

PREVIEW

In this action-packed sequel to PULSE, author L.R.Burkard takes readers on a heart-pounding journey into a landscape where teens shoulder rifles instead of school books, and where survival might mean becoming your own worst enemy.

CHAPTER ONE

SARAH

MAY 11

Four Months after the pulse

I knew before we left that something was wrong, but Richard never listens to me. It was dusk, time to get moving. Most people stay in after dark, which is why we travel at night. It's safer this way. People are the primary threat. Not regular, normal people like your grandmother or neighbors, or kindergarten teacher; those people are mostly gone. All the nice ones, gone! The ones left? They're the reason we move at night.

"We don't have time, Sarah." I looked up at my brother, my only family in the world I know for sure is still alive now that the EMP has sent our country into the dark ages.

“Almost done.”

He frowned as I hurried to scribble a few more lines in this journal, one of my meager belongings I’ve held onto from the time life was normal. Since before the EMP—the electromagnetic pulse that took down the power grid of the nation.

We had slept in an abandoned barn, on old, musty hay. It was far cleaner than other places we’d slept in recently. Richard brushed hay out of his hair, and pulled a comb from his back pocket. I have to hand it to him—he’s grown a beard, but still manages to stay neat and groomed. His hair is short—he shaved his off not long after I shaved mine and for the same reason-- *lice*. But unlike me, he looks good with the crew cut, like a military guy off duty. Except Richard is on duty. He's always on duty. Life is too dangerous to ever relax, ever let down our guard.

“C’mon, time's up.” My eyes met Richard’s and I sighed, shutting my book and letting him pull me to my feet. I knew he was right. I could hardly see what I was writing in the fading light. I shoved my journal and pen into my purse, strung it around my neck and tied it across my torso, close to my body. I shook hay off and pulled on my coat and zippered it, hiding the purse. Richard had already replaced his knife into its ankle holster, checked the pistol in his pocket, and was ready to move on. He slung the military-issue daypack over his back, then his rifle, and nodded at me.

Sometimes it was hard to remember this was Richard, my brother who had gone off to college and come home thinking guns should be banned. Or that building a strong military was foolish. Now he looks for firearms *all the time*. Sometimes we find them on fallen bodies... that's all I can say right now about that.

"Ready?" He peered outside at the gathering darkness. "There'll be little moonlight. We might be able to stay on the road."

"Really?" My heart rose. I was sick to death of traveling across fields and brush and woods. I never disliked nature particularly, but I never dreamed I’d be stuck out in it in all kinds of wind and weather, trudging through woods and fields at night where no one was really meant to walk. Following a trail would have been easier, but we didn’t dare. We had to forge our way, relying heavily on a topographical map Richard picked up once at a much-looted hardware store. The map helped immeasurably, but it couldn’t help us avoid the myriad little brooks and streams that dot Ohio, making our progress towards Aunt Susan’s house in Indiana slow and cumbersome. We might have been there by now if we didn’t have to follow waterways until we found a good crossing. Roads were so much easier. Civilized—as long as you didn’t run into other people. Starvation was a constant threat, but people were the scariest one.

Aside from other human beings, nothing creeps me out the way it used to. We’d come across wild dogs, coyotes, deer, foxes, raccoons, corn snakes, and the occasional skunk numerous times—but the sight of a wild critter was welcome. It might mean dinner. I try to keep my distance from snakes, sure, but ever since Richard caught and cooked a few, I lost my horror of them.

I am definitely no longer a normal American girl. How can I be? There is no longer a normal America.

This is my life every night: A long, hard hike with few breaks and precious little to eat or drink.

Richard helped me get my large daypack on my back. I adjusted the straps until they weren't digging into my shoulders, and we moved to the door of the barn. I waited while Richard peered out. He looked in all directions, then stepped out and looked around again. He turned to me and nodded.

I took a deep breath, and walked out of the barn. We'd been safe and relatively comfortable there. Would we find another refuge by morning?

I'd only gone a few feet when I started feeling it. Something wasn't right. I couldn't put my finger on it.

"Richard--I don't want to go tonight."

"Why not?"

I looked out at the scrubby field of brown stubble all around us. Normally, by this time in May, young corn shoots would have started showing, the scene before us a rolling swell of greenery. Instead, it was barren. Most farm machinery had died with the EMP, so there was little large-scale planting. Bare farms like this were common. But it wasn't the desolate field that had my attention, giving me pause. It was the sky. Dusk was usually yellowish-brown, sometimes blue-brown, but tonight it had an eerie greenish glow.

"I think weather's coming in."

Richard surveyed the sky. "I think it's from that." He pointed to my right. A plume of smoke was visible, rising above the tree line. We'd seen it the day before when it was much stronger. We'd seen lots of houses burning since we hit the road. Dark plumes were depressingly common. It seemed to be one of the new dangers since the EMP; out of control fires. Anyway, I didn't think the greenish sky had anything to do with that fire.

"No; it's the whole sky, especially that way." I pointed west. But as I said, Richard never listens to me. He took a breath. He was impatient.

"I've told you, Sarah, time is everything. If we don't reach Aunt Susan's before summer there won't be time to grow food. If we don't grow food, we don't survive next winter. We have no choice. C'mon."

I knew he was right, but I felt sure we were in for some kind of storm. "Just one night! I'm tired."

"Look, if we don't move, we starve. And I don't mean next winter. We've got enough provisions for two more days. The fact we've not already starved is a small miracle. I'm not going to push our luck. We have to keep going while we can, while we've got something to nourish us. If we run out of food before we get there we're dead. You understand? Dead."

Sometimes Richard's laser focus on getting us to Indiana was helpful. Having Aunt Susan's farm as a goal, a place to look forward to, even if we were living in fantasy land, helped my spirits when the weariness set in—which it did, often. At times I wanted to just give up, collapse, die on the spot. Why not? Mom and Jesse had died, my father was probably dead, my previous life was a faint memory, like a childhood book I'd read and enjoyed, but which was never real—but Richard's quiet talk about how our lives would improve when we reached Aunt Susan—it gave me hope.

Hope is a powerful thing. Like food, it could get me moving.

Tonight I wasn't thinking about hope, or the future, or anything other than that ominous looking sky. The last storm we'd been caught in left me miserable for three days because that's how long it took for my shoes to dry. I didn't want that to happen again.

But I followed my brother. We usually went to the edge of fields, just inside the brush line, out of sight, staying west as much as possible. We did that tonight. Richard said we had to wait for thicker darkness before hazarding a road. After awhile I thought maybe I'd been wrong about bad weather coming in. Maybe the sky just looked greenish sometimes and I'd never noticed it before.

Then, little by little, a breeze picked up. By the time we'd gone maybe three miles, it was strong. I tried to ignore it. I didn't want to say, "See? I told you so," because Richard is such a

good brother. Except for not listening to me, he is a much better brother, now, than before the EMP. But as the wind increased, dark clouds, visible even in the night sky, scudded with increasing speed across it and a jagged bolt of lightning revealed the greenish glow I'd seen earlier. Sudden, heavy rain pelted us, and I got cold—fast. I'd lost my hat the week before and was sorrier at that moment than ever; my head, with only two inches of stubby hair, was unprotected. And I noticed the wind was gaining force. The trees to our right were bending low, and sounds of snapping branches surrounded us.

"C'mon," Richard called. He motioned me away from the edge of the brush-line, deeper into the stand of woods. The brush and trees we came to for shelter were now alive with energy, snapping, twisting and hitting us in the face and arms and legs. I covered my head with my hands, trying to protect my face.

"I'm looking for shelter," Richard called, much to my relief. He was no more than a foot away, but I almost hadn't heard him above the wind. Walking was more and more difficult, like fighting an ocean tide. This was no thunder storm like any I'd ever experienced!

Then, we heard it. At first, it was a low rumble, like a distant train. Soon it sounded like a roaring crowd at a packed stadium. We stopped, squinting into the wind and dust and stood there, gasping, gaping at the incredible scene before us. The sky was reeling, alive—churning. Branches and other objects too dark to recognize were swirling eerily aloft as if being played with by some giant, invisible hand. We were actually looking at the growling belly of the storm, approaching like a snarling dog.

"What's happening?" I screamed.

"It's a tornado!" Richard yelled. His words terrified me. But even as the truth of what he said dawned on me, I was unable to move. I was leaning hard into a wall of wind, fighting to keep myself from flying backwards, helplessly, like a dandelion scattering in the breath of a child. Except I was the dandelion, and that storm's breath was a torrent. Even my weighty backpack offered no extra resistance to this force.

Richard grabbed my hand and ran.

"We'll never outrun it!" I panted, feeling heavy and defeated. Panic was sapping my strength. I tried to unstrap my pack, I wanted to be lighter, but he cried, "No!" and yanked me along.

"This way!" He dragged me after him behind a huge old tree, and shoved me unceremoniously to the ground, against the trunk.

"Put your head down! Maybe the tree will shelter us!"

"Trees aren't safe in a storm!" I yelled. "They're lightning magnets!"

"It's not lightning we have to worry about!"

As we huddled behind the tree, I looked past Richard's head and up into the green sky. The top of our tree swayed above me like a dancer taking a bow. My eyes widened. Richard couldn't see it. His head was over me, facing down. I stared, horrified but unable to look away. How far would it bend?

Around us the woods were alive, dancing like demons, the very trees possessed of a passionate dark tune that threatened to engulf us forever. We'd be killed at any moment, I just knew it! Amidst the awful swaying was a constant ripping and cracking of trees and limbs and branches—a symphony of terror. Then, *thud!* Something landed beside my head. *How long could we survive?*

Above us, the treetop, outlined against the green sky, bent yet lower, like a witch hunched over her cauldron. Lower, lower, she stooped.

"It's going to break!" I gasped. Richard couldn't hear me.

The roar was louder still. The tree held, but something inside me snapped. My sense of peril was unbearable. I had a spurt of energy, pure adrenaline I'm sure, and I jumped up and ran.

"Sarah!" There was no time for me to reason with Richard, and I couldn't stop, anyway. In seconds, I could feel him behind me, glad he was there, and kept going, not knowing how long we'd be able to run before the snarling twisting mass in the sky would bowl us down like ants on a sidewalk. I hardly noticed the branches whipping my face or arms, now. I didn't care. That living, moving, howling force behind us was what frightened me.

I usually struggled to keep up with Richard during the nightly hikes, but I ran like wildfire. We'd been living on fumes, dreams of food, for so long I guess my body was used to functioning on practically nothing. We came to a sharp drop, a ravine which held a narrow brook and I froze at the precipice.

"C'mon!" Richard jumped. I didn't want to move but he grabbed my hand. As I flew over the edge after him, helplessly, like his shadow, a sudden flash of lightning revealed every line on his face. His eyes were wild. We were in the air for only a second, but it felt like slow motion. I heard a cry as I went and knew faintly that it was me. Richard had forced us off the edge where the ground sheared away—into darkness. I hit the dirt—hard, falling against the bank, regardless of rocks, roots, mud and whatever else was there. The roar was deafening. My heart pounded painfully through my whole being but all I heard was that ferocious roar.

"Keep your head against the bank!" My brother's muffled yell—though he was right next to me--was unnecessary because I was already huddled against the earthen wall as small as I could make myself. My eyes shut fiercely, I felt ready to scream. Just when I thought I would pass out because of the noise and wind, Richard threw himself over me. His weight felt crushing. I knew he was trying to protect me.

CHAPTER TWO

LEXIE

MAY 12

Four months after the pulse

The sound of a shot, piercing the silence and my lovely dream, woke me. I blinked awake, while an uneasy feeling saturated my being. Something was wrong. Then I realized: *A shot!* I came fully awake and went into autopilot, grabbing my rifle from its high perch on my dresser and rushing to the window. Carefully, so as not to give someone a target, I stayed to one side, peering out from behind the curtain.

Dawn had just broken, and the landscape surrounding our farmhouse was a sultry, foggy cloud, leftover moisture from last night's storm. Anyone could be hiding out there. What I needed to know was who had fired that shot? *Was it us, or them?*

I saw nothing. Taking a quick peek at the top bunk to see if Andrea had heard it, I saw she was up already, her bunk empty. For a moment I wavered between throwing on clothes or keeping my look out. Since I hadn't heard more fire, I hurried to slip on jeans and a light sweat top. It would be chilly until the sun got higher in the sky.

Just last night at the council meeting, we'd been warned: Every day as the weather warmed, more people were on the move, people who would come our way. They were not to be trusted. Some, it's true, were harmless; others, possible allies, maybe even future members of our compound. But we couldn't assume anything. And if they'd fired first, that told us all we needed to know. They were "number fours" – threats.

An even greater threat than number fours was the possibility of foreign military. Rumor on the broad-band had it that enemies of the US were using the EMP to try and take over our country. There'd been sightings of guerilla outfits on our soil. So far we hadn't seen any, but how long would it be until we did? Even worse, how would we ever fight them off? Our little compound of thirty people could hardly put up a resistance to trained soldiers. Most had no experience with fire arms. The very idea terrified me. I tried not to think about it.

Number fours were bad enough, marauders who roamed the land and stole food and supplies from people, often killing those they'd just robbed. Our compound had successfully fought off more than a few bands of such people. We started out as a small community of Christian preppers; but we'd grown, taking in others who brought skills or knowledge we needed, while in return they got food and shelter. My science teacher would say it was a symbiotic living arrangement, a way for all of us to survive in a world gone dark and dangerous.

Have I mentioned the compound before? Probably not. I stopped journaling because I had no energy at the end of the day. Chores are practically all-consuming, now. It seems like a lifetime ago that we had electricity—though it was only four months. Anyways, time with night-lights is rationed—oil and batteries run out and we never know if we'll get more—and most nights I'd rather read than write.

But, about the compound. At first, it was just us and the Pattersons. They hadn't done any prepping, but we took them in, mostly because Andrea is my best friend and I knew her family needed us. Plus, we felt led in prayer to help them. Then, the Buchanans joined us, whom I'll

talk about later; and slowly, other people. For many of them, they'd survived since the EMP by the skin of their teeth, just barely keeping starvation at bay. But we all knew we're vulnerable individually, even those of us who stored food and supplies. And there's safety in numbers. Banding together was really the only solution.

Some people didn't want to leave their land or home to join us. There were arguments about where to build, whose property was the best for defense, for farming, and for water. But we had the best land assets of anyone else—a high hill (which is a natural vantage point for lookouts), a well with a manual pump, a running stream, flat farmland plus some woods, not to mention chickens, rabbits, a cow and horses—so in the end, our farm was chosen.

I was glad it was chosen, because it meant we didn't have to leave everything and start new somewhere else. And there's something comforting about the sounds of work going on around us. The pounding of hammers, the steady rhythm of saws making logs and beams from downed trees; even the shouts of men as they talk and work together. It means we're not under attack. But privacy, and our old way of life is gone. It was gone anyway, due to the EMP—and it's a blessing to have other people in our lives, people we can trust and form close relationships with. But Mom sometimes looks out at the work sites, the clearing of brush and trees and I see her face looking wistful. I miss having our house and land to ourselves, too.

Except for the Buchanans! Blake's family started building a cabin behind our barn shortly after we brought Andrea's family here. Their livestock was raided so often they got critically low. When their last rooster got stolen they decided to join forces with us. (We have a few roosters. You don't need a rooster for eggs, but if you want to keep getting eggs for years and years, then you do. A hen only lays well for a couple of years and then you need a younger one.) Anyways, with the hens also disappearing and the increasing foot traffic on their road, the kids weren't able to play outside anymore. Their house was on a main road. So they will have more cover here, more protection. And so will we.

I feel bad they had to leave their home, but it gives me a happy feeling to know Blake will be close by, now. Everyone knows Blake and I will get married one day—as long as we can stay alive that long. (He hasn't formally proposed, but I know it's coming.)

Andrea entered the room, nonchalant, not acting like we were under attack. She saw me with my rifle and said, "Oh. It's okay! It was a warning shot and they've gone."

I peered out at the misty fog hanging over the land, giving even the detached garage, adjacent to the house, a ghostly demeanor. "How can they be sure? We can't see anything out there."

Andrea smiled. "Jared's on duty and says so." Andrea likes Jared. He's new to the compound, but ex-Army, and came with a lot of surveillance tips and defense practices and other know-how. His word is sort of law. If he said it was all clear, then it was all clear.

I put my rifle down and considered returning to bed. I didn't have to be up so early, as morning barn chores were Andrea's today. If I could sleep in, I liked to. But I thought of the coffee that was probably hot in the percolator (which had a permanent spot on the woodstove these days), and my mouth watered. I didn't used to drink coffee. Now I'll drink anything that's available. Nothing edible or potable is ever taken for granted.

By the specks of straw clinging to her jeans, I could see Andrea had already been to the barn so I asked, "How's Rhema?" She met my eyes. Andrea's a pretty brunette, though she looks very different than she used to. I like this new Andrea, the one who hardly wears make up, who doesn't complain about clothes that haven't been washed properly in months, doesn't do her nails or hair, and has basically become a lot like me. Actually, I don't miss the old Andrea. I always liked Andrea just as she was, but I guess I did think she worried about all that girly stuff

too much.

"She's good. Wanna ride, today?" We both loved riding. I was teaching Andrea, but I usually managed to get in some time with my horse, Rhema, too. We need riders because none of our vehicles work (except one small diesel tractor, which we'll use until we run out of fuel. That was dad's least favorite piece of farm equipment—until the pulse!) Anyways, sometimes we have to search out new supplies. So Mom designated Horseback Riding as a new school subject. And she appointed me, the best horsewoman in the family, to teach Andrea.

"I'll ask Dad." We both knew it wasn't on our schedule. Everyone in the compound had to follow a schedule, even us teenagers. And, while homeschooling was important, running the compound had to come first. Without electricity, almost every single thing we do takes more work, more time, more planning.

The door opened. Aiden, one of Andrea's little brothers, came bouncing into the room, followed swiftly by Quentin, his twin.

"Don't come in without knocking!" Andrea scolded. "How many times have I told you that?"

Aiden's face fell, but Quentin was unfazed. "I heard a shot before," he said. "Did we kill anyone? Did we kill anyone?" His eagerness was eerie and, not too long ago, would have been unthinkable.

Andrea frowned. "You should be happy, because no, we didn't have to kill anyone."

"Oh." They'd both spoken, in unison, the way twins sometimes do. They were disappointed.

"C'mon, you guys," I said. "Your sister's right. It's GREAT, we didn't have to kill anyone!"

They looked at each other. Quentin looked back at us. "We just want there to be less bad guys," he explained, his eyes big and earnest. "If there's no bad guys, we can play outside like we used to."

Andrea and I exchanged glances. She got on one knee in front of the boys. "You still get to play outside," she said, softly.

"Only a little. Not as much as we used to."

"It's summertime," added Aiden. "We used to play outside a lot more in summertime." He dragged out the last syllable, tiiiime.

"It's only spring," Andrea said. "And nobody gets to play as much as we used to."

The boys nodded. Aiden sniffed. "Are you gonna take us outside today?" he asked.

I spoke up. "I am." It was part of our rotation on the schedule. Besides two hours we were supposed to spend on lessons, we shifted between childcare, nursery, kitchen chores, and livestock chores. Kitchen chores could be lots of things, but the other stuff was fairly routine. I liked doing childcare, whether playing with the kids or leaving them to their own devices. When they were happily entertained among themselves, I could read. They were never happily entertained without me for long, but it was something.

When the boys didn't even crack a smile, I added, "Well, I'M glad I'll get to play with *you!*" When they remained silent, Andrea turned to me with a sheepish grin. "They like it when it's my turn because I raid food storage for treats we haven't had in a long time."

I gasped. "Andrea!" The boys giggled.

Andrea put a finger to her lips. "Shhhhh!"

"We know," said Quentin. "It's a secret."

"My folks would kill you if they knew you were doing that!" In truth, I felt angry. I liked the treats from food storage as much as anyone. There hadn't been any shopping since the EMP. That meant the only chips, or chocolate bars, or packaged cookies we ever got to eat came from

storage. And there wasn't a great amount of that stuff. My mom had concentrated on nourishing food when she did the storing. I made a mental note to get down to the main storage area and check the buckets labeled "GOODIES." The only way Andrea could be scavenging for treats was from those buckets. I was surprised she'd discovered how to open them, but they were like gold, now. I'd reseal the ones she got into and hide the bucket opener.

Suddenly we heard a barrage of fire. It sounded close. "Get down!" Andrea pushed her brothers to the ground. Aiden started whimpering.

"Get under the bed, now!" I ordered. Quentin said, "It's okay, Aiden. We'll get the bad guys. Maybe we'll get them all!"

Aiden quieted. Andrea and I, meanwhile, were each back at a window. Andrea had grabbed her rifle, and we both peeked furtively outside. The fog was lifting. I gasped as I saw a figure holding a handgun dart out of the brush on one side of the house, heading towards the back.

"We've got company, all right! Number fours!"

"Company?" called Quentin. "Who's here?"

I raised the window enough to take a shot if I got one, frowning as I did so. I had no idea who was there, actually, but it wasn't military so that left four possibilities and three of them had just been eliminated. A non-threatening person didn't go darting about one's property, holding a firearm. Jared had obviously messed up. He'd said all was clear; but all wasn't clear. Someone was out there, and probably lots of someones—looters rarely came alone—and they were after our animals, at the least. At worst, they were after us.

"Who's out there, Lexie?" Quentin asked, again.

"Bad guys."

I heard our dogs barking from behind the house. *Someone, please, get the dogs inside!* Pets, we'd learned the hard way, were fair game for hungry looters. We'd lost our beautiful, harmless golden retriever, Kasha, last month during a raid. How anyone could eat someone's pet—my thoughts were cut off by another volley of fire ringing out, also coming from the back.

"They're at the barn or the coop!" Andrea said, turning to rush from the room.

"No, stay here!" She looked at me, questioning. "My dad and the others will be back there. We need to be here so if they retreat back this way, we can give them grief."

Giving them grief was really not an accurate way to put it. We were supposed to shoot anyone who tried to steal our animals or supplies, because these people, if not stopped, would always come back. So far, I'd never had to shoot someone for stealing, or for trying to. I prayed I never would.

Andrea returned to her window. We heard more shots, still from behind the house. And then, just as I leaned my rifle down for a moment to put my hair up with a stretchy band, a sudden ping at my window, right near my head, had me scrambling to get back in position to fire.

"They're back out front!" I gasped. Andrea already had her rifle at the window, leaning it on the sill as she took aim at something. In her slow, calm voice—Andrea was almost mystically calm during dire moments like this—she said, "No. They're not. There's just more of them." She glanced at me. "We've got to hold them back."

Worriedly, I looked out at the front. A line of ghostly figures, just visible through the lifting fog, were emerging from the brush that faced the street side of our property. Andrea was right! There were a lot of them and they were armed. One had a raised shotgun. And with a skirmish already going on in the back, I feared she and I were alone to contain this second wave of marauders.

I wasn't sure I was up to it.

CHAPTER THREE

SARAH

The earth shook. I sobbed, numb with terror, and begged God to protect us. Richard's arms tightened around me as, for a few seconds I felt us both being lifted. I had unknowingly grabbed hold of something which I now clung to for dear life. Richard's hold on me increased while I felt the terrible pulling trying to sweep us away. Then, without warning, he let go! He lifted off me and was gone!

I screamed, but didn't let go of my hold, fighting the pull that had whisked him away like words on the wind. With every bit of strength I possessed, I dragged my body into a crevice where my head had somehow found its way. I hadn't even realized the crevice was there; either that, or it had just been created when the embankment shifted from the force of the storm. Clinging to what felt like a large tree root, I huddled in the fetal position while the world around me screamed in protest, cracking and lashing and pounding.

The crevice shuddered as the embankment felt the power of nature's fury, taking the pummeling. I tasted dirt, wondering if it would cave in around me, on top of me, leaving me buried. And then, as quickly and surprisingly as it had come, the force suddenly lessened; a few seconds later, it was gone! It was like the air had been let out of a giant balloon. The roar moved on.

Blinking away soil, I lifted my head, withdrawing it from the crevice. The sky flashed, and I saw I was next to a jutting root system, part of which had formed my crevice. If the trees to that system had been uprooted, I'd have gone right along with them. But the air felt charged, electric. I heard the rumbling again, the warning sound we'd heard right before the tornado hit. The sky flashed and I saw another wall of sky, twisting and alive, coming my way! Was it a second funnel? Or had I been in the eye of the storm?

The roar increased quickly and I dove back into my crevice, this time clawing at the wall of dirt, trying to get deeper. I felt the embankment jump, heard the same awful twisting and screaming of trees and branches getting sucked into the swirling madness. I covered my head with my arms and prayed. An indescribable sound filled my ears as the wind wreaked havoc on the brook and the opposite bank, and then its awful screaming grew more distant. The train wreck of nature had passed, this time for sure. The only pounding left was my heart, echoing in sharp thuds throughout my being.

I crawled backwards from the crevice and sat on my haunches, taking deep breaths and getting my bearings. Our tree, that stooping witch during the storm, had unbent itself. The creaking and groaning and rain had stopped.

Distant lightning blinked, and I saw the crevice again. It was the sort of hole which normally you couldn't pay me *ten thousand dollars* to stick my hand into. The thought that I'd crawled into it without even thinking about it, folding myself up like a dinner napkin, seemed unreal. Yet it had saved my life. But Richard! How would I find him?

Darkness was deep, broken only by occasional flashes from the sky revealing a greenish-brown atmosphere, more brown than green, now. But only one thought filled my shaking, weak-kneed body: Where was Richard? And, when I found him, would he be alive?

When I felt strong enough to rise, I took a few tentative steps, calling Richard. My voice was weak, but I was desperate to find him and kept calling. I hoped, by some miracle, he was close by.

I climbed up the opposite embankment. When I reached the top and made my way through a flattened thicket, I saw the path the storm had taken through the trees. Then lightning jagged the sky about a half mile away and I saw the next grove of trees bowing like meek subjects before the furious gale. More lightning. And there! The plume! Before we'd been too close to see it clearly but now I did, a gigantic, rotating black thing, wider at the top, writhing along at its condensed bottom like an enraged, twisted demon, clearing all in its path.

I fell back down. All I wanted to do was sit and cry. I did not want to be alive if Richard was not. He was all I had left in the world. I reflected how he'd lifted off me, like a moth in a fan's breeze. Would it be possible for him to be alive? I remembered reading about people who had survived tornadoes after being caught up in the air, sometimes traveling for miles before landing somehow, somewhere. These accounts were from people who had survived. Richard might have, too.

I couldn't tell if my hope was reasonable or born of desperation—maybe even starvation. Maybe I wasn't thinking straight. But the thought that other people had survived such storms gave me hope and I got up. I slung off my pack and dug inside for the flashlight. We considered it almost sacred, this flashlight. We didn't use it for convenience. If we had, it would have died long ago. We saved it for only the direst circumstances. To my mind, finding Richard fit the bill. As I groped inside, my fingers came across the last piece of a granola bar I'd been saving. I grabbed it and ate it quickly, trying not to think about the fact that Richard had been carrying the rest of our food, meager as it was.

The one good thing about not having light most of the time was that now using the flashlight felt magical. It raised my spirits, and I began calling out to my brother, moving in the path of the storm, working my way more easily now around debris and brush since I could see them. Moving "easily" was still an overstatement.

The wake of the storm was easy to see, as the trees were mostly stumps, some as high as my waist; but following it was another thing. Limbs and broken branches and trunks littered the path. Trees half-pulled from the ground leaned at odd angles. I had to watch my step to keep from walking into them or getting tangled or falling. Seeing the wide swath of destruction, I realized that the force which had snatched Richard from me probably wouldn't have deposited him anywhere close. But just in case, I moved slowly, calling Richard and searching trees that were left intact, for his body. I half expected to find him hanging, lifeless, from a tree limb, high in the air. But I fought against such thoughts and trudged on. I resolved to search as long as it took. There was nothing else for me to do.

I couldn't go on without Richard.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEXIE

The band of marauders crept closer, and I panicked. “Andrea, let’s pray!” She was zeroing in on one of the intruders, getting ready to shoot, and didn’t answer.

“What if they’re friendly?”

“Lex, they just put a bullet in your window! That could have been your head!” She let out her breath and I saw her finger squeeze the trigger. The shot made me jump though I knew it was coming. I turned and ran to my dresser. I threw a pair of protective ear muffs at her and put down my rifle to position my own pair. I’d been in skirmishes before which had left my ears ringing for hours and I hated that sensation.

Outside, Andrea’s shot must have reached its mark, because the intruders scattered to all sides, (some, back the way they’d come! Hoorah!). Andrea kept shooting, while there I was, taking stock of the situation like a bystander, not a soldier. But I am supposed to be a soldier. We all are. We have to be.

I returned to my position, crouched, and aimed. I took a single shot and then suddenly Blake knelt beside me. “How’s it going?” he asked, his gaze quickly scanning the view out front.

More of our people entered the room to get to our windows, which gave a good vantage point for the front. Jared dropped down beside Andrea, falling into position to shoot. It seemed to be as natural for him as breathing.

I felt better having the guys with us. But then I heard the sound of a window crashing in, below us.

“They’re getting in the house!” I cried. Jared and Blake’s eyes met. They jumped up.

“We got it,” Jared said.

“Be careful!” I whispered to Blake. I grabbed his hand, and he gave mine a squeeze. Before taking off with Jared he stopped to say, “Lock the door behind us.”

As I did, I said, keeping my voice low, “I wish we’d gotten the kids to the safe room.”

“This is more fun!” Quentin’s voice, muffled, came out from below the bed. I had hoped the boys wouldn’t hear me. Andrea and I shook our heads. What kind of boys would the twins grow up to be if they thought armed encounters were fun?

“He doesn’t understand,” Andrea said. “To them, we’re playing cops and robbers.” We heard a shot from downstairs, then another, then another. My heart was in my throat.

“I see movement!” Andrea cried. I spun back to my post in time to see two people who had just emerged into view from the porch beneath us. A second later she took a shot and one fell. Andrea is an amazing shot—it’s a natural skill for her, like horseback riding is for me. I have trouble staying calm and focused when it comes to hurting other people—even when we are under attack. Andrea seems immune to misgivings about it. Like she’s trained not to see marauders as people. I have to sternly remind myself they mean us harm, they’re the enemy, or I can’t handle fighting.

While I mused and tried to get the other guy out there in my scope, Andrea took the shot and felled him. Downstairs, we’d heard a few more shots but it was quiet, now. We stayed at the windows, watching. Minutes ticked by and all was still. Andrea turned to me. I hurriedly lifted my ear protection. “What?”

"Why didn't you shoot one?" Her voice was calm, but in her eyes I saw something lurking. I just stared at her a moment. I hadn't meant NOT to shoot.

I shrugged. "I don't know. You got it done."

"Yeah. Thanks," she said, heavily. Turning back to the window, she added, "You're not a bad shot, Lexie. You could have taken one of them, too."

I bit my lip, staring at the front. So maybe it did bother her, having to kill people. I had let her do the dirty work. I'd let my dislike of shooting at human targets stop me. I loved shooting as a sport—but it wasn't fun, anymore. It was deadly serious.

I gave her my feeble defense. "They were leaving," I said. "I can't shoot anyone in the back."

Andrea's eyes widened. "They came to kill us and to steal! You know we can't let them get away after they shoot at us! You know the rules, Lex! They'll come back! You can't pick and choose who to fight when they start it. If you do that again, I'm gonna tell your dad!"

"I'm sorry. I'll do better next time." I could hardly stand to look into Andrea's large, reproving eyes at that moment.

Quentin and Aiden crawled out from under the bed. "We can come out now, right?" Quentin asked.

"No!" Andrea's sharp cry startled them; I saw Aiden's lip quiver, but his brother said, "C'mon, Aiden. It's okay." They backed under and were out of sight. I was still feeling guilty and looked at Andrea, trying to come up with an explanation. To my surprise, I saw her cheeks were wet! Andrea was rarely emotional after a skirmish. I felt helpless. I didn't know how to comfort her. "I'm sorry," I said again. She ignored me. But then we heard two shots from outside. It wasn't over!

Coming to attention at her window, she said, "C'mon! There's more of them. Help me this time!"

I did. I bit my lip so hard I could taste blood. I saw people out there grow blurry and realized I was crying. I wiped away the tears quickly so I could focus, but I couldn't deny I hated having to live on the defensive, with rifles practically attached to our bodies. We went nowhere unarmed. I wanted to be a normal teenager again. Not a private in this civil war, where survivors fought survivors.

If there really were foreign troops on the ground, wouldn't it be better for everyone if all Americans came together to resist them? But instead we had to constantly be on the alert for the ruthless "number fours" whose existence meant we were never safe. And there seemed to be a lot of them today.

I could hear shots hitting the house, but fortunately our people downstairs and at other strategic places on the grounds were giving return fire. Shots rang out for the next fifteen minutes, on and off, and at least two more men out there fell within our view. The "bad guys" were hurting. I heard my mom, evidently from the room beside us at her window, cry out, "Take that, you rascally varmint!" Andrea and I both giggled through our tears. When my mom got emotional, she reverted to southernisms from her youth. No doubt "rascally varmint" was a favorite saying of her grandma's or grandpappy's. We'd tease her about it, later. We both laughed too much—I think we were slightly unhinged. It was taking an emotional toll on us, living this way.

There was sporadic cross-fire for a few more minutes, and then silence. Thank God, silence. Andrea and I had no choice, however, but to stay as look outs for as long as it took until we heard an official "all clear." We saw no more intruders, and after about half an hour, sounds of normalcy, children's voices, from below. During a skirmish, children are hurried to the safe room and kept there until it was safe to come out. I was sure we could hear my little sisters and

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other kids below – which meant the threat had to be over.

My dad finally popped his head in to give the all clear. Andrea and I sighed with relief.

“Next time, Dad, could you send someone up here sooner?”

“Sorry, honey. There was a lot going on.”

We woke the boys who had by now fallen asleep – lulled by having to keep still.

Downstairs, I hugged our German shepherd, Bach, while Mozart, our Great Dane, enjoyed Andrea's attention. We learned that Jared had taken two guys with handcuffs, the ones who broke the window, I supposed. (Handcuffs: One of many "interesting" accessories Jared had brought with him to the compound.) Their capture was supposed to be good news because it meant we could get information from them. When the attackers were organized in a group, we wanted to know who was in charge, how they'd organized, what their targets and plans were. Were they just passing through or did they plan on scavenging the area completely?

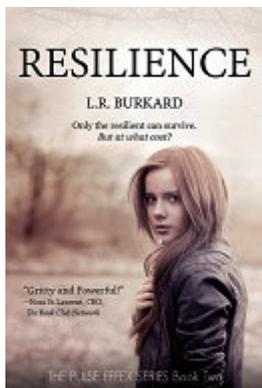
Andrea and I were just starting to tease my mom, calling her a “rascally varmint” when we saw Jared marching the prisoners towards an out-building. The smiles vanished from our faces. We knew what awaited those men.

END OF PREVIEW

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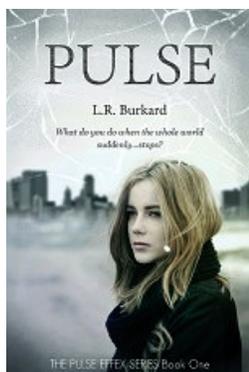


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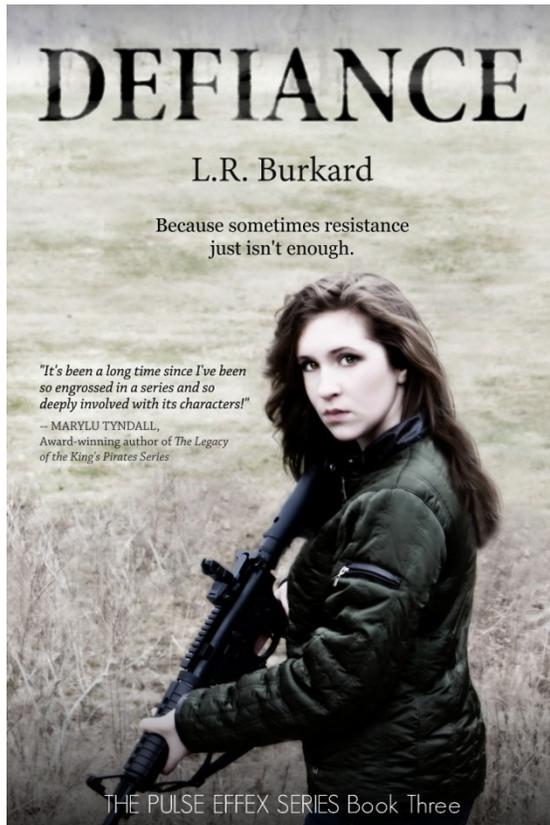
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[Linore Rose Burkard](#) is best known for [historical regency novels](#) with Harvest House Publishers, including *Before the Season Ends*, the award-winning *The House in Grosvenor Square*, and *The Country House Courtship*. Linore also writes YA/Suspense as [L.R.Burkard](#). As a writer known for meticulous research as well as bringing people marvelously to life on the page, Linore's books earn her devoted fans who report reading her novels over and over. Linore is a homeschooling mom of five, and enjoys cooking from scratch, family movie nights, gardening and painting. Linore teaches workshops for writers, and is a Writing Conference Coordinator.

"The idea for the PULSE EFFEX books came after I read an article about how close the earth came to suffering a severe solar storm, which could have caused a massive EMP. In space terms, we missed a catastrophe by a hair. But the 'what if' factor was set in motion. *What if it hadn't missed? What if I was a teen hooked on electronics—or an adult medically dependent on them?* **PULSE**, Book One in the series was born. Book Three, **DEFIANCE**, was finished in April, 2017.

Linore jokes that she has two personalities: [She's a Jane Austen- tea-drinking art-loving mommy](#) and a gun-toting, coffee gulping, hiking enthusiast.

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Waited with anticipation for book 2 in the series and high expectations were met!! Again the author takes us through a superbly written story, as told through the perspective of the diverse characters. I have to admit I devoured this read to fast because now I have to wait with continued anticipation for the next in the series..... I think I will read them again to pass the time!!!!!!

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