

CHAPTER 2

Hatcher and the Snake

2:00 am – October 23, 2034 – The Sandia Mountains near Albuquerque, NM

Lieutenants Mitch Wheeler and Karen Hatcher met as freshmen in calculus class at the University of North Georgia and discovered their birthdays were one day apart. It was the first of many commonalities that drew them together.

Both grew up in urban communities in large Midwest cities and completed secondary school in three years. Both excelled in math and physics. The college environment in Dahlonega Georgia was a wilderness paradise for these two city kids.

Despite his name, Wheeler was of Hispanic descent. With an olive complexion, jet-black hair and dark brown eyes, he spent most of his free time in the gym lifting weights. He was five-foot-seven on a tall day and compensated with hours of practice in the martial arts. He had a quick wit and always found the upside of any situation.

Hatcher was taller than Wheeler with a slender, athletic build. She wore her raven hair in a ponytail most of the time. Freckles she never tried to conceal augmented her nose and upper cheeks. But her bright blue eyes were her most striking feature. She was introverted and rarely smiled but was all business with her job in the military.

She was first in their PT class for hand-to-hand combat. Wheeler took second place, setting up years of competitive friendly matches between the two. Hatcher's fighting ability and direct manner earned the respect of male and female cadets alike.

While Hatcher excelled in combat, Wheeler surpassed everyone in physics and quantum mechanics. He read doctorate dissertations in his free time. His curiosity about the subjects might have been considered obsessive if he wasn't having so much fun learning about it.

Hatcher and Wheeler both had serious romantic interests back home, so their shared academic direction and abilities caused them to gravitate toward each other as friends. After graduation, they still regarded themselves a team and sought assignments where they could work together. This was a factor in McKnight's decision to recruit both for the HERO project.

Tonight, they breathed in cool desert air and basked in starlight atop a secluded hillock in the Sandia Mountains of New Mexico, just east of Albuquerque. At an altitude of 7000 feet, this region of the country was called high desert because of the low humidity and clear skies. They chose this location because of the elevation and the absence of light pollution. There was no moon tonight, and the sky was bright with stars.

"So, Wheeler, we ready yet?" Hatcher said.

Wheeler glanced at the timer on the Engine console. "Another couple of minutes and we can start recall. What time is it, anyway?"

Hatcher checked her phone. "Almost 0200 hours," she said as she typed in the camera's return beacon signature.

"Copy. Which test is this, Hatcher?"

“This is test number thirty-seven. The target time is October 23rd, 1934, one hundred years in the past.”

The purpose of the experiments was simple. They needed to learn how to calibrate the time travel engine to send a team to a specific date with accuracy. The tests were all the same. For each experiment, they changed the engine’s calibration, sent the camera back to photograph the stars, brought it back and calculated what time the camera landed in from their positions in the pictures. It was a tedious and painstaking process, but it was the easiest way the scientists could think of to collect the data they needed.

“Okay, it’s time. Bring it back,” Wheeler said.

Hatcher punched the recall button and a globe of light appeared over the stainless steel platform twenty yards away. As its brightness intensified, they could see the camera chariot, a four-wheeled chassis the size of a lawn mower. A stellar camera sat on it with the lens pointed up toward the stars.

As they watched, the light bulged to twice its size and dissipated. The chariot now stood before them on the platform. Following procedure, the two officers re-checked the travel calibration to confirm they recorded them correctly and Wheeler ran to the chariot to retrieve the film disk drive.

As he approached it, he thought he saw debris on top. *Did something fall on it?*

He hurried to the device and realized he was far too close. An angry western diamondback rattlesnake coiled around the camera. Its rattle stood upright and buzzed furiously.

Wheeler threw himself backward as it struck at his leg. He twisted as he fell, trying to avoid the exposed fangs. The snake missed his thigh by an inch but landed next to him. It coiled again, ready to strike as he rolled away from it.

Before the rattlesnake could strike, Hatcher dove on it from behind, grabbing its head in one palm and a coil of its body with the other. Using the forward momentum of her dive, she regained her feet and stood there, grinning at Wheeler and holding the furiously writhing reptile at arm’s length.

“I swear,” she said. “Leave you alone for a couple of seconds...”

Wheeler rose and panted as the adrenaline surge subsided. “Damn, Hatcher, you are one crazy woman.”

“Stop flirting with me,” she said. “You know I have a boyfriend.”

“Shit! We brought back a rattler from a hundred years ago. You’re holding a hundred-year-old snake!”

Hatcher waved it at him. “I don’t mean to break your train of philosophical rambling, but I’m already tired of wrestling this asshole. Could we please focus on the problem at hand?”

“Absolutely.” He ran to the camera chassis and pushed it off the platform. “Let’s send that bastard back to where he came from. Hang on a second.” He raced to the console and reset the Engine.

When finished, he ran toward Hatcher but stopped halfway there. “Wait,” he called over his shoulder as he sprinted to the truck and pulled out two shovels.

“Now we’re ready,” he added, as he dropped one at Hatcher’s feet and the other on the other side of the steel platform and ran back to the console.

The snake struggled furiously. With effort, Hatcher kept it under control.

“Okay,” he said. “When I start the engine, toss it on the platform. We’ll use the shovels to keep it there until it goes. Got it?”

“Yes, dammit, I got it. Start it already.”

Wheeler pulled the trigger and returned to the platform as Hatcher threw the angry reptile onto it. It coiled again and struck repeatedly at them as they worked to confine it inside the spinning globe of light.

After being poked hard twice, the snake advanced on Hatcher, forcing her to retreat a step. It slithered to the edge of the light globe, coiled and struck at Hatcher. The sphere bulged and dissipated with a bang.

The serpent's body and the part of the shovel inside the globe disappeared. Still in flight from the strike, its severed head bounced off Hatcher's midsection, the fangs snagging her fatigue blouse and spotting it with venom and blood. It landed on the platform with a thud, its mouth opening and closing reflexively.

They stood motionless for a long second.

Hatcher recovered first. "I hate snakes."

"Damn. Sorry about that. But we learned something important."

"What's that?"

Wheeler grinned. "If you're going to travel through time, you'd better make damn sure you keep your body inside the sphere."