twist.

She cried out with pain. "Yes," she said. "Mike found out Joe was going to double-cross us. He was going to tell Mrs. Perring, or some-

body she sent, where the negatives were and who the real blackmailer was — for a sum. We followed him to the alley and got to him first —"

"And your sweetheart — Mike Vellutini? Where will I find him?"

"He has a little night club. He runs a bolita game in the back room." She told me an address.

I threw her back on the couch and started for the door, but she caught up with me.

"Wait," she said. "Wait. Don't leave me now." Her fingers clawed at me. She started crying, her mouth working. "Mike made me stand there and watch while he stuck a knife in Joe's back last night so I'd see what happens to anybody who crosses him."

She said, "I'm scared of him. God, I'm scared of him. He's a fat, stinking pig. I hate him and I'm afraid of him."

Then her arms went around me, tightly, pressing her breasts against me so hard they burned through my shirt. "You're not afraid of him," she whispered, "or you wouldn't be tracking him down like this. Please, please take me away from that fat pig before he kills me. Take me out of Ybor City. I'll do anything for you . . ."

She raised her face and there was a mixture of stark fear and animal lust in her eyes. Then her mouth was against mine, hot and alive, like her trembling body. Her tongue darted out and her hands pulled at my clothes. . . .

I walked through the hot night with the woman smell still clinging to my body. It had been hard to make Lolita stay back at the room, and I succeeded only when I told her I was going to Vellutini's. She wasn't kidding about being afraid of him.

As I walked, I took the gun out and checked its magazine. Then I flicked the safety off, nestled it back in the shoulder rig and went on through the narrow, sweltering streets to the jook place that Mike Vellutini ran. The place where one night a few months ago a St. Petersburg society woman had been indiscreet with one of her many boy friends. Vellutini had gotten pictures of her, drunk and in bed with the man. And now he was making her pay through the nose to keep the picture under wraps.

Clever, though, Vellutini had never let it be known that he was the blackmailer. Always, the man whom Lolita had called Joe had contacted the woman for the money. He carried prints of the pictures. That was all.

I had come across the bay from St. Petersburg as an agent for Grace Perring to meet the man in the alley. I had brought with me a large sum of money to give him for the information that I now had for nothing. . . .

I went into Mike Vellutini's, a place of thick smoke, dark shadows, hot Latin piano, and cheap liquor. An evil hole on a back street where men and women from across the bay

could come and hide their sins in sweltering private rooms that Vellutini rented for a high price.

I walked across the floor and somewhere above me, in the layers of yellow smoke, a ceiling fan turned apathetically, casting a shadow, helpless in the muggy heat.

Nobody stopped me as I wandered through the place, into the back room, a closed den, rancid with the odors of stale smoke, beer, and the sweat from men's bodies. The men sat around under a single light, suspended from the ceiling by a drop cord and covered with a green shade . . . mostly Negroes from the docks and Latin cigar workers, playing bolita. The room held its breath while the little balls, consecutively numbered and tied in a bag, were tossed from one person to another. The players sat, dripping sweat, their teeth clamped on cigars, staring at the sack. They smoked, spit on the floor, and cursed while they waited to see if the ball clutched through the cloth would bear their winning number.

I didn't know the face of the man I was looking for, so I drifted through the crowd, seeking a clue to the owner of the place.

I moved down a hallway toward the men's room. A door opened and a man came out into the hall. He was fat and greasy and dirty. I could smell him from ten feet away. He was dressed in an undershirt, a limp grey rag, soggy and stained with sweat, and he had a towel around his

neck to soak up the sweat that ran down the thick, red creases of flesh. Beside the undershirt, he was wearing baggy seersucker trousers and tennis shoes.

His eyes were buried deep in soft pads of flesh, two glittering black marbles that studied me carefully. "You want someone?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Mike Vellutini." I said, and felt the weight of the gun under my left shoulder.

"Yeah?" He moved his cigar from one corner of his heavy, wet lips to the other. "About what?"

"Business, you might say."

His voice sounded like a flat tire rumbling over hollow pavement. "Come in here." He turned his back on me and lumbered into the office room.

I followed. It was a small, hot place like the other rooms. A French door opened out onto a courtyard where banana trees stood motionless in the still night.

The heavy man sat down behind his desk on a creaking swivel chair. He picked up a palmetto leaf and fanned himself while he looked at me through the cigar smoke with his shiny marble eyes.

"Go ahead," he rumbled. "I'm Mike Vellutini."

I sat on a chair, keeping my coat loose so the gun would come out fast. I went right to the point. "Several months ago," I said, "a woman, Grace Perring, came over from St. Pete with a man who was not her husband. During the night they

were in a number of places in Ybor City. She was too drunk to remember any of them. But in one of the places, she and this man were in bed and somebody took their picture. A week later, a thin little man came to call on her with prints of this picture. He represented another man who wanted a large sum of money not to show the picture to her children and friends. He kept coming back for money until it was more than she could pay. I came over to find the real blackmailer."

Vellutini sat behind the desk with an amused look on his face. "So now you find him. Me — Vellutini." He laughed, and sucked hungrily at the cigar. "Yes, that was a good picture. She sure was enjoying it, that blonde bitch. What a wrestle she was giving him!" He laughed some more, with his flabby lips around the cigar. "So why you risk your neck, you dumb flatfoot? Money? Or did that blonde bitch offer to pay you off the way she's been payin' off all those other guys in St. Petersburg?"

I shrugged. "Let's say she has some nice kids. Three of them." I reached for my gun, feeling a little tired.

Vellutini might have looked fat and lazy but he wasn't dumb. While he flicked the palmetto leaf with his right hand, his left had crept below the level of the desk to an open drawer. Now it sprang out and there was a very heavy revolver in it, pointed at me.

We both fired the first shot to-

gether. Mine didn't miss. I followed it with a second.

A pair of red roses blossomed out on Vellutini's soggy undershirt, then dissolved and ran down over his fat belly. He grunted, staring at me stupidly, his slobbery lips hanging open. Slowly, he rose to his feet, knocking the chair over behind him. He stood there for a second, swaying, staring at me. Then he fell across the desk with a crash.

Quickly, I dragged out desk and file drawers, pawing through them while voices murmured in the hall and fists beat against the door.

In the bottom of one drawer I found what I wanted, a snapshot negative. Even in the undeveloped negative I could recognize Grace Perring, and see the drunken, animal pleasure on her face as the man with her fondled her.

I stuffed it into a pocket and went through the French doors, through the courtyard and out into the dark streets.

I walked down through the stinking alleys of Ybor City toward the boat. I still had a body to bury out in the bay on my way back to St. Petersburg, and I still had to phone Lolita and warn her to say she knew nothing if the police questioned her.

Inside, I felt tired, dirty, and defeated. It would be nice, I thought, to stick around this Ybor City and the hot-blooded Lolita, who was mine for the asking.

But I had to get home to the quiet hell I lived in, across the bay.

I had to go on protecting, the best I knew how, the lives and happiness of three wonderful children whose mother was Grace Perring — my wife.



# MUGGED AND PRINTED

CHARLES BECKMAN, JR., whose *Ybor City*, is the second of his stories to appear in *Manhunt*, now lives in Corpus Christi, Texas — where he busily surveys his surroundings for authentic background material. His work has appeared in dozens of mystery magazines, and his novel, *Honky Tonk Girl*, exhibits his jazz-musician background at its best. He is now working on a new novel, between chapters of which he's doing another yarn for *Manhunt*. *Ybor City* is a fascinating story of a man's relentless chase after an unknown killer.

## IN THIS ISSUE:

### TNT

Henry Kane is here with a Peter Chambers novelette that mixes a high-diving blonde and a \$50,000 policy with murder and mayhem. Richard S. Prather has thrown Shell Scott into a mess of stolen jewels and the people who stole them in a thrilling tale titled *Hot-Rock Rumble*.

### TROUBLE

Harold Q. Masur is on tap with a Scott Jordan story about an empty safe deposit box — emptied on its owner's signature while the owner is in prison! And Evan Hunter starts his *Small Homicide* with a dead baby girl in a church, and takes us on the fascinating police hunt for the killer.

### THREAT

Michael Fessier is back with *The Faceless Man*, the story of a sheriff, an ex-convict, and the angry mob that wanted his life. And Richard Deming has put a wounded man, his beautiful wife, and a hungry gunman together in a snowbound cabin in a story of flaring emotions and hate.

### TERROR

Charles Beckman takes us to Ybor city, Tampa's Spanish district, for a murder committed in a dark alley, and the driving motivation of the man out to solve it. Emmanuel Winters is here with *The Caller*, the terrifying tale of a woman receiving phone calls from a stranger with one thing on his mind.

### TIEUP

And wrapping up the issue with a solid knot is a story by Hunt Collins, plus *Crime Cavalcade*, plus Manhunt's *Movie of the Month*. A jam-packed June jamboree!