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After the Blackout

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Introduction

Maya Brooks never thought about how dependent her life was on things she could neither see nor touch. She lived in a modest house on Sycamore Lane, in a town where everyone knew at least half their neighbors by name. As a schoolteacher, Maya took comfort in the small, predictable routines of her days—morning coffees, the chorus of bus doors whooshing open across the block, her children staggering into the kitchen with tousled hair and tired smiles. Every morning, she'd wave her kids off to school and drive her battered Toyota across town, listening to the local news, crafting mental lesson plans, and savoring the ordinary.

Her husband Jake worked maintenance at the community center. Evenings were slow and content: board games on the porch, laughter bubbling up through the summer dusk, the scent of cut grass mingling with barbecue smoke. Weekends meant soccer games, trips to the library, and sometimes, town hall meetings where nothing much ever happened. To outsiders, life seemed unremarkable, but for Maya and her family, its comfort lay in its predictability.

That comfort collapsed on an otherwise forgettable Thursday evening. She remembered the flicker—the lights dipped, then died, then her phone screen blanked out as if the world had blinked. At first, Maya assumed it was another rolling blackout. She grabbed candles from the junk drawer and lit them one by one, waiting for the familiar whirl of the refrigerator or the warm glow of the street lamps. Instead, silence settled, thick and certain. Neighbors gathered on their porches, their faces washed in confusion and rising unease.

As the hours stretched into morning and the blackout endured far beyond anything anyone could remember, uncertainty grew into fear. Radios crackled with static. The world outside their small town felt impossibly distant—untouchable. Rumors darted from one house to the next: maybe it was a storm somewhere, maybe a cyberattack, maybe something far worse. Maya watched her own children's faces as realization dawned: grownups didn't have answers this time.

When, after three days, there was still no word from outside, Maya understood that something fundamental had changed. She joined an impromptu meeting on the school steps. The old fabric of daily life—so easily taken for granted—had unraveled. People began to grasp for leadership, direction, for any sign that the world would right itself again.

But in that charged pause, Maya felt a resolve stirring inside her. She had always been the one to calm frightened first-graders, to spot the outsider and draw them in, to

build trust where fear threatened to take hold. Now, as the sky darkened without the promise of returning light, Maya knew that survival in their new world wouldn't come from strength or weapons—it would come from the promise of hope and the courage to build something new from the ashes. The blackout was only the beginning.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Static Before the Storm

The Thursday evening had been ordinary enough to be forgettable. Maya had spent the afternoon guiding her third-graders through the finer points of long division, a task that often felt more like an exercise in extreme patience than actual teaching. She'd come home to the familiar chaos of homework and dinner prep. Her son, Leo, a whirlwind of boundless energy at eight, was attempting to construct a fort out of every single cushion in the living room, while her daughter, fourteen-year-old Chloe, was glued to her phone, a perpetual extension of her hand.

Jake, bless his methodical heart, was tinkering with something in the garage - probably a loose hinge on the shed door or a sputtering lawnmower engine. The scent of onions sautéing for their spaghetti sauce mingled with the faint, comforting whiff of gasoline and sawdust. It was the kind of evening that made Maya appreciate the quiet hum of suburban existence, a lullaby of normalcy after the delightful pandemonium of a school day.

The television was droning softly in the background, a local news broadcast about a particularly aggressive strain of kudzu taking over the county line. Maya remembered thinking, idly, that some problems were truly first-world. She stirred the simmering sauce, a little proud of how her homemade recipe always managed to coax even Leo into eating his vegetables. Chloe, meanwhile, was texting furiously, probably planning some intricate teenage social maneuver, oblivious to anything beyond the glow of her screen.

Then came the flicker. Not a gentle fade, but a sharp, almost violent blink. The television went black, its droning replaced by an abrupt silence. The refrigerator, which had been humming its steady, reliable tune for years, fell silent too. Maya's first thought was, "Oh, just great. Another brownout." These were common enough in the summer, especially when everyone in town cranked up their air conditioners.

She looked up, expecting to see Chloe sigh dramatically and Leo complain about his video game freezing. But Chloe was staring at her phone, which had gone dark, a useless black rectangle in her hand. Leo, mid-fort construction, had frozen, his eyes wide as he looked around the suddenly dim living room. The streetlights outside, usually casting a soft amber glow, were utterly dark.

"Power outage?" Jake called from the garage, his voice echoing slightly in the sudden stillness.

"Looks like it!" Maya called back, a practiced cheerfulness in her tone. "Grab the

flashlights, honey!”

She went to the junk drawer in the kitchen, a chaotic repository of loose batteries, old pens, and forgotten receipts. Her fingers fumbled for the familiar smooth plastic of the emergency flashlight. She found it, flicked the switch, and nothing. Not even a faint glimmer. She tried another, then a third. All dead. That was odd. She was meticulous about keeping them charged.

A moment later, Jake appeared in the kitchen doorway, wiping grease from his hands with a rag. He had a bewildered look on his face. “My power drill won’t work. And the garage door opener... nothing.” He gestured to his phone, equally lifeless. “Even my phone’s dead. And I just charged it.”

Outside, a ripple of confusion began to spread. A few car alarms, momentarily shocked into life by the power surge, wailed briefly before dying out. Neighbors began to emerge onto their porches, illuminated only by the faint, lingering twilight. Mrs. Henderson from next door, usually a stickler for her evening routine of watching the news, was peering anxiously into the deepening gloom.

“Anyone else’s power out?” she called, her voice a little higher than usual.

A chorus of affirmative shouts rose from down the street. It wasn’t just their block. It wasn’t just their town, even though they didn’t know it yet. The usual reassuring sounds of evening — distant traffic, the thrum of air conditioners, the faint strains of music from open windows — were gone, replaced by an eerie, profound silence.

Maya tried the light switches again, just in case. Still nothing. She went to the window and looked out at Sycamore Lane, which was now a canyon of deepening shadows. The houses, usually warm with internal glows, were dark, like empty eyesockets. The streetlights, pillars of urban comfort, were stark and black against the fading sky.

Leo, usually so boisterous, had crept up beside her, his small hand gripping her shirt. “Mommy, why are the lights off?”

“Just a big power outage, honey,” Maya said, her voice steadier than she felt. “It’ll be back on soon.” But even as she said it, a prickle of unease snaked up her spine. This felt different. This felt... complete.

Chloe, for once, had put her phone down. She was looking at Maya with an expression of dawning worry. “But the internet’s out too. And the cell towers. I can’t get a signal at all.”

Jake tried the radio in his truck. Nothing but static. He tried the car itself. The engine turned over, but the electronic dashboard remained blank, a dark, unresponsive slab.

As the sun finally dipped below the horizon, plunging the world into an unnatural, absolute darkness, the silence deepened. The comforting sounds of human activity had vanished. No distant hum of a refrigerator, no glow from a television screen, no cars whizzing by. Just the rustle of leaves in the trees and the growing murmur of confused and worried voices from the porches down the street.

Maya pulled Leo closer, her gaze sweeping across the dark, silent expanse of their familiar street. The predictability, the comfort, the very fabric of their everyday lives, had not just flickered out; it had vanished. And in the unsettling void, a chilling question began to form in her mind: what if it wasn't coming back on? The night felt endless, heavy with unspoken questions.

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