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opening extract from

The Tar Man

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I did not sleep the night I feared would be my last on earth. Instead, my mind's eye surveyed the familiar landscape of my life's journey and I tried to make what sense of it I could. My fevered mind swung between terror of the noose that was to squeeze the last breath out of me, anger at the injustice of my plight, and blind, threadbare hope that my own story would not end – just yet.

I did not sleep. How could I waste one second of the life that remained to me? To be alive! Just to be alive! To think and feel and see and touch! Yet I believe that by the time dawn broke over Newgate Gaol, I had made my peace with God and I prayed, not only for myself, but also for him who had falsely condemned me: Lord Luxon.

Oft times in the intervening years, I have desired to recall those dark hours in my condemned cell – not for the horror of it but for the clarity it brought to my soul. For nothing is more precious than life itself – and nothing is easier to take for granted. I never forget the debt I owe to my rescuers who risked so much to pluck me from the jaws of death at Tyburn: to the late Sir Richard and Parson Ledbury, but, most of all, to Kate and to Peter.

A small flicker of hope lives on that Peter and his childhood friend might one day, by the grace of God, be reunited, but we no longer speak of it. There is one exception, however. On the anniversary of the day my life was saved and Peter's birthright was lost, Parson

Ledbury has long been in the habit of calling at Hawthorn Cottage, bearing bottles of his best claret. We sit under the spreading boughs of the oak and, as we watch the sun set over the valley which welcomed Peter into our century so many years ago, the three of us raise our glasses to Life, to Absent Families and to the Health and Happiness of Mistress Kate Dyer.

It was, of course, on that same day, the 1st August, 1763, that the Tar Man, in taking his place at the magic machine, stole the life that rightfully belonged to Peter. Having cheated death at the gallows, we share more than one bond, Blueskin and I. I pity him now all the more, as I truly understand how his bitterness took away any chance of happiness on this earth. Many is the time I have wondered what Peter's century held in store for The Tar Man and what he did with the life that he stole.

*The Life and Times of Gideon Seymour,
Cutpurse and Gentleman, 1792*

CHAPTER ONE

Oxford Street

**In which The Tar Man has his first encounter
with the twenty-first century and Kate and Dr Dyer
agree to conceal the truth from the police.**

It was late afternoon on 30th December, the last Saturday of the Christmas holidays, and freezing fog had settled, shroud-like, over London. It had been dark since four o'clock and wherever street lamps cast their orange glow, droplets of moisture could be seen dancing in the icy air.

In Trafalgar Square, seagulls, drawn inland by the severe weather, perched on top of Nelson's head. In St James's Park, pelicans skidded on frozen ponds. Harrods, its immense contours outlined by a million twinkling lights, appeared to float down Knightsbridge like a luxury liner. To the east of the city, dwarfing St Paul's Cathedral, gigantic skyscrapers disappeared into the fog, their position betrayed only by warning lights blinking like ghostly spaceships from within the mists.

Meanwhile, in a dank, dark alley off Oxford Street – a road that in centuries past led to a place of execution at Tyburn – a homeless man was stuffing newspapers down his jacket and covering himself

with layers of blankets. His black and white dog, who had more than a touch of sheepdog in him, lay at his side, shivering. The echoing noise of the street and the *drip, drip, drip* of a leaking gutter swiftly lulled the man to sleep and he did not even stir when his dog got to its feet and gave a long, low growl. If the man had looked up he would have seen, looming over him at some metres distant, silhouetted black on black, and perfectly still, an alert figure in a three-cornered hat who sat astride a powerfully-built horse. His head was cocked to one side as if straining to hear something. Satisfied that he was alone, the dark figure slumped forward and laid his cheek against the horse's neck, expelling the breath that he had been holding in.

'What manner of place is this,' he complained into the animal's ear, 'to unleash all the hounds of hell for making off with a single prancer? Though 'tis true you wouldn't look amiss even in the stables at Tempest House. You have spirit – I shall keep you if I can.'

The Tar Man patted the horse's neck and wiped the sweat from his brow, though every nerve and sinew was ready for flight or combat. In his years as Lord Luxon's henchman he had earned a fearsome reputation. Few dared say no to him and if they did they soon changed their mind. He had his hooks caught into enough rogues across London, and beyond, that with one twitch of his line he could reel in anything and anyone. Nothing happened without The Tar Man hearing of it first. But here, wherever 'here' was, he was alone and unknown and understood nothing. It suddenly struck him that his journey here had stripped him of everything – except himself. He clutched instinctively at the scar where the noose had seared into his flesh so long ago. What I need, he thought, is sanctuary. And a guide in this new world . . .

The Tar Man knew precisely where he was and yet he was lost. The roads were the same but everything in them was different . . .

This seemed to be London yet it was a London alive with infernal carriages that moved of their own accord at breathtaking speed. The noises and the smells and the sights of this familiar, yet foreign city tore his senses apart. He had hoped that the magic machine would take him to some enchanted land where the pavements would be lined with gold. Not this . . .

He became suddenly aware of a faint scraping of heels on gravel behind him. Then a flicker of torchlight illuminated the deeply etched scar that cut a track down the blue-black stubble from his jaw to his forehead. He wheeled around.

‘Stop! Police!’ came the cry.

The Tar Man did not answer but dug his heels into the sides of the horse he had stolen, two hours earlier, from the mounted policeman on Hampstead Heath. Without a second’s hesitation, horse and rider jumped clear over the vagrant and his dog and plunged headlong into the crowds. The frenzied barks that followed him were lost in the blast of noise that emanated from the busiest street in the world.

Wild-eyed, the Tar Man stared frantically around him. It was the time of the Christmas sales and half of London, after a week of seasonal overindulgence, was out in search of bargains. Oxford Street was heaving with shoppers, packed so densely that it took determination to walk a few metres. Never-ending streams of red double-decker buses and black cabs, their exhausts steaming in the cold, moved at a snail’s pace down the wide thoroughfare.

The Tar Man drove his horse on, vainly trying to breach the solid wall of shouting pedestrians that hemmed him in. His heart was racing. He had stepped into a trap of his own making. He berated himself furiously. Numbskull! Have I left my head behind as well as my nerve? Do I not have sense enough to look before I leap?

If he could have done, The Tar Man would have mown down these people like a cavalry officer charging into enemy infantry. But he could scarcely move an inch. He was trapped. Glancing around, he saw a group of men in dark blue uniforms emerging from the alley, pushing their way violently towards him, as menacing as any band of footpads of his acquaintance. Curiously, one of them was shouting into a small object he held to his lips.

Everyone was jostling and pressing up against him and screaming at him to get out of the way. All save a little girl who reached up to stroke the horse's moist nose. Her mother snatched her hand away. The Tar Man's eyes blazed. I have not come this far to fall at the first post! They shall not have me! They shall not! And he leaned down into the mass of pedestrians that pushed against him and when he reappeared he was gripping a large black umbrella as if it were a sword. He thrust it at the crowd, jabbing at people's chests and threatening to thwack them around the head to make them move away. Their piercing screams reached the policemen, who renewed their efforts to reach him through the crowds. Soon, though, the Tar Man had won a small circle of space in which to manoeuvre. He reversed the horse as far as it could go and whispered something into its ear. The policemen, now only five metres away, watched open-mouthed as they beheld a display of horsemanship the likes of which they were unlikely ever to see again.

The Tar Man held the horse still for an instant and then urged his mount into a majestic leap. Four horse hooves exploded like a thunderclap onto the top of a black cab. The impact was deafening. All heads turned to discover the source of the commotion. Skidding and sliding on the shiny metal, the horse could not keep its footing for long and The Tar Man, his great black coat flying behind him, guided it onto the next cab and then the next and the next . . . Hysterical passengers scrambled to get out onto the street.

Pedestrians stopped dead in their tracks. And, looking down from their ringside seats on the upper decks of buses, people gawped in disbelief at the spectacle of the Tar Man and his horse playing leapfrog with the black cabs from Selfridges to beyond John Lewis. Soon screams were replaced by laughter and whoops and cheers and the furious shouts of a long line of outraged cabbies. The merest hint of a smile appeared on The Tar Man's face but, just as the thought flashed through his mind to snatch off his three-cornered hat and take a bow, he became aware of an unworldly wind and a rhythmic thrumming that caused the ground beneath him to vibrate. He looked up.

The police helicopter slowly descended. It hovered directly above The Tar Man, its blades rotating into a sickening blur. When a booming voice, like the voice of God, spoke, he held up an arm to his face and paled visibly, paralysed with fear.

'Get off your horse. Get off your horse and lie on the ground!'

A pencil beam of blinding, blue-white light moved over the Tar Man. He was centre stage, spotlighted for all to see. The visitor from 1763 could not have orchestrated a more public entrance into the twenty-first century if he had hired the best publicist in London.

The pilot's magnified and distorted voice bounced off the high buildings into the foggy air:

'GET OFF YOUR HORSE! NOW!'

The Tar Man did not – could not – move. The helicopter descended even lower. In a reflex action to stop his three-cornered hat from blowing away, he clasped it to his head and, somehow, this simple action seemed to break the spell. He managed to tear his gaze away from the giant, flying beast and quickly scanned his surroundings for an escape route. Out of the corner of his eye he fancied he recognised an alley from the Oxford Road he knew. Praying it would not be a dead end, he tugged sharply on the reins

and urged his horse on. The crowd was less dense here and The Tar Man broke out, unchallenged, from the circle of light and vanished into black shadows. The helicopter pilot, anxious not to lose his prey, instantly flew higher and headed to the south of Oxford Street, training his searchlight onto half-lit pavements and picking out bewildered shoppers in its powerful beam, but the fugitive horseman was lost to sight.

The Tar Man emerged from the alley and rode at breakneck speed through the network of quieter streets towards Piccadilly. Onwards the Tar Man galloped, never stopping nor slowing down. He encountered few of these outlandish carriages that moved without horses and whenever he did see one, The Tar Man charged directly at it, wielding his umbrella fearlessly and daring it to attack him. In every case the strategy worked – the carriages squealed to an immediate halt. But how little bottom their passengers displayed, cowering behind those queer, curved windows! Faith, they are meeker than milkmaids! Why do they not challenge me?

‘Does no one ride in this city?’ he yelled at a young man in a black Mini Cooper. ‘Where are the horses? Where is the dirt?’

The bewildered man shook his head slowly from side to side.

The Tar Man took off again. Onwards he galloped, but always above and behind him he sensed the thudding of the flying beast getting nearer. He backtracked and hid in doorways and still managed to outwit his airborne pursuer. As he rode, window displays of impossible refinement flashed by – extraordinary costumes and shimmering jewels, all illuminated by lights that seemed as bright as the sun. With candles or lamps as powerful as these, he thought, the city need never sleep. Moon-cursers and cut-throats and assassins would be at pains to find a dark enough spot in which to do their business.

Sirens still wailed all around but, like the insistent whirringm

sound of the helicopter, the fearful noise was beginning to recede into the distance. The Tar Man allowed himself to slow down and he scrutinised the sky above. To the west of him, he could just make out the fuzzy white line of the helicopter's searchlight piercing through the swirling fog. He let out a sigh of relief.

The horse was tiring. Steam rose from its flanks and its breath came out in short bursts. When the Tar Man turned a corner into a grand square and saw that there was an enclosed garden at its centre he decided to rest there awhile. He whispered into his horse's ear, clicked his tongue and galloped towards the iron railings. The horse sailed over them and came to a halt under the cover of trees. The square was deserted except for a few couples strolling around its perimeter. The Tar Man slid off the horse and patted its neck.

'You have done well, my friend,' he said. The horse blew noisily through its velvet nostrils and reached down to tear what blades of grass it could from the clipped turf. The Tar Man walked over to one of the wooden benches that lined the gravel path and slumped down. He put his head in his hands. He was trembling – whether on account of the cold or the danger he did not know.

Unnoticed by the Tar Man, a police car glided into Berkeley Square and when its driver spotted the horse he turned off his engine and spoke into his radio. Slowly and quietly two police officers got out of the patrol car and scrambled over the iron railings, landing noiselessly on damp earth.

A grey squirrel, ferreting about amongst plastic wrappers in the litter bin next to The Tar Man, disturbed him. He looked up. As he did so he caught sight of the row of fine, tall buildings on the east side of the square. Distressed, he jumped up and looked at the west side and then looked to the south. His heart skipped a beat. Did he find himself in Berkeley Square? Could that huge edifice be

Landsdowne House? He tipped back his head and peered up at the topmost branches of plane trees. These trees must be nigh on two hundred years old!

‘How in heaven can this be?’ he exclaimed aloud. ‘This *is* Berkeley Square!’

He had accompanied Lord Luxon here only last month on a trip to see Mr Adams, the architect, who was trying to persuade his master to sell his house on Bird Cage Walk and build a five-storey house here in Berkeley Square instead. Yet there had not been a single plane tree in sight on that day and the front façade of Landsdowne House was barely started! The thought struck him that he had understood right from the start why this London was at the same time friend and stranger to him – yet he could not admit it to himself until now.

‘I am undone!’ he exclaimed aloud. ‘The machine has brought me to the future! How am I to return home?’

‘Would this be your horse, sir?’ asked a flat, deep voice behind him.

The Tar Man swung around. He had been surprised in attack too often in his time to hesitate. As soon as he saw the two men, dressed in the same uniform as his pursuers in Oxford Street, he dived straight at their legs and grabbed a knee each, so that they toppled over one on top of the other. Before they were back on their feet the Tar Man had already leaped onto his horse and was galloping away up the gravel path beneath the plane trees. The policemen ran back to their patrol car radioing for assistance as they went.

The Tar Man’s heart was pounding. These soldiers, with their ugly dark blue uniforms and cropped hair, were clearly not about to give up the chase. He was the fox and the pack of hounds was baying for his blood. Sirens blared from all directions. Then he

heard the helicopter alter its course and move nearer. It was beyond his understanding how they did it yet he was convinced that the soldiers could signal to each other from great distances . . .

He had to find his way back to his old haunts, seek sanctuary at St Paul's Church in Covent Garden. At all costs he must avoid the main thoroughfares where he would be easy game for the flying beast. Instead he would head south towards Green Park and then east towards Leicester Square, taking care to avoid Piccadilly.

When the Tar Man turned into Dover Street, however, he was confronted by another horseless carriage, this time with blue lights blazing on its roof and a wailing siren so piercing it hurt his ears. It accelerated straight at him at tremendous speed. The Tar Man pulled on the reins so sharply that the horse reared up into the air on its back legs. He retreated backwards and turned around only to see two more police cars coming towards him from the direction of Berkeley Square. Now he fled towards Albermarle Street but, fearing that he would be trapped into riding into Piccadilly itself where he would be too exposed, he pulled up sharply and turned right into New Bond Street instead. London was clad in different, garish clothes and yet, here, its bone structure was still the same. He knew these streets. He galloped recklessly on but a moment later he knew, without even needing to turn around, that his pursuers were upon him.

'So,' he cried to the horse, 'it seems that you are the last prancer in London and I am to be hunted down by persons determined to offer me hospitality of a kind I should prefer to refuse . . . Ha! Damn their eyes, I say! If they're bent on nabbing us, let us not give them an easy ride!'

He swerved right into the Burlington Arcade and even as he rode for his life through the glass tunnel of luxury shops, all crystal and silver and jewels and silks, his jaw dropped at the sight of

such rich pickings. It was near closing time and there were only half a dozen people left in the arcade. The air rang with the deafening sound of horse hooves striking polished stone.

‘Hold, there!’ he cried and pulled hard on the reins. His mount reared briefly onto its hind legs and horse and rider came to a skidding halt outside the window of a jeweller’s shop. The Tar Man’s eyes devoured the king’s ransom of precious stones and gold that nestled in dove grey velvet before him. A woman in a pearl necklace and cashmere coat stood cowering next to the same display. If The Tar Man was transfixed by the sight of a sapphire as big as a conker, sparkling under a spotlight, the woman was equally transfixed by the dark figure towering above her. She could feel the heat coming off his horse’s steaming sides. The explosive roar of police motorcycles flying into Burlington Arcade broke the sapphire’s spell but The Tar Man was not going to flee without some reward. He switched his attention from the shop window to the woman’s necklace in the blink of an eye. He snatched hold of her pearls and gave them a sharp tug. The clasp broke, leaving her neck bare and her face frozen in shock. Two powerful motorbikes screeched past her as, opening and closing her mouth like a fish out of water, she watched the Tar Man – and her pearl necklace – vanish out of sight into Piccadilly.

A few hundred metres away lay Piccadilly Circus. London was coming to life for the evening. Giant neon signs blinked on and off above the bustle of the street, black cabs deposited theatregoers close to Shaftsbury Avenue and couples stood hand in hand outside restaurants, examining the menus. A large group of young tourists sat on the edge of the fountain under the statue of Eros. They were drinking from cans and were dressed in T-shirts despite the bitter cold. One of them filmed his friends as they stood, laughing and posing outrageously, on the steps beneath the fountain.

When they suddenly stopped playing around, their attention drawn by something behind him, the boy turned and focussed his lens on a sight that had not been advertised in the travel brochures.

A lone figure on horseback was galloping towards them, picking his way through the crowds on the pavement and the traffic in the street. In front of him, people scrabbled desperately to get out of his way. When a stunned driver braked right in front of him, the horseman simply jumped onto the roof of the car before continuing on his way towards Piccadilly Circus.

'Wow!' exclaimed the boy and zoomed in on the Tar Man's pursuers. A wall of police cars and motorcycles, headlights blazing and sirens screaming, stretched fully from one side of the street to the other. Above them all a helicopter hovered angrily, like a wasp that has been brushed aside once too often and is getting ready to strike.

The boy trained his camera on the rider. He was wearing a bizarre black hat and, as well as a look of intense concentration, the boy recognised an unmistakeable glint of enjoyment cross his face. A surfer on the crest of a wave of police cars! This guy was actually having fun! The boy gave a whoop of appreciation. Whatever he'd done he sure had got under the skin of the police – they looked mad!

When the rider drew close to Piccadilly Circus Tube Station, and he saw the steady flow of people descending beneath the pavement, he slowed down briefly. Giving a cursory glance over his shoulder at the stream of patrol cars sweeping up behind him, he suddenly turned one hundred and eighty degrees and disappeared down the steep stairs into the London Underground. The horse had such confidence in his new master that he trotted down willingly, for all the world as if he caught the tube every day. Up above, police cars and motorcycles screeched to a halt. Passengers started to flee up

the stairs in panic but immediately had to press themselves against the walls as a small army of uniformed officers converged on the ticket hall in hot pursuit of the desperado on horseback who had left a trail of destruction halfway across London.

A few minutes later, shortly after the horse had trotted calmly back up the steps, a man emerged from a different exit, wearing a tweed jacket several sizes too big for him. He had long black hair which settled in rats' tails on his collar and fell forward across his face, concealing the rather nasty scar on one cheek. The man set off, head down and hands in his pockets, in the direction of Covent Garden.

Kate woke up screaming. 'Peter!!!'

Dr Pirretti, who was driving the hired estate car up the M1 through dense fog, swerved involuntarily with the shock of it.

'Whoah!' she exclaimed. 'That was a close call!'

Kate's Labrador, Molly, who was sitting in the boot, started to whimper and put her golden head over the rear seat so that she could lick her face. Kate's father, Dr Dyer, pushed the dog away.

'Everything's all right, Kate,' he reassured her. 'You're safe. I thought you were never going to wake up – you've missed all the fun . . .'

'Where am I, Dad? What's happening?'

Kate was not properly awake and felt sick and confused and disorientated.

'You're going home. Anita is driving us back up to Derbyshire.'

'Anita?'

'Dr Anita Pirretti – from NASA. I told you – she and Ed Jacob came over from the States when they heard that you and Peter had disappeared from the lab. She's been team-leading the anti-gravity project . . .'