

Snake Face

Chapter One

Las Cruces, NM

Stamos Tsitouris, “The Greek God,” strolled into the college library five minutes late wearing a smile that was—if Mae read him right—more flirtatious than apologetic. Mae was sitting alone on the couch near the coffee counter, reading over her notes for the group project they’d be working on, her mind on school, not Stamos. His expression took her by surprise. He couldn’t really be interested, could he?

At twenty-seven, Mae Martin was considered mature by her younger classmates. They looked up to her and leaned on her. Stamos was even more mature, though, and he intimidated them. The girls called him “the Greek God” behind his back, but could barely get a word out to his face.

He deserved the name. He was about forty, with a touch of gray at the edge of his wavy black hair. His features were strong and symmetrical. A short, neat salt-and-pepper beard framed his jaw, and he had twinkling brown eyes and heavy brows, a look both powerful and playful. Every inch of his body was an intentional masterpiece. Though he was about five-eight next to Mae’s five-foot-ten, she didn’t sense in him the awkwardness she sometimes noticed in shorter men.

Stamos took a place beside her, set his laptop and several books on the table, and looked at the empty chairs around them.

“So, we have only the elders willing to work on a Friday night.” His Greek accent was faint, barely a trace left, just enough to add charm to his deep, soft voice. “Are we surprised?”

The absent members of their group were two eighteen-year-old young men.

“The others might still show up.”

“I doubt it. We can get more done without them, anyway. We’ll tell Dr. Mendoza who did what, of course. Then we’ll be done in time to go out for dinner and still have hours for a walk, or some music, perhaps.”

A fair-skinned redhead, Mae blushed easily, and to her discomfort she felt the color warm her face now. She hadn’t been looking for dates or relationships—in fact she’d been avoiding them. “I’m sorry—I’d be embarrassed if I misunderstood—but did you just ask me out?”

“I did. We’re in all of our freshman classes together, the lonesome foreign adults in Health and Exercise Science. It only seems right, don’t you think?”

His referring to her North Carolina origins as foreign made her smile. Her accent was a lot stronger than his, and harder for New Mexicans to understand. The moment of humor put her more at ease. The suggestion of interest from this self-possessed man had caught her off guard, but it also flattered her. If she said yes, her first real date since her separation from her husband would be with *him*. The Greek God. “All right, yes. Dinner would be nice. Thanks.” Wondering what she’d gotten into, and if she was really ready to do this, she ducked her gaze to her notebook. “I reckon we’d better get this work done, then.”

She opened her notes on the presentation, and Stamos opened his.

“Have you been to Mesilla, to the old town?” he asked.

“Not yet.” She’d been so focused on her grades for the past few months she was practically a stranger to her new home state except for a few days in the capital, Santa Fe, and her commute to school in Las Cruces from Truth or Consequences, the small town where she lived. “I’ve been meaning to. I’ve heard it’s pretty.”

“It is. And it has good restaurants and entertainment. But I can see you are all business right now.”

They turned their attention to the project and quickly put together an outline on collaboration and referrals between fitness professionals and health care providers.

Mae checked her phone for messages as Stamos made some revisions in the outline. “I feel bad about leaving Jeff and Hal out of this without checking on them one more time. They needed to learn from it more than we did.” Mae was already certified as a personal trainer and group fitness instructor, and taught classes at the college fitness center. The little she knew about Stamos was that he owned a Pilates studio in Las Cruces and had a business degree as well as his certifications. The class was an introduction to the range of careers available within their major, but they were both in school to enhance the careers

they'd already chosen, not undecided like their classmates who hadn't shown up. "If something held them up, we should at least give them a chance to do part of the work, to make the slides or something." She texted the other two group members, got no replies. "That's weird. Those guys are glued to their phones."

"That's in class when they are bored. I don't think you should worry about them." Stamos typed something on his keyboard. "I will bet you that they're doing something interesting. Here—we have Hal on Facebook. Update as of eight o'clock this morning. The boys are climbing Organ Peak."

Mae glanced out the library's front window. In the distance she could see the jagged teeth of the Organ Mountains and that sharp peak the young men were climbing. A friend of hers, if Jamie was still a friend, had a history of some bad rock climbing accidents, and the thought of anyone ascending that peak made her uneasy. "Wouldn't they be done by now?"

"Of course. The guide would have them off the mountain well before dark, and you can't do that climb without a guide. It's much too dangerous."

"You mean you're not *supposed* to." Mae looked at her phone. No messages from the boys all day. They weren't close, only classmates, but she expected anyone involved in group work to be responsible enough to get in touch. Even if academically lazy, Jeff and Hal were energetic about texting. "What if they did it on their own and had an accident?"

Stamos frowned. "Then they are lying out in the middle of nowhere in very bad shape. There are some terrible drops off Organ Peak."

"Does the Facebook post say anything about a guide, or when they plan to start, or anything?"

"No. Just an illiterate declaration of intent."

"Shoot. How would anyone find them, if they can't get in touch? Like if there's no cell reception, or they lost their phones, or they're unconscious?"

"Are you a worrier?"

"For other people," Mae acknowledged. "I like to take care of 'em." *And if they're lost, I find them.*

This wasn't something she shared readily, but she didn't want it to damage a relationship again. If she was going to date Stamos, even casually, she wasn't going to leave this aspect of herself a secret. "I don't know what you're gonna think of this, but I have a way of looking for them."

"I see." With a thoughtful lowering of one eyebrow and a quizzical twist of his mouth to the same side, he regarded her for a moment, then asked, "What do you do exactly?"

She took the velvet pouch of crystals from her purse and dumped them into her palm. "I use these to help me focus, or for healing or protection. My Granma was a folk healer back in the mountains at home, and I take after her. I can see the past, or where lost people or animals are."

Stamos looked at the crystals. "Quite beautiful." He met her eyes. "You didn't want to tell me about that at first?"

"Not really. I thought you might think I was a quack or a nutcase. Or a witch." She slipped most of the crystals back into their little velvet bag and put it away, keeping one clear quartz point out. "It's part of why my husband and I split. He and his folks don't like that I do this. Nobody back home cared for it."

"That's unkind. I think it's interesting. My aunt Christina has *premonitions*." He exaggerated his accent on the word, seeming to imitate his aunt. "She's very dramatic and spooky about it, and she can be wrong sometimes, but when she's right I find it ... hmm ... *intriguing*. I think it's possible to have a real talent for it."

His response gave Mae relief and confidence. "I'm gonna see if I can find Jeff and Hal, if I have something they've handled. I need something from the person I'm looking for." She looked through her notes. Had either of the boys written anything on this presentation so far? It didn't look that way, and they hadn't contributed any of the articles. She wouldn't be able to pick up their energy traces. "Darn."

"I borrowed Jeff's pen at our last meeting." Stamos took it out of his briefcase, rolled it in his fingers. It was a fancy gold pen, the sort of thing a grandparent might have given as a high school graduation gift. Jeff would have used this often, perhaps with feelings about it, and left a lot of himself in it. "I need to return it to him." Stamos handed it to Mae. "Will this work?"

"It should be perfect. Thanks." Could she concentrate well enough to alter her state of mind and do the search right now? It was sufficiently quiet in the library, and Stamos seemed respectful, but he was looking at her as if he planned to watch. "Can you read or something while I do this?"

"Of course." He smiled and began to do something on his computer.

Holding the clear quartz point and the pen, Mae closed her eyes and quieted her breathing, focusing on the energy from the things she held. *What do I most need to know about Jeff?* The vision of a

tunnel that told her she was entering her psychic state came slowly, then took her through darkness to open up in a messy kitchen, where Jeff, Hal, and two young women stood around the table, drinking beer and laughing. The women had athletic builds, wore hiking clothes, and looked a few years older than Mae's classmates. The foursome seemed to be in the middle of reliving a comic event on the climb, and then progressed to a discussion of whether they'd go out to eat or if the woman whose kitchen it was would cook. Hal looked at his phone, made a face, and turned it off. Jeff took his out, read a message, and said, "We need a better story. Car broke down?"

Mae snapped out of the vision. This was all she needed to know. She wished she dared text them right now and say she knew what they were doing, but that wouldn't be right. It was one thing to let Stamos know she was psychic when she was concerned for the boys' safety, and another to make them feel they'd been spied on. She put the crystals she'd used in a separate pouch, the one for those that needed salt or sunlight to rebalance them, and put all of them away.

Stamos glanced up from his screen. "Did you find them?"

"Yes." Mae couldn't disguise her annoyance. "It looks like they met some women on the climb. They're ignoring me on purpose. Trying to come up with a good excuse for blowing us off."

"An encounter between youth and beauty. How could they resist?" Stamos smiled. "Life is short. We should forgive them."

I like this man. Stamos's easygoing acceptance of her psychic abilities and his tolerance of the temptation of fun for boys of eighteen dissolved her irritation with Jeff and Hal. Stamos brought out a lighter side of her that needed to come out again. She'd been too serious since school had started. "All right. They'll just owe us some work if they want credit on this project."

"I already e-mailed them the outline and the references. They have to make the Power Points. Not much, but it saves us time. So we can ..." A thought seemed to cross his mind and amuse him as he gave her an admiring glance. "I hope you can't read my mind."

"I don't use the Sight to be nosy." Considering the mischievous expression he wore, she added, "And I don't have to. You're being about as subtle as a train wreck."

"Those are my *thoughts*. I promise my *behavior* shall be impeccable." He closed up his laptop, packed it and the articles into his briefcase, and his smile broadened. "Unless you would like it to be otherwise."

When they walked outside, the sun had set and the air had chilled, but not unpleasantly. In a sky still more blue than black, a sliver of a moon hung over Organ Peak. That meant it was after dinner time in North Carolina. "Can you hang on a few minutes?" Mae asked. "I need to call my young'uns."

He frowned, more with concern than objection, if she interpreted the look correctly. "You have children? You're on campus all the time. How do you manage?"

"I have stepdaughters." As they descended the broad steps, Mae reached into her purse for her phone. "My second husband, the one I'm still getting divorced from, has custody of his twins from his first marriage. I try to stay in touch, seeing as I raised 'em, even if I'm not really their mama anymore."

Stamos regarded her in silence, his eyes narrowed, head slightly tilted, a subtle lift at corners of his mouth. She wondered what he was thinking. As young as she was, being divorced twice already could make her look unreliable. She wasn't, but she could see her history might give a man second thoughts about her.

He asked, "Do you go back to see them at Christmas?"

"I plan to. My stepfather from my mama's second marriage—sorry, my whole family sounds like a bad country song—wants me to come out, and I'd see 'em at his place. Why'd you ask?"

They stopped at the bottom of the library steps, and Mae perched on the stone wall at the edge of a cactus garden, phone still in hand.

"I'm going to Norfolk to see my parents over Christmas. If we get along, we might share the drive. And," he paused, with a twinkle in his eyes, "I assure you I like bad country songs."

Mae appreciated his way of saying he didn't mind her family's scrambled marital history. "My step-daddy is in Cauwetska, it's just south of the border from Norfolk. It'd work out that way, but it's kind of soon to tell you—I mean, I don't want to sound distrustful, but ..."

"But you don't know me yet, and I might be the big bad wolf?"

“Or we might get on each other’s nerves. That’s two or three days in a car together. How did you know I was from the East Coast, before I told you? I mean, if you don’t know the South real well, my accent could be from anywhere. Alabama or something.”

“Your father has to be Coach Martin. I know where he is from, and you have the same name and accent. Did you move here with him?”

“No. I came a lot later. For the free tuition.”

“And perhaps to start over?”

She nodded. She was most definitely starting life over. What about Stamos? She remembered a big Greek community in Virginia’s Tidewater region, so it didn’t surprise her that he had roots there. What was stranger was that he was in New Mexico. “What brought you here?”

“My ex-wife was in the Navy. We met when she was stationed in Norfolk. She’s from Las Cruces, so we ended up here, and I stayed, since I had my business. I sometimes think about moving back East, though.”

“Wait ’til I graduate and I’ll buy your business.”

Stamos’s eyebrows shot up, and then he laughed. “It’s nice to know exactly what kind of interest you have in me. The first time we go out, you already plan on profiting from my departure.”

“Did that sound wrong? You said you might leave, and I plan to stay, and I want my own business like yours—”

“No, it sounded wonderful. Like an independent woman who doesn’t have fantasies about a man on their first date. Exactly what I thought you would be.” He waited a moment, and continued. “I’ve admired you all semester. You seem so content in yourself, not bothering with makeup and hairstyles and manicures and all that suffering the young girls do to attract men. I see you striding through the world on those fine, long legs, not a care in the world if anyone notices you or not—and it makes me happy. It makes me like you. A kindred spirit.”

A weight fell off her shoulders that she didn’t even realize had been on them since he’d asked her out. He wasn’t looking for a wife, wasn’t shopping for the next long-term commitment. His compliments didn’t make her uncomfortable, but proud of herself, and pleased with him for being so perceptive and for valuing her freedom as much as his own. “Thank you. That’s the nicest thing you could have said.”

“Call your stepdaughters. I’ll wait at my car—if you don’t mind the man driving. I like my car.”

After her conversation with the six-year-old twins, Mae joined Stamos at a restored fifties car painted a radiant lemon yellow with white trim and matching upholstery. It even had yellow lines around the hubcaps. Her ex was a mechanic, and she couldn’t help thinking that Hubert would love this old classic, with its sweeping lines and gleaming chrome, its long fins and double row of rocket-shaped tail lights.

Hubert wasn’t quite out of her heart and mind, although the pain had faded after nearly eight months apart. She hoped he wouldn’t intrude on her thoughts during the date. She intended to have a fun, semi-romantic evening.

“Nice wheels,” she said. “No wonder you like your car.”

“Thank you. 1955 Dodge Coronet.”

“You wouldn’t drive this all the way to Norfolk, would you?”

“I really do drive it. It’s not just for show. I had the interior updated a little so I could have a CD player for my bad country songs and my Greek music. My ‘old country’ songs. But you’re right, I wouldn’t take it across the country. I would pay for gas, in your—I presume—more suitable car, and take turns driving.”

She had a reliable, efficient little Ford Focus. Hubert had used to take care of it. She pushed him out of her thoughts again. “That would work—if we decide to do it.”

Stamos unlocked the Coronet, opened Mae’s door for her, waited until she was in and closed it for her. A gentleman. As he drove out of the campus toward the highway, he asked for her preferences in places to eat and put in some music. Country—and it wasn’t bad. A promising sign if they were going to share a long trip. No arguments about what to listen to.

“You know where we’re going,” she said, “so you decide. I haven’t been out to dinner forever, so I’d be happy with any place, fancy or plain.”

“I’m surprised. What do you do on your Saturday nights? Study?”

“I do. Or read, or hang out with my neighbors or with Daddy and his partner. I haven’t had a date.”

“At all?”

“Well, there was this guy in Santa Fe, son of some friends of Daddy’s, that took an interest, but I wouldn’t call what we did dating. He wanted it to be, but it wasn’t.” Jamie Ellerbee had been a strange phenomenon, how he’d latched onto her in that innocent, crazy way of his. “I was only up there for a few days in August, cleaning up Daddy’s rental place for a new tenant, and this guy ... kinda stuck to me. We haven’t kept in touch.”

“Just as well, it sounds. It’s very uncomfortable when the attraction isn’t mutual.”

“It sure is.” It had been especially hard because she liked Jamie so much. She’d had to reject a friend. “I’m not ready for anyone falling in love at first sight.”

Stamos turned down the music. “Only at first sight?”

She wasn’t sure how to answer that. Was she ready for something to develop? “Yeah. I reckon I might be ready for love at tenth or fifteenth sight—” No. It was the fourteenth week of the semester. She’d seen Stamos a lot more than fifteen times already. “Or hundredth.”

Her answer sounded awkward to her ears, but Stamos looked pleased with it, as if she’d said exactly the right thing.

After an elegant dinner at a restaurant on the Mesilla plaza, Mae and Stamos admired the cathedral and strolled through side streets, exploring without any aim other than to enjoy each other’s company and the architecture of the old Spanish town. They were comfortable enough not to talk constantly, and Mae found it refreshing and peaceful, an ideal first date.

Jamie had never shut up. He’d been funny, or distressing, depending which way his random mind bounced, but even when he was entertaining he’d been exhausting. Stamos was relaxing to be around and yet sexy enough to give a little edge to his presence.

As they walked, Mae felt a puzzling urge to slip her arm around Stamos, as if she knew him well enough to do that. She didn’t, and her conscious mind didn’t even want to do it. Where did the urge come from? She looked at him, and the cause clicked into place. He was a *type*, stamped from a certain mold: solid, strong, stable, soft-spoken, smart and fond of cars. An older and Greeker Hubert. No wonder she felt so at ease.

At the bottom of a hill, they came to a long, low adobe building with a hot pink door. The brightly painted logo above the door displayed the odd name of *Snake Face* in dizzying dotted letters. A sign advertising *Live Music Tonight* stood on the sidewalk by the door. No music could be heard at the moment. Either it was very quiet, or the band was on a break.

“Shall we see what they have?” Stamos asked. “It looks like an interesting little place.”

“I’m game.”

Stamos pushed open the heavy wooden door, and as soon as they entered, Mae froze. At any other time this surprise might have made her happy, but not on her first date with Stamos. The timing couldn’t have been worse. She wished they could turn around and go back out, but it was too late. Jamie had seen her.