

A.J. THIBAULT



**GHOST
TOWN**

A Western Paranormal Mystery

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A WESTERN PARANORMAL THRILLER

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MOODBAIN

V. M. Moodbain was about to breach the door to the study when he heard voices shouting in a Russian dialect inside the oak-paneled chamber. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but he could guess.

He fingered the tarnished ring of keys clipped to his belt. For the last seventeen months, he'd entered this office without thinking twice. But this time he paused. The clamor escalated. Moodbain set his janitor's broom and bucket aside for not more than five seconds before the door burst open.

A Russian colonel-general barely glanced at him as he stormed out and turned away. Moodbain dunked his mop into the bucket and continued to swab the hall floor until the echoing footsteps receded in the distance. The fragile janitor turned the handle and entered the room. An impressive uniformed man behind the desk, preoccupied with the computer screen in front of him, ignored him.

"Ok?" Moodbain asked.

"Da."

Moodbain dusted the shelves and emptied the ash trays. Then, from an inner pocket, he withdrew a 5-inch Rosewood

Italian Switchblade, and with the agility and speed of a young, well-trained agent, he sliced the man's neck. The carotid artery pumped blood out of his body. It spilled onto his red and gold one-star insignia.

Moodbain ejected a disk from the man's computer and tucked it into his blue work overalls. He had what he came for.

He proceeded to the janitor's closet, where he stashed his gear. The three-star colonel-general suddenly reappeared around the corner.

"All locked up?" he asked in Russian.

Moodbain nodded.

"Enjoy the New Year."

"Yes, sir."

HOURS LATER FOUND Moodbain standing alone like an ancient statue, unbeaten in the desert at night.

Gale force winds tore at his brown canvas jacket. The spewing Gobi sands searched for every opportunity to get at the thief. Tiny darts needled his ankles, stung his neck, lashed at his face, but Moodbain hung on. In days past, he had waited extreme lengths of time without flinching a muscle. He'd withstood Norway's chill in the winter of '54 in Karasjok when his second had not arrived after months of hasty, filtered messages and pale reassurances. In the Arctic's sub-zero temperatures, Moodbain understood firsthand what it felt like to freeze to death. At the same time, he learned to expect nothing from anyone, nothing from the weather, nothing from friends, nothing from other American agents.

As the wind howled at his back and the sand shifted all around, the desert roared at him to leave. But Moodbain

stood and he waited. He counted from one to ten, never more. When he reached ten, he began again at one, went through the numbers, and repeated them until that's all he knew, the beating of his heart, the wait, and the count. It was a practice he'd picked up from a Zen monk in Burma after assassins had killed his second wife, and he was holed up in Rangoon recovering from a bout of amoebic dysentery.

Hours of standing on tireless legs gave way to this small feeling of accomplishment for him. The blackness of the sky faded to the west. Gray predawn light had not yet filtered down to the desert floor. The wind let up as if even it had grown tired of the long, unproductive delay. But Moodbain had not. For his age, his limbs were strong, his body firm.

He fixed his eyes on the distant horizon. His mind was alert. The numbers were coming to him slowly, rhythmically like precision notes on a cold, winter day. Any minute he expected to see the familiar shimmer of headlights over the ridge. He had to deliver the information before the Russians discovered what he did.

He scanned the area. There was no one in sight, no sign of life in the mountains, no trace of motion on the highway.

He took a deep breath.

"Perhaps he'd guessed wrong," he thought to himself. "Maybe there would be no visitor."

He might have been just suffering from an old man's despair over a trivial hope for the future, for a wish that had more likely vanished years before, for a dream he had misplaced somewhere back in his youth, someplace he could no longer reach. A bitter taste of resentment watered the inside of his mouth. He was tired.

There was nothing more he needed to do that someone else, someone younger, couldn't handle. He was concerned about his health. He wanted to live to a hundred. In the last year, an old man's lingering feelings of inadequacy and self-

doubt afflicted him, and at 79, it was the worst kind of menace to endure.

Moodbain raised a bulky arm, glanced at his watch. The morning air felt numbing. A tight shiver raked itself across his tired bones. It was 6 AM. He had been waiting for three and a half hours. Silence, no engine, no headlights. He knew he had wasted his time. Yet he still had the package.

Three Russian military Ural trucks raced toward him.

Time to go.

A powerful rotor started up nearby, the same way it had done each day for the past three mornings. It sliced the air into sweet, even pieces, and its dense thunder drowned out every muted sound on the frozen winter desert.

Moodbain moved toward the waiting helicopter. The Chinese had been very accommodating. He appreciated that. As he opened the door and climbed inside, the warmth from the craft gushed out and enveloped him. It filtered through his weathered core, and the memories of those cold days in Honningsvaag spilled from his mind like the bursting fruit from a dying maple. He remembered the vow he had taken back then, and this explained why he now felt betrayed. "You can't count on other Company men any longer," he kept telling himself. But you must never hope or try to predict the actions of those with more considerable skill. And that's what he'd done. That's where he'd made his mistake.

The grizzled captain sitting next to him lit a Marlboro and studied Moodbain's chiseled face with his deep-set Mongolian eyes as though the two of them were shouldering a futile burden like brothers facing execution for a crime they didn't commit. He palmed the cyclic and waited for some kind of response from the old man, but V.M. Moodbain did not look back. The Russian trucks zoomed in closer, closer. The pilot didn't hesitate to act on his own.

He lifted the chopper off the ground, leaving behind a

mad, screaming circle of icy dust. Moodbain stopped breathing for a moment to remove a leather glove and rub a wrinkled hand. He surveyed the landscape, all pink and gray under the crisp winter sky, and he turned to the aviator and growled.

“That’s it, we’ll try again tomorrow.”

Though he spoke no English, the pilot understood what he meant, yet he pretended not to. That’s what he was supposed to do. He leveled off at three thousand feet, banked the military chopper by a basin ridge, and chased the night sky to the unlit west.

FINAL EXIT

A string of seaside motels that had seen better days traced a misshapen line along a ribbon of highway like some discarded piece of gaudy, Christmas wrapping overlooking the Pacific. Two-story ramshackle motels, long since abandoned, held up their peeling white clapboard for public view. The Shiraz liquor store and Chez Jay were the only two buildings on the block that had withstood the great tremor of '94.

At the foot of Colorado, the old Santa Monica pier had been battered by the ocean. All that remained of that fishing spot and Funland was a nubble of debris that each day got pounded by the surf and was dragged further out to sea. Stabilized by corporate support, the Holiday Inn survived the offseason by hosting conventions or delivering rooms to the military brass who were on a rotating schedule as they monitored their patrols along the west coast. One block further south, Sambos restaurant continued to do a thriving breakfast and lunch business. Still, the adjacent hotel had been gutted by fire six months earlier, and now stood like some deserted beast, boarded and barren.

Some businesses had thrived; others had failed. The tone of the area was one of caution. It's not that the people were afraid of one another. It's more that the complexity of their lives bewildered them, the increasing shortages of fuel, the declining value of the dollar.

The only edifice that survived was housed in a rambling brownstone occupying fifteen acres of land down the street from the Santa Monica municipal City Hall. From the full, tree-lined boulevard, you could see the property was landscaped, the hedges groomed. No sign of decay, no sign of wear. A wide sweeping driveway led to the front door, circled around to the back, and showed the building's actual enormity. An unpretentious five-story block of brick and glass assumed the more substantial part of the complex. The property dissolved into the dirty alleys and rusting dumpsters that were the trademark of the plastic motels along the ocean strip behind it.

The rotting waste and refuse piled up by the dumpsters since the garbage men had gone on strike two months earlier was no small cause for alarm. Rats, up from the sewers, invaded the trash, and the stench from their remains in a space already overcrowded with cats and the homeless was one that permeated the neighborhood in the warm summer heat of mid-September.

Inside the cafeteria at Rand, the air was fresh. A complex system of filters and pumps made sure that the building's occupants, some of the most brilliant minds in the world, were breathing none of the poisons that people on the outside had grown to accept. The special today was halibut and chips, ripe snow peas, and as usual on Fridays, New England clam chowder.

Richard Hart eyed the choices with detachment. At 47, healthy and tanned, he seemed out-of-place, making this

simple selection. A short woman with curly black hair reached for a cup and settled the matter for him.

“Ready for coffee?” She asked.

Hart nodded.

“Double cream, right?”

Hart picked up the cup and started back to his table.

“Have a nice vacation,” she said.

“It’ll be nothing without you.”

A few people started to watch the two of them. Hart shot a short glance over his shoulder, and the curly-haired woman in the yellow smock held her studied pose for a second longer, then disappeared inside the kitchen. Hart knew he would never see her again. They had traded remarks like this back and forth for the last seven years, yet he’d never learned her name.

Twenty fellow analysts gathered around the table. Hart felt the refreshing mix of white wine, and vodka martinis wash through his system. There were the usual cracks that came with the end of a project, the usual jokes. As far as anyone knew, Richard A. Hart, one of the best and more prolific theoreticians in the corporation, was going on a well deserved and long overdue month-long vacation.

“Where you going, Ricky?” Ben’s face was robust, his lips thick and pink, his eyes active, always watering.

“Top secret,” said Hart.

“Take my word for it. The best salmon you will find anywhere is on the Columbia River. State line, you’ll see. Don’t forget who told you.”

Hart took a sip of his coffee and smiled. His manner was warm and so open and vulnerable that he could put the most anxious person at ease, giving nothing away. It’s not that he was trying to hide something. It’s just that, without seeming to be, he was selective about what he said and to whom. This unique talent had been responsible for his quick entry into

the inner circle of Rand's top ranks. It was this same ability and a solid background in systems research, that had gained him ready access to the office he now stood outside.

Bill Hennessey was a solid man in his mid-fifties. He didn't stand much above five and a half feet. He looked as though he would be more at home in an Irish pub wearing his hunting jacket and reliving the day's adventure than he was pacing the floor in a gray tailored three-piece suit.

He was a hard-drinking man who'd spent his finest hours in the various think tanks around the world. He'd listened to Kahn at Hudson, the boys in Rome, he spent a week every May at the Palais Fourage in Bonn, and now he was ready to listen to Hart.

"So, what do you mean by this?" His voice was harsh. He looked Hart straight in the eye and squashed a cigarette.

"What?"

The two men circled each other, Hennessey going to the files and Hart searching for a light. The balance finally settled when Hart put his feet up on Hennessey's desk and kicked back on his swivel chair.

Hennessey was the senior administrator and staff liaison between Rand and the country's security agencies. He was the first Irish Catholic who still believed in God to make it to that post. He removed his jacket, threw it on a chair. Then he rolled up his shirtsleeves, loosened his tie, and filled up two cups of water from the cooler. He set one down in front of Hart.

"I'm leaving," Hart said. "Time to move on."

"Why?"

"I need a break."

"I'm asking you why."

"Everybody leaves all the time."

"Not this suddenly."

"Personnel sent you the file without authorization. It's

not supposed to go through for another thirty days. Bill, I'm still on staff. Going on vacation, yes. But I'm still here for now."

"This isn't like you."

"It's complex."

"What? What is it? What's eating you?"

Something inside Hart allowed him to open up. It didn't happen often, but he trusted Bill, and he knew he had to tell him something. He knew that of the past seven years he'd spent at Rand, these last five with Hennessey had been the most productive of his life. If only for that, Hennessey needed some explanation, and he deserved a good one. Hart preferred brevity, yet he wanted to convey everything he needed to say to satisfy Bill without undoing either of them. It was only fair.

"I don't know where I'm going."

Hennessey was stunned. He spun on his heel, looked hard at Hart, and wondered if he'd heard him correctly.

"I find that hard to believe, Rick."

Hart refused to defend.

"A person with your insight, who advises the world on where tomorrow will be, and you're telling me that you don't know where the hell you're going?"

Hart rose from his chair and moved over to Bill.

"Look, I want to level with you. But I want you to hear what I have to say. It's taken me a long time to learn this, maybe too long." He paused and looked off. "I was honest with Barb for the past thirteen years, and it hurt. It hurt like hell. I never found out why."

Hennessey waited for him to continue.

"Look at me, Bill. I'm forty-six. I'll be forty-seven next month, divorced. I've done what I can here. Time to move on. I don't know what yet. This is not a simple choice for me. You know that."

Someone slammed a door in the outer office. It distracted him for a second as one eye followed the sound. There was silence again before he spoke.

“Think about it. How can I have answers for other people when I don’t even have answers for myself?”

Hennessey thought he spotted a trace of pain in Hart’s eyes. For Hart to go from a quick-witted, untiring center of the action kind of guy to the hollow man that now stood in front of him was a significant change. Something happened. The exchange had been awkward, but the truth was like that sometimes.

Hart left. The dust above the desk vanished in the afternoon sun, and Bill knew in his gut that the right thing would happen. He picked up the phone, dialed.

“OK, he just left.”

J E E P

The yellow Jeep raced through the desert. Although he was driving the last model of the '73 Commando, Hart decided that he loved the car so much, it was worth having the extra equipment put on rather than buying a more recent model. By 1985, leak-proof radiation seals, electronic digital readouts, vital interior air quality control, and virus-resistant airbags were standard equipment. The modified Jeep handled well. On a good day, it had a reliable five-hundred-mile range.

He looked into the rearview mirror to see if he was all right. His eyes were still hazel. He always had his tan, a couple of lines on his forehead, and a small mole on his right cheek. He was all right, he thought to himself. You spend enough time alone, and your mind won't shut off. It was like electricity. There was always another feed coming through, always-another impulse.

After he had followed Ben's explicit instructions for searching out the best camping and fishing sites in Northern California, he was surrounded by families with children, dogs, campers, and Colemans. The whole scene made him