



L.R. BURKARD

AN EMP
SURVIVAL THRILLER
Book One

PULSE
WORLD GONE DARK

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PULSE: WORLD GONE DARK

Please note: Pulse shows how three different families cope after an EMP (Electromagnetic pulse). One is secular, one Christian, and one nominally Christian. This excerpt is of the first family.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

PULSE

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PART ONE

ANDREA

AGE 16, JANUARY 11, DAY ONE

So my dad got all upset because when he went to leave for work the car went halfway down the driveway and died. His precious Mercedes. I was just walking out to wait for the school bus and he hurried toward me in a huff, yelling something about how the starter wouldn't turn over.

"What'd you do to the car, Andrea?"

I stared at him. I couldn't believe he was trying to pin it on me. "Nothing."

"What'd you do to it?" he asked again. I turned and stalked blindly down the driveway to wait by the mailbox, my heart pounding. Normally I'd enjoy the crunch of snow beneath my boots and the way the pines lining our driveway are blanketed in white, but I barely noticed either.

Leave it to Dad to ruin my day before it starts.

Yesterday Mom let me practice driving for about thirty-five minutes and the Mercedes drove just fine. So I'm supposed to know what happened? I'm guessing it's frozen because we're having a mean cold spell. The bottom line is Dad loves his car more than me (he loves lots of things more than me). I blinked away tears that felt cold on my skin the moment they appeared. Where was that bus? I wanted to see my friends and forget about home.

I waited, beginning to freeze. Designer boots aren't made for warmth. I waited a long time; I knew the bus should have come already but I didn't want to go back—Dad would say I overslept and missed its purpose or something like that.

Finally, I had to go in. Sure enough, there was Dad, hands on hips, glaring at me. "Why are you back?"

"The bus didn't come."

He stared as if he didn't believe me. "So walk to school."

I gaped at him. Was he kidding? We live, like, five miles from my high school. My mother called him from the kitchen. I turned and stared out the window. Our secluded circular drive was a winter wonderland. In nice weather, it's a beautifully manicured front, maintained meticulously by landscapers. Today it was a world of white, so cold the snow glittered. No way was I going to walk to school. Anyway, my father says things he doesn't mean when he's mad, so I took off my coat and boots in the mudroom. There's rarely an ounce of mud in it but that's what we call it.

I went to heat water for hot chocolate, but Mom said, "Nothing's working, Andrea. *Nothing*. We're having a blackout." Our house is like, all electric—the stove, our heat, and even the pump for the well. So when we lose electricity we're pretty much without everything. Mom's sort of freaking out about it. I'll bet she and Dad had one of their fights. We've lost electricity before, and the world didn't end. But when my parents fight, as opposed to just being mad at each other, everything and anything makes them crazy.

Dad's been outside tinkering with his car for the longest time, but it still won't start. I hope he can fix it. I can't stand the thought of being home all day with him here. My little brothers are home (their bus didn't come, either) and so I'm stuck with the whole family but no one to talk to.

I'd call Lexie except I can't get my stupid cellphone to work. Of all times for this to happen! I charged that phone all last night and we had power then because when I woke up my alarm clock showed the time—5:05AM. I asked Mom if I could borrow her cell and she said, "All the phones are dead. Something's going on."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing's working!" She tossed her hair back, looking exasperated.

I felt creeped out. "The house phone doesn't work?"

"No. Nothing." She took off with baby Lily to put her down for a nap. So, I can't text anyone or check online to see

if my friends posted anything. I can't watch YouTube or listen to music. My phone should work, but it doesn't. There's nothing to do. I may as well have gone to school.

Okay, so Dad said power lines might have been knocked down by the weight of the snow. That doesn't explain why we have no cell phones but, whatever. I don't care why this is happening. I just want it to be over.

Mom is still freaked out, nervously going around the kitchen like she doesn't know what to do with herself. She taped the refrigerator shut so we can't let out the cold air, and she unplugged all the appliances. I heard my father come in the side door to the garage, muttering to himself.

"Why didn't he take the Lexus to work?" I kept my voice low so he wouldn't hear me. He preferred the Mercedes, but I figured he wouldn't be picky at a time like this.

My mom turned, went to the counter, and leaned against it, her arms folded across her chest. My mother is a pretty woman, slim, and a dark brunette like me, but she often looks strained and unhappy. I figure if I were married to my dad, I'd look that way too.

"That's not working either," she said.

"BOTH cars are dead? At the same time? How did that happen?" "I have no idea." She looked disgusted, went to the sink, and started rinsing dishes with water from a plastic jug.

"Great, I hope that doesn't last." One day with my father was more than enough for me. I thought of his motorcycle. The motorcycle was Dad's nod to freedom, to his old self, the man he was before the corporate monster mentality owned him. He hardly used it even in good weather, but he never got rid of it.

"Too bad it's snow cover or he could use the motorcycle."

My mom didn't turn around but said, in a monotone voice, "That isn't working either."

This shocked me. "He TRIED the motorcycle? In this weather?"

"Just to see if it would start."

So, Dad was home for the day. I decided to keep a low profile by disappearing into my room. Upstairs I got in bed and picked up my iPad. When it wouldn't power on, I flung it on the mattress and stared at it. Why wasn't anything working? Even with a power outage, my cell phone and iPad

should work.

How depressing! I wished I could talk to Lexie. We'd laugh about having the day off from school because Mr. Sherman, our World Geography teacher would be totally frazzled that class was off schedule. Mr. Sherman follows his schedule like a Nazi. At least that was something to look forward to at school tomorrow—hearing Mr. Sherman bemoan our day off.

I tried to sleep but got bored, so I headed back downstairs. The boys were sliding down the wide mahogany banisters of our marble staircase. They're not supposed to do that, but I stood watching, enjoying their glee. The real estate agent who sold us the house called the staircase a "showstopper." I think it's why my dad bought this stupidly big house. Just to show off. Anyway, as I waited to see them crash at the bottom, I suddenly heard a strange, muffled sound. In a few seconds, I realized it was baby Lily—wailing from her room!

I rushed down the hall and into her room. She was on her back in the crib really going at it, screaming like a little banshee, arms and legs flailing. I leaned over to pick her up. Her wide-eyed terror made me hold her to my chest, saying softly, "Poor baby! Poor Lily! It's okay. We didn't hear you! Andrea's here."

I looked at the baby monitor and realized we'd forgotten it wasn't working! Lily's first stirrings are usually heard by one of us, so she never has to work up to full-fledged crying before we get her. She was unused to being ignored this long. Even in my arms, her little lower lip trembled and her whole tiny body shuddered now and then. I held her close, rocking back and forth before changing her diaper, but she continued fussing so I knew she wanted my mother.

Lily has the biggest, most beautiful blue eyes. I don't know where she got them because all the rest of us have green or brown, but I'm glad she does. She doesn't have a lot of hair yet, but I think it's going to be blonde and that's different from the rest of us too.

Downstairs I found Mom searching for batteries in a closet. "Mom, Lily was screaming her head off. This dumb house is so big we couldn't hear her!"

“Oh, my goodness!” Mom took the baby, who let out a gurgle of satisfaction. Snuggling Lily to her chest, Mom covered her little head with kisses and headed for the kitchen. “How did you hear her?”

“I was in the hall.” “Did you change her?”

“Yup.”

“Thank you.”

She looked upset. “She’s fine, mom. Babies cry.”

She reached for the fridge and then stopped. “Oh, I can’t heat the bottle.” She looked at me.

“I’ll make her a new one.”

“She likes them warm. How will we warm it?”

“Don’t we have anything?” I asked. “Doesn’t Dad have a space heater?”

She frowned. “It’s electric.”

I sighed, turning to get a clean bottle from the cupboard. “Well, she’s going to have to drink it at room temperature today.” Mom stood nearby as I measured the powdered formula into a bottle, then added water from a jug. She took one of Lily’s hands to kiss it but gasped.

“Her little hand is cold! I put her down for her nap not even thinking how she’d get cold up there.” She tore off a sock to feel her foot, then put a hand behind her neck and sighed. “Her neck is warm. That’s a good sign.”

“She’s fine, Mom.” But I had noticed the temperature in the house dropping too. Who would have thought one day without power would do that? I took over hunting down batteries and heard my dad come in. He said he’d spoken to the neighbors to see if they knew anything. Our plat has about five roads and maybe two dozen houses. Turns out none of our closest neighbors were home, but he found a family at the far end of the street who are in the same boat we are. Everything’s dead—cars, computers, phones, cell phones. Like us, they’re hoping only this area was affected and that outside our neighborhood everything is okay.

If nothing changes by tomorrow, Dad’s gonna walk a few miles down the main road with a neighbor to find out. He says we’re blind as bats with no TV or radio or phones. It’s so depressing. I hate being stuck at home with this useless family and nothing to do.

EVENING

I never knew a house could get cold this quickly. We really felt

it when the sun went down. Whenever we've had a power outage before, Dad took us to a hotel. Now we're stuck here. We have this gigantic fireplace—at least, I've always thought it's gigantic, but now that we need it for heat it seems hardly big enough. It's really the stone-flagged mantle and dark mahogany bookcases flanking it that make it seem huge. Anyway, Dad spent a long time getting a fire going, even with a fire starter and we still have to stay close to feel its warmth. We moved all the furniture into a small circle around it.

Mom got a camp stove from the garage (which I forgot we had. We haven't gone camping since before the twins were born) and by putting it over the logs, we could heat the tea kettle. Now we can warm the baby's bottles and I finally got to drink that hot chocolate I've been wanting all day!

We sat around the room together, which is hugely odd. My family never sits and hangs together. Well, not with my dad, anyway. The boys dragged in a bucket of building blocks and the baby was asleep in a portable crib near the fireplace.

I looked at my father. "When do you think power will be back?" When he didn't answer right away—he seemed to be thinking about it—my mom said, "I hope it's soon. But I don't get it—how come everything is out, even our cell phones and cars?" She looked at my dad as though he ought to know.

He shook his head. "I don't know. Those cars should start if it's zero degrees and it only got down to twelve today." He stared into the fireplace. "If it was only one of the cars, I could understand it. A fluke. But none of them work. I don't have an answer to that."

With nothing else to do, I tried reading with a flashlight, but I guess the batteries are dying because the light was dim. We have a few candles on the dining room table but it's pretty dark in here, even with the fireplace. My little brothers are giggling and being silly like it's a family camp-out, but my mom and dad aren't playing along. The baby is blissfully unaware that anything's changed; I envy her. Dad is worried because all we have are a few logs left from the holidays to burn besides some fire starters and cardboard boxes in the basement—but that's it. And the temperature is now below zero outside.

I'm not too worried—we've never had a long outage before so why would we now?

I tried to sleep in my room but woke in the middle of the night—*freezing*. Carrying blankets and my pillow, I groped my way in the dark and went downstairs where everyone else was in the family room. Mom and the baby had the best spot, asleep on a sofa moved in front of the big stone fireplace. The boys, on the floor in front of that. Dad was asleep on another couch, moved adjacent to Mom's. I put down

my blanket and pillow to sleep on the rug like the boys. But I'm only warm on the side facing the fireplace. And I wish I had my music. I'd give anything for one working phone! If I at least had that I might be able to forget about everything else. I hope power is back by tomorrow. This house is lonely and quiet and boring without electricity.

JANUARY 12
DAY TWO

Wretched morning. I had to get ready for school with no hot water or shower or anything—and then Dad walked out with me when I went for the bus. He wanted to talk to the driver and see what he could find out about the outage.

The bus never came. I was so disappointed. I'd prefer a normal day at school (even without a shower) to this grind. Home with nothing working. The whole time we stood out there waiting Dad said, like, two words to me. Sometimes he creeps me out.

So, the living room looks like a campsite with our extra blankets and pillows around. We have to dress in layers to keep anywhere near warm. If I need to use the restroom, I wear my coat! Speaking of which, the toilets stopped working last night. My father wasn't too concerned because he figured we can keep them flushing by bringing in water from the well. Even though it's powered by electricity, we have a manual hand pump. But after he went out to bring in the first bucket of water he returned shortly, cursing up a storm. The pump handle was frozen. And when he tried to force it to operate, it came apart right in front of his eyes. Seems he should have slowly defrosted it with heat instead of trying to force it to work. Now it's useless!

So, I was given the lovely task of hauling in snow—bucket after bucket of it. I am SICK of snow. We have four bathrooms in this ridiculous house, and I was supposed to fill *all* the tubs. After filling just one my arms and legs were aching, and my hands were starting to freeze. I begged Mom to let me rest. The layer of ice on everything makes it real work to get that stuff in a bucket and then into the house and then into the bathroom.

Mom said I could do more tomorrow. I thought, *Perfect! We'll probably have power by then!* I got warmed up by the fireplace and then went up to my room to hide. I didn't want Dad to see me and make me do more hauling. While I was out there, he did help a little because he was making a depression in a wall of snow to put a cooler with the rest of the food that was in our freezer. (Even though the house feels so

cold, it's still colder outside and he thinks it will keep better out there.) But his mood was still foul because of the broken pump, and I had to ignore a good deal of "colorful" language while he dug.

I asked my mother why he's so angry. She says it's because he can't get to work or even call in and it makes him feel crazy. He's a workaholic, so this is sort of killing him. He's also worried he'll get fired for not going in. And she thinks he's worried that other people are still going in and getting their jobs done while he's helpless out here in the plat, which is kind of isolated by surrounding farmland.

"Why would they fire him?" I asked. "He can't get to work when there's no power and no vehicles."

"They won't fire him," she answered, taking the single big black pot we've been using for heating food. She opened a few cans of stew, emptying them into the pot and I followed her as she brought it to the fireplace and positioned it on the camp stove. "He's just worried because he's like that."

It figures that my father is more upset about work going on without him than he is about what's happening here. This is the gist of what's really getting to Dad. HE CAN'T DISAPPEAR TO WORK AND BURY HIMSELF IN HIS JOB. What if his co-workers have power? What if things are going on without him as usual? He can't handle the thought. He's worse than I am about having to live without my stuff working.

A strange thought hit me, though. Maybe he's just afraid. He's used to being in control and feeling like he's good at what he does, like in his office. He's in upper management and calls the shots. Here, I don't think he knows how to take care of us with this outage. I think he feels as powerless as our gadgets.

When I returned to the living room the boys were doing a puzzle on the floor. Mom had the baby on her lap. Our useless big-screen TV sits in the corner like an altar. At first, I thought Mom was staring at it, but she wasn't. She was staring at nothing, lost in thought. I want to throw a sheet over that huge, silent TV. It's just a reminder of what we can't do.

JANUARY 13 DAY THREE

I woke up to find Dad's been burning my books for heat! I can't believe it. Of all the stuff he could have picked, of course, it had to be books that were mine. And he had the nerve to complain they weren't burning well! He says today we have to scour the property for branches and anything that will burn or else he'll start using furniture!

"Can't we wait and see if the power comes back?" I asked.

"It's ten degrees outside. We can't wait."

It's not like we have a forest out there, either. Our property is one acre of carefully landscaped lawn and flowers—when it's not covered in snow. We have only a small stand of trees and bushes before you reach someone else's property. Mom calls it a natural privacy fence. Dad said it's the best place we've got for finding anything to feed the fire.

We've never had long outages before. We were always lucky, even after a bad storm that took out electricity for thousands of people, 'cos we live near a substation. Since they always get that up and running quickly, we've always had power restored really fast. After last year's hurricane, we only lost our electricity for a day and a half. And my cell phone still worked. And our cars started. *What is going on?*

Dad walked all the way to that power station today. Normally you can't walk on the main road, at least not safely. If you leave the plat you take your life in your hands because everybody speeds out there. But today it was eerie quiet, Dad said, and he passed four cars that were abandoned in the middle of the road. He wanted to ask questions, but the substation was empty. He's not sure if it's empty because there's nothing they can do or because no one could get to it. Another thing—usually if you get close to the station, you can hear wires crackling. Today Dad said he heard only one thing: a whole lotta nothing.

I want to wash my hair. And I really want to talk to Lexie. I wish I was at school just so I could do something normal instead of having to haul in snow and now look for wood! And how will it even burn if it's frozen?

I trudged out to the stand of bushes and trees hoping someone was going to lose their job over this. Somebody somewhere must have done something wrong to cause this power failure. If you ask me, heads should roll!

But I was glad to be alone for a change. Even the silence didn't bother me. Snow always muffles sounds, but today it felt different. It took a while for me to realize it was because there wasn't a single sound of civilization; no one warming a car engine before leaving for work or to go shopping; no one using a power blower to clear snow; no one's radio or television turned up too loud, wafting out from their house. There wasn't a single sound except my own feet crunching in the snow.

I didn't find much to burn. Sure, there were bushes, but I had nothing to cut them with. I gathered the few sticks and branches sticking out but everything else was covered. When I went in complaining my feet felt like ice, Dad said, "Just be glad we have a fireplace." I wanted to give a sarcastic answer because he's said about a hundred times, 'It's a good thing we have a fireplace.' A hundred times. And if you ask me, a fireplace is not good enough, because unless I'm right up next to it, *I'm still cold.*

EVENING

Jim is back! Jim is our neighbor on the right. Dad stepped outside and saw a faint flickering light coming from his house and went to speak to him right away. Turns out Jim was at Walmart when the power went out, which is about thirteen miles from here. He spent the first night at the store with other people who were stranded, but he's been walking home ever since. He's not a young man, or he might have made it sooner. He managed to bring one bag from the store. He said he bought a lot more but had to leave it in his car.

"So, there's no power there either," my mom said flatly.

Dad shook his head. "Nope. Same as here. You should have seen Jim. He looked awful. He barely made it home. He stopped by a few roadside fires people had going, but he thinks he may have frostbite on both his feet."

"My goodness," said Mom. "Poor man." Then, "Does anyone know why?"

"Why what?"

"Why this happened to the electricity? Was it the snow? And what about cars and cell phones?"

"No one knows for sure."

My mother sighed. "Did you ask him about water?"

Jim's well has a manual pump like ours which hopefully isn't broken. We've been going through the bottled water my mom buys to mix up baby formula for Lily, but we're almost out. Hauling in snow and having to boil it is sheer misery. I hope his pump works.

"I'll ask him tomorrow. He didn't want to talk right now." He paused. "He said if I had a gun, I should make sure it's ready to use." You could hear the surprise in my father's voice.

"What does that mean?" I asked. My mother was waiting to hear his answer too.

"He said we might need to protect our homes. Looting could start soon if help doesn't come. If the power doesn't return. He reminded

me of what happened after Katrina.”

“But we’re out in the country. Who’s going to loot us?” Mom asked.

Dad shrugged. “I think Jim’s a little paranoid.”

“Did he see any looting going on?” Mom persisted.

Dad nodded. “Yup. He said people were starting to panic because Walmart wouldn’t accept anything but cash. And some people started walking out with their arms full of stuff they hadn’t paid for.” He shrugged. “I mean, who carries cash today?”

“But if you did have cash,” I said, “you could buy food and water. At least people in cities can buy that stuff. Unlike us, out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Dad gave me a dark look. “Yeah. For a few days. And then it all runs out. And then they come looking for more.”

“Well, they won’t find it here,” I quipped. I’d been noticing our pantry wasn’t all too stocked. I didn’t usually pay much attention to that stuff since it was Mom’s job to shop and cook. But already we were eating the less desirable items from the pantry like peanut butter and jelly. The boys like this so for them that’s just dandy. I would be fine if I never ate peanut butter again in my life.

Anyway, we’re going to run out of food, and then what? Nobody knows how long this is going to last. And no one knows why it’s happening. I wish I could get online and ask my friends. I wish we could watch the news and find out. I feel so alone. Another thing; the quiet inside the house is driving me crazy. Outside it seemed okay, even restful. But in here? I never realized how appliances make noise, but with nothing working in the house, there’s a strange silence that is grating on me. It’s like a lull before the storm. It’s quiet but not *peaceful*.

And I think the storm has already hit.

JANUARY 14 DAY FOUR

Today is the FOURTH day without power in this freezing house. I hate it. I can hardly believe it’s been four full days. I never thought this would happen to *us*. I know other people have experienced long outages after a bad storm or tornado, but we didn’t have a bad storm! We had snow, and it froze overnight, but that’s happened before without causing a power failure. I’m sick to death at how nothing is working. I WANT TO TEXT MY FRIENDS. I WANT TO TALK TO SOMEONE. I WANT TO USE MY COMPUTER.

It would help if we knew what was going on and how long we’ll

have to wait for power to come back. But there's no way to know anything—I feel crazy.

Dad went to the main road hoping to get information from someone—anyone—but when he got back his mood was darker than ever. I heard him talking to Mom.

“Yeah, I saw people. Pulling sleds loaded with stuff.” “Why?” asked Mom.

“They were heading to town to look for an emergency shelter.”

“Maybe we should go there,” I said.

“You want to walk to town in this cold?” Mom said. “That's five miles. I won't take Lily out in this weather.” She looked at my father. “Maybe if the car is working...?”

He shook his head. “Nope. I've tried it every day.”

“Do you think there is a shelter in town?” she asked.

“I have no idea.” He shrugged. “Maybe in the Civic Center; or the school gym. Other than those places, I don't know where they'd be able to accommodate a lot of people.”

I thought of trying to squeeze into the gymnasium with people I knew from town and thought better of wanting to go. Who would want to be stuck inside with all those people? Even friends. I hadn't showered in three days and my hair felt like dry spaghetti. Then I wondered if they might have running water. If they did, I'd go, no matter how I looked. Hot, running water—the idea filled me with longing. “If there was a shelter would there be running water?” I asked.

“Not unless they've got power,” said Dad. He looked at my mom. “If nothing changes by tomorrow, I'll make the walk into town and see what's what.”

“What about those big water towers?” Mom asked. “They would still work, wouldn't they? Because of gravity?”

“For a couple days, maybe longer,” Dad replied. “But once the pressure falls, they'll fail, just like everything else.”

I thought of the three jugs of water we had left for baby Lily's bottles. I got up and put on my gloves and a pullover hat.

“Where you going, Andi?” asked Aiden, scampering over to me with bright eyes. He looked utterly normal. The twins, seven years old, weren't feeling nearly as deprived as I was. They missed video games and television but didn't seem to mind that nothing else worked. They layered t-shirts under their clothes as if it were second nature and couldn't care less that hot running water was a thing of the past. They liked the whole family being in one room every day.

I tousled Aiden's hair. “I'm gonna collect more snow. I think we might need it.” Mom looked appreciatively at me, though she said

nothing. Dad was elsewhere, lost in thought. He was often like that; present, but not really there. I wondered what he was so busy thinking about.

“Can I help?” Aiden asked, looking up at me eagerly. “You certainly can!” I replied.

“I can too!” yelled Quentin, not to be outdone by his brother.

I found two mop buckets this time and Mom gave the boys empty Chinese food plastic tubs. She stood at the door and received our snow-laden containers to take them to the nearest bathtub, emptied them, and returned the containers for us to fill again. With the boys and Mom helping, we were able to fill up all the tubs. I was exhausted when we finally scrambled back inside and settled in front of the fireplace.

As I sat there cross-legged with Aiden and Quentin against me, their little faces red from the cold, it felt like we were a cozy family. Suddenly, I loved it. I enjoyed the fire too, its warmth and mesmerizing depths. I liked the way different colors appeared within the flames, and how the crackle of a spark now and then popped out like mini fireworks.

To my delight, Mom filled the kettle with snow and announced she was making hot chocolate. She brought in granola bars and crackers on a tray. The boys got a burst of energy and started dancing around the room.

Then Lily woke up and started fussing. I was ready to get her, but Mom asked my father to. It was the weirdest thing: when he picked up the baby, I saw no emotion on his face. He sat down holding her, and I couldn't help staring. It occurred to me that I never saw him holding her; Mom always had her. I wondered why, but I didn't say anything. He still seemed to be elsewhere anyway, even while he held her. He wasn't looking down or enjoying her the way most people enjoy a baby. He was staring at the fire, lost in thought. I felt sorry for Lily. My father is a loser! I don't care how much money he makes. I will never marry a man just because he makes a lot of money. I want a guy who looks into my eyes and sees who I am. I don't understand how my mother fell in love with my father. It seems impossible.

EVENING

It's dark and I'm restless. There's nothing to do except read. Dad found a couple more flashlights in the garage so I'm using one, but it's a pain. A flashlight doesn't seem heavy until you have to keep it at the right angle for reading. A candle isn't bright enough unless I hold my

book right up next to it and that's not comfortable and if I get sleepy my book would burn. So, I only read a chapter and I'm tired.

We had the last of the burgers tonight. I can't wait for this to end so we can get more food.

I miss hearing from my friends more than anything. I picked up my cell phone for the thousandth time just to see if it might work. (I knew it wouldn't, but I couldn't resist trying.) When it just stayed black and didn't start, I felt like throwing it in the fireplace. I would have too, except my father was in the room. I didn't feel like getting yelled at.

JANUARY 15 DAY FIVE

We are in much worse shape than I thought. The power outage isn't temporary like in the past! I was helping Mom with lunch, taking out paper plates, napkins, and plastic forks, while Dad was outside grilling hotdogs. Suddenly she said, "Your father thinks he knows what's going on."

I stopped and stared at her. "What? What's going on?"

She gave me a look. "He won't say. You know your father."

"Oh, wonderful!" I was tempted to get on my mother's case and tell her she ought to force it out of him. We had a right to know, didn't we? But I thought about how moody and angry my dad is, and how if you push him, he just flies into a rage.

Mom added, "He says he doesn't want to believe it yet."

"Believe what?" I asked.

"What might be happening?"

"I don't get it. What might be happening?"

Mom turned and folded her arms. "I'm wondering if we might be at war or something." I felt a chill creep down my spine which had nothing to do with the cold. Such a thought had never occurred to me. My idea was a major storm; I never would have thought of war.

"Who would we be at war with?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. North Korea? Russia? China? Or maybe radical Muslims. They've hated us forever."

I thought about that. "My world history teacher said Islam is a peaceful religion."

"Ha!" said my mother. "Tell that to the Christians who have been beheaded over there this year!" I'd forgotten Mom had studied Eastern religions in school and still followed world events. She paused, and said more quietly, "He's evidently unfamiliar with the

teachings of the Koran. That doesn't say much for his grasp of world history, either. More Christians were killed for their faith by Muslims in the past one hundred years than the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust."

I stared at her. The Holocaust was another thing my teacher had been fuzzy about. I wasn't actually sure how many had died in the Holocaust, but I didn't want to say so. "How would war stop our cars from starting?" I asked.

My mom sighed and shrugged. "I don't know."

Later while we ate hotdogs sitting around the fireplace, my father mentioned that some of the people he'd seen yesterday were trying to get home. They were stranded when the grid went down.

"What do you mean, 'the grid went down?'" I asked.

"The electric grid," he said. "It's down, ruined, kaput."

"How could that happen?" asked my mother, putting down her hotdog. I felt my stomach flip. Surely what he was saying was not possible.

"I was talking to Walt, you know, the guy down the road who owns the convenience store in town?" She nodded. "He said a solar pulse could do this. It affects all electronic circuitry, everything that has electronic parts."

"At least it's not war," Mom said. "And I guess that explains the cars."

He nodded. "And our phones, and computers, you name it."

"But we didn't feel anything," I said. "How could that happen without our knowing it?"

Dad spread out his hands. "Okay, a giant sun flare sends out this huge pulse, a magnetic wave, but people don't feel it. It doesn't affect us. But anything electronic gets fried."

"So how long does it last?" I asked.

"How long does what last?"

"The solar pulse. How long until it's over?"

"Oh, it's over," he explained. "It's over and done with."

"Okay," I said, trying to understand the implications, "so now we can fix everything?"

Dad looked as though my question annoyed him. "Well, that's the million-dollar question, isn't it?" He sounded angry. "How to fix everything. How do you get a new car motor? Or how do you know what got fried and needs to be replaced? And even if we have the parts—parts that did NOT get fried—how do you get them where they need to be if nothing's working?"

Mom had a disturbed look on her face, mirroring what I felt. I said, "You're making it sound like we're going to be like this for a long time."

He nodded, and a dark look came over his face. "That's exactly right." Mom stared off sadly into the fireplace. Dad stood. "I'm getting more wood to burn." We knew he meant he was going to scrounge around the basement and attic for old furniture.

Mom said, "Please don't use anything valuable."

He put his hands on his hips. "What's valuable if we freeze to death protecting it?" I felt bad for my mother because she cares about furniture and antiques and things like that, but I also hoped my dad would find something to burn. I was frightened by what he'd told us. And angry, but I didn't know who to be angry at. If it was really the sun that caused this mess, there was no one to blame. No one but God, I guess. Was God punishing us?

We certainly could have gone to church more. Now it was too late. We couldn't go anywhere.

Thoughts kept coming at me. If I'd been at school when it happened, I would have had to walk miles—in this weather—to get home. The idea scared me. I thought of the people still trying to reach home. That could have been any one of us! I wondered if that was the reason we hadn't seen our two closest neighbors. I thought of Chase Jones, this guy at school. He lives the furthest of any of us—thirty-five minutes by bus. His house was right on the border of school districts, so he was allowed to choose which one to go to and his mother chose ours. Imagine if he'd been at school when everything shut down! The thought made me shudder.

I felt as though gloom was deepening all around me like I was being engulfed. Suddenly I couldn't stand it. I was suffocating. I shot to my feet.

"Where are you going?" my mother asked.

"I don't know." I was embarrassed to find I was crying. She had a look of pain on her face; I knew she felt bad for me, but she just nodded, so I started walking aimlessly around the house, moving, I had to keep moving. I was tired of sitting in one stupid room all day to stay warm; tired of wearing heavy garments or my coat in the house; tired of not being able to take a shower, listen to music, or call a friend. I ended up in my bedroom, fell onto my bed and buried my face in my pillow and sobbed. I didn't want to believe what my dad said. If I believed this situation wasn't going to change for months and months, it would be unbearable. How was I supposed to survive alone with my family for months? How could I live without any friends or music or the

internet? I felt as though I'd just received a death sentence. Goodbye, life. Hello, wretchedness.

After crying my eyes out, I suddenly realized my father didn't know for SURE that we'd had a solar pulse. Even Walt, that store owner, didn't know for sure. They were guessing. *Guessing!* That meant they could be wrong. I grabbed a tissue and blew my nose. Maybe I was all upset for nothing. Maybe I'd wake up tomorrow and everything would be back to normal.

I went back downstairs, my stomach grumbling with hunger. I raided the pantry for cheese crackers and opened a can of ravioli. I felt better after I'd eaten. But I don't think it was the food that helped me as much as my decision not to believe what my dad said about a solar pulse. Right now, I feel sure things will turn around soon.

They have to!

END OF EXCERPT

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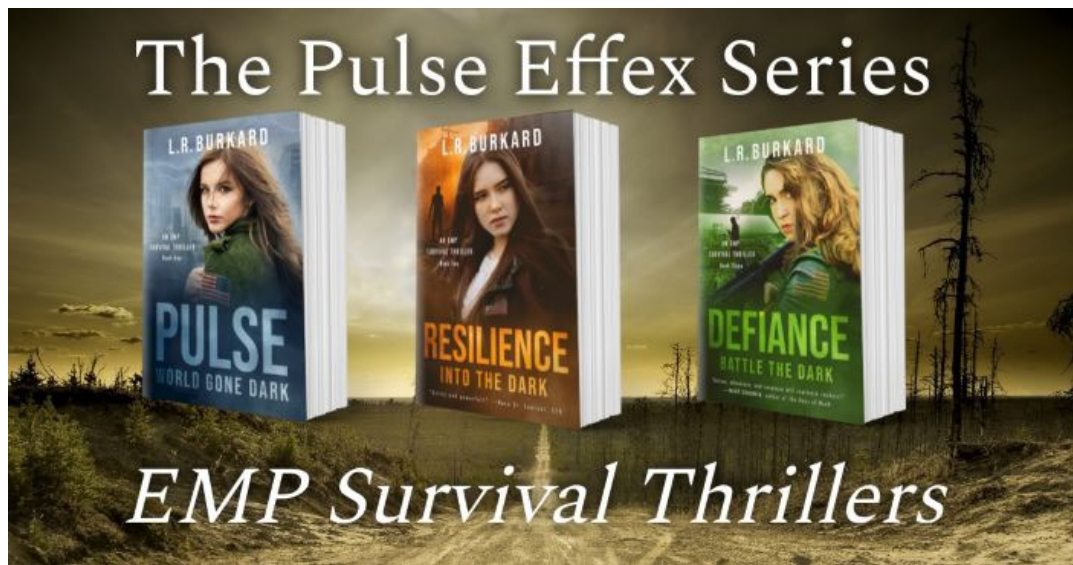
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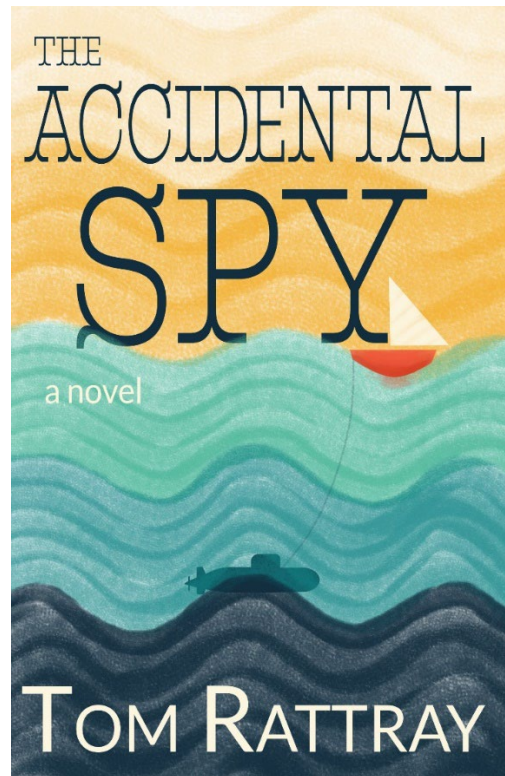


PULSE Book One Table of Contents

PART ONE: ANDREA 7
PART TWO: LEXIE..... 40
PART THREE: SARAH..... 107
PART FOUR: ANDREA 152
PART FIVE: LEXIE..... 160
PART SIX: SARAH 185
PART SEVEN: THREE MONTHS
 ANDREA..... 204
 LEXIE..... 215
 SARAH..... 223
 LEXIE..... 235
 SARAH..... 267
 LEXIE..... 270
 SARAH..... 278
 LEXIE..... 281
FOR REFLECTION 285
ABOUT THE AUTHOR 286
AFTERWORD..... 287
BONUS BOOK EXCERPT
 Resilience: Into the Dark 288
BONUS LIST: 35 Items that are First to Go
In Any Disaster 338

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