

## Mini #1: She Found Him at the End of the Line

Detective Mara Ives had imagined this moment in fragments—flashing lights, shouted orders, the weight of cuffs snapping shut. She had pictured justice loud and decisive.

Instead, she found him sitting at the end of the subway platform, feet dangling inches from the tracks, hands folded neatly in his lap like a man waiting patiently for forgiveness that would never come.

“You’re late,” he said, voice calm, almost kind, without turning around.

Mara raised her gun. The metal felt colder than usual, heavier. Her arms ached from months of holding them steady when everything inside her was unraveling. “Stand up,” she said. “Slowly.”

The platform smelled of rust and damp concrete. Water dripped somewhere in the dark, each echo ticking away the last seconds of something sacred.

He smiled faintly. “You chased me through alleys that smelled like death. Through basements where the walls remembered screams. You always knew it would end underground.”

Her jaw tightened. He knew her too well.

“Why?” she asked. Her voice cracked despite her effort. “Why them?”

He turned then. His eyes weren’t wild. They were tired. “Because no one listens until blood forces them to.”

Mara’s vision blurred. She saw the corkboard in her apartment—photos curling at the edges, red string sagging under the weight of too many names. She remembered unanswered voicemails. Empty chairs at family dinners. The woman she used to be.

“You ruined lives,” she whispered.

“So did you,” he said gently. “You just call it duty.”

The words cut deep and stayed there.

The tunnel began to glow. A train was coming—wind rushing ahead of it like a warning.

Mara stepped closer. “I lost myself chasing you,” she said. “And I would do it again.”

He nodded once. “That’s why it had to be you.”

She fired.

The sound split the station, swallowed almost immediately by the scream of the train as it roared past. His body collapsed, still before it hit the ground.

When the platform fell quiet again, Mara dropped to her knees. She sobbed—not in triumph, not in relief—but in mourning. For the victims. For the time stolen. For the pieces of herself she would never get back.

When backup arrived, they found her sitting there, clutching her badge like it was the last thing anchoring her to the world.

The case was closed.

But the cost would echo far longer than the gunshot ever did.

## Mini #2: What the Snow Took

The avalanche sounded like the mountain screaming.

One moment we were laughing—our breath puffing white, boots crunching clean powder—and the next the world tilted, roared, and collapsed. Snow swallowed sound, light, and direction all at once. I remember tumbling, spinning, my mouth filling with ice, my lungs burning as the mountain decided who it would keep.

When everything stopped, it was dark.

So dark I couldn't tell if my eyes were open.

I couldn't move my legs. Snow pressed against my chest like a living thing, heavy and unforgiving. I forced myself to breathe slowly, counting seconds the way the survival guide said—don't panic, don't thrash, don't waste oxygen.

“Evan?” I croaked.

No answer.

I dug with numb fingers until the snow loosened just enough to free my arm. My hand brushed fabric. A sleeve. His jacket.

Relief surged—then shattered.

Evan's face was blue beneath the frost, eyes half-open, lashes crusted with ice. I shook him anyway. I begged. I screamed until my throat burned raw.

The mountain didn't care.

Hours blurred. Or days. I don't know. Time doesn't behave underground. My mouth dried until swallowing felt like dragging glass down my throat. Hunger clawed next—sharp, hollow, humiliating. I rationed snow, letting tiny amounts melt against my tongue even though I knew it stole heat.

The cold crept in slowly, politely. First my fingers. Then my thoughts.

I talked to Evan so I wouldn't sleep. Told him stories we'd already lived. Promised him I'd get us home.

When my words slowed, I felt his presence fade—not like leaving, but like being erased.

I pressed my forehead to his frozen shoulder and said goodbye.

The rescuers found me three days later, delirious, wrapped around a body I refused to let go of. They said I survived because I made an air pocket. Because I stayed awake. Because I was lucky.

They didn't see the mountain take my best friend.

They didn't feel the snow teaching me the difference between surviving and being saved.

I came back alone.

And every winter, when the snow falls heavy and quiet, I hear the mountain breathe—and remember what it took.