

The Last Station on Highway Nine

1. The Stranger

The first thing anyone noticed about the gas station on Highway Nine was how alone it looked. A single island of buzzing fluorescent light surrounded by an ocean of desert night. Cars rarely stopped unless they were desperate—or lost.

Mara Finch had been both.

Her sedan coughed to a stop just past midnight, twenty miles from the nearest town. She coasted to the pump, dust swirling in her headlights, and climbed out. The air smelled like dust, fuel, and old coffee. The convenience store door jingled as she entered.

Behind the counter sat an old man with skin like worn leather and a name tag that read **“Walt.”** He didn’t look up from his newspaper.

“Pump three’s dead again,” he said.

Mara blinked. “I didn’t even say anything.”

“You didn’t have to,” Walt muttered. “Nobody drives all the way out here unless something’s broke.”

2. Static

Inside, the place felt trapped in another decade. Candy bars with faded wrappers. A corkboard of lost-dog flyers older than the dogs themselves. A dusty radio hummed faintly with static.

Mara brought a bottle of water to the counter.

“Can I use your phone? My car—”

“—ain’t goin’ anywhere tonight,” Walt said, finally looking up. His eyes were pale blue, clouded but sharp. “Storm’s coming.”

Mara frowned. The night sky outside looked perfectly clear.

Then the lights flickered.

For a split second, she saw something through the window—a figure standing by the pumps.

No car. No sound.

Then nothing.

"You saw him too, huh?" Walt said softly.

3. The Ledger

Walt reached under the counter and slid a battered logbook across.

"Everyone who stops here signs in," he said. "Just in case."

The pages were filled with hundreds of names, some crossed out. The most recent entries were dated *thirty years ago*.

"This a joke?" Mara asked.

Walt didn't answer. He was staring at the window again.

The radio hissed louder, as if tuned to a different kind of silence.

A voice—barely audible—whispered, "*You shouldn't be here.*"

Mara's hands trembled. "What is this place?"

Walt smiled faintly. "Depends who's asking. Sometimes it's just a station. Sometimes it's the last stop before you figure out what you've been running from."

4. The Storm

By one a.m., the desert wind began to howl. Dust hit the windows like rain.

Mara sat in a booth drinking burnt coffee while Walt refilled the generator. Every so often, she glanced at the dark glass outside—certain she'd see that figure again.

When she finally did, it wasn't standing still.

It was walking toward the door.

"Don't open it," Walt said, voice suddenly sharp.

The handle rattled.

A low hum filled the air—like a thousand insects vibrating in unison.

And then a knock.

Once.

Twice.

Then silence.

Mara whispered, “Who *is* that?”

Walt didn’t look up. “Sometimes, it’s the person you left behind.”

5. The Photograph

She found the photo while searching for cell service near the payphone. It was tucked beneath a stack of old receipts—a Polaroid of a younger Walt standing beside a woman who looked just like Mara.

Same eyes. Same half-smile.

“What is this?” she asked.

Walt sighed. “That was my daughter. You favor her.”

“What happened to her?”

“Storm got her,” he said simply. “Long time ago. But some nights, the road brings people who look like her back.”

The fluorescent light buzzed, dimmed—and went out completely.

6. The Choice

When power returned, Walt was gone.
So was the figure outside.

Only the logbook remained, open to a blank page.
At the top, scrawled in fresh ink, were the words: *Sign to leave*.

Her pen hovered over the paper.
Then she saw it—her name already written there in Walt’s shaky handwriting.

The wind died.
The hum faded.
And the desert was still again.

7. The Morning After

At dawn, a trucker stopped for fuel.

He found the station door open, the place empty. Coffee still warm on the counter.

He flipped through the logbook absently.

The last page was dated **October 11, 2025**.

The final entry read:

Mara Finch — finally headed home.

Epilogue

Far down Highway Nine, as the sun rose over the desert, a lone sedan rolled steadily east—no driver visible behind the wheel.

The radio inside whispered faintly between stations.

“You made it.”