

Karen Cimms

Forever and Always

BONUS EPILOGUE

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Brooklynn

“Welcome to the Mile-High Club.”

Beau’s mouth hovered warm against my neck before capturing my earlobe between his teeth.

“Hmmm.” Three orgasms in just over an hour and I was a noodle. A sleepy, sated noodle.

He nipped the juncture of my neck. “Now do you see the benefit of owning my own plane?”

I giggled and rolled onto my back, taking the sheet with me. “I like the idea of you not having to wait on airline schedules to get home when you’re away from me, but the price tag makes my head hurt.”

“Then don’t think about it. Think about the freedom we’ll have to up and go wherever and whenever we want.”

I made a face. “You say that like I don’t have a father to worry about or a farm to work.”

He pressed his lips to mine in the sweetest kiss. “I get it. Which is why I hired a manager and farmhands.” He rose from the bed and gave the sheet a yank. “You best get a move on.

We’re landing in twenty, and while I’d love nothing more than to stay naked and keep

christening the bed in my sweet new Gulfstream, I figure you're anxious to get on home and see your daddy."

He was right—about seeing my daddy. Not about buying a plane. While I'd taken a few long weekends to visit him in Nashville while he and the boys were recording their next album, this trip to Tybee Island was the longest I'd ever been away from home. Four weeks of nothing but rest, relaxation, and when I could coerce him into it, a little sightseeing.

But it was long past time to get on home and back to the real world. Not that I had a clue what that world looked like anymore. Despite how well I knew Beau, being engaged to a man who owned multiple homes, vehicles, a private jet, and seemingly bottomless bank accounts, along with a level of fame I'd barely begun to experience, I'd be navigating uncharted territory.

I snatched my panties off the floor as a knock sounded on the door to the bedroom.

"We're landing in ten minutes, Mr. Taylor," the flight attendant called through the cabin door. "You'll need to return to your seats and buckle in."

Beau gave a little hop as he snuggled into his jeans. "Thanks, Jennifer," he called. "We're on it." He grinned at me and lowered his voice. "Unless you want me to tell the pilot to keep circling and we go for one more round."

I tossed the pillow at his head. "Save it for when we get home, Romeo. One more round and I won't be able to walk off the plane."

He answered with a toothy grin. Someone was certainly satisfied with his sexual stamina and prowess.

To be honest, he wasn't the only one.

A black stretch limo was waiting when we stepped off of the plane and onto the tarmac. I shouldn't have been surprised. This was Beau, giving me a taste of a very real part of his life. A part that I was still having a hard time with.

Anthony, the head of Beau's security team, stepped out from the passenger side of the limo and opened the back door.

"Anthony?" I whispered. "Why is he here?"

Beau slipped his arm around my waist as he led me to the limo. "Get used to him, babe. The Covingtons are out on bail and Anthony is going to be your shadow until I know for sure those two bastards are behind bars for good."

"But ... but, I can't have him trailing around after me wherever I go."

"You can, and you will. Besides, you won't even know he's there. He's good at his job. He knows how to blend into the background."

How was that even possible? The man was six foot eight if he was an inch.

Before I could say more, Beau greeted his bodyguard—my bodyguard? Sweet Jesus!—and tucked me into the backseat of the limo where a bottle of champagne chilled in a silver ice bucket. Beside it was a crystal bowl filled with plump, ripe strawberries.

Beau slid in beside me. The door closed with a muted thump.

"How am I supposed to go back to real life if you're going to keep spoiling me like this?"

"This is your real life," he said as the limo drove off the tarmac. "Get used to it."

As proof of this new life of mine—as if spending a month at his mansion on Tybee Island hadn't been proof enough—Beau expertly popped the top on the bottle of my favorite Veuve Clicquot Brut Rose and poured us each a glass. And while this country girl might've been

resistant to changing her lifestyle, I had to admit, it hadn't taken long for me to develop a taste for pricey champagne. Too bad I couldn't enjoy it.

Beau held his glass aloft. "To us," he said, clicking the rim of my glass. "Forever."

"And always," I responded.

I'd barely swallowed the tiny sip I'd taken when Beau whipped a blindfold out of his pocket.

"What the hell is that for?"

He gave me a wicked grin. "You. Turn around so I can tie it on."

I leaned back. "Aren't we going home? Why do I need a blindfold?"

"Do you trust me?"

"I did. But that was before you wanted to blindfold me."

"C'mon," he nudged me. "I have a surprise for you."

I narrowed my eyes as I turned. "It isn't my own plane, is it?"

"Nope. It's better than a plane."

I spun around. "What?"

He grabbed my shoulders and turned me away from him. "Will you relax? You're gonna love it," he said as he slipped a bandana over my eyes and tied it gently but snugly around my head.

"Can you see anything?"

I tugged the bandana into place around my nose and eyes. "Nothing. Should I be nervous?"

He chuckled. "Not at all. I think you're going to be very happy." His voice dropped. "I hope."

His voice wasn't as confident as I'd have liked. Six years ago, I could say that Beau would know for certain what I would like or dislike. The same went for me. I knew what would make him happy and what he would hate.

But a lot of time had since passed. Our lives had gone in two different directions. He'd taken a huge gamble when he bought my engagement ring. I wouldn't have chosen a ring like that for myself in a million years. But it was beautiful, and I loved it. And I loved him for wanting to make such a huge statement. Was it a gamble to ask me to marry him?

Nope. He had to know I'd say yes.

But he also had to know that while it was a relief not to have to worry about where the money was coming from to keep the farm up and running, being on the receiving end of a steady influx of cash didn't make me all that comfortable either.

What if things went tits up and we split? He'd never take the farm from us or expect me to pay him back what he put out, but that didn't mean I wouldn't feel obligated to pay back every dime. Which was exactly why I'd wanted him to hold off on the upgrades he'd wanted to do to the house. I loved what the architects had come up with, but we needed to wait. The house was large enough for now. We could make do for a little while. At least another year.

"Sit back," Beau said. "Relax and open your mouth."

I leaned back against the soft leather seat. "Um ..."

"Get your mind out of the gutter."

I giggled.

He touched a ripe strawberry to my lips. "Wider," he said, his voice a deep rumble that went straight to my core. I bit into the strawberry. Sweetness coated my tongue. Before I could lick the juice from my bottom lip, Beau was there. Tasting me.

I couldn't help the moan that slipped out. "You're trying to distract me."

He pressed his lips to mine, kissing me thoroughly. I heard the smile in his voice. "Is it working?"

I nibbled on my bottom lip before answering. "I think it is."

He ran another strawberry over my lips and chuckled soft and low. "Good."

A half-hour later we bounced up a long, rutted road. At first, I thought it was our driveway, but ours wasn't this long. It also wasn't in such bad shape. Before long it seemed as if we were traveling over terrain of some kind.

"Are we back in Mr. Anderson's wheat field?" I asked.

Beau laughed. "No, but the last time was so much fun, we should do it again."

My cheeks grew warm remembering how much fun we'd had. Before Beau could tease me for blushing, the limo came to a stop and the door opened.

Beau climbed out and reached inside for my hand. I slid across the seat and let him pull me up to stand beside him. A pungent aroma filled the air. In the distance, I heard an old Merle Haggard tune.

"We are either on or very near a dairy farm," I declared. "Are we at Macie's?"

My best friend had a small apartment over the garage on her family's farm.

Beau slipped his arm around my waist and cinched it tightly. "No questions," he insisted. "Now let me guide you. We have to walk a little way."

I hooked my fingers through his belt loop. For all I knew, he was leading me through a pasture. I didn't want to trip and fall and find myself facedown in a cow pie.

We moved slowly, me afraid of falling despite the tight grip Beau had around my waist, and him trying not to rush me even though I could sense he was excited for me to see whatever it was that required this blindfold.

The bright sun that had warmed my face disappeared and the scent of hay filled my nostrils.

“We’re in a barn, right?”

He laughed but gave no answer.

There were a few snorts. A stomp or two. We were in a barn, all right.

“Did you buy me a horse?”

He stopped. “Do you want a horse?”

Would I like a horse someday? Sure, but if I said yes, I’d probably have one by nightfall. Instead of answering, I just, “HMMMM’d.”

Clearly, he could read my mind, because he laughed instead of calling me out on my non-answer.

We came to a stop. Beau took my arms and turned me. “Are you ready for your surprise?” He stood in front of me.

“Yes.” I rolled my eyes, not that he could see. “Can I take this off now? It’s hot in here.”

“I’ll do it.” He untied it gently, careful not to pull my hair.

I blinked a few times as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. As I’d guessed, we were in a barn, although I wasn’t sure whose barn. Beau stood before me, wearing a huge grin. Before I had a chance to speak, he stepped aside, and with a little flourish, proclaimed, “Ta da!”

I let out a loud squeal.

Standing in front of me was a fawn-colored Jersey calf with a white star emblazoned on her forehead. A huge pink bow was tied around her neck. I dropped to my knees and ran my hands over her sweet, little face. “Oh, my god. You dear thing, you.” I grinned up at Beau. “Is she mine? Did you buy her for me?”

He laughed. “I drop a small fortune on a private plane, and you’re more excited about a baby cow.”

“Hell yeah, I am!”

“She’s yours.”

I held her face and kissed the little white star and cooed at her. “I always name my animals after a character from one of my favorite books, but I think I’m gonna call you Twinkle.” I reverted to baby talk. “Yes, I am. You’d like that wouldn’t you, girl?” I glanced up at Beau. “She’s a girl, right?”

“She is.”

I rose. “How are we gonna get her home? I bet she’d fit in the back of the limo.”

The look he gave me said he wouldn’t put it past me. “She’s not going in the limo. We’ll figure something out.”

“I don’t want to leave her here.”

“She’ll be fine.” He took my hand. “C’mon now. There’s something else I want to show you.”

I gave Twinkle a scratch behind the ear, and then followed close beside Beau. “Another surprise? Not sure you’re gonna be able to top that.”

“We’ll see.”

He led me through the barn, and as we approached the doors, they slid open from either side. The scene before me took my breath away.

A pasture spread out before us, filled with cows. Dozens of them. Each wearing a huge pink bow that matched the one on little Twinkle. My eyes filled, and everything got blurry, especially when I realized where we were and whose dairy cows they were.

“Oh, Beau,” I collapsed against his chest. “Did you buy our herd back?”

His arms folded around me. “I did,” he said, his lips pressed to the top of my head.

I peeked over my shoulder. Anthony and one of the farmhands Beau had hired before we left for Georgia stood on either side of the open doors. I had no idea how many cows moseyed about resplendent in pink finery, but there were a hell of a lot more than the two-hundred head we’d sold to the Millers.

“Wait a second. Where did the rest of the cows come from?”

“C’mon. I have another surprise.”

“Beau!” I gave him a sharp poke in the belly. “You’re gonna go broke at this rate.”

“No worries,” he said, grinning. “With all these cows we’ll never go hungry or thirsty.”

He grabbed my hand and tugged me back through the barn, pausing long enough for me to shower a little affection on Twinkle as we passed her stall.

Outside, we headed for the house. As we drew closer, I saw Daddy and Aurelia sitting in rockers on the back porch. I took off running.

“Hey, sweet pea.” Daddy rose from the rocker and balanced on his cane.

Careful not to tackle him, I threw my arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. “Hey, Daddy. Did ya miss me?”

“You bet I did.” He patted my back. “It’s been pretty quiet around here, other than when Macie comes calling.”

Aurelia snorted. “Sweet baby Jesus. That girl was vaccinated with a phonograph needle. I never heard anyone talk as much as that child. Now get over here and give me some sugar.”

I stepped into her open arms. “Welcome home, honey,” she said. “Beau here tells me you liked his little place on the water.”

“Little?” My eyes grew until I realized she was teasing me. “I did. I loved it.” I looked at my daddy. “You’ll love it too, Daddy. Wait til you see how close it is to the water. You can see across the channel all the way to South Carolina.”

Beau chuckled. “It’s not as amazing as it sounds. A straight shot across the water is only about sixteen miles.”

“Well,” I grumbled. “I was impressed.”

Beau dropped a kiss atop my head. “That’s all that matters.”

“Y’all hungry?” Aurelia asked.

A yawn escaped before I could answer. “Starving, but a nap sounds good too. We should head on home, but first let me say hey to Miss Shirley and Mr. Eugene.”

A look passed between Beau and Aurelia, but before I could mention it, Beau took my hand. “There’s plenty of time for that later. I have another surprise.”

My face scrunched. “Seriously?” I waved my left hand in his face, pausing for a second to admire the way the light caught the six-carat emerald-cut engagement ring he’d given me a couple months ago. “I already said yes, Beau. Consider me swept off my feet.” I yawned again. “I’m not sure I can handle another surprise.”

Before I knew what was happening, he actually swept me off my feet.

“Then let’s not exert you,” he said as I wrapped my arms around his neck as he carried me to the limo. “We’ll see you in a few,” he called over his shoulder to Daddy and Aurelia.

“No nap for me, I guess,” I called out with a wave.

“I’m thinking that once we get married, maybe I should manage the checkbook,” I said as Beau dipped down and set me inside the limo.

“Unnecessary. I have a business manager who handles all of that.”

“Has he met you?” I prodded. “And if so, do you even listen to him? No offense, but you can be a little stubborn.”

Beau slid into the back seat beside me. “I’m stubborn? Okay, kettle,” he answered with a smirk.

I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. “I’ll admit it. I can be a little stubborn.”

He snorted. “A little? It wasn’t all that long ago you were so mad that I was trying to lend a hand, that you tried to headbutt me like a goddamn billy goat.”

“That was only a little bit stubborn. I was mostly pissed.”

“Whatever,” he said. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and I snuggled in closer. “Don’t fall asleep. We’re not going far.”

“I’m just resting my eyes.”

After jolting and jerking our way down the Millers’ driveway, the ride smoothed out. I had to admit, riding in a limo was really a superior way to travel. I was so tired that I almost hoped Beau was kidding when he said we wouldn’t be going far. We should’ve put that bed in the airplane to better use. Or at the very least, split the difference between napping and sexy time.

Beau rubbed his hand up and down my arm. “Brooklynn. Babe, did you really fall asleep?”

I popped an eye open. “Nope,” I lied. “I’m awake.”

He chuckled. “You got up way too early. You didn’t need to clean. Aurelia could’ve just made a few calls and had someone come in.”

“And I told you that you spend too much money.”

I sat up and wiped the drool from my mouth as the limo pulled alongside our house and stopped. It was an odd place to let us out, being neither near the front nor the back doors.

“Why are we getting out here?” I asked, fighting another yawn. *Dammit. This is getting ridiculous.* I fought the urge to stretch my arms over my head. “Please tell me my last surprise is here.” Close to my bed. All I needed was twenty minutes and I’d be good as new.

“It is,” Beau said, his eyes sparkling as he weaved his fingers into mine and tugged me along beside him toward the back of the house.

Good. I didn’t want to seem ungrateful or anyth—

My mouth fell open, and I lurched to a stop. My eyes swept across the back of our house. The porch was gone. In its place was a large two-story addition with expansive windows that matched the original six-over-six windows and a wide set of French doors with side lights that opened to the backyard. Instead of the fieldstone that made up the exterior of the rest of the house, wide clapboard was being installed that looked as if it belonged to another era, even though it was new.

A two-story addition had been erected on the north side of the house. While adding at least twenty-five or thirty feet to the width of the original house, most of it ran perpendicular to

the house, creating an L. The siding hadn't been fully installed yet, but it matched the clapboard used on the kitchen addition.

It was all exactly how I'd pictured it when Beau had shown me the architect's drawings after he'd decided Ashwood would become his home base. We'd agreed to expand the house and create more bedrooms on the second floor, including a large master, and a first-floor suite of rooms for Daddy. We'd included a large guest suite on the first floor, hoping Aurelia would continue to work for Beau.

And if all that wasn't enough, the barn and all the outbuildings had been give fresh coats of red paint.

Beau's arm slipped around my shoulders. Good thing, because I was feeling as if my legs might give out at any moment.

"Surprised?" he asked.

That was one way of putting it.

I swallowed the enormous lump in my throat. "Surprised? Yeah. I'm also gobsmacked, astounded, shocked. How the hell did you get all this done in just four weeks?"

"It's not all done, exactly. There's still interior work to be done. There are no fixtures or cabinets in the kitchen or the bathrooms. I wanted to leave all that for you to decide what you want. I was going to bring in an interior designer—and if that's what you want, we'll do it—but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted you to create our living space."

He took my hand and led me across the wreckage of our backyard, carefully stepping over divots and clods of dirt, telling me how that now that construction was done, a crew of landscapers would be installing a stone patio, fireplace, pavilion, and an outdoor kitchen.

"This summer, I'm putting in a pool." His brows furrowed. "If that's okay with you."

Who wouldn't want a pool? "With a heater?"

He grinned, and that smile warmed me more than any pool heater could. "Hell, yeah. And a hot tub, too. One with easy access for your daddy."

Damn. I wiped my eyes. This man of mine. My heart was so full it was about to burst out of my chest.

The new addition included three sets of French doors that faced into the yard. Beau opened the set closest to the original part of the house and led me into an enormous room with a two-story cathedral ceiling, a huge stone fireplace climbed up to the peak of the roof with tall windows on either side. A massive Palladian window flanked by more large windows faced the front yard. Sunlight poured into the room, lighting every corner.

I loved the old stone house I'd grown up in. And while it was cozy, it was also dark. I couldn't stop smiling at all of the light.

I did have one concern. "Have Daddy and Aurelia been living in a construction zone the entire time we've been gone?"

"Um ... not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

"I was going to wait until after you toured the entire house, but I have one more surprise for you."

He had to be kidding, right? "Beau! It's too much already!"

Grinning, he shoved his hand inside his jacket and pulled out a large envelope. "Relax. It's an early wedding present." He handed me the envelope. "Open it."

I shoved it into his chest. “No. Enough is enough. You’re going overboard with all of this. No more surprises. No more gifts. No more spending money like you’re printing it in the basement. And besides, our wedding isn’t for five more months.”

I folded my arms against my chest and stared him down.

The bastard snickered as he pulled my hand toward him and pressed the thick envelope into my palm. “Too late. It’s a done deal. Just open it.”

I continued to glare at him.

“Make all the faces you want. We can stand here all day.”

My back ached. I was tired and hungry, and the last thing I wanted was to stand in an unheated, unfinished room, no matter how bright and friendly it was. I fought another yawn.

“Fine,” I muttered. “But this is it. No more surprises.” *Well, maybe one.* I corrected myself. “No more surprises *from you.*”

I tore open the envelope and pulled out a sheaf of papers that had been folded into thirds. DEED was printed across the top of the first sheet in fancy script. My hands shook as I began to read. I flipped to the last page which had lines for several signatures. All had been filled in except for one. Mine.

I lifted my eyes to take in my fiancé’s smiling face. “Beau?”

“I have a pen, but technically, we have to go to the courthouse so you can sign in front of a notary.”

“You bought the Miller’s farm for me? When?”

“I was in the process of buying it when that whole thing went down with the Covingtons back in May. The deal included subdividing the property to allow Eugene and Shirley to keep an

acre at the front of the property near the road and for me to build them a house. All they wanted was a small modular, so it went up quickly. They moved in right after we left for Tybee.”

I blinked.

“Since you and your daddy had already approved all the upgrades to this house, other than this family room—which was a last-minute addition and approved by your daddy, so don’t you dare freak out—construction started the day we left.”

I really needed to sit down. “And Daddy and Aurelia?”

“They’ve been staying at the Miller farm—or your farm, as soon as you sign those papers.”

It was too much. I swayed and reached for Beau’s arm to steady myself.

“Are you okay?” he asked, paling slightly.

Was I okay? I wasn’t really sure. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Good.” As soon as he was sure I wasn’t about to pass out on him, he grinned like a kid on Christmas morning. Ironic, because it turned out that was exactly what he was thinking.

He led me to the center of the room and turned me so I was facing the wall of windows that looked out onto the front yard and acres of rolling lawn, covered in white from the snowfall we’d missed while lounging by the pool on Tybee.

“This is where we’ll put the Christmas tree,” he said proudly. “Every year, I’m gonna find the biggest tree in all of West Virginia and put it right in front of this window. It’s gonna have a million lights and we’re gonna handpick every ornament so that when we unpack them each year, we’ll be able to tell our kids the story behind each one.”

Oh. My. Heart.

He turned me toward him and gently gripped my shoulders. “Far as I’m concerned, this is my forever home, Brooklynn. Despite all the houses I own and the places I’ve lived, this will be my first real home. It already holds my best memories, and I know we’re going to create so many more here.”

His voice broke. My big, sweet, tough Beau’s voice broke, and his eyes filled.

“I can’t help but picture some future Christmas morning and our entire brood running down those stairs excited to see what Santa left for them.” He drew in a shaky breath. “I can’t wait, Brooklynn.” A few tears tracked down his face, matching the ones streaming down mine.

“We’re behind schedule,” he said, teasing me. “We should’ve had a passel by now.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m not sure about that. A passel is an awful lot of kids. How about we start with one next Christmas and go from there?”

He wrapped me in his arms, and with my head resting against his chest, listening to his heart beating in my ears, feeling warm and safe, I realized this right here was *my* forever home. Stone and mortar and clapboard may represent the shell of this house and these fancy new additions, but in Beau’s arms was where my home had always been.

He stiffened in my arms, and I giggled, knowing it was time for me to give him his surprise.

He pulled back slowly. I tilted my face toward his and rested my chin on his chest. Although I was smiling, tears streamed down my face.

“What do you mean we’ll start with one next Christmas? Christmas is nine months away. Does that mean you want to start trying?”

I gnawed on my lower lip. “Not exactly.”

Those beautiful dark blue eyes were as full as mine.

“Then what *exactly*?”

I held out my palms and gave him some jazz hands. “Surprise,” I choked out, my voice breaking on the second syllable.

“Seriously?”

The ability to form words had left me, so I nodded. Before I could wipe my eyes, or nose, Beau dove in, capturing my mouth and almost knocking me off my feet. The next thing I knew I was off those feet and spinning through the air.

“Easy, boy. I haven’t had morning sickness yet, but if you keep that up, there’s a good chance I might hurl.”

Laughing, he set me down gently. He straightened my jacket and smoothed my hair, all while tears flowed unchecked down his cheeks.

“When?” he asked.

“According to the doctor I saw last week in Savannah, I’m due around September 25, which means our little peanut was likely conceived on New Year’s Eve.”

“You went to the doctor without me?” He looked crestfallen.

“Yes, but only because I wanted to make sure I was really pregnant. I took a half-dozen tests, and all were positive, but I wanted to be one hundred percent certain.”

Smiling against my lips, he kissed me again. “I can’t stop grinning.”

I laughed. “I’ve been trying to figure out a way to surprise you. I wanted to do something special. But when you started sharing your vision of our future Christmases, it felt like the right time.”

He kissed me again, longer and deeper. “It was the perfect time. I’m a simple country boy, babe. I don’t need fancy.”

I made a face. “Should I pretend there’s not a brand spanking new Gulfstream jet sitting at the airport in Morgantown?”

“That was a necessary expense.”

“Whatever, dude.”

I let out a huge sigh and smiled. “How is this my life?”

He dipped low and pressed a gentle kiss to my still-flat belly. Then his hands cupped my face, and he lowered his mouth to meet mine.

“It’s our life, babe. And it’s gonna be a great life. Yours, mine, and that little peanut in there.”

And then he kissed me again.

He kissed me until the cows came home.