

"ONE TERRIFIC NOVEL."

- BANGKOK POST

JAKE NEEDHAM

**A WORLD OF
TROUBLE**

A JACK SHEPHERD NOVEL

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A Jack Shepherd Novel

Jake Needham

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PROLOGUE

I HAVE THE right to remain silent and mostly I have exercised that right. Anything I say can and will be used against me in a court of law. I have the right to an attorney. If I cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for me.

That's what they told me.

Of course, I figure it's mostly crap. If I don't start talking pretty soon, telling them what they want to hear, they'll haul me out to a little room somewhere in the back and beat the shit out of me.

So let's get one thing straight right now. Before they come back.

I am not who they say I am. I am not a criminal, not a spy, certainly not an assassin. I am not any of those things.

Maybe I cut a few corners here and there. I would admit to that. But at every turn I tried to do what seemed to me to be right. When you come down to it, that is my only real defense. I did what seemed to me to be right.

There is a pathetic air to that claim. I understand that. And it is something that embarrasses me. But nevertheless it is the truth, so I say it whenever they ask why I did what I did. At least, I think it is the truth. I am not absolutely certain I know what the truth actually is anymore.

Five years ago I was a high-flying lawyer in Washington, D.C., well enough connected to the masters of the universe to occasionally lunch at the White House mess. Three years ago, for reasons I will skip over now, I left the United States to become a professor of international business at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University. It was not long before I had a beautiful Italian-born girlfriend, a woman who would later become my wife, and together Anita and I moved into one of Bangkok's toniest apartment buildings.

That was when I really hit my stride. Half the companies in Asia seemed to want an American academic on their board of directors. Particularly one with connections in Washington who had been publicly hailed as an expert in international finance and money laundering. There was money and there was

prestige. There were private jets and there were suites at famous hotels. There was, let's face it, ego stroking on an international scale. It was like a blow job that never stopped. It was a great time. The best.

Today, on the other hand, is not a great time. Not the best.

I am no longer a professor of anything. I am no longer on anyone's board of directors or taking meetings with those good corporate citizens who were lined up outside my office door just a few months ago. I was a reluctant player in a little drama with an international fugitive just slightly less notorious than O.J. Simpson, one who thought I was his ticket to a White House pardon, and I attracted a lot of attention. All of it bad.

And that, as they say, was that.

Goodbye Chulalongkorn University. Goodbye corporate directorships. Goodbye private jets. Goodbye suites in famous hotels. Goodbye blow job.

I earn my living these days practicing law again. Or at least that is what I say when someone asks me what I am doing since I have no better answer. I work by myself in a one-room office in Hong Kong that is above a noodle shop. I live alone in a borrowed apartment. And I have absolutely no idea where, or with who, Anita may be anymore. There's a pattern there, but it's one I try not to dwell on.

In order to convince myself I was really a lawyer again, I had to have at least one client, of course. I had known Charlie for a while and he offered to become my first client and I took him on gratefully, without a second thought. It was just that simple. It never once occurred to me back then that having Charlie for a client would lead me straight to where I am today, sitting here in this chair, waiting for the FBI goons to come back and say what is to become of me.

Perhaps if I can explain to you what really happened, if I can convince you this is all just a terrible mistake, I can convince them, too. Perhaps I can even convince myself.

The problem is where to start. This is a story with a lot of beginnings. Sadly, it still has only one ending. All the same, I must begin somewhere, so I will do so here.

On a gloomy day in January in, of all places, Dubai, a tiny city-state in the United Arab Emirates perched on the edge of the Persian Gulf.

Just before dawn that morning a brief but furious storm had rolled in from the desert and left the whole city smelling like a roll of aluminum foil.

Oh wait, I almost forgot.

My name is Jack Shepherd.

But that may be the last thing I tell you of which I am completely and absolutely certain.

PART ONE

DUBAI

In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance.

In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace. And what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.

— Graham Greene
The Third Man

1

THE BLACK MERCEDES S500 pulled to the curb and stopped. Shepherd opened his eyes. He didn't much like what he saw when he did.

"I thought we were going to your office," he said.

"We are," the man in the backseat with him replied.

"This isn't your office."

"I need to stop here first."

"What for?"

General Chalerm 'Charlie' Kitnarok didn't answer. He just opened the rear door and got out, and his driver and security man jumped out right behind him. Charlie bent back down and beckoned. Shepherd was the only person left in the car, so he sighed and got out, too.

Shepherd stretched and yawned and he damn well took his time doing it. It was only mid-morning in Dubai but he hadn't slept more than a couple of hours on the overnight flight from Hong Kong and he was dog-tired and grumpy. He rolled his shoulders and looked around. They weren't anywhere near Charlie's office. They were parked on Baniyas Road a little west of the St. George Hotel, just outside the souk.

"CNN wants some local color for their piece," Charlie said as if he could see exactly what Shepherd was thinking. "You and I are going to take a walk through the souk and let them shoot a little film for background."

Shepherd glanced at the white Jeep Cherokee that had stopped right behind them. A cameraman and a soundman were unloading their gear while they ignored a young female producer who was barking instructions. The two men looked like world-weary old hands who had earned their chops covering the Vietnam War. The producer looked like she had graduated from Bryn Mawr the day before and didn't have any idea what the Vietnam War *was*.

"You think this is a bad idea, don't you?" Charlie asked.

"What?"

Charlie jerked his thumb at the CNN crew.

"It's none of my business," Shepherd said. "I'm a lawyer, not a media consultant. I don't give public relations advice, I give legal advice."

"Then give me legal advice."

"Sure. My legal advice is that there's nothing illegal about letting CNN hang around with you to do a story about an unimaginably wealthy former prime minister of Thailand now living in splendid exile in Dubai and devoting his life to helping the poor and wretched of this earth."

"That's what I thought," Charlie said. "So let's take a little walk and get this over with."

Charlie pressed his hand lightly against Shepherd's back, ushering him toward a murky passageway that led into the souk.

DUBAI SHOWS THE world a face that is gaudy and futuristic, but the souk is what Dubai is really about. Dark and primeval, its twisting maze of alleyways is clogged with so many burlap bags, cardboard boxes, and wooden crates that there is seldom room enough for more than two people to walk abreast. The pervasive gloom drains everything of color and renders the world in murky shades of gray. Only the souk's smells give it the illusion of depth and dimension. The cloying sweetness of the air, the spicy scents of cayenne and red pepper, the heady musk of wet burlap bags, the sour odor of garbage baking on hot concrete, the rich waft of bitter coffee, and the acrid aroma of strong tobacco smoked by men you cannot see.

Shepherd hated the souk. Every time he entered its cramped tangle of tiny passageways, some so narrow they were more like

cracks between buildings than places to walk, he felt like a guy in a horror movie, the one who never figures out the axe murderer is standing right behind him until it's too late. Shepherd was certain that a malevolent beast lived somewhere deep inside the souk. The place made his skin crawl.

Charlie didn't seem to feel any of that. He strolled the souk as if he owned it, and maybe he did. He certainly could afford it. According to Forbes, Charlie Kitnarok was the world's ninety-eighth richest man. And that was just counting the stuff they knew about.

Shepherd was Charlie's lawyer. He knew about the other stuff.

At least he knew about a lot of the other stuff. Maybe even *he* didn't know about everything. Charlie was a man who took pleasure in secrets and he had a great many of them. Shepherd doubted there was anybody alive who knew all of the things Charlie was involved in.

Possibly not even Charlie.

CHARLIE LED THE way with Shepherd walking next to him. The CNN camera crew took up a position about thirty feet behind them and the driver and the security man brought up the rear. They entered the souk and the gloom closed in. Split and pitted concrete walls rose up on both sides of them. Iron pipes and black rubber electrical cables snaked haphazardly back and forth over their heads and air conditioners buzzed and dripped from somewhere above. Metal handcarts piled with bulging burlap sacks and heavily taped brown cartons rattled past them in both directions.

Fifty feet inside the souk the alleyway made a sharp turn to the left and they passed a narrow shop with mounds of car batteries piled head-high behind a stained and dusty window. In front of the shop two men dressed in *dishdashas*, the long white shirt-dress that is the preferred attire of locals in Dubai, sat on upturned wooded boxes smoking cigarettes. Their dark eyes tracked Charlie and Shepherd as the little procession passed.

"Where are we going, Charlie?"

"Nowhere. Just walking."

It didn't feel to Shepherd like they were just walking. It felt more like they were going somewhere, but he had no idea where.

Still, Charlie was his client, his only client if he were being completely honest, and no matter how tired he was that was a boat Shepherd had absolutely no intention of rocking. So he nodded and said nothing.

Charlie took a heavy-framed pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses from his jacket pocket and slipped them on. The lenses were so dark they were almost black. Shepherd wondered why Charlie was putting on sunglasses when the light around them was already so dim he felt like he was walking under water.

A few minutes later they rounded a sharp bend, slipped past a tall stack of odd smelling burlap bags, and emerged into a rectangular courtyard. The courtyard didn't have much to recommend it as a destination, but something about it made Shepherd wonder if it was the place they had been heading all along.

It was about eighty feet long and twenty-five feet wide with narrow shophouses walling off all four sides. There was some kind of merchandise stacked in front of most of them. Brightly colored spices sealed in clear plastic cylinders the size of barrels; concrete packed in heavy red-and-blue striped paper bags; hundreds of pairs of slippers arranged by color on aluminum racks; wooden cases the size of refrigerators lettered in red Korean characters; and tan cardboard cartoons tightly bound with white plastic straps. The only exit was another narrow passageway at the opposite end.

Two men brushed by them walking in the direction from which they had just come. The first man was Iranian-looking, clean-shaven and wearing a dark suit with a white shirt buttoned at the neck. The other man wore a *dishdasha* and a blue Yankees baseball cap. Both men were talking on mobile telephones and Shepherd wondered briefly if they were talking to each other.

Charlie was a half step ahead of Shepherd, walking just in front of his right shoulder. They were almost exactly in the center of the rectangular space when Charlie turned his head as if he was about to say something. Whatever he was going to say, he never got the chance.

The shots came from behind them.

In the confined space of the courtyard, they sounded like mortar fire.

2

SHEPHERD REACTED BY instinct. He pushed Charlie behind two pallets piled high with burlap-wrapped bales and dived on top of him. The bales were stacked about four feet high and looked pretty solid. Shepherd had no idea what was in them, but he hoped to hell whatever it was would stop bullets.

Shepherd scrambled to his knees and took a quick glance over the bales.

The Iranian-looking man who had brushed past them was standing in front of an open-fronted shop with a sign in English over the door: SALEM ALI BAKERY. He was holding a .45 in his left hand with his right hand wrapped over the bottom of the grip. His feet were planted a shoulder-width apart, his knees bent, and his shoulders back. He looked like a model demonstrating the Weaver stance for a handgunner's manual.

“What the fuck you doing, Jack?” Charlie bellowed.

The gunman shifted the muzzle toward the sound of Charlie's voice and fired twice. Shepherd ducked back unharmed, but he didn't hear the shots thumping into the bags or ricocheting off the concrete behind them and he wondered about that for a moment.

That guy must be the world's worst shot, he thought. But even lousy shots get lucky, so Shepherd stayed as low as he could.

“Any more questions, Charlie?”

“Yeah. Why would anyone want to kill *you*, Jack?”

“Very fucking funny.”

Shepherd glanced over his shoulder. They were near the center of the courtyard and there was very little behind them but a narrow walkway disappearing into the gloom between a mobile phone dealer and a warehouse.

“What’s going on here, Charlie?”

“How should I know?”

“Somebody’s trying to kill you and you have no idea *why*? What are you into that I don’t know about?”

“Nothing, Jack. Nothing at all.”

Bullshit, Shepherd thought.

Charlie may have once been a military man, but the Thai army didn’t do much fighting so Shepherd doubted Charlie was any more comfortable under fire than he was. Still, Charlie looked calm enough to him. More annoyed than frightened really.

What the hell is happening here? Shepherd asked himself. *And why isn’t Charlie more disturbed about it?*

Shepherd took another glance over the bales and this time he didn’t draw fire. The Iranian-looking gunman’s full attention had shifted to the opposite end of the courtyard where Charlie’s driver and security man had suddenly appeared with the CNN crew right behind them. It looked to Shepherd like they were all about to be famous, although whether their fame would be posthumous was still an open question.

The security man didn’t hesitate. His weapon was out in front of him in a two-handed grip and he charged straight at the shooter, firing as he ran. The driver pulled a handgun, too, and slid to his left, blasting away. The gunman took two steps back, firing at first one man then the other as he retreated. Then all at once he dropped straight down like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

The security man took a few more strides, kicked the gunman’s gun out of his hand, and dived behind a pile of cardboard cartons. Across the courtyard, the driver flattened himself against the wooden crates with the Korean writing.

For a moment, everything stopped.

No more than twenty feet beyond where the gunman sprawled in the courtyard, the CNN cameraman had his camera up and his eye pressed to the viewfinder. All Shepherd could see of the man behind the camera was a blue baseball cap with CNN in red letters

above the bill, a denim jacket, wrinkled blue jeans, and a pair of blue-and-white athletic shoes. The soundman was just to the cameraman's right, arms straight out in front of him, a black microphone dangling from a short aluminum pole gripped in both hands. Slightly behind the cameraman and to his left, hovered the producer. She was wearing a khaki safari jacket and khaki pants tucked into the tops of brown work boots. She had short blond hair, a rosy complexion, and eyes the color of jade.

As Shepherd watched, the woman sank slowly to her knees and pressed her hands together in front of her face. She looked as if she was so emotionally overcome by the sight of a man shot to death right in front of her that she had been moved to prayer. Then Shepherd spotted the dark stain on the woman's safari jacket, right in the center of her chest.

She tilted her head down and examined the stain. Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Gradually she slumped forward, twisted slightly to her right, and laid her cheek gently against the dirty concrete of the courtyard. A bubble of red formed on her lips, popped, and slid onto the ground. She didn't move again.

3

SHEPHERD GOT HIS feet underneath him and grabbed Charlie by the arm.

“What are you doing?” Charlie asked.

“We’re getting the hell out of here!”

“Just stay put, Jack.”

“We don’t know how many gunmen there are, Charlie. They may be others, and they may have automatic weapons or even grenades. Your guys don’t have anything but handguns.”

“You think too much.” Charlie got his own feet under him and started to stand up. “Just stay where you are and—”

A fresh volley of shots cut Charlie off. Shepherd grabbed him and jerked him back down, but Charlie’s feet slid out from under him and he went head first into the bales. Shepherd heard the hollow sound of Charlie’s head bouncing off the wooden pallet. His sunglasses flew off and caromed away across the courtyard. Charlie sat up grunting in pain and lifted both hands to his face. A thick line of blood appeared across his forehead.

It was the blood that made up Shepherd’s mind.

Dragging Charlie behind him, he duck-walked behind the bales until they made it to the nearest shophouse. Inside was a single, large room filled almost to the ceiling with more burlap-wrapped bales just like the ones outside. Shepherd pulled Charlie toward the back.

There was a door. He grabbed the handle.

Locked, damn it.

Shepherd pushed hard on the door with his free hand. It gave slightly but didn't open. He stepped back, lifted his foot, and slammed it into the wood beside the lock. The door popped open as smoothly as if he had opened it with a key. Shepherd gave Charlie a quick glance. He seemed dazed and the bleeding had gotten worse. Keeping a tight grip on his arm, Shepherd pulled him into the alley behind the shophouse. He had no idea where they were going, but he had to keep them moving.

A right and two lefts brought them into another courtyard. It looked a lot like the one in which they had just been ambushed, but it wasn't. There was a shadowy passageway at the opposite end right next to a windowless stucco building exactly the color of sand. Shepherd headed straight for it. The gloom of the souk was now their friend. If Shepherd could lose them in it, they would probably be safe. He tightened his grip on Charlie and pulled him along.

THEY WENT ON like that through the twisting passageways of the souk, making random turns every so often. Shepherd thought they were moving further and further away from the place where they had been attacked, but he wasn't absolutely certain. What he *was* certain of was that he would know the right way to get them out of this when he saw it.

And then he did see it.

Shepherd and Charlie emerged suddenly onto a wide boulevard. Just on the other side of the boulevard were the aqua waters of Dubai Creek. Dubai Creek isn't really a creek at all, but rather a narrow inlet from the Persian Gulf that for centuries has been a port of call for small traders and a refuge for smugglers. The Creek was cluttered as it always was with its usual traffic of broad-beamed *dhows* while, between them, tiny *abras* darted like water bugs ferrying small groups of people from one side to the other.

Shepherd didn't hesitate. Dragging Charlie behind him, he broke into a lope across the road and headed straight for the Creek.

There was a line of *abras* tied up at the bank right in front of them and Shepherd made straight for the nearest one. He jumped down into the boat, steadied himself for a moment as the little craft

rocked from his weight, and helped Charlie to climb down behind him. The boatman was a dark-skinned fellow in blue shorts and a dirty white shirt. He was sitting in the stern of the boat methodically peeling and eating an orange. He regarded the new arrivals with curiosity.

“Go!” Shepherd shouted at the boatman. He pushed Charlie down onto the hard wooden bench in the center of the little boat. “Go, for Christ’s sake!”

The boatman didn’t move. He just sat there and stared at the crazy white guy screaming at him.

Everyone in Dubai might not speak English, but Shepherd spoke another language he was sure would be understood. He pulled a wad of currency out of his pocket and waved it at the boatman. The man responded immediately. Dropping his orange, he shoved the boat off the wharf with one hand and fired the engine with the other. They sputtered into the Creek and the boatman turned downriver toward the wharf on the opposite bank where *abras* usually put in.

Shepherd shook his head and pointed upriver. He could see the Sheraton Hotel in the distance and right now an American hotel looked pretty damn good to him. The boatman just stared at him, so Shepherd did the thing with the money again and pointed to the Sheraton. The man quickly swung the bow toward it.

Shepherd sat down on the wooden bench next to Charlie. “Are you okay?” he called over the throbbing of the boat’s engine. “Were you hit?”

When Charlie didn’t answer, Shepherd ran his hands over Charlie’s chest and neck looking for gunshot wounds. He was sure Charlie hadn’t taken a direct hit, but maybe a ricochet had caught him. The cut on his forehead wasn’t serious, Shepherd could see that now, just bleeding like a son of a bitch the way head cuts do.

“Are you okay?” he shouted again.

Charlie grunted, shook off Shepherd’s hands, and straightened up a little. He wiped a hand over his forehead and it came away covered with blood. Charlie held up his hand and looked at it for a moment.

“Stop screaming,” he said. “I’m bleeding. I haven’t gone fucking deaf.”

“I thought maybe you’d been—”

“I’m fine except for this shit,” he said and wiggled his bloody hand.

Charlie fished in his pocket with his other hand and came out with a white handkerchief. He used it to wipe some of the blood away and then he folded the handkerchief lengthwise and pressed it against the cut on his forehead to stop the bleeding. As the boat wallowed up Dubai Creek toward the Sheraton, Charlie shifted himself into a more comfortable position on the hard wooden seat.

“Fuck,” he muttered, “I would have been better off letting those guys shoot me than getting rescued by you.”

Shepherd didn’t know what to say to that, so he said nothing at all.

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