

"NEEDHAM KNOWS ABOUT THESE THINGS."

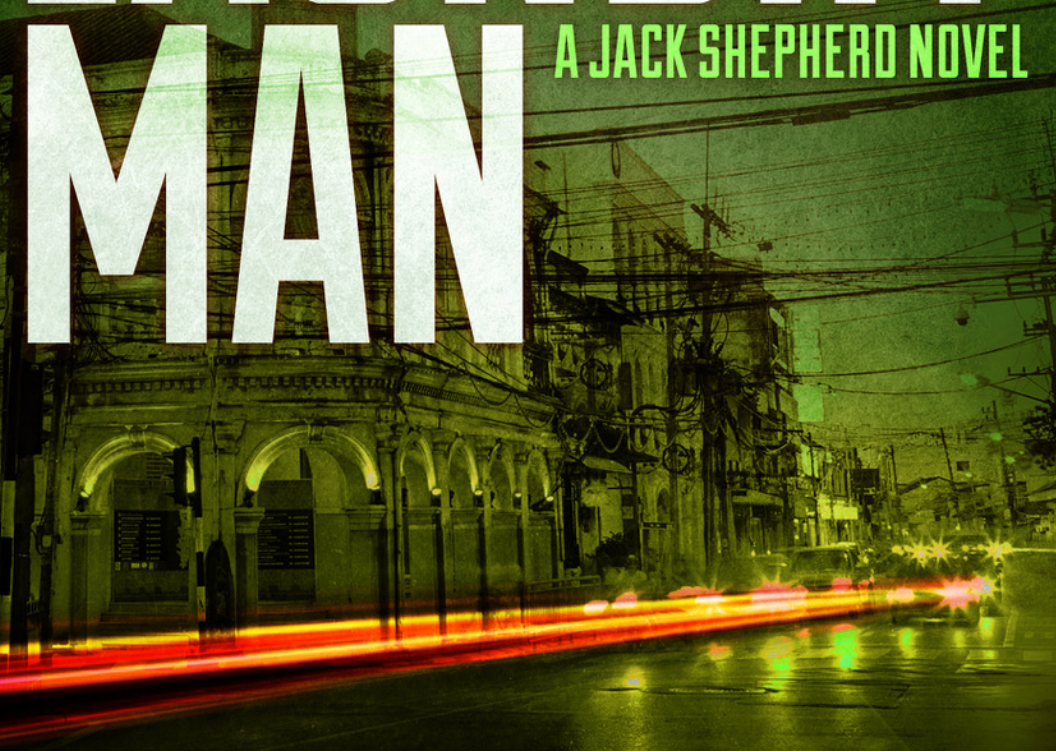
- WALL STREET JOURNAL ASIA

JAKE NEEDHAM

LAUNDRY

MAN

A JACK SHEPHERD NOVEL



LAUNDRY MAN

A Jack Shepherd Novel

Jake Needham

Half Penny Ltd
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“You’re an expatriate. You’ve lost touch with the soil. You get precious. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafes.”

“It sounds like a swell life,” I said. “When do I work?”

“You don’t work. One group claims women support you. Another group claims you’re impotent.”

Ernest Hemingway
THE SUN ALSO RISES

1

IT BEGAN EXACTLY the way the end of the world will begin. With a telephone call at two o'clock in the morning.

"Jack Shepherd," I croaked.

"Hey, Jack, old buddy. How you been?"

It was a man's voice, one I didn't recognize. I sat up and cleared my throat.

"Who's this?"

"I'm sorry to call in the middle of the night," the man said, ignoring my question, "but this can't wait. I'm really in deep shit here."

I was still struggling to place the voice so I said nothing.

"I need your help, Jack. I figure I got about a week here before somebody cuts off my nuts and feeds them to the ducks."

"I'm not going to start guessing," I said. "Who is this?"

"Oh, man, that's so sad. You mean to tell me you even don't recognize your old law partner's voice?"

"I've had a lot of—"

"This is Barry Gale."

That stopped me cold.

"Surprised, huh?" the man chuckled.

"Who are you?" I repeated.

“I just told you who I am, Jack. This is Barry Gale.”

I hit the disconnect button and tossed my cell phone back on the nightstand.

WHEN IT RANG again, I silently cursed myself for forgetting to turn the damned thing off.

I sat up and retrieved the phone and this time I looked at the number on the screen before I answered. All it said was unavailable. I thought fleetingly of just hitting the power button, but I didn't. Later, of course, I would wish I had.

“It's not nice to hang up on old friends, Jack.”

“We're not old friends.”

“Sure we are.”

“Look, pal, Barry Gale's dead. I know it and I'm sure you know it. So unless you're Mickey the Medium with a message from the other side, you can cut the crap. What do you want?”

“What makes you think I'm dead?” the man asked.

“Barry made a pretty flashy exit. It got a fair amount of attention.”

“You talking about the body they found in that swimming pool in Dallas?”

That was exactly what I was talking about. I said nothing.

“As I remember, and I'm pretty sure I *do* remember, that body had been in the water nearly a week before anybody found it so they couldn't get fingerprints. Also I hear the guy's face was too badly smashed up to recognize. Nobody thought it was worth bothering with DNA, and the ID was made from dental records.”

“So what? The dental records matched Barry's, didn't they?”

“Of course they did. They would, wouldn't they?”

“Are you trying to tell me the body in the swimming pool in Dallas wasn't Barry Gale's?”

“Not likely, Jack. Not likely at all. Particularly not as we're talking to each other on the telephone right now.”

I tried it another way.

“Look, buddy, I’m a reasonably approachable guy. Why don’t you just tell me who you are and what you want and then I can go back to sleep?”

There was a brief silence and then the man started talking again in a tired voice.

“Your name is Jonathan William Shepherd, but your father started calling you Jack when you were a kid to keep your mother from calling you Johnny and it stuck. You graduated from Georgetown Law School and you’re admitted to the bar in the District of Columbia and in New York. Stassen & Hardy recruited you right out of law school and it’s the only place you ever practiced law. You and I made partner the same year.”

I said nothing. The man apparently didn’t care.

“Your home address was 1701 Great Falls Road. It was a big white house out in Potomac, Maryland. Regrettably your happy home dissolved when your wife, the lovely Laura, took up with that proctologist out in Virginia. Dr. Butthole, you called him. How am I doing?”

“Very impressive,” I said.

“I’m an impressive guy.”

“Is that it?” I asked. “You recite a few things you’ve found out about me somewhere and now I’m supposed to believe you’re Barry Gale risen from the dead?”

“Hell, Jack, I could go on all night. How about this? Your office at Stassen & Hardy was about as far away from the reception area as it was possible for you to get and still be in the same building with the rest of us. You had a big glass table that you used for a desk. Goddamn, Jack, I’m sure you were the only lawyer in the world with a glass desk. It was like you were trying to look purer than the rest of us. Was that it, Jack? Was that what the glass desk was all about? And, oh yeah, you had that big yellow couch with the deep cushions where you took naps in the afternoon.”

“Look, I still don’t know what this is all about, but—”

“We had a part-time receptionist, a little Vietnamese girl who

was going to law school somewhere and worked as the relief girl on weekends. Remember? You fucked her right on that yellow couch one Saturday afternoon and then you admitted it to me a couple of weeks later after you'd sucked up an extra martini one night at the bar in the Mayflower Hotel. You seemed to be all cut up with guilt over it and said you hadn't told anyone else. Had you told anyone else, Jack?"

In the silence I could hear the guy breathing and I was sure he could hear me, too, except I was probably breathing a lot louder.

Because he was right.

I hadn't told anyone else.

The man went on before I could figure out what to say.

"You like living in Bangkok, Jack? I hear you're a teacher now. In some business school. That right?"

"Yes. I teach at Chulalongkorn University."

"No more lawyering? No more of that big-time stuff we used to do?"

"I don't practice law anymore if that's what you're asking me."

"Do you miss it?"

"Not particularly. I still do a little consulting sometimes."

"Consulting, huh? Is that right?" The man barked an abrupt laugh. "You want to consult with me, Jack?"

"I don't think so."

"Still a fucking hard-on, are you?"

"I just don't particularly like being the butt of some clown's crappy little joke."

"Oh, this is no joke, Jack. I wish to Christ it was, but it isn't."

I said nothing.

"Do you know that place called Took Lae Dee?" the man eventually asked. "The little food counter up in the front of the all-night Foodland on Sukhumvit Road?"

"Yeah. I know where it is."

"Meet me there tomorrow, around midnight. Just grab a stool and I'll find you."

“Midnight?”

“Is that a problem for you?”

“Yeah, that’s a problem for me. What makes you think I’d even consider coming to some damned supermarket at midnight just because a wacko pretending to be a dead guy calls me up and tells me to? I don’t know how you found out all those things about me, but if you think that’s enough—”

The man started laughing.

“Oh, it’s more than enough, Jack.”

He laughed some more. Thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance and I listened to it without saying anything else.

“I know you, my friend. You’d never pass up a chance to hear a story like this. Never. Especially not when it’s coming from a guy who’s gone to all the trouble I have to make himself dead.”

And with that, the man hung up.

2

I TOSSED AND turned for a while after that, but I knew I wasn't going back to sleep anytime soon. Eventually I gave up trying altogether and I went into my study and took a Montecristo out of the humidor on my desk. I pulled open the sliding door and walked out on the balcony.

Generally Bangkok's foreign residents went to considerable lengths to avoid breathing the city's air until it had been thoroughly dried, adequately chilled, and comprehensively decontaminated. Not only was the stuff hot and soggy, usually it smelled spoiled and a little sour, like it had been breathed by way too many people already. But this was January, the middle of winter in Thailand, and the southernmost edge of a large dome of Siberian air had slipped down from China and momentarily broken Bangkok's muggy heat. The air had turned pleasingly cool, even sweet, and it was richly thickened with the syrupy fragrances of frangipani, jasmine, and gardenias.

I cut and lit my cigar and I stood there smoking and looking out over the city for a long time.

When people in Washington first began to hear that I was leaving to live in Bangkok and teach at Chulalongkorn University, a few of them jumped to the conclusion I was making a point of

some kind, abandoning the land of my birth for reasons that were probably political and no doubt wacky. Others who heard what I was doing—and I noticed this group seemed to be composed mainly of women—attributed my change of address to middle-aged male angst fueled by overly moist fantasies of slim, submissive Thai women serving me brightly colored tropical drinks with little umbrellas in them. Most people, of course, fell into neither of those categories. Most people just assumed that I had lost my damned mind.

Part of the problem was that the whole idea of living in a foreign country was just so strange to most Americans, particularly since very few of them had ever seriously entertained the thought, however fleetingly, themselves. After all, everyone wanted to come to America, didn't they? Half the population of the earth was fighting to live in Orange County and work in a 7-Eleven, wasn't it? Why in God's name would an American even *think* of living anywhere else?

Before I had made the big jump, back in what now felt to me like another life, Barry Gale and I had both been partners in a large and well-connected Washington law firm. The firm was huge and, in spite of our common occupation, I had run across him only occasionally. Truth be told, I could remember very little at all about Barry Gale.

Except, really, for one thing.

Barry Gale had been both the outside legal counsel and a member of the board of directors of the Texas State Bank in Dallas when it was engulfed in scandal, a hugely psychedelic mess involving a bunch of Russian mobsters from New Jersey who had been using the bank to clean and press their income from a variety of rackets up and down the East Coast. The character at the center of the imbroglio was an Armenian named Jimini Zubokof, who was better known as Jimmy Kicks because he had once, so the legend went, personally taken his gleaming Ferragamos to an FBI informant and kicked the poor bastard to death.

Somehow Jimmy became inexplicably possessed by the idea of shifting his money-laundering operations to Asia—anywhere in Asia, really—and he demanded his people find a compliant bank somewhere that would serve his purposes. Of course, all Jimmy Kicks actually knew about Asia was how to order Chinese takeaway and he wasn't even very good at that, so in the ensuing upheaval at Texas State Bank offshore accounts and foreign currencies were whizzing all over the place and quite a lot of money disappeared. Tens of millions of dollars, or so the press reports claimed, were lost by the bank through dealing forward contracts in the foreign exchange market, although whose contracts they actually were or how the losses had been incurred was never made entirely clear.

Just as the whole saga was turning into old news, the disappearance of one of the bank's directors and the suicide of another freaked out the conspiracy buffs and the story jumped straight back onto the front pages. As far as I knew, no trace had ever been found of the director who vanished, but the so-called suicide had been dramatic enough to grab most of the attention anyway.

There was a guesthouse in North Dallas that the bank leased for the use of out-of-town directors. That was where Barry Gale had been found, at the bottom of the swimming pool, pinned to it by a manhole cover tied around his neck with barbed wire.

I drew on my Montecristo and exhaled a slow stream of smoke into the darkness. From somewhere I heard faint music and I listened quietly for a long while as the mournful voice of a young girl sang Thai love songs full of sorrow and loss. Her voice had a quavering, reed-thin quality, and the sound of it drifted over the city like wisps of river fog. The air smelled of ozone and rancid water. Lightning leaped soundlessly between clouds off in the distance, and the breeze cranked up a notch.

While I smoked I studied the city's skyline in the distance. The towers were brightly lit, etched into the night sky by lights so

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blindingly white that they seemed to drain the color from everything around them. In the distance beyond the skyscrapers I could just pick out the floodlights on the soaring, golden spires and preposterous-looking green and red tile roofs of the Grand Palace. Once the heart of a dazzling, secret world ruled over by a god-king, this eccentric collection of whimsical structures had lately fallen on less glamorous times. The King had long since decamped for more modern quarters and the Grand Palace was now neither grand nor a palace. These days it amounted to little more than a faintly shabby tourist attraction for the hordes of foreigners that swept over Thailand year-around.

There was a sudden flash of lightning and moments later a single, crunching boom of thunder drove the air out of the night. I dumped my cigar into an ashtray and walked back inside. As I shut the door, the storm hit like a fist.

3

CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY IS right in the middle of Bangkok and the Sasin School of Business is in the northwest corner of Chula's main campus. Sasin is housed in two mid-rise buildings that make up for what they lack in construction quality with their mediocre design. My office was on the sixth floor of the larger of the two buildings, around on the south side. It was nothing special, but at least I had a fine view of the golf course at the Royal Bangkok Sports Club and the towers of the Silom Road financial district just beyond it.

I had slept poorly and woken at dawn so I went in on Monday morning a couple of hours earlier than usual. In spite of the rain during the night, or perhaps because of it, the new day was glorious. The sky was so blue it reminded me of Hawaii, and a promising breeze out of the south carried the smell of salt all the way up from the Gulf of Thailand. None of the secretaries had come in yet, so I walked down to the little kitchen at the end of the hall and made some coffee.

Mondays were particularly pleasant days for me since I had only one class scheduled. It was an eleven o'clock lecture course entitled "Legal Aspects of the Regulation of Multinational Corporate Acquisition Finance Transactions in the Countries of the Pacific

Rim.” The kids called it “Wheel, Deal and Steal.” The course was a second-year elective that had never been very popular before I took it over, but now the enrollment was well above a hundred and the meetings had been moved to one of the large lecture halls across campus to accommodate the crowd.

My lectures were supposed to focus on case studies of the financing structures of major corporate acquisitions in Asia, but I always made an effort to sprinkle them with a few war stories to lighten up what otherwise would have been a dreary discourse on tax treaties, banking practices, and securities regulations. Almost all of my stories naturally concerned money—frequently very large amounts of it—and I had quickly discovered that money was an even better topic than sex for keeping students absolutely riveted.

The word around campus was that my lectures were entertaining and I suppose they were. Moreover, I was something less than the world’s toughest grader. If you turned up with reasonable regularity, course credit would be yours at the end of the semester without a great deal of fuss. I was a charter subscriber to Woody Allen’s Postulate: at least eighty percent of life is about just showing up.

There was another reason this particular course drew so well, however, one about which I had decidedly mixed feelings. My lectures generally featured anecdotes drawn from my own recollections of the bad old days, of gunslingers that had bought companies with big gestures instead of money and somehow gotten away with it for a while. Those stories were obviously popular with the students and that was what bothered me. I often got the uncomfortable feeling that they were less interested in absorbing the moral object lessons I was trying to impart than they were in figuring out how they could pull off the same kind of crap for themselves.

Regardless, today I was entirely free of the need to fret over what my students might make of my tales of greed and derring-do because I didn’t have to tell any. I was about to engage in the oldest

ruse known to academia, the guest lecturer ploy. All I had to do today was appear attentive and not get caught closing my eyes.

I went down to the administrative office while I waited for Mr. Coffee to finish dripping, gathered the weekend's harvest of incoming faxes out of the machine, and picked up copies of both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Bangkok Post*. Flipping quickly through the faxes, I found only one addressed to me, a notice that the board meeting for Southeast Asian Investment in Hong Kong later in the week had been shortened from two days to one. That wasn't particularly welcome news since I really enjoyed my all-expense-paid junkets to Hong Kong.

I walked back to the kitchen carrying the fax and the newspapers, picked out what looked like a clean mug from a cabinet above the sink, and poured myself some coffee. Then I returned to my own office, shut the door, dumped the fax on my desk, and settled back with the newspapers to do some serious coffee drinking.

TWO NEWSPAPERS AND three cups of coffee later, I made a preemptive toilet stop, then strolled across campus to the lecture hall where I found the guest lecturer for the day waiting outside for me. My designated hitter was an old Bangkok hand named Dollar Dunne, an American-born lawyer who had been around Thailand for longer than anyone I knew. As unlikely as it might seem, Dollar actually *was* his real name, one hung on him by a mother who either had a strange sense of humor or, given his ensuing success dealing his way around the back alleys of Asia, was startlingly prescient.

Dollar and I made small talk until the class had all taken their seats, then I did a couple of quick announcements and gave Dollar the kind of effusive and deferential introduction my guests always said was unnecessary but would have been mortally wounded not to receive. After that, I settled into a seat up at the back of the lecture hall and smiled as Dollar leaned against the podium and

launched into what were no doubt wildly embellished tales of his adventures as a legal mercenary stalking the commercial jungles of Asia.

Dollar was at least in his mid-fifties, but his wiry build and the way he wore his thick, silver hair in what was almost but not quite a Marine Corps buzz cut made him look much younger. His skin was perfectly tanned and his features still had a boyish, open quality to them. Instead of the predictable uniform of expensive suit and a white shirt, Dollar was wearing rumpled khakis and a green golf shirt that looked faded from many hours in the sun. His choice of wardrobe said a lot about him. He was probably happiest when he was doing exactly the opposite of whatever was expected. I had to admit the image Dollar affected, although a little studied for my taste, was pretty potent. It gave him a raffish quality that a lot of people found irresistible.

Dollar and I had first met back when I was still living in Washington. Dollar's firm had been lead counsel for a company called the Merchant Group that had gone suddenly and spectacularly belly up and left a good number of Stassen & Hardy's banking clients holding embarrassingly empty bags. The Merchant Group had technically been a Luxembourg corporation with its operating headquarters in Bangkok, but in reality it was as Australian as a red kangaroo. Lyndon Merchant was an Aussie and mostly he ran the organization out of Perth. He called it a private international merchant bank, but I had never met anyone who could figure out exactly what that crafty assembly of buzzwords was actually supposed to mean.

What the company actually did was equally difficult to divine. It did deals, of course, as the players liked to say back when the expression was still socially acceptable if not exactly laudable, but there was no consistent quality to them. It bought random companies all over the world, mostly with money borrowed from gullible and greedy bankers whose primary interest was in pumping up their reported profits with fat fees; then it either flipped the companies quickly for a fast profit, generally to some sucker lined

up in advance, or it cut the companies up, pulled the valuable assets out, and dumped what was left.

When Stassen & Hardy sent me out to Bangkok to fish around in the wreckage of the Merchant Group to see if anything was left for our clients to claim, it wasn't long before I was up to my butt in a morass of untraceable fund transfers and funny-money loans involving shell companies headquartered in places like the Cook Islands, Vanuatu, and Tonga. The gamy odor of the whole sordid mess was unmistakable, but I couldn't develop any solid connections between the Merchant Group's operations and the usual suspects in international scams of that sort: the intelligence agencies, drug traffickers, and arms brokers who were generally skulking somewhere in the shadows. Dollar, as I recalled, seemed to find the whole muddle more amusing than sinister, and working that case with him turned out to be the finest graduate seminar in Asian commercial skullduggery I could ever have wanted.

Dollar was right in the middle of telling my students a few stories about the Merchant Group, winging his way to the considerable amusement of the class through some of the wilder conspiracy theories, when he suddenly looked up at the back of the hall and cut me a wink that was impossible to miss. A few of the kids twisted around in their seats to check out my reaction. I reflexively returned a half-smile, but Dollar's gesture left me a little unsettled. The wink seemed to imply that Dollar and I shared some secret concerning the Merchant Group that he couldn't impart to the class. If that's what he thought, I couldn't imagine what that secret was supposed to be.

I was still thinking about that when the class started to applaud and I realized that Dollar had finished. The kids gathered their stuff, slid out of the narrow rows of theater-style seating that were tiered up off a center aisle, and began to make their way down to the main floor and out of the hall.

By the time I reached the bottom of the steps, the hall was almost empty and Dollar was leaning on the lectern at the front of the room waiting for me.