

# THERE IS A SEASON

## CHAPTER ONE

**C**ome on now, you great big soggy things, hold back a bit. Just give me a few more seconds of sunshine and then you can have the sky for the rest of the afternoon.”

But the wind-powered clouds ignored Beth Cristie’s hopeful bargaining and continued playing peekaboo with the sun. As the sky darkened once again, the petite ecologist bit back a string of potent words. Defeated for the moment, she let her camera dangle on its neck strap.

Casting a baleful eye at the speeding clouds, she had to remind herself the white fleece and gray thunder-heads were normal for spring in southwestern Washington State. They belonged. It was she and the others in the documentary crew who were the real intruders.

In fact, looking up at the breach in the volcano’s cone, Beth thought the ruined northern slopes of Mount St. Helens resembled a lifeless lunar landscape.

It had been more than a dozen years since the huge eruption had destroyed the volcano’s picture-perfect shape. But from this angle the event might have occurred yesterday, and Beth knew another eruption could happen again at any time.

A century from now—or today. Nobody knew.

Ignoring the shudder that went through her body, she pushed up her protective goggles to her forehead to get a better view of the thin plume rising from the lava dome. Smelling the sulfur in the air, she recalled the radio communique Ruth had received this morning, putting them on alert.

The scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey had monitored new signs of activity on the mountain. Ash and steam displays had cracked the thin crust capping the lava dome. From her position on the edge of the Pumice Plain, Beth couldn’t see into the caldera, but she could visualize what was happening inside.

Most of the experts thought the mountain was just rumbling and stretching like a sleepy bear before settling down for another centuries-long hibernation. Still, the authorities were concerned enough to take precautions, as if a new eruptive phase might begin. A warning had gone out yesterday clearing hikers and climbers off the slopes. The Forest Service and National Monument employees also asked tourists to leave the trails surrounding the volcano.

The call this morning had advised people with study permits—like field scientists and Beth’s documentary crew—to be on the alert and ready to move out on short notice. To their relief, the group was told they would be able to complete their week-long schedule.

Nevertheless, Beth had felt the sudden need to go into high gear, to speed up the completion of her part of the assignment. That’s why she was so desperate to finish taking these pictures. She wanted to show the courageous battle nature was waging in repopulating a disaster zone. In the few days she had been on Mount St. Helens, she had found many examples to confirm the resiliency of life.

After glancing at the clouds again, she refocused her attention on the celery-green bracken fern she had discovered clinging to a shallow crevice in a large boulder. Color slides of the tenacious plant would help remind everyone nature could come back under the most severe conditions.

If only she could get her camera and the light synchronized.

It was maddening, morning snow had turned to drizzle at noon. Now the rain had ended, but sun and cloud fought for dominance. Every time Beth tried to take a picture, she had to reset her ancient Nikon.

However, she was determined to get this shot. She checked the light meter, and before the reading could change, she snapped the shutter.

“All right!” she shouted in triumph, and then tempted the fates by going for a close-up shot. With a rapid change of lenses, she bent over the tiny plant. Just as she activated the button, a flurry of stinging particles hit her cheeks and forehead.

She instinctively closed her lids to protect her eyes from the scratchy material. When she dared open them again, Beth laughed out loud, seeing the ash was being kicked up by a scurrying pocket gopher. It was tunneling through the windswept cinders that threatened to cover the entrance to its burrow.

Still grinning, she waited for the perfect pose so that she could add the gopher to her pictorial study. Beth felt elated at finding the little creature.

“You hang in there, kids.” She gave the fern and gopher a whimsical word of encouragement. “It takes more than a little ash to get rid of us flora and fauna, right?”

The words had hardly been whipped out of her mouth by the persistent wind when the gopher disappeared.

Muttering under her breath, Beth surveyed the ten-foot-high jumble of boulders and debris that had collected against the mountain’s lower slope, searching the tiny animal’s territory. With eyes watching the rocks for any movement, she ran around the piles of stone, hoping to catch the rodent popping out of a side tunnel.

When she rushed to the far side of the massed rubble, instead of finding the elusive animal, she slammed into a delicate-looking array of scientific equipment attached to a tripod.

Whenever she thought about it later, Beth always remembered the scene as a slow-motion sequence of expanded time and languid movement. In reality, she instantly launched herself into a gravity-defying arabesque, reaching for the instrument package before it could fall.

As her hands closed around the device, Beth was thrown off balance. She managed to roll when she hit the ground, but her elbows took the force of the fall.

Gritting her teeth against the sting of scraped skin, she tried to get to her feet. She had just gotten to her knees when a shadow swooped down on her. The salvaged mechanism was wrested from her hands, and she found herself staring up into a set of mirrored goggles.

“You klutz! You almost ruined ten thousand dollars’ worth of irreplaceable seismic equipment. Not to mention wasting the six hours it took me to set up the experiment. Come on, get off the ground. I’m going to report you to the Forest Service. I’d run you the hell off this mountain myself, but it’s their job to deal with brainless kids who ignore their warnings.”

Beth glared up at the tall man, defying his order to get off her knees. *What an ingrate*, she thought, pushing up the arms of her sweater to examine her injured elbows. All he cared about was his equipment, he hadn’t even noticed her bleeding skin!

“What do you mean, *you’re* going to report me?” she shouted up at him. “This is all your fault. Only a fool would stick that damned junk where anybody could run into it. Go ahead, call the Forest Service office, I can’t wait for them to get here. They’ll be glad to verify my credentials and ticket you for reckless endangerment.”

When the man colorfully muttered his disbelief, Beth’s large amber eyes widened. But she wasn’t going to let him intimidate her with his language or by the way his huge body leaned over her.

“Hey, where did you get those funny goggles?” she gibed. “I bet it was from the same person who sold you your certification into the restricted area—Bozo the Clown!”

Beth knew her challenge might have lost a little of its power, because her voice had been reduced to a husky whisper by the ash and sulfur in the air. However, his reaction was still gratifying.

“Clown? Clown!” he shouted. The man whipped off the protective lenses. The exact color of his eyes eluded her in the glaring sunlight, but somehow it added to the fury blazing from them.

The force of his stare hit Beth right where she had always thought her soul was located—exactly between the eyes. Even in the midst of her outrage, she found herself reacting to his masculine strength and ruggedly handsome face. While he went off again, ranting about her failings, she fought the tug of an attraction that was all the more compelling because she had never felt anything like it before.

Shaking her head in a concerted effort to rid herself of the unwanted emotion, Beth's long hair reframed her face in a sun-tipped tangle of light-brown curls.

*My God, look at that!* Joshua Hunter's tirade dried up in midsentence when his eyes were captured by the golden nimbus surrounding the girl's head. Long seconds passed before he could pull his attention away from the glorious sight, to really examine her face and body for the first time.

In his fury at having his experiment upset, he had thought a thoughtless teenager had blundered into camp. Now he saw that though she was small and slight, her bulky sweater hid the shape of a grown woman.

Feeling an instantaneous wave of guilt when he found himself staring at the high rise of her breasts, Joshua's eyes snapped back to her face. The delicate features were nearly as enticing, and he almost groaned out loud. In desperation, he narrowed his eyes to slits, fighting to regain his initial rage.

Beth felt a blush threatening her cheeks while the man completed his sweep of her body and then looked into her face once again. *Now* was the time to get up off the ground and split, she decided. She'd go find Ruth and head back to camp to prepare for dinner. Rearranging the strap of her camera on her neck, she struggled to get on her feet.

The man shifted the equipment he was still holding to his left hand and held out the right one to help her. Beth hit it away. She immediately regretted the violent gesture; her elbows stung so much she gasped in pain. Yet, somehow the agony was easier to bear than the hot discomfort his scrutiny caused her.

The sound of her pain was hidden by the scrape of feet on loose rock behind her. Beth whirled around, expecting to see her coproducer, Ruth Murray. But a man, an older, more weather-beaten version of the angry giant next to her, was striding over from a large tent she hadn't noticed until that moment.

"What's going on out here, Josh? From the sound of it, I thought we were having another earthquake." He paused, looking down at Beth. "Now I find it was you, yelling at this pretty little bit of a girl."

His nonthreatening inspection of Beth's features caused none of the confusion the younger man's appraisal had given her. But not in any mood to respond to his flattery, she just peered warily up at him.

"My God! Look at her poor elbows."

His perceptive blue eyes must have seen the way she was holding her damaged arms.

"Those are nasty scrapes you've got there, miss. How in the world did this happen? Oh—" His gaze had gone to the jumble of metal on the ground. The collapsed tripod told most of the story.

"Joshua Jeremiah Hunter, why are you just standing there? Put down that infernal thing-a-ma-bob and get some soap and water for this wounded lady. Let's get her cleaned up and bandaged," he directed in a drawl Beth recognized as Texan.

The man called Joshua had the grace to look abashed when he finally noticed Beth had hurt herself. His eyes caught hers for an instant of apology. It seemed to Beth his attention wandered her face for a measurable beat of time. Then he sent up a muffled curse and turned on his heel. In a dozen long strides, he had reached the tent and disappeared inside.

With his overwhelming presence gone, Beth looked around for the first time, finding the shelter was only part of an elaborate field-laboratory setup. The clearing was dotted with expensive-looking scientific equipment. Picturing the makeshift camp she shared with the others in her documentary crew, she felt a momentary twinge of jealousy.

"I'm Stuart Hunter, miss. That rude young fellow in there is my son, Joshua. I don't understand why he's acting so contrary, I know I taught him better manners."

Even in the midst of her pain and anger, Beth felt like laughing out loud. The "young" man his father referred to must be in his mid-thirties. And he sure didn't look like the type who would accept the dressing down he had just received from anyone, even his father.

It was as much the prospect of seeing the son get his just desserts as the deep, soothing sound of Stuart Hunter's voice overcame Beth's reluctance to go into the tent. Inside, Joshua had already set out a complete first-aid kit, along with soap and water.

But when he reached out to help her, Beth's voice vibrated in a low whisper. "No, don't touch me. Keep your hands off my elbows. I'll clean them myself."

"Now, why don't you let him do it? My son's a doctor." A devilish grin creased the father's face. "A doctor of geology, I'll admit, but at one time, he was a fine paramedic. He's dealt with a lot worse than those scrapes. Right, Josh?"

Throwing his father a quick nod, *Dr.* Hunter then captured Beth around the waist and sat her down on a chair next to the field table.

“Oh! What do you think you’re doing?” she sputtered.

“You are going to stay there. The scrapes have got to be cleaned right away before infection sets in. Sit still and it won’t hurt, move around, and it will. It’s up to you. Either way, I’m going to treat those wounds.”

Beth was distracted from her protest by the irrelevant fact Joshua’s deep, authoritative voice lacked his father’s broad Texas accent. He began working on her right elbow, wiping liquid soap on it before she knew what was happening.

“Hey, would you watch what you’re doing,” she said in a final token protest. His fingers tightened on her wrist to prevent her from pulling away. She was very aware of the strength in the hand gripping her. He could have snapped the bone’s small circumference with a negligent twist of long suntanned fingers.

“Do you also have a degree in torture?” she complained when he directed a stinging stream of water over the wound. The sarcasm helped dampen the unsettling effect his touch was having on her.

“Now, don’t start crying like a baby,” he taunted in return, evidently angered by her reaction to his careful work.

Beth clamped down on the automatic burning tears that popped into the comers of her eyes at his words, willing them not to fall.

“Great bedside manner,” she muttered. “The medical world is still reeling from its loss to geology.”

Joshua chuckled, but just began to wash her other elbow. Beth stoically endured the rest of the process until he patted the area dry with sterile gauze. Taking hold of her wrist once more, he bent his dark head close to Beth’s while he examined the wound on her right elbow. Only inches separated her lips from the thick, long hair which fell over his forehead on to deep furrows of concentration.

His preoccupation allowed Beth to make a covert scan of his face. Her eyes slid past the beautiful black lashes that brushed his lean cheeks. Her gaze skimmed the straight perfection of his nose, and not daring to linger on a finely molded, sensuous mouth, Beth’s attention was snared by a strong, regular pulsation that beat under his harshly etched jawline.

As she watched the steady throb, it seemed to quicken in tempo until Beth was sure its rate had doubled. With his increased pulse, she became conscious that the faint, clean male scent surrounding him had thickened to the unmistakable lure of masculine arousal.

The fingers still grasping her wrist had closed so the pressure now pained more than her torn skin.

When he applied the sudden, cold sting of an antiseptic spray that first agonized and then numbed the region with blessed relief, Beth allowed a whispered protest to escape her lips.

“It really hurts.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’ll stop in a second,” his deep voice murmured.

“No—not the spray. I mean the way you’re squeezing my wrist.”

The force was instantly removed, and a flush ran rampant over his high cheekbones. Without another word, Joshua applied large dressings to the wounds, finishing his work with neat, secure taping.

“Leave those on till tonight and try to keep out of the ash. Let the wounds air-dry while you’re sleeping, then cover them during the day until they’re healed.”

The cold professionalism in his voice made Beth wonder if she had misinterpreted the whole episode. Then he scanned her upturned face, his gaze lingering long seconds on her mouth.

His tongue moistened his own lower lip. Beth held her breath. Waiting—waiting—until a shudder went through the man’s wide shoulders and he turned away to clean up the used materials.

The chair, the tent, the older man tactfully paging through a heavy book, all became part of Beth’s universe again.