



# *Whenever You Come Around*

A Kings Meadow Romance

## **Official Web Site of Kings Meadow, Idaho**

Kings Meadow welcomes you.

Tucked away in the mountains north of Boise, Kings Meadow (population 2,893) is rich in history. The first white man to enter this valley was a miner named John Leonard. Having failed to find his fortune panning for gold, he chose to raise cattle, knowing that the men and women pouring into the Boise Basin in search of wealth needed to eat and would want his beef. The year was 1864. The Leonards have continued to ranch in this valley for the past 150+ years, raising beef cattle well into the 20th century. Now the ranch is renowned for its champion Quarter Horses.

One of the local legends was a man by the name of Zeb McHenry who also came to Idaho Territory in the early days of the Boise Basin Gold Rush. Little is known about him after he left the area in 1865. However, it was McHenry who introduced this lush, green valley and the cattle raised by John Leonard to the miners in the Boise Basin. Hikers and horseback riders can still see the remains of McHenry's cabin and sluice box.

In 1866, the town of Kings Meadow was founded on the southwest end of the valley. Folklore says the name "Kings" was chosen because of an unfinished chess game between John Leonard and Zeb McHenry.

Residents and visitors love the beauty of nature that surrounds the valley, summer and winter. Pine-covered mountains rise to about 7,000 feet above sea level on all sides. Hot springs abound. The tranquil Gold Queen River winds its way from east to west; after leaving the valley, it merges with the South Fork of the Payette River, famous for its whitewater. Wildlife is abundant.

In Kings Meadow, horses can still be found tied up outside the local watering holes, and formal attire for weddings may include boots and cowboy hats.

Come and visit us. We'll make you feel at home.

## Chapter 1

Charity Anderson pulled into the driveway of her parents' home early on a Wednesday morning. The wood shutters were closed over all the main-floor windows. Her parents might as well have put up a sign: *Owners Away! Help Yourselves!* Then again, this was Kings Meadow. Neighbors looked out for neighbors and their property. It wasn't like in the city where you could live next door to people for a decade and not even know their names.

Taking a deep breath, she exited her automobile. Cocoa, her brindle-colored dog—a Heinz 57 mixed breed with a stocky body and short coat—jumped out right behind her and began to sniff around.

“Your nose must think it’s in heaven.” Charity headed for the front door. “Come on, girl. Let’s check things out.”

The calendar said June, but the cold, dreary interior of the darkened house felt more like February. The first thing Charity did was turn up the thermostat to get some heat pumping into the rooms. The next was to open all of the shutters to let in the light.

“Well, now, that helps. Doesn’t seem quite as desolate, does it?”

She stopped a moment and looked around, realizing it was the first time she’d ever stayed here by herself. It would feel strange without either her parents or her older sister, Terri, for company. Their parents were on a three-month tour of Europe and the Mediterranean. “The trip of a lifetime,” her mom had called it. “We’re finally going.” Her parents had scrimped and saved for the extended tour for the last thirty-five years.

As for Terri, she lived with her husband and daughter near Sun Valley, close to a three-hour drive from Kings Meadow. Charity didn’t expect to see much of her over the summer.

“Well, I’m not in Kings Meadow for visiting, anyway,” she said to Cocoa, who was exploring the house as if she’d never been in it before. “I guess you haven’t been here often. Have you, girl?”

A desperate need for solitude and silence had brought Charity to Kings Meadow. Her Victorian-era home on the Boise River—the one she’d bought several years earlier because of its charm and interesting floor plan—had been flooded this spring when the river overflowed its banks. The water damage had been serious enough, but the cleanup had also revealed serious structural issues that would require months of remodeling work.

*Maybe you shouldn’t have bought the place without getting another inspection. Maybe you shouldn’t make snap decisions all the time. Maybe if you’d follow Mom’s advice every now and then . . .*

“I’m trying,” she whispered, “but it isn’t easy.”

Setting her jaw, she threw off her troubled thoughts and headed up the stairs. The second-floor bedroom she’d shared with her sister up until Terri got married—right out of high school—hadn’t changed much. It still bore many of the traces of teenaged girls—possessions Terri and Charity hadn’t wanted to take with them when they moved out, things their mother had been unable to get rid of.

She picked up a glass figurine from the nightstand and turned it over in the palm of her hand. She’d won the crystal horse at the fair the summer before her senior year. The whole family had been there that night—Mom and Dad; Terri and her husband, Rick, and their new

baby; and Charity. She remembered the lights from the carnival rides, the loud music, the smells of hamburgers, grilled onions, and chorizos along Food Row, and the laughter. Lots and lots of laughter.

The pleasant memories made Charity smile as she unpacked her suitcases, placing some clothes in the old chest of drawers and hanging other items in the closet. There wasn't a lot of room in the latter. It had become a storage area for whatever size clothes her mother couldn't fit into at present.

When Charity's suitcases were emptied at last, she stowed them under her old bed. As she straightened, she looked out the window . . . and saw Buck Malone exit the house next door.

*Buck Malone.*

Her heart gave a crazy and unexpected flutter. She hadn't seen Buck in ages. Not even from a distance. But her old high school classmate—and secret heartthrob—was just as drop-dead gorgeous as he'd ever been. Perhaps more so. His shoulders were broader, and he looked taller too. *Was* he taller or was it a figment of her imagination?

*Stop it*, she mentally berated herself. It didn't matter. Buck was no one to her now. Just someone from her distant past. One of many someones from her distant past.

She watched him get into an old beater truck. The engine started, and in moments he'd pulled out of the driveway. Only after he was out of sight did she realize she'd begun to shake. Something dark and familiar lurked in her memory, and it took all of her resolve to block it out again. Weak in the knees, she sank onto the edge of the bed.

*Breathe. Just breathe. It's all right. You're okay. You're safe.*

Bit by bit, she willed her trembling hands to still, her heart to calm. These terrible feelings, these black thoughts and feared memories, were why she avoided coming home as much as possible. They were why she'd cut herself off from lifelong friends, why she'd erected barriers between herself and the people she loved. She hated the sense of being emotionally out of control. *Better to stay away from Kings Meadow than to feel this way.*

Only she didn't have a choice right now. Not really. Not with her house in complete disarray—hammers hammering, saws sawing, drills drilling for nine hours or more every day. Not with a book due all too soon at her publishers. Her parents' empty home had been the perfect and only logical answer to her dilemma.

She drew in another deep breath through her nose. *Better. Much better.* The shaking had stopped. Her pulse no longer raced. She could do this.

Rising from the bed, she saw Cocoa seated in the bedroom doorway, watching her with a patient gaze. "Guess we'd better think about stocking the refrigerator so we don't go hungry. Let's go to the store."

Her dog knew what "Let's go" meant. Cocoa raced down the stairs and danced around impatiently until Charity caught up with her, purse slung over her shoulder. When Charity opened the door, the dog dashed outside and sniffed around the yard a bit before meeting her at the car.

Gazing fondly at the panting animal, Charity chuckled. "You're a silly girl, aren't you?" She leaned over and affectionately scrubbed behind the dog's ears. With a groan, Cocoa melted against her leg.

Charity's heart melted too. She loved this dog more than she'd thought possible. She'd rescued Cocoa from the shelter when she was an awkward-looking pup of about eight months

old. Charity had been told the puppy was to be destroyed in three more days if no one adopted her. Maybe the girl at the shelter had known a soft touch when she saw one or maybe she'd spoken the truth. Whatever. Charity had left the shelter with Cocoa on a leash. She'd never been sorry for it either. The dog might not be beautiful in show terms—she was definitely not a purebred anything and part of her right ear had been torn off in a fight at the shelter—but she was smart as a whip and loved her mistress as much as Charity loved her. One-dog woman had met one-woman dog.

“Come on, then.” She opened the car door and Cocoa jumped into the driver's seat, hopped over the console, and sat on the passenger side. Charity laughed again. The dog didn't care where they were going. She just liked to go.

*Wouldn't things be simpler if we could all be like that?*

The drive to the grocery store in Kings Meadow took less than ten minutes, even with a couple of stop signs between the Anderson home and the market. There was plenty of parking available in the small lot at this time of day. Out of habit she chose a spot farthest from the store entrance where her SUV was less likely to get dinged by other doors. Then she grabbed the leash and fastened it to Cocoa's collar.

“Come on, girl. We'll find you some shade.”

Big purse slung over her shoulder, Charity walked to the front of the store, where she slid the leash over a post. “Cocoa, down. Stay.” The dog obediently flopped down. “Good girl.”

That taken care of, Charity stepped toward the automatic doors, which opened before her. The woman behind the checkout stand immediately looked in her direction. Her eyes widened.

“Charity Anderson. As I live and breathe. Is that you?”

“It's me, Mrs. Cook.”

“When was the last time you came home, girl?”

“It's been awhile.”

“Uh-huh.” The other woman nodded vigorously, a smile breaking across her face. She looked Charity up and down.

This was one thing Charity didn't miss about small-town life: everybody being in everybody else's business. Never being able to go somewhere without being recognized. But there was no avoiding it, and she might as well tell Laura Cook what the woman wanted to hear. “You'll be seeing more of me for a while. I'm here for the summer.”

“Is that right? Come to think of it, I guess I did hear that from someone. Something about your house getting torn apart. Those old houses are like that.”

*Nobody gets anything by you, Mrs. Cook.* Charity yanked a shopping cart free and dropped her bag into it.

“We're all so proud of you, dear,” the woman continued. “You know. The success of your books and all. Don't think I ever got to tell you that face to face. To think I knew you when you were a shy thing with braces on your teeth. And now you're famous.”

“Hardly famous, Mrs. Cook. But I love what I do.” *Most of the time.*

With a quick wave, she moved toward the first aisle, ending the conversation before she was tricked into sharing information she would prefer to keep to herself.

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Buck's brother, Ken, ran his hand over the saddle Buck had finished making the day before.

“Nice. Best one I've seen of yours.”

“Thanks.”

“Ever think of giving up being a guide and doing this year ’round?”

“Nope.” Buck shook his head. “I like what I do, just the way I do it.”

“You’ll never get rich.”

Buck barked a laugh. “And you’re gonna get rich as an educator?”

Ken tried to pull off an older-and-wiser brother glare, but it didn’t work. In a moment he chuckled too. “You’ve got me there.” He touched the saddle a second time. “Who’s it for?”

“Kimberly Leonard. A gift from her husband.”

“There’s a city girl I never expected to stick around for long.”

Buck glanced down at the leather bridle on the workbench. “I guess love’ll do that to you. But I wouldn’t know for sure. You’re the one who’s lucky in that department.”

“No argument from me.”

Buck meant it. Ken was lucky. No. More than that. Blessed. He and his wife, Sara, had fallen in love in high school, married while Ken was still in college, had three kids in quick succession, and now, ten years later, were expecting their fourth.

Buck, on the other hand, had never tried to find the “right one.” Not that he hadn’t known many nice women. Plenty of them. But he didn’t have any desire to settle down. He’d lived enough years doing the responsible thing, taking care of others, paying off debt. He deserved to have fun. To be, as his mom called it, “footloose and fancy free.” Nobody was going to change his mind about that. Not his brother and definitely not some female with marriage on her mind.

“You getting ready for a trip?” Ken asked, intruding on Buck’s thoughts.

“Yeah. I leave next week. A dozen boys and two leaders from their church are packing in for a week to clear some trails.”

Buck didn’t merely like what he did as a wilderness guide. He loved it. And what wasn’t to love? Spending most of the summer and early fall on horseback, riding through the beautiful Idaho backcountry, sleeping under the stars.

“They’ve got their own mounts,” he continued, “and supposedly they’re all good horsemen.”

*Not that it’s ever perfect*, he qualified to himself. Some of his clients weren’t ready for the trips they went on, whether it was their riding skills or their inability to rough it or—worse yet—both. When that happened, a trip could be challenging. But even then, he loved what he did as an outfitter. It was a simple life. He made enough money to feed his horses and pay his low-interest mortgage. And in the winter he had his custom saddle work.

Changing the subject, he asked, “How’s Sara?”

“Still tired.” His brother’s expression turned grim. “I’m worried, to tell you the truth. The doctor says she might have to go on bed rest until the baby’s born. Not sure how we’ll manage if that happens. The kids are already helping out as much as they can.”

“I say it a lot, but if there’s anything I can do, all you gotta do is ask.”

“I know. Thanks, Buck. I appreciate it.” Ken headed for the door. “Gotta run. Sara gave me a list of things I need to do before I go home.”

“Tell her I’m praying for her.”

“I’ll do it.”

After Ken left, Buck rose from the workbench and looked toward Antton Zubiari, the owner of the custom leather shop. “Thanks for letting me use your tools, Antton.”

“Always welcome,” the man answered with a wave of his gnarled hand.

Antton Zubiar had forgotten more about handcrafting the finest leather goods than Buck could ever hope to learn. Which was just one reason he liked hanging around the old Basque’s cramped, dusty workshop.

He bid the man a good day, then got in his truck and drove to the Merc, where he parked his truck a couple of spaces over from a silver Lexus. He’d seen the luxury SUV parked in the Anderson family’s driveway when he’d left his house this morning. Had to be the same one. There weren’t a whole lot of cars like that one in these mountains.

Only one person would drive a Lexus and be parked at the Anderson house—Charity Anderson herself. He hadn’t seen her in a long time. Years. But he’d seen her photo in the local newspaper a couple of times and heard about her plenty. A Kings Meadow High graduate publishing a series of bestselling novels before she turns thirty? That was big news around here. Folks were proud of her success. Especially her parents, who were now his next door neighbors.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Charity came out of the market, pushing a cart full of canvas shopping bags. At least he thought it was Charity. The photos in the newspaper hadn’t done her justice. She’d been a bookish sort back in school. A little plump. Kind of a plain Jane, but nice. And very, very bright.

*Nothing plump or plain about her now.* Slender and shapely, she wore skinny jeans, a sky-blue fitted top, and high heels—heels that didn’t belong anywhere in these mountains.

She turned to a dog that lay in the shade. With a quick motion, she freed the animal’s leash from a concrete post. Then, leash in hand, she grabbed the handle of the shopping cart again and started toward her car. Halfway across the lot, she glanced up and saw Buck. She stopped, a strange expression crossing her face. Almost as if she found meeting up with him unpleasant or something.

“Hi, Buck.” She smiled.

He must have imagined her first reaction. She sounded friendly enough now. “Hey, Charity. Is that really you? Haven’t seen you in years. How are you?”

“I’m fine.” She used the remote to open the back of her vehicle. “How about you?”

“Here. Let me get those for you.” He strode over to help load the new-looking canvas bags full of groceries into the car.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to—”

“My mom would tan my hide if I didn’t help a lady.”

Charity took a step back, leaving him more room to work. He had all the bags loaded into the vehicle in a matter of moments. After closing the rear door, he turned toward her again. She stood with arms crossed over her chest, looking defensive. As if she didn’t want to be near him. No sign of that fleeting smile. Maybe he hadn’t been wrong about her reaction.

Hoping to thaw the chill between them, he said, “I like your dog.”

Her expression didn’t change. Not a bit. “Thanks.”

*Stubborn, isn’t she?* Well, he could be stubborn too. “How’s the trip for your folks so far? Are they having a great time?”

At last there came a glimmer of a smile again. “Yes. I had an e-mail from them last night.” She drew a deep breath, as if steeling herself to continue the conversation. “They’re still getting over the jet lag but are enjoying the sites of London before they head to Paris.”

“Glad to hear it. Are you up here for long?”

She didn't answer at once. "For the summer, actually."

"The summer? I guess that means I'll see more of you then, now that we're neighbors. You knew I bought the place next door to your parents, right?"

"Yes, I knew. But I don't plan to be out and about much. I'll be writing most of the time. And listen, I really must get back to the house. I've got lots to do."

Buck couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten the brush-off from a woman. It irritated him more than it should, and now he was the one who wanted to leave. "Sure. Don't want to keep you. I'll take the cart in. That's where I was headed anyway."

At least going inside the store was what he'd intended. But things quickly went awry. Charity started to turn. Then she gave a little squeal of surprise and swayed to the side, looking as if she might topple over. Buck shoved the cart away and grabbed for her, but before he took hold, something caught him from the behind his knees, causing them to buckle. Next, his legs were yanked out from under him. He tried to break his fall with his hand. Despite it, he hit the ground hard.

For one blessed moment he felt nothing but surprise. Then the pain shot through him. A white-hot haze of agony. So bad he couldn't be sure where in his body it came from. Not good. He closed his eyes, sweat instantly beading his forehead.

"Buck. Oh, I'm sorry." Charity's voice seemed far away. "Cocoa, sit. *Sit!*"

Buck groaned and tried to push himself up from the blacktop. The pain became more specific as his right arm crumpled beneath him.

Charity knelt beside him. "Are you okay?"

"I don't think so," he answered, breathing hard. "What happened?"

"The leash. Cocoa. Oh, I'm so sorry."

Someone called Charity's name.

"We need the EMTs, Mrs. Cook," she shouted back, looking toward the store entrance.

At least Buck thought the store was in that direction. The world felt upside down and inside out right now, so he couldn't be sure of anything.

"I think you've broken your wrist. It's . . . it's turned kind of . . . funny. Try to hold still."

*Better not to look*, he thought, closing his eyes again. "I must've twisted my ankle too." He spoke through clenched teeth. "It's like it's on fire."

"The EMTs will be here soon." She took his left hand in hers and held on firmly.

Buck didn't doubt his wrist was broken. His ankle, too, more than likely. He knew what it felt like—between horses and sports, he'd been busted up before.

*But never at the start of the tourist season.*

His heart sank. If he had a broken bone or two, he was in trouble. He'd have to find another outfitter to fill in for him on the trips he'd booked for the next few weeks. Finding somebody good on such short notice wouldn't be easy.

*Nothing about this accident is going to help my bottom line.*

Crazy, the way those concerns shot through his head even as he made an effort to draw breath and ignore the pain.