

# THE RETURN OF MADAME ATOMOS

## *Chapter I*

It was an old army Dodge, bought just after the war at the surplus depot in Little Rock. Old Sam Bennett drove it, repaired it, took care of it and sometimes talked to it as if it were a human being. However, there was no reason to love the old machine that gave him such a hard time and was falling to pieces like a worn-out mattress and guzzled huge amounts of oil, water and gas. But Sam was a man who got attached to things—to a house or a familiar landscape. That's why he had never left Story or even Arkansas. Before him, his father cruised the roads to deliver supplies to the remote farms around Lake Ouachita. At that time his father dragged his merchandise around in a cart pulled by a mule on roads that barely existed. Now the work was easier, but customers were much more scarce.

The day came when Sam Bennett had only one order. He was not too worried about it, though, because he was already past 70 and he did not figure on living until 100.

At the moment, Sam was driving on a bad road that wound down to the lake. The sun had been shining for a month and the dust flew up around the cruising truck, so much that Sam saw nothing but a thick yellow cloud in his rear view mirror. Here, dust was the enemy. Sam could fight against it by knocking back beers, but the Dodge's air filter had never been able to get rid of it completely. The engine ran poorly; it spit and coughed just like Sam when he climbed out of bed.

On the way down, everything was fine, but the truck crawled at a pathetic speed when the road started going back up. It was the last hill. On the other side Sam would see the lake and then the bungalow inhabited for almost a month by the tall guy and the young Japanese lady. Sam did not even know their names. He made two deliveries a week to them, chatted a little with the guy and then went back the way he came. The guy paid in cash, was nice, always offered him a drink, but there was something in his eyes that said he did not like people sticking their nose in his business.

That did not bother Sam—he was not curious. He figured that everyone had the right to live like they wanted and there was never any problem as long as they paid their bill without grumbling about it.

He banged on the steering wheel and stepped on the gas. "Come on! Keep going, you old stick in the mud." The Dodge continued without fussing too much and reached the top of the hill. That's when he saw the car. It was parked on the side of the road and two men were leaning over the engine beneath the open hood. As the Dodge approached, they stood up. Sam pulled in front of the car and stopped.

"What's the problem?"

One of the men shrugged his shoulders and came forward. "Ran out of gas. You wouldn't have an extra gallon or two to give us would you?"

Sam jumped out like a much younger man, but winced because of his arthritis, thinking that he should stop jolting his old carcass like that. He limped to the back of the truck and pointed at all the stuff he was carrying. "I've got just the thing in here," he said contentedly. He dropped the side panel and added, "Gas, oil, battery, belts, fan, spare parts, beer, soda, alcohol, food! Take your pick! The House of Bennett is at your service." He was happy to be there at the right time to help out someone in a fix. That way he felt like he was more than just a delivery driver.

"A gas can would take care of it," the man said.

Without turning around, Sam reached out for the can. The man struck between the ribs and knife blade was buried in Sam's heart with frightening precision. The old man whimpered softly, let go of the truck and sagged to the ground. The man took his knife out of the wound and dried it on Sam's coat before slipping it back into his pocket. His partner threw the corpse over his shoulder, crossed the deserted road and walked among the gray rocks. Farther on there was a deep ravine...

Meanwhile, the killer closed the side panel and sat in the driver's seat. He started the Dodge and finished climbing the hill before plunging down on the other side.

Smith Beffort was waiting on the porch of the bungalow. From afar he had heard old Bennett coming in his Dodge, whose engine backfired badly. Then there was the unusual stop. Now the Dodge was hurtling down the hill at full speed, but Beffort was on his guard.

Since the telegram of Madame Atomos sent to Dr. Soblen, Beffort was always on his guard.

“What are you looking at out here, Smith?” Mie Azusa leaned tenderly against him. Beffort, who had not heard her come up, took her in his arms. She knew nothing. She was still living her wonderful dream. Some day he would have to tell her that Madame Atomos was not dead and that an awful threat loomed over their happiness, but Beffort was putting off the bad news as long as possible.

“Old Bennett’s supposed to come today, Mie,” he reminded.

“I know. Is that why you have a gun?”

Beffort managed to smile. “Professional flaw! At the FBI we wear a .38 like other people wear a ring.”

Mie stared at him gravely, too gravely. She had intuition and felt that her lover had lost his peace of mind since Dr. Soblen’s visit. “Don’t you think you should tell me the truth, dear? I never believed that Soblen came all the way out here just to say hello.”

“Oh? What do you have in mind?”

“Listen, Smith, I’m not a child. The fact that you were able to tear me out of the claws of the Atomos Organization borders on a miracle, but I’m not dense enough to believe that things are going to stay like this! Besides, I know that you think the same as I do. This bungalow is proof of your distrust. It’s isolated and you arranged things so that nobody knows where we are. Why all these precautions if you’re not afraid of something? Why did Soblen come here from Washington just to leave again the next day?”

The arrival of the Dodge saved Beffort from answering right away. The truck turned off the road, came through the yard and stopped in front of the slightly raised porch. Beffort already knew that it was not old Bennett behind the wheel. Being a G-man he knew that he always had to be wary of something new arising unexpectedly in an ongoing affair, especially when it looked like it was winding up. In this particular case, and since he and Mie Azusa were personally involved, no precaution would be overdoing it.

He grabbed the girl’s arm. “Go back inside right now,” he said, no room for arguing, “and don’t show yourself. If things get dangerous, leave through the back door and head for the lake. At the rocky point you’ll find a lifeboat ready to go.”

“Smith!”

“No questions!” Beffort barked.

She turned pale and let herself be pushed inside where she closed the thick door. Beffort took his .38 out of his holster, flicked off the safety and slid it into his belt under his leather coat. After that he walked out to see the Dodge that the edge of the porch had kept hidden. A young man dressed in blue overalls was whistling as he pulled out a crate. He heaved it up on his shoulder and saw Beffort standing motionless at the top of the steps.

“Hello. I have some supplies for you.” He took a few steps and then hesitated. “You’re Crystal Black, aren’t you?”

That was the name of the bungalow. “That’s right,” Beffort kept still. “You’re working with old Bennett?”

“No,” the man said as he hit the first step, “but since he’s got his leg broke, I’m doing the deliveries instead of him. Gotta help each other out in life, don’t ya?” He had reached the top of the stairs that were hewn out of the rock. “Where do you want me to put this?”

“Here is just fine.”

The man bent down and dropped the crate. In the course of his movement, his hair parted a little and Beffort saw the pale trace of a scar. But the man was already standing again and smiling. “Old Bennett might be out for quite a while.”

“Serious?”

“At his age a broken bone is always serious. Anyhow, I’m gonna be on the job for a couple of weeks. Then someone else will take my place. By the way, I don’t have a bill. We’ll settled up next time. When do you want me to come back?”

Beffort moved over a couple of feet so that he could see both the man and the truck. “Bennett didn’t tell you?”

“It all happened kinda fast,” the deliveryman explained while examining the bungalow, pretending to be uninterested. “The old man busted his leg this morning and an ambulance came straight away to take him to a hospital in Little Rock. He barely had time to get me the list of today’s deliveries. If you’re alone, this’ll get you by for the week?”

The question was clever and dangerous, considering his harmless nature. Beffort hedged. “My partner is fishing. Beffort usually delivers on Tuesdays and Fridays.”

“Okay, Friday it is. Have a good day.”

The deliveryman hustled down the steps, jumped into the Dodge and started off toward Story. Normally, Bennett continued his rounds along the lake.

Thinking hard, Beffort watched the Dodge climb the hill. The young man had behaved naturally except in three details: firstly, he did not take the order for Friday’s delivery; secondly, he did not give him a bill; thirdly, he did not take back the crate that Bennett left on deposit for each delivery. And then there was that scar. Beffort only saw it for a second, but he remembered that the servants of Madame Atomos and Mie Azusa herself had one in exactly the same place!

“Now are you going to tell me what’s going on, Smith?”

Beffort stared at her gravely. The moment had come to make her face the hard reality. “Mie, I’m going to give you some bad news.”

“I know. It has to do with Dr. Soblen’s visit, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. Soblen came to tell me that he received a letter from Madame Atomos...” Mie Azusa staggered and grabbed onto Beffort for support. He had been brutally up front on purpose, knowing very well that his fiancée would be grateful to him for his frankness once her emotion had faded. While he was at it, he told her how a mysterious couple had stolen the motor-brain from the FBI building in Atlanta, reminding her that it was the device that the surgeons had removed from her head to save her from the evil control of the Great Brain. And lastly, he quoted the important parts of Madame Atomos’ message.

“She promised to attend our marriage and addressing me indirectly said that I had your body but she had your soul. It’s obviously a reference to your ex-motor-brain, a badly veiled way of stating that she hopes to bring you back some day into the Atomos Organization... that she couldn’t stand losing you...”

The young lady was distressed. “If Madame Atomos isn’t dead,” she whispered, “who’s buried in the San Francisco cemetery?”

Beffort shrugged his shoulders. “No one except Madame Atomos can say. The wicked woman looked to us like Kanoto Yoshimuta. Akamatsu had her fingerprints and an old photograph of her when she was a professor at the university in Nagasaki. According to Akamatsu’s investigation, Kanoto Yoshimuta disappeared ten years ago after quitting the university and all we know is that she was 50 years old, specialized in atomic research, had lost her family in the explosion of the second bomb and her hatred for Americans knows no limits. Now, the woman who is buried in San Francisco is unquestionably Kanoto Yoshimuta, but now there’s proof that she is not Madame Atomos. Then again, the surgeons in Atomos City could very well have doctored the fingerprints and face of a stranger so that we would think she was Kanoto Yoshimuta. You see, Mie, the solution to the problem is still totally beyond us.”

He put his .38 back in the holster and continued, “Nevertheless, certain inexplicable events over the past year should have warned us. In August a storehouse of atomic missiles caught fire in Little Rock and a terrible disaster was barely avoided. Last November there was a power outage that for nine hours plunged almost 30 million Americans into darkness<sup>1</sup>.”

“Madame Atomos?”

“For sure! It’s got her M.O. all over it. We should have made the connection, dug into it, instead of writing it off to chance.”

Mie Azusa sat on the low wall. She had recovered her self-control and was ready to confront the situation. “Okay,” she admitted, “Madame Atomos is alive. She’s going to hunt us down to take her revenge, but nothing proves that she knows where we are. Just now you told me to hide when Bennett’s replacement arrived. Were your fears justified?”

Beffort told her about the anomalies that he noticed.

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<sup>1</sup> True. It happened on November 9, 1965. See short story at the end of this volume.

"It's troubling, indeed," the young lady commented. "Old Bennett is not the kind of man to work on credit. Even if he were on his deathbed, he would find the energy to get the money owed to him. And he was preparing his rounds ahead of time, remember, Smith?"

Beffort wrinkled his brow. Sam Bennett had, in fact, said that he was starting his delivery day very early and that everything had to be ready the night before. That would mean that the truck was packed and the bills in the pocket of his old coat...

"In order to clear things up," Mie Azusa suggested, "we have to find out if Bennett is really in the hospital with a broken leg."

"Okay. I'll take the car out of the garage. First we'll hop over to Story to question Sam's neighbors... If you don't have to change, we can leave right now."

Mie took his arm. "I'm staying just like I am, Smith."

They went to the garage, completely forgetting about the crate containing the provisions. Beffort started the engine of his rented Pontiac, got on the road and headed toward Story. The car swallowed the hill and when it reached the top Beffort slammed on the brakes. Passing by he had caught sight of the back of a truck parked off the road between two rocks. He put the car in reverse and recognized old Bennett's Dodge.

"What's the meaning of that?" Mie Azusa whispered.

Beffort unholstered his .38. "Come on, Mie, we have to take a closer look."

The Dodge was empty of passengers and nobody could be seen in the vicinity. Beffort and his fiancée searched around and found the corpse of Sam Bennett lying in the bottom of the ravine. Beffort went down and found that the old man had died of a stab wound to the heart.

When he came back up his face was hard. "We have to pack our bags, Mie. Madame Atomos is on our trail. I suppose that the young deliveryman was here to make sure that it was really us before taking any action. Come on, we don't have a second to lose."

They ran to the car. Beffort made a quick, clean u-turn, stepped on the gas and went down the hill at full speed. The Pontiac was almost at the bungalow when a muffled explosion rang out. On the porch the crate containing the provisions had just blown up, spreading thick smoke in the air.

Beffort slammed on the brakes, watched the smoke, which looked like it came from a tear gas grenade, and said, "If that crate had exploded in the bungalow the gas would probably have taken care of us. That proves that Madame Atomos knows that we're here. Sorry, Mie, but we don't have time to pack our bags."

He looked through the rear window and saw a big black car materialize on the top of the hill. He turned back around and saw a second car come into view at the other end of the road that went along the lake, which was usually not very crowded. The sudden appearance of two cars, each coming from opposite directions at this critical moment, could not be chance.

Beffort threw the Pontiac on the path leading to the garage, veered off before reaching the bungalow and drove on through the trees. Mie Azusa was wringing her hands nervously. She had never been involved in direct action and was unfamiliar with all the forms that violence could take. Only two years earlier she was a young student in Tokyo, among the crowd of youths attending the Takarazuka School. Then the Atomos Organization had kidnapped her and she became Miss Atomos after an extraordinary operation. A female robot, conscious one hour a day and practically cut off from the world that had, until then, been hers. Since the miraculous operation in Atlanta, she had become that student again, in whole, without the slightest memory of the crimes committed by Miss Atomos.

"Get ready!" Beffort warned. "I'm going to stop behind those thorny bushes. You jump out right away. Don't look back, just run to the lifeboat. Try to get it going..."

"What about you?"

"Don't worry, I'll be right behind you." He braked. "Go, Mie!"

The young lady leapt out of the Pontiac and ran to the rocky point, stopping on the shore of the little cove. No lifeboat could be seen, but a big speedboat was coming fast, not far off shore. Beffort showed up and realized instantly that the Atomos Organization had stolen the lifeboat to keep them from escaping. The speedboat on the lake was heading straight for them with open throttle. And on the road the two cars were meeting up at the bungalow.

All that was left was the narrow zone between the lake and the road.

Beffort took his fiancée's hand and dragged her between the pines. There the land was uneven enough for the couple to find refuge. With a little luck, they could maybe slip through the net that

Madame Atomos was casting, but Beffort was not kidding himself. He had made a mistake in coming to live in a bungalow lost in the middle of nowhere. But he did not know at the time that Madame Atomos was alive and it was only a matter of fooling an electronic brain.

Beffort and Mie Azusa ran for a minute without meeting any obstacles. The motor of the speedboat was rumbling now on the shore and the cars must have reached their destination. In a few seconds, the hunt would be organized and the situation would become desperate. Beffort could open fire on Madame Atomos' servants, but the bullets would not have any effect on the creatures made immortal by the motor-brain. In short it meant that it was impossible to fight and the only safety was in flight.

All of a sudden Beffort stopped Mie Azusa and made her lie down in a hole surrounded by bushes.

"What's wrong, Smith?"

He motioned for her to be silent and lied down beside her, keeping in sight the six men who were slowly making their way through the underbrush. They were attentive and silent and heading straight for them.