

One Year Later . . .

Christmas Eve

‘Would you please stop messing with the heating?’

I twisted against my seatbelt to glare at Callum, the scorching air blasting out the heating vents of the rented Range Rover as we tore up the M6.

‘But I’m too hot,’ I protested, pulling my legs up onto the seat and folding them underneath me to avoid the air vents.

‘Well, I’m too cold so leave it alone.’

‘Aren’t men supposed to run hotter than women?’

‘Aye, when they’re not wearing a kilt to drive five hundred miles from one end of the country to the other.’

My glare transformed into a self-satisfied smirk as I glanced down at his strong legs, only his knees visible under the red, green and blue tartan fabric and high black socks.

‘Don’t blame the kilt. I’m wearing shorts.’

‘Which is a choice you made.’

‘Stop complaining about the kilt,’ I say, reaching over to grip his thick thigh under the soft, dense wool. ‘All the better for a roadside quickie.’

His needy eyes leave the road, just for a second, and meet mine with interest.

‘Really?’

‘No, of course not,’ I scoff. ‘It is still broad daylight and there are traffic cameras up and down this stretch of the motorway, you pervert.’

The sound of someone clearing their throat interrupted before Callum could reply.

‘Have you two forgotten we’re in the back?’

I turned around to see Desi and Joel strapped into the backseat like overgrown toddlers, staring at me, unimpressed. Desi, red-faced in jeans and a t-shirt, scowled in my direction,

business as usual, but usually sunny Joel was stripped down to his boxer shorts, sweat beading on his forehead, chocolate all over his mouth.

‘And for the record, it’s fucking roasting,’ he said, using his abandoned shirt to dab at his face. ‘Please, for the love of all that is holy, turn the heating down, Callum.’

With a distinctly smug raised eyebrow, I turned back to my boyfriend, and watched as he reached for the temperature controls, grumbling under his breath.

‘What was that?’ I asked sweetly.

‘I said, you’d think the person driving five hundred miles would be allowed to control the climate of his own car,’ he replied, enunciating loud and clear in his rolling Scottish brogue.

‘It’s not your car, it’s a rental.’

‘Thank you, Desi, excellent point.’

‘Och, shut up and eat your croissants.’

‘I would,’ she replied. ‘Unfortunately...’

In the rearview mirror, I saw Joel shifting uneasily.

‘They’re all gone.’

‘All of them?’ Callum exploded, very nearly swerving off the road. ‘You ate all the croissants?’

‘There were only six!’

‘And you are one person!’

‘You can’t leave a man in a backseat with half a dozen croissants and a jar of Nutella for 47,000 hours and expect him not to eat them,’ Joel wailed back, swiping at the chocolate spread still daubed around his mouth. ‘Who has that kind of restraint?’

‘Me?’ Desi replied. ‘For the record, I only had one.’

‘Jesus wept,’ Callum muttered. ‘If that backseat is full of crumbs, you’ll be getting the Hoover out it before we take it back. I’m not paying a croissant cleaning fee.’

Joel sniffed and folded his arms. 'Maybe you should've thought about that before you provided croissants as an in-car snack.'

I watched Callum's grip on the steering wheel tighten until his knuckles turned white and even though his jaw was set tight, I knew he wasn't really annoyed, at least not with Joel. The true source of his ire was on the sat nav screen in front of him, still showing that we were four hours away. From Braewick, Scotland, and his family. Specifically, from his sister Elsie.

'Quick question.' Desi leaned forward over to rest her chin on the back of my seat. 'Are we—'

'Don't do it,' Callum warned. 'Do not ask.'

'Nearly—'

'Desi.'

'Ready for a wee stop because I'm about fifteen minutes away from pissing myself.'

'To be fair,' I said, tapping Callum lightly on the thigh. 'You only said you'd kill her if she asked are we nearly there yet and technically, she did not.'

'And hasn't for . . .' she looked down at her Apple Watch with pleasant surprise. 'Half an hour!'

'Are we nearly there yet?' Joel asked as Callum pulled sharply off the road into a motorway service station without a word. The entire contents backseat rattled over to one side and he gave a screeching yell. 'The fucking Nutella!'

'Maybe I should drive for a bit,' I suggested, biting my bottom lip as my boyfriend pulled into a parking spot and slammed on the brakes. As soon as the vehicle stopped, both back doors sprang open and Callum exhaled, releasing his grip on the steering wheel. He turned to look at me, one eyebrow raised, a half-cocked smile almost breaking out into a true grin.

'Laura, I would trust you to pop open my skull and poke around in my brain until the cows come home but we both know I'm not going to let you drive a Range Rover through the Scottish Highlands on Christmas Eve when it's forecast to snow.'

‘And that’s why I love you.’ I pushed forward to plant a soft kiss on his lips and smiled.
‘Now please tell me you hid extra croissants somewhere because I’m starving.’

‘In the boot, Tupperware box in my gym bag,’ he replied, returning the kiss. ‘And *that’s* really why you love me.’

‘Harsh but fair,’ I whispered happily with my eyes closed.

*

Even though it was my third visit to Balmaclay, the grand old home hadn’t lost any of its ability to shock me into awed silence and as we drove up over the hill, past Mal and Fiona’s cottage. I felt myself bubbling with excitement at the thought of seeing it again. We’d visited in July for his dad’s birthday, just for a couple of days before Callum had to get back to Paris, and in the summertime the house was just as spectacular as it had been the first time I’d ventured north. During daylight hours, the light shone directly on the house and the ancient stone walls looked like they’d been carved from gold. In the evening, cinematic sunsets stretched out over the loch, the sun settling behind the mountains for its short night’s sleep. But even I had to admit, winter was really Balmaclay’s time to shine. The forecast snow came down as we passed through Inverness and by the time we arrived in Braewick it was thick on the ground, dense and crisp, just begging for someone who might’ve been stuck in a very stuffy car for nine or so hours to throw themselves face first into the fluffy mounds.

‘Look at it!’ Desi shrieked, first out of the car and first to scoop up a handful of snow, pirouetting under the twinkling outdoor lights Lizzie had installed in the autumn. ‘Laura, bloody look at it!’

‘You’d think she’d never seen snow before,’ Joel groaned as he climbed out in his boxers, stretched his arms up over his head then twisted from side to side, seemingly oblivious to the subzero temperature. ‘What an embarrassment.’

‘Christ almighty, Laura, what has this one come as? Are ye in your hot blood, son?’

‘Mal!’ I threw my arm around the old man while he stared at Joel, then at me in my pink pyjama shorts. ‘Callum had the heat blasting in the car,’ I offered by way of explanation. ‘He’s being a complete bawbag.’

‘Because you made me wear a kilt!’ Callum protested, already removing bags from the boot while Joel hastily pulled on his jeans, Desi scooping up handfuls of sparkling snow and throwing it in the air.

‘Made you?’ Mal rolled his eyes. ‘She’s right, you wee shite, you are a bawbag.’

‘He lost a bet,’ I said, offering clarification. ‘I said he couldn’t let me cook an entire meal without interfering.’

‘How long did he last?’

‘It’s not my fault she doesn’t even know how to peel potatoes,’ Callum handed Mal one of the weekend bags then lifted my little rolling suitcase out the car with one hand.

‘You’re going to need to work on holding that tongue if you want this to work,’ Mal advised. ‘That’s how Fi and me have lasted so long. If she cooks it, I eat it, never mind the fact it tastes like something I pulled out the bottom of the loch. Speaking of, she’s been working on some new dishes for Christmas. There’s a big old Scottish breakfast in your future tomorrow, missy. How do you feel about that?’

‘As long as it’s not vegan,’ I said with a grin.

‘As vegan as me, *Caroline*,’ he guffawed. ‘As vegan as me.’

*

‘Here he is, the son and heir!’ Derek McClay was waiting at the front door when we walked inside, shaking the snow off our coats and knocking our boots clean. He hugged Callum first before moving on to me. I knew in his heart of hearts, he was still clinging to the idea that Callum would abandon his love of working in a Parisian kitchen and suddenly wake up one day with a wild passion for animal husbandry, but at least he seemed to have accepted me as a general concept. More or less, anyway.

‘Oh good,’ he frowned slightly at the sight of my two best friends. ‘You all managed to make it.’

‘Nowhere we’d rather be, Derek,’ Desi said, lavishing kisses on each of his cheeks.

‘Nowhere else to go honestly, my sister’s with the in-laws this year.’

‘And you couldn’t bother your parents?’

‘We’re Jewish.’

‘Doesn’t that mean you don’t celebrate Christmas?’

‘I celebrate presents,’ she replied. ‘Don’t worry, I can’t wait to sit down and explain my people’s entire belief system to you over turkey tomorrow. It’ll be a riot.’

‘And my dad’s a giant homophobe so lucky us, we all get to spend Christmas with you and the missus,’ Joel added, echoing Desi’s kisses on Derek’s plum-coloured face. ‘Where is your better half?’

‘Gone to get your brother from the station. Don’t look at me like that, she insisted, said I should stay here and wait for you, she wanted to get something from the supermarket and you know I can’t be trusted with getting the messages. She said they’d meet us at the carol service, Shiv as well.’ His eyes skirted between me and Callum. ‘You do know about Shiv and, um, your wee pal?’

‘Graham?’ Callum’s posture suddenly stiffened and I pretended not to notice. ‘Aye.’

‘Aye, well, you know what they say, lang may your rum reek.’ Derek clapped his hands together, officially changing the subject. ‘We’ve an hour or so before we need to get gone, does anybody need anything or shall I let you get yourselves settled in? Desi and Joel, you’re in the two guest rooms in the Abercorn wing and the two of you are in Cal’s room, assuming we’ve no night terrors to account for?’

‘What about Elsie?’ I asked, a not entirely unrelated non-sequitur. ‘Is she coming to the carol service?’

An awkward silence.

‘She’s down on the farm,’ he replied without actually answering my question. Clapping Joel on the back so hard he coughed, Derek pointed up the curved staircase. ‘Go on then, make sure we’ve time for a wee dram before we head back out. I’ll be damned if I’m doing another carol service sober.’

Desi and Joel led the way, Joel lugging their shared suitcase, Desi in charge of the blue IKEA bag full of gifts, with me and Callum following behind. We split at the end of the hallway, my friends disappearing off to the guest rooms, with loud but vague promises being made about meeting back downstairs in an hour.

‘Is it weird for you?’ I asked Callum as we ventured down the hall to his room. ‘Shiv and Graham getting together?’

‘Yes,’ he admitted, never one to lie to me, or even sugarcoat. ‘I always knew he fancied her but it’s strange to think of them being together.’

‘Have you considered not thinking about it?’

He stopped outside his room and smiled down at my serious face.

‘Have you considered giving me something else to think about?’

I gasped with mock outrage. ‘You expect me to have a quickie with you because you’re upset about ex-girlfriend going out with your best friend?’

‘I said it’s strange to think about it, not that it bothers me. I’m happy for them, I think they’ll be good for each other.’ He set down our bags, pulled me close and growled in my ear. ‘I expect you to have a quickie with me because I drove five hundred miles in a kilt with you sat at the side of me in those obscene little shorts and your friends two feet away in the backseat, so I couldn’t do a bloody thing about it.’

‘Well, in that case,’ I murmured, opening the door and dragging him inside. ‘We’d better not waste any more time, had we?’

Derek hadn't been kidding when he said he wanted a whisky before the carol service but he had played fast and loose with his definition of 'a wee dram'.

'I'll be driving then,' Callum said, declining the full-to-overflowing glass his father held out in his direction when we walked into the living room.

'Laura?'

'Why not?' I replied, accepting the glass under Desi and Joel's careful watch, both of them already well into their own drinks. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

'You throw up in the middle of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" and we do in fact all dismay?' Desi replied. 'I'm not holding your hair back if you chunder into the manger.'

I took the tiniest sip and held back an involuntary shudder. 'Don't worry, I've been working on my whisky tolerance.'

Callum pressed a kiss to the top of my head and I smiled up at him.

'Gross. You'd think you hadn't seen each other in a month,' Desi said, muttering into her glass.

'One month and four days,' Callum replied. 'Or do you not remember your own birthday party?'

'Not a lot of it, thankfully.' Desi swirled her drink thoughtfully, ice cubes clinking against the side of the crystal tumbler. 'I can't even imagine liking anyone enough to be sad because I hadn't seen them for a month.'

Joel looked at her with wide eyes.

'What about me?'

She scrunched up her face and threw back half a glass of whisky.

'I'd manage.'

'We'll get this show on the road, will we?' Derek suggested, slapping his thighs and rising to his feet before violence could occur. 'Drink up, kids.'

Joel and Desi killed their cocktails as I forced the rich, smoky liquid down my throat and into my not-nearly-full-enough stomach. Working on my tolerance meant nothing when faced with Derek McClay's stash. In twelve months, I had learned nothing. I was an idiot.

'Elsie still down on the farm?' Callum asked as I tried not to hiccup.

Derek looked to his son and nodded. 'I strongly suspect she'll be too busy to join us.'

While the rest of the McClay clan had come to terms with my presence in Callum's life, Elsie was still a significant hold out. We'd exchanged a few words during our summer visit but I wouldn't go so far as to say they were friendly. Polite, maybe. Passive aggressive, absolutely. Based on less than nothing, I'd had higher hopes for our Christmas interactions because, once again, I was an idiot.

'But it's Christmas Eve,' I declared, my head swimming almost immediately. 'She should be here.'

'I know better than to try to force my daughter into doing anything she doesn't want to do,' Derek said, polishing off the last dregs of his drink. 'You feel free to go and tell her that, hen.'

'You know what, I will.'

'You will what?'

'Go and tell Elsie she should come to the carol service,' I replied. 'It would mean a lot to Lizzie, I bet.'

'She'd rather get through Christmas Day without one of you in the hospital,' Derek said. 'And if you're asking me to bet on you or Elsie, I'm fond of you, Laura, but she'd pull your guts out through your nostrils as soon as give you the time of day.'

'No lies detected,' Joel muttered. 'Don't make us go down there, Lau, I'm scared of her.'

'Then it's time to put on your big boy pants,' I said, puffing out my chest with completely fake confidence. 'Because we're going down to the farm and one way or another, we're not coming back without Elsie.'

*

‘Quick question, does it always smell this bad?’ I asked, covering my face with the sleeve of my coat. ‘Because, bloody hell, it’s rank.’

‘It’s a farm,’ Derek sucked in a healthy lungful of cold, ripe air. ‘That’s the smell of the land, Laura, the smell of Callum’s people.’

‘If Callum smelled like this, we wouldn’t be here now,’ Desi stated, almost turning green. ‘Can I wait in the car?’

‘You can all piss off is what you can do.’

A loud, stern voice echoed from inside the barn, the front door slid all the way open.

‘And there she is.’ I hopped over a steaming pile of something I didn’t care to think too much about and marched in to confront Callum’s sister.

I was determined. I was hopeful. I was a fool. But if my plan worked, this would be the greatest Christmas gift I could give the McClay family. Building a bridge between their eldest son and only daughter, a beautiful, emotional coming together of two siblings who would, at last, put their past squabbles behind them and move forward into a new and beautiful phase of their relationship.

And if it didn’t, I’d got them a lovely cheeseboard with matching knives.

‘Elsie, it’s Laura,’ I called out as I powered through into the barn. ‘And Callum and Desi and Joel. Oh, and your dad.’

‘Ah, that’s pure dead brilliant,’ she yelled back from somewhere unseen. ‘Exactly who I was hoping to see.’

‘Really?’

‘No, you fudd, fuck off.’

‘We’re going down to the carol service. We want you to come.’

A moment of silence was followed by a loud moo, and a series of colourful expletives.

‘Well, I’m a bit busy at the moment,’ Elsie shouted. ‘Could you come back when I’m not up to my tits in a cow?’

‘That’s got to be a fun Scottish saying that means something else entirely, surely?’ Desi said to Callum but from the way Derek picked up his pace until he was almost at a run, I suspected not.

Sure enough, we found Elsie on her knees behind a very disgruntled sounding highland cow.

‘Calf’s stuck,’ she explained to her father when he crashed on his knees at her side. ‘She was fine until ten minutes ago but she’s getting upset.’

‘You should’ve called me.’

Derek pushed off his coat and his jacket, peering up inside the cow in a way that really felt as though he was invading her personal space. ‘Do we need to get Mal down here? Should I call the emergency vet?’

Elsie, as usual, looked less than impressed.

‘No,’ she said. ‘It’ll be fine, I can handle it on my own.’

‘But you don’t have to.’ Callum joined his dad and his sister on the ground, pushing up the sleeves of his sweater, a navy blue number I was particularly fond of and really would prefer didn’t end up covered in cow shit.

‘What can we do?’ he asked. ‘We want to help.’

Elsie was unconvinced. ‘Last time I checked, you wanted to piss off to France and make macarons and fanny about in London with your eejit girlfriend.’

‘I’m not an eejit, I’m almost a neurosurgeon.’

‘And I’ve never been more concerned for the National Health Service.’

‘Let me get up there.’ Derek pushed his daughter out the way, her arm slipping out of the cow’s birth canal with a noise that made Joel and Desi retch in unison. ‘Lizzie’s going to kill me when she sees the state of this shirt.’

‘Here.’ Callum passed his sister a rag from a stack of fabric at his side and with great reluctance, she accepted it, but not before looking him up and down with disgust.

‘Why are you wearing a kilt to go to the Braewick Christmas Eve carol service?’

‘Because Laura asked me to.’

Her eyes found me again. ‘As I said, eejit.’

‘He lost a bet!’ I said, before throwing up my arms in surrender. ‘You know what? Doesn’t matter. I didn’t come down here to fight, I came to try to put the drama behind us. I don’t to ruin Christmas.’

‘Again.’

‘I don’t want to ruin Christmas because we can’t get along,’ I expanded. ‘Can we at least *try* to be friends?’

‘No.’

‘Friendly?’

‘Can’t see it.’

‘Civil, then?’

‘Oh look!’ Desi shrieked and pointed past Elsie. ‘A tiny little cow just came out of the big one!’

‘A Christmas miracle,’ Joel breathed as the new mother lowed, and Derek tumbled backwards into Callum, arms full of brand new baby calf. ‘Also, I’m going to throw up.’

‘Away in a manger,’ Desi sang sweetly, a single tear trailing down her cheek. ‘No crib for a bed . . .’

‘What shall we name it?’ Joel asked excitedly. ‘We could go with the obvious, Christmas Eve, born in a barn...’

‘I’m not even religious and that doesn’t feel right,’ I told him, inching away from the McClay family as they tended to the calf, its huge, ginger mother turning around to inspect the fruits of her impressive labour.

‘But look!’ Desi exclaimed. ‘Three wise people, me, you and Callum, Joel’s practically a carpenter—’

‘I built an IKEA bedframe one time.’

‘—and Derek’s the inn keeper and he’s surrounded by cows, the mother and Elsie.’ She gasped happily as the calf opened its eyes, the already thick lashes fluttering in her direction. It lay panting on the ground as its mum licked it from head to toe, letting out the occasional desperate moo, as if asking someone to tell her what the hell was going on.

‘Joel,’ Desi cooed, hands clasped together. ‘It looks just like you the morning after Brighton Pride.’

‘If I wanted to deal with homophobia, I would’ve gone home for Christmas,’ he replied before taking a second look at the helpless calf and tipping his head to one side. ‘Although, to be fair . . .’

‘Well, I won’t be going to the carol service looking like this,’ Derek announced, standing gingerly and holding his arms away from his body. ‘We’d better trot on back to the house and get changed.’

A sudden double beep sounded from our rented Range Rover.

‘And we will be trotting,’ Callum said. ‘There’s no way on this earth you’re getting in that car covered in whatever it is you’re covered in.’

As if it heard and understood, the mother cow turned towards us and mooed, deeply offended, before turning back to the calf. Its long, russet hair was drying out and curling up, and somehow, it had transformed from a pile of slimy limbs with eyes into a perfectly formed, miniature cow, already preparing to take its first steps.

‘If human babies sorted themselves out this quickly, I might be more interested,’ Joel said, wrapping an arm around Desi’s shoulders and steering her away back towards the locked car. ‘Course, if my bollocks freeze off between now and getting back to the house, it’s not something I’ll ever have to worry about.’

‘Are you coming?’ I asked Elsie, standing to one side as she crouched down next to the calf, keeping out the mother’s way as she quietly observed their bond. For possibly the first time, I watched a genuinely happy smile spread across on her face, one that had nothing to do with scoring points off me or her brother or generally causing chaos. She looked up at me with shining eyes.

‘I’d rather pull a cow out of own vagina.’

Classic Elsie. Biting my lip, I breathed in deeply. This is for Callum, I reminded myself. You’re doing this for Callum.

‘We don’t have to be best friends—’

‘Good because I’ve met your friends.’

‘But I’d like to try to be friendly,’ I said as she stood up, wiping down her bare arms with another clean rag supplied by her brother. ‘We only have to see each other, what, five, maybe six days out of every year? At best?’

It was scary how much she looked like her brother when they stood side by side, only Callum was staring at me with true concern, like I’d somehow bumped my head and given myself a concussion without his noticing while Elsie could’ve easily been sizing me up for a shallow grave.

‘In the spirit of the season, the best I can do is agree to not eviscerate you in front of my parents,’ she offered eventually. ‘Which I could. If I wanted to. Starting with that haircut.’

‘Since it’s Christmas, I’m going to let that one slide,’ I said, triumphant. ‘Thank you.’

‘And whatever the fuck it is you’re wearing.’

‘Don’t push your luck.’

Without thinking, I reached out towards her to seal the deal with a handshake and before I could take it back, she grabbed my hand in hers, warm and sticky and covered in cow.

‘Och, sorry, did I get that on your top?’ Elsie asked, eternally cheerful and still holding on as I looked down at the variety of new stains on my M&S finest cashmere jumper. ‘That means you’re officially part of the family now.’

‘Let’s go back up to the house, shall we?’ Callum covered my hand with a towel as she released me. ‘Get you cleaned up.’

‘I think I’m going to be sick,’ I whispered to him as he folded me into his chest. ‘There’s every single kind of bodily fluid on my hand.’

‘You’re a surgeon. You’re covered in bodily fluids every day.’

I looked up at him with narrowed eyes. ‘How do you think brain surgery works?’

‘If you want to be at that carol service in twenty minutes, you need to get yourselves back up to the house to change,’ Derek said loudly as the calf began to stumble happily around the barn. ‘Everything’s fine down here.’ As he spoke, he reached back to squeeze his shoulder. ‘Els, have we got any of those stick-on heating pads down here? Reckon I’ve tweaked something back there.’

‘Why, do you need a massage?’ she asked sweetly, only for Derek to turn towards me with a look of pure terror.

‘No,’ he replied hurriedly. ‘I do not need a massage.’

It was just as well, to be honest.

*

We were late to the carol service, creeping in during a rousing chorus of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”, but Shiv and Graham had saved an entire row, making room for the whole family. Lizzie McClay’s face lit up when she saw Elsie and Callum filter in, side by side and I smiled, thrilled by my sacrifice, both emotional and literal since I was never going to get cow placenta out of my favourite jumper. The town hall looked exactly as I remembered it from the year before, the same ancient tinsel decorating the stage, the same mince pies and orange squash,

the same nativity set up, complete with Teletubby and twin T-Rexes. Apparently I'd been wrong to assume they were temporary stand-ins.

'Returning to the scene of the crime.' Callum smiled when I gave him a questioning look. 'Our first kiss?'

'Your first kiss with Caroline,' I corrected. 'That bitch.'

'True,' he grinned. 'Which means our first carol service kiss hasn't happened yet.'

Pushing up onto my toes, I let my lips find his, sweet and brief and secure, safe in the knowledge that there would be so many more kisses to come.

'First carol service kiss done.' I added a second for good measure. Then a third and a fourth, until Elsie jabbed her brother sharply in the ribs.

'Don't worry, we've still got lots of first ahead of us,' I told him, smothering a laugh as he winced with discomfort. Truce or no truce, she wasn't pulling her punches.

Callum's eyebrows flashed up and I saw a dimple in his left cheek appear, underneath his stubble. 'I don't know, we've crossed off a lot of them.'

'Not the kind of firsts I was thinking of,' I muttered, red-faced as I glanced down the row at his family.

'The firsts aren't as important to me these days anyway,' he said, drawing me in close. 'What matters most is you're my last.'

'Your only,' I promised, a rush of gentle warmth flooding me from the inside out, a chemical reaction I'd become so used to, I didn't even think about it anymore. After a year of being together, of late-night phone calls, stolen weekends and so many trips on the Eurostar that I now knew every single steward by name, none of it mattered. Oxytocin, vasopressin, serotonin, whatever. What I felt now was purely Callum McClay, pure love. And unlike the dopamine hits and spikes of norepinephrine, when I looked at him, his sapphire eyes burning into mine, I knew this feeling would last forever.