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KAREN ROBARDS



Tiger's Eye

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TIGER'S EYE

"Damn! Isabella!" Swatting the sponge from his face, Alec blinked furiously to rid his eyes of the soapy water. She stood before him, cheeks and eyes blazing with temper, fists on hips as she greeted him with the fiercest scowl he'd beheld in months. "My God, how did you get in here?" he demanded.

He looked quickly around, saw they were alone, and began to smile. He got to his feet, sloshing water on the floor, and stepped out of the tub.

"You blackguard! You were going to...to make love with that...that girl!" she cried, backing away from him as he drew closer.

Her choice of epithets made him grin. No one but Isabella talked like that. "Now that you're here, of course, I won't," he murmured wickedly.

✻ **KAREN ROBARDS** ✻

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To Rusty and Iris—beloved friends.
And, as always, with much love
to Doug and Peter.

I



Thunder crashed. A great jagged bolt of lightning split the sky, its brilliant white light illuminating the muddy road ahead for no more than a few seconds. Still, it was time enough to reveal five ominous horsed figures leaping from the copse of oaks at the road's bend to gallop furiously toward the oncoming coach.

"Stand and deliver!"

The terrifying cry, hurtled from the storm-tossed night, put the final, dismal cap on what had been, for all four occupants of the coach, a most harrowing day. Even as four pairs of eyes widened, and four spines straightened, the command was punctuated by a musket blast. The crested brougham swayed violently as Will Coachman, caught by surprise as he all but dozed on the high seat, snapped upright, his hands tightening reflexively on the reins. Beside him Jonas, the young groom pressed into service as outrider for this odd start of the earl's, almost went off the bench seat as the coach's wheels slipped in the mud. Saving himself with a hasty grab, he fumbled for the ancient fowling piece that Will had tucked beneath the seat at the last minute before departure. Before his hand did more than touch the cold metal, another musket barked, the ball whistling too close to the groom's head for comfort. Jonas ducked, swearing, and abandoned all thoughts of heroics.

For his part, Will thought for a moment of whipping up

the horses and making a run for it, but the beasts had travelled clear from Thetford that day and were as tired as he was. The earl's instructions had stated clearly that they were to take no more than this single day upon the road. His lordship was of no mind to pay for a night's stay at a hostelry when there was no need. He wished to see my lady in London on this very date, February the twenty-sixth. Will and the rest of the staff, as well as the lady herself, had all done their collective bests to comply with the earl's instructions, though my lady had had only two days to prepare for her journey. And yet just look where such praiseworthy obedience had brought them: to a perilous clash on a dark, deserted road with near a half-dozen highwaymen brandishing muskets! Had ever there been such an ill-fated day?

First one of the horses had gone lame, which meant that the beast had had to be replaced with a post horse, an expense with which the clutch-fisted earl would not be pleased. Then the rain had started, an icy downpour that turned the post-road into a quagmire and sent the coach slipping off into a ditch. It had taken the stout backs of a willing farmer and his son, plus Jonas and himself, to get the coach back on the road again. Which mishaps, of course, had made them far later than they should have been in getting to London. At that very moment it was nigh onto ten o'clock, and here was yet another delay!

Perhaps that was not quite the right way to think of an attack by five armed bandits, but that was how Will saw it, at least in the first few, surprised minutes. After all, in this the year of our Lord 1814, with Napoleon Bonaparte running wild all over the Continent and England bereft of near all but lawless men, being held up was not so uncommon. If they did but cooperate, the old man thought hopefully, they would suffer no hurt but the loss of the lady's valuables. And, bless her, she was not one to take on about that, nor blame him for that which he could not help.

Black-cloaked figures swirling out of the darkness to encircle the moving coach resolved his dilemma. Clearly,

the only thing that an attempt to flee would accomplish would be his own and Jonas's ruination. With a silent, heartfelt apology to the lady within, Will bowed to the inevitable and pulled the coach up. Two of the thieving rogues immediately grabbed at his reins; his horses, unused to such cavalier treatment, reared up in the shafts, whickering shrilly with fright.

Inside, Lady Isabella Georgiana Albans St. Just sat a little straighter on the plush velvet seat as the coach jolted to a stop. The widening of her soft blue eyes was one of the very few hints of perturbation she revealed. Like Will on the box, she had been near-dozing. Allowing her head to rest against the curved seat back had caused the masses of baby-fine brown hair that had plagued her since earliest childhood to work free of its pins, as it frequently did. Tickling tendrils straggled distractingly around her face as she blinked awake. It was a moment before she was certain that the muffled noises which had awakened her came from outside the coach and were real, not part of some disturbing dream.

If her pale skin went a shade whiter at the knowledge, the light from the single carriage lamp that was still lit was too uncertain to reveal it. Her fine-boned body in the unfashionably plain blue woolen frock remained stiffly erect but unmoving as she listened to the commotion outside. Long, slender white fingers tightened fractionally over the reticule she held in her lap, but the convulsive movement was covered by the lap robe that was tucked around her waist. The tip of her tongue appeared to wet lips that were far too wide for beauty. The nostrils of her narrow-bridged nose flared as she drew in a deep breath, for a moment calling attention to the dusting of freckles that had plagued her as long and persistently as her disobedient hair.

Then her breathing steadied. One hand emerged from the lap robe and rose in a gesture so automatic that it required no thought to brush the wayward strands of hair from her delicately boned face. She lifted her pointed chin

a scant fraction of an inch, squared her narrow shoulders, and waited with outward composure for what would come.

"My lady, what . . . ?"

Across from Isabella, riding backwards, Jessup, her thin, sallow-skinned maid, was far less resolute. The first musket shot brought her starting from deep sleep. As the coach lurched to a stop she stared wildly around, clasping her bony hands so tightly together that the knuckles showed white. There was an odd rasp to her breathing as she grasped what was happening in the darkness beyond the confines of the cozily lit carriage.

"Calm yourself, Jessup, if you please! I cannot think you'll be of any use to me or yourself if you give way to panic."

"My lady, my lady, we're being held up; we'll likely be ravished by the rogues and murdered! Oh! Oh! To think that we should come to this!" Jessup was beyond being calmed as she sought to convince her mistress of their danger.

A faint crease of displeasure appeared between Isabella's brows. Such fear was contagious, and she had no wish to lose her own composure. A stout heart would get one through most trials, she had found.

"Don't be silly; they've no reason to harm us! They are simply thieves. If we give them what they want, they'll be gone in a trice. I've a little money in my reticule, and you must give them my jewel case if they ask. If we do that, I'm sure we have nothing to fear."

Isabella was not quite as unruffled as she sounded, but she had borne the many vicissitudes visited on her in twenty-three years of life with fortitude, and she saw no reason to lose her head over what, after all, would likely be a very brief, if admittedly unpleasant, encounter. 'Twould all be over very quickly, she was sure, and then another hour or so would see them safe in London.

" 'Tis unnatural, my lady, so calm as you always are!" Jessup sounded almost accusing. Her own agitation was obvious as she all but bounced up and down on the seat.

Isabella, with the majority of her attention focused on

trying to hear what was happening outside rather than her maid's upset, supposed vaguely that Jessup had a point. Most ladies of quality were reputed to be possessed of exquisite sensibilities, and certainly any lady of sensibility would be giving way to the vapors about now, as shots and shouts sounded outside her carriage. But she had never had much sensibility, only sound common sense. Sensible Isabella, she had once heard her father describe her, to the man who was then, though she did not know it at the time, her prospective husband. Thinking back on it, Isabella supposed that her father's description of her was far more accurate than she had known at the time. At any rate, she had never seen any good come from an unrestrained display of emotion. Certainly all her tears and pleas had not managed to save her from being married off to Bernard—or save her from Bernard himself, once they were wed. After the humiliating disaster of her wedding night, she had vowed to have done with tears. She had not wept since.

“My lady . . . !”

The door was jerked open. A man stood in the aperture, one hand holding the door wide, the other grasping a pistol. Even Isabella gasped. Jessup squealed, and shrank back against the rolled squab. The dense blackness of the night outside shrouded all beyond the intruder in mystery. He stood, large and menacing, in the wavering pool of light that spilled from the coach. Masked and hooded as he was, Isabella could not distinguish a single feature, not even so much as an ear. All she could tell was that he was a man of some girth, not fat but solid and square-built, and his eyes, glinting through the slits in his mask, were a hard, flat brown.

“Lady Isabella?” He was looking at her as he spoke, his voice as hard and flat as his eyes. Isabella felt the sudden, sharp bite of real fear. He knew her name. But how could that be . . . ?

“Here, this is all I have.” She forced the words out around the sudden dryness in her mouth, thrusting her reticule at him at the same time. “Take it and be gone!”

"Nah! You'll not be rid of me so easy-like, my lady."

His accent was sharp and unfamiliar to her ears, not the well-modulated syllables of the well-bred nor the soft Norfolk burr she'd grown accustomed to since her marriage. But she had no time to ponder his origins. Despite his words, he snatched the reticule from her hand and stuffed it into a pocket well hidden by his enveloping cloak. Then he looked at her again. Though she could see nothing save his eyes, she gained the impression that he was grinning. An evil grin . . .

For a long moment they stared at one another. Isabella's heartbeat quickened, and she felt her stomach clench.

"Jessup, give him the jewel case."

If her words were sharp, it was because it was all she could do to keep her voice from shaking. Jessup blanched as the man's eyes slid around to her, but she reached into the little hidey-hole in the upholstery for the leather-bound case.

"Here 'tis." Jessup's voice was scarcely more than a squeak as she thrust the case at the man. He took it in his left hand, hefted it.

" 'Tis a rich prize," Isabella said steadily.

The man nodded. "Aye," he said, apparently impressed by the weight of it. Then he shouted over his shoulder to a henchman, tossed the jewel case to him, and turned his eyes back to Isabella. She had to fight not to shrink away from his gaze.

"You have it all now, so you may take yourself off." Her voice was surprisingly steady.

"Nah."

To Isabella's horror, he reached in to close a large, meaty hand around her upper arm. He dug his fingers into the soft flesh beneath her sleeve, hurting her and not caring if he did. Isabella knew in that moment that there was to be no speedy end to this nightmarish encounter, after all.

"Unhand me!" she cried, truly frightened now, beating at his arm with her free hand. She might as well have beaten her fist against an oak tree for all the effect it had.

Jessup screamed and cowered back in a corner as her mistress was dragged from the coach.

Only the hand on her arm kept Isabella from falling headlong into the muddy road. Her shoes sank deep and her skirt trailed in slimy ooze. The cold needles of an icy rain beat down on her uncovered head, wetting her to the skin in a matter of moments. An equally cold fear chilled her heart.

As she found her feet, Isabella was just able to make out three or four shadowy forms on horseback milling around the coach. Searching further, she discovered Will Coachman and Jonas, bound as neat as Christmas geese, lying in the tall grass at the side of the road. They were uncovered and, if left to lie thus in the rain for very long, would be in grave danger of contracting an inflammation of the lungs, or worse.

But at the moment Isabella harbored fears of a far more immediate danger, to herself as well as her servants. No highwaymen who chanced to rob a coach at random would know their victim's name—nor would they go to the trouble of tying up her servants. Stomach churning, Isabella reached the inescapable conclusion that her coach had not been chosen at random. These men had a purpose. . . .

"What do you want from me?" she demanded, her voice suddenly grown hoarse. Freezing cold from fear as much as from the rain, she turned and swept the dripping tails of hair from her face, looking up at her captor with what dignity she could muster as she struggled to quell a burgeoning panic. Her fright was rapidly assuming monstrous proportions. Instinctively she fought to remain calm. It was the only defense she had left to her.

He laughed, the sound coarse, and shoved her brutally on the shoulder, spinning her around, making her stagger and nearly fall. Then he caught one wrist, dragging it behind her back to yank her upright. Isabella cried out as he caught the other one, too, and bound them both with a leather strap. In the next instant a sour-smelling rag was tied roughly over her eyes, blinding her. Terror brought a

bitter taste surging into her mouth. Whatever these men intended, it was not simple robbery. . . .

With her eyes rendered useless, her hearing was suddenly more acute. Over the sounds of the rain and the wind she heard a rhythmic splashing that warned of the approach of horses. At least two . . .

"What do you want?" she asked again, her nerve nearly broken. A grunt was her only answer. There were presences around her, horses and men; she could feel them, hear them. . . .

Without warning she was spun around. Isabella cried out, staggered. Her cry was cut off by a wad of dry cloth thrust between her teeth. Her head swam sickeningly as in the next instant she was lifted off her feet to dangle head down over a man's shoulder. Instinct warned her to lie perfectly still as he strode away with her, one arm holding her about the thighs. In the background, Jessup's screams as she was dragged from the coach were abruptly silenced by what sounded like a blow. Such or worse would be her own fate if she gave her captor any trouble at all, Isabella sensed. Struggling mindlessly would avail her nothing. Better to remain calm so that, if an opportunity presented itself, she could use her wits to escape. To give way to the panic that threatened to overwhelm her would be useless.

With no care at all for her delicate bones or tender skin, Isabella found herself tossed facedown over a saddle. The leather creaked as a man mounted behind her. Isabella turned her head from the smell of wet horse and wet leather, her cheek resting against the beast's soaked, heaving side. Then, with a surge of muscles, the horse was off, bounding over the ground in great jolting leaps.

Held in place as she was by the man's hand on her back while her head spun sickeningly and her stomach churned, the truth of the matter occurred to Isabella in a blinding flash: for whatever purpose, she had just been kidnapped!

II



After a bruising ride over rough terrain, the horses—for her hearing told her that there were other horses and riders with them—at last stopped. The man behind her swung down, as did the others, she thought. The rain had stopped, but the smell of it was everywhere. The cold grew worse as the clock approached what must have been midnight or beyond.

With about as much care as if she had been a sack of grain, Isabella was lifted down from the horse and hefted over a man's shoulder again. Wordlessly he carried her inside what she assumed to be a house from the countless smells that assailed her nostrils as she passed out of the cold: cooking spices and peat-fueled fire, dust and tallow and a faint mustiness overlying all.

"Ye 'ave 'er, then?" It was a woman's voice, coarse and low.

"As ye see."

"Good, good. My, she be a wee little thing, ain't she? Not dressed as fine as I thought, for a countess. Ye sure ye got the right one?"

"She be the countess, right enough."

"Take 'er up, then. I got the room ready."

Isabella was borne up a steep, narrow flight of stairs. Its dimensions became painfully obvious to her because her head banged against the wall several times during the ascent. When he reached the top he took only a few steps.

There was the sound of a door opening, and he walked through it. Without warning, Isabella felt herself falling, to land on her back on a prickly, straw-stuffed mattress. She cried out at the unexpectedness of it, the sound muffled by the gag.

The woman *tch-tched*. "No more need for that, is there? There's none to 'ear 'er no matter if she screams. No need to suffocate the poor thing."

The man apparently shrugged, because the gag was fished from Isabella's mouth. Her lips and tongue felt dry and swollen. Her jaws ached. She closed her mouth, swallowing painfully, even as she was flipped over onto her back and her hands were untied.

"She's wet through. I s'pose she'd be glad to get them clothes off 'er."

"I don't see as it makes no difference whether she's wet or not."

"Ain't you that 'as to nurse 'er if she sickens, is it?" the woman retorted.

"Do what you want," the man replied, clearly indifferent.

"Besides, them clothes might look right nice on me." The woman reached out to finger Isabella's skirt. "'Tis good cloth, it is."

The man snorted. "Aye, and you might just get the dress on, too, if you was to split yerself in 'alf!"

The woman gave an indignant cry. There was the sound of a slap, and half-playful wrestling. Isabella, her hands free, turned over cautiously, hoping they were too intent on themselves to notice her. Instinctively one hand rose to her blindfold. . . .

"Nah!" The man's hand knocked hers away, the blow so hard that her fingers went numb from it. Then his hands were on her shoulders, shaking her. "You try that again, lady, and I'll beat you clear to London and back. You understand me?"

"I—I understand!"

He stopped shaking her, pushing her back down against the mattress instead.

"What are you doing?" Isabella could feel him leaning over her, and her heart stood still. He said nothing in reply, but caught one wrist and lifted it high above her head. Isabella felt a rope pass around her wrist, and realized with a sinking feeling that she was being tied to the bed frame.

"But 'ow am I to get 'er dress off, then?" The woman sounded disappointed as Isabella was secured wrists and ankles.

"That's your affair. But you're not to untie 'er without me 'ere, understand? If she was to get loose, it would go 'ard with you."

"Don't you threaten me, you—"

"Understand?" His voice was suddenly cold. The woman quieted.

"Aye, aye then. I understand." She sighed. "I s'pose I could cut the dress off 'er—but what good's a cut dress?"

"You'll 'ave to cut it to get into it anyway," the man said without sympathy. The pair of them sounded as if they were moving away from the bed. Isabella heard the creak of floorboards, followed by the sound of the door being shut and the click of a key in the lock. She was left alone in the dark, bound hand and foot to a bedframe that her fingers told her was made of solid iron. She was wet through, shivering with cold, and more afraid than she had ever been in her life.

What was to come to her now?