



Strange Caper

"This is the best mystery my wife has ever made me read."

— Randy Phipps

"I laughed. I cried. I funneled coffee..."

— Thea

Thea Phipps





It was to be an idyllic Greek holiday, courtesy of Albert and Violet, retired field agents for MI6. But, when the Frenchman entered the picture, not to mention the bipolar policeman and Serbian acrobats, everything changed. Instead of fleeing to safety, Bella ends up trapped on the naturists' island of Gavdos. She becomes ensnared in kidnapping, smuggling, and in trying to understand the puzzling brass key that will save them all...

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STRANGE CAPER

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Dedication

To all the Friends – you know who you are – and to my best friend
on earth, my husband, Randy.

CHAPTER ONE

At a hundred years of age, Liza Weebs is the oldest woman in Halfmoon, Cornwall. Her unclipped toenails resemble shards of rigatoni. They tap-tap-tap the cobblestones like a crocodile's when she toddles to the pub barefoot, which is nearly all the time.

She has a passion for only three things – gin, baking football-sized scones, and my older brother Jude. Jude is only twenty-seven. The term 'cougar' just isn't enough when you do the math. Even though her silhouette looks like a can of lager propped on two twigs, even though she is so short I can crown her head with my armpit, I am utterly intimidated by her, which was why Tamsin and I stupidly ate her scone.

She had given me the scone to give to Jude. He, in turn, gave it back to me in lieu of lunch. Tamsin and I were running last minute errands in preparation for our holiday with the Pengarths and didn't have time to stop. We should have suspected something was amiss with the quick bread. Big enough to double as a wheel chock, it was studded with chewy pellets that looked like currants, but tasted like bacon. There was no rational explanation for that, yet we kept eating. And there is no rational explanation for that, either.

We'd actually finished half of the dense wedge before tossing the rest to the seagulls. And as easily as that, we'd poisoned ourselves, inadvertently changing the course of our lives in the process. No telling what we had done to the birds.

I was ill the morning of our departure from London to Athens, Greece. My pre-flight queasiness was worse than usual. I dislike flying, so at first I'd thought I was suffering from an exceptionally bad case of nerves. Especially when I'd rid myself of my breakfast while I was saying goodbye to my parents, five brothers, uncle, grandmother, and two great-aunts at the airport. But when Tamsin lost her food right before we'd boarded, we'd put it down to lack of sleep and too much excitement. It was my first holiday without family or relatives save my grandfather, Finghin Quinn, who was traveling partway with us.

Unfortunately, Tamsin and I didn't realize what was actually happening to us until we were already strapped in and soaring over the Champagne region of France. We were finally forced to acknowledge our predicament when Tamsin had to summon a flight attendant for a second loo roll.

"Liza's vile scone." Tamsin crawled over my knees and collapsed in her seat. "It's the only thing we both ate. Bella, we have food poisoning. I won't swear to it, but I think I finally passed the pawn I'd swallowed when I was six."

I touched my abdomen where trolls were trying to burrow their way out with pickaxes. At least it kept my mind off the fact that we were hurtling through oxygen-deprived air hundreds of meters above earth.

I glanced at our traveling companions, Albert and Violet Pengarth, and at my grandfather, Finghin. My Irish father's Irish father. Grandfather was going to Antalya, Turkey, to see a man about a horse.

Throughout history, the phrase "to see a man about a horse" has meant three different things – visiting a woman, urinating, or going out to the pub for a drink. All three are basically related activities as far as I was concerned, with one leading to the other. But when it came to my grandfather, the phrase was meant literally.

Grandfather owned a stable in Halfmoon, Cornwall, just minutes from my parents' inn, the Iron Rose. The stable was small and select, offering training, boarding, and stud services.

While Tamsin, the Pengarths, and I planned on taking a flight from London to Athens, and from there a shuttle flight to the water-bound Prefecture of Achaea to begin our tour, Grandfather planned to go only as far as Athens with us. Once there we would part ways, and he would continue his journey to Turkey where he was going to arrange for a vial of champion-grade horse seed to be transported back home. I wasn't sure what that entailed except an obstacle course of paperwork and an uncomfortable amount of money.

Grandfather caught my glance. "How's the form, lass? Still plankin' it?"

"I'm fine." I didn't want to go into details lest he felt obliged to snatch me from my Grecian idyll before it even began. "I think I'm getting better."

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Even though I am no longer a child, I am absurdly uncomfortable around him. Uncomfortable with an inconvenient smidgen of terrified thrown in. It wasn't that we didn't have some kind of relationship as grandfather and granddaughter; it was just that we synchronized as well as a mastiff and a pink poodle on the same leash.

Grandfather is a tall, solid, seventy-one-year-old ex-lothario horse whisperer. He is intimidating and impatient, with long silver hair that he keeps in a ponytail, fierce black eyes, and a lean face that's a cross between a hero's and a Parisian gargoyle's.

I am usually irreverent, laughter being my first reaction to most things, and because of that I am usually underestimated. And adding insult to injury in my grandfather's eyes, as far as I was concerned, horses were far more interesting with cowboys on their backs.

My grandmother claimed that my grandfather was hiding his true personality. According to her, under all that smoldering brusqueness he is amusing and charming in that way only the Irish have. However, if he's hiding his charm, he's hiding it well and he's been hiding it all of my life. But then again, it explained my father who shares his genes as my grandfather's oldest son. My mother said that my father can charm statues off their pedestals. Perhaps when my eighteen-year-old grandfather sired my father he had inadvertently passed his charm on like a relay runner passing a baton.

Our plane suddenly dipped, hitting a pocket of turbulence. Dribbles of sweat rolled down my forehead, contradicting my claim to be fine. Hurriedly shifting my gaze before Grandfather could comment with another crude Gaelic idiom, I studied Albert Pengarth with pretended interest.

Albert is tall, wiry, and as handsome as a seventy-something man can be. His snowy hair is still plentiful, and his blue eyes have a wise squint that makes him look as if he's about to utter something witty or urbane. To be candid, his dry squint makes him look like a superannuated James Bond.

Oddly enough, that's exactly what he used to be.

In their younger years, he and his wife Violet worked for the British government as field agents for MI6. They had met while on assignment

in Afghanistan doing I don't know what. Possibly blowing up Goldfinger. I had never asked even though I'd wanted to.

Violet is small, unflaggingly energetic, consistently cheerful, and shrewdly practical. She dresses in plain, simple clothes, but wears unusual hats. She wore her favorite, a red fez with a black tassel. The fringe was pinned to the side with a brooch so it wouldn't flop into her eye.

Another wave of scone-induced nausea assaulted me.

Albert leaned past my grandfather and grinned at me from across the aisle. "You girls doing fine? Still looking forward to all those Greek men?"

I smiled in spite of my discomfort. It was a standing joke between us. Even though I am 21, six months younger than Tamsin, we are both unattached.

There were two reasons for my lack of sophistication. The first is that I had yet to go on a proper date. Wooing hearts isn't a recreational sport to me, like arm wrestling or canal jumping. If someone won my heart, I wanted them to keep it. The second reason is that I am the only girl in a herd of five overly protective brothers, four of them older. I had yet to meet the man courageous enough to forge past them and past my father to get to me.

Tamsin, however, had a different tale to tell. At eighteen, she had lost her heart to a young man she had grown up with in Wales. He didn't return her affections, so in an effort to refocus her life, she moved to Halfmoon in her nineteenth year.

She rented an attic flat in a boardinghouse. I still lived at home with my family. But in spite of the differences in our lifestyle, we became fast friends, both doing the same volunteer work in the village, often accompanying each other on our various missions and assignments. Not only did we share in disaster relief work, traveling to other parts of England with my brothers, but we also shared in projects closer to home. One of the things we did in the village was to engage in a free educational program. Tamsin, the Pengarths, and I taught people who had never had formal schooling how to read. We also taught the interested or curious anything they wanted to know about the Bible.

About the Bible, but not about religion. Religion was something utterly different.

"Pooh, Albert. Leave her be." Violet, sitting on the other side of Tamsin, leaned over my friend's lap to prod my arm. "You take your time. There are plenty of lovely young men out there."

"I don't mind," I said truthfully, swiping the sweat from my forehead.

Violet gave me a look of concern. "Oh, dear, you really are ill. Maybe you both should lean your seats back a little. Should I summon an attendant? She might have something that will take the edge off."

I had my doubts that anything short of euthanasia would take the edge off, so I shook my head. "I'll be fine. It should pass."

Tamsin snorted at my unfortunate choice of words.

"If you're certain," Violet said uneasily. "You girls will tell me if you feel worse?"

"Don't worry about us. Really," Tamsin assured her. "I'm going to try to sleep." She closed her eyes. "Maybe if I ignore it, the pain will stop."

Too miserable to rest, I gave her a dubious look then turned to my own random thoughts. Trying to distract my attention from my stomach, I studied my fellow passengers. The plane had its usual cross section of humanity, from working businessmen, to vacationing families, to us, but there was one person my gaze kept returning to like iron filings to a magnet. I couldn't figure out why since I could see only the back of his head.

He sat five rows ahead of me, just across the aisle. Even when I leaned out to stare, all I could see were a set of broad shoulders and a solid looking knee clad in a dark suit. I stood up, pretending to stretch, and stepped closer, trying to see more before going back to my seat. I wasn't able to glimpse his face from my brief vantage point, but I could make out the chiseled angle of his jaw and cheekbone. From what I could tell, he looked youngish, absurdly well built, and prosperous if the Italian silk was anything to go by.

As soon as I reclaimed my seat I leaned into the aisle again, studying his ebony hair. He could have been Greek, though he seemed too tall for a Greek. He could have been Spanish. He could have even

been Portuguese or American. Middle Eastern? Italian? I caught a glimpse of a silver watch and restless fingers beating a tattoo on his knee. He was definitely dark skinned, but I couldn't tell whether he was naturally dark, or it was merely a suntan.

I couldn't think of an excuse to make my way up front to get a better look, trying and rejecting several scenarios, each one more ridiculous than the last. So I sat, staring, watching the back of his head, my discomfort nearly forgotten in my speculations.

Then, while we were somewhere over Greece, he turned suddenly and smoothly as if I had summoned him, and looked right at me. My heart jumped at being caught out, and I felt myself gawking. One of his eyebrows raised in amusement in that long blank second before I finally averted my gaze.

In that fleeting moment, I noticed that his face was well-defined, but as soon as I looked away I couldn't recall anything specific about it except his eyes. His curiously brilliant eyes were the silver blue of old Irish crystal. I noticed not just their color, but their expression as well. In that quick moment I had seen an inner grin in that charged stare.

The loudspeaker came on just then, telling us to fasten our safety belts as the plane was about to descend into Athens' International Airport. I felt something well up in the pit of my stomach. It was either a bubble of pure anticipation and excitement, or an evil burp from Liza's malicious scone. I heard my grandfather grumble something to Albert as Tamsin and I fastened our belts.

"Are you excited, my dears?" Violet asked. I nodded, my fist pressed to my stomach and my eyes drawn back to the thatch of black hair in spite of myself.

"Look!" Tamsin exclaimed a moment later, her hand on my arm reclaiming my attention. I leaned toward the window.

Below us was sun-drenched Athens, ringed by the distant slopes of Mounts Parnes, Hymettus, and Pendelikon. A haze covered the city under the white light, but I could make out the glittering bustle and movement like a giant pulse.

I looked at Tamsin, wanting to say something, but abruptly lost all thought as the plane dropped out from under me. We turned on our wing, Athens tilted toward us, and the roiling bubble in my stomach

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quivered. I shut my eyes, feeling another drop of sweat ooze down my forehead.

Violet patted my knee. "Don't worry, dear, we won't crash. If it makes you feel any better, Albert and I know how to fly. Not these new planes, but we should be able to radio in and follow instructions, of course."

Of course. I grinned in spite of myself, the image of those luminous eyes still imprinted on the insides of my lids.

CHAPTER TWO

We landed smoothly, the plane's wheels whining as we braked. Following the signals of the men below, the plane swung in a slow arc and rolled up to the terminal. A bell pinged in the speakers, the 'fasten safety belts' sign blinked off, and in three languages a voice bade us to get out of the plane and have a wonderful day.

There was the slow bustle as passengers stood and began to gather their belongings. Looking past the shoulders of those exiting the plane, I tried to catch another glimpse of the man with the ice-and-smoke eyes, but he'd already left.

Tamsin, the Pengarths, my grandfather, and I filed out together, edging ourselves into the flow of humanity pouring out of the plane, down the corridor, and into the terminal. My flight bag was cumbersome, but not heavy, having nothing more in it than a spare set of underclothes in case I became separated from my luggage. I had really intended to use my flight bag for carrying home Greek souvenirs.

In contrast, my overly laden purse slung across my shoulder was as heavy as a tombstone. I freed my bulging carotid artery from the strap and prayed that I wouldn't encounter a purse-snatcher. One quick yank, and I would have to be mailed back home as a quadriplegic.

We made it into the building without losing each other and stopped beside the row of windows to take stock of our whereabouts.

Apparently the exit corridor had disgorged all of us into the customs lobby. Ahead of us were counters, curtained booths, and burly Greek security personnel smiling at us like prison wardens. The only way out of the building and into Greece would be to pass the counters. A mass of passengers had already queued up to the officials behind the computers.

I saw a somber clot of five Greek Orthodox priests. They stood against the far wall like a row of dignified wallflowers at a dance. Dressed alike in their long black cassocks, they were hard to tell apart. Their distinctive headgear reminded me of veiled take-away cartons –

tall, rounded yet blocky, and the same black as their robes. Each one sported an impressively bushy beard, making them look as if they were peering over gorse bushes.

I had never seen their traditional garb in person before, and I eyed them interestedly. Then one of the priests stopped scanning the crowd and pinned his eyes to mine, looking at me with the considering stare of a dingo eyeing a baby. I smiled, hoping to diffuse the awkward moment, but all I got in return was a slow flaring of his magnificent nostrils. Then his glower intensified.

Startled, I looked down at my clothes, but couldn't see anything about my pale chinos, black tee shirt, and dark espadrilles that would incite such interest. I couldn't tell if his fierce regard was curiosity or zealous disapproval.

I did further mental inventory of myself.

I looked a bit like my mother, but sadly not enough. My mother, being Italian and exotically beautiful, has silver gilt Botticelli curls, violet eyes, and skin that is relatively unlined in spite of her forty-nine years.

I have blonde hair like hers, but my curls are longer, wilder, looser, exhibiting an untamable, spastic will of their own, which I find annoying. Most of the time, I feel as if I have shrubbery on my head. My eyes are nearly the same color as my mother's, and I have something of the rest of her face, but there the similarities end. My mouth is my father's. Having Irish blood coursing through our veins, our mouths seem to perpetually grin no matter what the rest of our face is doing. On my father it looks appealing. On me it just makes my face quite a bit plainer than my mother's. I am also indifferently short at five feet, three inches.

I glanced back at the scowling priest and was startled to find that while I had been contemplating my appearance his glare had shifted to Tamsin. I looked at my oblivious friend who was busily scanning the growing queue behind us.

In spite of her French surname of Hugo, Tamsin is one of the fair-skinned Welsh. She is nearly eight inches taller than I am and has the elongated giraffe-like silhouette of a photographer's dream, with lanky arms and legs that she is still learning how to control. Her smooth dark

hair is neatly bobbed at her chin, and her dark brown eyes are perfectly round in her triangular face, reminding me a little of an amazed cat.

I couldn't see anything about either of us that could have offended him, unless my hair was more disordered than usual. I pressed a hand to the curls, trying to smooth them down.

The priest's gaze continued to ricochet between us before he leaned over and spoke to one of his companions. To paraphrase a line from *Hamlet*, "something was rotten in the state of Denmark."

Violet nudged my ribs with a pointed little elbow and I jumped.

"I always did like a burly man in a beard. Greek men are certainly blessed with hair," she murmured. "I'll bet they shed, though. I suppose I should be grateful that Albert's chest is as hairless as an egg."

I laughed in spite of myself, instantly regretting it when I felt my queasiness shift.

Forcing myself to dismiss the unnerving attention of the priests, I took stock of the crowd, realizing that more than one planeload was being processed. Families with children, couples, earnest young men and women, all people I hadn't seen on our plane, were crowding the room.

I shifted the purse strap cutting into my neck, wondering why I'd seen fit to pack two travel books.

"Those priests weren't on the plane with us." Tamsin shot a frown at the black-robed men, bringing my unwilling focus back to the clerics against the wall. "What are they doing here? They seem upset."

"I expect they're waiting for someone." Albert cheerfully urged us forward.

We fumbled for our passports and made our way toward the long counter where we would either be welcomed, or strip-searched, and got in another queue. I dropped my flight bag and scooted it forward with my foot every time the queue inched forward. We eventually found ourselves in front of a waiting official.

"Your turn, luv." Violet tagged me, and I stepped up to the counter.

The man was as short as I was, burly, and one of the furriest persons I had ever seen. Stubble covered the bottom half of his face, beginning just under his eyes and continuing downward in a wiry pelt that peeked over the V of his shirt collar. No doubt he grew hairier as

his body progressed. His arms were hairy, his hands were hairy; even his fingers had coins of hair swirling above each knuckle. The only parts not covered in dynamic follicles were his fingernails, his eyeballs, his teeth, and a thin strip of forehead. He smiled and held his hand out for my passport.

I handed him my papers. Another drop of sweat crept from my scalp and was arrested by one of my dense Italian eyebrows.

He typed the pertinent bits of information from my passport into his computer, but before he could stamp the tiny book and hand it back, a pair of priests broke from their stance against the wall. They parted the crowd and swanned up to us. One of them, the one who had caught me staring at him earlier, leaned toward the official, invading the tight space, and asked him something in Greek. It sounded vaguely accusatory, but our official shrugged impatiently and shook his head. He asked a second question, and the man shook his head a second time, this time emphatically.

The other priest slapped an angry hand on the counter, scanned the bustle around us, and said something to his peer.

Violet took a chance that neither of the priests could speak English. "He just asked if they found the criminal, yet. His words." She peered up at the grizzled beard of the priest closest to her. "The attractive one seems to have had *tarama salata* for his lunch."

Tamsin ducked her head beside me, horrified, but she needn't have worried. The uncomprehending priest gave Violet a grave smile and raised a hand in benediction.

"Why, hello to you too, you handsome devil," Violet said, smiling back.

Mistaking her inane greeting for a comment of gratitude, he nodded graciously, turned to leave with his colleague, and nearly tripped over my flight bag.

"Pardon." Embarrassed, I dragged it out from under his feet and picked it up. Both priests glared at me with offended dignity. I decided it would be a mistake to smile, apologetically or otherwise. They turned away and made their way to another wall, standing against it to watch the passing travelers from their new vantage point.

The passport official, now grinning, asked to see the contents of my flight bag. I plopped it on the counter, watching as he reached in with a broad hand. Finding my underwear, he hooked it with his finger, pulled it out, and peered in at my brassiere.

"That is all?" he asked. My panties hung from his pinkie like a scarlet doily.

I nodded, feeling my face flame.

"You certainly travel light," Violet chirped, unperturbed.

The metal detectors suddenly beeped beyond the press of bodies, and a flurry of uniformed officials hustled a hapless man into a cubicle and drew the curtains. I stared like everyone else and wondered what they were going to do to him. I hoped they were merely going to run a hand-held metal detector past his body and pat him down until they could discover the source of the beep, but I wasn't so sure. The spectacle had the air of a public arrest and execution.

When the Pengarths had invited us to travel with them to Greece, I hadn't expected much drama. So far, I'd suffered from food poisoning, offended a contingent of Greek Orthodox priests, and watched a man get set upon by airport Security. And I hadn't even stepped out onto Greek soil yet. The nausea escalated. Just a notch, but it was enough for me to press a hand to my abdomen and sweat in earnest.

The official dropped my underpants back into my flight bag, stamped my passport before I could throw up on him, and handed it to me. Then he gave me a smile that showed all five of his gold caps.

"Welcome to Greece." He thrust my unzipped bag across the counter.

"*Efharisto*," I said, exhausting my knowledge of the Greek language with the only Modern Greek word I knew.

While the others were getting processed, I looked around for something to shield my next actions, and found a large trash bin against the far wall. Slipping behind it, I lifted my unwieldy purse from my neck, extracted a wad of euros, divided the wad as discreetly as I could, shoved the money deeply into two different pockets then settled my purse into my flight bag. I zipped the bag up, and hurried with my head down toward the metal detectors blocking the entry into Greece, wanting to get my next bout of nausea over with. I had an intense desire

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to escape to freedom and find a lavatory. My intestines felt like a python trying to regurgitate a goat.

I no sooner started scurrying when I crashed into the man with the silver-blue eyes.



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