

## **Mini #5 - The World we left Behind**

*I'd worked the night shift at the gas station for years. The hum of freezers, the low chatter of customers, the ding of the door — background noise to a quiet life.*

*I stepped into the bathroom.*

*Everything was normal.*

*When I came out, the world was gone.*

*No voices. No hum. No footsteps. The aisles stood untouched, coffee steaming beside a half-filled cup. I checked the cameras, heart pounding. On one frame, people stood in line. On the next, the store was empty.*

*No flash. No panic.*

*Just absence.*

*I drove home, dread hollowing my chest. Streetlights blinked over deserted roads. My front door hung open. My wife's book lay on the couch. My kids' shoes by the door.*

*No one.*

*By evening, I'd loaded supplies into my truck — training kicking in like muscle memory. Ex-Green Beret. Survive first. Break later.*

*That's when I heard it.*

*"Hello?"*

*A woman stood by the curb, shaking, eyes swollen from crying. She clutched a wedding ring in her palm like it might answer her.*

*"They were just... here," she whispered. "My husband. My little girls."*

*My throat tightened. I nodded.*

*"Mine too."*

*We stood there, two strangers in a town that no longer existed.*

*And for the first time all day, I wasn't completely alone.*

## **MINI #6 — Borrowed Time**

The clinic didn't advertise in newspapers.

You found it only if you knew the right question to ask.

"How much is an hour worth?"

Daniel hadn't wanted to know the answer — not until his daughter's condition worsened and the doctor quietly explained the word *terminal* like it was weather instead of doom.

He sat in a sterile room while a woman in a gray suit slid a contract toward him.

"Borrowed time," she said. "You give us years you haven't lived yet. We give them now — where you need them."

"How many?" Daniel asked.

"As many as you can afford."

He signed because love rarely negotiates with reason.

The first result was miraculous. His daughter laughed again. She walked. She slept through the night. The doctors said *unexplainable*, which was their favorite way to say *fear*.

Daniel didn't tell them his legs felt heavier. Or that every morning his reflection looked slightly older than it had the night before.

He kept borrowing.

Birthdays. School plays. Quiet dinners. Sunsets.

Small miracles stacked into memories.

On the final day, he returned to the clinic, bones aching, hair gray, heart full.

The woman in gray smiled politely.

"Your balance is complete."

Daniel nodded. "Was it enough?"

She glanced at the contract. “You gave her eight years.”

“And what did it cost me?”

She closed the folder gently.

“Forty.”

Daniel walked outside and watched his daughter run across the lawn — strong, bright, alive.

When his chest tightened and the world dimmed, he felt no fear.

He’d already lived the years that mattered.