

SHE DARED TO DREAM. HE DARED TO BELIEVE.  
TOGETHER, THEY BUILT THE IMPOSSIBLE.

STRONGER  
*than* SHIFTING  
SANDS

BARBARA  
BLYTHE

# Stronger than Shifting Sands

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2026

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0539-2

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

In memory of my mother and father, Barbara and Timothy Brown. After eloping, they spent their first year of married life in Pensacola, FL. The first vacation

I recall when a child was spent on Marathon Key. It was only natural to be inspired by the turquoise waters and white sand. And to God, who has blessed me with a second chance at writing. "...with God, all things are possible." Mat.19:26



## *What People are Saying*

### *Fire Dragon's Angel*

Set in both England and a turbulent early US, this story is wonderfully written. The characters leap to life from the page. Full of emotionally charged moments...(it) will keep you spell bound through it's pages... ~ Happily Ever After Reviews

Blythe's writing is engaging and she'd a good story teller...Blythe won't disappoint. ~ You Gotta Read Reviews

To colonial era lovers everywhere, this is a must read! ~ Diana Flow, reviewer

# CHAPTER 1

JUNE 1905

BOYNTON BEACH, FLORIDA

A FEW MILES SOUTH OF PALM BEACH

He was a white tiger among a clan of striped hyenas.

Kimball Delacroix swallowed a gasp. The six-foot-plus display of muscle and flesh that stood at the end of the pier terrified her in a fascinating way. Positioned adjacent to the moored *Island Lady*, the “tiger”, in one of those swim suits of black and white striped wool that seemed to be all the rage at Boynton Beach that season, conversed with a gray-bearded individual. The older man’s attire and braided cap suggested he might be the captain of the ship gently rocking at the pier. The other men assembled, also in striped swim suits of varying design, had triggered her thought of striped hyenas. Their posturing bespoke of wealth, encircled by arrogance, treachery, and stupidity.

She also knew, from her foray into Hebrew culture her first semester at Cornell, that the Hebrew word for hyena and hypocrite was the same. No surprise there, aware that most of those men surrounding the tiger were supremely confident in their invincibility. She’d frequently choked on large doses of that in the last few

months.

But the toned physique displayed by the tiger's suit brought to mind an Indian white tiger she'd once seen in a New York City zoo. His folded, bronzed arms strained the fabric of his sleeves while he remained unaware of Kimball's perusal and mercifully oblivious to her stares. A tug on her arm forced Kimball to turn to her best friend, Caty Lansdale. A petite blonde with big blue eyes and a diminutive, child-like figure, she nervously twisted her hands.

"You know you shouldn't be here."

While Kimball pondered Caty's ominous words, the strong breeze blowing off the Atlantic lifted an edge of her knotted scarf, allowing her russet curls to escape. Drawing in deeply of the salt-scented air, she was more than prepared to deal with Caty's resistance just as she had for the past fifteen years. With reassurances and cajoling.

"Just look at him. He'll never let you on the ship."

As Kimball clapped her hand atop the pesky scarf, she dared another look at the guardian of the fishing boat ramp. Her stomach fluttered, not from fear, but from something she'd never felt before. She drew a deep breath. "You just watch."

"Your parents gave you strict instructions this morning."

"They said not to go off alone. I didn't. You're with me. They told me to be back at the hotel for tea. That's six hours from now. I've plenty of time. Mother told me not to forget the soiree at Whitehall this evening." Kimball rolled her eyes. "As if I could forget

something she's talked about for the past two months. Father told me not to walk too far. And I didn't because I rode here in the hotel's wagon."

"If they find out—"

"They won't. Caty, I've been doing this for nine years. God has taken care of me."

"What if He doesn't this time? It's so far down, and something could go wrong. If you don't come up—"

"I've been trained by experts, and I'm certified."

"Experts?" Caty was clearly aghast. "The Espinosas are itinerant wreckers. And you received your certification because you let the officials think you were a boy."

"No one asked. They didn't need to know. I've got to do this, Caty. This is an amazing opportunity. The only wrecks I've seen were ancient and disintegrating. This is a fairly new ship with an iron hull, and it won't be broken into little pieces."

"You can't dive dressed like that." Caty gestured at Kimball's proper seaside attire consisting of a navy wool tunic cinched at the waist, with matching bloomers beneath, proper dark stockings, and laced slippers.

Kimball shook her head. "You know me better. I've got a boy's suit underneath."

Caty's eyes widened comically as she gasped. "I wish you'd never overheard those men talking at the hotel last evening."

Kimball begged to differ. It seemed providential that she and Caty had chosen seats on the veranda

directly across from two men discussing an outing for the following morning. The shorter of the men had recommended to his companion that they join a group planning a rendezvous on the *Island Lady* at the Boynton Beach pier. The men were going to dive down to the wreck of the *Lofthus*, a Norwegian vessel which sank off Boynton Beach seven years earlier.

Kimball couldn't miss such an opportunity. Caty had been less than thrilled when Kimball announced her intention.

"All you have to do is stay on the boat. You love sailing."

"I don't when you're beneath the boat, and I'm on the boat. Suppose you encounter a squid or a shark or something?"

"Then I'll have quite a tale to tell. Caty, it'll be fine. You'll see." Kimball looked around. The wooden pier was thronged with men, women, and children—most occupied with fishing poles, lines, tackle, bait, and the lucky few, flailing fish just pulled from the briny depths. Kimball's gaze returned to the docked ships, settling once more on the one carrying the divers to the site of the *Lofthus*. Several men were already gathered on deck, their laughter carrying easily on the wind. If she planned to be accepted as a diver, it was time to shed her bathing costume, tuck up her hair in the close fitting cap she'd brought along, and present herself as a young man in search of adventure.

At that moment, the tiger paused in his conversation with the bearded man and seemed to visually interrogate those boarding. He lifted his

sculpted chin, his gaze touching hers with unnerving intensity.

A shudder raced through Kimball. It was as though he could see deep into her soul. Quickly she looked away. The tiger's eyes were far too probing. Far too knowing. "I need to change, Caty. Stay here and wait for me."

"Where are you going?" There was no mistaking the panic in Caty's voice. Sometimes her friend seemed afraid of her own shadow.

"To the bath house to remove this." Kimball held out her hot, scratchy skirt.

"You'll never pass for a boy." Worry etched her friend's voice and eyes accompanied by a wringing of hands.

"You'll see." Taking a side set of steps, Kimball churned up sand with her slipper clad feet as she hurried toward the cluster of bath houses. Slipping in a vacant one, she shed her feminine garb, made sure the wrapping around her chest was secure, and then adjusted the male bathing costume she'd purchased for her diving lessons. The last thing she did was tuck her hair inside the striped cap. Darting out, she earned a few questioning looks from passersby who saw a "boy" emerging from a lady's changing area. By the time she reached Caty, she was breathless from the rushing and running.

"What do you think?" Kimball turned in a circle for Caty's inspection.

"I think this is a bad idea. Let's go back to the hotel."

"Absolutely not." Kimball handed Caty her bathing attire, and prodded her forward. The raucous screeching of a flock of diving gulls temporarily drowned out the surrounding laughter and conversations of the two-legged intruders. One of the gulls swooped low and deposited an unwelcome, gooey gift on her bare toes. Kimball hoped this wasn't an omen of failure as she choked back threatening nausea. She simply had to do this.

"Where are your spectacles, Kimball?"

Kimball slowed as she pondered Caty's words. Dratted things. She'd left them at the hotel. Having lost pair after pair, much to her mother's distress, Kimball realized there was a reason for their frequent disappearance. She'd hated them as a child, she hated them now, and would always hate them. But their absence wouldn't ruin this golden opportunity.

"I don't really need them. They're more trouble than they're worth."

"I thought you needed them to see," Caty said, clearly not believing her.

"Not all of the time. Besides, the wreck will be too huge to miss."

"What if there's a sign down there that says 'danger' or 'stay away'? You'll never see the warning."

"I'm going." Kimball was done with Caty's what-ifs and pressed on to the *Island Lady*. As she and Caty started up the gangplank, she recognized the two men from the Royal Poinciana hotel, surrounded by other equally obnoxious, socially snobbish, bored, rich men. The tiger, positioned at the entry, looked up at their

approach while the older, suited man disappeared into the interior of the large fishing boat. Kimball suddenly wished she hadn't forgotten her eye glasses. Her steps slowed, uncomfortable beneath the man's stare.

Spirals of dark hair peeked above the scooped neck of his snug top. His legs, spread at the moment as though braced on the deck of a wave-tossed ship, revealed powerful thighs and calves. Lowering her eyes, Kimball knew she blushed. She'd seen many a male in bathing attire, but none had ever looked...powerful. Was he among the group staying at the Royal Poinciana? Somehow he didn't strike her as the type.

"Might I be of help?" His hair was dark, barely a shade lighter than black, but his face was a bit out of focus thanks to her far-sightedness.

Caty clutched the back of Kimball's suit, clearly terrified. Kimball would have to make her decision to stay or run based upon the man's tone of voice because she couldn't clearly define his expression. And his voice—waves of heat raced through her, his deep baritone resonating with vitality and strength. And unquestioned authority.

"I'm," she faltered, her nerve threatening to evaporate. She tried again, lowering her voice. "I'm a guest at a local hotel. I heard there's to be a dive today to the wreck of the *Lofthus*."

"For experienced divers—adult divers." His words ruffled her internal feathers, and she drew herself up to her full height of five feet, six inches. He still dwarfed her.

"I'm among that number."

Caty wailed, and Kimball prayed the man hadn't heard.

"You couldn't be more than fifteen, and a scrawny fifteen." There was a hint of humor in his voice. "Does your mother know where you are? I suppose your friend wants to dive, too?" He uncrossed his arms and nodded at Caty. Another tiny wail.

"No. She'll wait for me. On the ship, if that's permissible?"

"It's not . Go back to wherever you're staying before someone wonders where you are."

"I am an adult. I'm twenty one. I've been diving for nine years."

"Free diving?"

"Yes."

"How long can you hold your breath?"

"Long enough. I'm also certified to dive with equipment—"

"How could you possibly dive in a heavy suit, helmet, and boots?"

"I assure you, I can. I have the money—"

"Time for you to leave." He advanced and caught her arm. Kimball snatched free.

"Your attitude and manner is offensive. I insist on speaking with the captain."

"I know your kind. You're spoiled and don't know the meaning of the word 'no.' The only diving you've ever done has been in a tub when looking for a lost bar of soap." Turning his back on her, he started to walk away.

Fury propelled her forward, and she grabbed his arm.

He stopped. And glared.

Caty sobbed.

"I told you, I have the money. I intend to dive today with those men." She nodded toward the men who had boarded. Judging by the shift in activity, the ship would soon be leaving.

"You can't—you're a girl."

Pounding commenced in Kimball's ears, humiliation flooding her with heat from face to toes. How could he have known she was a girl? Caty. Caty had given her away with her nervous wailing and sobbing. If she dared to look at her lifelong friend, she might be tempted to shake her senseless.

"Next time," he reached out and tugged on a curl, one that had escaped without her knowledge, "hide your hair better. Now run along. And stay out of trouble. If someone taught you to dive, they should be permanently beached."

Tears threatened behind Kimball's burning eyes, all of the humiliation and unfounded bias she'd endured her first year of college clawing for release. If she had a dime for every insult directed at her by a male engineering student, she'd be wealthier than Henry Flagler. This condescending barbarian from the Dark Ages needed to be taught a lesson. She would have reveled in enlightening him. Unfortunately, it would fall to someone else to do that.

About to lose her battle with tears, Kimball turned abruptly and started down the pier she'd journeyed up

so jubilantly a few minutes earlier. Caty fell into step behind her, her sigh of relief aggravating. On her second step, Kimball's clouded vision obscured an uneven plank, and her toe caught in the crack. Going down on her knees, a fierce burning encompassed her right one. A cry escaped before she could contain it while a hand reached out. Belonging to none other than the insufferable tiger.

"I don't need your help." To prove her point, she staggered up, her balance unsteady and her knee throbbing. Looking down, Kimball saw the scraped skin, and swallowed back another cry. She was certain to have a miserable evening at Flagler's affair hobbled by an injury. Daring to look up at the hovering man, her agitation intensified.

"Are you sure? I could arrange to have you returned—where are you staying?"

"Not far," she managed through gritted teeth. "Your help isn't necessary." Her biting rejection elicited a hint of remorse in his eyes. But it quickly vanished. "Enjoy the dive." Presenting her back, she resumed an unsteady walk. Caty joined her, both silent while they put distance between themselves and the *Island Lady*. As they descended the steps leading back to the beach, Caty finally spoke.

"I'm sorry, Kimball. You'll have other opportunities. I'm sure of it. You always find a way to do exciting things."

Caty was trying to cheer her. At the moment, that was impossible. She'd just encountered another man determined to stop her from living her life.

## CHAPTER 2

HENRY FLAGLER ESTATE  
WHITEHALL, PALM BEACH, FLORIDA

Exasperated, Kimball slipped into an alcove and placed her untouched crystal cup of fruit punch on a ledge. Frantic rummaging through her beaded silk reticule confirmed the fact she'd left her spectacles somewhere. She could have sworn she just had them.

Heart sinking and stomach churning with dread, she leaned against the silver papered wall of the small nook shared with a smiling marble cherub who seemed far too carefree and perfectly sighted. If only Caty had come this evening—she'd have seen that Kimball kept up with her glasses. As it was, Caty was back at the Royal Poinciana, nursing the headache Kimball's earlier excursion had given her. Kimball had a headache, too—caused by that ill-informed oaf who thought it his duty to keep her in her place. If she could tell him a thing or two—

“Are these yours?”

Kimball's anger faded as she absorbed the fact a tall gentleman was poised on the threshold of her private space of humiliation. She considered dashing past him, but thought better of it when the glint of glass reflecting the glow of the electric lights told her

the man had possession of her lost article. She hesitated to grasp them, torn between a wish to disappear and a fierce need to clearly see her knight in shining armor. No scolding for her tonight from Mother, praise the Lord.

"You laid them beside the punch bowl. I noticed them as soon as you turned away. I had a deuced time following you through the crush of guests." There was something unnervingly familiar about his voice.

Kimball's white gloved hand shook as she accepted his offering. As she folded her fingers about them, she wondered where she'd heard this voice before. The men conversing on the veranda last night—on the way to Boynton Beach—on the pier—or—*oh, no...*

Her breath caught as memory surfaced, and she jammed her glasses on, nearly poking herself in the eye with a wire temple arm. His face came into perfect, unsettling focus. "You!" Standing before her was the tiger in a tuxedo.

"Guilty as charged." His in-focus face failed to reveal hairy warts or a hawk-like beak. Tanned, his dark hair was thick and straight, and his emerald eyes glowed. Adding insult to injury, he had the audacity to smile, revealing startling white teeth. How dare he smile as though amused by the earlier incident? Kimball was sorely tempted to wipe that smile from his handsome face.

Rather than give in to temptation in an effort to preserve her shredded pride, she brushed past him, the entrance to the ballroom beckoning. With her second

determined step, the pier-side injury flared, and she stumbled in her cuban-heeled tango boots.

He was instantly by her side, and before she could protest, he led her back to the alcove she'd just vacated. By gently pushing on her shoulder, he gave her no choice but to sit on the satin covered bench beneath an arched window. It wasn't easy to swallow her pride.

Biting her lip, she forced herself to look anywhere but at him, scanning the opulent space created for those weary of dancing or in need of privacy. More marble cherubs, shaded by towering palms, and surrounded by squat palmettos were evenly spaced about the colonnaded room. No expense had been spared in the mansion decorated in the style of the Italian Renaissance—but why would one expect otherwise? Her attractive tormentor cleared his throat forcing her back to the moment and his disturbing presence.

“Thank you.” The words came out stiff; distasteful, souring her mouth. He chuckled, and then looked down at his formal black coat, flicking a non-existent speck of lint from his lapel with his bronzed index finger. Kimball stared, fascinated by the movements of his callused hand. Its condition told her he did more with his time than play tennis and wager on the ponies, which her parents thought was perfectly acceptable behavior for Edgar, the man her parents wanted her to marry. With her improved vision, she noticed his evening attire, though clean and pressed, bore evidence of wear, stamping it second hand. It in no way diminished his physical attributes and

accentuated his broad shoulders. His earlier state of dress—or lack of—filled her mind forcing her to lower her eyes. He was so unlike the other young men present tonight in Henry Flagler’s mansion—most of them indolent, inconsiderate, and wealthy. “For returning my spectacles. You’ve spared me a lecture.”

“How so?”

Kimball dared to glance up. He towered, but didn’t intimidate. She’d thought his manner infuriating earlier. Now, he seemed almost—charming? What was wrong with her? Either she’d spent too long in the sun or donning a Worth gown and submitting to tortuous hair arranging had left her unbalanced.

“I’ve lost several pairs in six months. My mother is at her wit’s end. She told me to attach them to a chain, but that would remind me of my Latin instructor at Heathwell’s.”

“No fondness for Latin?”

“Latin is fine. I wasn’t overly fond of Miss Dahlia Heathwell.” He laughed, and she joined in before she realized what she was doing.

~\*~

As their laughter faded, Logan Stillwater met the young woman’s gaze, discovering depths to her brown eyes that rivaled those of the deepest ocean. Should he tell her the dive to the *Lofthus* was disappointing and that he’d rescued two on the dive for failing to follow basic instructions? Men with money always seemed to think they were above the rules. How she thought she

could pass herself off as a boy was beyond him. And if she'd fooled other men in that ridiculous getup she'd worn earlier, they were either blind or lacking in mind.

Dressed now as a woman of society, the pale aqua fabric of her gown was the same shade as the water of the Keys and the perfect color for her creamy skin and auburn hair. The lights picked out copper strands in the intricate curls, and Logan wished he could tug on one as he had earlier.

"So you saw me—by the punch bowl?"

The conversation wasn't moving as smoothly as he'd hoped. He was blessed she hadn't slapped him given his earlier rudeness. But there'd been no way he would let her on that ship once he'd put together what she hadn't been telling him—namely that she was a girl—a woman. His gaze rested briefly on the sumptuously gowned figure that defined hourglass. She perched on the bench as though poised for flight.

"You were conversing with Mrs. Flagler and another woman."

"My mother," she volunteered. "You recognized me?"

"Not at first. But after I ventured closer, your eyes gave you away."

"Why did you come closer?" There was a softening in her tone and expression. Perhaps some of her anger had faded. He hoped now that he could apologize.

"I was—intrigued."

"Intrigued?"

"Another way of saying I hoped to make your