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THE LORD OF WORLDS

T O M P U G H

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Chapter 1

*9 March, 1569. Border lands between the Ottoman
and Persian Empires*

Covered in a scab of sand, Matthew Longstaff muttered curses as he slid from the saddle. The horse was heavy, hooves sinking with each laboured step. Murad began to follow Longstaff's lead, an expression of perfect trust on the young face. Longstaff shook his head. The boy was skinny, his pony a better match for the conditions. Bad enough that Longstaff had dragged him here. An orphan from the streets of Istanbul, this wasn't Murad's natural environment any more than it was Longstaff's.

Three days had passed since they left the great trading road to enter this Godforsaken wasteland. For a while, silently rehearsing the arguments in favour of this adventure, Longstaff had kept his misgivings in check. Now, far from the comforts of Istanbul, with the wind whistling its note of endless despair, London's demands seemed less compelling.

Abu Risha's instructions were clear: remain on the floor of the *wadi* – a jagged crevasse which ran through the landscape like a scar. Longstaff rearranged the loose robe he wore over his jerkin. Murad's pony stumbled. Still smiling, the boy coaxed it onwards. A stranger in the Ottoman Empire, in company Longstaff was powerless to follow the shifts in mood, prevented by ignorance from obeying even the most basic demands of courtesy. Murad had kept him out of trouble on the boat from Istanbul, purchased their horses in Antioch, translated for him at the caravanserai near Bira where the landlord's demands had been so extortionate.

"Daylight robbery," Longstaff had called it, speaking the *lingua franca* of Istanbul – a bastard form of Italian with traces

of French, Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Spanish – the only language he and Murad had in common.

The complacent landlord had pointed to watchtowers at each corner of his property. “Security costs money. You’re welcome to take your chances among the bandits.”

Unconsciously, Murad had imitated the man as he translated, palms open, a mock-mournful expression on his face, making Longstaff smile as he listed the horrors waiting beyond the walls. They’d seen no sign of murderers in the days since, nor of captive djinns, or sorcerers or man-eaters. Only this desolate emptiness. Longstaff shook his head, no longer inclined to smile, fretting that he should have left the boy in Bira.

“We still have enough food and water to reach the caravanserai,” he said, “but only if we turn back now.”

Murad looked at the saddlebags on Longstaff’s horse. “We’ve come this far.”

The sun beat down with steady fury. The *wadi* twisted left and right. The further they went, the more it resembled a killing ground. Longstaff felt a moment’s nostalgia for Suffolk. It was March; the servants would have built a fire in the great stone hearth at Martlesham. He could almost hear the snap and crackle of dried oak, warming rooms which knew nothing of Islam or the pitiless demands of Ramadan.

The boy cleared his throat.

Longstaff squinted at the high ridges, unwilling to trust his own senses in this alien landscape. “What?”

“Nothing. I’m thirsty, master.”

“Then drink.”

Murad shook his head. “It will be dark soon.”

It had been a deliberate decision to arrange this desert rendezvous during the month-long fast – to take advantage of the lethargy it induced. In Istanbul it had seemed a clever notion. Now it just seemed cruel.

“Master!”

Shouted commands wove a harsh melody through the warp of wind. Riders appeared on the ridges. A troop of six pushed their animals into a wild descent. Longstaff's hand went to the hilt of his sword. He'd been a soldier for many years; long enough to know he stood no chance against these men on their own terrain. He raised his arms as they galloped nearer, the horses kicking up great clouds of sand.

"Abu Risha," shouted Longstaff. "Abu Risha is expecting us."

The horsemen circled, naked blades flashing in the sunlight. Longstaff heard Murad's voice through the whirlwind of sand.

"Submit to their demands, Master. All will be well."

The horsemen pressed closer, dressed in sand-coloured robes and turbans. Rough hands pulled Longstaff from the saddle. His wrists were bound, a blindfold tied across his eyes. Almost with contempt, they neglected to take his sword. Robbed of his sight, smells struck Longstaff with the force of blows. Horse sweat and sunburnt leather. The desert warriors forced him up the ridge before they let him mount again. Someone jerked hard on the lead rope. The horse shied. The men were grumbling. Not in Turkish. Was it Arabic? Persian? Another language entirely? Aurélie would have known. Longstaff thought of his wife, searching for the scattered remains of a long-forgotten past to the north. She had counselled him against this journey, reminding him of Walsingham's broken promises. Queen Elizabeth's spymaster had made it sound so simple – establish a trade agreement between England and the Ottoman Empire, frustrate the interests of France and Venice.

Longstaff felt an unwelcome shiver of resentment – a small landslide of sand fell from his forehead. Without money, it was impossible to gain a foothold in the Great Turk's capital. Elizabeth refused to open her purse, insisting that the merchants of London's Muscovy Company should bear the cost – and they wouldn't pay until the sultan recognised Longstaff as England's ambassador. A position he was powerless to secure without spending vast sums on gifts and bribes.

A volley of shouted instructions interrupted his thoughts. "Murad?"

"Stay where you are. Do not attempt to remove the blindfold."

"Are you all right?"

"They have not hurt me. It is time to pray, nothing more."

Maghrib. The evening prayer. Maghrib meant sunset. Sunset meant water. Just the thought of it made Longstaff's tongue swell as the men performed their devotions. The final, plaintive call still echoing in the empty landscape as his ropes were severed, a waterskin pressed into his hands. Longstaff drank until he was dizzy for lack of air.

The temperature dropped as they pushed on. Longstaff hoped the men had thrown a blanket around Murad's skinny shoulders. He couldn't seem to talk over the sound of his own breath. The gentle creak of leather. Shrill laughter in the desert.

Jackals.

Scavengers.

Sure enough, a rising tide of sound began to lap at the darkness – a great number of people sleeping lightly, guards sharing a joke, a stringed instrument whose notes Longstaff did not recognise. Rough hands removed his blindfold. Beneath a vast sky, rows of sheepskin tents stretched into the distance, campfires winking at regular intervals.

Longstaff slid from his horse, scrutinised by half a dozen desert warriors. Hard-bitten men who roamed these borderlands between two empires, eking out a living in times of peace, growing rich when the blood flowed in earnest. Four of them raised lamps. Fuelled by the black tar which leached from the earth in these parts, the smell was heady and acrid. A man strode into the centre of the welcoming committee.

"Abu Risha," murmured Murad.

The newcomer was lean and hard, dark eyes giving nothing away. "*As-salāmu alaykum.*"

"*Wa-alaikum us-salām,*" replied Longstaff carefully.

The bandit chieftain switched to his native tongue.

“He says your horse is ridiculous,” translated Murad. “Too big, too fat. Too lazy for this country.”

Abu Risha stared, as if daring Longstaff to disagree.

“The horse is tired,” he replied. “So am I. Does he propose that we conduct our business now?”

The bandit smiled. His teeth were stained black. “In the morning,” he said in the lingua franca, “*Insha’ Allah.*”

God willing. Longstaff and Murad were taken to a tent at the camp’s edge. The silent warriors made no attempt to inspect their saddlebags or weapons. Out here in the desert, they didn’t even post a guard. The tent was a simple thing. Longstaff touched the outer layer of matted fleece before ducking inside. Blindly, he gathered cushions from the floor to make his bed, then lay down fully dressed – despite the grinding weight of his jerkin.

During the course of his life, Longstaff had been a merchant’s apprentice, soldier, thief, and gentleman farmer. He had never expected to add ‘smuggler’ to that list, but he needed money to fulfil England’s demands and there were vast profits to be made in these untracked wastes – for anyone willing to break the sultan’s embargo on Persian silk. The sudden scarcity in Europe had pushed prices to a record high.

“You did well today,” he told Murad. “Pay no attention to the tales you’ve heard. No harm will come to us here.”

“I’m not worried.”

Longstaff nodded in the darkness. Around his neck, he wore a small medallion with Aurélie’s profile stamped on one side. He raised it to his lips before closing his eyes.

Chapter 2

Breakfast arrived before dawn – a dish of rice which Longstaff and Murad ate together at the entrance to their tent, waiting impatiently for sunrise and a first clear view of their surroundings. A *muezzin* sounded the call to prayer, his ghostly voice echoing far beyond the camp.

Abu Risha's men knelt on clay tablets covered with small carpets. Some wore scarlet turbans, some black, some were the colour of the desert itself. In long, neat rows, they raised and lowered their arms like barley before the wind. "What now?" asked Longstaff when their devotions came to an end.

"They have not forgotten us," replied Murad, carefully folding his own small prayer mat.

Longstaff brushed the dust from his robe. "We can't sit here like a pair of beggars."

They made a slow tour of the camp. Birds of prey perched outside nearly every tent. The horses were corralled in large pens, separated from a smaller herd of pack animals, nostrils cut to help them breathe in this inhospitable land. A group of men formed a loose circle around a pair of well-matched wrestlers. A leopard stood chained to a stake set fast in the bone-hard ground. An armed warrior, his black hair caught in a ring of bone, interrupted Longstaff's progress.

"Abu Risha will see us now," translated Murad.

The formalities came first. Abu Risha repeated the terms which Longstaff had agreed with his intermediaries in Istanbul – an eye-watering sum of money in return for a substantial quantity of silk. Longstaff nodded. The price was high for a reason. Determined to destroy their enemies in Persia, the Ottomans were enforcing a strict embargo on their most

valuable export. Longstaff knew he faced torture and execution if he was caught moving the silk.

“I’m aware of the risks,” he said.

Abu Risha signalled. A young warrior stepped forward. Dressed in a long *khameez* and loose *shalwar* trousers, he wore a curved scimitar at his belt and carried Longstaff’s heavy saddlebags as if they were empty. A crowd began to form. The warrior emptied the bags at Longstaff’s feet; fresh shirt and linens, a whetstone – several pieces of broken masonry covered in an indecipherable script.

Murad looked at Longstaff in alarm, even as he continued translating Abu Risha’s words. “As you say, the details were settled in Istanbul. Half the gold now, half when you take delivery of the silk in Bursa.”

Two hundred men stood around them in a loose circle. Longstaff saw the odd flash of colour – silk cuffs, a turban set with semi-precious stones – but most aped their master’s dark robe. The silence was terrible. Abu Risha raised a hand. His men produced great rolls of silk, translucent in the sunshine.

“From Kashan,” translated Murad. “Suleiman the Magnificent may have taken Babylonia, Mesopotamia and Media – but the Persian Shah still controls the production of silk.”

“Useless,” said Longstaff, “if he can’t bring his wares to market.”

Abu Risha ignored him. “I have kept my side of the bargain. It’s time for you to keep yours.”

The young warrior drew his curved sword. Longstaff spat before reaching for his own weapon. The bastard was a head taller than him and at least ten years his junior.

“What are you doing?” Murad’s voice rose an octave.

Longstaff raised one hand in the universal gesture of peace. With the other, he drew his sword and threw it down in the dust. Forcing himself to remain calm, he removed his belt and

robe, revealing the bulky jerkin beneath. He plucked at the laces; the garment hit the earth with a heavy thud.

“Your gold,” he gestured at the jerkin.

Another of Abu Risha’s men slashed at the leather with a wickedly sharp knife. Gold coins slipped from the padded lining onto the hard ground. Freed from the weight of so much gold, borne over so many days, Longstaff rose up onto his toes.

No one spoke until the count was finished. “It’s all here.”

Longstaff could feel Abu Risha reassessing him – shoulders muscled from years of swinging a war-sword, scars appearing at the open collar of his shirt like rivers on a map. Only slowly did he realise Murad had stopped translating. The boy was speaking on his own account.

“What are you telling him?”

Murad flushed crimson. “He wants to know if I am blind, that I did not realise you were carrying so much extra weight.”

“Tell your master I took precautions to prevent you from discovering the truth.”

Murad’s eyes appeared to double in size.

“You knew he worked for me?” said Abu Risha.

“He was too good to be true – but there are others who might have been paying him. I hoped he worked for you.”

“Because now you don’t have to kill him.” The bandit nodded, then snapped his fingers. The warrior fetched him Longstaff’s sword from the ground. He swung it easily back and forth. The crowd had grown larger, attracted by the pile of golden coins. “I almost executed you last night,” he said. “For entering my camp on such an ugly horse.”

The moment of decision, thought Longstaff. The pain was coming now, after so many days of carrying the gold, creeping through his joints. He thought of Aurélie, her smile, the wrinkle between her blue eyes which he loved so well. Abu Risha took a step closer.

“I should kill you now.”

“You could,” agreed Longstaff, not taking his eyes from the gaunt chieftain. He could feel his life weighed in the balance. “You *might* find another buyer for your silk. Then again, you might not – once people learn how you honour your agreements.”

“An agreement with an infidel.” Abu Risha shrugged.

“But it’s an infidel you need,” said Longstaff. “Who else will buy your silk? Who else can ensure it reaches Christian markets?”

The bandit lifted Longstaff’s *katzbalger* sword. “The weapon speaks in your favour,” he said. “Let’s see how you use it.”

He threw the sword at Longstaff’s feet, then nodded at his tall champion. Longstaff repressed a groan. It had been years since he’d fought a duel. The surrounding men stamped their approval, raising a ring of dust from the dry earth. Longstaff stretched his neck and shoulder muscles, forcing thoughts of Aurélie to one side. Slowly, he bent to retrieve the sword. He was parched, tongue probing bone-dry teeth for a hint of moisture. After two years in the Ottoman Empire, he knew better than to ask for water during Ramadan.

“I hope you don’t expect me to kill him.”

Abu Risha stared. “You object to spilling blood?”

“I came to trade, not fight.” Longstaff swung the *katzbalger* in a wide arc. “None of this is necessary.”

“Oh, but it is,” smiled Abu Risha. “I like to know who I’m doing business with.”

His champion raised the wickedly curved scimitar above his head. Two hundred men cheered. Longstaff attacked, aiming for the gut. The desert warrior turned his blade aside with ease. Longstaff struck at the head, then forced his adversary back with a series of heavy blows. The clash of steel produced another roar from the crowd. He swung again, willing his sword-arm to move with the old fluency. His adversary moved like the desert wind, head still, retreating smoothly.

Longstaff disengaged, already out of breath. The young warrior offered him no respite, teasing with feint after feint. Longstaff watched his feet, trying to anticipate each new stroke, growing gradually furious with himself. He was here to trade – ten days’ journey and Aurélie left to fend for herself in Bursa. He was damned if he’d play this swordsman’s game, damned if he’d have his arse handed to him by someone young enough to be his son.

Longstaff stopped retreating, his sword an extension of his arm, guided by the memory of a hundred fights, but his feet set as if in stone. He was too good to fight so badly. What would the young warrior make of him? Longstaff waited for a moment of confusion. There! The warrior’s eyes rolled left, seeking guidance from his master. Longstaff burst forward, letting the scimitar slide the length of his blade, crashing one furious fist against the swordsman’s jaw.

The eyes widened in surprise, then rolled so that only the whites were showing. The young man sat down hard, head raising dust a moment later.

Abu Risha took Longstaff by the shoulders, kissing him on both cheeks.

“A man after my own heart,” he said. “Together, you and I will cheat the shah and sultan both, *insha’ Allah*.”

That night, Longstaff was given a seat beside Abu Risha at the head of a long table. Silent women, hidden behind veils, brought platters of pears, melons, quinces, oranges, pistachios, almonds – and great earthenware jugs of strong Persian wine. As in Istanbul, it seemed, the Prophet’s prohibition on alcohol was honoured in the breach. The bandit chieftain proposed a toast. Longstaff had done what he could to improve his appearance – washing his hands and face in the gloomy tent, rubbing a halo of dust from his hair. The women disinterred whole sheep from nearby firepits. No one spoke for several minutes – eating and drinking in reverent silence after the day’s fast.

Abu Risha signalled for Murad to begin translating. "There were Franks at the shah's court not long ago," he said. "Seeking a military alliance against the Ottomans."

Longstaff nodded warily. *Franks* was a term used to describe anyone who came from west of the Bosphorus. "I hope the shah wasn't foolish enough to listen. We're too busy fighting one another to make war on the Ottomans."

Abu Risha's curiosity was piqued. He wanted to know why the Franks fought each other. About the Hapsburgs and the Valois, about Luther and the great divide in Christendom. Longstaff was impressed. If he'd been as inquisitive since arriving in Istanbul, God knows what he might have learned by now. He raised a hand, forestalling the next question.

"When do we leave for Bursa?"

"You leave in the morning," replied Abu Risha, with heavy emphasis on the first word. "Murad will accompany you as far as Antioch. We will meet again on the first day of *Bairam*. The celebrations will mask our arrival outside Bursa."

Bairam; the festival which marked the end of Ramadan.
Eight days.

"I would prefer to travel with you," said Longstaff.

Abu Risha looked past him, into the great darkness surrounding them on all sides. He spoke like a lover. "There's nothing for you out there. Not enough water to drown a man, nor wood to burn him, nor earth to bury him – and still a thousand ways to die."

Longstaff wanted to object. He was interrupted by the rumble of kettle drums. Abu Risha raised his cup in yet another toast. Dancers appeared to a great chorus of whistles. A blur of arms and legs in the half light, teasing the wine in Longstaff's veins. Abu Risha hauled him to his feet. "Come."

The music faded quickly, trapped among the tents, swallowed by the enormous sky, then replaced by the soft whickering of horses. Abu Risha called for torches. The animals

came at the sound of his voice, a dozen of them gathering in the pool of smoky light.

“A good horse should be proud,” he said, separating one of the animals from its companions. “This is Khamseen.”

“She’s beautiful,” acknowledged Longstaff.

“I know that,” said Abu Risha. “Tell me why.”

Another test. Longstaff tried to focus on the animal in front of him. “The eyes are soft and clear, ears straight as spears.” He reached forwards, cupping the horse’s cheek in one hand. “Small teeth, narrow shoulders tapering to a broad, flat back. She’s a fine animal.”

“She’s yours,” said Abu Risha. “A gift to save you time and trouble. Eight days to reach Bursa; you won’t manage it on the pig which brought you here.”

Longstaff knew he should refuse. He knew he should insist on accompanying Abu Risha overland to Bursa. He had fought for his life once already today and there was still so much to do if he truly hoped to establish an embassy in Istanbul – and still so many enemies waiting with their knives sharpened for his first mistake.

Chapter 3

13 March, 1569. Istanbul

The patient flinched whenever his foreign physician approached.

“I have to set the break,” explained Gaetan Durant in broken Turkish. “I can’t do it without touching you.”

The man – a wealthy merchant with thick grey hair and rolls of affluence on his hips – spoke across Durant, addressing the younger man at his side.

“He says,” reported Khalid in the *lingua franca*, “that foreign devils can’t be trusted not to make mistakes.”

Durant smiled. He would have to introduce the merchant to Longstaff; the two of them were made for each other. It had become a mantra with the Englishman: *Never forget we’re strangers. One mistake – they’ll run us out of Istanbul faster than you can swing a sword.*

Durant missed his friend – off with Aurélie somewhere in the south – but not the constant worrying.

“Tell him I’ve been setting bones since before you were born.”

It was nearly true. In his mid-twenties – the age Khalid was now – Durant had studied medicine at the University of Montpellier, but left before sitting for his physician’s cap. It wasn’t until arriving in Istanbul – after years of living as a sawbones and a thief, with his daughter now safely settled in France – that he’d rekindled the embers of that earlier ambition, pestering Ben Chabib until the renowned physician agreed to accept him as a student.

He waited while Khalid persuaded the fat merchant to accept a foul-smelling tea made from dried cannabis leaves.

Soon afterwards, the merchant slipped gently into a dreamless stupor. Khalid stepped aside, careful not to block Durant's light.

"Show me."

Despite the open windows, it was hot in the *maristan*. Out of respect for his colleagues, Durant hadn't eaten since *sahur*. He could ignore his hunger easily enough but found the constant thirst a torment. He paused to wipe his forehead while Khalid applied pressure to the patient's torso. The merchant was a man of influence in the neighbourhood; a favourable report would do wonders for Durant's reputation. He took hold of the leg, pulled, twisted, then pushed in a single smooth motion. Bone scraped against bone. The patient barely stirred.

"Not bad for a barbarian," he said with satisfaction.

Khalid didn't reply. Durant turned to find Ben Chabib himself looking over his shoulder at the plump merchant. "He sustained the break falling from his horse?"

Not waiting for a reply, the senior physician leaned close, nostrils flaring slightly as he inhaled. In his late fifties, still lean with an oddly unlined face, there were times when Ben Chabib reminded Durant of a cloistered monk.

He didn't seem so unworldly now. What had Durant missed? He lifted the sheet. The patient had relieved himself.

"Should we be concerned?" asked Ben Chabib.

"I don't think so."

"No?" The physician studied him. "The patient's urine has a marked sourness. The fact he released so little when you set his leg could suggest an active illness – perhaps a wasting sickness – drying his vital fluids from within."

Durant took a moment to steady himself. Ben Chabib was one of the world's foremost diagnosticians. Worse still, Durant was aware that his limited Turkish made him sound like a child, unable to hedge his opinions in flights of clever qualifications.

"The patient doesn't appear to have lost weight," he said. "The burst capillaries in his nose suggest a drinker – which would explain both the odour and his evident dehydration."

Ben Chabib smiled. “Then I suggest you prescribe a diet of fruit and water – at least until the break heals.”

He moved on to the next bed. Durant stretched, joints popping along the length of his back. Nervous energy. He’d been working too hard. Months of making up medicines, performing amputations, dressing wounds, removing piles.

“Enough for today,” said Khalid.

Durant gestured at the merchant. “I should be here when he wakes.”

“He’ll be in foul mood. Give him some time to appreciate your work first.”

They left the *maristan* together. The winter shutters had been removed from the windows a few days earlier, the scent of disease less pervasive than it would have been in London or Paris – though strong enough that both men drew a deep breath when they reached the exit. Most of their peers lived in tiny cells adjoining the *maristan*, but Durant was too old, too attached to his comforts, and Khalid was already married, the father of two young children. Both were glad of the chance to leave each day, to escape the smell of illness and the cries of pain for a few hours. They ducked through a small garden where musicians played to soothe the sick, past the two-storey *medrese* and the grey-domed mosque. The grounds of the complex were crowded with imams, doorkeepers, lesson readers.

“It was a trap,” said Durant. “Ben Chabib wanted me to diagnose our fat friend with a wasting sickness!”

“He was teasing you,” replied Khalid. “It means he likes you.”

Durant shook his head. Pure chance had brought him to Istanbul. Two years ago, he’d helped Longstaff and Aurélie prevent an alliance of Catholic powers from making war on England. Instead of celebrating their achievement, Walsingham – the English queen’s ambitious intelligencer – had barred them from returning home. It had been too dangerous to remain in France. Aurélie was wanted by the Inquisition in Italy and

Spain, and Tzar Ivan of Russia still had men scouring central Europe for any sign of Longstaff. So Walsingham had sent them east to Istanbul.

To his own astonishment, Durant had found new peace of mind in this city between two worlds – and did not want to run again. “You don’t think Ben Chabib is tiring of me? People were upset when he agreed to take me on.”

Khalid laughed. “They’re jealous.”

“They have names for us.”

“I know. The cross, the carpet, and the candelabra – may Allah forgive me.”

“Astaghfirullah,” murmured Durant. *May God forgive me.*

Khalid laughed, a sound of genuine pleasure echoed by the afternoon call to prayer. “Why not come with me today?”

“Me?” Durant shook his head. “I’d make a poor Mohammedan.”

“We’re not Christians,” corrected Khalid. “We don’t submit to the Prophet, only to Allah Himself.”

“You’d better not keep Him waiting then.” Durant stood quietly while his friend ran up the steps, retreating into shadow until the *muezzin* fell silent. Even Rome – especially Rome! – couldn’t rival Istanbul for piety. During Ramadan, the city’s vast population seemed to form a single religious order.

Durant resisted an urge to return to the hospital’s well-stocked library. Longstaff had left him holding the fort; a mountain of correspondence had accumulated over the last few weeks. He bent his steps in the direction of home, picturing himself at the Englishman’s desk. This time, he promised himself. No more excuses. He would open the embroidered pouches in which the Turks sent their letters – the sealed envelopes from Walsingham in London – and come to grips with the impossibly vague nature of Longstaff’s ambitions.

Just thinking about it made him hungry. The covered stalls at the food market were quiet. Tame kites picked at scraps between the cobblestones. Durant thought of the cookshops

of Paris, jugs of cheap wine, rushes thick with filth and spittle. And the noise – voices roaring in argument and laughter. The markets of Istanbul were a bed of whispers by comparison. He bought a pair of aubergines. The vendor served him with sleepy patience. Durant had cooked for Longstaff and Aurélie before they left for Bursa, his interest in food developing in parallel with his renewed devotion to medicine. Both disciplines required intellect, both were driven by the senses. The house would be empty when he got home. No distractions from Longstaff's correspondence and no one to cook for. He would slice the aubergines and fry them slowly in butter. A simple meal for a lonely bachelor. Would Khalid have reached home by now? Durant felt certain he could picture his young friend's family – the wife shy and pretty, the children lively and confident. But the rooms remained a mystery. It wasn't something that worried Longstaff or Aurélie – they hardly seemed to notice how small their world had become in this enormous city – but Durant's patients were Turkish. How could he treat them when he knew so little of how they lived?

The few women he passed in the streets were indistinguishable from ghosts, gliding silently in their shapeless robes. Durant wondered how he must appear to them – what little they could see of him through their gauzy veils – a stranger in parts of the city where Christians rarely ventured. Experience had marked his features with a cynical cast. The lopsided grin sat oddly as he pressed deeper into the warren of streets, aubergines swinging carelessly at his side, battling the temptation to run a hand through his dark hair. A walker by nature, his heart began to beat more swiftly. Each day, he swore he would avoid this neighbourhood, each day its Judas trees and poplars drew him back. Wisteria trailed from rooftop to rooftop. A group of men walked past with flowers in their turbans. The streets grew narrow, upper storeys almost touching overhead. How many eyes watched him pass, hidden behind the latticed windows? Istanbul – a city of glimpses; that's how it had been with the

woman in the window. Several weeks ago, he'd glimpsed her by chance with her shoulder against the frame, eyes closed, face tilted towards the winter sun. He still remembered her intake of breath when she'd seen him below – the ghost of a smile before she closed the shutters.

The street she lived on was out of his way; half a dozen homes leading to half a dozen more. Durant returned nearly every day, as if his feet had a mind of their own. He tried not to think of whether she would be waiting today, whether he would see her silhouette in the window. Was he placing her in danger? There were no ground-floor workshops in this part of the city. Ottoman bureaucracy dwarfed anything comparable in Europe. Turkish men could have as many as four wives.

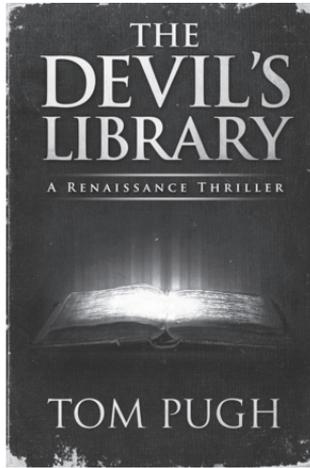
The shutters opened a fraction. He saw her high brow, a hint of dark hair beneath the linen headscarf. She smiled at him, though her eyes seemed filled with sadness. Something fell from the window, blown off course by a breath of wind before it struck the cobblestones. Durant felt clumsy. How often had Longstaff complimented him on his talent for the dramatic? He stooped to gather a daffodil in his palm. Three small white flowers lay nearby. It couldn't be coincidence. She was gone by the time he straightened. Slipping the flowers into his sleeve with the skill of a card-sharp, he forced himself to walk on.

He knew the meaning of a daffodil in the secret language of love. "*What would you risk for me?*"

From their high minarets, the city's *muezzins* began the evening call to prayer. Durant waited impatiently at the water's edge. It took an age for the *bostanci* oarsmen to make their devotions, slake the day's thirst with great drafts of water, opening a cool passage for the food which followed. Full night had fallen by the time they were willing to ply their trade again. From his seat in the crowded *caique*, Durant looked back at the hills of 'Stanboul – at slender minarets glowing in the light of a thousand candles, the great dome of Hagia Sophia rising like a second sun. Gently, he held the three white flowers in one

hand. He had studied medicine for long enough to know them. Ipomoea, called moon flowers because they bloomed at night, their fragile petals closing at the sun's caress. Three flowers. Three nights. *What would you risk for me?* Durant hardly dared believe it; his mystery woman – the woman in the window. Was she proposing that they meet? Was there any other way to interpret her message?

Also by Tom Pugh



“A gripping, atmospheric debut. I couldn’t put it down.”

Eve Harris, Booker longlisted author of
‘The Marrying of Chani Kaufman’

“Pugh’s first novel is a magnificent achievement. Let us hope he returns to enthrall us with another very soon.”

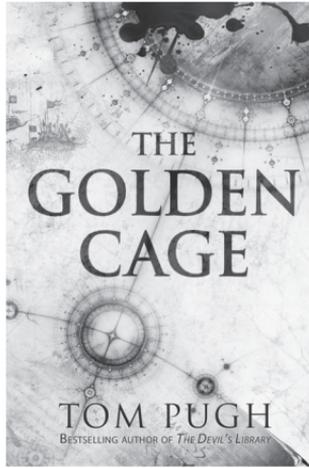
David Dickinson,
author of the Powerscourt series

The Otiosi? As far as Mathew Longstaff knows, they’re just a group of harmless scholars with an eccentric interest in the works of antiquity. When they ask him to travel east, to recover a lost text from Ivan the Terrible’s private library, he can’t think of anything but the reward – home. A return to England and an end to the long years of exile and warfare.

But the Otiosi are on the trail of a greater prize than Longstaff realises – the legendary ‘Devil’s Library’. And they are not alone. Gregorio Spina, the Pope’s spymaster and Chief

Censor, is obsessed with finding the Library. It's not the accumulated wisdom of centuries he's after – a swamp of lies and heresy in his opinion – but among the filth, like a diamond at the centre of the Devil's black heart, Spina believes that God has placed a treasure, a weapon to defeat the Antichrist and pitch his hordes back into hell.

Only Longstaff, together with the unpredictable physician, Gaetan Durant, can stop Spina using the Library to plunge Europe into a second Dark Ages. The two adventurers fight their way south, from the snowfields of Muscovy to the sun-baked plains of Italy, where an ageing scholar and his beautiful, young protégé hold the final piece of the puzzle. But is it already too late? Can the four of them take on the might of the Roman Church and hope to win?



“Pugh excels at weaving together different historical threads into a single narrative...The book is sure to appeal to fans of the works of Dan Brown and other conspiracy-curious storytellers.”

Kirkus Reviews

1565. Their last mission on behalf of the Lord Chancellor nearly got them killed. Now back in England, former soldier Matthew Longstaff and his Italian wife, Aurélie, are living quietly in the countryside when news arrives from France; their closest friend has disappeared.

In London, fledgling spy-master Francis Walsingham suspects a traitor on Queen Elizabeth’s Privy Council. In France, the physician Gaetan Durant is held at a secret location and forced to produce forgeries which will trigger a war. In Rome, the pope prepares a Bull of Excommunication against Elizabeth. Everything is connected. Trapped in this game of plot and counter-plot, Longstaff must journey to Paris in pursuit of his missing friend – and evidence of the enterprise taking shape against protestant England. Meanwhile in London, Aurélie’s attempts to track down the traitor lead to a lethal battle of wits against London’s most notorious astrologer.

Even if both succeed, it may already be too late. Wild, apocalyptic rumours race ahead of the separated lovers: of a lost Gospel in Christ's own hand; of heretic queens and caged prophets. Only one thing seems certain – war is coming, an unholy inferno which threatens to consume all Europe...