

# Chapter 1: Eleven Minutes to Dark — Why the Backup Plan Failed

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## The Night the Generator, the Alarm and the Power Station All Went Quiet

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Picture a January evening on a gravel road. The ice has been ticking against the windows since noon. At 4:49 the lights blink twice and go out, and the man inside checks his watch out of habit. Sunset is at 5:00. He has eleven minutes of gray light left.

He isn't worried at first. He did everything the ads told him to do. There is a portable generator in the shed. There is a lithium "power station" charged in the closet. There is a smart alarm panel that texts his daughter if anything goes wrong.

By 5:00 the power station is running a lamp and a phone charger. By 5:40 the generator has refused its tenth pull. The gas in the tank is from last spring. The cell tower on the ridge is on battery backup, then it isn't, and the alarm panel's little light turns amber. The furnace fan is silent. So is the well pump. By midnight the kitchen thermometer reads fifty-one degrees and falling. He owns thousands of dollars of backup equipment and none of it is making heat.

That man is a composite, a typical case built from what readers and neighbors have described to me over the years. You may recognize him. You may *be* him.

## What He Did Next Matters Most

The dangerous hour comes after the backups fail. A cold, tired man starts improvising. He thinks about rolling the generator into the garage, out of the sleet. He thinks about lighting the gas oven and leaving the door open.

Both ideas can kill him before morning. A generator running in an enclosed space can produce lethal carbon monoxide levels in under 15 minutes (CDC; U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2026-02). The federal rule is blunt:

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"Never use a generator, pressure washer, or any gasoline-powered engine inside your home, basement, or garage or less than 20 feet from any window, door, or vent." — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

If you run one at all, it stays outdoors, at least 20 feet from every window, door and vent. A battery-powered carbon monoxide detector should be sounding off inside the house. About 100 Americans die each year from carbon monoxide caused by portable generators, most of them between November and February<sup>31</sup>. Chapters 14 and 15 cover those rules in full. For now, remember that the machine meant to save him became the thing he had to guard against.

## Every Modern Backup Leans on Power, Fuel, Signal or a Subscription

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I learned this the hard way. One ice storm, my own generator sat in the shed with a carburetor gummed shut by stale gasoline. I had tested it in October and never again. My wife and I spent that night in coats at the kitchen table, listening to a battery radio and feeling foolish.

Afterward I sat down with a pencil and listed every backup we owned. Then I wrote down what each one needed in order to work. The answers fell into four piles. I call them **the Four Leashes**.

**The Four Leashes:** every modern backup is tied to power, fuel, signal or a subscription. When the storm cuts the leash, the backup stops, usually on the night you need it.

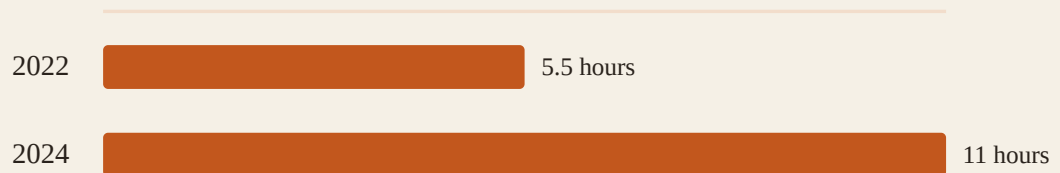
- ▶ **Power.** The power station must be charged. The pellet stove needs electricity to feed pellets. Most furnaces need it to run the blower and igniter.
- ▶ **Fuel.** The generator needs fresh gasoline, and gas goes stale. Propane needs a delivery truck that can reach your road.
- ▶ **Signal.** Smart thermostats, alarm panels and "check-in" apps need cell or internet service. Towers run on their own batteries, and those batteries run down.
- ▶ **Subscription.** Monitoring plans, app features and service contracts need a monthly payment and a working company behind them.

None of these gadgets is worthless. The trouble is stacking them. Each one adds a leash, and a long storm cuts them all at once.

## Why the Leashes Are Getting Shorter

Outages are lasting longer. In 2024, U.S. electricity customers averaged about 11 hours without power, the most in a decade and nearly twice the average of the ten years before<sup>33</sup>. That average was about 5.5 hours in 2022<sup>33</sup>.

### Average hours without power per U.S. customer



Average hours without power per U.S. customer

An average hides the worst cases. When Winter Storm Fern hit in January 2026, more than a million customers lost power across the South and East. By January 26 more than 30 deaths had been reported, and officials warned some Southern areas could be dark for weeks rather than days<sup>19, 7</sup>. Chapter 2 digs into why rural lines come back last.

**161** of the 246 deaths in Texas's 2021 winter storm were from hypothermia, and **125** of those victims were 60 or older<sup>24</sup>.

Read that twice. Most of those people didn't die outdoors in a ditch. We'll look closely at where they died, and why, in Chapter 3.

## What the Frontier Household Relied On Instead

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A reader on a farm-and-tractor forum put it plainly. He lost power for a week during a winter ice storm, with nothing but electric heat. Afterward he installed a wood stove and started cutting and storing his own firewood. Backup heat that didn't need the grid became his first priority (TractorByNet forum).

He didn't buy a smarter gadget. He went backward, toward the way a cabin family kept warm. As I read it, their approach rested on a few habits that needed no leash at all:

1. **Heat one room, not the whole house.** Families gathered where the fire was. The rest of the house was allowed to go cold.
2. **Keep the heat in.** They stuffed gaps with rags, hung quilts over doors and windows, and kept ceilings low.
3. **Store heat in heavy things.** Stone hearths, warm bricks and water held warmth long after the fire burned down.
4. **Warm the body first.** Wool, bedding and a covered bed did work the room couldn't.
5. **Keep fuel you can see and stack.** A woodpile doesn't need a truck, a tower or a password.

None of this is nostalgia. Pioneer houses burned down, and people choked on bad chimneys. We won't copy their risks. We'll borrow their thinking and add what they lacked: battery carbon monoxide detectors, proper stove clearances, and a fire extinguisher within reach.



## What This Book Will and Won't Ask of You

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You've been sold enough. So here is my promise, in writing.

### What I Won't Ask

- ▶ **No subscriptions.** Nothing in this book stops working if a company goes under or a payment bounces.
- ▶ **No big-ticket systems.** The warm room in Chapter 13 is built mostly from garage and hardware-store parts over one weekend.
- ▶ **No ladders you can't trust.** Where a job needs height, I'll show you a safer way or tell you to hire it out.
- ▶ **No viral tricks.** The clay-pot candle heater and the salt bucket get an honest test in Chapter 18, with the physics laid out.
- ▶ **No improvised burners.** Grills, camp stoves and gas ovens are never used for indoor heat. Chapter 15 explains why, with the records to back it.

#### What I Will Ask

- ▶ **One room.** You'll choose it, measure it and seal it before the storm chooses for you.
- ▶ **One afternoon with your bills.** Chapter 7 shows you where your money leaks, for free.
- ▶ **A few safety tools.** At least one battery-powered carbon monoxide detector near where you sleep, a fire extinguisher, and a metal bucket.
- ▶ **A practice night.** You'll sleep in your warm room once, on purpose, while the power is still on.

**Do this tonight: the Leash Inventory (20 minutes, pencil and paper)**

- ✓ Walk the house and list every backup you own: generator, power station, heater, alarm, lantern, radio.
- ✓ Beside each one, write which leash it needs: power, fuel, signal or subscription.
- ✓ Circle any item with fuel older than six months or a battery you haven't checked this season.
- ✓ Count how many items on your list make **heat with no leash at all**.
- ✓ Keep the sheet. You'll use it in Chapter 23.

If that last count is zero, you're not alone, and you're not foolish. You're the man this book was written for.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **List your backups by leash** (power, fuel, signal, subscription) and assume a long storm cuts all four at once.
- ▶ **Plan to heat one room**, not the whole house. That's where every frontier habit starts.
- ▶ **Never move a generator indoors or into the garage.** Keep it outside, at least 20 feet from windows, doors and vents, with a battery CO detector running inside.
- ▶ **Test before you trust.** A backup you haven't run this season is a hope, not a plan.
- ▶ **Spend on sealing and safety first**, gadgets last.

Eleven minutes of daylight is enough time to close a door, grab a quilt and move into one room. It isn't enough time to fix a generator or wait on a truck. That raises a harder question. If outages keep stretching from hours toward days, how long should your plan actually hold, and why does the power reach your road last?