

Daddy

Chapter one: All I need is a partner to play spades with the cards up, all trust

“The information for Naomi’s summer basketball camp came in today,” said Mariah as we watched television. I braced myself; she tended to talk in pieces when she was giving bad news.

“Alright.” I muted the TV, reached for her hand, and rubbed her wedding ring with my thumb. “Hit me.”

She looked at me sideways, her eyes narrowing as my fingers caressed her own. “The camp alone is several hundred dollars. But she also needs new shoes. I mean, she can go a few more months without them, but the bottoms are falling apart. If she cuts too hard they will start talking.”

Mariah tucked her feet under her body, put her elbow on the back of the couch, and leaned into it. She wore one of my long-sleeve button-ups and the top two buttons of the blue shirt were undone. No bra. Miles of smooth, lotioned legs came together under an umbrella of sheer black panties. I held onto her hand. Was Naomi back from school? I strained my ears but didn’t hear anything.

“Eugene!” snapped Mariah, “What did I just say?”

Shit. “Um...”

“Ugh, I can’t stand niggas. All y’all think about is sex. Sex, sex, sex.” She smacked her teeth. “I saaaaaaid, everything in total could come out to about five hundred, and that includes the shoes.”

“Five hundred, huh?” I brushed my waves with my hand and did some quick math. We had about two hundred in do-whatever money left for the month and about five hundred saved in the bank. But that was for emergencies only.

“Right. So,” she bit her lip, “I started looking at some YMCA programs instead, and I found one that looks promising. Wanna see?”

I closed the gap between us on the couch. Then, before she could scramble away, I snuck my arms around her waist and pulled her close so that her head rested against my neck. “Aye, girl,” I whispered, my voice an octave lower.

“Get off me, man.” She struggled lightly against my arms.

“What’s my name, girl?”

“Nigga, move! I’m being serious right now, I ain’t playing with you!” She smiled, then frowned when she saw that I noticed.

“Who’s playing?” I reached out and held her chin with one hand, my thumb resting gently against her full, pillowy lips. She ignored it. “What’s my name, girl?” I whispered again.

She squinted, stubborn, then took the tip of my thumb in her mouth and let her lips close gently around it. “Daddy,” she whispered back, my thumb held in place.

“What was that?”

She pulled her head back sharply and rolled her eyes. “Nah nigga, you got it once already. Now answer my question. YMCA?”

“Relax,” I said. “I’ll get the money.” Nope, Naomi definitely wasn’t home.

“How?” she asked.

“What’s my name?”

“Eugene! How are--”

“You know I’ll do anything for my…girls.” I raised my eyebrows and slipped my hand under her shirt.

Mariah laughed, rolling her eyes again. “Oh, Jesus. You tried it. That weak ass double entendre needs to get the fuck on. God. Wannabe Kendrick ass nigga. Ugly ass nigga. Boooo! Get away from me.”

“I’m nice,” I said, undeterred. “Gimmie a beat.”

“Why? Just to hear you fuck it up? Boy, move!”

“Fuck your beat then, I’m going accapella.” I cleared my throat, bobbing my head up and down. “Uh, yeah, uh, yeah. Turn the music up turn the lights down I’m in my zone.”

“Look at you. Ugly ass. Kendrick don’t need all that intro.”

I ignored her. “Uh. Yeah. Las Vegas greatest. Morpheus in the Matrix. I am legend in the making and you can’t rush history. You a hatin ass nigga, your doubt ain’t shit to me. My lyrics scamper…blissfully. I’m that nigga--”

Mariah exploded with open-mouthed laughter. She tried to speak but ended up snorting loudly. “No! No, no, no! We’re not just moving past that,” she finally gasped. “Did you just say your lyrics fucking SCAMPER?!”

Damn. “Maybe.”

“I’m filing for divorce. I can’t believe I let you seed me. Naomi deserves better. I deserve better. I let a nigga named ‘Eugene’ seed me. God.”

I grinned and kissed her neck. “I don’t remember hearing any complaints at the time.”

“Just kiss me, man. Please.” She started giggling again, and I moved her fully onto my lap, letting her legs straddle mine. I popped the buttons on her shirt, kissing each new piece of skin it revealed. Just when she was about to shrug it off her shoulders, the front door opened our daughter walked in.

“Hey,” Naomi called out when she spotted me, “What’s for din--” she halted when she noticed her mother, who just managed to slip under a blanket before Naomi had come into view.

Naomi looked at me, then at her mother, then back at me again. Her eyes widened. I looked at her, then at Mariah, then back at her. Mariah, blushing, looked only at the ceiling. I shrugged.

“Oh my God!” shrieked Naomi, running up the stairs.

Chapter two: One million, two million, three million, twenty million, oh I’m so good at math

Walking into the poker room at the casino felt like coming home. Chips clicked and clacked in rhythmic cacophony. Players bellowed as dealers slapped cards onto the felt. Waitresses hustled between chairs, the pretty ones smiling coyly at the catcalls, the ugly ones flirting openly, their voices spreading smoothly over the ambience like guava jelly. Big Mike, the floor manager, noticed me immediately and plodded over.

“Ah sheeeeeeeeeet! Is that Eugene?” he called out, his base voice reverberating in my chest. “My man! It’s been a while. I thought you were done?” He clapped me on the shoulders and stuck his hand out, palm up. The thick, glistening, fleshy meat reminded me of an uncooked T-bone steak. I hesitated, then grasped it, feeling my own hand growing damp from whatever fluids leaked from his. Shameful relief filled me after the handshake ended.

“Big! It’s good to see you. Yeah, I was. In fact, I still am. This isn’t a comeback, more of a check-in. How are things?”

“New players, same game. You know how it goes,” Big said, taking out a cloth and dabbing his face. While he weighed at least four hundred pounds, somehow his pinstriped suit still dwarfed him, draping over his body like he was a teenager playing in his father’s clothes.

“New players, same game.” I nodded. “And the wife? Is she finished with her classes?”

Big’s eyes sparkled. “Her MBA wraps in like six months, dude. The casino already offered her a position in corporate if she wants to come back. ‘We take care of our own,’ blah, blah.” He slipped the cloth back inside his breast pocket and smiled wide, flashing unusually perfect teeth. “I told her to ignore them and get the hell out this hoe. Why be a dealer for twelve years just to come back to the same spot? She should be a banker or something. A real fancy ass. But she don’t listen to me. These high-yellow girls man, they already smelling themselves, just off life. Put a couple letters on their name? Sheeeeeeeet. You can’t say nothing to them. It’s a goddamn travesty,” he bemoaned, voice bursting with pride. “Anyway, what game you here for?”

“A 2-5 game, if you got the seat.”

“2-5?” Big raised his eyebrows. “Baller moves today, huh? The 1-2 table is normally your speed if I remember right.”

“Scared money don’t make money.”

“Sheet,” Big agreed. “Okay. Let me see what I got.” He stuck his hand out, and I clasped it without reservation, an atonement for my earlier sins. As he lumbered off, I looked around the room, seeing if I recognized any old faces. I didn’t, which was fine by me. I hated taking money from friends.

Chapter three: If you feeling like a pimp nigga go on brush your shoulders off

Opening the door to my bedroom, I saw Mariah sitting on the bed cross-legged, laptop open in front of her, hair in a scarf. The *tap-tap* of her nails against the keyboard reminded me of the sound of stacking chips. I rubbed my hands together as I walked. “Uh. Listen.”

She didn’t glance up from her computer.

“Slow it down. Uh. Listen. Wait for it, wait for it,” I bobbed up and down like a metronome, “wop, wop, wop, wop, *boom---ksh*, my beard too thick my wave game nice, *boom---ksh*, two in the morning but I feel alright, *boom---ksh*, and if they ask me why I flex so hard, *boom---ksh*, on god, its cuz--”

“Nobody gives a fuck, Eugene Christopher Wendell,” Mariah cut in, her eyes not leaving the screen. “You see I’m working. Where you been all night?”

“Wow!” I glanced around. “My whole government though? Relax, the streets listening. Besides,” my tone darkened, rumbling like a muscle car in neutral, “that’s not my name tonight.” I leaned down, lifted her scarf, and kissed her forehead softly. Closing her laptop, I took her face in my hands then kissed her fully. When we separated, her chest visibly rose and fell and her eyes searched mine.

“What’s my name, girl?” I asked, meeting her gaze.

She said nothing for a few moments, then her eyebrows flew. “You got it? Just like that? How?”

I shrugged off my shirt, pulling it over my head and tossing it onto the floor. Once it was off, Mariah rested her hand on my bare chest and ran her thumbs down the curves of my muscles.

“Close your eyes,” I said. She closed them, her face partially obscured by her scarf, her hands still on my chest. She waited for me to speak again, her lips slightly parted. I said nothing for thirty seconds, wondering if she would break the pose. She didn’t.

“Hands behind your back,” I said. She immediately clasped her hands behind her, then tilted her chin up towards my face. Her breathing deepened and she stilled. I waited too, holding the moment, testing its weight, checking its balance.

“Open your mouth,” I said finally. Her lips parted further.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the five crisp hundred-dollar bills. I ran the edges of them up her bare arm, making a tight figure-eight motion along her collar bone. One by one I took each bill and placed it on the edge of her lips.

“You know what this is?” I asked once I had placed the last one. She nodded. I took the bills out of her mouth and placed them on the night stand next to her.

“What’s my name?”

“Daddy.”

“Say it again.”

“Yes, Daddy. Your name is Daddy.” Eyes still closed, Mariah groped outward, finding my hand and desperately pulling it to her face. She kissed my palm and nibbled my fingers, her lips leaving warm wetness against my skin.

“And whose are you?”

“Yours. All yours. Only yours.”

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The next day, Naomi and I went to Footlocker. We barely opened the door before some bug-eyed kid jogged up to us with a name tag reading “Jeremiah” on his shirt. He looked about sixteen, with pimples swarming his forehead and a body all elbows and cheekbones, more praying mantis than human.

“Welcome to Footlocker,” he said, looking right at Naomi. “Need help finding anything?”

“No,” I said, “we know what--”

“We would *love* your help,” Naomi cut in, “thank you. I’m here for some new basketball shoes.”

“Basketball shoes, sure.” The kid’s head jerked up and down, its heft seemingly too much for his beanpole neck. “LeBron’s, Durant’s, Kobe’s, you name it! Just take a seat and I’ll get you measured.”

“Sit over there?” she crooned, gesturing with one manicured hand.

“Yup,” his voice cracked and he flinched. “I’ll be right back.” He held her gaze for a heartbeat before scrambling away.

“You can’t be serious,” I said.

Naomi shrugged. “He’s cute.”

“A Bug’s Life lookin nigga. Flick the Ant ass nigga. Hopper the Wasp headass. You gotta thing for ugly insects now?”

“He’s not ugly! And...who is Flick the Ant?”

“Don’t play with me.”

Naomi stared back at me, face blank.

“Wow. Okay. Wow. This is my fault.” I shook my head.

“Whatever you say.” Naomi rolled her eyes then greedily stared at the shoes around her. “What’s my budget?” She picked up a pair of neon blue Nikes, turning them over in her hands.

“You can get whatever you want, baby.”

She glanced up at me, slack-jawed. “Any pair?”

“Any pair,” I said, trying to sound casual. Her recognition of the moment wrenched my stomach. This shouldn’t be so damn memorable.

She looked at me, absorbing the impact of my words. It seemed as if their weight had sobered her, squeezing out some of her childhood like pressure on a tube of toothpaste. All I wanted was to squish it back in, to introduce her to Flik the Ant.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, baby?” Out of the corner of my eye I saw Praying Mantis skittering over, a foot-measure in his hand. He smiled at Naomi.

“Thank you.”

Chapter four: Fuck with me, you know I got it

At the poker tables later that night, I gave four crumpled hundred-dollar bills to the chip runner, an older, willowy Korean lady. She frowned as smoothed the bills, fanning them out for the ceiling cameras, then handed me four stacks of chips. Smiling guiltily, I thanked her, then placed the stacks on the felt. I had stuffed the money in my shoe the other night to avoid accidentally giving it to Mariah.

I studied the other players at my table, letting my eyes run over each person in turn. Eight people hunched over their chips around me, but one player immediately struck me as a threat. A middle aged, bearded, Middle Eastern man sat directly across from me. He looked like he belonged to the Iranian Mafia, assuming Iran had a mafia. His right hand sported a matte black ring, heavy and dense. The ring caught no light, had no shine to it at all, which only convinced me of its value. On his left, a gold watch with six faces flaunted all the shine that the ring shunned. The man looked like he could lose a few thousand without blinking. That made him dangerous, as I could only play with the money in front of me.

Two hours later, I had flipped my \$400 into \$800 and sipped contentedly on a ginger ale. Big Mike started his shift and I gave him a head nod when he looked my way. He ambled over to my table, forcing players to grunt and scoot closer to their tables so he could pass.

“Sup. Back at it?” He stuck out his hand. I gripped it, relieved that he hadn’t yet worked up a sweat. “Looks like a good day,” he said, eyeing my stack.

“Yeah, I’m about to go home,” I said, grinning. “Get some then get some, feel me?”

“Oooooo-kay, *Eugene*,” said Big, pronouncing my name like a math teacher, “You going home cuz you on a curfew, not cuz you’re about to stir the mac and cheese. I know who wears the pants in your house, nigga. Sheeeeeeeeeeeet.”

I laughed. “Listen, Mariah knows what it is. And it is what it is.” The dealer slapped the table gently in front of my chips, startling me. The table was waiting on me to act. I glanced at my cards and folded. Mr. Iranian Mafia grunted like he knew what I was going to do. Fuck that guy.

“Please, spare me,” groaned Big. “Yo, get the fuck outa here. You know how the game goes. You don’t beat the casino...”

“Until you leave the casino.” I finished. “I’m gonna play through my button and I’m out.” He nodded then huffed away. Just then, my phone buzzed with a text from Mariah:

Hey Daddy... after you dropped Naomi home she started shining her shoes with a toothbrush. You really did a thing here. Oh, also, last night was kinda hot or whatever...but if you EVER put nasty ass money in my mouth again you'll be homeless for a month. Test God, not me.

Love you 😊

Damn, I adored that woman.

The dealer slapped the table again, this time with attitude. "My bad," I mumbled, checking my cards. I had pocket kings. "Raise," I said, putting in fifty dollars.

Mr. Mafia checked his cards. "Re-raise. One hundred and fifty." He stared right at me. Fuck this guy. Fuck his ring. Fuck his watch. Fuck his thick-ass beard. Fuck his intimidating bitch-ass aura.

"All in," I said, shoving all eight hundred dollars.

He shrugged and matched my stack. With this type of money, I might even take Mariah to see the Grand Canyon later this month. She had always wanted to go. The cards came out: 9, 2, 4, 5, 10. I showed my pair of kings. Mr. Mafia flipped over pocket tens, giving him a winning three-of-a-kind on the last card. He scooped up my chips with a chuckle.

I rose, pulled my hoodie up, and left.

Chapter five: Fame is the worst drug known to man, its stronger than, heroin, when you can look in the mirror like 'there I am' and still not see what you've become

A few nights later, I staggered through the casino parking lot, feeling hot and cold all at once. The dull echoes of the casino chimes, which sounded so promising when I entered, now shrilled, their gaudiness naked. My vision swam and I stumbled over my feet, catching hold of a railing to keep from falling. Just before it happened, I knew I would vomit. Soft chunks of bile flooded my mouth, billowing my cheeks and violating my nose. I kept heaving well after my stomach emptied, each retch expectant, like a would-be murderer who couldn't fathom why his gun kept jamming. I looked down at my hands and didn't know them as mine. I pinched my arm and felt nothing. I pinched it again, hard. I tore skin and felt warm blood trickle down my elbow. This was real. Jesus. No money in my checking. No money in my savings. In our savings. I heaved twice more at the thought. Did I even have gas to get home? I was supposed to buy groceries tomorrow. Jesus. Jesus.

I had felt this guilty only once before, years ago. I was eighteen, visiting my girlfriend one last time before going to college. She wasn't going, her parents couldn't afford it, so she found a job in retail. We spent our last evening cuddled her room. Then, suddenly, she sat up. She asked me if I wanted to break up. She said she loved me and she knew I was going places and she didn't want me to feel held back. She said she would understand if I wanted to end things, that it would hurt, but she would survive. She just wanted the truth. No, I said. You're my girl. I love you now and forever. She asked me if I was sure. She asked me if this was what I really wanted, if I could really be happy with her, if I could really see a future with her. Yes, I said, I'm sure. Yes, I want this. Yes, I am happy with you. And yes, I see a future with you.

She offered me her virginity then. She wanted to make one more memory before I left. She said she wanted me thinking about her while I was gone and hungry for her upon my return. She said she would cook a huge meal for Thanksgiving, then she would be my meal. She said she was my slut for the night, and that she wanted me to remember this moment for the rest of

my life. She told me to take her. And I did. She told me to go harder. And I did. She told me to slap her ass. She told me to pull her hair. She told me to lie back so she could bounce on that dick. And I did. She rode me like her life depended on it. And when we finished, she swallowed every drop of me.

I didn't cry on the drive home. I didn't cry in the shower. I didn't even cry as I fell asleep. But I cried when I woke up. Because I knew. And perhaps, maybe, she at least suspected.

Yes. I would remember that moment for the rest of my life.

No. I wouldn't come home for Thanksgiving.

Chapter six: If I wasn't a superhero in your face, my heart breaks for the day I have to explain my mistakes, and the mask goes away, and Santa Clause is fake

"Dad!" Naomi called as she ran from room to room, opening and slamming every closet door she came across. "Have you seen my shoes? I can't find them anywhere and I have practice soon!"

"Slow down," I said, putting a hand on her shoulder and spinning her so she faced me. "Did you check your room? The car?"

"Both! I can't find them!" She ran trembling fingers through her hair and bit her lip, her genuine panic collapsing my lungs

"Okay. Wear your old ones tonight. Tomorrow we'll search the house. Don't worry, they'll turn up."

"Alright." She swiped a determined hand across her face and sniffed. "I just, I know how much they cost, and I...I don't want you to think I...I..."

"No, stop," I said, drawing her into my chest. Her soft gasps drove icy spikes through my heels. "We'll find them. Don't worry. I'm sure they'll turn up tomorrow." I looked up and saw a man in the hallway mirror, hugging my daughter, whispering lies. That man narrowed his eyes at me. That man pointed a finger at me.

"They'll turn up tomorrow," I repeated.

Chapter seven: Still nigga

"No."

"What?" I said, switching the phone from my left shoulder to my right. I sat in my car, parked in the garage, the engine off. "What you mean no?"

"Woah, relax boss. You need to calm down." Oh. I had been yelling. "Sheet," he chastised, "I said what I said. No."

"Big--"

"Don't fucking 'Big' me, Eugene. You know what?" He took a slow breath and I almost hung up in the silence. "No. Never mind. My answer is no. You need to own up to your peoples and I'm not gonna drag this out."

"Nah, nah, fuck that." My collar felt tight around my neck. "This isn't a 'no' type of situation here, Big. I got bills, man. Groceries to buy. My wife, Big. And Naomi. She needs shoes, man. How the hell can you say no to me right now? All for a fucking moral lesson? Like this is some nut-ass PBS cartoon?"

“Listen, I wasn’t even gonna come for your life like that. I really wasn’t. But you clearly don’t give a fuck, so I won’t either. I *see* you, Eugene. I *know* you. You can front to everyone else. To Mariah. To Naomi. To sweet little baby Jesus. I don’t care. But *we both know* this isn’t the first--”

I cut the phone off and screamed into my steering wheel.

Chapter eight: Never go Eric Benét

“You told me you were done, Eugene.” Mariah said.

“I know.”

“You told me. You stood right there, looked me in the eye, and said you were done. That’s what you said. You knew how I grew up. You knew what my dad put my family through. You knew. You *fucking knew*. And you gambled anyway. And when you lost it all, you said you were done.”

“I know.”

We sat facing each other on the couch. Mariah rocked back and forth, her knees tucked against her chest, her arms wrapped around them, protecting them, it seemed, from me.

“I should have known,” she murmured. “All those hundreds...I should have known.” She looked up abruptly, eyes hard. “How much? And speak up, please.”

“Mariah--”

“Nope.” She sucked in a breath. “No, let me stop you right there. Don’t say my name. Don’t give me an explanation. Tell me how much you lost. The next words out your mouth need to be a number, Eugene. You hear me? A fucking number. How much?”

I took a breath. “Mariah--”

“How much!”

I cringed, leaning away from her. I sat back up and tried to speak. My voice cracked. I swallowed and started again.

“I lost twenty-six hundred, Mariah.”

She didn’t move, didn’t blink, didn’t even shift her weight. “How?” she asked eventually, her tone flat. “We didn’t have a third of that. How did you lose so much?”

“I, um, I borrowed--”

“Speak the fuck up, Eugene!”

I licked my lips and brushed my waves. “I borrowed to cover what I lost the first couple nights. I tried to use it to earn back our savings, but I lost it. I borrowed again, thinking I would make enough pay back the first loan. And I...”

“You lost that too,” Mariah whispered.

“I lost that too,” I repeated, wiping my face with my shirt. “I didn’t...want you to know. I really didn’t want you to know.” I wiped my face with my right hand, then again with my left. “You said...you would leave. If it happened again. You said you would leave. So I didn’t want you to know. I’m sorry. This was the only time. Don’t leave, please. Please don’t leave.”

She said nothing. She stopped rocking back and forth and closed her eyes. I shifted so that I sat next to her, nearly touching her. I reached for her hand and cautiously grazed her fingertips with mine. She flinched, and the violence of it nearly made me retch.

“Mariah?”

No response.

“Mariah? Please. Say something.”

Nothing.

I got off the couch and slid onto my knees in front of her. Without speaking, I buried my head in her ankles and massaged her calves with my hands. I felt tears pool on my cheeks, now unable to freely fall down my face. She would speak. When she was ready, she would speak. And I would wait.

Two minutes passed. Then five. I didn't move. I would wait.

"I'm not sure," she said slowly, "what hurts more. The fact that I have become my mother, or the fact that you have become my father."

She stopped then, but it still wasn't my turn to speak. I would wait.

"No. No, no. That's a lie. I know *exactly* what hurts more."

She paused again, then sighed. She took one finger, placed it under my chin, then lifted my head towards hers. Her lips were tight, her eyebrows furrowed, and her eyes seemed ten years older than they should be.

"You have to tell her," she said.

Chapter nine: Kill Jay-Z

"Naomi, can we talk? It's about your shoes." We sat on her bed, posters of Candace Parker and Kobe Bryant covered her walls. A collection of pristine trophies rested atop her dresser and a dusty dollhouse languished by her bookshelf. I had given it to her years ago and had never seen her play with it. Still, she kept it, a fact which made me proud and sad. I hadn't really known her then, not like I should have.

She perked up. "Did you find them?"

"No. Well, sort of. But no." I hesitated, wishing I could die, imagining my body pressed through a shredder, visualizing my skin flayed and hanging like a partially peeled orange. "I sold them, Naomi. I...got into some money trouble and I sold them. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for selling them, and I'm sorry I let you look for them. It was...cruel...of me, as a person, as your father."

I saw her mind digesting this new information, sifting it with the callous precision of a young teenager. She tilted her head and chewed her bottom lip, her face unreadable. Perhaps I still didn't know her. She looked up at me, then at her trophy collection, then at her old shoes lying by the door. The bottoms had finally started coming apart and I saw the places where she had superglued them together.

"Daddy?"

I tried to respond but found no words.

"I would have given them to you," she said. "You can trust me. You didn't have to pretend."

I could trust her. *I could trust her.* Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

"You did what you had to," she said. "It's...okay."

"Naomi, are you sure? You don't have any questions?"

"I'm sure. No questions." And for her, I knew, that was that. A mystery solved, a wrong righted. Her unwillingness to treat this moment with the gravity I thought it deserved broke my heart anew. She still believed in me to the point where such a massive betrayal could be mended by words. I was rescued by the breadth of her forgiveness yet crushed beneath its weightlessness.

"Alright," I said. "Thank you."

She nodded slightly, just once. “Um,” she said after a moment, her voice small, “I wanted to show you something else though, if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, yeah sure. What’s up?”

She sighed. “You’re gonna laugh at me.”

“I won’t,” I said, “What is it?”

“Do you promise?” she asked softly, her question a boulder that threatened to bend my back and buckle my knees.

“I promise.”

“Okay.” She pulled a creased sheet of paper from her pocket. It looked like it had been folded and refolded many times. “I’ve been practicing by myself,” she said sheepishly, “but it’s not the same.”

“Practicing?” I asked, confused.

“Yup.” Naomi grinned, nervous but excited. She cleared her throat twice. “Gimmie a beat.”