

PULSE

L.R. Burkard

*What do you do when the whole world
suddenly...stops?*

THE PULSE EFFEX SERIES Book One

Cover by Design Xpressions, Dayton, OH
Contact TheDesignXpressions@gmail.com

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PULSE

Copyright © 2015 by Linore Rose Burkard
Published by Lilliput Press, Ohio

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Burkard, L.R.

Pulse / L.R. Burkard

ISBN 978-0-9792154-8-3 (print)

ISBN 978-0-9792154-7-6 (ebook)

1. Apocalyptic—Fiction 2. Post-Apocalyptic—Fiction 3. YA Suspense—Fiction 4. Christian—Fiction

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Printed in the United States of America

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 towards me in a huff, yelling something about how the starter wouldn't even turn over.

"What'd you do to the car, Andrea?" he demanded. I stared at him. I couldn't believe he was trying to pin it on me.

"Nothing."

"What'd you do to it, huh?" he asked again. I turned and stalked blindly down the driveway to wait by the mailbox. My heart was 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 it on 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 at me as if he didn't believe me.

"So walk to school," he said. 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 beautiful 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 mud room. (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 black out." 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 her and Dad had one of their fights. We've lost electricity before and the world didn't end. But when my parents actually have a fight, as opposed to just being mad at each other silently, 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 idiot cell phone 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 head at me, looking exasperated and 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 even text anyone. I can't check online to see if my friends have posted anything. I can't watch YouTube, and just now I turned on my iPod, only it didn't turn on. It should have, but it didn'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 really 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 asked, keeping my voice low so he wouldn't hear me. I knew he preferred the Mercedes, but I couldn't see why he'd be picky at a time like this.

My mom turned and 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. She went to the sink and started rinsing dishes with water from a plastic jug.

"Great, I hope that doesn't last," I said. 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'd never gotten 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 was shocking. "He actually TRIED the motorcycle, in this weather?"

"Just to see if it would start," she said, still not turning around.

So dad was definitely home for the day. I decided to keep a low profile by disappearing to

my room. Upstairs, I got in bed and picked up my iPad. When it wouldn't power on, I flung it down on the mattress and stared at it. Why wasn't anything working? Even with a power outage, my cell phone and iPad should work. I felt suddenly depressed. 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 to her room and opened the door. 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 still 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 to fuss 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. I shook my head. "Mom, Lily was screaming her head off. This idiotic house is so big we couldn't hear her!"

"Oh, my goodness!" Mom held out her arms and took the baby, who let out a gurgle of satisfaction. She snuggled Lily to her chest, covering 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."

My mother looked upset, so I added, "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 nodded. "Yeah. 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!" she cried. "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 begun to notice 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 gone to speak 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 home at the far end of the street, and they're 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 one of the neighbors to find out. He says we're blind as bats with no TV or radio or phones. It's depressing. I hate being stuck at home with this useless family and nothing to do.

EVENING

I never knew a house could get so cold this quickly. We really felt it when the sun went down. Whenever we've had a power outage before, Dad just 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, but 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 actually 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!

So 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 had dragged in their 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 was looking at my dad as though she expected him to explain it all. 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 that. 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 it's too 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 even 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. Everyone else was in the family room. Mom was asleep on a sofa that had been moved in front of the big stone fireplace, and the boys were on the floor in front of that. Dad was asleep on another couch, moved so that

it was adjacent to the one with Mom. I put down a few blankets and my pillow and slept on the rug like the boys. I'm only warm on the side facing the fireplace, though. Mom has baby Lily and so they have the best spot, followed by the boys.

I managed to fall asleep earlier without my music, but right now I'm wishing I had it. I'd give anything for one working iPod! If I at least had that I might be able to forget about everything else.

I hope the 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, he 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, and 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 it 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 be expected to 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."

Anyway, 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 of things and feeling like he's good at what he does, like in his office. Here, I don't think he knows how to take care of us with this outage. He's in upper management and calls the shots at work. Now, he's only got us to boss around. Otherwise, he's as powerless as our gadgets.

When I returned to the living room, the boys were doing a puzzle on the floor and mom was sitting with the baby, just staring ahead. It was like she was watching TV, only of course it wasn't working. Our useless big-screen sits in the corner like an altar, and at first it looked like mom was staring at it. But she wasn't. She's just 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 all 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 out there, Andrea," he said. "We can't wait."

It's not like we have a forest out there, either. Our property is one acre, most of which is carefully landscaped lawn and flowers when it's not covered in snow. So we have 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 electric for thousands of people, 'cos we live near a substation. Since they always get that up and running quickly and we're nearby, we've always had power restored quickly. After last year's hurricane we only lost our electric for a day and a half. And my cell phone still worked. And our cars started. *What is going on?*

So Dad walked all the way to that power station today. Normally you can't walk on our main road, at least not safely. If you leave the plat you take your life in your hands because everybody speeds on the main road. But today it was eerie quiet, Dad said, and he passed four cars that were dead and abandoned in the middle of the road. He wanted to ask questions but the substation was empty. Dad's not sure if it was empty because there's nothing they can do, or if it's 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 so 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 with all that snow and ice? 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 must have done something wrong, somewhere, to cause this power failure. If you ask me, heads should roll!

When I got there I was glad to be alone for a change. Even the silence didn't bother me. Snow cover always brings a muffled quality with it, but today it felt different. It took awhile 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 their sidewalk or drive of snow; no one's radio or television turned up too loud and 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 that were sticking up out of the snow, but everything else is covered, and it didn't amount to a lot. When I went in complaining my feet felt like ice, Dad said, "Just be glad we have a fireplace." I wanted to give him a sarcastic answer cos' 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, so he went to speak to him right away. Turns out, Jim was at Wal-Mart when the power went out. Wal-Mart is about thirteen miles from here. Jim spent the first night at the store with other people who were stranded, but he's been walking home ever since. Jim's not a young man, or he might have made it sooner. He managed to bring one bag of stuff 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, like 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 electric? Was it the snow? And what about cars and cell phones?"

"No one knows for sure. It's anyone's guess."

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 of it. Hauling in snow and having to boil it is like sheer misery. I hope his pump works.

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

"What does that mean?" I asked. I thought I must have heard him wrong. My dad looked at me. 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 here 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 at Wal-Mart because they wouldn't accept anything but cash. And some people actually started walking out with their arms full of stuff they hadn't paid for." He shrugged. "I mean, who carries cash today? Nobody."

"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 actually 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 on Facebook 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.

[End of excerpt]

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Advance Praise for *PULSE*

REALLY ENJOYED IT

"I really enjoyed *PULSE*! L. R. Burkard does a fantastic job depicting what life might be like for those that are prepared--and those that are anything but. (If you wonder why some people bother "prepping" read this book!) I also enjoyed the strong emphasis on faith and how focused on Christ some of the characters were."

CHRIS RAY, PreparedChristian.net

A PAGE TURNER

"*PULSE* is a page turner from the very beginning. I wanted to know what would happen to the characters and their families, and you will, too! The world has become increasingly dependent on technology for just about everything. What if all of that technology failed? How would we survive, what things would it impact? *PULSE* is a fascinating answer to that question."

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RIVETING

"L.R. Burkard's *PULSE* is a riveting story of the effects of an EMP that takes place in the United States. Centering on the lives of three different families, Burkard accurately captures the complexities of life without electricity as well as other hardships they must face. I found her story chock-full of clever and ingenious ways of dealing with the disaster. Blended with loss and hope, *PULSE* is full of surprises

making it a great read. Considering the times we are in, I find it a must read for the church.”

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HEART POUNDING

“Loved it! Loved it! Loved it! I cried over (SPOILER REMOVED). My heart pounded at the first sight of the marauding gang and didn’t stop till (SPOILER REMOVED)! Holy Cow, guess I better invest in a rifle!”

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EXCITING

“*PULSE* is exciting, thought provoking, and hard to put down! I enjoyed every page!”

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FASCINATING

“*PULSE* is carefully researched and fascinating, with gripping subject matter and compelling characters. Highly recommended!”

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HAD MY WIFE READ IT

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