



THE *S* CANE  
CANDY *S* CAPER



## THE SADIE HOFFMILLER CULINARY MYSTERIES

|                           |                             |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Lemon Tart</i>         | <i>Banana Split</i>         |
| <i>English Trifle</i>     | <i>Tres Leches Cupcakes</i> |
| <i>Devil's Food Cake</i>  | <i>Baked Alaska</i>         |
| <i>Key Lime Pie</i>       | <i>Rocky Road</i>           |
| <i>Blackberry Crumble</i> | <i>Fortune Cookie</i>       |
| <i>Pumpkin Roll</i>       | <i>Wedding Cake</i>         |



### *The Candy Cane Caper recipes*

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Download a free PDF of all the recipes in this book at [josiskilpack.com](http://josiskilpack.com)

A COZY CULINARY MYSTERY



THE *S* CANDY CANE  
CANDY  CAPER



JOSI S. KILPACK

A MYSTERY WITH RECIPES



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*To all the readers who asked,  
“Will you ever write another Sadie book?”  
This story would not exist if not for you.*



# CHAPTER 1



**I**t takes an awful lot of work to get ready for the most wonderful day of the year, Pete, but it doesn't take much to destroy it." Sadie paused long enough to take a breath, but quick enough to keep Pete from speaking. "One drunk uncle or forgotten gift or inconvenient storm could be the difference between a 'Happy Holiday' and a Rankin and Bass movie."

Pete laughed through the phone while Sadie scowled at the threatening clouds hanging low over Fort Collins, Colorado, where she and Pete had lived for five years of wedded bliss. Pete was in Phoenix today, though—seventy-two degrees, thank you very much.

"Haven't you been dreaming of a white Christmas, Sadie?" Pete teased.

"Not eighteen inches of white Christmas in twenty-four hours! What if the storm shuts down the airport and no one can get here? What if there is black ice on the roads?" Pete's son, Jared, and his family were driving up from New Mexico. Shawn and Maggie were flying in from Sacramento, and Breanna's family was flying all the

way from London. Pete's two daughters lived in town; at least she didn't have to worry about them.

"Sadie," Pete said in his patient-husband tone. "Everyone will get there in time, I promise."

Sadie sat up straighter in her car, sufficiently triggered by the patronizing comment. "I'm supposed to trust a promise like that? You promised you'd be home today and look how that's turned out."

"I said I *hoped* to be home tonight," Pete corrected. "I *promised* to be home for Christmas Eve."

"Which is—" She checked her watch—4:18 p.m. "Thirty-one hours and forty-two minutes away."

"But Christmas Eve lasts for twenty-four hours, so I have fifty-five hours and forty-two minutes before you can accuse me of breaking my word."

Technically he was right, but the disappointment of him having to extend the cold case investigation that had taken him to Arizona for a few days amplified Sadie's holiday-induced anxieties that having all of their children and grandchildren together would not end up as holly jolly as she'd expected. Pete's daughter had generously offered her home for the Christmas party on December 26, which was perfect because Pete and Sadie's condo would have been terribly cramped.

Sadie had volunteered to be in charge of the food: holiday favorites from both sides of the family, which had sounded fun back in October. However, the pressure to get everything just right so that both families felt comfortable and included was growing in intensity as the big day grew closer. Just that morning, Pete's daughter Michelle had emailed Sadie a copy of a cake recipe her mom had



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made every year when they'd been young—Cunningham Candy Cane Cake. What if Sadie didn't make it as well as Pete's late wife had? What if his children interpreted her failure as a dismissal of an important part of their past?

The anxiety spiral tightened.

"What if you get delayed again, Pete? What if I don't make the Candy Cane Cake as well as Pat did?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "What if the clams don't come in for the cioppino? What if the grandkids hate the marshmallow guns we got them? What if one of the littler grandkids chokes on a marshmallow? It's the first time everyone has been together since the wedding, which was, well, a disaster."

For most people, a "wedding disaster" would be having the buttercream frosting melt on the cake or burgundy tablecloths instead of Christmas Red. For Pete and Sadie's wedding, it had meant explosions, shoot-outs, psychopaths, and one gravely injured minister. Pastor Donald, thankfully, had made a full recovery and was back in Garrison, preaching fiery sermons about miracles, guardian angels, and the power of adversity in each person's personal development throughout their lives. After five years, there were even parts of that day guests could laugh about.

Some guests.

Not often, though.

Pete spoke. "A wise woman once told me that allowing negativity to cloud your focus can influence the event itself through unconscious choices that then lead to additional conflicts."

That "wise woman" was Sadie herself. She was always talking to him about energy and mindfulness, but the negative energy of a difficult cold case or an argument with the guy who let his dog run

loose in the neighborhood was not the same as twenty-some-odd people whose last encounter with each other had been a traumatic experience.

Sadie had been having honest-to-goodness nightmares about this blended holiday celebration three nights in a row, now—pretty much since Pete had left town. Anxiety-ridden dreams had led to poor sleep, which made the stress worse during her overscheduled days, which led to more tension, which led to additional anxiety-ridden dreams and . . .

“The guys are here,” Pete said, his voice sounding more professional. “I’ve got to go, but I promise that everyone will be there for the family party on the twenty-sixth, and Christmas Eve will find me where the love-light gleams.”

Sadie couldn’t help but smile. “What is love-light, anyway?”

Pete laughed. “I have no idea, but we’ll figure it out. Together. In two more days, okay?”

Sadie wanted to pout and cry, but she’d better not, what with Santa Claus coming to town and all. She was already risking her status of being on the “nice list” by being such a big whiner about Pete’s case.

“I’ll literally be counting the hours. What time is your flight to Denver on Tuesday?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I’ll let you know as soon as I know.”

And just like that the spiral started all over again. What if everyone showed up but Pete wasn’t there? Talk about awkward. “You’re not sure? Pete, there aren’t a lot of last-minute seats available to pick up on Christmas Eve.”

“The department figures all that out, but I’ll be home. I

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promise. Try to find something to distract yourself, okay? How's the book coming?"

"I turned it in on Friday," Sadie said, a little hurt he didn't remember.

Since retiring from investigations, Sadie had converted her experiences into storylines for culinary mystery novels. The last one had been a bear to write, so it had been a relief to send it off to her wonderful editor right before Christmas. She would start on her next story in January sometime. The space between one book and the next was golden, time she could use to catch up with friends and deep clean her house and travel with Pete since his work was flexible, too. This time, however, she'd only felt more stressed due to the holiday demands.

"That's right," Pete said. "Then if not a book, try to find something else to take your mind off your stress—that shouldn't be too difficult this time of year. I'm really sorry I can't be there to help."

Sadie heard the voices of Pete's partners grow louder in the background. Their time was up.

Sadie said goodbye and then tapped her phone on the steering wheel, gazing through the windshield to the entrance of Nicholas House, a care facility with hospice services. Sadie's friend Mary had moved in there a few months ago, and Sadie had been visiting several times a week since. She felt her anxieties settle into a gentle walk instead of dashing through the snow as they had been.

Mary Hallmark had been the first neighbor to introduce herself when Pete and Sadie had moved to Fort Collins. Since then, Mary had become a dear friend in addition to being the best across-the-street-neighbor anyone could wish for in a new town. Mary had been eighty-nine years old back then and as spunky and

independent as anyone could hope to be at her age. She'd helped find Sadie volunteer opportunities, which had led to meeting people and feeling at home. Mary had also tried to teach Sadie how to quilt, though Sadie didn't have much of a knack for it.

Mary's age had started catching up to her a few years ago, however, and her blurred vision that had troubled her so much on the last quilt turned out to be macular degeneration, which progressed quickly, limiting her precious independence until she was all but confined to her home. Luckily, her great-granddaughter, Joy, had moved in to care for her, which had allowed Mary to stay in her home a while longer.

Then, last spring, Mary had been diagnosed with stage three pancreatic cancer. She'd felt that treating it at her age was ridiculous and instead spent the summer putting her affairs in order and giving away most of what she'd spent a lifetime collecting. In September, she put her remaining heirlooms and gifts for her family into storage, sold her home, and moved into Nicholas House with the last few pieces of her own furniture. Mary comforted the people who loved her with the reminder that she'd lived a good life and was ready to step into the next one. It was difficult to feel sorry for her when she did not feel sorry for herself.

Each person in her circle—which had been growing smaller for years as friends and family preceded her passing—had come to accept her decision. Nicholas House had been an excellent choice. The food was first-rate, and families were encouraged to dine with their loved ones; they could even stay overnight on occasion. Joy had done so several times during the first couple of weeks, helping both her and Mary ease into the change.

Mary's doctors had told her she'd be lucky to make it three

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months without treatment. Mary had also stopped her blood-pressure medication and the statin she'd been taking to manage her cholesterol. The only medications she took now were for pain management, and only sparingly. No one thought she would make it to see the leaves change colors. Or Halloween. Or Thanksgiving. And now Christmas.

With each holiday that approached, Mary had been reluctant to expect she'd be there to enjoy it, which was why she hadn't called Sadie until yesterday to ask if Sadie would help her set up her Christmas tree. Sadie had been encouraging her to do that very thing for the last week and was committed to do everything she possibly could to make Mary's last Christmas as wonderful as possible. She had fetched Mary's Christmas ornaments from Mary's storage unit yesterday afternoon, and now that the church Christmas program and social was over, she could give Mary and her tree her full attention. For a couple of hours anyway. Helping a dear friend prepare for Christmas would be the perfect distraction from her silly anxieties.

"Time to forget yourself and do some good," Sadie said out loud as she turned off the car's engine. She'd kept it running during her conversation with Pete in order to keep the heat on. The temperature dropped as soon as the engine went still. It might be seventy-two degrees in Arizona, but in Fort Collins, it was a bracing twenty-six. Sadie adjusted her red-and-white-striped scarf tighter around her neck and slid her phone into the pocket of her puffy red coat before opening her door.

Holy nutcracker, but it was cold outside!

She hurried to the back of the car and popped the hatchback. Two green plastic tubs labeled "Christmas Ornaments" waited

alongside a basket filled with ten individual plastic containers of cookies for Mary to give to the staff.

Sadie placed the basket of cookies on top of one of the tubs and lifted it from the car—it wasn't heavy. The thought of seeing Mary and decorating her tree brought Sadie the peace she had been searching for. *This* was exactly where she needed to be right now, and Pete would be back by Christmas Eve. He'd promised.

It was Christmastime, she reminded herself, and nothing terrible would happen so long as Sadie kept her wits about her and made a conscious effort to focus on the positives.