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ROAD

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Rocky Road recipes

Ol' Dad's Dutch Chicken	25
Ol' Dad's Dutch Potatoes	26
Maddox Rolls	27
Raspberry Butter	28
No-Brainer Fruit Salad	46
Mormon Muffins	82
Funeral Potatoes	137
Strawberry Pretzel Pie	146
Waffle Mania Waffles	176
Café Rio-Style Barbacoa Pork	225
Cilantro Lime Rice	226
Tomatillo Dressing	227
Fry Sauce	262
Dream Cookies	275
Granny Annie's Rocky Road Fudge	333
Jam Bars	345

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ROCKY ROAD

A CULINARY MYSTERY

JOSI S. KILPACK



To Sadie's Test Kitchen:
Annie, Danyelle, Don, Katie, Laree, Lisa, Megan, Sandra, Whit
Couldn't do this without you guys—thank you so very much

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CHAPTER 1



Bittersweet Anniversary

Following the two-month anniversary of Dr. Trenton Hendricks's disappearance during a hiking trip in the Paradise Point area, his wife, Anita Hendricks, has announced a memorial service to be held in his honor on Wednesday, June 22, at 2:00 at the Red Rock Foundation Hall.

Hendricks was last seen on Friday, April 8, when he set out on a backpacking trip, alone. "He is an experienced hiker," his wife said in an article that first ran in the April 13 edition of this paper. "And he often takes to the backcountry to clear his

head following a busy work week."

When Hendricks failed to return from the hike, Mrs. Hendricks contacted Search and Rescue. Hendricks's Jeep Grand Cherokee was found at the Chuckwalla Trailhead the following day, but after six full days and thousands of man-hours, the official search was called off. Nothing belonging to Hendricks was discovered during the search. It is presumed that he is deceased. Hikers are asked to be vigilant as they take to the backcountry and report anything they might discover.

The memorial service will be held just two days prior to the Red Rock Cancer Walk, a Breast Cancer Awareness fund-raising event that Hendricks and his business partner, Dr. Jacob Waters, began nine years ago. Though rumored to be canceled this year due to Hendricks's disappearance, the event will take place as it has in previous years. When asked about the decision to continue with the event, Mrs. Hendricks said, "It is what Trenton would have wanted. He was passionate about his work and I take comfort in knowing that while the hole he has left in so many lives will never be filled, he left this world a better place than

he found it." In lieu of flowers, it is requested that donations be made to the Red Rock Cancer Fund, which provides free breast cancer screenings to low-income women in Iron and Washington counties and grants to help cover treatment if patients are unable to cover the costs.

Community members are invited to join the fundraiser this Friday, June 24, at 7:00 p.m. The 12-hour night-walk will begin at 7:30 p.m. and end with a pancake breakfast Saturday morning at 8:00 a.m. Entry fee for the walk is \$45 per person. Each participant will receive a T-shirt and a gift bag with contributions from local sponsors.

Sadie finished reading the article and looked up at Caro, her friend of the past year as well as the cousin of Sadie's fiancé, Pete. Sadie had just arrived at the hotel room in St. George, Utah, where she and Caro would stay as part of an extended girls' weekend. If she'd felt she could do so without hurting Caro's feelings, Sadie would likely have stayed home—she'd been gone for most of the month of June—but she loved Caro and didn't know when she'd

have another opportunity to spend time with her like this. Despite Caro being at least ten years Sadie's junior—mid-forties to Sadie's late fifties—the two of them got along swimmingly, and Sadie enjoyed Caro's company very much.

Was it Sadie's imagination that Caro had been a little too excited to have her read this article as soon as they got into their room? And did Caro also seem expectantly interested in Sadie's response? "That's too bad about Dr. Hendricks," Sadie said, refolding the newspaper carefully and placing it beside her on the bed.

"It is too bad," Caro said from where she sat facing Sadie on the other double bed. "And weird, right?"

"Weird?" Sadie said, wondering at Caro's pointed interest. "Weird how?"

"He *disappeared* . . . and everyone seems to be assuming he's dead, but there's *no* proof. No one has found his pack, a shoe—nothing."

"Disappearances are always hard to deal with," Sadie said, ignoring what she feared was behind Caro's leading questions. Caro wanted to investigate; Sadie could feel it, but didn't share Caro's anticipation. She'd come to St. George to enjoy a few days with her good friend, not to investigate the disappearance of a man she'd never met.

"He was Tess's doctor, you know, when she found the lump—she said he was really great, and the foundation saved her life. She—and lots of his other patients—are really broken up over his disappearance."

Sadie put her hands in her lap and pondered a few seconds more before speaking. Caro's dark eyes were bright with excitement when Sadie looked up at her again. "Please tell me this isn't why we're here," Sadie said with a somewhat pleading smile. "Please tell me

we came to attend some plays and go shopping and be a part of the walkathon with your cousin?”

“Of course that’s why we came,” Caro said, looking sheepish as she waved away Sadie’s concern. “Tess and I have participated in this walkathon every year since she was first diagnosed, and I’m so excited that you’re with us this year—you’re going to love Tess.” She looked at the newspaper lying beside Sadie on the bed. “And I didn’t think much about Dr. H’s disappearance, either, when Tess first brought me up to speed on it, but the more I read about it and talked with her, the more I thought that since we’re here maybe we could, you know, look into things. Here, let me get the other articles for you—Tess gave me a whole stack when I got here Sunday.”

Caro hurried to the dresser. Once her back was turned, Sadie let out a breath, trying to figure out how best to communicate that her level of interest in solving a mystery was at an all-time low right now. A glance at the diamond ring on her left hand initiated the familiar zing she felt every time she thought about what it represented. At the age of fifty-eight—after being a widow for more than twenty years and raising her now-adult children on her own—Sadie was engaged. Engaged! *To be married!*

July 26th had been chosen as the big day . . . and it was just over one month away—five weeks from today, in fact. It was probably a good thing that Sadie had plenty to do between now and then, this trip with Caro being one of the things that would fill the days of waiting until Sadie became Mrs. Peter Cunningham. For his part, Pete was right now in Cabo San Lucas enjoying a guys’ week of deep sea fishing that offset her girls’ weekend of shopping and pedicures. It was silly how much Sadie missed him, but she did. She saw the ring again and felt the zing once more. Would she ever get used to this?

“Sadie?”

Sadie blinked and looked up to meet Caro's bemused expression. "What?"

Caro was sitting on the bed across from Sadie again, holding a stack of papers in both hands—the articles Tess had given her, Sadie assumed. "I asked if Dr. H's disappearance seems strange to *you*. Have you dealt with anything like this in your other cases?"

"Not like this, no." She *had* been involved in a disappearance case before, though, and couldn't help thinking about it now that Caro had brought it up. It had been hard—and frightening at times—and yet the resolution had brought a lot of people peace. But she still didn't want to investigate this one. She wanted to order napkins with her and Pete's names on them and research honeymoon destinations. That the last few years of her life had been filled with a variety of investigations—murders, mostly, but a few others as well—wasn't something she wanted to dwell on right now.

Caro seemed disappointed in Sadie's response. When the two had worked an investigation in New Mexico several months ago, Caro had been a natural: detail-oriented, smart, and uninhibited about sneaking around. But Sadie's head was in a different place now—she had a wedding to plan, a married life to prepare for. And Pete, who had always served as a support system in the other cases she'd found herself involved in, wasn't available for her to bounce ideas off of—he was wrestling marlins and swordfish off the coast of Mexico. No, now was not a good time for Sadie to put on her Sherlock Holmes hat.

"I wonder," Caro said, with boldness coloring her words, "if you and I could look into things while we're here, ya know? Answer some of the as-yet-unanswered questions and figure out what happened to Dr. Hendricks. It could be fun!"

Fun? "Search and Rescue looked for six days, Caro." She thought

of the expansive wilderness that surrounded this relatively small city—a bit of an oasis in the midst of magnificent red rock mountains, canyons, and plateaus. Even though this was Sadie’s first visit to St. George, she knew about southern Utah’s numerous national parks that protected the unique topography of the region. Though Sadie had hoped to go on a hike or two while they were here, it was crazy to think they might be able to find a missing hiker.

“I don’t mean we should search the backcountry. I mean, why did he go out by himself, and why hasn’t anyone found any of his gear, and what was his personal life like? Professional life? Was anyone angry with him? Did he have debts to hide from?”

“St. George isn’t a big city, and the people are nice. I bet we could gather a lot of information—find things the police know nothing about and figure out what really happened to Dr. H.”

Sadie mentally tamped down the curiosity Caro’s questions were stirring. Her own investigative instincts were never very far below the surface, and she repeated Caro’s questions in her mind. Instead of giving in to the tingle and pull, however, she shook her head and tried to think of what Pete would say in response to this. “I’m sure the police investigation is exploring all those questions. And you’re jumping to some pretty extreme conclusions with no evidence or circumstance. Did Tess ask you to do this?”

“Not really,” Caro said, which meant Tess *was* a part of it. She’d gathered all the articles and given them to Caro for a reason. Did Tess know about Caro’s foray into investigation work? Did she know about Sadie’s?

“I’m happy to share my concerns with Tess, too,” Sadie said, still channeling Pete’s wisdom. “But if you’re thinking of trying to investigate this, you’ll have to count me out.” She smiled in hopes of softening the impact of those words, though she meant every one

of them. “Most people who know my history won’t believe this, but I don’t go looking for mysteries to solve—especially now. I have a wedding to plan and I’m still recovering from that cruise. I realize that his disappearance is difficult for the people who cared about Dr. Hendricks, but I’m really not interested in pursuing this, Caro. I’m sorry.”

Looking at the pile of papers in her lap, Caro bit her lip, her disappointment impossible to ignore. Sadie felt bad shooting down Caro’s hopes, but she sincerely meant what she’d said, so she refrained from apologizing again.

“What if . . .,” Caro said just as the silence was becoming awkward. Sadie waited for her to continue, but Caro seemed to be thinking hard about what to say, or, perhaps, whether to say it at all. Caro couldn’t know what her delays did for Sadie’s curiosity—it was getting more difficult to hold back. What if Dr. Hendricks *did* have a reason to disappear?

“What if *what*?” Sadie asked, still pulling tight on the reins of her interest.

Caro looked up from the articles she seemed to be holding tighter than before and met Sadie’s eyes. “What if we already found something?”

CHAPTER 2



“What did you find?” Sadie said, hating the eagerness in her tone and trying to push it back down again. Her instincts were working against her.

“Here,” Caro said, jumping off her bed with the stack of papers in her hands and then sitting next to Sadie a moment later, causing both of them to bounce slightly. “Let me show you.” She shuffled through the articles before removing one. She put the other articles—most of them printed off a computer rather than cut from an actual newspaper—beside her on the bed, and then handed the one she still held to Sadie. Sadie quickly read the date—April 19th—and the title, “Physician still missing.” Caro pointed to the picture under the title. It showed a gravel parking lot surrounded by brush, a rough two-rail fence, and red sandstone. There were a police Jeep and a silver Jeep Cherokee in the parking area and several people standing around looking official. A small brown building in the center of the circular parking area was likely a restroom.

“That’s Dr. H’s Cherokee,” Caro explained as Sadie’s eyes traveled to the caption beneath the photo. “*Dr. Trenton Hendricks’s Jeep Cherokee was located on Tuesday at the Chuckwalla Trailhead, where*

it is presumed Dr. Hendricks went hiking on April 8.” Caro continued, “His wife reported him missing Monday morning and his car was found a day later with his cell phone on the front seat. It had been turned off Friday afternoon.”

“Okay,” Sadie said, scanning more of the article in hopes of determining why this particular article was significant enough to have caught so much of Caro’s attention.

“Now, look at this,” Caro said, riffling through the stack of articles she’d set aside. She pulled out a photograph printed from a computer and put it in Sadie’s hands. The photo showed two women smiling into a camera, with a red-rock landscape similar to that in the newspaper picture behind them . . . wait, it was more than similar.

Sadie put the photo beside the grainier newspaper photo and looked between them several times. “Is this the same parking lot?” she asked. The angles weren’t exactly identical, but there was a trail marker that said “Chuckwalla” in both photos—to the left of the smiling women in one and in the right corner of the shot printed in the newspaper. In both photos, the same two-rail wooden fence enclosed the parking area. The line of mountains on the horizon behind them remained unchanged.

Caro grinned, nodded quickly, and handed Sadie another photo. This one, a landscape photo, showed the same parking lot in the lower corner but was taken from a vantage point farther away. “Look at the cars,” Caro said, pointing to the vehicles in the photos. Sadie had to squint—the cars weren’t the focal point of the picture and didn’t stand out, but she saw a red sedan, a dark-colored truck, and a yellow Hummer. The Hummer was parked in the same place as the Cherokee in the newspaper photo. Caro continued, “No Jeep

Cherokee—despite the fact that this photo was taken on Sunday, April tenth, two days *after* Dr. H left to go hiking.”

Sadie looked at the photos again to verify the placement of the vehicles. She noted that there was no date and time stamp on the printed photos, which meant there was no way to prove that the photo had been taken on April tenth. She looked up at Caro, “So you think . . . what?”

“I think something’s fishy,” Caro said, looking rather pleased with herself as she returned to her bed. They were facing each other again. “He left on Friday. His car *wasn’t* there on Sunday, but it *was* there on Tuesday morning. What if something else happened to him and someone put his car in that lot to make it *look* like he disappeared while hiking?”

Sadie chose to play devil’s advocate. “What if he hiked somewhere else on Saturday and then went to the Chuckwalla Trailhead after this photo was taken on the tenth?”

Caro shook her head. “He was supposed to have been home on Sunday afternoon.”

“Maybe he wanted to take one more short hike Sunday evening.”

“And he took his entire sixty-pound frame pack on a quick hike? Sunset is around eight o’clock that time of year—I looked it up. Why take his whole pack if he’s planning to be back to the car in a few hours?”

Sadie still felt it was a stretch to be too concerned about this, but she couldn’t help asking more questions. “Who’s in this photo?” she said, holding up the one of the two women.

“That’s Tess’s friend Kathryn,” Caro said, pointing to the younger woman. “She’s a breast cancer survivor like Tess and has gone on a hike every year on the anniversary of her doctor telling her she was cancer free. She doesn’t live here in St. George, and she

posted the photos on Facebook only a few weeks ago. When this new article came out, Tess made the connection.” She waved toward the first article Sadie had read. “When I got into town yesterday, Tess showed me the photos to see what I thought. It’s the same parking lot—you can tell, right?—and his car isn’t in it.”

“But, like I said, that doesn’t *prove* anything. There’s no *proof* these photos were taken the same Sunday his car should have been there.”

“Kathryn talked about the hike before and after on Facebook,” Caro said. “That counts for something.”

“I’m not saying anyone’s a liar, but—”

Caro cut her off. “This photo *proves* there is an inaccuracy in what the police think happened, which is that Dr. H went hiking on Saturday and never came back.”

“Yes, okay, that’s a good point,” Sadie said with a nod. She’d seen in more than one case how a small detail could make all the difference. She felt better knowing that Caro wasn’t seeing this as proof that foul play had taken place, just that the police assumptions were incorrect in this one small detail. “Did you take this to the police, then?”

An immediate look of disappointment crossed Caro’s face. “Well, no.”

Sadie knew she hadn’t. If she’d taken this to the police, the gleam in her eye wouldn’t be quite so bright. Sadie picked up the other articles and handed them and the photographs back to Caro with an understanding smile. “Then that’s the next step.”

Caro’s shoulders slumped slightly. “I thought you and I could look into it—ya know, see what we could find out on our own.”

Sadie reached across the aisle between them and put a hand on Caro’s knee in hopes it would make the letdown a little easier. “Caro,

this is an active police investigation, and you've found potential evidence. You know we need to take it to the police."

"But, Sadie—," Caro said, sounding a little exasperated. She looked past Sadie for a moment, as though lining up her argument, then made eye contact with her again. "You have a gift. You are so good at this stuff. You change lives and find what no one else can find. I've seen it."

Sadie couldn't help being flattered, but it didn't change her mind. Part of her hesitation was likely because the other investigations she'd found herself in were months apart, giving her more time to recover, whereas her last case—if you could call it that—was just a few weeks ago. "I've also made a lot of messes, too. *And* this doesn't feel like something my skills would lend themselves to. This is a disappearance in the backcountry—not my forte to say the least, and I don't have any personal investment here—which isn't an aspect I can just make up."

"But if something's happened, isn't that enough for you to become personally invested in it?"

"Not right now, it isn't," Sadie said, not liking how cold she sounded but not sure how else to explain it. "I'm getting married next month. There's been a lot going on. This isn't the right time."

Caro wasn't giving up. Sadie could see it in the set of her brow and the angle of her chin. "I don't know that personal investment and timing is the right way to determine what's right and wrong. In the Bible it says we shouldn't hide our light under a bushel, Sadie. I think God gave you this light and—"

"And sometimes those bushels catch on fire," Sadie said, her voice just a little bit sharper. "Which happened to me just a few weeks ago, and I haven't healed from it yet. I'm sorry. I'm not ready

to tackle another case, and this one isn't right for me anyway. We need to take these photos to the police and let them handle it."

Caro looked into her lap, but Sadie—though she was tempted—was not swayed to give in to her feelings of empathy. In the past, she had been guilty of not going to the police when she should have, and so, while she understood Caro's reluctance to do so, it didn't change the facts. When Caro spoke next, her voice was softer, more humble. "Tess had this idea to put together a scrapbook for Dr. H's family, and we could use that as an excuse to talk to people. Ya know—without getting people all suspicious. Maybe he told someone something, or had some secrets that could explain the discrepancy."

Sadie stood her ground. "Caro, the photos are evidence."

Caro nodded her understanding, but Sadie could tell she felt the sting of being excited about doing something only to have Sadie shoot it full of lead. "And," Sadie continued, "it's important information for the police to have. I bet they'll be really grateful to have it—in fact, why don't we take it to them right now?"

Caro looked conflicted. "Now?"

"Absolutely," Sadie said, wanting to validate Caro's hard work in gathering this information. Regardless of Sadie's feelings about the case, she could appreciate Caro's investment and feelings of disappointment. "That article on Sunday shows there's still community interest in this case, and this could be the break the police need to figure out what's happened. Maybe they've found other discrepancies that this will help support. Who knows? I'm so impressed that you and Tess put all of this together." It was difficult not to lecture Caro on the fact that she and Tess should have taken this to the police right away, but she hated those lectures when she was on the receiving end and therefore chose the kinder and gentler route. And a scrapbook? Talk about a flimsy cover story. It would never have

worked. She was doing Caro and Tess a favor by stopping this before they embarrassed themselves. “The authorities need to know about this. What time are we meeting Tess tonight? Are we still having dinner with her family?”

Caro still sounded subdued. “Yeah, we’re supposed to be at her house at six o’clock.”

It was just after four now. “We could run to the police station right now and turn this information in,” Sadie said. “Or . . .” She picked up the article with the incriminating photo of the Cherokee and scanned the page. “It says a Sergeant Woodruff is an investigator on the case. We could call him and set up a time to meet with him. That way we would know the information got to the right person.”

“You really think that’s best? I mean, you don’t want to just, I don’t know, talk to Dr. H’s wife or maybe one of the reporters who’ve followed the case or . . . someone else who might know something? I think Tess’s scrapbook idea could really work—she’s already started getting the layout put together.”

Sadie took a breath and kept her smile in place. Oh, how well she remembered feeling this way when she was worked up about a new case and people told her to just be still. How ironic that, for once, it was Sadie giving the counsel to do less and pull back. “It’s a police matter, Caro. The very best thing we can do is help them do their best work, and this will help them do that. Why don’t you call Sergeant Woodruff and ask him what we should do with all this information?”

Caro looked at the articles in her hands again and nodded. “Can I make copies of everything first?” Caro asked, giving Sadie a hopeful look. “Just in case?”