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**Opening Extract from...**

# Tiger with a Human Soul

Written by Barbara Bisco

Published by Black Lotus Publishing Ltd

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# TIGER WITH A HUMAN SOUL

BARBARA BISCO



Black Lotus
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**ISBN: 978-0-9560276-2-7**

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Typeset in Goudy by Lawrence Mann
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
**CPI Cox and Wyman Ltd**.
Reading, Berkshire, RG1 8EX UK
Registered under the Companies House Act
Number 2,196,742
www.cpibooks.co.uk

Published by
**BLACK LOTUS PUBLISHING LTD.**
25 Belsize Crescent
London, UK NW3 5QY
Registered under the Companies House Act
Number 5,928,807
www.blacklotuspublishing.com




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Tess looked up from her letter at the sound of excited voices coming from the quadrangle in front of the library. She turned to the boy sitting next to her and asked him in Indonesian what was going on.

At first he said that he didn't know but after listening a moment longer, he added that it was something about a tiger. At least, that's what it sounded like to Tess.

Convinced that she must have misunderstood, she asked, '*Harimau*?'

It was the Indonesian word for tiger.

The boy nodded but before she had a chance to ask him anything more, he jumped up and rushed out the door.

Tess hesitated, uncertain whether to follow him. Even in Java, where improbable things seemed to happen every five minutes, she really couldn't believe there was a tiger just outside the library. Still, something must be happening and she was curious, so she hurried over to see what it was.

The only unusual thing she noticed at first was that lots of people were milling around talking excitedly to each other. A police cordon was being set up in front of the Food Science Building on the other side of the quadrangle and a throng of people were pressing up against it in order, she supposed, to peer inside.

Suddenly being tall was a good thing as she could see over most people's heads. The trouble was that what met

her eyes was not a pretty sight.

A man covered in blood was being carried out of the building, heaved into a bicycle rickshaw and pedalled away.

There didn't seem to be anything more to see after that but, to her surprise, the crowd didn't dissolve. She kept hearing the word that sounded so much like tiger but must be something else.

She looked around for someone who might be able to explain what was going on and saw an American she had met in the Southeast Asia Foundation office. He was an anthropologist, she recalled, so he should understand what all this was about.

'Gary,' she called, making her way through the crowd towards him.

'Barry,' he corrected with a genial smile, 'Barry Gellert. And you're Teresa Dickenson, right?'

'I hate the name Teresa,' she said. 'I always try to get people to call me Tess.'

'Okay, Tess,' he agreed.

'Can you explain what all this is about?'

'You won't believe this but I swear it's true. There's a tiger in the Food Science Building.'

'You don't mean roaming around free,' she protested.

'That's exactly what I mean. It seems to be checking the place out, wandering around like it's some kind of



invited guest.'

'You can't be serious.'

'I've seen it myself, stripes and all, every inch a tiger.'

Tess regarded him balefully. She didn't like being played for a fool. On the other hand, he looked like he was really nice. His eyes sort of lit up when he smiled and she liked that. It made her wonder if, preposterous as it seemed, he was actually telling her the truth.

'Look,' he said, seeing the sceptical expression on her face, 'I promise I'm not making this up. I swear I got the shock of my life this morning when I saw it.'

'You mean you were in there with it?'

'No, I was just going by the building when a bunch of guys came leaping out the windows, running like all the fiends of hell were after them. Something was obviously scaring the shit out of them and I wanted to find out what it was. It was pretty obvious they weren't going to stop and tell me about it so I figured I'd have to see for myself.'

'You can't have actually gone in there after all that?' she exclaimed. He surely couldn't have been that much of an idiot.

'God no, I just popped my head through the window and damned if I didn't see it, pacing up and down in front of the blackboard looking positively professorial, like it was about to give the class a lecture on zoology or something.'

Tess laughed. 'I'd have thought the lecture would have

been on William Blake,' she said.

'You lost me there,' he returned, baffled, 'why him?'

'Tiger, tiger burning bright; in the forests of the night', she said, quoting the first line of the poem, 'remember that?'

'Vaguely. It sounds familiar but I have to admit it didn't exactly spring to mind.'

'Who was the man who didn't get away in time?' she asked, changing the subject. 'The one who was taken away in the rickshaw all covered in blood?'

'He was the cleaner. Just doing his job, poor guy, but he sure as hell was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He looked like he had been pretty badly mauled.' Spotting his friend, Kanwa, in the crowd, he called, 'Is this an ordinary event around here, wild animals turning up without an invitation?'

'Happens all the time,' Kanwa returned, with a laugh. 'Three or four signed up for my class just yesterday.'

Then, seeing Tess and afraid she might think he was serious, he added, 'No, this is a real first. I can't remember anything like this ever happening before.'

'What I don't understand,' Tess said, 'is how a tiger could just wander through a city like Yogyakarta and turn up in a university building.'

'Animals are smart,' Kanwa said, 'sometimes smarter than people. They know when a volcano is about to



erupt and they come down off the mountain looking for a safer place.'

'But Mt Merapi doesn't still erupt, does it?' Tess gasped.

'I'm afraid it does, every few years.'

'But it's so close,' she said, with an instinctive shudder, 'I can see it from the terrace in front of the house where I live, at least I can in the mornings before the cloud cover settles in. Don't people worry about living so close to an active volcano?'

'It's okay,' Kanwa assured her, 'the lava never comes down this way.'

'Why not?'

'I guess we're just lucky here in Yogya,' he said, and then turning to Barry, asked him how his project was going.

'It's going exactly nowhere at the moment. Trying to get accurate information in this country has to be the world's most thankless task. People just tell me what they think I want to hear, or what the village headman wants them to say, or what they've decided would make them look good. It drives me crazy.'

Tess, surprised to hear an anthropologist talk like this, was trying to think of ways to present the Javanese in a better light when a small van with the words *Kebun Binatang* displayed on the side drew up in front of the Food Science Building.

Half a dozen men jumped out of it, climbed over the

police cordon and took up positions at the classroom windows.

'Who are they? What are they going to do?' Tess asked.

'It looks like they're from the zoo,' Barry said. 'I expect they're going to shoot the bastard with some darts.'

Tess gave a cry of outrage. 'You can't mean –'

'Just sleeping darts,' Kanwa put in hastily, 'so they can take it to the zoo.'

To Barry's surprise, this prospect didn't seem to make Tess feel much better. 'Hey, what's the matter,' he said. 'Isn't that a damn sight better than killing it?'

'I'm not so sure,' she replied truculently.

'Well, they have to do something with it,' Barry pointed out. 'They can't just hand it a notebook and a pen and send it into class. I mean, suppose it gets hungry in the middle of a lecture and feels like a quick snack? The professor might look up and find that he was missing a student.'

Barry's hopes of drawing a laugh from Tess came to nothing because, just at that moment, the heavily sedated tiger was brought out on a makeshift stretcher and shoved unceremoniously into the waiting van.

The sight of the majestic creature being subjected to such ignominious treatment tore at Tess' heart. Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought of the fate that lay ahead of it, a life of degradation in the zoo behind the bars of a cage.



'Hey, aren't you taking this a little hard?' Barry asked, beginning to wonder if this girl was some kind of mental case.

'He looked dead,' Tess said flatly.

'You'd look pretty dead too if someone had just jabbed you with a snoot-full of knock-out drugs,' Barry declared. 'Stop worrying. He'll come round soon enough and be as right as rain.'

'I hope he doesn't,' she cried. 'He'd be better off dead than locked up in some horrible cage for the rest of his life.'

'Bullshit! After all this kerfuffle, he'll be famous and get the royal treatment. In tiger language that means plenty to eat, the best accommodation on offer and a guaranteed introduction to the tigress with the sexiest stripes in the zoo.'

'I just wish that were true.'

'Why is it,' Barry asked, turning to Kanwa, 'that beautiful women never believe anything I say?'

The jokey question annoyed Tess. She knew she wasn't beautiful and hated it when men, boys, whoever, tried to score points with her by suggesting she was.

What she didn't take into account was her lively spirit - at once animated and thoughtful, mischievous and sensitive - that sparkled in her eyes and gave a quixotic loveliness to her face. Barry was not the first person to mistake this for beauty and she did him an injustice when