

THE REVENGE OF MADAME ATOMOS

Chapter I

Smith Beffort tore the page off the calendar and was astonished to see that the month of November had started 17 days earlier. His face froze. In August, Madame Atomos had literally disintegrated in the police headquarters in Canby, Oregon, where she was being held prisoner. It was stupefying, unlikely and utterly unexpected. Still, the diabolical woman had really disappeared from the room in which four men were guarding her. Beforehand, Madame Atomos had given herself the satisfaction of telling how she planned to escape. Naturally, no one believed that she could disintegrate herself there and reconstruct her human form almost instantaneously in her lair on Atomia Island.

Since this magic trick—teleportation by disintegration, whose principles violate no laws of physics—the FBI had been forced to search for the location of Atomia Island. They had inspected every island in the Pacific and particularly in the Hawaiian Islands with no success. Needless to say that this was a huge job. How could they find an underground shelter in an archipelago spread out over almost 1000 square miles?

“How indeed?” Beffort mumbled.

Just then Dr. Soblen walked into the kitchen. Being the Befforts’ guest for the last couple of weeks, Soblen was recuperating from his trip to the Pacific where he was helping in the search. When he heard Beffort, he said, “You’re talking to yourself, Smith?”

Beffort frowned and shook Soblen’s hand. “Yes,” he admitted. “If this continues, I think Madame Atomos will end up making me senile. Did you sleep well, doc?”

“Yes, thanks. Tell me, Smith, in spite of what everyone thinks, are you still afraid of Madame Atomos coming back?”

Beffort’s smile had no joy in it. He pointed to the coffee pot and the table set for breakfast. “Help yourself.”

“Answer my question first,” Soblen insisted.

Beffort spread his hands, palms up, and said, “I’ll believe she’s dead when I see her corpse.”

“So,” Soblen said calmly, “you’re going to spend the rest of your life tearing your hair out. In our present state of knowledge, we can admit that Madame Atomos could have disintegrated herself, but we must refuse to believe that she actually did...”

“Okay,” Beffort interrupted, “we’ve already talked about this till the cows come home! Eat some toast—it’s something solid.”

Soblen sat down, poured himself some coffee and started buttering his toast. “Is Mie still in bed?”

Beffort pointed to the clock, “Do you know that it’s not yet 6 a.m.?” Soblen had a little jolt. Beffort sat across from him and went on, “You’re here on vacation but you talk aloud in your sleep all night long and you get up at the same time as me. Is that proof of your peaceful state of mind?”

“At my age...”

“No way! In truth, you can’t stop thinking about Madame Atomos. Last night you yelled out her name a dozen times. Doc, you’re in no position to lecture me.”

Soblen buried his nose in his toast.

“Of course,” Beffort continued, “you would die before admitting it, but Canby really shook you up. Madame Atomos was at our mercy and then all of a sudden, poof! Nothing in her chair but a pile of clothes. For a scientist, that’s pretty unusual, isn’t it?”

Soblen shrugged his shoulders and defended himself, “That’s not the issue. I simply claim that Madame Atomos could not have reconstructed her human form and so we’re chasing a ghost.”

“Excuse me,” Beffort corrected. “*You* are chasing a ghost! Me, I haven’t budged from here since August—you can jot that down in your little notebook.”

“You’re stuck in a rut.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re not in the same position. I knew that you wouldn’t find Atomia Island and that you would come back here to see how I was doing. So, you can see that I’m biding my time. I’m just waiting for Madame Atomos to show herself and in my opinion, it won’t take long.”

Soblen smiled frugally. “For a patient man,” he said sarcastically, “you’re pretty nervous! At night you hear me dreaming, but I hear you pacing for miles between the bathroom and the second floor landing. Plus, I think it’s your stomping that keeps me awake. You should take some tranquilizers!”

Smith Beffort sat back and lit his first cigarette of the day. “In conclusion, doc, we’re all on hot coals and the tension is mounting the closer the theatrical moment comes for Madame Atomos to reappear. The normal cycle of the famous three months is almost up. It’s always been at the end of this time that our enemy launches a new attack against the United States.”

“Yes,” Soblen tried holding firm, “but she had never disintegrated herself before!” He was stubborn as a mule.

“Damn,” Beffort said, “if you were so sure she was dead, you wouldn’t be so stressed all the time.”

Soblen drained his cup of coffee, wiped his mouth ceremoniously and murmured in an irritated voice, “You see, Smith, you can’t swear to anything when it comes to Madame Atomos. Probabilities give her a one in a million chance of success at teleportation by disintegration and it’s precisely this slim chance that bothers me. We know that Madame Atomos has domesticated the atom, that she invented a terrifying disintegrator ray, that she can protect herself with a magnetic shield and submit hundreds of innocent people to her will by sticking a motor-brain in their heads. We know she uses flying saucers that are capable of astounding speed, that she gave immortality to some people and that she has at hand extraordinary inventions that we know nothing about. In all this we also know with almost mathematical certainty that Atomia Island is somewhere in the Hawaiian Islands and nevertheless, we can’t find a trace of it. So, how do you expect me to sleep soundly?”

After a short silence, Beffort said, “Basically, we’re only now starting to be honest! So far we’ve been careful not to reveal our worries. Let’s stop this farce and admit that Madame Atomos is now capable of disintegrating and reintegrating herself at will.”

“Let’s admit that.”

“So what’s stopping her from suddenly materializing right in front of us, here and now, and wiping us out with one swipe of her ray gun?”

Soblen shook his head. “Impossible. As a prerequisite she would need an accomplice here.”

“Why?”

“Because teleportation has to have a computer at the departure and a second computer at the arrival. Theoretically, it should happen like this: you feed the potential traveler’s genetic code into the first computer and he’s disintegrated. Meanwhile, the code has been sent to the second computer, which reconstructs the traveler in flesh and blood on arrival. Therefore, for Madame Atomos to materialize suddenly before us, a computer would have to be hidden somewhere in the kitchen to reconstruct her.”

Beffort tapped the ash off his cigarette and said thoughtfully, “If I understand correctly, the trip happens at the speed it takes to transmit electromagnetic signals, that is the speed of light. Suppose that Madame Atomos expands her system...”

“Expands?”

“Yes. If she can travel in this way, why not also let her servants do the same? I can just see the whole Atomos Organization moving around like lightning and striking where we least expect it. All it would take is an accomplice to sneak a computer into the point of arrival.”

Soblen scrunched up his nose and said, “It wouldn’t even have to be hidden. At zero hour it would just have to be wherever they want. The disintegrator computer that Madame Atomos used to vanish from the police station in Canby was the size of a watch. The reconstruction computer can obviously be the same size so that anybody could put it anywhere without attracting any special attention. Hell, Smith, this is a serious concern!”

Beffort stubbed out his butt in the ashtray, stood up and started pacing with his hands in his pockets. “Now, doc, you understand why I stayed home instead of going with you to dredge the Pacific. Madame Atomos’ hatred of Americans is completely focused on me and my family. She swore to kill us and she won’t stop until she’s accomplished her sinister plans. So, if our guesses are

right, from now on I have to be suspicious of everyone. Every person who caters this house might be carrying a reconstruction computer.”

He sat back down across from Soblen and added, “Our best protection is that very few people know we’re living here...” He counted on his fingers out loud. “You, Akamatsu, J.E.E., Witter, Hyde and Owen Bernitz. Six men whom I fully trust but whom Madame Atomos knows.”

Soblen puckered his mouth. “And the neighbors?”

Beffort flipped his hands, resigned. “It’s impossible for us not to look like oddballs to them. We practically never leave and the deliverymen have never crossed the yard. The neighbors have to be wondering what’s going on behind the high walls and your arrival must look like something of the utmost importance. But it’s inevitable. For Madame Atomos to find out that we’re living in the suburbs of Williamsburg, it would take a miracle. She’ll be searching at the other end of the United States, in the deserts, mountains and forests, but she’ll certainly never imagine that we’re only 400 miles from New York!”

Dr. Soblen sighed. Now Beffort was put on the defensive. While some people were trying to find the location of Atomia Island, Beffort was thinking only of Madame Atomos’ next attack and, like a soldier, was preparing for the shock by digging trenches. It was just an image but in Soblen’s eyes this way of proceeding looked more like surrender.

However, Beffort had full power in the fight against the sinister Japanese woman and her Organization. The navy, air force and the Green Dragon Force added up to a formidable deterrence power. Why let them lay down their arms while the enemy was working in the wings on a new attack whose consequences might be catastrophic to the United States?

“I don’t understand, Smith,” Soblen spoke frankly since he never minced words when the situation started to look dire. “You’re acting like a man who is scared.”

Beffort raised his eyebrows. “But *I am scared!* For months I’ve feared for the life of my wife and son who are the main targets of Madame Atomos. Everyone is congratulating each other because the USA is calm thanks to the diversion that the Befforts create in the sinister woman’s mind, but no one thinks of the danger that’s looming over us. Their reaction is all too human. Two or three lives mean nothing if you put in the balance the millions of people whom the Atomos Organization might strike down after we’re eliminated. Because that’s the whole problem, doc—for Madame Atomos to continue to ignore the USA, we have to stay alive.” He raised a finger and spoke gravely, “The day after she kills us, she’ll annihilate the United States! Don’t you see, I’m not just scared for my family?”

Soblen nodded. “I didn’t see things like that,” he admitted, “but in that case, why not find a safer hideout?”

Beffort smiled and rubbed his weary face, explaining, “Doctor, we have to be reasonable and understand that Madame Atomos could get tired of looking for us if it takes too long.”

Soblen’s eyes widened. “Are you insinuating that you’re deliberately staying within her reach?” Beffort nodded and Soblen raised his voice, “You’re tempting the devil!”

“Madame Atomos is the devil personified and we’re playing a great big game of chess with her. Except that she cheats and all the pawns that we capture she replaces from our own reserves. Now you’re not so sure, but at the start of our conversation you claimed that Madame Atomos was dead. Well, you can’t imagine the number of men and women who have disappeared since August.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve read the papers and Eddy Witter keeps me up-to-date on the reports filed with missing persons. Now, in two and a half months almost 2,000 people have vanished without leaving the slightest trace. What do you make of that, doc?”

Soblen grimaced. “If I believe you, I’ll have to conclude that Madame Atomos is rebuilding her Organization. Recruiters are kidnapping American citizens and probably taking them back to Atomia Island where they are operated on to put a motor-brain in their skull. Afterward, they become slaves of the Great Brain, which is just an extraordinary electronic machine controlled by Madame Atomos...”

“Okay, doc! You’ve learned your lesson by heart,” Beffort observed. Then he pointed at the calendar and said, “It’s November 17. I’ll bet my bottom dollar that we’ll hear news from Madame Atomos before the end of the month.”

Soblen stayed quiet. He knew Beffort was right.

Chapter II

On the same day at 8 a.m., Miss Dolly McIntyre closed the door of her apartment, caught the elevator and went from the 12th floor down to the lobby of the building located at 455C Washington Street in Boston. Miss McIntyre was a superb blonde full of inviting curves. With her very free spirit she always looked on the bright side, lived in the present and did not care at all about what the future held in store. Of course, she was only 23 years old so she still had plenty of time to think about her golden years.

Dolly worked in a travel agency. She was constantly in contact with businessmen who had fat wallets, which she emptied using her charms. In short, she felt happy and had no complexes. Nevertheless, Dolly chose her partners carefully. Strange as it may seem, she was not what you would call “easy”. So, no one could boast of breaking the ice with her without first being physically attractive to her. Some young ladies like young men. Dolly was drawn to men in their 40s or 50s, with graying temples, experienced in love and who knew how to treat her with uncommon tenderness. Dolly always felt like she was the man’s daughter, protected and free to let loose in all kinds of frivolity. Her partner forgave all her whims with a cute little grunt.

On the other hand, Dolly hated the young pretty boys with more and more effeminate manners, who looked bored watching her while they played sluggishly with their long straight hair. To them she was just another girl. Besides, the demands of these young apathetic and unmanly boys were stupendous. They wanted this, said no to that, etc.

T.B. Clark knew of Dolly’s disgust for the young men her age. Clark was the “Mister” of the moment. Right now he was parked at the other end of Washington Street in his shiny orange Cadillac waiting for his young lover to show up so he could drive her to work as he did every day. There was already a lot of traffic and a veritable wall of cars separated the two sidewalks. To cross the street the light had to change.

The front door of the building finally swung open and Dolly appeared. She was ravishing. Even more—sensational!

She smiled, waved to Clark and came down the sidewalk toward the light at the crosswalk. About halfway down she stopped for no reason and stood still on the edge of the sidewalk, looking at something off in the distance that only she could see, but that completely captivated her attention.

T.B. Clark followed her eyes, saw nothing special and suddenly had the weird feeling that something was wrong with Dolly. At that precise moment an old Chevrolet pulled up to the young lady and a guy in his early 20s got out. Long hair, pale skin... exactly the type Dolly could not stand the sight of. The young man walked up to Dolly, took her arm and led her to his old beater. Dolly sat calmly in the passenger seat. The guy walked around the Chevy, sat behind the wheel and instantly took off.

T.B. Clark sat there dazed. He had just witnessed something unbelievable and was swimming in utter confusion. Anger finally got the better of him, but it was much too late. Clark had a fast car, but the traffic kept him from making a U-turn. He was forced to go to the intersection and wait at the red light, letting the pedestrians cross before starting in pursuit. He sped like crazy down Washington Street and got to Dedham with no sign of the old Chevy.

The Chevrolet had turned west a long time before. It cruised slowly through Quincy and continued in no hurry toward Hingham Bay. Dolly and the young man had not spoken a word when the car stopped at pier 2, reserved for pleasure boats. The young man cut the engine, helped Dolly out and then led her gently to the yacht that had obviously been docked in the same place for a long time. It was called the *Lanai*.

Dolly followed the man to a cabin, which he made sure to lock, covered the window and turned on the light. After that he took a black uniform and short, black boots out of a closet and put them on the bunk before walking over to Dolly, who was still strangely passive. Unemotionally and unforcefully he took off the girl’s fur coat and then her dress; he popped off her bra and then slipped off her panties and girdle and stockings; then he removed her pumps. All this without meeting the least resistance or receiving any help, just a flaccid indifference that would have been alarming under any other circumstances.

Naked now, Dolly stared blankly at the young man piling up her clothes in the closet. Afterward she let him help her put on the black uniform and boots and then with thoroughly empty eyes she watched him while he lifted a trapdoor in the corner of the cabin. The young man, still silent and stone-faced, came back to her and pushed her to the ladder that sank into the belly of the small yacht. Dolly shimmied down into the hold in front of the man. He climbed down after her and lifted the cover of a tube that stuck through the yacht's hull. This tube was two and a half feet in diameter and furnished with another ladder.

Dolly and the man climbed down another 20 rungs and into the operating room of the submarine that was huddled up against the hull of the *Lanai*. The young man handed Dolly over to the six waiting surgeons; he turned around and immediately climbed back on board the yacht.

Ten minutes later the old Chevrolet, equipped with an emitter that paralyzed the will, was cruising the streets of Boston again in search of new, healthy and beautiful servants for the Atomos Organization.

T.B. Clark gave up his search, went to his office and worked unproductively until noon. Everyone annoyed him a lot as he did not get a minute to himself to phone the travel agency where Dolly worked. When he finally got the chance to call, it was past noon. The agency was closed and no one answered the phone. Seriously worried, Clark got back into this car and drove straight to 455C Washington St. He left his Cadillac in the parking lot, found a phone booth and, to assuage his conscience, dialed Dolly's home number. To his great surprise the girl answered right away.

Clark was well bred, he said, "I waited for you this morning for nothing, huh?"

Dolly laughed her head off. "Oh, I'm really sorry, Tony, but the most extraordinary thing happened to me! Can you believe that out of the blue I ran into my brother? I haven't seen him in at least five years..."

Clark was shocked silent. He had imagined everything but this.

"Where are you, Tony dear?" Dolly murmured.

"Downstairs," Clark answered stupidly.

There was a short silence before Dolly complained, "Don't you want to see me?"

He got a little emotional lump in his throat. He was 42 years old and Dolly was certainly one of his last (maybe the last) conquests and she had a lot more power over him than she imagined. When she talked to him in that pouty voice, Clark melted and always felt like he was 20 again. "Of course I want to see you, Dolly."

"Well, are you coming up," Dolly whispered.

"I'm on my way!"

He hung up. Dolly did the same, undressed quickly and slipped on a see-through negligee. After unlocking the door of her apartment, she lay down on the living room couch.

She had never acted like this, but she was ready to do all kinds of things that she had never done before, even though she did not know it because she no longer really existed. Miss McIntyre was just another one of Madame Atomos' creatures, controlled by the motor-brain, like a robot, on a specific wavelength through electromagnetic impulse. Thus, she had just received orders to bring Clark up to her room. The Organization was recruiting and the Great Brain wanted to see if the man could be of use. The programming wanted *healthy* and *beautiful* for its future victims, but it said nothing about *young*...

Clark rang, got no answer, tried the door and opened it. He closed it behind him and entered the living room. Seeing the pose his young mistress had struck took his breath away.

"Hello, Tony."

Clark stepped forward, already burning with desire, unaware that Dolly's eyes were sending back his image to the Great Brain. Over on Atomia Island, thousands of miles from Boston, a file was speeding into a programmer, passing from one sector to another, until it ended up in a sorting tray with one word printed on it: *Good*.

The order was sent in a flash to the motor-brain that the surgeons on the submarine had buried in the girl's brain. Dolly smiled and patted the couch. "Get comfortable, Tony dear."

Clark was undressed in the blink of an eye. When he was naked, Dolly turned on the paralyzing emitter they had given her and Clark froze in the middle of the living room. Now he was ripe for the operation.

The next day T.B. Clark was completely out of circulation, but Dolly McIntyre, promoted by the Great Brain for headhunter of the Atomos Organization, went to the travel agency as usual. Naturally, Clark's wife informed the police about her husband's disappearance. Under normal circumstances, when it was just a normal citizen, the police would do nothing before the legal delay of 48 hours. However, it happened that T.B. Clark was a big fish, his wife's brother was a senator and she loved him a lot. All this combined to land the matter directly on the desk of a G-man named Clay. He was the director of the Boston FBI and so considering the fact that too many Americans had disappeared over the last two months, he immediately decided to deal with the Clark file personally.

Clark was a cautious man. He had jealously hidden his tryst with Dolly but when it comes to affairs, it is very difficult, nary impossible, to fool a personal secretary for long.

Through Clark's secretary, Clay quickly and easily got the address of Dolly McIntyre and two telephone numbers: one was her home number, the other of the agency where she worked. He asked no questions and went directly to the agency. When got there, he asked a ravishing young blonde where he could find Miss Dolly McIntyre.

The blonde smiled and said, "I'm Dolly McIntyre. What can I do for you?"

Clay avoided thinking about all the things this wonder could do for him and flashed his badge. "Mr. Clark has disappeared," he said.

"Oh dear!" Dolly exclaimed.

Clay leaned over the counter where he got a bird's eye view of the girl's cleavage and almost forgot what he had come there for. Good God, it was about Clark! "When did you last see him?"

Dolly batted here eyelashes. "The day before yesterday, I think," she stuttered. The problem was (and the Great Brain did not know it) that Dolly did not know how to lie. Right now she was under the Great Brain's control, but she still retained a certain amount of intellectual independence. Here is where you might say the Atomos Organization was not exactly perfect. When the young lady stuttered, the Great Brain had no way of catching up. If it interfered, it might cause more problems with unexpected consequences.

A machine, even an electronic one devised by Madame Atomos, was still just a machine!

Naturally Clay raised an eyebrow. "You think? If I were you, I think I'd be sure, don't you?"

This time the Great Brain must have taken the reins. It sent a little impulse to Dolly's motor-brain so she could answer with complete self-control, "But I am sure! It's just a way of speaking... Say, I hope nothing serious has happened to him?"

"We don't know anything. How was he?"

"Like always."

Clay felt something was not right. From the personal secretary he had learned that Clark probably saw his mistress every morning. Logically, therefore, and since Clark had disappeared the day before around noon, Dolly must have seen him that morning.

Clay was a good G-man. Miss McIntyre's attitude seemed strange (though he could not say why), so he decided to put off his interrogation until later in order to get as much information as possible from his subject. After all, he had come here on instinct. The mistress of a man as important as T.B. Clark deserved more light on the situation before being grilled under the blinding lamps of the FBI!

Clay put on a satisfied smile and very politely said goodbye, to take his business elsewhere, that is, he was soon in front of the building where Dolly lived. Well, you would have had to be totally blind not to spot Clark's shiny Cadillac parked in the lot next door. Clay mumbled to himself, then called headquarters and waited patiently on the sidewalk. Five minutes later two specialists showed up. Clay led them to Miss McIntyre's door and they quickly found a key to open the lock. In the apartment the three men made a thorough search. Clay was not at all surprised not to find Clark, but he was surprised to find his clothes.

"Weird," he moaned.

"And what do you think this is?" one of the break-in specialists asked. He was holding a small, square box with a screen on it, two knobs and a very short antenna. Clay grabbed the thing and examined it, with a troubled look because the antenna did not look quite right.

"Turn the knob..."

"No! You can go. I'll take care of closing up here."

The specialists left after giving the key to their boss. Clay used Dolly's phone to call James Edward Evans in Washington. They tried to put him on hold, but he said it was urgent and got put straight through to the FBI's head honcho.

"What's eating you, Clay?" J.E.E. asked.

"If you know where Smith Beffort is," Clay said in earnest, "I think you'll want to contact him immediately!"

"Okay, but what about?"

"I'm on a trail that stinks of his Atomos to high heaven!"

"Go on..."

"A guy's disappeared," Clay summed up, "and his mistress claims she hasn't seen him since the day before yesterday..."

"Stop!" J.E.E. interrupted. "That has nothing to do with us."

"Wait. At the girl's place I just found the guy's clothes and I'm holding some weird little box with a grid screen, two knobs and an antenna. Given Beffort's latest instructions to us, it seems to me that finding a contraption like this deserves..."

"Okay! You're sure it's not a radio or tape recorder or maybe..."

"No!"

"And the girl?"

"Exactly. It was her behavior that made up my mind. If she were normal, she would never have said she had no news from her sugar daddy when she had to know I would immediately spot his car in the lot next to her building. To all appearances, she killed him with an accomplice."

"Blood?"

"Not a drop, but his underwear and t-shirt. Statistics show that a man very rarely leaves these things with his mistress, right? Unless..."

"That goes without saying," J.E.E. cut in bitterly. "Where are you right now?"

"At the girl's apartment."

"Go back to your office and try to find out what that black box is. Beffort will call you in a few minutes."

"Okay."

J.E.E. hung up. Clay did the same, tucked the box under his arm and left, being careful to lock the door behind him. He had left Clark's clothes where they were. There was no way for Miss McIntyre to know that her love nest had been violated.

Clay pressed the elevator button and waited for it to arrive. When the doors finally opened a young man with long hair and pale skin came out. Clay stepped aside to let him pass, but the guy pointed the antenna of a black box at him and turned the knob. Clay understood instantly, but the ray was too fast for him. Although he wanted to jump away, the G-man stood frozen. A kind of veil fell over his eyes and he suddenly lost his willpower and all desire.

The young man led him by the arm into the elevator. Then he pressed the button for the first floor.