

River and the theaters, and a couple of death-smelling dogs located four bodies in shallow graves in the sandy soil, planted here and there amidst the arundo grass and cottonwoods, none of them, apparently, Evelyn Lamuraglia's. All of them men — illegal aliens and down-and-outers, folks who could disappear without stirring up much of a fuss.

Transients were roused from hootches and shanties, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were unleashed early on a planned flood-control project, with their tree-chomping, brush-eating hydro-ax with its high-powered hyper-rotational blades that chewed up dense bushes and magnolias and wax-myrtles and shacks and abandoned cars and lost grocery carts. Then they brought in the big machinery, bulldozed the woodland down to bare sand, and rolled three more bodies from their narrow graves — one of them fresh to the point of near warmth, presumed to be — though a dental check was needed, the face having been smashed then worked on by things that crawl — that of Evelyn Lamuraglia.

EVELYN GETS A COUPE DE VILLE

The body they found down by the river turned out not to be that of Evelyn Lamuraglia. It was Pepper Sopko, sixty-four-year-old teacher's aide, grandmother of ten, who had been abducted from a grocery store parking lot to suffer a quick death — rock bashed on the back of her skull — after several hours of horrid degradations. As Pepper was being bashed, Evelyn Lamuraglia was on her way to Vegas with one Palmer Cheadle, who wrestled her car keys away from her (and dropped them in the parking lot) because, "Sweetheart, you're too damned drunk to drive," That he, Palmer C., was also too damned drunk to drive was a thought that apparently did not occur to the man. He dragged her across the parking lot, slapped her hard enough, as she writhed from his grasp, to knock her into an alcohol-enhanced slumber that allowed him to lay her out gently in the back seat of his Coupe de Ville.

He hit Highway 76, winding his way alongside the river, then blasted up onto Interstate 15, Vegas bound he would tell her, if she should wake up and start to squawk; but he really intended to hand her a fate similar to Pepper Sopko's, somewhere out in the empty desert north of Victorville, where her boney old body wouldn't be found for years, if ever.

"Wasa, wasa?" Evelyn rasped, her bird's nest hair-do popping into Palmer Cheadle's rear-view mirror. Three a.m., and the Coupe de Ville had just crested the Cajon

Pass outside of Riverside/San Bernardino. "Jus' you lay back down and relax, Sweetheart," Palmer blared. "You an' me are gonna hit Vegas in a high-roller mode, Jus' a couple o' hours now."

Evelyn did not find this at all comforting. She had no memory of her new escort's unsophisticated pick-up lines, or of the three double bourbon and cokes he'd bought her. All she knew for sure was that she was half-drunk in the back seat of a strange car, a loud man with a large crew-cut head behind the wheel, rolling through God-knows-where on a black star-speckled night. And her warning light — that was normally nonfunctional when her tank was full — blinked back on, brightly: "Let me out, motherfucker." Palmer Cheadle chuckled at this request; he'd heard it before, and never complied, not until he'd gotten them where he wanted them. "I intend to, Darlin', I surely do," he said, his mean grin twinkling in the mirror.

He let her out behind a row of low sandy hills a half a mile off the main highway, and chased her (Damn, she's a feisty one) nearly two hundred yards into the desert before he caught her and — winded to near collapse, so out of shape from the long years of tobacco and drink was he — ended up on the receiving end of a sound thrashing, a cornered weasel attack that featured fingernails to the face and a foot so hard and deep to the groin that it laid him out, incapacitated; a turning of the tables, as it were, for Palmer Cheadle. He was usually the one possessed of his full facilities in these little tussles; it was the ladies who were laid out via several quick punches to the face before he killed them with his bare hands, thumbs sinking deep into crumbling tracheas.

Evelyn didn't have the strength to go the bare hand route, though, so she ran back to the Coupe de Ville and drove it out to the prostrate Palmer and ran him over, back and forth, a dozen times, feeling the vibrations of large bones breaking through the leather upholstery, as the souls of the man's seven previous victims danced over their separate graves in a five-mile radius of Evelyn's victory roll.

FOUR DAYS SLOPPY DRUNK

Palmer Cheadle had been a man of shallow roots, so his disappearance had caused no consternation. He was in the thoughts of not a soul on earth when the scavengers slunk in to work him over as he lay dead in the desert, crushed under the wheels of his own car by a woman who was to be the next victim of his series of sexual attacks that culminated, always, in murder.