

MADAME ATOMOS SOWS THE WHIRLWIND

Chapter I

Sergeant James Bundick and his partner Danny were riding in an unmarked green car that had seen better days and would certainly not last another winter. They had just exited Highway 23 and could already see the first breathtaking lights of the Mojave Desert in front of them. In the early morning heat of the spring the mist rising off the Pacific was starting to spread over the suburbs of Los Angeles.

Danny, the younger of the two police officers, glanced quickly at his colleague. He wondered whether he, too, would change like that in 20 years and become a paunchy civil servant like Sergeant Bundick, who was reaching retirement age and did not seem to think much about anything. Danny was only 23 and still very gung-ho about the career he had chosen: to defend widows and orphans, as he liked to tell himself. It might seem kind of overrated, a tad old-fashioned, especially at the dawn of the 1970s when most young Americans felt radically opposed to the established order and went around preaching about free love and anti-war. The demonstrations in San Francisco last month had proved this point once again. Danny understood all this. He understood how you could have doubts when you saw all those policemen marching around and when he looked at Sergeant Bundick with his clammy hands and his face that looked like it was melting in the heat of the Californian desert. But Danny was young and his belief in a better world was still intact.

With his sweaty finger Bundick pointed to the glove compartment. "Go on, boy, open that up. With a little luck you'll find a road map buried in that mess."

"Don't you ever get sick of the police, Bundick? Always the same thing, watching the same places..."

"First of all, I don't always do the same thing. I don't know who you were out on patrol with before, but you'll see that our mission orders have changed a little."

"You officers have briefings. They keep you up-to-date. Us others never get told anything."

"Yeah, well, try to find that goddamn map," the sergeant grunted. "It may be a mess but it's still a glove compartment."

Danny's eyes rolled up. He was holding what must have been a road map from the 40s. The sergeant nodded to him that it was the right one and that for a rookie he was getting by just fine. Then he slammed on the Ford's brake in order to kick up as much dust as possible before pulling over to the side of the road. Danny was stunned by the brutal silence of the desert. He had never liked the place and surely never would.

Sergeant Bundick tried to unfold the map without looking too ridiculous, but it was a lost cause. The tattered sheets started flying all over the place. Danny looked apologetic before deciding to come to his aide.

"Do we really need a map to drive through the desert? Don't you know it like the back of your hand after all this time patrolling it?"

"Where do you come from, pal?" Bundick laughed. "Certainly not from this state or anywhere around."

"I was born in L.A. and I grew up there."

"You must not have left the city much!"

"I went to New York a few times and..."

"No, I mean, you must not have ventured into this neck of the woods very often."

"Just since I joined the police force. A few patrols with and without you."

"That's exactly what I thought."

The sergeant looked at the map one last time. Figuring it was useless he tossed it lazily out the window before starting the car up again and speeding off.

They drove for a good half an hour in silence. The car glided down the road, smooth and steady in spite of the speed, which impressed Danny to no small degree. The sergeant was very concentrated on his driving.

In the distance the landscape slowly took shape. The dry, sharp rocks of the desert presented a vision that was far from monotonous. The elements seemed to transform themselves constantly. The asphalt was long gone by now, but they could still make out a highway running parallel in the distance that a number of big trucks were rolling down. Danny thought he it might be Route 66, but he was not really sure. It gradually veered off as the car seemed to head into an area totally cut off from the world.

Bundick stopped again. First because he had something to say and the sound of the engine combined with that of the gravel under the tires drowned out any normal conversation. Then, also, because he needed to get some air and relieve himself.

“Hell, it’s not even noon and already this hot!” the sergeant commented, scrambling out of the car.

He opened the trunk and took out two beers.

“Get out, son. Come and have a drink. I gotta explain something to you.”

Danny did not have to be asked twice and he guzzled one of the cans in one go.

“Okay, one beer will do. We’re on duty. And with this sun another might just prove fatal. And not to worry, we’ve got enough to feed an army back here in the trunk. So, the good news is that you’re going to be able to eat lunch if this goddamn sand hasn’t scoured your throat.”

“Are we planning to sit out here a long time?” Danny asked. “You could tell me a little more about what we’re doing?”

“You know Manson, boy? The family and all that mess?”

“To tell you the truth I was kind of expecting as much. Since those crazies massacred a whole family last year I imagine all the cops in California are hunting the commune that was living in the desert or around Los Angeles.”

“A little like that, boy. A little like that... but not quite.”

“I’m all ears, Bundick. Are you and me going to arrest a new Manson this afternoon?”

“It’s just a routine inspection, maybe a little bit premature. We’re going farther into the desert where nobody lives unless they have to. You know, I’ve got nothing against the youth of today. Your fashion, your stuff and everything, long hair, love fests like wild pigs... I know that you’re a nice guy, young and all. No, what I’m talking about is living in those communes and eating cactus. But, you see, Manson wasn’t young. He was older and used the young, the innocence of the young.”

“Say, Bundick, you talk pretty good. Ever think of teaching philosophy?”

“Go on and joke, kid, but you can’t imagine how sordid the desert is. There are places that won’t ever be put on maps and in some of those places they still worship Satan. It’s become a fad after Manson. More and more junkies are gathering around these pseudo-gurus. Satan and all that is hogwash, but the murders are real.”

“You shouldn’t paint everything black either, Sergeant. Mansons aren’t running around the streets. I mean the communes. And over the last ten years we’ve had ten times worse than him too with that crazy Japanese woman.”

“In fact, speaking of Japs, I understand you’re related to Smith Beffort?”

“Smith Beffort is my uncle. He’s my father’s brother.”

Bundick took two more beers out of the trunk. “You deserve a second drink, kid. With my respect,” he said somberly.

Danny smiled. He liked Bundick. While drinking his beer he thought again that he would not mind being partners with him.

“In conclusion? What’s the program for the day, Sergeant?”

“Like I said, we’re going to make a little premature inspection of the communes in the desert where people don’t usually go.”

“What? We’re going to check out all the hippies in the Mojave?”

“Not exactly, not exactly. Let’s say that we’re going to check out one commune. And I’ll add that even if it’s not really dangerous, it does present certain risks.”

At that moment the sergeant was looking for some kind of change in his young partner’s expression, but Danny remained unfazed.

“That’s good, son. You’ve got guts. An old cop about to retire and a young one like you ought to have no problem at all.”

“Tell me a little more, Sergeant. Where are we going?”

“To a guy named Vargas.”

“Vargas? Who is he? A Manson copycat?”

James Bundick spoke in all seriousness. “There are a lot of youth moving around today,” he said, scrutinizing the horizon like an old Indian waiting for a cavalry that will never come. “A few murders in remote spots and some of them even on the edge of the Mojave, not your usual thing, no, ritual murders and all that. As I said, I don’t believe in all that hogwash, but on his last patrol Sergeant Braddock, who was a heartbeat away from retirement like me, left early after finding one of these things.”

“What is one of these things?”

“The youth are turning crazy because of drugs. They kill more and more violently and gratuitously. There was even a massacre not far from here last month. That’s all I’ll say because I don’t want you heaving your breakfast. But believe me, it was not a pretty sight.”

“I didn’t hear anything about it.”

“Nobody heard anything about it. But things are moving a lot, believe you me. Manson has become a hero to all the trash.”

“And Vargas?”

“Vargas would be more like a poor boy’s Manson, or so I hope. For the moment we don’t have anything against him, but we’re keeping a close eye on him. He’s pretty young, not yet 40, but with his eyes, his past and his gift of gab he could pass Christ off as a conman. He lives in a commune close to here with 20 or so morons, some more dangerous than others. That’s where we’re going.”

“And we’re just going to barge in on them?”

The sergeant turned away from the horizon and stared at Danny straight in the eyes. “For a young man you’re not too with it. Haven’t you heard of the Hollywood Bowl? Three days of love, booze and drugs. And maybe some music if they’re able to listen.”

“My girlfriend might be there, but it’s not my sort of thing. I didn’t know about it.”

“Yeah, well, the police know about it, imagine that. And I can tell you that right now all these kids with Vargas are having themselves a time in Los Angeles. We’ll have all afternoon to search their camp. Come on, let’s get going. We’ll check it out and then go home.”

After fifteen minutes on the road the Vargas ranch came in sight. It was located in a small, sunken valley. From their vantage point the two men could see the whole set-up: a big building with a flat roof and a few small shacks to the left and right. Everything looked covered in sand, but it might have been just an optical illusion.

No sign of life could be seen on the ranch.

The policemen parked right outside the front door. Danny noticed that the door was missing a few square panels, which made the building even more ghostly.

The sand must get in through all those holes, he thought. How can they live in there?

Then he remembered Manson. He had read a bunch of stuff after they arrested the guru and his family. Manson was way out there. Of all his twisted ideas there was one that had caught the young policeman’s attention: Manson was convinced that there were subterranean people living in the desert. The idea had fascinated Danny also and it took on its full meaning as he stared at the gaping holes that seemed to invite into the realm of the fourth dimension.

“Don’t start daydreaming, boy,” the sergeant said. “Don’t let it affect you. It’s just an old wood shack. It’s not going to swallow you up.”

The two police officers climbed out of the car. Danny was ready to draw his weapon at any moment.

If there's danger, he thought, I'd be surprised if my gun did any good.

He shook that idea out of his head. He was certainly not going to let himself get upset by the evil spirits of the desert.

"You see, my boy, we don't even have to break down the door."

Sergeant Bundick entered the house. Danny was right behind him. They were surprised by the darkness and the foul smell in the room. Groping around the sergeant flipped a light switch, hoping that the generator was not broken. The light revealed a room full of dust.

"They should have more holes in the doors. It stinks pretty bad in here," he said.

Danny felt reassured. With the nauseating stench he was expecting to see a rotting corpse or some other squalid remains, but it was only the smell of must and grime.

The two men opened the windows and the creaking shutters so that the sun could shine in and give a semblance of life to a place that truly looked dead.

"Are you sure they only just left?" Danny asked. "I'd swear the house has been abandoned for months."

"Who cares," Bundick replied. "Nobody's here and we can inspect the place."

He had already started searching a closet in the main room, which was big and must have been used as the living room. There was a tiny table in the center piled with dirty dishes and several beat-up sofas that were, in fact, nothing but backseats of different cars. One of the posters pinned to the wall showed a soldier standing up, being hit by a bullet and about to fall, his final gesture frozen before death. Below it was printed "Why?" but some jokester had written in "Why not?", which made Bundick smile as he kept searching with healthy enthusiasm.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Danny asked.

"Weapons. Mostly weapons. These communes are used as stashes. When we've found them, we can trap Vargas. I'm sure the bastard's hiding them here."

"Right now I see nothing but spilled tea."

"We should find some dope too. But don't worry about that for the moment, unless it's big bagfuls. Why don't you go check upstairs?"

Danny started up the stairs to the second floor.

"Watch yourself," Bundick shouted after him. "Step carefully and call me if you find anything. And don't hesitate to pull your gun if you need to."

A bright, almost blinding light was shining upstairs, in strange contrast to the darkness on the first floor. Danny examined the sun-drenched room. Seeing the mattresses lying on the floor, he figured it must be the dormitory. The room had an extremely relaxing air about it. The young policeman caught a few whiffs of incense and was amazed by the feeling of quiet wholeness that filled the room. No trace of satanic objects here. No sacrificed animal corpse. He tried to imagine the people living here. It was like a parallel world that he knew nothing about but that he would really like to get a little closer to.

A few ashtrays on the ground, blankets lying around and a big bay window where all the light was coming in. The room was certainly going to become an oven in less than an hour.

Danny was shaken out of his daydream by the shouts of Sergeant Bundick, who must have found something.

"Get down here, boy! It's the jackpot!"

On the first floor he found the sergeant panting at the stairs to the basement and motioning him to follow.

"There's a cellar down there. It's full of guns. For a bunch of non-violent groupies, it doesn't look good."

They scrambled down the stairs. The cellar preserved a certain humidity that was refreshing after the heat outside. Gun racks stood against the stone walls, lined up with weapons of all sizes. Danny was impressed by their number.

"There's at least a hundred here," he said. "What in God's name have we stumbled onto?"

"We've gotta go," Bundick grunted. "Mission accomplished. Let's get back to the station."

On hearing this, the young policeman felt a shiver run down his spine. The sergeant's voice was a little shaky. And his anxiety was catching.

What caught Danny's attention was a group of weapons lying on the ground: a few rifles and shotguns, some with the barrel sawed off, and a 38 special, but also a small, shiny object. Danny bent down to pick it up. He weighed it in his hand.

"This must be a weapon," he said, "but it looks like a toy. Have you seen anything like this, Bundick?"

Before he finished a muffled din rumbled outside. The two men rushed upstairs and saw an unexpected number of motorcycles roaring and backfiring furiously. 50 or so bikers were encircling their car. Not too many women by the looks of it. Big, solid guys riding big, solid bikes.

"They came back sooner than I expected. Don't you worry, kid. I'll have a talk with them."

The sergeant motioned to Danny to stay in the room like a father giving an order to his son. The young policeman watched Bundick walk through the doorway and face the pack. The engines stopped. There was total silence.

All of a sudden Danny remembered an image from a science fiction film whose name he could not recall. An image of a priest walking forward, bible in hand, in front of a crowd of warmongering extraterrestrials. He never knew whether his mind had foreseen the following scene or things happened so fast that he confused dream, reality and the nightmare that he witnessed.

Nonetheless, the white lightning that struck Sergeant Bundick must have been faster than his brain because his reason refused to believe what his eyes were seeing. The body of his partner vanished leaving behind only a wisp of blue smoke that very quickly faded into the desert dust.