

Five: Before

He watched the boy dwindle in the rear-view mirror, lost quickly in the dim light. The packages sat beside him on the cracked vinyl bench seat, and he thought about the transaction. Mackie was becoming increasingly erratic, sending his kid on the last two hand-offs. The hell was he thinking? He'd been a little harsh with the kid, he knew, but irritation was a constant these days, and the little shit had the same look on his face that his old man did.

He knew Gabe would want him to replay the whole thing, the micro-manager that he was. OCD meets psychopath was getting old, and he wondered not for the first time how such a flawed individual had managed to build a drug distribution network that spanned two states, yet operated out of a tiny town with a crew of only ten.

He flicked the diminished cigarette out the open window, and thought about how it really didn't matter. Today was the day. He was reasonably sure he'd come out on top at the end, but he knew as well as anyone and more than most how things could go sideways no matter how hard you've planned. Orchestration was math, but life was chaos and would only tolerate so much logic and structure before it gave opposition.

As he rolled towards town, he was thinking about the day ahead of him, the pieces in play, and the possible permutations.

He had a lot riding on the actions of others, but he'd built enough redundancy into the plan that he could still win, despite someone switching sides at the last minute. He was analyzing what he knew about each participant for the umpteenth time, when she spoke up. It had been at least a year since the last time, and her voice in his head caused him an involuntary physical twitch.

"Why this again? You *keep* choosing it, and it's just you wasting time, and avoiding, dad."

It took him a moment to absorb the shock of it, and the pain that always followed.

Please, Aubrey. This never helps.

It was a stock response, offered up because he never had anything else when this happened. As usual, it also made no difference. She was never deterred when she had something to say to him.

"C'mon, dad. Even if you get what you want today, it'll be like all the times before. It'll be like Atlanta, like Tupelo, and like Juarez, too. It will hold for a time, and then it'll fall apart. All the cracks are already there. I know you can see them, because *I* can see them."

The anguish he thought finally banished wrapped again around his heart, a coiling serpent intent on constriction and

cessation, and he imagined the steady beating beginning to falter. Her loss enveloped him, even as he argued with her.

No. This is it, I know it. Please leave it be.

She gave that same little chuff that expressed her exasperation.

"Fine, dad. You never listen anyway. But that's ultimately what I came to tell you. I'm leaving for good. This is the last time."

The statement was the high buzz of an inbound sniper round in his mind, and in the second or so between the impact and the distant sound of the report were the ramifications. The impact shredded nearly all surrounding thought and emotion, but his body reacted automatically, tapping the brakes and pulling to the shoulder, the car quickly obscured in a plume of red clay dust as it came to a stop.

Wait, what? What? Why?

She sighed.

"Dad, I love you. That's why I stayed. But you don't listen, and I have other things to do. Besides, there's someone else coming. It would've been easier on you if you'd listened to me, but she knows how to get to you in a way I can't."

He struggled, as internal assumptions crumbled, and new structures solidified in their place, horrifying in their implications. The years spent trying to deal with his dead

daughter's interjections in his head paled as the weight of her final departure fell on him in an instant, and he screamed inside.

No. No! No, Aubrey! I was wrong! I'll stop. I'll do anything. Just stay.

Her laugh was distant, the reduction in volume indicative of her withdrawal. Her voice seemed cast backwards, as if she was walking away.

"We're beyond that, dad. I feel bad for trying again, because I already knew I couldn't change anything. It's just habit, I guess. All that's left is, remember prom night, and I'll be waiting for you when you get here."

Then she passed out of hearing, gone for good. He could tell, and the loss was a terror that threatened to tear him apart from the inside. There had always been a hint of her that remained when she was done speaking her piece, like the faint smell of smoke in your clothes. Not now.

Come back! Please...

Nothing.

An agonized howl began to fill him as the absence of her yawned wide within. It grew, and grew, until it could no longer be contained, and burst out of his throat in a series of primal screams. Trees towering above disgorged flocks of birds as his

torment split the air, and the car rocked slightly on its
springs as their shadows departed.