

Driven to Death

by

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Chapter One

"That looks more like human sacrifice than a wedding ceremony," Casey Brandt muttered as she watched an Aztec dancer bound through the orange flames leaping from a pit in the center of the grassy courtyard.

Stu McKnight chuckled and grinned. "Human sacrifice. Your first marriage. Same things, aren't they?"

"Pretty much," Casey agreed, studying the dancer again as he circled the fire pit. His feathered headdress rippled to the insistent drumbeat, his naked chest and thighs glistened with perspiration in the cooling October afternoon, and the rattles around his ankles chattered as if still attached to the snakes from which they'd been hacked. He seemed to have been plucked from a temple a thousand years ago, carried across time and set down in the adobe-walled former convent on the outskirts of Albuquerque. Swaying, he raised his right foot and thrust it into the flames.

Casey gasped and Stu's hand tightened around her fingers. "Don't worry, babe," he whispered. "He's done this a thousand times. He won't get burned."

The dancer, head aloft, remained still. The drum throbbed on, and the other dancers shuffled around him. His face showed a fierce pride, but no trace of pain.

On the far side of the courtyard, Barb Monroe and Neal Thompson twined their arms around each other and watched the dance of new fire in honor of their wedding.

In spite of daily vows to move on with her life, Casey once again made a mental tally of what her ex-husband had cost her: love, trust, self-esteem--not to mention time and money. Her fingers strained against Stu's, curling into fists.

"What do you think, babe," Stu whispered, "want to book these guys for our aisle walk?"

Casey winced. Stu had referred to her mating debacle as her first marriage. She still preferred to think of it as her last. Her only. "We'd need an asbestos carpet in the church," she pointed out, trying to deflect his question with humor.

The lead dancer drew his foot slowly from the flames and joined the other figures snaking around Neal and Barb.

"We could have it right here." Stu pressed against her back, his lips brushing her ear, sending electric sparks down her spine. "In the spring, maybe? I checked the bookings; March is wide open."

The drummer changed his rhythm and picked up the beat, pounding on the sides of the log drum, then on the bleached leather of the drum head. The dancers shuffled faster, silver bracelets flashing, beaded skirts and loincloths whipping around their legs. Casey felt herself swaying with them. She drew in a deep breath, smelling bourbon on Stu's breath and Old Spice on his cheeks. Don't push it, she thought. I'm not ready to marry again. I may never be ready. Just let it be.

He didn't. "You say 'yes' and I'll get you a diamond so big you can mount it on a belt buckle."

In spite of herself, she smiled at the image for the few seconds it took her practical side to compute the cost of such a stone. Stu loved to buy treats and give presents, and believed as long as he still had blank checks, he still had money. Casey doubted he had enough put away to afford a rock much bigger than a fly speck. If she wasn't ready to make a commitment, she certainly wasn't ready to have him go into debt for a symbol of it.

A gust of wind showered golden leaves down around the dancers, and they raised their hands to the blue dome of New Mexico sky. Barb and Neal smiled at each other, and kissed slowly. Easy for you, Casey thought, you're both so sure you want to be together for the rest of your lives, so willing to work out all those little problems, hurdle those obstacles. She realized she was frowning at her best friends, and pulled her lips into a smile.

"So, how about March? Or April? Before it gets too hot."

Casey leaned back against Stu's broad chest and the stomach he could never quite suck in. His arms tightened around her and he kissed the top of her head, a small familiar gesture that made her feel wanted, protected. She tilted her head so he could hear over the throbbing drums. "We're here to celebrate with Barb and Neal. It's their day. Let's talk about this later, okay?"

"When later?" His voice slid up a notch. "*Exactly* when?"

"Ssshhh." Casey scanned the friends and co-workers ringing the courtyard. Everyone seemed to be focused on the dancers. "Just later."

"Tonight? When we get home?" His hands tightened on her shoulders.

She felt claustrophobic, felt she was being herded into a pen. Stu had come down with a full-blown case of wedding-fever a week ago and cast off all his own doubts and fears. "Just later, okay?"

"No. You know what? It's not okay." He jerked away.

Casey stumbled backward, high heels sliding on the weathered stone path bordering the courtyard. She flung out her arms for balance, smashing her knuckles against a cedar post. "Ow!" She flexed her hand and saw blood welling from a scrape.

A woman next to them gasped and a man stepped toward her. Stu didn't seem to notice. "You say 'later' all the time, babe. Later isn't coming around fast enough for me." Head down, he shouldered aside an elderly man, plowed through a gaggle of children, and left the courtyard through a shadowed archway.

People on all sides turned to look, brows furrowed with concern. Casey sucked at her knuckles and felt her cheeks burn as if she'd been slapped. From across the courtyard, Barb shot her a quizzical look and Neal raised his eyebrows. She shrugged in return and turned aside, chewing at her lower lip. Were they feeling sorry for her? Or for Stu?

The drumbeat was giving her a headache. Why couldn't Stu understand that she wasn't the heroine in those happily-ever-after movies he loved to rent on Friday evenings? She wasn't ready to ride off into the sunset with a middle-aged disc jockey even if he had helped her overpower a killer before she became the fourth victim. Feeling grateful, triumphant and lucky to be alive wasn't enough of a foundation for spending the rest of her life with a man. Especially when he stomped off like a two-year-old who wasn't getting his way.

From the corner of her eye she saw Stu emerge from another archway, slap an advertising executive on the back, give a fellow deejay a high five, and snag a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. He emptied it in a long gulp, and took another. Turning, he stared at her, raised the glass in a slow salute, then drained it, too.

Very adult, Casey thought. Well, he could pickle himself if he wanted. Ignoring the whispers around her, she watched Barb and Neal sharing sips from a single glass and smiling at the dancers who circled before them. The drum beat louder and faster, then slowed, like a runner's heart when the race was finished. The dancers stopped, bowed, and ran from the courtyard to a spattering of cheers and applause.

As that died out, Casey heard loud laughter echoing off the adobe walls. She turned to see Stu fling an arm around the narrow shoulders of a very thin, very blonde woman in a glittery red wisp of dress. The woman

simpered up at him, tossed her hair, and offered him a sip of her champagne. Stu laughed again and knocked back the bubbly.

Oh, gag me. She's barely old enough to vote. Casey wanted to yell the words across the courtyard, wanted to point at Stu and watch everyone turn to look. But they'd look at her, too, she realized. And they'd say she was jealous. Jealous? Hah! She was a television news director. She was smart, witty, and with her recently streaked hair and new turquoise silk dress, not bad looking for a woman standing in the shade of forty. She turned and bolted through the nearest archway.

"Hey there, missy, don't be in such a hurry to get in line." A hand gripped her shoulder. "There's plenty of food for all of us. I should know, I paid for every morsel."

Casey blinked in the dim light of long room. Small windows, high on the walls, let in only constricted sunbeams. An array of candles did little to help. "Uncle Jimmy?"

"It's not the Easter Bunny." The tall, gaunt man doffed an immaculate white Stetson, freeing a shock of glistening silver hair. "I saw Stu take off like he had a burr on his bottom and I said to myself, 'Jimmy, my boy, you've just found yourself a dinner companion.' Tell me I'm not mistaken."

Make the best of things, Casey told herself. If Stu wants to be a jerk, let him. Rise above it. She smiled at Barb's great uncle, stood on tiptoe and kissed the papery lips just visible beneath a waxed and curling moustache. Uncle Jimmy reminded her of an aging riverboat gambler. "You're as right as rain."

James Buchanan Carroll slapped the hat against his thigh. "As right as rain? Don't hear that expression much out here. In fact, don't think I've heard it at all since I left Kentucky. Maybe you should say as dandy as dust, or as slick as sand." He shot the cuff of a sky-blue silk shirt and offered an arm encased in the crisp, white, loosely woven fabric of his suit jacket. "May I escort you to the buffet, my dear?"

"Thank you." Casey accepted, vowing not to look in Stu's direction, to be polite and attentive, to put everything else aside. She allowed Uncle Jimmy to steer her to the long table set up against one wall of the high-ceilinged dining hall. He offered her a chilled plate the size of a hubcap and a napkin folded around gleaming silverware. Barb must have anticipated that her guests would do some serious eating. Her guess was probably right. TV and radio people loved free food. And booze. "I haven't seen you for a couple of, Uncle Jimmy. What have you been up to?"

He laughed. "I've been staying out of Barbara's way. Hell hath no fury like a woman who perceives the least little comment about her wedding

plans as the meddling of a foolish old man." He selected a quarter moon of cantaloupe and placed it on Casey's plate.

"Surely Barb doesn't think you're meddling? She told me you gave her a dozen blank checks and told her to have at it."

Uncle Jimmy laughed again and dug a long-handled spoon into a heaping bowl of pasta salad. "I did. And she did. But I'm here to tell you she got a little frazzled at the end. Lit into me when I told her to calm down, it would all work out." He set a mound of pasta on Casey's plate. "So I took refuge on the golf course." He sighed. "Although that's more of an outdoor torture chamber than a refuge. It's those sand traps on the back nine. They hurt me every time. But I'll beat them. Or be buried in them." He helped both of them to asparagus, cornbread, cold boiled shrimp and two kinds of dipping sauce, then paused, staring into her eyes. "You know, that gives me an idea. We've got enough fodder here for the first round. Let's find a seat." Grasping her elbow, he tugged her toward a tiny table in the corner.

Casey shot a longing look over her shoulder at dozens of dishes they'd left unsampled and the people lined up waiting to get at them. Would there be any chocolate sour cream cake left? Any caramel apple pie?

Uncle Jimmy seemed to read her mind. "You won't miss out on any of those desserts, I promise. I left strict instructions with the caterers to set aside care packages for both of us. We can make complete pigs of ourselves later, at home, where we can loosen our belts."

Casey grinned and thought about how lucky she was that Uncle Jimmy had commandeered Casey, Stu and Neal as part of his family shortly after he'd moved to town in the late spring. At eighty-three, Uncle Jimmy said, life was too short to be spent doing anything that wasn't enjoyable, or counting your change. He played golf nearly every day, cooked spicy dinners, arranged trips to Indian ruins, gambling casinos, galleries and shopping malls, and was always ready for a play or movie.

He set his plate on the table, drew out Casey's chair, and bowed as she sat. Southern manners, she thought; they make a woman feel treasured, cared for. Her mind drifted to Stu. It wasn't that he didn't have good manners, it was just that his were limited by comparison, and weren't automatic. Stu was more likely to apologize later for not holding the door while she brought in the groceries than he was to jump up and help with the bags.

"I'll be eighty-four next month." Uncle Jimmy interrupted her thoughts as he unrolled his napkin, spaced the knife, fork and spoon beside his plate, and laid the cloth across his lap. "Who knows how much longer I have."

"Years," Casey assured him.

He blinked eyes the color of worn denim. "That may be. And it may not. Man my age, with my bad habits--" He accepted a glass of champagne from a white-jacketed waiter, passed it to Casey, and took one of his own. "I could go any time. Even right this minute, with my new snake-skin boots on." He clinked his glass against hers, took a swallow, and patted his moustache with his napkin. "That's where you come in. My plans are all laid, but I need someone like you to carry them out so they won't go awry, as the poet says." He raised his glass again.

Casey nodded, chewing on a fat shrimp and wishing she could dash back to the buffet for more. When she'd decided to skip lunch, she hadn't known the wedding ceremony would take so long, hadn't imagined that conflict with Stu could leave her emotionally empty and longing for comfort food. She glanced at the long table. Hadn't she seen a bowl of cashews near the salads?

"That's what I like best about you, Casey. You never say anything stupid like 'who, me?' You listen. That's why I named you the executor of my will."

Executor? Casey popped the last bite of shrimp into her mouth before the words he'd just praised her for not saying could erupt from her lips.

"I should have asked you first, I suppose. I can't ask Barb. Mention the word 'die' and she falls apart. I'm her only relative, you know, except for young Theodore. You stared down death when you caught Harlan Webber. You've got guts, girl, so I want you to take care of the odds and ends."

"What exactly are those odds and ends?"

"Little things lawyers don't want to hassle with. Not the money part. That's all set. Some goes to charity, and there's plenty for Barb, and a trust fund for Theodore. I've got the rest all written down. In fact, there's a letter on the way to you right now. All you have to do is make sure my clothes get to a homeless shelter, my books get to the library, my old watch and chain and gold cuff links go to Theodore, and my lady friend gets a few little things to remember--"

Casey saw an opening and changed the subject. "How *is* Dorothy?" No matter what Uncle Jimmy thought, talking about death made her uncomfortable, as if mentioning it brought it closer. "I thought she'd be here today."

He closed his eyes for a few seconds and shook his head. "She hasn't been too well, lately. She's lost her appetite, gotten frail. She moved out of her apartment and into the big building awhile ago. Now she doesn't want to leave her room. She's getting forgetful, too, confused. The last time I saw

her, a few days ago, she didn't know who I was. Got agitated when I tried to explain, and the aide called in a nurse who told me I should leave." His eyes misted over and Casey laid a hand on his, feeling the sharp definition of each bone.

"She's never told me," he continued, "and you know a real lady doesn't talk about the number of birthdays she's celebrated, but I surmise she came of age during the days of bathtub gin and buying on margin." He paused to sniff and swallow. "This spell came on awful sudden-like, so I'm hoping it's just a touch of flu. Maybe she got over-anxious, or accidentally mixed up some of her medications. She takes a lot of pills. Heart and blood pressure and cholesterol and so on. Seems to me they might be doing more harm than good, but you know how I feel about using drugs, legal and illegal."

Casey knew. Except for an occasional beer or glass of wine, Uncle Jimmy didn't touch alcohol, and only on the coldest and dampest days would he take anything for his arthritis. Once she'd heard him give Stu a stern lecture about smoking marijuana. He'd told Stu he loved him like a nephew, but if he found him using the weed within a mile of Theodore, he'd rip his lungs out. Come to think of it, Casey realized, Stu hadn't rolled a joint since then.

Uncle Jimmy sighed. "The doctor checks in every few days. If there was a problem with her pills, I guess he'd know it. They're attentive at the Coyote Creek Care Center, but then, for what we pay, they ought to be."

He forked up a mound of salad and Casey nibbled at the cantaloupe. It was sweet, cool, and low in calories--totally unsatisfying compared to the desserts they'd passed by. "Do you think it's Alzheimer's?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "It seemed to me to come on too quickly, but they won't tell me much. I'm not family, they say. Patient confidentiality, they say."

"Well, they do have rules they--"

"Oh, horse shit!"

A woman at the next table looked up in surprise. Casey giggled.

Uncle Jimmy inclined his head toward her. "Pardon my French." He lowered his voice. "I know they have rules. But it's not like I'm going to blab the information around town, put it on the air like your reporters would."

Casey opened her mouth to defend herself and her television news operation, but he raised his hand and cut her off. "You know I didn't mean *your* reporters, Casey. I meant the ones at the other stations."

"Sure."

He grinned. "Speaking of news stories, though, I came across something that might develop into a good one."

Casey leaned forward automatically. "What is it? Tell me."

He shook his head. "Not today. This is a day for festivity." He raised his glass and took a sip of champagne. "Besides, I have to collect some more information first, ask some more questions. I don't want to go off half cocked." He set the glass down and narrowed his eyes. "Oh, and to get back to the subject of my demise, there's one more thing. It's what I thought of over at the buffet, and it will be tough, but I know you can do it. I don't want a service. I set aside money for some kind of a celebration for you and all my friends--dinner, a party, whatever you decide. And I don't want to be buried. I want to be cremated. No coffin. A cardboard box. Find the best deal in town. And when I've made an ash of myself..." He paused, waited until she smiled, then continued. "Put me in that big sand trap on the sixteenth hole. Not smack in the middle, mind you, but up under that damn lip of turf where my ball always lands."

"What's so tough about that assignment?" Casey forced a laugh. "I'll wait until Stu hits into the trap and have him drop you off while he's trying to get out."

"It's not that easy, girl. You'll have to dig a hole or the wind will take me, or maybe the groundskeepers will rake me out. And that trap's just across the fence from the office and restaurant. People coming and going all day. At night there's the security staff. But you'll manage." His eyes slid toward the buffet and tightened. "You'll manage."

Casey followed his glance and saw Stu and the blonde nearing the desserts at the end of the buffet line. She gripped her seat, forcing herself to remain still.

Uncle Jimmy touched her cheek with a cool finger. "What's going on with you two?"

"Stu wants me to marry him." Casey could barely hear her own voice. "Or at least he did. I think he imagined I'd say 'yes' today."

"Hmm. But you don't love him?"

"No. I *do* love him," Casey choked. "I just can't-- I don't want to fail again."

"I can understand that, girl. I love women, God knows I do," he chuckled, "but I knew I couldn't run a marriage like a business so I spent sixty-five years avoiding the altar." He slapped his hand on the table. "You two need to talk things out. Before one of you does something the other can't forgive." He got to his feet, drew a white handkerchief from an inside pocket and offered it. "The van from Coyote Creek won't be here to collect me for

two hours. *If* it's on time. This is, after all, the land of manana." He raised his hands in surrender. "But I'm getting used to that. Learning to take my time. Say, I've got an idea. Let's walk to that bar down the highway and play a little pool."

Casey wiped her eyes, trying to keep the mascara from smearing. "I can't. I promised Barb I'd go through the gifts and make sure they've all got their cards attached. She wants to have her thank you notes out by the end of the month."

Uncle Jimmy smiled fondly at his niece who had just entered the dining hall on Neal's arm. "That girl could organize an avalanche." He brushed imaginary crumbs from his jacket. "Well, I'm going to take a stroll down there. I'll be back in time for the dancing and I expect you to be my partner." He drew back her chair and offered a hand.

Casey rested her fingers on it as she stood. "Yours is the only name on my dance card. But I think you should stay here. I've heard El Perro Blanco is a rough place. The cops are down there at least once a week. Fights. Robberies. Mug--"

"Don't you worry about me. I left my credit cards and wallet at home." He drew a bill from the pocket of his jacket. "Twenty dollars. That's all I have on me. Surely no one would mug an old man for that."

Casey started to open her mouth to point out that his boots and hat were worth five hundred dollars at least, but Uncle Jimmy wagged a finger at the sun. "Besides, I'll only be gone a little while. And it's still broad daylight."